

**FROM JACK THE RIPPER TO JAMAL THE
RAPIST: DISINFORMATION, BLOOD LIBEL AND
THE IMAGERY OF THE IMMIGRANT CRIMINAL**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis sets out to conceptualize the current moment of disinformation (called post-truth era by some researchers) arguing that there were several similar moments in Western history. The specific moment the thesis choose for comparison was the late 19th century, when – according to the assumptions of the thesis – the emerging mass media might have posed a similar challenge to human cognition as the emergence of social media does in contemporary times. The thesis works with Cultural Attraction Theory as its main framework and utilizes a case study methodology with discourse analysis. The particular disinformation that it focused on was a 19th century “blood libel”-case concerning immigrant populations and compared it to post-2015 disinforming narratives about refugee-seekers. The major findings consist of showing how similar ecological settings constitute to similar narratives due to the specificities of human cognition, while introduced Cultural Attraction Theory to the study of blood libels and disinformation in general.

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Introduction

If researchers were to go back to the origins of disinformation in human history using a time-machine, they would have quite a lengthy road to cover. One of the oldest, intentionally disinforming message that historians uncovered and refuted, dates to Ancient Egypt. The then-pharaoh of Egypt, Ramesses II, got entangled in a war with the Hittite Empire, and a battle was fought that has since become known as the Battle of Kadesh in 1274 BC. In what is also dubbed as the biggest battle ever fought with chariots (Eggenberger, 1985), both Ramesses II and the Hittites suffered an inconclusive battle with many casualties, while the city of Kadesh remained under Hittite rule (Hasel, 1998). Upon returning to his kingdom via Damascus, Ramesses ordered a scribe called Pentaur to write a heroic poem about him capturing Kadesh and his victory over the Hittite army. Pentaur did as asked, and pictured Ramesses II as victorious, possessing the heart of a lion, strong enough defeat a thousand men all by himself. The poem often places the king in situations of being overpowered by the Hittites and praises the godly Ramesses II for turning around the tide of the battle alone (Tappan, 1914).

As it happens with popular disinforming messages, Ramesses' "truth" was quickly disseminated all over his empire. The poem was carved into antique "news" amplifiers, such as obelisks and the walls of the temples of Abu Simbel, Luxor and Karnak. His disinformation campaign was so successful, that it effectively fooled historians and scientists for over 3000 years into believing that Ramesses did in fact defeat the Hittite army and sacked the city of Kadesh. Doubts concerning Pentaur's Poem and the Egyptian victory at Kadesh first arose at the beginning of the 20th century, when archeologists discovered the official Hittite account on the battle that – much to their surprise – significantly differed from Egyptian records. As

contemporary journalists would put it, two “*alternative realities*” existed simultaneously, and archeologists acted as some sort of ancient fact-checkers to get the story right. To rephrase the old realist saying, it seems that victory is not always written by the victors; but by those who have a pen.

The example of the Battle of Kadesh might be one of the oldest and historically most persistent piece of disinformation that we know of. In 2016 AC, some 3200 years after Ramesses II’s disinformation campaign, the expression “*post-truth*” becomes the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year. The adjective is defined as “*relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief*” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). In the very same year, White House spokesperson Kellyanne Conway uses the expression “*alternative facts*” while reacting to the controversy regarding the actual number of people taking part in President-elect Donald Trump’s Inauguration Ceremony (Gajanan, 2017). “*Fake news*” is another popular expression that’s becoming widely used to address the new age of misinformation. The term is then quickly hijacked by politicians like Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán, with the purpose to stigmatize certain news outlets for disagreeing with their politics.

From the sheer number of new expressions created and the massive interest shown towards the processes that these expressions refer to, one might deduce that we have indeed entered a new era in which facts and quality journalism matters less and less. Some fear that the previously well-defined border between facts and opinions blur and will disappear. But all these new expressions created to aid our understanding of contemporary history are, in fact, fundamentally ahistorical. They assume that humanity has had a “*truth era*” before “*post-truth*”; some kind of a Golden Age perhaps, where we should all aim to return to. This peculiar nostalgia, that might refer to a romanticized pre-internet age, is somewhat misleading.

This thesis operates with the assumption that disinformation has always been present in human societies – much like a virus, waiting for the outbreak. Similarly, there have always been certain actors present inside societies – virus carriers, to enforce the epidemiological comparison – who were “interested” in disinforming. For the most part, their versions on reality are marginalized. The other main assumption of this thesis is that it takes a specific constellation of environmental and psychological features that interplay and create a moment in which societies are more susceptible to disinformation. *Cultural Attraction Theory* (also known as *Cultural Epidemiology*) is the framework that answers the questions regarding the spread of public representations (like disinformation), figuring out why certain narratives become virulent while others perish (Sperber, 1996). Along the lines of Cultural Attraction Theory, this contemporary epidemic of disinformation will continue until the population builds a “*herd immunity*” helping to identify disinforming content and actors that are untrustworthy. The newly formed immunity, as the thesis aims to show, is usually achieved through the enactment of new legislations stemming from “updated” political ideologies, and practices adopted to debunk manipulative methods. Some of the new legislations lead to the development of educational programs, while others enforce censorship. The thesis argues that there are better and worse historical moments for disinforming strategies, and it aims to highlight several features to answer the question: what constitutes to the historical moment of disinformation we are living in right now? Why does it happen now? Has it happened before? If it had, in what sense were previous historical moments similar to the one we’re living right now?

The thesis uses discourse analysis on written media sources as a case study methodology to show that there was a similar moment in European history to the one we are living now, the late 19th century, in an age that is generally regarded as “modern” and “industrialist”. Despite the compliments we pay to this era, it saw the re-emergence of the most vivid and dangerous

medieval myths and conspiracy theories that have ever plagued European societies. These changes happened rather quick, much like an outbreak. With the use of this distant example, the goal of the thesis is to conceptualize the historical moment taking place right now. In order to narrow down the comparison, the thesis concentrates on a special type of disinformation: framing immigrant out-groups as violent criminals committing monstrous crimes against the most innocent members of society: women and children. Sagvári and Messing (2018) in their study of the European Values Survey distinguished between perceived economic, cultural and security threats that migration poses. The image of the migrant criminal falls between the safety and cultural threats, and has a long history in many societies. An elaborate vocabulary and associated imagery was also created, or to be more precise, developed from existing motifs, deploying demonizing images and pseudoscientific explanations alike. The ideas, tales, and other information about immigrants – a set of public representations – exist in societies but is not in the mainstream all the time. The behavior of newcomers is often pictured as going against social taboos, with the political goal to agitate against the co-existence of the newcomer group with the residing in-group.

There are good reasons why the phenomenon of disinformation should be tackled with the use of individual case studies. Similarly to other types of public representations, circulating disinformation needs to be studied from the perspective of an “*individual pathology*” (Sperber, 1996). To answer the question why certain ideas and information spreads like wildfire in or in between societies (and why others don’t), we need to study cases first to be able to generalize findings.

Nonetheless, there are specific reasons why disinformation about immigrants are in the scope of this thesis. Both the late 19th century setting and the latest political era in Europe (that is since 2015) are hallmarked by migration debates and competing views on what actions should be implemented. The theme of migration and related disinformation (in association with

growing nationalism) is one connection between the late 19th century case and the modern one. Furthermore, both of these crises were accompanied by the simultaneous emergence of new communicational channels (mass media during the late 19th century and social media during the 2010s') that posed a completely unprecedented challenge for the information processing system of the human mind.

The perfect storm of misinformation?

There is an assumption waiting to be dealt with before cleaning up the definitional swamp of expressions like fake news, post truth and alternative facts. It is the assumption that there actually is a successful moment of misinformation happening right now. If misinformation has been around human societies for thousands of years, how do we know that there is a good moment for it right now? Maybe misinformation did not become more influential, only more salient, thanks to social media or other factors associated with the 21st century digital communication environment. How do we know that there is a moment?

First of all, we can measure its impact on our political systems, most notably the effects of disinformation on democracies. According to a study ordered by the European Parliament, disinformation distorts political decision making and elections, and when the deployment of disinforming tactics leads to success, the manipulative party or political actor might continue to degrade democratic institutions (Bayer et al, 2019). In other parts of the world, disinforming messages are heavily involved in ethnic violence (Lime, 2018), voter confusion, and in the Rohingya-genocide (Mozur, 2018; Gowen & Bearak, 2017). Disinforming tactics are understood as fundamentally undemocratic tools that are in the hands of authoritarian leaders, nationalists, populists and other political extremists. In recent years, these political

narratives have yet again entered mainstream politics and gained votes. Although some research draws a direct connection between populism and disinformation, this thesis by no means aims to assess these theories.

Secondly, other effects of misinformation are also measurable, most notably its effects on the representation and acceptance of scientific consensus. A good example would be the recent trend of measles, rubeola and other, previously well-controlled diseases that are gaining grounds again in the United States thanks to misinformation and conspiracy theories undermining the scientific world view (Kekatos, 2019). From a theoretical perspective, scientific consensus enjoyed a more or less hegemonic position in specific areas such as healthcare – this position is now being challenged, and the effects of this struggle for power are clearly shown in outbreaks of long-forgotten diseases.

Thirdly, we can measure the economic dimension of this historical moment: how big of a business is it to spread misinformation? Has there been any change in the income of “disinformers” in the past few years that would lead us to the conclusion that there is indeed a moment where it is becoming more and more profitable to enter this shady business? Many researchers suggest that misinformation as a business model has indeed become more and more profitable. Entire “*troll factories*” or “*fake news factories*” were discovered in recent years, all involved in creating and spreading (particularly Russian) disinformation. A fake news factory was established in the since infamous Macedonian town of Veles before the 2016 US presidential election, where the city’s youth profited from entering the disinformation-business (Subramanian, 2017). Following the scandal in Veles, the term “*digital gold rush*” was coined by international news agencies.

Cleaning up the swamp: defining alternative facts, fake news and disinformation

The first important scholarly works of any research trying to understand the phenomenon of misinformation, let it be the origins, the content or the motives behind it, starts with the studies of Robert Knapp's '*Psychology of Rumor*' (1944), and Gordon Allport's and Leo Postman's '*Analysis of Rumor*' (1946). Knapp defines rumor as a "*special case of informal social communication*" (Knapp, 1944), and also as information that is not officially verified. In Allport's influential work, the authors do not actually define rumor, but they are interested in the spread and mechanisms of the circulated information. Despite the differences in their interests, Knapp, Allport and Postman all understood rumor as something that is transferred from mouth to mouth; Allport went on to discover how the amount of information in the rumor is decreased and the remaining content sharpened to satisfy or resonate with the emotional needs of the audience. This notion of "*emotional need*" returns in contemporary literature as well but in a slightly different perspective. Allport deployed a characteristically Freudian approach to conceptualize what "emotional needs" mean (introducing unconscious needs and projections), while contemporary researchers (see for example, Chen et al, 2013) have a more social psychological take on the term, concentrating on group belonging and reaching out towards peers.

Rumor does not seem like a good candidate for an expression to use in research, since today's information structure involves written or audiovisual information disseminated through social media platforms and news outlets. In order to grasp the emerging phenomenon, journalists and researchers created a whole array of new expressions. "*Factoid*", for example, is an obscure expression, coined by legendary writer Norman Mailer while working on the biography of Marilyn Monroe. It refers to a piece of information that is being accepted as true, although it has absolutely no foundation in reality – "*facts which had no existence before*

appearing in a magazine or newspaper” (Mailer, 1973). A factoid poses as reliable information, while it is not. The problem with this expression is its unspecified character; a factoid can as well be a happening, a conspiracy theory, an entire story, an urban legend, or half a sentence. Under factoid, the piece of misinformation that the Great Wall of China is visible from outer space falls into the same category as the conspiracy theory claiming that George Soros wants to ship migrants to Europe to undermine Christian culture. For any scientific research, a much more detailed categorization is needed, preferably one that includes the dimensions of *harmfulness* and *intentionality*.

Albeit the term “*fake news*” seems to be the most popular – according to Google Trends the number of searches suddenly multiplied in late 2016 – leading politicians on both ends of the radical spectrum began wielding “*fake news*” as a political branding iron. Essentially, crying “*fake news*” on a source has become the tool of tribalized political narrative, and thus its use became problematic in academic work. With that being said, there were some who tried to give a definition to fake news with the intention to lift it to the level of academic consensus. Rini defined the term fake news as a piece of information that poses as reliable news, but was created with the double-intent to be circulated among the biggest audience as possible, and to deceive the readers (Rini, 2017). A meta-study on the term found that scientific discourse about fake news is largely ambiguous, since researchers use it to refer to occasionally very different phenomena (Tandoc et al, 2018). Because of the ambiguity, this research refrains from using the expression “*fake news*” in favor of a better, more punctual expression.

We have arrived at “*post-truth*” and “*post factual*”. Both imply that there has been an era of facts and truth, and none of them contain the elements of intentionality which is vital to distinguish malevolency. “*Alternative facts*” – thanks to the circumstances of its conception – is heavily loaded with partisan political interpretations and belongs more to the realm of literature and philosophy at this point. And what about *conspiracy theories*? According to

Krekó, conspiracy theory is “*a belief, in which actors armed with great power/influence secretly cooperate to realize a plan that’s goal is to gain economic or political power over the in-group*” (Krekó, 2014). In this sense, conspiracy theories are subchapters of what we will call *disinformation*.

