

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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Walls on Not Exactly Lying

“Fake news.” In today’s polarized and often vitriolic social and political climate, this succinct but highly charged two-word phrase has become a rhetorical cudgel used by partisans of all stripes to dismiss and discredit their political and ideological opponents and the press outlets that each side believes are shills for the other. Although the phrase only really came to the forefront of public consciousness with the rise of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States in 2016 and his use of the term to highlight what he and his supporters saw as a militant bias against him by an overly liberal, and therefore anti-conservative press, it has since become almost the default tool used by both sides of the political spectrum to cast doubt on any piece of journalism that does not conform to or questions their ideological narrative. This phenomenon has undeniably helped to fuel a crisis within the profession of journalism itself. The constant accusations of fakery and fraud, both legitimate and illegitimate, inevitably erodes

the trust the public has in journalists and their work and further fosters, sustains, and inflames a counterproductive political atmosphere where each side silos itself into its own rhetorical and ideological echo chambers.

In an era when the currently living generations mostly came of age with the ingrained belief that journalism’s core mission is to reveal “truth” in an unbiased manner, accusations of “fake news” seem particularly damning to the profession and its practitioners. Yet the question remains: is fake news, in fact, *new*? Did fakery and fraud in journalism only become a problem during the Trump administration or has it always been there lurking under the surface to one degree or another? Is it even a problem at all? Is it just a hollow accusation simply meant to steer people away from legitimate news stories that may damage a particular political party, politician, public figure, or cause? In an illuminating and extremely timely exposé, Andie Tucher tackles those

very questions in her book, *Not Exactly Lying: Fake News and Fake Journalism in American History*. What Tucher painstakingly reveals in a rigorously thorough examination is that “fake news” as she defines it, “something that was *purposefully* (emphasis in the original) untrue, created by people who understood, at some level and for whatever benign or devious purpose, that what they were saying was false or deceptive”—has been a part of the journalistic landscape since the very beginning of journalism in America (p. 4).

Tucher is uniquely positioned to address this topic. Her undergraduate degree was in the classics, her master’s work was in rare-book librarianship, her PhD in American civilization. This background provides her with a firm basis in scholarship and academic rigor. She also has direct experience in journalism, having worked with Bill Moyers at Public Affairs Television, as a documentary producer with ABC News, and with the *Columbia Journalism Review*. She is currently a professor of journalism and the director of the Communications PhD Program at Columbia University where she helps to train the next generation of journalists. This experience obviously gives her insight into the inner workings of the field of journalism and its practitioners. Journalism itself can be described as the history of the present, so the combination of a background in both disciplines, history and journalism, perhaps makes Tucher one of the most credible authorities on the issue.

That is not to say, however, that Tucher’s scholarship is not without its faults. As can be ascertained by her association with Bill Moyers, who on more than one occasion has been accused of an anti-conservative/pro-liberal bias, as well as the time she spent as a speechwriter for the Clinton/Gore campaign in 1992, Tucher brings her own biases to the table. Despite an impassioned defense of and call for journalistic objectivity and standards in her conclusion to the book, ironically the closer Tucher gets to the present day in her narrative of the evolution of fake and fraudulent

journalism, the more difficult it is for her to maintain the very objectivity she claims is missing from much of today’s media.

Tucher begins her narrative at the very beginning of the practice of journalism in what would become the United States with the publication of Benjamin Harris’s Boston-based *Publick Occurrences Both Foreign and Domestic* in 1690. *Publick Occurrences* was “the first publication containing information about current affairs and intended to appear on a regular schedule” (p. 10). Even at its birth, Tucher explains, American journalism was mired in questions over what was true and what was not that spilled over from the highly contested political climate that defined Restoration-era England, and the press in London in particular, where Harris cut his journalistic teeth. Harris ultimately relocated himself and his work after he “compiled such a long record of legal troubles over his feisty anti-Catholic and anti-Stuart newspapers and pamphlets that he felt it wise to flee England” (p. 11). He did not exactly meet with an easier time in the colonies, either, as *Publick Occurrences* created such a stir in Boston that the “governing council responded by almost immediately proscribing the paper and went about destroying the edition with such zeal that only a single copy of that sole issue is known to survive” (p. 13).

