VERIFICATION HANDBOOK

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS
TO VERIFYING DIGITAL CONTENT
FOR EMERGENCY COVERAGE

European Journalism Centre

EDITED BY CRAIG SILVERMAN
EDITOR OF 'REGRET THE ERROR', THE POYNTER INSTITUTE

Verification Handbook

Verification and Fact Checking

Craig Silverman ([@craigsilverman](https://twitter.com/CraigSilverman)) is an entrepreneurial journalist and a leading expert on media errors, accuracy and verification. He is currently a fellow with the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, and recently launched Emergent.info, a real-time rumor tracker. Craig edited the Verification Handbook from the European Journalism Center and is the founder and editor of Regret the Error, a blog about media accuracy and the discipline of verification. It is now part of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, where Craig serves as adjunct faculty. He previously served as director of content for Spundge and helped launch OpenFile, an online local news startup that delivered community-driven reporting in six Canadian cities. Craig is also the former managing editor of PBS MediaShift and has been a columnist for The Globe And Mail, Toronto Star, and Columbia Journalism Review. He is the author of two award-winning non-fiction books, Regret The Error: How Media Mistakes Pollute the Press and Imperil Free Speech and Mafiaboy: A Portrait of the Hacker as a Young Man.

Are verification and fact checking the same thing?

The two terms are often used interchangeably, sometimes causing confusion, but there are key differences.

"Verification is the editorial technique used by journalists — including fact-checkers — to verify the accuracy of a statement," says Bill Adair, the founder of PolitiFact and currently the Knight Professor of the Practice of Journalism and Public Policy at Duke University.

- **Verification** is a discipline that lies at the heart of journalism, and that is increasingly being practiced and applied by other professions.

- **Fact checking** is a specific application of verification in the world of journalism. In this respect, as Adair notes, verification is a fundamental practice that enables fact checking.

They share DNA in the sense that each is about confirming or debunking information. As these two terms and practices enter more of the conversation around journalism, user-generated content, online investigations, and humanitarian work, it's useful to know where they overlap, and where they diverge.

Fact Checking

Fact checking as a concept and job title took hold in journalism in New York in the 1920s. TIME magazine was at the time a young publication, and its two founders decided they needed a group of staffers to ensure everything gathered by the reporters was accurate.

TIME co-founder Edward Kennedy explained that the job of the fact checker was to identify and then confirm or refute every verifiable fact in a magazine article:

The most important point to remember in checking is that the writer is your natural enemy. He is trying to see how much he can get away with. Remember that when people write letters about mistakes, it is you who will be screeched at. So protect yourself.

Soon The New Yorker had fact checkers, as did Fortune and other magazines. Fact checkers have occasionally been hired by book publishers or authors to vet their material, but it remained largely a job at large American magazines.

The ranks of magazine checkers has thinned since layoffs began in the 1990s. Today, some digital operations including Upworthy and Medium employ staff or freelance fact checkers. But there are fewer working today than in decades past.

In fact, the work of fact-checking has largely moved away from traditional publishing and into the realm of political journalism.

Fact checking took on a new, but related, meaning with the launch of FactCheck.org in 1993. That site's goal is to "monitor the factual accuracy of what is said by major U.S. political players in the form of TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews and news releases."

In 2007, it was joined in that mission by PolitiFact. Today, according to a study by the Duke Reporters Lab, there are more than 40 active so-called "fact checking" organizations around the world. They primarily focus of checking the statements of politicians and other public figures.

This is increasingly what people mean today when they talk about fact checking.

Here's how PolitiFact describes its process:

- PolitiFact writers and editors spend considerable time researching and deliberating on our rulings. We always try to get the original statement in its full context rather than an edited form that appeared in news stories. We then divide the statement into individual claims that we check separately.

- When possible, we go to original sources to verify the claims. We look for original government reports rather than news stories. We interview impartial experts.

The above notes that in order for PolitiFact staffers to do their fact checking, they must engage in the work of verification.

Once again, it is the application of verification that enables the act of fact checking.

Verification

In their book, "The Elements of Journalism" Tom Rosenstiel and Bill Kovach write that "The essence of journalism is a discipline of verification."

That discipline is described as "a scientific-like approach to getting the facts and also the

right facts."

This is a useful definition of verification. It also helps describe the process applied by fact checkers to do their work. You can't be a fact checker without practicing verification. But verification is practiced by many people who are not fact checkers — or journalists, for that matter.

Verification has come back to the fore of journalism, and taken on new urgency for people such as human rights workers and law enforcement, thanks to the rise of social media and user-generated content.

"Not too long ago, reporters were the guardians of scarce facts delivered at an appointed time to a passive audience," wrote Storyful CEO Mark Little in an essay for Nieman Reports. "Today we are the managers of an overabundance of information and content, discovered, verified and delivered in partnership with active communities."

That abundance of content, from disparate sources spread all over the world, makes the application of verification more essential than ever before. Social media content is also increasingly important in humanitarian, legal, public safety and human rights work.

Regardless of their goals and role, more and more people are working to verify a tweet, video, photograph, or online claim. Knowing whether something is true or false, or is what it claims to be, enables a range of work and actions.

Tracking Back a Text Message: Collaborative Verification with Checkdesk

Craig Silverman ([@craigsilverman](https://twitter.com/CraigSilverman)) is an entrepreneurial journalist and a leading expert on media errors, accuracy and verification. He is currently a fellow with the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, and recently launched Emergent.info, a real-time rumor tracker. Craig edited the Verification Handbook from the European Journalism Center and is the founder and editor of Regret the Error, a blog about media accuracy and the discipline of verification. It is now part of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, where Craig serves as adjunct faculty. He previously served as director of content for Spundge and helped launch OpenFile, an online local news startup that delivered community-driven reporting in six Canadian cities. Craig is also the former managing editor of PBS MediaShift and has been a columnist for The Globe And Mail, Toronto Star, and Columbia Journalism Review. He is the author of two award-winning non-fiction books, Regret The Error: How Media Mistakes Pollute the Press and Imperil Free Speech and Mafiaboy: A Portrait of the Hacker as a Young Man.

During the days of heavy fighting and bombardment in Gaza and Israel in the summer of 2014, this image began to circulate on Twitter and Facebook:

It purported to show a text message that the Israeli Army sent to residents of an area in Gaza, warning them of an imminent attack. Tom Trewinnard, who works for the non-profit Meedan, which is active in the Middle East, saw the image being shared by his contacts.

"This was one image that I saw quite a lot of people sharing," he says. "These were people who I would expect not to share things that they hadn't checked, or that looked kind of suspicious."

It seemed suspicious to Trewinnard. A few things raised questions in his mind:

- The message was in English. Would the IDF send an English message to residents of Gaza?
- Language such as "We will destroy your house" seemed too stark, even though

Trewinnard said he finds the IDF's English Twitter account is often very blunt.

- He wondered if someone in Gaza would have "Israel Army" saved as a contact in their phone. That is apparently the case with this person, as evidenced by the contact name in the upper right hand corner.
- The image has a timestamp of 9:56 in the bottom left hand corner. What's that from?

