

Outsmarting Propaganda: Combatting the Lure of Extremist Recruitment Strategies

Compelling Question: How do extremists use propaganda and disinformation to recruit followers, especially young people?

Grade Level		Time	Standards/Competencies	
K-2	3-5	90 Minutes or Two Class Periods	Common Core Anchor: Reading: R1, R9 Speaking & Listening: SL1, SL2, SL5 Language: L4, L6	SEL: Self-Awareness Social Awareness Responsible Decision- Making
MS	10-12			



Web Related Connections

LESSON OVERVIEW

On January 6, 2021, Congress met in the U.S. Capitol to count electoral votes and certify the results of the 2020 Presidential election. While this took place, a violent mob of right-wing extremists and others stormed the Capitol. They came to Washington, D.C. (and several state capitals) to disrupt and overturn the results of the Presidential election. As House and Senate lawmakers held their floor debates, angry rioters—many wearing and carrying white supremacist symbolism—invaded the Capitol building, spewing rage and hate. Five people were killed, including one Capitol Police officer. Many have been arrested and the search for suspects continues.

Other well-known incidents involving white supremacy and domestic extremism include Charlottesville’s ‘Unite the Right’ rally in 2017, and the mass shooting of nine Black parishioners in a Charleston, SC church in 2015 by Dylann Roof, a man who espoused white supremacist ideology. There have also been various international incidents that were inspired by the terrorist groups ISIS and Al Qaeda. Terrorist and extremist groups actively try to recruit new members to join their causes in a variety of ways and the internet and social media have been a powerful tool in their arsenal, especially when trying to entice young people to their cause. Terrorist and extremist groups and their supporters use websites and social media platforms to share propaganda, spread disinformation and misinformation and to foster a sense of community for supporters, which serves to amplify their influence.

This high school lesson provides an opportunity for students to understand what propaganda is and how it is used, learn about extremism and terrorism and their recruitment methodology and consider actions they can take to counter those strategies.

[Note: It is important to consider that you may have students in your classroom that may be affected by terrorism or extremism and/or by stereotypes about who extremists are. Be prepared and sensitive to those students, taking into account the extent to which they are a minority or majority of your classroom and plan accordingly. It is important to be aware that some students may feel uncomfortable, sad, relieved or a host of other feelings in having these discussions.]

Lessons

- [The Alt Right and White Supremacy](#)
- [Experiences with Race and Racism](#)
- [Swastikas and Other Hate Symbols](#)
- [What is Algorithmic Bias?](#)

Other Resources

- [After Charlottesville: Teaching about Racism, Antisemitism and White Supremacy](#)
- [Helping Students Make Sense of News Stories about Bias and Injustice](#)
- [Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism](#)
- [The Dangers of Disinformation](#)
- [Finding the Balance: Countering Extremism and Combating Stereotypes](#)
- [New Hate and Old: The Changing Face of American White Supremacy](#)
- [ADL Report: Right-Wing Extremists Killed 38 People in 2019, Far Surpassing All Other Murderous Extremists](#)

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand what propaganda is and the ways it is both similar to and different from advertising.
- Students will explore some of the most common elements of propaganda.
- Students will learn about extremism and terrorism and the recruitment methods used, especially those targeting young people.
- Students will reflect on actions they can take to counter the propaganda and recruitment methods of extremists and terrorists.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- “Coca-Cola - Share a Coke This Summer” video (1½ mins., Coca Cola, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCFqXCPGjrl>)
- [Examples of Propaganda](#) (videos and pictures to project for class viewing)
- [Elements of Propaganda](#) (one for each student)
- “I became part of the alt-right at age 13, thanks to Reddit and Google” article (Fast Company, December 5, 2019, www.fastcompany.com/90438818/i-became-part-of-the-alt-right-at-age-13-thanks-to-reddit-and-google, one for each student)

PROCEDURES



What is Advertising? What is Propaganda?

1. Begin the lesson by showing this commercial: [Coca-Cola - Share a Coke This Summer](#) (or another one of your choosing). After watching the video, engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
 - What happened in the video?
 - How did you feel while watching it?
 - What is the overall message of it?
 - How do the feelings it is meant to evoke connect with the product?
2. Explain that the commercial is a form of advertising. Ask students: *What is advertising?* Come to a definition of **advertising** as speech, writing, pictures or films/video meant to persuade people to buy something. Explain that advertisements can take a variety of forms including:
 - television commercials
 - online video commercials
 - billboards and other outdoor advertising (in stadiums, etc.)
 - magazine and newspaper ads
 - online banner ads
 - text ads on cell phones
 - email advertisements
 - ads on radio and podcasts
 - ads on social media networks
 - ads before movies

