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Upon learning the definition of propaganda at the beginning of this course, I take a look back at one of the first assignments that challenged us to define propaganda in our own personal words.  I stated that propaganda is “ideas, and a way to communicate these ideas in an often times exaggerated way to spread a certain point of view”.  For not knowing much information about what propaganda is, I think this was an accurate description, however, after coming to the end of this course, I now know that propaganda has many forms, many definitions, and can be either negative or positive.  The word has a wide variety of definitions but no matter how it is defined, propaganda is everywhere in our world.  It is in the news, the media, advertising, entertainment, and politics.  Ultimately, we see propaganda in our life every day and it is impossible to avoid.

Due to the impact that propaganda has on almost every aspect of our world, the use of social media to persuade and influence people has increased.  However, with the use of social media as a new form of propaganda, unfortunately, there have been many downsides to this type of platform.  A group that uses social media and propaganda hand in hand in a negative way is ISIS.  According to Brooking, Emerson & Singer, “Social media has empowered ISIS recruiting, helping the group draw at least 30,000 foreign fighters, from some 100 countries, to the battlefields of Syria and Iraq. It has aided the seeding of new franchises in places ranging from Libya and Afghanistan to Nigeria and Bangladesh.  And it is how the group has inspired acts of terror on five continents” (2016).  The use of social media is what has catapulted ISIS into what they consider success and has been the main force in their persuasion.  Not only is ISIS powerful through their use of social media, but they are also powerful in their use of visuals.  In *The Power of Visual Material: Persuasion, Emotion and Identification*, Joffe states that “Visual material appears to be especially memorable and the salience that this confers may make it particularly forceful. This links to the vivid quality of visual material” (2008).  A main part of powerful propaganda is using visuals and learning about the ways that ISIS creates propaganda has been eye opening for me and beneficial in the way I view international terrorism and the impact that it can have not only the United States, but specifically users of social media.  Previously in 2014, when the organization was known as Al Queda in Iraq, beheading videos of captures were produced and shared, becoming one of the most influential propaganda tactics that was used.  They wanted to scare as many people as they could by sharing these gruesome videos.  After reading the article titled *A Tool to Delete Beheading Videos Before They Even Appear Online,*I was somewhat shocked to learn that some social media companies weren’t fully on board with teaming up with a detection system.  Anything that can be done to help put a stop to ISIS’s viral posts and powerful social media use should be executed.  Waddell states,  “The creators of a child-porn detection system want to block terrorist propaganda from news feeds- but social media companies aren’t convinced it’s a good idea” (2016).  Going along with the article by Waddell, an article titled *Why ISIS is Winning the Social Media War* states that the reason attempts to neutralize the Islamic State’s power is “because the architects of our countermeasures fail to grasp what makes the organization’s content and distribution method so distinctive”. With the Islamic State becoming so successful thanks to their mastery of modern digital tools that help produce and spread their propaganda, it is difficult to believe that this can’t be stopped, or better filtered.  ISIS’s powerful and effective propaganda can be seen through their ability to recruit strangers.  As stated by Koerner, “The Islamic State is content to crowdsource its social media activity—and its violence—out to individuals with whom it has no concrete ties” (Koerner).  It is apparent that their propaganda tactics are working if they are able to persuade individuals with little knowledge or that are unaware of what they are going to be agreeing to, to join their efforts in attacking the US.  As a result, their uses of the digital services and platforms that have become essential to our daily lives have been taken advantage of by ISIS through their propaganda techniques.  Unlike ISIS, there are groups and individuals that use images, visuals, and social media to promote and spread positive messages, such as the producers behind the KONY 2012 video.

