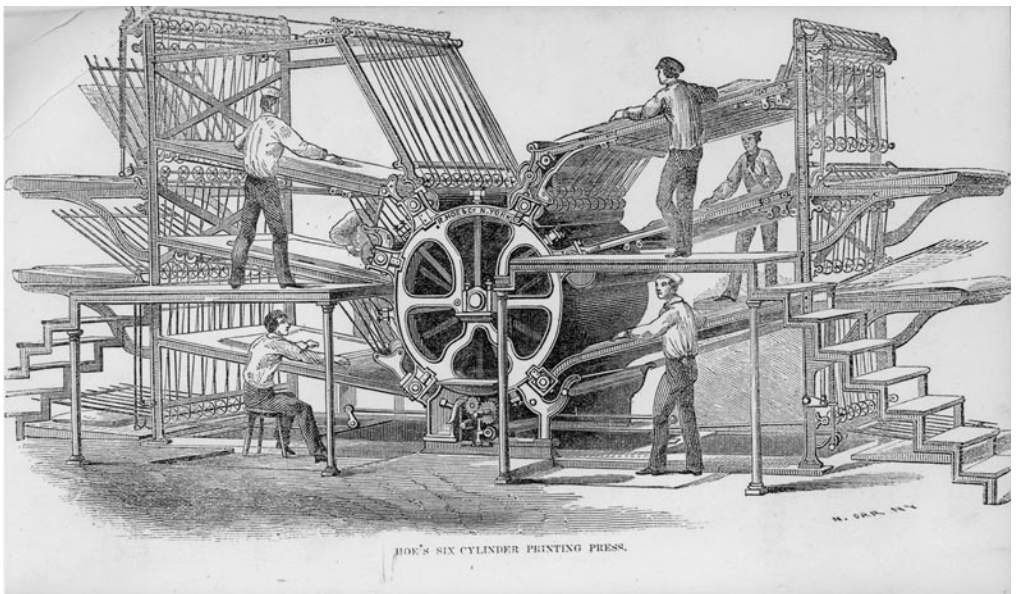


"Hoe's Six Cylinder Printing Press" (rotary printing press).  
From *History of the Processes of Manufacture and Uses of Printing, Gas-Light, Pottery, Glass and Iron* (1864).



# Rumor and Media: On Circulations and Credence (via Kant and Marx)

STEFAN ANDRIOPOULOS

Our current moment is marked by the accelerated circulation of rumors, fake news, and the political polarization and persistent delusions they have brought about. Forty percent of Americans continue to believe in the “Big Lie” that the 2020 election was somehow manipulated, even though all claims of voter fraud have been disproven and convincingly refuted. In a similar vein, anti-vaccine narratives and conspiracy theories have gained considerable traction, leading their believers to wrongly see vaccines as ineffective and dangerous or even as sinister, government-controlled implants. How is it possible that so many people lend credence to rumors and false allegations? And how might one seek to correct false beliefs that seem immune to fact-checking and rational refutation? In this article I try to answer these questions by undertaking a short, selective history of the constitutive links between rumor, media, and the credence created by new modes of circulation.

The final congressional report on the January 6, 2021 U.S. Capitol attack notes that social media “played a prominent role in amplifying erroneous claims of election fraud” and highlights the crucial role of emotions and affect, which render solely rational rebuttals of false rumors ineffective: “many of President Trump’s supporters *wanted* to believe [these false allegations]. The stolen election narrative has proven to be remarkably durable precisely because it is a matter of belief—not evidence, or reason.”<sup>1</sup> In line with this analysis, it is tempting to pin our current, seemingly unprecedented crisis to the rise of social media, which have created new forms of circulation, collectivity, and affect.<sup>2</sup> However, in the following I will show that concerns over rumor have long been a feature of media change and the introduction of new technologies and media forms. By studying this unexplored history, we can gain a better understanding of our present situation, which is only the most recent example of how new media facilitate the circulation of rumors and lend them credibility. The later parts of the article therefore analyze the interrelation between rumor and popular print media in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by

undertaking a new reading of texts by Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx. I begin, however, by putting forward some general points, thereby laying the groundwork for an analysis of different historical instantiations of this intimate link between the spread of unreliable information and newly emerging media.

### Rumors and Media Change

My main argument is simple and can be summarized in two short sentences:

1. The emergence of new technologies and of new and accessible media forms increases and accelerates the circulation of rumors and disinformation.
2. Circulation and repetition create belief.

One historical example for this dynamic, from long before our present moment, is the invention of movable type in early modern Europe, where the medium of print served as a necessary but not sufficient condition for the Gutenberg Bible, the Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution.<sup>3</sup> However, in the same period a surge of pamphlets and broadsides emerged that reported on the births of various monstrous creatures, such as the Monster of Ravenna, the Monk Calf, and the Papal Ass. While they were highly sensational, each of these texts made forceful claims to factuality and veracity.<sup>4</sup> The broadsides and pamphlets were often reprinted, circulating widely as a result.<sup>5</sup> In their magisterial study *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (1998), Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park therefore describe “this multiplication of monsters” as “spring[ing] at least in part from the new technology of printing, which greatly facilitated the spread of news through pamphlets and broadsides.”<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, it is important to note that the first texts printed by Johannes Gutenberg were the papal indulgence letters that disgusted Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon, and other Protestant reformers so strongly.<sup>7</sup> Anticipating this essay’s conclusion, one could therefore say that it was the proliferation of Catholic indulgence letters that was superseded by the circulation of polemical anti-papal pamphlets. These Protestant broadsides and pamphlets, in turn, led to the founding of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of Faith by Pope Gregory XV one hundred years later, thereby giving us the term *propaganda* through the congregation’s Latin name,



Sacra Congregata de Propaganda Fide.

Despite this close connection to the history of printing, most popular and scholarly studies describe rumor as an exclusively or primarily oral phenomenon. The cultural historian Hans-Joachim Neubauer defines *hearsay* as the “primary and proper medium” of rumor.<sup>8</sup> In his book *Rumors: Uses, Interpretations, and Images*, Jean-Noël Kapferer introduces rumors as “the oldest form of mass media.”<sup>9</sup> But then he sets out to separate rumor from media by describing “pure” rumors as exclusively belonging to the realm of oral speech:

When news from an unofficial source is transmitted by word of mouth alone, showing a characteristic progress of chain spreading and large-scale propagation, then we are dealing with a case of “pure rumor.” If the media takes up the torch in spreading the news, . . . they ennoble it. The rumor is then no longer pure: it has been . . . “mediatized.” Only “pure” rumors allow us to observe the movement of progressive growth, which starts from virtually nothing and lapses in the end into silence.<sup>10</sup>

In the following I do away with Kapferer’s distinction between “pure,” oral rumors, on the one hand, and “mediatized” rumors, on the other. For at least since the invention of drawing, writing, and graffiti, rumors have bridged multiple media, assuming a status that is always already impure.<sup>11</sup> Viral rumors emerge from a self-amplifying feedback loop that jumps across various media, from hearsay, graffiti, pamphlets, and posters to radio, TV, and social media—and back. This process is frequently propelled by various forms of strong, negative affect, such as anger, hatred, or outrage over a perceived wrong. In addition, it is often the jump or transition from one medium to another that gives a rumor heightened credibility.

An essay by Rahul Mukherjee that analyzes the role of the social-media platform WhatsApp for what is called “cow vigilantism” in India provides a pertinent example.<sup>12</sup> There, young Hindu nationalist men organize in WhatsApp groups to ensure that no one eats cows, on account of the animal’s sacred status, according to Hindu doctrine. Such organization often leads to violence against Muslim Indians who are wrongly accused of consuming beef. Mukherjee describes one incident that occurred during September 2015 in Dadri, a town in Western Uttar Pradesh. Along with the accusation that a Muslim neighbor had slaughtered and eaten cows, gory and decontextualized images of bloody beef carcasses and meat circulated among village inhabitants via WhatsApp. The allegation found seeming corroboration and confirmation when it was repeated in an announcement from the village temple’s loudspeaker, which led to the lynching of the

Workshop of Lucas Cranach the Elder. *The Papal Ass*, 1523. Woodcut frontispiece to Philip Melanchthon and Martin Luther, *Deutung der zwo grewlichen Figuren Bapstesels zu Rom und Munchkalbs zu freyberg in Meyssen funden* (1523). Melanchthon’s text

presents the alleged discovery of a monstrous body in the Roman river of Tiber in 1496 as proving the perversion and monstrosity of the Roman papacy. Kupferstich-Kabinett, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. Photograph: Herbert Boswank.

wrongly accused man. Many factors coalesce and converge in such an incident—nationalism, religion, masculinity, and the incitement of violence. What amplified the rumor and thereby lent it additional credence, however, was its transition from WhatsApp to temple loudspeaker. Similarly, in the United States, the Big Lie of the stolen presidential election of 2020 migrated from social media platforms such as Twitter and Reddit to One America News and Tucker Carlson on Fox News and back again to social media, a process by which the lie not only crossed back and forth between social media and cable TV but also gained credibility.

