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CHAPTER

TWENTY-ONE

TEACHING STUDENTS TO ANALYZE AND INTERPRET HISTORICAL PROPAGANDA

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on using primary sources to teach students to define propaganda and explain how it has been used in a historical context, especially as it relates to US political history. Students have always known the internet and have witnessed fake news as it circulates the web, but they may not know that information has been used for purposes of persuasion throughout history. The activity provided in this chapter makes use of special collections materials pertaining to historical propaganda and affords students the opportunity to critically analyze and interpret primary sources.

Introduction

Introducing Students to Fake News and Propaganda

Growing up, children have immediate access to information through the internet. So, it is not surprising that college students have been introduced to fake news as it circulates



the web. The Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) defines fake news as “information that is deliberately fabricated and published with the intention to deceive and to mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts.”¹ Since the insidious nature of this deceptive information is often caused by malicious actors, it is imperative to teach students how to identify such information by critically evaluating sources because many incoming college students are unable to do so. The Stanford History Education Group analyzed middle schoolers, high schoolers, and college students in a study surrounding their ability to evaluate information and found they were often unable to correctly identify the credibility of sources.² *The Library Journal* and Credo Reference conducted a first-year experience survey and revealed the number one challenge facing first-year students is recognizing and evaluating credible and reliable sources.³ The dissemination of false information is a rising problem along with ease of access to information through the internet. Librarians are uniquely positioned to teach students how to examine the authority and validity of information.

Whether distributed with malicious intent or out of sheer ignorance, society is witnessing an increase in the amount of false information. This means it is more important than ever for students to know how to tell the difference among facts, opinions, misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda. The learning goals for our first-year seminar course, “Information Investigators: Decoding Fake News,” ask students to explore the ways in which information is organized, including the roles of primary and secondary sources in information research. We also ask them to be able to distinguish between fact and opinion. We spend time early in the course defining these terms before bringing the students to the library’s Special Collections department.

Misinformation is when false information is shared unknowingly because the person or entity sharing the information believes it to be true.⁴ We see this all the time on social media because misinformation is widely spread when people blindly believe stories without fact-checking the information and/or verifying the reliability of the source. There is rarely malicious intent when misinformation is shared, but the same cannot be said about disinformation. Disinformation is when fake news is spread intentionally by someone who knows the information is false.⁵ Disinformation is disseminated for a variety of reasons, often with an intent to harm or for personal gain.

When we teach students about news and opinion, we point to editorials, commentary, and letters to the editor. While opinion pieces may play to our emotions, they do offer verifiable facts and evidence supported by reasoning. Propaganda speaks to fears and insecurities; it distorts and manipulates facts and is one-sided.⁶ Propaganda frequently uses misinformation and disinformation and it is meant to persuade an audience. As we will see in this chapter, evidence of propaganda is in the historical record, so using special collections materials can give students a powerful “hands-on” opportunity to see how false information has been used over time until the present day.

The Problem of Propaganda and Critical Media Literacy

Barton writes that “fake news is at its core a new form of propaganda.”⁷ Propaganda “refers to the process of spreading, diffusing, and disseminating, especially statements, ideas, beliefs, and doctrines.”⁸ Its purpose is to persuade rather than to inform, and both fake news and propaganda are designed to appeal to emotions rather than to provide facts. Propaganda is used by those seeking power to influence beliefs. “Partisan attachment is an important predictor of beliefs,”⁹ so propaganda can solidify the public divisions caused by partisanship.

Another form of power is control of the dissemination of news and information, so governments are often the means for disseminating propaganda. The use of propaganda by governments was a preoccupation for the United Nations (UN) during the onset of the Cold War.¹⁰ It was viewed as a “threat posed to friendly relations between peoples and States by the systematic diffusion of deliberately false or distorted reports.”¹¹ At the time, many felt a need to limit the right to freedom of expression in order to counter false reporting, and wording that limited freedom of expression was included in the UN’s 1948 Draft Convention on Freedom of Information, but the convention was never opened for signatories.¹²

Today, “whitelisting” and fact-checking websites are promoted as solutions to the problem of fake news, but Barton¹³ notes that these solutions raise questions such as “who decides what is a legitimate media source?” and “what authority do fact-checking systems have over other websites?” He goes on to make the case that through critical media literacy, the public can “obtain the tools to verify or dismiss information.” He cites Levitin, who states that educational systems are not keeping up with the “explosion of information” and are not teaching “what constitutes evidence and how to evaluate it.”¹⁴ The “critical” part of critical media literacy “explores the role of language and communication” to define relationships of power and domination.¹⁵ So teaching students about propaganda is a valuable strategy for using critical information and media literacy to analyze fake news.

