

History is full of examples of misinformation being broadly believed by the gullible. There were no newspapers or other media during the middle ages. People learned the news from town criers, priests in the churches, and edicts from rulers. Aside from that, the rumor mills were alive and well, and the superstitious believed anything.

The first Crusade was called by Pope Urban II in 1095, a call to arms in response to the Muslim takeover of the Holy Land, barring and persecuting Christian pilgrims. This was a fight long in coming. The European nobility, being promised forgiveness of sins, wanted to take up arms in this crusade. It took them the better part of the year to raise their armies and turn over the management of their lands to their wives.

Their peasants, however, were ready to go immediately. They deserted the lands they tilled as serfs (bound to their masters) and set off to "the Holy Land." They had no idea where that was, and knew nothing about the lands they would pass through. German peasants followed a charismatic demagogue, Peter the Hermit, who led them down the Rhine River on a great Crusade, murdering thousands of Jews living there. They believed the "news" that Jews drank the blood of Christian babies and were unbelievers deserving death.

Next, the mobs headed toward Constantinople, traveling through Hungary, a Christian kingdom whose people spoke a language other than "Christian," (French, German, English). The mobs began slaughtering Hungarians, (fake news that they were pagans), a slaughter that stopped when the government troops wiped them out.

From the 15th to the 18th centuries in Europe, fake news ushered in the witch-hunting craze, a period in which thousands of mostly old women were accused of consorting with the Devil and were burned at the stake. Initially it was rumor and conspiracy theories, but ultimately it was greed and misogyny that spurred this movement.

The modern concept of "news" began in England, followed by the American colonies, in the late 1700s. Over time, certain newspapers were found to be, by consensus, reliable. Journalistic standards emerged in which news sources had to be vetted, sources named, and accounts of events as truthful as reporters could make them. Newspapers were considered so important by our Founding Fathers that the First Amendment to our Constitution was Freedom of Speech and the Press. The good press speaks truth to power.

In addition to reliable press, too many publications have been propaganda pieces, spreading conspiracy theories and outright lies. Powerful governments, dictatorships, have always made use of this capability.

One of the most blatant and successful pieces of made-up propaganda was produced by the Russian secret police in 1888, when they supposedly uncovered a document revealing an enormous Jewish plot to rule the world. This work, "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," circulated, meeting with great popularity, until the London and New York newspapers during the 1920s, declared the work a fraud, totally made up. Despite this discrediting, the book continued to be printed and disseminated by Henry Ford, Hitler, and finally printed in Arabic by Egypt and Saudi Arabia. People who choose this sort of "news" believe it, no matter what.

The Russians, first as an Empire, later as the USSR, and today as Russia the Nation State, have been masters of fake news. They have sowed so much propaganda through hacking, a national press that is just a mouthpiece of its government, and planting every sort of conspiracy and fake news throughout the world. Some people are so credulous that they will believe anything in print. I remember one "National Inquirer" with a headline: "Baby Born with Wooden Leg." People were buying this gem in the supermarket checkout stand.

Russia's lower house of parliament this week unanimously approved a bill allowing the government to register international media outlets as "foreign agents." Their own investigative journalists are jailed, accused of "fake news," or murdered. Their protection against dictatorship is now gone. One-third of our own population is on the same path. They believe real news is fake and fake news is real.

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