Getting to know… Renee Hobbs

What are you currently working on? *Mind Over Media: Analyzing Contemporary Propaganda* continues to evolve and change. It’s a crowdsourced gallery of contemporary propaganda from all over the world along with lesson plans and activities for learners in high school and college. Thanks to funding from the European Commission and support from the Evens Foundation, we’re adapting the online educational platform to meet the needs of students and teachers in Europe. We are working with media literacy organizations in Western and Eastern Europe (France, Belgium, Finland, Poland, Croatia and Romania) and will be using the website in outreach initiatives with students and teachers in those countries.

Also, with my German colleague Silke Grafe and her doctoral student Christian Seyferth-Zapf at the University of Wurzburg, we have been exploring the educational value of cross-national dialogue between students from the U.S. and Germany in analyzing contemporary political propaganda. We are finding that such dialogues help students go beyond merely recognizing propaganda techniques by deepening their understanding of the role of context in the meaning-making process. This work is an extension of my historical examination of propaganda education in the 1930s as an early form of media literacy.
education. We’re suspect that learners benefit from opportunities to examine propaganda in a global context. Because propaganda activates strong emotions and simplifies information and ideas, it can provoke intellectual curiosity. Since media literacy competencies include the practice of asking critical questions about what we watch, see, listen to, read and play, we want to better understand the relationship between exposure to propaganda, the practice of critical analysis, and the stimulation of intellectual curiosity.

I’m also thrilled to be working on a media literacy textbook which will be published by Rowman and Littlefield in 2019. Working with the distinguished communication editor Elizabeth Swayze is a real pleasure and we think the book will be a real alternative for faculty who are teaching Media Literacy. There are many faculty, we think, who want their courses to (more directly) support the development of media literacy competencies that transfer from the classroom to the living room, the workplace and the public sphere. That’s what the book aims to support.

Which achievement are you most proud of, and why? Creating a new academic program is not easy. But I’m so proud of the URI Graduate Certificate in Digital Literacy, which is a 12-credit postgraduate program that’s an outgrowth of the spectacular success of the URI Summer Institute in Digital Literacy. We have graduate students and adult learners from all over the country and all over the world participating in this program. I love this learning experience so much! Now in its 6th year, this intensive hands-on, minds-on experience attracts over 100 elementary and secondary teachers, college faculty, librarians, youth media professionals, researchers and education leaders. I always learn so much from this program! Developed in collaboration with my URI colleague Dr. Julie Coiro in the School of Education, who is one of the world’s leading experts on online reading comprehension, we are considering how the disciplines of communication/media studies and education can help us understand what ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ mean in a digital age.

My understanding of digital and media literacy has been through a real transformation as a result of exposure to such a diverse constellation of people who have participated in this program. At the Summer Institute in Digital Literacy, keynote speakers including Doug Rushkoff, Howard Rheingold, Joyce Valenza, Chris Lehmann and Dan Gillmor have helped
us explore connections across disciplines and fields. And so many insights result from the many brilliant and talented people who attend the program!

This year, the 42-hour program will be held July 15 – 20 on the downtown Providence campus of the University of Rhode Island and our keynote speakers include one of my former students, the Philadelphia-based media literacy educator Nuala Cabral along with her father, the renowned professional storyteller Len Cabral. I’m looking forward to their keynote address, “Before There Were Screens, There Were Stories.” They will help us consider the future of digital and media literacy by exploring the relevance, limitations and power of story. In a fast-evolving media landscape where screens are ubiquitous, attention spans are short, multitasking is the norm and human connection is at our fingertips, we wonder: How can we make space in our lives for storytelling that nurtures and connects us in a busy and divisive world?

What is an important question from parents and practitioners that we as academics cannot provide a good answer to yet? Everyone always asks me, “How prevalent is media literacy education in the U.S. and around the world?” We don’t have great data on this because media literacy education takes so many forms. When Joe Kahne and Benjamin Bowyer measured exposure to media literacy education with a representative sample of 2,100 California youth ages 15 to 27, they asked questions that focused on media literacy’s ability to promote accurate judgment of truth claims. They summed responses to two questions: (1) How often have you discussed how to tell if the information you find online is trustworthy? and (2) How often have you discussed the importance of evaluating the evidence that backs up people’s opinions?

