

## **SUMMARY OF COMMUNICATIONS TRAINING AT #USWRR18: STANDING FOR TRUTH IN A PROPAGANDA ERA**

Erin and I created the HearYourselfThink Project when we realized the dangerous extent to which inflammatory, increasingly extreme, and agenda-driven media sources were overwhelming the public discourse. We were stunned when unhinged hordes turned out to “healthcare town halls” based on their total belief in conspiracy theories, misinformation, and outright lies. We were further alarmed and galvanized when we saw suburban Pittsburgh residents become enraged and irrational when a local Catholic charity organization announced plans to temporarily shelter 20 refugee children. These refugees, fleeing violence in South America, had been relentlessly demonized by Fox and talk radio causing traumatized women and children to be confronted by angry mobs in parts of the country. Our Pittsburgh neighbors who wanted to shut out 20 of these desperate children thought of themselves as good Christian folk — and they were basically decent people — that is when not under the influence of media mind-poisoning.

**We knew that this phenomenon — what we call demagogue media — would eventually break our democracy if we could not get citizens to realize how these con artists were manipulating and warping the American channels of communication.**

"The American fascist would prefer not to use violence. His method is to poison the channels of public information. With a fascist the problem is never how best to present the truth to the public but how best to use the news to deceive the public into giving the fascist and his group more money or more power."

— Henry Wallace, FDR's vice-president in 1944

What is a demagogue defined? Quite simply: “A person, especially a political leader, who wins support by exciting emotion and prejudice rather than using reason.”

What is the method of communication natural to the demagogue? It is always the propaganda appeal. Propaganda is defined as:

“Information that is not objective, that's used to influence an audience and further an agenda; often by presenting facts selectively to encourage a particular perception, or by

using loaded language to produce an emotional rather than a rational response to the information that is presented.”

If demagogues use propaganda to manipulate people with prejudice and emotion what emotion is at the core of the propaganda appeal? FEAR!

**Demagogues and propagandists love fear because it's easy to trigger a fear response.**



Why is it so easy? Because our brains are wired for fear as a primal survival response to potential threats. The hunter gatherer who didn't react when there was a rustling in the leaves, even if it was the wind or a mouse, was more likely to be removed from the gene pool when it happened to be a poisonous snake. Fear is why we're here.

But thanks to demagogues and media manipulators, fear is also why so many are voting against their own interests, why Americans are divided and unable to agree even on basic facts, and why we're failing to respond to the climate crises which threatens humanity's long term survival.

The demagogue knows that he can easily move someone from fear to anger by playing on prejudice to provide a scapegoat; a target for pent up anxiety and frustration. And **they know that when strong emotions like fear and anger are in play, critical thinking and higher moral reasoning are severely diminished allowing for the acceptance of propaganda as fact.**

Why are there still people who insist President Obama was born in Kenya and some even who still believe Iraq had weapons of mass destruction? It all starts with targeting the Amygdala (the brain's fear center) with a scary story masquerading as truth. (SEE: Slide 17: Cycle of Indoctrination). Indoctrination defined as “teaching a person or group to accept a set of beliefs uncritically.” Fear sets off this cycle.

That's also why in 1938 thousands of Americans believed murderous Martians were invading New Jersey... because Orson Welles used the radio to tell a horror story dressed up as the news for Halloween. Boo.

And fear is so overwhelming, you might even know it's a made up story and still act out irrationally in the real world, like with the Jaws Effect.

**When we grasp the power of mass media to spread misinformation, bigotry, and fear we realize the importance of having responsible leaders who will reject the path of the demagogue and help citizens stay connected to their thinking minds and to their higher ideals and values.**

That's why the example of FDR is so significant to our times now. When world tensions were high and demagogues around the world were using radio to whip up hatred and divide people, Roosevelt counseled Americans to stay calm, cool, and united so they would be prepared to defend democracy and the American way.



### **WORDS OF WISDOM FROM FDR:**

“Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education.”

“We are a nation of many nationalities, many races, many religions—bound together by a single unity, the unity of freedom and equality. Whoever seeks to set one nationality against another, seeks to degrade all nationalities. Whoever seeks to set one race against another seeks to enslave all races. Whoever seeks to set one religion against another, seeks to destroy all religion.”