The researcher Claire Wardle was among the first to call for a unified dictionary for academics dealing with these issues. She proposed a distinction between misinformation, disinformation and malinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Misinformation can be defined as inaccurate content originating from bad journalism and other mistakes; and interestingly enough, poorly understood satire also falls into this category. In its core, misinformation lacks the intention to harm. It is important not to forget that unintentionally misinforming messages also possess the potential of causing distress in readers or lead to violence. Disinformation and malinformation on the other hand, have an intent to harm, but they differ in truthfulness. Disinformation is defined as “*fabricated or deliberately manipulated content, intentionally created conspiracy theories or rumors*” (Wardle, 2018). The definition of disinformation is perhaps closest to the popular understanding of fake news as well. In situations when real information is shared with the intent to harm (like private information leaked to the public) we talk of malinformation. Wardle also differentiated seven categories of what she called “*information disorders*”. These are:

- 1.) Satire or parody;
- 2.) Misleading content;
- 3.) Imposter content;
- 4.) Fabricated content;
- 5.) False connections;

6.) False context;

7.) Manipulated content.

The primary focus of this research will be on disinformation, more closely misleading and fabricated content. Fabricated content contains information that is entirely made up and is designed to “*deceive and do harm*”, while misleading content deliberately tries to frame an issue or an individual (Wardle, 2018). Wardle’s categorization and her pioneering attempt to get all researchers and policymakers on the same linguistic platform is recognized and used by various institutions and researchers alike. The International Center for Journalists uses her definitions, as well as Poynter Institute, one of the U.S’ leading fact-checker organizations. It has found its way to education as well, initiatives like News Literacy Project that teaches primary and secondary-school children to identify quality journalism and misinformation are also based on her terminology.

Chapter I.

Medieval Accusations Spreading on Modern Platforms: Blood Libels in Mass Media

The specific type of intentional disinformation that this thesis utilizes for analysis took various forms over the past centuries and has been both very popular and completely off the map for decades. From medieval times until the late 19th century, scholars commonly refer to it as the “*blood libel*”. The earliest proven blood libels that we know of are from the 13th century (Johnson, 2012), and they generally involve two religiously different groups, and an accusation of one of the groups murdering a child or a youngster for various religious or in some cases, medical purposes. The most prominent reason behind the murders was that Jews needed Christian blood to bake matzo during Passover. *Encyclopedia Judaica* defines blood libels as

[...] the allegation that Jews murder non-Jews, especially Christian children, in order to obtain blood for the Passover or other rituals. [...] a complex of deliberate lies, trumped-up accusations, and popular beliefs about the murder-lust of the Jews and their bloodthirstiness, based on the conception that Jews hate Christianity and mankind in general.

Johnson began drafting the old myth along the lines of returning canonical themes:

The story begins with the discovery of a child’s body. [...] The child is Christian, and he is young. [...] The Jews are accused of murdering the boy for obscure ritual purposes, and what begins as a dark rumor might end in anti-Jewish violence, or perhaps a judicial inquiry involving the possibility of torture and execution (Johnson, 2012).

According to Johnson, there was always an actual (unsolved) murder – a mystery as such – a vengeful and angry mob, and a minority that was made responsible for the crime. Though her observations might be true for medieval accusations, the 19th century blood libel, like an ever-changing folk tale, got enriched with contemporary political and social-Darwinist elements, like race-theory and political othering (Kieval, 1997). It is true however, that blood libels are peculiar in their content-specificity.

As Johnson later mentions, the accusations were made for “*insidious political reasons*” (Johnson, 2012) and as we read through the stories from Europe it becomes apparent how convenient it was for ethnic entrepreneurs to start off the rumor. The historian, Helmut Walser Smith, convincingly shows through a German case study how the accusation served the interests of the non-Jewish majority by justifying the confiscation of Jewish property (predicting the ghetto mechanics of WWII), how it served the interests of newspaper correspondents by boosting newspaper sales, and how emerging anti-Semitic parties could exploit the political potential of the deepening group conflict by framing it as a racial issue (Smith, 2002).

Throughout the centuries of European history, the myth of Jews murdering innocent Christians was used as a blunt, but quite effective tool for ethnic mobilization. Smith (2002) worked with over 78 documented cases from the 19th century, almost 30 of them ended with violence and/or pogroms. According to another statistic put together by Lehr (1974), there had been 128 publicly documented incidents between 1873 and 1900, although Western European countries are not represented. Clearly, late 19th century saw a perfect historical moment for disinformation. During the dawn of modern democratic systems, blood accusations were used to incite hatred for various political and economic reasons. There is a political potential in culturally different groups mobilizing against one another, and for some (as the thesis will argue, evolutionary) reasons, blood accusations resonate well both with groups living in the

modern informational era as well as groups that lived in medieval ages. How could we categorize blood libels using the contemporary definitions about disinformation? According to Johnson and other scholars, the intention to harm is clearly there. The connection and the entire story that tied the Jewish population to murders were fabricated – in this sense, blood libels are one of the worst kinds of intentional hate and violence-inciting disinformation that European history knew.

1.1. When and why do blood libels happen?

Over the years, anthropologists, historians and psychologists set out to form their own explanations about blood libels. From the Freudian reading of Dundes (1991), that treated the accusations as a projective inversion of the Christian ritual of eating the “body and blood” of Christ, to the more historical approach of Schultz (1991), who raised attention to the general conditions in which Christian children were forced to live and how the Jewry could have been framed for these difficulties, the interpretational spectrum is quite wide.

Other scholars praised economic explanations for blood libels, that were generally based on Realistic Conflict Theory (Sherif, 1966), and the attempts to explain the phenomenon from this perspective resulted in a long-lasting debate: why blood libels and such accusations happen in the first place? One example from realistic conflict is Levine’s historical analysis (Levine, 1991), in which there has been an unholy relationship between the situation of the Jewish Diasporas in European societies and the emancipation of these Diasporas. Some non-Jewish communities framed emancipation as an issue that takes away from their rights by giving rights to the Jewry. In essence: someone’s profit is someone else’s loss (also known as *zero-sum bias*). Levine built his explanation on the traditional imagery of Jews; them being

innkeepers selling wine. Wine was understood as malevolent tool to trap Christian peasants in serfdom, and with the creative deployment of blood-symbolism, the image of Jews as vampires and leeches was born. Kieval objected this economic view on the grounds of not considering specific cultural factors, local cultural exchange, and relying too much on the jolly joker of “*socioeconomic crisis*” as a predisposition to blood accusations (Kieval, 1997).

One of the most useful studies written on the topic is the work of Werner Bergmann (2002). Bergmann introduces the term “*exclusionary riot*”, referring to instances when rioting is not aimed against the state or against the bearers of the monopoly of violence, but a minority that was perceived as a threat. Grouping pogroms and other violent actions against perceived out-groups, Bergmann’s concept utilizes the tradition of economic, realistic conflict theories and social identity theories alike.

He starts off with the already mentioned motif of a general crisis that is understood as “*changes in the dominant group’s position*” (Bergmann, 2002). This change can be perceived (imagined) or real, it can mean an actual, quantifiable shift in minority positions, or some sort of “*power displacement*” following a war or other historical event. The change triggers a defense reaction from the dominant group, meaning that they might try to regain social control through violence (Black, 1983). Following the threat, the amount of intergroup communication decreases. The lack of communication followed by the heightened identification with the in-group has a deepening effect on prejudiced thinking (Quillian, 1995). The bigger the cultural distance between the dominant and the subgroup, the bigger the chances are for exclusionary riots to take place. Bergmann identifies police and legal incompetence as another indicator preceding violence – one of the most commonly reoccurring motifs in virtually every modern (19th century and post-19th century) blood libel. The integrated view of exclusionary riots is not dependent on Jewish versus non-Jewish dichotomy, although it was created based on case studies of Jewish blood accusations from

Germany. It is easy to see how useful Bergmann's approach is especially when we describe migration as an economic threat, challenging the in-group's hegemony. However, in his take, any other accusation could be used to incite an exclusionary riot.

Dramatized Approach of Blood Accusations

Other scholars emphasized the fact that blood libels are not always imposed against Jews but can be deployed against virtually any other out-group too, although in the long history of these accusations most frequently Jewish minorities have been accused. As Norman Cohn has shown, Jews were not the only targets of these accusations even during European history itself. Deriving representations from a “*traditional stock of defamatory clichés*”, similar accusations were imposed on heretics, and even early Christians (Cohn, 1975). Similarly, Kende defines this particular type of disinformation as an

Anthropologically constant demonic concept, that in changing forms, but probably appears anywhere where there are two, significantly different human groups live by each other.

(Kende, 1995).

This definition is written from a more anthropological – if not evolutionary – perspective than the ones Encyclopedia Judaica or others gave and is of central importance for this research. Anthropologists would say that these stories belong to the realm of “*evoked culture*”; meaning a “*set of capacities present in the cognitive equipment of all members of the species, that might be triggered by external circumstances*” (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). Kende in fact points toward some unnamed capacity in the human mind that is evoked by the external circumstance of two different human groups living next to each other. If there are no significantly different groups living next to each other, these stories do not appear. To

illustrate how evoked culture works, Boyer (1998) compares it to a jukebox, that has a finite amount of songs, and certain songs will be selected following external circumstances (the audience of the pub, in his example). It seems that blood libels were “songs” that were on the top list during the late 19th century – and are huge hits since 2015 as well. And not only in Europe; Kende did write an entire chapter on the question of non-Jewish blood accusations. Following his observations on different blood libels from the 19th century, Kende also identified reoccurring patterns. He argued that the pattern directs us towards a general model of blood accusations – or, if we use the terminology of the literature review, a particular kind of intentionally harmful disinformation, pasted into the frames of existing stereotypes and cognitive schemas. In his modeling, three elements are differentiated. These elements can be discussed and interpreted in the light of other similar theories.

1. The level of the individual: personal beliefs, the salience of conscious or unconscious prejudices that are described as a passive knowledge of the folklore – a set of mental and public representations – that describes how Jews murder children from time to time for religious reasons.
2. The level of the masses, or as Kende puts it, mass psychosis, that is related to either the heightened atmosphere of a celebration, or some sort of crisis. There are scholars like Farhat-Holzman (2008) who conceptualized medieval crises along the lines of returning plagues. Kende’s preferred expression, mass psychosis, is a somewhat outdated social psychological concept, originating from early scientific literature, possibly from the ever-influential work of LeBon (1896). His take on the nature of masses and crowds could be conceptualized using contemporary literature; to use the colorful expression of Cohen, it could be understood as events of “*moral panic*” (Cohen, 2002) or as previously mentioned exclusionary riots.

3. The level of the pseudo-scientific literature of blood accusations that served as a legitimization of folklore. Discourse analysts like Reisigl and Wodak created a methodology to measure and categorize these pseudoscientific elements (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). Shulamit Volkov dealt with the development of this modern language (1978) and the detachment from old religious tones. In her view, this language – or cultural code, as she put it – was developed in the 19th century as an agitation against modernity. Sounds quite paradoxical, if not counter-intuitive, that a modernized language was needed to reject modernity itself. Similarly, Kieval dedicated an entire paper to uncover the use of scientific language in constructing modern ritual murder accusations. According to his case study of the infamous Hungarian Tiszaeszlar-case, this language utilizes religious disinformation paired with cherry-picked scientific explanations and authority (2012).

What is especially interesting about the modeling is that in Kende's view, the simple presence of these three elements isn't enough for the eruption of an actual ethnic mobilization, but the model presumes a so-called "*game master*", who is responsible for evoking these elements from communities (the in-group as such). In communicational theory, one would use the word "*amplifier*", but Kende derived "*game master*" from medieval folk dramas to reflect on the similarities between blood libel cases and mystery plays. These people serve as main organizers for carnivals, folk theatres – and were responsible for ethnic mobilization as well, since blood accusations generally happened around the time of big Christian holidays (Trachtenberg, 1983). Game masters set the general tones for conversations, evoked public representations such as conspiracy theories based on the cultural knowledge of the community and called for action when the time was right, and then kept the act in motion with various methods (like notifying newspaper correspondents or officials). Their common trait was that they were all intellectuals and claimed to possess a knowledge about the minority that was in

focus of the accusations. Game masters introduced the previously mentioned “*scientific-literary*” element to the narrative of blood libel cases.

Kende was not the only one who approached blood libels as highly ritualized, dramatic events. In his fundamental work of the infamous Hungarian Tiszaeszlár-case, György Kövér (2011) utilized the structure of a classical drama to structure his findings. First, he meticulously analyzed the so called “*dramatic setting*” in which the act is realized, starting from maps, family trees and property-structures. The socio-demographic facts are surrounded by the tides of history, most notably the emancipation of the Jewry and the imminent backlash that followed, alongside with the abolition of serfdom and the re-structuralization of the Hungarian countryside and social strata. The “*performers*” were divided by their role as victim(s), accusers and accused are accompanied by a colorful montage of other late 19th century characters, such as judiciaries, clergymen, journalists, politicians and as events unfold, and more and more political potential can be mined out from the incident, entire political movements familiarize with the narrative.

Kövéér also mentions game masters, and perhaps the most relevant part of his research is in association with the thesis are his notions on the role of the media. According to Kövéér, the blood libel case could not have grown out to be what it is today without the amplifying effect of sensationalist coverage and newly established far-right news outlets. Gyula Verhovay, the founder of the anti-Semitic newspaper *Függetlenség* (*Independence* in Hungarian) observed the curious situation of anti-Semitic publications within the Hungarian public, lamenting that while the readership multiplied thanks to the Tiszaeszlár blood libel and the subsequent trials, the State itself tries to control them by scaring away advertisers and by conducting media-trials (Kövéér, 2011). His observations about the situation of fear and hate-mongering journalism bears similarities to how governments and social media firms try to contain disinforming news outlets in the digital age by discouraging advertisers from appearing on

disinforming platforms. Kende, somewhat in agreement with what Kövér later showed, speculated that with the emergence of mass media and mass literacy in Europe during the second half of the 19th century, game masters were depersonalized, and media outlets took on their role.

