

**U S**

**AND**

**T H E M**

a reflection on fake news, propaganda and  
visual history

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**FOREWORD**

Growing up in [redacted] I was taught  
to [redacted] love [redacted] without question. [redacted]  
[redacted] turn on the TV and watch [redacted]  
[redacted] propaganda

[redacted]  
[redacted]  
[redacted]  
[redacted]  
[redacted]  
[redacted]

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] tactics [REDACTED]  
propagandists like to use, blaming [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] the enemy. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] strategically creates a national enemy with  
intensity blown out of proportion.

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] As soon as I arrived in 2016, the United States  
descended into political chaos with the 2016 presidential election.  
Although, many of my undergraduate professors kept telling me  
that it wasn't like this before. I saw politicians using China and  
communism to dismiss and tarnish their political opponents.  
*Democrats are commies! Trump loves China and you can't trust him! We  
must put China down!*

I realized that the rhetoric of American nationalism propaganda is not  
that far off from the rhetoric of Chinese nationalism propaganda. In  
fact, creating an imagined, collective enemy, has always been a strategy  
to manufacture consent and obedience by political powers. For many  
people in the US, it might be tempting to think that propaganda is  
something that lives in the past, or at least in authoritarian regimes  
like Russia, North Korea and China. In reality, propaganda does exist  
in the US. And it is alive and well.

The maintenance person in my apartment once asked me if I was  
a communist. While this question amuses me now, at the moment  
I wondered if he understood what communism was. The People's  
Republic of China is a socialist country under an authoritarian  
regime, not a communist one. But his question did not come from

nowhere. Almost a hundred years of red scare propaganda has turned  
the word communist into the equivalent of *un-American* and *anti-  
Christian*. Red scare propaganda is still working in effect today in  
the US. Many politicians are willing to give up on social welfare and  
infrastructures that could have drastically improved people's life, out  
of fear of being labeled communist. (Heller, 1999).

My own academic journey is a journey where I grapple with my  
political identity and my experience with propaganda through various  
channels. I started off as a creative writing major, and wrote short  
dystopian stories about people living in lies. Then I switched my  
major to advertising (out of fear of not finding a job), and learned  
about the science behind persuasion and public relations. I took a lot  
of media studies and journalism classes, eventually leading me to do  
design research on political communication in the MFA DRI program.  
This booklet is a reflection on my visual history research process  
and creative work in response to my learning. Making is part of my  
research and thinking process. While my thesis and primary research  
are my focuses, these creative projects helped me think deeper about  
the literature and express myself beyond academic writing.



## WICKED CONNECTION

During the late 1990s, just years before the arrival of the millennium, the World Wide Web promised a future more connected and informed than we could have ever imagined. As of 2023, it has not truly delivered.

Charles Reich once predicted in the 60s that cybernetics, a discipline based on system thinking that became foundational to the development of today's internet, was going to bring forth the third wave of consciousness (Turner, 2006). Granted, the improvement of technologies and science of the agricultural economy led the

Europeans to the new ways of seeing the world in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment period. The industrial revolution freed the bourgeois from rigid structure, and led to another revolution of consciousness. In this logic, the cybernetic system of automation, and the ultra-connected cyberspace would have already led us to the third wave of consciousness, a post-modern enlightenment that would have bridged gaps of knowledge and connected communities and left bigotry and ignorance in the past. Almost 60 years later, we still haven't arrived at the supposed new wave of consciousness.

Google was supposed to bring all knowledge and truth searchable to the user's fingertips, and social media such Facebook and Instagram were supposed to connect us despite any physical distance. Yet, it feels like we are more divided and less connected than ever. As we marvel at the existence of flat-earthers and deniers of climate change, some of us must have wondered if we truly are using the same Internet. Algorithms of search engines now can return different results, sometimes even conflicting results, based on personal search history and user location. Social media platforms feed users contents similar to their interests, creating a giant echo chamber where it is difficult to catch a sight of the other sight without us deliberately doing so (Netflix, 2020). In a sense, instead of living in an age of new enlightenment, we are living in an age of informational segregation, where we all live in different realities. The original promise of connection, might as well be a *con*.



*Connected*. Graphic design poster. Zhi Luo, 2022.



*Space trip*. Illustration. Zhi Luo, 2022.

*Con nected* is a poster project I completed in my independent study with Professor Angelica Sibrian in Spring 2022. In creating the poster, I tried to reflect on the state of distraught that many of us are in, as we try to make sense of the current information landscape. This was my first serious effort of doing graphic design. I had a grand vision of creating visual discomfort through bodily horror, but soon realized my limited skill of Illustrator couldn't get the result that I wanted. So I turned to simple line work to create a twisted web made of nerves stemming from brains and tiny hands at the nerve ends—a bodily representation of the Internet.