“Great power involves great responsibility.”

### **Critical Thinking:**

- 1) disciplined thinking that is clear, rational, open-minded, and informed by evidence
- 2) reasonable, reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do
- 3) includes a commitment to using reason in the formulation of our beliefs
- 4) thinking about one's thinking in a manner designed to organize, clarify, and recognize errors and biases in one's own thinking
- 5) keeping our bullshit detectors in working order and being aware when someone is yanking our chain for their own gain.





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## STANDING FOR TRUTH IN A PROPAGANDA ERA

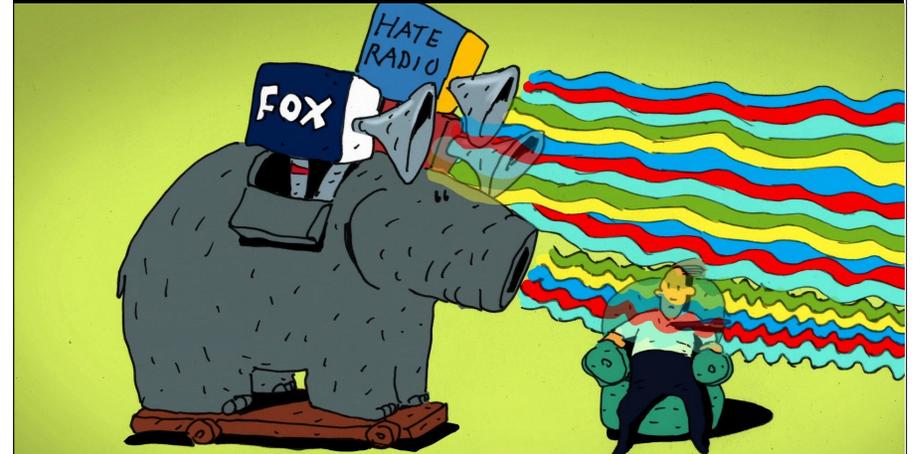
"To save man from the morass of  
propaganda, in my opinion, is one  
of the chief aims of education."

— Martin Luther King, Jr. (1947)

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## DEMAGOGUE:

A person, especially a political leader, who wins  
support by exciting emotion and prejudice rather  
than using reason.



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## PROPAGANDA IS:

"Information that is not objective, that's used to  
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produce an emotional rather than a rational  
response to the information that is presented."

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## AT THE CORE OF PROPAGANDA IS FEAR



*"Psychologically  
terrorized people are  
attracted to clear vision  
of where evil lurks in  
the world and clear  
vision of how to  
obliterate it..."*

— Psychology Prof. Sheldon Solomon, Skidmore College

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## AILES' MEMO TO NIXON:

"Today, television news is watched more often than people read newspapers, than people listen to the radio, than people read or gather any other form of communication."

"The reason: People are lazy."

**"WITH TELEVISION YOU JUST SIT-WATCH-LISTEN."**



The thinking is done for you.

Memo: "A Plan for Putting the GOP on TV News"

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**" FEAR IS EASY.**  
Fear is the simplest emotion to tweak in a campaign ad.

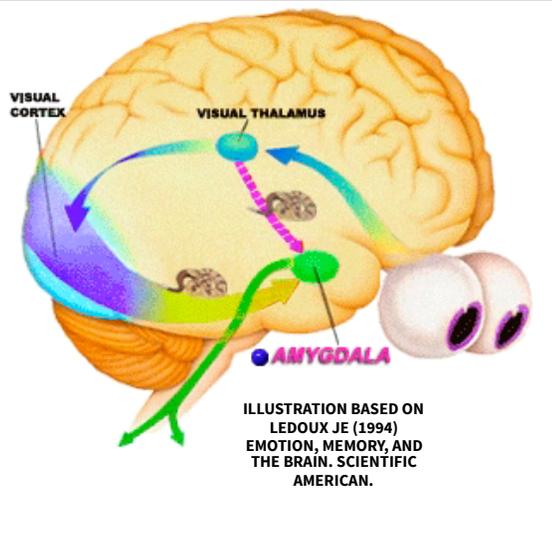
You associate your opponent with terror, with fear, with crime, with causing pain and uncertainty.

