Online Propaganda and the Proliferation of Hate

This lesson is part of USE, UNDERSTAND & CREATE: A Digital Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools: http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework.

Overview

In this lesson students learn about the ways that propaganda techniques are used to promote hatred and intolerance online. The lesson begins with a class discussion about what propaganda is and how it works. Students will review various types of propaganda deployed for a variety of purposes and explore how propaganda can be used as a tool for promoting hatred. For homework, students analyze examples of propaganda techniques found online and identify the rhetorical devices used.

Learning Outcomes

Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- develop an awareness of how propaganda is used in everyday society
- develop an understanding of the ways in which propaganda is used to misinform, anger, and incite people to hatred or xenophobia
- learn to adopt a skeptical approach to truth claims made by propaganda

Preparation and Materials

Prepare to project the *Propaganda Slideshow*

Photocopy or make electronically available *Propaganda Against Hate (Assignment Sheet)*

Review the teacher backgrounder *Complicated Conversations in the Classroom*

- *Optional:* Send home the parent tip sheet *Talking to Kids About Hate Online*
- *Optional:* Review the MediaSmarts articles on Online Hate, Authenticating Information and Fair Dealing for Media Education

Procedure

What is Propaganda?

Show **slide 1** of the *Propaganda Slideshow* and ask students what they think propaganda is. After they have volunteered a few ideas or definitions (*don't try to develop a final definition yet*) show **slide 2** and ask if students consider this to be propaganda. Why or why not? (*Again, don't correct students or try to reach a consensus -- just gather student contributions and go on.*)

Advance to **slide 3** and ask: How is it different from or similar to the first slide? How do those similarities and differences shed light on what propaganda is?.

Show **slide 4** and ask, again, if this is propaganda. Why or why not? How is it different from or similar to the third and fourth slides?

Tell students that all three of the slides they've seen so far are, indeed, examples of propaganda..

Ask: Based on these three examples, how would they define propaganda?

Advance to **slide five** and explain the following elements of the concept:

- Propaganda uses images that resonate with you emotionally
- Propaganda tries to get you to believe in an idea or to feel a certain way.
- Propaganda attempts to convince you by manipulating your emotions rather than making a logical argument.

Ask them if they can think of any examples of propaganda that they encounter on a daily basis. (Possible examples include advertising or political campaigns; again, don't comment on students' contributions yet but simply note them.)

Advance through slides 6-11 and explain that propaganda can be used to provoke positive images: pride (the famous image of "Rosie the Riveter" encouraged women working for the war effort during World War II); hope (posters promoting Canada to potential immigrants made it seem much more welcoming than it often was); and love (the PSA plays on parents' desire to protect their children to encourage them to use the correct car seat.)

Advance to slides 12-13 and point out that while all propaganda tries to persuade you emotionally, rather than making a logical argument, it is not always for a bad purpose: for instance it would be hard to complain about a propaganda message encouraging people to brush their teeth.

Advance to slides 14-15 and say that it's essential to find out the motivation behind propaganda: the same message reads very differently if it was made to promote a dental practice.

Recognizing Hate Propaganda

Advance to **slide 16** and tell students that hate groups often use propaganda because while they may sometimes pretend to make logical arguments they are really most interested in manipulating you emotionally. (This is why even when they supply evidence or statistics these are misrepresented, cherry-picked or simply made up.)

Now distribute the *Ideologies of Hate* handout and advance to **slide 17.** Explain that to recognize hate propaganda we need to understand the *ideologies of hate* that they use to try to manipulate you.

Advance to **slide 18** and read through the entry on *Othering and dehumanization* in the handout.

Advance to **slide 19** and ask the class how this World War I propaganda poster uses this technique. (Point out that war propaganda and hate propaganda often use the same techniques because they are both aimed at justifying hatred and violence against an enemy.) Here Germany is represented as a dangerous ape who is threatening a helpless woman.

Advance to **slide 20** and read through the entry on *Victimhood* in the handout.

