

“Alternative Facts”: The Origins of Fake News and its Implications

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the origins of the current rise in disinformation, compares and contrasts historical and modern examples of fake news, and analyzes the trends between them. By observing patterns across specific case studies where fake news was leveraged to manipulate public opinion, we dissect the contemporary misinformation dilemma and offer methods to combat false narratives. We achieve this through a historical analysis of Yellow Journalism in the late 1800s, early 20th-century propaganda, and disinformation in the 2020 United States election. One significant revelation in modern times that has altered the ways fake news perpetuates is media digitization. Platforms such as social media, news websites, and blogs have reshaped the contemporary media sphere. Misinformation proliferation has persisted since historical times and still threatens how citizens view political and social issues, something we need to mitigate. Thus, our overarching question is: “What are the dangers of fake news, and how have political leaders historically leveraged it to their advantage?” Today, there’s speculation as to whether or not media digitization has amplified its effects, another controversy we dismantle in this multi-dimensional article.

Introduction

“BREAKING: Two Explosions in the White House and Barack Obama is Injured”¹ (Fisher, 2021). On Tuesday, April 23, 2013, this outlandish claim circulated headlines of different news outlets throughout the country. The result was an instantaneous dissipation of nearly \$136 billion in equity market value. This nose-dive only lasted three minutes yet still managed to invoke international panic amongst stockbrokers and everyday citizens alike. Thankfully, this alarming headline was fabricated by Syrian hackers with the sole intention of causing chaos worldwide to appease their dictator Bashar al-Assad’s desires. While devastating, this event was a largely inconsequential example of fake news’ effect on the world. Although there were no lasting effects, in this case, widespread dissemination of fake news has created severe and lasting consequences in other instances, both in contemporary times and historically.

There are varying interpretations of what is considered fake news. Some consider it to be anything false said by a person of power, and others see basic lies told by nearly anybody to be “fake news.” News, satire, parody, fabrication, half-truths, and propaganda can all fall under the general category of fake news. However, the aforementioned examples represent various facets of fake news. Our definition ties exaggeration, intention, and persuasion together under one definition. For this article, we define fake news as information known to be false or drastically exaggerated by its creator, intending to streamline readers’ ideologies thus, swaying public opinion.

Furthermore, fake news is not a new concept² (Burston, 2018). Political leaders have leveraged fake news for personal gain since the beginning time. In the 1275 Statute of Westminster, the first codification of English law, spreading false news was considered a political crime³ (Heekeren, 2021). From false reports that King George II was dying in the early 1700s to the Great Moon Hoax of 1835 and leading up to Trump’s manipulation of his followers through misleading information, fake news has plagued society throughout history. Though the new era of media digitization known as the “digital era” is widely assumed to have drastically altered the landscape of fake news, this

is not always the case. Historical instances of fake news can provide a more nuanced look into contemporary issues and their solutions.

Scholarly opinions on the danger of fake news and how it has been leveraged historically tend to be congruent. However, many researchers have come to a consensus similar to our own surrounding historical instances of fake news, being that misinformation is repeatedly leveraged and most effective during times of crisis. Opinions on the dangers also align, stating that fake news inflicts long-lasting consequences in the forms of biases and single-story narratives and tearing apart institutional credibility after debunking⁴ (Neander, 2010).

However, the debate on the effects of digitization on fake news is highly contentious, as there are many different views on whether or not the digital era has amplified fake news' audience, combatted its spread, or accomplished neither. Margaret Van Heekeren's historical analysis of this contemporary issue provides a unique perspective on the issue. Her paper centers around the idea that digital avenues have not played a role in worsening the problem of fake news due to the lack of mainstream media publication misinformation received in modern times. Van Heekeren utilizes historical examples of fake news to support her claims about the digital era's effect on fake news. Her argument highlights that in the pre-digital era, fake news was primarily disseminated through mainstream media, which most of the population relied on for their information. When fake stories were issued, the publishers who initially circulated the stories were also in charge of correcting them. This resulted in the rampant spread of fake news, as publishers, fearing a loss of reputation, rarely corrected falsehoods in their own stories. Van Heekeren further states that concerns over maintenance of integrity ensured that any corrections eventually made would be minimal and heavily delayed. She uses the reach of fake news and the size of audiences to explain how the fragmentation of digital media has limited the dissemination of fake news in the digital era in comparison to historical examples. By explaining how the digital era's immediacy allows for the identification and correction of fake news faster than any other period in history, Van Heekeren explains that the internet also has checks against fake news. She emphasizes that the digital age has created new and effective methods of combating fake news through abundant sources available to the general public that enable easier debunking of fraudulent information. On the contrary, resources in the past were limited, forcing people to rely on misinformation perpetuated by mainstream publishers of the time. She argues that the digital era has increased the ability to stop the spread of misinformation. Although Van Heekeren agrees that fake news is a severe problem, she concludes that the digital era only enables the continuation of a persistent problem and has not created a new one⁵ (Heekeren, *The Curative Effect of Social Media on Fake News: A Historical Re-Evaluation*, 2019).