Tucher aptly highlights how Harris both helped to establish the nascent framework upon which the very concepts of journalistic integrity and objectivity were slowly built over the next several centuries, while also flaunting and contradicting those very same ideals for distinctly partisan purposes. To highlight the idea that little has changed in the practice of journalism since its inception in America, Tucher notes that “the first practitioner of American journalism was seeking to earn credibility in terms that sound strikingly modern: he would only use reliable sources, he would correct his mistakes, and he would sniff out and punish anyone who told lies” (p. 12). Despite

such claims, however, Harris found himself in hot water over his story about the supposed plot by the dauphin of France to overthrow his father, the king, for allegedly cuckolding the dauphin's wife, which was by all accounts a "calculated item of fake news" (p. 14). Throughout the book, this is a theme that Tucher returns to repeatedly: journalists claim high-minded ideals of fairness and objectivity out of one side of their mouths (or pens, as it were), while practicing a vastly different, and usually partisan, set of others.

From these (not so) humble beginnings, Tucher methodically traces the evolution of the ethics and practice of journalism in the United States, its struggles with truth, lies, partisanship, and its responsibilities to its readers and the political system in which it operates, into the present day. Over the span of ten chapters, she meticulously details incident after incident of intentional and unintentional journalistic falsehoods throughout the entire span of American history. Few, if any, publications or journalists were immune to this phenomenon, despite often vociferous claims to the contrary. Tucher's diligent and exhaustive scholarship delves deep into the context, motives, responses, and, most importantly, the consequences of each occurrence for such false reporting's effect not only on the society and politics of the time, but also on the development and practice of journalism itself.

Much of this development revolved around the evolving dynamics between the perception of journalism's role in society and its responsibilities to that society and its readers. Tucher explains how in the first half of the nineteenth century, as American journalism was emerging from its colonial origins, mired in the hyperpartisanship of the early republic and responding to and influencing the growing democratic impetus in American society and politics, fake news was generally accepted to an extent. In the emerging democratic ethos of the age, journalists functioned as the instigators and mediators of public debate over what was

real and what was true. Journalists and editors of the day "weren't telling their readers one way or the other what to think ... they were *asking* them, warmly inviting them, to enter into a spirited public debate over whether the stories were true or false and assuring them they had as much right as even the rich and powerful to make up their own minds" (p. 29). This sort of attitude placed just as much responsibility on the readers as the journalists themselves and reflected a more cooperative dynamic between the public and the journalists tasked with informing them. There were certainly exceptions to this general rule and numerous incidents of purposefully misleading fakery in the antebellum era, such as the infamous "Roorback hoax" during the 1844 presidential campaign of James K. Polk. However, both sides considered fake news as an accepted, if sometimes problematic, aspect of the journalistic trade. "Newspaper readers," argues Tucher, "wanted and expected to read truthful accounts of authentic events, certainly, but they were also accustomed to encountering drama, mystery, intrigue, combat, and humor in the same pages.... They expected, in short, their newspapers to serve a wide range of interests and purposes, which included not just describing the world but also exploring, enjoying, adjusting, and revising it" (p. 53).

These attitudes began to change during the Civil War. Most of the American public, Union and Confederate alike, were either directly or indirectly engaged in the conflict to one extent or another. Unlike much of the fake news that proliferated in the antebellum era that highlighted incidents and occurrences that were often distant and far removed from most Americans' everyday lives (at least directly), just about everyone had some sort of stake in the war. Suddenly, accuracy and truth in reporting seemed to really matter. The antebellum democratic ethos of journalism did not simply disappear overnight, however, and in the second half of the nineteenth century there was a constant tension between the bias and partisanship of journalists and the growing calls of

the public, as well as pressures from competitors, to report accurately and fairly. This tension led to “decades worth of contentious discussions about the larger realm of journalistic fabrications, fancies, and frauds; about when, if ever, it was acceptable to fudge the truth; and about who had the authority to claim jurisdiction over the truth in the first place” (p. 54). These debates directly influenced the increasing efforts within journalistic circles to professionalize the industry with a set of standards to which all could be held accountable. [1]