The historian Robert Darnton highlights this ability of rumors to traverse media boundaries within another historical context in an essay that describes eighteenth-century Paris as an “early information society.” Darnton emphasizes the flow of information—and of rumor, gossip, and slander—through various modes and media of communication that include oral speech, handwriting, and print.<sup>13</sup> Darnton therefore arrives at the following conclusion:

First, it makes no sense . . . to separate printed from oral and written modes of communication, as we casually do when we speak of “print culture,” because they were all bound together in a multi-media system. Nor, second, does it serve any purpose to derive one mode of communication from another, as if our task . . . was to trace a message to its source. It was the spread of the message that mattered—not its origin but its *amplification*, the way it reached the public and ultimately took hold. That process should be understood as a matter of *feedback* . . . , rather than of . . . linear causality.<sup>14</sup>

Building on Darnton, I contend that separating or sealing off various modes of circulation from one another prevents us from understanding the self-amplification of rumors. Yet, while organic concepts such as “spread” or “contagion” seem almost unavoidable in describing viral rumors, I will in the following—while occasionally relying on the terms *spread* and *dissemination*—privilege an admittedly more cybernetic terminology. My theorization of the intersections between rumor and media avoids the notion of “contagion,” centering instead on the terms *circulation*, *feedback*, and *amplification* to account for the various modes in which the transmission and repetition of a rumor, or narrative, serve to increase its volume, reach, and acceptance. These feedback loops of “going viral” are not limited to one mode or medium of circulation. Eighteenth-century rumors moved across oral speech, handwriting, and print, while today’s unverified claims traverse social media, radio, and TV. Returning to Darnton’s critique of “print culture” as a notion that obscures the plurality of media through which a message or rumor circulates, I would like to add that eighteenth-

century Enlightenment thinkers often described the negative aspects of print media in oral terms. For scholars who are attached to books and essays, acknowledging the dark side of printed matter seems to be difficult.

In addition to their traversing of various media, viral rumors are almost never entirely false. Instead, rumors frequently blend facts with fabrications, and they must speak to real grievances to find wide resonance. Take QAnon, a strange hybrid of rumor, conspiracy theory, and cult. In contrast to the complete lack of evidence for QAnon's claims of a Democratic, deep-state cabal of Satanic, cannibalistic pedophiles who battle against a Messiah figure named Donald Trump, the list of powerful groups—the Catholic Church, boarding schools, national athletic organizations—that have allowed and covered up ongoing, systematic sexual abuse of minors by their own members and employees is long and well-documented. It is this combination of facts with fabrications that makes rumors so potent.<sup>15</sup>

The same blending of real concerns and facts with extreme fabrications can be observed in a rumor that led to violent riots and the killing of several police officers by an outraged mob in Paris in May 1750. As the historians Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel show, a dark rumor circulated at that time alleging that King Louis XV was suffering from leprosy and was trying to cure himself by taking baths in the blood of children—a literal blood bath rumor and a narrative with clear echoes of the antisemitic blood libel. The story was widely believed, however, because, in the months before the riot, the police had begun combatting what they perceived as urban disorder by arbitrarily arresting or abducting vagrant or unaccompanied children from the streets of Paris.<sup>16</sup>

That rumors blend facts with fiction was also emphasized in Roman antiquity by Vergil, who in his *Aeneid* personifies rumor as the Roman goddess of Fama—a “horrible monster” (*monstrum horrendum*) with numerous clamoring mouths and tongues that “sing alike of facts and falsehoods.”<sup>17</sup> Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, by contrast, describes “the house of fama” as an intricate architectural structure, thronged with “crowds” and a “light-weight populace,” a space where “thousands [of rumors], false mixed with true,” reverberate.<sup>18</sup> Both Vergil and Ovid take note of the crucial role of affect for the self-amplifying feedback loop that enables viral rumors. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* highlights how “overwhelming fears” and “groundless delight” can lead to “sudden sedition.” In Vergil's *Aeneid*, the conception and birth of the winged goddess Fama is linked to the “rage” (*ira*) her mother feels with the Olympians, while Fama herself inspires rage and anger in those who hear her singing.<sup>19</sup> These literary descriptions of rumor furthermore stress its close connection to crowds, an intersection that remains remarkably constant across different historical periods, from antiquity to the present.

In the late nineteenth century, Gustave Le Bon emphasized the collective will of the crowd as separate from the individual will of its members, and he explained the emergence of the crowd as being based on a process of “mental contagion” that leads to a loss of rationality among its members, a process Le Bon explicitly likens to the state of hypnosis.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, his psychology of the crowd celebrates the “leaders” of the crowd in an authoritarian, protofascist manner that renders his whole theory problematic.<sup>21</sup> Gabriel Tarde’s *Laws of Imitation* (1890), quoted by Le Bon, explains the rise and cohesion of social unities in a similar but less explicitly authoritarian manner as based on “imitation” and “somnambulism.” In Tarde’s words, “Society is imitation and imitation is a kind of somnambulism.”<sup>22</sup> More recently, Tony D. Sampson has drawn on both Le Bon and Tarde to analyze new media technologies as facilitating “contagion” and the spread of viral memes.<sup>23</sup> However, similar to Brian Massumi, Sampson presents affect as preceding language and narrative, describing “discourse” as responding to “a prediscursive flow of contagious affect, feelings, and emotions.”<sup>24</sup>

Viral rumors do mobilize and generate strong, often negative, forms of affect—a fact that finds corroboration in the recent revelation that Facebook’s algorithms harnessed emotions like anger and hate to produce sustained user engagement and increase revenue.<sup>25</sup> But rumors also tell stories that give voice to collective desires, fears, and anxieties. Since these stories elicit an embodied response that has a semantic and narrative dimension, a purely rational refutation or fact-check rarely ends the circulation of a rumor. But rumors can be engaged, modified, and redirected through counternarratives that elicit emotions and rely on storytelling as well. To describe the dissemination of false rumors as arising from “a prediscursive flow of contagious affect” therefore obscures a potentially powerful way of disrupting their spread: the circulation of counternarratives that also mobilize affect and successfully combine storytelling with reasoning. In the next part of this essay I will turn to Kant’s classical model of rational Enlightenment as one, admittedly deficient, mode of responding to rumors, simultaneously analyzing Kant’s distinction between an enlightened public and an irrational crowd. In the final section, I will then undertake a new reading of Marx and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto* as theorizing accelerated modes of circulation while also providing a related but more effective model for countering the spread of rumors and disinformation.

### **Kant: The Two Sides of Circulation and the Crowd versus the Public**

In 1763, Kant wrote a letter to Charlotte Knobloch, responding to a query of hers concerning the Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg’s alleged ability to communicate with spirits. In the letter, Kant felt the need to assure

Knobloch that he had not fallen victim to popular superstition and rumors in exploring this topic: “Allow me to justify my procedure in this matter, gracious lady, since it may look as though a popular delusion [*ein gemeiner Wahn*] had predisposed me to seek out these tales and to accept them eagerly, without careful examination.”<sup>26</sup>

After distancing himself from “popular delusion” in this manner, Kant relates three stories about Swedenborg’s alleged ability to see into the spirit world. He goes so far as to describe one story as “beyond any conceivable doubt,” and he characterizes another one as credible because it was sent by one ambassador to another as “news meant for public use.”<sup>27</sup> In addition, Kant characterizes Swedenborg as “a scholar” (*ein Gelehrter*) and declares that all remaining questions about this issue will be answered in a book that Swedenborg would soon publish in London. According to Kant, that book would have the effect of “making this whole strange affair publicly known before the eyes of the world.”<sup>28</sup>

