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Philippe Bourdin and Stéphane Le Bras, eds., *Les Fausses Nouvelles: Un millénaire de bruits et de rumeurs dans l'espace public français*. Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2018. 211 pp. 15.00€. (pb). ISBN 978-2-84516-811-4.

Review by Katlyn Marie Carter, University of Notre Dame.

This volume of essays usefully explores the conceptual evolution of *fausses nouvelles*, the difference between this concept and the Anglophone concept of fake news, and the distinct media culture of France vis-à-vis Anglo-Saxon societies in terms of how the problem of *fausses nouvelles* manifests and has throughout history. Its tentative conclusion--in so much as a collection of essays produces any one conclusion--is succinctly summed up in the acknowledgements: "les 'fausses nouvelles' sont moins une menace pour la démocratie qu'un reflet de son état" (p. 7). It is for this reason that studying this phenomenon historically is useful, both for historians seeking to better explain the past and for those of us struggling to make sense of the world around us.

The volume is broken into three parts: the first two historical and the final one contemporary, with pieces written by journalists, political scientists, and activists. Taken as a whole, the volume (which emerged from a symposium held at the Cercle Condorcet de Clermont-Ferrand), represents a creative and laudatory effort to bring historians into conversation with journalists and scholars concerned with current phenomena and, sometimes, how to respond to them. The authors in the volume, each in his or her own way, contribute to breaking down a simple or monolithic view of what *fausses nouvelles* or fake news is comprised of and how it has operated historically. Paying close attention to the vocabulary used to describe the spread of false information--or particularly, *nouvelles*, which Hélène Guillot reminds us is not the same thing as information--the authors probe the nuanced way in which a variety of material we might group under the umbrella of false news is produced, consumed, and strategically deployed throughout history and today.

Of note, and great utility, is the focus on terminology many of the authors bring to the volume. Jean-Luc Fray opens the collection by urging a study of *fausses nouvelles* over the *longue durée*, with a focus on the medieval period. He proceeds to reconstruct a taxonomy of *fausses nouvelles*, each component with its own distinct implications and function in medieval society. A *bruit* was not the same as a *rumeur*, a *nouvelle*, a *fama*, or a *légende*. In breaking down these types of what we might now group together as "fake news," Fray reminds the reader that to look at a concept historically requires a shedding of our modern mentality in order to understand what it meant and how it worked in the period under consideration. "L'atmosphère mentale est profondément différente," he writes, "puisque la croyance, loin d'être suspecte dans les sociétés anciennes, est auréolé d'un halo positif, même si le renversement de sens de crédulité et crédule (termes apparus

en langue française, respectivement à la fin des XIII<sup>e</sup> et XIV<sup>e</sup> siècles) et l'évolution sémantique de superstition prouvent que ces sociétés ne cultivent pas pour autant de naïveté béate" (p. 45). In short, what we now see as a negative epistemological commitment is not trans-historically negative. Historians need to make an effort to reconstruct the mindsets and ways of thinking in earlier periods in order to understand how false information functioned in other times and places.

The question of journalists' positions in media ecosystems leads to intriguing parallels between the essay written by historian Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire about the *nouvellistes* of the eighteenth century and that by France TV journalist Didier Desormeaux about contemporary journalism. Both authors interrogate the self-conception of reporters and especially the relationship between reporters and their sources. Beaurepaire makes the point that eighteenth-century *nouvellistes* were often much more connected to and dependent on state actors than the Habermasian vision of a detached public sphere would have us believe. In pre-Revolutionary France, *nouvellistes* were often imbricated with state actors and official spaces, carefully situating themselves to maintain access and seek patronage. Even those who would report on critical or unflattering material against an official would sometimes rhetorically distance themselves from the reports. In his periodical, for example, Siméon-Prosper Hardy would print *vers hostiles* to Chancellor Maupeou, but would keep his distance by framing them as things he had heard rather than something he was himself saying (p. 62). Examining a similar point in the modern era, Desormeaux urges us to hone in on the sources journalists use and how they relate to them if we want to better understand the proliferation of fake news. He suggests that demands for quick on-the-scene reporting paired with diminishing resources often renders journalists overly reliant on institutions with an interest in supplying spin.

Guillot's essay on photography during the First World War serves as a useful reminder that this is not an entirely new situation. Examining how government control over access to the front and the dissemination of photos shaped the portrayal of the war, Guillot emphasizes that even a seemingly objective media format can convey *fausses nouvelles*. The essay hones in on government censors to examine their actions with regard to images produced during the war and, in so doing, it highlights the unique role of photography in conveying information (and misinformation). Censors were often less worried about what a photo actually showed than what it could be used to show. Guillot identifies a concern with the way in which photographs, especially when deracinated from any explanatory text, could serve to convey a myriad of messages depending on the framing and viewers' expectations and experiences. She identifies a fruitful paradox of photography: at the same time as it is often taken as objective evidence, it is a form of media highly dependent on viewer interpretation, which can make it a tool for disseminating *fausses nouvelles*.

