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## A Historical Perspective



by Michael E. Miller/The Washington Post via Getty Images

Kori and Danielle Hayes at a Pizzagate demonstration, outside the White House in Washington, DC on March 25, 2017.

# Truth Is What You Fake of It

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Is misinformation in the modern media environment unprecedented? Are politicians and political activists less truthful than in the past? While “fake news” and “post-truth” were buzzwords in 2017 and 2018, neither represents a new phenomenon in history. Historians have long known and been able to trace how issue entrepreneurs, opportunists, politicians, and ideological anarchists use misinformation for personal and political gain or entertainment.

## Faking for Profit

Misinformation for profit is nothing new to the news industry. In 1835, British astronomer John Herschel used a newly invented telescope to view the moon. Across the Atlantic, the *New York Sun* carried stories about Herschel’s discoveries alleging that the astronomer had found, among other things, giant bat-like people, blue-skinned goats, and temples made of sapphire. Stories like this were directly responsible for a massive surge in sales for the newspaper, which shot from 8,000 to more than 19,000 copies and, for a time, became the world’s bestselling daily paper. Richard Adams Locke, then publisher of the paper, was directly responsible, purposefully producing fantastic stories to increase circulation and the strategy worked well. Curiosity about space and the potential for there to be life on other planets was widespread and news like this was front page material, but none of the true stories about the moon attracted nearly as much attention as the *Sun*’s fake coverage, which was later collected and sold in book form.<sup>1</sup>

Why did the *Sun* coverage of the moon sell better than London’s the *Times*, previously the bestselling daily? In reality, the moon is a lifeless hunk of rock, fascinating and beautiful to some, but boring to others. Legitimate newspapers of the era presented readers with captivating depictions of an alien landscape, lifeless but nonetheless beautiful and serene, and this captivated audiences, but not nearly as much as the *Sun*’s more colorful coverage. The difference was that the *Sun* provided readers not with perplexing reality, but with something akin to what they hoped or fantasized might be true.

Fake news for profit predates the *Sun* debacle by centuries. Historians have found, for instance, that, after the dawn of the printing press in the 1600s, thousands of pamphlets and “newsbooks” containing entirely fabricated stories were sold throughout Europe. These publications were often purposefully inflammatory and provocative, making bold, outlandish claims, because such claims attracted more interest and thus generated more sales. This mattered little when publications were primarily one-offs, but the emerging legitimate media objected to this practice and it was the newspapers that first acted to ferret out illegitimate news. This happened because journalists perceived themselves as having a stake in their reputation and

accuracy and so helped to expose the charlatany of manipulators like Locke who misled the public for profit. The modern press evolved out of this movement, an internal drive for legitimacy that would make the press something more than entertainment, a service profiting from, but also operating in the public trust.

### Faking for Power

In a 2016 article in *Politico* magazine, writer Jacob Soll explains how, in the 1400s, fake news gave rise to the spread of anti-Semitism in Italy. On Easter Sunday in 1475, after a young boy named Simonino had gone missing, a Franciscan preacher in Trento, Italy gave a series of sermons in which he claimed that the town's Jewish residents had kidnapped and killed the boy. Historians aren't entirely certain why the preacher, Bernardino of Feltre, was so violently opposed to Judaism, but his accusations, entirely without foundation or evidence, had devastating results. Stories of Jewish immorality spread from town to town via postings and written accounts from individuals claiming to have witnessed Jewish blood-drinking, child abuse, and other crimes firsthand. It was a concerted effort by the region's xenophobic and otherwise anti-Semitic population to dehumanize the Jewish population and the campaign worked. In Trento, the entire Jewish community was arrested and tortured with 15–17 burned at the stake after being convicted despite a complete lack of evidence.<sup>2</sup>

The fake news of the 1400s is an example of another popular and continuing strain of misinformation that has again come into vogue (or anti-vogue since most Americans state in polls that they disapprove of it) during and since the 2016 election cycle. Issue entrepreneurs use fake news of the type disseminated in the 1400s to gain political or social power and to motivate the public towards a certain goal or, more typically, against a perceived enemy. This is how much of the fake news identified from 2016–2018 was used, to connect political enemies or unfavorable ideologies with manufactured crimes and immoral behaviors/actions so as to motivate the public against those same enemies or ideologies.

There are many examples of this kind of misinformation in American history, and the proliferation of propagandistic claims intensifies around highly controversial issues. Creators of historic “fake news” have used misinformation to generate antipathy against immigrants in general, the Irish, Catholics, Asians, African Americans, and, more recently, Muslims. Though each campaign against a certain political, social, racial, ethnic, or religious group is unique there are common characteristics used by propagandists attempting to foment public conflict.

