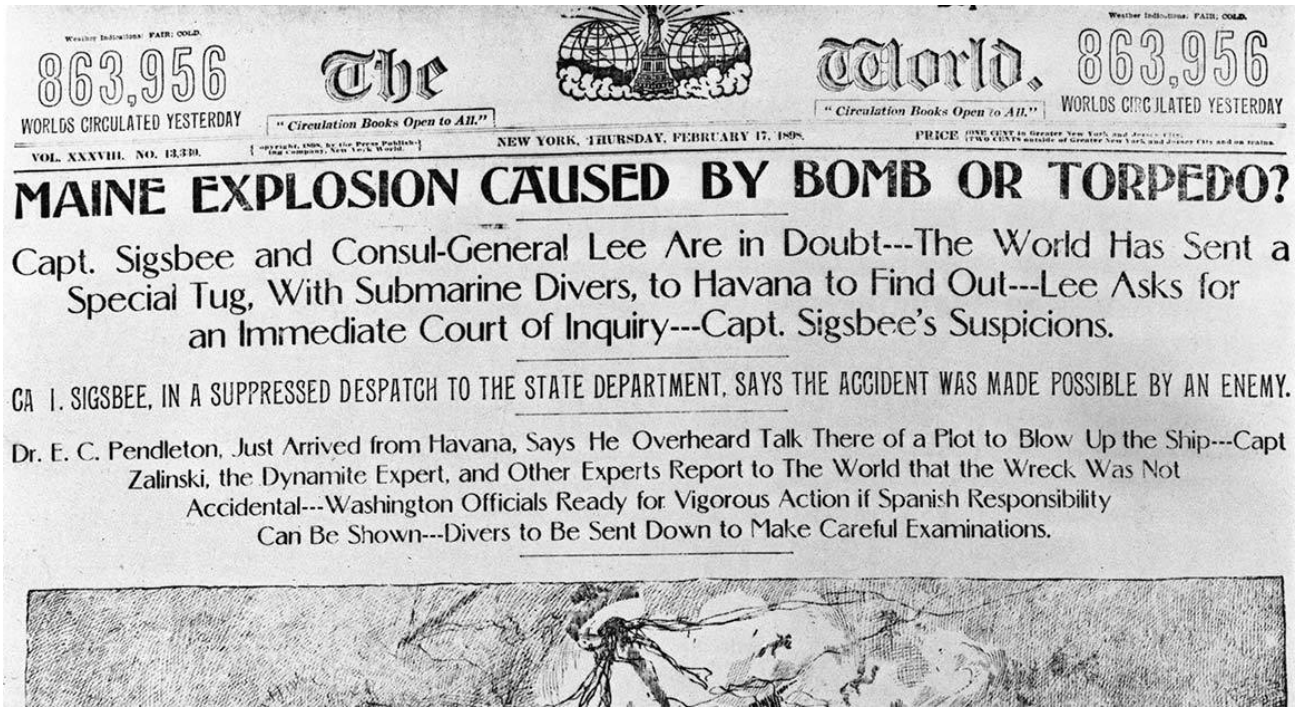
POLITICO



Weather Indications: FAIR; COLD.

863,956
WORLDS CIRCULATED YESTERDAY

The World.

"Circulation Books Open to All."

VOL. XXXVIII. NO. 13,330. NEW YORK, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 1898. PRICE ONE CENT in Greater New York and Jersey City. TWO CENTS outside of Greater New York and Jersey City and on trains.

MAINE EXPLOSION CAUSED BY BOMB OR TORPEDO?

Capt. Sigsbee and Consul-General Lee Are in Doubt---The World Has Sent a Special Tug, With Submarine Divers, to Havana to Find Out---Lee Asks for an Immediate Court of Inquiry---Capt. Sigsbee's Suspicions.

CA I. SIGSBEE, IN A SUPPRESSED DESPATCH TO THE STATE DEPARTMENT, SAYS THE ACCIDENT WAS MADE POSSIBLE BY AN ENEMY.

Dr. E. C. Pendleton, Just Arrived from Havana, Says He Overheard Talk There of a Plot to Blow Up the Ship---Capt Zalinski, the Dynamite Expert, and Other Experts Report to The World that the Wreck Was Not Accidental---Washington Officials Ready for Vigorous Action if Spanish Responsibility Can Be Shown---Divers to Be Sent Down to Make Careful Examinations.

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HISTORY DEPT.