Key Words

(See ADL's [Education Glossary Terms](#).)

abhorrently
accountable
algorithms
alt-right
brotherhood
coherent
counter-protestor
disinformation
dissipate
egregious
espoused
fabricated
fallacy
feminists
homicide
immigration
infatuation
inflammatory
malleable
manipulate
maxims
moderator
obligation
persona
perspectives
persuade
radicalization
sarcastically
skeptical
skewed
spawning
ulterior motives
validation

3. Explain to students that we are now going to discuss another form of persuasive media information, which is propaganda. Ask students: *What is propaganda?* Elicit from students the following definition:

Propaganda: Information that is shared and spread in order to influence public opinion and to manipulate other people's beliefs, often to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view. Ask students if they can share any examples of propaganda that they have seen.

4. Ask students: *How are advertising and propaganda similar? How are they different?* Explain that advertising and propaganda are both media tools used to convey something. Propaganda is similar to advertising in that it uses similar media formats in order to spread its message. However, unlike advertising, propaganda does not try to encourage the sale of a product, service or idea. Propaganda is a verbal and visual presentation used to change public attitudes about a particular person or subject.



Elements of Propaganda

1. Share a few [Examples of Propaganda](#) (pictures and videos) from the list and read aloud the descriptions of each before showing them. Explain to students that some are current day and some are historical examples. After showing each, ask the following questions:
 - What's going on?
 - What are they trying to convey?
 - Is this propaganda and if so, how do you know?
2. Engage students in a general discussion by asking:
 - What do some of these forms of propaganda have in common?
 - How are they different?
 - How is this propaganda similar to or different from propaganda you have seen?
 - What strategies did they use to influence and/or persuade you to believe something? (*Record their responses to this last question on the board/smart board.*)
3. Explain that propaganda often includes an element of truth. Many propaganda examples will be based on a fact or sentiment that is true, but is distorted or surrounded by other information that is not true.
4. Explain that propaganda often has some common elements. Distribute the [Elements of Propaganda](#) handout to each student. Together, read each element aloud, sharing the example noted on the sheet and asking students if they have other examples for each element.
5. Show one or more of the propaganda examples again, one at a time, and this time ask students to discuss what may be true and false in each example and to refer to the Elements of Propaganda handout and identify which element(s) are used in each example.
6. Ask students: *Have you heard the term disinformation?* Define **disinformation** as false information, which is intended to mislead, especially propaganda by a government organization to a rival power or the media.

Explain that disinformation is different than misinformation in that disinformation is intended to mislead. Further explain that misinformation and disinformation are often used as propaganda. The 2020 Presidential election is a prime example. President Trump and others in power used disinformation to mislead their followers and the general public about the election results. They spread the false and thoroughly debunked disinformation that there had been massive voter fraud in the presidential election and that President Trump had won in a landslide. The President and his supporters have many platforms and a megaphone to be heard, over and over. As a result, the disinformation spreads quickly. Followers, supporters and others do not necessarily know it is untrue and may not understand its intent to mislead. In turn, they share it with others, and it spreads rapidly and exponentially online. For more information on disinformation, see the ADL resource "[The Dangers of Disinformation.](#)"



Information Sharing

1. Ask students: *What do you know about extremism and terrorism, both domestic and international?* Allow students to share what they know for just a few minutes as this won't be an exhaustive lesson on terrorism. If they don't share this, remind them about the following: On January 6, 2021, Congress met in the U.S. Capitol to count electoral votes and certify the results of the 2020 Presidential election. While this took place, a violent mob of right-wing extremists and others, who came to Washington, D.C. (and several state capitals) to disrupt and overturn the results of the Presidential election, stormed the Capitol. As House and Senate lawmakers held their floor debates, angry rioters—many wearing and carrying white supremacist symbolism—invaded the Capitol building, spewing rage and hate. Five people were killed, including one Capitol Police officer.
2. Explain that there is a lot to learn about it and we will share some basic information.
3. Share with students [basic information about extremism and terrorism](#).
4. Engage students in a brief discussion by asking the following questions:
 - What did you learn that you didn't know before?
 - Why do you think that some people become friendly with extremist or terrorist groups online?
 - What more do you want to know?



Reading Activity

1. Distribute the ["I became part of the alt-right at 13, thanks to Reddit and Google"](#) article to each student. Give students 15 minutes to read the article and encourage them to write notes in the margins or highlight aspects of the article they want to remember, questions they have and vocabulary words for which they may be unfamiliar.