Advance to **slide 21** and ask the class how this World War II propaganda poster uses this technique. Here Japan and Germany are depicted as monsters threatening a woman and helpless child.

Advance to **slide 22** and read through the entry on *Secret enemies* in the handout.

Advance to **slide 23** and ask the class how this parody propaganda poster uses this technique. Here we are being told that any of our neighbours might be a zombie and as a result we must be ready to inform on them (which will presumably result in their being killed.)

Advance to **slide 24** and read through the entry on *Us versus them* in the handout.

Advance to **slide 25** and ask the class how this Australian World War I propaganda poster uses this technique. Here we are being told that war is inevitable—the only question is where the war will happen.

Advance to **slide 26** and read through the entry on *Justifying violence* in the handout.

Advance to **slide 27** and ask the class how these World War II propaganda posters use this technique. In the first image, violence is justified *explicitly* (by showing the German soldier being attacked from the viewer's point of view); in the second it is justified *implicitly* (saying it's necessary to fight Germany to prevent an attack on religion.)

Advance to **slide 28** and tell the class that you are now going to see some recent examples of hate propaganda. For each one they will try to identify which ideologies of hate are being used.

Advance to **slide 29.** This Facebook post uses *secret enemy* ("they are not asylum seekers") and *us versus them* ("they are invaders.") It *justifies violence* against refugees in the same way as the image of the boot crushing the church: by showing a beloved symbol being attacked. Tell students that none of these images are actually what the post claims they are: the top one shows a political candidate's banner being burned, cropped so that only the red and white stripes at the bottom are visible; the second is of a protest in London, U.K in 2010.; the third is from a protest in Ohio in 2016.

Ask students how they could find out if these images were what the post claims they are. Suggest that they could use a *reverse image search* such as TinEye.com to *find the source* of the photos, or *use fact-checking tools* such as MediaSmarts' fact-checking search engine (bit.ly/fact-search) to find out if this story has been debunked. (See www.breakthefake.ca for more on how to verify claims and images online.)

Advance to **slide 30.** This cartoon uses *secret enemy* (literally showing refugees as a 'trojan horse') and *victimhood* (the Uncle Sam character, representing White Americans, is accused of being racist for what the cartoon suggests is reasonable skepticism.) Those with a knowledge of the story of the trojan horse will also read this as *us versus them* because it is suggesting that refugees will destroy America once they are inside it, as the hidden Greeks did to Troy.

Advance to **slide 31**. This post is an example of *victimhood* (with the innocent child—similar to the one in the "Buy Victory Bonds" poster—positioned as in need of defending) and *us versus them* (because the post equates a "safe" nation with a "White" one.)

Advance to **slide 32**. This image is a particularly blunt example of *dehumanization*, literally saying "politicians aren't people" but rather "property of the state." The image of the noose is clearly *justifying violence* towards politicians who are seen as disloyal.

The image is also an example of *dog-whistling*, a technique hate groups use to send messages that mean different things to different audiences. In this case it is a reference to a racist novel that features a mass execution of non-White Americans and "traitorous" politicians. While people who are just sympathetic to the racist message would only see the surface meaning, people who are already familiar with hate propaganda will recognize the specific reference as a call to action.

Advance to **slide 33**.This post is an example of *victimhood* because it presents a beloved cultural figure (Tintin) as being under threat. It is also an example of *us versus them* because, like the "Will you fight now" poster, it suggests that failing to take action will result in the nation's (cultural) destruction. It too is an example of dog-whistling, referring to a conspiracy theory that Western governments are intentionally trying to replace the White population with immigrants.

Advance to **slide 34** This post is an example of *dehumanization (*representing immigrants as literally inhuman by equating them with the Uruk-Hai from the *Lord of the Rings* movies, from which the image was taken) and *us versus them* (suggesting that immigrants want to destroy Western societies rather than join them); in context, the two clearly combine to *justify violence*. It is also an example of *victimhood* as, by parodying arguments that might be made against the speaker's position, the speaker is shown as having been unfairly attacked.

