Chapter 10

Spiritualism and the Resurgence of Fake News

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the Spiritualist movement and its rapid growth due to the formation of mass media and compares these events with the current rise of fake news in the mass media. The technology of cheaper publications created a media platform that featured stories about Spiritualist mediums and communications with the spirit world. These articles were published in newspapers next to regular news creating a blurred line between real and hoax news stories. Laws were later created to address instances of fraud that occurred in the medium industry. Today, social media platforms provide a similar vessel for the spread of fake news. Online fake news is published alongside legitimate news reports leaving readers unable to differentiate between real and fake articles. Around the world countries are actioning initiatives to address the proliferation of false news to prevent the spread of misinformation. This chapter compares the parallels between these events, how hoaxes and fake news begin and spread, and examines the measures governments are taking to curb the growth of misinformation.

INTRODUCTION

The Victorian era saw the birth of one of the largest religious movements when the Fox sisters’ claim to be able to communicate with departed spirits rapidly spread across the Western world. The Victorians had a prominent death culture which fueled their interest in these claims and permitted them to accept the possibility of communicating with loved ones beyond the grave. This religious movement was an attractive belief system because of the high death rate experienced by both the upper and lower classes. This movement became known as Spiritualism, and its followers, Spiritualists. The rapid growth of the movement occurred as a result of the advent of mass media. The proliferation of Spiritualist followers can be directly correlated with the new printing technology that permitted newspapers to be printed at a cheaper cost, which became known as the penny press. Prior to the penny press, printing technology was expensive and newspapers were targeted at an upper class audience who could make regular pur-
chases or afford subscriptions. Once newspapers could be printed at a lower cost, individuals from the middle and lower classes were also able to afford to purchase the paper. The entire newspaper industry shifted as papers began to make revenue from advertising, and as this newly tapped audience wanted to read stories different than those that appealed to the upper class. The penny press spawned the era of mass media as new newspapers were established, printed en masse, and sold. News stories of mediums and communication with the spirit world were frequently featured in the popular press, and the constant controversy about whether it was a hoax or not only encouraged the popularity and spread of the Spiritualist movement.

In the information era, the Internet and social media platforms are the new technologies that have profoundly influenced and changed mass media. The Internet and social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, can be argued to be today’s equivalent of the penny press. The more sensational a news story was in the penny papers, the more papers it sold and the more advertisers were willing to pay for running advertisements. Spiritualist mediums capitalized on this new form of media and often prompted controversies about their own stage shows in order to create a sensational story for the papers. Similarly, today, stories posted and shared on social media platforms are published with the sole intention of capturing attention via sensationalized clickbait titles that encourage viewers to click the website link, which generates ad revenue for the site’s owner. Similar to the penny press, the Internet and social media have further facilitated the authoring of content and the sharing of information. Penny papers enabled new newspapers, publishers, and journalists to become established and allowed information to be consumed by more people by being sold inexpensively due to the revenue generated by advertisements. The Internet has done much the same, especially in the Western world. The Internet and social media have enabled anyone to be a publisher or author, and have allowed information to be consumed at a rapid rate by a large audience with revenue generated by advertisement.

Controversy, hoaxes, and sensational stories were published in the penny press to propel the Spiritualist movement. The promise of contacting a loved one who had passed on gained a strong following during a time when the death tolls of the American Civil War and the First and Second World Wars affected so many. Today, fake news and misinformation likewise gain traction by exploiting people’s fears and prejudices through the publication and promotion of stories that confirm people’s preconceptions. The titles of fake news stories are skillfully crafted for confirmation bias as they encourage people to click on a story that confirms their personal views, providing them with proof that their views are accurate. The ad revenue generated from fake news stories can be a profitable business for its publishers and can be used as an effective tool to spread misinformation to gain public support.

Spiritualism, hoaxes, and false news have all had outspoken opponents. Similar to England’s Fraudulent Mediums Act that legislated against mediums purposely deceiving their paying customers, governments around the world today are taking action against deceptive misinformation. Around the globe countries have set up task forces to prevent foreign influence on election campaigns and are allocating funds to educate the public about misinformation online. This chapter investigates how fake news is not a new phenomenon. It suggests that by examining our past and gaining an understanding of the motives that drive people to believe the unbelievable, we can better formulate how to approach similar issues concerning misinformation that persist today.