Teaching Propaganda

Just as the term “fake news” has been around for a while,¹⁶ teaching students to analyze propaganda is nothing new. A significant nationwide effort to develop teaching methods and curricula for addressing propaganda is described in an article by Hobbs and McGee.¹⁷ The Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA) was founded in 1937 by philanthropists, including Edward Filene. The editorial director was Clyde Miller, a journalist who taught a course on “Public Education and Education” at Columbia University. The IPA has two educational approaches to analyzing propaganda. The first approach was designed to help “the public detect, recognize and analyze propaganda”¹⁸ through the use of seven propaganda devices derived from the field of classical rhetoric, i.e., name-calling, bandwagon, glittering generalities, flag-waving, “plain folks,” testimonial, and stacking the cards.¹⁹ The IPA created this list of rhetorical devices so students would be aware that they could be

“tricked” and to prevent them from being “fooled or manipulated.”²⁰ As an example, one English teacher gave students an assignment to fact-check a letter for “errors and prejudice claims.”²¹ The letter, “In Defense of Hitler,” was written by a student and appeared in *Scholastic* magazine in 1938. The students in the class voted on the most effective responses to the letter and sent them to *Scholastic*. The result was that the magazine editors developed a policy for addressing fascism.

A second less well-known educational approach developed by the IPA, the “ABCs of propaganda analysis,” encourages students to engage in the “practice of reflecting on one’s own biases and world view” as they form opinions about the propaganda they are analyzing.²² The ABCs included “ascertain the conflict element,” “doubt your opinions are ‘your very own,’” and “find the facts before you come to any conclusions.”²³ It is this approach that is at the root of critical media literacy today. Hosterman²⁴ references Marshall McLuhan’s quote that “the medium is the message” and writes about the importance of teaching students to “identify and evaluate methods of information dissemination.” He describes his ideas for teaching an introductory course in propaganda that includes the analysis of historical and contemporary examples of propaganda. Students are asked to “examine those characteristics that help to separate propaganda” from other forms of communication.²⁵ While rhetoric and propaganda use the same methods of persuasion and are audience-centered, propaganda emphasizes the method of delivery and the control over this delivery. Hosterman also points out that another important characteristic of propaganda is “its presentational nature.”²⁶

Since propaganda has proven to be a powerful tool used to influence societal beliefs and actions, there are numerous examples where visual representations of propaganda were used as weapons of ideological warfare. Introducing students to propaganda through a historical lens and encouraging them to evaluate it to the extent that their knowledge and prior experiences permits are effective ways to introduce students to the societal impacts of fake news. The most effective use of propaganda is when the content’s message speaks to and reinforces our own beliefs or is packaged in an innocuous format, such as *Our World*, a 1940s school yearbook from the Manzanar Japanese internment camp. *Our World* looks like any other yearbook, with pages showing pictures of students, various student clubs, plays, fashion shows, sports, but nothing else that reveals the other reality of life in the internment camp. Historical examples of propaganda such as the *Our World* yearbook can be found in primary source materials in library archives and special collections.

Using Primary Sources in Special Collections to Teach Propaganda

How can engaging with primary sources offer a different learning experience that students would otherwise not gain using secondary sources? What is the purpose of bringing students to special collections? What would they not experience during their classroom lectures?

Special collections can include manuscripts, oral histories, photographs, maps, posters, ephemera, rare books, moving images, university archives, etc.—any materials that have been deemed to hold historical and enduring value. Items in special collections are often rare and unique. Although it is not the only place to access primary sources, students can directly handle and work with primary sources in a variety of formats in special collections. Primary sources provide firsthand accounts of events and are produced at the same time as those events or later recalled from the memories of eyewitnesses. Unlike secondary sources, primary sources contain content that has not already undergone interpretation by others or were created for the purposes of publication and mass circulation. In this way, primary sources represent the most authentic snapshots of how people felt, how they lived, and of their day-to-day activities.

By integrating primary sources into instruction, course instructors give students opportunities to learn about and engage with materials that come from the time periods they are studying. In teaching about fake news, showing students different examples of historical propaganda allows them to see the various methods the government, military, politicians, and other groups have employed in the past to persuade the public to feel and act in certain ways in order to garner support for specific issues and causes.

The learning activity presented in this chapter not only provides students with a chance to see original evidence of historical propaganda, but it also allows special collections to act as a “research laboratory” where students can get hands-on experience in analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating as well as in talking and answering questions about primary sources.²⁷ For a majority of students, it will be their first time visiting special collections and handling primary sources. To relieve anxiety in working with unfamiliar sources and begin developing their skills in primary source literacy,²⁸ it is useful to have a few questions already prepared for each table of items to help students examine and guide their analyses of historical propaganda, such as, “What is or are the item(s) talking about? What is the purpose and why was it created?” The lesson plan incorporates active learning²⁹ techniques and aspects of constructivist learning strategies, where students collaborate on tasks (in this case, answering questions about the items) that lead to the construction of their own meaning and to students developing their own interpretations. Based on what students have learned about fake news in previous classes, new learning will take place as they evaluate different forms of historical propaganda and synthesize new information.

