



FAKE NEWS THROUGHOUT HISTORY

Although it's tempting to look at fake news as an exclusively 21st-century phenomenon, doing so also allows us to lay the blame for the way it affects us as human beings at the foot of technology, which is both unfair and unwise. Technology has had a great impact on the speed by which fake news travels as well as on the expanse of its reach, but the reasons people concoct it, and the reasons we continue to believe it, remain largely unchanged. A few examples from history:

1782

To stir up animosity toward Great Britain, Benjamin Franklin created an entirely fake "supplement" of an actual Boston newspaper, with a grisly hoax story about the discovery of 700 scalps—the result of an alliance between King George and Native American forces. Franklin sent the paper to upstanding friends, who shared it with their friends, and so on.

1914

Woodrow Wilson's Committee on Public Information (CPI) recruited 75,000 trained speakers known as "Four-Minute Men," who conveyed positive messages about World War I in short speeches they gave wherever they could find an audience—town squares, movie theaters, churches, etc.

1930s–
1940s

Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini used propaganda to fuel their individual rises to power. Both painted the legitimate press as enemies of the people and declared their own version of events to be the only version that could be trusted.

The Problem Is Us

In short, the problem isn't the technology: it's us—or at least our brains. And it's not because we're stupid or don't have the skills to parse false information from what's true. Rather, "there's an even more fundamental impulse at play: our innate desire for an easy answer." (Steinmetz, 2018)¹

What Is "Fake News"?

The term "fake news" is itself an oversimplification of a complex and rapidly evolving problem. Implying that information falls into one of two categories—true or false—denies the subtleties within the false narratives that are being created to fool us. Instead, educators need to sharpen students' ability to distinguish between what's there to inform versus what's meant to entertain, influence, or encourage us to consume.

"Fake news" is lazy language. Be specific. Do you mean:

Propaganda. Ideas, facts, or allegations spread deliberately to further one's cause or to damage an opposing cause.

Disinformation. False information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth. Differs from propaganda in that it is often spread to discredit a rival rather than promote one's own agenda.

Conspiracy theory. A theory that explains an event or set of circumstances as the result of a secret plot by usually powerful conspirators. Typically spread as part of a disinformation campaign to discredit a rival.

Clickbait. Something (such as a headline) designed to make readers want to click on a hyperlink, especially when the link leads to content of dubious value or interest.

Some other options:

Satire. A way of using humor to show that someone or something is foolish, weak, bad, etc.; humor that shows the weaknesses or bad qualities of a person, government, society, etc.

Bias challenging. Anything that doesn't confirm our own biases. More and more, people are using the term "fake news" to discredit anything that challenges their existing beliefs.

Distinctions are important when considering how best to teach students to spot suspect news stories.

7 TACTICS OF FAKE NEWS

Those who create fake news take advantage of natural weaknesses in the human brain by using these tactics:

- They often feature famous or familiar names and places.
- They bombard us with brief, repeated versions of the same story.
- They often include at least some facts to make it difficult to pick out what is real and what is fake.
- They model their articles, videos, and other media so that they are almost indistinguishable from legitimate news counterparts.
- They include (sometimes completely fabricated or taken out of context) "eyewitness" testimonials to add legitimacy.
- They rely on fear and propaganda to inflame existing anxieties.
- They take advantage of our tendency to trust information that confirms our existing biases, which also increases the likelihood of an emotional investment on the reader's part.