

FAKE NEWS

How Did We Get Here?

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In a tweet on Dec. 10, 2016, Donald Trump used the term “fake news” for the first time (*The Washington Post*, Jan. 3, 2018). At his first post-election news conference, President-elect Trump pointed to particular journalists to take their questions, but refused questions from CNN reporter Jim Acosta, saying, “Not you. Your organization’s terrible. . . I’m not going to give you a question. You are fake news” (CNBC, Jan. 11, 2017). Photo by Gage Skidmore: Presidential candidate Donald Trump at a campaign rally, Phoenix, AZ, Oct. 29, 2017 (CC BY-SA-3.0)

ON the heels of Vietnam and Watergate, the public had a significant level of trust in the media. The high watermark was 1976 when Gallop Poll results indicated that 72% of Americans trusted the news. During the 2016 election cycle that figure dropped to an all-time low of 32%. Now, two-thirds of Americans no longer trust the news media.

While the term *fake news* is not new, it gained notoriety during the 2016 election. Subsequently, another term, *alternative facts*, entered the political vocabulary. Walter Cronkite’s famous signoff, “That’s the way it is,” would not

hold up by contemporary standards. Today’s viewing audience is more skeptical of the media than ever before.

EARLY BRUSHES WITH FAKE NEWS

Newspaper comic strips became popular in the late nineteenth century with the introduction of color printing presses. *Hogan’s Alley* starred a boy in a yellow nightshirt known as the Yellow Kid. Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal* both featured the Yellow Kid in a ratcheted attempt to outdo the other, a duel in sensational headlines and colorful, sometimes spurious content that gave

rise to the term *yellow journalism*. The term is still used pejoratively to describe reporting that is less than ethical.

Sensationalism and attempts to scoop the competition often skip fact-checking a story and the result is an unintentional, embarrassing form of fake news. Case in point: In spring 1897, Hearst hired Mark Twain to cover Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee. While Twain was in London, the rival *New York Herald* reported he was “grievously ill and possibly dying.” The following day, Hearst’s *New York Journal* published the caption “Mark Twain Amused,” quoting Twain: “The report of my death was an exaggeration.”



The *Journal* enjoyed elbowing its competition who tried to capitalize on being the first to report what would have been a notable story.

Newspapers were the staple source for news throughout American history, but with twentieth-century advances in radio technology, the public turned to a new medium for information and entertainment. In an early example of fake news, Orson Welles attempted to meld “breaking news” and entertainment in a now-famous radio adaptation of H.G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds*. On October 30, 1938, Welles broadcast his *Mercury Theatre on the Air* using simulated news interruptions for effect. Since it sounded like a news bulletin interrupting scheduled programming, listeners who tuned in after the introduction mistook the drama for actual unfolding events. The program purportedly caused panic among some who feared an actual Martian invasion.

MONETIZING THE NEWS

In the early days of television, news programming was viewed as a public service. Revenue and profits came through paid advertising during sitcoms, game shows, and variety broadcasts; advertisers were *not* clamoring to sponsor news broadcasts. News shows simply did not attract ratings. That all changed when *60 Minutes* aired as a completely revamped news format in 1968. In his book *Breaking the News* (Vintage Books, 1997), James Fallows notes that *60 Minutes* fundamentally changed TV journalism for one simple reason—it made money. This “news magazine,” as it billed itself, broadcast news stories in a way that attracted viewers’ attention and proved to networks that news programming could generate revenue.

Others recognized the profitability of news and looked for ways to capitalize on it. Ted Turner launched CNN on June 1, 1980. The idea of having a news-only channel was novel enough, but having it on around the clock would lead to significant changes in news presentation. It contributed to a 24-hour news cycle and viewers’ voracious appetite for fresh stories and breaking news—and it was profitable.

Time Warner eventually acquired Turner Broadcasting System, Inc. in a \$7.5 billion merger. For over sixteen years, CNN enjoyed sole supremacy as the only cable news network on a national scale. That changed when MSNBC

and FOX News came on the scene in 1996, and the competitive race for ratings in round-the-clock coverage became frenzied. Reminiscent of the past, it fueled a competition to go after the most salacious and sensational stories.

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

The rush for ratings has driven mainstream news outlets to broadcast stories they otherwise would have shunned. Sensational stories, often reserved for tabloids, have increasingly made their way into conventional media. Stories on scandal or the private lives of public figures have become prominent fixtures in the news.