*Space trip* speculates a future technology that can harvest attention as an energy source from the public, and power spaceships with zero harmful emission. As space tourism has become quite popular among the ultra-rich, (think Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk), society has become quite critical of their extravagant spending on such deeds. Here I present an environmentally friendly way to tour the space for those who can afford it. Now they can tour the space and give themselves a pat on the shoulder that they have done something great to benefit the planet. This noir design poster is a critique on the current attention economy that keeps us addicted to constant feed of contents and drama. Our identity on social media stratified and flattened, only to be commodified to the marketing companies. Every second we pay attention to trending topics someone is getting paid. Our attention made space tourism for the ultra-rich possible. In this design, I take this connection further and make it a direct link.

Turner, F. (2008). *From counterculture to cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the rise of Digital utopianism*. The University of Chicago Press.  
Netflix. (2020). *The Social Dilemma*. USA.

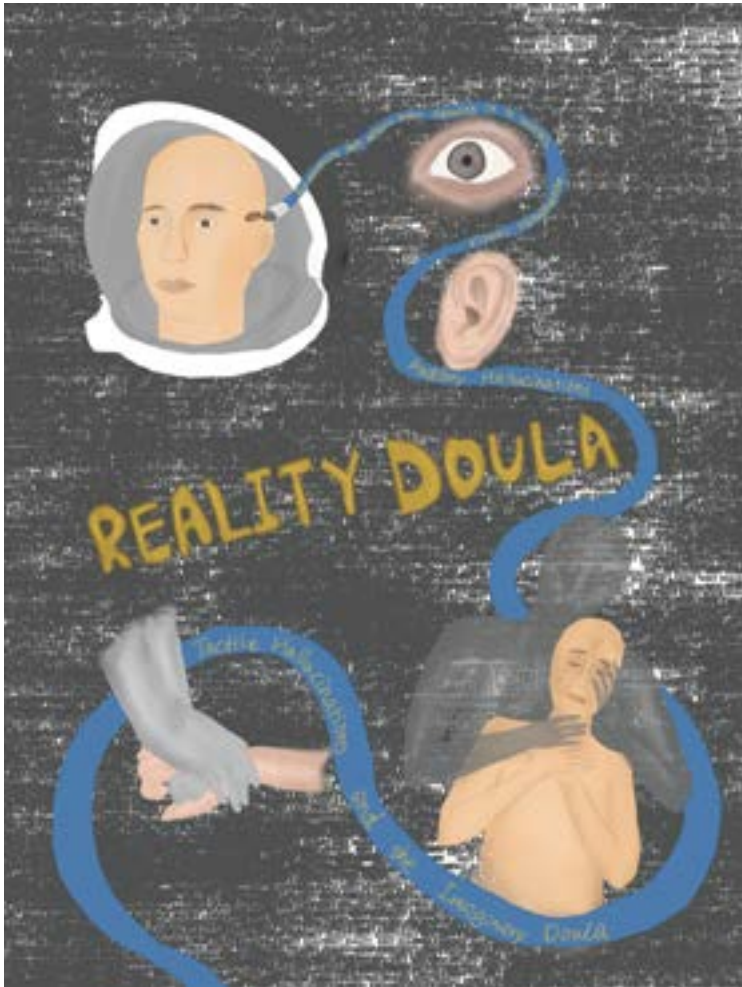


*They live*. Universal pictures, 1988.

## LIVED LIES

Lying is part of human nature. Statistically speaking, we are lied to from 10 to 200 times a day (Meyer, 2011). Although lying itself is pedestrian, we often find lying in politics unforgivable. Fake news, misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda are all forms of deception and lying. Amidst confusion about the veracity of claims by politicians, saying something is *fake news* or lies sometimes is a powerful enough political weapon to dismiss an opponent, regardless of the truth.

Hannah Arendt argued in *Crisis of the Republic* that organized lies are the most dangerous above all other forms of lying (1973). Arendt suggested that organized lying utilizes tactics of manipulation, namely propaganda, disinformation, intentional obscurity, spectacle, scapegoating and gaslight (O’Gorman, 2020). These tactics conceal



*Reality Doula*. Illustration. Zhi Luo, 2022.

the liar's true intentions and manipulate the audiences, taking away their rights to free will in a cunning way. In authoritarian states, the governments have concentrated control over the Internet and most of the mass media, and thus are able to manipulate at such a high scale that they can rewrite history and interpret reality. To survive in such environments, citizens not only have to obey the propagandist's version of reality, but also sometimes have to participate and become propagandists themselves.