In contrast, Kayla Keener argues that the digitization of media has built on existing malaise within the present issue, amplifying it to new degrees⁶ ¹⁸ (Keener, *Alternative Facts and Fake News: Digital Mediation and the Affective Spread of Hate in the Era of Trump*, 2019) . This stance is more popular amongst the majority of historians in the field. Keener argues that social media has enabled the popularization of fake news, as no one has control over the narratives the public consumes. Historically, newspapers and news networks controlled most of the information published, but the digital era has made this impossible since fake news can originate anywhere from anybody. As a result, fake news can metastasize in a way it previously could not. While the article does discuss the influence of leaders such as Donald Trump in spreading disinformation, ultimately, Keener argues that disinformation primarily stems from the public at large rather than individual leaders. She states that the fake news is not solely caused by leaders like Trump but rather a crisis caused by latent anger in American society, aiming to create a social media movement committed to spreading disinformation. Keener believes that digitization has enabled the bottom-up spread of disinformation and significantly increased its audiences. Concha Perez-Curiel and her co-authors agree with this view and call for a re-thinking of the societal place of social media⁷ ²⁸ (Perez-Curiel, 2021).

While both Keener and Van Heekeren agree that fake news is a significant and unmitigated dilemma in the modern era, they firmly disagree on the effects of social media on misinformation. Van Heekeren argues that the credibility of fake news has decreased in relation to historical instances of fake news that were unmitigated and taken at face value. However, Keener and many others disagree on the nature of fake news historically. They argue that widespread misinformation through social media is novel, unprecedented, and far worse than any historical example of fake news.

We seek to use historical case studies to reach a middle ground within literature. Our thinking builds largely on Van Heekeren's idea that media digitization on its own has not done much to amplify the contemporary fake news dilemma in comparison to historical instances due to the contrasting avenues of media publication. The idea that mainstream media of the past caused more issues than current "side-street" media publication sources do now as a result of different levels of credibility ties in directly with the arguments of our case studies. However, we aim to build on her ideas by also borrowing from Keener's primarily contradictory thesis supporting the idea that social media has taken the current issue of misinformation to new heights. We mesh the contrasting ideas together to form our own innovative outlook on media digitization and its present-day implications that we have not seen considered by any other scholars. Our idea centralizes around the rhetorical device of ethos, claiming that although media digitization on its own has not elevated the previously existing problem, with the indulgence or support of a credible figure such as a celebrity or political figure, social media has allowed those championed stories to spread at unprecedented rates and in newfound quantities. This idea combines ideas from both ends of the spectrum of existing scholarship, resulting in a newer, relatively fringe ideology surrounding the current disinformation predicament.

In this paper, we plan to discuss and analyze three main case studies, both historical and modern, pertaining to fake news: Yellow journalism in the 19th century, wartime propaganda of the early 20th-century (namely World Wars One and Two), and President Trump's recent election denialism. Before the turn of the 19th century, journalism took a turn away from objectivity toward extreme exaggerations. When rival news companies began competing for news coverage, they turned to sensationalism to maximize their popularity. As a result, news at the time was overly exaggerated or even fabricated in order to quickly grab the attention of readers. This stoked American nationalism surrounding the sinking of the USS Maine. Although there is disagreement over the true cause of the Spanish-American war, many believe that illegitimate blame on the Spanish for the sinking of the USS Maine contributed greatly to the initiation of the conflict.

From the early 1900s up to the 1950's tensions permeated between many nations worldwide, which political leaders and institutions of the time amplified through wartime propaganda. The propagated news included ample misinformation and exaggerated truths that promoted hatred of opposing nations and their people. A poster from World War One in America captioned "Destroy this mad brute!" depicted Germany as a savage beast, holding captive a defenseless American woman in one arm and bearing a bloodied club in the other. Such an image associated Germany with pure evil in the minds of American citizens, causing the widespread villainization of Germany and its people during the era^{8 15} (Hopps, 2022). Propaganda aiming to villainize nations was a perpetual theme of World War One and World War Two that continued to stoke the flames between nations, inciting more violence and hatred to no one's benefit.

In the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election, President Trump refused to concede by repeatedly and baselessly claiming that fraud robbed him of the election. Trump took to social media to share his unfounded thoughts by stating he "won this election, by a lot." He furthered his claims by stating that President Biden had won through the use of illegal votes and, therefore, was not the legitimate President-Elect. Trump's claims reached a large audience, as his supporters gave into his delusions because of his use of decisive and persuasive rhetoric, even though his assertions were mendacious.

This brings us to the idea which forms the basis for our paper that historically and to this day, world leaders and institutions leverage fake news to sway public opinion to their advantage, specifically during times of crisis and political vulnerability. Additionally, misinformation often leads to widespread confusion, biases, single-story narratives, and in some cases, war, all of which are detrimental to our society's understanding of modern events through historical context. Fake news is and historically has been more than large-scale lies, it is a political weapon.

The structure of this article consists of five different sections, which proceed as follows: Section one includes all of the aforementioned introductory text; Section two discusses and explains the three case studies in-depth; Section three compares and contrasts those case studies with one another, and aims to recognize common themes and analyze trends; Section four explores the effects of media digitization on fake news dissemination; Section five concludes by

summarizing the key ideas of the paper, reiterating the importance of the fake news dilemma, proposing potential mitigation methods, and laying out future courses of action in terms of research.

