

How Abraham Lincoln Confronted—And Spread—Misinformation | Time

By Elizabeth Mitchell

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On May 18, 1864, U.S. troops marched into lower Manhattan and entered the offices of two key New York City newspapers. Soldiers leveled guns at staff members' heads. They blocked the doors with bayonets. President Abraham Lincoln had ordered the arrest of the editors and the seizure of the newspapers. That particular May morning, the papers had run a presidential proclamation announcing a draft of 400,000 new soldiers. The problem: Lincoln had issued no such proclamation.

In the run-up to the 2020 election, American life is full of misinformation about everything from the security of [mail-in voting](#) to the [causes of West Coast wildfires](#). Despite [efforts](#) to help citizens [guard against](#) “fake news,” curtailing misinformation remains a controversial and difficult task. But, while the [platforms](#) that help today's untruths snowball and spread are often decidedly modern, the problem itself is nothing new. During the Civil War, Americans furiously sifted false from true during a time of extreme partisan divisions, even among those who agreed on the need to abolish slavery. They even had their own version of the Internet—the telegraph—which had exposed such stark partisan divisions in the country, its inventor [Samuel Morse](#) founded an organization to rebuild national unity. Looking at that time, it's possible to identify key lessons for navigating this 2020 election season when accusations and false brags about the candidates abound.

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