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## News(?)papers: A Typology of Fake News, 1880-1920

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# **NEWS(?)PAPERS: A TYPOLOGY OF FAKE NEWS, 1880-1920**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Mass Communication

in

Theanship School of Mass Communication

by

Olivia Grace Romaguera  
B.A., University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2021  
May 2023

*This thesis is dedicated to my late aunt Christine Kampmann  
and my late friend Gabriella Alsaqqa*

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	iii
Abstract .....	v
Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	4
I. Financial Gain.....	13
II. Character Assassination .....	21
III. War Tactic.....	31
IV. Newspaper Rivalry .....	47
V. Quackery .....	59
Conclusion .....	69
Bibliography .....	72
Vita .....	85

## **Abstract**

“Fake news” is a malleable concept. It can be beaten and reshaped to fit many different contexts. One widely accepted definition of fake news is false information purporting itself to be factual. Another is information that is factual but called “fake” in order to discredit it. Concern over the spread of fake news increased in recent years. But preoccupation with what is happening today has left a gap in our understanding of the phenomenon, specifically its roots in the past. “Fake news” was present when news technology was relatively primitive; it is not essentially a function of such modern advancements as cable programming and the internet. To analyze the antecedents to modern fake news, I reviewed 500 newspaper articles printed between 1880 and 1920. I created five categories to distinguish various intents for using the term—financial gain, character assassination, war tactic, newspaper rivalry, and quackery. The analysis showed that the news media often used the term to discredit their competition and claim their authority over the truth, as is the case today.

## Introduction

There are journals of high and low degree,  
Journals alive, and dead,  
Journals as yellow as yellow can be,  
And journals whose types are red;  
But the meanest journal beneath the skies,  
The journal that gives the bleus,  
Is the journal whose columns are filled  
with lies—  
The journal that “fakes” its news.<sup>1</sup>

Donald J. Trump’s announcement that he would be running for president in the 2016 election set the tone for his campaign. He called the country a “dumping ground” for the problems of everyone else and suggested a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border because Mexico was not sending their “best” people to America.<sup>2</sup> Almost instantly, internet users posing as credible news outlets shared false information about the 2016 election and presidential candidates. When citizens could not find faith in the news media, they practiced a kind of rookie journalism to share important information about current events. But those reports were even more likely to be partial or inaccurate. During Trump’s candidacy and presidency, people everywhere started using the term “fake news” as a vague but powerful label for misleading information. In response to the controversy surrounding his political (and personal) activity, Trump simply cried “FAKE NEWS!” to manipulate narratives in the news.

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<sup>1</sup> “Jay,” “News(?)papers,” *Los Angeles Evening Express*, March 16, 1898; “Jay” frequently wrote poems about current events for the *Evening Express*.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah McCammon, “Donald Trump Has Brought on Countless Controversies In An Unlikely Campaign,” *NPR Politics* (November 5, 2016). <https://www.npr.org/2016/11/05/500782887/donald-trumps-road-to-election-day>.

Since the beginning of his administration, Trump called journalists and news outlets “fake news” an estimated 2,000 times by October 2020.<sup>3</sup> “One of the greatest of all terms I’ve come up with is ‘fake,’” Trump said on Mike Huckabee’s talk show in October 2017.<sup>4</sup> Two years later, during a press conference with Finnish President Sauli Niinistö, he said, “I don’t even use fake anymore. I call the fake news now corrupt news because fake isn’t tough enough. And I’m the one that came up with the term—I’m very proud of it, but I think I’m gonna switch it to corrupt news.”<sup>5</sup> Scholars and pundits debunked that claim—even the Merriam-Webster dictionary webpage gave a short history of the term “fake news” and the concept of misinformation in response to Trump’s delusion.<sup>6</sup>

This was not the first time the head of state expressed mistrust in the news media; in fact, the president challenging the press is more common than not.<sup>7</sup> Trump’s use of the term “fake news” was not the first of its kind among past presidents, either. What’s remarkable about the ways Trump, journalists, and the public use “fake news” is the term’s chameleon-like characteristics that allow it to adapt to its contextual surroundings. As people began to apply the phrase in reference to unrelated topics, the term gained new meanings each time it was used. The different uses of “fake news” create complications for studying and accurately defining the term.

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<sup>3</sup> Alex Woodward, “‘Fake news’: A guide to Trump’s favourite phrase - and the dangers it obscures,” *Independent* (October 2, 2020). <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-election/trump-fake-news-counter-history-b732873.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Steve Coll, “Donald Trump’s ‘Fake News’ Tactics,” *New Yorker*, December 3, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> “Trump Claims He Invented the Term ‘Fake News’—Here’s an Interview With the Guy Who Actually Helped Popularize It,” *Washingtonian* (2019) <https://www.washingtonian.com/2019/10/02/trump-claims-he-invented-the-term-fake-news-an-interview-with-the-guy-who-actually-helped-popularize-it/>.

<sup>6</sup> “The Real Story of Fake News,” Words We’re Watching, Merriam-Webster, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/the-real-story-of-fake-news>.

<sup>7</sup> Harold Holzer, *The Presidents vs. the Press: The Endless Battle Between the White House and the Media from the Founding Fathers to Fake News* (Dutton, 2020).



Preoccupation with fake news today has also left a gap in our understanding of the term, particularly its roots in the past. Misinformation has confused public opinion since some of the earliest journalistic products in ancient Rome, such as “pasquinades”—satirical sonnets—which author Pietro Aretino disseminated to manipulate a pontifical election in 1522.<sup>8</sup> The long history of humbug, bullshit, lying, and so on, is well-documented. Scholars began carefully analyzing each word during the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> “Fake news” shares a similar lifespan with those terms, appearing in newspapers as early as 1889. Through a historical-contextual analysis of more than 500 American news articles printed during the Progressive Era, this thesis shows that the different types of “fake news” we define today are the same ways in which newspapers used the term over a century ago. By drawing links between the uses of the term over time, we can better understand the fake news phenomenon.

Based on trends in newspapers printed between 1880 and 1920, I propose a five-category typology to distinguish the ways the news uses the term, both then and now. I organized the types of fake news (financial gain, character assassination, war tactic, newspaper rivalry, and quackery) by the use of the term and the content of the news article.

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Darnton, “The True History of Fake News,” *New York Review of Books* (2017). <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2017/02/13/the-true-history-of-fake-news/>.

<sup>9</sup> For humbug, see P. T. Barnum, *The Humbugs of the World: An Account of Humbugs, Delusions, Impositions, Quackeries, Deceits and Deceivers Generally, in All Ages* (New York: Carleton, 1866) and Max Black, “The Prevalence of Humbug,” in *The Prevalence of Humbug and Other Essays* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983). For bullshit and lying, see Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).

## Literature Review

### The emergence of fake journalism

The concept of fake news—false information presenting itself as being factual—dates back to antiquity. In the sixth century AD, Byzantine historian Procopius wrote *Anecdota*, or *Secret History*, to falsely portray Emperor Justinian as cruel and incompetent. A millennium later, Italian author, poet, and satirist Pietro Aretino composed scornful sonnets about his least favorite candidates in the 1522 pontifical election and attached them to a statue near the Piazza Navona in Rome. These sonnets became known as “pasquinades.” Over the next two centuries, pasquinades flooded the streets of Paris in the form of printed “canards”—which were similar, minus the strict sonnet structure—about things like fictional beasts and the Queen, sometimes coupled with distasteful illustrations. In late eighteenth-century London, when newspapers began to circulate around a broad—yet exclusive—public, gossip had a regular place in the city’s ten dailies. Printer-publishers happily put snippets of hearsay in the available space in their columns. When suppression of the press did not allow political slander and scandalous reporting, satirical stories traveled by word of mouth and underhand extras. *Nouvellistes* spread news by trading among themselves bits of paper with the latest news scrawled on them, or sometimes leaving the notes in odd places for strangers to happen upon. As Parisians whipped up public opinion through short stories, poems, and songs that told of mendacious rumors, the police, with only loose and authorless paper trails, struggled and ultimately failed to repress those responsible for the false information.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Darnton, “The True History of Fake News.”

Upon the formation of the United States, printed materials already featured deliberately false gossip and propaganda. Political candidates, for example, created pamphlets with outrageous claims to libel their opponents.<sup>11</sup> Readers hardly regarded information in the newspaper as factual until the end of the nineteenth century. Before the 1880s, the United States did not have a lot of other print or bookstores available. In a market for entertainment, the news was as amusing as it was informational—if not more. Readers treated journalism and the quality of newspapers with a casual attitude.<sup>12</sup> They expected to find fabricated happenings and decorated hoaxes alongside the notes of the day. Beginning with America’s first newspaper, *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick*, published by Benjamin Harris in Boston in 1690, printers assumed readers would judge the truthfulness of news for themselves.<sup>13</sup> A footnote in an underground newspaper produced in London read: “Half of this article is true.” “It was up to the reader to decide which half,” observed historian Robert Darnton.<sup>14</sup>

Newspapers began to produce trustworthy information during the 1830s when America’s middle class arose and demanded equal access to the news. Cheaper paper manufacturing allowed for lower prices and a significant increase in newspaper circulation. With their new and expansive audiences, publishers could boost their paper’s market appeal and increase revenue by providing generalized, nonpartisan news. Many newspapers started to strive for objectivity in

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<sup>11</sup> Matthijs Tieleman, “How 18th-Century Information Wars Can Solve the Problem of 21st-Century ‘Fake News,’” *Washington Post* (February 24, 2019), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/02/24/how-th-century-information-wars-can-solve-problem-st-century-fake-news/>.

<sup>12</sup> Steven Fabian, “An Interview with Dr. Andie Tucher, Columbia Journalism School,” *Radical History Review*, no. 141 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-9170794>.

<sup>13</sup> Autumn Lorimer Linford, “Not Exactly Lying: Fake News and Fake Journalism in American History,” *American Journalism* 39, no. 3 (2022), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/08821127.2022.2097846>; Andie Tucher, *Not Exactly Lying: Fake News and Fake Journalism in American History* (Columbia University Press, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Darnton, “The True History of Fake News.”

their reporting.<sup>15</sup> Professionalism and accuracy became true ideals of journalism in the 1880s and 1890s. In an industry that once produced both entertaining and informative material with little care for quality, journalists now had to find a balance between entertaining and factual storytelling. Readers inspected the paper's content like never before, keeping a watchful eye on its accuracy. If a news item was inaccurate, misleading, or total nonsense, audiences questioned its place in the paper. Many agreed that kind of material was immoral, indefensible, and should be considered criminal. As the public started to expect news to be accurate, journalism gained the ability to be "fake" during the evolution of the news industry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>16</sup>

"Yellow journalism" and the "yellow press" were the first widely recognized American terms describing sensational and exaggerated journalism based on little or no legitimate news. Newsmen used those terms in reference to Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* during their circulation war and the 1898 Spanish-American War. Audiences condemned this kind of reporting as unethical and unprofessional. Common characteristics of yellow journalism included large scare headlines, heavy reliance on anonymous sources, overuse of pictures or cartoons, shameless self-promotion, faked interviews, and pseudoscience, among others.<sup>17</sup> The words "disinformation" and "propaganda," to an extent, replaced "yellow journalism" during the World Wars.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> John Maxwell Hamilton and Heidi J. S. Tworek, "A natural history of the news: An epigenetic study," *Journalism* 18, no. 4 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884915625630>.

<sup>16</sup> Tucher, *Not Exactly Lying: Fake News and Fake Journalism in American History*.

<sup>17</sup> Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History, 1690-1960*, 3rd edition ed. (Macmillan, 1962); W. Joseph Campbell, *Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies* (Greenwood, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Maria D. Molina et al., "'Fake News' Is Not Simply False Information: A Concept Explication and Taxonomy of Online Content," *American Behavioral Scientist* 65, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764219878224>.

## First use of “fake news”

The term “yellow journalism” first appeared in the newspaper in January 1897 in the *New York Press*.<sup>19</sup> In the research conducted for this thesis, I found “fake journalism” used by the *Burlington Free Press* in December 1887, “fake newspaper” by the *Sioux City Journal* in April 1889, and the exact term “fake news” in several American papers from California to Ohio towards the end of 1889. Newspapers used the term constantly afterward—between 1890 and 1920. Although newspapers widely used “disinformation” and “propaganda” to describe inaccurate or biased news reports during the World Wars, they also referred to false war rumors and nationalist newspeak as “fake news.” To counter former president Donald J. Trump’s multiple claims that he coined the term “fake news,” the phrase predates our earliest conceptions of “yellow journalism.”

## Defining fake

In analyzing fakery and dishonesty, scholars distinguished between humbug, bullshit, phonies, hoaxes, deception, faking, propaganda, nonsense, misinformation, and disinformation.<sup>20</sup> The history of humbug began with American showman P. T. Barnum, who attracted crowds that enjoyed hoaxes. In Barnum’s *Humbugs of the World*, he rejected the meaning of humbug as a deceptive swindler.<sup>21</sup> He instead defined it as a man who “arrests public attention” and attracts “crowds of customers by his unique displays.”<sup>22</sup> Barnum promoted an Americanized idea of

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<sup>19</sup> Campbell, *Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies*.

<sup>20</sup> Kevin Young, *Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2017); Ian Tattersall and Peter Névraumont, *Hoax: A History of Deception: 5,000 Years of Fakes, Forgeries, and Fallacies* (Black Dog & Leventhal, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> P. T. Barnum, *The Humbugs of the World: An Account of Humbugs, Delusions, Impositions, Quackeries, Deceits and Deceivers Generally, in All Ages*.

<sup>22</sup> Young, *Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News*.

hoaxes and deception, in which audiences were drawn to humbug. Edgar Allan Poe believed man was made to diddle—as he called it. He defended diddling as an exact science. “Diddling, rightly considered, is a compound, of which the ingredients are minuteness, [self-]interest, perseverance, ingenuity, audacity, nonchalance, originality, impertinence, and grin.”<sup>23</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, after Poe’s tale of an individual’s hot-air balloon trip to the moon in 1835 and Locke’s Moon Hoax, Americans became disillusioned with the humbug Barnum advertised. After decades of hoaxes and the controversy that followed, the once wide-eyed crowds thought that nonsense overwhelmed their market of ideas. Readers and printers became averse to “diddling.” Philosophers scrutinized these frauds, fearing they were dangerous to society. In 1983, Max Black defined humbug as “deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, especially by pretentious word or deed, of somebody’s own thoughts, feelings, or attitudes.”<sup>24</sup> The perpetrator of humbug aims to give their audience a false impression of what is occurring in their mind.<sup>25</sup>

Max Black’s definition of humbug falls short of lying due to the speaker’s intentions. A lie is a deliberately false statement that the speaker pretends is true. A liar knowingly speaks against the truth. While humbug requires the speaker to intentionally misrepresent what they are thinking, the speaker does not tell a lie unless they share their true beliefs. If nobody knows what is going on in the mind of the speaker, there is no “truth” or “lie” about their thoughts. Bullshit, defined by Harry Frankfurt, stands apart from humbug and lying because it features a total

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<sup>23</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Raising the Wind; or, Diddling Considered as One of the Exact Sciences,” 1-4, *Philadelphia Saturday Courier*, October 14, 1843.

<sup>24</sup> Max Black, “The Prevalence of Humbug,” 143.

