

False Reporting on the Internet and the Spread of Rumors: Three Case Studies

Paul Hitlin
Fall 2003

Following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, a significant number of unsubstantiated rumors circulated around the Internet. One email pointed to the existence of prophecies by Nostradamus written hundreds of years earlier that predicted the attacks. Another accused Israel of masterminding the strikes and that thousands of Jews were told in advance to stay home from work that morning. The Internet allowed for a vast audience to spread these rumors along with the technology to facilitate their transmission, even though there was little evidence to support them and the rumors were later proven incorrect. Considering this spread of rumors, Stephen O'Leary (2002) writes:

What may be hard for mainstream journalists to understand is that, in crisis situations, the social functions of rumor are virtually indistinguishable from the social functions of 'real news.' People spread rumors via the Net for the same reason that they read their papers or tune into CNN: they are trying to make sense of their world. (pg. 3)

O'Leary claims that these rumors fill a need for consumers of news that is very similar to the void that 'real news' fills. However, are the consequences the same? These Internet rumors help people to make sense of their world following a tragedy, although the lasting consequences are potentially much more harmful.

The Internet is certainly not responsible for errors in journalism. Every medium of news has a history of misreported stories. However, the nature of the Internet has created a new method for consumers to get their news and allowed for far greater numbers of people to become involved with the production and dissemination of news. As a consequence, cyberjournalism and the Internet have had real effects on both the process of reporting and subsequent public discourse.

How are errors in Internet journalism corrected online? What are the overarching consequences of errors that appear on Internet web sites? Jim Hall (2001) believes that one

problem with instant news appearing on the Internet is that the way errors are handled does not adequately address the fact that an error was made. He writes, “The problem with instant news is that when it is wrong it tends to be buried, sedimenting into and reinforcing its context, rather than corrected” (p. 133). Errors of Internet reporting do not often get identified and corrected as they do in newspapers. Instead, even if the editors of the Web site where the error first appeared change their site to remove the error, often the same false information will have already spread throughout other Web sites and emails. These rumors can become part of a public folklore even if there are no facts to support the original reports.

This paper will first consider Hall’s assertion that errors are buried rather than corrected, and will examine the reasons Internet reporting leads to false reports. Then, three case studies of significant false reports on the Internet will be compared to the theories behind cyberjournalism in order to understand why the errors occurred and the impacts of these stories. Investigating these three examples will help us to begin to understand how we can decrease the influence of false reports in the future.

The first case study is the plane crash of TWA flight 800 in 1996. Even before full investigations were conducted, the Internet was full of reports of missiles or other causes behind the crash, the impacts of which would reach as far as the White House. The second case study will examine Matt Drudge’s report that former White House special assistant Sidney Blumenthal physically abused his wife. The third case study will take a look at the pervasive rumors that the death of former Bill Clinton aide Vince Foster was a murder, not a suicide, even though numerous investigations have concluded that these accusations are unsupported. This incident is a clear example of how partisan politics can play a role in the spread of false reports on the

Internet.

There has been much discussion about what distinguishes a ‘journalist’ working for a mainstream news source from a self-titled ‘reporter’ who never leaves his/her computer and instead just links to reports on other sites. While these distinctions are important and worth discussing, it will not be within the realm of this study to draw out these distinctions. Instead, this paper will consider news reports that appear on the Internet regardless of whether or not the site displaying the report considers itself a news source. As we will see, public opinion can often be influenced as much from rumors on sites with little credibility as it can from more mainstream sources.

Reasons for Cyberjournalism Errors

Before considering the specific cases of false reporting, it is important to understand why the nature of the Internet may encourage reporting errors. Philip Seib (2001) points out that the Internet is not alone in containing factual errors. He writes, “the Web really is little different from other media in terms of its potential to abuse and be abused and its capability for self-governance” (pp. 129 - 130). The Internet itself, the actual technology, can not be held responsible for false reports since those reports have existed in all forms of media. However, there are qualities of the Internet and the manner in which news is reported on the Web that create differences in how frequently errors appear and what results as a consequence.

The causes of most cyberjournalism errors can be separated into four main categories. Let us now turn to each cause and examine it in turn.

1. The Need for Speed

The first and probably most significant reason for false reporting on the Internet is the 24-hour a day news cycle that the Internet promotes. With the development of newspapers, the news cycle was a daylong process that ended with having a story included in the next day's edition of the paper. This cycle changed with the expansion of cable television channels devoted entirely to news such as CNN and later MSNBC and Fox News. The cycle was expanded even further by the development of the Internet which is available to consumers 24-hours a day. Because of the constant need to keep both cable television and the Internet supplied with new information, expectations of news deadlines have shifted. As Seib notes, in the current information age, the deadline for reporters is always 'now' (p. 142).

