Press release

Fake news long before Trump

Research at the Cluster of Excellence on fake news in the Middle Ages – Conference of literary scholars and historians on hoaxes and their cultural negotiation in the European Middle Ages – "Whether courtly plots or conspiracy theories in the face of the plague: fake news was an unsettling factor long before mass media" – Results in episode 8 of the Cluster of Excellence's "Religion and Politics" research podcast

Münster, 28 June 2021 (exc) According to researchers from the University of Münster's Cluster of Excellence "Religion and Politics", fake news existed long before Donald Trump and social media. Whether courtly plots or conspiracy theories in the face of the plague: uncertainty about the truth of news is not a new phenomenon. "The negotiation of true and false information has always been able to develop its own dynamics in times of crisis. This also applies to the Middle Ages, although communication in this period required a much stronger corporeal presence", explain the Romance scholar Pia Claudia Doering and the historian Marcel Bubert from the Cluster of Excellence. "Contrary to what we think today, the spreading of fake news and the assessment of the truth of news are not necessarily linked to mass media".

Doering and Bubert are hosting a conference starting on Thursday on fake news in the Middle Ages. "Looking back into the past is not about the question of what is recognizably 'false' today, such as reports about monstrous beings or witches", Bubert explains. "Rather, we explore the conditions under which claims to validity and truth were accepted or rejected". The Zoom conference on 1 and 2 July is entitled "'I do not know who is telling the truth, and who is lying' – fake news and its cultural negotiation in the European Middle Ages", and opens up historical and literary perspectives on medieval negotiations of truth and lies. The thematic spectrum ranges from constructions of truth in novels about the legendary King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, to reflections on lying by the author Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) and anti-Jewish accusations of ritual murder and conspiracy, and to controversies of the time about astrology.

"Literature is traditionally confronted with the accusation that its fictions are lies and deception", Doering explains, and the combatting of such accusations leads it to reflect more deeply on the relationship between true and false. According to Doering, literary texts make a decisive contribution to developing procedures that explore the boundaries between historiography and poetry, between truth and fiction. "We therefore want to bring literary scholars and historians together to discuss linguistic-rhetorical and media strategies of evidence production".

In the run-up to the conference, there will be a new episode of the "Religion and Politics" research podcast on the Cluster of Excellence's annual theme "Belonging and Demarcation". This will deal with fake news in the Middle Ages and contain many historical examples – such as a campaign by the French King Philip the Fair against the Knights Templar, a spiritual order of knights whom he accused of serious crimes such as sodomy and heresy. Action against the Knights Templar caused a sensation throughout Europe at the beginning of the 14th century, but, according to Bubert, it also provoked scepticism: some contemporaries suspected that the king was acting solely out of greed, which he denied. "The court now finds itself in the position of having to declare news circulating about the king's true intentions to be false. This is remarkable". Given this competition between different claims, many contemporaries were uncertain about the truth of the news that had been circulated. One French chronicler made the succinct point: "I do not know who is telling the truth, and who is lying".

In view of such findings, Doering and Bubert argue that fake news should not be regarded solely as a current phenomenon, as is often the case in public opinion. They point out that some researchers attribute the current "flexible handling of facts" to postmodern thinking, which understands truth as a social construction, while others see the transformation of digital media as the decisive factor for the changed production of truths. "If we are currently living in a post-factual era, as is often claimed in media discussion, then there must have been a factual age when the handling of news functioned quite differently", says Bubert. "However, the situation that a multiplicity of truths makes the world more confusing is not fundamentally new; people had to deal with competing truth claims in much earlier times, too".

As the two researchers explain, it was especially conflictual events such as epidemics, wars, or the death of a ruler that were often accompanied by rumours. In some cases, rumours were fomented, and then triggered spectacular battles of interpretation due to their political explosiveness. "News spread via travelling merchants, minstrels, pilgrims and preachers, as well as through letters and pamphlets – quite rapidly by the standards of the time", explains Bubert. Long before the Covid-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories caused unrest during the great plague wave in the 14th century. Pope Clement VI himself rejected the rumour that the plague had been caused by the poisoning of wells by Jews, pointing out that they had also died of the plague.

The literature of the time also says a lot about how falsehoods were dealt with, as Doering explains. Medieval poets such as Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374), Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1342-1400), and Christine de Pizan (1364-after 1429) recognize the immense influence of rumours, half-truths and hoaxes. They transform their observations into vivid images: the rumour is conceived in ancient tradition as a flying demon whose body is covered all over with eyes, ears, mouths and tongues. In the "Romance of the Rose", the most influential work of French literature in the Middle Ages, the figure of False Appearance, as a consummate pretender, exposes the mechanisms of religious hypocrisy. Thus, despite completely different media conditions, the medieval battles over true and false interpretations show strong parallels to the present. The conference will take a literary and historical perspective to examine not only the parallels but also the differences. (apo/vvm)

References:

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Caption: Marcel Bubert (© private), Pia Claudia Doering (© private)