<sup>25</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 14.

disregard for the truth. In many cases, the “bullshit artist” may not even know the truth but does not care about the accuracy of their claims.<sup>26</sup>

The terms misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda more accurately describe deception in our current news and information environments. Misinformation refers to false perceptions and the inadvertent sharing of false information. Disinformation, on the other hand, compares to lying, as the speaker willfully and systematically shares false information.<sup>27</sup>

Defining propaganda deals with the same issues as defining fake news. One problem is a lack of collective agreement. After the First World War, Lasswell described it as an attempt to reach large numbers of people and influence their attitudes on controversial matters relevant to that group.<sup>28</sup> Scholars revise this definition as our political, social, and cultural contexts change. For example, newer descriptions consider propaganda to be persuasion by non-violent means. Other definitions focus on its duplicity, stating it is a “branch of the art of lying that consists in almost deceiving one’s friends without quite deceiving one’s enemies.”<sup>29</sup> Propaganda, like fake news, takes many shapes and forms. Individuals can reinterpret the term in different contexts, causing it to be inconsistent in its colloquial uses.<sup>30</sup> Its associations and motivations for use, however, are generally constant. The goal of propaganda is always to change attitudes and typically does not intend to clarify issues.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*.

<sup>27</sup> “Fake news. It’s complicated,” *First Draft News*, 2017, <https://firstdraftnews.org/articles/fake-news-complicated/>; J. M. O’Brien, “The Big Lie Is Coming For You,” *Fortune* 185, no. 3 (2022).

<sup>28</sup> Harold D. Lasswell, *Propaganda Techniques in the World War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927).

<sup>29</sup> John Lee, *The Diplomatic Persuaders: New Role of the Mass Media in International Relations*, ed. Ray Eldon Hiebert, Wiley Series on Government and Communication, (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1968).

<sup>30</sup> Nicholas Jackson O’Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction* (The University of Michigan Press, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Ernst Kris and Nathan Leites, “Trends in 20th Century Propaganda,” in *Propaganda in War and Crisis*, ed. Harold D. Lasswell and Saul K. Padover (Cornwall Press, Inc., 1951).

## Types of fake news

As Americans struggled with fake news during the 2016 presidential election, academics searched for ways to help the average citizen better understand our information environment. The Trump administration used terms like “alternative facts,” “illegitimate,” and “fake news” to distort and manipulate how audiences received political news.<sup>32</sup> Fake news became more complex than political propaganda.

In 2017, Claire Wardle offered an alternative to the one-dimensional term “fake news.”<sup>33</sup> She argued that “fake” wasn’t sufficient to describe the different types of misinformation and disinformation. She placed seven categories of controversial content on a scale measuring the message’s intent to deceive. Satire or Parody, False Connection, Misleading Content, and False Context were on the less harmful and deceptive end of the scale. Satire or Parody does not aim to cause harm, but it has the potential to fool readers. False connection refers to headlines, captions, visuals, or any other descriptors that do not support the main content. Misleading content is the misuse of information to frame an issue or an individual. False context is legitimate content that is shared with inaccurate contextual information. Imposter Content, Manipulated Content, and Fabricated Content were on the more deceptive end of the scale. Imposter content impersonates genuine sources. Manipulated content is genuine information that is distorted with the intent to deceive. Fabricated content is original content that is 100% false and created to deceive and cause harm. Wardle added to fact-checker Eliot Higgins’s four ‘Ps’ to explain various

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<sup>32</sup> Leslie Savan, “Words in the Age of Trump,” *Nation* (2017). <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/words-in-the-age-of-trump/>.

<sup>33</sup> Wardle, “Fake news. It’s complicated.”



motivations for creating fake content—Poor Journalism, Parody, to Provoke or ‘Punk,’ Passion, Partisanship, Profit, Political Influence or Power, and Propaganda.<sup>34</sup>

In 2019, a group of researchers at Pennsylvania State University started a project to also go beyond broader definitions of “fake news.” Molina et al. established distinctive features of that content to advance machine learning in flagging misinformation and presented a typology of eight categories: real news, false news, polarized content, satire, misreporting, commentary, persuasive information, and citizen journalism. “False news” is deliberately falsified information that often promotes conspiracy theories. “Polarized content” is biased information that is not necessarily false but fits a particular ideology and uses attempts to justify its position to assert the truth. “Satire” is a purposefully false story that intends to deceive but is meant to be perceived as unrealistic. “Misreporting” is false information often communicated by mistake. The main goal of the authors of “commentary” and feature writing is to share their opinion on an issue, which readers sometimes confuse with objective news. “Persuasive information” is native advertisement or promotional content, either political or nonpolitical. “Citizen journalism” is nontraditional sources, such as internet users, providing important information that is not covered in mainstream news. These reports are unverified and can be inaccurate.

Verstraete et al. distinguished four categories of fake news: satire, hoax, propaganda, and trolling. They defined “satire” as a news story containing deliberately false content without a motive for deception or financial benefit. A “hoax” also has purposefully false information. The author is typically monetarily motivated and intends to deceive the audience. “Propaganda” is information that is, again, intentionally false and/or biased content. The creator does not desire

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<sup>34</sup> Wardle, “Fake news. It’s complicated.”

financial gain but wants to deceive the reader to change attitudes and promote a particular political view. “Trolling” is purposefully false or biased content intended to deceive. “Trolls” wish to amuse the reader and “gain personal humor value.”<sup>35</sup> Molina et al. and Verstraete et al. incorporated user-created content in the form of Tweets, Facebook posts, memes, etc.<sup>36</sup>

## **Research method and typology**

This thesis addresses trends of “fake news” through historical analysis and distinguishes the uses of the term in a typology structure. I used a convenience sample of 500 newspaper articles published between 1880 and 1920 from the online newspaper archive Newspapers.com. Those came from the top 50 American newspapers that showed in the results of a search for “fake news” in the database. I also searched *Printer’s Ink* and *Editor & Publisher* in the same period. Only exact matches for the phrase were selected for the analysis, with the exception of “fake newspaper” and instances where there was an additional qualifier, such as “fake war news” and “fake political news.” I collected 500 reports and analyzed over 300 of them—at least five of the earliest articles from each newspaper. The themes revealed in the analysis justified five categories: financial gain, character assassination, war tactic, newspaper rivalry, and quackery. I organized messages based on two factors—the use of the term and the content of the news story. These categories show that the ways we distinguish and define “fake news” today are the same ways in which the newspaper used the term over a century ago. As is the case today, pundits and newspapers used the term as an armed weapon to claim authority over the truth.

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<sup>35</sup> Mark Verstraete, Jane R. Bambauer, and Derek E. Bambauer, “Identifying and Countering Fake News,” *Hastings Law Journal* 73, no. 821 (2021).

<sup>36</sup> Molina et al., “‘Fake News’ Is Not Simply False Information: A Concept Explication and Taxonomy of Online Content.”; Verstraete, Bambauer, and Bambauer, “Identifying and Countering Fake News.”

## I. Financial Gain

A common use of “fake news” is for personal or organizational monetary gain. In some cases, this is lazy journalism; a reporter with no news fabricates a story to make ends meet. But in other instances, this type of journalism is self-serving, opportunistic, and exploitative.

Today, we see this almost every time we open our web browser. With new opportunities for revenue on the internet, such as digital advertising and paywalls that require consumers to enter their credit card information to browse a site, individuals exploit the masses to maximize those profits. Anyone can apply to use AdSense and place advertisements on their website to monetize traffic. All it takes is intriguing a user; the ads do the rest. In 2019, the Global Disinformation Index found that ad technology companies spend on average \$235 million every year to run ads on sites that publish misinformation. The co-founder and executive director of the GDI, Clare Melford, said, “Our estimates show that ad tech and brands are unwittingly funding disinformation domains. These findings clearly demonstrate that this is a whole-of-industry problem that requires a whole-of-industry solution.”<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, the internet creates new, straightforward avenues for the least qualified individuals to profit off disinformation and misinformation—oftentimes anonymously. But using fake news for financial gain is nothing new. Like the other types of fake news, this one simply evolved with the internet and cable programming. In the 1890s and early 1900s, for example, newsboys made extra money by crying out headlines that weren’t in the paper. Journalists

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<sup>37</sup> Daniel Funke, Susan Benkelman, and Cristina Tardáguila, “Factually: How misinformation makes money,” *American Press Institute* (2019). <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/fact-checking-project/factually-newsletter/factually-how-misinformation-makes-money/>.

invented stories and sold them to newspapers. And individuals and entire organizations intercepted wire news dispatches to print the news as their own.

### **“Newsboy fakirs”**

At the end of the nineteenth century, newsboys desperate to sell their papers commonly exploited fake news by crying false headlines. The *Buffalo Commercial* wrote in January 1893, “‘Fake’ news will not in the long run help newsboys in getting rid of their few morning papers.”<sup>38</sup> The *Commercial* printed another article about these newsboys in February 1896:

#### **FAKE NEWS AGAIN.**

##### **Tricky Newsboys Deceive the People with False Cries.**

“Black Rock cyclone!” a number of newsboys were yelling on the streets today. There was nothing in the papers to back the cry. It was another case of “fake” news.

There has been a good deal of this sort of thing lately. Under prize-package stimulus, certain newsboys have been crying false news and deceiving the people.<sup>39</sup>

The next month, the *Buffalo Evening News* wrote about the legality of newsboys shouting fakes, “Newsboys who hereafter try to make business brisk by crying fake news will be gathered by the police... The crowding of certain corners with newsboys during busy hours of the day will no longer be tolerated.”<sup>40</sup> When it came to policing newsboys, however, some officials failed to properly enforce the law. In April 1900, for example, a Buffalo policeman arrested Nathan Battlestone, a newsboy, “on a charge of violating the ordinances in crying out newspapers for sale.” After Battlestone replicated his cry in court, the Judge responded,

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<sup>38</sup> “‘Fake’ news will not in the long run help newsboys in getting rid of their few morning papers,” *Buffalo Commercial*, January 13, 1893.

<sup>39</sup> “Fake News Again. Tricky Newsboys Deceive the People with False Cries,” *Buffalo Commercial*, February 19; February 21, 1896.

<sup>40</sup> “Boys mustn’t shout fakes,” *Buffalo Evening News*, March 19, 1896.

“Then he has violated no ordinance. If the boy did not call louder than that he was not even committing a nuisance and was doing nothing forbidden by city ordinances. Calling out papers in a regular manner and with no intention to annoy anyone unnecessarily is not a violation of the law and I discharge the prisoner.”

The news report added,

The newspapers of the city do not uphold disorderly conduct on the part of the newsboys or the crying out of fake news or fake extras, but they do maintain that the boys have the right to cry their wares, and so long as they do it in an orderly manner the police should not molest them.<sup>41</sup>

In one story from the Baltimore *Evening Sun* in July 1903, titled “Fake News Criers at Last Come to Grief,” a “newsboy fakir” cried down the streets of Harlem about a “tur’ble accident” in which, “All ‘bout th’ four hunnerd people wot lost their lives.” When a Harlem resident offered “the swindler of the commonest New York type” a penny for the paper—the ordinary price—he demanded a nickel. The “accident” turned out to be “a miserable little four-line item on one of the inner pages, stating that a steamer that had just arrived at Vancouver had brought advices from China to the effect that 400 Chinamen had lost their lives in a flood of the Yang-tse-Kiang river.” Allegedly, the Harlem man started punching the boy. The “fakir” pressed charges, but it did not end in the newsboy’s favor. After hearing both sides, the Harlem police magistrate dismissed the case. “The Harlem man has been receiving scores of congratulatory letters from New Yorkers ever since,” the report concluded.<sup>42</sup>

The *Evening Sun*’s remark that the newsboy fakir was “of the commonest New York type” may be related to the newsboys’ strike of July 1899. A group of angry newsboys in Queens refused to sell the *New York World* and *Journal* because the newspapers’ wholesale price remained 10 cents higher than before the Spanish-American war; most other newspapers reverted

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<sup>41</sup> “Newsboys will not be bullied by the police,” *Buffalo Evening News*, April 14, 1900.

<sup>42</sup> “Fake News Criers at Last Come to Grief. Newsboy Fakirs,” *Evening Star*, July 18, 1903.

prices to pre-war levels. Higher costs might have further provoked New York newsboys to cry false headlines. On August 1, the two newspapers compromised and offered that publishers will buy back unsold papers. The wholesale price remained inflated at 60 cents. The newsboys accepted the terms and ended the two-week-long strike. Papers rarely reported on newsboy fakirs in the following years.

### **Invented stories**

Around the same time, journalists took advantage of the norm of using anonymous sources to sell unverified stories. Even newspapers of the time recognized it: “The anonymous character of much of the news that circulates gave the fabricators of false news a clear field, the ignorance in which the public is kept... [makes] it impossible for anyone to deny the stories that are circulated: it also makes it difficult for the police to reach the culprits.”<sup>43</sup> In general journalistic practice, early textbooks on newspaper reporting and correspondence from 1907 and 1912 did not make any reference to anonymous sourcing and its dangers.<sup>44</sup> The profession did not focus on anonymous sourcing until the 1960s and 1970s when observers and scholars of American journalism complained about an overreliance on anonymous sources.

Between 1880 and 1920, practicing journalists might not have been warned against using these sources unless their own or another paper already made the mistake. Thus, individuals could anonymously send news to papers for money—whether it was credible or not. Reports from the *Buffalo Commercial and Democrat and Chronicle* in September 1894 called those individuals “special fiends”; “There must be plenty of money in the tills of some of the New

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<sup>43</sup> “Anonymous Letters,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 22, 1915.

<sup>44</sup> Matt J. Duffy, “Anonymous Sources: A Historical Review of the Norms Surrounding Their Use,” *American Journalism* 31, no. 2 (2014): 244, <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1080/08821127.2014.905363>.

York papers if the ‘special fiends’ who send them all sorts of ‘fake’ news from Buffalo get any pay for their falsehoods.”<sup>45</sup>

The Meriden *Record-Journal* described a news-faking scheme of a different kind in an article titled “Fake News Bureau.” Instead of a journalist sharing fake reports, a news organization paid others to fake news:

The latest development in the news collecting business in New York, is a syndicate which tries to make contracts with merchants for the purpose of making fake news for the papers. This is claimed to be advantageous to the merchant and to the news syndicate, as it advertises the former and the latter is able to sell its stories to the papers. Its offer to one man was to furnish twelve stories for \$200, they to include an attempted safe cracking, loss of a \$5,000 diamond stud in a theatre, a hold-up, and various other schemes which would make sensational stories. All the details were to be arranged by the syndicate, the merchant to lend his store and his person to the stories only. With that they do the rest. The schemers are to have the stories written in advance, and as soon as the event takes place they will be presented to the newspapers for publication.

The scheme is a charming one for the syndicate, and judging from the stories that have appeared in some of the New York papers within the last few months, has worked successfully.<sup>46</sup>

## **Telegraph fakes**

Reporters also “stole” news by intercepting dispatches meant for other news associations. Many newspapers thought this was lazy and unforgivable. Take this story from the *Buffalo Commercial*, on February 12, 1891, in which a correspondent waited for dispatches in the telegraph office, rather than gathering his own news:

### **“FAKE” NEWS.**

#### **The Way in Which Some Correspondents Worked it “At the Front...”**

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<sup>45</sup> “Fake News from Buffalo,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, September 8, 1894; “Special Fiends Who Send Fake News for Pay,” *Buffalo Commercial*, September 6, 1894.

<sup>46</sup> “Fake News Bureau,” *Record-Journal*, January 29, 1897.

