

What's New about Fake News? Integrating Digital History for Media Literacy

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As we continue to confront the implications of fake news and misinformation for American democracy, particularly the effects on our public institutions, it is natural to turn to examples from the past. Digital libraries and archives provide our students with unprecedented access to media from the past. Digital history includes the raw materials of history—archival materials such as texts, images, and artifacts that have been digitized to allow access to larger audiences. Digital history also includes products such as digital documentaries, digital exhibits, and digital tours that provide a narrative or argument about the past. Teachers can use digital history as “history-specific cognitive tools” to “help students learn content, analyze sources, frame historical problems, corroborate evidence, determine significance, or build historical arguments.”¹ I will focus on resources available through the Library of Congress, including the *Chronicling America* collection, and affiliated organizations. At the outset, it is important to note that digital archives are themselves historical narratives, relying on available archival evidence and curated based on a unique set of assumptions and biases.

Looking to the Past to Understand the Present

Turning to the past to help understand contemporary contexts makes the field of history more relevant for students as

they draw lessons about historical significance and change over time. According to Lynn Hunt:

The emergence of new concerns in the present invariably reveals aspects of historical experience that have been occluded or forgotten. Respect for the past ... enables us to see beyond our present-day concerns backward and forward at the same time.²

This “respect for the past” includes avoiding presentism—relying too heavily on our contemporary perspectives to understand the past. Peter Lee cautions that “world views of previous generations of people were profoundly different than our own.”³ Understanding the past requires students to develop “extraordinary knowledge and skills” to “put oneself in another’s shoes.”⁴ Teachers must help students navigate the pitfalls of presentism as they “examine the fruitful tension between present concerns and respect for the past.”⁵ When students consider the ways in which their present experiences influence their interpretation of past events, they can develop more nuanced understandings both about the past and the present. Specific to understanding the long history of fake news, digital history can provide cognitive tools for students to analyze media as a cultural text. Highlighted teaching

examples include evaluating new media over time, uncovering bias, and engaging in discourse analysis.

Evaluating Newspapers and Other Media

The history of the press in the United States provides a window into major political events over time. News stories provide content about events as well as reflect the socio-cultural context of the time. Newspapers helped to shape public opinion, and the perspectives conveyed often reveal political and geographic differences. Teachers can juxtapose other types of media alongside newspaper accounts to engage students in uncovering bias and seeking out corroborating evidence. The teaching suggestions I provide include brief summaries about the role of newspapers and other media at different times in American history alongside examples of relevant digital history resources for the events mentioned (see sidebar on p. 115). Across the examples, students are encouraged to engage in discourse analysis to uncover hidden bias and latent meaning in the artifacts.

Colonial Period, the Boston Massacre, and Perspective Taking in Media

Colonial leaders knew that newspapers could play an important role in shaping public opinion about the revolu-

tionary cause. In his diary, John Adams wrote, “The Evening spent in preparing for the Next Days Newspaper [*Boston Gazette*]—a curious Employment. Cooking up Paragraphs, Articles, Occurrences, &c.—working the political Engine!” For evidence of the “political engine” at work, we can turn to Monday, March 12, 1770, when the *Boston Gazette* featured a stark illustration of four simple coffins alongside an account of the events that became known as the Boston Massacre (see sidebar on p. 115 for URLs). Details of the event were also captured in an engraving by Paul Revere, “The Bloody Massacre Perpetrated in King Street Boston,” which largely corroborates the account offered by the *Boston Gazette*. To look for contradictory evidence, students must dig deeper. Options include reading the transcript of the trial of the British soldiers, represented in court by John Adams. At the trial, James Bailey testified to seeing large pieces of ice being thrown at the soldiers. Students can also read [British] Captain Thomas Preston’s account of the events in the *Boston Evening Post*, on June 25, 1770.

Ultimately students will need to develop historical arguments about the Boston Massacre based on the primary sources they analyze. Beyond acknowledging evidence of the clash between British soldiers stationed in Boston and civilians, the exact details of the events appear to be complicated by competing accounts. Part of understanding the Boston Massacre as a significant event in American history, then, is understanding how it became latent with cultural meaning. Historical accounts of the events reveal the concerns and perspectives of the time and demonstrate how media captured and perhaps shaped those perspectives.

