

POL S 334 A - Shankar Vedantam-Hidden Brain, **Fake News An Origin Story**

[00:00:00.00] - This is Hidden Brain. I'm Shankar Vedantam.

[00:00:02.10] [LIGHT MUSIC]

[00:00:04.05] It can feel like everywhere you look, someone's accusing someone else of peddling fake news.

[00:00:09.27] - Why did a CNN reporter retweet that false fake tweet about the migrant children being in cages?

[00:00:15.87] - A recurring internet story says Pope Francis endorsed Hillary Clinton. Posts about it have circulated Twitter and Facebook, but it's bogus.

[00:00:24.25] - Now the fake news is saying we're fake news.

[00:00:26.04] - But the story is false.

[00:00:27.75] - Fake news is the enemy.

[00:00:29.46] - It is fake news.

[00:00:31.26] - These charges and counter charges about inaccuracy, bias, and fabrication can seem modern. In fact, they're deeply rooted in the history of American journalism.

[00:00:41.85] - There are patterns and resonances that recur and recur and recur.

[00:00:45.57] - But if there are similarities between the present and the past, there are also areas of sharp divergence. There are things about our present moment that are unique and uniquely dangerous.

[00:00:56.58] - I think there are consequential differences in what's going on now in the Trump administration. Some very important and nerve-wracking differences.

[00:01:04.47] - This week on Hidden Brain, what the history of fake news in the United States reveals about an important tension at the heart of journalism. Should reporters think about their readers and listeners as consumers or as citizens? Should the media give people what they want or what they need?

[00:01:24.93] - Support for this podcast and the following message come from Showtime and the acclaimed drama series The Affair, starring Dominic West, Ruth Wilson, Maura Tierney, and Joshua Jackson. The Affair returns this summer. Don't miss a new episode of The Affair, every Sunday only on Showtime.

[00:01:44.21] - Andy Tucker is a professor at Columbia University, and she studies the history of what we now call fake news. Andy, welcome to Hidden Brain.

[00:01:53.48] - Thanks for having me.

[00:01:55.17] - I want to start with a story from your book Froth and Scum. You describe a crime that took place one Sunday morning in 1836. What was the crime and how did it first come to light?

[00:02:06.47] - Early that morning, a young woman who lived at a house of prostitution in New York City was found hacked to death in her bed, and her body was set on fire. It was a sensational crime, as it would be in any era. But it became particularly frenzied and important because there was a new kind of newspaper in this city. And suddenly, there was competition to cover a sensational story more sensationally than the next guy. It became what I think is one of the first media circuses in US history, to figure out who was the guilty party. Who killed her and why.

[00:02:47.72] - So police arrest a guy, put him on trial. But very quickly, this new kind of newspaper, which is the penny press, springs into action. Editors serve up all the lurid details of the case, including several unverified claims, and insist that they're acting in the public good.

[00:03:03.77] - The public good was a really important part of how the new newspapers were covering this. They said, we're doing something really different. Newspapers before that had been generally very partisan. They were funded by political parties. They were operated by political party functionaries. They were an accepted part of the political system.

[00:03:23.18] The new penny press did something different. They said, we're just giving information to people who want information. We are not connected anywhere. We're free. We're independent. We can tell you anything. We're not bound by any political ties. So you have the right to know what's going on, and we're the ones who are going to tell you. We're doing it for the public good.

[00:03:44.15] - How did they go about covering the story?

[00:03:46.55] - Oh, it was quite a circus. There was no such thing as a reporter at that time. The political newspapers had an editor who kind of thought and wrote. Then the penny press had to invent the idea of the reporter. The person who went around doing shoe leather observation and investigation, poking around, asking questions, trying to get into the crime scene. All of this was brand new. Some people were horrified that these nosy little people were buzzing around, asking embarrassing questions and talking to people who were much higher than them in station.

[00:04:24.29] But a lot of readers thought this was just great. This was news that finally was catering to them. This was ordinary, middle class, working class people who were not terribly interested in all of the Washington scandals and imbroglios, and this was what they wanted to know.

