History of Fake News

"Massive digital misinformation is becoming pervasive in online social media to the extent that it has been listed by the World Economic Forum (WEF) as one of the main threats to our society."[1]

Fake news is nothing new. While fake news was in the headlines frequently in the 2016 US election cycle, the origins of fake news date back to before the printing press. Rumor and false stories have probably been around as long as humans have lived in groups where power matters. Until the printing press was invented, news was usually transferred from person to person via word of mouth. The ability to have an impact on what people know is an asset that has been prized for many centuries.

Pre–Printing Press Era

Forms of writing inscribed on materials like stone, clay, and papyrus appeared several thousand years ago. The information in these writings was usually limited to the leaders of the group (emperors, pharaohs, Incas, religious and military leaders, and so on). Controlling information gave some people power over others and has probably contributed to the creation of most of the hierarchical cultures we know today. Knowledge is power. Those controlling knowledge, information, and the means to disseminate information became group leaders, with privileges that others in the group did not have. In many early state societies, remnants of the perks of leadership remain— pyramids, castles, lavish household goods, and more. Some of the information that has survived, carved in stone or baked on tablets or drawn in pictograms, extolled the wonder and power of the leaders. Often these messages were reminders to the common people that the leader controlled their lives. Others were created to insure that an individual leader would be remembered for his great prowess, his success in battle, or his great leadership skills. Without means to verify the claims, it's hard to know whether the information was true or fake news.

In the sixth century AD, Procopius of Caesarea (500–ca. 554 AD), the principal historian of Byzantium, used fake news to smear the Emperor Justinian.[2] While Procopius supported Justinian during his lifetime, after the emperor's death Procopius released a treatise called *Secret History* that discredited the emperor and his wife. As the emperor was dead, there could be no retaliation, questioning, or investigations. Since the new emperor did not favor Justinian, it is possible the author had a motivation to distance himself from Justinian's court, using the stories (often wild and unverifiable) to do so.

Post–Printing Press Era

The invention of the printing press and the concurrent spread of literacy made it possible to spread information more widely. Those who were literate could easily use that ability to manipulate information to those who were not literate. As more people became literate, it became more difficult to mislead by misrepresenting what was written.

As literacy rates increased, it eventually became economically feasible to print and sell information. This made the ability to write convincingly and authoritatively on a topic a powerful skill. Leaders have always sought to have talented writers in their employ and to control what information was

produced. Printed information became available in different formats and from different sources. Books, newspapers, broadsides, and cartoons were often created by writers who had a monetary incentive. Some were paid by a publisher to provide real news. Others, it seems, were paid to write information for the benefit of their employer.

In 1522, Italian author and satirist Pietro Aretino wrote wicked sonnets, pamphlets, and plays. He self-published his correspondence with the nobility of Italy, using their letters to blackmail former friends and patrons. If those individuals failed to provide the money he required, their indiscretions became public. He took the Roman style of *pasquino*—anonymous lampooning—to a new level of satire and parody. While his writings were satirical (not unlike today's *Saturday Night Live* satire), they planted the seeds of doubt in the minds of their readers about the people in power in Italy and helped to shape the complex political reality of the time.[3]

Aretino's pasquinos were followed by a French variety of fake news known as the canard. The French word *canard* can be used to mean an unfounded rumor or story. Canards were rife during the seventeenth century in France. One canard reported that a monster, captured in Chile, was being shipped to France. This report included an engraving of a dragon-like creature. During the French Revolution the face of Marie Antoinette was superimposed onto the dragon. The revised image was used to disparage the queen.[4] The resulting surge in unpopularity for the queen may have contributed to her harsh treatment during the revolution.

Jonathan Swift complained about political fake news in 1710 in his essay "The Art of Political Lying." He spoke about the damage that lies can do, whether ascribed to a particular author or anonymous: "Falsehood flies, and truth comes limping after it, so that when men come to be undeceived, it is too late; the jest is over, and the tale hath had its effect."[5] Swift's descriptions of fake news in politics in 1710 are remarkably similar to those of writers of the twenty-first century.

