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Tracing "Fake News:" The Printing Press, Social Media, and Politics

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IN THE WAKE of the 2016 presidential election, the words "fake news" appears everywhere. They emerge in bold red on news headlines. They pop up regularly on social media trending pages. They penetrate everyday conversations and dialogue, raising doubts about reliability in news reporting. "Fake news" tremor American politics, creating deeper rifts between political parties, resulting in distrust of elected officials. The government's influences the distribution information and perspective in the media generates increased societal awareness. However, despite this consciousness, the practice of appropriating images and quotations — stripping them of their original context and transplanting them in an entirely new one — alongside slanted texts is not new. The printing press sets a precedent for other literacy tools, including social media, in regards to how institutions assert their hold of authority as seen in the direct correlation between their wants and public opinion. The use of social media in the 2016 election mimics how regimes and churches drive their political agendas imperialistically. Both yield major political shifts and grant increased municipal access to implicitly channeled material.

In *Nine Ideas About Language*, Harvey A. Daniels explains that speakers of a certain language and dialect alter their speech patterns to suit specific social situations. He argues that people use "grumbled fragments of a private code" such as "uhhh" and "you gonna," in the privacy of their homes, while at work they speak in professional manner (Daniels 9).

Although this idea was written within the context of spoken language, the rise of print culture applies directly to written language. Depending their intended audience, the author consciously adjusts their language to deliver tailored material. In her essay, "The Marian Establishment and the Printing Press," Jennifer Loach mentions multiple examples of writers "designing" their language for a specific audience. Both King Edward and Queen Mary's rules rely upon printed propaganda, targeted towards foreign audiences. As a result, many governmental publications comprised of non-English rhetoric in hopes of appealing to non-British rulers (Loach 142-144). The writers carefully craft messages that align with their political agendas, especially in terms of international affairs and trade. The language reinforces the competency of English superintend as a result. Yet, although this example seems inclusive as it employs multiple languages, government propaganda hopes to be easily read by a niche audience, especially by foreign government diplomats. Give the rarity bilingual Englishmen during the period, access to these documents is limited. Today, legal cases brand news on social media. Legal jargon lends itself to nuance that can be easily misconstrued and perpetuated on a massive scale. The printing press and social media both highlight a gap between language and understanding caused by "subdialects and jargon." When skilled writers employ niche language that can only be understood by a specific audience, the circulation of said propaganda skyrockets.

In addition to becoming a political tool for governments and allowing for widespread printed communication internationally, administrations weaponize the printing press against their political enemies. David R. Como calls upon *The Intentions of the Armie of the Kingdome of Scotland*, wherein he alludes to a 1640 Scottish political pamphlet announcing a possible invasion in England. The Cloppenburg Press, a small underground news source, copies said pamphlet without consent from Edinburgh and runs the story, alerting the English that foils the attack (Como 56-57). The Scottish Committee of Estates of states raises arms against Britain while the Cloppenburg Press worked as a spy. Essentially, they recopy the pamphlet not only as a warning, but also as a defense mechanism. Como continues, stating that the printing press allow for "the most systematic and concentrated campaigns" and "bombard[s] a separate kingdom with propaganda" "fundamentally alter[ing] the political process of another nation" (57). The Scottish spread word of an invasion on in order to directly

interfere with the English government via print media. Thus, the Scottish distort attitudes towards England as the propaganda heightens already-established tension until it becomes tangible conflict. This translates to how the current American president, Donald Trump, directs strong language at foreign government diplomats and leaders on Twitter. In January 2018, Trump declares, "North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the 'Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times'…I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!" (Trump). Trump's tweets challenging North Korea's nuclear program raises heated dialogue on America's relations with North Korea. In attacking the North Korean regime on such a public and easily-accessible platform, President Trump forces engagement publically, opening discussion on nuclear and military programs. This contributes to the development of the June 2018 North Korea-United States Summit, as well as, negotiations between the two countries. Just as the printing press sets the tone between the English and Scottish conflict, President Trump's social media prolific tweeting sets the tone of the summit.

While governments uses the printing press as a tool for political agreements and war, religious institutions, specifically the Church, engage with print culture for both missionary and educational purposes. Kyle C. Sessions draws comparisons between a range of media, examining the phenomena of "media changeover" in the context of sixteenth-century hymnals and pamphlets. He notes how the Protestant church takes advantage of the pivotal between oral and print culture to gather support for the Protestant church. They appeal to the illiterate "oral culture" read through "hymn tune[s]" with rhyme and rhythm. As literacy rates increase and the printed publications becomes more common, print culture overtakes oral culture, rationalizing the Church's choice to shift from memorized tunes to paper bound hymnals (Sessions 116). This underscores the impact of multimedia. Sessions concludes that the Church "exploit[s]" "its own immense advantage" via hymnals, mirroring today's chronic social media engagement (116). Information unfolds in various forms — such as photos, blog posts, videos, and short blurbs — that intersect on a single site. Users consume posts preferentially. Content like videos and photos with captions engage users multisensorially, just as the Protestant hymnals do. The hymnals of the early printing press set the precedent for the multimedia content of present-day media that entice visually and aurally.

