

The Hoax Central

23 MAR 2022

Fake News

By ANONYMOUS

"Sensationalism always sold well. By the early 19th century, modern newspapers came on the scene, touting scoops and exposés and 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." J. Soll, "The Long and Brutal History of Fake News," POLITICO Magazine, 18-Dec-2016.

False and distorted news material isn't exactly a new thing. It's been a part of media history long before social media, since the invention of the printing press. It's what sells tabloids.

In the 1890s, rival newspaper publishers Joseph Pulitzer and William Hearst competed over the audience through sensationalism and reporting rumors as facts, a practice that became known as "yellow journalism." Their incredulous news played a role in leading the US into the Spanish-American War of 1898. Eventually, there was a backlash against the lack of journalistic integrity: The public demanded more objective and reliable news sources, which created a niche that The New York Times was established to fill at the turn of the 20th century. Yellow journalism became less common. That is until the rise of web-based news brought it all back in full force.

One of the motivations for 1890s newspapers engaging in yellow journalism is the same as for propaganda creators today: Exaggerated news with shocking headlines gets attention, and sells papers (or prompts mouse-clicks), promoting the sale of advertising. In the form of traditional news media, most people have learned better than to take outrageous news articles as seriously as

they did at the height of the yellow journalism era. More recently, tabloids like The National Enquirer and The New York Sun, and fad magazines like The Freak and The Wet Dog are generally known as false news sources. Similarly, people recognize that parody news productions on the web and TV feature satire and ironic, but unreal, accounts of current events.

In 1888, a series of brutal slayings in the Whitechapel district of East London were widely reported. Accounts of the eleven murders, typically involving prostitutes, were described in graphic detail in the newspapers of the time. Many tried to profit from the high-profile case by spreading fake news.

James Kendrick, another news vendor, was also charged with crying out false news about Jack the Ripper. After slow Sunday sales, he began calling that there was a "Horrible Discovery of a Missing Woman at Charing Cross". Later, he cried out that four women were discovered slashed at Charing Cross. One customer, who bought one of his papers, found no such article inside and took the matter to the police. The news vendor/news vendor was sentenced to 14 days in jail, with hard labor.

Operation INFEKTION was an active measure disinformation campaign run by the KGB in the 1980s to plant the idea that the United States had invented HIV/AIDS²³ as part of a biological weapons research project at Fort Detrick, Maryland. Historian Thomas Boghardt popularized the codename "INFEKTION" based on the claims of former East German Ministry for State Security (Stasi) officer Günter Bohnsack de, who claimed that the Stasi codename for the campaign was either "INFEKTION" or also "VORWÄRTS II" ("FORWARD II").² However, historians Christopher Nehring and Douglas Selva found in the former Stasi and Bulgarian State Security archives materials

that prove the actual Stasi codename for the AIDS disinformation campaign was Operation Denver.⁴⁵ The operation involved "an extraordinary amount of effort funding radio programs, courting journalists, distributing would-be scientific studies", according to journalist Joshua Yaffa, and even became the subject of a report by Dan Rather on the CBS Evening News.⁶

In 1912, Charles Dawson claimed that he had discovered the "missing link" between apes and man. In February 1912, Dawson contacted Arthur Smith Woodward, Keeper of Geology at the Natural History Museum, stating he had found a section of a human-like skull in Pleistocene gravel beds near Piltdown, East Sussex.² That summer, Dawson and Smith Woodward purportedly discovered more bones and artifacts at the site, which they connected to the same individual. These finds included a jawbone, more skull fragments, a set of teeth, and primitive tools.

Smith Woodward reconstructed the skull fragments and hypothesized that they belonged to a human ancestor from 500,000 years ago. The discovery was announced at a Geological Society meeting and was given the Latin name *Eoanthropus dawsoni* ("Dawson's dawn-man"). The questionable significance of the assemblage remained the subject of considerable controversy until it was conclusively exposed in 1953 as a forgery. It was found to have consisted of the altered mandible and some teeth of an orangutan deliberately combined with the cranium of a fully developed, though small-brained, modern human.

The Piltdown hoax is prominent for two reasons: the attention it generated around the subject of human evolution, and the length of time, 41 years, that elapsed from its alleged initial discovery to its definitive exposure as a composite forgery.