[00:04:40.11] [LIGHT MUSIC]

[00:04:42.57] - Bringing people what they wanted. Newspapers began to treat their audiences like consumers. They began to ask what their audiences might want to read, and to shape their stories to cater to those demands. This sometimes meant a blatant disregard for the truth.

[00:04:58.53] - The Herald wanted a more respectable readership. The Herald wanted middle class people. So The Herald decided that the nice middle class young man who had been accused of the crime was actually innocent. He was a poor lamb who was being framed by evil and designing madams and police officers.

[00:05:18.08] The Sun was a newspaper much more closely tied to the working class. They wanted to give a story that was more appealing to the working class, which was, this poor woman on the fringe of society is being abused and exploited by rich and powerful people. So they both looked at the same crime and had entirely different interpretations based on what they thought their readers would prefer to hear.

[00:05:42.14] In some ways, it's a very democratic approach to news. It's telling these readers, you can make up your own minds. You can look at the case and you can figure out what you believe based on your own intuition and your own intelligence. You don't need smart elites to tell you this.

[00:06:01.35] So even though each newspaper fudged and shaded the truth, they did it on the understanding that readers would choose one or the other. And that was part of their pitch. You can figure it out. You can decide. That was really exciting.

[00:06:16.76] - And of course, as you're talking right now, I'm hearing echoes to the present day, where if you're a Democrat, you have your preferred cable news channel. If you're a conservative, you have your preferred cable news channel. It really is not that different than it was 200 years ago.

[00:06:29.64] - No. In some ways, it's very, very similar. There are patterns and resonances that recur and recur and recur.

[00:06:35.72] - One of the things that your book and other essays and writing reveal is that at times of great conflict, that allows people to look at the same facts and reach very different conclusions about them. And of course, a civil war is maybe exhibit A in this, because you have an enormous conflict happening within the country, and you have the press basically describing what happened in ways that are diametrically opposed to other publications. Do you have examples of fake news during the Civil War?

[00:07:04.50] - There's one strange one in which a Battle of Pea Ridge, Arkansas, which is in the wild northwestern corner of the Ozarks, very far from everything. And a reporter for the New York Tribune writes a very long, elaborate, really thorough, really good piece about the battle that later two of his colleagues say he made up completely because he wasn't there. He hadn't made it to the battlefield in time, it was so hard to get to.

[00:07:34.02] He listened to other people. He read other reports. He used his own knowledge. He understood what might have happened. It was common knowledge among many journalists, but they were very wary about revealing that. They would refer to it, but they didn't use the name of the reporter. They were trying to protect their own guy rather than worrying about whether this was truthful and whether audiences might be misled.

[00:07:57.48] [LIGHT MUSIC]

[00:08:00.12] - By the end of the 19th century, journalism had become a sort of Wild West. There were very few rules for how reporters should operate.

[00:08:07.11] - This is the time of the Spanish-American War, and the yellow press, the very sensational press, spearheaded by William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer in New York. And they're competing with each other. The fake news often gets worse and worse at times of intense competition.

[00:08:24.42] They are making up all sorts of stuff. It's a war with low stakes and low casualties, relatively, so it seems open to all sorts of creativity and interpretation. It becomes so sensational that people begin to think of journalism as incapable of telling the truth.

[00:08:47.16] There are new technologies too. There is the motion picture. Edison's film crews go down to Cuba in order to film-- they say to film what's going on. Turns out these new motion picture cameras are not very good. They're really clumsy. They don't take pictures well.

[00:09:02.97] So instead, what happens is Edison runs a lot of these little newsreels, actualities of what's going on in Cuba. But he actually stages them in the mountains of West Orange in New Jersey.

[00:09:14.73] - [CHUCKLES]

[00:09:15.99] - So there's a lot going on that's really bad. And then of growing understanding that journalism is at a crisis point. That nobody believes it.

[00:09:26.38] - So there are many forms of fake news that we can laugh about, but it's also clear that many journalism outlets have used fake news and accusations of fake news to push really disturbing agendas. You mentioned how the Atlanta Constitution had reported on lynchings, specifically the work of Ida B. Wells.

