

Skepticism Beats Snopes as an Antidote to Fake News

These days what's called 'fact checking' is no more than a comprehensive gotcha effort.

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Sophisticated netizens swear by the myth-busting of Snopes, a website that has debunked many an urban legend. But Snopes—or any other enterprise established only to check facts—can't stop the epidemic of fake news allegedly pervading social and traditional media.

When customer reviews of sellers first appeared on [eBay](#), scholars quickly lauded—and backed with rigorous, fact-based [research](#)—the benefits of independent evaluation. But it didn't take long for scammers to produce fake reviews. Sellers learned to pay not-so-independent reviewers to post glowing evaluations of their products and viciously bad-mouth the competition.

E-commerce sites fought back: Amazon ranks reviewers and labels feedback provided by “verified buyers.” But that simply leads to an arms race in competitive fakery. Sellers offer high-rated reviewers free goods or pay reviewers to make “verified” purchases. Dubious evaluations have also now shed their grammatical hilarity, although some tipoffs continue to amuse aficionados of the genre. Starting a review with “I am a student” is one telltale.

Some kinds of reviews are harder to fake. Real users who post reviews of Airbnb accommodations are easily identified—although even here, guests have an incentive to puff up the ratings of their hosts, because the hosts also rate their guests.

Still, it's questionable whether even real customers provide more-trustworthy certifications of quality than producers or merchants do. Yes, sellers want to persuade you to buy, but those with hard-won reputations also have an incentive to make claims they can more or less justify.

Similarly with news. When oligopolistic producers ruled, they provided reliability to the extent their readers wanted it. At one end supermarket tabloids published stories and grainy pictures of extraterrestrial landings and improbable celebrity shenanigans. At the other end were publications like the *New Yorker* and—surprisingly to me—*Inc.* magazine. They catered to different subscribers, ranging from literary lefties to conservative small-business owners. What they covered (and how) naturally reflected the interest of their readers. In my experience, both magazines checked the accuracy of the articles they published with more rigor and ferocity than prestigious scholarly journals do.

Technology made this model hard to sustain. Google and [Facebook](#) sucked away the advertising that supported news reporting—and the fact checking. More competition for fewer readers and advertisers tempted traditionally staid news outlets toward tabloid sensationalism and fantasy, albeit in a more political and (usually) less salacious vein. And what is [now called](#) “fact checking” is a competitive gotcha effort, not an exercise in controlling the reliability of a news organization's own product.

Technology has also brought into the fray ideological amateurs who have no reporting costs—or reputations to worry about. Anyone with a mobile phone—that is to say, anyone—can tweet or post on Facebook and with modestly more effort hold forth on a blog. Cameras in mobile phones give everyone the capabilities of photojournalists and documentarians.

Even amateurs who don't expect payment often hope for attention, swelling a race to the bottom in sensationalism. And while mobile phones have made photography and videography cheap and easy, software has enabled the doctoring of images. Faking still pictures is already within nearly anyone's reach; doing the same with movies will soon be as well. Citizen-reporters, those whose political convictions self-justify their means, thus add to the inaccuracies of professional journalism. And while some freelancers may expose media falsehoods rather than produce their own, how are we to know which ones? Independent policing of the news has a natural appeal, but it raises the question posed in Juvenal's Satires: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* "Who will guard the guards themselves?"

Snopes's myth busting can't stop fantasy masquerading as fact either. It's a for-profit business whose complete reliance on advertising exposes it to the same forces that stoke fakery: Survival requires more web traffic than debunking true urban legends can easily attract. And according to critics, Snopes is biased to the left.

Even worse would be a Snopes-like entity publicly owned and operated like NPR, to say nothing of laws against fake news. Especially in America, one man's falsehood is another's free speech. Periodic changes in political power should remind all sides that whatever the room for falsehood it may sustain, the First Amendment is vital to protecting all our other freedoms.

Someday, perhaps, attention-seeking social-media posts will naturally peter out, as CB radio chatter and scurrilous pamphleteering once did. Or media entrepreneurs may figure out better ways to profit from accurate reporting, although the historical record suggests that the expectation that truth will dominate public discourse has little basis in reality.

Instead, as always, we should treat skepticism as a vital civic virtue. Rather than obsess about ferreting out falsehoods and punishing liars, we can avoid much harm by asking: What if widely reported facts are wrong? Better to acknowledge how little we know than to persist in believing what just ain't so.

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