Relevant examples of propaganda were selected for the learning activity, such as WWII recruitment posters featuring women performing traditionally male-dominated tasks, an artist book highlighting the same historical arguments against interracial marriage used to oppose same-sex marriage, and periodicals from early 1930s Germany with anti-Semitic and anti-Communist sentiments. Students also closely examined a 1976 pamphlet from the Association of Libertarian Feminists titled “Government is Women’s Enemy” as well as the *Our World* yearbook mentioned in the previous section.

Conclusion

Fake news is not a new phenomenon and neither is propaganda, which can present information in a way that makes their intent difficult to decipher. We can use primary sources to give students the opportunity to have a more authentic way to view and analyze information. Our learning activity provides students with a hands-on opportunity to use special collections or other archival materials to investigate examples of propaganda. Having a deeper understanding of propaganda through this historical lens helps students recognize false information that is readily available on the internet and highly persuasive in nature due to its emotional appeal. It is yet another method to teach the critical source evaluation skills that are necessary for academic success.

Learning Activity

Introduction to Historical Propaganda in Special Collections: Using Historical Propaganda to Learn How to Interpret Primary Sources

Brief description of activity:

Students learn how to approach interpreting primary sources through examining examples of historical propaganda and answering questions on their activity worksheets. The questions will direct students to identify and communicate information about the items. Referencing their answers from the activity, students will share information with the rest of the class.

Student learning outcomes:

1. Students will be able to recognize examples of propaganda through the examination of primary sources.
2. Students will be able to analyze propaganda techniques by examining primary sources and answering questions from an activity worksheet.

Time to run activity:

Approximately 40 minutes; can be lengthened by

1. asking each student, instead of a single representative for each group or pair, to share information about an item or items to the rest of the class, and
2. having the librarian demonstrate how to search for and request special collections items.

Preparation:

Plan and review the types of materials to feature in the session, page and retrieve the items, prepare student activity worksheets with questions (can be based on various formats of

materials such as posters, artists' books, manuscripts, photographs, etc.), and print out enough copies for all of the students and course instructor and lay the items out onto tables.

Materials needed:

1. Resources containing propaganda (examples: artists' books, posters, artwork, pamphlets, yearbooks, and other archival materials in various formats)
2. Activity worksheet (to pose questions):
 - What is or are the item(s) talking about?
 - What is the purpose and why was it created?
 - Who is the intended audience?
 - Is there an emotional appeal?

Examples: tables and resources:

- Table 1: Materials pertaining to propaganda as it relates to Japanese Internment during WWII
- Table 2: Materials pertaining to propaganda as it relates to anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial
- Table 3: Materials pertaining to war recruitment propaganda
- Table 4: Miscellaneous materials containing political propaganda
- Table 5: Artists' books containing racist and homophobic propaganda, as well as exploring falsehoods
- Table 6: Artists' books pertaining to politics in art, gun control, and racism

Teaching plan:

1. Break students into small groups or pairs.
2. Briefly talk about the items displayed on the tables without revealing too much information.
3. Demonstrate the proper handling of materials.
4. Hand out an activity worksheet to each student and review the questions together as a class.
5. Give each group or pair 10 minutes to examine the items at their table together and answer questions from their worksheets.
6. Encourage students to talk to each other about what they are looking at.
7. After the first 10 minutes, each group or pair will move to another table and repeat step 5.
8. Reflection: referencing their answers from the activity, students will share information with the rest of the class.
9. Class ends. The librarian collects students' worksheets to share with the course instructor through email.

Helpful hints:

- Use a timer (for example, I use the timer on my phone) to make sure students spend only 10 minutes at each table.

- Students review the About Us webpage for the Special Collections department prior to their class visit.
- For institutions that don't have access to special collections, use digitized collections and/or examples of propaganda from your general collection. Examples:
 - Washington State University Libraries Digital Collections, <https://content.libraries.wsu.edu/digital/collection/propaganda>
 - Library of Congress Digital Collections, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/?q=propaganda>
 - Hoover Institution Library & Archives Digital Collections, <https://digitalcollections.hoover.org/collections>
 - National Archives exhibit: Powers of Persuasion—Poster Art from World War II, https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers_of_persuasion/powers_of_persuasion_home.html

Recommended readings:

McGonagle, Tarlach. "Fake News: False Fears or Real Concerns?" *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights* 35, no. 4 (2017): 203–09. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0924051917738685>.

