

Andie Tucher. *Not Exactly Lying: Fake News and Fake Journalism in American History.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. 384 pp. \$28.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-18635-3.



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Recent years have witnessed a flood of publications on “fake news,” disinformation, and the crisis of public trust in mainstream news media. Alarm sirens ring from both sides of the political spectrum decrying the manipulation of news reporting. The popular press has produced a stream of thinly researched books confirming these fears and feeding consumer desires. These works may sell well in airport kiosks but have short shelf lives. In contrast, historian and journalist Andie Tucher’s *Not Exactly Lying: Fake News and Fake Journalism in American History* provides an examination that is both timely and enduring.

Not Exactly Lying offers historical context for the current crisis, positioning it in the longer history of American journalism. In the American democratic experiment, truth was to be established by objectively verifiable facts, not state policy or propaganda. The drafters of the US Constitution enshrined free speech and freedom of the press in the Bill of Rights. These bedrocks of American political culture stand in stark contrast to the practices of the monarchical states of the

past and the authoritarian dictatorships of today. Enlightenment inspired intellectuals of the era believed that in the free competition of ideas, truth would win. Unfortunately, experience has proven otherwise. Tucher explains that the American commitment to free speech and a free press created an information sphere dependent on self-regulation to set the boundaries of acceptable practices. In tracing the changing attitudes toward truth and objectivity in American journalism, Tucher weaves together the influences of technological changes, social and political movements, and trends within journalism itself.

As Tucher notes, standard histories of journalism depict a steady progression toward increasing professionalization and accountability. *Not Exactly Lying* paints a murkier, more cyclical pattern. Despite Tucher’s obvious concern over the impact of fake news on American public life, the tone of the book is less alarmist than others in this field. While Donald J. Trump claims to have invented the term “fake news,” its use goes back to the early twentieth century, and the origins of the

concept date back further still. Whether identified as tall tales, humbug, roorbacks, hoaxes, or fake news, untruths have been present in the American information sphere since before the founding of the republic. The motivations behind these manipulative uses of journalistic forms also follow familiar patterns: partisan political advantage, social or political control, wartime morale, commercial profits, and personal ambitions of individual authors. Although news has often been “not exactly true,” democracy has survived nonetheless.

While “news” can include a wide range of information, Tucher’s interest lies in journalism and the way “fakers” assume the outward appearance of journalism to lend credibility to their information. For Tucher, the practice of fake journalism is a larger problem than the information in fake news because it undermines trust in all news. To be “fake,” Tucher explains, the information must be deliberately untrue. News can only be “fake” if there is an expectation of truth or objectivity. Biased reporting, even hyper-partisan propaganda, is “fake” only if it presents itself as objective.

Tucher’s examination of changing expectations of truth and journalistic efforts to self-regulate progresses chronologically from the revolutionary era to the Trump presidency. Engaging and well researched, *Not Exactly Lying* offers numerous examples of untruthful reporting in each era, the debates that surrounded them, and their impact on the evolution of professional journalism. Lest the reader get lost in the details, Tucher provides quick summaries of the self-affirmed role of the press along the way, delightfully presented as news mottos: “We report, you decide,” “We report, you believe,” “We report, you go shopping,” “You decide, we report,” etc.

Tucher reminds the reader of the partisan political beginnings of the American press, with even the venerable Benjamin Franklin producing fake news of British atrocities in hopes of influencing peace negotiations in the American War of In-

dependence. Tucher then focuses on dialectical movements within several distinct eras. In the early republic, newspapers served as a medium for partisan opinion and argument, but in the 1830s they shifted toward providing information (not necessarily true). At the same time, the penny press emerged with its hodgepodge of content designed primarily to entertain, not educate. The end of the nineteenth century saw the spread of yellow journalism but also the drive to professionalize journalism. The 1920s produced the tabloid press followed by a sobering 1930s in which audiences were less amused by frivolous news. The McCarthyism of the 1950s made truth a partisan commodity, and the professional practices designed to ensure objectivity and fairness became liabilities. “Fake news” became a smear thrown at inconvenient or opposing views. Proponents of New Journalism argued in the 1960s and 1970s that the professional commitment to objectivity and balance prevented journalists from adequately addressing the issues of the day, and they pushed for openly subjective reporting. *Not Exactly Lying* shows that American journalism has always been fraught by tensions between news as entertainment and sober facts, between motives of commercial profit and public good, and between a commitment to advocacy and objectivity.

