

Transcript

[0:01] (music)

Derek Bruff: [0:06] This is Leading Lines. I'm Derek Bruff. In this episode we're circling back to a favorite topic here on the podcast, media literacy. Leading Lines producer, Melissa Mallon, recently talked with Renee Hobbs, professor of communication studies at the University of Rhode Island, about her new book, *Mind Over Media: Propaganda Education for a Digital Age*.

[0:30] Professor Hobbs is a longtime leader in the field of media literacy education with a CV a mile long, and her new book distills her research and practice on propaganda education, a topic that is as timely as ever these days. In the interview, she talks about her entry into media literacy, how the field has changed over the decades, and how faculty and teachers and all disciplines can practice connecting their classrooms to the culture around them. (music)

Melissa Mallon: [1:05] I am very pleased to be interviewing one of my media literacy heroes, Renee Hobbs. She has just come out with a new book, which we will talk about shortly. But before we get into that, I just want to say welcome, Renee and thank you so much for being here.

Renee Hobbs: [1:25] I'm so happy to meet you, Melissa, and thank you so much for inviting me.

Melissa: [1:29] It is my pleasure. And I have said already in this short interview, how much of a fan I am of you. But I was wondering if you could share a little bit about your passions related to media literacy and what led you in this direction in your career.

Renee: [1:48] It seems like, the only way to describe to you how I stumbled in to media

literacy.

Melissa: [1:58] Stumbled? Ok.

Renee: [2:00] Yeah, is to explain that I was a double major at the University of Michigan in English literature and in a new major, at that time, called film videos studies. In that experience, I took a lot of film classes and I was really interested in, and I loved literature and I loved analyzing literature. And I was really intrigued about why we weren't analyzing the popular culture that was all around me.

[2:35] Until as a senior in college, I got to write a fifty-page paper on *Saturday Night Fever*, which had just been released in movie theaters. And the thrill of writing a fifty-page paper on *Saturday Night Fever* was at that time just mind-blowing, so mind-blowing. And I thought, okay, this has changed me profoundly, right? The way I see the world, the way I see popular culture, the way I see my own identity, the way I see myself as a media consumer, everything about the art of storytelling and the power of the relationship that we have with characters and ideas and information, it all just blew up for me.

[3:22] And so I desperately searched around to figure out, well, how could I keep learning about this in graduate school? And there were two options, right? I could go to a communication school where it seemed like they were very interested in the texts of mass communication at that time. Or I could go to an education school and think about the idea that people are learning from entertainment culture and media culture, that they're not even aware that they're learning.

[3:54] So that's what I decided to do. And when I was at Harvard Ed school, getting my EDD in human development and getting a big dose of educational media, right? And what that's all about. I was not allowed to write about media literacy. The term media literacy hadn't actually been developed yet, and there was only one dissertation in the university library by a guy named John Culkin, who critically analyzed a high-school class where kids made media. And I said, I want to do a dissertation on kids analyzing media. And I was told there's no literature on that. You can't do a dissertation on that topic. (laughs) So that started my passion for trying to make a literature for this field.

Melissa: [4:46] That's really fascinating.

Renee: [4:48] And cultivated community.

Melissa: [4:49] So I'm curious how you were able to work under those constraints and sort of push past them to start creating that community. With media literacy in particular, it's not one discipline. It's not, you know, one type of educator. It's all of us and everything we do. So can you talk a little bit about what that was like to be at the forefront of creating that community?

Renee: [5:15] Yeah. Well, of course it was just out of sheer desperation. It was like I needed people to talk to. (laughs) And it turned out that they were everywhere, right? They were in libraries. They were in K12 schools, right? They were artists working in communities, right? They were all over the place. And so I remember going to a conference in Canada about media literacy. I believe that was the first Canadian media literacy conference back in the eighties, right? And I remember being surprised there were only four or five Americans there. And I thought, oh no, no, no, no. There are more than four people. (laughs)

Melissa: [5:56] We got to change this.