I wanted to scare the living shit out of white people in Pennsylvania and Ohio. Today, they would all be Trump voters, I'm sure.

- Rick Wilson, GOP strategist & ad maker "

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## WHY PROPAGANDISTS LOVE FEAR:



**Amygdala Controls:**

**Sub-rational emotions**

- FEAR
- ANGER
- THREAT RESPONSE
- IN-GROUP EMPATHY

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## NEO-CORTEX: "FOUNDER BRAIN"



Critical thinking, imagination, long-term planning, higher moral reasoning

**NEO-CORTEX**  
thinking, problem solving, behavioral control, imagination

**CORPUS CALLOSUM**  
passes information from left brain (rules, logic) to right brain (impulse, feelings)

**CEREBELLUM**  
coordination and balance

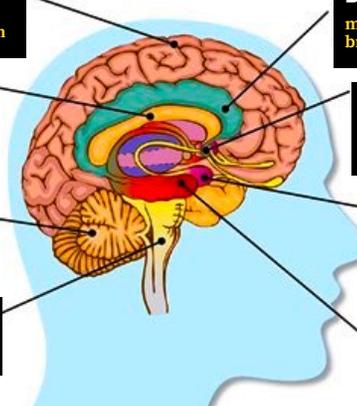
**BRAIN STEM**  
breathing, sleep, heart rate

**BASAL GANGLIA**  
movement, reward, coordinating brain messages, forming habits

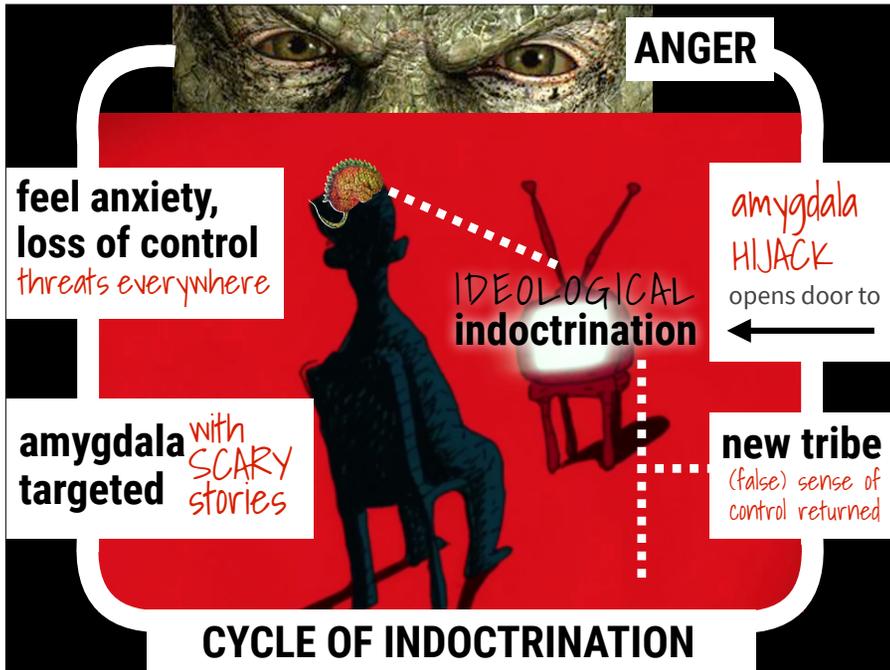
**HYPOTHALAMUS**  
hunger, emotions, temperature, pain sensations

**AMYGDALA**  
fear, facial recognition, emotional memory, empathy, aggression, senses danger

**HIPPOCAMPUS**  
memory, learning, emotion



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**DEMAGOGUES:**

- ▶ Seize on or create crisis to consolidate power
- ▶ Manufacture, exaggerate “rubber snake” threats
- ▶ Use media to scapegoat “the other,” inflame factions, elicit rage
- ▶ Destroy solidarity, undermine institutions

**DEMOCRATIC LEADERS:**

- ▶ Help citizens manage fears in times of crisis
- ▶ Respond rationally to “real snake” threats
- ▶ Use media to calm, unify public around shared democratic values
- ▶ While flawed, act in good faith for common good

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**RADIO FAKE SCARES NATION**

**WAR OF THE WORLDS PANIC: HOW DID WELLES DO IT?**

**FICTION DRESSED UP AS NEWS...**

urgent bulletins broke into program — “we interrupt our regular program...”