Despite these transformations in perceptions and practice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the growing professionalization of the industry, including rigorous training programs at prestigious institutions of higher learning, the proliferation of fake news and debates over its legitimacy as a tool to add interest to otherwise factual reporting and to shape and direct public opinion and socioeconomic policy, grew exponentially as the twentieth century unfolded. As the Industrial Revolution progressed and technology advanced every decade, it affected everything it touched; journalism was no exception. Advances in photography and the advent of film and radio transformed the way reporting could be done and opened a wide range of new opportunities for fakery and outright forgery. Such technological breakthroughs coincided with an increasing, if often tense, partnership between the press and government. Security concerns, both internal and external, derived from World War I saw the government develop whole departments devoted to manipulating and disseminating information to the public and co-opting the private press as participants in those efforts—efforts that often flew in the face of new claims of professionalism within the industry. From the Great Depression to World War II, to McCarthyism and the Cold War, to Watergate, a running theme in Tucher’s analysis is the tension between the idea that the responsibility of the press in a democratic society is to hold the government accountable for its ac-

tions and policies, and the idea that the press should work with, or at least not work against, the government to mold public opinion for the greater good. On both ends of that spectrum, fakery and falsehoods abounded, whether it be CIA infiltration and manipulation of both domestic and foreign media during the Cold War or the advent of New Journalism in the 1960s and 1970s and its open willingness to reject the very idea of objectivity and play fast and loose with the truth in its efforts to attack what it viewed as corruption in the government and the morality of society itself.

The advent of the internet once again changed everything. The internet promised a new democratization of information, a new era where “everyone was a reporter” (p. 236). What began in the blogosphere and amateur news sites such as the *Drudge Report*, and exploded with the spread of social media, shattered the boundaries of journalism itself. This “new networked world ... harbored no editors or gatekeepers and required little more than a pair of deft hands at the keyboard to instantly launch stories, rumors, and gossip into the world” (p. 239). This, of course, created a situation where misinformation and outright lies could be spread around the world at the speed of light, which caused havoc among a public both enamored with and wary of the new technology and the information overload that came with it and the mainstream, or traditional, journalists that now had to not only account for this new phenomenon, but also compete directly with it for the attention of the masses. Such competition led to many mainstream media outlets hastily compiling stories based on the same rumors, innuendos, accusations, and unsubstantiated claims that pervaded the internet. As many of these stories crumbled upon closer scrutiny, a 1999 *Newsweek* poll conducted after the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal and Clinton’s subsequent impeachment—the story that put Matt Drudge of the *Drudge Report* on the mainstream map—indicated that “more than half”

of the respondents “reported their opinion had fallen” of the media in general (p. 242).

Throughout all of this, Tucher’s attention to detail and rigorous examination of the motives and consequences of each new development and incident she examines, intentional and unintentional, provide deeply contextualized analysis of the phenomenon of fake news from every angle in an obvious attempt to be as unbiased as possible. However, the closer she gets to the present day in her narrative, the more difficult it seems for her to retain such impartiality. This is one of the inherent problems within the discipline of history. The closer one gets to the lived experiences of the historian, the more difficult it is for that historian to rise above their subjective experiences, perceptions, and biases and analyze events in a truly impartial and objective manner. Of course, that very conundrum can easily be applied to journalists as well—can a journalist, a human being with their own innate and learned prejudices, be truly objective toward events, ideas, and personalities that directly affect them personally in the same ways they affect their readers?

The cracks in Tucher’s impartiality become readily apparent in the closing chapter and her examination of Fox News and its rise to prominence as the most popular conservative leaning news organization. Despite the claims of “fair and balanced” (news, interpretation, reporting) and “we report, you decide,” it was obvious from very early on as to where Fox’s loyalties lay, and Tucher rightly argues that Fox had much influence on the growing polarization of the media and American society that continues into the present. Tucher insists, however, that Fox does not just occasionally peddle fake news, as most news outlets and organizations have done throughout American history; it practices “fake *journalism* as a cover for its real work of partisan activism” (p. 244). This may be an accurate analysis, but the problem is that she reserves such accusations for Fox and Fox alone. She does not hold other news organizations such as

CNN or MSNBC to the same scrutiny. She does briefly discuss MSNBC and notes how some have described the network as “Fox’s Liberal Evil Twin,” but she essentially dismisses the claim with the thinly veiled defense that whatever partisanship infected MSNBC was only in reaction to and an attempt to counterbalance Fox (p. 248). There is no in-depth analysis of any fake stories or the people and agendas of MSNBC or CNN in the same manner as she treats Fox. At best, this is a gross oversight that neglects any other news organizations’ contributions to the phenomenon of fake news; at worst this is an intentional misdirection that seeks to place all the blame on an organization whose politics and ideologies Tucher disagrees with. The irony is not lost that at the same time Tucher lampoons Fox’s impartiality as a “myth,” she reveals her own by not holding Fox’s competitors to the same thorough examination.