The printing press heightens the importance and power of controlling and manipulating information and continues into today in its physically absence. In "History of Fake News," Joanna M. Burkhardt explains how the ability to write well tethers agency. Through writing, authority figures engineer how the public perceives and responds to genuine knowledge and misinformation. By hemegonizing particulars and how it is conveyed, leaders strengthen their hold on public opinion (Burkhardt, 5-6). This is true both now in the era of Mass Media and in the 1600s when the printing press became the hallmark propaganda tool across religious and state institutions. 14th century sonnets, plays, and pamphlets of Italian writer and satirist Pietro Aretino reflect this phenomenon. Aretino writes satirically, but "plant[s] seeds of doubt in the minds of their readers" and "shap[es] the complex political reality of the time." Burkhardt compares Aretino's writing to contemporary Saturday Night Live skits as testaments to persuasive writing (Burkhardt 6). Although both mock influencial people, their shared satire engages with a level of already-established truths and doubts in the audience. The writing in both indirectly accuses, aiming to expose problematic discourses stemming from social structures in society. The printing press creates strong communication skills, as seen in Aretino's sonnets, and accounts for the ways in which persuasive writing loosens the 'authority' people in subject positions employ in order to sway public opinion.

Caricature Showing Marie Antoinette as a Dragon (Anonymous)

Not only does the printing press allot power to strong written skills, but it also allows for the circulation of images that can later be appropriated. Burkhardt cites the French canard as an example of early "fake news" perpetuated by the seventeenth-century French printing press. Specifically, Burkhardt describes a monster captured in Chile that was being sent to France. The image of a dragon-like creature appears with the story. Later, this image becomes edited to depict Marie Antoinette's face during the French Revolution (6). Because images could now circulated rapidly, appropriating images occurs in a variety of contexts and venues relatively unnoticed by the general public. The creature with Marie Antoinette's face joins other images that recycle images taken out of their prior context to fill new agendas, often for political gain. The "Join, or Die" snake's original stems from colonial unification against the French during the French and Indian War. Yet, the snake reemerges later during the American Revolution against the British.

Join, or Die (Franklin)

Though ironic in retrospect, the colonists employ the image against the Crown to stoke divisions between revolutionaries and the Tories. And, the practice of reusing and re-appropriating images extends into modern-day social media, wherein images proliferate via photoshop with the click of a

button. The press allows for the appropriation of images, similar to how social media allows for easy appropriation of information, quotes, and images.

The rise of literacy rates in the 1600s contributes to the development of the printing press. Reading materials such as pamphlets, posters and books became more readily available due to print culture. Robert A. Gross claims that the press and Protestantism contribute to heightened literacy in the American colonies. He explains that the protestant ministers use widespread literacy to "fulfill a fundamental, public purpose" of spreading and securing Protestantism in the colonies (Gross 380). Literacy, appears to be "nearly universal," extends to "the poorest classes," and leaves "no soul unturned" as it created a mass "culture of pious print" (380). The literacy rates exceed even social and class status by the end of the seventeenth-century (380). The rapid growth of the printing press and the accessibility it brings to western culture as seen today. As social media rises in prominence, availability increases concomitantly. The sudden surge in "pious print" mirrors modern-day, 24-hour, newsfeeds. New content and material constantly oversaturate readers with often extraneous data. In both circumstances, technologies enable mass access to knowledge and yield a consumer driven culture.

Although both the printing press and social media grants the public access to information they otherwise would not have, the discrepancy between consumption and comprehension arises. Both paint an illusion of equal opportunity. Differences in levels of literacy and education create discrepancies in what certain populations understand. In Gross's example, he mentions that the "ministry was steeped in the humanist tradition of the classics," which had been "inaccessible to the vast majority" for years due to low literacy rates. Although the mass population now has literacy through the proliferation of "pious print," the formal education to understand the classical references so heavily embedded in Christian literature perpetuates inequalities (380). Without this understanding, laymen struggle to grasp subtle nuances, failing to properly teach as a result. Unfortunately, this is the same with modern news. The complex policies render texts incomprehensible for individuals lacking a formal education. Articles and headlines using political jargon or words with niche connotations correspond to "fake news" as a result of ignorance. The mass of details available does not equalize as it should. Certain information remains reserved for a small,

elite audiences as they have the means to fully engage with these texts and, thus, declares the narrative for those outside this social stratum.