Trewinnard's organization is developing Checkdesk, a platform that people and organizations can use to perform collaborative verification. He decided to open a Checkdesk thread to verify the image, and use it to track the verification process for the image in question.

He kicked off the process by sending a tweet from the Checkdesk Twitter account that invited people to help him verify whether this was a real text message:
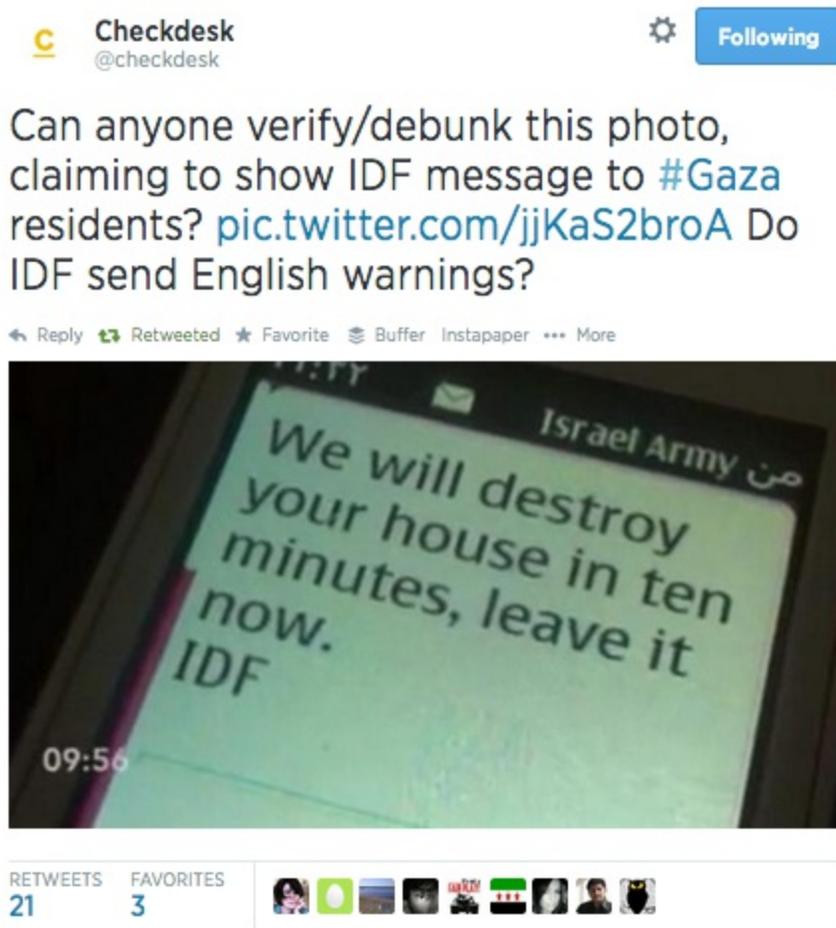
"The Checkdesk account has less than 300 followers," Trewinnard said. He didn't expect an onslaught of replies. But a few retweets from people with a lot of followers, including @BrownMoses, inspired others to take action.

The Checkdesk tweet included two specific questions for people to help answer, as well as an invitation for collaboration. Soon, Trewinnard was fielding replies from people who offered their opinion, and, in some cases, useful links.

He was also pointed to an Instagram account that had shared what appeared to be a real message sent by the IDF to someone in Gaza close to two years earlier:

Trewinnard was able to verify that the Instagram user in question was in Gaza at the time, and that Israel was carrying out an operation in Gaza in that timeframe. He also saw that the same image had been used by the credible 972mag blog.

The above image provided a valuable bit of evidence to compare to the image he was working to verify. It differed in that the above message came in Arabic, and showed that the sender was identified by "IDF," not "Israel Army." Trewinnard also said the tone of the message, which warned people to stay away from "Hamas elements," was different than

efe kerem sozeri
@efekerem
Follow

@checkdesk @Brown_Moses google img returned unreliable posts, while @haaretzcom reads "recorded telephone messages"
haaretz.com/news/diplomacy...

Reply Retweet Favorite Buffer Instapaper More

RETWEET
1

Fanar Haddad
@fanarhaddad
Follow

@checkdesk @Brown_Moses Porky pies! Why would they text in English??? Why would it b from 'Israel Army' not 'IDF'. Sounds like BS to me!

Reply Retweet Favorite Buffer More

RETWEET   FAVORITE
1   1

1:39 PM - 21 Jul 2014

---

the language used in the message they were trying to verify.

This all suggested the image he was working on was not real. But there was still the question of where it came from, and why it had a time stamp in the bottom corner.

Trewinnard said he tried doing a reverse image search on the picture to see where else it had appeared online. But he didn't immediately click through to all of the links that showed where it had appeared on Facebook. Another Twitter user did, and he found a post that showed conclusively where the image had come from:

The Facebook post includes a video that clearly shows where the text message came from. It was shown in a short film clip that is critical of Israel. The numbers in the bottom left hand corner correspond to a countdown that takes place during the video:

"So there had been these flags … but this guy found the actual source of the image," Trewinnard said.
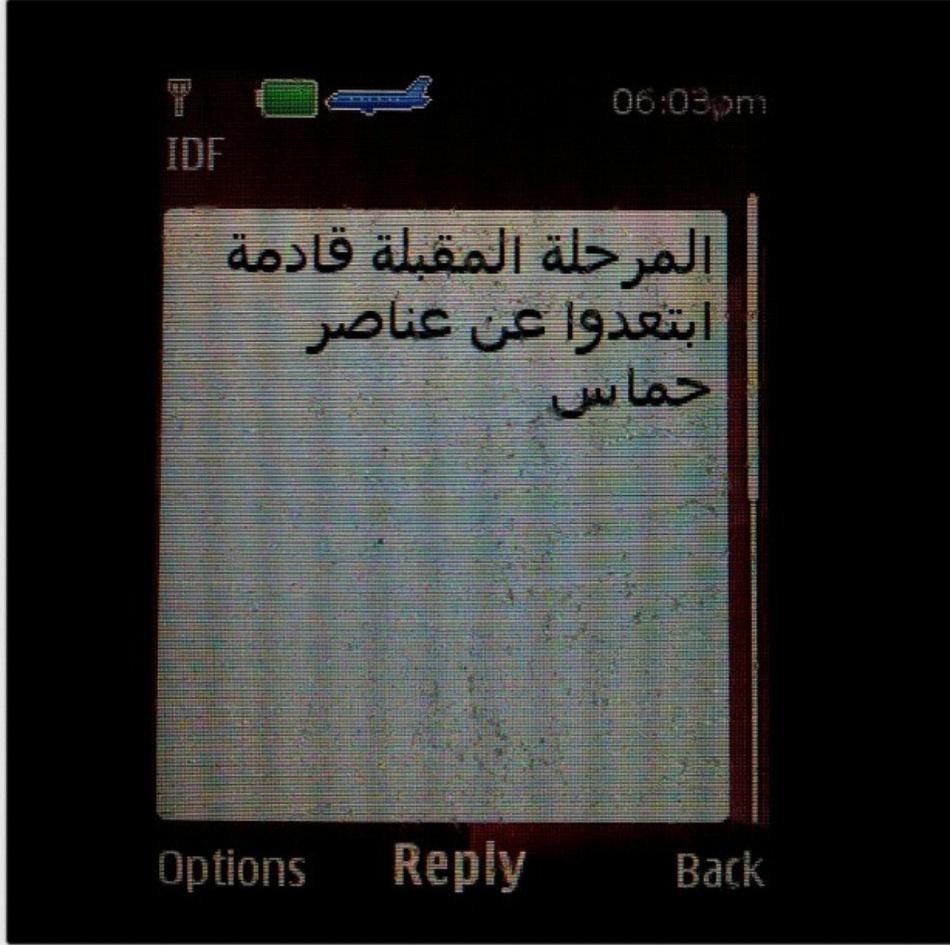
He said that the entire process took roughly an hour from his first tweet to the link to the video that confirmed the source of the image.