Methods

Case Study 1

Our first case study focuses on yellow journalism, a term used to describe illegitimate and sensationalist journalism⁹ ¹⁶ (Kaplan, 2008). Yellow journalism became perpetual at the end of the 19th century. Fierce competition between rival publishers, Joseph Pulitzer and William Hearst, sparked a race that caused increasingly exaggerated stories. Although yellow journalism experienced popular success, its focus on sensationalist and populist stories drove previously credible journalists to voice concerns about the stories' legitimacy. This effort would be unsuccessful, as yellow journalists continued to grow and amassed millions of readers, which drove publishers to release increasingly absurdist stories⁹ ¹⁶ (Kaplan, 2008). However, yellow journalism during the 1890s owes its success to the conditions of the time. With increasing ad revenue and paper stock prices dropping to two cents, newspapers published more issues, which expanded the audience of yellow journalism to countries overseas. The New York publishers' constant hunt for new readers ultimately led to disaster in a time of crisis.

While yellow journalism gained popularity in America, a rebellion was brewing in Cuba. Hearst was greatly invested in the struggles of the Cubans and leveraged his newspaper to misinform Americans on the issue¹⁰ ⁷ (Foner, 1968). Spain's crackdown on the Cuban rebellion utilized brutal acts of violence, but yellow journalism's reporting of the uprising strayed far away from the truth. Hearst and Pulitzer relied on information from Cuban refugees in New York, who twisted the narrative against the Spanish¹¹. The stories from Cuban refugees were distorted by the New York press in a move toward severely nationalist sensationalism. The result was an American public severely misinformed about the Cuban rebellion, which caused them to feel more anti-Spanish. Nationalism and sympathy for the Cuban refugees contributed to the promotion of aggressive foreign policy against Spain.

The apotheosis of yellow journalism's effect on foreign policy was with the sinking of the USS Maine. Journalists published sensationalist articles blaming Spain for the sinking of the Maine. Reports of an explosion, bombing, and Spanish terrorism on the ship were perpetuated in the news¹². The ramifications were immediate, as the public made calls to politicians for a declaration of war. Shortly after the ship sank, President McKinley declared war on Spain, and the Spanish-American war took place. The war officially began with the American intervention in Cuba. Although the conflict was never fought on American or Spanish territory, the war had major consequences on both countries' global influence. The war led to American influence in world affairs and forced Spain to focus on domestic issues and step down as a colonial power.

Although decision-makers of the time did not read the New York newspapers plagued with yellow journalism, the public's sympathy for Cubans played a role in the start of the conflict, a perfect example of misinformation-induced fear morphing into political emotion. While yellow journalism played a role in influencing the declaration of war against Spain, other factors, such as President McKinley's realization that Spain was unable to maintain adequate control over Cuba, were the principal reasons why the United States declared war¹³ ²³ (Nasaw, 2000). However, yellow journalism informed the public about the atrocities in Cuba and gave continuous updates throughout the war that promoted jingoism and nationalism.

Yellow journalism was a turning point for fake news, as it marked the one of the first instances of widespread and intentionally misleading publication of false information¹⁴ ³⁰ (Samuel, 2016). Misinformation was used to increase profits and spread the author's own jingoistic beliefs. The risk fake news poses to societal stability remains great. Historically, fake news has demonstrated its ability to exacerbate times of crisis by building on people's existing fear and insecurity. The utilization of certain and indisputable rhetoric to convince the public of claims that would otherwise be outlandish embodies a common theme across historical examples of fake news. Yellow journalism

adopted this technique by fabricating interviews and titles with extreme exaggeration^{15 22} (Mott, 2000). It did not directly influence foreign policy during the Spanish-American War, but its influence on domestic sentiment surrounding Spanish colonial rule was significant and instrumental in garnering sympathy for the Cuban revolutionaries.

Case Study 2

Our second case study centers around wartime propaganda from World Wars One and Two. Fake news was a pervasive theme of the early 20th-century, occurring in nations across the globe and in various forms. Propaganda proliferated the wartime landscape that consisted of social and political instability, thriving off of these dire circumstances.

There exist countless examples of precursors to fake news from the era that fit under our paper's all-encompassing definition, one of which being censorship, specifically the iron grip that the Japanese government placed on its entertainment and publishing industries during the height of its involvement in World War Two. Japanese literature from the time is littered with partial truths due to government censorship of the press aiming to tighten their ideological grip on citizens to mobilize the masses and win the war^{16 17} (Kawana, 2010). Government scrutiny of certain publications became so intense that authors self-censored and avoided all controversial topics. A lack of these necessary details leads to single-story narratives, and in the case of Japanese literature from the 1940s, a deficit of richness and variety in propaganda-tainted literature from the time. However, censorship is only one form of early 20th-century fake news, and arguably not the most impactful.