[00:09:44.19] - Yes. In 1894, the Atlanta Constitution had a headline in which it dismissed as fake news reporting by Ida B. Wells on a particularly gruesome lynching that involved African-American women and children. And Ida Wells was a crusading journalist who was exposing fearlessly the epidemic of lynching in the South. And the Atlanta Constitution, which was a very important, influential paper for the white South, was refusing to acknowledge this. And by using the term "fake," dismissed her claims and made it very difficult to discuss the issue in public.

[00:10:26.85] - So at a certain point in American journalism, the virtues or the ideals of objectivity, neutrality, accuracy, these come to be seen as cardinal rules for the press. When did this happen and what prompted it?

[00:10:41.13] - That began at the very end of the 19th century, the very beginning of the 20th century, when objectivity and impartiality started to become news values. One of the key players here is the New York Times, which has just been bought by Adolph Ochs in 1896. And he decides he's going to make the New York Times a paper of record. He's going to make it the final arbiter in matters of fact. It's going to be trustworthy, and it's going to be decent.

[00:11:09.43] One of its mottos, of course, all the news that's fit to print. But another of its mottos was, it will not soil the breakfast cloth. So he was making a real point of being decent and honorable, which went along with being more accurate.

[00:11:23.02] So all of these different qualities are combining, so that by the early 20th century, the idea of objectivity, neutrality, impartiality, those ideas are becoming more conventional in certain kinds of newspapers. The yellow press continues to be yellow, and people love that too.

[00:11:39.99] - But the interesting thing, of course, is that even as there are these new norms of fairness, and objectivity, accuracy, the norm that, basically, publishing fake or fabricated news is wrong, this does not do away with the problem of fake news. In some ways, you could argue maybe it even exacerbates the problem, when you think about in more recent times, the New York Times publishing reports citing unnamed sources that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. You can't dismiss the New York Times as the penny press or the yellow press. This becomes part of the drumbeat that actually leads to war.

[00:12:15.96] - It's really complicated. Once a newspaper announces that it is going to be truthful, neutral, objective, once it announces it's going to be accountable, then it's faced with the real question-- what happens if we get it wrong? How do you make up for that? Do you undermine your own credibility by acknowledging you made a mistake, or do you undermine your own credibility by ignoring the fact that you made a mistake? So the fall of an authority, I think the sound the authority makes when he smacks into the forest floor is much louder than the fall of a newspaper that has never been particularly known for accuracy.

[00:12:59.51] - You're at Columbia University's journalism school, and your school was called in to investigate a prominent story in Rolling Stone magazine. I want you to listen to this clip describing the results of the Columbia University study and Fox News.

[00:13:13.25] - This is being called a journalistic failure. Columbia University releasing its review of the discredited Rolling Stone article on an alleged gang rape at a University of Virginia fraternity house.

[00:13:24.38] - So in some ways, Andy, this feels like an echo of the 19th century, where different publications were trading charges of fake news. Fox News is often accused of peddling fake news by the rest of the mainstream media, and here you have Fox News voicing outrage about fake news in another outlet. History repeating itself, right?

[00:13:42.92] - Fake news can be used as an accusation. The term "fake news" has become almost meaningless because it can be flung in all sorts of contexts, like this one, like a very contentious and controversial news organization claiming that another news organization is fake.

[00:14:03.68] Fake news can mean anything you want it to mean. It can mean news that is honestly mistaken. It can mean news that is something I don't agree with. It can mean news that says something rude about somebody I support. Using fake news in any kind of debate has become almost ridiculous because it's talking past each other. But it seems to be an inevitable part of any kind of disagreement, of any kind of complaint about the press today.

[00:14:30.29] [LIGHT MUSIC]

[00:14:31.97] - When we come back, we'll take a closer look at the surprising idealism that often leads to fake news. Stay with us.

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[00:15:47.23] - This is Hidden Brain. I'm Shankar Vedantam. I'm talking this episode with Andy Tucker, who studies history and journalism at Columbia University. One of the fascinating ideas in your work, Andy, is that journalists have resorted to fake news because they think it serves audiences and the public good. So if you needed to cover a devastating tornado in the 19th century but the telegraph lines were down and the details of what happened were scarce, your choices were to either say nothing about the disaster or to try and imagine what happened.

