Editors' Introduction

Steven Fabian, Marissa J. Moorman, and Josh Shepperd

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary made *post-truth* its international word of the year. Not coincidentally, this announcement coincided with the end of Donald Trump's long electoral campaign that culminated in his presidential victory. The adjective reflects the contemporary trend of deliberately misusing facts to erode the public's trust in our gatekeepers of information such as news outlets, health authorities, and political institutions. Yet, as Kenan Malik wrote in the *Guardian* in 2018, "lies masquerading as news are as old as news itself." Indeed, Dr. Andie Tucher, author of a forthcoming book on the history of fake news in the United States, observes that editors and journalists have a long history of using misinformation to sell newspapers, leaving it up to the public to decide for themselves what to believe. From the "penny press" to the "yellow press," newspaper editors used sensationalism, distortion of the truth, and embellishment to captivate and capture a paying audience.

Malik, however, also makes an assumption about the past, stating that until now "only governments and powerful figures could manipulate public opinion." This issue of the *Radical History Review* assembles contributions that examine this assertion by asking questions such as the following: How did news break to the public in the past? How did everyday people, journalists, institutions, and subaltern actors break past elite gatekeepers of public information? Who acted, and how, to break the public's faith in those who presumed to guard the "public good," and why? How can scholars break down, or deconstruct, the ways in which we understand the struggles over public discourse?

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Subaltern actors such as Ida B. Wells, Mohandas K. Gandhi, and Lois Gibbs challenged powerful gatekeepers by bringing their own breaking news to the attention of the public. But they also faced heavy-handed attempts to delegitimize their narratives. Conversely, throughout history, everyday people dominated informal news networks of their own, based in ports, taverns, and caravanserais where word of mouth could rapidly shape public opinion to devastating effect. Even the tolerant King Charles II attempted to ban coffeehouses in late seventeenth-century England because he feared the "divers false, malicious and scandalous reports [ ] devised [there] and spread abroad to the Defamation of His Majestie's Government, and to the Disturbance of the Peace and Quiet of the Realm." The public backlash, however, forced him to rescind the proclamation.

Today's combination of smartphones and social media creates a powerful means by which marginalized people can bypass the gatekeepers of the media and speak to the world. Perhaps no other person exemplifies this phenomenon better than Greta Thunberg, a fourteen-year-old Swede, who posted to various social media platforms a photo of herself protesting climate change in front of her school in 2018. What happened thereafter is now known as the "Greta effect"—the rapid transformation into global influencer. Rather than news being spread from person to person in public venues—as Charles II once feared—people today "retweet" news, amplifying its messages at breakneck speed.

Donald Trump represents a deadlier side to the Greta effect. Despite being a member of a powerful elite with tremendous access to the news media, Trump turned to the same social media platforms to amplify misinformation, even as Fox News continued to enable him. His voice grew more powerful still after he won the Oval Office, reinvigorating the term *breaking news* throughout his presidency. His behavior emboldened other social media users and news outlets who shared his white-supremacist sympathies to unleash a torrent of lies over time that culminated in an attack on American democracy. On January 6, 2021, via our phones, televisions, and computers, we witnessed an insurrection by the radical, white-supremacist right as a mob of rioters attacked the US Capitol.

Violent attempts to overturn US elections are not new, as historian Eric Foner's work reminds us. They were a regular occurrence during Reconstruction aimed at curtailing African American enfranchisement. What may be different this time around is the ways white supremacists and political opportunists (many of them elected officials) used the media to organize and mediate the attack before and as it happened. These actions constitute a kind of "breaking news" that has, in fact, broken the news. Aside from the fact that the radical right mob ran off and attacked CNN reporters and destroyed the equipment of the AP reporting team, thus turning transmission cables into a noose that symbolized their violent, racist intent and ambitions, the Trump administration and the growth of white nationalism, in conjunction with the rapacious capitalist ambitions of media companies, have undermined and destabilized the role of the press as the third estate.

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As radical historians we have an obligation to think carefully and critically about what happened. This issue treats breaking news as a critical research question that interrogates the nexus of informational production, how discursive affiliation influences interpretation and framing of events as they happen, and how documentary content resonates among political movements while exerting limits and pressures on coalition building, bureaucratic organization, and public fidelity to rights issues. Articles examine the immediacy of how "breaking" political events enter into the machinations of interpretation, circulation, and canonization, while considering how the positionalities of the producers, audiences, and industrial contexts affect the perception of political events, activist issues, and "official knowledge." There are three methodological takeaways for leftist historians: (1) media institutions provide valuable primary source materials that have too often been overlooked when considering broader social movement and activist strategies; (2) media content serves to influence the homological and metonymic behaviors of different discursive positionings, sometimes to the extent that broadcasters and editorialists become ideological gatekeepers of broad political blocs; and (3) media messaging plays and has always played a crucial role in activism, and in that way, exegesis of historical representations cannot be treated as a tertiary category when analyzing issues around activist strategy and organizing.

