

Meet the Mysterious Creator of Rumor-Debunking Site Snopes.com

Cheryl Eddy November 6, 2014

[Snopes.com](#) creator David Mikkelsen has been calling out [scuttlebutt] on the Internet for two decades. (There's no [antifreeze in Fireball](#), people ... merely the makings of a very regrettable hangover.) We caught up with Mikkelsen to find out where Snopes came from, and what's next for the site.

Mikkelsen named the site after an early Internet alias, itself a nod to the Snopes family of criminals and tenant farmers in several William Faulkner novels. With a long-planned redesign and expansion of the site finally in the works, he'll soon have an even better platform for disproving all those wild stories in your Facebook feed.

io9.com: When and why did you start the site?

David Mikkelsen: It started about 20 years ago. I worked for a large computer company back in the days when only universities, the Department of Defense, and computer companies were on the Internet. I was a participant in an old Usenet newsgroup that had to do with urban legends. But in newsgroups, things would scroll off and disappear after a few weeks. So when the first graphical browser came out, I started writing up things for the web.

Since I was an early adopter, it quickly became the place where everybody sent every questionable thing they saw on the Internet. It took a left turn from what I was intending it to be. It became more of a reference and fact-checking site than just an urban-legends site.

What's it like, knowing you oversee *the reference point for anyone needing to debunk anything online?*

It's kind of interesting to be sort of anonymously famous. Everywhere you go, even in other countries, you run into people who know about [Snopes.com], but of course no one recognizes me! People are always trying to tell me that it has vastly more influence than I realize. [Laughs.] I hope not!

How have urban legends changed along with the Internet, now that so much "news" is disseminated via social media?

Technically all those [viral news stories] aren't urban legends, because urban legends are stories, narratives with a moral.

Like the killer with the hook!

Yeah! [Laughs.] It's pretty much, everything that's questionable gets turned into an urban legend. Of course, things spread much more quickly now. Debunkings never keep pace with the original false items, because the corrections aren't nearly as interesting. A lot has changed, even with what I do — it used to be, say, for a picture or video to go viral, people would forward it to each other by email, and it took weeks for it to build up. There'd be plenty of lead time to try and figure out where it came from, and whether it was real.

Now, it's much more ephemeral; things come and go so quickly. People post a funny video on Facebook, and 20 minutes later it's a headline in the *New York Post* or something. There's much less time to identify them and write about them.

Are people more gullible than they used to be?

No. Technology changes, but human nature doesn't. But perhaps it's made it a lot easier for others to exploit people's gullibility.

Do you still get most of your tips via email?

It used to be mostly seeing what people were sending in email, and seeing what terms people were entering into our search engine. But, again, that's greatly changed. We have to be scanning what's hitting on Facebook, and what's going around on Twitter. We can't depend on people coming to us, necessarily, so we have to know how to mine social media, Reddit, things like that, and see what's popular.

How do you go about debunking rumors (or proving them)? Is each post kind of its own exercise in investigative journalism?

It's a common question, but it's hard to say, because it can be quite different depending on what the nature of the item is. Some of it's just basic reading comprehension — like, someone's asking if there's a bill before Congress makes it legal to run over frogs or something. [Laughs.] If you actually read the text of the bill, you can determine that it doesn't actually say that.

Other items are fairly easy to research online. But other things, you actually have to track down people, email them or call them. Older stories might involve traditional methods, like books and magazines. It's pretty varied. But certainly things are a lot easier now — with, like, image search, you can trace back the origins of an image without having to hope you just stumble across it like we did 20 years ago. Really, there's nothing magical or surprising about it. People often seem to think that we have some mystical ability to divine the truth. A Magic 8-Ball or something. But it's all the kind of stuff you'd expect.