[00:16:16.90] - Yes. There was a real debate about the term "faking" in the 1880s and 1890s. But it was a debate in which many people argued-- many journalists argued faking is a good thing. By faking at that time, they didn't mean nefarious manipulation. They meant embellishment, adding some details, filling in gaps that they hadn't been able to see at the time, making an interviewee sound a little more articulate. It wasn't wholesale manipulation.

[00:16:51.62] But they argued that people would like that better because it gave them truth that was closer to what they expected, that it gave them stuff that wasn't boring. That nobody wanted a newspaper-- said one handbook for journalists, nobody wants a newspaper to be a mathematical treatise. You don't want to be crazily accurate. So in the beginning, this term "fake

news," or faking of news, was seen as something that journalists could do to make their readers happier.

[00:17:21.80] - In other words, if the mere recitation of the facts doesn't do justice to the truth, the honest journalist actually goes beyond the facts to try and represent the truth.

[00:17:32.33] - Yes. Yes. You can do a higher truth that way. And that's a term that we hear a lot, somehow getting at a higher truth by glossing over inconvenient details. But this was a genuine movement in the early years of the professionalization of the press. There were professional journals in which this argument was made. Do it for your readers. They'll be happier.

[00:17:52.58] It's a little self-serving because it also meant that a journalist who was being a little lazy could get away with it. A journalist who wanted to pretend he was a novelist could get away with it. But in general, yes, there was a real sense that it was a good thing to do.

[00:18:06.80] - And it wasn't just about what the public needs. As you point out, it's also about what the public wants. I'm thinking about the advice that William Hills gave to newspaper correspondents in 1887. He's basically saying, one reason we should lie to our audiences is because our audiences want us to lie to them.

[00:18:22.94] - Yeah. It makes them feel better. He had an example of, if you're telling the story of a professor who is fascinated into eloping with a young student, it doesn't hurt anybody, said Hills, to say that the young student was an enchanting 16-year-old brunette instead of the washed out 23-year-old blonde she truly was. It would make people happy. It didn't hurt anybody. They would read your story and they would-- the subtext there, of course, being they would buy your newspaper.

[00:18:51.04] [LIGHT MUSIC]

[00:18:54.65] - To be clear, in most newsrooms today, behavior like this will get a journalist fired. This sort of fabrication didn't just happen in newspapers. Andy has found that over and over, new technologies opened up new avenues for faking. The irony is, people always have faith that each new technology will make it harder to manipulate the truth.

[00:19:16.04] - Early photography was seen-- when it first was announced in 1839, people like Edgar Allan Poe are talking about how real it is, and how you could finally see more real than any kind of art. And within decades, you had someone like William Mumler, who was taking what he called spirit photographs. He would take a portrait of a person, and go off and do things in the darkroom, and bring it back, and hovering over the shoulder of the person in the photograph would be the indistinct outline of someone he said was a spirit of a lost loved one. I don't know how he said, but my camera can pick up these spirits, these ghosts, and they show up in the picture.

[00:19:59.36] And people loved that. People-- this was the year of the Civil War. People were desperate to be in contact with people they had lost. They believed it because the technology seemed so new and magical that they believed it could do anything.

[00:20:16.30] - And now, with the rise of technologies like social media, we were told that with Twitter and Facebook, you would have 10 million fact checkers, and so we're going to get a more accurate version of reality. But we also now have 10 million publishers putting out their own facts and theories all the time.

[00:20:33.83] - The internet is really challenging, because it's so hard to know the difference. You go on one page, and yes, it is a page of a serious news organization that has fact checkers, and has editors, and has codes of ethics. And then you go to another page, and it looks physically very similar, but it's got completely different approach to news. And it can be very hard for a casual browser to understand the difference. They seem to be similar, but the content can end up being radically different.

[00:21:06.99] - So the history is very good at telling us that the things we think of as dramatic and new might only be iterations of what's happened in the past. But are you really saying there's no difference between our current moment and earlier ones? Specifically looking at the Trump administration, its relationship with the truth, its constant war with the press. Are you really saying this is only just more of the same?

