

History of Fake News

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Department of Government

“There has been more new error propagated by the press in the last ten years than in a hundred years before...”

Can you date this?

“There has been more new error propagated by the press in the last ten years than in a hundred years before **1798.**”

President John Adams

(For more on this, see <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1917158>)

Ben Franklin Loved Fake News

- ▶ Began his career as a printer
- ▶ Had established first newspaper in Philadelphia; author of Poor Richard's Almanack
- ▶ Would go on to be postmaster general, statesman, representative to the Continental Congress, Ambassador to France
- ▶ Very little formal education, but was incredibly intelligent with strong opinions

1782, Paris....

- ▶ The US, France, Britain, and other European countries had been at war
- ▶ Ben Franklin is US ambassador to Paris, negotiating the terms of the Treaty of Paris
- ▶ Seeking reparations for US citizens; decided to try to influence British popular opinion

Fake News

Creates a fake issue of a real newspaper, the Boston Independent Chronicle

- ▶ “Supplement” to the Boston Independent Chronicle, Numb. 705, dated “Boston, March 12.”
- ▶ A sheet of paper with two articles, and a number of advertisements (to be believable)
- ▶ Newspaper discusses atrocities undertaken by Native American Populations on behalf of the British during the Revolution
- ▶ Intention for this fake U.S. paper to be picked up and then reprinted in Europe

Yellow Ground, with little red Spangles to represent, by way of Triumph, the Tears or Grief occasioned to their Relations; a black scalping Knife or Hatchet at the Bottom, to mark their being killed with those Instruments. 17 others, Hair very grey; black Hoops; plain brown Colour; no Mark but the short Club or Cassetete, to shew they were knocked down dead, or had their Brains beat out.

No. 6. Containing 103 Boys' Scalps, of various Ages; small green Hoops; whitish Ground on the Skin, with red Tears in the Middle, and black Bullet-marks, Knife, Hatchet, or Club, as their Deaths happened.

No. 7. 211 Girls' Scalps, big and little; small yellow Hoops; white Ground; Tears; Hatchet, Club, scalping Knife, &c.

No. 8. This Package is a Mixture of all the Varieties above-mention'd, to the Number of 122; with a Box of Birch Bark, containing 29 little Infants' Scalps of various Sizes; small white Hoops; white Ground; no Tears; and only a little black Knife in the Middle, to shew they were ript out of their Mothers' Bellies.

With these Packs, the Chiefs send to your Excellency the following Speech, delivered by Conejogatchie in Council, interpreted by the elder Moore, the Trader, and taken down by me in Writing.

Father,

We send you herewith many Scalps, that you may see we are not idle Friends.

A blue Belt.

Father,

We with you to send these Scalps over the Water to the great King, that he may regard them and be refreshed; and that he may see our faithfulness in destroying his Enemies, and be convinced that his Presents have not been made to ungrateful People.

A blue and white Belt with red Tassels.

Father,

Attend to what I am now going to say: it is a Matter of much Weight. The great King's Enemies are many, and they grow fast in Number. They were formerly like young Panthers; they could nei-

distributed among both Houses of Parliament; a double Quantity to the Bishops.

TO BE SOLD.

A convenient Tan-Yard, lying in Medfield, on the Post Road, Half a Mile from the Meeting-House, with a good Dwelling-House and Barn, and about 20 Acres of Land, consisting of Mowing, Plowing, and Pasturing, and an excellent Orchard. For further Particulars enquire of Adam Peters, on the Premises.

TO BE SOLD.

A large Tract of LAND, lying partly in Oxford, and partly in Charlton, in the County of Worcester. It is situated on a great Country Road, about Half a Mile from Charlton Meeting-House, and is capable of making a Number of fine Settlements. For further Particulars enquire of Joseph Blaney, of Salem, or Doctor Samuel Danforth, of Boston.

All Persons indebted to, or that have any

Demands on, the Estate of Richard Greenleaf, late of Newbury-Port, Esq; deceased, are requested to bring in their Accounts to Moses Frazier and Mary Greenleaf, Executors to the last Will and Testament of the deceased, for an immediate Settlement.

TO BE SOLD.

A small new Brick HOUSE, two Rooms on a Floor, at the South Part of the Town.—Enquire of the Printer.

Strayed or stolen from the Subscriber,

living in Salem, a Bay Horse, about seven Years old, a stocky well set Horse, marked I. C. on his off Thigh, trots all. Whoever shall take up said Horse and return him to the Owner, shall be handsomely rewarded.

HENRY WHITE.

Did they fall for it?

Did they fall for it?

“That article in the Boston paper must be romance, all of it invention, cruel forgery I hope and believe. Bales of scalps!!! Neither the King nor his old ministers... are capable of such atrocities.” (James Hutton to Ben Franklin, July 1782)

Did they fall for it?