Competitive pressures have also contributed to an emphasis being placed more on timeliness than accuracy. A number of Internet sites, such as Matt Drudge's *Drudge Report*, are one-person operations that issue reports on gossip and rumor without being constrained by traditional standards of reporting. These sites apply pressure to other news organizations to be the first to report a story or risk being scooped. Drudge himself believes that "absolute truth matters less than absolute speed" (Seib, 2001, p. 143). He also suggests that since we live in an information economy, complete accuracy is not possible or even necessary. Drudge focuses instead on immediacy and believes that the Web encourages this type of reporting (Hall, 2002, p. 148).

The pressure on reporters to be the first with a story has detracted from more traditional methods of journalism. Because the goal used to be to get a report into the next day's newspaper or that evening's nightly news television broadcast, reporters had more time for fact-checking.

The 24-hour-a-day news cycle has decreased the time reporters have to assure accuracy and as a result, many errors found on the Internet can be attributed to the competitive pressure for journalists to be the first to break a specific news story.

2. The Desire to Attract 'Hits'

Competition among Web sites is also a cause for some false reports. Web sites have financial incentives to attract visitors to their sites, whether it is through advertising or a desire to widen the site's influence. Hall argues that journalism on the Web has promoted the idea that news is 'infotainment' and more at the mercy of the demands of the marketplace than to its audiences (Hall, 2001, p. 155). Web sites must fill the desires of consumers, or risk losing those consumers to other sites that either get the information first or are even more sensational in their reporting.

Furthermore, with the ability of Internet users to visit almost any news source in the world, as opposed to being confined to their local newspapers or television stations, the competition on the Web exacerbates the desire of sites to get the story first. Most news sites are updated several times a day, and competition forces those sites to get the story first or risk being thought of as irrelevant or out-of-date.

3. Political Gains

The specific source of many Internet rumors is often difficult to ascertain. However, certain rumors on the Internet are clearly promoted for partisan political gain and to advance a particular ideology.

Even after four investigations came to the same conclusions about Vince Foster's death, certain political groups were still spreading false reports in order to promote their own cause. For example, a fund-raising letter sent out by anti-Clinton groups asked for \$1,000 donations in order to support the "Clinton Investigation Commission" which would investigate the claim that Foster was murdered (Piacente, 1997). Opponents of the Clinton administration perpetuated this false report to the exclusion of evidence in the case. These anti-Clinton groups were less concerned with accuracy than with forwarding a partisan agenda and the persistence of this specific rumor can be attributed to their political motives.

4. Attraction to Scandal

News, and specifically news on the Web, is often led by scandal and the concept of the spectacular rather than issues of depth (Hall, 2001, p. 137). For example, reports that TWA flight 800 was brought down by a missile were much more exciting than a report that a technical problem in the plane caused the crash. While some sites did wait for investigations into the cause of the crash to make conclusions about what actually brought the plane down, other sites used more dramatic rumors of missile fire to headline their reports. The competition between sites on the Web and the ability for consumers to move rapidly between those sites furthers the need for reporters to lead with scandal in order to catch consumers' attention. This desire for the spectacular, along with an emphasis on scandal, often leads to other false reports on the Internet.

Correction Policy, Social Cascades, and Online Credibility

Now that we have seen the four main reasons errors are found on the Internet, another

key issue to understand is how those mistakes are corrected. There is still no singular method that Web sites use to correct errors, but as Seib (2001) writes:

The easiest way to fix a mistake is simply to erase it and replace it with the correct information. That is a temptation unique to electronic publication, since there is no “original” version in the print or video archives...This is fine for readers who come to the site after the correction has been made. But failure to post a formal notice of correction implies that there was never an error, and that is less than honest. (pp. 154 - 155)

The question of how to correct a mistake once it is discovered that causes Hall to suggest that the nature of Internet journalism reinforces the error’s context rather than corrects the false information. While some retractions are clearly posted, as was the case with Matt Drudge following the accusations against Sidney Blumenthal, often the error has already spread to other sources. As a result, whether or not the original source is corrected no longer matters because the information will have already moved onto other places on the Web.