1.2. Towards a Cognitive Approach to the Study of Blood Libels and the Spread of Disinformation

Although the theories mentioned beforehand have done groundbreaking work in drafting the historical and psychological settings in which blood libels take place, they nevertheless lack the explanatory power to address two important features. Blood libels are universal and also specific. Universal in the sense that very similar accusations have happened in other (non-European) cultures, even if research regarding these stories has traditionally concentrated on the changes of Judeo-Christian relations and the psychological processes that took place during certain historical events (like the backlash against emancipation-theory or the rejection of modernization through a projected image on the Jewry). Stories bearing a strong family resemblance with blood libels are also found in other contexts, for example in India between Muslims and Hindus, where they call mythical child kidnappers “*hopadora*” (Nayar & Sehgal, 2018), and in South America, between indigenous Indians and Mexicans (Martinez, 2018).

Blood libels are also specific in the sense that the stories gravitate around the same theme. Why could blood libels become so popular from all the horrific stories that could be invented about Jews? If we try to explain blood libels from the perspective of European culture and its relationship with Jewry, we might be able to provide a partial explanation about the

specificity of the story, but our model will not live up to the challenge of explaining its spread across cultures (universality). An approach is needed that explains both the universality and the specificity. As I will argue, Cultural Attraction Theory (CAT) is a fitting framework to address these pressing questions.

Let us start with the latter: why blood libels? The story, let it be culturally well-embedded, seems strangely specific. Baking the blood of children into matzo during Passover? Most of us have heard the saying: if you must lie, then lie big. Pratkanis and Aronson, in their book titled *The Age of Propaganda*, argue that big lies (they utilize the previously mentioned “factoid” expression) are useful in a sense that a lie big enough will require extra effort to falsify. Huge lies seem less likely to be made up. To make matters worse, in some occasions, an attempt on falsification raises even further questions, and might justify suspicion (Aronson & Pratkanis, 1991). Although their argument sounds convincing, it still does not explain the formation of blood libels. Ritual murders surely are gripping horror stories; *unique events with an eternal structure* (Ostling, 2017). How come that *this* specific horror story became so influential over the centuries?

As a cultural attraction theorist would argue, a population – let this be Christians – possess a large set of mental representations (beliefs, intentions, etc.) about the Jewry stemming from the fact of them being a religious out-group – Roth (1941) even theorized that blood libels and similar accusations are indispensable psychological elements of expressing religious antipathy. Very few of these mental representations then got communicated to others in forms public representations (signals, utterances and tales). Through interpretation they evoke other, slightly different mental representations in the listeners, and the tales will undergo a continuous transformation (or mutation). For example, Trachtenberg (1983) mentions, how the Passover-motif was missing from early accusations and only appeared and was engrained in the public mind from the 15th century. Following this so called “*causal chain*” (Heintz &

Cladiere, 2015), mental representations about the Jews are being spread like viruses, and which each transmission they mutate and transform into slightly different tales that gravitate around the same cultural attractor (Sperber, 1996; Heintz, 2018). Blood libel was only one from thousands of fearful mental representations that Christian populations held about the Jews, and only one from the several dozen public representations that circulated inside the oral tradition of Christian communities. These stories are primarily associated to the Jewry and appear in relation to Jews so often because of the specificity of the Judeo-Christian relations. Jewish history was described by Christians as a trail of crimes starting with the murder of the Messiah (Nirenberg, 2013).

The public representations, through each transmission, entered an “*arms race*” of horrific details concerning the crimes of the Jews, until only a few, very persistent public representations were left – all bearing the same *family resemblance*, to use Wittgenstein’s expression. Researchers of the Jewish stereotype are familiar with the images that are temporary winners of the arms race: the Jew as poisoner of wells, the Jew as carrier of diseases, etc. The family resemblance, or Cohn’s previously mentioned “*stock of clichés*” expression is called a *cultural attractor* by researchers working with CAT (Sperber, 1996).

According to the definitions, stories always contain the element of an out-group committing grievous violence against the most innocent members of the in-group (violence against children are traditionally tabooed in most human cultures). The stories vary depending on the time and space they are being told, as it can be seen in 19th century blood libel cases. In some occasions, the gender of the victim is different (boy or a girl). In other cases, the reasoning behind the tale has different grounds (religious or pseudo-scientific explanations). Sometimes, the profession of the perpetrator identified behind the murder is different – to mention a few from the extensive list of clichés, the Jew could be a butcher, an innkeeper, a seasonal worker, an organ trafficker, a foreign spy or an immigrant. These mutations all gravitate around the

same cultural attractor, and on the long run, adapt the details of the story to the environment of the given historical time and space.

From the description of the cultural attractor of blood libels, the following question instantly emerges: what exactly makes this specific cultural attractor so successful that it is capable of mutating and spreading around in a continent like an epidemic? Answering questions like this is the main task of CAT. Why certain public representations disappear, while others become popular? CAT distinguishes two separate *factors of attractors* that constitute cultural attractors: psychological and ecological factors. Identifying these factors helps theorists to understand the success (or unsuccess) of different ideas. In order to answer the question of what makes the attractor of out-group violence psychologically appealing, we must ask the question: what exactly happens in the brain when it meets a story like the blood libel?

Tuned for blood: Psychological Factors behind Blood Libels

Researchers in recent years paid great attention to fear-inciting political messages (e.g. Wodak, 2015) and in relation, information processing under the event of unsettling or distressful stimuli. In general, when the human mind is presented with negative stimuli – let that be pictures of murdered Christians or angry human faces – the emerging emotions are accompanied by specific visceral response patterns (Bányai et al, 2012). These patterns indicate that the brain is in the state of heightened information processing. At the end of this processing, the subject is able to make an intuitive decision between a “*fight*” or a “*flight*” reaction (Cannon, 1932). When the subject is being exposed to the stimuli, their heart rate suddenly drops (deaccelerates). This deacceleration is prolonged in cases when the stimulus presented has a characteristically negative valency (Winton et al, 1984).

While experimenting with different pictures presented to human subjects researchers found that the strongest reactions were given to pictures that depicted in-group members being victims of aggression (Bradley et al, 2001). This reaction is not human-specific; the same can be observed among primates (Hebb, 1949). Images depicting in-group members dismembered, mutilated or disemboweled, especially if the in-group members were women or children (the most “innocent” members of the group), have the potential to evoke the strongest visceral reactions among all other fear or hate-inciting stimuli that can be given to the human mind.

A specific brain lobe, called the insula (Brodmann area 13-14.), starts firing instantly when information like the blood libel is presented. The insular lobe distinguishes between two types of sub-emotions inside the larger emotional category of disgust. The first is the previously mentioned dismemberment or disembowelment of in-group members. The second is contamination: poison, blood, bodily fluids and disease (Kreibig, 2010). It is not a coincidence that prejudiced myths about the Jews are closely associated with either one of these subgroups of disgust.

From all the potentially effective public representations, those prevailed that were able to evoke the strongest visceral reactions from the target audience. Theoretically, in-groups tentatively tested different narratives with slightly different details (mutations), and during the centuries-long experimenting, they arrived at blood libel-stories, which were particularly “mobilizing”. In a way, humans experimentally constructed the public representation that communicates with deep evolutionary features; the evolution of blood libel could be a journey to find out what engrosses and outrages us the most. In a famous thought experiment about selective attention, Donald Broadbent (1958) proposed to imagine that we walk around the tables at a busy cocktail party with loads of guests talking to each other. We hear many conversations but manage to listen to the one we intend to listen. There are however, a few

conversations, that are harder to exclude with our selective filter – conversations that are so gripping and interesting, that people slowly began to gather to listen to them, like moths around the lightbulb. Blood libels – perhaps due to their nature of resonating with specific evolutionary features of the human mind – are stories that stand out from the cacophony of cocktail parties.

Finally, what evidence do we have, besides empirical data of visceral reactions, to back up the evolutionary modelling of the blood libel? For example, we observe the transmission and mutation of public representations in real time, since cultural evolution continues. The aim of cultural evolution is not to replicate existing stories without changes, and the mutations happening through cultural evolution are less coincidental than of biological ones (Phillips et al, 2017). As mentioned before, blood libels, at the turn of the 20th century, got enriched with pseudoscientific explanations that substituted religious tones. The pseudoscientific explanations then changed as well, and many modern versions were born.

Another evidence to argue for an evolution of narrative besides real-time observations comes from the nature of complex systems. Richard Dawkins, the often-controversial evolutionary biologist, also involved in the cultural evolution research through *memetics*, came up with a colorful allegory he titled “*The Mountain of Improbability*” (Dawkins, 2006). In theory, there are two ways of explaining the existence of a complex system. The first route is to take a step-by-step approach, dealing with the improbability originating from the complexity of the system slowly. It is like climbing a mountain using the declivitous path. The other approach is the steep one: it is to assume that the complex system was created in one big step – Dawkins imagines this as jumping directly to the peak from the foot of the mountain.

In Dawkins’ example, a human eye is explained through this theory. During the evolution of this organ, the outcome looks specific, fitting and non-dissectible, like a perfect tool, created

for one sole purpose. Evolutionary theory deals with the complexity of an eye by theorizing millions of small, tentative steps (mutations) leading up to the organ we know today. The evolution of narratives like the blood libel could be like that. Carefully curated, perfect tools to raise attention, to engross and mobilize our cognitive structures, and were created through thousands of years of tentative narrative evolution.

The example of the *Mountain of Improbability* teaches us that if we try to dissect the narrative of blood libels and explain its imagery using only European culture and historical implications, then we are scraping the surface. Even worse, we try to jump directly to the top of the *Mountain* instead of taking smaller, less improbable steps. Using the evolutionary approach, we are keeping the universality, the “*constant*” adjective from Kende’s “*anthropologically constant demonic concept*” inside the description. With the application of the evolutionary approach, one can explain why a seemingly ridiculous story like blood libels has such a strong effect on the human mind, and why similar stories appear in other cultures with different out-groups as antagonists from time to time.

So far, using the conclusions of the definitional clean-up regarding false information, we have categorized blood libels as characteristically nefarious, content specific and persistent pieces of disinformation (public representation). The thesis introduced the main schools of thoughts, the traditional ways of understanding the spread and development of blood libels. Finally, we have attempted to conceptualize them inside the larger frameworks of Cultural Attraction Theory to explain its universality and specificity. Briefly, we have also set out to understand what psychological factors might contribute to the success of blood libel stories. Now, the thesis will finally turn towards the main explanations – the ecological analysis concerning the external features that contributed to the viral spread of blood libel-type disinformation during the latter part of the 19th century. The conclusions of this part will then be used to conceptualize the information environment we live in now, pinpointing similarities.

Chapter II.

Seasonal Epidemics: Ecological Factors and Acquired Psychological Factors behind the Success of Blood Libels and related Disinformation

When Cultural Attraction Theory divides psychological and ecological factors to separate categories, they are not entirely understood separable. In reality, they mutually affect each other. Cultural Attraction Theory implies that changes in the environment (or changes in the factors of attraction) often times pose a new challenge to the human cognitive system (as a matter of fact, this assumption can be found in the theory of biological evolution as well, in the form of *environmental triggers*). Acquired psychological factors can then help the mind to adopt to the new environment, in a continuous a chain of change and adaptation.

To use the epidemiological metaphor that CAT deals with, imagine that the population holds certain public representations, specific types of disinformation for example, like viruses (Sperber, 1996). In any given time, a small subpopulation is always affected by the virus, but the numbers of “*infected*” do not reach the scale of a cross-population epidemic. Suddenly, thanks to a change in the environment (the ecological factor) a wider population becomes susceptible to infection. The change in the environment leads to a *seasonal epidemic*. In epidemiology, environmental transformations are conceptualized as food shortages or heatwaves followed by famines. Generally speaking, ecological change is an exposure that leaves the defense mechanisms of individual organisms weaker; it allows the virus to wreak havoc until the population builds herd immunity or adopts practices to prevent further infections.

As was displayed at the very beginning of the thesis, disinformation is constant in societies, as well as “*virus carriers*” (or people who are willing to share disinformation). However, much like in the case of epidemics, a specific environmental setting is needed in order for disinforming messages to culminate from sub-culturally shared public representations into a large-scale outbreak.

As a hypothesis, the thesis works with the assumption that the sudden rise of blood libel-type disinformation during the 19th century can be explained with acquired psychological (literacy) and environmental changes (emergence of mass media) that challenged the human cognitive system on a level that was unknown before. It took decades for the cognitive systems to adopt to the new, more turbulent information environment, and societies tried to tackle this challenge by adapting specific policies; some of these policies even reached the depths of moral theory. Furthermore, the thesis also claims that there are significant similarities between the mentioned environmental changes of the 19th century and the changes that took place since 2015. Accordingly, these latest environmental changes pose a specific challenge to our cognitive systems, thus making the population vulnerable to the spread of specific information. In recent times, there have been a few, tentative steps towards adaptation to this new environment, and interestingly enough, the debates about the strategies that can be implemented, and the implications of possible actions appear somewhat similar to the debates that took place almost one and a half century ago.

