

***Facts are optional,
laughs are not!***

FAKE NEWS!

**DO YOU HAVE
A RIGHT TO BE
FOOLED?**



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Don’t stop learning now!

In *Introduction to Satire*, Leonard Feinberg defines satire as “a playfully critical distortion of the familiar.” One way that people create satire is by playfully distorting our ideas of the news: think mock television newscasts like *Saturday Night Live*’s Weekend Update or fictional online news sites like *The Beaverton*. When people play with the news this way, it becomes satirical “fake news.”

Satirical fake news goes back to at least the 1640s. Back then, it wasn’t called fake news, but it looked a lot like it. To enliven coverage of the English Civil War, satirists would embellish reports on the conflict. The basic idea underlying this 17th-century approach to playing with news—that is, stretching truths—lives on today.

This issue of *The PLEA* helps us make sense of the modern landscape of satirical fake news. It explores the many meanings of the term “fake news,” introduces popular sources of satirical fake news in Canada and abroad, discusses some reasons why satirical fake news can fool us, and considers if laws are needed to help rein in the sometimes fun but sometimes dangerous phenomena of fake news. Suitable for most any reader, *FAKE NEWS!* fulfills several indicators in Saskatchewan’s Media Studies 20 curriculum.

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A word can have more than one meaning. To know what we mean in any particular situation, we need to define our terms.

WHAT IS FAKE NEWS?

“Fake news” means a lot of things. Fun satirical news programs have been called fake news. Websites that publish malicious and misleading reports have been called fake news. Even reputable news organisations have been called fake news.

With so many uses for the words fake news, what can we make of its meaning? A good place to start is the *Oxford English Dictionary*. OED defines fake news as “news that conveys or incorporates false, fabricated, or deliberately misleading information.”



Roman Emperors used coins to spread news. Caesar's coins reinforced his claim that he descended from the goddess Venus.

News full of false, fabricated, or deliberately misleading information is nothing new. Across history people have used fake news to cast doubt on their rivals, build support for the causes they believe in, or just to have fun. Take the civil war in Rome some 2000 years ago. Emperor Octavian created poems that spread lies about his rival Mark Antony. As well, Octavian minted coins that glorified and at times stretched the truth about himself. In other words, Octavian was peddling fake news.

As technology evolved, fake news followed suit. The printing press, invented in 1440, was a key advance

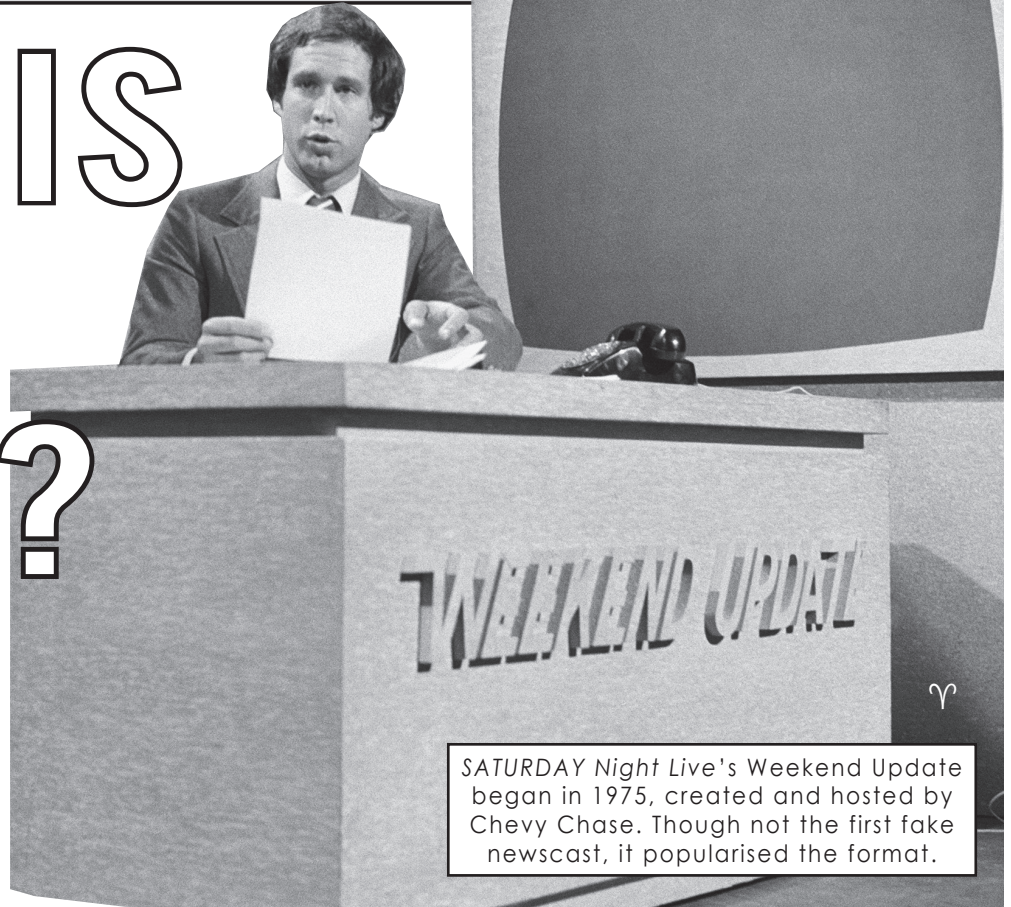
in how we spread ideas. For the first time, people could print countless copies of pamphlets filled with all sorts of news and information.

