

# Pop goes the Internet hoax

## How learning to lie will find you the truth



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Alfonso Ribeiro, Fresh Prince of Bel-Air alum and recent victim of an online death hoax. (Nikki Nelson/WENN.com)

Fake is the new real.

We live in a world where natural flavours mean artificial flavours, where reality means fictitious, and where viral lies become infectious truths.

So how do we even know what's real anymore?

The eve before Halloween, in 1938, Orson Welles presented his radio play adaptation of The War of the Worlds. Broadcast as if it were a news bulletin, widespread panic snowballed throughout North America, as listeners believed martians had taken over Earth.

Pop culture hoaxes are nothing new, but with social media these deceptions can quickly grow into memes, revelations, and mainstream news stories.

As Washington Post columnist @geneweingarten tweeted, "Q: What was the greatest hoax ever perpetrated? A: We don't know, do we?"

In 2010, Wellesley College researchers found that with the advent of real-time search results, content from Twitter, blogs and news sites were loaded to the first page of searches within minutes of their generation. They argued that this presented a new opportunity for information to spread quicker, increasing our exposure to "personal opinions, fabricated content, unverified events, lies and misrepresentations."

We put so much trust in Google that it has become gospel.

Simply seek a random living celebrity's death and you just may find it – likely at the hand of serial killer Twitter.

Recently, Bill Cosby died – for the fifth time – along with Morgan Freeman, Rihanna, Eddie Murphy and Bill Nye the Science Guy. Perhaps only once a celebrity stops trending on Twitter should we worry about his or her existence.

As @sportsology tweeted, “There should be a social media rule that you can't post #RIP unless you've looked up at least one real source to see if it's true.”

But it has gone far beyond dead-lebrities and elaborate hoaxes. It's now insidious little lies that fuel our fodder.

The other week false reports ran rampant that Samsung paid Apple a \$1 billion fine in 30 truckloads of nickels.

Over a year ago, a quote erroneously attributed to Betty White went viral, to be passed around to this day.

A couple of months ago – for the second time in two years – Back to the Future fans were duped into believing it was the “future date” from the movie. McFlys!

After the Royal Wedding, you couldn't escape pictures from Cinderella online, showing almost exact likeness between the cartoon characters and real-life royals. Too bad the pictures had been doctored.

Perhaps only by learning to lie like these frauds, can we learn to find the truth.

T. Mills Kelly, a professor at George Mason University in Virginia, instructs Lying About The Past, a course that encourages participants to create sophisticated – but innocuous – historical fables, then let them loose on the Internet. After two weeks, everyone comes clean about the fabrications.

“Because they had to create plausible ‘false facts’ to support their hoaxes, my students became much closer readers of historical sources,” writes Kelly in his article “Teaching students to lie.”

And the professor taught them well. Though he cautioned the public of the impending stunts, one of his student's stories made its way through Facebook and Twitter, only to land in USA Today – one of the largest papers in America.

“Despite many stern warnings from teachers or parents, too often students uncritically accept what they find online, especially if it is served up in the first page of Google search results,” notes Kelly. “Of course, the same can be said of both scholars and society as a whole.”

So be critical, be skeptical and learn to be a liar.

And, with that, it's time to announce that this is the last #eSaidSheSaid column.

Or is it?

## DID YOU KNOW

Celebrities falsely reported as dead include: Gordon Lightfoot, Miley Cyrus, Jon Bon Jovi, Hilary Duff, Adam Sandler, Alfonso Ribeiro, Jim Carrey, Lindsay Lohan, Paris Hilton and Justin Bieber.

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## POLL

Have you ever been duped by a celebrity death hoax?

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**Yes**

**18**  
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