Kant’s positive assessment of Swedenborg is surprising, and I have written elsewhere about the importance of spiritualist notions for Kant’s critical philosophy.<sup>29</sup> But for the purposes of this article, my focus is on Kant’s optimistic view of the public and the transparency created by scholarly books, which make things “publicly known before the eyes of the world”—a stance that places his letter to Knobloch in close proximity to his response to the question “What Is Enlightenment?,” which appeared twenty years later in a 1784 issue of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*.<sup>30</sup>

In that essay Kant puts forward a teleological account of the perfectibility of the human species that is predicated on the circulation of scholarly print publications as a model for how humanity will gain enlightenment. Kant opens the essay by describing the obstacles that make it nearly impossible for an individual to leave behind a state of tutelage or dependence (*Unmündigkeit*) that has become almost “nature” to them. But Kant asserts as well that, in contrast to one isolated human individual, a “public” will almost inevitably enlighten itself:

But that a public [*ein Publikum*] enlighten itself is more easily possible; indeed, it is nearly inevitable, if only the public is given freedom. For there will always be a few, even among the established guardians of the great masses [*des großen Haufens*], who think for themselves; these few, after throwing off the yoke of tutelage for themselves, will spread around [*um sich verbreiten*] the spirit of rational appreciation of one’s own value and of everyone’s calling to think for themselves.<sup>31</sup>

In this passage we can discern both a conceptual opposition and a performative contradiction. Kant distinguishes first between “a public” and



the “vast masses.” The latter’s negative qualities become even more evident in the sentences that follow, where Kant insists that true enlightenment can occur only as a gradual process and not by means of a revolution. According to Kant, a revolution will not bring about a true transformation of one’s mode of thinking but merely replace old prejudices with new ones, which thereby continue to serve as “a leash of the vast unthinking masses.”<sup>32</sup> However, although Kant seeks to uphold this distinction between a rational public and a common populace or crowd, the demarcation between the two is not as clear or stable as Kant suggests. Not only do we need to account for the possibility of the public losing its rationality and thereby turning into an “unthinking mass.” But even the constitution of the public presupposes a dissemination of the “spirit” of rational thinking that comes peculiarly close to the model of nonrational, affective contagion or imitation that is often invoked to account for social cohesion and the circulation of rumors. For a public will not enlighten itself unless the few who have started thinking for themselves “will spread around the spirit of rational appreciation of one’s own value and of everyone’s calling to think for themselves.” In the language of our current mediascape, we could say that Kant pins his hopes on a few enlightened “influencers” who will disseminate the spirit of thinking independently instead of being influenced.

If we go one step further to ask how Kant describes the mechanism and the materialities of this spread or dissemination, then we must analyze Kant’s notion of the “public use of one’s own reason.” Kant seems comfortable with restrictions that curb the “private” use of reason that pertains to specific professional duties. But at the same time, he insists that the public use of reason must always remain free and unrestricted. Clarifying the distinction between the two, Kant writes, “By the public use of one’s own reason I understand that which someone makes of it *as a scholar* [*als Gelehrter*] before the entire public of the *world of readers* [*vor dem ganzen Publikum der Leserwelt*].”<sup>33</sup> Kant’s essay thereby echoes his earlier letter to Knobloch proclaiming that Swedenborg’s book will answer all remaining questions by “making this whole strange affair publicly known before the eyes of the world” (*diese ganze sonderbare Sache vor den Augen der Welt öffentlich bekannt zu machen*). For Kant, the primary incarnation of a “public” that will inevitably enlighten itself is the “world of readers,” and the main engine of this process is the publishing and reading of scholarly texts and books.

A more recent reformulation of this stance toward the public and the circulation of texts can be found in “Publics and Counterpublics,” an essay in which Michael Warner explicitly emphasizes that a public is constituted by the circulation of texts. In Warner’s words, “Anything that addresses a public is meant to undergo circulation. This helps us understand why

print, and the organization of markets for print, were historically so central in the development of the public sphere.”<sup>34</sup> A book more contemporaneous to Kant that explicitly conceptualizes print media along the lines of Kant’s argumentation is a short treatise by Josias Ludwig Gosch, published in 1789 and titled *Fragmente über den Ideenlauf* (Fragments on the circulation of ideas). The book contains one chapter on “the mechanism of the circulation of ideas” that is mostly devoted to print media, and Gosch offers his readers an Enlightenment theory of media that celebrates the positive effects of accelerated circulation. Accordingly, Gosch praises “the invention of the art of printing books” for allowing easy access to classical authors and scholarly works, and he describes the “circulation of ideas” as promoting “the gradual perfection of the human species.”<sup>35</sup>

Gosch’s book thereby responded to contemporaneous technological innovations in the printing process that gained momentum around 1780, when the first prototypes of a cylinder press were being developed and patented in France and England. In 1811, the German inventor Friedrich Koenig introduced a high-speed, steam-powered cylinder press that had a much higher output of printed pages than previous models.<sup>36</sup> But the accelerated circulation of printed matter that Kant and Gosch viewed so positively was not restricted to scholarly texts. Just as in the early modern period, print functioned as a malleable medium in the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>37</sup> In addition to an increase in scholarly treatises and journals, the print market after 1750 also witnessed an explosion in esoteric and occultist treatises, as well as in novels, flyers, and pamphlets. The rising rate of popular literacy, the concurrent rise of the lending library, and the proliferation of commercial pamphlets, popular journals, and magazines were all part of a mediascape in which print and reading were not confined to the realms of religion and scholarship.<sup>38</sup> In Germany this “reading revolution” also gave rise to concerns about “reading addiction” (*Lesesucht*), the practice of reading too much and too fast, which was supposed to lead to delusions and a distorted perception of reality.<sup>39</sup>

Johann Gottfried Hoche, who published a treatise on the subject in 1794, defined “reading addiction” as “a misguided and pernicious abuse of an otherwise beneficial practice, a truly large evil as contagious as the yellow fever in Philadelphia.” Hoche continued, “[O]ne reads everything without purpose, without any order, one does not appreciate anything and devours everything; nothing is understood properly, and everything is given only a cursory reading and then forgotten right away, which is, however, quite good for most of what was read.”<sup>40</sup> Hoche’s simile of a contagious disease—“a truly large evil as contagious as the yellow fever in Philadelphia”—is also invoked by Kant in a 1790 letter that addresses the sources of “the current

prevalence of mystical enthusiasm." In the letter, Kant characterizes "reading addiction" as "the carrier which spreads this illness [and] the miasmatic poison which produces it."<sup>41</sup>

In 1766, twenty-five years before his condemnation of reading addiction and just three years after his letter to Knobloch, Kant responded to the surge in mystical and spiritualist texts that included Swedenborg's book *Arcana Coelestia* by viciously attacking Swedenborg in a treatise titled "Dreams of a Spirit-Seer, Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics." Kant frames his text as a response to a proliferation of stories about ghostly apparitions that many were accepting as genuine. He writes in the preamble, "But why is it that the popular tales [*gemeine Erzählungen*] which find such widespread acceptance . . . are circulating with such futility and impunity, insinuating themselves even into scholarly theories?"<sup>42</sup> Kant thereby asserts a distinction between "popular tales" and "scholarly theories" that corresponds to the opposition between the vast unthinking masses and the public. He continues by stating that he had tried to avoid a stance of dogmatic skepticism that lacks the foundation of an argument. But in doing so, Kant alleges, he succumbed to the allure of popular rumor:

To believe none of the many things which are told with some semblance of truth, and to do so without any reason, is as much a foolish prejudice as to believe everything which is spread by popular rumor [*gemeines Gerücht*], and to do so without examination. For this reason, the author of this essay, in attempting to avoid the former prejudice, allowed himself to be in part carried away by the latter.<sup>43</sup>

By describing himself as having given in to the allure of popular rumor, Kant inverts the claims he made in his letter to Knobloch, where he had presented himself as having carefully examined all available evidence, unaffected by any "popular delusion." The same narratives about Swedenborg's spiritual visions that Kant had previously characterized as "news meant for public use" and as "beyond any conceivable doubt" are now introduced as having "no other testimony than that of popular hearsay [*die gemeine Sage*], which provides very dubious proof," a phrase that corresponds to Kant's definition of *rumor* and *hearsay* in his posthumously published *Reflexionen zur Logik* (Reflections on logic).<sup>44</sup> There Kant gives his most elaborate definition of rumor by writing,

Popular hearsay (*fama*) is a testimony of many aural witnesses [*Hörenden*] of an event whose eyewitness is unknown. These aural witnesses either live at the same time, and then their hearsay is a public rumor (*rumor sine capite*). Or they live at different times and then it is an oral tradition (*oralis traditio*). Popular hearsay lacks necessary authority.<sup>45</sup>

Within “Dreams of a Spirit-Seer” Kant thereby shifts to a purely oral register that allows him to preserve an idealization of print media. However, he also expands upon the implied danger posed to an enlightened rational public by stating, “It has always been the case . . . that certain absurdities have found acceptance *even among rational people* for no other reason than that everybody talks about them.”<sup>46</sup> Even though he continues to describe rumor as a purely oral phenomenon, Kant thereby arrives at one of the main arguments of this article: circulation and repetition create belief—or, in Kant’s terminology, they produce the acceptance of unfounded or false claims as factual and verified.

