

The sad truth: Truth is the first casualty of the war for Web traffic

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Are your New Year's resolutions starting to flag? If you're serious about losing weight, you might want to call The Fat Squad.

Headed by the former Marine Corps drill sergeant Joseph Bones, the so-called "most aggressive diet company in America" will dispatch commandos to keep dieters away from those late-night trips to the pantry. With military-inspired force, if need be.

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Think about it: All that stands between you and a slimmer you is \$300 per day plus expenses.

Well, that, and the fact that The Fat Squad doesn't actually exist.

That final awkward little detail, though, didn't stop *Good Morning America* from booking Mr. Bones for an interview touting his revolutionary guard technique. The Philadelphia Inquirer newspaper ran a piece about the company. So did, er, The Globe and Mail. And all were eventually forced to correct the record when the truth – that the company existed only in the whimsical imaginings and the authentic-looking press releases of a serial media hoaxer named Joey Skaggs – came to light. Skaggs wanted to demonstrate that reporters "are always more interested in a good story than they are in the truth."

If that was true in 1986, when Skaggs pulled his Fat Squad hoax, it is ever more so now, when too many news outlets spend too much time trying to ride the wave of viral content without any apparent desire to first conduct some basic fact-checking on the stories they tell. The consequences of that default mode, in an era when news stories are propelled faster and farther by social media,

are potentially dire.

On Tuesday, the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University published a troubling paper on the explosion of junk in our newsfeeds. Written by Craig Silverman, a Montreal-based journalist and Tow Center fellow, *Lies, Damn Lies, and Viral Content: How news websites spread (and debunk) online rumors, unverified claims, and misinformation charges that news sites* [<http://towcenter.org/research/lies-damn-lies-and-viral-content/>] “dedicate far more time and resources to propagating questionable and often false claims than they do working to verify and/or debunk viral content and online rumours. Rather than acting as a source of accurate information, online media frequently promote misinformation in an attempt to drive traffic and social engagement.”

Journalism’s financial and cultural incentives, which used to support the search for facts, now favour the search for eyeballs. If truth is the first casualty of war, it is also one of the first casualties of the war for web traffic.

We all know this is the new state of things, even if we like to pretend it’s not true. So, a year and a half ago, when a young Kansas City, Mo., woman named Caitlin Heller tried making a sexy twerking video for her boyfriend and ended up smashing into her glass coffee table and lighting herself on fire, nobody should have been surprised that dozens of outlets – from ABC’s *The View* to CNN, MSNBC and the morning show on Global TV here in Canada – gleefully and credulously aired [the resulting YouTube video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CddMD3QqTFs) [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CddMD3QqTFs>].

Few of those outlets, though, followed up with the revelation a few days later that the whole thing was a hoax orchestrated by the late-night host Jimmy Kimmel.

And if the problem is bad with television, it’s infinitely worse online, where content is shared without either effort or, frequently, care for its veracity.

Too often, says Silverman, news sites play games with their readers that allow them to ride the momentary interest in a story, even if they know the story probably isn’t true. “News organizations utilize a range of hedging language and attribution formulations (‘reportedly,’ ‘claims,’ etc.) to convey that information they are passing on is unverified. They frequently use headlines that express the unverified claim as a question (‘did a woman have a third breast added?’). However, research shows these subtleties result in misinformed audiences.”

He adds: “It’s a vicious-yet-familiar cycle: A claim makes its way to social media or elsewhere online. One or a few news sites choose to repeat it. Some employ headlines that declare the claim to be true to encourage sharing and clicks, while others use hedging language such as ‘reportedly.’ Once given a stamp of credibility by the press, the claim is now primed for other news sites to follow on and repeat it, pointing back to the earlier sites. Eventually its point of origin is obscured by a mass of interlinked news articles, few (if any) of which add reporting or context for the reader.”

But if the news media were solely to blame in Joey Skaggs’s heyday, in the new ecosystem where everybody with access to the Web is a potential publisher, it may be that regular people are

increasingly to blame. Last fall, Silverman notes, as Ebola hoaxes spread online, the website NationalReport.net carried a number of breathless reports about infections. Many were picked up and spread through Facebook and other social sites. Never mind that NationalReport.net consists of entirely fake stories.

After one NationalReport.net story about an entire Texas town being placed under quarantine received more than 130,000 likes or shares on Facebook, Silverman found five articles that sought to debunk the false report on sites such as Snopes. They didn't get much attention. "Together, they achieved only a third of the share count of the panic-inducing fake."

Silverman notes: "Misinformation is often more viral and spreads with greater frequency than corrective information. One reason for this is that false information is designed to meet emotional needs, reinforce beliefs and provide fodder for our inherent desire to make sense of the world."

All is not lost, he argues. Silverman is a founder of [Emergent](http://www.emergent.info/) [http://www.emergent.info/], a data-driven tracker that seeks to follow and debunk viral hoaxes.

And he notes in the paper that smart outlets could seize an opportunity to distinguish themselves by hoax-busting on a regular basis. Two years ago, Silverman writes that an editor at the Metro Sweden newspaper began the Viral Reviewer, [a regular feature](http://www.emergent.info/saudi-arabia-tempting-eyes) [http://www.emergent.info/saudi-arabia-tempting-eyes] in which he and two colleagues "investigate trending stories published by the Swedish press to see if the facts stand up to scrutiny." Last year, the feature received an Innovator of the Year award at the Swedish Grand Prize for Journalism.

That news, alas, was not widely shared.