The Long and Brutal History of Fake News

Bogus news has been around a lot longer than real news. And it's left a lot of destruction behind.

By **JACOB SOLL** | December 18, 2016

The fake news hit Trent, Italy, on Easter Sunday, 1475. A 2 ½-year-old child named Simonino had gone missing, and a Franciscan preacher, Bernardino da Feltre, gave a series of sermons claiming that the Jewish community had murdered the child, drained his blood and drunk it to celebrate Passover. The rumors spread fast. Before long da Feltre was claiming that the boy's body had been found in the basement of a Jewish house. In response, the Prince-Bishop of Trent Johannes IV Hinderbach immediately ordered the city's entire Jewish community arrested and tortured. Fifteen of them were found guilty and burned at the stake. The story inspired surrounding communities to commit similar atrocities.

Recognizing a false story, the papacy intervened and attempted to stop both the story and the murders. But Hinderbach refused to meet the papal legate, and feeling threatened, simply spread more fake news stories about Jews drinking the blood of Christian children. In the end, the popular fervor supporting these anti-semitic "blood libel" stories made it impossible for the papacy to interfere with Hinderbach, who had Simonino canonized—Saint Simon—and attributed to him a hundred miracles. Today, historians have catalogued the fake stories of child-murdering, blood-drinking Jews, which have existed since the 12th century as part of the foundation of anti-Semitism. And yet, one anti-Semitic website still claims the story is true and Simon is still a martyred saint. Some fake news never dies.

Over the past few months, "fake news" has been on the loose once again. From bogus stories about Hillary Clinton's imminent indictment to myths about a postal worker in Ohio destroying absentee ballots cast for Donald Trump, colorful and damaging tales have begun to circulate rapidly and widely on Twitter and Facebook. In some cases they have had violent results: Earlier this month a man armed with an AR-15 fired a shot inside a Washington, D.C., restaurant, claiming to be investigating (fake) reports that Clinton aide John Podesta was heading up a child abuse ring there.

But amid all the media handwringing about fake news and how to deal with it, one fact seems to have gotten lost: Fake news is not a new phenomenon. It has been around since news became a concept 500 years ago with the invention of print—a lot longer, in fact, than verified, "objective" news, which emerged in force a little more than a century ago. From the start, fake news has tended to be sensationalist and extreme, designed to inflame passions and prejudices. And it has often provoked violence. The Nazi propaganda machine

authorities to handle. With the decline of trusted news establishments around the country, who's to stop them today?

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Fake news took off at the same time that news began to circulate widely, after Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1439. "Real" news was hard to verify in that era. There were plenty of news sources—from official publications by political and religious authorities, to eyewitness accounts from sailors and merchants—but no concept of journalistic ethics or objectivity. Readers in search of fact had to pay close attention. In the 16th century, those who wanted real news believed that leaked secret government reports were reliable sources, such as Venetian government correspondence, known as *relazioni*. But it wasn't long before leaked original documents were soon followed by fake *relazioni* leaks. By the 17th century, historians began to play a role in verifying the news by publishing their sources as verifiable footnotes. The trial over Galileo's findings in 1610 also created a desire for scientifically verifiable news and helped create influential scholarly news sources.

But as printing expanded, so flowed fake news, from spectacular stories of sea monsters and witches to claims that sinners were responsible for natural disasters. The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 was one of the more complex news stories of all time, with the church and many European authorities blaming the natural disaster on divine retribution against sinners. An entire genre of fake news pamphlets (*relações de sucessos*) emerged in Portugal, claiming that some survivors owed their lives to an apparition of the Virgin Mary. These religiously inspired accounts of the earthquake sparked the famed Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire to attack religious explanations of natural events, and also made Voltaire into an activist against fake religious news.

There was a lot of it in that era. When, in 1761, Marc-Antoine Calas, the 22-year-old son of a respected Protestant merchant in Toulouse, apparently committed suicide, Catholic activists spread news stories that Calas' father, Jean, had killed him because he wanted to convert to Catholicism. The local judicial authorities posted signs calling for legal witnesses to corroborate the account, successfully turning rumors into official facts, and, in turn, official news.

story eventually sparked outrage against such fake legal stories, torture and even execution. It became a touchstone for the Enlightenment itself.