This discrepancy in understanding language seen in both the early printing press and modern media ties into another one of Harvey A. Daniels' ideas on language. He suggests that "languages are intimately related to the societies and individuals who use them" (Daniels 15). The language a person uses and, thereby, understand serves as a reflection of said person's background, education, and identity (15). Yetta Goodman discusses three major principles of written language. The first, relational principles, accounts for how writing represents spoken language (Goodman 320). Functional principles relates to the way people implement writing for specific purposes (320). And, linguistic principles functions in regards to how language-users understand writing systems to be organized (320). Literate people from various backgrounds develop these principles in different ways. As Goodman says in her example of functional principles, "in homes where parents are college students, computer programmers, or authors, children will discover functional principles different from those developed by children" (321). Because these children have varying exposure and purposes for developing literacy, their language differs. The same discrepancy appears in the literate populations both in the past and today. Although literacy rates seem universal, their levels and principles around the world range and, thus, inhibit the power of mass communication's effectiveness. Thus, print and social media enable misinterpretation to persist.

Despite the illusion of true accessibility, the printing press remains exclusive, printing predominantly in the languages of powerful institutions such as European governments and churches controls subordinate groups. In the 1500s, the Spanish "aid missionaries in the Christianization of native populations," which involves teaching the natives Spanish, implicitly phasing out the native tongues (Calvo 278). Although the first texts in Mexico City and Lima produce multilingual workbooks designed to teach the native population Spanish, the number of prints in Native American languages decreases from 31% to 3% between 1539-1600 (278-279). The Spanish government uses the printing press, not only to spread their power, but also to establish their language. They exercise imperial dominance over the colonized and "Christianized" natives. The reliance upon a single language in the printing press still exists in modern-day internet and social media discourse. In her book *Trans-National English in Social Media*, Jennifer Dailey-

O'Cain notes that English is "the dominant language of the internet," but is becoming "increasingly less so" (Dailey-O'Cain 47). Although this trend contrasts that of the Spanish printing press, Dailey-O'Cain stresses that the languages on the internet unfairly represent of the diversity of languages spoken throughout the world. She notes that many world languages do not appear online and major representation functions authoritatively "in the broader social order" (47). As seen in both the printing press and the internet, the unequal representation of different languages reflects the underlying power structures that institutions use to push their agenda.

Many individuals view the latent economic potential of the printing press, participating in endeavors that capitalize on the new and growing technology. Reverend Jose Glover, attempts to start his own private printing business by purchasing his own personal press and hiring mechanics to work the press. Although he did not live to open his printing shop in New England, his widowed wife carries on the business in modern-day Cambridge, Massachusetts (Gross 381). This shows that, although the early American presses were mostly under clerical control, the printing press ultimately functions as a "private enterprise from the start" (380). Individuals successfully capitalize on the new technology. The same economic patterns appear in present-day social media, where "twenty-first-century economic incentives" perpetuate "fake news" (Burkhardt 7). Advertisers calculatingly invest in websites that attract the most people possible. Yet, many of these websites, unfortunately, appeal to "human propensity for sensation" generate misleading headlines that grab widespread attention (8). The economic incentives of both the printing press and online media reflect the best and worst qualities of human nature. While the development of the printing press appealed to Reverend Jose Glover's desires for private economic ventures independent of the church, popular online web content lures advertisers who have no apprehensions about funding false, slanderous articles to make a profit (Gross 380; Burkhardt 8).

Although the printing press and social media are often perceived as separate phenomena that require different forms of literacy, they are both technologies that followed similar patterns of economic, political, and popular growth. The printing press allows for the mass production of literature, promotes literacy in underprivileged populations, and gives the majority access to knowledge they otherwise would not. The development of the internet and social media platforms grants millions of people receive

to information in multimedia formats and the ability to voice their opinions in innumeral spaces. Even though the two technologies differ physically, print being tangible and material in juxtaposition to the internet, they both foster mass circulation of "fake news." Their vices appear in every type of media, including fliers and pamphlets from the early printing press, articles from yellow journalism newspapers and flashy headlines on social media feeds. Despite their differences, the historical and political contexts through which their audiences engages with them follow the same patterns in how they influence political and economic systems. How people in power use media to manipulate facts remains stagnant over time.

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Trump, Donald (realDonaldTrump). "North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just
          stated that the 'Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times.' Will someone
          from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too
          have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than
          his, and my Button works!." 2 January 2018, 7:49 PM. Tweet.