In 1906, a Bellingham, Washington newspaper, the *Puget Sound American*, used the term “Dusky Peril” to describe an influx of Sikhs arriving in the region to work in the lumber industry.<sup>3</sup> What's interesting in the coverage is that white residents in the community claimed that the Sikh residents had insulted and attacked white women in their community. This is a common tactic that generates hatred of a target group by suggesting that members of the group are so morally, ethically, and culturally deficient that they will attack the defenseless. By claiming that women are being attacked, the provocateur also has a better chance of engendering protective,

defensive, and aggressive responses from male readers or viewers, and thus of encouraging violence. Similarly, “fake news” peddlers often hide their identity, or claim that the source of the information they present comes from an expert or an individual who would have little reason to lie about the claim in question. Coverage of the Sikh invasion led to a race riot in which the 200 Sikhs who had settled in Washington were violently beaten and driven from the town. Similarly, in a 2017 article in *Slate*, writer Mike Mariani discusses how “fake news” about Catholics abusing children in sex rings or attacking Protestant women, preceded the now infamous anti-Irish riots in Philadelphia in the 1830s.<sup>4</sup>

### **All-American Fakery**

In 2017 and 2018, Donald Trump made numerous false claims about his political rivals and about contentious issues in American politics. This is a political tactic long employed in the United States and familiar even to the “founding fathers” of American society. For instance, historians have found that Benjamin Franklin produced fictional stories about the British paying Native Americans to scalp colonists in his effort to build support for the revolution. Similarly, in the lead up to the 1800 election, Federalists like John Adams and Alexander Hamilton spread a false rumor that Thomas Jefferson was secretly an atheist, an ideology widely feared and maligned in the 1800s in much the same way that some Americans in 2018 fear and believe misinformation about Islam and Muslims. In the 1800s, when the press was funded directly by politicians and lobbyists, the situation was very similar to the modern media environment.

Then, as now, the threat to American discourse was so acute the Thomas Jefferson felt misinformation was a threat to American discourse. In 1807, Jefferson wrote:

“It is a melancholy truth, that a suppression of the press could not more completely [sic] deprive the nation of its benefits, than is done, by its abandoned prostitution to falsehood. Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper.”<sup>5</sup>

Essentially Jefferson, in 1807, was making a similar claim to that made by Donald Trump in 2018, who frequently claims that most or all of the information presented by the “mainstream media” is “fake news.” The situation perceived by the two presidents is similar, but the media environment in 1800 was fundamentally different from that of the twenty-first century. In Jefferson’s era, the mainstream press was funded by lobbyists and interest groups and newspapers did not typically operate according to ethical guidelines. In Jefferson’s era, alternative publications were the ones trying to provide legitimate information to counter the propaganda produced and paid for by politicians and issue entrepreneurs.

Over time, the mainstream press evolved so as to be more or less self-policing, with journalists encouraged and rewarded for calling out mistakes and misinformation presented by other journalists and journalists regularly punished for failing to correct their own mistakes. Over time, those who gravitated towards careers in the press did so not for profit, but out of a desire to contribute to informed public

discourse and this meant that the newspapers and the journalists who wrote for them became more and more independent and increasingly served as an important check on the powers of the government, rather than a tool for governmental manipulation.

The mainstream press of the twenty-first century is nothing like the press that Jefferson so passionately condemned and, in fact, much of the content produced through the mainstream media would most likely have been quite appealing to a politician like Jefferson. In Jefferson's era, the mainstream press was more like the propaganda produced in the twenty-first century by the Russian government or white-nationalist Internet groups, proliferated through "fake news" sites and publications, or produced by pundits who are paid to shape public opinion rather than to inform the public. Today, misinformation is the "alternative" news, rather than the mainstream press and so Jefferson and Trump, though sharing the same message, were actually talking about opposite features of the media environment.

## Under the Sun

There is a proverb in Ecclesiastes 1:9 that says:

What has been will be again,

What has been done with be done again;

There is nothing new under the sun.<sup>6</sup>

Misinformation is profitable and effective as a tool for the political or ideological manipulation of public opinion and so, the use of misinformation is perennial and always a part of human societies. Critics might argue that those who intentionally use misinformation are guilty of some moral or ethical misdeed, but this is a matter of perspective. Those producing "fake news" for profit have their own proximate needs and concerns, which may outweigh any concern for how this activity affects others. Those who use misinformation for political or ideological purposes might believe that their cause is so righteous, or their enemies so insidiously evil and difficult to fight, that dishonesty is warranted by the need to mount an effective resistance.

Misinformation and propaganda appeals because it appears to confirm what people fear or what they want to believe. Those who purchased issues of the *Sun*, reading about man-bats and sapphire temples, might have wanted to believe that such an environment existed, or might have read about it because they feared what the existence of such a society might mean for them. In any case, the fantastic articles confirmed the feelings or ideas of those who gravitated towards them. The appeal of fantasy is also a fundamental part of the human psyche, enabling individuals to find, in fiction, what they fail to find in their lives, whether it be magical riches, youth, beauty, or ideological comfort and righteousness.

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## Notes

1. Standage, “The True History of Fake News.”
2. Soll, “The Long and Brutal History of Fake News.”
3. “Have We a Dusky Peril?” SAADA.
4. Mariani, “Nativism, Violence, and the Origins of the Paranoid Style.”
5. Umberti, “The Real History of Fake News.”
6. “Ecclesiastes 1:9,” *Biblehub*.