### ...THE MAN WHO STOLE NEWS.

The injury done the profession by these wild publications can never be estimated, but that was a matter of no moment to the imaginative gentlemen, nor did they have any regard for the relatives of soldiers in the field when they sent out vague rumors of great slaughter, rumors for which the writers knew there was not even the slightest foundation. On more than one occasion the military authorities discussed the advisability of removing four or five of the most conspicuous sinners from the reservation, and one man was practically ejected. It was his habit to loaf in the telegraph office, and the allegation against him charged that he took advantage of his skill as an operator to capture messages and use them as news. He also reaped where he sowed not, for when another correspondent sent a dispatch the specimen in question took the substance of it as it was being transmitted; an easy way to gather news, but hardly an honest proceeding. The same game was played at Rushville by the same individual. He may have thought it smart, but it was not creditable and its effect was decidedly detrimental to the reputable laborers in the news field.<sup>47</sup>

Entire organizations “stole” news too. In January 1895, the *Omaha Daily Bee* reported that a “Fake News Bureau in Chicago...was Stealing Associated Press Matter.”<sup>48</sup> According to an exposé from the *Evening Post*, smaller organizations secured portions of Associated Press dispatches—which cost the AP \$1,250,000 every year—by “clipping cable dispatches from early editions and re-writing them to give the appearance of originality.” The *Post* created a plan to put dispatches from eight to twenty years ago on the wires. After several papers copied the reports, the *Post* caught the United Press stealing the news. The UP tapped wires to furnish their news at low rates and return higher profits. Three years later, the *St. Joseph News-Press* reported a similar scam, in which individuals stole “stale news” from local papers:

These are the days when the peddlers of fake news are getting in their works. It is always amusing to the knowing ones to watch the yaps who with open mouths gather around the saloon bulletin board and watch the fellow who, for a few drinks, copies the

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<sup>47</sup> “‘Fake’ News. The Way in Which Some Correspondents Worked it At the Front,” *Buffalo Commercial*, February 12, 1891.

<sup>48</sup> “Fake News Bureau in Chicago that Was Stealing Associated Press Matter,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, January 17, 1895.



items from a paper three days old, or steals the fresh items from the bulletin of a local newspaper which pays for the telegrams.

But the worst dealer in stale news is the daily paper that takes no news service and lives by stealing from other papers...

...Such deceit should ruin the sale of that paper forever and yet every day it catches new victims among the unwary.<sup>49</sup>

### **Legality of fake news**

Papers and policymakers responded to fakes in the newspaper with efforts to reprimand those sending false news, as they did with newsboy fakirs. The Connecticut Legislature in March 1893, for example, introduced a bill that would allow the state to punish the “fakirs.” The *Detroit Free Press* printed this report, quoting another Connecticut daily:

#### **After the Fakirs.**

“The evil complained of,” says the Hartford Times, “has certainly grown to great proportions lately. Three or four centers of humbug Connecticut news send such tales to New York papers, and to any Connecticut papers that will pay for such service. It seems to be an easy way for any fairly ‘smart’ chap to earn a \$5 or a \$10 payment, and the number of such enterprising fellows is all the while increasing. They do not manufacture their wonderful facts and occurrences out of whole cloth, some slight basis of their sensational animal stories and other matter may possibly be hunted out, but it amounts to nothing, and is made readable only by blowing it up into an ‘iridescent dream’ of a soap-bubble humbug.”<sup>50</sup>

In March 1901, the Benton *Herald-Palladium* advocated for the Michigan legislature to pass a similar law, which would make “faking news” a misdemeanor.

There ought to be a law passed by the Michigan legislature providing that whoever sends by mail or telegraph or otherwise knowingly furnishes to newspapers false or exaggerated reports of real or alleged happening should be deemed guilty of a

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<sup>49</sup> “Stale News,” *St. Joseph News-Press*, July 4, 1898.

<sup>50</sup> “After the Fakirs,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 17, 1893.

misdemeanor and severely punished. The mania for sending out “fake” news is becoming almost intolerable, in this part of the state at least.<sup>51</sup>

Reports from the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times* in the spring of 1916 showed similar efforts to outlaw fake news and punish those responsible in El Paso—a center of interest during the Mexican Revolution. The Texan city saw many Mexican refugees escaping violence and economic disruption after Pancho Villa raided Columbus, New Mexico in March 1916. The Mexican consul in El Paso, Andreas Garcia, sent a dispatch describing a regulation just passed to fine correspondents circulating fake news \$25 to \$200.<sup>52</sup>

The ability of fake news to financially profit its creators proliferates as our news sources and media platforms develop and become more complex. Modern instances manifest as illnesses and injuries faked for donations and charity, advertisements featured on webpages and social media sites that share false information, and fake news causing fluctuations worth hundreds of millions of dollars in stock share prices.<sup>53</sup> Though monetary losses attributed to “fake news” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were a fraction of the damages we see today, newspapers used the same term to describe similar problems with misinformation.

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<sup>51</sup> “Untitled,” *Herald-Palladium*, March 5, 1901.

<sup>52</sup> “El Paso to Stop Fake News. Law to Fine Offending Correspondents \$25 to \$200 is Passed,” *The New York Times*, March 29, 1916; “Fines for Fake News. El Paso to Levy \$25 to \$200 on Writers of False Reports,” *Washington Post*, April 9, 1916.

<sup>53</sup> Brendan Rascius, “Mother made 5-year-old adoptive daughter fake seizure to get donations, feds say,” *News & Observer* (March 3, 2023). <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/nation-world/national/article272725035.html#storylink=cpy>; Alicia McElhaney, “Fake news creates real losses,” *Institutional Investor* (November 18, 2019); Funke, Benkelman, and Tardáguila, “Factually: How misinformation makes money.”

## II. Character Assassination

One of Donald Trump's most common uses of "fake news" is to discredit any information he does not agree with—even when the information is undeniably true. Fake news, used in this way, intends to damage the reputation of a person or entity. According to the Lab for Character Assassination and Reputation Politics (CARP), character assassination "is the deliberate destruction of an individual's reputation or credibility. It refers to both the process (e.g., a smear campaign) and the outcome of this process (e.g., a damaged reputation)."<sup>54</sup> For this category of fake news, the term "character assassination" includes the intentional slander of not just individual actors, but entire organizations as well.

Consider the 2016 U.S. presidential election, when Trump began his relentless war on the press. At the 2017 Conservative Political Action Conference, he described the "fake news media" as the enemy of the American people.<sup>55</sup> At an Ohio rally in Youngstown in the same year, Donald Trump said, "Now here's what I do—I'd ask whether or not you think I will someday be on Mount Rushmore." He claimed that if he made that statement facetiously, just "having fun, the fake news media will say 'He believes he should be on Mount Rushmore.' So I won't say it... What a dishonest group of people, I tell you."<sup>56</sup> When Trump believed the press had an agenda to assassinate his character, he retaliated by exercising the same methods against them.

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<sup>54</sup> Martijn Icks et al., *Character Assassination in Theory and Practice* (George Mason University, 2017).

<sup>55</sup> Icks et al., *Character Assassination in Theory and Practice*.

<sup>56</sup> Donald J. Trump, "Trump: 'Fake news' would believe Rushmore joke," (Associated Press, 2017). <https://video-ebscohost-com.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/c/exgfi4/details/11195cyt8?q=trump%20fake%20news&deviceId=&lang=en&minDate=&maxDate=>.

Trump discredited journalists throughout his presidency. He did this to evoke among Americans distrust in news outlets and their assessment of his performance. Twentieth-century presidents also used the term “fake news” to discredit the press. Newspapers used the terms in partisan affairs to label news biased towards or affiliated with a particular candidate or political party. Sometimes the “fake news” was false information and other times it was accurate reports that the opposition did not agree with.

### **Presidents vs. the press**

Trump’s belief that the press had a vendetta against his reputation was not the first of its kind. His mistrust of the press, however paranoiac, had roots in an endless battle between the White House and the media. For example, in 1798, President John Adams signed sedition statutes into law that would allow the prosecution of journalists. In May 1864, during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln ordered the seizure the newspapers and the imprisonment of irresponsible editors and reporters. The press knew Richard Nixon to be hostile towards journalists. They considered Woodrow Wilson to be cold and remote. Unlike the rest, President Theodore Roosevelt was amicable towards the press and enjoyed reporters. But he still punished those who displeased him, as he did with the Panama libel case against Pulitzer’s *New York World*.<sup>57</sup> To the presidents, information is power. They often believe that reporters deliberately misrepresent them, if not lie. Journalists, on the other hand, see themselves as guardians of truth

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<sup>57</sup> Holzer, *The Presidents vs. the Press: The Endless Battle Between the White House and the Media from the Founding Fathers to Fake News*.

and tend to distrust those in power.<sup>58</sup> In the battle between the press and the White House, presidents often use the term “fake news” to discredit the press.

An 1898 report by the *Evening Star* titled “Alleged Interviews With the President” showed the efforts of the McKinley administration to control the press and gatekeep information. McKinley did not trust the press to accurately report his statements.

Several alleged interviews with the President have recently appeared in outside newspapers on trivial subjects. The President feels that legitimate newspapers ought not to publish fake news of this kind. It is well known among the newspaper men of Washington that the President never talks to a newspaper man for publication as an authorized or unauthorized interview. Members of the profession are cordially received by the President at times and he talks to them about various matters, but it is well understood that he is not to be directly or indirectly quoted. This is done for various reasons. The chief reason is that if the President began to permit interviews it would be only a short time when he would be incorrectly reported. His position is such that he could not be making corrections of mistakes and constantly appearing in interviews.<sup>59</sup>

After President Theodore Roosevelt left office in 1908, he led an expedition to Africa. While Roosevelt was in Nairobi, British East Africa, countless American papers wanted to report stories about his safari. According to the *Kansas City Journal*, his hunting stories came at a high cost—a dollar a word. A correspondent of the Associated Press traveled to Nairobi as a special guest of Mr. Roosevelt and reported on the former president’s health and his expedition. The correspondent learned that Roosevelt was “annoyed” with newspapers circulating false stories. The following day, the *Nashville Banner* printed, “Mr. Roosevelt warns the American public against the fake news that is being sent about his hunting exploits.”<sup>60</sup> The papers sharing “fake

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<sup>58</sup> Jack Shafer, “The Presidents vs. the Press: The Endless Battle Between the White House and the Media — From the Founding Fathers to Fake News,” *The New York Times* (2020).

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/25/books/review/the-presidents-vs-the-press-harold-holzer.html>.

<sup>59</sup> “Alleged Interviews With the President,” *Evening Star*, January 26, 1898.

<sup>60</sup> “Untitled,” *Nashville Banner*, May 26, 1909.

news” maybe did not intend to damage Roosevelt’s character, but Roosevelt did intend to damage theirs.

In April 1915, “fake news” in the *New York Herald* prompted President Wilson to warn journalists at an Associated Press luncheon against publishing unreliable news. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* printed key quotes from his speech, “There is news and news...that turns out to be falsehood... We ought not to deal in stuff of that kind. We ought not to permit things of that sort because its energy is malign, its energy is not of the truth, its energy is of mischief. The world ought to know the truth, but the world ought not at this period of unstable equilibrium to be disturbed by rumor...The food of opinion... is the news of the day.”<sup>61</sup>

In March 1891, the *Buffalo Commercial* called this the “work of ‘special fiends.’” A Buffalo resident commented on a *New York Sun* article about former President Millard Fillmore’s family and the journalist, who claimed he saw Fillmore’s nephews behaving immorally in a Buffalo hotel.

“It seems to me that first-class newspapers should be in better business. The public taste is not really vitiated and it does not in its desire for ‘news’ absolutely crave for distortions of facts and enlargements of incidents; and it certainly has no genuine appetite for ‘fake news’ and ‘special fiend’ decoctions such as were served up by a local syndicate a year or two ago.”

The speaker was a prominent citizen who had just been reading a dispatch from Buffalo, published in the *New York Sun* of yesterday, setting forth that four nephews of the late President Millard Fillmore had been indulging in bar-room orgies at the Tiff House and elsewhere and had conducted themselves in such a manner as not only to disgrace themselves, but also to sully the Fillmore family reputation and bring discredit alike on the hotel and the city.

The *Commercial* did not find any evidence supporting the *Sun*’s story. The report continued,

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<sup>61</sup> “The President on Reliable News,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 23, 1915.

It seems that the special fiends in Buffalo have only been scotched, not killed, and that there is at least one paper in Buffalo willing to foster and encourage them, and that some of the New York newspapers have so little regard for truthful and honest journalism that they are willing to receive and to publish the slimy emanations of these reptiles of the literary kingdom.<sup>62</sup>

The *Herald-Palladium* argued newspapers printed fake news of this kind for publicity. In March 1901, the Benton paper exposed two newspapers in the same city for sharing premature information about former President Benjamin Harrison's death.

#### MORE FAKE "NEWS."

When the two Benton Harbor daily papers went to press Tuesday afternoon Gen. Harrison was still alive at his home in Indianapolis, although very low, and with his death hourly expected, as was truthfully stated in the special dispatch with glaring head lines stating that the distinguished American citizen was dead, with an editorial commenting at length on the event and instructions to its newsboys to cry "All about ex-president Harrison's death," was a plain attempt on the part of our cotemporary to get a little cheap notoriety for supposed journalistic enterprise. That the attempt failed utterly is evidenced by the expressions of amusement and disgust heard about town to-day. The desperate endeavors made by conscienceless newspapers and irresponsible telegraph correspondents to keep this locality inflamed with false and sensational "news" has been frequently mentioned as of late, and is not only exasperating but humiliating to those who still look upon journalism as a reputable profession.<sup>63</sup>

These news stories followed Harrison's pneumonia diagnosis in February, which worsened over the next month despite treatment. The papers used Harrison's fame and death, soon expected, to "beat" the other papers that would report his passing in the following hours.

The United Press similarly exploited the death of Pope Pius X in August 1914. The UP claimed Rome sent a code message announcing the Pope's death. The Vatican denied the UP

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<sup>62</sup> "Work of Special Fiends," *Buffalo Commercial*, March 2, 1891.

<sup>63</sup> "More Fake News," *Herald-Palladium*, March 13, 1901.

reports and claimed the UP publicized the Pope's passing two hours early.<sup>64</sup> The Spokane *Spokesman Review* accused the UP of misreporting Queen Victoria's death earlier that year.<sup>65</sup>

### **Partisan affairs**

As the UP's "fake news" demonstrates, newspapers did not only manipulate the character of presidents for publicity. Newspapers commonly called "fake" news about partisan relations and elections, whether the conflict was within the same party or between separate parties. An early example took place during a decade-long conflict within the Pennsylvania Republican Party—Senator Quay and Governor Hastings being the distinguished rivals.

In 1895, Pennsylvania's Republican political boss and Senator, Matthew Quay, faced rebellion from the Pennsylvania Republican Party. In 1895, the anti-Quay reform faction of the Republican Party elected Daniel H. Hastings to succeed Democrat Robert E. Pattinson as Governor of Pennsylvania. Senator Quay reluctantly accepted Hastings' election as the lesser evil of another term for the Democrats in the state capitol.

Despite Hastings' attempts to befriend Quay, the reform element was determined to keep Quay off balance after the Hastings nomination. David Martin and Charles A. Porter led this effort. Quay called them the "Hog Combine." Martin, a former faithful Quay lieutenant, destroyed all hope for unity in the Pennsylvania Republican Party by "ditching" mayoral candidate Boies Penrose, a member of the Quay machine. The editor of the *Philadelphia Times*,

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<sup>64</sup> Melville E. Stone, "News Faking is Shown Up. Premature Announcement of Death of Pope by United Press a Pure-Fake," *Wheeling Intelligencer*, August 22, 1914.

<sup>65</sup> Melville E. Stone, "Fake News By The United Press," *Spokesman Review*, August 22, 1914.



A. K. McClure, called Martin's betrayal "assassination, nothing more nor less." The *Times* launched a campaign against the Hog Combine.<sup>66</sup>

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* joined the campaign and commented on a "fake news bureau" operating under the name "Colonels Russell" throughout the summer of 1895. The *Inquirer* claimed that the Colonels Russell printed fakes in a "handful of newspapers they control through the State."<sup>67</sup>

The "fake" news bureau of Colonels Russell continues to grind out manufactured news against Senator Quay. It hopes to get in its greatest work during the next two weeks. During that time the primaries will be held in Northampton, Centre and Bucks counties. Senator Quay has made no fight in any of these counties. One is Reeder's county, the other Hastings' and the last Gilkeson's. Of course they will all be for Hastings, as they have never at any time been counted in the Quay column.