The result of this spread of Internet rumors is a phenomenon described by Cass Sunstein as one of ‘social cascades.’ Sunstein suggests that groups of people often move together in a direction of one set of beliefs or actions. He refers to this as a cascade effect (Sunstein, 2002, p. 80). Information can travel and become entrenched even if that information is incorrect. Sunstein argues that the Internet, with its wide reach and seemingly unending amount of Web sites and emails, greatly increases the likelihood of social cascades. Rumors can be passed to many users and spread quickly. The result is that the information appears believable solely due to the fact that the information has been repeated so many times. Richard Davis (1999) sums up the potential danger of this phenomenon:

Anyone can put anything on the Internet and seemingly does. Often, one cannot be sure of the reliability of the information provided. Reliability diminishes exponentially as the information is passed from user to user and e-mail list to e-mail list until it acquires a degree of legitimacy by virtue of its widespread dissemination and constant repetition. (p. 44)

A number of other factors also contribute to the believability of information passed on the Internet. Richard Davis and Diana Owen (1998) discuss many of the reasons why ‘new media,’ consisting of the Internet, talk radio, and interactive television, often engage users in different ways than previous forms of news. They claim that much of new media relies on active participation by users rather than a more passive relationship between users and newspapers or earlier television programs. Davis and Owen describe the influence of this connection:

The degree of involvement or interactivity with media is linked to the level of an audience member’s media consumption and the strength of the effects of the communication. People who have a highly active relationship with a particular medium, such as callers to talk radio programs, may be more likely to establish a regular habit of attending to the medium and are more likely to be influenced by content than those whose acquaintance with the communication source is more casual. (p. 160)

Internet users who participate in online activities are not only more likely to be influenced by content they see online, but new media has a capacity to create strong psychological bonds between users and the media source. Davis and Owen add, “Individuals form personal relationships with their television sets and their computers. They treat computers as if they are people, talking to them, ascribing personalities to them and reacting to them emotionally when computers hand out praise or criticism during an interactive sessions” (p. 160). Users have greater influence over the content of media on the Web than in previous forms of media, whether it results from emailing articles of interest or responding to online polls and questionnaires. These interactions contribute to the perceived credibility that Internet users ascribe to information they receive over the Web. Stories that might be disregarded as false had they been disseminated through other forms of media often facilitate a social cascade effect if that information is spread online.

Having considered both why errors appear on the Internet and the difficulty in effectively correcting false information, let us now consider three cases of prominent false reports on the Internet and how those instances were handled.

Case Study One: The Crash of TWA Flight 800 in 1996

A clear example of how constant repetition of an erroneous report can result in widespread belief can be seen in the wake of the crash of TWA Flight 800. On July 17, 1996, the passenger flight left JFK International Airport in New York en route to Paris, but tragically crashed into the Long Island Sound. All 230 passengers and crew on board died.

Almost immediately, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) began investigating the causes of the crash and rumors started to spread throughout the Internet as to what led to the tragedy. Three main theories quickly surfaced as to what caused the crash: the crash was an act of terrorism conducted from onboard the flight; a mechanical malfunction was responsible for bringing down the plane; or the plane was shot down by a surface-to-air missile (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 104).

Some evidence initially indicated the crash could be a result of terrorism, either an onboard bomb or a projectile fired at the plane from the ground. The accident took place several days before the beginning of the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, which later became a target of a bombing attack. Some observers felt the timing of the plane crash indicated that it was somehow connected to international terrorism. In addition, numerous eyewitnesses reported having seen a streak of light approaching the plane before the explosion (Charles, 2001, p. 218). As the NTSB and the FBI began to investigate, numerous signals from the federal government

indicated that all three potential theories were in play. As much as six months into a very public investigation, the NTSB was still declaring that all three theories remained as possibilities (Negroni, 2001). This did not change until March of 1997, when federal investigators began to dismiss theories of a missile bringing TWA Flight 800 down, claiming there was “no physical evidence” of such an attack (CNN.com, 1997).

As the investigation into the crash progressed and began to rule out terrorism, rumors persisted throughout the Internet that a government cover-up was concealing the real causes. At the forefront of those rumors was Pierre Salinger, a former press secretary to John F. Kennedy and correspondent for ABC News. Salinger insisted that he had a letter from French intelligence proving that a U.S. Navy missile ship shot down TWA Flight 800, and the FBI was covering up the act. Salinger’s claims were reported in numerous news outlets. In addition, Salinger and several other journalists published a report in *Paris Match* stating that radar images existed that proved that a missile hit the plane (Harper, 1998, p. 85).