2.1. The Emergence of Mass Communication in the 19th century – the Ecological Factor

When we talk of disinformation, we theorize a communicational process that takes place between a source and a receiver. Between the source and a receiver there can be multiple elements, depending on the communicational act in question. Fundamentally, researchers have traditionally theorized a message, a communicational channel and transmitters (Shannon 1948). In mass media and communication, the communicational process is enriched with *amplifiers* – actors that makes certain messages appear louder, more salient, more distributed. During the latter part of 19th century, the communicational channels, the status of the amplifiers, and the cognitive apparatus of the receivers have all changed in a rapid fashion. Naturally, with the changes of the elements of communication, the sources were also determined to change their ways of delivering messages.

The two most important changes associated with communicational development in the 19th century were growing literacy and the emergence of mass media. The newly acquired cognitive ability (literacy) opened the doors for a historically unprecedented volume of information for the masses. The switch from irregular amounts of infrequent oral information to insurmountable amounts of periodical written information happened amazingly fast, much like an explosion.

Before the explosion: Old Journalism

Curiously, the emergence of mass media preceded government legislations aimed at literacy. Newspapers, as amplifiers, were around before the 19th century; but they were mostly seen as

the privilege of the upper-classes (Slauter, 2015). 17th and 18th century journalism had very little in common with what we call journalism today. The so called “*Old Journalism*” – prevalent mostly in Britain and in the American Colonies – was under heavy censorship. Any news outlet could be charged with the infamous “*sedition libel*”; the criticism of public personas such as the king counted as a criminal offense. Because of the looming threat of trials and the judicial “flexibility” of courts when it came to interpret seditious libels, most news outlets were cautious not to step over boundaries.

Newspaper designs were also quite different compared to modern ones: no pictures, no headlines, no crossheads or illuminated typography. They mostly consisted of a few foreign news, word-to-word transcripts of official speeches and other utterances (commonly referred to as “*horserace coverage*”), as well as events of public concern such as executions, marriages and funerals. News were still primarily spread through traditional mouth-to-mouth communication, mostly in forms of rumor. Political news was also distributed on pamphlets and broadsides. The interest shown towards these half-illegal pieces of information fluctuated: the demand was heightened in times of war or crisis, and decayed in peacetime (Raymond, 2003). For decades, the competition for becoming the news source of the modern era was fought between multiple contesters: newspapers, pamphlets, broadsides and post offices.

So how did newspapers prevail? One of the main factors behind their success was *periodicity*. Utilizing a predictable schedule, reader-bases were formed around specific news outlets, anxiously awaiting the next issue. With a stable reader-base, investors became interested in placing advertisements inside newspapers, and that meant steady income for publishers (Slauter, 2015). Periodicity however, had its own downsides: publication deadlines are dissociated from the historical timeline. Events – by their independent nature – don’t necessarily happen according to publication schedules, but the demand for frequent information delivery created an obligation to publish regularly even if there were no

significant happenings of public concern (Sommerville, 1996). This brought along an inflation of what was considered as “*news*” and “*public concern*”, paving the way for sensationalism, and creating a demand to mutate and spin existing stories (to keep the reader-base entertained).

By the year 1775, newspapers have become the number one source of information (Slauter, 2015). Circulation, however, was still quite low for several reasons: illiteracy, technical difficulties of printing and mostly, taxation. At the time of the American Revolutionary Wars, there were around 71 papers in England (21 of these were based in London) and 42 in the American colonies (Harris, 1987). In the next 60 years, by 1829, the growth of the news base had been fairly slow, as well as the readership’s, as London newspapers had 30 readers per day on average, while provincial papers had less than 10, meaning an approximate 25 readers for the average English newspaper per day (Aspinall, 1946).

The main obstacle for *Old Journalism* to transform into real mass media, was the heavy taxation (that essentially meant a form of censorship). Some news outlets went underground to avoid taxation and censorship by printing *Unstamped Newspapers*, that were circulated illegally. Most of them were cheap, government critical, radical newspapers that marketed themselves as “*independent*”.

The taxation was two-folded. There was a 4-penny tax per newspaper called *Newspaper Stamp Duty*, and a 3-shilling 6 penny tax *Advertisement Duty*, that kept newspaper prices high, and working classes confined to coffee shops and reading rooms. In 1834, after fifteen years and more than 800 people imprisoned in the War of the Unstamped, newspaper duties were reduced to 1 penny (albeit the penalties for evading taxation became more severe). It was not longer than 1853 (abolition of *Advertisement Duty*) and 1855 (abolition of *Newspaper Stamp Duty*) that newspapers broke completely free from taxation. However, the first effects

were shown right after 1834. The reader base, the number of copies in circulation and the number of news outlets themselves multiplied. The circulation itself skyrocketed from 39 million copies to 122 million copies – the amount had almost quadrupled between 1836 and 1854 (Lake, 1984).

After the explosion: New Journalism

The emerging mass media saw the formation of “*New Journalism*”. With a language that was engaging and personal, utilizing journalistic styles like interviews and opinion articles, news outlets began employing hordes of sensation-loathing reporters controlled by buzzing press offices. Speed – both in producing the copies and filling them with content – became essential (Weiner, 2014).

Looking for ways to stand out in the economic competition, the design of publications evolved: illustrations on every page, bold typography and tall headlines were the new deals of the day. The papers, naturally, were also cheap, enabling them to entertain a wide readership from all social classes. Sensationalistic “*yellow journalism*” and investigative, quality journalism (or *muckraking*) was not yet clearly separated, as journalistic ethics were mostly undefined.

Editors maintained a fairly “egalitarian” concept whilst putting together issues: whatever entertains the reader and sells the paper. By contrast, the goal of *Old Journalism* was defined as “*to elevate the character of mankind*” (Grant, 1871). The pioneers of this new era quickly observed some of the most prominent fallacies of human information processing through their experiences in newspaper sales. Ghastly murder mysteries, sports news and gossips about public figures became indispensable parts of the daily content. New Journalism, as it can be

expected, also required a different business model, switching from small family run publications prominent of Old Journalism, to the predecessors of giant media enterprises we are familiar with today.

There was a related change in the cognitive capacities that allowed the evolution of *New Journalism*: mass literacy. Around 1790, an estimated 80.000 people were able to read in England. The richer classes, and primarily males were literate, due to the private school system that was seen as restrictive (Altick, 1957). New educational reforms, like the *Education Act of 1870* meant that the state took responsibility for lower working classes to acquire the skills of reading and writing. Not only that, but mass circulated, well-designed newspapers meant extra motivation to learn how to read at least on basic levels amongst the robotic educational methods of mid-19th century England. At the very beginning, teaching someone how to read did not mean interpretation, but simple translation, thus the statistical data on reading works with a slightly different ability than what we normally mean. Reading was seen as a “*mechanical exercise*” that enabled the child to “*translate printed symbols to their spoken equivalent*” (Altick, 1954). The late “*Forster*” *Education Act of 1870* the British Empire was able to maintain the steady growth of literacy among its citizens. By the end of the century, 97.2% of the male population and 96.8% of the female population possessed the ability to read and write, while in the 1841 census data the percentages were only 67.3% among males and 51.1% among females.

The number of literate Britons was on the rise before the latter part of the 19th century – but as it was shown, they simply weren’t rich enough to buy information frequently, because of the taxation implemented on newspapers put the prices beyond their reach. The two interconnected changes –the abolition of tax on information plus the growing number of literates in society – opened an entirely new market for information amplifiers to reach receivers, and the receivers were finally able not only to comprehend, but to afford

information that the amplifiers offered. Working class Britons, by the millions, suddenly gained access to domains of information that they did not have access to before.

2.2. Mass Communication and Information Processing – the Acquired Psychological Factor

What cognitive challenges did these changes pose for the individual? A classical way of arguing is that the population became more and more informed and were capable of closely monitoring the domestic and foreign policies of their respective governments. To put it simply, the citizens grew conscious of their wider surroundings and their relations to the world, that subsequently contributed to the strengthening of popular sovereignty. As Arthur Aspinall (1946) wrote:

The multiplication of newspaper readers gradually produced a revolution in our government by increasing the number of those who exercised some sort of judgement on public affairs.

In this rather optimistic view, newspapers became tools of a more inclusive democratic system that had a better proximity to its citizens. The correlation goes like this: with mass media comes mass political pressure.

All the great reforms of the period, such as the abolition of slavery and the slave trade, catholic emancipation, [...] were preceded by long periods of agitation of which the Newspaper Press was an indispensable instrument. (Aspinall, 1946).

Several other cases could be mentioned. The agitation that led to the raise of the age of consent from 13 years to 16 years old regarding sexual relationships (the “*Stead Act*”, named after the legendary muckraker journalist W. T. Stead) was led by a series of investigative

articles titled *The Maiden Tribute to the Modern Babylon* written about child prostitution in *The Pall Mall Gazette* (Walkowitz, 1992). The *Gazette* wasn't the only one. *The Jewish Chronicle* for example, alongside with other news outlets, pioneered journalistic practices such as fact-checking and judicial monitoring to report about the abuses of power that affected Eastern Jewish immigrants upon reaching the shores of Britain.

This being said, it is important to note that the emerging mass media had another, darker side. For example, the editor and writer behind the *Modern Babylon* articles, W. T. Stead, was as much as a sensationalist as he was a pioneer of investigative journalism. Stead, as one of the most popular journalist and editor of the Victorian Era (also the first editor ever to employ female reporters), embodied both personalities of the New Journalism. From one side, he advocated sub-theories like "*Government by Journalism*", defining the press as a political actor capable of ruling (Stead, 1886). Historically, his account on the role of the media could be viewed as a predecessor of 20th century theories like *watchdog journalism* and the *Fourth Estate*. In the meantime, he kept on establishing the cheapest kind of tabloid journals (called *titbits*) that had nothing to do with quality journalism.

It is true that agitation through mass media contributed to the acceptance of legislations and policies we now consider to be cornerstones of human rights, but on the other hand, agitation also led to other, less appealing consequences. Following sensationalist covering of cases like the Jack the Ripper-murders (starting from 1888), anti-immigration agitation and anti-Semitic pogroms followed (Gilman, 1991; Walkowitz, 1992). The tools of New Journalism were easily and effectively used for anti-democratic purposes as well as democratic ones. Certain news outlets used the tools that New Journalism implemented to circulate openly racist drawings of the shady, beaky-nosed, bearded, black-coated, aggressive looking Eastern Jew with a sinister look on his face.



1. Figure Sketches of the murderer from the Illustrated Police News, 1888.
Right under the picture of the immigrant Jewish criminal, the infamous Goulston Street
graffito reads:

"The Juwes are not the men that will be blamed for nothing."

The media-led agitation, that Aspinall praises, also contributed to the enactment of legislations such as the *Aliens Act of 1905*, that is widely regarded as anti-Semitic and hostile in today's scientific research (Dummet, 2001). Media served as a magnifying glass over the imperfections of human information processing; providing space to cognitive fallacies like the anti-immigration bias (Wagner et al, 2010). Mass media granted access to unprecedented amounts information to masses of citizens under a very short period of time. Albeit one could argue that the citizens have become more informed than ever before in the history of human societies, on the flipside they have also become more vulnerable to the effects of mis and disinformation.

Skyrocketing media publications and the ability to read are clearly connected. But it is important to distinguish the ability to read from the ability to critically evaluate information. The ability to read is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for one to process information from a critical perspective. Literacy does *not* equal critical reading; the simple ability to comprehend information does not necessarily mean that the person in question can interpret the written text correctly. This observation was evident for the supporters and for the agitators against public education as early as the 19th century. Eyes capable of reading can look at the Bible and can look at “atheistic propaganda” just as easy (Altick, 1957). The question of publicly educating the working classes divided the political landscape of England during the first half of the century.

Supporters of government engagement in education cited Adam Smith’s observation regarding the laboring classes of industrialized societies; he claimed that low class laborers engaged in monotonous work eventually lose their “*mental flexibility*”, therefore becoming easier targets for demagogues (Smith, 1776). On the other hand, lawmakers were afraid that through reading, the working class will gain access to radical ideas that were spread around during the French Revolution. The primary concern was to pacify the working class through education (Altick, 1954).

As it can be seen, not only the scale of information that people had access to has changed, but also the modality in which the information was communicated differed to what populations got used to for millennia. The importance of modality is not a factor that should be downplayed. Humans, generally speaking, possess a cognitive ability that assesses the truthfulness and motivations of the information source, and monitors the contents of the delivered message for ambiguities and counter-intuitive cues. This ability is known as *epistemic vigilance* (Sperber et al, 2010) by cognitive scientists. Even before the existence of the ability was first theorized, researchers suggested some form of “*inherent trust*” in

communicational actions, stating that the sheer existence of common language presupposes a generally truthful use of speech (Davidson, 1984). Experiments were concluded to show that our mental systems by default work with the automatic presumption that the messages being communicated are reliable, and the acceptance of the message already happens *before* the examination could start (Gilbert et al, 1990).

Humans are inherently gullible – essentially this is what experiments claimed. The experimental methods and the radical conclusions stemming from these methods have been questioned since (Richter, 2009), but nonetheless, there is evidence of humans presuming some kind of a *cooperative motivation* behind every communicational act, and this might come with some form of inherent acceptance (Grice, 1969). But even if humans cooperate, goes on the argument, their interests are never exactly the same, and to avoid being misled, an evolutionary tool, a lie detector is needed (Sperber et al, 2010). This lie detector however, is not tuned for the type of communication that mass media offers.

