Editors’ Notebook

Where Is the Truth in Virtual Reality?

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Last fall, The Quarterly received an email from lan Goddard, the webmaster of an Internet site that purports to shed light on conspiracies, cover-ups, and other government shenanigans. In the email, Goddard asked that we correct “grossly false information” contained in an article that appeared in our journal. The summer 1998 article to which Goddard refers, “Virtual Reality: Evaluating Online Information,” by Holly Littlefield, describes Littlefield’s efforts to help her students evaluate the validity and accuracy of Web sites they use as sources of information for research.

It was the second paragraph of Goddard’s letter that caught my eye: “Littlefield claims that my Web site contains information about alien abductions and JFK assassination plots. My site has NEVER contained any information on either alien abductions or JFK assassination plots. I don’t even hold much of an opinion on those subjects. The Quarterly should publish a correction.”

I dropped what I was doing and went to look up the article in question, which now, two years later, I only vaguely recalled. Since when, I wondered, had we been publishing articles worthy of plot ideas for the X-Files?

As it turns out, Goddard’s Web site was a passing reference in Littlefield’s article, a reference that focused not on assassination plots and aliens but on Goddard’s claims regarding the crash of TWA Flight 800 in the summer of 1996. Littlefield wanted to make the point that “students are not the only ones duped into believing Internet hoaxes.” To support this claim, she discussed the much publicized case of the “well-respected” journalist Pierre Salinger, who reported in the fall of 1996 that TWA Flight 800 had been shot down by U.S. Navy missiles, a claim supported by “government documents” in his possession. After a national stir, news reports revealed that the source of the “government” information was lan Goddard’s Web site. And as Goddard admits—and anyone who visits his Web site can verify—he does have an elaborately documented theory about Navy missiles shooting down TWA Flight 800.

Littlefield called Goddard “an unreliable conspiracy monger,” and mentioned that she’d seen theories about alien abductions and JFK assassination plots at his Web site. Littlefield also wrote that Goddard later admitted in a written statement to CNN regarding the TWA Flight 800 theory that he had “made-up all the information because he wanted to give the government a black eye.”

In his letter to The Quarterly, Goddard disputes Littlefield’s statement. He says he never made up the information. “What I did say was that I was sorry for pointing a finger at the Navy, which is not the same thing as saying I fabricated the information.”

Goddard, then, is questioning Littlefield’s account on two points. First, does his site include information, as Littlefield claims it does, about alien abductions and JFK assassination plots? And secondly, did Goddard admit that he made up the information with regard to Flight 800? On the first point, Goddard is willing to cut Littlefield a little slack. “It’s most likely that your journal’s claim that my Web site has material that it never has had was a confusion that another site hosting my writing was my site, which is not an uncommon error, and I’d not hold it against anyone, except in this case, as a result, I’m attributed as author of material that is not my own….”

When I contacted Littlefield to ask her to comment on Goddard’s claims, she acknowledged that she could not absolutely confirm that the site she’d visited was Goddard’s. And she had no record of the Web address she had visited three years ago when writing the article. She admitted that it could have been another site. If it did come from another site, Littlefield recognized the irony of falling into the trap she had been coaching her students to avoid: assuming the accuracy of information found on the Internet.

In answer to Goddard’s second point, that he, in fact, had not stated that he made up this information regarding Flight 800, Littlefield forwarded to us the two newspaper pieces that had been her sources, one from the Cox News Service and the other from the New York Times. The issue now became whether we were to believe her sources. It may be foolish to challenge the reliability of the New York Times, but my own experience has given me reason to wonder. While I was in journalism school in the 1980s, I was writing an in-depth article
on the work of a Bay Area organization that provided relief services to El Salvador during that country's civil war. I'd spent several hours interviewing two relief workers in person, both of whom had returned to San Francisco from El Salvador a few days earlier. They'd graciously agreed to the interviews, even though I told them I was writing strictly for a class project and not for publication.

A few days after the interviews were completed, I was working frantically to finish my 5,000-word story by the next day's deadline when, on my way to get my fourth cappuccino of the day, I picked up a copy of the New York Times. There on the front page was a story about a protest march that had occurred earlier that week in San Salvador, El Salvador's capital city—the same march that I had just written about in my own article! I congratulated myself on my journalistic acumen, having nearly "scooped" the New York Times with my article. Never mind that my piece was still sitting unfinished on my computer screen and would never be published. But as I read the New York Times article, I realized that it was a quite different version of the same story. It appeared to downplay recent events connected to U.S. involvement there, and as I read, I realized that my source had given me a very different perspective. I knew that neither version was necessarily the "correct" one but that our different sources had experienced the events in very different ways. It was an enlightening moment in my early journalism career, and I've never again assumed that newspapers are unquestionably accurate or objective, not even the New York Times.

Complicating the issue around the accuracy of Littlefield's sources is the fact that the pieces were not strictly news accounts. The New York Times piece was an editorial and the Cox News Service piece was written by a columnist. The editorial says that Goddard admitted that he "invented" the tale to give the government a black eye, whereas the column says "he pursued and promoted" his claim to give the government a black eye." The difference in these two phrases leaves quite a bit of room for interpretation. Cox News Service writer Howard Kleinberg muddies the waters further, questioning whether Goddard even exists. "That settles it! If it happened on the Internet, I won't believe it. Someone's going to have to prove to me that anything on the Internet is true, even the baseball scores and weather report. It's all because of Ian Goddard, and people like him. If there is an Ian Goddard, I don't know whom or what to believe any more," Kleinberg wrote.

As Littlefield advised in her article, teachers should "get students to question their sources, to realize that every writer has some bias, that every story has another side or two or three, and that many sources may have hidden—and not so hidden—agendas."

After our phone conversation, Littlefield contemplated the issue and responded in an email, "The irony of this situation is certainly not lost on me. While I was writing an article about helping students to evaluate and determine the veracity and authenticity of the information they find on Web sites, I myself may have been duped. Hmm, if nothing else, this certainly gives me a humbling example to use in my own classes." Just like a writing project teacher to turn her mistake, if that's what it was, into an opportunity to enhance her students' learning.

If anything, the experience only strengthens the point of Littlefield's article. It is impossible to counter Goddard's assertion that his Web site never contained information about alien abductions and JFK assassination plots. Unlike books, newspapers, or other printed sources of information, Web sites can change from month to month, even day to day. Without the printed word in hand, there is no way to verify that it was ever published.

For several days after receiving Goddard's letter, we struggled to either corroborate or refute his claims, and so we finally had to admit we would be able to do neither. Instead, we decided, unlike Howard Kleinberg, to grant that Ian Goddard in fact does exist, then to tell the story, and finally, to let our readers decide.

Roxanne Barber, a former journalist, is director of communications for the National Writing Project at the University of California, Berkeley.

If you have an interesting story about how access to the Internet has challenged your teaching practice or changed the way your students approach their work, we'd like to hear it.

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