With an answer in hand, Trewinnard changed the verification status of the image to "False."

include("_footer.php"); ?>

Raya FM

#فقط في غزة

See Translation

— with Mina Narmar.

Like · Comment · Share · July 20

👍 5,829 people like this.　　　　　　Top Comments ▾

🔖 17,572 shares

Write a comment...　　　　　　　📷

Nouha Meftah

لا أحد يمكنه تصور شعور انسان يتلقى رسالة لمغادرة منزله خلال 10 دقائق ليتم تدميره ...في تلك اللحظة ستدق على رتاج الذاكرة أجمل اللحظات التي عاشها في بيته ويحمله الحنين الى الضحكات الصادقة التي تعالت في أرجائها ..إلى السهرات العائلية التي جمعتهم قبل أن يف ...See More

Like · Reply · 👍 180 · July 20 at 12:09pm · Edited

💬 5 Replies

The Fake Football Reporter

Craig Silverman ([@craigsilverman](https://twitter.com/CraigSilverman)) is an entrepreneurial journalist and a leading expert on media errors, accuracy and verification. He is currently a fellow with the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, and recently launched Emergent.info, a real-time rumor tracker. Craig edited the Verification Handbook from the European Journalism Center and is the founder and editor of Regret the Error, a blog about media accuracy and the discipline of verification. It is now part of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, where Craig serves as adjunct faculty. He previously served as director of content for Spundge and helped launch OpenFile, an online local news startup that delivered community-driven reporting in six Canadian cities. Craig is also the former managing editor of PBS MediaShift and has been a columnist for The Globe And Mail, Toronto Star, and Columbia Journalism Review. He is the author of two award-winning non-fiction books, Regret The Error: How Media Mistakes Pollute the Press and Imperil Free Speech and Mafiaboy: A Portrait of the Hacker as a Young Man.

Samuel Rhodes was a blonde, square-jawed football insider who lit up Twitter with rumors of player transfers and other scoops.

Rhodes tweeted rumors and predictions about what players and managers were up to, and was right often enough to attract over 20,000 followers. His bio described him as a freelance writer for The Daily Telegraph and the Financial Times. His tweets kept the rumors and scoops coming:

Sam Rhodes @SamuelRhodes_

BREAKING: Arsenal agree 2-year deal with Julio Cesar. [TMW]

Sam Rhodes @SamuelRh... 12/05/2013
Arsenal are very close to the €22m signing of Real Madrid striker Gonzalo Higuaín. (Sport.es)

Cherno follows

Sam Rhodes @SamuelRh... 05/05/2013
It looks like Jovetic is on his way to Arsenal............

One of Rhodes' biggest coups came when he tweeted that Chelsea was going to fire its manager, Roberto Di Matteo, the next day.

He was right.

But things unraveled a few months later. A social media editor at The Daily Telegraph spoke out to say there was no one by the name of Samuel Rhodes writing for them, not now or ever. The FT disclaimed any knowledge or relationship with Rhodes.

Soon, the Twitter account was suspended. Then, in January 2014, the Financial Times revealed that Samuel Rhodes was Sam Gardiner, a teenaged British schoolboy.

"He devised a target of 50,000 Twitter followers and a strategy of propagating rumour,"

reported the FT.

Gardiner said he created the account, and a previous fake, because he wanted people to listen to his views about football. No one had paid much attention to him when he tweeted as himself.

"My motive wasn't to deliberately mislead people, my motive was to air my opinions on the biggest possible platform, and to flood them around the world," he told BBC Trending radio.

Gardiner's efforts reveal some of the tactics used by Twitter hoax accounts to draw in real people, and to push out rumors and fake information.

Rumor Strategy

One key to the success of the account was that Gardiner played on the insatiable desire for transfer rumors, and for exclusives about which players and managers were being signed or released.

"It was the only way to get big," Gardiner told the FT. "Everyone has opinions, not everyone has access to the transfer market."

Offering information that was exclusive and that fed into the desires of people is a common strategy for social media hoaxsters. It's a fast way to gain attention.

He also followed real football journalists on Twitter, and copied them.

"He studied how journalists who are successful on Twitter tweet - a mix of wit, opinion, rumor and statistics, he says - and emulated this. He would tweet at peak times, send out teasers 30 minutes ahead of time and engage with his most high-profile followers," the BBC reported. xw The FT also noted that "Gardiner interspersed his rumors with genuine tidbits from newspapers to lend his Twitter account more authority."