Historians such as Elizabeth Eisenstein say that this newfound ability to quickly print information and spread it far-and-wide was the single-biggest factor in the breakdown of the Catholic Church's domination over Europe. However, not every pamphlet was fair or accurate. False and inflammatory publications—that is, fake news—heated tempers and helped spark religious wars.

The next key advance in fake news came in the 1800s, once newspapers became established sources of information. Unsavoury newspaper

publishers would print fantastical or outrightly false news to increase readership or spread propaganda. Readers of the day called out this practice for exactly what it was: fake news. The words were widely used by 1890, the year the *Oxford English Dictionary* marks as their entry into the English language.

The term fake news didn't remain in common use for long. In the early 1900s the newspaper industry embraced the ideal of professional journalism. Newspapers now strived to be objective and fact-based. Once the news was more accurate, fake news was no longer on the public's mind and the term faded away.



SATURDAY Night Live's Weekend Update began in 1975, created and hosted by Chevy Chase. Though not the first fake newscast, it popularised the format.

WHAT IS FAKE NEWS? (CONT.)

Keeping Up with the Times

Even though the term fake news went into hibernation for most of the 20th century, the spread of fake news never stopped. People still created misleading information that masqueraded as legitimate news, but it was usually called propaganda.

In the mid 1990s, the term fake news emerged from its slumber. This time, it was repurposed to describe satirical newscasts on American television. Such fake newscasts created satire by mixing current events with critical humour and serious commentary.

Canadian-born comedian Norm Macdonald was key in bringing back these words. The host of *Saturday Night Live*'s Weekend Update from 1994-1997, he would open each newscast with "I'm Norm Macdonald, and now, the fake news." With almost 10 million weekly viewers, Macdonald mainstreamed fake news as a description for fun, satirical news.

Shortly after Macdonald left *Saturday Night Live*, *The*

Daily Show with Jon Stewart debuted on Comedy Central. Another fake news show, it became popular for its critical political content. While staff would privately call the show fake news, Comedy Central didn't publicly embrace the label until 2004.

At the time, American news network CNN branded itself "The most trusted name in news." During the 2004 Republican National Convention, Comedy Central played on CNN's slogan by setting up a large billboard near the convention centre that pronounced *The Daily Show* as "The most trusted name in fake news." The move further cemented fake news in the public's mind as a form of satire.

Everything Old is New Again

Barely a decade passed before fake news began to be associated with its original meaning of bad, deliberately misleading information. In 2014, online disinformation expert Craig Silverman was running a research project on plagiarised and fabricated



news. Spotting a false story on *National Report*, he labelled it "fake news" and posted it to Twitter. The tweet didn't get much attention, but it was the beginning of Silverman using fake news in its original sense: as he defines it, "people or entities who consciously lie for profit and propaganda."