Nevertheless the Colonels Russell will endeavor to impress the public with the belief that each of these counties is a great victory for Hastings and a great defeat for Quay.<sup>68</sup>

The Pennsylvania Republican Party remained split through the turn of the century and worsened after Quay's death in 1904. The *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette* stated in December 1904 that Quay "was able to hold the warring county factions. Since his death there has been no balance wheel in the organization."<sup>69</sup>

One return for "fake news" was all too familiar, despite being over 100 years old. It came from the *Hamilton Evening Journal* on October 10, 1892, one month before the presidential

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<sup>66</sup> James A. Kehl, *Boss Rule in the Gilded Age* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981), 188.

<https://digital.library.pitt.edu/islandora/object/pitt%3A31735057893954/viewer#page/212/mode/1up>.

<sup>67</sup> "The Fake News Bureau," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 12, 1895.

<sup>68</sup> "That Fake News Bureau," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 18, 1895.

<sup>69</sup> "War in Beaver County Camp. Republican Party Organization Has Been Split Into Three Factories," *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette*, December 21, 1904.

election. The paper was one of many from all over the country to compare the sizes of crowds at the Republican and Democratic rallies for the presidential and vice presidential nominees—Benjamin Harrison with Whitelaw Reid and Grover Cleveland with Adlai Stevenson, respectively. According to the *Journal*, a Republican paper, presumably in New York, anticipated the Democratic party’s rally in Woodsdale, Ohio, would be a washout. The *Journal*’s response read:

“Who hath believed our report?”—Isaiah, 53 chapter.

The Republican could well use the above today. For some time the organ of fake news has been proclaiming that the democratic meeting at Woodsdale would be a fizzle. It might have been well for this sheet to have waited. Prophesying is delicate business.

The democratic meeting at Woodsdale was a success. The attendance was large. As large as any one expected. There was nearly three times as many people as attended the Reid fizzle.<sup>70</sup>

Crowd size is a useful metric to evaluate the success of public events, like the Million Man March on the Mall in 1995, after which the National Park Service released estimates suggesting 400,000 attendees were present. That figure, however, caused controversy; the event coordinators filed a defamation lawsuit. The following year, Congress prohibited the Park Service from using its money to count crowds.<sup>71</sup> History shows that spectators will always dispute crowd numbers. A week before the *Hamilton Evening Journal*’s assessment of the rivaling parties’ crowd sizes, the *New York World* reported on the National League Convention at Buffalo, calling it “the greatest fizzle of this campaign to date.” The report read, “The Harrison

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<sup>70</sup> “Who hath believed our report?” *Hamilton Evening Journal*, October 3, 1892.

<sup>71</sup> Amy B. Wang, “It’s usually difficult for people to agree on a crowd’s size. Here’s why,” *Washington Post* (January 22, 2017). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/01/22/its-usually-difficult-for-people-to-agree-on-a-crowds-size-heres-why/>.

campaign has opened in a way that foreshadows another Democratic tidal wave.” For what it’s worth, the New York papers allied with Harrison were right.

The *Omaha Daily Bee* heavily covered the Nebraska House of Representatives election in 1894. The paper consistently called the Republican campaign and its headquarters a “fake-mill.” It accused Republicans of creating “fabricated affidavits and campaign fakes...to discredit anything that may be...charged by The Bee.”<sup>72</sup> The *Omaha World-Herald* stated days before nationwide elections ended on November 6, “The democratic county ticket is the best ever nominated in Douglas county, and the republican county ticket is the worst.”<sup>73</sup> The Republican nominees swept the election, with just one Populist incumbent representative re-elected. Two days later, the *Bee* wrote, “For Sale Cheap—Several well equipped factories for the manufacture of fake political news. Apply at the former headquarters of the defunct railroad republican state committee, Millard hotel, Omaha.”<sup>74</sup>

Tennessee papers created similar controversy in the years leading up to the 1916 Senate election. Tennessee citizens elected Democrat Luke Lea, Democrat to the Senate in 1911. He ran for re-election for the following term. In October 1915, the Nashville *Banner* wrote, “Senator Lea’s organ appears to be running its fake news factory overtime and putting its editorial department to help manufacture stuff that its owner thinks may keep life in his campaign for senate.”<sup>75</sup> The “fake news factory” was the *Tennessean*, previously known as the *Nashville American*, which Lea once served as editor and publisher. The “fake news” concerned former Tennessee governors Republican Ben W. Hooper and Democrat Malcolm R. Patterson.

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<sup>72</sup> “Cuttlefish Tactics. Raising a Cloud to Hide Him,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, October 21, 1894.

<sup>73</sup> “Untitled,” *Omaha World-Herald*, January 4, 1894.

<sup>74</sup> “For Sale Cheap,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, November 9, 1894.

<sup>75</sup> “Hooper and Patterson,” *Nashville Banner*, October 13, 1915.

Due to a rift in the Tennessee Democratic Party, papers speculated whether Lea or Patterson would be the democratic nominee for the primary. The *Tennessean* claimed Hooper said he had “enough on Patterson to hang him.” The *Banner* called the quote “fake news” designed to indicate “a wish on Hooper’s part to discredit Patterson and prevent him from securing the nomination.”<sup>76</sup> In the end, Lea obtained the nomination but lost to Kenneth McKellar in the Democratic primary. Hooper went to the general primary and also lost to McKellar, who became Tennessee’s longest-serving senator.

Former President Donald Trump called the news media and news stories “fake news” not only to discredit them but also to establish himself as an “arbiter of truth.” He was not alone. McKinley called papers “fake news” as early as 1898, along with Roosevelt in 1909. Newspapers reporting on partisan affairs, such as elections for the Senate and the House of Representatives, often endorsed a political party or candidate. Those papers commonly called sources affiliated with the opposition “fake news syndicates” and “factories,” as they also battled to be the arbiter of truth.

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<sup>76</sup> “Hooper and Patterson.”

### III. War Tactic

Propaganda intends to motivate individuals to change their political beliefs and other attitudes. Fake news aims for a similar outcome and uses sensational falsehoods to spread the information faster and to wider audiences. Creators of fake news have different motives for manipulating public opinion. Nationalists use the term to disparage other regions and their ability to disseminate accurate information. Their purpose is to discourage support for enemy nations and encourage support for their own state. This is most common during war.

Three weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, hackers posted to a Ukrainian news site a “deepfake” video of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy surrendering to Russia. Fake Zelenskyy said to his forces, “There is no need to die in this war. I advise you to live.” After real Zelenskyy dismissed the video as a hoax, internet users argued it was an example of Russia’s desperate attempts to spread fake news.<sup>77</sup> In October, pro-Russian social media accounts claimed that the Western media and Ukrainian propaganda faked images of victims of a Russian missile strike in Kyiv. Associated Press and Reuters reporters on the scene debunked those claims.<sup>78</sup> In February 2023, Russia threatened to expel U.S. diplomats from the embassy in Moscow after the officials spread what Moscow called “fake news” about Russia’s military operation in Ukraine.<sup>79</sup> According to Russian law, it is illegal to spread “knowingly false

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<sup>77</sup> Vera Bergengruen, “Inside the Kremlin’s Year of Ukraine Propaganda,” *Time* (2023). <https://time.com/6257372/russia-ukraine-war-disinformation/>.

<sup>78</sup> Catalina Marchant de Abreu, “Debunking claims that Ukraine staged injuries following Russian missile strike on Kyiv,” *France 24* (2022). <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/truth-or-fake/20221017-ukraine-stages-fake-bloody-inhabitants-following-russian-missile-strike-in-kyiv>.

<sup>79</sup> Andrew Osborn, “Russia accuses U.S. embassy of ‘fake news’ over Ukraine, threatens expulsions,” *Reuters* (2023). <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-accuses-us-embassy-fake-news-over-ukraine-threatens-expulsions-2023-02-07/>.

information” about the country’s army. Russia passed this law shortly after the invasion of Ukraine. Nearly 150 people have been tried for spreading “fake news” since.<sup>80</sup>

The various Russo-Ukrainian War propaganda disseminated by public officials, news channels, and anonymous sources show that fake news wields great political power. It influences public opinion about the war and which side citizens see as the “enemy.” The frenzied news environment during war allows many actors to disseminate false information for different reasons. For example, journalists can fabricate news stories to make them look like original exclusives. Countries can spread lies to confuse and antagonize their enemy nations. Newspaper publishers can exploit manic crowds to sell papers and grow audiences. Individuals also use the term “fake news” to discredit other sources of information during the war, such as newspapers or entire countries. In the period in question, however, papers often did not know the source of the information they called “fake news.” They mostly guessed who produced it. For this category, I focus on sensational journalism, “rumors” (not necessarily false, but premature reports and articles with unknown sources), “fake news” as a war tactic (false information deliberately sent by foreign officials), and war correspondents who fabricate reports to get a good story.

### **Sensational journalism and rumors**

“Yellow journals” exaggerated the Cuban struggle for independence from Spain and the conflict between America and Spain in 1898. They did this to appeal to the market for war news and increase circulation. A week after the sinking of the USS *Maine*, the *Scranton Tribune* listed headlines the “yellow press” used for war news and called them “fake news”:

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<sup>80</sup> “Russia Jails Anti-War Journalist 6 Years for Fake News,” *Moscow Times* 2023, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/02/15/ukraine-war-zelensky-says-fighting-for-every-meter-in-east-a80229>.

## YELLOW-KID JOURNALISM

“Yaller” headings of “fake” news: “The Whole Country Thrilling with the War Fever,” “Spain Fears the Journal,” “The Pulpit Sustains the Journal,” “General Miles Says We Are Unprepared for War, but World Investigation Proves Otherwise,” “World’s Divers Again Offered”—etc., etc., etc. If you enjoy being daily made a fool of, you will keep right on.<sup>81</sup>

A week later, the *Beatrice Daily Express* complained about the “fake war news fad”:

Even the New York Tribune, which has always been staid and reliable, is being carried away to some extent by the fake war news fad, and there is absolutely no paper of importance in the metropolis that has the sense to give the news without coloring or exaggeration. The Associated Press dispatches are truthful and conservative, and have been since the Maine disaster occurred, and they give from day to day all the real news, but the enterprising newspapers are not satisfied with the plain, unvarnished truth. They are making a great mistake. They are disgusting their best readers, and making journalism ridiculous.<sup>82</sup>

This “fake news” was not necessarily false; the country *did* thrill with war fever. But the *Scranton Tribune* and *Beatrice Daily Express* believed the sensational headlines and dispatches made a mockery of journalism. The papers mentioned in the *Tribune* article, the *New York World* and *Journal*, pioneered the sensationalism “fad.” Joseph Pulitzer and William R. Hearst exploited the “war fever” to increase circulation and develop their readership. Those motives earned their reporting the label “fake news.”

Rumors also spread quickly across the world, leading whole countries to believe their troops advanced upon the enemy or that the war was over. Many of these reports did not say who

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<sup>81</sup> “Yellow-Kid Journalism,” *Tribune*, February 24, 1898.

<sup>82</sup> “Untitled,” *Beatrice Daily Express*, March 3, 1898.

sent the fake news or why, but some made speculations. On June 7, 1898, the *Baltimore Sun* responded to rumors about the Spanish troops' advancements:

#### Spaniards Rejoice Over Fake News

Spaniards here are rejoicing over "news" received that Spanish cruisers have been sent to the Philippines and are already nearing Manila. There is also great joy among the Spaniards because of a cable dispatch stating that the United States cruiser *Baltimore* has been destroyed by a Spanish torpedo boat.<sup>83</sup>

The *Baltimore Sun* called the news "fake" because it lacked confirmation, not because the information was necessarily false. The Spanish Minister of War Lieutenant-General Correa later found no evidence that the event occurred. But, according to other reports, the news that Spanish cruisers were sent to the Philippines, appeared to be verifiable.

The month prior, the U.S. Navy defeated the Spanish fleet guarding the Philippines. Shortly after, the United States sent its first troops to the islands and joined in a policy to keep all parts of the island.<sup>84</sup> With the recent U.S. Navy victory, the press was confident in the troops' ability to maintain their position in the Philippines. The motive for the report is unknown, but American papers maybe intended to discourage the Spanish by calling their efforts "fake news." I discuss an article by the *Morning News* about the same incident in a later section on fake news used as a war tactic.

When the Spanish-American War began, the Yaqui Native American tribes had been at war with the Mexican government for at least a decade. The prolonged struggle, beginning in

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<sup>83</sup> James Gordon Bennett, "Spaniards Rejoice Over 'Fake' News," *Baltimore Sun*, June 7, 1898.

<sup>84</sup> NPS, "Spanish-American War and the Philippine-American War, 1898-1902," National Park Service (2023). <https://www.nps.gov/goga/learn/historyculture/spanish-american-war.htm>; LOC, "The World of 1898: The Spanish-American War Chronology," Library of Congress (2011). <https://www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic/1898/chronology.html>.



1825, lasted a full century.<sup>85</sup> The American press characterized both the Mexican government and the Yaqui in contradicting ways during the conflict. At one point, newspapers portrayed the Yaqui as heroic due to their unrelenting efforts against Mexican oppression. In 1897, the *San Francisco Call* described the Yaqui people as “spirited,” “daring,” “brave,” and “vigilant.”<sup>86</sup>

By 1906, however, papers believed the Mexican people were victims of the Yaquis. Because the Yaqui rebellion in 1904 threatened Sonora’s mining development, Governor Rafael Izábel organized manhunts to send Yaquis to work on Yucatán plantations. The Yaqui refused to submit to the Mexican government. Guerilla activities and government prosecution intensified from 1904 to 1909.<sup>87</sup> When the *Los Angeles Times* covered the conflict in 1906, it described the Yaqui people as “predatory bands of red men” and “murderous redskins.”<sup>88</sup>

The article, by Allen Kelly, explained that Mexican officials suppressed the Sonoran press. Kelly thought the Sonoran censorship caused locals to spread rumors and “fake news”:

#### FAKE FACTORIES BUSY.

In consequence of this policy of suppression and repression, Sonora reeks with rumors and false alarms, and it is almost impossible to separate the true from the false. The wildest fabrications are accepted as facts and passed along by word of mouth, growing as they travel, finding their way into the columns of American newspapers and affording to the Sonoran officials good excuse for discrediting all that is published concerning the Yaqui trouble.

Certain fake news factories on the border are responsible for much of the sensational lying about the Yaqui outbreaks, but it is more probable that the basis of nearly every false report has been a yarn born of the imagination of some paisano and passed along in the gossip of the country. The Sonoran people are like children in their credulity and in their facility of invention of stories, and in the absence of printed news,

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<sup>85</sup> Edward H. Spicer, *Cycles of Conquest* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1962).

<sup>86</sup> H. W. Patton, “Victory of the Yaquis After Fighting Fourteen Years,” *San Francisco Call*, December 26, 1897.

<sup>87</sup> Shelley Bowen Hatfield, *Chasing Shadows: Indians Along the United States-Mexico Border 1876-1911* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

<sup>88</sup> “Sonora in Terror of Red Rovers,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 1906.

they revel in gossip. And it must be admitted that a great many Americans in Sonora have fallen into the same habit and are not far behind the simple paisano in powers of invention and capacity for swallowing cock-and-ball stories. When people have little to do but talk, they are pretty certain to talk a great deal of nonsense.<sup>89</sup>

During the First World War, the Central Powers and Allied Forces constantly circulated false information about fabricated defeats and victories. Sometimes, German officials sent the gossip themselves to disrupt American efforts. I cover those reports in the following section, but in this sub-category, reporters could not explain the false rumors and who sent them. For example, many American papers prematurely announced that Germany signed armistice terms and ended the war. The false news spread four days before the signing of the Armistice of Compiègne on November 11, 1918. The *Courier-Journal* called it “fake news”:

#### CITY THRILLED AT FAKE “NEWS”

Crowds Fill Streets Until Midnight—Flags From Every Window.

