

■ Fake News—Pope Francis’s Alleged Endorsement of Donald Trump

Date: July, 2016

Author: Unknown

Genre: Speech; article

Summary Overview

Misleading, even purposefully misleading, news stories are by no means new. However, given the advent of the Internet and the particular dynamics of the 2016 presidential election, fake news played an unprecedented role in that election. Entrepreneurial Americans trying to make money, and foreign powers trying to influence United States politics, published a wide array of fake news articles in the lead up to the 2016 vote. Unlike in the past when most Americans got their news primarily from reputable journalistic sources, many Americans in the 2010s began to rely on their social media networks to receive news shared by friends and acquaintances. The document reprinted here is the core of a fake news article allegedly quoting Pope Francis on his decision to endorse Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton in the 2016 race; it was widely shared on social media at the time.

Defining Moment

Deception, falsehoods, and lies, constants of human life as old as communication itself, have taken on a new life in American politics in the 2010s.

Deception plays a central role in many origin stories, such as the *Book of Genesis* and Hesiod’s *Theogony*, as various cultures work their way through reconciling the central role that deception plays in human society. The innovation of writing only made deception easier. In the dialogue *Phaedrus*, Plato’s character of Socrates discusses how the spoken word is more amenable to truth than the written word because a speaker must declare himself openly while a writer can remain anonymous. The framers of the U.S. Constitution understood that deceptiveness could hinder a fully functioning democracy. Their prescribed antidote was an informed citizenry, capable of distinguishing truth from falsehoods. Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and third U.S. president, said, “An educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people.” He believed education could act as a bul-

wark against the deceptiveness that would eventually threaten Americans’ freedom. The First Amendment to the Constitution enshrined the freedom of the press to allow journalists to seek the truth unhindered and to prevent them from being forced to print falsehoods on behalf of the state.

And, indeed, an educated citizenry and the First Amendment have been necessary in fending off constant attacks on truth in the American democracy. While the First Amendment remains in place, the state of journalism in America has undergone its ups and downs. A particularly trying period came at the end of the nineteenth century when yellow journalism came into vogue, especially in New York City. Yellow journalism is a term, coined in that era, to refer to a sensationalist type of journalism that often completely fabricated quotations or interviews and cared more about newspaper sales than truth. An alternate term for yellow journalism is tabloid journalism. Although the prominence of yellow journalism waned after this era, it remained present in American journalism through the present day. Another low point in journalism came in a different form during the early 2000s. In the lead up to the United States’ invasion of Iraq, the vast majority of American news outlets uncritically regurgitated the Bush Administration’s false talking points regarding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Many journalists have since voiced regrets for their roles in the press’ abdication of its duty as a critical assessor of state propaganda.

These prior eras pale in comparison to the crisis in American journalism occurring during the 2016 election cycle and the Trump presidency. Like the advent of writing, the Internet has made mass communication easier and faster; however, also like the advent of writing, the Internet has abetted deception by making anonymity easier. Communications experts had long noted how journalism on the web was more susceptible to sensationalism, yet it was not until the 2016 election that the Internet became a space for an all-out assault on the truth. With many people getting their news from

friends and acquaintances on social media as opposed to traditional news sources, fake news stories, such as the one featured here, flourished. This story about alleged statements by Pope Francis first premiered on a fake news website, WTOE5News.com. Like other, similar fake news websites, this site uses a domain name that makes it appear to be a legitimate source—in this case, a local news station. BuzzFeed News discovered that this site was linked to a dozen other similar fake news sites run by the same person or group of people. Another such site, Ending the Fed, subsequently ran the same story. According to BuzzFeed News, by the time of election night 2016 this story had nearly one million engagements (i.e., looks or other actions) on Facebook.