While rumors in the eighteenth century circulated through hearsay, posters, pamphlets, and books, Kant seeks to exempt the “world of readers” and the “public use of reason” from any association with “popular delusion.” Clinging to an exclusively positive view of print media, he links hearsay to women, asserting,

By a great deal of hearsay children and women eventually induced a substantial number of intelligent men to take a common wolf for a hyena, and that in spite of the fact that any rational person could see that there are not likely to be any African predators prowling around the forests in France.<sup>47</sup>

By contrasting “intelligent men” with women and children in this disparaging manner, Kant seeks to stabilize and uphold the demarcation between a rational public and the unthinking masses and between the public use of reason, on the one hand, and popular, commercial print on the other. Nonetheless, he has to concede that the boundary between popular delusions and the world of readers has become permeable. Even “rational people” and “intelligent men” fall prey to the circulation of rumors and unfounded stories, which Kant describes as “going around” (*herumgehend*) like a specter.<sup>48</sup>

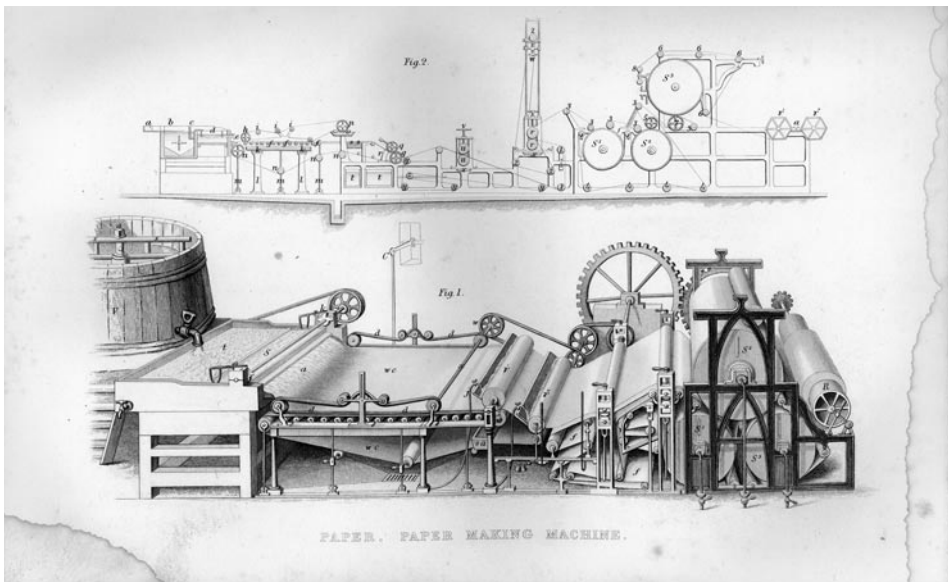
As the preamble already suggests by describing “popular tales” as “insinuating themselves *even into scholarly theories*,” Kant himself is not immune to this dynamic. He concedes that his own summary and refutation of Swedenborg’s theories engages “in such a despicable business as that of spreading fairy tales abroad, which every rational being would hesitate to listen to with patience—and, indeed, not merely disseminating them but actually making them the text of a philosophical investigation.”<sup>49</sup> Even in criticizing Swedenborg, Kant enables and perpetuates the circulation of rumors and stories that he seeks to end. The narratives about Swedenborg are rejected as unreliable and misleading. But they are nonetheless reprinted and thereby turned into the “text of a philosophical investigation.” “Dreams

of a Spirit-Seer” thus testifies to a general dilemma that also pertains to engaging false rumors in social media. The denial or rational refutation of a rumor can be counterproductive because it inadvertently repeats the allegation that is being refuted, thereby keeping it in circulation. Twenty-five years after the publication of “Dreams,” Kant therefore wrote a private letter to Ludwig Ernst Borowski in which he recommends “scornful silence” rather than “elaborate refutation” as the appropriate media strategy when responding to the proliferation of stories about animal magnetism.<sup>50</sup> But silence does not disrupt the circulation of falsehoods, and Borowski paradoxically subverted Kant’s recommendation by publishing Kant’s letter as an appendix to a book about the infamous ghost-seer Alessandro di Cagliostro.<sup>51</sup>

In contrast to Kant’s idealization of print, Johann Gottfried Herder explicitly linked print media to rumor in a short historical account of the history of print technologies in his *Letters on the Promotion of Humanity* (1796). Three years before the first patent for a steam-powered paper mill capable of producing endless rolls of paper, Herder looked back at the end of the Middle Ages and the shift from parchment, which was made from animal skins, to paper, which was made from old clothes and rags and therefore more widely available.<sup>52</sup> After emphasizing the revolutionary impact of this switch, Herder likens the printing press to Fama, the winged Roman goddess of rumor. In Herder’s words:

Now the letterpress was introduced and lent wings to rags [*Lumpen*] which had been scrawled on. They fly into every corner of the world; with every year, with every hour of the day . . . the wings of this literary Fama grow and fly to the end of the world. . . . That which human voices keep silent about is talked and yelled about by molded types and mercantile pamphlets.<sup>53</sup>

Akin to Kant, Herder switches to an oral register to criticize the negative aspects of commercial print. But his description of “mercantile pamphlets” as “yelling” simultaneously highlights the strong negative affect that seems to mark popular print media in the eighteenth century (even Kant’s “Dreams” is marked by strong anger in its attacks on Swedenborg). Herder



concedes that the “world of scholarly knowledge” would be impossible without print. He also warns, however, against the effects of widely available paper on which “everything” is printed and dispersed, regardless of quality or veracity.<sup>54</sup> Highlighting the negative effects of wide and easy access to print, Johann Heinrich Zschokke wrote in similar terms in 1821, shortly after Koenig’s introduction of the steam-powered, high-speed cylinder press:

nowadays, simple print tools allow for the worst as well as the best work to be reproduced a thousand times with marvelous speed before being *disseminated over the world*. . . . From this stems the immense flood of literary works that openly carry the *imprint* [*Gepräge*] of wretchedness, destined to transmit the errors and the spiritual and moral aberrations of their authors.<sup>55</sup>

Herder and Zschokke foreground the global reach of rumor and “mercantile pamphlets” that are disseminated all over the world. These textual invocations of print media’s worldwide reach correspond to contemporaneous paintings and sculptures of Fama, which show the winged goddess, trumpet in hand, standing atop the globe.

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw a steady rise, described as a “flood,” in the circulation of books, journals, newspapers, and pamphlets. In 1843, however, Richard Hoe’s invention of the rotary printing press enabled another sharp increase in print media.<sup>56</sup> Lowering the costs of printing, the rotary press made numerous new newspapers commercially viable. But these often filled their pages with ostensibly factual news of questionable veracity.<sup>57</sup> One especially glaring example is a fictional literary text by Edgar Allan Poe, published in 1845 under the title

“The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar.” Poe’s sensational story about a mesmerist experiment gone wrong was taken by some contemporaneous readers as factual after its initial publication in the *American Review*.<sup>58</sup> By then reprinting the text in his own *Broadway Journal*, Poe initiated a viral chain of further reprints in newspapers, magazines, and popular science journals that described the fictional story as factual because it had been printed before.<sup>59</sup> The London-based *Popular Record of Modern Science* even changed the title of the story to “Mesmerism in America: Death of M. Valdemar in New York.”<sup>60</sup> The editorial introduction of a British pamphlet edition similarly



Opposite: “Paper Making Machine.” From *Cyclopaedia of Useful Arts, Mechanical and Chemical, Manufactures, Mining, and Engineering* (1852).

Left: Robert Henze. *Fama/Pheme*, 1895. Dresden.