As Silverman's project carried into 2016, he and his colleague Lawrence Alexander discovered Macedonian-based websites that were spreading deliberately misleading news that favoured then-presidential candidate

Donald Trump. They wrote about it for *Buzzfeed* on November 3rd of that year. The story went viral, and Google searches for the words "fake news" skyrocketed. Fake news was back on the public's mind as a term for false or misleading news reports, just like it was with newspaper readers of the 1800s.

Only a month later, the meaning of fake news further evolved. This time, the change was drastic and profound. On December 10th, then president-elect Donald

What is Professional Journalism?

Journalism is a watchdog on all of society. To be a good watchdog, quality journalism sticks to some basic principles: independence, inquiry, and fact verification.

Independence means that journalists should be free from influence—be it from government, corporations, or even media owners—to

pursue stories wherever they find them. Inquiry means that journalists should ensure that all relevant avenues of a story are covered. Verification of facts means that journalists should check that their report is true. When journalism embraces these principles, we can feel more confident in the news that we consume.



Trump took to Twitter to describe a CNN story that he would stay on as executive producer of reality TV show *The Apprentice* while in office as “FAKE NEWS!!!”

To be sure, the CNN story had factual errors. Importantly though, the errors did not appear to be deliberate. CNN based their story on a report that appeared earlier that day in *Variety*.

From here Trump continued to use the term, transforming it into a catch-all description of many legacy journalistic organisations such as *The New York Times* and NBC News. In fact, during his first term as president he used “fake news”

approximately 2,000 times. It caught on, and many people now regularly use it to discredit news organisations.

The term fake news, thus, has come to have at least three uses today. First, it can be deployed to describe news reports that appear real but are maliciously intended to mislead people. Think Macedonian websites knowingly peddling falsehoods as real news. Second, it can be deployed to describe fun or mischievous satirical news. Think Week-

end Update offering a humorous version of the news. Third, it can be deployed in a pejorative sense to discredit and undermine trust in professional journalism. Think Donald Trump suggesting that some reports or even entire news organisations are little more than purveyors of false information.

Consumers of news and current events have good reason to be attuned to every possible meaning of fake news. In fact, our media literacy depends on knowing how the term is being used in any given context.

The coming pages focus on the fun: we will consider fake

BENNY HILL OFTEN USED BURLESQUE TO SATIRISE THE NEWS.

news that is mischievous and satirical. Such fake news has the possibility to mislead, but unlike more nefarious forms of fake news it is not out to maliciously fool people. Rather, its creators generally have good intentions.

**NEWS FLASH!
THE TERM FAKE NEWS
HAS AT LEAST THREE
USES TODAY**

1. Professional journalists will issue updates to their stories or entirely retract them if facts are proven to be incorrect.
 - a) Why are these updates important for maintaining trust in journalism?
 - b) People generally don't re-read the news. How much impact do updates or retractions have?
2. Prior to the 21st century, only a few print or broadcast organisations could spread news far-and-wide. The cost of equipment and limited airwave bandwidth were barriers to entry. Today, anyone with an internet connection can create and spread news. What are the good and bad things to have come from these changes?
3. Trust in the news media is at an all-time low. Do you think that satirical fake news contributes to this distrust? If so, how?

Canada is inundated with American

But we also create
relevant to our

VANCOUVER

This is That is a radio news program that sounds like CBC Radio One's serious journalism. It aired from 2010-2018, and periodically reappears for special features. Their reports include eyewitness interviews and expert commentary, and use background sounds to add an air of realism.

The realism fools some listeners. A story about the (non-existent) Calgary Aquarium shutting down and holding a public barbecue to get rid of the fish resulted in listeners calling the CBC to condemn the Aquarium. "I think this is absolutely outrageous and disgusting" said one listener, while another said "This is shocking... I just hope it's a joke."



SASKATOON

The Feather News creates thoughtful yet outrageously funny features that deal with everything from decolonisation's relationship with white "woke" culture to how Canada's courts clash with Indigenous sovereignty.

Beginning in 2018 as a blog, *The Feather News* soon grew into an APTN series. Founder Ryan Moccassin credits the relationship with APTN for helping them navigate sensitive issues with care. A second season is now available on APTN's lumi platform.



