

Fake News: The New Yellow Journalism

One of the first recorded uses of fake news occurred in 63BC during the war for the Roman Empire. Octavian fabricated stories that aided his defeat of Marc Anthony for control of the empire. He followed this up by renaming himself Augusta, a fake name, and distributing phony drawings of himself so that the people of the empire would think he was young and handsome.

Recently, many have wondered if fake news is new. It is not. Fake news has been around since the beginning of civilization. Actually, it is older than fact-based news. However, the widespread use of fake news goes back 500 years¹ but the phrase fake news, itself, is only 125 years old.²

Most of us have at some point in the past year heard speculation about the role fake news is playing today in science, politics, war, entertainment, prejudice and more. Fake news has impacted these areas throughout time. Here are a few interesting examples.

On Easter Sunday in 1475, a Catholic priest bellowed from the pulpit that Jews had kidnapped and murdered a child. Worse yet, he claimed the Jews drained all the blood from the child for use in Passover service. This news spread like wildfire. Panic and prejudice ensued. Jews were rounded up and hung. Even the pope could not contain the story. It, of course, was entirely false. Hitler repeated very similar news stories in order to validate his policy of extermination of the Jews.

The United States was and is not immune from fake news promoting prejudice. Riots damaging Catholic churches broke out in Philadelphia in 1844 when newspapers reported that Catholics were going into public schools and stealing bibles.

In the 1800's newspapers printed stories of rampant rape of white women by slaves. Journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett wrote a pamphlet named "*Southern Horrors*". In it she referenced newspaper stories throughout the South alleging an epidemic of black-on-white rape. One such story was in

the *Memphis Daily Commercial*. Its editors declared, "There is no longer a restraint upon the brute passion of the brute Negro."³ Fake news incited prejudice throughout the ages.

If you thought disparaging lies were a new way to influence voters, think again. The "Last Will and Testament of Hanna the Elephant" was a story published in 1522 about the elephant pet of Pope Leo. It was the first of a series written by Aretino, an influential Italian author, to disparage the political and religious leaders of the time. His prose was false and belittling to sway the election of leaders. Fake news in politics fill the pages of history.

Has fake news aroused fear in the past? Well, in 1780, a news article appeared that aroused massive terror. The newspaper claimed that a creature with the head of a Fury, the scaly body of a dragon and wings of a bat was being brought by ship to Spain. Of course, this wasn't true but the rampant panic it caused was real.

Fake news has long influenced our understanding of science. A series of stories in the New York Sun in 1835 reported on a new giant telescope set up by the British in South Africa. The news reported that when you looked through the scope there was life on the moon but it was bats that looked like men and goats with blue skin. Supposedly there was also a temple made from polished sapphire. This fakery was put out as a real scientific discovery.

War and fake news seem to go hand in hand. The term "yellow journalism" was coined during the late 1800's during the battle between William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. One of the most famous instances of the influence of false news stories on war **came** from this era.

Hearst's Morning Journal printed phony illustrations of America women being stripped searched by Cubans. Hearst next published that the battleship, the USS Maine, was sunk by the Cubans and he included in his article counterfeit blueprints of the alleged bomb. In fact, Hearst was reputed to have told his reporter, "You furnish some pictures and I will furnish the war."⁴ These highly inflammatory stories changed the tide of public opinion and accelerated the start of Spanish American War.

But, use of fake news to influence war goes back even further in our history. Benjamin Franklin fueled fear in colonists to elicit support for the Revolutionary War. He printed fictitious stories that King George had engaged “savage” Indians to scalp soldiers and citizens.

Fake News prospered during World War II. Both the Allies and the Axis powers used fake news to create fear, prejudice and patriotism. The stories were initiated by the governments and were referred to as propaganda. However, the propaganda used during WW II had the same characteristics of fake news today.

Adolph Hitler was a master of fakery. Hitler authorized broadcasts in French to be aired telling French soldiers that the British soldiers were in Paris bedding the wives of the French instead of being on the lines fighting. He also broadcasted programs to the United States using alluring voices extolling the close connection between the US and Germany since much of the US was populated with German immigrants. He hoped this would keep America out of the war.