By extension, students can continue their analytical reflection about the Boston Massacre and media created to describe the event, by considering the recognition given to Crispus Attucks, a victim of the massacre. Although his death

was mentioned in the *Boston Gazette* (1770)—“A mulatto man, named Crispus Attucks, who was born in Framingham, but lately belonged to New-Providence... also killed instantly”—he did not appear in Paul Revere’s engraving. Rather, it was much later that Attucks appears in visual depictions of the Boston Massacre. For example, when students analyze W. L. Champney’s (1856) and B.F. Hammond’s (1897) lithographs they will note Attucks as a central, highlighted figure in the imagery of the massacre. This discourse can be compared to digital primary source texts that mention Attucks, including Booker T. Washington’s (1898) Thanksgiving Jubilee services address and Martin Luther King Jr.’s (1964) *Why We Can’t Wait*. Here teachers can encourage students to consider the role of media as a cultural creation, reflecting the concerns and issues of the time in which it is created. For instance, students will note that Attucks gained greater recognition as victim of the Boston Massacre over time, especially as part of the long civil rights movement in the United States.

Harper’s Ferry and the Significance of News Images

Throughout the nineteenth century, newspapers became increasingly important in American culture. Advances in printing technology made it cheaper and easier for publishers to reach large groups of people. This period was also marked by the emergence of an independent, commercial press, free from political party affiliation. According to Menahem Blondheim, “The independent press remained political, opinionated, and even partisan. Yet its independence of party sponsorship and patronage had far-reaching effects on the nature and flow of public information.”⁶ Among these effects were the rise of investigative journalism and the notion of the free press as a check on government power.

One of the most successful newspapers of the period, *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* (established in 1855), gained

prominence due to its coverage of John Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry. During the Civil War, the paper’s circulation averaged between 100,000–160,000 copies per issue. Andrea Pearson notes that Leslie’s paper “had a reputation for sensationalizing written news” yet was credited with highlighting the “importance and accuracy of the news image in nineteenth-century America.”⁷

To explore the significance of news images as a new technology of the nineteenth century, students can analyze a variety of Leslie’s images of John Brown. For example, the Saturday, November 19, 1859, edition featured a full-page portrait of John Brown with the caption: “John Brown, now under sentence of death for treason and murder, at Charlestown, Va. From a photograph taken one year ago by Martin M. Lawrence.” This image and others from Leslie’s newspaper could be analyzed with particular attention paid to the extent to which Leslie’s newspaper was able to provide “accurate” images of a polemic event. In addition, Leslie’s images could be compared to other accounts about Harper’s Ferry from newspapers across the United States. For example, *The Southerner* (Tarboro Edgecombe Co., N.C., 1859) described the “startling news” about the raid on Harper’s Ferry. *The Iowa Transcript* (1859) focused on Brown’s “defense of the Constitution” and his experiences in Bleeding Kansas. And *The Anti-Slavery Bugle* (Ohio, 1860) referred to “the martyrs” who died at Harper’s Ferry. These papers provide a snapshot of the regional differences in reporting about Harper’s Ferry. By extension, students could also compare Leslie’s reporting before and after the start of the Civil War when, in order to keep his readership, he gave the newspaper a “decisively Northern bent.”⁸ Across these examples, the news images and stories provide insight about the culture of the time in which they were produced, highlighting the importance placed on pictorial papers and the role of the newspaper at a time of deep political polarization. They also demonstrate the

Digital History Resources

(This list of resources can also be accessed at: go.ncsu.edu/whatsnewfakenews)

Colonial Period, the Boston Massacre, and Perspective Taking in Media

The Boston Gazette and Country Journal. Monday, March 12, 1770, www.loc.gov/item/2006682619/

Article from pages 2–3 of *The Boston-Gazette and Country Journal*, No. 779, March 12 1770, www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=316&img_step=1&pid=2&mode=transcript#page1

Paul Revere's engraving of the "The Bloody Massacre Perpetrated in King Street Boston," www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a45748/

Trial of the British soldiers (1824)
www.loc.gov/law/help/rare-books/pdf/john_adams_1824_version.pdf

Boston Evening Post, June 25 1770 (the Annotated Newspapers of Harbottle Dorr, Jr.) www.masshist.org/dorr/volume/3/sequence/196

Crispus Attucks and the Boston Massacre
www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/march-05/

