Hoaxing: An Epidemic of Mind-Twisting Propaganda

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On a brisk fall day in 2018, I made my way off the school bus with my friends after a bumpy, loud ride from our houses to our middle school. Our shoes crunched the piles of leaves below us as we stepped onto the ground. We headed toward the doors of our so-called welcoming, judgment-free school situated in one of the most liberal cities in the U.S.—Seattle, Washington—where it certainly fit right in.

That day, though, was different. Right as we got off the buses, before we made it onto the official school campus, we were bombarded with adults handing us comic books no bigger than a notecard. As unknowing eleven-year-olds, we were charmed by the opportunity to read a fun picture book. But as we took them, we saw our teachers leaving the building, hustling toward us, with fear and anger in their faces. Seeing how upset it was making our teachers, we felt like we were doing something wrong by reading the books. But we were rebellious tweens, so we read them anyway. These books were the clearest definition of propaganda I've ever encountered firsthand. They were called Chick tracts—created by an Evangelical christian named Jack Chick, and published en masse. The Seattle Times characterizes them as "[taking] aim at anyone who didn't fit Chick's mid-20th-century, fundamentalist Christian mold: gay people, marijuana smokers… Muslims, Mormons." They were distributed "wherever potential sinners lingered" (Kiley). Clearly, they thought a middle school full of liberal tweens would be a good target. These books informed us through silly-looking drawings all of the great sins we were

committing just by living our lives. What I remember the most was one that explained why being queer was the worst possible thing you could do, going into grave detail with violent images that never should have been anywhere near so many children.

If I had seen that now, I would have been appalled, but I would know that it was wrong and I wouldn't give it any power to affect the way I thought of myself or others close to me. But at the time, I remember being so confused. Having two lesbian grandmothers was something I should probably be ashamed of, right? Because these books, along with so many other influences, told me it was bad. But I loved them more than anything and I frankly couldn't care less because it meant I got to have three grandmas. Still, though, I never mentioned that to anyone until I got to high school and realized how much of a load of crap it was that I hadn't. So why did I let myself be ashamed of something I had no personal issue with? Why did I let myself, even in the smallest amount, be influenced by voices speaking hatefully against what I knew to be true?

In his book *Bunk,* Kevin Young analyzes the common occurrence of misinformation in the media. Young is a poet and essayist, currently working as the director of the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of African American History and Culture. He wrote *Bunk* in 2017 to describe the phenomenon of hoaxing that's largely existent in America. Young describes the presence of a "crop of hoaxes… signal[ing] our age's narrative crisis" and the modern tendency of authors to create "fiction that looks like biography" (307). Even if a fictitious article is not advertised to be a true story, its presentation can cause people to assume validity. For example, a misleading headline can create a false sense of truth for a reader in a fictional piece. The comic books I encountered were of a similar characteristic. Nowhere did they claim to be proven by science, but their biographical nature induced the reader to view their claims as fact.

Additionally, Young writes, “sometimes we want a storyteller to boss us around… we crave the storyteller’s excuses as much as the story itself” (308). This helps explain the tendency for people to absorb misinformation even if they know it’s not true. There’s something exciting about hearing from a new perspective about a topic you don’t know much about. I knew the Chick Tracts were wrong, but I read them anyway. Whether it’s real curiosity, or a desire to prove that you know better, it’s not uncommon to want to read something you disagree with—and it’s possible for a little piece of their argument to slip into your subconscious. How that happens, though, is a tough question to answer.

No matter how much the people around me told me “everyone should be celebrated” and “love is beautiful no matter what,” I didn’t fully understand what it meant. People were coming at me from the other side with such graphic and passionate anger, and I didn’t know what to do with it. The comic books were ripped out of our hands and thrown away promptly before we even had a chance to hear why they were so bad. I was left with two perspectives—one from the people I loved, and one from people I had no reason to trust, but who certainly scared my eleven-year old brain. Nobody at my school talked about *why* it was important to accept one another for who we are, just that it was the absolute first priority. Nobody ever mentioned an argument from the other side. So when we were slammed in the face with one, it was hard not to, in one tiny part of our mind, fall for it.

In *Bunk,* Young claims hoaxing to be a dangerous game. “[It] infect[s] our sense of what’s true,” he writes. “We come to mistrust not only others but also ourselves and our own instincts” (306). This means that misinformation causes us to doubt what we know to be true. In this case, my instinct was to *not* hate other people, but after multiple instances of experiencing these hateful comic books’ messages situating themselves in my brain, along with hate from

many other sources, I couldn't help but mistrust that instinct. Perhaps, as Young said, I craved a new perspective, for the storyteller to change the way I thought. I knew my instinct was right, but something caused an ounce of shame to creep in, enough to influence my actions.

So why, if I was so set in my beliefs which were validated by almost everyone close to me, would I ever come to doubt them? Young suggests that when we are so set in our ways, we don't stop to think about *why* we think the way we do. For example, Young writes, "During periods in which science is largely a matter of academic concern to mathematicians and laboratory logicians, the masses are unconcerned except when some theorist is so rash as to question Holy Writ" (307). In other words, when science isn't something the masses need to talk about—because professionals have got it covered—it's not of popular concern. But, that makes it ever easier for one sole voice to speak out, to ask some question doubting the findings of science, and for it to catch on. If education is limited to "take this vaccine" or "don't take this medicine," with no explanation as to *why,* people will believe any claim that makes sense to them—a lack of context leads to a lack of skepticism.

In my case, perhaps I was a part of those masses that neglected to question *why* I had the values I did. In a way all young children are, because they're brought up their whole lives being told what to think, often not being able to build their values themselves. They will adopt the values their parents have, but will be prone to doubt as soon as a voice speaks for the other side. Even though I trusted the people that told me what my values should be, I didn't know enough about why I should trust them. And that made me vulnerable, as Young describes, to such a "rash" theorist.

The issue of propaganda doesn't end with my experience—it's becoming more and more prevalent in the news and in politics, with misinformation spreading like wildfires and with

people having shaky understandings of why they have the values they have. For example, when a voter is served up a post from a certain candidate, and continues to interact with posts like it, they'll suck themselves into a black hole of misinformation before they have the chance to determine what they truly believe. The American Psychological Association claims "exposure to misinformation increases the odds that people will believe it" ("How and Why Does Misinformation Spread?"). This means that when someone is exposed repeatedly to one specific piece of misinformation, they are more likely to believe it than if they only saw it once. Hence the danger of the black hole of social media algorithms, and the comic books' impact on me after reading them every year. It also explains the threat of misinformation—the more it spreads, the more people will fall for it. The production of misinformation doesn't seem to be ending soon, either. As Young puts it, "hoaxing may be the last great undiagnosed addiction" (306). With this he implies that those who create misinformation strive to continue with it—they crave the attention they get from introducing imaginative—albeit false—ideas and information. With both creators and consumers of misinformation caught up in a cycle, soon it won't be clear what's real.

Eventually, I was able to continue to learn from those around me and understand why those books were so bad—but that is often not the case. Propaganda's influence on a person's actions and beliefs is inevitable when they don't have the proper support systems to explain why it's wrong. However, proper education has the power to prevent this. If my school had properly taught us about why what we were reading was bad, it would have aided in preventing us from falling for similar misinformation in the future. Schooling can work wonders to promote the critical thinking skills necessary to fight this epidemic in our society. Young makes it clear that our absorption of misinformation isn't often on purpose, and everyone is susceptible to it. So, we must educate young people to develop their own values—before some "rash theorist" swoops

in and makes them question their entire belief system.

Works Cited

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