Beyond the story discussed here, other widely shared fake news stories included: “Donald Trump sent his own plane to transport 200 stranded marines,” “WikiLeaks confirms Hillary sold weapons to ISIS ... Then drops another bombshell,” “FBI agent suspected in Hillary e-mail leaks found dead in apartment murder-suicide,” “ISIS leader calls for American Muslim voters to support Hillary Clinton,” “FBI director received millions from Clinton Foundation, his brother’s law firm does Clinton’s taxes,” and “Hillary Clinton in 2013: ‘I would like to see people like Donald Trump run for office; they’re honest and can’t be bought.’” The fake news stories primarily targeted and circulated among Clinton bashers and Trump supporters, but some fake news stories also targeted and were circulated on the left of the political spectrum, such as “Ireland is now officially accepting Trump refugees from America.” A story modeled after the one featured in this chapter, but claiming that Pope Francis endorsed Hillary Clinton, was circulated yet not nearly as widely as this one. Fake news stories claimed that Comet Ping Pong, a pizzeria in Washington D.C., was running an underground child sex slavery ring somehow affiliated with Hillary Clinton. Employees of the pizzeria faced repeated harassment stemming from the fake stories, and then on December 4, 2016, a man entered the pizzeria with an assault rifle and fired three shots while attempting to “self-investigate” the conspiracy.

The rise in fake news stories bolstered the success of an unusually misleading politician. All politicians bend the truth to fit their needs; however, some do so more than others. An analysis by the *Washington Post*

discovered that in his first 406 days in office, Donald Trump made 2,436 false or misleading claims, which averages out to six per day. More jarring than the lies—because, again, all politicians twist the truth—are Trump’s assaults on the institution of American journalism and the freedom of the press. He does not only push back against stories that he thinks are unfair (a common practice among politicians), but he attacks the American press as a whole, unlike any major national politician since Richard Nixon. He has promised to “open up libel laws” to make it easier to sue journalists, thereby eliminating the freedom of the press. His tactics mirror those of strongmen from across the globe who have trampled upon or eliminated the local press’ freedom; they also signal to concurrent strongmen that America is okay with this type of behavior. The term fake news itself, originally used to denote fabricated and purposefully misleading stories, has been transformed by Trump and other politicians. Trump uses it to denote any story or media outlet that does not depict him favorably. For instance, on February 17, 2017, he tweeted: “The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!”

It is possible that the era of fake news will wane just as the era of yellow journalism ultimately waned. Americans may become more discerning in the reading of news shared on social media and elsewhere. However, with new technologies allowing people to replicate someone’s voice or seamlessly Photoshop them into pictures and videos, new assaults on truth lie on the horizon.

Document Information

The author of this fake news story is unknown. The story was first published on the website WTOE5News.com. BuzzFeed News has used the site’s Google AdSense Id (which is used to post and collect money from advertisements on websites) to identify the owner of this and a network of other similar sites. BuzzFeed claims that a man named Justin Smithson owned these sites and, therefore, is the probable author of the content in this story. In his response to the BuzzFeed News article, Smithson denied ownership of the websites in question.



U.S. President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania with Pope Francis, 24 May 2017, Vatican City. By Shealah Craighead - The White House, U.S. Government, Washington, DC.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President

VATICAN CITY

... [statements attributed to Pope Francis] ...

"I have been hesitant to offer any kind of support for either candidate in the U.S. presidential election but I now feel that to not voice my concern would be a dereliction of my duty as the Holy See. A strong and free America is vitally important in maintaining a strong and free world and in that sense what happens in American elections affects us all. The Rule of Law is the backbone of the American government as it is in any nation that strives for freedom and I

now fear that the Rule of Law in America has been dealt a dangerous blow. The FBI, in refusing to recommend prosecution after admitting that the law had been broken on multiple occasions by Secretary Clinton, has exposed itself as corrupted by political forces that have become far too powerful. Though I don't agree with Mr. Trump on some issues, I feel that voting against the powerful political forces that have corrupted the entire American federal government is the only option for a nation that desires a government that is truly for the people and by the people. For this primary reason I ask, not as the Holy Father, but as a concerned citizen of the world that Americans vote for Donald Trump for President of the United States."

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Document Themes and Analysis

This document represents the crux of a fake news article that first appeared on WTOE5News.com. The short article has a quick introduction and conclusion but primarily consists of this fake quotation attributed to Pope Francis. A comparison between the historical Pope Francis and the construction within this document will help make sense of the divide between fact and fiction in this era when the terms seem ever more muddled.