Not Exactly Lying also devotes considerable time to wartime reporting. From inaccurate reports of the First Battle of Bull Run to hagiographic tales of Theodore Roosevelt in the Spanish-American War to weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in Iraq, Tucher shows that fake news accompanied every war in American history. Photographs were staged. Atrocities were fabricated. Battle outcomes were skewed or concealed. Sometimes practical issues of battlefield access or the limitations of communication devices resulted in faked photos or falsified accounts, but concerns over morale and military spirit also played a role. Military conflict brought into news reporting additional government influence if not outright cen-

sorship. Journalists were sometimes willing, sometimes reluctant, and sometimes unwitting accomplices in disseminating government untruths. Tucher also points out the unintended consequences of wartime propaganda that weakens trust in news reports. For example, exaggerated false accounts of German atrocities in World War I made audiences incredulous of accurate accounts of atrocities in World War II.

Fake news is not necessarily bad, if there is no expectation of truth or objectivity. While conceding the difficulty of evaluating audience reception, Tucher credits nineteenth-century readers with the ability to appreciate humbug for its entertainment value, not its accuracy. Cultural historian Robert Darnton (*The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* [1984]) argues that to truly understand the past requires deciphering the mental symbolism of the period to “get the joke.” Early American readers should not be dismissed as dupes just because modern scholars do not “get the joke” of the Wild Animal Hoax of 1874, for example. As with readers of *The Onion* or viewers of *The Colbert Show*, Tucher argues that we should assume more people “got the joke” than did not. *Not Exactly Lying*’s debunking of the hysteria supposedly invoked by Orson Welles’s 1938 radio play of a Martian landing lends further credit to the discernment abilities of the masses. However, the book does not examine bizarre conspiracy theories, such as Pizzagate, QAnon, or alien lizard people, and the reasons why (or if) many people believe them to be fact, not fiction. Tucher’s focus on traditional news platforms neglects the multiplicity of emerging sources of news. To what extent should we trust viewers of videos on TikTok or readers of 4Chan’s /pol/ message board to “get the joke”?

Not Exactly Lying also provides interesting comparisons of differing expectations of truth across various mediums. For example, higher expectations of truthfulness led to more regulation of radio than moving pictures, which were under-

stood as entertainment and regulated for decency but not accuracy. Missing in Tucher’s analysis is a discussion of television and the internet as mediums, and the impact of developments within those mediums. While Tucher discusses *Fox News*, there is no analysis of the impact of twenty-four-hour news channels more generally. The book also fails to address the transition of newspapers from print formats to digital formats and what Ryan Holiday describes in *Trust Me, I’m Lying: Confessions of a Media Manipulator* (2013) as “trading up,” a process by which fake news is elevated to the digital pages of mainstream news outlets. Nor is there any discussion of the potential impact of artificial intelligence.

While detailing the challenges posed to objective journalism by outside forces, Tucher also looks at self-inflicted wounds, such as the fake news scandals surrounding Pulitzer Prize winner Janet Cooke (*Washington Post*), Jayson Blair (*New York Times*), Stephen Glass (*New Republic*), Jack Kelley (*USA Today*), and others. Tucher also admits that professionalized journalism has at times given “reputable” news outlets control in determining truth at times when their reports should have been deemed “fake.” During the Jim Crow era, reports in Ida B. Wells’s *Memphis Free Speech and Headlight* newspaper were smeared as “fake,” not the racist false information of the mainstream newspapers they refuted. For decades, the prestige of the *New York Times* legitimized Walter Duranty’s favorable depictions of conditions in the Soviet Union, discrediting Gareth Jones’s more accurate accounts of horrific famine. Nevertheless, Tucher places tentative hope in professional journalism to offer a way forward.

Unsurprising given her role as director of the Communications PhD Program at the Columbia Journalism School, Tucher looks to professional journalism to right the ship in the current storm of misinformation and fake news. *Not Exactly Lying* shows that each surge of “fake news” in the past eventually led to a new and commercially vi-

able demand for trustworthy news. *Not Exactly Lying* offers no roadmap for the way forward, no detailed course of action. It invites the reader to find solace in the knowledge that the current crisis of “fake news” and “fake journalism” is not as unprecedented as it seems. Amid the deluge of amateur reporters, Tucher argues, there is still place for professional journalism. Is Tucher prophetic or idealistic? Only time will tell, but hopefully she is right.

The views expressed in this review are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the US Air Force, Air University, the Department of Defense, or the US government.

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