This is a common deception tactic. In the world of espionage double agents would intersperse misinformation and deceptions with verifiable (and even mundane) information. Hoax propagators also try to give their falsehoods the trappings of veracity by combining real images and information with fakes.
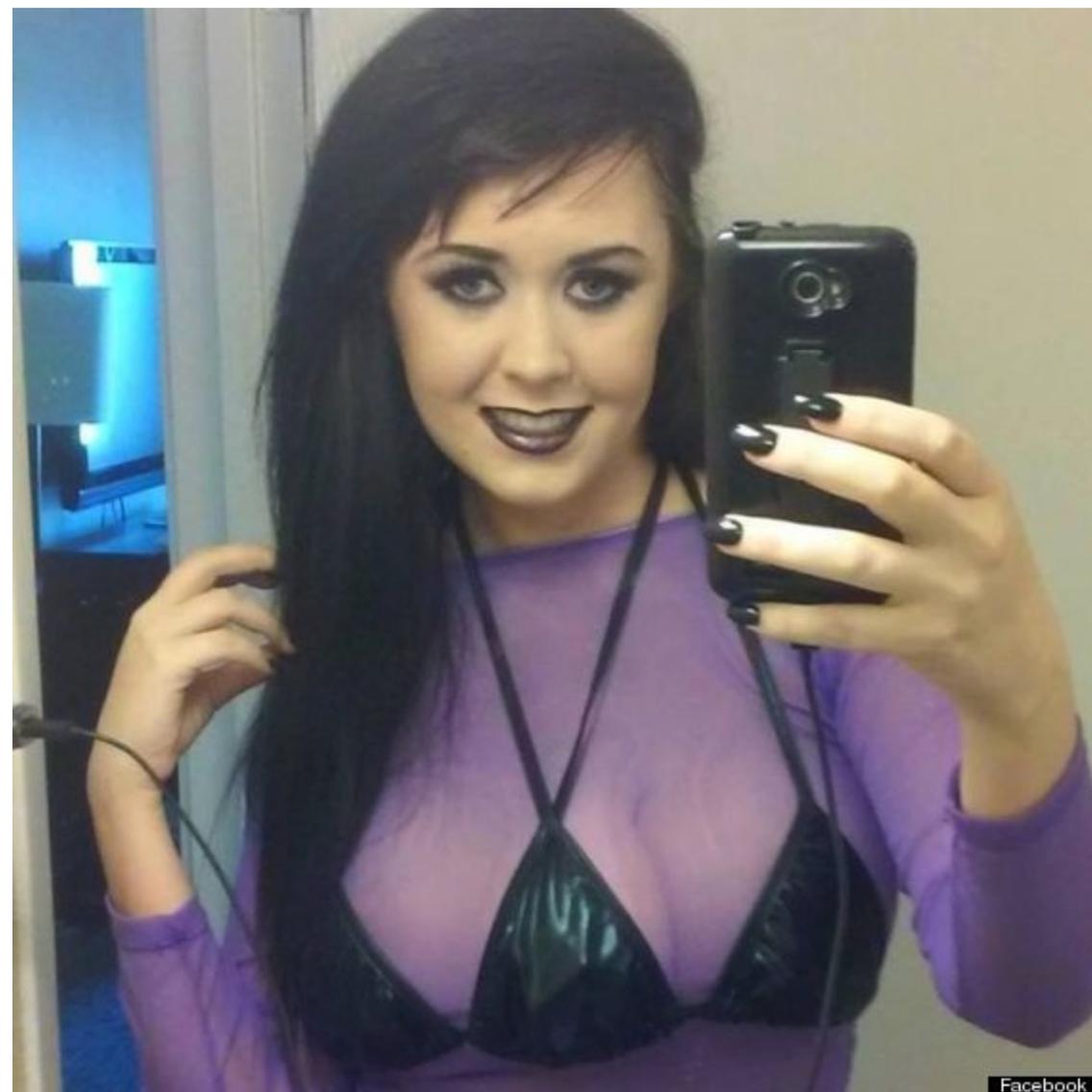
If Gardiner had only tweeted rumors and scoops, he would have stood out from the other, credible football journalists due to his strange behavior, and the fact that he didn't have any real exclusive information to share. By not only tweeting rumors, he was able to build up credibility, and therefore make his rumors all the more believable.

The Story of Jasmine Tridevil: Getting around Roadblocks to Verification

Craig Silverman ([@craigsilverman](https://twitter.com/CraigSilverman)) is an entrepreneurial journalist and a leading expert on media errors, accuracy and verification. He is currently a fellow with the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, and recently launched Emergent.info, a real-time rumor tracker. Craig edited the Verification Handbook from the European Journalism Center and is the founder and editor of Regret the Error, a blog about media accuracy and the discipline of verification. It is now part of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, where Craig serves as adjunct faculty. He previously served as director of content for Spundge and helped launch OpenFile, an online local news startup that delivered community-driven reporting in six Canadian cities. Craig is also the former managing editor of PBS MediaShift and has been a columnist for The Globe And Mail, Toronto Star, and Columbia Journalism Review. He is the author of two award-winning non-fiction books, Regret The Error: How Media Mistakes Pollute the Press and Imperil Free Speech and Mafiaboy: A Portrait of the Hacker as a Young Man.

Facebook

She went by the name Jasmine Tridevil and claimed to have had a third breast added to her chest as a way to make herself unattractive to men.

That sentence alone includes enough questionable elements to cause journalists and others to treat her claims with great skepticism. But after Tridevil gave a radio interview about her alleged surgery, her story soon went viral, with some news websites reporting her augmentation as a matter of fact.

As the story spread rapidly on social media, the red flags became even more prominent:

- The only images of her and her new addition came from her own social media accounts and website. She wasn't allowing other people to photograph her.
- She refused to provide the contact information of the doctor who performed the surgery, saying he required that she sign a non-disclosure agreement.
- Plastic surgeons in the United States are bound by an ethical code which holds that "'the principal objective of the medical profession is to render services to humanity with full respect for human dignity." Any physician that agreed to add a third breast would likely be in violation of this code.
- The idea of a three-breasted woman was made famous in the film "Total Recall," giving her claim a fictional aspect.
- She claimed to be filming a reality show, with the goal of having it picked up by MTV. If fame was her goal, could she be trusted?
- She was using a pseudonym.

[Snopes](#), the website dedicated to investigating hoaxes and urban legends, pointed out the problems with her story, and the fact that many news sites were parroting it without performing basic checks:

> In the initial frenzy of interest in Jasmine Tridevil and her purported third breast, lots of linking and re-posting of the same information and images occurred. However, few looked very deeply at the claims made by the woman shown in the images or her agents, or whether such a modification was even feasible. Instead, multiple media outlets took her claims at face value and ran it as a straight news story with no corroboration (other than self-provided images that could easily have been faked): they contacted no one who knew or had seen Ms. Tridevil, they sought no third-party photographs of her, they didn't verify the story with the doctor who supposedly performed her unusual enhancement surgery, nor did they probe her obvious pseudonym to determine her real name and background.

The lack of independent photos and access to her physician cut off obvious and important avenues for independent verification. When a source throws up so many roadblocks, that alone is reason to question their claims.

In the end, it was Snopes that did the necessary investigation into Tridevil. Along with noting her unwillingness to provide any corroborating evidence, they performed a [Whois](#) search on the domain jasminetridevil.com and discovered it had been registered by Alisha Hessler. Searching for online information about that woman turned up evidence that she looked very much like Tridevil and had worked as a massage therapist in the same city. They also discovered that she had achieved a level of notoriety years earlier:

> In December 2013 Hessler made headlines for an incident in which she claimed she was beaten while on the way home from a club, then offered her attacker the choice of standing on a street corner wearing a dunce cap and holding a sign that read "I

beat women" rather than being reported to police and charged with a crime. (Hessler also said "she wanted to have the man who beat her sign a waiver allowing her to beat him for 10 minutes.") According to local police, Hessler withdrew her complaint and "stopped returning [their] calls" after she was pressed for details of the alleged attack.

Based on the lack of supporting evidence, Tridevil/Hessler's unwillingness to provide any avenues for verification, and her history as someone who made possible false claims for publicity, Snopes soon declared her claims to be fake. That caused some in the press to begin to question Tridevil's story.

Tridevil, meanwhile, continued to offer ample reason to question her claims. She agreed to an interview with a Tampa TV station but refused to discuss her claim in detail, or to offer proof:

> She agreed to the interview on the condition we only discuss her self-produced show she hopes will be picked up by a cable network, and when we asked to see her third breast, she obliged, but with only a quick flash. When asked her why we couldn't have a longer look Tridevil responded, "I'm not ready to do that right now because it's in episode six of my show."