#### NEWS FROM NEW ALBANY

The New Albany fire department bells were rung yesterday noon when news of the rumor that the war was ended was received in New Albany. Messages received later that the news was unofficial did not dampen the ardor of the people and the celebration continued until nearly midnight.

Factories and stores in the city closed during the afternoon and business practically was suspended, while the people of the city, men, women, and children, joined in the celebration. As though at a given word flags were unfurled all over the city. Decorated automobiles and wagons filled the streets from every quarter, and all sorts of noise-making devices that could be gotten together were utilized in giving vent to the expression of the joy of the people. School children left the schools and joined in the various impromptu parades and the high school boys contributed their full quota in the noise-making attending the jollification.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> “Sonora in Terror of Red Rovers.”

<sup>90</sup> “City Thrilled at Fake News,” *Courier-Journal*, November 8, 1918.

Papers across the country reported the same story: “The rumor would not down,” even after news reports explained it was unverified.<sup>91</sup> Cities everywhere organized parades. The *Courier-Journal* called it “fake news” only because of its ill-timing. The conference over the armistice started only hours before the rumor spread.

### **Fake news as a war tactic**

National officials deliberately sent these dispatches to gain support for their side. According to the American press during the Spanish-American War, Spain used “fake news” as a war tactic to influence Spanish morale and confuse the American troops. Months before the war began, on September 30, 1897, the Meriden *Record-Journal* exposed the Spanish government for soliciting “fake news” from journalists to misrepresent the Cuban struggle:

Another demand has been made upon the Spanish treasury. Foreign journalists are now to be employed at the rate of \$50,000 a year to “fake” news. By means of this faking machine an attempt will be made to prejudice the public by spreading reports of the horrible crimes committed by the Cubans. Spain must be reduced to dire extremities when it is obliged to resort to such methods to advance its cause.<sup>92</sup>

As the Spanish misrepresented their troops’ objectives and the Cuban efforts, ongoing famine and disease among the Cuban people worsened. The Spanish effected the horrific conditions, as they relocated entire rural populations of noncombatants living on the island to concentration camps in coastal cities.<sup>93</sup> American papers reported the realities of the Cuban-Spanish conflict.

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<sup>91</sup> “Another Rumor Excited People: Was Premature,” *Hiawatcha Daily World*, November 7, 1918.

<sup>92</sup> “Untitled,” *Record-Journal*, September 30, 1897.

<sup>93</sup> G. J. A. O’Toole, *The Spanish War: An American Epic-1898* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984).

President McKinley appealed for humanitarian aid for starving Cubans in January 1898.<sup>94</sup>

Spain's attempts to "fake news" and conceal the Cubans' conditions provoked an American hatred for the country. Soon after the public and the press pressured McKinley to be more aggressive, the American military intervened in Cuba and the Philippines.

By the time McKinley formally called for military intervention, the American press did not trust the Spanish government. In May, the *Morning News* reported on the "fake news" that a Spanish torpedo boat destroyed the United States cruiser Baltimore. The *Morning News* accused the Spanish governor-general of the Philippines, Basilio Augustín Dávila, of sending the fake news to promote the Spanish cause. The article calls him "Augusti":

#### AUGUSTI'S FAKE NEWS.

##### He Reports Arms and Ammunition Captured From Americans.

Gov. Gen. Augusti, the Spanish commander at Manila, seems to be following the tactics of Capt. Gen. Blanco at Havana in sending out for the encouragement of the Spaniards "news" of repeated alleged reverses to the American arms.

A dispatch from Manila, just received here, says: "The United States cruiser Baltimore is disabled by an explosion, which occurred on board of her.

"The Americans attempted to land arms and ammunition at Binacayan and the Spanish troops, who occupied a good position, permitted the Americans to land, when they fell upon them and captured their arms and ammunition."<sup>95</sup>

Again, in June, newspapers accused a Spanish official of trying to misdirect American troops with fake news. This article came from the *Semi-Weekly New Era*:

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<sup>94</sup> Lewis L. Gould, *The Presidency of William McKinley* (University Press of Kansas, 1980).

<sup>95</sup> "Augusti's Fake News. He Reports Arms and Ammunition Captured From Americans," *Morning News*, May 27, 1898.

## Spain Still Resorting to Trickery.

### Trying to Create the Impression That the Spanish Fleet is Not in Santiago Harbor.

There is a persistent belief here and at Madrid that Admiral Cervera is not as Santiago de Cuba. The correspondent of the *Gaulois* at Madrid telegraphed from there, saying he has learned from the highest authority that Admiral Cervera has never been in the harbor of Santiago de Cuba and that the Spanish ships there belong to Captain Villamil's torpedo squadron.

It appears from the information gathered by the *Gaulois'* correspondent that Admiral Cervera, after leaving the Cape Verde Islands, "manoeuvred so as to deceive the Americans."<sup>96</sup>

The glut of misinformation coming from Spain exasperated the American press. One American officer decided to send false information to the Spanish as retribution. Fake news as a war tactic was no longer a one-sided effort. Newspapers across the United States printed this article between October and December of 1901:

## FAKING WAR NEWS.

### How It Was Done by American Officer to Fool the Spaniards.

Captain Bartlett describes in the *October Century* the coast signal service system organized to keep watch for Spanish cruisers and incidentally gives a bit of "secret service" information.

"The reporters almost mobbed the office for news; but I was dumb to all entreaties, and the news that we received, which was of great value in many instances, was known only to the secretary and the war board, and never became public. Some of the astounding and wonderful daily news of the possible movements or intentions of the Spanish fleets was brought to me by reporters, having been received, as they said, from the most reliable authorities. Sometimes I would say that their news was all wrong, and they would go away disappointed, but I would read the fake in the next day's paper. The people, they said, demanded some news.

"I became very tired of the constant fakes, and I was satisfied that the Spaniards were helping along some of the scares. I proposed to the war board that we carry the

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<sup>96</sup> "Another Battle May Be In Progress," *Semi-Weekly New Era*, June 4, 1898.

same game into the enemy's country, and after preparing a statement that it was the intention of the department to send several vessels to Spain to attack unprotected ports, I submitted it to the secretary, and, with his approval, got it into Madrid as a secret purpose of this government. It was taken as genuine, and the Spanish immediately began sending troops to the seacoast towns, and to fortify them. The excitement and consternation in Spain quite equaled what our own coast had gone through at an earlier date.

"The fake news worked so well that, as a sequence, the department, as is known, later prepared a special squadron, under the command of Commodore Watson, to be ready to carry the war into Spain; but peace came before it was sent."<sup>97</sup>

In the case of the Yaqui struggle, the origin of the "fake news" in the previous sub-category was unclear. The *Los Angeles Times* attributed the false information to gossip from Sonoran locals and American readers. Historian Steve Devitt argued otherwise. Some areas of the Mexican government's project to deport the Yaqui people, for example, were missing from records of official governmental and military correspondence. This was likely because government officials abused their positions and profited from essentially enslaving Yaqui people on plantations in Yucatán. The increased censorship from the Mexican government during the Yaqui conflict suggests that both the Mexican and international press "kept the realities of Mexico from their readers, either through ignorance or design."<sup>98</sup>

Like those in the Spanish-American War, the countries fighting the First World War spread false stories about victory and defeat to boost citizens' morale and discourage enemy populations. Early in the war, in August 1914, a British cable ship cut five German underwater cables, blocking German communications to the United States. With no German news, American

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<sup>97</sup> "Faking War News. How It Was Done by American Officer to Fool the Spaniards," *Newton Press*, November 15, 1901.

<sup>98</sup> Steve Devitt, "The Porfirian influence on Mexican journalism: An enduring legacy of economic control" (Master of Arts in Journalism University of Montana, 1987).

public opinion formed around European news, which was biased toward the Allies. Those stories characterized Germany as the “bully of Europe.” Americans quickly adopted that view.<sup>99</sup>

In 1915, German submarines sunk the RMS *Lusitania*, killing 128 Americans onboard. Woodrow Wilson wanted full support from Americans after he declared war in April. Propaganda flourished as newspapers used it to meet that end. The newly formed Committee on Public Information created propaganda that they felt was not “malicious,” but “based on fact.”<sup>100</sup> American journalists believed that Germany sent “malicious propaganda.” For example, in July 1917, the *Star Tribune* explained German efforts to discourage enemies by spreading false information:

#### German Agents Fake News.

Indeed, the activity of the American main fleet in the North sea is so probable that rumors (undoubtedly started by German agents of a great sea disaster) found ready credence this spring. These unfounded stories had it that the United States fleet had met the Germans, been worsted and lay for the most part on the bottom of the ocean. The reports stirred up such widespread uneasiness among the masses of the people that an official denial was thought advisable.<sup>101</sup>

The journalist is “an engineer of souls” playing on the “whole keyboard of human instincts...to incite action,” Russian sociologist Serge Chakhotin argued.<sup>102</sup> Thus, Americans responded to the false reports morosely and sometimes violently.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> NMMC, “Journalism During WWI,” National Museum of the Marine Corps.

<sup>100</sup> NMMC, “Journalism During WWI.”

<sup>101</sup> “German Agents Fake News,” *Star Tribune* 1917.

<sup>102</sup> Serge Chakhotin, *The Rape of the Masses: The Psychology of Totalitarian Political Propaganda* (New York, 1940); Alice Goldfarb Marquis, “Words as Weapons: Propaganda in Britain and Germany During the First World War,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 13 (1978).

<sup>103</sup> “Fake News Caused Near Riot. Report That Germans Had Invaded America Angered Workers,” *Spokesman-Review*, December 26, 1917.

America later accused the German government of using “fake news” to appeal to neutral Switzerland. With a German-speaking majority in Switzerland, the Central Powers had an accessible Swiss audience. Germany owned and operated several Swiss papers marketed to both German- and French-speaking populations. Like Europe did after they blocked German communications to America, Germany controlled the war news that reached Swiss readers. On November 11, 1917, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported:

#### GERMANS SPEND MILLIONS TO GAIN SWISS SYMPATHY

Buy Newspapers, Start New Ones, Form Fake News Agencies, to Influence People.

#### EFFORTS ARE CLUMSY

Entente by Tact and Cleverness Is Revealing Even Real German News to Readers.

Probably at no time since the war began has German propaganda been more aggressively active in Switzerland than at present.

Those following the German campaign declare that uncounted millions are being spent and that the expenditures have increased since the day, not so very many months ago, when counter efforts were begun—counter efforts that with a comparatively insignificant amount of money have accomplished wonders by their tact and cleverness.

Germany acquired a number of newspapers in Switzerland—several in the German language and one published in French, the latter now under suspension. Similarly, the “Swiss” papers in the German language are quite obviously German as the Berlin Lokal Anzeiger or the Cologne Gazette, except that they are immeasurably less able.

Then the Germans acquired or started a whole series of news agencies through which to distribute their news. Soon, however, these agencies added another and vastly more important function, that of collecting and transmitting news from countries at war with German—news, however, carefully colored, if not actually distorted. It was in this direction that the German propaganda began to be dangerously effective.

With America’s entry into the war the agencies went a step farther, for some of them began to send, both to Switzerland and to Germany, distorted news from the United States. Again and again the reliable, genuinely Swiss journals, issued denials or published the correct news. The first effect was not to be corrected by later stories.



The general trend of this American news concerns the embargo and America's intentions toward Switzerland. Every story in a list that would fill a scrap book tended to show that the United States had the intention of starving its little sister republic. Not even an announcement by Switzerland's President that from authentic reports he knew food was underway or soon to start could offset the effect of the first stories. And they had meantime gone to Germany and were followed by sympathetic editorials in German papers popular here commiserating with Switzerland in its struggle against Yankee oppression.<sup>104</sup>

Pundits, scholars, and citizens defined propaganda in many ways during the war. But when it came from Germany, they consistently regarded it as malicious. The United States, particularly the Committee on Public Information headed by George Creel, used propaganda to push the idea that Europe's salvation from the Central Powers depended on America's intervention. Both sides used propaganda to shape global public opinion. They also used the term "fake news" in the same way, to discourage support for and insult enemy war efforts.

### **War correspondents**

The American press generally admired their war correspondents, until an individual reporter's misdeeds gave them reason to doubt the ethics of correspondents. In 1897, the editor of the *Pottsville Republican*, Joseph Henry Zerbey, defended the reputation of American war correspondents covering the Cuban war for independence. He claimed they were "not appreciated as they should be by the general public of the United States."

[The reporters are] belied and defamed by the selfish money-lenders of the North who speculate in Spanish securities, and those officials in high places under the Washington government who are accepting pay from the Spanish government for misusing the U.S. courts and navy in perverting out laws and oppressing American sympathizers of the

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<sup>104</sup> "Germans Spend Millions to Gain Swiss Sympathy," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 11, 1917.

Cubans who are putting up such a gallant effort to secure their freedom from galling despotism.<sup>105</sup>

Zerbey argued that American reporters did not have an opportunity to fake their stories. He explained that Spanish officials closely watched over them:

No, no, you can't fairly call fake any of the Cuban news sent home by our United States correspondents in Cuba, for no other reason than that their reputations as news gatherers are at stake, and lastly because there is no necessity to fake any news, there is too much of it to be had, the one great trouble being to get the news item from Cuba to the United States, another to have the home editor handle it as sent in, and the last to have the people accept it as truth.<sup>106</sup>

The *Sioux City Journal* defended the Spanish-American War correspondents a year later:

#### FIGHTING FOR NEWS.

Do readers of newspapers ever stop to consider at what cost news is often secured—not cost in money alone, but of risk to life and personal discomfort?...

...There has been a good deal said and written about “fake” war news, and there has been much ground for this criticism, but despite these stories, spun from the elusive fancy of overzealous and not too truthful penny-a-liners, the real news appears and it is the product of much bravery and daring. Let us honor the war correspondent who is doing his duty fully as well as any soldier or marine.<sup>107</sup>

American newspapers increasingly defended their war correspondents during those summer months. They reported in detail the conditions and restrictions the correspondents dealt with at

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<sup>105</sup> Joseph Henry Zerbey, “U.S. Reporters Who Handle Cuban News. Great Hustling Required to Successfully Handle News for the ‘States’ Papers. Closely Watched By Spanish Officials! Don’t Need to Send Fake News Reports,” *Pottsville-Republican*, April 15, 1897.

<sup>106</sup> Zerbey, “U.S. Reporters Who Handle Cuban News. Great Hustling Required to Successfully Handle News for the ‘States’ Papers. Closely Watched By Spanish Officials! Don’t Need to Send Fake News Reports.”

<sup>107</sup> “Fighting For News,” *Sioux City Journal*, June 21, 1898.

the front. War correspondent Richard Harding Davis, a friend of Theodore Roosevelt, documented the Battle at Las Guasimas and the Battle of San Juan Hill over the next few days after the *Sioux City Journal* report. In his book on the Spanish-American War, Campbell claimed that Davis and Edward Marshall, another war correspondent, “took up weapons and fired on Spanish soldiers.”<sup>108</sup>

During the Mexican-Yaqui conflict, Mexican officials made every effort to restrict American war correspondents. It’s likely officials restricted journalists to hide the realities of the war. Four years after newspapers reported Yaqui Native Americans terrorized Sonora, a Mexican correspondent admitted to having seen many Yaqui executions and hardships that the news never covered.<sup>109</sup> The American press nonetheless accused correspondents of faking reports due to the restrictions at the front. The *Los Angeles Times* claimed that American correspondents reported “fake news” from Chihuahua and El Paso, quoting “mythical prospectors” who “just escaped from the Yaqui country” as their sources. The “invented” reports included massacres in the mountains and great escapes, as well as a fabricated Mexican campaign.

