

Fake news? That's a very old story.

By Robert G. Parkinson November 25, 2016

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Last week, [The Post](#) reported that Paul Horner, “the 38-year-old impresario of a Facebook fake-news empire,” believes he turned the election in favor of Donald Trump. For many, the claim signals an alarming turn into uncharted political territory. But fake news is part of American history. In fact, it goes back to the founding of the republic.

In 1769, [John Adams](#) gleefully wrote in his diary about spending the evening occupied with “a curious employment. Cooking up Paragraphs, Articles, Occurrences etc. — working the political Engine!” Adams, along with his cousin Sam and a handful of other Boston patriots, were planting false and exaggerated stories meant to undermine royal authority in Massachusetts.

Several other leaders of the American Revolution likewise attempted to manage public opinion by fabricating stories that looked like the real thing. [William Livingston](#), then governor of New Jersey, secretly crafted lengthy pieces that newspaper publishers featured. One, titled “The Impartial Chronicle,” was anything but, claiming that the king was sending tens of thousands of foreign soldiers to kill Americans.

But the most important was crafted in 1782 at a makeshift printing press in a Paris suburb. Benjamin Franklin, taking time out from his duties as American ambassador to France, concocted an entirely fake issue of a real Boston newspaper, the *Independent Chronicle*. In it, Franklin fabricated a story allegedly from the New York frontier .

The story was gruesome: American forces had discovered bags containing more than 700 “[SCALPS from our unhappy Country-folks.](#)” There were bags of boys’, girls’, soldiers and even infants’ scalps, all allegedly taken by Indians in league with King George. There was also a note written to the tyrant king hoping he would receive these presents and “be refreshed.”

None of this was true, of course, but it struck a frightful chord. To drive the point home, Franklin composed a fake letter from a real person, naval hero John Paul Jones, that ventriloquized almost verbatim the Declaration of Independence, including the accusation toward the end of that document suggesting the colonies must declare independence because the king has “engage[d] savages to murder . . . defenseless farmers, women, and children.”

Franklin sent copies of his fake newspaper to colleagues insisting, “the substance is truth.” Sure enough, the story appeared in real papers in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, New York and Rhode Island. What did those readers believe? Did they know they were being manipulated?

Franklin wrote a friend about the power of what he had just done. “By the press we can speak to nations,” he wrote with pride. With the power of the newspaper, politicians could not only “strike while the iron is hot,” but also stoke those fires by “continual striking,” Franklin wrote with a wink.

Franklin’s concoction didn’t swing the Revolution. By this time, the Americans had defeated the British at Yorktown, and independence was all but secured. But the topic of Franklin’s gory hoax was significant: What an independent United States would do about the people Franklin spread this untruth about was entirely up in the air.

To be sure, many Native Americans had allied with the British and inflicted deep wounds to families across the frontier. But not all of them had. Franklin’s lies added to the notion that all Indians were “merciless,” as the Declaration referred to them. None of them, by that reasoning, could be Americans, even the thousands who served alongside George Washington. By the “continual striking” of that idea, Franklin’s bags of scalps obliterated such nuance. They were all enemies to the republic.

Flash forward 30 years. It is 1813, and America is again at war with Britain. The king’s men are again making alliances with native people. At the Raisin River in Michigan, a combined force of British soldiers and natives routed the Americans, killing hundreds of Kentucky militiamen. An outraged public then adopted the rallying cry “Remember the Raisin!” for the remainder of the War of 1812.

How did newspaper publishers remember the Raisin River massacre? By resurrecting Franklin’s hoax. That spring, to illustrate the long roots of this terrible bloodshed, U.S. newspapers introduced a new generation to Franklin’s fake bags of scalps, heating up the iron once again. And, once again, reinforcing the idea that Indians — supposedly bloodthirsty, dangerous and in league with the British — were America’s enemy.

Our own fake news purveyor, Paul Horner, suggests that Americans today are “definitely dumber” than they used to be. Perhaps. But we are not the only ones who fell for hoaxes, and American leaders — even ones we revere as Founding Fathers — were not above embracing such fabrications to shape opinion.

These stories from America’s past, however, are not dissimilar to ones in our own time. Then, as now, they were about who belongs to the republic and who does not. Then, as now, they were about stirring up fear and passions. We need to proceed cautiously. Stories that we think may vanish as a blip in our social media news feeds may end up having a longer life than we expect, causing more damage than we can anticipate.

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