



“A most mischievous word”: Neil Postman’s approach to propaganda education

*Before there was a term called media literacy education, there was an interdisciplinary group of writers and thinkers who taught people to guard themselves against the manipulative power of language. One of the leaders of this group was Neil Postman, known for his best-selling book published in 1985, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Early in his career, Postman promoted a pedagogy of teaching and learning about language, media, and culture. In defining propaganda as “a most mischievous word,” Postman aimed to heighten learners’ attention on the abstracting function of language and its capacity to reshape attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge.*

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Research questions

- What concepts and instructional practices did Neil Postman use to help people learn to critically analyze contemporary propaganda?
- How does Postman’s exploration of language and meaning fit into the larger history of media literacy education?

Essay summary

- Postman defines propaganda as intentionally designed communication that invites people to respond emotionally, immediately, and in an either-or manner, emphasizing its capacity to undo more reasoned habits of mind. By defining propaganda in relation to its form, context, and impact on audiences, Postman acknowledges that propaganda is present in many forms of contemporary media, including entertainment, information, and persuasion.
- Postman’s pedagogy builds upon literary close reading practices, and he uses comparison contrast to examine an example of emotion-laden propaganda and compare it with another form of expression that purports to be more informational. Transparent and emotionally evocative propaganda is not to be feared, Postman explains. But when propaganda is not transparent about

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its aims, when it uses language in ways that distort reality, it can be harmful, even when its intentions are well-meaning and designed to support a worthy cause.

- Through the strategic selection of propaganda artifacts, educators may provoke learners in ways that enable dialogue and discussion to contribute towards the building of a community of inquiry. From this, learners gain awareness of the value of encountering multiple, diverse, and conflicting interpretations of media messages. As a result, pedagogies rooted in discussion and dialogue contribute to civic education.
- Although Postman advocated for dialogue and discussion as a primary pedagogy, he acknowledged the importance of students learning to use the power of information and communication to make a difference in the world. By creating propaganda, students learn about the social responsibilities of digital authorship.

Implications

As an effort to help learners of all ages navigate increasingly complex media and information ecosystems, the pedagogy of media literacy has a long intellectual history. Although the term “media literacy” only became widely used during the 1990s, ideas underpinning its practice were germinating during the early part of the 20th century, when many philosophers, writers, critics, and academics were exploring the difficulties of living in a symbolic world replete with mass media and communication. Scholars including Kenneth Burke, Aldous Huxley, Alfred North Whitehead, Ludwig Wittgenstein, C. S. Peirce, John Dewey, Ernest Cassirer, Edward Sapir, and I. A. Richards all offered ideas about the relationship between expression, media, education, and democracy that influenced the work of later educators and scholars who developed and used the term media literacy (Hobbs, 2016).

In the 1930s, as fascism grew in Europe and around the world, scholars noted that although humans’ use of language enabled vast innovation, it also put people at tremendous risk from the harmful propaganda of demagogues and dictators. Educators were fascinated with the challenge of teaching about contemporary propaganda in the years leading up to World War II, as film and radio offered new ways to combine entertainment, information, and persuasion. The Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA) offered monthly publications to educators who were urged to help people recognize the rhetorical strategies used by propagandists (Miller & Edwards, 1936). Based in New York City, the organization had active correspondence with high school teachers from across the region and across the nation. More than 1 million students participated in IPA learning activities on the topic of propaganda. Although the IPA folded at the onset of American involvement in the war, many teachers continued to teach students how to recognize “glittering generalities,” “card stacking,” and “bandwagon” and other rhetorical appeals (Hobbs & McGee, 2014). Although we don’t know for certain, Neil Postman himself may have learned to identify propaganda techniques as a high school student in New York City public schools.

Neil Postman, known for his best-selling book published in 1985, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, influenced a generation of media literacy educators with his insights on inquiry learning in and out of schools, the role of technology in shaping culture and values, and the narratives that underpin the aims of education. Early in his career, Postman promoted a pedagogy of teaching and learning about language, media, and culture that focused on the systematic analysis and exploration of modes of communication (Postman, 1974a), which he termed media ecology (Postman, 1974b). But how does Postman’s work on propaganda fit into the history of media literacy and propaganda education?