Tucher’s gloves come off completely, however, in her conclusion, unambiguously titled “A Degenerate and Perverted Monstrosity.” Here she sets aside the mantle of the historian and fully assumes the mantle of a modern partisan journalist, which only deepens the irony of a work that set out, at least ostensibly, to expose the façade of impartiality in American news media and reveal the “fakery” that is persistent throughout its history. She throws the proverbial gauntlet down from the very start: “Donald Trump’s presidency and its Gotterdammerung made it impossible for any sentient journalism historian to avoid the urgent inquiries: Isn’t fake news worse now than it’s ever been? Isn’t it posing unprecedented dangers to democracy and public life?” Her answer is a plain and unequivocal, “Yes” (p. 277). She proceeds to acknowledge all of the fakery in American journalism and its effects that her own painstaking research and analysis reveals. “Fake news and fake journalism,” she declares, “have been part of the American media landscape for as long as there’s been an American media landscape and have shown a disturbing ability to innovate and adapt, to camouflage their intentions, to complicate and

confound civic life.... The relationship between journalism and the truth has always been more fragile than many of us realize” (p. 278). Tucher follows this admission, however, with the claim, “But the president who made more than thirty thousand ‘false or misleading claims’ in public during his four years in office—generally to the delight of his loyal base of right-wing supporters—focused and accelerated the trends as never before” (p. 278).

There are several issues with this statement. First, Tucher’s tone and verbiage—particularly the thinly veiled partisan disdain of the phrase “generally to the delight of his loyal base of right-wing supporters”—clearly indicates on which side of the debate her allegiances lay. Second, “false and misleading claims” have been part of the American politician’s arsenal (really of every political actor throughout all human history) from the very beginning, Trump being no exception. Only a running tally of all such claims by every major politician of the last few centuries at least (a daunting task certainly) would place that statement in any sort of historical perspective. Third, the source she uses for the “more than thirty thousand ‘false or misleading claims’” is the *Washington Post* and its “Fact Checkers.” The problem here is twofold: the *Post* is known for its own political bent to the left and the entire phenomenon of “fact checking” has itself been called into question numerous times as a form of gaslighting and fake news itself.[2] This raises an even deeper question: Can any analysis of partisanship and fakery in journalism use as evidentiary “proof” the claims and analysis of one set of partisan journalists against their political opponents, particularly in the present without the benefit of historical hindsight? At least when analyzing the past—particularly the past distant enough that the one doing the analysis has no direct experience and therefore much less “skin in the game,” if you will—one has the benefit of being able to sift through the causes and effects, both short- and long-term, and come to a more reasonable, and ultimately less partisan and/or ideologic-

ally driven, conclusion that is aligned more closely with the truth. Removing, or at least accounting for, one’s bias is extremely difficult in and of itself, but attempting to do so when one has strong opinions of direct lived experience seems more often than not an exercise in futility.

The conclusion of the above statement—that Trump’s presidency “focused and accelerated the trends as never before”—may indeed be true. But the issue is that Tucher places the blame for that squarely and almost solely at the feet of Trump himself and the conservative news media that championed him. She states:

Fake journalism has now solidified its status as the essential driver of the political organization of public life, rooted in a burgeoning ecosystem of right-wing media activists and organizations that exploit the swift, lightweight affordances of the online world and embrace the Fox News tactic of presenting its hyperpartisan fare as professionally verified, accurate, and unbiased. Often flaunting the rhetoric of democracy and press freedom, these organizations explicitly claim to be operating according to the standards of professionalized journalism and frequently denigrate the national press and the “liberal media” for failing to do the same thing (p. 282).

She continues by lambasting organizations such as the Sinclair Broadcast Group, Breitbart News Network, Alex Jones and InfoWars, and the “stridently white-nationalist and anti-immigrant” *Daily Caller* for their contributions to this phenomenon (pp. 282-284). All of that is fair game, of course, and there is no doubt that such organizations and outlets played a significant role but, again, Tucher fails to address the same issues present in the left-leaning liberal organizations and outlets. Whether or not the conservative media initiated the modern surge in fake news, liberal media outlets have certainly done their share to contribute to and exacerbate it. Any balanced accounting and acknowledgment of the media’s coverage of such things as “Russiagate,” COVID 19, the

Black Lives Matter movement and the death of George Floyd, and the 2020 election (including things like the Hunter Biden laptop and the Capitol riots) must analyze the role that liberal news media (and social media organizations that tend to lean more to the left) played in facilitating fake news and, possibly more significantly, suppressing newsworthy items that it deemed “fake” for partisan purposes (such as the Hunter Biden laptop or the possibility of the “lab leak” theory of CoVID 19). She does pay some passing lip service to issues within the liberal media, briefly mentioning coverage of “Trump’s alleged ‘conspiracy’ with the Kremlin to manipulate the 2016 election” and “front page stories” that “routinely called out Trump’s ‘lies,’ referred to ‘racist’ behavior, and openly deliberated about whether to use the term *coup* or *attempted coup* in describing the Capitol riot,” but she does not really call out any of the organizations or outlets by name or place any real blame or culpability on their shoulders (p. 286).