Of course, the US also resorted to wild propaganda during this war. Our government released to the eager media, pictures depicting Japanese soldiers as apes, savages and rapists. One famous cartoon showed a Japanese soldier with bucked teeth and crossed eyes carrying a naked white woman away from a battle. For all the Japanese atrocities, none of this was true.

If you watched the PBS series this fall about the Vietnam War, you quickly realized that fake news played a significant role. Both Democratic and Republican administrations told the American people many deceptions during the conflict. In August 1964, the USS *Maddox*, a navy destroyer, was sent into the waters near North Vietnam to electronically record raids by the South Vietnamese army. The *Maddox* was attacked by 3 patrol boats. The Maddox may have fired first. Two days later, the White House directed the *Maddox* and the destroyer, the USS *Turner Joy* back into waters near North Vietnam. During the night the *Maddox* again reported it had been attacked. The facts were murky and unconfirmed. The White House seized on the incident and reported it to the press as an unprovoked

surprise attack on the US. This catapulted the US into active combat. In reality, the facts were never really proven. We now know that Presidents from Truman to Nixon lied about Vietnam. With all these examples of deception should we really be so surprised by today's news.

No history of fake news would be complete without reminding us of the radio broadcast of "The War of the Worlds." In a desire to make the H.G. Wells book, *War of the Worlds* more entertaining, Orson Wells used a dramatic news bulletin format on his radio program. Each bulletin contained a different update such as reports of mysterious creatures or deadly war machines from Mars heading to New York City. Millions thought this was a true broadcast and were terrified. Was this the precursor to our Jimmy Fallon or Saturday Night Live's phony new casts?

The history of fake news answers our question, "Is this phenomena novel to the 21st century?" However, other questions remain. What are the differences between fake news, yellow journalism and propaganda? How has technology effected fake news? What techniques are used in fake news and finally why does fake news continue today>

According to the Cambridge Dictionary "propaganda" is defined as information or ideas that are spread by an organized group or government to influence people's opinions by not giving all the facts or by secretly emphasizing only one way of looking at the facts.⁵ People are more tolerant of propaganda because in the past its distinction from fake news was that the government was the purveyor and therefore more trusted.

Reading further in the Cambridge dictionary, "Fake News" is defined as false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or by using other media that are usually created to influence political views or as a joke."⁶ If propaganda from the government is given to the media for dissemination isn't it fake news? Plus, how can governmental propaganda controlled by elected officials not be political? The distinctions between propaganda and fake news are practically nonexistent. "Yellow journalism" is not defined by the Cambridge Dictionary but Google defines it

simply as crude exaggeration which means it could be synonymous with propaganda or fake news. Have you ever seen a recent fake news story without some exaggeration?

James Carson more rigorously defined fake news by dividing it into five categories.⁷

1. Intentionally deceptive news – Made up stories entirely to deceive readers
2. Jokes – belittling, sarcasm
3. Large scale hoaxes – Deceptions reported at face value by reputable news sources.
4. Slanted reporting – Selectively choosing elements leaving out other aspects of a story to serve an agenda. AND
5. Contentious Truth – Stories where the facts are prickly, murky and lead to different interpretations. (5)

All the examples given today of yellow journalism and propaganda include these exact five categories. Making distinctions between the three terms is splitting hairs.

What effect has technology had on fake news? Fake news took a back seat to objective news for 70 years until internet technology gave it a rebirth. However, this is not the first-time fake news was affected by technology.

From the days of Aretino gluing hand written false sonnets about candidates for pope on statues in Rome when paper and ink became prevalent, to the invention of the printing press in 1439 by Gutenberg, fake news has thrived because of new technology. Even the simple technological advance of printed pictures impacted fake news because pictures added a new medium and reached nonreaders.

The telegraph and the telephone influenced the spread of fake news. The dawn of the age of the radio caused as much skepticism as the internet today. Even electronic billboards now flash headlines to thousands passing as they drive.

The internet first affected the spread of fake news **through chain emails**. Emails popped up in your inbox. The subject line became the modern-day headline full of emotionally charged words. The end of the email was a call to action -- forward this to the world! Well, at least to the world of your address book.

However, none of these new technologies has had the effect of spreading fake news **like social media**. No longer is your in-box clogged with chain emails. Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter have taken over.