Written information published in newspapers counts as a one-way communicational process including a communicator that the receiver of the message cannot see or know. In terms of human evolution, epistemic vigilance evolved in an environment in which individuals adopted to speak to each other face-to-face in a two-sided, cooperative communicational process where the receiver had the chance to ask questions and speak to the source. Written mass media communication is different by nature, thus poses an entirely new challenge for information monitoring abilities; specifically epistemic vigilance. Readers couldn't assess the truthfulness (or gullibility) of the sources based on nonverbal cues (since the communication was not personal). Various cognitive biases emerged from the sheer fact that the piece of information had been published in a flashy newspaper – that is source credibility bias (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Another bias about the truthfulness of the news source can erect from the simple fact that it was read by many others – that is bandwagon-effect or groupthink

(Janis, 1972). Some biases stand on a completely rational foundation: for example, readers can perceive that someone took effort and money to publish something. The argument is that if the *communicational investment* of the source seems substantial, that leads to a biased assessment about the truthfulness of the source.

Not only 19th century human cognitive structure was unprepared for such information dumping, but the sources and amplifiers actively took part in exploiting these weaknesses. In order to sell their respective papers to the largest audience possible, news outlets and journalists (the amplifiers) often times adopted strategies that belonged to the realm of sensationalism – or *yellow journalism* – in order to boost their sales. Delivering truthful pieces of information was not necessarily the aim of communication, since the readers wanted to be entertained and the publishers wanted to sell. The reality depicted in the newspapers – meaning the happenings that the newspapers revolved around – might not have differed that much, but the *framing* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) of reality did.

2.3. Communicational Changes in the 19th century and in the 21st century: Similarities and Differences

There are a few points to be highlighted and remembered from the previously introduced history of late 19th century mass media and literacy, that will be compared to the age of social media.

- 1.) First is the explosion-like spread of a new mass communicational channel that changes how sources communicate with the receivers (the stimulus);
- 2.) Second is the emergence of the ability to *comprehend* new information coupled with the *availability* of information for every member of society (processing);

- 3.) The last would be the response from societies for the challenges the new communicational channel pose (the reaction).

Certain factors in comparison of cases might overlap but are never completely identical. The similarities and differences are studied through these three stages/dimensions. The model of comparison could be conceptualized as a “stimuli-processing-reaction”-circle (or SR-model). In the framework of this thesis, the challenge that the late 19th century England faced due to the emergence of printed mass media was that the *population gained access to information* whenever they pleased. The challenge of 21st century social media communication on the other hand, is that *information has access to the population* through algorithms, profiling, microtargeting, and favoring an environment that contributes to the creation of opinionated echo-chambers, often without the consent of the receiver.

Before delving into the explosive spread of new communicational channels, it is important to make a significant distinction between what is called the one-step flow of communication and the two-step flow of communication models. In their pioneering study, Lazarsfeld and Katz (1955) conceptualized the mass media that emerged and evolved since the late 19th century as a process that contained social interactions as an inherent part in interpreting messages that was disseminated by news outlets.

First, mass media produces messages that are spread around. Some members of the audience however, are introduced to these messages through a “*water cooler effect*”, in which interactions with friends, peers and family members spread around news and help in interpretation. The one-step flow of communication on the other hand, left the social interactions out of the equation, and targeted audience members one by one, through the “*narrowest channel*” possible (Bennett & Manheim, 2006). Using targeting and profiling skills, the sources substituted the role of social interactions. These targeting skills include

actual personality profiling and geolocation, and assumes a lot more passive information processing method than printed media consumption, that is called “*inattentive participation*”. For journalists to adopt and prevail in this new, personalized news environment, they must transform into “*practicing sociometricians*” (Bennett & Manheim, 2006).

Sudden Popularity of New Channels

To address the first stage of the comparison, that is the explosive spread of new communicational channels, the two cases, namely the spread of literacy and New Journalism during the 19th century, and the spread of social media communication in the 21st century are seen similar in its *rapidity*. 19th century news circulation in England quadrupled in less than 20 years. In a way, the 21st century example is more “explosive”, more global, less bound to the Western world, involving more users in the one-step flow communication. The number of internet users is 4.388 billion, while social media users are around 3.484 billion worldwide, counting on a steady 9% growth on a year-to-year basis (Global Digital Report, 2019), while platforms like Facebook are only been around since 2006. The means and methods of communication and news consumption have changed significantly during this short period of time; there has been a transition from the two-step flow of communication to one-step flow of communication. During the 19th century, there has been a transition from oral storytelling to mass media communication under the course of 20 years. The early mass media later evolved into what researchers call the two-step flow communicational environment. In both eras, entire populations have started consuming and receiving news through different channels, in different modalities, and with different communicational strategies behind – and all this meant completely new challenges to their cognitive system.

Challenges to Cognition

As much as 19th century lawmakers realized that the ability to read is not equal to the ability to read critically, the same observations are made in the age of social media environment. A study concluded by researchers at Stanford University showed that more than 80% of the middle-schoolers aren't capable of reliably distinguishing between an actual news article and an advertisement they find on a news site. Less than 20% has questioned the credibility of a misleading photo and less than 33% of college students were able to identify political lobbying behind Tweets (Wineburg et al, 2016). So it seems that the sheer ability to open and work with mobile and computer applications (*digital literacy*) and being a proficient reader (*literacy*) are not in themselves enough to be able to critically evaluate (*media literacy*) the information that we are being targeted with on modern platforms – so it was the case for 19th century newspaper consumers who were finally able to read and buy information for themselves.

The weapons arsenal for “virus carriers” to deploy has evolved considerably during the age of social media. In the 19th century, yellow journalism used the previously mentioned big headlines, illustrations, biased reporting and evidence-forging as journalistic malpractices. In the age of social media, disinformers have downloadable applications to mimic the looks of reliable news sources, they have photo altering computer programs to deceive viewers, they have video altering computer programs to produce *deepfakes*, and above all, internet access to reach anyone at any time through their cell phones and computers. The challenge that the one-step flow of communication poses to our cognitive system is similar, but also more grievous

than its 19th century two-step flow counterpart – perhaps because of the social isolation that comes with this latest style of mass communication (Bennett & Manheim, 2006).

Managing disinformation

As it was noted before, communicational processes operate with a source, a channel, a message, amplifiers and a receiver. 19th century and 21st century lawmakers were similar to an extent that they tried to handle problems of mass media by tentatively aiming at different elements of the communicational process.

One way of addressing the problems caused by mass media is to educate the receivers. It is also the long-term solution, since the investment put into educational programs necessarily takes generations to show. Educating is initiated by the enactment of elementary and high-school education programs, like the ones in late 19th century England, beginning with the *Education Act of 1870*. In the 21st century, we have digital literacy and media literacy programs, like the *News Literacy Project*, that is a U.S.-based non-profit educational NGO, specializing in teaching children about critical information evaluation techniques and quality journalism.

There are only three countries on the planet – Belgium, the Netherlands, and interestingly, Nigeria – that utilized state-level media literacy campaigns or programs, according to a daily updated map of anti-misinformation measures by Poynter Institute. Education bills don't simply appear, but often times are preceded by agitation and subsequent changes in moral philosophy and in political theory. After the late 19th century, following the footsteps of media pioneers like W.T. Stead, the role of mass media was in dire need of addressing by democratic theory. Quality journalism was introduced to the theoretical structure of how we understand

democracies and created ideals such as watchdog-journalism and the *Fourth Estate* theory that deals with mass media as the fourth branch of power next to judicial, executive and legislative branches (Schultz, 1998). As much as the classic three branches were understood since Montesquieu as being necessarily separate from each other to prevent the formulation of tyrannical rule, the fourth one, mass media and the press had to be introduced to this framework as a separate branch too – thus, the ideals of *independent journalism* and *free press* were born. Independent journalism formulated its own ethics that is supposed to guide journalists while doing their work and provides transparency for the readers about how the news article was published.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are the practices aimed at sources. One, if not the most problematic of all solutions, it frequently operates with censorship, culminating into never-ending debates about freedom of expression. Censoring content by threatening the source with the previously mentioned “*sedition libel*” is a classic 19th century example. The modern counterpart of this practice is banning news sources and personalities from social media sites based on hate-speech and anti-disinformation policies. Seditious libels allowed courts to send the individuals behind publications into prison for spreading specific contents, and there are countries that adopt similar laws against online misinformation nowadays, like in Bangladesh where journalists can be put in jail for propaganda (“President signs Digital Security Bill into law”, 2018), or in Cambodia for spreading misinformation (Lamb, 2018).

Another practice put into use is controlling messages. In the modern era, this is either done by independent or by state-funded fact-checker organizations, that try to fight off the horde of bogus messages one-by-one. The most popular ones are *Snopes.com* (also the earliest of its kind), *Poynter Institute* and *EU vs. Disinfo* (or East Stratcom Task Force), which is the official EU agency fighting against Russian disinformation. Before Snopes was created in 1994 (that is the first year of the Internet Age), news outlets were entrusted in carrying out

their own fact-checking activities – in the early 20th century, *Collier's Weekly* in the U.S. was known for myth-busting and fact-checking. In the U.K., the already mentioned *Jewish Chronicle* was involved (among some others) in inspecting the veracity of public utterances concerning Jewish immigrants.

The following, last chapter will deal with a 19th century case of Jack the Ripper to show how disinforming public representations mutate in a modernized mass media environment, then use these findings to conceptualize 21st century blood libels.

Chapter III.

Case studies: How Similar Moments Constitute to Similar Narratives

3.1. Immigration, violence and Jack the Ripper-case

During the late 19th century, poor Eastern Jewish immigrants have appeared in London's ports. Most of these immigrants aspired to continue their journey towards the “*golden median*” of the United States, leaving the Old Continent and its medieval prejudices behind once and for all, while others were stuck in London. Migration – as it has been since 2015 – was one of the central themes in the 1880s' Europe as well. Albeit the destination and plans differed, the immigrants shared the same reason behind the Exodus: escaping blood accusations, pogroms and mistreatment. The immigrants mostly came from Russia – hence the slang-expression “*Ruffian*” appeared in Cockney accent – and related territories such as Ukraine and Galicia. Not only Britain, but entire Europe witnessed displaced Jewish families travelling through the continent in hope of a better life.

In some cases, conspiracy theories stemmed from immigration, and the travelling Jews met the same hostility they tried to run away from. Hungarian anti-Semitic parties propagated a story that has since become known as the “*Myth of the Galician Jew*.” According to the narrative spread by news outlets, large populations of Galician Jews were ready to flood the country and contaminate the nation's body. Despite the census evidence, the myth persisted for more than two decades, until an anti-immigration act was accepted in 1903 – against non-existent migrants (Konrád, 2018). The case shows some similarities to how the Hungarian

government reacts to migration since 2015 (despite the lack of migrants wanting to reside in Hungary.)

Following the changes in legislation and the pogroms that followed in Russia and in other places of Europe, around 120.000 to 150.000 European Jews settled in Britain between 1881 and 1914; the exact numbers were unknown since the deficiencies in immigrant administration (Winder, 2004). Although the numbers were not substantial (compared to the entire population) the “*new Jews*” quickly became very salient Others. There were several factors contributing to this process. Eastern Jews had a designated place – the dangerous slums of the East End –, they were associated with their own, radical political views – anarchism and socialism –, they had their own language that a few non-immigrants understood – Yiddish – that isolated them from the residing Anglo-Jewish minority (Gainer, 1972).

Soon enough, the salient differences between the residing population and the Eastern Jewish immigrants became the new frontlines of heated political debates, culminating into the codification of the Aliens Act of 1905, that – for the first time in History – forced the British Empire to differentiate between asylum seekers and “*undesirable immigrants*.” In a culture that traditionally viewed itself as tolerant towards immigration, living up to the doctrines of free movement and free trade – in opposition of continental Europe – such a legal step was unprecedented (Bashford & McAdam, 2014). There were a few notable incidents that propelled public opinion and imagination towards framing the Jewish immigrants as cultural and economic threats to their society, and even more, threats to nationhood and national identity. Before the Aliens act was accepted, the *British Brothers League* – a nationalistic paramilitary organization – was formed with the slogan: *England for the English*. The league was an extraparlimentary pressure group that focused on immigration and had ties with the Conservative Party.

Among perceived cultural threats, criminality was an issue, associated closely with the image of the Eastern Jew, most visibly shown in the first mass-publicized crime sensation of media history, the *Jack the Ripper-case*. When Jewish immigrants were blamed for the bloody mutilation of five prostitutes in Whitechapel, the accusations eerily resembling blood libels emerged quickly, and certain news outlets proved to be excellent amplifiers of hysteria. The East End, and more specifically, Whitechapel became symbols of a foreign, invasive body inside the metropole. According to anti-alien campaigners the area was the “*portal to the filth and squalor of the East*” (Brewer, 1888). From the beginning of the 1880’s (the beginning of migration that is) the East End was characteristically pictured as the representation of unemployment, filth, dirt, the place where the outcasts of society gathered (Lemmers, 1998). The Londoners and the middle-class were simultaneously disgusted and intrigued by the nightlife of Whitechapel and the surrounding area, where even police officers didn’t dare to venture alone; hence the name “*Do as You Please Street*” was coined by journalists and city folk (Walkowitz, 1992). As Robert S. Wistrich wrote about the British situation:

The specific configuration of anti-Semitism [...] combined negative stereotypes of poor immigrant Jews with a whole range of ‘Rich Jew’ anti-Semitism, intellectual racism, Social Darwinism and class snobbery, with vulgar conspiracy theories about Jewish plans for world domination (Wistrich, 1992).

