

2.1.1: Fake News History

Hoaxes. While Higdon (2020) traced the first use of "fake news" back to the late 19th century, the earliest indications of what makes up fake news are hundreds and thousands of years old. Van Heekeren (2020) writes that false news was a part of ancient Athens and that false news was included in a clause in the Statute of Westminster in 1275, considered the first codification of Western law. These examples make it likely that other types of deception existed in subsequent centuries. However, much of the historical research on the origins of fake news focuses on the practice of hoaxes in the 18th and 19th centuries. Walsh (2006) pinpoints the origin of "hoax" in 1808 but also suggests its roots go back centuries earlier to "hocus pocus," which is a play on the Latin "hoc est corpus" used in the Catholic ritual of transubstantiation. Finerman and Thomas (2018) do not share Walsh's conviction of the Latin origin but do agree that the genesis of "hoax" is near the beginning of the 19th century. The authors also offer an explanation of the hoax:

Often a hoax is defined as a deception by which an amusing or mischievous untruth comes to be believed. Sometimes a hoax is taken to be anything believed by fraud or deception. Yet other times a hoax is meant to trick or fool. You might see a hoax in the intent of the hoaxer, or in an effect upon the hoaxee, or both. (p. 352)

Whether or not earlier deceptive messages and publications were labeled as hoaxes, a number of 18th-century examples seem to fit the requirements of a hoax. Ben Franklin was well-known for his hoaxes (Finerman & Thomas, 2018, Gorbach, 2018). Gorbach tells us that Franklin published a hoax in 1730 about a witch trial that including dancing sheep and singing hogs. Franklin did not write it in order to deceive his readers but to make light of common superstitions about witchcraft. British satirist Jonathan Swift also sought to expose astrology as

bogus when he falsely predicted the death of popular seer John Partridge. But Gorbach notes that Franklin had other motives for his deceptions. Like Swift, Franklin lied about an imminent death. Franklin made the claim about almanac publisher Titan Leeds in *Poor Richard's Almanac* (written by Franklin's alter-ego Richard Saunders) in order to increase sales of Franklin's own publication. Franklin also took similar approaches with newspaper rivals to help his Philadelphia Gazette become the colonies' most popular newspaper.

Speaking of newspapers, Creech and Roessner (2019) suggest the era of the partisan press in the late 18th and early 19th century might be one of the earlier examples of the media's willingness to publish fake political news. This era saw publishers essentially serving as lackeys for political forces, willingly aiding in the spread of lies about political rivals to curry favor with a particular faction. Schudson (1978) wrote that "journalists were usually little more than secretaries dependent upon cliques of politicians, merchants, brokers, and office-seekers for their position and bread" (p. 16). This trend continued into the early 1830s, as Creech and Roessner joined Finnerman and Thomas (2018), Gorbach (2018), and Walsh (2006) in suggesting the rise of the "penny press" was the next phase of fake news, sending the media in new directions.