

# Before Trump, the long history of fake news

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Donald Trump may have popularised "fake news", but the concept has been around for centuries

In capital letters and with an exclamation mark, "FAKE NEWS!" may have been popularised by Donald Trump in hundreds of his tweets but the concept has existed for centuries.

For the US president the term refers to what he claims are lies masquerading as news in the mainstream "Fake News Media".

Generally, it means "false news released in the media with full knowledge of the facts," says French communications expert Pascal Froissart, from University of Paris 8.

This existed long before Trump became the 45th president of the United States in 2017 and way ahead of the emergence of social media.

Here are some examples through history.

## Dubious Byzantine 'anecdota'

Early versions of fake news are found in the sixth-century "Anecdota" of prominent Byzantine scholar and writer Procopius, says Harvard University historian Robert Darnton.

Known as "Secret History" in English, these texts contain "dubious information" on the purported behind-the-scenes scandals of the reign of Emperor Justinian, Darnton says.

They were kept secret until Procopius's death and contrasted with his official writings about the ruler.

## Pharaonic fibs

French researcher Francois-Bernard Huyghe finds traces of fake news even further back in time, during the period of the Egyptian pharaohs before the birth of Christ.

For example, Ramses II's claimed victory over the Hittite people at the battle of Kadesh towards 1274 BC, which is celebrated in bas-reliefs and Egyptian texts, was in reality a "semi-defeat", he says.

The real success was "that of propaganda, of the sculptors and scribes," Huyghe says.

## Half-true 'libelles'

In 18th century France "libelles" were short satirical or controversial texts that mixed truth and fiction in an "early form of fake news," historian Robert Zaretsky, from the University of Houston, told AFP.

One item published in London in 1771, concerning scandals in the French court, even warned readers that some of the content is "at the very most plausible" and some an "obvious falsity".

## Rags, fabrications

Sold in the streets of France during the same period, "canards" were popular newsheets that often carried made-up [news](#), for example, reporting around 1780 the capture of an imaginary monster in Chile.

The word has moved into the English language to mean an unfounded rumour or story.

Elaborate hoaxes designed to sell newspapers emerged in the US press in the 19th century.

The New York Herald, for example, gave in 1874 an account of a bloody escape of wild animals from the Central Park Zoo but wrapped up with: "Of course the entire story given above is a pure fabrication."

It is around this time the term "[fake news](#)" seems to have appeared, says US journalist Robert Love in the Columbia Journalism Review.

It was a period "when a rush of emerging technologies intersected with newsgathering practices during a boom time for newspapers," he says.

### **Operation INFEKTION**

During the Cold War a calculated Soviet tactic was the "deliberate spreading of false information to influence opinion and weaken an enemy", in this case the West, according to Huyghe.

An emblematic case was the KGB's Operation INFEKTION, aimed at making people believe that HIV/AIDS was a biological weapon created in US army laboratories.

It started with the publication in an obscure Indian newspaper in 1983 of an anonymous letter making such claims, which were eventually spread more widely.

### **Media hoaxed**

In late 1989, as the communist regime of Nicolae Ceausescu tottered in Romania, images were published of mutilated bodies dug from mass graves near the town of Timisoara.

They were said to be victims of the regime's security forces. The pictures went around the world, galvanising public opinion against Ceausescu who was executed by the end of the year.

But the corpses turned out to be of people who had died from illness or accidents before the unfolding revolution.

The repetition of false reports by other media was what Huyghe called an "autointoxication" in his 2016 book on disinformation, "La Desinformation: Les Armes du Faux".

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