But the smoking gun that proved her to be a fake came a day later. That same Tampa TV station obtained a document from the local airport that had been filled out when Hessler's luggage was stolen weeks before. Among the items listed in the bag was a "3 breast prosthesis":

Though the above document provided the final, irrefutable proof of this hoax, there were many clues and red flags from the very start.

- < Previous
- Next : How to Evaluate the Veracity of a Rumor

Stolen Batmobile: How to Evaluate the Veracity of a Rumor

Craig Silverman ([@craigsilverman](https://twitter.com/CraigSilverman)) is an entrepreneurial journalist and a leading expert on media errors, accuracy and verification. He is currently a fellow with the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, and recently launched Emergent.info, a real-time rumor tracker. Craig edited the Verification Handbook from the European Journalism Center and is the founder and editor of Regret the Error, a blog about media accuracy and the discipline of verification. It is now part of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, where Craig serves as adjunct faculty. He previously served as director of content for Spundge and helped launch OpenFile, an online local news startup that delivered community-driven reporting in six Canadian cities. Craig is also the former managing editor of PBS MediaShift and has been a columnist for The Globe And Mail, Toronto Star, and Columbia Journalism Review. He is the author of two award-winning non-fiction books, Regret The Error: How Media Mistakes Pollute the Press and Imperil Free Speech and Mafiaboy: A Portrait of the Hacker as a Young Man.

On September 12, 2014 the website BleedingCool.com reported that the Batmobile had been stolen from a film set in Detroit.

At the time of the report, the new Batman v Superman movie was filming in Detroit. So the Batmobile was indeed in town. But had it been stolen? The site's story largely consisted of two paragraphs:

> The scuttlebutt from sources in Detroit is that one of the Batmobile models being used in the filming of Batman Vs. Superman has gone missing, believed stolen.
>
> *It would not be the first time a Batmobile has been nicked in Detroit.* Though that was just a $200 replica of the TV Series version back in 2o10[sic].

The report was based on unnamed "sources," and offered no other evidence to support the claim. The sources were also only identified as being in Detroit.

That didn't stop the claim from spreading to other comics websites, including CosmicbookNews and theouthousers.com.

The story might have remained an unsourced rumor on a comics websites, but it was soon picked up by the website of the local CBS station:

> A website is reporting that the Batmobile, from the upcoming Batman v. Superman flick, has gone missing in Detroit… and is presumed stolen. If this is true I could only imagine seeing it driving down 696 in rush hour. …Does this person — if the rumor is true (we don't know how credible the source is) — think that he or she can just go cruising around in this car no one will notice?

Two other local news organizations were aware of the report — but they took a very

different approach.

Rather than repeat the unsourced report, The Detroit Free Press assigned reporters to contact people on-set for confirmation, and they also reached out to the police.

At the Detroit News, they also received word about a stolen Batmobile, and they too reached out to the police and the production.

"We wanted to do our own reporting," said Dawn Needham, a digital news editor at The Detroit News. "We saw reports that it had been stolen, but also saw a Tweet that seemed to indicate it might not be true. We called police, tried to contact the production company, followed the string on social media." Within a few hours of the initial report going live at BleedingCool.com, the Free Press published a story about the supposedly stolen Batmobile. Headlined, "Batmobile stolen in Detroit? Good one, joker!" it debunked the rumor.

"Holy Motor City gossip! The rumored theft of the Batmobile in Detroit appears to be a false alarm," it reported.

The story quoted Detroit police spokesman Sgt. Michael Woody saying,"The Batmobile is safe in the Batcave where it belongs."

At the same time other sites had chosen to re-report the claim from BleedingCool.com, the Free Press and News both elected to wait and make calls to sources that could offer a definitive answer. in this case, it was the local police and the film's on-set publicity representatives.

In cases where information has already been published or is circulating on social media, journalists and others have to decide if they will repeat the rumor, or choose to hold back. In cases where the rumor could cause panic or harm, it's essential to wait and work for confirmation. But what about when the information is of a light-hearted nature, as with a supposedly stolen Batmobile?

The decision making process at the Free Press and Detroit News both involved examining the original source of the rumor in order to judge whether the rumor itself was credible, and therefore worth sharing in the early stages.

It was easy to see why the BleedingCool.com article didn't meet the standard for dissemination:

- The author of the post is based in London, England and did not have a track record for delivering scoops about this film shoot in Detroit.
- The report cited "scuttlebutt from sources in Detroit," but gave no other details of the source of the information.
- There was no evidence to support the claim.
- The site bears this small disclaimer text at the bottom of every page: "Disclaimer: This site is full of news, gossip and rumour. You are invited to use your discretion and intelligence when discerning which is which. BleedingCool.com cannot be held

responsible for falling educational standards. Bleeding Cool is neither fair nor balanced, but it is quite fun."

Two newspapers decided to wait and reach out to credible sources. CBS Detroit and others, however, ran with the rumor right away. The CBS story did note that an effort had been made to secure information from the police:

Our brother station WWJ put a call into the Detroit Police Department to see if there is any truth to this. (Update! As of 4 p.m., police were saying they hadn't heard about this, but were looking into it).

That was the last update made on the story. As of today, it still reports the rumor as being possibly true, even though the Free Press story debunking the rumor went online just a few hours later the same day.

"Holy crap, Batman -- look what happened to a a once-distinguished news organization," [noted a post from Detroit news site Deadline Detroit](#).

Russian Bear Attack: Tracking Back the Suspect Origin of a Viral Story

Craig Silverman ([@craigsilverman](https://twitter.com/CraigSilverman)) is an entrepreneurial journalist and a leading expert on media errors, accuracy and verification. He is currently a fellow with the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, and recently launched Emergent.info, a real-time rumor tracker. Craig edited the Verification Handbook from the European Journalism Center and is the founder and editor of Regret the Error, a blog about media accuracy and the discipline of verification. It is now part of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, where Craig serves as adjunct faculty. He previously served as director of content for Spundge and helped launch OpenFile, an online local news startup that delivered community-driven reporting in six Canadian cities. Craig is also the former managing editor of PBS MediaShift and has been a columnist for The Globe And Mail, Toronto Star, and Columbia Journalism Review. He is the author of two award-winning non-fiction books, Regret The Error: How Media Mistakes Pollute the Press and Imperil Free Speech and Mafiaboy: A Portrait of the Hacker as a Young Man.

Igor Vorozhbitsyn was on a fishing trip in Northern Russia when he was attacked by a large bear.

Vorozhbitsyn was being mauled and feared for life until the bear was suddenly startled by a noise, causing it to run away. As was later reported by news organizations around the world, the bear ran off when Vorozhbitsyn's phone began to play its ringtone: the song "Baby" by Justin Bieber.

In a line that was echoed by the many websites that ran with the story, MailOnline's [story](link) led with the headline, "Finally, proof that Justin Bieber IS unbearable."

After seeing the story tweeted out by someone on my Twitter timeline, I decided to see if it stood up to scrutiny.

