

Social Media: The New Yellow Journalism (of the 21st Century)?

How the spread of misinformation or hyperbolized (facts), be it intentional or unintentional, has taken on a new fashion in the 21st century--comparable to that of 19th century Yellow Journalism--misrepresents historical narrative, undermines the lives of those who are combating the disproven reality head on, or even vilifies certain aspects of history in order to sway public opinion in a desirable direction.



(image credit: preweek.com)

By definition, social media does not narrow itself down to digital applications. Instead, it is an online or paper-based device that “enables users to create and share content or participate in social networking (Oxford Dictionary).” Take “yellow journalism,” a term coined in 1898 during the conflict and eventual war between the United States and Spanish, for example. Newspapers such as the **New York Journal** or **New York World** harbored that “yellow journalism” strategy to discuss a socio-political affair and blow it out of proportion to sway public opinion. The incentive with this form of journalism and media was to blame the Spanish for heinous acts and harness public desire to fight against the Spanish, eliminate their power in Cuba, and encroach for economic benefit. Because this form of journalism was the only hub for information that the United States could refer to in terms of updates regarding international conflict, it was inevitable that misinformation would be spread.

Not all forms of social media are misinformed; however, with these hubs of socio-economic and political affairs comes the ability to skew the truth or contort facts—be it conscious or subconscious—to provoke a desired reaction. Tying back to the more prevalent forms of social media in the present day, Instagram, Facebook, and Tiktok are all arenas that have exacerbated the spread of misinformation and fabrication of “news” or “facts.” Infographics, captions, and pictures can implement that same strategy associated with 20th century “yellow journalism,” which is to hyperbolize or falsify. Whether or not the falsified information was spread intentionally, the issue does not lie in the motive. Instead, it lies in the outcome: how will the audience react, what information will be spread, and how will the event being discussed be contorted or skewed in ways that further blurs awareness?

Testaments to the above questions have displayed themselves more often in the past few years, specifically with the increased incentive to remain “socially active or aware.” Take, for instance, the late 2020 effort to combat or alleviate police brutality against marginalized groups: *Black Lives Matter*, a movement that rooted itself in securing socio-political justice and equality for African Americans, swept across all social media platforms. Every campaign or mass-belief system invites proponents and opponents of the cause at hand; infographics, social media accounts and videos, and news reports exacerbated the divide between supporters and non-supporters, specifically through the contortion of the truth. According to [nor.org](https://www.nor.org/), the translation of the Black Lives Matter movement onto applications such as Twitter and Instagram opened the door to a blatant skewing of the incentive of this movement. “Online are posts riddled with disinformation, including those specifically targeting BLM,” Cheryl Corley states.

“One post, for example, falsely claims the government has identified it as a terrorist group. Another widely circulated claim is that BLM activists had badly beaten a group of elderly white people (Corely, once over).” In this instance, misinformation was deliberately spread to vilify those involved in the *Black Lives Matter* movement and stain its name with false regard. Because the line has long been blurred between a social media falsity and a “cardinal truth,” public opinion is swayed, and understanding is skewed simply by the click of a button or the use of a keyword that misrenders the

facts. This very quote transcends the history of yellow journalism and reintroduces it in a wholly digital manner; in either case, public opinion or understanding is pinpricked by those false narratives, making it that much more difficult to remain aware or understand what it is the event or movement surrounds, and how it addresses social and racial liberties.

The Black Lives Matter issue was not the first nor last example of false narratives and hyperbolization. In the present day, those grievances have proved even more detrimental in regards to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, which has spanned since 2014, though amplified in the past few weeks following a complete Russian assault on Ukraine. Fear of the unknown and uncertain has amplified the spread of misinformation, specifically based on outlets such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter; because this conflict is multifaceted, a plurality of assumptions are made, egging on hysteria. A hot take of the validity of conflict between Russia and Ukraine has gone viral, “proving that this conflict is a hoax” and that it has been “fabricated or hyperbolized by the West in terms of its scale.” According to [bbc.com](https://www.bbc.com), a video featuring a set of actors and a crew of cameras filming a script that had to do with an attack on Ukrainian soil resurfaced in the past few weeks. Unbeknown to the entire audience of Twitter and social media viewers, this video dated back to 2020, two years before the immediate February attacks (made on behalf of Russia), and was not meant to foreshadow Russo-Ukrainian conflict. The individual who posted this video purposely took it out of context to sway public opinion and prove that this entire conflict is staged.

Social media has reigned the most prevalent outlet for individuals such as the person who posted this video to completely skew the narrative and share entirely false information in anonymity--without consequences being tied to their name. With instances such as “posts riddled with misinformation” in regards to the Black Lives Matter Movement, the spread of misinformation not only makes it increasingly difficult to understand what the event pertains to and how we as a society can combat said issues, it also undermines the rights, liberties, and efforts or feelings of those who have directly endured a socio-economic, racial, or war-based issue. It provides persons living behind a screen with the ability to comment, skew, and manipulate the context of a rather serious issue---a

power which then redefines history, pits individuals against one another based on swayed public opinion, and undermines or even disguises the lives of those facing the issue head on.

With the intentional spread of misinformation comes the opposite end: the non-intentional. Unlike those above, this form of misinformation is not deliberately spread to plague or sway public opinion. Instead, it is often to encourage awareness regarding a current event or issue. Infographics, educational videos, or informative posters are shared on social media platforms or even through more local media(s) such as the school newspaper, broadcasts, etc., to contextualize a current event and describe or explain how and why it is affecting society in the present day. A majority of the non-intentional spread(s) of misinformation bases itself on the unknown: at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, 2020, the unknown was analogous to the common state of mind. No one understood the multitude of this virus and therefore could only speculate about when and where the virus originated and the fortitude of the disease. According to [frontiersin.org](https://www.frontiersin.org), “Misinformation about COVID-19 has proliferated widely on social media, ranging from the peddling of fake “cures,” such as gargling with lemon or salt water and injecting yourself with bleach ([World Health Organization, 2020a](https://www.who.int)) to false conspiracy theories that the virus was bioengineered in a lab in Wuhan ([Andersen et al., 2020](#); [Cohen, 2020](#)), or that the 5G cellular network is causing or exacerbating symptoms of COVID-19 ([BBC News, 2020](#)).” Because this speculation could not be confirmed nor denied at the very beginning of the pandemic, these falsities were virtually unhaltable until mid-or late-end pandemic when the virus was debunked and understood biologically, chemically, and medicinally.

With all of the aforementioned, it is imperative that an individual considers whether or not their terms or words will misrender perception of an event or goes according to their own beliefs rather than the facts. If the facts have yet to be confirmed, perhaps it is more beneficial to keep those speculation(s) to yourself so as to not promote misinformation or public outcry, or undermine the experiences of those whose reality is being falsified.

Sources:

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