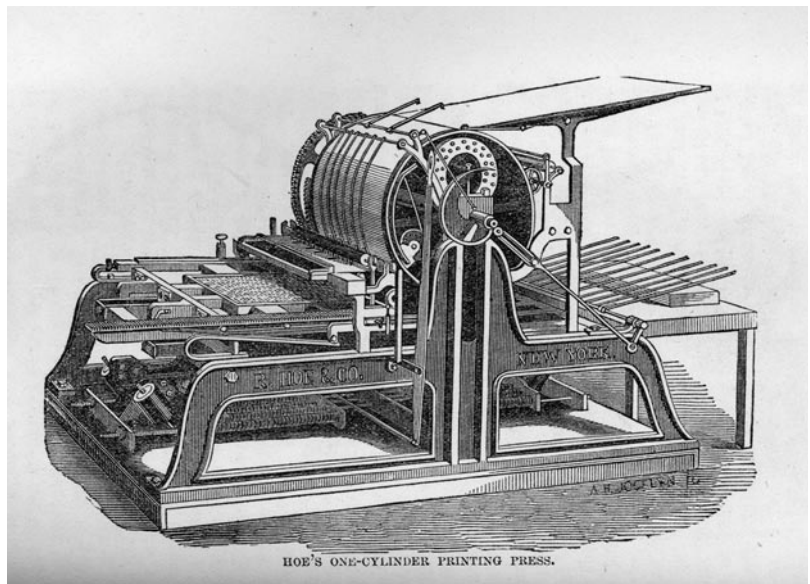
invoked the previous printings of the story as corroborating its veracity:

The following astonishing narrative first appeared in the *American Magazine* [sic], a work of some standing in the United States, where the case has excited the most intense interest. . . . The narrative, though only a plain recital of facts, is of so extraordinary a nature as almost to surpass belief. It is only necessary to add, that credence is given to it in America, where the occurrence took place.<sup>61</sup>

The wave of newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets that followed the invention of the rotary printing press in 1843 thus produced content and credence in a circular feedback loop of reprinting that resembles the dynamic of reposting and retweeting in social media today. In April 1846, the British poet Elizabeth Barrett took note of this dynamic and described Poe's narrative as "going the rounds of the newspapers," a phrase that resembles Kant's earlier turn against the circulation of unfounded tales and rumors that were "going around" (*herumgehend*) like a specter.<sup>62</sup> Summarizing Kant's, Herder's, and Gosch's theorizations of print media, we can see that these eighteenth-century authors distinguished between two diametrically opposed versions of circulation: the exchange of scholarly ideas among the enlightened public of the "world of readers"; and the dissemination of rumors and unfounded narratives among the crowd and the "unthinking masses." This opposition between two sides of circulation persists into the nineteenth century and also pertains to our present moment.

### **Marx's *Communist Manifesto*—The Circulation of Counternarratives**

The text that has come to be known as *The Communist Manifesto* was first published under the title *Manifesto of the Communist Party* in February 1848. Written by Marx and Engels, the twenty-three-page German-language pamphlet was printed and distributed by the Educational Society for Workers (*Bildungs-Gesellschaft für Arbeiter*), which was associated with the Communist League and maintained an office on Liverpool Street in London. Beneath the title, the green cover page features the last sentence of the *Manifesto* as an epigraph—"Workers of All Countries Unite!" (Proletarier



aller Länder vereinigt Euch!)]—a transnational exhortation slightly at odds with the Germanic Gothic font in which the words are set. Over the next decades, the humble pamphlet would become “one of the most printed, translated, and circulated texts in history.”<sup>63</sup> Its publication history and arguments speak clearly and powerfully to the two sides of circulation that are also central to my reading of Kant’s, Gosch’s, and Herder’s texts.

The *Manifesto* describes and celebrates the revolutionary change created by the productive forces of capitalism. What often goes overlooked, however, is how the text centers on new media technologies such as “steam ships, railways, [and] electrical telegraphs,” praising these “growing means of communication” (*wachsenden Kommunikationsmittel*) for fostering the worldwide aggregation of all workers.<sup>64</sup> These workers, who have nothing to lose and a world to gain, are the heroes of the *Manifesto*’s ending. However, the protagonist or antagonist of the text’s main body is the bourgeoisie. In a tone of awe that borders on exhilaration, Marx and Engels highlight the radical destruction of national borders and local traditions that has been brought about by modern capitalism and global trade:

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. . . . Age-old national industries have been destroyed and are still being destroyed daily. They are displaced by new industries, . . . which no longer process indigenous raw materials but ones that come from the remotest regions; industries whose products are consumed not only at home but in all parts of the world simultaneously. In place of the old wants [*Bedürfnisse*], satisfied by domestic products, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of the most distant countries and climates. In place of the old, local and national self-sufficiency and seclusion, we have commerce in every direction [*ein allseitiger Verkehr*], a universal dependence of nations from one another.<sup>65</sup>

In the eighteenth century, Herder, Kant, and Gosch emphasized the worldwide reach of print media and of rumor. *The Communist Manifesto* arrives at a similar argument by juxtaposing worldwide economic commerce to transnational exchange in the sphere of scholarship and literature: “And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.”<sup>66</sup>

The “circulation of ideas” that Kant and Gosch celebrated as the motor of enlightenment thus becomes a counterpart to the worldwide circulation

“Hoe’s One-Cylinder Printing Press” (rotary printing press). From *History of the Processes of Manufacture and Uses of Printing, Gas-Light, Pottery, Glass and Iron* (1864).



of commodities in *The Communist Manifesto*. In addition, Kant's notion of the "world of readers" (*Leserwelt*) is transformed into a "world literature" (*Weltliteratur*) that overcomes all national limitations and local restrictions. Marx and Engels even stage the *Manifesto* itself as an instantiation of this new world literature, writing at the beginning of the text, "Communists of the most diverse nationalities [*der verschiedensten Nationalität*] have assembled in London and drafted the following manifesto that is published in the English, French, German, Italian, Flemish and Danish languages."<sup>67</sup>

When the text was first published, this claim was mostly aspirational. Instead of coming from the "most diverse nationalities," the *Manifesto's* actual authors, Marx and Engels, were both German. In November 1847 they had attended an international meeting of the Communist League in London at which Marx was asked to write a program for the league. Drawing on earlier drafts by Engels, he completed the text in two months.<sup>68</sup> After the first pamphlet edition of the *Manifesto* was published in February 1848, a second pamphlet edition with corrections of typographical errors was printed a month later, and copies of this second pamphlet edition were sent to Paris and Cologne. The text was also serialized in the German-language newspaper *Deutsch-Londoner Zeitung* from March to July 1848, and a Swedish translation appeared in Stockholm in the same year. The first English translation was published, in serialized form, in November 1850 in the *Red Republican* as "German Communism: Manifesto of the German Communist Party"—a title that undercut the *Manifesto's* internationalist claim.<sup>69</sup> Under the pressure of increased censorship that followed the suppression of the various revolutions of 1848, the French, Italian, Flemish, and Danish editions mentioned in the opening of the *Manifesto* did not immediately materialize. In the 1850s and 1860s *The Communist Manifesto* did, however, reach a respectable number of reprints and translations, often emerging from expatriate communities that could more easily circumvent the restrictions of national censorship and had, by default, a transnational orientation (one German edition, for instance, was printed in 1851 in New York). But not until the 1870s and 1880s did the text's circulation begin to accelerate explosively and with a global range.<sup>70</sup> With numbers of editions and translations reaching particularly high peaks in 1905 and 1917, the *Manifesto* left behind its parochial origins and became a truly transnational text. The global reach of print media that was still mostly fantasy in Kant's and Marx's invocations of the "world of readers" and the rise of a "world literature" thus became reality by the early twentieth century.<sup>71</sup>

In 1848, however, the goal of addressing workers from all countries seemed out of reach for a German-language pamphlet published in London. In addition, the languages mentioned in the introduction of the *Manifesto*—

English, French, German, Italian, Flemish, and Danish—are all European. The paragraph that follows the invocation of a rising “world literature” problematically highlights the battering down of “all Chinese walls” by global circulation and cheap commodity prices. Marx and Engels proceed to give a Eurocentric bent to their insight into the transformative and revolutionary potential of new modes of circulation by asserting, “the bourgeoisie . . . through the infinitely facilitated communications [*die unendlich erleichterten Kommunikationen*] drags all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization.”<sup>72</sup>