American writer Edgar Allan Poe in 1844 wrote a hoax newspaper article claiming that a balloonist had crossed the Atlantic in a hot air balloon in only three days.[6] His attention to scientific details and the plausibility of the idea caused many people to believe the account until reporters failed to find the balloon or the balloonist. The story was retracted four days after publication. Poe is credited with writing at least six stories that turned out to be fake news.[7]

Mass Media Era

Father Ronald Arbuthnott Knox did a fake news broadcast in January 1926 called "Broadcasting the Barricades" on BBC radio.[8] During this broadcast Knox implied that London was being attacked by Communists, Parliament was under siege, and the Savoy Hotel and Big Ben had been blown up. Those who tuned in late did not hear the disclaimer that the broadcast was a spoof and not an actual news broadcast. This dramatic presentation, coming only a few months after the General Strike in England, caused a minor panic until the story could be explained.

This fake news report was famously followed by Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds* broadcast in 1938. *The War of the Worlds* was published as a book in 1898, but those who did not read science fiction were unfamiliar with the story. The presentation of the story as a radio broadcast again caused a minor panic, this time in the United States, as there were few clues to indicate that reports of a Martian invasion were fictional. While this broadcast was not meant to be fake news, those who missed the introduction didn't know that.[9]

On November 3, 1948, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* editors were so certain of the outcome of the previous day's presidential election that they published the paper with a headline stating, "Dewey Defeats Truman." An iconic picture shows President Truman holding up the newspaper with the erroneous headline. The caption for the picture quotes Truman as saying, "That ain't the way I heard it."[10] The paper, of course, retracted the statement and reprinted the paper with the correct news later in the day. This incident is one reason that journalists at reputable news outlets are required to verify information a number of times before publication.

It is easy to see that fake news has existed for a long time. From the few examples described above, the effects of fake news have ranged widely, from amusement to death. Some authors of fake news probably had benign motivations for producing it. Others appear to have intended to harm individuals, families, or governments. The intended and unintended consequences of fake news of the pre-internet era were profound and far-reaching for the time. As the means of spreading fake news increased, the consequences became increasingly serious.

Internet Era

In the late twentieth century, the internet provided new means for disseminating fake news on a vastly increased scale. When the internet was made publicly available, it was possible for anyone who had a computer to access it. At the same time, innovations in computers made them affordable to the average person. Making information available on the internet became a new way to promote products as well as make information available to everyone almost instantly.

Some fake websites were created in the early years of generalized web use. Some of these hoax websites were satire. Others were meant to mislead or deliberately spread biased or fake news. Early library instruction classes used these types of website as cautionary examples of what an internet user needed to look for. Using a checklist of criteria to identify fake news websites was relatively easy. A few hoax website favorites are

- *DHMO.org.* This website claims that the compound DHMO (Dihydrogen Monoxide), a component of just about everything, has been linked to terrible problems such as cancer, acid rain, and global warming. While everything suggested on the website is true, it is not until one's high school chemistry kicks in that the joke is revealed— DHMO and H^2O are the same thing.
- *Feline Reactions to Bearded Men.* Another popular piece of fake news is a "research study" regarding the reactions of cats to bearded men. This study is reported as if it had been published in a scientific journal. It includes a literature review, a description of the experiment, the raw data resulting from the experiment, and the conclusions reached by the researchers as a result. It is not until the reader gets to the bibliography of the article that the experiment is revealed to be a hoax. Included in the bibliography are articles supposedly written by Madonna Louise Ciccone (Madonna the singer), A. Schwartzenegger (Arnold, perhaps?), and Doctor Seuss and published in journals such as the *Western Musicology Journal*, *Tonsological Proceedings*, and the *Journal of Feline Forensic Studies*.
- *city-mankato.us.* One of the first websites to make use of website technology to mislead and misdirect was a fake site for the city of Mankato, Minnesota. This website describes the climate as temperate to tropical, claiming that a geological anomaly allows the Mankato Valley to enjoy a year-round temperature of no less than 70 degrees Fahrenheit, while providing snow year-round at nearby Mount Kroto. It reported that one could watch the summer migration of whales up the Minnesota River. An insert shows a picture of a beach, with a second insert showing the current temperature—both tropical. The website proudly announces that it is a Yahoo "Pick of the Week" site and has been featured by the *New York Times* and the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. Needless to say, no geological anomaly of this type exists in Minnesota. Whales do not migrate up (or down) the Minnesota River at any time, and the pictures of the beaches and the thermometer are actually showing beaches and temperatures from places very far south of Mankato. It is true that Yahoo,