[00:21:30.44] - No. I think there are consequential differences in what's going on now in the Trump administration. Some very important and nerve-wracking differences. I don't know of another time in which an administration so uniformly and vigorously and constantly worked to undermine and diminish journalism as having any relationship with the truth.

[00:21:56.63] It is not even an argument about facts so much as an argument about, you cannot trust those guys. They're deceitful. They're dishonest. It's a very emotional argument. And I think to have no place to stand-- it leaves truth-telling no place to stand. And I find that really dangerous to the idea of a democracy.

[00:22:21.76] - And when you think about that danger, is there a way for ordinary citizens to think their way through this? If you are an average person in the country, and you constantly hear claims of fake news being hurled from every direction in every other direction, it's just easy to throw up your hands and say, why should I trust anything?

[00:22:43.37] - That's a danger. A danger that worries me and many other journalists very, very much. There are many scholars and many journalists who are desperately trying to figure out ways to address the failing trust in news, the rush of fake news.

[00:22:59.96] It's really difficult. There are people who say that training in media literacy will help. There are people who say that news organizations need to be more transparent. In Europe, there are various governmental or quasi-governmental efforts to regulate what's available, what's possible. Malaysia has passed a law criminalizing fake news. Italy, you can report it to the police. These are all efforts, and I think we need to keep making efforts. But I'm not sure what

will help other than the public, the citizenry maintaining its vigilance and refusing to throw up its hands and give up, and insisting on reading with courage, with skepticism, with an open mind, and engaging in open debate.

[00:24:00.37] - Speaking of government regulation, I want to end by going back to one of the earliest cases of fake news in American history. You describe a case from 1690, and you say that the story led to an extraordinary 14-year period when American newspapers published absolutely no fake news. What happened?

[00:24:21.04] - In 1690, the very first newspaper published in North America, *Public Occurrences*. He came to Boston, Benjamin Harris. He was from London. And he set himself up as just a guy named Ben who was going to publish a newspaper to tell the truth.

[00:24:37.33] And he had a list at the top of what he was going to do. I'm going to tell the truth. If I find that people are not telling the truth, I will expose them. I will give people the information they need. I will use only the best sources. So it sounded very modern.

[00:24:50.92] He then published a piece that claimed that the King of France, Louis XIV, was sleeping with his daughter-in-law, which could have been a mistake, but I think it was fake news in a very modern sense intended to undermine the king because of the religious tensions at the time. The king was a fervent Catholic. Harris was not. Harris was a Protestant. I think he published that news knowing it was not true, because the king didn't have a daughter-in-law, and did it in order to undermine the king.

[00:25:25.03] He was shut down. He was shut down immediately, because this was seen as something impossible for an ordinary person to do, to be so critical, saying whatever he wanted. And then for the next 14 years, there was no fake news published in America, because for the next 14 years, there were no newspapers published in America.

[00:25:42.79] [LIGHT MUSIC]

[00:25:45.85] - Andy Tucker is a professor at Columbia University. She's the author of *Froth and Scum* and a forthcoming book on fake news. Its working title is *Misinformed*. Andy, thanks for joining me today on *Hidden Brain*.

[00:25:57.70] - Thank you very much.

[00:26:00.67] - This week's show was produced by Rhaina Cohen and edited by Tara Boyle. Our team includes Jenny Schmidt, Parth Shah, Thomas Lu, Laura Kwerel, and Adhiti Bandlamudi.

[00:26:10.93] Our unsung hero this week is Gerry Holmes. Gerry's the deputy managing editor with NPR News. In an era where the demands and pressures of journalism can feel really intense, Gerry's the type of editor you want to have by your side. He's always calm, he's always thoughtful, and he manages the many tensions of a modern newsroom with a skilled hand. Thank you, Gerry. You make our journalism better.

[00:26:35.14] You can find more Hidden Brain on Facebook and Twitter. If you like the show, please let others know and leave us a review on iTunes. I'm Shankar Vedantam, and this is NPR.

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[00:27:11.98] [LIGHT MUSIC]