#### FAKE WAR NEWS...

...There was not a word of truth in all this stuff, and nearly every line of it was invented deliberately. As one of the fakirs says, “The papers were all clamoring for news of the Yaqui was, and we had to give them something.”

What they gave was ridiculous and impossible, and the alarm for the safety of American miners that they aroused was cruelly needless.

The work of these irresponsible cusses, who are the curse of American journalism, has given the Mexican officials a bad opinion of the American newspapers, and caused

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<sup>108</sup> W. Joseph Campbell, *The Spanish-American War: American Wars and the Media in Primary Documents* (Greenwood, 2005). <http://fs2.american.edu/wjc/www/spanish.html>.

<sup>109</sup> Robert H. Murray, “The Yaqui Indians. Correspondent Denies Stories of Cruelty, But Admits That Many Executions Have Taken Place and That Hardships Accompanied the Deportation of the Indians-History of the Wars,” *El Paso Herald*, March 26, 1910.

them to look unfavorably upon the presence of correspondents in the field. It also accounts for their unwillingness to give information or to do anything to facilitate a correspondent's legitimate work. They are coldly polite, but they will not permit a correspondent to go where he can see anything, and their whole demeanor indicates that they consider it impertinent of the American papers to seek any news of this war.

Being unable to get information directly where it should be obtained, the correspondent can only gather reports, rumors and opinion promiscuously, sift and sort them, reject what is not probable, and get at the truth to the best of his ability and judgment. A "war correspondent" who is not permitted to go to the front and see the fighting is not to be envied.<sup>110</sup>

Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Seymour Hersh complained about similar conditions for Iraq War correspondents, who stayed away from the front. He said, if cameras pulled away from reporters' stand-ups shown on the news channel, "viewers would see dozens of military securing the area, with snipers on the rooftops and helicopters circling. It is fake news."<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> "Fake War News," *Los Angeles Times*, September 7, 1889.

<sup>111</sup> "Fake news and a lot of lousy reporting," *Frontline Club* (March 27, 2008).  
[https://www.frontlineclub.com/fake\\_news\\_and\\_a\\_lot\\_of\\_lousy\\_reporting/](https://www.frontlineclub.com/fake_news_and_a_lot_of_lousy_reporting/).

## IV. Newspaper Rivalry

Like they tactically used the term “fake news” during war, newspapers also used the term to discredit newspapers to compete for readers. Some news outlets cried “fake news” for the sake of the truth, to notify readers about false information. Other sources, however, chastised other papers and exploited their misreporting to compete for readership. Today, this often occurs between the partisan media.

Consider the dueling personalities of CNN and Fox News. This rivalry has persisted for decades now. In April 2022, Fox News posted an article titled, “CNN’s long history of pushing disinformation, here are five examples.” They cited CNN falsely reporting on stories such as Russian collusion with Donald Trump’s campaign in the 2016 election, Joe Rogan taking “horse dewormer” after testing positive for coronavirus, and the FBI’s investigation of Hunter Biden’s emails as being part of a Russian disinformation campaign.<sup>112</sup>

In February 2023, CNN Business journalist Oliver Darcy wrote a report claiming, “Fox News has been exposed as a dishonest organization terrified of its own audience... like never before.”<sup>113</sup> Leaked text messages and emails that revealed the opinions of the network’s senior executives and talk hosts on the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election results. Fox News engineered election coverage and supported the “lies” of Trump and his campaign surrogates to appeal to right-wing audiences. Conversations among hosts and executives showed the channel pushed the rigged election narrative to get viewers and to not “antagonize Trump further.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Nikolas Lanum and Brian Flood, “CNN’s long history of pushing disinformation, here are five examples,” *Fox* (2022). <https://www.foxnews.com/media/cnn-disinformation-examples-smollett-collusion-covington-rogan-media>.

<sup>113</sup> Oliver Darcy, “Analysis: Fox News has been exposed as a dishonest organization terrified of its own audience,” *CNN Business* (2023). <https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/17/business/fox-news-dominion-lies/index.html>.

<sup>114</sup> Darcy, “Analysis: Fox News has been exposed as a dishonest organization terrified of its own audience.”

Nineteenth-century newspapers were not nearly as polarized as today's partisan media.<sup>115</sup>

Instead, they prioritized the ability of journalists to stick to the facts and report accurate information about the world around them.

Local information was king in the day-to-day context. Even as American news nationalized, readers still turned to local papers as a medium to connect to national trends and patterns.<sup>116</sup> Thus, papers mainly competed for readers on a local level. When they did compete on a larger scale, papers typically targeted news organizations like the Associated Press and the United Press.

### **“Fake news!”**

The overabundance of exaggerated and falsified information in the 1890s demanded the news industry's attention. “Fake news” caused a never-ending cycle of papers misreporting and later correcting those stories. Some papers virtuously corrected the misinformation, as they served the public on a quest for the truth. Others went a step further and discredited the entire newspaper.

This type of use of the term “fake news” had some of the earliest examples of the phrase. The *Marysville Daily Appeal* wrote in December 1889, “In its attempts to make a reputation for enterprise in connection with the late floods, the *Post* has merely succeeded in gaining an undesirable reputation as a publisher of ‘fake’ news. The people all want the news, but not fiction dressed up as fact.”

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<sup>115</sup> James T. Hamilton, “A market for press independence: The evolution of nonpartisan newspapers in the nineteenth century,” in *All the news that's fit to sell: How the market transforms information into news* (2011).

<sup>116</sup> Julia A. Guarneri, “Making Metropolitans: Newspapers and the Urbanization of Americans 1880-1930” (Yale University, 2012).

Local newspapers commonly accused each other of printing fake news. They did this to enhance their own trustworthiness and damage another paper's reputation. The *Hamilton Evening Journal*, for example, frequently publicized misreporting by the *Hamilton Daily Republican*. In 1892, the *Republican* attacked the *New York World* for printing fake news. That later caused problems for the *Republican* when it misreported a speech from President McKinley. The *Evening Journal* covered the inaccurate report:

#### Who is the Fakir?

The *Republican* of this city, the organ of trusts and monopoly, the sheet that insults the German and the working men, the sheet of the "cheap coat cheap man" idea, the sheet that takes special delight in calling the *New York World* all the bad names in the dictionary and which has accused it of printing "fake" news, itself now stands convicted of a rank fake or else the Cincinnati C. G. is the guilty party.

The *Republican*... published what purported to be Major McKinley's speech at Woodsdale. It palmed this speech off on the unsuspecting reader as the speech Mr. McKinley had just delivered. Did he deliver this speech? If the C. G. is to be relied upon McKinley did not deliver it at Woodsdale on Saturday. The C. G. had a special correspondent at the meeting and reported McKinley in full. The two reports compare in no particular; there are not two lines the same; a careful reading of McKinley's speech in the C. G. fails to find a corresponding sentence in the speech the *Republican* published.

Now there is something wrong somewhere. It is not possible that two *full* reports of the same speech can be alike in *not a single instance*. Who is the fakir? Did the *Republican* publish an old speech of McKinley's and try to give it to the public as fresh matter?<sup>117</sup>

Two days later, the *Evening Journal* confirmed that the *Republican* faked McKinley's speech.

#### SELF-ACKNOWLEDGED FAKE.

Is the *Republican* a fakir of news?

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<sup>117</sup> "Who is the Fakir," *Hamilton Evening Journal*, September 12, 1892.

The Democrat on Monday exposed the fact that McKinley's speech in the above said sheet and in the Cincinnati C. G. were in no respects identical. Someone then was guilty of a most miserable and contemptible journalistic fake. The Republican last night remained silent on the subject and thus conveyed the impression that it had no defense to make.

Readers will remember the exceedingly harsh and bitter language used by the Republican toward the New York World when the republican press was accusing the World of publishing a piece of "fake" news. The Republican itself now stands self-convicted of the rankest attempt at fake journalism in the history of Hamilton. It palmed off one of McKinley's (or some other man's) old speeches, and offered it to the people of Hamilton as the speech McKinley that day delivered at Woodsdale. Such business as this is disreputable in the extreme. How can a paper which stoops so low expect to ever get the confidence of the people! The Republican should get under cover and hide its head. Swindling in this city will not go, and "not a man can be found who stands up in defense or enters a word of denial of the fraud of which this impostor stands convicted."<sup>118</sup>

The *World* also earned the reputation of a "fake newspaper" early in the 1890s. In 1890, the paper printed an unverified report that census officials plotted to forge U.S. census returns "for partisan purposes." An official said the story was "made up of whole cloth, without a word of truth in it."<sup>119</sup> Some papers defended the *World's* journalists, but the newspaper was otherwise known to be a "yellow journal"—which was named after a *World* comic strip character, "The Yellow Kid."<sup>120</sup>

In 1892, the *Harrisburg Telegraph* wrote, "The New York *World* prints a story to the effect that the Pennsylvania railroad company has become a part of the coal combine and joined Reading. We don't believe it, if the *World* is the only authority. The *World* is a fake newspaper, and its news cannot be depended upon as accurate."<sup>121</sup> The *Telegraph* printed another article

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<sup>118</sup> "Self-Acknowledged Fake," *Hamilton Evening Journal*, September 14, 1892.

<sup>119</sup> "No Truth in the Story," *Evening Star*, October 13, 1890.

<sup>120</sup> "Fake News in the 1890s: Yellow Journalism," the Digital Public Library of America, 2018, <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/fake-news-in-the-1890s-yellow-journalism>.

<sup>121</sup> "Untitled," *Harrisburg Telegraph*, August 11, 1892.



about the *World* in 1893: “The ‘fake’ New York *World* has again been caught up in its trickery. It printed a ‘cable’ dispath [*sic*] from Honolulu, when there is no cable from there to any other country. The *World* is unfortunate in being edited by men totally devoid of conscience, and nobody believes it any more.”<sup>122</sup> In September 1892, the *Sun* shared articles from several newspapers discrediting the *World*:

#### STILL THE CONTEMPT PILES ON.

The Verdict of the Press on Joseph Pulitzer and His Newspaper...

...*From the Chatham Courier.*

The *Sun* charges the *World* with manufacturing news in its own office purporting to be cable news of interviews with prominent scientists in Europe. It makes a strong showing, and the *World* fails to answer the charges satisfactorily. Unless it can do so, it stands charged with and guilty of one of the most infamous crimes against public confidence that a newspaper can perpetrate.

The manufacturing of news, whether on a large scale like this charged against the *World*, or in lesser degree, cannot be too strongly condemned. It strikes at the vital point in the character of a newspaper, for if once it be proven untrustworthy and unreliable in its dissemination of news, and intentionally and systematically proceeds to deceive its readers in an attempt to gain notoriety and a reputation for enterprise to which it is not thereby entitled, the public should “boycott” it and treat it with disdain and contempt, and there is no more satisfactory way of doing this than by withholding their patronage.

A newspaper is not unlike an individual. Each has a character and a reputation, and one as well as the other needs to be exceedingly careful that neither character nor reputation becomes sullied. Of all unfortunate and foolish things a newspaper may do, that of destroying public confidence in itself is most unfortunate and most foolish. And it can accomplish this end in no other way more quickly or more completely than in the matter of “fake” news...

...*From the Lockport Daily Sun.*

If you see it in the *World*, it’s faked.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> “Untitled,” *Harrisburg Telegraph*, February 11, 1893.

<sup>123</sup> “Still the Contempt Piles On. The Verdict of the Press on Joseph Pulitzer and His Newspaper,” *Sun*, September 3, 1892.

During the circulation war between the *New York World* and *New York Journal*, the press considered both papers untrustworthy. Just weeks before the *Maine* exploded, the *Beatrice Daily Express* said the *Journal* produced the “foulest sensations,” and the *World* manufactured “fake news”:

#### NEW YORK NEWSPAPERS.

The New York Journal, owned by a millionaire, is the avowed champion of the poor man, and the sworn enemy of rich people. It prints sickly stories about poor factory girls who marry dukes, and elevates the public mind by gathering up all the foulest sensations and printing them double-leaded, with headings a foot long. The *World* devotes most of its time to manufacturing fake news. It receives cablegrams from places thousands of miles from the nearest cable, and when it does get a legitimate piece of news, it multiplies it by six.<sup>124</sup>

*Editor & Publisher* printed a statement by Pulitzer, undated, on December 19, 1914. He spoke for his paper’s prestige. He called attention to the time, money, and thought needed to maintain a high standard of accuracy. One source said it was from 1902.<sup>125</sup>

“What I say is that there are not half a dozen papers in the United States which tamper with the news, which publish what they know to be false. But if I thought that I had done no better than that I would be ashamed to own a paper. It is not enough to refrain from publishing fake news, it is not enough to take ordinary care to avoid the mistakes which arise from ignorance, the carelessness, the stupidity of one or more of the many men who handle the news before it gets into print; you have got to do much more than that; you have got to make every one connected with the paper—your editors, your reporters, your correspondents, your rewrite men, your proofreaders—believe that accuracy is to a newspaper what virtue is to a woman.”—Joseph Pulitzer.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> “New York Newspapers,” *Beatrice Daily Express*, January 22, 1898.

<sup>125</sup> Jennifer Robinson, “American Masters: Joseph Pulitzer,” *KPBS* (April 10, 2019).  
<https://www.kpbs.org/news/arts-culture/2019/04/10/american-masters-joseph-pulitzer>.

<sup>126</sup> “Untitled,” *Editor & Publisher*, December 19, 1914.

The Associated Press faced similar controversy in the early 1890s, beginning with rumors of collusion with the United Press. Investigative reporter Victor F. Lawson covered that conspiracy in a 10,000-word report in 1892. The New York AP, highly implicated in the scheme, went out of business by the end of the year. The Chicago-based Western AP fought against the United Press, waging a “wire service war.” Lawson collected over \$500,000 from the Associated Press’s publishers to fund that war.<sup>127</sup>

The *Sun* revealed in September 1894 that the Associated Press was losing \$300,000 a year and attributed it to President Lawson and Manager Melville E. Stone.<sup>128</sup> According to the article, Lawson and Stone repeatedly assured members that they were not running the business at a loss. Lawson admitted in a letter that the Associated Press was heavily in debt to some Chicago banks “and that members must come to the rescue with an additional weekly assessment to make good a monthly deficit of several thousand dollars.” The report continued, “Underneath all of this discontent the wretched and delusive quality of the service has created a constantly growing dissatisfaction, while nothing has appeared to allay the irritation caused by the continuous exposure of fake news, fake sensations, and failure to gather and intelligently present the real news of the day.” The *Sun* included comments from two other newspapers. The Buffalo *Enquirer* said, “The Chicago news-gathering association styling itself the Associated Press would have no difficulty in assuming the title of ‘Father of Lies’ as its corporate name. There would be a fitness about the name which would appeal to the good sense of all, and there is no one who claims a prior title to it.” The Evansville *Courier* said, “One would suppose that the papers that are served by the Associated Press would begin to be weary of paying big money for fakely tales.”

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<sup>127</sup> Oliver Gramling, *AP, The Story of News* (New York, 1940).

<sup>128</sup> “Losing \$300,000 a Year. ‘Associated Press’ Finances Under Lawson and Stone,” *Sun*, September 13, 1894.

