REPORT, ADVERTISE, DELIVER

THE TERM "JOURNALISM" originated in the 1830s, but it was the muckrakers of the early 20th-century Progressive Era who solidified the role of reporters as investigators speaking truth to power. Readers began to open their daily papers expecting information instead of just opinions. Meanwhile, print advertising strategies became more advanced, even if Madison Avenue advertising executives were still targeting the same impulses that street hawkers had been exploiting for centuries. The effects of more recent technological changes — from Craigslist's Innocent marketing ploy gets out of hand and a nation dreams of giant potatoes and winged men flying on the moon. Sometimes the cutting edge of science isn't quite sharp enough yet. Occasionally a genuine villain uses the news to tell lies for profit. • IN THIS CASE: "The Times" • IN THIS CASE: "The United States Chronicle (September 3, 1819); Manufacturers & Farmers Journal, Providence and Pawtucket Advertiser (March 2, 1820); The Micromon (March 23, 1827); Liberty Herald (March 6, 1830); The Patriot's Sentinel (February 14, 1863); The Seawrill (April 15, 1813).

START THE PRESSES

TECHNOLOGY has always played a role in shaping the news we read, and the machines we use to record and publish the news have their own biases and predispositions. The output of industrial printing presses in the early 19th century matched a new industrialized appetite for the news, and the pages of penny newspapers told stories that were a far cry from those told to a limited, wealthy audience in a former age of handwritten newsletters delivered through the mail. Even people's sense of what to expect from images has changed through the decades: someone in the 20th century listing a home for sale or reading an account of a battle would expect unique images, rather than the stock cuts that satisfied earlier audiences. • IN THIS CASE: "Quadroon Publishing Press" insert from the Baltimore American (October 29, 1806); La Epigrafia Mexicana (October & November, 1876); Oficioso newspaper a zarzuela (Moseley, 1925); Heads and Bodies: Fox in the Study and Planning of Lithotype Newspaper Typography (Morgan Library Company, 1994); Specimen of Printing Types from the New England Type Foundry (Boston, 1834).

FAKE NEWS!

IT CAN FEEL LIKE A PHRASE that belongs distinctly to our current moment, but it actually has been in use for over a century. The idea of our “first draft of history” might be a bad draft has been a source of anxiety for as long as there has been news to tell. We want to feel confident that our news isn’t “fake” because it shapes how we start and finish our days, how we understand what’s happening around us, and who we are. But our centuries-long history with the news suggests that “fake” is too blunt a term for the ways the news sometimes fails us.

This exhibition doesn’t attempt to tell a comprehensive history of journalism, or even the story of the print newspaper. Instead it offers a sense of the many ways the news can fail to do what we need it to do (a ship was too slow, a prank got out of hand, photography didn’t exist...), and how our expectations of what we need it to do have changed.

If you lived in Providence in 1811, you might have spent days living in a world where King George III was presumed dead, not because anyone willfully lied to you, but because the mechanisms for delivering news worked more slowly than they do today, and rumors had to spread by sail across oceans before being distributed in print. At least you and your neighbors would have been on roughly the same page: a few centuries earlier hand-written newsletters, predecessors to the modern newspaper, were available only to the rich and powerful, while sporadically-produced modern newspaper, were available only to the wealthy audience in a former age of hand-printing presses. At least they worked more slowly than they do today, and information instead of just opinions. Meanwhile, print advertising strategies became more advanced, even if Madison Avenue advertising executives were still targeting the same impulses that street hawkers had been exploiting for centuries. The effects of more recent technological changes — from Craigslist's Innocent marketing ploy gets out of hand and a nation dreams of giant potatoes and winged men flying on the moon. Sometimes the cutting edge of science isn't quite sharp enough yet. Occasionally a genuine villain uses the news to tell lies for profit. • IN THIS CASE: "The Times" • IN THIS CASE: "The United States Chronicle (September 3, 1819); Manufacturers & Farmers Journal, Providence and Pawtucket Advertiser (March 2, 1820); The Micromon (March 23, 1827); Liberty Herald (March 6, 1830); The Patriot's Sentinel (February 14, 1863); The Seawrill (April 15, 1813).