As expected, the anti-Jewish and anti-immigration sentiments that were already severe only worsened during the infamous “*Autumn of Terror*” in 1888, when an unknown serial killer claimed at least five victims (mostly prostitutes) in the poorest neighborhood of the East End. The women were killed in a horrid fashion: mutilated, often missing certain organs, that provided additional grounds for speculations. The murders had several Jewish connotations above the fact that they happened in an area that was seen as the locus of Jewish migration. The double murders happened on the 30th of September 1888 have left one of the victims,

Catherine Eddowes, dead directly next to the International Working Men's Educational Club – a notorious gathering place for socialists and anarchists, and the publishing house of two Yiddish-speaking leftist newspapers.

Making scientific approach difficult, the case is heavily loaded with conspiracy theories. The strongly anti-Semitic interpretations are largely forgotten in popular knowledge and rarely mentioned in scholarly work. They are strongly represented however in newspapers of the era. What we know of the Jack the Ripper-case today is basically the same as police officers knew at the time. We know that there was a serial killer at large in London's Whitechapel who killed women in a horrendous fashion, and that he/she never got caught. Over the years many layers of conspiracy theories were superimposed on the original story. In contemporary London however, accusing the immigrant Jewish population with the murders was a central trait of interpretations. According to Gilman (1991), "*a high proportion of 130 men questioned were Jews.*"

The perpetrator himself was not shy to address the question regarding him/her being Jewish. In a letter sent to the Scotland Yard, the Ripper himself wrote: "*So now they say I'm a Yid when will they lern [sic!] Dear old Boss!*" (Feldman, 2007). Another famous example is the graffiti found at Goulston Street, close the murder scene of Eddowes. According to the police sources, the message read: "*The Juwes [sic!] are not the men that will be blamed for nothing.*" Whether the person behind these messages was the actual killer is highly doubted and debated by researchers. The murders and the Autumn of Terror were the big sensations in London at the time, and some journalists tried to spin the story and keep sensations coming by artificially forging letters themselves and then sending those to the police – some of them later confessed these wrongdoings. Not only them, but the surrounding London neighborhood enjoyed occasionally to pose as the Ripper; a popular verse at the time mentioned the Jewish accusations as well:

I'm not a butcher,/ I'm not a Yid,/Nor yet a foreign skipper,/But I'm your own light-hearted friend,/Yours truly, Jack the Ripper. (Caputi, 1987).

More than two dozen newspapers followed the story of the murders and published opinion pieces on immigration and criminality in 1880's London. In this analysis, a popular news outlet, *The Pall Mall Gazette* is in the focus, which was known as a conservative paper, that pioneered investigative techniques and sensationalism alike. Its founder was W.T. Stead.

The discourse analysis picks up the thread on the 1st of September 1888 and uses all articles in the archives from the mentioned news source until the 1st of October. Choosing the 1st of September for the starting point was due to pragmatic reasons: the first “canonic” murder took place at the evening of the 31st of August (meaning the first articles appeared on the 1st of September), then over the course of September, the serial killer claimed three more victims, making this month the peak of Jack the Ripper's media career. The month ends with the killing of Catherine Eddowes, the fourth victim from the Canonic Five (the five victims that are believed to be the victims of the same perpetrator).

Journalists at the time utilized a specific type of language and metaphors to frame the story as a Jewish blood libel. The research established categories for the discourse analysis based on Fein's dimensions of the Jewish stereotype, that differentiates between older, medieval and modern contents (Fein, 1987). Her original imagery consisted of five main images of Jews:

- 1.) The Judas-image (betrayal, manipulator)
- 2.) Shylock-image (financial exploiter, capitalist)
- 3.) Red Jew-image (revolutionary, sceptic, iconoclast)
- 4.) Demonologic-image (non-human murderer)
- 5.) The lecherous-Jew (sexual aggressor).

Based on these images or frames, the methodology tailored four categories of othering narrative for analysis:

- 1.) traditional themes of medieval blood accusations (in association with the Demonologic image and the Judas-image)
- 2.) cultural othering; (language, appearance, etc.)
- 3.) political othering; (Shylock and Red Jew image)
- 4.) sexual/mental othering (The lecherous Jew image).

Findings

Blood accusation: The analysis identified 57 cases in 28 articles that could be interpreted as direct references to blood accusations. The mentions of “*blood*” and more specifically, the *amount* of blood was in the focus. It is noticeable from the first glance that most of the analyzed news articles from *Pall Mall Gazette* were disturbingly meticulous on specifying how much blood was left in the victims and how the murderer mutilated them. Additional motifs from the traditional narrative familiar from other 19th century cases – most notably Smith’s *Butcher’s Tale* (2002) – were also categorized, such as:

- a.) notions of blood or the lack of blood, throats cut;
- b.) otherworldly, magical elements, such as “*fiend*” and “*ghoul*”;
- c.) the notion that the murderer “*cannot be heard*” by anyone, moves as a ghost;
- d.) mentioning of butchers and slaughterers, the infamous notion of “*anatomical knowledge*”;
- e.) any other motif that was somehow seen as a reference to blood accusations (mentioning of Jewish holidays, for example).

As Smith points out in his work, a returning theme of the blood accusations was the notion that the victims of the Jews were “dry” as all of their blood was used for ritual purposes (Smith, 2002). Another popular notion, “*trails of blood*”, was frequently mentioned in the articles, suggesting that the victims were murdered *elsewhere* and were put to the crime scene later. The symbol of blood, ghouls and demons in association with Jews activated a specific frame, that we categorize as blood libels.

An interesting reoccurring pattern in the *Gazette* articles, that a day or two after each murder, previously hidden trails of blood were discovered by one of the residents close to the murder scene. As Johnson put it: “*The body might be discovered in a sewer drainage ditch, perhaps in a wood*” (Johnson, 2012). Although police tried to deny the theory of the “*primary crime scene*” multiple times, the motif kept returning after each murder. Other connotations of the secondary crime scene could be that the readers understood the murders as part of a larger conspiracy that organized moving the victims and setting up false clues for the investigators – so with the use of this narrative, the entire Jewish minority became suspicious.

The figure of the kosher butcher was the main antagonist in many cases of the blood libel, as they were the ones entrusted with the murder. The precision of the cuts was perceived as a giveaway sign. As the *Jewish Chronicle* observed it on October the 12th, 1888:

There are not wanting signs of a deliberate attempt to connect the Jews with the Whitechapel murders. A butcher writes to a contemporary to suggest that the character of the incisions is such that they were made by a butcher, and thence he jumps to the conclusion that it was a Jewish butcher, a trade rival exclusively employed by Jews. (Notes of the Week, 1888.)

It seems that this butcher-specific feature of 19th century blood libels were very much present in the Jack the Ripper-case too. On October the 2nd, 1888, the Pall Mall Gazette published an article titled “*An Epitome of Suggestions of the Public.*” It was essentially a list of the most

popular ideas on capturing the killer, proposed through reader's letters. One of the proposals read:

PROFESSIONAL SLAUGHTERERS - Some suggest that a census of the men employed in slaughter-houses should be taken. (An Epitome of the Suggestions, 1888).

Cultural othering: 57 occasions of cultural othering in 28 articles were identified. Cultural othering refers to notions in the narrative that the perpetrator(s) could not have come from an English background, because no one with English heritage would have been capable of carrying out such unspeakable acts of horror. Logically, the murderer must have come from a different culture, probably speaking different language altogether, or speaking "*English with a foreign accent*" as it was echoed several times by the *Gazette*. Applying the "foreign speaking stranger"-frame essentially meant pointing at the Jewish immigrants who arrived in great numbers at the time. Mentions of national othering, most notably the use of the expression "*Ruffian*" was also prevalent, as a metonymy for Jewish immigrants.

- a.) notions of the perpetrator being a stranger ("*Ruffian*", Jew);
- b.) Notions of the perpetrator coming from a different "race" (social-Darwinist element);
- c.) Picturing the murderer as a short, dark, bearded Eastern-man;
- d.) Notions of savages, barbarians, North-American Indians.

Activating popular stereotypes about the Native People (d.) is another a classic frame. Ostling (2017) called these type of comparisons "*symbolic equivalences*", since early-modern Jews were often accompanied by and compared to the Native people of the New World, whom were portrayed as infanticidal and cannibalistic. The sample of articles contained the same

number of cultural otherings and references to blood libels, and the timing of their appearance was similar.

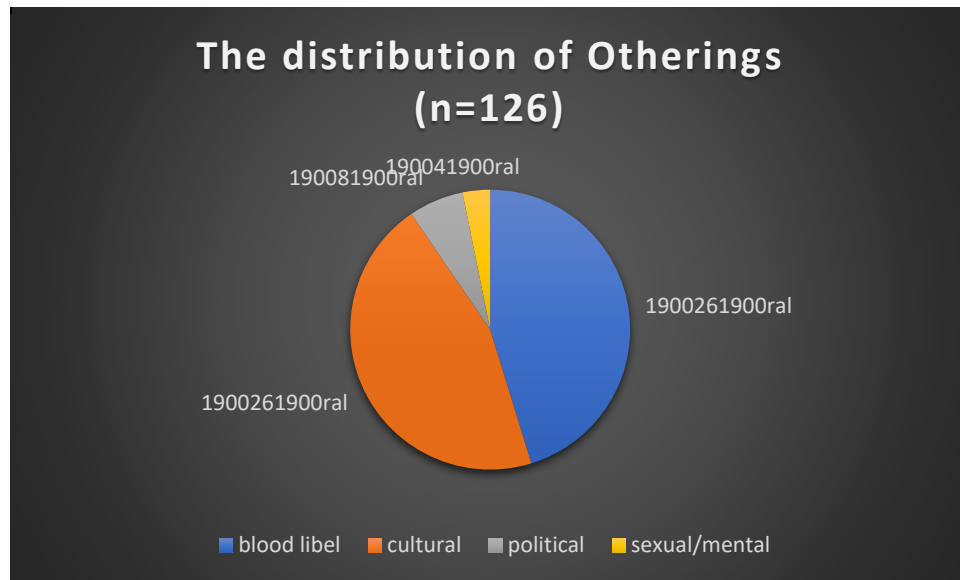
Political othering: 8 occasions of political othering in 28 articles were identified. Every mention of the perpetrator's possible social status and economic background fell into the category of political othering.

- a.) Direct reference to political views (socialists, etc.);
- b.) Notions referring to the socioeconomic status of the perpetrator ("*looked like a mechanic*");

Sexual or mental othering: 4 cases of sexual or mental othering were identified. This category referred to all the cases in which

- a.) the perpetrator was portrayed as a "*sexual maniac*",
- b.) the perpetrator was described as a "*lunatic*".

The narrative surrounding this form of othering commonly appeared in the company of pseudo-scientific, "psychological" explanations thoroughly elaborated in opinion pieces with obvious associations to Fein's *lecherous Jew*-image. The Jew himself was perceived as sexually different, not only in morals (manifested in the fact that the perpetrator attacked prostitutes) but also physically distorted; the most common motif of sexual difference was the alteration of the body via circumcision (Gilman, 1991).



2. Figure The distribution of otherings in the sample

Examples of mutated images

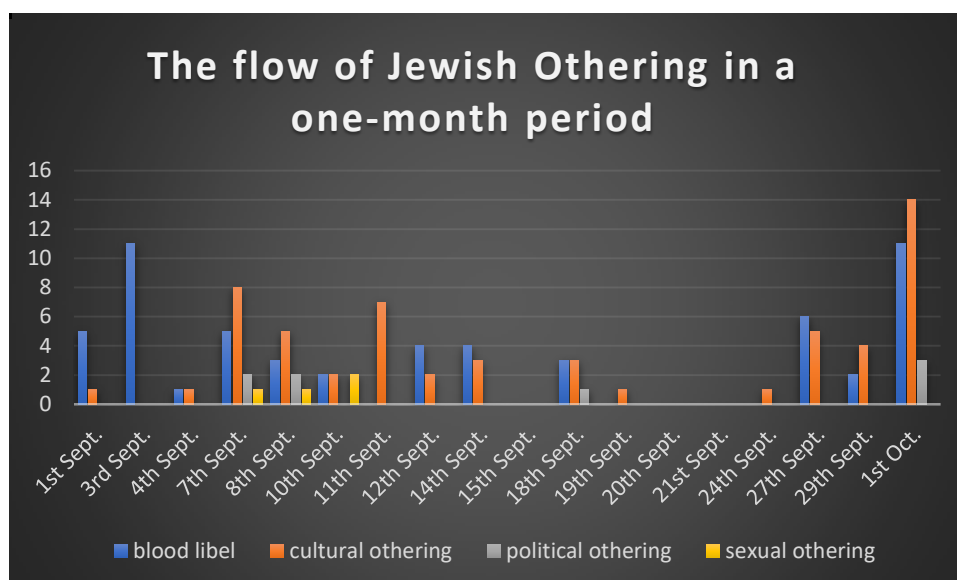
In the frameworks of Cultural Attraction Theory, this case study is excellent to show how the public representations that seem so clear cut in Fein’s imagery started mutating and transforming together to adopt to the contemporary communicational environment fueled by newly found literacy and the emerging newspaper press. A narrative that became quite popular at the time depicted the Jewish perpetrator as a *de facto* organ trafficker. The new public representation did not appear in a news article, but in a statement and an opinion article delivered by the official coroner of the investigation, Wynne E. Baxter. According to his conspiracy theory, Jack the Ripper was as a stereotypical Eastern Jewish worker with a short build, boasting a “*shabby genteel appearance*”, who sold the organs of the murdered women in exchange of 20 English pounds to an American businessman, who gathered the organs for American Universities (picturing immigrant Jews as friends of the Americans had its own connotations). Baxter cited unnamed officials working in medical museums to back up his accusation. “[It was] *clear that there is a market for the missing organ*”, Baxter wrote

(“Remarkable Statement by the Coroner”, 1888). His new representation was quickly taken over by other news outlets despite police denial and was spread overnight like an epidemic.