the *New York Times,* and the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* featured this website, but not for the reasons you might think. When fake news could still be amusing, this website proved both clever and ironic.
- *MartinLutherKing.org.* This website was created by Stormfront, a white supremacist group, to try to mislead readers about the Civil Rights activist by discrediting his work, his writing, and his personal life.[11] The fact that the website used the .org domain extension convinced a number of people that it was unbiased because the domain extension was usually associated with nonprofit organizations working for good. The authors of the website did not reveal themselves nor did they state their affiliations. Using Martin Luther King's name for the website insured that people looking for information about King could easily arrive at this fake news website. This website is no longer active.

HOAX Websites

DHMO.org
www.dhmo.org

"Feline Reactions to Bearded Men"
www.improbable.com/airchives/classical/cat/cat.html

"Mankato, Minnesota"
http://city-mankato.us

"Martin Luther King, Jr."
www.martinlutherking.org

Global Reach of Fake News

Initial forays into the world of fake news fall into the category of entertainment, satire, and parody. They are meant to amuse or to instruct the unwary. Canards and other news that fall into the category of misinformation and misdirection, like the Martin Luther King website, often have more sinister and serious motives. In generations past, newspaper readers were warned that just because something was printed in the newspaper did not mean that it was true. In the twenty-first century, the same could be said about the internet. People of today create fake news for many of the same reasons that people of the past did. A number of new twists help to drive the creation and spread of fake news that did not exist until recently.

Twenty-first-century economic incentives have increased the motivation to supply the public with fake news. The internet is now funded by advertisers

rather than by the government. Advertisers are in business to get information about their products to as many people as possible. Advertisers will pay a website owner to allow their advertising to be shown, just as they might pay a newspaper publisher to print advertisements in the paper. How do advertisers decide in which websites to place their ads? Using computing power to collect the data, it is possible to count the number of visits and visitors to individual sites. Popular websites attract large numbers of people who visit those sites, making them attractive to advertisers. The more people who are exposed to the products advertisers want to sell, the more sales are possible. The fee paid to the website owners by the advertisers rewards website owners for publishing popular information and provides an incentive to create more content that will attract more people to the site.

People are attracted to gossip, rumor, scandal, innuendo, and the unlikely. *Access Hollywood* on TV and the *National Enquirer* at the newsstand have used human nature to make their products popular. That popularity attracts advertisers. In a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed, Matthew A. Baum and David Lazer report "Another thing we know is that shocking claims stick in your memory. A long-standing body of research shows that people are more likely to attend to and later recall a sensational or negative headline, even if a fact checker flags it as suspect."[12]

In the past several years, people have created websites that capitalize on those nonintellectual aspects of human nature. Advertisers are interested in how many people will potentially be exposed to their products, rather than the truth or falsity of the content of the page on which the advertising appears. Unfortunately, sites with sensational headlines or suggestive content tend to be very popular, generating large numbers of visits to those sites and creating an advertising opportunity. Some advertisers will capitalize on this human propensity for sensation by paying writers of popular content without regard for the actual content at the site. The website can report anything it likes, as long as it attracts a large number of people. This is how fake news is monetized, providing incentives for writers to concentrate on the sensational rather than the truthful.