Pure propaganda, wrongfully justified lies created with the deliberate intent of manipulation, also permeated the mainstream media during both world wars and the contentious period in between. We have chosen to analyze one atrocity story from World War One that stands above the rest in both magnitude and consequence. It provides a textbook example of the detrimental threat propaganda posed during the dire wartime crisis^{17 3} (Bytwerk, 2022). This story demonized the entire German population, portraying them as soulless, barbaric brutes, helped persuade China to join the war to bring down the Germans, and left a taint on Britain's reputation of credibility, which led to a delayed reaction from the world upon hearing of Nazi atrocities in the Second World War. We are referencing the German Corpse Factory story, originally brought to public attention in 1915 amidst the catastrophic circumstances of World War One.

Before discussing the details and analyzing the effects of the German Corpse Factory falsehood, it's important to note that it is generally accepted that the story was a deliberate misinformation campaign implemented by the British Military Intelligence. The principal aim of this campaign militarily was to vilify Germany in the eyes of the world and persuade China to join the war on behalf of the Allied Powers, taking advantage of the international crisis of the time that was World War One^{18 31} (Watts, 2017).

Talk of these so-called "Kadaververwertungsanstalt," or corpse utilization plants, originated in nations of the allied powers as rumors in early 1915, but lacked widespread credence and therefore did not reach broad audiences. According to the original reports, the Germans were boiling down the bodies of their war casualties into fats later used to make useful products – soaps, lubricants, munitions, and even pig feed. The story became mainstream when German journalist Karl Rosner visited the Western Front and provided his first-hand testimony in the German newspaper Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger dated April 5, 1917. In the newspaper article published on April 10, Rosner's translated account states: "We pass through Evergnicourt. There is a dull smell in the air, as if lime were being burnt. We are passing the great Corpse Utilization Establishment (Kadaververwertungsanstalt) of this Army Group"^{19 20} (MacGregor, 2019). This was adopted by the mainstream Entente press as proof that the theory was legitimate, resulting in the extensive publication of the story in reputable newspapers around the globe, most notably in Britain's Times and Daily Mail. The story also made headlines in China's North-China Daily News, claiming the Chinese president had been shocked on hearing of the practice from a German admiral. The article from the Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger containing Rosner's testimony went on to be quoted in countless other British, American, and French newspapers and quickly became a world-renowned fact that was used as evidence of German savagery and, therefore, justification for the war.

The story was even discussed in the British Parliament²⁰ (Garcia, 2019). In response to questions about its legitimacy, Robert Cecil, British Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, would respond that: “In view of other actions by German military authorities, there is nothing incredible in the present charge against them”¹⁹ (MacGregor, 2019). His retort reveals the single-story narrative of Germans at the time, which framed them as barbaric, soulless brutes. In essence, Cecil claimed that he nor anybody else outside of Germany should expect anything less of the Germans or have any doubts about the accusations due to the type of people Germans are, a direct result of stigmatization rooted in fraudulent propagandistic narratives.

In 1925 reports that former British Chief Intelligence Officer during World War One, John V. Charteris, was responsible for the origins of the Corpse Factory propaganda story circulated worldwide. These findings were confirmed when he delivered a speech in which he admitted to fabricating the entire report, a statement he later revoked when faced with backlash from the British government²⁵ (Neander, *Media and Propaganda: The Northcliffe Press and the Corpse Factory Story of World War I*, 2010). British Parliament faced global resentment due to ethical concerns over the false propagation of such a disturbing story, as a result of Charteris’s “confession.” The backlash led to a formal acknowledgment of the story’s falsehood in December 1925 by British Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain.

The story’s effectiveness in mobilizing anti-German sentiments made the German Corpse Factory story a “master-hoax” of World War One propaganda. Its repercussions were extensive and tie directly into the historical dangers of fake news and the times it has been most commonly leveraged. Early 20th-century propaganda proliferation was enabled because of both world wars and the international state of crisis, supporting our overarching idea that fake news is easily leveraged during times of crisis and struggle. Both of these characteristics were defining features of the early 20th century. The Corpse Factory story led to global, long-lasting biases demonizing Germany and forming a single-story narrative that framed Germans in a discriminatory view until late in the 20th-century. Other historical consequences of the Corpse Factory propaganda story included the following: Partial responsibility for the severity of reparations Germany was forced to pay in the Treaty of Versailles, which planted seeds for future war, false beliefs surrounding the events justifying the war, and most importantly, the delayed response of other nations when initial reports of Nazi atrocities against Jews materialized in the 1930s, as a result of the skepticism created by the previous lie. Tragically, true stories of Jewish corpses being used in the same fashion surfaced during World War Two²¹ (Congress, 2016), yet were widely disregarded as another falsehood because of the prominent parallels between the Corpse Factory story and new stories of Nazi concentration camps, leading to major loss of life that could’ve been avoided. This effect was both detrimental and unforeseeable, exemplifying the unintentional yet immensely impactful dangers of fake news.