Two weeks before, *Democrat and Chronicle* accused the Western Associated Press of publishing “fake news” that *The New York Times* was for sale:

A fake news concern, the Western Associated Press, is responsible for the story that the New York Times was for sale and that the property has greatly depreciated in value. The New York Post, a member of the association, gave out the news and now it is defendant in a libel suit as a consequence. The Times stock is not in the market and the report was a gross fabrication from beginning to end.<sup>129</sup>

*Democrat and Chronicle* wrote about the AP again in February 1895, claiming that the association had been printing “fake news” since September 1893. Again, the news report focused on the AP’s finances. They showed the management was deeply in debt, although managers insisted the AP was not operating at a loss:

#### A Bankrupt Press Association

For the last eighteen months the newspaper world has heard much of a concern organized, ostensibly, for the purpose of gathering and distributing news, named...the Associated Press. It has distinguished itself, during that period, by furnishing the newspapers served by it with some of the most outrageous “fakes,” that is to say, purely imaginary stories presented as facts, in the history of American journalism, and by bragging noisily and persistently about its efficiency and prosperity. Its management has exhibited to clients of the older and stronger press association, the United Press, which serves the *Democrat and Chronicle* and the *Union and Advertiser*, of this city, statements of Associated Press earnings and expenditures showing that the former greatly exceeded the latter, for the purpose of “roping them in,” and, in some instances, it has succeeded in effecting its purpose.

The annual meeting of the Western Associated Press was held on February 14th last, in Chicago. The board of directors, at this meeting, submitted a statement which shows that in every month but two of the period during which the management was daily publicly asserting that it did not owe a cent and was making money, the expenditures exceeded the receipts by thousands of dollars, the total loss from August 1, 1893, to January 1, 1894, being \$209,414.82, and the excess of liabilities over assets being \$219,634.19, on the showing of the report.

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<sup>129</sup> “Untitled,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, August 30, 1894.

During the period covered by the report the managers of the Western Associated Press “have drawn from their captured newspapers in extra assessments over \$200,000; in subscriptions to their capital stock \$46,750; they have borrowed \$100,000; they owe telegraph companies and others \$109,542.82, making a deficit for the period named of \$456,000.”

There is a great deal of comment to be made on this state of facts. It is all to be found in an editorial article in the New York Sun, which we reprint in another column. We need only add the remark that nothing but “fake” news can be expected from a purely “fake” association, and the expression of our sympathy for the unfortunate newspapers that have been swindled into accepting the service of this bankrupt and fraudulent concern.<sup>130</sup>

The *Sun* called the Associated Press a “fake news bureau,” among other things, in the last days of the Spanish-American War, on August 9, 1898:

#### *THE FAKE NEWS BUREAU.*

Convicted of Sending out False News and Violating the Government’s Orders.

For the second time within a period of a little more than one week, the Associated Press has been convicted upon its own testimony of being an irresponsible, unreliable and dishonest news manufacturing association. When this disreputable organization announced in a Washington despatch, published on July 31, in extravagant and pompous language, that M. Cambon, the French Ambassador, had been appointed Envoy Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to negotiate a treaty of peace between Spain and the United States, the public accepted the publication on its face as due largely to the customary ignorance of the employees of the fake news factory and their desire to produce a sensation. It was a foolish experiment, for the bombastic despatch was immediately denounced by the friends of the Ambassador and every member of the Administration as preposterous, absurd, and worthy of notice only as displaying the profound ignorance of those who concerted it.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> “A Bankrupt Press Association,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, February 26, 1895.

<sup>131</sup> “The Fake News Bureau. Convicted of Sending out False News and Violating the Government’s Orders,” *Sun*, August 9, 1898.

## Self-promotion

Newspapers commonly exploited the “fake news fad” by advertising their own organization as one that does not print news of that kind. This was also one of the earliest uses of the term “fake news.” In December 1889, a fully Polish-language American weekly of Toledo, Ohio, by the name of *Ameryka* regularly advertised in its headlines, “Only Reliable Firms can advertise in the AMERYKA. No fake news! No humbug ‘ads’!”<sup>132</sup>

The *Saint Paul Globe* used the term the same way nine years later. The paper printed this advertisement regularly in the first few months of the Spanish-American War: “The Globe’s Motto: Live News, Latest News, Reliable News—No Fake War News.”<sup>133</sup>

In February 1901, the *Daily Palladium* claimed to be known for its accuracy: “Why don’t you send it? *The Palladium* contains a record of city and neighborhood news as complete as any other paper, and it is noted for its freedom from scandals and ‘fake’ news, and for its reliability, ‘If you see it in *The Palladium* you may know it is correct.’”

Two papers in Omaha, Nebraska—the *World-Herald* and *Daily Bee*—did the same. The *Daily Bee* wrote in 1904, “The Bee never prints fake news.”<sup>134</sup> The *World-Herald* used it during war, in August 1914, to set the paper apart from those who printed false information:

No Fake War News  
No Fake War Extras

The world has entered upon the most momentous stage of its entire history. Practically all Europe is at war with itself. Millions of armed men, billions of money, all the skill and ingenuity of science, ever known, are devoting themselves to just one object—the destruction of life and property and the overturning of governments.

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<sup>132</sup> “Front page,” *Ameryka*, December 21, 1889.

<sup>133</sup> “The Globe’s Motto,” *Saint Paul Globe*, April 28, 1898.

<sup>134</sup> “The Illustrated Bee,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, February 27, 1904.

The fate of Europe is at stake. The future of civilization has been thrown into the maelstrom.

World-Herald readers will be privileged to follow the march of Destiny across the world. They may depend upon this newspaper to give them all the news that is available, and to give it at the earliest possible moment...

...The World-Herald will print no “fake” war news. It will be [in] the utmost possible pains to insure that only authentic news appears in its columns. It will issue no cheap, catch-penny fake extras.<sup>135</sup>

The *Daily Bee* printed again in December 1917, “IF YOU READ IT IN THE BEE YOU MAY BE SURE IT’S TRUE; NO FAKE NEWS OR PICTURES.”<sup>136</sup>

In 1915 and 1916, the *Los Angeles Evening Express* boasted that it never prints fake news stories. Despite the Associated Press’ reputation as a “fake news factory,” the *Evening Express* attributed its accuracy to the AP, which serviced the paper. The *Evening Express* printed this article daily in July 1915:

#### The World’s News Today

The difference in time between Los Angeles and New York, London and Europe enables the Evening Express to print today’s world news today.

The Evening Express is the only member of the Associated Press in the Los Angeles evening field.

The Associated Press is the greatest and most reliable news-gathering organization in the world. It neither guesses nor fakes the news.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> “No Fake War News No Fake War Extras,” *Omaha World-Herald*, August 6, 1914.

<sup>136</sup> “Front page,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, December 8, 1917.

<sup>137</sup> “The World’s News Today,” *Los Angeles Evening Express*, July 6, 1915.

A year later, the *Evening Express* printed another article to the same effect:

The Evening Express is conceded to be the best afternoon newspaper published in Los Angeles. One of the many reasons for the growing popularity of the Evening Express is the fact that its world news is supplied by the Associated Press. The news-gathering facilities of the Associated Press are unlimited and illimitable. Its lines girdle the globe. The Associated Press is trustworthy because it does not sacrifice principle for expediency. This organization eclipses its competitors in every department. The Associated Press does not disseminate fake “news” stories. The Evening Express is the only afternoon newspaper in Los Angeles receiving the Associated Press service.<sup>138</sup>

Today, we often see news outlets post articles disproving “alternative facts” and “fake news” and promoting their own authenticity. The AP News, for example, reported weekly between 2020 and 2022, “NOT REAL NEWS: A look at what didn’t happen this week.”<sup>139</sup> The press does not just compete for readers’ attention, but their trust as well.

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<sup>138</sup> “Express Best By Discerning Readers’ Test,” *Los Angeles Express*, March 8, 1916.

<sup>139</sup> “Not Real News,” *Associated Press*, 2020-2022, <https://apnews.com/hub/not-real-news>.



## V. Quackery

After a bubonic plague outbreak in London in 1665, many physicians and members of the London College of Physicians fled to the countryside. In the absence of licensed doctors, London's working class turned to "quacks"—people who falsely claimed to be educated in medicine and operated with no regulations.<sup>140</sup> Many quacks did not have the resources or social status to study at a medical college. They sold homemade medicines and quick remedies by shouting on street corners. Some virtuous "quacks" intended to help the sick, but others saw a business opportunity. They preyed on the vulnerable, those without the financial means to see licensed doctors. In the United States, "snake oil salesmen" similarly peddled false cures. They claimed their medicines had exotic ingredients that provide benefits.

In the United States, false medicines attracted crowds during the nineteenth century for several reasons. Despite newly formed medical schools gaining prestige in the early 1800s, Europe kept more established schools with world-class reputations. Anatomy laws before the Civil War made it difficult for biologists to study the human body, which slowed advancements in medicine. Doctors commonly prescribed mercury-based blue mass pills to treat many illnesses such as syphilis, constipation, parasitic infections, tuberculosis, and toothache. Those pills were toxic, unregulated, and often ineffective. For many patients, traditional medicines were too expensive and did not treat their illnesses.<sup>141</sup> Doctor frauds exploited those desperate for effective treatment by advertising their medicines as "cure-alls." Pandemics, such as the 1918

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<sup>140</sup> "Quacks, Plagues, and Pandemics," Pandemic Perspectives, Science History Institute, updated December 15, 2020, <https://www.sciencehistory.org/distillations/quacks-plagues-and-pandemics#:~:text=The%20term%20quack%20originates%20from,taken%20at%20one's%20own%20risk.>

<sup>141</sup> "Changes in Medicine During the 19th Century," Civil War, American Battlefield Trust, updated March 25, 2020, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/changes-medicine-during-19th-century>.

Spanish flu epidemic, brought quacks and snake oil salesmen high traffic and sales.

### **Snake oil salesmen**

Dynomizer creator Dr. Albert Adams and Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes are two of the most well-known quacks. Their inventions claimed they could provide the same service—diagnose any known disease with a single drop of blood. The difference between the two inventions was nearly a century. Dr. Abrams’s Dynomizer hit big during the First World War, around 1918. In 2015, *Fortune* reported Holmes’s Theranos was worth \$9 billion.<sup>142</sup> Doctors and scientists debunked the devices soon after they became popular. Like snake oil salesmen, Abrams and Holmes exploited naïve audiences by obscuring the inner workings of their complex “high-tech” devices and selling fake cures.

In 1916, an advertising committee of the Retail Merchants’ Association published a report about papers advertising “fake medicine news.”<sup>143</sup> The report said, “A large proportion of the so-called patent medicine industry has been built up on the credulity of the public, especially the suffering sick and susceptible. Truth and honesty were often and still are lost sight of.” The *Washington Post* shared the committee’s report, which listed examples of “doctor frauds”:

“A certain ‘professor’ with a weak solution of salt and sugar dropped in the eyes, promised to cure consumption, paralysis, Bright’s disease, cataracts, the morphine habit, and anything else the son of the man may be afflicted with. His income was about \$150,000 a year.

“In another instance a half ounce of flavored vaseline sold for a dollar, on the basis that it would remedy all defects of the eye. A third claimed to cure cancer, typhoid fever, and other diseases by laying on the various shaped packets filled with clay and

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<sup>142</sup> Roger Parloff, “This CEO is out for blood,” *Fortune* (June 12, 2014). <https://fortune.com/2014/06/12/theranos-blood-holmes/>.

<sup>143</sup> “Assails Fake Medicine. Committee of Retail Merchants Also Attacks ‘Doctor’ Frauds. Makes a Voluminous Report,” *Washington Post*, September 23, 1916.

charcoal. The poor bear of burden of these gigantic frauds.”

The report says the Washington papers as a whole have made more progress in “cleaning-up” than an equal number of papers in any other city of the same size in the United States.

After assailing various drugs guaranteed to cure chronic diseases the report lists arterio sclerosis, asthma, Bright’s disease, cancer, cataract, consumption, diabetes, drunkard’s liver, epilepsy, infantile paralysis, locomotor ataxia, paralysis, pellagra, pneumonia, whooping cough and yellow fever as being among maladies that no drug can cure.

The report ends with an appeal to all daily newspapers to refuse to print false medical advertisements.<sup>144</sup>

Health misinformation continues to dangerously influence unsuspecting audiences.

Today, anonymous individuals can sell health-related products online with fake user testimonies or paid partners. Medicine counterfeiters are becoming more dangerous.<sup>145</sup> It doesn’t help that investigative journalism no longer has the appetite it had a century ago when billionaires funded pressure groups to issue press releases.<sup>146</sup>

## **Pandemic hysteria**

As the world struggled with a global COVID-19 outbreak and federal governments exercised significant control over citizens, a fake news “infodemic” rapidly developed. The proliferation of false information caused confusion and mistrust, affecting the response from America’s already debilitated public health system.<sup>147</sup> Like Theranos had its predecessor the

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<sup>144</sup> “Assails Fake Medicine. Committee of Retail Merchants Also Attacks ‘Doctor’ Frauds. Makes a Voluminous Report.”

<sup>145</sup> “Lay down the law on fakes,” *Nature Medicine* 16, no. 4 (2010).

<sup>146</sup> Matt Ridley, “Beware pseudoscience: The science behind scare stories is often exaggerated or bogus,” *Spectator* (2019).

<sup>147</sup> Nelson A. Atehoruta and Stella Patino, “COVID-19, a tale of two pandemics: Novel coronavirus and fake news messaging,” *Health Promotion International* 36 (2021).

Dynomizer, the COVID-19 infodemic was a reiteration of the misinformation surrounding cholera and Spanish flu outbreaks at the turn of the twentieth century.

An active cholera outbreak in the spring and summer of 1892 scared Americans. They worried about the possibility of the disease spreading across the water from Europe and the Middle East, where cholera was rampant.<sup>148</sup> Against the wishes of New York state and local public health officials, as well as the residents of New York, dozens of ships from Hamburg, Germany, traveled to the Port of New York in the fall. By September 1, New York declared an outbreak. Because Tammany Hall and the Democracy of New York controlled the “Quarantine Station” during the epidemic, one paper in Ohio blamed the democratic party of New York City for the outbreak. The *Hamilton Evening Journal* denied those claims on September 16:

No more outrageous or contemptible bit of journalism was ever exhibited than that in the Cincinnati Commercial Gazette today, charging the democratic party of New York City with being responsible for cholera getting into the city. The C. G. does not charge the party with being responsible for its importation: the money-grasping Hamburg steam-ship company is to blame for this. But it might just as well charge the party with one as the other. The columns of the C. G. every day since cholera was reported give the lie to its nasty charges of today. The C. G., as everyone else, knows that all hands united in New York to keep out the dread disease; that paper told daily of the heroic fight that was being made by the city and state authorities, aided by the federal government.

We are surprised at the C. G. If it had been the “fake news” organette of this city not so much would have been thought of it.<sup>149</sup>

The *Evening Journal* touched on partisan relations and discredited its local contemporary the *Cincinnati Commercial Gazette*. This article is more relevant, however, to the health misinformation category because the cholera outbreak provoked the report. It’s difficult to know

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<sup>148</sup> Howard Markel, “‘Knocking out the Cholera’: Cholera, Class, and Quarantines in New York City, 1892,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 69, no. 3 (1995).

<sup>149</sup> “Untitled,” *Hamilton Evening Journal*, September 16, 1892.

whether the *Evening Journal* would have made these comments about the New York political parties or the *Gazette* in the absence of the pandemic hysteria.

The following week, a mob gathered in Fire Island where the iron steamboat *Cepheus* arrived. It ferried passengers from the SS *Normannia*, a German ocean liner that offered a weekly express service from Hamburg to New York. The mob of men wielded guns and fireplace pokers to prevent the passengers from landing.<sup>150</sup>

A year later, a *New York Herald* report confirmed rumors of cholera riots in the suburbs of Hamburg. According to an article from the *Star Tribune* on October 12, officials in Hamburg claimed the report was false. The officials said they wanted the *Herald* to put an end to its “frivolous” stories.

