

propaganda (prɪˈpɑːɡəndə) capable of being propagated  
 for congregatio de pro  
 faith: see PROPAGATE  
 Congregation for the  
 foreign missions 2 any systematic, widespread dissemination or  
 promotion of particular ideas, doctrines, practices, etc. to further  
 one's own cause or to damage an opposing one 3 ideas, doctrines, or  
 allegations so spread: now often used disparagingly to connote  
 deception  
 prop  
 system

**“Propaganda is indifferent to truth and truthfulness, knowledge and understanding. It is a form of strategic communication that uses any means to accomplish its ends.”**

WALTER CUNNINGHAM

# ‘Distracted and distractible’

BY EMILY GREEN  
STAFF WRITER

Do you think of Saturday Night Live as propaganda? What about those commercials of sad-looking puppies in cages that can't be helped “without your support”?



Media literacy expert Renee Hobbs says propaganda is on the rise around the world

At Mind Over Media, a crowdsourced online collection of media messaging, you can explore these and other examples of contemporary propaganda. Users can comment on how they perceive the messaging and rate it on a scale of “beneficial” to “harmful.”

This project is one of many online tools for teaching critical thinking in media consumption that internationally renowned digital and media literacy education expert Renee Hobbs has produced.

Hobbs is a professor of communication and education and director of the Media Education Lab at the Harrington School of Communication and Media at the University of Rhode Island. There, she co-directs the Graduate Certificate in Digital Literacy, a blended learning program that attracts educators and media professionals from across the country. She has authored several academic books about digital learning and media literacy. Her latest, “Create to Learn: An Introduction to Digital Literacy,” is available for pre-order.

At a time when the line between news and propaganda seems to be increasingly blurred, we asked Hobbs about ways to recognize and combat the propaganda that seems to be coming at us from all sides.

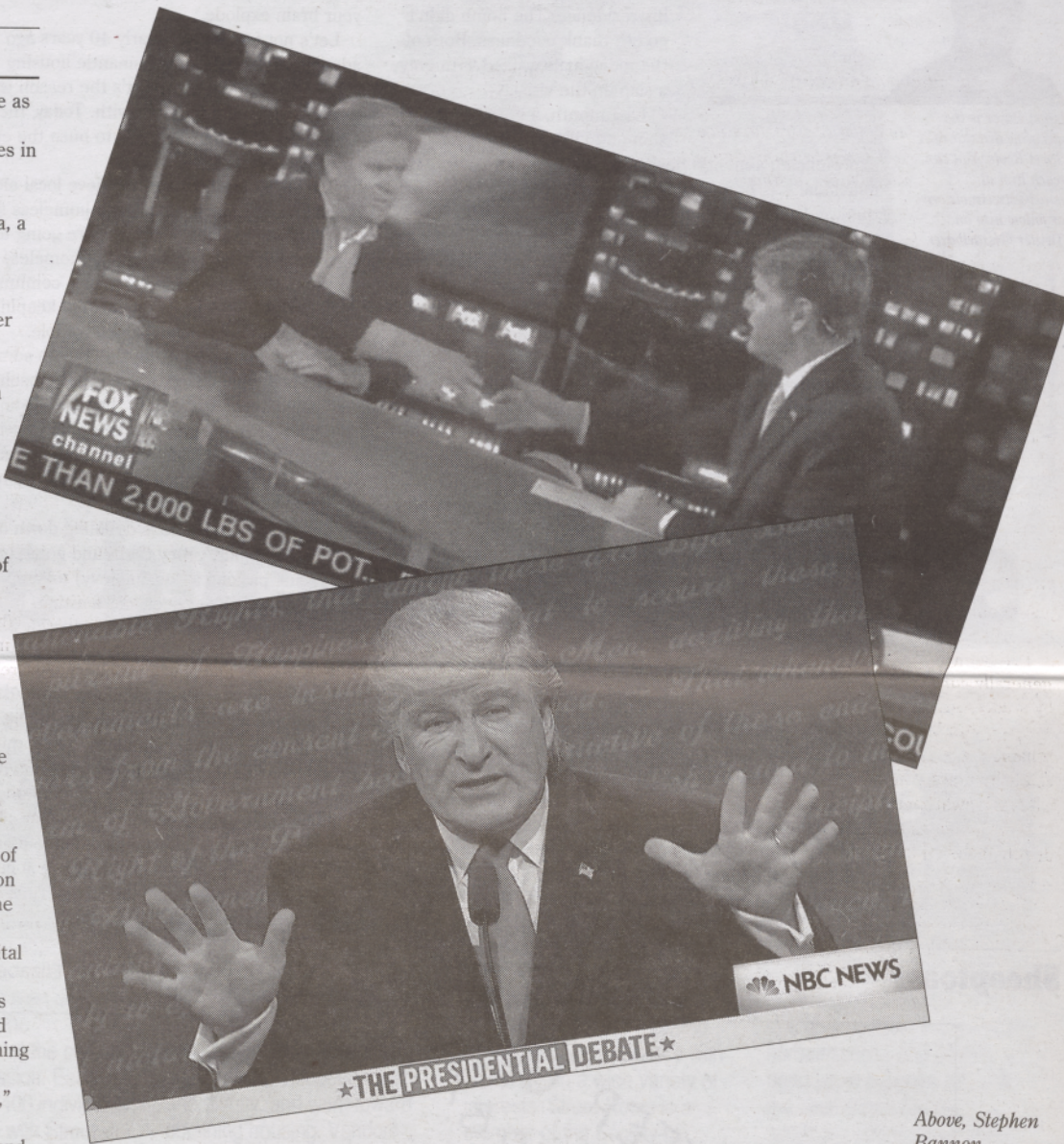
**Emily Green:** First, a personal question: What is it about the pursuit of media literacy that attracted you?

