

(HISTORY) (REPEATS ITSELF)

MISINFORMATION

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Picture this: mid-June, a riot in New England burns down a statue of a politician. Angry civilians seek revenge in the form of arson after reading an article about the governor of Massachusetts' political stance on a controversial law. Does burning down a figure of him

bring about any real change? Not really. Although illogical, unproductive, and sometimes even hypocritical, it is human nature to vent frustration in violent manners when someone has a contrary opinion. Interestingly enough, this Massachusetts governor wasn't even in favor of this law. Thanks to some misinformed journalism, angry Bostonians attempted to remove him from office, despite sharing the same political views.

Deepfakes, clickbait, misquotes. We live in an age rife with misinformation. There is no shortage of panic-riddled articles, Youtube videos, and even real-life conversations about this pandemic of fake news. It seems, unless something is physically in print, we can't trust anything we read these days. And to many people, this 21st-century pandemonium makes perfect sense. Before the internet, you had to be somebody to have published work. Nowadays, anyone can publish anything about any topic with no regard to credibility, and people will reference and cite these "facts" as if they hold merit.

With every chaotic thing happening in the world, misinformation being one of them, it can seem like times are getting progressively worse. But there is good and bad news. The good news is that things aren't worse than they were before, and the bad news is that things have always been bad. Problems may manifest themselves in different ways, but the core issues are always the same. After all, human nature is human nature.

Remember that riot in Massachusetts? It did happen in mid-June. Mid-June of 1773. The conniving politician who published that incorrect story was Samuel Adams, one of the founding fathers of our country.

In 1773 tensions were at an all-time high as the thirteen colonies tried to establish themselves as an independent country. Two of the hot-button issues were the Townshend Acts (arbitrary taxes on the colonists to raise money for the British Parliament) and the Stamp Act (taxes on any printed item such as newspapers, legal documents, and even playing cards). Colonists were appalled at this blatant act of taxation without representation. The aforementioned Massachusetts governor, Thomas Hutchinson himself was also against this, which he expressed in a series of letters to the assistant to the British Prime Minister. Unfortunately, these letters were vague, convoluted, and open to misinterpretation—which is exactly what ended up happening. Adams, a longtime opponent of Hutchinson,

was instructed by Benjamin Franklin not to publish these letters but did so anyway. Adams selectively published excerpts from the letters in a specific order with the sole intent of misinforming the public about Hutchinson's loyalties. Thanks to this slanderous, and more importantly, false article, not only was Hutchinson's reputation tarnished, but his political career was ruined.

This historical event parallels hundreds of other similar events that have happened not since the invention of the internet, nor the Gutenberg press, but the beginning of humankind. Misinformation has pervaded human

civilization ever since we began to communicate. Why are we so prone to not only spreading misinformation, but also vigorously and harmfully reacting to it without confirmation of its verity?

One of the greatest follies of human nature is our love for the sensational. We all love gossip, drama, scandal, and intrigue, and those who say they don't are lying. Whether it be putting others down to feel better about ourselves, or to spice up our own boring life, or maybe out of jealousy, there are many reasons why we can't seem to be able to mind our own business. Meddling in the lives of others gives us confirmation and consolation about how we choose to live our own. That's why this kind of "yellow journalism" exists. This is what makes money. This is what sells copies or garners clicks. It's meant to invoke our primitive, territorial instincts: our lust, greed, pride, or vanity. And when a large group of people are not using their prefrontal cortex, but rather their amygdalas, that's what we call an angry mob.

But why do we believe these kitschy headlines? Why don't we fact-check? Why don't we establish credibility? Why don't we seek out evidence that contradicts our preexisting notions? Aren't we rational beings, according to Aristotle? Unfortunately, confirmation bias can transform even the most rational logicians into biased sophists. We see what we want to see. We believe what we want to believe. We search for information that confirms our beliefs and disregard any that doesn't. We seek out people who agree with us. If someone doesn't fit into the echochamber that we've become accustomed to, we take it as a personal attack.

The scary thing is that we don't even realize we are biased. Most people believe they are unbiased. Most people are wrong. Confirmation bias is at the root of misinformation—the creation and the spread of it. And as long as confirmation bias is part of our nature, we will need to be wary of the information we consume and make sure to challenge our beliefs. There is more content and media than ever before and it seems like the world is becoming increasingly deceptive. The truth is that it's always been like this—it's just more in our face now. ☆