Actually, Postman’s interest in propaganda was incidental to a much larger narrative, situated at the blurry intersections of the humanities, media studies, and education. Well before he became a media scholar, Postman was a teacher and teacher educator (Postman, 1958; 1961). Postman’s work

demonstrates the central practice of the critical analysis of language (Postman, 1976), using specific media texts or artifacts of popular culture. In examining Postman's approach to teaching propaganda in the 1970s in the years leading up to his formulation of the scholarly practice of media ecology, there are some themes in his work that have implications for how propaganda education is currently conceptualized within contemporary dialogues about media literacy education. When media artifacts are strategically chosen by the instructor, they may provoke learners into genuine thinking (Postman, 1979). The resulting dialogue, discussion, and creative expression in the classroom enable students to recognize the active process of meaning-making and interpretation. Such pedagogies may cultivate communities of inquiry that embody the collaborative practices of engaged citizenship (Kahne & Bowyer, 2019). For these reasons, Postman's close analysis of 20th-century propaganda offers some value for today's educators seeking to help learners thrive in a culture saturated with new forms of digital propaganda.

The pedagogy of media literacy education is rooted in the practices of critical reading and creative media production, where a focus on media and popular culture enables rich connections between classroom and contemporary culture (Hobbs, 2010). These practices were foundational to Neil Postman's pedagogy and stemmed from his background in English education (Thaler, 2003). Following in the footsteps of Marshall McLuhan (1960), Postman emphasized the value of using topics, issues, and materials that were relevant to children and young people (Postman, 1995). Like McLuhan, Postman included examples from advertising, news, music, and even fashion, conflating city and classroom (Mason, 2016). By emphasizing the interconnectedness of technology, communication, art, and symbolic forms, both Postman and McLuhan wanted to help people better "understand the past, make sense out of the present, and provide us with the best hope of anticipating and planning for the future" (Strate, 2017, p. 245).

Because propaganda comes in many diverse genres and forms (including public service announcements, political campaigns, news media, movies, memes, and social media, just to name a few) it provides a rich array of opportunities for learners to engage in sense-making using strategies of reasoning and interpretation. Sadly, the scholarly literature on literacy education still makes little acknowledgement of the fact that advertising and propaganda are persuasive genres that demand different types of critical reading practices than texts whose purpose is primarily informational (Hobbs, 2020a). To interpret persuasive genres, learners must be attentive to the emotional dimensions of messages as they make inferences about audience interpretation and authorial intent. They must imagine the potential impact and consequences of messages upon different viewers, readers, or listeners. By identifying the target audience and rhetorical appeals used to construct a message, learners come to appreciate how propaganda engages the active participation of audiences, whose hopes, fears, and dreams are addressed through symbolic expression.

Long before terms such as implicit bias and confirmation bias were formulated, Postman articulated how dialogue and discussion activities increase learners' awareness of how their own beliefs and prior knowledge might lead them to differentially interpret the meaning, quality, utility, and value of propaganda that can be found in information, entertainment, and persuasion. Moreover, as learners interpret and analyze propaganda, conversations inevitably get into deeper terrain, opening up ethical issues including the changing nature of knowledge, the limits of human freedom, and the role of propaganda in gaining and maintaining social and institutional power (Hobbs, 2020b).

Postman understood that the motives of the propagandist were inherently unknowable and that even propaganda that is designed to support or advance a worthy cause can be harmful when it distorts people's understanding of social reality. Building on the work of Jacques Ellul (1979), Postman recognized that moral and ethical judgments about the relative benefits and potential harms of propaganda are baked into the interpretation process. For this reason, people need advanced skills of interpretation and

analysis because of the linguistic and epistemic mischief caused by propaganda, which can create “a thicket of unreality” (Boorstin, 1961, p. 3).

Writing at a time before email and the Internet were becoming ubiquitous, Postman recognized that information technologies were creating a culture “without moral foundation” by altering our understanding of what is real (Postman, 1994). He noted that every tool has an ideological bias, a predisposition to construct the world as one thing rather than another. For today’s learners, understanding the propaganda function of algorithmic personalization may lead to a deeper consideration of texts that tap into audience values for aesthetic, commercial, and political purposes (Hobbs, 2020a). But these competencies and skills cannot merely be transmitted through a teacher’s lecture. They must be cultivated through active participation in a discourse community.