Walking Eagle News long-time Fontaine range for award for grow by employ straighten it Indigeno Fontaine cr part, to how " power than i left or the racism wh advises a to "Be a tell the

Fake News: Buy Local

fake news, from *Saturday Night Live's* Weekend Update to *The Onion*.

brilliant homegrown fake news that is far more day-to-day lives. Here's some to check out...

WINNIPEG

g Eagle News is a project by the Indigenous journalist Tim. Its newswire-type stories from "White vegan wins major or suggestion Inuit communities beans or something" to "Store free just gonna go ahead and items on shelf close to where person shopping."

credits his site's success, in it's more about attacking the right." He calls out where he sees it, and inspiring writers writer and truth."

TORONTO

The Beaverton is a sardonic Canadian fake news site. Since it launched in 2010, its offerings have included a Comedy Network series, a podcast, and a book that satirises Canada's history.

Editor-in-chief Luke Gordon Field is a lawyer by training. As he explained to *Canadaland*, Canada's history of rather strict defamation laws made it more difficult to say untrue things about people, particularly before freedom of expression was enshrined in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. This past may help explain why our satire has traditionally been more kind and cautious than American satire.



HALIFAX

22 Minutes is Canada's longest-running televised comedy show. Often political, it debuted for Canada's 1993 federal election. Episodes begin with a fake newscast, then continue with interviews, parody commercials, on-location reports, and critical editorials.

22 Minutes has had several controversial moments, including a 2003 incident where their sports commentator Raj Binder (played by Shaun Majumder) snuck into team photos at an Edmonton Oilers/Montreal Canadiens hockey game. An outraged Oilers official claimed Majumder ruined the photos and called him "a moron."



FAKE NEWS

In the 1980s and into the 1990s, North America's best-selling fake news was *Weekly World News*. Calling itself "America's Only Reliable Newspaper," this fantastical tabloid took news and stretched it to the limit. At its peak, it sold a million copies per week.

WWN lived in print from 1979 to 2007, and maintains an online presence today. It began when the *National Enquirer* bought a new colour printing press. Instead of scrapping the old black-and-white press, they created a new tabloid filled with oddball stories.

Originally, about 80% of *WWN*'s stories were true. They soon realised that the more outlandish the news, the higher the sales. This tilted the paper towards satire. By the mid-1980s, it was mostly filled with far-fetched news and hilarious regular features.

A typical edition would include absurd stories on alien abductions, religious miracles, dead celebrity sightings, the occult, and fad diets. Regular features ranged from the rude advice doled out in the Dear Dotti column, to Ed Anger's weekly opinion piece, a satirical take on far-right blowhards.

To most readers, *WWN* looked silly. And the content often was coarse and vulgar. Otherwise, *WWN* mimicked real journalism. Its stories were written by trained journalists. They used plain language, headlines and subheadlines, bylines, eyewitness quotes, and expert commentary.

WWN's journalistic approach made it look believable. Adding to the believability was that it included strange-but-true news mixed amongst the fake news.

Interestingly, many outlandish *WWN* stories were not invented by their writers. Rather, when people called in with bizarre tales, reporters tossed aside journalistic principles of fact verification

POORLY-PHOTOSHOPPED PHOTOS WERE A STAPLE OF *WWN*'S NONSENSICAL APPROACH TO THE NEWS.

What are Tabloids?

WWN uses the tabloid journalism format. First appearing in the late 1800s, tabloids are sensational, photograph-filled newspapers with plain-language short stories. American tabloid pioneer Randolph Hearst described them as "90% entertainment, 10% information."

The word tabloid originated with a pill manufacturer. They combined the words tablet (a pill) and alkaloid (a

medicine with several uses) to create a new word: tabloid. In 1896, *Daily Mail* founder Alfred Harmsworth borrowed the word "tabloid" to describe his new, sensational, plain-language newspaper. Playing off another meaning of the word tablet (a writing surface), he believed that calling the *Daily Mail* a tabloid would make it seem like a dose of concentrated, informational medicine.

REAL PAPER

and took a scribe approach. As former editor Sal Ivone said, "A lady once called us and said her toaster was talking to her. I said, 'Put the toaster on the phone.' We took it seriously."