In addition to celebrating the revolutionary impact of accelerated modes of communication, Marx and Engels also acknowledge the circulation of disinformation in terms reminiscent of Herder’s denigration of “rags that have been scrawled on.” Toward the end of their summary of existing socialist and communist texts, which forms the third part of the *Manifesto*, they write, “With very few exceptions, all the so-called Socialist and Communist publications that are now circulating in Germany belong to the domain of this filthy and unnerving literature [*in den Bereich dieser schmutzigen und entnervenden Literatur*].”<sup>73</sup>

Instead of a blind idealization of print culture, we thus find an awareness of the two sides of circulation in *The Communist Manifesto*: the rise of “world literature,” on the one hand, and the circulation of “filthy and unnerving literature,” on the other. Acknowledging this dark side of circulation also distinguishes the *Manifesto* from *The Eighteenth Brumaire* (1852), wherein Marx seeks to blame the successful coup of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte in 1851 on “the poor means of communication in France.” According to Marx, these prevented the smallholding peasants (*Parzellenbauern*) from entering “into mutual communication,” rendering their “connection” “purely local” rather than “national.”<sup>74</sup> *The Eighteenth Brumaire* thus implies, in my opinion incorrectly, that the success of reactionary populism in a figure like Louis Napoleon Bonaparte rests on the *absence* of circulation rather than the circulation of disinformation and rumors, a claim that seems to be belied by the fact that Louis Napoleon had gained fame not only because of his name but also by publishing several widely circulating pamphlets, including *The Extinction of Pauperism* (1844).<sup>75</sup>

The *Manifesto* put forward a corresponding but inverted stance by celebrating the rise of “world literature” and by emphasizing that the “growing means of communication” promoted “the ever expanding union [*Vereinigung*] of the workers.” Marx and Engels even momentarily succumb to a technological determinism when they write, “It was just this connection [*Verbindung*] that was needed to centralize the numerous local struggles. . . . And that union [*Vereinigung*], which the burghers of the Middle Ages, with their

*country lanes*, attained over centuries, the modern proletarians, *thanks to railways*, achieve in a few years.”<sup>76</sup>

Marx’s optimism that technological innovation and accelerated circulation will inevitably bring about political progress and emancipation relies on a teleology that denies contingency, the wide realm of possible outcomes, positive or negative, that characterizes the introduction of new technologies and media forms. But the *Manifesto* does remain attuned to the adverse effects of new print media when it attacks the inferior communist and socialist texts circulating in Germany as belonging to a “domain of filthy and unnerving literature,” a domain that in Marx and Engels’s view would presumably include Louis Napoleon Bonaparte’s pamphlets. Even more important, the opening lines of the *Manifesto* deliver a powerful response to the circulation of rumors and disinformation, tracing a dynamic that marks our current moment as well:

A specter is going around in Europe—the specter of communism. [Ein Gespenst geht um in Europa—das Gespenst des Kommunismus.] All the powers of old Europe have conjoined into a holy hunt against this specter: Pope and Tsar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German policemen.

Where is the opposition party that has not been decried as communist by its ruling adversaries? Where is the opposition that has not hurled back the branding reproach of communism, against the more progressive opposition parties, as well as against its reactionary adversaries?

Two things result from this fact:

I. Communism is already acknowledged by all European powers as a power in itself.

II. It is high time that Communists should openly publish their views, their goals, their inclinations before the whole world and counter the fairy tales of the specter of communism with a manifesto of the party itself. [Es ist hohe Zeit, daß die Kommunisten ihre Anschauungsweise, ihre Zwecke, ihre Tendenzen vor der ganzen Welt offen darlegen und den Märchen vom Gespenst des Kommunismus ein Manifest der Partei selbst entgegenstellen].<sup>77</sup>

The beginning of the *Manifesto* thereby echoes both Kant’s “Dreams of a Spirit-Seer” and his “Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” The misleading tales that are “going around” (*herumgehend*) are supposed to be corrected by a text that is meant to be “openly” published “before the whole world [*vor der ganzen Welt offen darlegen*].” But unlike Kant, Marx and Engels do not simply propagate rational argumentation. Instead, they

seek to put forward a powerful counternarrative that mobilizes affect and storytelling and combines this storytelling with reasoning. In addition to correcting misinformation, the *Manifesto* tells its readers a rousing story by casting the bourgeoisie as a powerful antagonist who inadvertently brings about the aggregation of all workers and the universal liberation from the “chains” of capitalist exploitation. Today the implied teleology of this projection may elicit skepticism, but its enduring success testifies to the power of a counternarrative that does not remain bound to a mere rebuttal of errors and false claims, but instead tells its own story. The opening of the *Manifesto* even draws on the circulation of disinformation as proof of the “fact” that “Communism is already acknowledged by all European powers as a power in itself.” Marx and Engels thereby harness and redirect the power of circulation to propel the dissemination of their counternarrative, which supersedes and eclipses the proliferation of rumors and disinformation as the *Manifesto* itself gains an ever-increasing circulation by being excerpted, reprinted, and translated all over the world.

The explorations, theorizations, and close readings presented in this article analyze various historical instantiations of the intimate link between new media forms and the accelerated circulation of rumors and disinformation—from the early modern period to our present moment. Across these periods specific structural features of viral rumors remain remarkably constant: the mobilization of strong forms of affect, the mixing of facts with fabrication, and the transitions from one medium to another that increase the credibility of a rumor. More important here, the common thread that emerges from juxtaposing Kant and Marx in their relation to print media is the ambivalence of circulation—as rumor and disinformation or as an agent of enlightenment and political progress—an opposition that mirrors the unstable distinction between the “unthinking masses” and a more enlightened or progressive form of collectivity. Our present moment is shaped by different technologies, but these structural features and tensions remain largely unchanged. In addition, one clear insight pertains not only to the long history of the credence produced by new modes of circulation but also to our current mediascape. Purely rational rebuttals that inadvertently repeat the false claims they seek to refute will not end the circulation of a rumor. Instead of simply replicating Kant’s model for an enlightened public, Marx and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto*—while surprisingly indebted to Kant—offers a more effective model for countering the spread of false rumors: by widely disseminating a counternarrative, one can harness the power of circulation to eclipse disinformation.

## Notes

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1. *Final Report of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol*, House Report 117–663 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2022), <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/GPO-J6-REPORT/>, 213; emphasis added.

2. Accordingly, the journalist and media critic Max Fisher places responsibility for the insurrection with social media companies, which prioritize user engagement and advertising revenue over the screening and moderating of posts on their platforms. Fisher therefore describes cell phones as “the real leader” of the rioters who acted under the control of what he terms “a digitally guided collective will.” Max Fisher, *The Chaos Machine: The Inside Story of How Social Media Rewired Our Minds and Our World* (New York: Little, Brown, 2022), 321. Even though the focus of this article is on the history of media change and rumors, the algorithms that sort and suggest content on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok do play a crucial role in the gradual radicalization of social media users who fall into the rabbit hole of QAnon, the Big Lie, or antivaccine narratives.

3. The classical account of the printing press as increasing rationality and reason remains Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979). See also Stephan Füßel, *Gutenberg and the Impact of Printing*, trans. Douglas Martin (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005).

4. On the frequent use of *real*, *true*, and *veracious* in the titles of these broadsides and pamphlets, see Irene Ewinkel, *De monstis: Deutung und Funktion von Wundergeburten auf Flugblättern im Deutschland des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1995), 7–8.

5. Philip Melancthon and Martin Luther, *Deutung der zwo grewlichen Figuren Bapstesels zu Rom und Munchkalbs zu freyberg in Meyssen funden* (Wittenberg: [Joh. Grunenberg], 1523). On this pamphlet, see also R.W. Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1994), 129–133.

6. Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 180.

7. See Füßel, 25–30.

8. Hans-Joachim Neubauer, *The Rumor: A Cultural History* (London: Free Association Press, 1999), 1.

9. Jean-Noël Kapferer, *Rumors: Uses, Interpretations, and Images* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 1.

10. Kapferer, 16.

11. On how graffiti share qualities of textual and oral culture, see Kristina Milnor, *Graffiti and the Literary Landscape in Roman Pompeii* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 24.

12. Rahul Mukherjee, “Mobile Witnessing on WhatsApp: Vigilante Virality and the Anatomy of Mob Lynching,” *South Asian Popular Culture* 18, no. 1 (2020): 79–101.

