

Fighting Misinformation

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about how events that happen get recorded. In general, the first groups to record events are the media. Historians have at least two advantages the media doesn't have: hindsight and a lack of pressure to publish for and sell to a mass audience. It is not uncommon for this pressure to lead to inaccurate, biased, or sensationalistic coverage of events. A good historian will know how to spot these problems. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Fake News? Check the Source!
2. Sensationalism In The 1790s
3. Yellow Journalism In The 1890s
4. Propaganda In The 1950s
5. Lessons From The Past: Who Do You Trust?



BEFORE YOU START

Why should you not believe everything that you read or hear in the news?

1. Fake News? Check the Source!

“Fake news” has become a hot topic as the internet and social media have made it easier and faster to share news stories. The term itself describes false information that's spread deliberately to deceive readers. It might be done for the purpose of propaganda, to persuade people to believe or act in a certain way, or for the purpose of profit, to make money by tempting people to visit a webpage. Fake news is different from simple online rumors because it tries to look like a reliable source—a fake news website might have a web address similar to a legitimate newspaper, for example.

When it comes to the news these days, it can be hard to know just who to trust. That's where Rod Hicks, the “Journalist On Call” for The Society of Professional Journalists, comes in. He's made it his mission to help journalists regain the public's trust in an era of fake news. In the *Sophia Story* below, you'll discover how Rod is working to facilitate understanding between journalists and their audiences by learning how reporters source information for their stories.

Video Transcription

[MUSIC PLAYING] Every day, we are all bombarded with information. More and more we wonder, how do we know what's true.

That is a lie of fake news back there.

45% of people distrust news. There's so much misinformation. And people cannot distinguish between fact and opinion. You end up being uninformed because you're missing out on the full story. This is a serious problem.

You're about to discover how finding valid sources helps combat misinformation and sets you up for success.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

I'm Rod Hicks. I've been a journalist for over three decades. I've worked at the Detroit News, Detroit Free Press, St. Louis Post-dispatch. And then I worked at the Associated Press for almost 10 years as an editor. It's one of the most respected news organizations in the world.

While I was at the Associated Press, I got to work on a lot of major stories-- the Sandy Hook shooting, the Boston Marathon bombing, Bill Cosby's two trials.

Mr. Cosby, how are you feeling today?

While working at the AP, Rod witnessed the damaging effect of misinformation firsthand. One of the stories at the time was Pizzagate. In 2016, people started posting on social media something about Hillary Clinton being involved in the child sex trafficking ring, operated out of a pizza restaurant in Washington DC. It is not supported by any documentation or police organization. The conspiracy is not remotely true. But there are people who actually believe it.

I got news for you. Pedogate and Pizzagate ain't gonna blow over.

Pizzagate and Pedogate are real.

And one guy from North Carolina actually drove to this restaurant with a weapon that was discharged in the restaurant, because he said he was going to rescue the kids.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

This is an example of how dangerous it is to put out misinformation.

Driven to combat the onslaught of misinformation, Rod changed his career focus. Today, he works to rebuild public trust in the media with the Society of Professional Journalists. Americans are trusting journalists less today, because they don't really know what's news and what's not news. You have people putting out propaganda deliberately, trying to make it look like news. And sometimes advertising looks like news. Sometimes that's satire that people take seriously. What we really need to do is better educate the public about how news works and what news really is.

Rod partners with news outlets like the Philadelphia Inquirer to explain to the public with journalists do. They teach that the key to reporting accurate, reliable news is sourcing. Journalists are trained to find the truth. They're trained to go to primary sources, sources that know the information that they're seeking.

We have lots of different sources. Some of them are people, public records, drones, maps, archives, census data.

All of these are sources of information to build stories for journalism.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Any good journalist knows that sourcing is just the beginning. To ensure that each source is reliable,

they must also check that is both relevant and credible.

You have to ask yourself if the sources of information you're receiving are in positions to have the information that they're disseminating. That's what we had to do with the Kobe Bryant story.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Somebody saw that Kobe Bryant had been killed in a helicopter crash. We would not run that story until we confirmed it. We connected with people locally who have ties to that family. So we had multiple people to confirm this before we put it up on our website.

He's a major figure. You don't report that people die and get that kind of thing wrong. It's always more important to be right and be second, than be first and get it wrong.