How did social media become a game changer? Social media became widespread around 2007 when Facebook opened up to people other than college students.⁸ According to Statista in the 3rd quarter of 2017, **2.07 billion people** around the world use Facebook each month⁹. (8) Social media has **exploded** the numbers of people reached and the **speed** they can receive news. Most sources agree, never has news traveled so quickly.

Social media mastered the art of the **sensational headline**. Tempting and fiery words are used to create a headline that seize a person's attention. The internet dubbed these headlines "click bait". **The headline peaks** a person's curiosity seducing them to take the bait and click on the story. They are the driver of fake news on social media and are now used by all other media.

Social media also changed news reporting. Now anyone can be a "reporter" of information just by posting on Twitter or Facebook. Smartphones enable us to video events and post as they are happening. Professional journalists are supplanted by you and me. In Michigan, the day before the election in 2016, 50% of the content on social media was prepared by professional journalists and 50% was written by everyday citizens.¹⁰ Furthermore, 23% of Americans say they have **shared a made-up** news story online either knowingly or unknowingly.¹¹

Media companies are accelerating this change from professional journalists by paying for these stories from nonprofessionals. During the election in 2016 people working from home made significant

sums of money by being contracted to develop fake news. One college student from the Republic of Georgia supposedly earned over thousands of dollars pushing fake news that flattered Trump¹² while a teen from Macedonia earned \$60,000 dollars writing fake news stories on the internet. He was a master of click bait and discovered that headlines maligning Hillary Clinton received the most clicks¹³. They were paid for each click someone made. He posted hundreds of fake news stories using multiple Facebook accounts.

Any mention of the power of social media must include both the effect of the smart phone and of the algorithms used by Facebook, Google and other sites to track what you click.¹⁴ that keep on **Your clicks are the gift that keeps on giving**. The algorithms allow sites to remember what you clicked and send you more stories with similar information, topics, and attitudes for days to come.²² Secondly, the prevalence of smartphones allow individuals to continuously view news and to send news as it happens How many of you glance down at news banners on your phone throughout your day. How many of you glanced down while I have been talking? One positive result of smartphones is it does deter some falsehoods spreading because facts can be checked instantaneously.

But why does Fake news continue to exist? Fake news survives because of three phenomena. First. stories change our brain increasing our desire for more stories. Second, fake news strengthens membership in groups and organizations. Finally, fake news makes big money.

First let's examine how fake news effects our brain. To understand how stories, activate our brain we need to understand the techniques used by producers of fake stories. Reina Donovan in "Debating Fake News" delineates several tactics that work on our susceptibility to fake news. All of these tactics heavily utilize the power of suggestion and **avoid asking us** to think critically. They are backed by illustrations, symbols and slogans to help etch the story in our mind.¹⁵ As I read these **tactics**, think of some of the stories you thought were fake recently and see if you can identify which of these **tactics were used**.

Subtle suggestions - Broad absolute statements in easily understood, everyday language, to be accepted at face value.

Indirect statements - A person or story claims righteousness by associating with trusted people or groups.

Appealing to human desires - Made up statements and stories that create dreams come true for the reader. This tactic promises you will be safer, happier, more successful, or richer.

Inducing panic and fear- Negative, dark, worst case scenario and scary Information that will induce strong emotions of panic and fear thus blocking rational thinking.

Discrediting the people who disagree through name calling, vilifying a person, and blaming them. Discrediting someone distracts from the real issue. It is quicker to discredit a person than to discredit their ideas.

Bullying - It is employed when the other people are not self-confident to shut them down.

Changing Facts in History - These are statements altering or omitting facts so the story portrayed is the story the author desires to be told.

So how do these tactics change the brain? The story telling methods of fake news contain the attributes of a story that activate the brain. According to Paul Zak, director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies, tension filled, emotionally charged human-interest stories capturing our attention by taking us into the protagonist world create brain changes.¹⁶ The stories must always have a hook.” These strongly emotive stories evoke a release of oxytocin. Oxytocin is a powerful hormone that is a neurotransmitter. It is not the opioid, oxycontin. It is one of four neurotransmitters that helps us be happy. Oxytocin is often called “the love hormone,” and can be an antidote to depressive feelings. It is the hormone that underlies trust.¹⁷ Oxytocin makes us more sensitive to social cues. **It** motivates

people to engage with others. Since these types of stories produce oxytocin, they stimulate positive feelings and connection. **Is** it any wonder we crave these stories?