Salinger’s credentials and his unwillingness to give up on his theory lent great credibility to the missile story. Many people on the Internet who believed the government was trying to hide something picked up on his writings. Interestingly enough, the letter that Salinger claimed had come from French intelligence was instead a memo that had been circulating on the Internet for several months written by a former United Air Lines pilot named Richard Russell.¹ As Mark Hunter writes in his Salon.com article, Salinger’s insistence on promoting his conspiracy theory of both the missile and the FBI cover-up, even with scare evidence, actually harmed the real

¹For complete text of the Internet letter written by Russell, see (Harper, 1998, pp. 85-86)

investigation by causing a significant distraction for investigators. It also caused further psychological stress on the family members of the victims of the crash who were forced to revisit the circumstances as a result of these repeated allegations.

By the time the NTSB issued its final report on the crash in August of 2000, much of the talk of conspiracy theories relating to the crash had disappeared. In 2001, the Federal Aviation Agency (FAA) acted in response to what was believed to be the actual cause of the crash and issued safety rules to minimize flammable vapors and decrease the risk of a tank igniting (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 117). However, the consequences of the crash rumors can be seen both in continuing public discourse and actions taken by upper levels of the federal government.

The immediate rumors following the crash about a possible bomb or missile attack led to direct government action. In the days that followed the accident, before much hard evidence was discovered, President Clinton issued a tightening of security at airports throughout the country in order to try to prevent any acts of terrorism (Cobb & Primo, 2003, p. 106). Clinton later created the White House Commission on Aviation Safety, led by Vice President Al Gore, which issued recommendations for improving airline safety (Cobb & Primo, 2003, pp. 110-111). Just the possibility of a terrorist or missile attack was enough for the federal government to react strongly and tighten security.

What role did the Internet play in promoting and maintaining the false rumors about the crash of TWA Flight 800? Internet sites were not alone in reporting the rumors about the crash. Many newspapers, including the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*, also reported the possibilities of a bomb or terror attack (Cobb & Primo, 2003, pp. 107-108). However, the Internet did allow for certain aspects of the story to persist even when the evidence against the

rumors was mounting. For one thing, a letter written by Richard Russell that circulated by email throughout the Internet played a key role in Salinger's claims about a government cover-up. Whether or not Salinger knew the true source of the letter, the circulation of the note alone added some perceived credibility to the rumor. This Internet 'error' was not corrected and removed. Instead, as Hall suggested, the nature of the Internet embedded the rumor. The circulation continued even after the NTSB determined it was false: a clear example of a social cascade facilitated by the Internet, moving many to believe the government was hiding information and not telling the full story about the crash.

To further this notion about the impact of these rumors, one only has to look to the Internet today, more than seven years after the crash, to see how public discourse has been influenced. While the Internet is full of conspiracy theories and anti-government rhetoric, a simple search can still find many Web sites that maintain that the TWA crash was a government cover-up. A clear example is the Web site *whatreallyhappened.com*. One can still go to this site at any time and read about how the government is hiding secrets and promoting beliefs that the "witnesses who saw a missile hit the jumbo jet are all drunks" (*whatreallyhappened.com*, 2002). To any person deciding to conduct research into the causes of this plane crash today, the Internet is a rich resource consisting of both facts about the accident and significant rumor and innuendo.

Case Study Two: Sidney Blumenthal vs. Matt Drudge and Internet Libel

While some Internet rumors persist on numerous Web sites, others can be linked more closely with one specific site, as is the case with a report that appeared on Matt Drudge's Web

site, *drudgereport.com*, in 1997. Matt Drudge's one-man newsroom is most well known for breaking the story about President Bill Clinton's Oval Office affair with a White House intern. Along with breaking that story, Drudge has had 'exclusives' with a number of other stories, some of which turned out not to be true at all. Included among these was the report that Bill Clinton had fathered an illegitimate black son, a report that was later proven to be false (Hall, 2001, p. 129).

On August 8, 1997, Drudge chose to report on his Web site allegations about White House special assistant Sidney Blumenthal. Writing about a Republican operative who was facing allegations of spousal abuse, Drudge issued the 'exclusive' on his Web site that included the following:

The Drudge Report has learned that top GOP operatives who feel there is a double-standard of only reporting [sic] shame believe they are holding an ace card: New White House recruit Sidney Blumenthal has a spousal abuse past that has been effectively covered up. The accusations are explosive. "There are court records of Blumenthal's violence against his wife," one influential Republican [sic], who demanded anonymity, tells the *Drudge Report*. (Blumenthal, 2003, pp. 239-240)

Drudge goes on to write that one White House source claimed the allegations were entirely false and that Drudge had been unsuccessful in his attempts to contact Blumenthal regarding these charges.