Despite being full of nonsense, *WWN* tried not to harm people who may end up believing their reports. Former writer Bob Lind said that heartbreak and change of behaviour set in when a reader with a deathly-ill aunt contacted them to request more details on a story about a Mexican peasant's cockamamie cure for cancer. Likewise, former editor Dick Kulpa said they avoided things like lost treasure stories out of a fear that people may devote their lives and savings to locating it.

WWN's mixture of fake news, real news, and call-in tales blurred the line between fiction and reality. But unlike some of today's online fake news, the paper had little power to mislead. Most readers knew exactly what they

were getting into when they picked up a copy of *WWN*: they were getting into fun.

Even though *Weekly World News* is out-of-print, its in-

fluence lives on. In the late 1980s, *Onion* creators visited *WWN* headquarters as they planned their satirical paper. *The Onion* adopted

WWN's method of using a veneer of journalistic standards for fake news, and staff from each paper formed long-standing friendships.

I said, 'Put the toaster on the phone.'



1. The more ridiculous and coarse *WWN* became, the more copies it sold. What does this tell us about the ways we produce and consume news?
2. In the UK, a *WWN*-like tabloid *Sunday Sport* is still in print. It mixes outlandish and fake news with softcore nudity and sports. Its satire is crude, but their editor holds that they are not mean. They will not satirise actual people unless their actions are of their own volition. What does society lose when satire becomes malicious and personal?



Getting the Joke

Should there be a law that makes us label satirical fake news?

Before the internet, people usually weren't fooled by satirical fake news. It almost always appeared on comedy shows like *Saturday Night Live* or in outrageous print journals like *Weekly World News*. Audiences laughed because they knew at the get-go that it was satire.

When it was time to consume real news, people then turned to a handful of familiar sources that they could trust. They read reputable newspapers and magazines, or tuned into television and radio stations with reliable and well-funded newsrooms.

Today, media consumption is different. Like the past, we can still turn to reliable and professional news sources like the CBC or the Regina *Leader-Post*. However, that's not the only place to find news. We can also use social media or search engines to gather and read news, where we are offered countless sources from around the world.

With social media, not ev-

ery link brings us to a reputable news story. Intermingled amongst the real news is fake news of all varieties, including satirical fake news. Because satirical fake news looks like real news and swims in this sea of real news, people are more easily fooled into believing that satirical fake news is real.

When we mistake satire for real news, we become

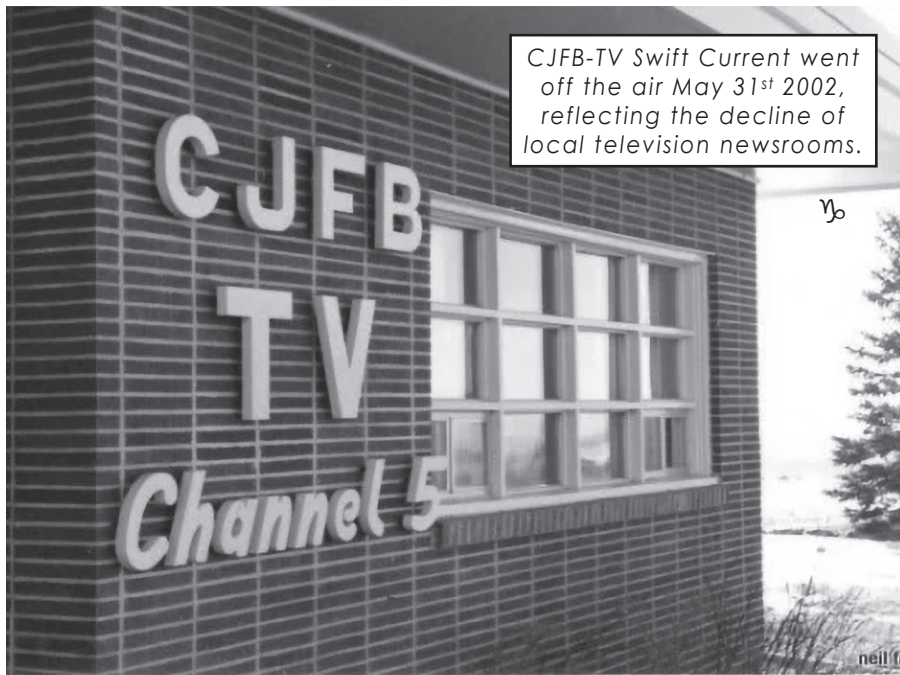
misinformed. If we share it, we become spreaders of misinformation. This means that regardless of intentions, the satire can take on some characteristics of "bad" fake news discussed on pages 4 and 5.

