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Snopes and the Search for Facts in a Post-Fact World

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Feeling depressed about the conflation of fiction and fact in the first few months of 2017, I steered a car into the hills of Calabasas to meet with one person whom many rely on to set things straight. This is an area near Los Angeles best known for its production of Kardashians, but there were no McMansions on the street where I was headed, only old, gnarled trees and a few modest houses. I spotted the one I was looking for—a ramshackle bungalow—because the car in the driveway gave it away. Its license plate read *SNOPEs*.

David Mikkelson, the publisher of the fact-checking site [Snopes.com](#), answered the door himself. He was wearing khakis and a polo shirt, his hair at an awkward length, somewhere between late-career Robert Redford and early-career Steve Carell. He had been working alone at the kitchen table, with just a laptop, a mouse, and the internet. The house, which he was getting ready to sell, was sparsely furnished, the most prominent feature being built-in bookcases filled with ancient hardcovers—“there’s a whole shelf devoted to

the Titanic and other maritime disasters,” Mikkelson told me—and board games, his primary hobby.

Since about 2010, this house has passed for a headquarters, as Snopes has no formal offices, just 16 people sitting at their laptops in different rooms across the country, trying to swim against the tide of spin, memes, and outright lies in the American public sphere.

There are other fact-checking outfits, like PolitiFact, which is operated by the *Tampa Bay Times*, or FactCheck.org at the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. But Snopes has kicked around the internet since 1994—which makes it almost as old as what we once called the World Wide Web. In this age of untruth, it has become an indispensable resource. Should your friend’s sister start a conspiracy trash fire in a Facebook comment thread, Snopes is a reliable form of extinguisher. Because of this reputation, Snopes was listed as a partner in a Facebook fact-checking effort announced last fall after the social media giant acknowledged it had become a conduit for fake news. Potentially false stories could be flagged by users and an algorithm, and then organizations like Snopes, ABC News, and the Associated Press would be tasked with investigating them.

As pretty much anyone knows, the truth can be a slippery bastard. Getting to the bottom of something requires what you might generously call a *fussy* personality. Mikkelson possesses that trait. He spends hours writing a detailed analysis of a claim and feels frustrated when readers just want a “true” or “false” answer. He’s got the worldview of Eeyore, had Eeyore been obsessed with cataloging the precise history, variety, and growing seasons of

thistles in the Hundred Acre Wood. He can even get pessimistic about whether his work makes a difference. “Since a lot of this stuff is really complicated, nuanced stuff with areas of gray, it requires lengthy and complex explanations,” he said. “But a lot of the audience, their eyes just tend to glaze over, and it’s just, they don’t want to have to follow all of that. So they just fall back on their preconceptions.”

“Do you ever get sick of the stupidity of all this?” I asked Mikkelson in his kitchen.

“Yes,” he said. His eyes rolled heavenward, and he gave a weary little laugh. But what I didn’t know then was that more chaos was coming, and it was chaos that threatened the very existence of Snopes. Just days later, Mikkelson would start a fight with the new co-owners of the business, which led them to freeze the distribution of the site’s ad revenues, making Snopes so cash-poor that by July it had to resort to a “Save Snopes” GoFundMe campaign to keep operations afloat. The appeal worked. It had raised, as of late August, more than \$690,000.

The groundswell of support was a satisfying, even humbling, ratification of the work Mikkelson and his staff had put into Snopes. But amid the good feelings were some questions. Articles mentioned a messy divorce; they mentioned “embezzling claims.” And just as it’s hard for Snopes to nail down,

absolutely, definitively, certain truths about the toxicity of a copper mugž
it can be trickier than expected to nail 'Xck b 'h Y'fi h 'U'ci h'GbcdYg'

Mikkelson first adopted his “nom de net,” snopes—lowercase, at first—in the early 1990s in a Usenet group called alt.folklore.urban. The name comes from a lesser-known William Faulkner trilogy, but Mikkelson just shrugged when I asked if he was a big Faulkner fan. The attraction was the sound —“short and catchy and distinctive.”

Alt.folklore.urban was a place for people who enjoyed collecting, sorting, and organizing facts. These were people who might spend hours trying to figure out if hot water froze faster than cold water or whether “Puff the Magic Dragon” was *actually* about drugs.

Barbara Hamel was in her thirties, married, and living in Ottawa, Canada, when she first found alt.folklore.urban, via the Ottawa FreeNet. She’d worked as a secretary and a bookkeeper, but it wasn’t really what she’d imagined for herself. “Under different circumstances, I would have gone on to become a journalist,” she wrote in an email to me recently, “but after applying to Ryerson University in Toronto, I was felled by Crohn’s disease and thus had to abandon that plan and find another way in life.” She posted several times a day, a funny, wry, and engaging presence.

David and Barbara began flirting in the Usenet group, and by the fall of 1994, Barbara had moved to California to be with David. They wed in 1996. It was in the early days of their romance, David says, when he had the idea that would become Snopes. The graphical web had just been born, and he saw an opportunity to rescue his careful research from the relentless chronological stream of the Usenet group.