- ▶ There were actually two letters; one was about imprisoned sailors but was considered boring and so was ignored
- ▶ Many thought it was so exaggerated that it couldn't be true
- ▶ Still, was published in a handful of London newspapers, and was reprinted in US papers
- ▶ Other more detailed ways they could have known: used an italic script that had been created for him

French Observer

Note one of the powers of the US press was that it was decentralized

- ▶ de Tocqueville claimed Americans “instinctively” understood the evils of centralized censorship, and avoided creating a government body with the ability to assess truth
- ▶ de Tocqueville concluded that “in order to enjoy the inestimable benefits that the liberty of the press ensures, it is necessary to submit to the inevitable evils that it creates.” (Democracy in America, 1835)
- ▶ Now, free market of ideas might be overwhelmed....we will discuss!

Fast forward to the 1890s...

Yellow Journalism

Yellow journalism = sensationalist newspaper reporting, characterized by profit-seeking coverage of world events

- ▶ Term comes from competition between two NYC newspapers in the 1890s
- ▶ Note, the specific phrase yellow journalism comes from a fight over the employ of a cartoonist who was poached from one paper to another; the character the cartoonist was famous for was called the “Yellow Kid”



Joseph Pulitzer, Owner of the New York World (1884)



William Randolph Hearst, Owner of the New York Journal (1885)



Figure: Source: Puck, v. 43, no. 1098, (1898 March 23), cover.

Newsies



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBgzLkaulrs>

<https://manshipmassmedia.wordpress.com/2014/11/14/carrying-the-banner-newsies-and-its-significance/>

Newsies

“You wanna move the next edition
Give us an earthquake or a war
How ‘bout a crooked politician?
Yeah, stupid, that ain’t news no more...”

Spanish American War

Background

- ▶ Cuba was a Spanish colony, whose revolutionary movement took off in the 1890s
- ▶ US public opinion called for Spain to withdraw from Cuba, and supported the revolutionaries
- ▶ American was a world power, and becoming aggressive
- ▶ Seeking to increase their readership, the two papers went to war over their coverage of Cuban independence
- ▶ Used cartoons and pictures to stoke fires of anti-Spanish sentiment

USS Maine

- ▶ One of the first warships built by the US, it was sent to Cuba to protect US citizens in January 1898
- ▶ USS Maine sank in Havana Harbor, for reasons still unknown
- ▶ Both newspapers blamed Spain
- ▶ Full of fake news; they completely made things up

“Remember the Maine, to Hell with Spain...”

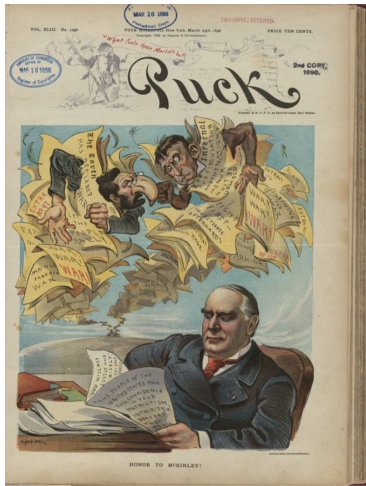
“War Caused by the Press”

- ▶ A month later McKinley asked Congress for authority to send American troops to Cuba
- ▶ Historians claim this helped push the United States and Spain into war in Cuba and the Philippines
- ▶ Led to the acquisition of overseas territory (Puerto Rico, Phillipines, Cuba, etc)



Uncle Sam's Dream of Conquest and Carnage – Caused by Reading the Jingo Newspapers (1895) — [Source](#).

Source: Puck, v. 38, no. 975, (1895 November 13), centerfold.



Source: Puck, v. 43, no. 1098, (1898 March 23), cover.

063,956

The



World.

063,956

WORLD ORIGINATED YESTERDAY

Published Weekly (except on Sundays)

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 1917

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WORLD ORIGINATED YESTERDAY

MAINE EXPLOSION CAUSED BY BOMB OR TORPEDO

Capt. Sigsbee and Consul-General Lee Are in Doubt—The World Has Sent Special Tug, With Submarine Divers, to Havana to Find Out—Lee Asks for an Immediate Court of Inquiry—260 Men Dead

IN A SUPPRESSED DESPATCH TO THE STATE DEPARTMENT, THE CAPTAIN SAYS THE ACCIDENT WAS MADE POSSIBLE BY AN ENEMY TORPEDO. DR. E. C. PENDLETON, JUST ARRIVED FROM HAVANA, SAYS HE OVERHEARD TALK THERE OF A PLOT TO BLOW UP THE SHIP. ZALASKI, THE DYNAMITE EXPERT, AND OTHER EXPERTS REPORT TO THE WORLD THAT THE WRECK WAS NOT ACCIDENTAL—WASHINGTON OFFICIALS READY FOR VIGOROUS ACTION IF SPANISH RESPONSIBILITY CAN BE SHOWN—DIVERS TO BE SENT DOWN TO MAKE CAREFUL EXAMINATIONS.