Renee: [6:00] So with my friend, Liz Thoman, and a couple other people, we started a national organization. We started a club and it became the National Association for Media Literacy Education. And it really was just a chance for us to get together once a year and have in-depth conversations and arguments about what we were experiencing and what it meant.

Melissa: [6:35] So how, and I promise that we will talk about your book in a minute. But this is also very fascinating because it just being at the forefront of something like this, how have you seen the conversation change over the last thirty years?

Renee: [6:41] One thing that's not changed is that this group likes to circle the wagons and shoot in. (laughs) So for example, when Sam Weinberg started attacking the librarians for the checklist approach to information literacy and made it seem like his thing was so much superior to what the librarians were doing. That's a typical practice. We've been seeing that for thirty years. We've been fighting amongst ourselves about which kind of media literacy is better.

[7:21] And I will plead guilty to being one of those fighters. Since I have sparred with the people in news literacy. I have sparred with the academics doing teaching media literacy at

the college level. I've publicized my complaints in scholarly journals and elsewhere. And I feel like the energetic way in which we're all trying to apprehend this elephant. You know that, that parable of the blind men and the elephant, right, where you feel the tail and you say, the elephant is like a rope and I feel the body and say, oh no, the elephant is like a wall. Somebody else feels the tusk and says, the elephant is hard and pointy. So I think one of the reasons why the media literacy community is so lively and contentious and so diverse is because the thing we're trying to understand and study is huge and complicated and multi-dimensional.

Melissa: [8:25] And that's just what was going through my head when you were saying that, is it's so hard for scholars to agree on one tiny little, like reading a piece of literature that is contained within the two covers of a book. There's so many interpretations of something like that. But when you get to something as complex as news and media, especially now, and the way we consume it is different and the way we approach it is different and the way create it is different. Yeah. I can definitely see the issues there.

Renee: [8:59] Yeah. And I mean, one of the things that makes the field so interesting to me is the interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary nature of the field. As psychologists and sociologists and political scientists and people in information sciences and people in media studies, people in human development, the interdisciplinary lenses that we use to sort of make sense of our complex relationship with media and technology is really fascinating, but academics like to define their terms.

[9:31] So we've been fighting about what does media literacy mean for thirty years, and that term has changed over thirty years and is still changing to reflect the ways in which our engage with media and technology are changing. Which is why I'm kind of forgiving of the fact that we don't all agree. We don't all have the same understanding of media literacy and I'm very ecumenical. I've kind of got that big tent philosophy that says, whatever your understanding of media literacy is, you're welcome, right? Even though I might not embrace that practice or that definition, you're still part of the big tent.

Melissa: [10:11] Right. You know in a way, I think having some of those contrary voices does help push forward the message and you need that, right?

Renee: [10:20] Yeah, yeah.

Melissa: [10:22] So that, ok, I think this is actually a good time to start talking about your book because I have a kind of a similar question. You have just written a new book. You've written several books, but your newest one *Mind Over Media: Propaganda Education for a Digital Age*. Got my copy here too. (laughs) There's so much amazing content in here.

[10:45] So I have a twin sister who teaches fifth grade and she's also very into media literacy. And she teaches her kids about this sort of thing. And so we talk a lot about the kind of K12 through higher ed continuum. So I'm really excited. I'm going to mark up my copy and then send it to her and get her thoughts too. I think that's one of the things that I want to point out and ask you a little bit about the book is this idea that it really is covering the continuum of education.

[11:16] And so we've talked a little bit about how media literacy has changed and how the sort of, the scholarship of it has changed over the last thirty years. But can you talk a little bit about what that looks like in the classroom? And have you seen shifts? Do you have thoughts on the progression there?

Renee: [11:36] That's a really interesting and complicated question. This book, *Mind Over Media: Propaganda Education for a Digital Age* started in a way, writing this book ten years ago, more than ten years ago, when I started wrestling with what was propaganda? What is propaganda in an era of social media? And how educators thinking about propaganda was rooted in the past.

