ENTERTAINMENT

The debunking website Snopes turns 25 this year. And that's not fake news

By **RANDEE DAWN**
OCT 12, 2018 | 12:05 PM

David Mikkelson next to his computer monitor with a doctored storm photo in which two tornadoes were added to the original photo, which had only one. (Los Angeles Times)

Remember the one about the “new deadly spider species” that was killing Americans this summer? Or those “friend complimented you” texts that were linked to sex trafficking? Or that Florida Gov. Rick Scott returned a rescue dog after he got re-elected?

Even if you didn’t hear about those recent rumors and urban legends, it’s safe to say that Snopes.com has. For almost 25 years, Snopes – which averages 22 million views per month – has crafted itself into the go-to web location for confirming or debunking every rumor or urban legend your father-in-law emailed you, your sister posted on Facebook or your college buddy showed you in a Reddit meme.

And thanks to the ongoing flood of “fake news,” political shenanigans and a persistent human desire to pass along stories that “feel true,” it’s also safe to say that Snopes, headed by founder and CEO David Mikkelson, will never run out of material.

“This job combines two things a lot of people find appealing: Always having interesting stories ready at hand, and also being able to tell people they’re wrong,” says Mikkelson, who started a version of the site in 1994; his now ex-wife, Barbara, became a significant contributor shortly thereafter.

“I don’t get a lot of joy or mileage out of telling people they’re wrong,” he clarifies. “I’ll say, ‘I think we did a piece about that.’”

There’s a good chance Snopes did, though there’s no way the site – with its small staff of editors and fact-checkers scattered around the country – can cover every rumor, misstatement or piece of fakery that winds its way through the zeitgeist. But if enough people are talking about a topic, Snopes will try to drill deep and uncover the facts.

“Sometimes, it’s disappointing to see what people are interested in and what they’re ignoring,” admits Mikkelson, who is based in Tacoma, Wash. “There may be a news story about a gas attack in Syria and whether it was staged by the government – that’s a real-world important issue. But what people are asking about is a fake news story about a woman giving birth to a litter of kittens in an elevator. Which is not only totally fake but has zero impact on anyone’s life.”

Yet over the decades, Snopes has emerged as more than just a fun, reliable way to one-up your friends with researched facts. These days, professional news sources,

fellow fact-checking sites and academics find it a useful tool for their own research or reporting. In addition, Facebook has made Snopes one of its reliable third-party fact-checking programs to try tamping false news.

“I haven’t done a paper in the past 10 years that I haven’t also checked to see what Snopes had to say about it first,” says Patricia Turner, professor of folklore at UCLA. “Anything that raises hairs on the back of my neck, I go to Snopes.”

Alexios Mantzarlis, director of the International Fact-Checking Network. notes that “the average reader doesn’t have the time to check everything. Especially in a time with no gatekeepers and with information being able to travel to a wide audience without an editor, it’s good to have organizations that sort fact from fiction.”

Yet things didn’t start out that way. Mikkelson’s roots with Snopes involve the collision of early folklore/urban legend newsgroups and the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research. The society published a quarterly summary of the most active legends of the time, which former president Bill Ellis says the Mikkelsons often contributed to. When it became easier for average folks to create websites, Ellis says, “They took it to the next level, and God bless them.”

The appeal of the site was immediate, and by 2009 Snopes pulled in over 6 million unique visitors per month. But it was post-9/11 that turned out to be a watershed for the site, as Mikkelson puts it, as conspiracy theories and rumors abounded post-attacks.

“We were the only ones at the time that were tracking and collating and investigating whether these rumors were true or not,” says Mikkelson. “Before 2001, things went around for weeks before they built critical mass and went viral. Today, someone posts something shocking on Facebook, and in a half-hour it’s a headline.”

President Trump’s victory in the 2016 election provided a shift in the types of stories being vetted, he adds. “Political items have become a much higher percentage of the topic mix since the election, probably up from 60-70% to about 90%.”

These days, Snopes operates as a virtual company with approximately 16 employees and no physical office space, though its largest hub of workers is in San Diego. Online advertising provides the primary revenue stream, but a small proportion of

revenue derives from Snopes' fact-checking partnership with Facebook and public donations, says Mikkelson.

Snopes has its critics, who charge it is biased – though significantly those critics come from both the left and the right. The reasons for this perception are complex (and Snopes has even created a web page to address the issue) but come down in part to the sheer volume of possible stories that beg for reporting and the relatively brief presentation each gets on the site.

"They're very good at fact-checking," says Turner. "But I don't know that it's their role to be particularly analytical; each text is a freestanding contribution, and they don't generalize."

"There's a real confirmation bias on the part of the complainants," suggests Mikkelson. "People will take a single example and claim it's evidence of bias. Things that are false or exaggerated are what will get people's attention."

Often, it's only headlines readers end up absorbing. Take the Rick Scott dog rescue story: Snopes' analysis reveals that yes, he got a dog prior to the election, which made for great optics. And yes, he did return the dog post-election – but because the dog had severe behavioral issues.

"People proclaim they're all interested in facts and don't want editorializing or opinion, but facts by themselves have little to no meaning without context," says Mikkelson. "Without context, you take away a very different implication from the Rick Scott thing."

"You can say it has a bias, but I think it has a bias toward the facts," says Ellis.

Perhaps one of Snopes' greatest contributions – for those who use and read it diligently – is that it provides a kind of media studies education. "Our regular readers are very good at recognizing what's false about rumors or anything questionable," Mikkelson says. "It's a skill people have had to learn, and one they need to learn."

In the end, Snopes remains a valuable resource, even if it never can catch up with the strange things purported to be true on the internet.

“Human beings love stories,” says Turner. “We process the world around us in narrative form. We like beginnings, middles and ends, heroes and villains. We take ordinary circumstances and adjust them so they have a storyline and characters that reinforce our way of looking at the world. Snopes isn’t a silver bullet. But we are better off for having it.”

LATEST NEWS

4 days after the storm, Florida's Panhandle is still reeling
36m

Congress and Western allies demand answers on fate of journalist as Saudi Arabia balks