Point out the blue check mark and explain to students that means the poster's account has been verified on Twitter. Tell them that being verified on a social network does *not* mean a source is reliable, only that they have proven they are who they say they are.

Advance to **slide 35** and tell the class that even when a propaganda message includes facts or statistics it's not actually inviting you to think logically: if you did you might ask about what's missing in this graphic - where the statistics came from, whether they're accurate, how they compare to past numbers, and why we should think they're a problem. The purpose instead is to provoke an emotional reaction through claims like *victimhood* (suggesting White people are "Earth's most endangered species"), *secret enemies* (if White people are endangered, it follows the other people are the ones endangering them) and *othering* and *us versus them* (representing different races as ideograms of different colours, suggesting a fundamental difference between them).

Propaganda against hate

Advance to **slide 36** and tell the class that while we should always be cautious of propaganda because it tries to manipulate us emotionally, rather than making a logical argument, it can be used for positive ends as well. This should not replace more thought-out arguments but can have a powerful effect when used to counter hate propaganda.

Advance to **slide 37**. This public service announcement from the 1950s counters *othering* and *us versus them* by defining them as un-American.

Advance to **slide 38**. This parody public service announcement counters *dehumanization* by emphasizing the similarities between 'mutants" (a fictional persecuted group in the *X-Men* comics and movies) and non-mutant humans.

Distribute the assignment sheet *Propaganda Against Hate* and tell students they will be creating a propaganda poster designed to specifically counter one or more of the ideologies of hate studied in class. The poster should include text and at least one image. *(Depending on the time and technology available, you may permit students to create media installations such as videos, animations, or audio recordings of songs or broadcasts instead.)* They do not have to create the image(s.) The assignment sheet has some suggestions for sources of copyright-free images for students to use in their posters. You may also want to read the MediaSmarts article Fair Dealing for Media Education (https://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/media-issues/intellectual-property/fair-dealing-media-education) to help give your students guidance on using other images legally and ethically.

When students have completed the poster (or other text) they then write a paragraph identifying which ideology (or ideologies) of hate they chose to counter and how the text and design elements they chose will work to counter them and promote positive values.

If you wish you can have a vernissage of posters once the project has been completed so that students can see each others' work.

Propaganda Against Hate

For this project you will create a propaganda poster designed to specifically counter one or more of the ideologies of hate we studied in class:

- Othering and dehumanization

- Victimhood

- Secret Enemies

- Us Versus Them

- Justifying Violence

You can do this by *highlighting the flaws and/or dangers* of those ideologies, by *promoting values that are opposed* to those ideologies, or both.

Your poster should include text and at least one image. You do not have to create the images but you must give credit and ensure that you have a legal right or license to use them. Here are some copyright-cleared image sources to get you started:

- pexels.com

- thenounproject.org

- archive.org

- pics4learning.com

- openclipart.com

When you have finished your poster, write a paragraph explaining which ideology (or ideologies) of hate you chose to counter, which strategy or strategies you used (confronting the ideology or promoting opposite values) and how that was achieved through the text and design elements you chose.

Ideologies of Hate

There's a big difference between hate speech and making real political points. One way to tell the difference is to look for *ideologies of hate*: these are basic ideas that are found in hate material and not usually found in legitimate discussion. (An *ideology* is a system of ideas or a way of thinking.) Writers who use these ideas are trying to play on your emotions to get you to agree with them.

Othering and Dehumanization

The most important hateful idea is that the world is divided into two groups: "Us" and "Them." Hate content creates an idea of an "Other" who is absolutely and unchangeably different from us. Writers who use this idea will always emphasize things that make the Other seem different and will argue that people are born different, rather than the differences come from our cultures or how we are raised. Sometimes writers will use negative terms for the Other or compare them to animals to portray them this way.