Nowhere is the burden of keeping an audience felt more keenly than in the print media. While many outlets have tried to adapt to the 24-hour news cycle by adding online versions of print content, many were unable to keep up and closed their doors.

Sales and advertising are all-important to print media and a larger readership means more profits. Print media outlets have always courted talented writers, hoping that good articles will equate to wider circulation. The pressure to perform is felt by journalists who go to great lengths to get a good story.

One such journalist was Stephen Glass, a rising star at *New Republic* magazine. Glass was a gifted writer with a knack for getting stories that no one else could. His articles were entertaining and earned him a high profile. He published in *Rolling Stone*, *Harper’s Magazine*, and *The New York Times Magazine*. He appeared as a commentator on C-SPAN and was seen as one of the most sought-after journalists in Washington in the late 1990s.

There was just one problem—he was fabricating some of his stories.

Glass allowed the rush of notoriety to detract him from the truth. He went to great extremes to deceive his editor and fact-checkers at *New Republic*. His cover was blown when a particular story caught the attention of a reporter at *Forbes*. The so-called facts of Glass’s story didn’t add up and the editor of *New Republic* was called on it. An investigation ensued and the magazine determined that more than half of Glass’s stories contained fabricated material or were completely made up.



In remarks at a retirement ceremony for Sen. Harry M. Reid on Dec. 8, 2016, Hillary Clinton said:

Let me just mention briefly one threat in particular that should concern all Americans—Democrats, Republicans, and independents alike, especially those who serve in our Congress: the epidemic of malicious fake news and false propaganda that flooded social media over the past year. It's now clear that so-called fake news can have real-world consequences. This isn't about politics or partisanship. Lives are at risk—lives of ordinary people just trying to go about their days, to do their jobs, contribute to their communities. It's a danger that must be addressed and addressed quickly. . . . It's imperative that leaders in both the private sector and the public sector step up to protect our democracy and innocent lives.

(*The Washington Post*, Jan. 3, 2018). Photo by Gage Skidmore: Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at a campaign rally in Phoenix, Arizona, March 21, 2016 (CC BY-SA-3.0)



OKLAHOMA HUMANITIES

Let's Talk About It, Oklahoma is a statewide scholar-led book club offered by OH, and participants heartily endorse it: 85% learned about the human experience through reading and discussing literature; 76% gained awareness of a new perspective; 84% increased their ability to be open-minded. Visit okhumanities.org to learn more and to find a series near you.

THE INTERNET: ANYTHING GOES

As newspapers and magazines struggled and cable news channels expanded, the internet rapidly became a popular source for information, coinciding with the development of affordable personal computers. More and more Americans became connected to the web. Reputable news outlets tapped into this new media to supplement coverage, hoping of take advantage of its potential to attract more advertising. Others outside the traditional news business discovered that the internet offered an easy platform to circulate stories and commentary to a larger audience. Anyone could become a journalist.

Enter Matt Drudge. Drudge was working odd jobs in Hollywood in the early 1990s when he started an email subscription service to relay the latest celebrity gossip. In 1995 he began publishing online, adding Washington political scandals to the Hollywood gossip. The *Drudge Report* was the first source to break the news that Jack Kemp would be Bob Dole's running mate in the 1996 presidential election. In 1998, the *Drudge Report* broke an unpublished *Newsweek* story about Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton. Matt Drudge's name became renowned in political circles and today his website receives around three million hits a day.

The internet was a new platform to distribute hard news—and quickly generated an audience for commentary and fake news. Since it is largely unregulated, individuals and organizations can put out any type of material at will. In many cases that includes intentionally false information. Internet sites that look like legitimate news organizations crank out false stories ranging from the humorous to the subversive. The purveyor of false news can

operate under a veil of secrecy, making it hard to detect story sources or their validity.

TRUMPIAN HYPERBOLE

Donald Trump gained national prominence when his book *Trump: The Art of the Deal* was published in 1987. The book was number one on *The New York Times* Best Seller list for thirteen weeks and remained on the list for almost a year. Throughout the 2016 presidential campaign, candidate Trump touted the book and said as president he would make the best deals for the country.