This article discusses historical and contemporary perspectives on the term "fake news." The evolution of the term once again validates its existence through historical context and discusses ways in which it has been used as propaganda in wartime and for various political purposes. McGonagle discusses free expression and freedom of speech and then shifts to the contemporary dissemination of false content through the internet.

Merriam-Webster. "The Real Story of 'Fake News.'" Accessed September 23, 2019.

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/the-real-story-of-fake-news>.

This is a brief historical analysis of the origin of the words "fake news." It verifies that fake news is by no means a new phenomenon, but the general use of the term appears toward the end of the nineteenth century. It also discusses news descriptors like "false" and "counterfeit" being used prior to the general use of the term "fake news" as early as the 1500s.

Silva, John. "NLP Blog: Distinguishing Among News, Opinion and Propaganda." News Literacy Project. June 20, 2018. <https://newslit.org/educators/civic-blog/distinguishing-among-news-opinion-and-propaganda/>.

This article discusses the differences among news, opinion, and propaganda. It defines misinformation and disinformation and discusses how it is used in propaganda. The article also points out why it is important for students to understand and learn to distinguish between factual and false information. The News Literacy Project is well-regarded and repeatedly cited in the literature surrounding teaching "fake news" and source evaluation.

ENDNOTES

1. "Fake News," Ethical Journalism Network, accessed November 30, 2019, <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/tag/fake-news/page/4>.
2. Angeleen Neely-Sardon and Mia Tignor, "Focus on the Facts: A News and Information Literacy Instructional Program," *The Reference Librarian* 59, no. 3 (July 3, 2018): 110.
3. "LJ_FirstYearExperienceSurvey_Mar2017.Pdf," *Library Journal*, Credo, accessed September 12, 2019: 10, https://s3.amazonaws.com/WebVault/research/LJ_FirstYearExperienceSurvey_Mar2017.pdf.
4. John Silva, "Distinguishing among News, Opinion and Propaganda," *NLP Blog* (blog), June 20, 2018, <https://newslit.org/educators/civic-blog/distinguishing-among-news-opinion-and-propaganda/>.
5. Silva, "Distinguishing among News."
6. Ibid.
7. Colin C. Barton, "Critical Literacy in the Post-Truth Media Landscape," *Policy Futures in Education* 17, no.8 (March 14, 2019): 1027.
8. Craig A. Hosterman, "Teaching Propaganda," *Communication Education* 30 no. 2: 157.
9. Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31 no. 2 (2017), quoted in Barton, "Critical Literacy," 1028.
10. Tarlach McGonagle, "Fake News: False Fears or Real Concerns?," *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights* 35, no. 4 (2017): 205.
11. McGonagle, "Fake News: False Fears or Real Concerns," 205
12. Ibid., 206.
13. Barton, "Critical Literacy," 1031
14. Daniel J. Levitin, "Weaponized Lies: How to Think Critically in the Post-Truth Era (New York: Dutton, 2017), quoted in Barton, "Critical Literacy," 1033.
15. Kellner Douglas and Jeff Share, "Critical media literacy is not an option," *Learning Inquiry* 1 no. 1 (2007), quoted in quoted in Barton, "Critical Literacy," 1033.
16. "The Real Story of Fake News," Merriam-Webster, accessed November 30, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/the-real-story-of-fake-news>.
17. Renee Hobbs and Sandra McGee, "Teaching about Propaganda: An Examination of the Historical Roots of Media Literacy," *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 6, no. 2 (November 9, 2014): 60.
18. Hobbs and McGee, "Teaching about Propaganda," 60.
19. Ibid., 59, table 1.
20. Ibid., 60.
21. Ibid., 61.
22. Clyde Miller. "Some comments on propaganda analysis and the science of democracy," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 5 no. 4 (1941), quoted in Hobbs and McGee, "Teaching about Propaganda," 62.
23. Hobbs and McGee, "Teaching about Propaganda," 63, table 2.
24. Hosterman, "Teaching Propaganda," 157.
25. Ibid., 159.
26. Ibid., 160.
27. Ann Schmiesing and Deborah R. Hollis, "The Role of Special Collections in Humanities Undergraduate and Graduate Teaching: A Case Study," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 2, no. 3 (2002), quoted in Barbara Rockenbach, "Archives, Undergraduates, and Inquiry-Based Learning: Case Studies from Yale University Library," *The American Archivist* 74, no. 1 (2011): 300.
28. According to the "Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy," developed by the SAA-ACRL/RBMS Joint Task Force, primary source literacy is the "combination of knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, and ethically use primary sources within specific disciplinary contexts, in order to create new knowledge or to revise existing understandings."
29. Active learning includes instructional activities that involve "students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing." Charles C. Bonwell and James A. Eison, *Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom* (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Reports, 1991), quoted in Cynthia J. Brame, "Active Learning," accessed December 3, 2019, <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/active-learning/#what>.

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