*Reality Doula* is a noir design poster project I completed as part of the provocation of the DRI studio course taught by Professor Nekita Thomas. It describes a brainwashing technology in the future. My inspiration comes from my realization that it is painful to let go of one's perception of reality to accept a version of truth that is forced upon. Government, political party, and corporate propaganda, institutional lies, erasure of history, media blackout or distorted facts... we are constantly exposed to messages by the rich and the powerful, and it seems that we have to be extremely diligent about consuming media contents so we are not deceived. *What if we are forced to accept these messages as truth or otherwise it would have dire consequences? How do we deal with this loss?* Reality Doula connects directly to your brain, and aids you as you transition to a different version of reality. Just like birth doula and death doula, reality doula connects with your emotional needs via visual, auditory and tactile hallucination, holding your hand as you once again become governable.

I played with typography by layering small prints of *obey* reality to create a black and white background. I took inspiration from the 1988 film *They Live*.

Meyer, P. (2011). *How to spot A liar*. Pamela Meyer: *How to spot a liar* | TED Talk.  
Arendt, H. (1973). *Crisis of the Republic*. Penguin.  
O'Gorman, N. (2020). *Politics for everybody: Reading Hannah Arendt in Uncertain Times*. The University of Chicago Press.  
Universal Pictures. (1988). *They live*.



A worker inspects an AR-15 gun at Davidson Defense in Orem, Utah. George Frey/AFP/Getty Images. United States, 2021.





*The Gadsden Flag. Christopher Gadsden. United States, 1775.*

## TURNING TO VISUAL POLITICS

The political challenges posed by the age of the internet have led to a growing number of research on finding technological solutions. Fact-checking and labeling, for example, have become popular research subjects following the 2016 and 2020 United States presidential elections. Academic interests in political memes and online communities have also been growing. However, this shift of focus on new media does not mean that there is no value in examining historical political visuals in print media.

We may not see propaganda posters at town squares as often, but the same kind of persuasion is now present in new forms of digital media like Instagram posts and Tik Tok videos. In fact, many political disinformation memes and social media visuals utilize very similar manipulation techniques to historical propaganda posters and illustrations. A lot of nationalist visual symbols in the US were



*Members of the Proud Boys at a rally from online news story 'Broad range of grievances' continue to motivate Oath Keepers and Proud Boys. Anthony Crider/ Flickr. United States, 2022.*

developed during the early American Revolution period, persisted through history and became part of contemporary language and visual culture.

My MFA research journey was not a linear process. In 2020 when I first started the program, I wanted to develop a design intervention to combat political misinformation and propaganda in the news media. I did research on the trust-worthiness of major news outlets in the US, but eventually I decided to shift my focus. The truth was that the more I learned about this topic, the less comfortable I was to design a solution. *Who am I to tell you who to trust? Why would you trust me? Do I trust my own judgment?* I constantly asked myself these questions. I came to the conclusion that there is likely no easy solution to the complicated information crisis we are in. I also realized that technologies are unlikely to be effective for a political, ideological and historical problem.



Destroy This Mad Brute Enlist - U.S. Army. Harry, R. Hopps. United States, 1918.



Vogue Magazine. United States, 2008

The turning point of my research was in Spring 2022. I ran a culture-jamming workshop in an art-based research methodology class, taught by Professor Sarah Travis. I gave participants screenshots of politically-divisive news headlines on American TV. I included both left and right-leaning shows such as MSNBC and Fox News. Participants sharply recognized repeated patterns, images and phrases in the news headlines. They drew on the host's faces, wrote rhetorical questions next to the headlines and circled parts of the images, such as the American Flag, that they felt were manipulative.



Collage. Anonymous, 2022.