**Renee Hobbs:** I have a complex love-hate relationship with print, sound, visual and digital media. I've always found that I enjoy a movie more if I get the chance to talk about it with others. That's also true for listening to music, watching TV and especially reading a newspaper. I believe that when people use media intentionally and purposefully, they get more pleasure from it – and they have higher expectations for what they consume and create. When I come across really well-produced websites, blog posts, videos or news, I am deeply appreciative. But then there's all that dreck that drenches us with

its superficiality and sensationalism. Ultimately, we have to have higher expectations of our media system in order for it to meet our culture's real needs.

**E.G.:** Earlier this month, you were the keynote speaker at a United Nations Alliance of Civilizations event titled “Media and Information Literacy: Educational Strategies for the Prevention of Violent Extremism.” This branch of the UN was launched in December 2015 to counter xenophobia, racism and narratives of hatred in the media. I wanted to ask you about your thoughts on media literacy worldwide, gleaned from this conference or through other channels. Are you seeing any notable trends in propaganda? Are there any major differences in the way different populations consume media, and is there anything unique about the fake news phenomenon we are seeing in the U.S.?

**R.H.:** Propaganda is on the rise around the



Above, Stephen Bannon, President Trump's senior policy advisor, shaking hands before an interview with Sean Hannity on Fox News. Below Alec Baldwin portrays Donald Trump on Saturday Night Live.

world. There's a big increase in the amount of “positive propaganda,” which is created by nonprofit organizations and governments and activists to address issues of social, political and economic concern, including issues like xenophobia, racism, poverty, homelessness, domestic violence, violent extremism, LGBTQ rights and more. Today, all over the world, people are using media on their mobile devices, and this means they are a bit more distracted and distractible. It's challenging to read deeply if you're using media “in between” doing other things. This practice tends to reinforce the use of media to reinforce our existing beliefs, to amuse and to entertain, rather than to learn new things or take social action. The term “fake news” has been co-opted beyond all recognition here in the U.S., but in its original formulation, the planting of false news stories as a means of disinformation

See HOBBS, page 5