Recently, there has been a call for media literacy education to focus less on knowledge and skills and more on “connecting humans, embracing differences” through relational activities, where the process matters as much as the outcome (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017, p. 451). As my analysis of Postman’s lesson reveals, media literacy education has long been conceptualized as a dimension of civic education; indeed, much of Postman’s writing about education emphasizes its role in the construction of community, where the critical analysis of media messages is explicitly presented as a collaborative practice of citizenship, designed to advance the exercise of democratic rights and civil responsibilities. For example, in a brilliantly titled book, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (1969), Postman and Weingartner explain how inquiry-learning pedagogies advance learner confidence and autonomy by empowering students to take responsibility for their own interpretations of the symbolic environment. In their formulation of inquiry learning, the teacher rarely tells students a personal opinion about a particular social or political issue and does not accept a single statement as an answer to a question. The teacher encourages student-to-student interaction as opposed to student-to-teacher interaction and the teacher generally avoids acting as a mediator or judge. Lessons develop from the interests and responses of students and not from a predetermined curriculum.

Such discourse alters the nature of the authority relationship between teacher and students, putting students in the driver’s seat. When students have more control over their own learning, motivation and engagement improve. Postman knew that these ideas about the value of activating critical questions in the classroom would appeal to students at a time when they were increasingly questioning the “establishment.” He also knew that this way of teaching would be off-putting to traditionalists who cling to the power hierarchies embedded in teaching. He also knew it would be off-putting to protectionists who see media culture as the enemy of education. He gently provoked English teachers by noting, “If these questions strike you as politically dangerous, I would remind you that there is nothing more dangerous to the future of our country than curriculums which keep students playing with sentence diagrams while the languages of reality go swirling, uncomprehended, around their ears” (Postman, 1967, p. 1165).

This type of admonishment continues into the present era, as in the position statement developed by the National Council of Teachers of English (2019), which advocates for a new vision of English education. It urges English teachers to promote pedagogy and scholarly curricula in English and related subjects that instruct students in civic and critical literacy, helping students to “analyze and evaluate sophisticated persuasive techniques in all texts, genres, and types of media, current and yet to be imagined.” Teachers are also encouraged to “model civic literacy and conversation” where students can have an informed discussion and engage with current events and civic issues “while staying mindful and critical of the difference between the intent and impact of their language” (NCTE, 2019, p. 1).

Postman wanted teachers to feel deeply responsible for educating students who would be capable of democratic self-governance (Ross, 2009). Like Ellul (1973), he recognized that there is a moral and ethical dimension in resisting the technologies and the forms of propaganda that perpetuate illusions. But even more important than building people’s resistance to propaganda is the practice of restoring the public

sphere “by reclaiming participation in political debate and action” (Cunningham, 2002, p. 190). Media literacy activities function as civic education because they increase learners’ awareness of the epistemic value of encountering multiple, diverse, and even conflicting perspectives (Kahne et al., 2015).

Contemporary media literacy education emphasizes composing media, not just analyzing it. While he did not use the term media literacy, Postman did use the term multimedia literacy, referring specifically to a broadened conceptualization of the expressive function of literacy. According to Postman, students should express what they know through a wide range of communication skills beyond merely reading and writing. Educators should place equal importance on “speaking, listening, filming, audio-taping, video-taping, painting, and other possibilities” (Postman, 1974, p. 61). When students create propaganda for social causes that matter to them, they recognize that propaganda can be beneficial. Young people crave opportunities to develop civic identities as change agents (Hobbs, 2020b). Through the study of propaganda, learners inevitably reflect on the ethical obligations of the people who create media, those who provide digital platforms to distribute content, and those who not only make choices and interpret messages, but respond, remix, and share content.

Evidence

To better understand how Postman’s ideas about propaganda embodied some fundamental practices of what would later be called media literacy education, I first consider Postman’s unique definition of propaganda, presented as part of a “lesson plan” in his 1979 essay entitled “Propaganda.” This work was excerpted from his 1976 book, *Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk*. In this work, Postman’s identity as a teacher is quite evident. His exploration of propaganda focuses on both the dangers of either–or framing to short-circuit critical thinking and the many ways in which language (and other symbol systems) shape reality. These two ideas form a bedrock foundation for the later arguments he developed concerning the biases of technologies and their impact on culture and values. In analyzing propaganda, Postman shows how language limits critical thinking about the true complexity of the world and he offers a deceptively simple instructional practice that promotes engaged dialogue and discussion with the goal of fostering critical autonomy and civic participation in learners of all ages.