Relevant and credible sources are the key to finding the truth, no matter who you are.

When journalists do their jobs well, the people that they're reporting for are well informed. And they can rely on the information that they just receive. And the skills that journalists use are the same skills that people use in their everyday lives. You need trustworthy information to make sound decisions, whether it's in school or other parts of your life.

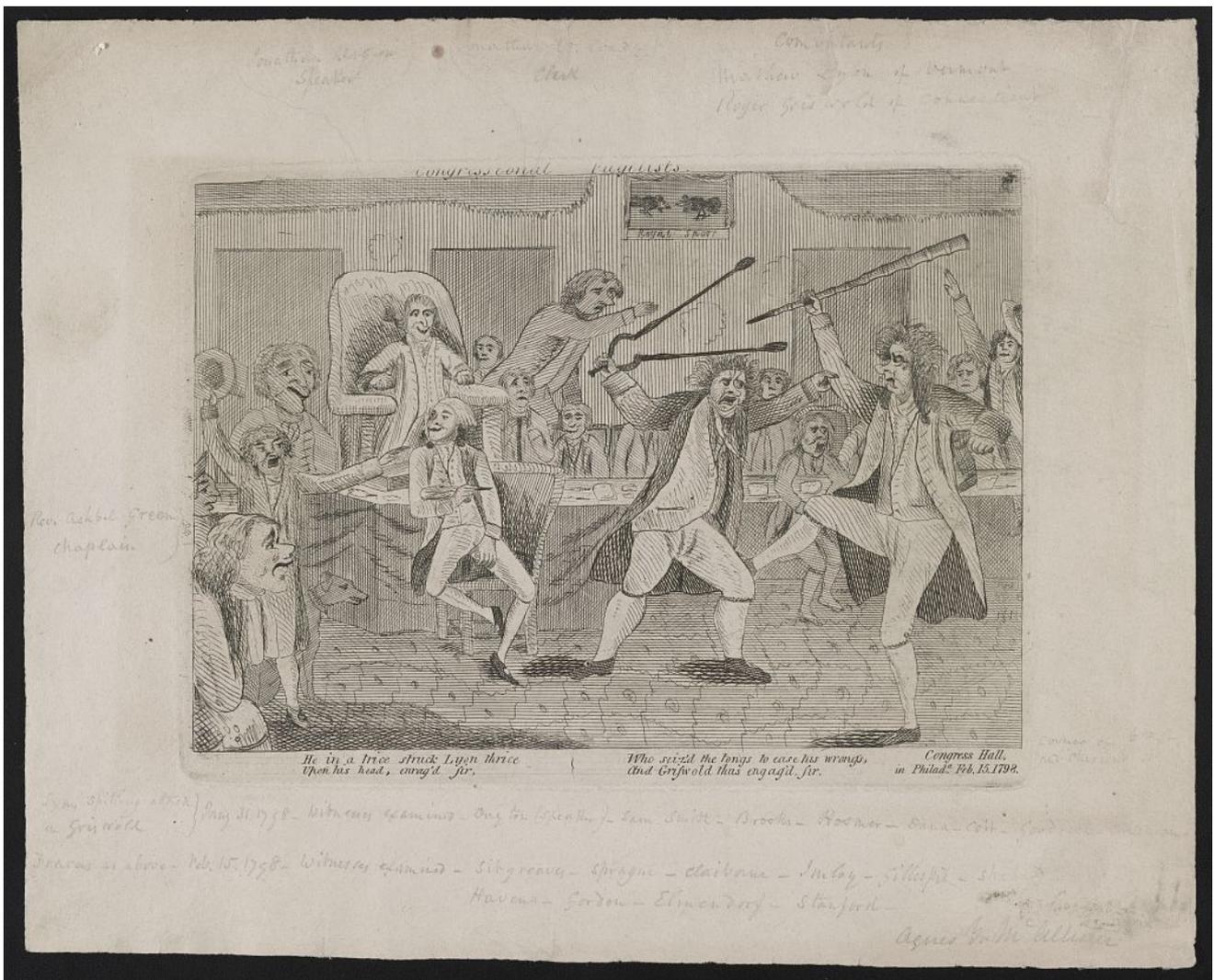
[MUSIC PLAYING]

Fake news is a form of misinformation, which has been around for centuries. As we begin our study of history in this challenge, let's start by taking a brief look at some points in the American past when misinformation played a key role.