NOTE: You can also provide the article for students to read the evening before for homework.
2. After students have finished reading, have students turn and talk with someone sitting near them. Have each share their initial thoughts and feelings after reading the article.
3. Reconvene students and engage them in a class discussion by asking the following questions:
 - What were you thinking and feeling as you read?
 - What did you learn that you didn't know before?
 - Did anything surprise you and if so, what?
 - How was the author lured into the alt-right and white supremacy? What strategies were used?
 - How does the reading connect to what you know about propaganda?
 - What about the writer made him susceptible to the recruitment?
 - What changed his thinking about these groups?
 - What does the writer mean when he says, "But while a quick burst of radiation probably won't give you cancer, prolonged exposure is far more dangerous?"
 - The writer believes tech companies are, in large part, responsible for the spread of extremism. Do you agree with this? Why or why not? Who or what else is to blame?
 - Why do you think these extremist groups target young people?
 - How can young people (and others) be aware of and counter the propaganda?

Closing

Distribute index cards to each student and ask the following question: *Given what you learned and now know, what is one thing you can do about propaganda, disinformation and extremism?* (Tell students it can be something on a very personal level like awareness or something larger such as engaging in activism.) Have

students write their ideas on their index card, collect them, mix them up and redistribute them and then have each student read aloud what is on their index card. If time permits, choose some of the suggestions to explore in greater depth as an extension activity or long-term project.

ADDITIONAL READING

- [“Do you have white teenage sons? Listen up.’ How white supremacists are recruiting boys online.”](#) (*The Washington Post*, September 17, 2019)
- [“Dylann Roof Photos and a Manifesto Are Posted on Website”](#) (*The Washington Post*, June 20, 2015)
- [Five Key Questions Form Foundation for Media Inquiry](#) (Center for Media Literacy)
- [“ISIS and the Lonely Young American”](#) (*The Washington Post*, June 27, 2015)
- [“Neo-Nazi Terror Groups Are Using iFunny to Recruit”](#) (Vice News, November 14, 2019)
- [“This Is How You Become a White Supremacist”](#) (*The Washington Post*, June 25, 2015)
- [“Want to help the Islamic State recruit? Treat all Muslims as potential terrorists”](#) (*The Washington Post*, November 30, 2015)
- [“We Were Blindsided’: Families Of Extremists Form Group To Fight Hate”](#) (NPR, December 12, 2019)
- [“What Happened After My 13-Year-Old Son Joined the Alt-Right”](#) (*The Washingtonian*, May 5, 2019)
- [“Who Will Become a Terrorist? Research Yields Few Clues”](#) (*The New York Times*, March 27, 2016)

Common Core Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
R9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.
Speaking and Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
SL2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively and orally.
SL5: Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.
Language
L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
L6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

CASEL's SEL Competencies

COMPETENCIES
Self-Awareness: The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.
Social Awareness: The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, & contexts.
Responsible Decision-Making: The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.

Examples of Propaganda

EXAMPLE 1



Description: This poster is called “Rosie the Riveter” and was designed to boost the morale of women who were encouraged to work during World War II (while men were at war) including making airplanes and ships for the war effort.

EXAMPLE 2

“Ice Cream Ad” video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ty4T5MuYRZw>

Description: Referred to as “**Girl with Ice Cream Cone**”, this was a television campaign ad for Lyndon B. Johnson who was running against Barry Goldwater for President in 1964.

EXAMPLE 3

Daisy Ad video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cwqHB6QeUw>

Description: “Daisy”, sometimes known as “**Daisy Girl**” or “**Peace, Little Girl**”, was a controversial political advertisement also aired on television for Lyndon B. Johnson who was running against Barry Goldwater for President in 1964. Though only aired once (by the campaign), it is considered an important factor in Johnson’s landslide victory over Barry Goldwater and an important turning point in political and advertising history.

EXAMPLE 4

It’s Time for Americans to Come Out of the Shadows video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQOuf_AzMfM

Description: This is an ad produced by the [Federation of American Immigration Reform \(FAIR\)](#), an anti-immigrant group in the U.S. FAIR advocates for limits on legal immigration and for ending undocumented immigration.

EXAMPLE 5

dawla.son. @dawlareturnz___ · 6m
 #IS #WilayatAlFurat
 🇮🇶 Ice cream shops in Abu Kamal town. 📷 justpaste.it/ieskrem3

REWEETS 2 FAVORITE 1

Description: This Tweet by an ISIS supporter includes a photo collage produced by ISIS propagandists allegedly depicting an ice cream shop in ISIS controlled territory. ISIS regularly releases these type of photos intended to show that life in its territory is normal, if not ideal.

EXAMPLE 6

STOP THE INVASION!**“KEEP AMERICA AMERICAN”**

Say “NO!” to the massive influx of third world immigration. Take a stand against these criminal invaders. Mass immigration and forced assimilation is genocide by the United Nations own definition. “Deliberate inflicting on the groups conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; Imposing of measures intended to prevent births within the group.” Honorable native born white American men and women the time for patriotism is now, take a stand and defend our country, and stand valiant in defense of its original ideals and institutions our forefathers fought and died for!

