

BOOK REVIEW

Mind over media: Propaganda education for a digital age



Book review

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OVERVIEW

Renee Hobbs's *Mind Over Media: Propaganda Education for a Digital Age* is an important media literacy education book. If you teach adolescents, young adults, or teacher prep, you're going to want to spend some time with this text. As issues arising from disinformation gnaw at our current body politic and our actual physical bodies, the book is obviously timely. What differentiates it from other texts about propaganda is that it examines propaganda explicitly and implicitly through the frame of teaching, without oversimplifying either propaganda or teaching. This approach leads to some unexpected twists.

Those looking for traditional information about propaganda will find it here. Familiar documents – war posters, Nazi films, and the like – are included alongside newer media forms, like clickbait, memes, sock puppets, and bots. The breadth and number of references and practical teaching suggestions are impressive, indicative of a veteran educator who has collected examples over years of teaching and networking.

Major theorists are covered, too. Hobbs's review of Langer's work on Hitler's "Big Lie" reveals startling parallels to current authoritarian political leaders (p. 145). And she frequently cites and builds on the influential work of Jacques Ellul. But Hobbs isn't interested in pitting one definition of propaganda against another in order to declare a single "winner." This is a departure from traditional academic discourse, and an obvious one looking through an educator's lens. Insisting on a single definition would be doing students' work for them. Hobbs opts, instead, to provide activity suggestions to help students identify features of propaganda and understand how variations are products of specific times and circumstances (pp. 15-16).

Understanding propaganda through an education lens

Hobbs's approach is weighted more towards the individual learner than on disrupting media systems and that is reflected in her main goal: "As people activate critical thinking skills in recognizing and responding to propaganda, they increase autonomy and personal freedom" (p. xvi). This goal meshes with (or perhaps leads to?) Hobbs's conclusion that "propaganda is in the eye of the beholder" (p. 242). The task, then, is learning how to spot the key rhetorical tools used by propagandists and to be aware of how one's experiences, beliefs, and identity influence interpretation.

The "eye of the beholder" construct opens the door to such a wide range of media being identified as propaganda that every reader will almost certainly have an example that is absent from this text. Such gaps are inconsequential. There are more than enough examples for any educator to be able to figure out how to apply media literacy skills and methods to whatever examples of propaganda meet their curricular needs.

More importantly, as Hobbs posits, propaganda devices can be present in positive as well as negative messaging (p. 4). For those accustomed to seeing propaganda as only negative, it can be jarring to think of propaganda in service of the good as well as the nefarious. But from an education standpoint it makes perfect sense. Media literacy education asks students to analyze *all* media, not just media they find objectionable, so if lessons are successful, students should be able to identify propaganda devices whenever they appear, irrespective of the message.

Also significant, Hobbs employs a pedagogical approach in which processing emotions is as important to interpretation as well-reasoned analysis. She summarizes, "Inquiry as a form of learning involves careful consideration of the interplay between the human heart, mind, hands, and spirit" (p. 275). This approach is especially important for analysis of propaganda, which intentionally provokes emotional reactions in order to short circuit critical thinking. Yet, common instructional strategies are often limited to exercises in logical reasoning.

Hobbs aims to change that. She offers an entire section on "Feelings as Information," and shares observations of students who have complex, multifaceted, and even internally contradictory emotional responses to some media. This is the case, for example, in her observations of students finding fake Facebook or Instagram accounts, noting that some experience the discovery as exhilarating while others find it creepy (p. 92). Naming their reactions helps students recognize and understand why they are drawn to some social media posts and not others.

The acknowledgement that emotions play a role in our intellectual work, and therefore must be accounted for in our teaching, is one of the great strengths of this book. It is central to many of the text's most thought-provoking passages, such as the exploration of assessing authenticity in an era when many define it as staying true to our inner selves. Hobbs notes that while "experts ask for our trust in their evidence, information, and reasoning, celebrities inspire our trust in their identities" (p. 224). Hence the appeal of charismatic leaders, even

when they have a loose relationship with facts. This appreciation for the role of emotion also underscores one of the book's most important points relative to media literacy education. Everyone is vulnerable to propaganda, almost as part of the human condition, so this isn't about inoculating one group against the ideas of another.

Hobbs makes a convincing case that educational efforts based solely on dispassionate fact-checking are likely to fall short, and she provides a variety of classroom-tested strategies that address both cognitive and affective learning. Her appreciation of emotion as integral to learning makes it all the more puzzling that her list of five key questions for analysis (p. 148) doesn't include any reflection prompts. To be clear, Hobbs's approach is not "anything goes," nor is it apolitical. There are ethical limits and an assumption that liberal democracy is foundational. But for Hobbs, drawing narrow political boundaries around media literacy education is likely to alienate many of the students who could benefit most.