The second narrative depicts the Jew as a stranger with possibly supernatural powers. In between murders, when the police couldn’t dig up any new information and there was no new victim, journalists set out to the East End to interview the residents of Whitechapel in hope of acquiring sensational details. This practice, alongside with opinion articles and publicists, greatly constituted to the mutation of public representations. On September the 8th, 1888, the day of Annie Chapman’s murder, a strange description of a man was published in the *Gazette*. Every interviewee seemed to know him and at the same time, no one really knew who he was. The article titled “*The Horrors of the East End*” gave a description that merged demonical, political and sexual representations. “*His name nobody knows, but all are united in the belief that he is a Jew or of Jewish parentage, his face being of a marked Hebrew type. [...] in moving about he never makes any noise. [...] they never see him or know of his presence until he is close by them*” (“The Horrors of the East End,” 1888). The person is short built, bearded, “*sinister*”, and an unemployed, anarchist criminal. “*Slipper-maker by trade, but does not work [...] business is blackmailing*” (“The Horrors of the East End”, 1888).

Conclusions

Based on the data acquired, a chronological chart representing how different narrative frames appeared in relation of the murders was created, with the purpose to illustrate how the evolution of the narrative took place in the sensationalist 19th century mass media environment.



3. Figure The four murders in question took place on the 31st of August (meaning the first news about it appeared on the 1st of September), then the second on the 8th of September, finally the third and fourth on the 30th September, respectively.

One of the most important findings of the data visualization was that representations of classic blood libel and cultural othering are quickest to emerge after each murder, and (in varying degree) stay present during the lifetime of the narrative. Inserting this finding into the framework of Cultural Attraction Theory, those representations are most prevalent that are closest to the *cultural attractor* (the central motif of an out-group brutally murdering in-group members). The representations do *not* mutate all the time (as it happens in oral communication), since most written accounts gravitate around the same theme.

The mutation of the story seems to be fueled by the appearance of more symbolic, abstract representations – in this case, political and sexual othering. The actors responsible for transforming the narrative operate with complex rhetorical devices such as allegories, comparisons, metaphors and pseudo-scientific expressions. In some occasions – like in the “*Organ Trafficker*”-theory – the mutation is triggered by a single actor (a game master), with the use of opinion articles and guest writings.

To a certain extent it can also be seen, that the transformation of public representations is done *in between* murders, and not *right after* each murder. The explanation behind this could be that a mutation for a narrative in a sensationalist communicational environment is needed when nothing happens. In vain of a new murder story, additional mutations are introduced to keep the narrative alive and to entertain readers. In between murders, officers and professionals publish their own take on the story, and reporters began forging evidence to produce popular disinformation.

3.2. Immigration, violence and blood libels since 2015

In 2015, there was an influx of refugee-seekers coming to Europe mostly from Middle-Eastern countries such as Syria and Afghanistan. According to UNHCR data, there were over 1 million immigrants arriving during the year 2015 (UNHCR Global Trends, 2015). 50% of them were men, while 25% children. The demographics of refugee-seekers were mixed, 50% of them were fleeing from Syria, the remaining from other conflict zones such as Afghanistan (21%), Iraq (9%) and Somalia (2%). These refugees are portrayed as culturally and physically different, posing a discriminate security, cultural and economic threat. The “*Muslim others*” are pictured as possessing their own spaces – refugee camps and specific neighborhoods, often described as “*no-go-zones*” by far-right political actors (Kaszeta, 2018; Tiflati, 2018). They have their own language(s) – Arabic and variants –, their own religion that is also framed as a political ideology: Islam. In political propaganda, Muslim refugee seekers are pictured as physically different, as a wave of brown, young males ready to flood Christian Europe – see for example, UKIP’s anti-immigrant billboard-design that parallels pre-WWII anti-Semitic propaganda (Stewart & Mason, 2016).

The first case study about the Jack the Ripper-case worked with anti-Semitic imagery and narratives, and when a seemingly similar image is being projected on Muslims, it is important to briefly address the question whether Muslims are somehow becoming the new Jews for European societies?

There have been a lot of debates in recent years about the interchangeability of images used by anti-Semitism and Islamophobia (see Bunzl, 2007). Particularly since the 2015 refugee-crisis, political scientists have pointed out how previously anti-Semitic parties were capable of re-actualizing themselves by becoming strongly anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant. Not only that, but new parties and platforms have also been established on the premise of protecting Christian Europe. Political parties and narratives that have been filling the role of a pariah in European societies are now emerging into the mainstream, largely due to the fact that anti-Muslim sentiments are not as heavily tabooed in public speech as anti-Semitic ones. Research about this has already started before the 2015 crisis (Zick et al, 2011), and stayed in the forefront of interest for researchers in the field of prejudice and social consensus ever since. A recent study using the data of the European Values Survey has shown how social distance has grown towards Muslim residents in European countries (Sagvari & Messing, 2018).

Islamophobia in its literal sense – as it can be deducted from term itself – is an attitude with a cognitive element that is religious justification. In this regard, it holds similarities not with modern anti-Semitism, but with pre-19th century Jew hatred (Berger, 1986) or Judeophobia (Lewis, 2004), that discriminated Jews on the grounds of belonging to a group of different faith, not on the grounds of different race. In its most basic understanding, Islamophobia pushes the narrative that the out-group behaves the way they behave because they have been irreversibly indoctrinated by a “satanic” religion, and therefore should not be trusted (or treated as humans). Far-right narratives traditionally picture Islam as a “religion of intolerance”, or as a “religion of violence”. Under the expression “violence” the

interpretational spectrum is quite wide: Muslim people are associated with rape, kidnap, murder and general mistreatment of women (which, to say the least, is ironic from the notoriously misogynistic far-right) and are also associated with jihad and terrorist attacks. The anti-Muslim argument usually operates with the Quran interpretations of radical Islamist organizations, and utilizes certain “evidence” (for example the infamous writing of Sayyid Qutb, titled *Milestones*) to prove their point and to insert the stereotype into a conspiratory framework: Muslims want to destroy everyone who does not share their faith, or want to enforce their own religion on others. Aggression – continues the argument – is encoded in their sacred texts overseeing their everyday activities.

The attitudes concerning Jewry have traditionally been associated with religious differences as well: them being iconoclasts, murderers of Christ, killers of children (Trachtenberg, 1983). Jews have also been pictured as violent – think of the blood libel case, or in more contemporary times, the image of Israelis as senseless killers of Palestinian children. Many of the conclusions used to justify these legendary wrongdoings were drawn from the misinterpretations of Talmudic texts – hence the stereotypical image of the “*Talmudic Jew*” (Oisteanu, 2005). When pictured this way, Jews are nothing more than evil acolytes of their own religious views. As the attitude develops, Jews are being hated *not* for being specific individuals, but for belonging to a specific group inside society – they are being targeted for their “groupness”. As Klug puts it, we can see a “[...] *frozen image projected onto the screen of a living person; the fact that the image might on occasion fit the reality does not affect its status as an image*” (Klug, 2014).

As we could see, the motif of religious differences supported by cherry-picked pseudo-scientific “evidence” is a common trait of both Islamophobia and classical Judeophobia. In a way, both Jews and Muslims are pictured as “*folk devils*”; demonic actors that resonate rather well with deeply embedded (evolutionary) fears (Werbner, 2013). The social imagery of

Muslims and Jews share other similarities as the narrative slides more and more into a conspiracy theory. There is the notion of an “*invasion*” and a particularly framed “*cultural threat*”. In the previously mentioned study done by Sagvari and Messing, the authors point out that the emotional potential derived from cultural threat topples all other types of fear-inciting messages that far-right and anti-immigration parties can utilize during their campaigns.

It is important to note however, that these comparisons are in focus of heated debates, mostly because of the fact that Jews have never committed ritual murder while Islam terrorism does exist – when we talk about similarities, we talk about similarities of imagined structures and more closely, the previously mentioned “frozen images” that are being projected onto an entire population.

The implications of these similarities can be quite slippery. If one says for example, that the function of Islamophobia is identical to anti-Semitism, they seem to make a claim that Muslims might be targeted the same way as Jews were before/during the Holocaust. Thus – the objection goes – claims of functional similarity point towards historical relativism. Not being careful enough with this topic has seen the fall and public humiliation of numerous politicians and journalists who dared to venture to these perilous waters (i.e. the case of Shahid Malik, British MP of the House of Commons). This thesis deals with constructed images and the evolution of these images, as well as the perceived similarities in their formation. The relation these images have to reality is another matter of categorization – see Langmuir’s (1990) differentiation between chimeric, xenophobic and realistic assertions about out-groups.

Following the comparative logic, similar moments should contribute to the formation of similar narratives. Certain far-right myths resemble Jewish world-conspiracy theories, like the plot to introduce sharia (Islamic law) in every country; or the Eurabia-theory in which Muslims aspire for world domination that shares common motifs with the Protocols of the Elders of Zion (Carr, 2011). In that regard, Islamophobia does share the notorious world domination dimension with anti-Semitism to some extent.

All in all, the refugee crisis should be a perfect moment for blood libel-type accusations to resurface, not only from the perspective of Cultural Attraction Theory, but from the perspectives of *exclusionary riots* (Bergmann, 2002) and *moral panic* (Cohen, 1980) as well. There are serious ecological shifts, like the sudden appearance of an outgroup, and the economic, security and cultural threat this poses on social dominance. Meanwhile, a social media coverage is present that can, from one hand, provide up-to-date, live information about happenings while also possess the potential to disinform on a scale never seen before. Practically free, bogus information is available for large populations – the share of individuals who used online social networks on a daily basis was 40%, while Facebook penetration reached more than 80% inside European population (Statista, 2017).

The widespread social media information sharing has its own, lurking dangers, like actors who are willing to disinform for various political and economic reasons: anti-immigration parties, the Russian Federation and “*fake news factories*”, to name a few. To contribute to the perfect storm of disinformation, specific ecological and acquired psychological factors were missing that could have made populations more resistant against disinformation: the lack of

legislative control over social media (ecological factor) and the underdeveloped-ness of media and digital literacy in Europe (psychological factors).

To further emphasize parallels between the 19th century case and the contemporary refugee-crisis, similar behaviors manifested in wake of the turmoil. Heated debates about legislations began; while in England, agitation against immigration contributed to the acceptance of the *Aliens Act of 1905*, in the EU debates about the *Dublin Convention* emerged, and the crisis propelled towards the partial suspension of the regulation (Pouilly, 2017). The political climate favors the establishment of certain far-right and paramilitary organizations. As it was mentioned, agitation against Jewish immigration gave birth to a proto-fascist organization called *The British Brother's League* in 1901 (Johnson, 2014). Similarly, organizations were formed in England against Muslims and Muslim immigration, like the *English Defense League* or the British chapter of the German Islamophobic organization *PEGIDA*, that are both anti-Islam, operating with the same kind of mass rallies what the *BLL* utilized back in the day.

Blood libels and picturing refugees as violent perpetrators committing crimes against the most innocent members of the in-group is an essential part of agitation against immigration – as it was in the 19th century. Violent refugees are accused with kidnapping and raping – occasionally murdering – innocent and young Christian girls, thus the name “*rapefugee*” was invented and used widely in far-right publications. Naturally, as it happened with the Jack the Ripper-case where there were actual murders, some contemporary accusations also have a kernel of truth in them. There were offenses of this nature committed by refugees (i.e. the murder of *Maria L.* in Freiburg), but the number of fake accusations is far higher than the

number of actual incidents, according to a fact-check project concluded by Der Spiegel in Germany (“Is There Truth To Refugee Rape Reports?”, 2018).

One way of spreading bogus information about immigrant violence is to fake statistics about them; a popular webpage, *rapefugees.net* is pioneering this method alongside fellow Islamophobic think tank Gatestone Institute (Kern, 2017). To combat the spread of fake accusations and to give a more precise picture on the situation, fact-checkers in Germany and in the European Union began addressing this type of disinformation. Teaming up with a fellow developer, Karolin Schwartz established *hoaxmap.org* as an answer to bogus information website *rapefugees.com*. *"The stories seemed to be [orchestrated] by far-right parties and organisations and I wanted to try to find some way to help organise this - maybe find patterns and give people a tool to look up these stories [when] they were being confronted with new ones."* (Kermeliotis, 2016). The site's database contains almost 500 fake murder, assault and rape accusation that are visualized on a map – around as much as *rapefugees.com* operates with. The site tries to combat disinformation with the use of official sources, like police statements. There are more than three dozen disinformation cases that the *EU vs. Disinfo* fact-checker team debunked personally, and some of these disinforming articles used the map of *rapefugees.com* as a reference. One of their most infamous cases was the Lisa-kidnapping, that operated with the same cultural attractor of a young woman being kidnapped and raped by an outgroup. It turned out to be entirely faked and was probably a way for the Russian Federation to meddle with EU politics, and to stir discontent among German residents with a Russian heritage (Janda, 2016). The battle over the realities of immigrant criminality is fought between fact-checkers and (mostly) far-right actors willing to disinform.