Early 20th-century fake news occurred in different forms, but most notably as wartime propaganda. In the case of Japanese censorship, it led to widespread misinformation. The Corpse Factory Story had more egregious implications, including long-standing single-story narratives, assisting in setting the stage for World War Two, and major loss of life later down the line, which demonstrated the unanticipated dangers of fake news. Both exemplify how propaganda can be utilized as a political weapon that thrives in times of crisis, since war undoubtedly represents a major crisis. Fake news from this era was undeniably manipulated as a result of circumstances and led to drastic, lasting consequences that bear similarities to contemporary implications of fake news, such as disinformation in the 2020 election, which is to be discussed in depth in the following case study.

Case Study 3

Our third and final case study analyzes misinformation in the 2020 United States presidential election. During the 2020 election, President Donald Trump weaponized his platform on Twitter as well as conservative media networks to exploit the current crisis by claiming that the election was rigged. This created immense social and political instability, which led to the eventual storming of the Capitol on January 6. As the election returns were reported, the President continued to cast doubt on the voting processes by tweeting, “We are up BIG, but they are trying to STEAL

the Election. We will never let them do it. Votes cannot be cast after the Poles [sic] are closed!”^{22 32} (Woolley, n.d.) He claimed that his victory was dissipated by invalid and illegal ballots, which led him to announce that he “WON THIS ELECTION, BY A LOT!”^{22 32} (Woolley, n.d.). President Trump regularly tweeted out a combination of angry screeds about election fraud and supposed evidence that supported these claims, creating a parallel universe that his followers indulged in. Trump’s constant denunciation of an acclaimed stolen election caused uncertainty surrounding Biden’s claim to the presidency and accusations that elitists were destroying democracy by casting fraudulent votes^{23 11} (Gordon Pennycook, 2021). Trump’s lies and the resulting hostile media environment caused substantial problems, such as death threats toward public officials and, most infamously, the Capitol Riot. On the day of the riot, the President stated, “If you do not fight like Hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore”^{24 24} (Naylor, 2021). The President’s false rhetoric caused armed rioters to storm the Capitol, threatening the lives of congress members while causing unquantifiable damage to American faith in democracy. Confederate flags flew in the Capitol, a confederate goal that the actual Confederacy never accomplished. The Capitol Riot impaired the democratic process by illustrating that constitutional elections were not sacrosanct and that fabricated accusations of fake results would lead to violent backlash. In addition, Trump’s false claims absorbed a large group of Americans into a false reality, which further undermined democracy and amplified societal disconnect. The misinformation campaign entrenched biases which caused substantial violence, radicalism, and chaos.

The dissemination of misinformation during the election was fueled by Trump. The President’s tweets caused a movement to form around his rhetoric, preventing President Joe Biden’s succession. His statements also inflamed his supporters to drastic degrees; it was right after his speech at the “Save our Country” rally that rioters stormed the Capitol on January 6. Without his influence and element of ethos, the anti-election movement would never have been cast into mainstream media, and though there would likely still be backlash, nothing like the detrimental, premeditated storming of the Capitol would ever have occurred^{23 27} (Pennycook, 2021). The anti-election movement depended on Trump’s support to achieve mainstream status.

President Trump’s permeating of misinformation led to widespread chaos. His push to overturn the election created a toxic environment and induced physical consequences, such as death threats, violent protests, and several deaths at the Capitol. Democracy was severely weakened as a consequence of the Capitol riot. Trump was responsible for fanning the flames of anger and violence, and the riot would not have escalated without his rhetoric. This serves as evidence that misinformation in the digital era is detrimental and elevates consequences beyond historical levels when backed by a credible figure that grants stories integrity. Fake news in the 2020 election was proliferated by President Trump primarily through social media, leading to the drastic aforementioned repercussions. Given that fake news still plays a prominent role in our national discourse, it is critical to understand its history and use it to inform our views on the present.

Results

Analyses of Case Studies

There are many similarities between the ways that fake news has been leveraged throughout history. In all three of the case studies, misinformation thrived due to times of crisis. Pre-war tensions during the age of yellow journalism, two world wars during the early 20th-century, and rising radicalism in the United States in 2020 all exemplify major crises. Fake news does not randomly materialize but is purposely implemented amidst social and political uncertainty. The rebellion in Cuba, the violence of the World Wars, and the chaos of 2020 all contributed to a perfect storm of circumstances for fake news to proliferate. However, misinformation would not have become a serious problem in any of these instances without the backing of institutional power. In the case of yellow journalism, it was primarily William Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer who inserted exaggerations and half-truths into their publications because of their support for Cuban independence and desire to gain power, something they thought could be achieved by increasing their

articles' circulation. Without Hearst's and Pulitzer's constant pushing of these stories, the stories would have never gained credence or affected policy, thus, the Spanish-American War might have been avoided.

During World War One, myths of Corpse Factories already existed, but were not accepted as fact until British intelligence decided to weaponize the stories. Without the intervention of Charteris and his colleagues, the hoax would not have become mainstream, but they did intervene, and so many people in the Entente countries accepted and used it as justification for the war until the story was debunked post-conflict. During the 2020 election, President Trump repeatedly and inaccurately claimed that fraud was skewing the results. Those baseless claims circulated throughout the right-wing community. Though there would have existed some speculation of fraud in the election regardless amongst fringe communities, the notion that fraud drastically altered election results would have remained in those communities without Trump's rhetoric. Today most Republicans agree fraud played a role in the 2020 election, and many do not believe President Biden is the legitimate president. Without an institutional platform or the backing of a powerful leader, false narratives usually remain on the fringes of society.