[12:04] My own college students, when they came to my class, my upper-level undergraduate class in propaganda said, oh, I'm so glad to be taking a history class. Propaganda was something that had happened in twentieth century Germany. And I was like, oh no. That's a profound misunderstanding. (laughs) Where did you get that idea from?

[12:31] Well, if the only time propaganda, the word propaganda, is ever used is in your history class, you might understand. I couldn't blame the undergraduates. So I started about thinking, well, okay, this book is really for college students. And as I began researching the book, I desperately searched around to find when was propaganda or how is propaganda taught before university, right?

[13:02] Well, how was it taught in middle school or in elementary school or high school? And that led me on a journey of historical discovery to find the Institute for Propaganda

Analysis, which in 1939 basically began reaching out to public librarians, to teachers and schools, in high schools especially. And sharing ideas about how to teach about the kind of propaganda that was happening in the United States as antisemitism in this country was rising.

[13:38] As pro-Nazi demonstrations were being held in New York City. I mean, and as tensions between isolationism and feeling the obligation to support the European war effort were part of the Zeitgeist of American culture, creating some really interesting opportunities to think about propaganda and especially propaganda on the radio. Radio was kind of a new technology, right?

[14:01] So all that is to say that, that discovery, that in fact, teaching about propaganda has long been part of what happened in public schools in the twentieth century in the United States. It was like, okay, well we can restore that practice and we can look more deeply at it. My mom was an English teacher and so she, I remember, had mimeographed materials from that era that she still used teaching kids about glittering generalities and bandwagon effects. And I thought, wow, here it is. And at that time, I'm writing the book, 2018, here it is in 2018 and American teachers are still using this stuff from 1939. (laughs) Like we could do better.

Melissa: [14:51] So is that what you found when you were doing some of the research that it hadn't really changed? Fascinating.

Renee: [14:57] And in fact, it hadn't really changed and teachers were more afraid to teach about it. Because as we have become more polarized, as the polarization has grown since 2016, teachers were anxious. I remember in the research for the book, one of the chapters explicitly addresses the election of 2016 and how teachers did not feel comfortable using political campaign advertising, typically that would be the once every four years, you can show a political hat in school and talk about it, critically analyzing. That's media literacy, right? But teachers were afraid to do that in 2016.

Melissa: [15:37] You mentioned that one of the things that sort of led you down this particular path was that undergraduate with its history experience, have you noticed any changes in how students engage with these topics?

Renee: [15:52] Well, of course, one of the reasons why I love teaching propaganda so much

is the gigantic shift that happens in just fourteen weeks. Because they arrive thinking propaganda happened in the twentieth century. And then they think oh, it's all bad. Propaganda is all about disinformation. It's all false. It's all lies. It's all conspiracy theories. It's all terrorism. It's all bad and dangerous.

[16:18] And then we talk about beneficial propaganda, like public service announcements, right? We talk about art and activism as forms of propaganda that are profoundly beneficial in helping us develop a civic imagination, right? To imagine the future, because the original meaning of propaganda was much closer to the idea that propaganda was one means by which people are induced to act together because social consensus is necessary for human societies to flourish.

[16:51] So I just love the sort of emotional roller coaster (laughs) that my students go on as they transform their thinking. And even then, as they start to analyze how nationalism and patriotism is a form of propaganda. How pro propaganda entertainment makes us think violence is a desirable way to solve problems. That's what the heroes do after all. And then even to recognize the propaganda that's embedded in our textbooks and the way we tell the stories of our history.

[17:30] So yes, my students actually come to understand propaganda in a much more broader context. They're able to see it in their social media feeds. They're able to recognize how it's shaped their own understandings and the ideologies of the people around them. It's why, and you know, this, Melissa, teaching media literacy is fun.

