



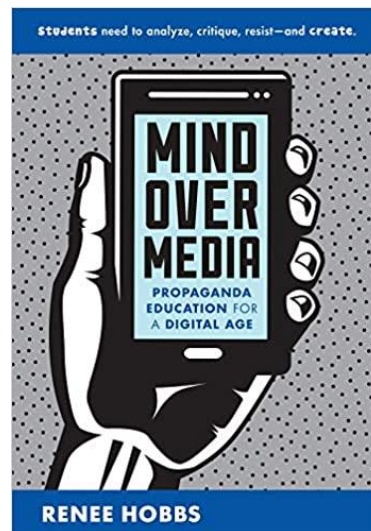
Hobbs, R. (2020). *Mind over media: Propaganda education for a digital age*. W.W. Norton and Company.

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In the midst of a moral panic over fake news and disinformation, Renee Hobbs's *Mind Over Media: Propaganda Education for a Digital Age* offers an "optimistic" and "empowering" guide for teaching and learning about propaganda. Hobbs echoes what scholars have said for decades (Fuchs, 2018; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Lippmann, 1920, 1922): "let's admit it. Propaganda is a word with a bad reputation" (p. 12). In the subsequent pages, Hobbs introduces the duality of propaganda as a communication tool



that has proven to be both beneficial and problematic. On the one hand, our society derives benefits from the use of propaganda such as democratic consensus. On the other hand, there is a "dark side" of propaganda that amplifies and legitimizes intolerance, hate speech, disinformation, election interference, terrorism, and conspiracy theories (p. 138). *Mind Over Media* asserts itself as an antidote to the dark side of propaganda. Using positivist language and broad generalizations, it provides scaffolding for effective propaganda pedagogy designed for learners from kindergarten through graduate school, and those both in-and-out of school.

The goal of the text is to provide teachers with strategies to introduce students to the analysis of propaganda (p. 24). Without providing sufficient evidence, Hobbs contends that this book is necessary for three reasons: educators fear teaching students about propaganda, most people only read about propaganda in history classes, and too many educators treat the topic as an opportunity to indoctrinate students. The text falls short of its stated goals of introducing a comprehensive analysis of propaganda: teaching the

reader how to decode propaganda, and providing information for media literacy educators about propaganda pedagogy.

Although *Mind Over Media* contains useful and relevant content, it tries to do too much with too little. Hobbs claims that *Mind Over Media* is written for classrooms from “grade school to graduate school,” an overwhelming task given the different levels of learning and interest encompassed by that wide range of readers (p. 24). The expansive focus is not adequately addressed resulting in a sub-par analysis of these important topics. For example, the book’s second chapter attempts to stuff the past, present, and future of propaganda *and* effective pedagogical approaches to understanding it into 41 pages. This is unhelpful to readers seeking a deeper analysis of these topics, especially if they are unfamiliar with the content.

According to Hobbs, when it comes to propaganda pedagogy, effective practitioners avoid indoctrination and instead practice humility. Further, *Mind Over Media* argues that effective propaganda pedagogy “does not increase cynicism, suspicion, distrust, and alienation” among students (p. xvii). This is a major contradiction in the text. Narrowly defining the acceptable responses to propaganda is precisely the goal of propagandists. It is authoritarian for an educator to narrowly define the appropriate response to propaganda in the classroom. In fact, if propaganda is such a pervasive and influential force, as Hobbs contends, we might expect some students who see the falsehoods in propaganda to feel a sense of alienation from the large swaths of the population that have internalized propagandistic narratives. If handled conscientiously by the teacher, degrees of alienation caused by real world circumstances can lead to greater learning opportunities. Furthermore, if this pedagogy is really about empowerment, why not let the students decide if they are cynical, suspicious, or distrustful of content from known fake news producers (news media; governments; political parties; and corporations)?

The lack of clarity regarding the power dynamics between audiences and propagandists is another area of concern in *Mind Over Media*. For example, Hobbs sends an empowering message that users are not beholden to propagandists. However, this is contradicted, one paragraph later, by Hobbs’ contention that “throughout history, propagandists have chosen whether to unify or divide people, depending on their own strategic goals” (p. xiv-xv). Hobbs at times seems to be promising readers that they have the power to circumvent propagandists’ messaging, while simultaneously portraying readers as powerless to the will of the propagandist. For example, Hobbs excuses CNN’s Brian Stelter for repeatedly dedicating a disproportionate amount of precious broadcast time to trivial stories about Donald Trump rather than more newsworthy stories. Hobbs explains that Stelter was simply a powerless victim of Trump’s propaganda, which, like all effective propaganda, steals and holds an audience’s attention. This is inconsistent with the claim that audiences have the power to interpret and respond to messaging. Hobbs’s apologetic analysis feeds into the notion that Trump possesses some unique power to direct the news media cycle. Of course, this

ignores the agency of Stelter, and the corporate news business model that depends on lucrative ratings (p. 140)

Mind Over Media provides some useful scaffolding for educators interested in enhancing their pedagogical approach to propaganda. Hobbs introduces pedagogical approaches to propaganda that discuss social media platforms as a form of data currency; the six paradigms now being used by educators, journalists, and librarians to help students navigate the so called fake news they encounter online (the propaganda model of news, information literacy, media literacy, news literacy, online civic reasoning, and youth participatory politics); and the types of fake news (sponsored content; partisan news; conspiracy theories and pseudoscience; parody or satire; hoaxes and memes; bots, trolls, and sock puppets; Government sponsored news; and errors in journalism). Most interestingly, Hobbs, who spent years, defending her support for Channel One, a corporate-sponsored daily news program intended for classroom use (Folkemer, & Hobbs, 1994; Hobbs, 2010), rightly admits that educators should be wary of corporate educational content because it can serve to indoctrinate students. Hobbs uses the example of biotechnology firms, which provide video lesson plans that narrowly shape students' understanding of genetically modified vegetables.

In the end, *Mind Over Media* over-promises and under-delivers. It is not always clear if Hobbs is writing to a teacher, student, or lay-person, or if she is discussing propaganda or education. The threads and audiences that this book seeks to bring together are ambitious, and Hobbs deserves credit for trying to tackle such a far-reaching set of topics. However, readers would be better served identifying content tailored to their specific reading level (from kindergarten to graduate school) and needs (educators, student, or lay-person).

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About the Reviewer

Dr. Nolan Higdon is an author and university lecturer of history and media studies. Higdon has authored numerous books and journal articles including *The Anatomy of Fake News: A Critical News Literacy Education* (University of California Press, 2020). His areas of concentration include digital culture, news media history, and critical media literacy. Higdon is a founding member of the Critical Media Literacy Conference of the Americas. He sits on the boards of the Action Coalition for Media Education (ACME) and Northwest Alliance For Alternative Media And Education.



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