Here's how I eventually discovered that the Justin Bieber ringtone story wasn't what it first appeared.

Step One: Close Reading

The first step was to gather all of the articles I could find in order to examine the facts they reported, and the sources they used. It soon became clear that all the stories about the bear-meets-Bieber tale included the same facts, and these facts were often stated without attribution. Most of the articles pointed to other articles that simply rewrote the story.

Some stories included the same quote from an unnamed "wildlife expert": "Sometimes a sharp shock can stop an angry bear in its tracks and that ringtone would be a very unexpected sound for a bear."

Many articles included the same pictures of the man in bandages. They were often attributed to CEN, the Central European News agency, or to EuroPics, another agency. It

was clear that all of the stories were simply rewrites of the same facts, with them all pointing either to MailOnline or a site called the Austrian Times as the source. The photo agency, CEN, was also a potential source, as MailOnline credited it with the images.

Step Two: Identifying and Investigating the Original Source

The Austrian Times' story was published prior to MailOnline's. That meant it appeared to be the first English-language media outlet to carry the story.

The Austrian Times's story repeated all of the same facts as the other stories, but the image it used was different in one important way:

Justin Bieber Helps Defend

© Komsomolskaya Pravda   05. 08. 14. - 09:45

Rather than credit the image to CEN or EuropPics, it cited a Russian publication, Komosomolskaya Pravda. This was the first indication that the story may have originated in a Russian news outlet.

By going to Pravda's website and searching for the fisherman's name, [I discovered the original article about the bear attack](#), which predated the Austrian Times story by over a week:

It featured the photos that had spread everywhere, and a translation of the story also confirmed many of the key facts: the man's name, the location where he was fishing, the bear attack… everything except one key detail. It made no mention of Justin Bieber. Instead, the story reported that the bear was scared off when the man's phone began to recite the current time.
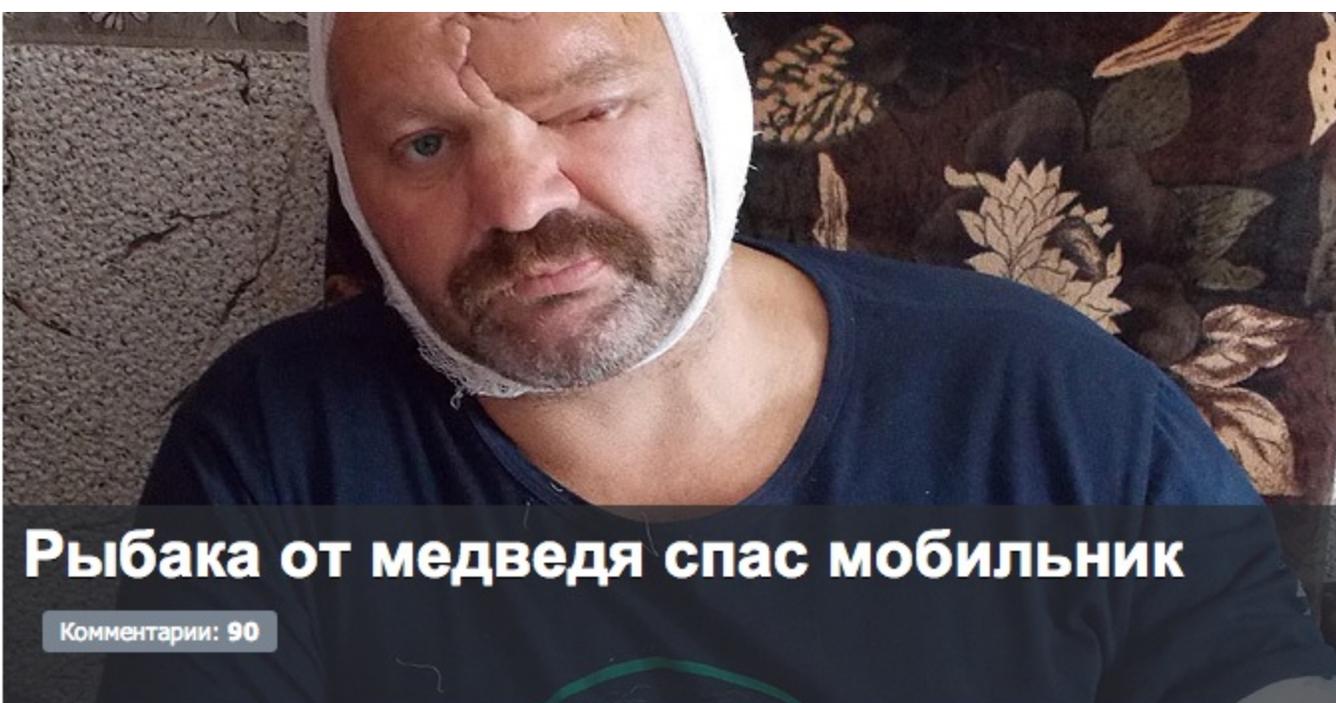
Рыбака от медведя спас мобильник

Комментарии: 90

Зверь-людоед, испугавшись сигнала телефона, бросил растерзанную жертву в тайге

Сообщения об участившихся в Якутии нападениях медведей на людей 53-летний житель Нерюнгри Игорь Ворожбицын проигнорировал, мол, за свою жизнь не раз встречался нос к носу с косолапыми и все обходилось. Поэтому как обычно без опаски отправился на рыбалку в соседний Алданский район. От дороги мужчина пошел по ручью, к зимовью, где обычно останавливался на рыбалку. Из оружия только нож на поясе, в руках – удочки, за спиной – рюкзак.

Временами накрапывающий дождь заставил набросить плотный длинный плащ. Через несколько километров вышел на старую автомобильную дорогу. Переобулся, привязал болотники к рюкзаку и пошел в сторону ключа Эвота, к зимовью.

Пройдя в какой-то жутковатой полной тишине метров триста, ясно почувствовал, что

That meant at some point the Justin Bieber reference was inserted. Since it appeared to be the story that set off all the others, The Austrian Times was the place to focus more attention.

Step Three: Digging into The AustrianTimes/CEN/EuroPics

It was time to learn more about the Austrian Times and also about CEN/EuroPics, and where they got the story and the photos.

I called the phone number listed for the Times and asked to speak to the main person listed on their website, but was told he wasn't available. The woman I spoke with said she didn't know the specifics of the Bieber story, but that she would check with their people in Russia. As for their reporting process, she told me:

A lot of stories are found on the wire or in local media but also from local interviews on the ground, or we speak to the reporters who wrote them; we speak to police to

get things confirmed.

That was the last real conversation I had with anyone at the Austrian Times, or at CEN/EuroPics. I soon found that the Times and the two agencies were all owned by the same man, Michael Leidig. The connection between the Times and CEN and its sister agency, EuroPics was found by performing [Whois](#) searches on all of the domains. They all came back to the same parent company and the same man, Leidig.

I called and asked to speak with him, but was told he was away on vacation and out of the country. He also didn't respond to any of my emailed questions.