**“I heard it on the news”**

dramatic firsthand accounts from reporters, experts and officials (all actors)

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**MR. WELLES AND MASS DELUSION**

Journalist Dorothy Thompson

“ A few effective voices, accompanied by sound effects, can so convince masses of people of a totally unreasonable, completely fantastic proposition as to create nation-wide panic... They have demonstrated beyond question of a doubt, the appalling dangers and enormous effectiveness of popular and theatrical demagoguery...”

**THE POWER OF MASS SUGGESTION IS THE MOST POTENT FORCE TODAY...**

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# to spark critical thinking, use the POWER OF NARRATIVE

## JAWS STORY:



- Fictional story used natural creature as movie monster
- Sparked shark-hunting (some species down 90%)
- Amplified a threat out of proportion to all reality
- Who's getting the "shark" treatment in media today?

Using parallel examples, stories can create powerful, visceral realizations before someone can resist them. AHA! moments...

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## STANDING FOR TRUTH IN A PROPAGANDA ERA

IF we're living in a media age where it's all about speed, negative emotion, and reactivity,

THEN we need to cool it down, break down walls, and induce moments of self-reflection.



### WHAT CAN WE DO?

- ▶ Follow FDR's lead
- ▶ Spark insight about media manipulation
- ▶ Talk about how fear & strong emotion hijack critical thinking

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## 27-9-3: CONNECT—REVEAL—INOCULATE

Get people to think... about their thinking

**3**  
POINTS

### CONNECT (SHARED VALUES, ISSUES)

- ▶ What do you have in common? Ask!
- ▶ What do you both care about?

### REVEAL (USE NARRATIVE, ASK QUESTIONS)

- ▶ Move/keep interaction on "higher brain" level
- ▶ Self-questioning: "Should I believe everything I think"

### INOCULATE (MEDIA LITERACY)

- ▶ How we are all vulnerable to fear-based appeals
- ▶ How media has changed (Cronkite to Alex Jones)

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**27**  
WORDS

**9**  
SECONDS

**3**  
POINTS

### EXAMPLES

"Do you think media can cause mass hysteria? Remember the War of the Worlds panic in 1938? Fear can shut down our minds and trigger panic over nothing."

"Hitler used fear to control people. What did FDR say? 'The only thing we have to fear is... fear itself.' Real leaders help people keep their heads."

"Propagandists know how our minds work. They use our minds against us. We can defend ourselves if we know how they operate. Just like with any con job."

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**27**  
WORDS

**9**  
SECONDS

**3**  
POINTS

**PRACTICE!**

“Why should my tax dollars support anything that helps people who aren’t willing to help themselves?”

**27-9-3:** No one likes paying taxes. But Limbaugh wants us mad at poor people so they pass a bill to cut his taxes and stick it to us.

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**27**  
WORDS

**9**  
SECONDS

**3**  
POINTS

**PRACTICE!**

“Immigrants are taking our jobs. We should build a wall!”

**27-9-3:** My immigrant uncle fought for a union at the factory where he worked in Greensburg. This wall stuff makes me think about how Italians were hated.

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**27**  
WORDS

**9**  
SECONDS

**3**  
POINTS

**Center around 1 concept, weave in others**

- ▶ Reveal media manipulation
- ▶ Induce self-reflection
- ▶ Provoke critical thinking/ask questions
- ▶ Personal connection
- ▶ Inspire through values (American, Union)
- ▶ Reawaken higher moral reasoning
- ▶ Add information (story)
- ▶ Shift focus to common good and social solidarity
- ▶ Walk through past lessons/remind with examples
- ▶ Stigmatize what’s toxic to democracy
- ▶ Promote reason, truth, and respect for facts as core values

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**THANK YOU!**

- ▶ **Books:** “The Assault on Reason” (Al Gore), “Washington’s Farewell: The Founding Father’s Warning to Future Generations” - John Avlon
- ▶ **Movies:** “The Brainwashing of My Dad” (Doc), “A Face in the Crowd” (Andy Griffith), “Don’t Be a Sucker” (US War Dept. post-WWII 1947)

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