The Boston Massacre, March 5, 1770 (by W.L. Champney)
www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/388659

Harper's Ferry and the Significance of News Images

John Brown *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (front page)
<https://cdn.loc.gov/service/pnp/cph/3c30000/3c37000/3c37500/3c37591v.jpg>

The Harper's Ferry Insurrection—The U.S. Marines storming the engine house—Insurgents firing through holes in the doors / from a sketch made on the spot by our special artist. www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3c26970/

The Southerner, October 22, 1859, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn90052434/1859-10-22/ed-1/>

Iowa Transcript, November 3, 1859,
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87058318/1859-11-03/ed-1/>

The Anti-Slavery Bugle, New-Lisbon, Ohio, November 10, 1860,
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83035487/1860-11-10/ed-1/seq-3/>

Civil War, News Journalism, and Photography

Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln. Volume 7. Lincoln, Abraham, 1809-1865 <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln7/1:773.2?rgn=div2;view=fulltext;q1=May+30%2C+1864>

The Life of Abraham Lincoln
<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=KCoDAAAAYAAJ&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA11>

Abraham Lincoln Slide Show—Selected Images from the Collections of the Library of Congress
www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/608_lincoln_slide.html

Gold Hoax, Forged Proclamation and Reaction (Transcription from the Lincoln papers)
<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln7/1:773.2?rgn=div2;view=fulltext;q1=May+30%2C+1864>

Gold Hoax, The Forged Proclamation and Reaction (Transcription from NYT archives)
www.nytimes.com/1864/05/19/archives/the-forged-proclamation-public-excitement-and-indignation.html

The New York Herald, May 19, 1864, Page 2, Image 2
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030313/1864-05-19/ed-1/seq-2/>

About the New York Journal of Commerce
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030542/>

The true story behind the Gettysburg sharpshooter (National Archives)
<https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2013/06/20/the-true-story-behind-the-gettysburg-sharpshooter/>

The Home of the Rebel Sharpshooter
<https://iz.wp.com/prologue.blogs.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/home-of-a-rebel-sharpshooter.jpg?ssl=1>

Civil War Photojournalism: A Record of War (Library of Congress)
www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/photojournalism/slides.html

Our protection/ Chas. Paxson, photographer, N.Y.
www.loc.gov/item/2016647906/

Rosa, Charley, Rebecca. Slave children from New Orleans / Chas. Paxson, photographer, N.Y., www.loc.gov/item/2010647863/

Charley, a slave boy from New Orleans / Chas. Paxson, photographer, N.Y., www.loc.gov/item/2010647888/

extent to which media can influence the viewer's impression of historical events by emphasizing, distorting, or omitting certain aspects of those events.

Civil War, News Journalism, and Photography

Abraham Lincoln is often credited for the way in which he “grew to understand and appreciate newspapers as a political tool for reaching a wide audience” and “as a means for self-advancement in his career as a politician.”⁹ During his political career and as president he nurtured a positive relationship with the press and media of the time, noting that “public sentiment is everything.”¹⁰ Given the increasingly widespread nature of the news media of the day, Lincoln also had to contend with less than favorable press, including from Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*. According to Allen Guelzo, “Far from deferring to wartime opinion, Lincoln instead took up the task of molding and shaping it himself.”¹¹ For instance, Lincoln's secretary, John Hay, sent material to several newspapers during the time and some believed that Lincoln may have been involved directly in the political correspondence. After the *Emancipation Proclamation* (1862), Lincoln and his administration mounted a campaign to positively impact public opinion in the face of widespread criticism.

Perhaps the most significant example of misinformation that Lincoln had to confront during his administration was the Civil War “Gold Hoax” in May 1864. Hoping to manipulate the gold market, Joseph Howard conspired to insert a fake report in two New York newspapers from Lincoln alerting the American public about the conscription of 400,000 new troops. News of the draft and the implication that the war was not favoring the North sent shock waves through the New York Stock Exchange. Very quickly editors of other newspapers became suspicious about the report and soon revealed Howard as the culprit. Students can read the text of the fake

executive order as well as the response in a digital version of Lincoln's papers. Importantly, this event calls to question issues related to the freedom of the press and, considering Howard's three-month prison sentence, whether or not people who produce fake news should be punished.