Tony Schwartz, who worked with Trump to ghostwrite the book, spent eighteen months following Trump around to get a feel for the New York businessman's style and mannerisms. Schwartz noticed Trump's frequent bold (not always truthful) exaggerations. Schwartz often heard others' accounts that differed from Trump's version of the same story. To explain the disconnect, Schwartz came up with the term *truthful hyperbole*. Speaking in Trump's voice he penned:

The final key to the way I promote is bravado. I play to people's fantasies. People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do. That's why a little hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it truthful hyperbole. It's an innocent form of exaggeration—and a very effective form of promotion.

While nonsensical, *truthful hyperbole* was a catchy phrase that seemed to explain how Trump operates. Schwartz claimed that Trump

loved the term. Something always has to be the biggest, greatest, the most spectacular and it worked well for Trump on the campaign trail. Not long after his inauguration, however, that bravado from the new administration set off an early bout with the press.

In his first briefing, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer contended that the media had distorted the number of attendees at the president's inauguration on January 20, 2017. Spicer reported that Trump's inauguration attracted more people than any previous president. When Spicer's assertion was disputed with aerial photographs and ridership numbers from the D.C. Metro, the Trump team went on the defensive. Campaign consultant and White House counselor Kellyanne Conway defended Spicer the following day on NBC's *Meet the Press*. Conway claimed that Spicer was using "alternative facts." Moderator Chuck Todd quickly jumped in: "Alternative facts? Alternative facts are not facts. They're falsehoods." The exchange between Conway and Todd sparked accusatory and defensive responses throughout the media.

Since then, use of the term *alternative facts* is common. Though critics refer to it as "Orwellian," comedians love it. TIME magazine created a "Facts vs. Alternative Facts" section to fact-check statements made by the president and other public officials.

POST-TRUTH: STATE OF OUR TIME

It may not be surprising that *post-truth* beat out *alt-right* and *Brexit* as *Oxford Dictionaries'* 2016 Word of the Year. Selected in the wake of the presidential election in the United States, the word seemed appropriate given the tenor of the campaign and the fake news associated with it. Fake

news stories garnered attention from both parties during the 2016 elections. Pizzagate, a conspiracy theory claiming that a pizza restaurant served as cover for a child sex ring involving prominent Democrats, was based on Clinton campaign manager John Podesta's hacked emails. The conspiracy claimed these emails (which made their way to WikiLeaks) contained coded messages propagating pedophilia. Another story involved a Twitter user who claimed he attended a Trump rally in Manhattan and witnessed thousands chanting, "We hate Muslims, we hate blacks, we want our great country back." The post caused a stir, though there was no evidence to substantiate the purported account. Pizzagate, the Trump Rally Chant, and many stories like them were completely false, but spread like wildfire through social media. Casper Grathwohl, President of Oxford Dictionaries, noted that with "social media as a news source and a growing distrust of facts offered up by the establishment, *post-truth* as a concept has been finding its linguistic footing for some time."

Post-truth implies that we are living in an age where the concept of truth is no longer relevant. While it may be too soon to see if this is the case, Grathwohl postulated, "Given that usage of the term hasn't shown any signs of slowing down, I wouldn't be surprised if *post-truth* becomes one of the defining words of our time."

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(Excerpt from *Meet the Press* with Chuck Todd, NBC News, Jan. 22, 2017)

CHUCK TODD: (voiceover introduction) Late in the day on his first full day in the job, the new press secretary, Sean Spicer, gathered reporters, took no questions and then flatly accused the media of lying, intentionally lying to understate the size of Mr. Trump's inaugural crowd.

SEAN SPICER: (video clip, speaking to reporters) This was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration—period—both in person and around the globe.

CHUCK TODD: And joining me now is the counselor to President Trump, Kellyanne Conway. . . . Let me begin with this question[:] . . . I'm curious why President Trump chose yesterday to send out his press secretary to essentially litigate a provable falsehood when it comes to a small and petty thing like inaugural crowd size. . . .

KELLYANNE CONWAY: I don't think ultimately presidents are judged by crowd sizes at their inauguration. I think they're judged by their accomplishments. . . . Sean Spicer, our press secretary, gave alternative facts. . . .

CHUCK TODD: Look, alternative facts are not facts. They're falsehoods. . . .

KELLYANNE CONWAY: There's no way to really quantify crowds. We all know that. . . . The way that you just laughed at me is actually symbolic of the way, very representative of the way we're treated by the press. I'll just ignore it. I'm bigger than that. *Photo by Gage Skidmore: Kellyanne Conway speaking at Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), National Harbor, MD, Feb. 23, 2017 (CC BY-SA-3.0)*