The ultimate irony is found in the last few pages of Tucher’s conclusion where she calls for a return to (or, maybe better, given the analysis presented in her work, a new beginning of) objectivity in journalism. She writes:

But for all its flaws, when it’s carried out correctly, genuine professional objectivity still offers news consumers an alternative increasingly rare in the chaotic, hyperpartisan scrum that is today’s media landscape: a declaration that the truth is contingent not on emotion or individual whim or partisan mandate but on evidence tested through the use of dedicated processes and tools. Objective journalists who truly follow their obligations to fairly weigh and analyze a range of plausible viewpoints, even those they disagree with, have no alternative to recognize room for debate—for democratic deliberation—in finding the truth. Fake journalists prefer to slam the door to that room (p. 289).

This is a “fair and balanced” proposition—to steal Fox News’ oft used but highly suspect catch

phrase—and one at which journalists should indeed aim. But the ability of modern journalists to actually achieve that goal is called into question by the analysis of the very journalist (Tucher herself) that proposes it. As fair and without obvious bias as her analysis in most of this work is, once that analysis reaches the realm in which Tucher herself has much direct personal experience, her ability to “fairly weigh and analyze a range of plausible viewpoints, even those they disagree with” does not seem to hold up to scrutiny. Perhaps it is the word “plausible” itself that is the crucial caveat here – if the claim of one side is not seen as “plausible” by the other, then that in itself “slams the door” to the “room for debate,” whether it is fake news or not. Then, of course, there is the question of “sides” to begin with. Truly objective journalism takes no side at all. Is that even possible? Should journalists choose a side or not? Is there room for opinion in journalism or should opinions be the domain of op-eds and pundits? Are op-eds and punditry still journalism in the strictest sense of the term? These questions and more must be contended with as America attempts to navigate out of the polarized media and political space in which it finds itself.

Perhaps, however, the problems within Tucher’s work and the ironies that emerge are not truly solvable or reconcilable. As she painstakingly and methodically shows throughout her work, fake news has been present in American journalism from the beginning. Despite all efforts to account for it and stamp it out, it has only grown in direct correlation to the size, scope, and technological advancements of the media apparatus itself. As long as humans hold opinions and have motivation and incentive to present those opinions about the world around them and the machinations of its peoples as more “true” than others, then the phenomenon of fakery in news media has no immediate or obvious solution. And since we humans are opinionated in our very essence, I would

not hold my breath that fake news is going anywhere anytime soon.

With all that said, *Not Exactly Lying: Fake News and Fake Journalism in American History* is an extremely timely and important work. Despite its flaws, Tucher has proven once and for all that fake news is not a modern phenomenon at all but instead has been a fundamental part of the American media landscape since its inception. The criticism above only reinforces the very questions and problems that the work raises—the reality and, indeed, plausibility of objectivity itself. The apparent cognitive dissonance of the work in its later stages might just accurately reflect the collective cognitive dissonance that struggles with the reality of a “free press” and the expectations of the roles that the press does or should play in society. It is not at all a negative critique that Tucher’s work raises just as many questions as it answers, as that is indeed what a good work of history should do. *Not Exactly Lying* clearly establishes a foundation of understanding of the ways in which fake news has manifested itself throughout American history from root to branch. That in itself is an important achievement. What we do with this knowledge, how we tackle this problem, and whether or not it is even “fixable” remains to be seen.

Notes

[1]. For more on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century efforts to transform journalism from a trade to a respected profession, see Randall S. Sumpter, *Before Journalism Schools: How Gilded Age Reporters Learned the Rules* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2018).

[2]. For a scholarly study of the phenomenon, see Andrew Moshirnia, “Who Will Check the Checkers? False Factcheckers and Memetic Misinformation,” *Utah Law Review* no. 4 (2020): 1029-73, <https://dc.law.utah.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1270&context=ulr>.

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