The issue's first section features articles thematically linked by their focus on efforts to regulate the distribution of news and information. The US historian Heather Cox Richardson noted in her highly regarded Facebook political updates that given the threat that disinformation has proven to American democracy, there are now calls for restoring the fairness doctrine. But the fairness doctrine now looks naive. Indeed, it is part of the problem. In this issue, A. J. Bauer's article examines how this policy, allowed to lapse in 1987, had previously required companies that held a broadcast license to present news honestly by ensuring that opposing sides were given equal airtime. Focusing on American liberal media reformers' efforts in the 1940s to regulate conservative journalist Fulton Lewis Jr., Bauer demonstrates how their strategy backfired, leading to the opening of the airwaves to increased conservative editorials. Seeking "fair and balanced" coverage of news events, reformers cast conservative journalism as "propaganda disguised as news," thus providing Lewis and his ilk a foil to accuse reformers of bias, leading to the passing of the fairness doctrine of 1949 by the United States Federal Communications Commission. Over time, the fairness doctrine contributed to the gradual elision of "real and entrenched political disagreement."

International collaborations in the context of the Cold War and decolonization are the subject of Sarah Nelson's article. Nelson centers media professionals and technical experts from Asia, Africa, and Latin America who imagined an international satellite system that would equalize news production and distribution around the globe, using space communications technologies to overcome the inequalities of a colonial land-based infrastructure. She takes a deep dive into the

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UNESCO archives to uncover how this international body privileged the voices of US modernization theorists who promoted US commercial interests, and thus averted the more radical solutions that global South professionals and actors advocated. Nelson argues that the origins of the concept of "mass media for national development" lay not with these Western social scientists but instead with the telecom engineers, press professionals, and media bureaucrats from the global South who proposed an international telecom system that decolonized states could use to foster information sovereignty.

Allison Perlman's "Intertel and Global Public Affairs Programming" conducts a close analysis of a key transnational broadcasting collaboration in the 1960s that synthesized civic, propagandic, and documentary discourses to produce a contradictory yet significant text that anticipated the philosophical tenor of American public media. Working from primary documents and original program content, Perlman notes that Intertel aimed to reconfigure the role of broadcasting during the Cold War as a strategy to test the political boundaries of television. Intertel was conceived as a new type of public affairs program. At the same time, it anticipated a new approach to educational media that endeavored to inform viewers, beyond skill acquisition, by calling on technical and aesthetic conventions typically associated with cinema. The entire process—production, distribution, and content—served to simultaneously challenge and replicate illiberal Cold War practices and principles, making it a crucial source for the study of the promise and dangers of affect in media advocacy work.

While the above three articles examine legal regulatory measures, Maria Ferenc and Piotr Laskowski analyze the conditions that facilitated the spread and acceptance of what they label as "false news" throughout the Warsaw ghetto in the 1940s. The Jewish community, in the most desperate of situations, devoured any whiff of a rumor legitimized in print, no matter how unrealistic, if only it suggested that they might be saved. In such a context, there were those, such as Polish communists and the Polish underground, who took advantage of these people's vulnerable states of mind to spread false news to win their political support.

The second section features articles that examine how various marginalized groups challenged media gatekeepers. Kerri K. Greenidge's article on William Monroe Trotter and the transnational radical Black press reminds us that "post-truth" is not a recent phenomenon that undermines public confidence in the gatekeepers of information; it has also underwritten the violent anti-Blackness of US politics, and press complicity in it. In the first decades of the twentieth century, Trotter, the publisher of the *Boston Guardian*, used the paper to challenge the conservative white and African American papers and to mobilize mass protests against the rampant, violent white supremacy of the time (lynchings and the debut and screenings of *The Birth of the Nation*). Boston's early twentieth-century Black working-class community had a distinctly international and autonomous perspective and set of diasporic ties that Trotter spoke to and built on. Black Bostonians read, thought, and debated Black nationalism, socialism, and Marxism. Greenidge shows

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how this fueled a radical critique that understood how racism served capitalism and pursued a politics that fought not just for social but also for economic change. Greenidge's exploration of Trotter's work and paper connects the earlier antebellum Black radical press to the activism of journalist Ida B. Wells, through Trotter, and to the Black leftist papers associated with the Harlem Renaissance.