Yet with satire, being fooled is inevitable. In fact, misleading people is part of the fun. Satire is a playful art, and often uses irony and obfuscation to hide its



The Humble Pause

The University of Regina's Gordon Pennycook and MIT's David Rand believe that our susceptibility to fake news is partly driven by lazy thinking. They suggest that the best way to fight fake news is simple: take a breath and ask yourself "is this accurate" before sharing.



CJFB-TV Swift Current went off the air May 31st 2002, reflecting the decline of local television newsrooms.

fake news as satire. Even worse, he worries that bad actors would ignore labelling rules altogether to perpetuate hoaxes. After all, people would be more easily fooled if they expected satire to be labelled but it wasn't.

Phiddian concludes that "I have a right to be fooled." Instead of turning over satirical fake news to the judgment of some state

real meanings. Everybody won't be fooled all of the time, but some people will be fooled some of the time.

Because satirical fake news can mislead, demands have been made to label it as satire. Advocates believe that labels would prevent misinformation

The Babylon Bee includes its tagline "Fake News You Can Trust" on all its pages.

However, there is no legal requirement to label fake news as satire. Satire scholar Robert Phiddian believes this is a good thing. Most every law produces intended and unin-

authority, it's up to each of us to be conscientious citizens who consume news with some degree of critical thinking.

Robert Phiddian may or may not be correct. Regardless of what side you fall on, there's no easy way to prevent people from being taken in by satirical fake news.

But whether we're fooled or not, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that satire can be a lot of fun. This fun often contains insightful commentary and criticism about our society. When thought of this way, we can see how satirical fake news can help us become better citizens. Perhaps just as importantly, satirical fake news can help give us all a better sense of humour.

Reinforcing Our Priors

People are more inclined to believe something if it reinforces what they already think. This premise is shown in a study of two popular fake news sites: *The Babylon Bee* and *The Onion*.

The Babylon Bee tends to lean to the political right. *The Onion* tends to lean to the political left. Researchers found that left-leaning people were more likely to fall for outrageous *Onion* stories that made conservatives look like fools. On the other side, right-leaning people were more likely to fall for outrageous *Babylon Bee* stories that made liberals look like fools. And on the whole, right-leaning people were fooled somewhat more often than left-leaning people.

Human nature, as it turns out, makes all of us susceptible to fake news. This reality does not necessarily mean that we should be cynical about the news. However, it can't hurt to have a little healthy doubt about what we read.

WITH SATIRE, BEING FOOLED IS INEVITABLE

from spreading, because people would be aware that they were reading satire.

Some companies have voluntarily heeded these calls. For example, Google News gives satirical news sites the option of adding a satire label to search returns. Much the same,

tended consequences. He has outlined some consequences that could arise if satire labels became mandatory.

As Phiddian sees it, labels could "fall off" as the satire circulates online. Similarly, people could make honest mistakes and fail to label their

That's News to Me

1. Artificial intelligence is not necessarily the answer to fake news. Algorithms designed to detect malicious fake news often scoop up well-intentioned satire by mistake. What is the value of human intuition and good sense in an AI era?

2. The law is an essential tool for creating order and resolving disputes.
 - a) Can we expect the law to solve all of society's problems and conflicts?
 - b) If not, what other tools do we have?



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"a sense of
humor... is the
greatest enemy
of fanaticism"

- Neil Postman,
The End of Education

QUESTIONS?

COMMENTS?



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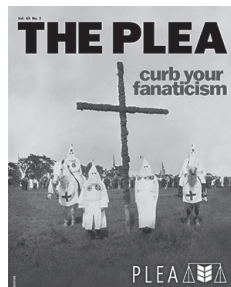
ISSN 0715-4224

(Print)

ISSN 1918-1116

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