Amidst the strengths, flaws

Despite the strengths of this book – and there are many – there are also some significant missteps. For example, there is an incredibly confusing discussion of philosophers who argue that the boundaries between science, not science, and pseudoscience are fuzzy and determined by social consensus. It is certainly true that science is not objective and that social consensus plays a significant role in acceptance or rejection of specific claims. But science is a definable method. Selectively applying that method is pseudoscience, and rejecting that method in favor of un-testable assertions (even if social consensus exists) is not science. It's difficult to see how Hobbs's philosophical discussion provides useful insight for teachers seeking ways to help students analyze propaganda as it relates to science.

Also troubling is the opening discussion of the "Beneficial Propaganda" chapter (pp. 182-183). Hobbs introduces a PSA intended to challenge prejudice. The voice over includes the phrase "My heart doesn't see race." Hobbs's analysis, which explains how the video reinforces equality as a core value of American culture, completely ignores what for many will be a visceral sense of being erased by the voice-over's version of "colorblindness."

In another example, Hobbs writes more like a fan than an analyst in her description of Edward Bernays. She reports that the widely acknowledged father of

public relations defined his vocation as "the ethical practice of propaganda," and believed that propaganda was "truly democratic" because anyone could use it (p. 35). Even if one accepts Bernays' view of his work at face value, it is worthwhile to question why his methods have been so easily twisted, not infrequently used in ways that are egregiously damaging (for example, lying about the health impact of cigarette smoking or pollution, or making brutal dictators appear to be benign). And although it is true that propaganda can come from sources on opposing sides of an issue or conflict, it is also true that there is not equal access to channels of production and dissemination, even in the digital world.

Looking for deeper analysis

Sometimes Hobbs raises important issues and offers valuable insight, but stops short of deep analysis, especially in areas related to the power dynamics of race and class. One such instance is Hobbs's examination of advertising as propaganda for capitalism. She ponders the ways that branding is used to satisfy the human need for common culture, connecting people through products. It is frustrating when she opts to showcase the voice of a marketer who explains that brands help you "become more you" (p. 18) without acknowledging even a hint of irony in the mass marketing of identical products as an attempt to help people express individual identity.

Throughout, Hobbs leans towards viewing propaganda as the product of choices made by individuals and analysis is often of individual media texts (p. 4). Additional examination of context would have been helpful. What is it about societal and commercial structures that creates more funding for misleading messages than pro-social ones? Are there markers that could help distinguish authoritarian propaganda from that created to promote pro-social causes, i.e., do different types of actors use the rhetorical tools differently?

TEACHING STRATEGIES

Hobbs is generally perceptive about the challenges of teaching.

- She addresses the tricky topic of when or whether teachers should share their own views, noting that there won't ever be a single answer applicable in every situation because strategies will

(and should) change based on circumstance, needs of students, and learning objectives (pp. 221-222).

- She rejects teaching that demonizes media creators because it doesn't much help students build critical thinking skills even if it feels satisfying and even if the instructor's attack is accurate and justified (p. 112).
- She recognizes that analyzing foreign propaganda may "create or reinforce damaging cultural stereotypes" while also providing the critical distance needed to practice skills in order to be prepared to analyze examples with more personal emotional weight (p. 178).
- She urges educators to see the ways that media can be both beneficial and harmful at the same time, illustrating the point by examining the representation of disability in the film *Wonder* (p. 267). She understands that it is more productive to engage students in looking for strengths and weaknesses rather than asking students to reduce the discourse by taking a side.

Sometimes, however, important insights are incomplete. This is the case in Hobbs's description of students playing a game in which they take on the role of an Internet troll who creates and shares disinformation. Her initial description is perceptive:

Such hands-on, experiential learning may provide learners with a better understanding of the many techniques used to intentionally mislead and deceive. But there may be downsides to such games. Because it teaches students how to create disinformation, the game may serve to normalize disinformation and make it look like harmless entertainment. Indeed, my students had so much fun playing the game, competing with each other to get a high score, that I worried it might be teaching them how to be disinformation experts. I wondered whether the playful spirit of the game...interfered with the thoughtful ethical reflection about the real-world consequences of spreading false and harmful messages. (p. 166)

What is unclear here is why Hobbs "wonders" rather than knows. This is an activity she actually did with students. Did they exhibit a deeper understanding or not? Why is there no assessment, formal or otherwise? In fact, the book offers little guidance on how one might evaluate media literacy skills. That is a significant omission.