Postman’s definition of propaganda

In his 1979 essay, Postman defines propaganda in a unique way, as “language that invites us to respond emotionally, emphatically, more or less immediately, and in an either-or manner” (p. 130). Postman’s definition centers on the form and context of propaganda and its impact on readers, viewers, or listeners. This is a definition whose purpose seems aligned with the goals of an educator who wants people to be able to recognize and resist propaganda. As a definition, it also offers strategic insights for those who wish to create propaganda as a means to accomplish their activist goals.

Other definitions of propaganda of the time period seem to have different goals. For example, consider Ellul’s definition, where propaganda is distinguished by its reliance on technology, widespread dissemination, and embeddedness in institutions of power (Ellul, 1973). Writing at about the same time as Postman, Altheide and Johnson (1980, p. 23) offer a definition of propaganda as a communication strategy that uses truth to maintain an organization’s apparent legitimacy. Definitions of propaganda evolve and change over time because those who write definitions are responsive to the context and situation of a particular era (Cunningham, 2002). Today, new terms like computational propaganda have emerged to explain how power/knowledge structures are embodied in technologies, platforms, algorithms, and code (Woolley & Howard, 2018).

It is noteworthy that in his definition, Postman refuses to demonize or use metaphorical language that conceptualizes propaganda as a dangerous weapon. By including the memorable phrase about cultivating either-or thinking, he aims to foreground how language simplifies the natural complexity of the world. He is concerned that dichotomies like good/bad and true/false may activate tribal loyalties and identities that may lead people to bypass critical thinking. Postman resists the easy tendency to use propaganda as a "smear word" (McKenzie, 1942) because doing so would interfere with the principal insight that he aims to convey: the inevitable ways that language constructs and shapes social reality.

Language is not merely a set of rhetorical strategies, but a way that we humans interact with our environment. Through languages, art forms, symbol systems, technologies, and platforms, people relate to the environment as interdependent parts of an ecosystem. Propaganda simplifies complex information through abstracting, which is an active cognitive process where we take into ourselves something from the outside environment, using perception, information, and ideas "which provide us with a necessarily incomplete and selective summary, or map of our environment" (Strate, 2010, p. 35). Through abstracting, we collaboratively create and accumulate knowledge. But in this process, a lot is left out, because every choice must be a particular choice. Every word, graphic display, or numerical symbol is a particular, limited, and partial one.

Postman points out that because all language is essentially persuasive, "the distinction between persuasion and other types of talking does not seem to be very useful" (1979, p. 132). One of his first graduate students, Terence Moran, recalls that one of the first axioms Postman presented to the class was that "words themselves have no meanings, that only people have meanings which they try to express through words" (Moran, 2004, p. 26). For Postman, language does much more than merely describe events and things in the world; language also tells us what we should notice, who we should ignore, and what we should treasure or despise. Because the words people use have embedded ideologies, Postman appreciated Alfred Korzybski's point that "Whatever we say something is, it is not" (Postman, 2003, p. 358).

Comparison–contrast pedagogy

Postman's short essay offers a comparison-contrast activity designed to illustrate some key ideas about how the language of propaganda may short-circuit or hijack critical thinking. Postman describes an activity that is designed to promote dialogue and discussion. While he does not explicitly identify it as a lesson plan, his didactic use of language makes it evident throughout that the presentation of examples is designed as a learning activity. Using content about both the Vietnam War and the Black Power movement, Postman intentionally chooses topics certain to appeal to adolescents and young adult learners of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In modeling the use of contemporary news media in the English classroom, he shares two quite different forms of news propaganda that offer ideologically distinctive stances that support both causes.

The first artifact that Postman analyzes is a letter to the editor published in the *Indianapolis Star* in 1968, with the headline, "A Letter from a War Veteran." The letter takes on the fictionalized first-person voice of a dead soldier who died in the Vietnam War, referencing the loss of family members, and pulling out all the emotional stops to arouse patriotic feelings and support for the war effort. Postman notes that this work was "constructed to evoke Indianapolis passions in favor of the war" (Postman, 1979, p. 130). Letters to the editor may function as propaganda. They are transparent in their persuasive purpose and designed to unify a group of people and build social consensus.