Peter C. Pihos's "Police Brutality Exposed" interrogates the relationship between media coverage, the development of political will to form coalitions, and the consequent effects of investigative journalism on reporting and bureaucratic machinations to investigate police brutality. Pihos details how the murders of the Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were first covered by the *Chicago Defender*, while the murders were played down by the *Chicago Tribune*. But over time, the *Defender*'s reporting generated a series of changes in public discourse about investigating police violence. The *Tribune* convened a "Police Brutality" series and coalitions emerged, problematically, to address the issue of police brutality. Perhaps unexpectedly, additional attention was paid to the issue by the city. Yet, as the issue gained traction among the mainstream press, and as it was absorbed by bureaucratic machinations in the city of Chicago, radical energy to imagine different structures of resistance on the issue, first made by the investigative journalism of the *Defender*, was enervated by mainstream attention.

Adam Quinn's "Aboveground, Underground, and Locked Down" explores the role of the history of radical prison newspapers in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s among other activist, protest, and social justice movements. Calling on primary sources and interviews, Quinn looks at struggles detailed in prison newspapers, including author politics, how publishers contemplated issues and strategies for dealing with the carceral state, and the relationship between confinement and connected social movements. The history of radical publishers in Washington State reveals a case study of a rarely discussed counterpublic who wrote cutting analyses of police violence, censorship, health policy, and orientation rights. The article looks at prison newspaper's publishing strategies, the aesthetics and layout of each publication, and the biographies of participating journalists.

Jorge E. Cuéllar analyzes how the privatization of the media in El Salvador has left its people vulnerable to the spread of conservative misinformation that masks the reality of class exploitation. In response, Equipo Maíz, a popular collective of educators, has worked tirelessly since the civil war of the 1980s to challenge this hegemony by providing Salvadorans with analytical skills-building workshops and an alternative news source featuring political cartoons. By providing civics education for marginalized groups, Equipo Maíz instructs its readers to challenge the order of things as portrayed by the conservative and sensationalist press and to strive for something different and better.

In an Interview feature, coeditor Steven Fabian and Columbia Journalism School professor Andie Tucher discuss her forthcoming book on the history of fake news in the United States. The book represents a culmination of thirty years of her

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life's research oriented around the theme of truth-telling conventions in journalism. She explains that despite the fact that fake news has a long history in America, earlier incarnations were far less harmful than our current post-truth era. She also defines and examines what she calls fake journalism, which uses the conventions of objective journalism in deceptive ways to mislead people into accepting lies as truth.

Rosemary Pennington's contribution, "Teaching Breaking News," beautifully rounds out this issue. She explores the idea of breaking news and how it is taught in journalism school. Pennington argues for an "ethics of empathy" that could have a significant impact on news reporting. She asserts: "A journalistic ethic that centers social empathy—empathy that allows you to better understand inequality and injustice—can help reporters break out of the chains of 'liveness' to produce truly meaningful work." Pennington argues that an ethics of empathy attunes journalists to humanity and justice, while still employing the journalist's tools of verification and skepticism. An ethics of empathy might indeed be transformative in many walks of life.

This issue, "Breaking News," was conceived before the January 6, 2021 attack in a world already deeply marked by media spectacles and marred by the perversions of norms that characterized the authoritarian and racist rule of Donald Trump as president of the United States. This issue gathers work that analyzes and critiques and also looks for successes and radical imaginations of possibilities and practices that prioritize justice, acts of marginalized groups to empower themselves, and policies that enliven equity. The cover image reflects the radical energies of the analyses in this issue. Rather than just presenting a photograph of Lois Gibbs in her housecoat outside her home in Niagara Falls, New York, in 1980, we see her framed by a swarm of boom mics, her activist strategy of using the news media laid bare. Gibbs exemplifies those people who, before the era of social media, could overcome powerful gatekeepers to break their stories. A working-class, stay-at-home mother, Gibbs rallied her neighbors against the Hooker Chemical Company and the city of Niagara Falls, New York, to draw national attention to the toxic waste site upon which their neighborhood and their children's school had knowingly been built. This was all the more impressive given how many of her neighbors—including her own husband—were employed by Hooker Chemical. Gibbs, like others examined in this issue, is a stark counterexample to Kenan Malik's assertion that until now "only governments and powerful figures could manipulate public opinion."

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