The Other is usually shown as either *inferior* or *threatening* (or both). It's important to hate speech that the writer's group is shown as being both smarter and better than the Other. At the same time, the Other will often be shown as a threat to the writer's group. This is often done by misinterpreting facts, statistics or history to suggest that the Other is trying to hurt the writer's group. Othering and dehumanization can make it seem like violence against a group is acceptable and even necessary for your own group's survival. Usually, the writer will say that this is the fault of the Other or people within the group who've turned against it.

Victimhood

It's important for hatemongers to feel as though they are the victims and their group is under attack. Since we all sometimes feel like the world is against us, it can be very effective to tell us that our problems are somebody else's fault. Anyone who suffers as part of the struggle (including those who are arrested for hate crimes, or whose websites are shut down for spreading hate speech) are not just victims but *martyrs*, whose suffering is almost holy because it happened as part of the struggle. Also, if members of the writer's group are the real victims, this means that people we have designated as Other are not victims, so we don't need to feel any sympathy for them.

Secret Enemies

One of the clearest signs that an argument is based on hate is showing one or more groups as secretly plotting against the writer's group. Sometimes the group being targeted is shown as being manipulated by another, even more evil group (to explain how they can be both dangerous and inferior.) In some cases the secret enemy may be a group that does not even exist, such as a conspiracy, secret society or even aliens.

Member's of the writer's group who don't share the writer's prejudices are portrayed as being "asleep" or "sheep" while the writer and others like them "have their eyes open." To explain why the crimes of these secret enemies are not reported, hate groups will often say that the targeted groups are in control of the news media.

Us Versus Them

Another sign of an argument coming from hate is the idea that the groups cannot co-exist: conflict is inevitable. An extreme version of this is *accelerationsism*, suggesting that a war will happen soon between the writer's group and the Other and that the writer's group must be prepared to be on top.

Justifying Violence

Hate propaganda often tries to *justify violence* against the othered group(s). Sometimes it will openly state that violence is needed and justified; other times it will *imply* that by using one of the other images such as victimhood or us versus them.

Task Assessment Rubric: Propaganda Poster

	Learning Expectations	*Achievement*
Use Skills and competencies that fall under "use" range from basic technical know-how – using computer programs such as word processors, web browsers, email, and other communication tools – to the more sophisticated abilities for accessing and using knowledge resources, such as search engines and online databases, and emerging technologies such as cloud computing.	*Finding and Verifying:* locate, organize, analyze, evaluate, synthesize, and ethically use information from a variety of sources and media *Making and Remixing:* select and use appropriate technology to effectively create a media text	Insufficient (R); Beginning (1); Developing (2); Competent (3) Confident (4)
Understand Understand includes recognizing how networked technology affects our behaviour and our perceptions, beliefs and feelings about the world around us. Understand also prepares us for a knowledge economy as we develop information management skills for finding, evaluating and effectively using information to communicate, collaborate and solve problems.	*Ethics and Empathy:* understand the dynamics of hate propaganda and how it affects all of the people involved *Community Engagement:* understand how meaning is produced through multimedia (text, images, audio, video) understand the responsibility of individuals to engage with biased or hateful content online *Finding and Verifying:* recognize bias, loaded language and other persuasive techniques identify the point of view of a text	Insufficient (R); Beginning (1); Developing (2); Competent (3) Confident (4)

	Learning Expectations	*Achievement*
Create Create is the ability to produce content and effectively communicate through a variety of digital media tools. It includes being able to adapt what we produce for various contexts and audiences; to create and communicate using rich media such as images, video and sound; and to effectively and responsibly engage with user-generated content such as blogs and discussion forums, video and photo sharing, social gaming and other forms of social media. The ability to create using digital media ensures that Canadians are active contributors to digital society.	*Community Engagement:* make valuable contributions to the public knowledge domain (e.g. wikis, public forums, reviews) *Finding and Verifying:* create new artistic, critical or analytical works	Insufficient (R); Beginning (1); Developing (2); Competent (3) Confident (4)