Lies spread by powerful people and organizations do not only serve their perpetrator's purpose. Fake news causes external and severe damage to people, property, and ideas as well. Hearst's and Pulitzer's articles decrying Spanish atrocities helped influence American opinion towards war with Spain, and their lurid coverage of the USS Maine sinking helped initiate America into war. The Spanish-American War would go on to claim thousands of lives, and the resulting Filipino American War would do the same. During World War One, Allied propaganda centering German atrocities was a major factor influencing China's decision to enter the war. More importantly however, was the permanent damage to Britain's credibility. When the Nazis committed atrocities for real that resembled the corpse factory stories, such as using Jewish corpses to make soap, nobody believed the British reports because of their previous perfidy. Similarly, Japanese propaganda and censorship of their press led to the Pacific Theater of World War Two and the Second Sino-Japanese War, both of which resulted in millions of deaths. President Trump's lies about the election caused a decrease in faith in the democratic process, inspired violent threats against election workers, and led to the insurrection of the Capitol, costing innocent lives. Fake news, once mainstreamed, can cause bloodshed and widespread confusion in the short term, and degrades faith in institutions, truth, and ideals in the long term.

The repercussions of fake news are usually a result of the perpetrator's desire for power, another theme across all three case studies. Hearst's and Pulitzer's motivation was partially to help the Cubans, but also to increase their national profile and newspaper profits. Meanwhile, the British government was motivated by a strategic desire to bring China into the war for militaristic gains. This granted them an advantage over Germany, as they sought to increase their country's fighting strength rather than personal power. President Trump aimed to maintain his presidency, which was his motivation for claiming that he won the election. All successful implications of fake news also contain an element of repetition, to ensure the intended misinformation is hammered into public consciousness. Whether it be through an abundance of articles depicting atrocities in Cuba, countless propagandistic publications decrying German barbarity, or chronic tweeting that denounces extensive amounts of fraud in an election, repetition is vital to the successful perpetuation of false narratives.

On the contrary, there exist a few key differences in the ways fake news is leveraged between the three case studies. One clear distinction is the differentiating vectors through which fake news was spread. The New York Journal and the New York World were both newspapers; During the age of yellow journalism, physical newspapers were the primary vector of information and disinformation. As technology advanced, however, newspapers remained an important contributor to the dissemination of information but were no longer the focal point. Radios became increasingly prominent, especially during World War Two, and thus became the primary method of spreading disinformation across the world, especially in authoritarian countries like Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union. Today, while mainstream media sources such as television and newspapers remain important, social media has risen as an integral source of disinformation for consumers, because it amplifies the voices of political leaders more effectively than mainstream media of the past. Rapid technological advancements have led to new ways of perpetuating falsehoods.

Another point of deviance between the examples is that while the yellow journalists and Trump both spread fake news aiming to gain personal power, the British government did so aiming to gain military advantages. Additionally, the degree of truth in the different cases differed. Hearst and Pulitzer mostly exaggerated stories that were at least partially true for dramatic effect. British military intelligence vastly twisted the words of a true story from a non-British source - namely, that animal corpses were being used to create products for the war - essentially forming a completely new narrative aimed to shape public opinion to their liking. Trump baselessly lied without evidence or only with support from sources biased in his favor. Both motives and truthfulness varied across the three studies.

However, all of the trends found in our case studies reinforce the key points we argue in our thesis. Across the board, powerful leaders and institutions utilize their authority to spread false narratives and gain power by manipulating public opinion, specifically during times of crisis. Furthermore, their misinformation causes violence and death, as well as chaos and loss of public trust, which diminishes the public's ability to comprehend reality. Fake news is only mainstreamed when backed by a credible figure who seeks to use it for gains politically, militarily, economically, or socially. The digital era has allowed social media to rise as a powerful force in shaping public opinion. President Trump, among other figures, have taken advantage of this modern revelation to spread their influence quicker and more efficiently than was previously possible. However, there is righteous controversy surrounding whether media digitization has amplified leaders and institutions' ability to spread fake news or simply re-constructed the media landscape without any real change in terms of potency.

Discussion

The Digital Era

Media digitization has undeniably altered the landscape of fake news and avenues in which its dissemination occurs, but has it actually made the problem worse or simply changed the way in which misinformation proliferates the modern media sphere^{25 21} (Zimdars, 2020)? Contrary to popular assumption, media digitization has not made the problem worse. Media digitization alone has not amplified the issue of fake news proliferation, nor has it created an original problem. However, there are many other facets to be considered in the thorough explanation. The pervasive issue we face today is a mere continuation of a pre-existing one that has plagued society throughout history, as evidenced by our case studies dating back to the 1800s. Building off of Margaret Van Heekeren's ideas from her article titled "The Curative Effect of Social Media on Fake News: A Historical Re-Evaluation," the primary explanation for this claim centers around the types of media fake news was published in historically compared to modern times^{5 12} (Heekeren, The Curative Effect of Social Media on Fake News: A Historical Re-Evaluation, 2019). Historically, fake news was generally published in mainstream media allowing stories to reach vast audiences, appearing at "every breakfast table"^{26 10} (Goodge, 1909). The credibility of these stories was also assumed and never questioned due to the honorable reputations of mainstream media publishers. In contrast, today, fake news often enables various smaller, less credible media silos, limiting its ability to gain the necessary traction to reach mainstream media. This fragmentation of media in the digital era has actually contributed to mitigating fake news to a certain extent.