In the end, there remains no proof of the Justin Bieber connection, and the people who were responsible for spreading it refused to speak or answer questions.

With a bit of work to examine the content of the story, and track it back to the original source, news organizations around the world could have avoided giving exposure to a story that included fabricated material.

Educator's Guide: Types of Online Fakes

Craig Silverman ([@craigsilverman](https://twitter.com/CraigSilverman)) is an entrepreneurial journalist and a leading expert on media errors, accuracy and verification. He is currently a fellow with the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, and recently launched Emergent.info, a real-time rumor tracker. Craig edited the Verification Handbook from the European Journalism Center and is the founder and editor of Regret the Error, a blog about media accuracy and the discipline of verification. It is now part of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, where Craig serves as adjunct faculty. He previously served as director of content for Spundge and helped launch OpenFile, an online local news startup that delivered community-driven reporting in six Canadian cities. Craig is also the former managing editor of PBS MediaShift and has been a columnist for The Globe And Mail, Toronto Star, and Columbia Journalism Review. He is the author of two award-winning non-fiction books, Regret The Error: How Media Mistakes Pollute the Press and Imperil Free Speech and Mafiaboy: A Portrait of the Hacker as a Young Man.

Rina Tsubaki ([@wildflyingpanda](https://twitter.com/wildflyingpanda))leads and manages the "Verification Handbook" and "Emergency Journalism" initiatives at the European Journalism Centre in the Netherlands. Emergency Journalism brings together resources for media professionals reporting in and about volatile situations in the digital age, and Tsubaki has frequently spoken on these topics at events, including a U.N. meeting and the International Journalism Festival. Earlier, she managed several projects focusing on the role of citizens in the changing media landscape, and in 2011 she was the lead contributor of the Internews Europe's report on the role of communication during the March 2011 Japan quake. She has also contributed to Hokkaido Shimbun, a regional daily newspaper in Japan.

The misinformation and hoaxes that flow over the Internet often fall into specific categories. Understanding what to expect can help you make the right call in a fast moving situation, and avoid giving a hoax new life.

The types of fakes fit into the following categories:

1. Real photos from unrelated events.
2. Art, ads, film and staged scenes.
3. Photoshopped images.
4. Fake accounts.
5. Altered manual retweets.
6. Fake tweets.
7. Fake websites.

1. Real photos from unrelated events

As seen during Hurricane Sandy and the Syrian conflict, images and video from past events

are frequently reuploaded and reused on social networks.

JAMIE
@jamster83

Follow

Amazing picture of hurricane #Sandy decending in New York

Reply Retweet Favorite ... More

RETWEETS
2,593

FAVORITES
558

11:51 AM - 29 Oct 2012

Flag media

During Hurricane Sandy, this photo went viral on Twitter. The original photo was published by the Wall Street Journal over a year earlier, on April 28, 2011. But this resharing of the image with a Sandy hashtag quickly attracted retweets and favorites.

Tip *Run a reverse image search to see whether there is an earlier version of the same image online.*

Source:

http://verificationhandbook.com/additionalmaterial/types-of-online-fakes.php

Football Centre
@FootballCentre

⚙ +👤 Follow

Riots have already started in Brazil. #BRA

↩ Reply 🔁 Retweet ★ Favorite ••• More

RETWEETS   FAVORITES
10,051   2,109

11:14 PM - 8 Jul 2014

This photo was shared on social networks after the game between Brazil and Germany during the World Cup in 2014. The incident in the photo actually dates back to June 2013, when a number of protests took place ahead of the World Cup. This Reuters photo capturing the scene near the Mineirao Stadium in Belo Horizonte, Brazil that June was reused by @FootballCentre and was retweeted more than 10,000 times.

Tip: *Professional photos may be misused in order to report new events. As with the earlier example, a fake can easily be spotted by running a reverse image search.*

Source: http://www.bustle.com/articles/30930-fake-brazil-riot-photos-on-twitter-arent-from-tuesdays-world-cup-loss-to-germany

Another example is a photo that claimed to show Darren Wilson, the police officer who killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. in 2014. The photo went viral on Facebook and was shared tens of thousands times. The individual in the photo is not Wilson. It's Jim McNeil, a motocross rider who died

in 2011. The photo itself is from 2006, when McNeil was injured after a crash.

Tip: *Identify who and what are captured in the photo and triangulate by comparing different sources, while of course performing a reverse image search.*

Source: http://antiviral.gawker.com/supposed-photo-of-injured-darren-wilson-is-just-some-wh-1630576562

This photo appeared on Venezuelan state-owned broadcaster VTV's programme "Con El Mazo Dando." It claimed to be proof of weapons being used by General Angel Vivasthe during the Venezuelan uprising in early 2014.

Interestingly, the same photo was found on the website of a gun store.

Tip: *Fakes may be used by the governments and state-owned media outlets to spread their political message and misinform the public.*

Source: http://elpaisperfecto.blogspot.nl/2014/02/montaje-de-diosdado-cabello-24-02-20114.html

Daily Mirror ✔
@DailyMirror

⚙ 👤 Follow

Putin put out as Russia crash out of Olympic Ice Hockey. Hey Vlad, wasn't this the one you *really* wanted to win?

↩ Reply ⟲ Retweet ★ Favorite ⋯ More

RETWEETS 21   FAVORITES 9

4:04 PM - 19 Feb 2014

The Daily Mirror used this photo when the Russian Olympic hockey team was defeated by the Finnish team at the Sochi Winter Games in 2014. The photo was originally taken a [few days earlier](#) during the game between Russia and Slovakia — a game the Russians won.

Tip: *It's common practice for some media outlets to use a photo that best describes the story, rather than one from the actual event. It's crucial to question whether images are from the actual event being described, especially on social media.*

Source:

http://www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2014/feb/19/tweets/photo-showing-sad-putin-and-medvedev-was-taken-day/

S KOREAN FERRY DISASTER
AT LEAST 36 CONFIRMED DEAD; HUNDREDS MISSING

When a ferry sank in South Korea, a FOX News report used old footage of the mother of a Mount Everest avalanche victim and portrayed it as being related to the ferry tragedy. The Korean Cultural Centre complained, as did other organizations.

Tip: *Images being used to represent an event may reflect older footage, as well as poor sensitivity about races or ethnic groups. Don't assume that the footage has been properly vetted.*

S o u r c e : http://www.smh.com.au/world/fox-news-used-images-of-random-sad-asians-in-south-korea-ferry-report-20140507-zr63g.html

27 May 2012 Last updated at 00:40 ET

Syria massacre in Houla condemned as outrage grows

This image - which cannot be independently verified - is believed to show the bodies of children in Houla awaiting burial

This is another example where a photo from an unrelated event was used in a news story. On 27 May, 2012, the BBC reported about a massacre in Syria and used the above image. It included this description: "This image - which cannot be independently verified - is believed to show the bodies of children in Houla awaiting burial." It was later identified as a photo from Iraq in 2003.