13. “Anecdotal as they are, these examples show that news (nouvelles) circulated through several media and by different modes—oral, manuscript, and print.” Robert Darnton, “An Early Information Society: News and the Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” *American*

*Historical Review* 105, no. 1 (February 2000): 4.

14. Darnton, “An Early Information Society,” 30; emphasis added. See also Robert Darnton, *Poetry and the Police: Communication Networks in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).

15. On the mixing of facts and fabrications in propaganda and conspiracy theories, see also Nicola Gess, *Halbwahrheiten: Zur Manipulation von Wirklichkeit* (Berlin: Matthes und Seitz, 2021). For an English-language essay, see Nicola Gess, “Half-Truths: On an Instrument of Post-truth Politics (and Conspiracy Narratives),” in *Plots: Literary Form and Cultures of Conspiracy*, ed. Ben Carver, Dana Craciun, and Todor Hristov (London: Routledge, 2021), 164–179.

16. See Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel, *The Vanishing Children of Paris: Rumor and Politics before the French Revolution*, trans. Claudia Miéville (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), esp. 97–102.

17. Virgil, *Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid I–VI*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, revised by C.P. Goold (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 434. In Latin: “Monstrum horrendum,” Aeneid IV.181; “et pariter facta atque infecta canebat,” Aeneid IV.190.

18. “Crowds throng its halls, a lightweight populace / That comes and goes, and rumours everywhere / Thousands, false mixed with true, roam to and fro / . . . Some pass on what they’ve gathered, and as each / Gossip adds something new the Story grows. / Here is credulity, here reckless Error, / Groundless Delight, Whispers of unknown source, / Sudden Sedition, overwhelming Fears.” Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A.D. Melville (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 275; emphasis added. “[A]tria turba tenet: veniunt, leve vulgus, euntque / mixtaque cum veris passim commenta vagantur / milia rumorum confusaque verba volutant; / e quibus hi vacuas implent sermonibus aures, / hi narrate ferunt alio, mensuraque ficti / crescit, et auditis aliquid novum adicit auctor. / illi Credulitas, illic temerarius Error / vanque Laetitia est consternatique Timorie / Seditioque repens dubioque auctore Susurri.” Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XII.53–61.

19. Vergil, *Aeneid*, IV.178, IV.197 (“ira”).

20. Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895; New York: Routledge, 2017), 50–52. On the prevalence of medical theories of hypnotism and suggestion in legal debates, the social sciences, and literature and cinema around 1900, see Stefan Andriopoulos, *Possessed: Hypnotic Crimes, Corporate Fiction, and the Invention of Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

21. One text that relies heavily and uncritically on Le Bon in analyzing the spread of rumors is Heidi J. Larson, *Stuck: How Vaccine Rumors Start—and Why They Don’t Go Away* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020).

22. Gabriel Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation*, trans. Elsie C. Parsons (New York: Henry Holt, 1903), 87.

23. Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

24. Sampson, 3. For theorizations of affect as contagious, see also Anna Gibbs, “Panic! Affect Contagion, Mimesis, and Suggestion in the Social Field,” *Cultural Studies Review* 14, no. 2 (2008): 130–145; and Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

25. On the internal Facebook research data leaked by Frances Haugen, see, for instance, Jeremy B. Merrill and Will Oremus, “Five Points for Anger, One for a ‘Like’: How Facebook’s

Formula Fostered Rage and Misinformation,” *Washington Post*, 26 October 2021; and Fisher, 336–339.

26. Immanuel Kant, “Letter to Charlotte von Knobloch, August 10, 1763,” in *Correspondence*, trans. Arnulf Zweig (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 70 (translation modified). In German: Immanuel Kant, “An Fräulein Charlotte von Knobloch 10. Aug [1763],” in *Briefe*, ed. Jürgen Zehbe (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht 1970), 21.

27. Kant, *Correspondence*, 71, 73 (translation modified); Kant, *Briefe*, 22, 24 (“*Nachricht zum öffentlichen Gebrauch*”).

28. Kant, *Correspondence*, 72 (translation modified); “diese ganze sonderbare Sache vor den Augen der Welt öffentlich bekannt zu machen.” Kant, *Briefe*, 23.

29. See Stefan Andriopoulos, *Ghostly Apparitions: German Idealism, the Gothic Novel, and Optical Media* (New York: Zone Books, 2013).

30. Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?,” in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11–22. In German: Immanuel Kant, “Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?” (1784), in *Schriften zur Anthropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik 1*, vol. 11 of *Werkausgabe*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), 53–61.

31. Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?,” 17–18 (translation modified, emphasis added); Kant, “Was ist Aufklärung?,” 54.

32. Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?,” 18 (translation modified); “Leitbande des gedankenlosen großen Haufens.” Kant, “Was ist Aufklärung?,” 55.

33. Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?,” 18 (translation modified, emphasis added); Kant, “Was ist Aufklärung?,” 55.

34. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2005), 91.

35. Josias Ludwig Gosch, *Fragmente über den Ideenlauf* (1789), ed. Georg Stanitzek and Hartmut Winkler (Berlin: Kadmos, 2006), 107–116, 121, 158.

36. On Koenig’s cylinder press, which was mostly used for newspaper printing, see Claus W. Gerhardt, *Der Buchdruck*, vol. 2 of *Geschichte der Druckverfahren* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1975), 107–112.

37. On divergent adaptations of print as a medium in this period, see also Michael Warner, “The Cultural Mediation of the Print Medium,” in *The Letters of the Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 1–31.

38. Reinhard Wittmann, “Was There a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?,” in *A History of Reading in the West*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 284–312.

39. For an overview of the debate on reading addiction, see Hennig Wrage, “Jene Fabrik der Bücher: Über Lesesucht, ein Phantasma des medialen Ursprungs und die Kinder- und Jugendliteratur der Aufklärung,” *Monatshefte* 102, no. 1 (2010): 1–21.

40. Johann Gottfried Hoche, *Vertraute Briefe über die jetzige abentheuerliche Lesesucht und über den Einfluß derselben auf die Verminderung des häuslichen und öffentlichen Glücks* (Hannover: Ritscher, 1794), 68. See also Johann Rudolph Gottlieb Beyer, *Ueber das Bücherlesen in so fern es zum Luxus unserer Zeit gehört* (Erfurt: Keyer, 1796); and Johann Andreas Keyn, *Ueber die Lesesucht der Jugend, nebst einigen Vorschlägen, wie Eltern und Lehrer dieselbe zu mäßigen und zu leiten trachten sollen* (Regensburg: Zeidler, 1803).

41. Immanuel Kant, “To Ludwig Ernst Borowski [March 1790],” in *Correspondence*, 337 (translation modified). In German: Immanuel Kant, “An Ludwig Ernst Borowski,” in *Briefe*, 160.

42. Immanuel Kant, “Dreams of a Spirit-Seer, Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics” (1766), in *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770*, trans. and ed. David Walford (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 305. In German: Immanuel Kant, *Träume eines Geistersehers, erläutert durch Träume der Metaphysik*, in *Vorkritische Schriften bis 1768*, vol. 2 of *Werkausgabe*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), 923.

43. Kant, “Dreams of a Spirit-Seer,” 306 (translation modified); Kant, *Träume eines Geistersehers*, 924.

44. Kant, “Dreams of a Spirit-Seer,” 342; Kant, *Träume eines Geistersehers*, 967.

45. Immanuel Kant, *Reflexionen zur Logik*, vol. 16 of *Gesammelte Schriften (Akademie-Ausgabe)* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1914), 506 (my translation).

46. Kant, “Dreams of a Spirit-Seer,” 343 (translation modified, emphasis added); Kant, *Träume eines Geistersehers*, 969.

47. Kant, “Dreams of a Spirit-Seer,” 343; Kant, *Träume eines Geistersehers*, 969. See also, “Women are particularly prone to lend credence to stories of prophecy, interpretation of dreams, and all kinds of other marvelous things.” Kant, “Dreams of a Spirit-Seer,” 342; Kant, *Träume eines Geistersehers*, 967. Even Kant’s “What Is Enlightenment?” suggests that women will be content to remain in a state of tutelage and dependence instead of thinking for themselves.

48. Kant, “Dreams of a Spirit-Seer,” 340 (see also 358). “Beide Beschwerlichkeiten finden sich in gewisser Maße bei den herumgehenden Geistergeschichten zusammen.” Kant, *Träume eines Geistersehers*, 965 (see also 987).