The second reason Fake News is alive and well is because it strengthens the organizations that are the foundation of our society. All of us belong to tribes today. Humans basically are pack animals we survive best in a tribe. We want and need to belong. Our tribes are our churches, family, neighborhoods, and political organizations. According to the *Psychology of Tribalism*, the tribe is the default sociological human construct.¹⁸ Tribal cohesion is essential to our survival and the tribe survives because of a common set of values and beliefs. Outside opinion disturb these beliefs threatening the tribe. The tribe erodes when members are exposed to different constructs. The internet has widened the availability of information and tribe leaders fear the attack is weakening the tribe. Fake news is put out by the tribe to combat these attacks. People blindly accept this fake news so they can are not out of sync with their tribe. Remember, the tribe is essential for our survival.

Money is the last of the major reasons fake news thrives. From the beginning of the printing press, selling news has been a profitable way to make money. The Hearst /Pulitzer use of yellow journalism was a battle to sell the most papers and make the most money. Sensational headlines draw people. Stories that cause controversy and skirt the facts sell! Click bait headlines also increase the revenue a site earns, driving up profits. Web providers sell ads based on the sites receiving the most clicks. Finally, the low cost of distribution of news via the web has driven up profitability.

Closing Thoughts:

How influential is social media and fake news? Depending upon whose data you quote 60%¹⁹ to 62%²⁰ of Americans read their news on social media sites. (18) Part of the influence of social networking sites is how easily a tweet or a post can be shared, multiplying their reach. Remember, nearly 23% of Americans have shared or written fake news.

The consolidation of news corporations into large **conglomerates** has reinforced the impact of fake news. In 1983 there were **50** news sources. Consolidation has left Americans with **6** news conglomerates.²¹ Less sources leads to slanted news. The conglomerates fearlessly work to shape our thinking. The conglomerates, though, have spurred the growth of independent alternative news sources. However, many of these have no professional ethics either. News media primarily uses Facebook as its platform. As Facebook announced shifts more to family and friends and away from media, these conglomerates have been caught unprepared. This may cause a decrease in fake news for a time.²²

What about truth? Fake news is deception: so has it eroded truthfulness? Time magazine published a cover “Is Truth Dead?” in March of 2017.²³ “Alternative facts” was coined last winter. Could different versions of the truth really exist? This should be a Quest paper on its own. However, a paper on Fake News today needs to mention recent discussions that contend that truth has become fluid. These discussions contend that our wide acceptance of other cultures, races, and religions may have altered the concept of truth. Some of the reading indicates an evolutionary phenomenon happening. As we evolved in the past 50 years to be accepting of people’s differences it became natural to accept that how one person experiences an event may be different than another’s. We have seen that altering facts is not new but beyond the basic facts of who what when and where, the truth of “why” becomes a matter of perspective. ²⁴

Now here at the end let’s indulge in very brief look at the effect of Fake News on the 2016 Election. There is a new study that came out on January 3, 2018 conducted jointly by Dartmouth, Princeton and the University of Exeter.²⁵ It is the first hard data on consumption of fake news and the election and most likely will not be the last. They analyzed data of 2500 Americans representing a cross section of citizens. They looked at the web traffic of these individuals. Their findings were as follows:

Fake news was just a fraction of the news consumed by the participants in the study.

- Consumption broke down along partisan lines with the most conservative, 10% ,of the sample accounting for 65% of the visits to fake news sites.
- Pro-Trump users **were 3** times more likely to visit fake news sites than those supporting Clinton.
- American **over the age of 60** were more likely to visit fake news sites than younger people.
- The conclusions were that for all the media coverage, fake news only reached a small subset of Americans and most of the people it reached were already very partisan.

Of course, **alternative facts will be forthcoming questioning this data. Media conglomerates may report the facts of this study but not the facts of other studies. Some people will question the truthfulness of these facts. Who is to say my paper and its facts are true. All of which lead to two other great Quest Papers for the next season. They are.” **Is the changing landscape of the media effecting America**” and **“Is Truth Dead.” Just not written by ME.****

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⁶ [https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/fake news](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/fake%20news)

⁷ Carson, James,” What is fake News? Its Origins and how it grew in 2016,” <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/0/fake-nes-origins-grew-2016/>, March 16,2017. Pg.39

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