Melissa: [17:50] It really is. And I actually had flagged because I did want to chat a little bit about the idea of beneficial propaganda and so I'm glad that you brought that up. There are so many situations that our students are already deeply engaged in. I was just talking with a couple of undergraduates recently about using social media for activism. And they don't realize that they are participating in propaganda. So have you had your students actively monitor how they're participating or have you had them do activities where they are creating or engaging?

Renee: [18:26] I always have my students create propaganda. And I used to save that activity for the end of the semester.

Melissa: [18:33] Ok.

Renee: [18:34] Ok, so now that you fully understand the ethical issues of being propagandas, now that you understand the risks and harms that propaganda can cause. Now you can create propaganda. But it turned out that that was a little bit parallelizing because they knew too much, right? (laughs)

Melissa: [18:53] Yeah, they're overthinking it.

Renee: [18:55] Exactly. The creative flavor was kind of deflated a little bit. So now I use it as the very first activity of the semester, right? Essentially before they even know anything about propaganda, I say, let's just use what you already know. You know that propaganda activates strong emotions. You know that propaganda simplifies, extremely simplifies information. You know that propaganda appeals to people's values. And you know that propaganda attacks opponents, use those techniques on a topic.

[19:27] And then I don't just let them go wild on any topic. There's lot of reasons why I don't do that. (laughs) I send them to dosomething.org, which is a great advocacy organization that has any number of really great causes. And they choose from one of those really great causes. And maybe it's taking shorter showers, right? To save water. Or maybe it's all kinds of things, right? So solving, reducing racism, well, all those things.

[20:01] What they start to realize is that to be a citizen in a democracy, you have to be a good propagandist. You have to be able to cut through the clutter to reach people's hearts because information is good and you librarians, you guys worship it, right? Right, information is great. And academics, yeah, information is wonderful. But people make decisions at the intersection of their head and their heart. And we can't deny the power of emotional reasoning is also linked to sort of ethical and moral values, right? And so when we put those on the table for students to say, okay, you position yourself as an ethical and moral person when you consumed propaganda and when you created as well.

Melissa: [20:55] Does this process of having them kind of think through the really personal creation, I mean, but the personal kind of ethical, moral connection at the beginning of the semester, has that made a difference in how they approach the content throughout the rest of the term?

Renee: [21:11] Yeah, for sure. One kid, just a couple of weeks ago really, because the beginning of the semester wasn't that long ago, right? One kid at the very beginning of the

semester, about the assignment, he emailed me and he said, well, can I lie? And it was like, I'm glad you're thinking about that. (laughs) Of course, you're free to lie, right? The freedom of expression, you are free to lie, lying is not illegal.

Melissa: [21:39] It's a good lesson to learn.

Renee: [21:41] Right. But there are consequences to your lie, you figure it out. And so then now, as the semester goes on, we are starting to realize that what happens when you can't trust communicators in the public sphere. What happens when their lies so outnumber truths? What are the consequences to that? That people no longer trust established authorities. People no longer respect evidence and reasoning. It was almost like his own little personal question like just completely intersected with what's going on in the culture at this very moment in history.

Melissa: [22:17] I mean, I don't think you could've planned that better. Serendipity at its finest in the classroom.

Renee: [22:25] You know, that's such a great observation, Melissa, because part of what makes media literacy so much fun and teachers in every subject area and field benefit from bringing it in as a pedagogy. So some people think media literacy is a subject matter. Is it a field? Is it a discipline? Is it a social movement? Well, yes, it is all of those things and it's also a pedagogy. That's why a science teacher can be a media literacy teacher, a history teacher, a physics teacher, an environmentalist, literature, an art historian. So in some ways this idea that the practice of connecting the classroom to the culture is at the heart of thinking about why media literacy helped school be relevant to life. And that's what makes it so much fun to teach.

