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It?s in the newspaper - it must be true

by BRIAN LOCKHART

Print media can be a very powerful tool.

If the Toronto Star or New York Times printed a national headline reading ?Aliens have landed ? Seek contact with world leaders,? most people would believe it, whether or not it was true.

That is why many world governments try to control the media and decide which news the population should read about ? whether it's true or not.

There's good propaganda and bad propaganda.

Good propaganda takes an event and then twists elements of the story to skew in favour of the desired result.

Bad propaganda contains outright lies.

Several years ago, North Korean state media announced that the ?Dear Leader' ? the country's dictator, Supreme Leader, whatever you want to call him ? scored several holes in one and hit 38 under par the very first time he played golf.

I'm pretty sure even some North Koreans thought this was ridiculous but didn't even crack a smile when they read the news for fear of being sent to a re-education camp or disappearing some night.

In North America, a journalist who makes up facts or creates a story where there isn't one would, at the very least, be out of a job. It is taken very seriously on this continent. That at least, applies to credible papers, not supermarket tabloids who apparently have staff meetings where the assignment editor doesn't ask questions, checks no sources, and has no problem with publishing a story about Bigfoot being captured and is now working as an MMA fighter.

News stories can change the course of history. If it wasn't for two intrepid journalists in the U.S., Richard Nixon may have completed his second term of office.

The history of newspapers goes back to the 1600's, sort of. They were more like handwritten letters that published news.

Early printing presses made things a lot easier, but at the time, government censorship was still a problem. By the early 1800's, newspapers were popping up all over the place. The fact that literacy rates were going up, meant more people could read ? thus a readership and a market.

The path the new newspapers took wasn't exactly a straight one. In the early days, there was lot of payola, both from government and private sources, to put a spin on stories that favoured government, or in the case of business, a new product. You couldn't trust everything you read.

A friend of mine gave me some copies of an old local newspaper ? the Tottanham Sentinel. Some of the editions date back well over 100 years. For a small town paper, it was actually pretty extensive with stories both local, and from around the world, so I guess they were plugged into a news feed.

They are also full broad sheet of the old style, which I always found to be a little too large.

I was interested in reading them as I wanted to see how much journalism has changed over the years.

It certainly was interesting reading these old news stories. I'm not sure who the reporters were, as many of the short articles don't say who wrote it, but this newspaper really had the pulse of the community flowing through its office.

There are a lot of small personal stories, like ?Mrs. Crabtree slipped on ice on her front doorstep on Saturday morning and broke her leg,? and ?Mr. Huburt Thorn is in the hospital with appendicitis.?

In the society column, there are gems like ?Miss J. Hamilton of Tottenham was in town on Saturday,? and ?Mr. Richard St. John made a business trip to the Queen City last week.?

I'm not sure how that was news, even back then. And did Mr. St. John call the paper and let them know he was going out of town, or was one of his neighbours a spy?

One thing that really stands out is the use of names. People involved in car accidents or other type of accidents where named along with address and age.

However, I do recall the newspaper, a daily, where I grew up, did use to print names and addresses of people who appeared in court.

That's how I found out a guy in my school, age 16 at the time, was arrested for attempting to shoplift a Playboy magazine, and my then girlfriend's mother was convicted for shoplifting baby clothes although they didn't have a baby.

Reading these old newspapers has really inspired me.

I think I'm going to follow up on that tip I received about a Bigfoot sighting in the wilds of Amaranth.