Tip: *Pay close attention to photo descriptions that flag it as not having been fully verified.*

Source: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/bbc/9293620/BBC-News-uses-Iraq-photo-to-illustrate-Syrian-massacre.html

2. Art, ads, movies and staged scenes

Users on social networks often circulate images taken from art, ads and films during real news events.

This tweet, sent during Hurricane Sandy, is actually a screen capture from an film art project entitled "Flooded McDonald's," which can be watched on Vimeo.

Tip: *Be cautious of the images that are too good to be true, and seek out reliable sources to aid with confirmation. In this case, contacting local authorities to ask about the flooding situation in Virginia Beach could have provided some necessary context.*

Source:

http://www.snopes.com/photos/natural/sandy.asp

In January 2014, The Daily Bhaskar, a daily newspaper in India, used this photo in an article entitled "Heartbreaking pic: Syrian child sleeps between graves of his parents." The photo, however, was part of art project by a Saudi Arabia-based photographer, and had been uploaded to Instagram weeks before this happened.

Tip: *Media outlets do not necessary practice verification before sharing an image or other piece of content. It's essential to perform your own verification before republishing.*

Source: http://imediaethics.org/hoax-photo-of-syrian-boy-sleeping-between-parents-graves-was-staged/?new

This photo was posted across social networks with the hashtag #SaveDonbassPeople. However, it's actually a still from the Russian war film, "The Brest Fortress."

Tip: *Check who's spreading the photo. Are they politically active on one side or another, and have they shared other questionable images?*

Source: http://www.stopfake.org/en/snapshot-of-movie-the-brest-fortress-is-being-presented-as-a-photo-of-donbass/

3. Photoshopped Images

This photo was released by North Korea's state-owned Korean Central News Agency in March 2013. When The Atlantic examined the hovercrafts, they saw that they were identical to each other. The KCNA had cloned one hovercraft to make the image more threatening.

Source:

http://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2013/03/is-this-north-korean-hovercraft-landing-photo-faked/100480/

Prior to the Sochi Games in 2014, Quebec's Minister of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology came under attack after sharing a digitally manipulated photo of two athletes. The original photo did not include Quebec-branded gloves. After sending it, the minister deleted the tweet, adding "The perils of " photoshop " ... I am myself a victim. :)" His press attache also told the media that "He didn't know before he tweeted it that the picture had been photoshopped."

Tip: *When influential people share images, they add a layer of credibility and virality to the content. But they too can be victims of fakes.*

S o u r c e : http://globalnews.ca/news/1145676/quebec-minister-tweets-photoshopped-olympic-photo/

"A shark swimming in the street in Puerto Rico after #HurricaneIrene hit."

↩ Reply ⇄ Retweet ★ Favorite ••• More

RETWEETS 15,389 FAVORITES 1,554

4:16 AM - 26 Aug 2011

The Verification Handbook's Case Study 4.2: Verifying Two Suspicious "Street Sharks" During Hurricane Sandy explained how photoshopped shark images circulated during Hurricane Sandy. In fact, street sharks made an appearance even before Sandy. When Hurricane Irene struck in 2011, this tweet went viral, introducing many to the street shark phenomenon. The original photo of the shark is found in an issue of Africa Geographic in 2005.

Tip: *Be very wary of shark images shared during hurricanes!*

Source: http://imediaethics.org/7-fake-weather-photos-to-watch-out-for-in-the-2014-hurricane-season/

This example shows how traditional media outlets sometimes publish digitally manipulated photos. The Daily Mail published the image of Tottenham footballer Emmanuel Adebayor saluting the manager after his goal during the match between Tottenham and Sunderland. The print edition included a photo that erased Chris Ramsey, standing next to the manager.

Tip: *Professional photos published by media outlets are sometimes (though rarely) altered or manipulated. This is one of the recurring type of fakes that have existed throughout our history. Verification also needs to*

be applied to non-social media content.

4. Fake account

Fake accounts are a constant presence on social networks. They are usually set up using the names of celebrities, politicians or other famous people. This unverified account claimed to belong to the son of football player David Beckham and his popstar wife, Victoria Beckham. It was created in 2011 and gathered more than 27,000 followers, in spite of having many characteristics of fake accounts.

Tip: *Twitter and Facebook verify accounts of famous/prominent people and organizations. You can spot these because they have a blue tick mark on the profile page. Second guess if there is no blue check mark, and ask them to share the evidence to authenticate the individual.*

When Pope Francis I was appointed in 2013, a fake account, @JMBergoglio, tweeted "Immensely happy to be the new Pope, Francis I." Many people, including journalists, were fooled by this account, helping propel it to 100,000 followers within a few hours. However, a quick look at the account's previous tweets reveals many questionable messages. This includes the above message which translates to, "If I'm the new pope, children will love me more than Santa Claus".

Tip: *Check previous tweets to see if they are consistent with the person.*

Source:

This Morrissey Twitter account is a unique example because it's a case where Twitter itself wrongly verified a fake account.

Tip: *While this is a rare case, this example shows that even a verified check cannot be treated as 100 percent reliable. Also remember that Twitter accounts can be hacked. In those cases, it's not the real person tweeting.*

Source:

5. Manual retweets

In 2009 Twitter introduced a retweet button that allows people to retweet the original tweet on their feed. However, many users still manually retweet by copy-pasting the original tweet with RT at the beginning. This opens up the possibility that people will alter the original message and attribute it to other users. It also means that previously deleted messages can live on as manual retweets, thereby spreading misinformation.

Tip: *Check if you can find the original tweet.*

6. Fake tweet, facebook wall posts and iPhone conversations

There are a number of tools and apps that allow people to easily create a fake tweets,

Facebook wall posts and iPhone conversations. Here's a look at some of the ones to watch out for.

- **The Wall Machine (http://thewallmachine.com/):**

  This tool can be used to create fake Facebook wall posts. After signing in with your Facebook account, you can create a profile photo, account name and comments on your imaginary post. A similar tool is from Simulator.com, where you can create a fake Facebook post and download the JPG file from the site. See an example below.

- **Lemme Tweet That For You**

  (http://lemmetweetthatforyou.com):

  This tool is used to fabricate an embeddable and sharable fake tweet with a customizable username, body text, and number of RTs and favorites. Simulator.com also has a tool to create a fake tweet and download it as a JPG image file.

FakePhoneText (http://www.fakephonetext.com/):

This tool is used to create and download a image of fake iPhone message conversation. You can set the name and content of the messages, as well also the cell network, time, type of connection (i.e. 3G, WIFI) and battery status. There is also another text message generator called iOS7 Text.

7. Fake websites

It may look real, but this wasn't the authentic New York Post website. It was created to raise awareness about climate change. It's relatively easy to copy a website and set it up on a different web address — and to fool people in the process. That was what Wikileaks did when it set up a fake copy of The New York Times' website in order to promote an equally fake op-ed by columnist Bill Keller:

The differences were subtle, and even some New York Times journalists were fooled.

Tip: *Check the URL, and search on different search engines to see if the URL matches*

with the top hits for that property. If unsure about a URL, perform a Whois search to see who owns the domain, and when it was first registered.