49. Kant, “Dreams of a Spirit-Seer,” 342–343 (translation modified); Kant, *Träume eines Geistersehers*, 968.

50. Kant, “To Ludwig Ernst Borowski,” in *Correspondence*, 338; Kant, “An Ludwig Ernst Borowski,” in *Briefe*, 162.

51. See Immanuel Kant, “Über den Hang zur Schwärmerei und die Mittel dagegen,” in Ludwig Ernst Borowski, *Cagliostro, einer der merkwürdigsten Abentheurer unsres Jahrhunderts: Seine Geschichte, nebst Raisonnement über ihn und den schwärmerischen Unfug unsrer Zeit überhaupt* (Königsberg: Gottlieb Lebrecht Hartung, 1790), 160–162.

52. On the steam-powered paper mill and its importance for printing, see Gerhardt, 112–114.

53. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität*, 10 vols. (Riga: Hartknoch, 1796), 8:50–51. In his *Briefe*, Herder also relies on the notion of “contagion” (*Ansteckung*) to explain the spread of “delusion and insanity” (*Wahn und Wahnsinn*): “Unfortunately it is known that there is almost nothing more contagious in the world than delusion and insanity. One needs to search for truth by means of reasoning and with effort; but one accepts delusions through imitation, often inadvertently, merely by socializing with the deluded, by partaking in good faith in their otherwise benign disposition. Delusions communicate themselves just as yawning communicates itself, in the same way as facial expressions and moods are transmitted to us.” Herder, *Briefe* (Riga: Hartknoch, 1794), 4:89 (my translation). Herder’s statement corresponds to Hume’s account of “sympathy” and “contagion”: “others enter into the same humour, and catch the sentiment, by a contagion or natural sympathy.” David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1975), 250–251. It also anticipates Tarde’s notion of sociality in his *Laws of Imitation*. Herder expands on this by warning against the special power of “national delusion” (*Nationalwahn*) that is immune to any doubt: “who would want to contradict a



delusion . . . once it has been trumpeted out by the mouth of rumor as the fame of the nation? Who would not prefer to join this delusion for the sake of being sociable? An accepted delusion is only strengthened by loose doubts of a counterdelusion.” Herder, *Briefe* (1794), 4:90–91.

54. The phrase is “mit der Buchdruckerei nämlich kam *alles* an den Tag.” Herder, *Briefe* (1796), 8:52.

55. Heinrich Zschokke, “Eine Warnung vor den Gefahren der Lesesucht,” in *Stunden der Andacht zur Beförderung wahren Christenthums und häuslicher Gottesverehrung*, vol. 5, *Andachtsbuch für die Jugend, Sechste verbesserte Original-Ausgabe* (Aarau: Heinrich Remigius Sauerländer, 1821), 131; emphasis added. See also Johann Georg Heinzmann, *Appell an meine Nation: Über die Pest der deutschen Literatur* (Bern: Auf Kosten des Verfassers, 1795), 125: “Keine Nation hat in den letzten Jahren so viel gedruckt, als die Deutsche . . . so hat man eine Meeresfluth von Büchern.” (In the last years no nation has printed as much as the German one . . . thus one encounters a flood of books.)

56. On the history of the rotary printing press, see James Morgan, *Printing Presses: History and Development* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), 185–205.

57. See Andie Tucher, *Not Exactly Lying: Fake News and Fake Journalism in American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

58. Edgar Allan Poe, “The Facts of M. Valdemar’s Case,” *American Review: A Whig Journal of Politics, Literature, Art, and Science* 2, no. 12 (December 1845): 561–565.

59. Edgar Allan Poe, “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” *Broadway Journal*, 20 December 1845, 365–370. For an analysis of Poe’s story and its various reprints, see Stefan Andriopoulos, “Arrested in the Moment of Dying: Science, Fiction, and the Reality Effect of Reprinting,” *American Literature* 80, no. 3 (2018): 533–543.

60. Edgar Allan Poe, “Mesmerism in America: Death of M. Valdemar in New York,” *Popular Record of Modern Science*, 10 January 1846, 17–20.

61. “Editorial Note,” in Edgar Allan Poe, *Mesmerism “in articulo mortis”: An Astounding and Horrifying Narrative, Shewing the Extraordinary Power of Mesmerism in Arresting the Progress of Death* (London: Short, 1846).

62. Elizabeth Barrett (April 1846), quoted in Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1998), 485.

63. Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 38.

64. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), in *Later Political Writings*, trans. Terrell Carver (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6, 9 (translation modified). In German: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* (London: Gedruckt in der Office der Bildungs-Gesellschaft für Arbeiter von I.E. Burghard, 1848), 6, 9.

65. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*, 4–5 (translation modified); Marx and Engels, *Manifest*, 5.

66. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*, 4–5 (translation modified); Marx and Engels, *Manifest*, 5. For a comparison of Marx’s notion of world literature to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s, see Puchner, 49–51. For a juxtaposition of Marx’s writings to nineteenth-century literary texts, see S.S. Prawer, *Karl Marx and World Literature* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1976).

67. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*, 1 (translation modified); Marx and Engels, *Manifest*, 3.

68. See China Miéville, *A Spectre Haunting: On the Communist Manifesto* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022), 29–30.

69. A comprehensive overview of the various editions and translations of the *Communist Manifesto* can be found in Bert Andréas, *Le manifeste communiste de Marx et Engels; Histoire et bibliographie, 1848–1918* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1963). The first English translation in the *Red Republican* renders the opening of the text, “Ein Gespenst geht um in Europa—das Gespenst des Kommunismus,” as “A frightful hobgoblin stalks around Europe. We are haunted by a ghost, the ghost of communism.”

70. Eric Hobsbawm makes the intriguing claim that Marx’s vigorous defense of the Paris Commune in 1871 and an 1872 treason trial against the leaders of the German Social Democratic Party in Leipzig served as catalysts for the explosion of editions and printings in that decade: “The prosecution read the text of the Manifesto into the court proceedings, and thus gave the Social-Democrats their first chance of publishing it legally and in a large print run, as part of the court proceedings.” Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition* (London: Verso, 2012), 6. This unforced error testifies again to the possibility that a refutation—or in this case a prosecution—may inadvertently amplify the claims it seeks to repudiate or to suppress. But this specifically German circumstance cannot explain the proliferation of non-German editions in the 1870s, and the length of the court proceedings meant that the books recording them did not circulate easily. See, for instance, “Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei,” in *Leipziger Hochverrathsprozeß: Ausführlicher Bericht über die Verhandlungen des Schwurgerichts in dem Prozeß gegen Liebknecht, Bebel und Kepner vom 11–26. März 1872* (Leipzig: Genossenschaftsdruckerei, 1874), 97–119; this volume has a total length of 600 pages.

71. The first partial Chinese translation was published in 1908 in Shanghai, translated from a Japanese translation from 1904. The first complete Chinese translation appeared as late as 1920, also in Shanghai.

72. China Miéville claims that the distinction between “barbarian” and “civilized” is undermined by the next sentence of the *Manifesto* (“it compels them to introduce so-called civilization into their midst”). Miéville, 76. But this argument is not entirely convincing, as the subsequent paragraph describes “the Orient” becoming dependent on “the Occident,” and the editorial introduction to the first English translation in 1850 announces, “The turmoil consequent upon that event [the French revolution of February 1848] made it impossible to carry out, at that time, the intention of translating it into all the languages of civilized Europe.” George Julian Harney, “Introduction to German Communism: A Manifesto of the German Communist Party,” *Red Republican* 1, no. 21 (9 November 1850): 161.

73. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*, 25 (translation modified); Marx and Engels, *Manifest*, 20.

74. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), in *Later Political Writings*, 117 (translation modified). In German: “die schlechten französischen Kommunikationsmittel,” “in welchseitigen Verkehr treten,” “ein nur lokaler Zusammenhang, . . . keine nationale Verbindung”; Karl Marx, *Der Achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte: Zweite Ausgabe* (Hamburg: Otto Meißner, 1869), 88, 89.

75. Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, *Extinction du paupérisme* (Paris: Pagnerre éditeur, 1844). For an American edition, see Napoleon Louis Bonaparte, *The Extinction of Pauperism: Translated from the Third Paris Edition by James H. Causten* (Washington, DC: William M. Morrison, 1853).

76. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*, 9 (translation modified, emphasis added); Marx and Engels, *Manifest*, 9.

77. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*, 1 (translation modified); Marx and Engels, *Manifest*, 3.