**Texas Knights
Of the Ku Klux Klan**

Description: This is a flyer that was distributed by a Texas branch of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), a right-wing extremist and white supremacist organization. In this flyer, the KKK attempts to suggest that immigration leads to the demise of ‘real Americans,’ who are necessarily white and Christian.

Elements of Propaganda

Bandwagon: Conveying to the audience through an advertisement that since everyone is doing it, so should you, or in other words, if it is good enough for the people in the propaganda, it is good enough for you.

Example: All of these great people agree that their cause is right and that everyone else is wrong. Who are you to disagree with them?

Scapegoating: Assigning blame to a group or individual, when that group or individual is really not the cause of the problem. This takes away the blame from responsible parties.

Example: The Nazis used scapegoating against the Jews. They blamed the Jews for their bad economy.

Assertion: An enthusiastic statement that is presented as fact, but may not actually be true.

Examples: If an advertiser claims that their product is the best, but doesn't include any evidence. Stating that people don't have jobs because they are taken by immigrants, even though research proves that immigration creates more jobs.

Omission: Not presenting the whole truth. This leads people to jump to conclusions about the evidence being presented.

Example: Showing the hijacked planes hitting the twin towers on 9/11 conveys a message of revenge and anger, but only showing the aftermath conveys a message of sorrow.

Plain folk: Using a prominent person to convince the audience that this person and his ideas are "of the people."

Example: Showing an actor buying groceries or paying taxes or showing an important politician eating at a fast food restaurant.

Fear: Use fear to convince the audience that if they do not take a particular course of action, like getting home insurance, something bad will happen, like flooding.

Example: This was used in the Holocaust as well. The Germans became convinced that the Jews were going to take over the government, and they needed to do something to prevent this from happening.

Half the information: Convincing the audience to choose one option by presenting it as the best of the worse options. Alternatively, making predictions based on the future that are based only on a few facts or allowing the audience to come to false conclusions by only presenting some facts, but not all of them.

Example: There are some real problems in society, including poverty and high divorce rates. The only way to escape these problems is to join our group.

Basic Information about Extremism and Terrorism

- **Extremism** is a concept used to describe religious, social or political belief systems that exist substantially outside of belief systems more broadly accepted in society (i.e., “mainstream” beliefs). Extreme ideologies often seek radical changes in the nature of government, religion or society. Not all extremists are terrorists—some people hold extremist beliefs but do not resort to violence in an attempt to enact those beliefs.
- **Terrorism** is a pre-planned act or attempted act of significant violence by one or more non-state actors in order to further an ideological, social or religious cause, or to harm perceived opponents of such causes. Significant violent acts can include bombings or use of other weapons of mass destruction, assassinations and targeted killings, shooting sprees, arsons and fire bombings, kidnappings and hostage situations and, in some cases, armed robberies.
- Many different types of ideological movements have attempted to use terrorism to achieve their goals. Some examples include: anti-government (people who do believe there should not be any government), environmental extremists (people/groups who believe that violence should be used, especially against property, against businesses or persons believed to be damaging the environment or hurting plants or animals), religious extremists (including Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Hindu and more), white supremacists and some nationalist movements (groups that are fighting for sovereignty over a geographic area).
- Over the past several years, white supremacist extremists in the U.S. have experienced a resurgence, driven in large part by the rise of the alt right. Modern white supremacist ideology is centered on the assertion that the white race is in danger of extinction, drowned by a rising tide of non-white people who are controlled and manipulated by Jews. White supremacists believe that almost any action is justified if it will help “save” the white race. Extremist groups actively try to get new members to join their causes. One of the ways they do this is online. Most extremist groups have their own websites and they and their supporters have profiles on different social media sites. They use these to share propaganda and to become friends with people who seem to display some interest in what they are thinking, doing and saying. Newcomers might become friends with several different extremists online. As they see their new friends’ posts, they grow more and more exposed to terrorist propaganda and also begin to feel like many other people agree with it. They also can talk about it with their new friends online, and sometimes with their in-person friends, too. They come to feel that they are a part of a *community* with these extremist friends online and to feel like these new online friends are real friends. They do not realize that the extremists don’t like them for who they are, but rather are just trying to take advantage of them to further the goals of the extremist group. As people are drawn into these new social groups, they want to maintain their new ‘friendships’ and may also begin to trust their online contacts and believe what they are saying. A few people can forget why extremism and terrorism are evil and begin to believe that their new friends have legitimate viewpoints. Over time many come to believe that they have no choice but to use or advocate for violence.