

Fact-checking website's role brings new attacks

adapted from an article by David Streitfeld

- 1 The last line of defense against the torrent of half-truths, untruths and outright fakery that make up so much of the modern internet is in a shabby building that on the inside looks like a dot-com on the way to nowhere. Snopes, the fact-checking website, does not have an office designed to inspire awe, or even be noticed.



- 2 18. This is where the muddled masses come by the virtual millions to establish just what on earth is really going on in a world turned upside down. For 20 years, Snopes was dedicated to urban legends, like the supposed existence of alligators in New York City sewers, and other benign misinformation. But its range and readership increased significantly during a prolonged presidential election campaign in which facts became irrelevant and reality itself seemed up for grabs. Did Donald J Trump say on Twitter that he planned to arrest the "Saturday Night Live" star Alec Baldwin for sedition? Has Hillary Clinton quietly filed for divorce? And was Alan Thicke, the star of "Growing Pains," really dead? All untrue, except for the demise of Mr. Thicke, 20-1.
- 3 One way to chart Snopes's increasing prominence is by measuring the rise in fake news about the site itself. If you believe the internet, the founder of Snopes, David Mikkelson, has a longer rap sheet than legendary American gangster Al Capone. He was supposedly arrested for committing fraud and corruption and running a pit bull ring. The underlying message of these vicious and false attacks is that the movement to fact-check the internet is a left-wing conspiracy that must be resisted at all costs. Smearing people because you do not like what they're saying often works to shut them up, 20-2.
- 4 Mikkelson seems more amused than outraged by the spectacle that is the internet, even when it takes aim at him. But he conceded that something had gone wrong with the early utopian dreams for the internet. "Making everyone equal as an information source doesn't work very well in practice," he said. "It used to be that if you got too far from the mainstream, you were shunned for being a little nutty," Kim LaCapria who writes many of the Snopes political posts, adds. "Now there is so much nutty going around that it's socially acceptable to embrace wild accusations. People aren't necessarily getting the media literacy they need, 20-3." Mr. Thicke's death underlined this. "People think the death of a 69-year-old from a heart attack must be a hoax. That is how

muddy the waters are now," LaCapria said. "They are afraid to trust anyone."

- 5 But there are also those who trust too much, and they are a much larger group. The personal profiles at the end of posts on Snopes are often 21, so LaCapria wrote that she got her job "due to an executive order unilaterally passed by President Obama during a secret, late-night session." A joke — but her own mother took it at face value. "You've known me for 36 years. Of course it's not true!" LaCapria told her. "It's very easy for us to be tricked, all of us."

The New York Times, 2016