#### FAKE NEWS.

##### How the United Press Foreign Advices Are Concocted.

Further investigation by the Associated Press correspondent at Hamburg into the story sent out by a news association and appearing the New York Herald and some other newspapers in the United States, describing in sensational terms to alleged cholera riots, shows that the stories are absolutely without foundation. One of these sensational reports describes an alleged cholera riot, said to have taken place in St. Pauli, a suburb of Hamburg, Monday night last, and the other tells of another alleged riot at the same place on September 25. Yesterday’s report is simply a repetition of the former story.

Herr Pohatzui, director of the Borsen-halle, to whom the latter story was sent, wires that the reports are absolutely false and a mass of lies from beginning to end.

The dispatch which appeared in the New York Herald on Sept. 26 last, was reproduced yesterday by the Hamburgischen Correspondent under the heading, “Censure of the Herald’s Frivolous Reports.”

The foreign correspondent of this irresponsible news agency, not recognizing his own false story, its sensational features having been so exaggerated by his home office in

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<sup>150</sup> Markel, “‘Knocking out the Cholera’: Cholera, Class, and Quarantines in New York City, 1892.”

New York, took it for a new story and reported the whole fake back to New York.<sup>151</sup>

A day before the *Star Tribune* report, *The New York Times* detailed another fatal riot in Hamburg, where citizens kicked and trampled sanitary officers to their deaths after they tried to enforce regulations for preventing the spread of cholera.<sup>152</sup> Considering the efforts of Hamburg officials to conceal the cholera epidemic in Hamburg the year prior, it's possible that they wanted to again suppress the conditions in Germany.<sup>153</sup>

During the First World War, officials similarly censored news about the 1918 flu pandemic that might affect morale. Spain, which remained neutral throughout the war, reported candidly about the country's active outbreak beginning in May 1918—hence the name “Spanish flu.”<sup>154</sup> The first documented case was in Kansas, two months before Spain publicized the epidemic.<sup>155</sup> Global mobilization of troops during the war caused quick transmission. The spring outbreak continued through the summer. The fall saw a much deadlier flu pandemic, with tens of millions of deaths worldwide in the last few months of the year. November 8, 1918, after newspapers prematurely reported the war ended, the Missouri *St. Joseph News-Press* shared a statement from the Missouri Secretary of the State Board of Health about the mass gatherings:

## NEW “FLU” EPIDEMIC?

### YESTERDAY’S DEMONSTRATION MAY CAUSE FRESH OUTBREAK.

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<sup>151</sup> “Fake News. How the United Press Foreign Advices Are Concocted,” *Star Tribune*, October 12, 1893.

<sup>152</sup> “Cholera Riot In Hamburg. Sanitary Officers Again Attacked By A Mob,” *The New York Times*, October 10, 1893.

<sup>153</sup> Markel, “‘Knocking out the Cholera’: Cholera, Class, and Quarantines in New York City, 1892.”

<sup>154</sup> Johanna Mayer, “The Origin of the Name Spanish Flu,” *Science Friday* (January 29, 2019).  
<https://www.sciencefriday.com/articles/the-origin-of-the-spanish-flu/>.

<sup>155</sup> L. Spinney, *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How it Changed the World* (2018).

Secretary of Health Board Says Thousands Exposed Themselves to Disease Germs in  
Jubilation Over Fake “Peace” News.

Dr. George H. Jones, secretary of the state board of health, today said that a new wave of Spanish influenza can be expected in Missouri as a result of the wild demonstrations in many cities yesterday over the false news that the war was ended.

Thousands of persons crowded into the streets and marched through rain with bared heads, exposing themselves to the influenza germ. An outbreak of the epidemic can now be expected, Doctor Jones said.<sup>156</sup>

Germany officially signed the armistice on November 11. This caused further celebrations, which led to increased outbreaks. That second wave dwindled in the following month.<sup>157</sup>

**Bogus health stories and conspiracy**

Current headlines appeal to a market for alarm by exaggerating environmental and medical information. For example, the COVID-19 vaccine does not cause infertility and vaccine ingredients do not cause autism, but you’ve likely heard rumors that suggest otherwise.<sup>158</sup> Some of the “scientific studies” we see turn out to be fraudulent. Even after experts debunk the “fake news,” the damage is already done, as the stories continue to circulate through media outlets and social media platforms.<sup>159</sup> Like the news articles that prey on pandemic hysteria, these bogus reports exploit readers’ ignorance of medical health and tell unbelievable stories to excite the public.

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<sup>156</sup> “New ‘Flu’ Epidemic? Yesterday’s Demonstration May Cause Fresh Outbreak,” *St. Joseph News-Press*, November 8, 1918.

<sup>157</sup> K. D. Patterson and G. F. Pyle, “The geography and mortality of the 1918 influenza pandemic,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 65, no. 1 (1991).

<sup>158</sup> CDC, “No evidence that COVID-19 vaccines affect fertility,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (July 14, 2022). <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/planning-for-pregnancy.html>; CDC, “Vaccines do not cause autism,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (December 1, 2021). <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/concerns/autism.html>.

<sup>159</sup> Ridley, “Beware pseudoscience: The science behind scare stories is often exaggerated or bogus.”

The cholera epidemics intersected with the “germ theory era”—a period when “bacterio-mania” preoccupied many physicians.<sup>160</sup> Today, we accept the germ theory as the scientific theory for many diseases. When mid-nineteenth-century scientists first observed the bacteria causing certain diseases, however, the medical health field gave those discoveries little credit. Doctors and their teachers neglected these findings for over a decade afterward. Despite groundbreaking studies on cholera in 1882 by Robert Koch, doctors did not reach a consensus until the 1893 cholera outbreak in New York.<sup>161</sup> The United States softened the blow of the epidemic with improved water supplies and quarantine regulations. By 1900, medical scientists generally agreed on the criteria for germ theory.

As microbiology and germ theory grew more dominant as basic scientific foundations for studying health and disease, medicine reached “the dignity of a true science.”<sup>162</sup> Other sources, however, still denied the theory. The *Capital-Journal* wrote in 1903: “There is not a word of truth in this germ theory—not a single word. It is purely imaginary and has no reliable justification...The doctors cling to the germ theory with a death grip.”<sup>163</sup> The scientific standing of the theory was “a hard matter to determine by the outsider.”<sup>164</sup> In other words, the average reader did not understand and often had bizarre misconceptions about the theory. In October 1914, the *Record-Journal* printed an article titled “Health Talks,” by William Brady, M.D.:

#### THE INSANE FEAR OF GERMS.

It is a familiar fact, in bacteriology, that the skin of the hands is never free from

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<sup>160</sup> Markel, “‘Knocking out the Cholera’: Cholera, Class, and Quarantines in New York City, 1892.”

<sup>161</sup> Mervyn Susser and Zena Stein, “Germ Theory, Infection, and Bacteriology,” in *Eras in Epidemiology: The Evolution of Ideas* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>162</sup> Dr. Cyrus Elson, “Within a Century. Wonderful Advances Made in Medicine and Surgery,” *Evening Star*, December 15, 1900.

<sup>163</sup> “Is Consumption Hereditary,” *Capital Journal*, December 8, 1903.

<sup>164</sup> “The Germ Theory,” *Commercial Appeal*, June 8, 1901.



ordinary pus-producing germs. Surgeons know that even the most thorough scrubbing and soaking in germicidal solutions will not wholly sterilize the hands, and hence rubber gloves are worn for operating, because rubber gloves can be completely sterilized...

...This ubiquity of microbes, however, has been absurdly over-estimated by those who jump at conclusions. For instance, paper money has been suspected of carrying all sorts of disease. Some time ago a fake news dispatch came out under a Washington, D.C., date line, stating that a government “expert” (name not mentioned, of course) had made bacteriological tests of treasury notes which were in general circulation, and had found thereon the germs of scarlet fever, smallpox, and I don’t recall just what other dread diseases—the causative germs of which, it so happens, have never been discovered! This item, however, served to make people a bit nervous about taking money—not doctors, but those who don’t need money so badly...

...It is unnecessary to fear disease germs so long as they are not planted directly upon a mucous membrane or a broken skin.<sup>165</sup>

Ignorance breeds conspiracy. In 2019, Fox News’ Pete Hegseth said he hadn’t washed his hands in 10 years; “Germs are not a real thing. I can’t see them, therefore they’re not real.”<sup>166</sup>

Several papers printed in the winter of 1910 a news story about a young lady who died in Cleveland, Ohio. According to those reports, her cause of death was live lizards in her stomach. Doctors allegedly removed the lizards from her stomach after her death. One lizard, still alive, was said to be six inches long. The story claimed that the girl unknowingly swallowed the animals while drinking from a spring a year prior. This theory suggested that they grew to full size in her stomach and eventually killed her. The *Nashville Banner* printed a response to the story from physicians:

#### LIZARD STORY SIMPLE FAKE

Physicians Say Reptile Could Not Live an Hour in Human Stomach.

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<sup>165</sup> William Brady, “Health Talks. The Insane Fear of Germs,” *Record-Journal*, October 21, 1914.

<sup>166</sup> Sam Wolfson, “‘Germs are not a real thing’: Fox News host says he hasn’t washed hands in 10 years,” *Guardian* (February 11, 2019). <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/feb/11/germs-are-not-real-fox-news-host-pete-hegseth>.

## WOULD BE DIGESTED

Basis of Such Articles, Scientist Says, is Usually Mental Delusion of Hysterical Patient...

## ...FAKE NEWS STORIES

Considered purely from the newspaper standpoint, there is another element that may enter into the situation, an actor other than the hysterical patient and the quack doctor, namely, the unscrupulous reporter or correspondent. There are men who find it quite profitable to write fake items for newspapers. These fakes are rarely, if ever, perpetrated or attempted at home. Even if a reporter were inclined to manufacture an item of news out of the whole cloth for the paper on which he is regularly employed, he would know that investigation would be easy and that he would be exposed. The fake is usually written by some one who gathers items for newspapers in cities other than that in which he lives, and is thus comparatively immune from the danger of exposure. It will be readily understood, for instance, that a Nashville newspaper had small means of investigating to find out the truth or falsity of the lizard story sent out from Cleveland.

Thus, with a hysterical patient, not overly scrupulous doctor and a fake reporter, stories like that of live lizards in a young woman's stomach for a year are easily accounted for.<sup>167</sup>

It's possible that the cholera disease, transmitted through contaminated drinking water, inspired this story.<sup>168</sup> A market for apocalyptic health stories drove the creation of these scares.

A more recent example of this would be the brain-eating amoeba contracted by ingesting contaminated water and a death scare in 2013, which the Louisiana Department of Health responded to with a "Myth vs. Fact" report.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> "Lizard Story Simple Fake. Physicians Say Reptile Could Not Live an Hour in Human Stomach. Would Be Digested," *Nashville Banner*, December 16, 1910.

<sup>168</sup> Kathleen Tuthill, "John Snow and the Broad Street Pump," *Cricket*, 2003.

<sup>169</sup> LDH, "Myth vs. Fact: LDH Dispels Rumors about Naegleria Fowleri Ameba, Drinking Water in Louisiana," Louisiana Department of Health (October 17, 2018). <https://ldh.la.gov/news/2870>.

## Conclusion

Fake news is not a beast of modern technology. Rather, it evolves alongside our information environment and news media technologies. False information spreads because people humbug, bullshit, and lie. A liar knowingly speaks against the truth. As children, we learn to lie to protect or help ourselves.<sup>170</sup> Sixteenth-century Italian diplomat Niccolò Machiavelli said the “art of deceiving [is] always necessary for those who would mount to great heights.”<sup>171</sup>

We are born with a predisposition to believe authority figures because we rely on them to survive our earliest years.<sup>172</sup> We come to believe those who claim to have the skills and knowledge that give them authority. As a result, we often trust the news media to use good judgment in gathering and reporting news. Journalists, political officials, and other pundits weaken that trust when they use the term “fake news” to negate information and discredit the source.

It’s possible that Trump’s grandiose personality helped “fake news” stick in popular culture, but he shouldn’t get ahead of himself. Newspapers used the term “fake news” as early as 1889 to exploit a glut of misinformation and shamelessly advertise that they print “no fake news.” The terms “fake news” and “fake journalism” predate our earliest understandings of the “yellow press.” The ways in which news channels, politicians, and other pundits use the term directly reflect the ways newspapers used “fake news” between 1880 and 1920. Both then and

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<sup>170</sup> Robert J. Burrowes, “Why do People Lie? And Why do other People Believe them? - The purpose of fear is to suppress awareness of the truth,” *Salem-News* (June 20, 2013). <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/1470C2C0F4984778>.

<sup>171</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, “Chapter XIII: That Men rise from humble to high Fortunes rather by Fraud than by Force,” in *Discourses on Livy* (University of Chicago Press, 1531; 1998).

<sup>172</sup> Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (Harper & Row, 1974).

now, these organizations and individuals use the term to prove themselves as arbiters of the truth.

Newspapers and journalists used the term to boost circulation, fudge a good story, stimulate morale during war, discredit other sources of information, and otherwise manipulate public opinion. Five categories describe the distinct ways they used the term “fake news”: financial gain, character assassination, war tactic, newspaper rivalry, and quackery. This typology does have some overlap, for example, an epidemic report that references political party conflict or war news that discredits another newspaper’s accuracy. The Mexican government’s suppression of the Yaqui struggle provides a good example of articles that covered several sub-categories. For my typology, I prioritized the impetus for the newspaper’s report and the most obvious motives for using the term “fake news.” Regardless of the category, individuals generally used “fake news” to claim authority over the truth.

The freedom of speech promised by the First Amendment makes it difficult to legally regulate the spread of false information. City and state governments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did introduce bills to the legislature that would make false reports illegal.<sup>173</sup> Some of those laws did pass, such as the one in El Paso. But they seemed to be enforced infrequently and inconsistently. The *Buffalo Commercial* lamented in 1915, “Will the law regarding the circulation of fake news ever be enforced?”<sup>174</sup> Thus, the responsibility to evaluate information fell to the individual, which is the case today.

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<sup>173</sup> In Connecticut: “After the Fakirs,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 17, 1893.

In Kansas: “Bill Aimed at Fake News,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 9, 1916; Evans, Rhonda. “Fake News Isn’t New: Researching Its History with NYPL’s E-Resources,” NYPL Blog. (August 23, 2017). <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2017/08/23/fake-news-isnt-new>.

In New York: “Sender of Fake News Has Been Sent to Prison,” *Buffalo Commercial*, March 12, 1910; “Bill Penalizing Fake News Peddlers Passes Assembly,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, April 15, 1920.

In Pennsylvania: “What the Law Says,” *Evening Sun*, November 14, 1919, 4.

<sup>174</sup> “Untitled,” *Buffalo Commercial*, February 25, 1915.

Modern technology such as cable programming and the internet did not create fake news, but it does make deception easier. Today, anyone can create social media accounts and lie to look better in some way.<sup>175</sup> Many people are none the wiser and believe online liars. We find that even after fact-checkers disprove false information, the effects of the misinformation remain; the false information and its correction compete to be remembered. This suggests that we need to do more than debunk misinformation to combat fake news. We need to take a proactive approach.

Research shows that teaching people about common manipulation techniques causes them to be more skeptical of false information in the future. Teaching media literacy can help internet users distinguish between what's real and fake. This endeavor should be incorporated into education standards in the public school system so we can learn to guard against confirmation bias and other errors in processing information. Seeing that fake news has deep roots in our information environment, we need to better understand how to evaluate media sources.

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<sup>175</sup> Michelle Drouin et al., "Why do people lie online? Because everyone lies on the internet," *Computers in Human Behavior* 64 (2016), <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.06.052>.

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*Pomona Daily Review*  
*Pottsville-Republican*  
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