While viewing the KONY 2012 video, the main qualities of propaganda that are used to capture the audience and get the message across is “activating strong emotions, responding to the audience needs, simplifying information and ideas, and attacking opponents” (Hobbs, 2016).  The KONY 2012 video about the genocide in Central Africa became one of the most widely viewed viral videos ever and is a strong example of positive propaganda.  This film was created in order to bring awareness and understanding to a complicated, violent, and controversial topic.  Through the use of producing a video, interviewing children, showing the living conditions, the producers are able to capture the emotions and attention of the viewer.   During the video it is highlighted that these children are living in terrible conditions and their lives are constantly in danger.  It makes you feel sympathetic for the children and puts into perspective the great lives that we live every day here in the United States.  “It simplifies complicated issues through the use of evocative symbols, whether in written, musical, visual, or digital form, or order to help channel complex human emotions and shape attitudes and behaviors" (Hobbs, 2013, 626).  The producers of this film took a complicated issue and explained it to the viewers as he is explaining it to his five year old son.  It wasn’t my first time viewing this video because I had watched a presentation on it in high school.  However, viewing and interpreting it while in a college class about propaganda has brought much more value to the film and I was able to connect with the video, understand the problem, and see how such a strong message can be produced through the use of a visual.  Not only did this film activate the viewer’s emotion and simplify information to direct the audience toward the desired goal, but it also used the technique of attacking an opponent.  In this case, the opponent is Joseph Kony and the creators of this film want the viewers to have a feeling of being a hero and activate feelings of pride by becoming informed of what this ‘villain’ is doing and how they can help.    Consequences of the use of propaganda can be unpredictable, just like how KONY 2012 began to spread virally.  With this film being one of the most viral videos every produced, it is important to understand what makes something become viral and why.

Sharing online content is a fundamental part of our modern world.  Anything you share online has the ability to go viral; it all depends on what you are posting.  Virality is when an image, video, or piece of information circulates rapidly and widely between users.  According to Emerson & Singer, “marketing experts have long known, that compelling imagery matters far more than any accompanying text in determining whether or not something goes viral” (2016).  This explains why the KONY 2012 film went viral and ISIS’s success in viral video and social media posts. Berger & Milkman state that “One reason people may share stories, news, and information is because they contain useful information” (2011). To activate viewer’s emotions with useful information while creating propaganda is a powerful technique to persuasion.  With part of propaganda being virality, people will often share emotionally charged content to help make sense of their experiences or to deepen social connection.  If people are sharing positive content it may also help boost other’s moods. (Berger, Milkman, 2011).

For the duration of this course, propaganda, politics, fake news, and virality were all relevant and existing in our society, making the course readings and lessons interesting to apply and understand in real world situations.  During the 2016 Presidential campaign, fake news became extremely relevant and dominating in our media.  Along with that, comes the connection to Russia and their use of propaganda in attempt to scare Americans as well, especially during the election.  When reading about “The PropOrNot Team”, I found myself questioning whether the intentions of this independent group were to help Americans, or to scare them even more.  One major learning point is that you never truly know the motives behind propaganda and the PropOrNot website is an example of how this is true.  They describe themselves as a “newly-formed independent team of computer scientists, statisticians, national security professionals, journalists and political activists, dedicated to identifying propaganda- particularly Russian propaganda targeting a U.S. audience” (Adrian, 2016).   This organization spread fake news articles across the Internet that were attempting to hurt Hillary Clinton and help Donald Trump during the election.  The story was on top of the Washington Post’s most-read list and was even shared by politicians on Twitter.  There have been several claims that Russian propaganda was being produced for Trump’s election and both republican and democratic news sources were reporting stories on the fake news.  This reinstates that propaganda is everywhere in our world and anyone can become a propagandist.  Even credible news sources have been seen to report on stories that will get the most clicks, likes, or shares.  Another large aspect of Russian propaganda comes from RT, formerly known as Russia Today.  RT started out by telling positive stories in 2005 about the history and culture of Russia.  However, due to poor ratings, they decided to change their strategy and eventually became a “Platform for Western conspiracy-theorists, far-right nationalists, and far-left radicals who sympathize with Russia” (Delman, 2015).  Similar to Chinese propaganda, RT started out with the same intent, attempting to promote a positive image.  However, when it comes down to it, fake news is what spreads, what catches people’s attention and is ultimately the direction that RT and Chinese propaganda ended up taking. Just because Russia and China are very different countries from the United States, it became clear to me that there are some similarities in the use of propaganda. No matter what country you are in, the basis and foundation of propaganda remains the same: the goal is to persuade and control. Control is more so a factor is Russia and China than it is here in the United States. However, control can come in different ways such as trying to control behavior when it comes to buying a product, eating a certain kind of food, believing in a certain religion, etc.,. The desire to control behavior and thoughts are the force behind propaganda, and a large realization I have come to at the end of this course

Each week I began to realize how much propaganda surrounds me in my everyday life, something I never realized before taking this course.  Whether it is in my Facebook newsfeed from a friend, a news article, a television show, or a viral post that I click on social media; it comes from many sources and can hold a positive or negative message. However, I don’t feel like I can’t believe or trust anything I see in the media, I am just much more informed, aware, and educated on propaganda and how to detect it, how to understand it, and ways to interpret it.

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