Yet even the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment could not stop the flow of fake news. For example, in the years preceding the French Revolution, a cascade of pamphlets appeared in Paris exposing for the first time the details of the near-bankrupt government's spectacular budget deficit. Each came from a separate political camp, and each contradicted the other with different numbers, blaming the deficit on different finance ministers. Eventually, through government leaks and more and more verifiable accounts, enough information was made public for readers to glean a general sense of state finance; but, like today, readers had to be both skeptical and skilled to figure out the truth.

Even our glorified Founders were perpetrators of fake news for political means. To whip up revolutionary fervor, Ben Franklin himself concocted propaganda stories about murderous "scalping" Indians working in league with the British King George III. Other revolutionary leaders published fake propaganda stories that King George was sending thousands of foreign soldiers to slaughter the American patriots and turn the tide of the War of Independence to get people to enlist and support the revolutionary cause.

By the 1800s, fake news was back again, swirling around questions of race. Like Jewish blood libel, American racial sentiments and fears were powerful in producing false stories. One persistent "cottage industry" of fake news in antebellum America was stories of African-Americans spontaneously turning white. In other instances, fake news reports of slave uprisings or of crimes by slaves, led to terrible violence against African-Americans.

Sensationalism always sold well. By the early 19th century, modern newspapers came on the scene, touting scoops and exposés, but also fake stories to increase circulation. The *New York Sun*'s "Great Moon Hoax" of 1835 claimed that there was an alien civilization on the moon, and established the *Sun* as a leading, profitable newspaper. In 1844, anti-Catholic newspapers in Philadelphia falsely claimed that Irishmen were stealing bibles from public schools, leading to violent riots and attacks on Catholic churches. During the Gilded Age, yellow journalism flourished, using fake interviews, false experts and bogus stories to spark sympathy and rage as desired. Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* published exaggerated crime dramas to sell papers. In the 1890s, plutocrats like William Randolph Hearst and his *Morning Journal* used exaggeration to help spark the Spanish-

One silver lining in this long and alarming history of fake news is yellow journalism and its results—from civil violence to war—caused a backlash, and sent the public in search of more objective news. It was this flourishing market that sparked the rise of relatively objective journalism as an industry in turn-of-the century America. For the first time, American papers hired reporters to cover local beats and statehouses, building a chain of trust between local, state and national reporters and the public.

While partisan reporting and sensationalism never went away (just check out supermarket newsstands), objective journalism did become a successful business model—and also, until recently, the dominant one. In 1896, Adolph Ochs purchased the *New York Times*, looking to produce a "facts"-based newspaper that would be useful to the wealthy investor class by providing reliable business information and general news. Ochs showed that news did not have to be sensationalist to be profitable, though the paper was accused of being a mouthpiece for "bondholders."

Of course, the objective journalism consensus had its hiccups. With the advent of World War II, and in light of the Nazi and Communist propaganda machines, there was concern about the U.S. government's wartime involvement in producing news propaganda. In the 1950s, Joseph McCarthy was accused of manipulating reporters like "Pavlov's dogs," but a *New Yorker* article from the period insisted that reporters should report and not "tell readers which 'facts' are really 'facts' and which are not." By the 1960s, a new generation of reporters signed on to report on "non establishment" stories. Many of these reporters questioned the very ideal of objectivity, yet, nonetheless, hewed to the basic guiding principle of reporting based on verifiable and reputable sources.

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It wasn't until the rise of web-generated news that our era's journalistic norms were seriously challenged, and fake news became a powerful force again. Digital news, you might say, has brought yellow journalism back to the fore. For one, algorithms that create news feeds and compilations have no regard for accuracy and objectivity. At the same time, the digital news trend has decimated the force—measured in both money and manpower—of the traditional, objectively minded, independent press.

The Pew Research Center's "State of the Media 2016" paints a grim picture for most serious

journalistic principles, were locally known and trusted. They could be found in bars and local schools and acted as the human link between statehouses, Washington, D.C., and the U.S. population. They were seen as local heroes. (Jimmy Stewart often played truth-obsessed newspaper reporters in films, like the 1948 thriller *Call Northside 777*.) But today, these popular role models and societal links are gone, and with them, a trusted filter within civil society—the sort of filter that can say with authority to fellow local citizens that fake news is not only fake, it is also potentially deadly.

Real news is not coming back in any tangible way on a competitive local level, or as a driver of opinion in a world where the majority of the population does not rely on professionally reported news sources and so much news is filtered via social media, and by governments. And as real news recedes, fake news will grow. We've seen the terrifying results this has had in the past—and our biggest challenge will be to find a new way to combat the rising tide.