THE WRECK OF THE MAINE WAS BY A TORPEDO

... (Small text columns below the image) ...

\$50,000 REWARD.—WHO DESTROYED THE MAINE?—\$50,000 REWARD.

The Journal will give \$50,000 for information leading to the perpetrator of the Maine outrage. The person who gives the information must be a resident of the United States or a citizen of the United States.

EDITION FOR GREATER NEW YORK
NEW YORK JOURNAL
AND ADVERTISER.

The Journal will give \$50,000 for information leading to the perpetrator of the Maine outrage. The person who gives the information must be a resident of the United States or a citizen of the United States.

SIX CENTS. PUBLISHED WEEKLY. THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 1901. 12 PAGES. PRICE ONE CENT PER COPY.

DESTRUCTION OF THE WAR SHIP MAINE WAS THE WORK OF AN ENEMY

\$50,000!
\$50,000 REWARD!
For the Detection of the
Perpetrator of
the Maine Outrage!

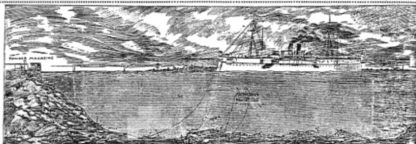
The Journal offers a reward of \$50,000 for information leading to the perpetrator of the Maine outrage. The person who gives the information must be a resident of the United States or a citizen of the United States. The reward will be paid in full when the perpetrator is identified and the information is verified by the United States Navy. The reward will be paid in full when the perpetrator is identified and the information is verified by the United States Navy. The reward will be paid in full when the perpetrator is identified and the information is verified by the United States Navy.

Assistant Secretary Roosevelt
Convinced the Explosion of
the War Ship Was Not
an Accident.

The Journal Offers \$50,000 Reward for the
Conviction of the Criminals Who Sent
258 American Sailors to Their Death.
Naval Officers Unanimous That
the Ship Was Destroyed
on Purpose.

\$50,000!
\$50,000 REWARD!
For the Detection of the
Perpetrator of
the Maine Outrage!

The Journal offers a reward of \$50,000 for information leading to the perpetrator of the Maine outrage. The person who gives the information must be a resident of the United States or a citizen of the United States. The reward will be paid in full when the perpetrator is identified and the information is verified by the United States Navy. The reward will be paid in full when the perpetrator is identified and the information is verified by the United States Navy. The reward will be paid in full when the perpetrator is identified and the information is verified by the United States Navy.



NAVAL OFFICERS THINK THE MAINE WAS DESTROYED BY A SPANISH MINE.

Hidden Mine or a Sunken Torpedo Believed to Have Been the Weapon Used Against the American Man-of-War—Officers and Men Tell Thrilling Stories of Being Blown Into the Air Amid a Mass of Shattered Steel and Exploding Shells—Survivors Brought to Key West Scout the Idea of Accident—Spanish Officials Protest Too Much—Our Cabinet Orders a Searching Inquiry—Journal Sends Divers to Havana to Report Upon the Condition of the Wreck.

What is this?

$$X \rightarrow Y$$

Cause and Effect

Did fake news cause the Spanish American War?

$$X \rightarrow Y$$

Cause and Effect

Did fake news cause the Spanish American War?

Probably not.

- ▶ Anti-Spanish sentiments existed outside these two newspapers
- ▶ Historical events all happened
- ▶ Figures like Teddy Roosevelt had already been pushing for territorial expansion

Cause and Effect

But it helped.

- ▶ Most likely increased anti-Spanish sentiment
- ▶ Political parties used these events to pressure McKinley
- ▶ Showed that the press could influence public reaction to international event

Countering Truth Decay

A RAND Initiative to Restore the Role of Facts and Analysis in Public Life



Photo by vepars/Adobe Stock

Source: Rand Truth Decay, <https://www.rand.org/research/projects/truth-decay.html>

Table 3.1
Assessment of Level of Truth Decay in the 1880s–1890s

Trend	Low	Moderate	High
Increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretations of facts and data*	✓		
A blurring of the line between opinion and fact			✓
The increasing relative volume, and resulting influence, of opinion and personal experience over fact			✓
Declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information*	✓		

NOTES: An asterisk indicates that our assessment relies on limited verified data. These assessments are approximations and should be considered largely in relative terms (i.e., to each other, not across periods).

Source: Rand Truth Decay, <https://www.rand.org/research/projects/truth-decay.html>

What were the **historical** problems with misinformation? What problems still exist today?

Be ready to discuss the Lapham's Quarterly Excerpts: Plato, Woolf, and Sayers.