The question of why *fausses nouvelles* arise at particular moments is taken up by a number of authors throughout the volume, along with the problem or how or whether to combat it. François Ploux identifies the instability, uncertainty and politicization of the early Restoration as the perfect breeding ground for the spread of *fausses nouvelles*. Suspicion paired with a lack of information created the conditions for the spread of rumors, especially in the vein of speculation, as a mode of expressing both hopes and fears. A similar dynamic was at play during the French Revolution, according to Hervé Leuwers, who emphasizes that denunciations were not merely cynical, calculating power grabs, but were rooted in uncertainty and a view of individuals as central to historical developments. Such investigations emphasize the hypothesis stated at the outset of the volume that *fausses nouvelles* are less a threat to democracies than a reflection of their

states. These historians are less focused on the effect of false news, than on what its presence can tell us about the society when and where it proliferated. This type of analysis fits into a trend of historians working on colonial contexts in particular, who have turned to rumors as a way of recovering lost epistemologies or worldviews of the subaltern.[1] Taking this approach, we might usefully think of *fausses nouvelles*, particularly in the form of rumors, as useful or even generative, rather than entirely pejorative.

If we do think of *fausses nouvelles* as having utility in some sense, it is also worth asking: for whom? Shifting focus from the conditions of society at any given moment, some of the authors ask who it is that benefits from the circulation of *fausses nouvelles* as a way to answer the question of why it circulates. Bastien Cabot's analysis of why workers and popular classes turn to *bruits* and *rumeurs* emphasizes their utility to conveying concerns to authorities. These forms of communication can serve either to defy authorities or to make demands of them, which helps explain why they are spread. Echoing the work of Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel, Cabot reminds us that "les classes populaires ne sont pas uniquement des récepteurs passifs de ces contextes sociaux, ni des transmetteurs naïfs de ces rumeurs et fausses nouvelles" (p. 109).[2] Stéphane Le Bras picks up this line of questioning from a slightly different vantage point, asking why an emphasis on fraud became so central to the 1907 uprising of wine producers in Languedoc. The simple answer is that the misrepresentation proved politically useful and was amplified by the press, which presented the movement as a work of specific groups based on its politics.

Probing the heart of the challenge Americans are facing today, Vincent Michelot asks how fake news is operating in the United States, particularly by focusing on Donald Trump's motivations and the effects of his adoption of the term. A president who entered office with an insecurity over the outcome of the popular vote and influence of a foreign power in the election, soon found himself under investigation while already campaigning for the next election. Under such circumstances, the application of the label of fake news to anything he perceived to be a threat became a way to diminish trust in the press and position himself as on the side of the people. Asking how this could happen in the generally robust American media environment, Michelot identifies three factors: the rise of populism (particularly animosity for expertise) intense polarization, and the capacious freedom of the press established by the First Amendment and subsequent jurisprudence. It is this last point that bears further scrutiny. Unlike in France, Michelot writes, freedom of speech in the United States has scant restrictions. This can lead to the elevation of fringe and scientifically-contested claims being elevated and treated as equivalent to factually-based and scientifically-backed information. This condition makes it less of a leap for the White House to "tient un discours à l'opposé de la réalité" (p. 185). The result, he suggests, is that "le concept même de *fake news*, son fonctionnement et son efficacité sont indissociables du cadre juridique américain d'encadrement de la liberté d'expression" (p. 185).

Leuwers's essay earlier in the volume provides the historical context for disagreements about the relative risks and benefits of a commitment to total press freedom, tracing them back to the French Revolution. Leuwers focuses on Camille Desmoulins, who considered denunciation essential to protecting the public good and saw the possibility of false denunciations as a fair price to pay. Desmoulins maintained a constant commitment to absolute freedom of the press, despite what he saw as the inevitability of errors or abuses. The final three essays in the volume, including a short entry by Éric Favéy of the Ligue d'Enseignement, raise these challenges anew, asking what we can and want to do about the proliferation of *fausses nouvelles* in modern society.

This, I would argue, is not necessarily the purview of historians—and the volume certainly does not force them into taking stances. Instead most of the authors gesture, more or less overtly, to the underlying question of how historians can use *fausses nouvelles* and what they can show us about periods in the past, which, it turns out, is a lot.

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Vincent Michelot, “De « fausses nouvelles » à « *fake news* » : itinéraire sémantique américain”

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Stéphane Le Bras, “Conclusion : L’histoire et les historiens face aux fausses informations : identifier, decrypter et exploiter”

#### NOTES

[1] For some notable examples of this approach, see especially: Anne Eller, “Rumors of Slavery: Defending Emancipation in a Hostile Caribbean,” in *American Historical Review*, Vol. 122, no. 3 (June 2017); Steven Hahn, “‘Extravagant Expectations’ of Freedom: Rumour, Political Struggle, and the Christmas Insurrection Scare of 1865 in the American South,” in *Past & Present*, No. 157 (November 1997); S. A. Smith, “Talking Toads and Chinless Ghosts: The Politics of

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‘Superstitious’ Rumors in the People’s Republic of China, 1961-1965,” in *American Historical Review*, Vol. 111, No. 2 (April 2006); Gregory Dowd, *Groundless: Rumors, Legends, and Hoaxes on the Early American Frontier* (Johns Hopkins University Press: 2015); David Coast and Jo Fox, “Rumor and Politics,” in *History Compass*, Vol. 13, no. 5 (2015).

[2] Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel, *The Vanishing Children of Paris: Rumor and Politics before the French Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 1991)

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