The page grew. It was a joint effort, though at first David kept his day job as a computer tech and coder at an HMO. His income paid for their expenses and the cost of running the site. David and Barbara lived frugally in a rented condo in Agoura Hills, and their stories about these salad days sound like tales from an endearingly dorky public-access television show. Barbara remembers the tests they would conduct to prove a fact or a falsehood. “One had me sitting for half an hour with my mouth full of marshmallows; another had me sequestering plants in our glass-enclosed fireplace lest the cats gnaw on them before the conclusion of a multiweek experiment on the effects of microwaved water on their growth.”

For the first seven years or so, the site stayed firmly in the realm of what you might call Weird America: Was Walt Disney cryogenically frozen after death? (No, he wasn't.) Google was not yet officially a verb, and the internet was still in some ways the domain of nerds whose web pages were read by other nerds. The site got attention from local media when reporters wrote up the dangers of believing your email forwards—the closest thing to fake news the early internet could come up with—but it remained, mostly, a hobby for the Mikkelsons.

Then, on September 11, 2001, out of the clear blue sky, everything changed. The planes flew into the Twin Towers and crashed at the Pentagon and in Pennsylvania, and America turned, panicked, to the internet to try to explain those events to itself. “I posted the first of the September 11 articles just after midnight on September 12,” Barbara wrote to me. It was a post debunking the rumor that the 16th century astrologer Nostradamus had predicted the attacks. “I researched and wrote that first article only because I needed to do something other than just cry and feel helpless.” The tenor of their site was about to change.

Where once they had been conducting tests with marshmallows and houseplants, now they were debunking claims that there were 4,000 Israelis who worked in the World Trade Center who stayed home that fateful day.

Traffic spiked. Suddenly the press, which had treated Snopes mostly as a curiosity, took real interest. The Mikkelsons found themselves doing newspaper interviews, appearing on television, talking about the lies Americans were telling themselves in the aftermath of the catastrophe. When David's job disappeared in a round of layoffs in 2002, it seemed natural that he would work full-time on the site. In 2003 the Mikkelsons incorporated, combining their names to form Bardav Inc. They each took a 50 percent interest in the business, with Barbara doing the bookkeeping while David managed the technical aspects of the site, and both of them researching and writing posts. They were both active in the user forums they had set up too. Kim LaCapria, a frequent poster who later became one of Snopes' first employees, says she relied on Barbara in those years. "She gave me lots of advice, she was probably one of the most influential adult women on me when I was a young woman."

The world kept churning out bizarre rumors. Snopes let the world know that sushi did not cause maggots in a man's brain and, at the height of tensions over the war in Iraq, debunked a claim that a South Carolina restaurant was turning away service members. And in 2008, as Barack Obama campaigned for the presidency and won, Snopes explained that he was not, in fact, the Antichrist and refuted a fake Kenyan birth certificate circulated in 2009, which, among other signals of inauthenticity, was stamped "Republic of Kenya" before such a country existed.

Finally, with a growing stream of falsehoods to attend to, the site hired LaCapria as its first writer in 2014. The next year, David brought on a freelance journalist named Brooke Binkowski, who quickly became indispensable, and hired even more researchers. Binkowski now serves as the managing editor of the site.

Snopes had been hoping to vault itself out of partisanship by sticking to the facts. But the times we are in don't allow for any such creature. For years—since Snopes started writing about politics—the underbelly of the internet has been vomiting up conspiracies suggesting that Snopes is a liberal front. Mikkelson, for his part, claims to be neither Democrat nor Republican; he says he's essentially apolitical, with loosely libertarian views. His protests made no headway with Fox News, and sites like The Daily Caller complained that Snopes has hired researchers of a liberal persuasion and insist with regularity that Snopes is “fake news.”

None of the aspersions being cast hurt Snopes as an enterprise. Traffic hit an all-time high of 3.7 million pageviews just after the 2016 election, thanks to controversies large and small. Ad revenue was growing. It should have been a great time for everyone at Snopes. But for the Mikkelsons, things were unraveling.

On May 8, 2014, Barbara abruptly took her things out of the Calabasas house and moved to Las Vegas while David was away on a trip. Then she filed for divorce. Neither David nor Barbara would talk to me on the record about the divorce. But London's *Daily Mail* gave the Mikkelsons' split the full tabloid treatment last December, and the divorce papers have been uploaded to the internet by some unknown person, surfacing on fringe right-wing websites and providing the outlines of their dispute.

At some point before Barbara left him, David began seeing a woman named Elyssa Young, whom he eventually married in late 2016. Today, Young works

for Snopes as an administrative assistant but previously worked as a professional escort, something she's been open about. In fact, in 2004, when Young ran for Congress in Hawaii on the Libertarian Party ticket, she wrote on her campaign pitch: "My background is in the adult entertainment and sex industry, so for once, you will get an honest person in office." (Young did not respond to numerous requests for comment.)

The *Daily Mail* played up the salacious details of this history, which included the more serious claims that David used company funds to pay for Young's personal travel. For his part, David refuses to be bothered by this public airing. "It's just stupid personal stuff that doesn't have to do with any aspect of the work I or my staff does," he says. "Also, know that the people interested in ferreting out this stuff were probably really hoping to find something like undisclosed financial sources, undisclosed political contributions, drug abuse, criminal record, something like that, and nope, none of that is out there to be found."