Even with social media, most people still rely on mainstream media as their primary news source. As a Stanford University research project showed, "social media was not the major source of political news for most Americans in 2016; only 14 percent [of those polled] say they relied on Facebook and other social media sites as their most important source of election coverage"^{27 5} (Crawford, 2017). In contrast to the perception that people nowadays source their information primarily from social media, most still rely on established news institutions for their information. The study concluded that television was most Americans' go-to source for political news. Fake news stories of today often originate and circulate strictly in lesser online media silos, and as a result do not become mainstream and do not reach extensive audiences.

This idea of fake news garnering more viewership in the pre-digital era can also be supported with quantitative data from a study conducted in support of Van Heekerens' paper. The data compares the population reach of two fake news stories across Britain, Australia, and the United States, one occurring in the pre-digital era and the other in 2016: The Corpse Factory and the Pope Endorses Trump narrative stemming from the 2016 election. Although the figures from 1917 are conservative to eliminate any possibility of over-exaggeration, the data shows that the Corpse Factory fabrication reached 6.9% of the combined population of the three countries, whereas Pope Endorses Trump only reached 4.7%, even with the support of social media^{5 12} (Heekeren, *The Curative Effect of Social Media on Fake News: A Historical Re-Evaluation*, 2019). Although this comparison is not representative of all fake news examples since it compares two different falsehoods, it still helps prove media digitization alone is not the sole contributor to the contemporary fake news dilemma.

Additionally, media digitization has allowed for easier debunking of misinformation. The abundance of online resources that can dissect information have enabled much more efficient discrediting of fake news. The mainstream control of media before digitization gave people no opportunity to question the story presented in those news sources. Furthermore, the difference in the time gap between publication and debunking is another key distinction between fake news then vs now. The Corpse Story took eight years to be formally acknowledged as fraudulent, whereas many instances of fake news in the digital era are debunked in a matter of hours or days. This typically limits consequences beyond brief periods of panic or shock. Again, these contemporary narratives are quickly put to rest today due to the ample resources available for debunking misinformation. In the late 1800s with Yellow Journalism and the early 1900s with the Corpse Factory story, people relied on the same people who published false narratives to debunk them, which oftentimes did not occur until later down the road as publishing agencies were nervous about losing credibility as a result of discrediting their own stories. Information during these instances was much more streamlined than it is now, contributing to the extreme difficulty that came with debunking fake news in comparison to the modern day. In the same way social media has provided a platform for more fake news perpetrators, it has also allowed for an equal amount of fake news debunkers, leveling the playing field overall.

The concept of the digital era paving the way for more debunking of misinformation can also help explain the common perception that fake news is solely a current and growing phenomenon. As previously emphasized, the modern issue of fake news is neither novel nor experiencing tangible growth when put in historical context. It has been around for ages, but the problem appears to be growing because people are simply more aware of it now due to the frequent publicized debunking of false narratives. Modern instances are far more regularly recognized as fake, whereas historically, people were not even aware of the issue because the existence of fake news was rarely revealed, making it seem like there was no problem to begin with. As evidenced by our case studies, that statement holds no merit as fake news has been around and has been just as impactful for a long time. However, its current increase in debunking has allowed the problem to be recognized far more now than it was historically, creating the illusion that it's solely a contemporary problem.

Stepping back to the original overarching question proposed in the first paragraph of this section about the effects of media digitization on fake news, let's examine the more nuanced version of our current argument up to this point. Until now, we've placed heavy emphasis on the idea that media digitization alone has not really amplified the contemporary fake news crisis, but undeniably the problem persists. Our complete argument in response to question surrounding the effects of media digitization on fake news is as follows: Media digitization exclusively has not amplified the current fake news issue predicament, but the digital era coupled with the backing support of a credible figure such as a political leader or celebrity, has enabled the proliferation of misinformation in unparalleled volumes and velocities. However, that only happens when the defining aspect of credibility is achieved.

In June of 2020, false claims originating from white supremacist groups that Antifa members planned to enter wealthy neighborhoods with intentions of looting and inciting violence circulated all over social media^{28 1} (Brandy Zadrozny, 2020). These falsehoods remained in lesser media silos and were largely inconsequential, that was until President Trump endorsed them, retweeting the original claims. This allowed the claims to reach extensive audiences and were automatically assumed to be accurate since the president himself was issuing warnings about them. This also

had the effect of subconsciously associating minority groups with fear and violence in the minds of those living in the wealthy neighborhoods, furthering the disconnect between socioeconomic groups in our country. The immediate period of dismay inflicted by these accusations was quickly resolved with debunking, but the contribution to racial biases remained a lasting effect even after the claims were proven as fraudulent. Social media allowed this story to proliferate mainstream media efficiently and vastly, but only after Trump's support gave it credibility. Without his affirmations, the story would have remained where it originated in smaller media silos.