They found about one-third of students reported exposure to media literacy education. These questions are an important way of measuring media literacy education experiences that tap into how high school social studies, journalism and teacher-librarians may approach the topic. But teachers don’t all approach media literacy the same way. At the Student Television Network, I see high school students and their teachers who are developing media literacy competencies through video production learning experiences. They’re examining how media shapes social reality by giving students experiences to make media themselves. At the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) conference, I see a myriad of ways that media
literacy is introduced to learners. At the 2017 conference, there were 80 or more sessions about media literacy, as teachers showed how they incorporate pop culture in the English classroom, analyze reality TV and examine patterns of representation in Disney/Marvel films, and help students to blog, create podcasts, and engage in digital dialogue. Around the world, a whole new generation of teacher educators is helping future teachers develop media literacy competencies and learn how to use innovative pedagogies to advance those competencies in learners. Because of the many diverse ways in which media literacy is taught and learned, we don’t yet have good data on how many students are exposed to media literacy education in and out of schools.

What would be your work motto?

“Create to Learn.”

A big part of my identity is as a media producer and I thrive on opportunities that involve collaborative and creative media production. It’s how I learn best.

Which of your publications is your favorite, and why? The most recent baby is always the favorite. I am thrilled about my new book, Create to Learn: Introduction to Digital Literacy (Wiley, 2017), which is designed to offer college students support in analyzing and creating media in nine forms: blogs and websites, podcasts and audio, images, animation, vlogging and screencasting, infographics and data visualization, video production, remix and social media. We have created an online companion website that offers samples of student creative work to inspire learners, too.

If you had unlimited resources, what kind of project would you want to do and why? I’m a field-builder. It is my continued hope that communication and media studies scholars can continue to bring their innovative pedagogies and their disciplinary expertise to important teaching and research questions in the field. If I had unlimited resources, I would help address the problem of hyper-specialization and fragmentation in the academy. Today, with the explosion of new knowledge and the decline in academic travel budgets, it takes an extra effort to engage in cross-disciplinary dialogue. Long ago, as a graduate student, I first encountered the deep points of connection between the field of communication/media studies and the field of education by reading the philosopher John Dewey. Today, more than ever, I see that many interesting research questions stand at the intersection of these two fields.
The problem is that media literacy scholars and educators come from so many different backgrounds that they rarely get to encounter and learn from each other. For example, consider this partial list of groups where media literacy researchers and educators gather:

**Film Studies.** At the Society of Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS), film teachers have a Media Literacy and Pedagogical Outreach Special Interest Group that explores how media literacy competencies are developed in the field of film studies.

**School Journalism.** At the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, the Scholastic Journalism Division explores the impact of learning to create news media in the context of K-12 education.

**Media Psychology.** At the American Psychology Association, Division 46 is focused on Media Psychology and Technology and researchers consider how media literacy may be an intervention to address potentially harmful media effects.

**Literacy.** At the International Literacy Association (ILA), they have a Technology in Literacy SIG that examines how 'reading' and 'writing' practices are transforming with digital media and technology use.

**Education.** At the American Educational Research Association (AERA), they have a Media, Culture and Learning SIG that considers the role of popular culture in education.

**Communication.** At the International Communication Association (ICA), the scholarship of media literacy may be found in the Instructional and Developmental Division or the Children, Adolescents and Media Division.

I’m proud to say that the organization I helped to found, [the National Association of Media Literacy Education](#) now has over 4,000 members and their 2017 national conference in Chicago attracted 400 faculty and educators from around the world. My dream project would involve creative ways to bring together the growing and diverse global community of people with interests in media literacy. To advance practice and research in media literacy education, we need people from many different academic and professional fields including human development, media psychology, public health, library and information science, anthropology, computer science, and the...
humanities to all share and learn from each other. I would love to be able to do a long-term longitudinal design in which we can study the transactional nature of media effects among children and adolescents. It would be so helpful to understand how childhood media use, and the effects of such use, influence how the individuals use media, and are influenced by it, during adolescence and into young adulthood (and beyond if I get even more money). In this way, we could begin to see how media can influence developmental trajectories.

**If you had to give one piece of advice to young CAM scholars, what would it be?** Realize that you are part of a learning community where everyone learns from everyone.

**Who would you like to put in the spotlight next, and why?** I would like to learn more about Shobha Avadhani.