Beyond examining outright hoaxes, students can also consider the role of photography in shaping public assumptions about Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War more generally. For example, “biographers have noted that Abraham Lincoln was the first president to use photography actively to present a favorable public image of his administration.”¹² Here, students can explore images of Lincoln to analyze the messages he was presenting about himself as a leader and a person.

At the same time, students have the opportunity to explore a large body of war photography taken during the Civil War. Students may recognize the work of Mathew Brady and his contemporaries, who documented battlefields and the home front. Rather than read these images as eyewitness accounts of the war, students can critically explore the photographs to uncover their underlying discourse and relevance within nineteenth-century American culture. According to Allen Trachtenberg, Civil War photographers sometimes manipulated images to resemble popular notions about the war or other illustrations of the time.¹³ Famously, the photographer of the “Rebel Sharpshooter” staged the shot, moving the body of a dead Confederate soldier to intensify the drama of the scene. This and other images from the time provide further evidence of the manner in which media both shape and are shaped by the cultural context.

In order to appreciate common notions about photography in the nineteenth century, students can also study the widely popular *carte-de-visite* (CdV) photographs from the period (small prints mounted on card stock). Since CdVs could be sent easily through the

mail and cheaply produced, this technology enabled people to share and collect images of loved ones, popular figures, and important events. Charles Paxson produced and sold CdVs of slave children in New Orleans during the Civil War. *Harper's Weekly* published Paxson's images to accompany a public tour by formerly enslaved people promoting abolitionist causes in the North in 1864. As students analyze Paxson's images, they can consider questions these images raise about race. They might also consider the timing of the publication, just after the New York draft riots, and the intended effect of the public media campaign as the Civil War dragged into its fourth year. Perhaps the CdVs of popular figures also provide early examples of the rise of celebrity culture and social media.

Discourse Analysis Questions

What is notable about this image?

What compositional elements do you notice?

What seems to be the message?

Making Connections to Today

By exploring innovation in information technology and the evolving role of media from the eighteenth and nineteenth century, students have an opportunity to go beyond presentism—viewing the artifacts through the lens of modern technology—towards deeper understanding of the context in which the artifacts were produced. By analyzing digital history, students will contextualize the history of journalism in the United States over time. They can continue their exploration by considering the role of news media during the civil rights era and the Watergate scandal and in more recent developments within the field of journalism. At the same time, this study calls to mind perennial questions about the development of public opinion—“as the product of public-minded rational

consensus”¹⁴ or the product of popular (often commercial) media. An important aspect of understanding media is to consider the extent to which it has impacted public opinion and been shaped by public opinion over time. 🌐

Notes

1. Robert B. Bain, “‘They Thought the World was Flat?’ Applying the Principles of *How People Learn* in Teaching High School History,” in *How Students Learn: History, Mathematics, and Science in the Classroom*, eds. M. Suzanne Donovan and John D. Bransford (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2005), 202–203.
2. Lynn Hunt, “Against Presentism,” *Perspectives on History: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association* (May 1, 2002), www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2002/against-presentism, n.p.
3. Peter Lee, “Putting Principles into Practice: Understanding History,” in *How Students Learn: History, Mathematics, and Science in the Classroom*, 183.
4. Ibid.
5. Hunt, n.p.
6. Menahem Blondheim, “‘Public Sentiment is Everything:’ The Union’s Public Communications Strategy and the Bogus Proclamation of 1864,” *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 3 (December 2002), 873.
7. Andrea G. Pearson, “Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper and Harper’s Weekly: Innovation and Imitation in Nineteenth-Century American Pictorial Reporting,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 23, no. 4 (Spring 1990), 82.
8. Pearson, 89.
9. Gregory A. Borchard and David W. Bulla, *Lincoln Mediated: The President and the Press Through Nineteenth-Century Media* (New York, N.Y.: Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 2.
10. The Complete Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858, ed. Paul M. Angle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 114.
11. Allen C. Guelzo, “‘Public Sentiment is Everything:’ Abraham Lincoln and the Power of Public Opinion,” *Lincoln and Liberty: Wisdom for the Ages*, ed. Lucas E. Morel (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 183.
12. Borchard and Bulla, 29.
13. Allen Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images of History Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York, N.Y.: Hill and Wang, 1989).
14. Guelzo, 174.

Reference

1. See for example the special section on media literacy in *Social Education* 82, no. 4 (September 2018.)

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