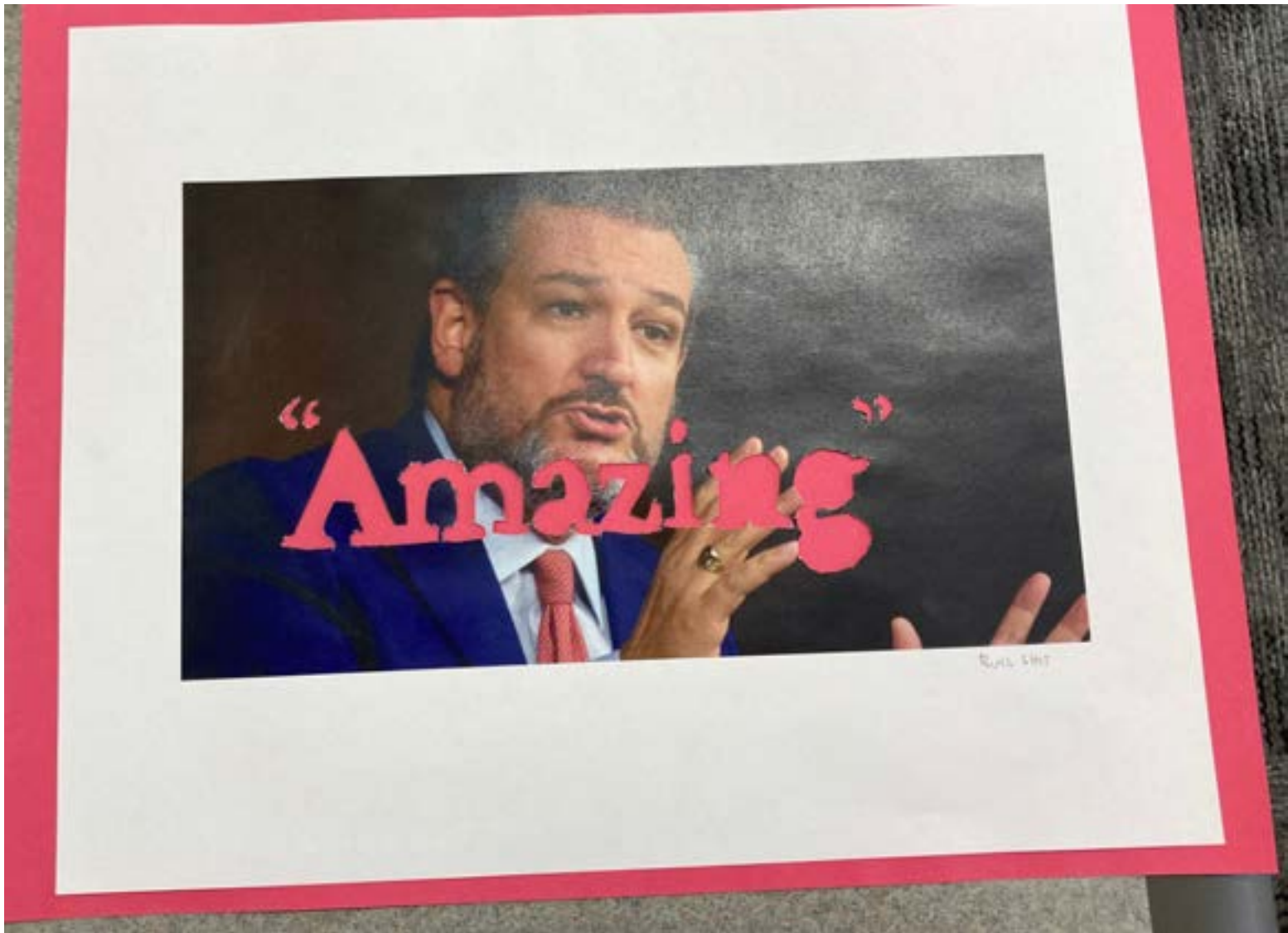
Collage. Azlan Smith, 2022.



Collages. Jean Carlos Valentin Velilla, 2022.



Collages. Jean Carlos Valentin Velilla, 2022.



Collage. Tim Abel, 2022.



Collage. Sarah Travis, 2022.



Collage. Anonymous, 2022.



Collage. Samantha Shoppell, 2022.

The workshop results sparked my curiosity about the politics of visual references—how come the American flag is considered manipulative by the participants in the context of the anti-vaccine rallies, but viewed positively at the pride parade. This workshop led me to pursue the thread of visual rhetoric in political communication.

## AFTERWORD

A lot have happened in the past three years. I haven't been able to see my family since 2018. The pandemic extended my homesickness. I said my last goodbye to my paternal grandma on a WeChat call before she passed in August 2020.

Trump lost the 2020 presidential election. The January 6 insurrection happened. Mass shootings. School shootings. Lot's of them. Roe v. Wade was overturned. Abortion rights are under attack. Trans lives are under attack. Black lives still matter, yet still under attack.

Back home, [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] trapped [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] protested [REDACTED]  
thousands [REDACTED] echoed [REDACTED] in blank paper [REDACTED] The  
[REDACTED] intervened. [REDACTED] The Internet  
was scrubbed clean. [REDACTED] nothing [REDACTED] happened.

A lot more happened. I grieved. A lot. I was angry. *Really angry*. I was lost. I knew I was not the only one experiencing these emotions. In fact, I found some solace and camaraderie in this collective grief. I worked slowly. This research required lot's of emotional labor, and a lot of unlearning. By the end of the three years, I have become a different person.

My research and my creative work are ways I, a person living in the contemporary world, grapple with the information crisis and political theater that originated in the long history before me and persisted through time and space. To me, this problem is a long continuum. There was no definite starting point, and there will be no clean ending. It is like a muddy river of history. We are all picking pebbles along the riverbanks, trying to piece together some version of truth.