The problem with most sensational information is that it is not always based on fact, or those facts are twisted in some way to make the story seem like something it is not. It is sometimes based on no information at all. For example:

> Creators of fake news found that they could capture so much interest that they could make money off fake news through automated advertising that rewards high traffic to their sites. A man running a string of fake news sites from the Los Angeles suburbs told NPR he made between $10,000 and $30,000 a month. A computer science student in

the former Soviet republic of Georgia told the New York Times that creating a new website and filling it with both real stories and fake news that flattered Trump was a "gold mine."[13]

Technological advances have increased the spread of information and democratized its consumption globally. There are obvious benefits associated with instantaneous access to information. The dissemination of information allows ideas to be shared and formerly inaccessible regions to be connected. It makes choices available and provides a platform for many points of view.

However, in a largely unregulated medium, supported and driven by advertising, the incentive for good is often outweighed by the incentive to make money, and this has a major impact on how the medium develops over time. Proliferation of fake news is one outcome. While the existence of fake news is not new, the speed at which it travels and the global reach of the technology that can spread it are unprecedented. Fake news exists in the same context as real news on the internet. The problem seems to be distinguishing between what is fake and what is real.

Notes

1. Michela Del Vicario, Alessandro Bessi, Fabiana Zollo, Fabio Petroni, Antonio Scala, Guido Caldarelli, H. Eugene Stanley, and Walter Quattrociocchi, "The Spreading of Misinformation Online," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 113, no. 3 (January 19, 2016): 534, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1517441113.
2. Procopius, *Secret History*, trans. Richard Atwater (New York: Covici Friede; Chicago: P. Covici, 1927; repr. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/procop-anec.asp.
3. "Pietro Aretino," Wikipedia, last updated August 7, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pietro_Aretino.
4. Robert Darnton, "The True History of Fake News," *NYR Daily* (blog), New York Review of Books, February 13, 2017, http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/02/13/the-true-history-of-fake-news/.
5. Jonathan Swift, "The Art of Political Lying," *Examiner*, no. 14 (November 9, 1710), para. 9, repr. in Richard Nordquist, "The Art of Political Lying, by Jonathan Swift," ThoughtCo., last updated March 20, 2016, https://www.thoughtco.com/art-of-political-lying-by-swift-1690138.
6. Edgar Allan Poe, "The Balloon Hoax," published 1844, reprinted in PoeStories.com, accessed September 6, 2017, https://poestories.com/read/balloonhoax.
7. Gilbert Arevalo, "The Six Hoaxes of Edgar Allan Poe," HubPages, last updated March 30, 2017, https://hubpages.com/literature/The-Six-Hoaxes-of-Edgar-Allan-Poe.
8. A. Brad Schwartz, "Broadcasting the Barricades," A. Brad Schwartz website, January 16, 2015, https://

abradschwartz.com/2015/01/16/broadcasting -the-barricades/.

9. "The War of the Worlds (radio drama)," Wikipedia, last updated August 24, 2017, https://en.wikipedia .org/wiki/The_War_of_the_Worlds_(radio_drama).

10. Tim Jones, "Dewey Defeats Truman," Chicago Tribune website, accessed September 6, 2017, www .chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/politics /chi-chicagodays-deweydefeats-story-story.html.

11. Keith Thomson, "White Supremacist Site Martin-LutherKing.org Marks 12th Anniversary," *The Blog*, HuffPost, last updated May 26, 2011, www.huffing tonpost.com/entry/white-supremacist-site-ma_b _809755.html.

12. Matthew A. Baum and David Lazer, "Google and Facebook Aren't Fighting Fake News with the Right Weapons," op-ed, *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 2017, www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-baum -lazer-how-to-fight-fake-news-20170508-story.html.

13. Angie Drobnic Holan, "2016 Lie of the Year: Fake News," PolitiFact, December 13, 2016, www.politi fact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2016/dec/13 /2016-lie-year-fake-news/.