During the 19th century, the fight against mis and disinformation meant somewhat the same challenges for journalists and news outlets. The newly emerging quality journalism – the early

precursors of investigative journalism and watchdog reporting – wrestled with dreadful but harsh journalistic malpractices that some news outlets adopted to come out on top in the news competition. Screaming headlines, prejudiced drawings and emotional publicists undermined impartial reporting. As it was shown in the first case study, during the so-called “*Autumn of Terror*”, when a serial killer claimed at least five victims in the immigrant neighborhood of London’s East End, news outlets and public figures were quick to identify Jewish immigrants as the culprits behind the killings. Certain news outlets began drawing parallels between continental blood libel cases and the Ripper-killings.

The Jewish Chronicle decided to debunk these accusations one-by-one, in a series of articles dedicated to each case. Their experiences were eerily similar to the dilemmas that modern fact-checkers are facing in the digital age. *The Star* – the flagship of cheap, sensationalist journalism – published a series of articles comparing the Ripper-killings to an infamous blood libel case in Galicia that was popularized as “*The Ritter-case*”. In the core of the story, as in the Ripper-case, was an actual crime: a Christian girl was murdered in a Galician town, and gentiles suspected a Jew, Moses Ritter, behind her death. This is how *The Chronicle* addressed the journalistic practices and the message of *The Star*:

The correspondent [of The Star newspaper that published the original article comparing the Ritter-case to the Ripper-murders] goes on to commit still grosser errors. Evidence, he said, was given, and passages quoted from the Talmud to show that a belief existed among ignorant Jews that an Israelite who had been intimate with a Christian woman might make atonement by slaying and mutilating her (“Notes of the Week”, 1888).

In this excerpt from an article, *The Chronicle* attempted to obstruct a scientific-literary claim, namely the dogmatic reading of Talmudic texts. The argument introducing misinterpreted or misrepresented religious doctrines as part of anti-Jewish agitation is one of the oldest tricks that ethnic entrepreneurs utilized – hence the prevalence of the “*Talmudic Jew*” imagery in

far-right propaganda (Trachtenberg, 1983). The article is also one of the earliest attempts of journalists checking each other's work and calling out other news sources for using prejudiced sources. *The Chronicle* kept on reporting about the Ritter-case, meticulously refuting every bits of disinformation about the case. As *hoaxmap.org* does, journalists of the *Chronicle* reached out to official sources, including a certain Dr. Bloch, a member of the Austrian Reichsrat, who “*has made the superstitions of that province [Galicia] his special study*” (“The Ritter Case”, 1888). Two weeks later, on the 26th of October, 1888, *The Chronicle* once again wrote about the ending of the case, that saw the Ritters being acquitted from prison “*on the merits of the case, and not because the only witness against them died in prison*” (“The Ritter Trial”, 1888).

Most importantly, *The Chronicle* closed this final article by stating that “*we cannot allow this subject to be discussed any further in our columns*” (“The Ritter Trial”, 1888). By that time, the editors might have realized that they have probably paid more than enough attention to a conspiracy theory. Any further writings would only have given more grounds to the gentiles believing that “the Jews” were protesting against this comparison because there was some truth to it. As early as 1888, journalists had to learn the bitter lesson about the time-problem that exists between the creation of disinformation and fact-checking. Uncovering the truth and presenting it to the readers takes a lot more time and effort than coming up with fake accusations. The broader the lie, the harder it is to be debunked. Furthermore, *The Jewish Chronicle* was not in an ideal situation to defend foreign Jews from accusations like the blood libel, simply because they were a Jewish newspaper; the publication was not viewed as a credible source for anyone who believed in the conspiracies regarding Jewry of Jewish faith. In this regard, the contemporary *EU vs. Disinfo* faces the same problem: it is not seen as a credible source for anyone who shares far-right, anti-immigrant or Eurosceptic beliefs, precisely because this fact-checker organization is an agency that belongs to the EU.

The lifespan of disinformation in the media is another problem that both 19th century and 21st century fact-checkers had to address. A prime example of what is called “*continued influence effect*” by social psychologists Johnson and Seifert (1994), can be seen in an article from 1910. More than two decades after the Ripper-murders, the late head of the Criminal Investigation Unit, Sir Robert Anderson accused the Jews of sheltering Jack the Ripper, precisely because he was a Jew himself. In the original article published in the newspaper *Crime and Criminals*, Sir Roberts speculated that the Scotland Yard was unable to capture the “*low class Jew*” because “*people of that class [Jews] in the East End will not give up one of their number to Gentile justice*” (“Police ‘Theory’ Again”, 1910). As it happens so often in modern times with respectable news outlets, the fact-checking and myth-busting activity can backfire among those people who were most predisposed to accuse the Jewry with being the perpetrator(s). The afterlife of the Lisa-case appears to be similar in this regard, since news outlets had to address the question again years after it was clearly debunked and regarded as false by basically all major news outlet in Europe. A bogus news article claiming that there are “*doubts that the Lisa-case was fake*” appeared in Germany in 2018 (EU vs. Disinfo, 2018).

As *The Jewish Chronicle* (and many other, continental Jewish news outlets) found out through experience, there is a fragile, ambiguous balance between underreporting a piece of disinformation and overreporting it. Needless to say, the fight against disinformation and conspiracy theories was as challenging for them as it is for journalists today.



4. Figure Unknown artist: *Ritual murder*. Around 1882-1887.

This oil painting depicting a ritual murder is dated around the end of the 19th century, and it is believed to be a representation of the Tiszaeszlár ritual murder accusation. Initially, experts believed that the controversial painting was the work of famous Hungarian plen-air painter Mihaly Munkacsy (Foldes, 2013). Nevertheless, the identity of the artist behind the painting is still debated.

Centre of the composition is the illuminated figure of a naked, blonde, innocent Christian woman, whose body is positioned exactly how Jesus Christ has canonically been painted after the deposition from the crucifix. She is surrounded by dark faced, sinister looking foreign Jews, who seem to be feeding off her body like leeches. In a sense, the painting is a grotesque inverse of the Christian *Pieta*-scene. Some perpetrators stare at intimate parts of the girl's

body, indicating sexual desires. The figure to the right, holding up a golden bowl, wears the striped Jewish *tallit*-scarf, probably as a reference to the classical religious motifs of blood libels. At the middle of painting shady figure can be seen wearing a huge, exotic looking furry hat, or *shtreimel*, traditionally worn by Hasidic Jews. The painting can be interpreted as an allegory of how emancipated, but superstitious Jews murder Christian culture across Europe.

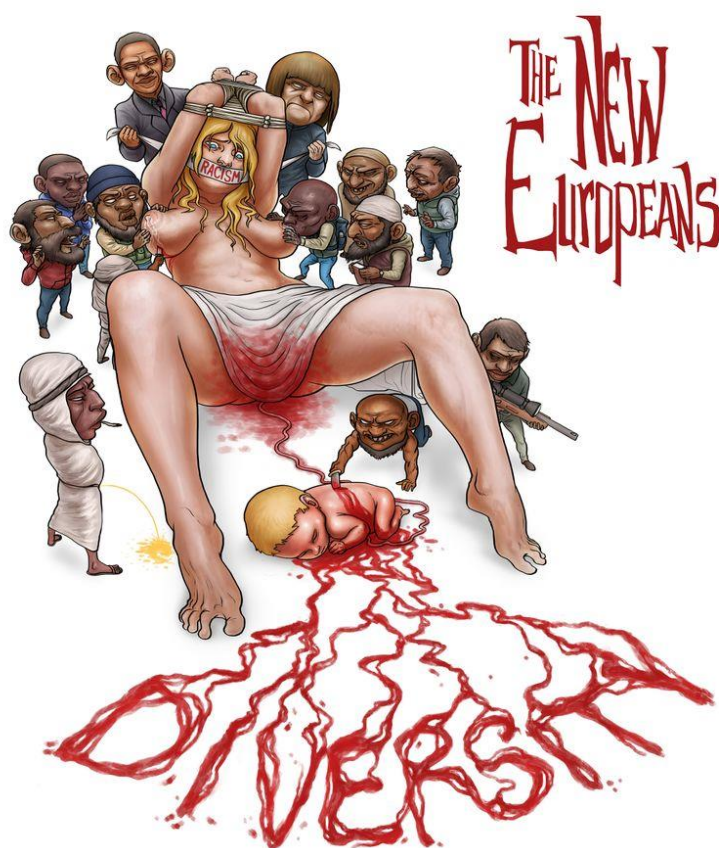
Below a contemporary caricature from far-right British media titled “*Multiculturalism*”, that quickly gained notoriety and have been resurfacing on far-right forums, media publications and in the “researches” of right-leaning think tanks regularly.



5. Figure Unknown artist: English anti-immigration cartoon. 2015.

This English cartoon utilizes the imagery of old blood libels with having a young Christian woman violated by a group of brown skinned, aggressive foreign characters. One of them even points at the Quran to symbolize religious differences, while another prepares to burn the girl with gasoline. At the right side of the picture, official incompetence is depicted by a policeman turning his back on the action happening behind him, not willing to protect the citizens. Police incompetence and institutional distrust were popular themes of almost all the 19th century blood accusations; the Jack the Ripper-case for example, saw the rise and fall of four police inspectors.

Another contemporary illustration that could be compared to 19th century images appeared around 2015 as well, and is relying heavily on blood symbolism, abortion and treachery.



6. Figure Unknown artist: *The New Europeans*. First appearance around 2015.

The young, blonde naked Christian girl is again in the middle of the composition, surrounded by the familiar brown-skinned, sinister figures, two treacherous politicians: Barack Obama and Angela Merkel (it is worth noticing how the cartoonist gave large ears and a small-head to the then-American President, to make his appearance more ape-like). The Christian girl has just given birth to a blonde, white (Aryan) child, who is instantly being stabbed by a smiling immigrant – a direct reference to blood accusations, and perhaps, a symbol of immigration “aborting” the Christian population. The blood flowing out from her womb turns into a slogan that is understood to be the ideological “umbrella” over the rape of Europe: diversity. Instead of feeding her newborn baby, the Christian girl, who in this context could be interpreted as a metaphor for Europe, is forced to give her milk – her vitality as such – to greedy looking foreigners, while being silenced with a piece of cloth that has the word “*Racism*” written on it. In the far-right understanding, political correctness suffocates the possibility of talking about such issues as “*ethnic homogeneity*”, or “*defending the nation*”. It is no coincidence, that all the way from late 19th century, far-right news outlets lovingly picked the expressions “*Free Speech*” and “*Independence*” as their name (i.e. Eduard Drumont’s anti-Semitic daily *La Libre Parole*).

Summary

This thesis aimed to interpret the current era of disinformation using a 19th century case study to highlight similarities, and to prove that current challenges indeed had a historical predecessor that brings us closer to understand the rapid changes of our times, while also trying to answer the question why humans act similarly in different historical moments due to their cognitive features. The thesis also introduced the epidemiologic perspective of Cultural

Attraction Theory to the study of 19th century blood libels, and theorized the evolutionary process behind this peculiar narrative. In order to widen research, future studies might bring in similar narratives from different cultures to make the theory more robust.

CAT might be a good framework to study other, virulent cases of disinformation as well. Researchers have begun conceptualizing the ecological features of mass media communication and its implications on human psyche – but they fundamentally tied their studies to 21st century cases, making their findings somewhat ahistorical. In future research, the topic of ecological factors could be widened with the rise of populism, in association with disinformation and the changes of source credibility – the topic of populism itself was too wide to introduce here. CAT provides an excellent logical structure to include acquired psychological factors that societies build while educating their citizens. Surpassing of what was originally expected, the historical comparison with 19th century cases have had some implications along the lines of solutions, with highlighting what methods and strategies were tried in the past to manage disinformation.

Closing Remarks

It can be an uncomfortable experience to witness the rebirth of certain historical narratives. After the bloodbath of the 20th century, it would be satisfactory to explore how European societies have learned their lessons about the power of words and frames and write a thesis about the “*death of a myth*” instead of writing about similarities, resurgence and possible outcomes.

Unfortunately, thanks to the interplay between permanent and acquired psychological factors and the quickly changing ecological factors that this thesis dealt with, this is not the case. Repetitions in history might give us a chance to think about historical time itself – physicist Carlo Rovelli famously compared time to a deck of continuously shuffled cards in which we sometimes identify reoccurring patterns that we perceive as the flow of time (Rovelli, 2017). With the stubborn reappearance of certain narrative patterns, one cannot help to think that humans – perhaps due to their slowly changing cognitive features and limited lifespan – are playing with a lot smaller deck of cards (or historical possibilities) that we would like to imagine.

Based on the comparison made between 19th century and 21st century cases, disinformation is not solvable; it is only manageable. Societies, although very slowly, over the course of decades, did get better in managing the challenges of disinformation after the emergence of mass media. Political ideologies have changed, that brought along legislative changes and education, while mass media also worked out a set of norms that we call journalistic ethics. Ethical journalism became a trademark of quality, that gained some trust from the audience.

Compared to this process, 21st century societies have only begun their fight with contemporary disinformation and disinformers. The role of social media as a communicational channel in modern democracies is a widely debated question that requires quick and smart answers. Legislations concerning the issue are scarce and tentative, educational programs are not widespread, and social media firms are undecided concerning their ethical stance. In order to manage disinformation – and to ensure the survival of democratic mechanisms – innovation is needed in the dimensions of law, political philosophy and ethics. Strategies and new tools can only be used safely once the theoretical foundations are solid.

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