2. Sensationalism In The 1790s

We've all seen examples of sensational headlines, created to draw readers' attention and encourage them to purchase a newspaper or click on a link for the full story. Today, we might refer to online sensationalism as "clickbait"—news and headlines that are designed to emphasize drama rather than report facts. In the early days of the United States, using sensationalism to sell newspapers and influence politics wasn't called clickbait, but it was certainly a common practice.

During the 1790s, many Americans in the newly formed United States closely followed the unfolding events of the French Revolution by reading accounts of them in newspapers. As newspapers reported sensationalized stories of the violence in France, Americans increasingly came to fear an overthrow of the newly formed U.S. government. One result of this fear was the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. These four laws were intended to limit both immigration and anti-American writing or speech. They also sought to keep people with radical political ideas out of the country (Mansky, 2018).



Cartoon depicting a fight in Congress regarding the Alien and Sedition Acts, 1798

3. Yellow Journalism In The 1890s

There have been other moments of journalistic embellishment—or even flat-out fabrication—to increase sales or shape national events. In the late 1800s, this became known as “yellow journalism.”

One of the earliest and best documented explosions of “yellow journalism” took place in the late 1800s, when newspapers owned by William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer dramatized and sensationalized stories that played on the emotions of the American people. The most famous instance occurred when an American Navy ship—the USS Maine—suffered an explosion and sank in Havana Harbor in 1898. The cause of the explosion was widely debated, and even within the Navy, there was no definite answer. The newspapers, however, framed it as potential sabotage, convincing many people that the explosion had been a deliberate attack on the U.S. military. These articles and the slogan “Remember the Maine!” helped create widespread support for entering the Spanish-American War of 1898 (Mott, 2013).

the early 1950s, Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin led the charge to expose and prosecute suspected communist spies and their sympathizers in the United States. McCarthy's accusations were largely based on false or unsubstantiated evidence, but the investigations made front-page news across the country.

Propaganda appeared in popular culture outlets like magazines and films, stoking fears that communists lurked within the highest levels of the U.S. government and entertainment industry. Innocent people were targeted, and in some cases their careers and personal lives suffered irreparable harm.



TERMS TO KNOW

Cold War

The period of tension between the United States and the Soviet Union (as well as their respective allies) that began shortly after World War II and ended when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.

Propaganda

Misleading or one-sided information intended to sway people to believe or act in a particular way.

5. Lessons From The Past: Who Do You Trust?

The strategies you'll learn in this course for reading historical sources closely are the same strategies that can help you detect misinformation and become a careful reader of the news. Historical sources often include the same kinds of things you'll find in today's newspapers or news websites: first-person accounts, editorials, political cartoons, photographs, even statistics. And whether it came out last century or last week, each source was produced or created by someone: an individual chose what to include and not include, how to set a tone and style, and whether to frame the content from a certain perspective or include personal opinion or analysis.

This isn't to say that you shouldn't trust any news sources—many do offer reliable information, even in our age of clickbait headlines and fake news. But the critical thinking process you'll be learning in the coming challenges will give you the tools to fact-check what you read or hear.

When you approach information like a historian, you think about the context of what you're reading. You consider who wrote it, where, and why. You also look for additional sources that might confirm what you read or offer alternative perspectives. These tactics will help you get a more complete picture of what's happening in our world.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **“fake news”** is a serious problem in today's world. People are having a harder time distinguishing what information is trustworthy, and what constitutes misinformation. But misinformation is not unique to the 21st century. Americans encountered **sensationalism in the 1790s**, **yellow journalism in the 1890s**, and **propaganda in the 1950s** that embellished or distorted facts. These are just a few examples of how misinformation sought to shape public opinion and alter behavior in different eras. The **“Lesson from the past: who do you trust?”** is as relevant today as it was then. By learning to think like a historian, which involves reading sources closely and critically, you can become a better detective of misinformation.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: Strategic Education, Inc. 2020. Learn from the Past, Prepare for the Future.

REFERENCES

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ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Cartoon depicting a fight in Congress regarding the Alien and Sedition Acts, 1798](#) | **Author:** Library of Congress |
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- [The front page of the New York evening journal from February 17, 1898.](#) | **Author:** Library of Congress, Washington, DC
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