In conclusion, the current misinformation crisis is a mere continuation of a persisting historical issue. It inflicted major consequences in the forms of biases, single-story narratives, and wrongful persuasion of public opinion then, similar to how it continues to do so now. Media digitization has not independently amplified this issue, but when combined with the endorsement of an established, trustworthy figure or institution to achieve credibility, the digital era has enabled dissemination at much greater rates and quantities than ever before. Even though this problem has gone unsolved for centuries, that does not mean we should allow it to continue to wreak havoc in our social and political landscapes. Mitigation methods are of dire need, and further research into the ethics of how this can be achieved against the backdrop of the first amendment may be a good place to start.

Conclusion

Through a comprehensive analysis of yellow journalism, early 20th-century propaganda, and misinformation in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, all of which portray the implications of fake news from different historical time periods, we have arrived at the following conclusion to our foundational question: Leaders and institutions have historically taken advantage of turbulent times in society to weaponize misinformation for personal gain. This produces detrimental repercussions in the forms of long-standing biases, physical violence, and even planting seeds for war. Both of these claims retain their credence in modern times, as although it is not a novel issue, fake news continues to plague the contemporary media sphere and has meshed with politics to a greater degree than ever before, frequently radicalizing political discourse. However, despite most people viewing the current misinformation crisis as a growing issue and direct result of media digitization, it is only when coupled with the support of a credible figure that the digital era has enabled newfound levels of proliferation. It is the lethal combination of the digital age's endless number of media platforms and enticing rhetoric of trustworthy individuals that has created the perfect storm of misinformation we face today.

Why is this significant? Because despite the historical examples of the detrimental effects of misinformation, we remain without progress in combating the foundational problem. We continue to live amidst a time of perpetual confusion over what is fact and what is fabrication, making no attempt at learning from our most valuable resource, history. Looking back on historical implications of fake news can highlight patterns in motive, timing, and methods of proliferation. We can then apply that knowledge to digest and dissect the contemporary misinformation crisis, distinguishing the divide between real and fake. The constants between examples from the past allow us to predict the future, a powerful tool that society needs to take advantage of. Distinct from the digital era, fake news proliferation is a persisting issue dating back to ancient times that continues to cause social and political discourse, which as reiterated throughout the paper and demonstrated as a major trend across all three case studies, often leads to more extreme repercussions. Though fake news is not as obvious a cause of pain and violence as wars and riots, misinformation turns fear into political emotion, and those emotions lead to the aforementioned consequences. People should care about the innocent lives lost in propaganda fueled conflicts and single-story narratives in which entire nations of people are wrongfully characterized for decades beyond the original falsehood. This is what forms the dire need for mitigation of false narratives, but before people make genuine efforts at finding solutions, they first need to comprehend the problem in its entirety.

Moving forward, research aimed towards developing effective mitigation techniques should be the primary course of action. Although history can provide a definite answer of what not to do in some instances, because no real attempt was and still has not been made, further investigation of solutions is required. Filtration of influential peoples'

social media accounts is one interesting tactic that we feel deserves more extensive research. Although this may initially sound impossible against the backdrop of the first amendment, the big media platforms including social media and news agencies are all owned independently of the government and therefore are not subjected to its rules. Twitter demonstrated this capability on January 8, 2020, after “permanently suspending” former president Donald Trump’s account, which proved relatively useful in containing his stream of ludicrous claims surrounding election results. Deletion of accounts may not always be necessary, as there are other less drastic measures that could still be beneficial. For example, prior to the suspension of Trump’s account, false information warnings were placed on many of his posts. Another approach to company specific regulation could be a filtration system where tweets by people of power are first put through a sort of fake news detecting algorithm before being allowed to reach widespread audiences. Governmental regulation of publications by big news institutions and influential peoples is against the first amendment, but it’s perfectly constitutional for independent corporations to implement filtration mechanisms on their own platforms. If anybody opposes these mechanisms, then they do not have to utilize the platforms, but if all the mainstream media companies make a collaborative effort to implement similar filtration systems, then users will have no choice but to continue using them with their new restrictions. Big media companies provide the platform amplifying fake news proliferation, but therefore are the same agencies with the power to mitigate it, which they must collectively agree to do to help combat the misinformation crisis.

However, it's integral to remember that although this method would help mitigate the perpetuation of fake news, it accomplishes nothing in the way of dissipating fake news altogether, as it fails to address the roots of the problem. The concept of fake news will always exist as leaders and institutions alike recognize the supreme power it possesses when it comes to manipulating public opinion and will continue to be utilized as a political weapon for personal gains for the foreseeable future. It is up to our generation and those succeeding us to recognize the gravity of this issue and conduct research beyond the current scope of intelligence to solve this problem that's plagued society since the beginning of time.

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