In another lesson, students explore a current website run by white supremacist Richard Spencer, but Hobbs offers no guidance on how to do the activity without each student actually visiting the site. Staying off the site is an essential teaching strategy to avoid generating hits

that increase Spencer's revenue and placing students in the awkward position of supporting the hateful rhetoric they are studying. Nor does Hobbs acknowledge that the experience of listening to an interview with a white supremacist is different for students in groups targeted by Spencer's hate than for those from the ruling majority he celebrates (p. 152). To her credit, Hobbs does provide an entire section on the tensions between amplification and avoidance, that is, whether the learning benefits outweigh the exposure of students to dangerous ideas that they may not have otherwise encountered (pp. 176-178). But that section doesn't appear for another twenty-plus pages, and there is no explicit link to this lesson.

Some suggested lessons are especially welcome because they are so often absent from media literacy texts, but some of these are also deficient in important ways. So, for example, it is great to see a section on textbooks as propaganda. But it is disappointing that the section refers to the Lost Cause version of the U.S. Civil War in past tense, as if it's not taught anymore when, in fact, it is still standard fare in many schools (p. 259). The description of a class simulation based on George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (pp. 247-248) is similarly welcome and also inadequate. It's an intriguing activity but the description never acknowledges that simulations should be undertaken with caution so as to avoid reproducing power dynamics that further harm students who are already marginalized. When used cavalierly as an engagement strategy, simulations can erode trust among classmates and the teacher.

Mind Over Media can be a frustrating read, perhaps because one of its strengths is also a weakness. Hobbs champions "intellectual curiosity, humility, and respect for multiple perspectives" as essential to the success of both education and democracy. As she writes in the book's eloquent Epilogue, "we can learn to not just tolerate complexity, but to embrace it" (p. 276). This openness is Hobbs's answer to skeptics who point to the limits of critical thinking skills or fear that teaching students to question the constructed nature of knowledge primes them to embrace conspiracy theories. But that very welcome embrace of complexity and diversity sometimes results in language or strategy choices that hedge. Uncertainty isn't always helpful for educators seeking guidance on effective practice.

For example, Hobbs uses the protests following the murder of George Floyd to examine the paradox of intolerance. She contrasts Karl Popper's argument that a tolerant society must be intolerant of intolerance (p. 156) with John Stuart Mill's notion that it is through the clash of ideas (even ideas we hate) that we clarify our own

thinking and come closer to truth (p. 157). Her discussion of whether public protest suppresses speech or increases tolerance is filled with words like “can” and “may.” This might work if Hobbs also suggested important variables for students to consider. For example, who is most likely to be targeted by life-threatening attacks if free speech is unmitigated? Hint: It’s not typically those who already possess power or privilege.

The hedging pattern also shapes discussions that aren’t directly about teaching, as in this instance:

Certain types of media messages may be indifferent to truth, for example, when their primary purpose is to entertain. However, when propaganda that is designed to inform becomes indifferent to truth, it is not only ethically flawed, it *may* become downright harmful. [emphasis added] (p. 263)

“May”? What are the reasonable alternatives to harm here? It’s not that Hobbs is never definite. She acknowledges, for example, the challenge of teaching students to analyze conspiracy theories, but says unequivocally that “it is a risk worth taking” (p. 170). It’s unclear why she can be so definitive in some places and not others.

Discourse as opportunity

Despite its shortcomings, I recommend this book. Hobbs writes in a way that makes complex ideas readable, even to non-specialists. And I appreciate that she resists easy answers. As she observes, “One of the biggest misconceptions is that truth requires certainty” and our experience of the world is never pure (p. 277). Jacques Ellul argued that a heightened awareness of propaganda was ultimately the only way to be free from its powerful pull (p. 276). Hobbs makes it clear that this necessitates being willing to discuss contentious or emotional political issues with our students. Rejection of controversial classroom dialogue is, according to Hobbs, “understandable” but “shortsighted.” Avoidance does “real harm by failing to prepare a generation of students for citizenship in a democratic society” (p. 219).

Hobbs accepts that education alone isn’t a magic bullet. Nevertheless, in today’s world, a media literacy approach to the study of propaganda is exceptionally important, giving “educators a chance to talk with students about the interplay between feeling and thinking, social relationships and civic action” (p. 190). This book makes it abundantly clear that media literacy

education is essential, and it is so much richer and more complex than a few key questions or fact-checking strategies.