Melissa: [23:13] We've talked a little bit about this in our conversation, but that idea that a science class can talk about propaganda, an art class, a music class. It just, it fits. And so I was wondering sort of within that vein, if you had any tips or strategies, how would you imagine an educator or an instructor, librarian, whomever that wants to use what's in *Mind Over Media* in their classroom, in their teaching. There's a lot of really great activities in here, but do you have any suggestions about how you think someone might go about using those?

Renee: [23:50] Right. Thanks for asking that great question. So one of the things I tried to do.

The book is written for a very wide audience. It's written for anyone who's interested in propaganda. And it's interested in anyone who's interested in teaching and learning about propaganda. And so I didn't want to create rigid sort of teacherly lesson plans that say, you know, here's what to do in the first ten minutes and here's what to do in the second ten minutes. That wouldn't make sense at all for this kind of book.

[24:20] Instead, what I offer is thirty-nine sketches of an arc of a learning experience, and each one has a clear takeaway, that is a learning outcome. This is what this lesson is supposed to be illustrating. Each of them has an activity because of course, media literacy is a profoundly activity centered pedagogy, right? Where we engage with texts. We use discussion and dialogue. We use media creation. We use games and other pedagogies to create opportunities for people to share meanings and to be influenced by each other in the sharing of meanings.

[25:00] And so these thirty-nine activities take on everything from, let's understand more about the financing of political campaigns. (laughs) Let's learn to listen and ask questions. Let's think a little bit about advertising's appeals and so many more activities. So these activities, I hope as a reader, moves through the book, if she's an educator, that the activities fertilize the imagination because one of the things I've learned teaching teachers for thirty years is that they're incredibly creative and teachers are brilliant at taking ideas and translating them to the needs of their unique learners. So a fourth-grade teacher is going to read this book differently than a college teacher. But each one is going to find some gems of ideas that they will easily be able to bring into their practice to meet the needs of their learners.

Melissa: [25:55] I think this idea of not being too rigid, again sort of loops back to what we were talking about earlier, that take media literacy in the direction that, you know, maybe even that day in your classroom somebody bring something up that they saw on the news or they saw something on social media, you know, having sort of this, this framework, but then it's flexible and loose enough that you can use it to guide the moments.

[26:22] Obviously, propaganda, media literacy, critical thinking about digital media, not going away at any time soon. Probably will keep getting more complex in terms of the kinds of things to look at and investigate. So what do you think is, maybe this is too much to think about right at the moment. But is there something that you're thinking might be the next emergent thing that you want to investigate? What's keeping you questioning?

Renee: [26:53] I love you for asking that question. Thank you for asking that question. I'll describe to you sort of where. So the end of the book, at the end of this *Mind Over Media* book, I come to the conclusion that a combination of intellectual curiosity and humility are the ingredients for navigating in a world where propaganda is embedded in entertainment. It's embedded in information, and it's embedded in persuasion in so many ways.

[27:29] So I think my next project is going to be to try to quantify that a little bit. And to try to figure out, of course, intellectual curiosity and humility have been measured by other social scientists, but I'm especially interested in those two concepts as they relate to this rising phenomenon of algorithmic personalization. You know, right now, when you search on Google and I search on Google, we don't always get the same results. Right now, my Netflix looks probably a lot different from your Netflix. And my Amazon probably looks different than your Amazon, right?

[28:15] So for librarians and educators who have spent the last time immemorial thinking that we live in a shared media landscape that the library that I walk into is the same library that you walk into. Well, now that's not true, right? And it's going to increasingly be not true as algorithmic personalization affects every part of people's online lives. And so I want to try to figure out what habits of mind and what dispositions are gonna be needed to navigate a world that is so personalized. And I think one thing that is going to be part of that is figuring out how we get curious about other people's lived experience with media and technology.

Melissa: [29:07] Curiosity is such a huge part of this, not only for ourselves, as we're navigating the world of digital media and choosing what path we take. But to turn that into more of an inquiry to others, I'm excited for this.