Then he presents a brief, close analysis of an informative paragraph on the life of George Jackson, the founder of an African American Marxist–Leninist revolutionary prison activist group called the Black Guerilla Family. Postman's voice simply drips with sarcasm as he explains that the propaganda about George Jackson circulated among intellectuals in New York City "when it was the fashion to elevate

revolutionaries to sainthood" (p. 131). In analyzing how the passage presents a hagiographic version of Jackson's criminal history, making a violent man seem like a choirboy, Postman's tone is alternatively incredulous, lighthearted, and playful. He calls the reader's attention to the way narrative structure and language choices seem to minimize the scope of Jackson's criminal behavior. By representing Jackson in a heroic way, the author of the passage misleads readers, distorting reality. Postman does take pains to point out that he has no complaints about the man whose story is being told. What's arouses his ire is propaganda "that attempts to conceal itself as information" (p. 133). Postman also fears that people will become habituated to the emotional pull of propaganda, building on the work of Gustave LeBon in noting that propaganda can turn groups into intoxicated, mindless crowds.

Omitted from the short essay is any reflection on how learners may encounter such a lesson. We can easily imagine how students' engaged dialogue would revolve around their different allegiances towards the content of the two artifacts. Students who hate the Vietnam War might disagree with Postman's appreciation of the honest transparency of the pro-war letter writer, resenting the author's strategy for activating strong emotion and the depiction of sympathy for veterans. Students who see themselves as stakeholders in the fight against racism might be offended when Postman problematizes the warm-and-fuzzy depiction of the life history of an African-American prison activist. It's easy to imagine the lively response of learners to such an exercise as they find themselves with increased awareness of how their own beliefs, allegiances, values, and prior knowledge might lead them to differentially interpret the utility and validity of these two different forms of propaganda.

In selecting and analyzing these two examples of propaganda in news, Postman's goal here seems to provoke: he is challenging learners out of their quick and easy assumptions about good/bad and true/false. This instructional practice also enables Postman to show the value of comparison contrast in helping students recognize how authors can use language in ways that transparently reveal or strategically disguise their purposes, intentions, and goals.

In calling propaganda a most mischievous word, Postman heightens learners' attention on the abstracting function of language and its capacity to reshape attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge. Postman refuses to demonize sentimental, patriotic propaganda and he examines the potential harms of propaganda that misrepresents reality in order to promote a worthy cause. In doing so, Postman points out the power of language to activate strong emotions while simultaneously elucidating how well-meaning individuals can produce compelling unrealities in support of their causes.

Methods

Historical research methods were implemented in this study to examine Neil Postman's conceptualization of propaganda in relation to media literacy education. To help readers comprehend the textured complexities of the past, I provide a close analysis of a single comparison–contrast activity published in 1979 that demonstrates one lesson in the pedagogy of propaganda analysis. This work is explicated through document analysis, a qualitative research method used for contextualizing research within a subject or field (Bowen, 2009).

I focused my attention on understanding the context of Neil Postman's early work in education (published before 1980) to better understand significant influences on his pedagogical approach to the study of propaganda. Primary source materials include Postman's published books, journal articles, book reviews, magazine pieces for educational publications, and interviews. Postman's works that examined general semantics were included, but I did not focus on the body of work on media ecology which has been extensively reviewed by communication scholars. Secondary source materials included published works about Neil Postman by Lance Strate (2006), Terence Moran (2017, 2004) Thom Gencarelli (2000), and Peter Thaler (2003) who wrote about Postman's identity as a teacher and human being.

Of course, I also draw upon my own relationship with Postman and our occasional professional conversations about media literacy education. Document analysis has limitations: It does not provide all of the necessary information required to answer research questions. But this method helped me identify certain concepts and instructional practices that Postman used to help people learn to critically analyze contemporary propaganda well before the term “media literacy” was in wide circulation. Through my close reading of texts from the past, this paper shows how Postman’s work on language and meaning fits into the larger history of media literacy and propaganda education.

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