The fictionalized Pope Francis that speaks in the document has an uncharacteristically opinionated and specific perspective on American politics. The second sentence of the speech reads: "A strong and free America is vitally important in maintaining a strong and free world and in that sense what happens in American elections affects us all." The ideal America being "strong and free" is more of an American interpretation than a Vatican one, although the end of the sentence, "us all," does try to broaden the perspective. The following sentence is where the fictional Pope Francis starts to significantly depart from the historical one: "The Rule of Law is the backbone of the American government as it is in any nation that strives for freedom and I now

fear that the Rule of Law in America has been dealt a dangerous blow." The phrase "Rule of Law" eludes to a theme with a long history in American politics; however, the sentiment within this sentence has no real precedent in Vatican rhetoric. The next sentence offers further departures from a Vatican point of view: "The FBI, in refusing to recommend prosecution after admitting that the law had been broken on multiple occasions by Secretary Clinton, has exposed itself as corrupted by political forces that have become far too powerful." This view has been long developed in Republican and anti-Clinton circles within American politics. However, to suggest that this view comes from the pope reveals a misreading of non-Americans' priorities regarding American politics as well as a deep misunderstanding of the types of statements that the pope makes.

The historical Pope Francis was born in 1936 in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He himself is a norm-shattering figure as the first Jesuit pope, the first pope from the Southern hemisphere, and the first pope from the Americas. In the Middle Ages, popes used to be infamous for meddling in nations' political affairs, primarily on the European continent. However, those days are

long gone. The popes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries do meet with world leaders and offer statements that encourage specific agendas that align with their respective worldviews. They have been loath, however, to get down into the muck of any country's political battles. The statement from the fictionalized Pope Francis that most resembles something that the historical Pope Francis might say—perhaps the *only* statement that resembles something that the real Pope Francis might say—is the first half of the first sentence: “I have been hesitant to offer any kind of support for either candidate in the U.S. presidential election.” If the alleged speech had cut off there it may have been credible; however, it immediately devolves into the fictionalized Pope Francis analyzed above. The historical Pope Francis has since discussed the problem of fake news. In an interview on December 7, 2016, he called fake news a “sickness.” He does not name this or other fake news articles that reference him directly, but one can imagine him considering them as he speaks against fake news in general.

It is impossible to tell from the document itself if the author who constructs the fictionalized Pope Francis is a political supporter of Trump or not. The author does, however, intend for this story to be shared among Trump supporters, so the fictional Pope Francis ends up sound much like a Trump supporter himself. In doing so, one of the themes he develops is that of law and order. In one of the sentences that sounds least like the historical Pope Francis, the fictional pope states: “The Rule of Law is the backbone of the American government as it is in any nation that strives for freedom and I now fear that the Rule of Law in America has been dealt a dangerous blow.” The phrase “Rule of Law,” emphasized with capital letters, echoes the Trump campaign’s efforts to depict their candidate as an advocate of law and order. This, in turn, looks back to Richard Nixon’s portrayal of himself as an advocate of law and order. Then, as now, the calls for law and order specifically play to white grievance and attempt

to stir up white fear. For instance, in late November, 2015, Candidate Trump retweeted a false graphic that, among other falsehoods, vastly inflated the amount of crimes committed by “blacks.” In another example, during a speech to police officers on July 28, 2017, Trump, by this time president, endorsed police brutality, saying, “When you guys put somebody in the car and you’re protecting their head, you know, the way you put their hand over? Like, don’t hit their head, and they just killed somebody—don’t hit their head. I said, you can take the hand away, okay?” Multiple exhaustive analyses have shown that police brutality makes neighborhoods less safe; however, the specific kind of law and order espoused by Trump attempts to look tough and to blame political correctness for complicated societal issues. It is this narrow understanding of law and order that the document attempts to evoke, and the narrowness is seen in the document as well. The fictional Pope Francis focuses on Secretary Hillary Clinton, a favorite target of conservative media even before the 2016 election, when discussing the “Rule of Law,” leaving aside the many systemic and individual challenges to the American criminal justice system.

—Anthony Vivian, MA

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