[29:23] So Renee, I don't want to keep you too long because I know that there are a lot of constraints on everyone's times right now. But I do have one more question for you. And this is a question that we're asking on the Leading Lines podcast. We've sort of done a lot of discussion over the last six months on what it's like to be an educator in the world that we're living in right now. So I'm wondering if you can share, if there's something that you've learned as you've been teaching remotely or in person or whatever it looks like for you during this strange year of 2020, that might continue to inform your teaching as we move back to hopefully a more normal time?

Renee: [30:09] Cool question. One thing that I've been fascinated with is how this pandemic crisis has created opportunities for innovation and a big breakthrough in my own experience teaching online has been the increase sensitivity that I have to people's social and emotional functioning. Because the extreme stress and the uncertainty and the health risks plus all the drama associated with the election has just shown us that our students are full human beings and navigating an incredibly stressful world at a time when their ability to predict the future is very low. And so I've become better at tuning in to my students' emotional needs to recognizing the hunger they have for community connectedness, for reassurance, for support and honoring students, not just for their cognition, right, but also for their affect, also for their caring, also for their feelings of vulnerability.

[31:26] And so I feel like, I hope that I'm able to carry that sensibility forward in my teaching. I'm wondering how digital tools like this one we're using right now, right, could help us deepen our relationships. Because, you know, ultimately, teaching is not transmitting knowledge from experts to novices. Teaching is a relationship, it's a social relationship and it's a social relationship that should be rooted in care. And I feel the pandemic has enabled us all to be more aware of the role of care in the maintenance and in the creation of cultures that move forward despite obstacles, right? Because we've had these huge obstacles and we still face them, they're still in front of us. But if we can rely and trust and care for each other, we know we'll get through it.

Melissa: [32:28] I love that answer so much and I think you're absolutely right. No matter what happens, the pandemic will be over at some point, right? It's going to be over. Our world is complex and there are global issues that are affecting every single one of our students. And creating that community and having that care is so crucial. So I'm right there with you. Yes. Renee, thank you so much for spending part of your morning with me. It was so lovely to talk to you. I was really excited to have this interview and it's been a sheer pleasure.

Renee: [33:05] Right back at you. Such a wonderful experience to connect with you and thank you so much for the good work that you do on behalf of your students and your colleagues and the teachers that you support. So, you know, we're all, we all are holding hands together in this crazy time, huh?

Melissa: [33:22] Thank you so much for saying that, Renee, and thank you again for taking the time to be here with me on the Leading Lines podcast. Again, it's been a real pleasure. I'm

so excited about your new book and I look forward to seeing what comes next from you.
(music)

Derek: [33:40] That was Renee Hobbs, professor of communication studies at the University of Rhode Island and author of the book, *Mind Over Media: Propaganda Education for a Digital Age*, now available from Norton Press. Thanks to Melissa Mallon, director of teaching and learning at the Vanderbilt libraries for that lively interview. Please see the show notes for links to more information about Renee and her book.

[34:03] I really appreciated the way Renee Hobbs described her students' experience in her propaganda course as an emotional roller coaster, as they continually have their preconceived notions about propaganda challenged by the course activities. When I work with faculty on the design of courses and the identification of their learning goals, we often talk about the idea of uncoverage. That is, helping students confront the incorrect or naive or misleading mental models they have about the course content. It seems appropriate that Professor Hobbs would practice this kind of uncoverage in a course on propaganda, since a better understanding of how propaganda works can help our students uncover all kinds of problematic understandings in our culture. And as I record this in November 2020, this seems to be a critical skill for the health of our democracy.

[34:53] Thanks again to Melissa for that great interview. Leading Lines is produced by the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching and the Jean and Alexander Heard libraries. This episode was edited by Melissa Mallon and Rhett McDaniel. Look for new episodes when we publish them. I'm your host, Derek Bruff. Thanks for listening and be safe. (music)