Three problems existed for Drudge in relation to this story. First, no court records existed that claimed Blumenthal abused his wife. Second, Drudge had not in fact made any attempts to contact Blumenthal. And third, Sidney Blumenthal decided to sue Matt Drudge and the Internet carrier of his column, American Online (AOL), for libel after other conservative news sources such as the *New York Post* and talk radio programs picked up the story (Blumenthal, 2003, p. 241).

This false Internet report was unique in that the origin of the rumor on the Web was clear along with who was responsible for spreading the rumor. Because of this, Blumenthal did have an opportunity to confront his accuser, which he did the day after the report first appeared. Blumenthal and his lawyer sent a letter to Drudge demanding to know the sources of the report. If Drudge did not comply, Blumenthal threatened to take “appropriate action” (Blumenthal, 2003, p. 244). In direct response to the threat, Drudge printed a retraction on his Web site that read, “I am issuing a retraction of my information regarding Sidney Blumenthal that appeared in the Drudge Report on August 11, 1997” (Blumenthal, 2003, p. 247). Drudge never officially apologized for the specific claim, although he was quoted as saying, “I apologize if any harm has been done. The story was issued in good faith. It was based on two sources who clearly were operating from a political motivation” (Kurtz, 1997).

While the lawsuit proceeded against Drudge with the blessing of President Clinton and the White House, the final result was not nearly as dramatic as the initial report. In May of 2001, Drudge and Blumenthal settled the suit out of court, and Blumenthal agreed to pay \$2,500 to Drudge to reimburse travel expenses (Kurtz, 2001). Blumenthal claimed that he settled the suit because Drudge had endless financial backing from conservative groups and the suit was doing little more than providing additional exposure for Drudge (Blumenthal, 2003, p. 784). One interesting side note to this case is that early in the process, a U.S. District judge had ruled that the Internet service provider, AOL, could not be a defendant in the libel case even though they had paid Drudge for his work. This decision was a significant victory for Internet service providers in protecting them from lawsuits concerning the content that appears on their own Web sites (Swartz, 1998).

Unlike the rumors about the TWA crash, this case study is much clearer in terms of who was responsible for placing the rumor online. Defamation of character is common in the Internet world, but Blumenthal viewed his lawsuit as an opportunity to make a larger point, “bringing the Internet under the same law that applied to the rest of the press” (Blumenthal, 2003, p. 471). Judging exactly how successful he was in doing so and whether future Internet sites will be as willing to publish unsubstantiated rumors is difficult. Drudge, for one, continues to publish numerous stories with seemingly little fear about being incorrect. However, this example does illustrate one occurrence where a retraction was issued on the same Internet site as the original error. Did the retraction correct the harm that resulted from a false story? Clearly Sidney Blumenthal did not feel so and continued his libel lawsuit even after the retraction was issued.

In addition, this news report was more a result of a partisan political agenda than it was an issue of Drudge trying to beat his competition by issuing an exclusive story not available on any other site. Drudge has been accused by many of having strong ties to conservative political groups who may have planted the Blumenthal story, but there seem to be no indications that other news sites were in competition with Drudge to be the first to issue this report. He would not thus have been facing a shortened time to check sources and facts. Drudge himself acknowledged that his sources for this story were acting on their own political agenda.

Case Study Three: The Suicide of White House Aide Vince Foster

Unlike the previous case study, the origins of the rumors involving the suicide of White House Aide Vince Foster are less clear. On July 20, 1993, the body of Vince Foster was discovered in a park in Washington, D.C. Foster had apparently committed suicide, and much of

the initial evidence pointed to a self-inflicted gunshot wound as the cause of death. He had been showing tremendous signs of stress as he found himself the subject of political battles in Washington and a number of accusations against the Clinton administration. Foster had reportedly been very upset about the attention he was receiving in the “Travelgate” scandal and his role in questions about billing records involving Hillary Clinton and Whitewater investments (Tisdall, 1994). However, immediately after his body was found, rumors began circulating the Internet suggesting that Foster’s death had not been a suicide. These reports claimed that the death was a murder that was covered-up by members of the Clinton administration who felt Foster knew too much about the Whitewater investigation being conducted by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr.

Rumors of unresolved questions within the investigation of Foster’s death began to spread throughout the Internet by members of conservative activist groups who made no secret of their hatred of President Clinton. Why was there no suicide note? Why were the keys on Foster’s body not found at the scene, but only later, once the body was moved? What did the torn note say that was found near the body? Why were records missing from Vince Foster’s office after the body was found? Those looking for sensational stories and rumors involving this story did not have to look hard on the Internet to find them.

The cascade effect of this story reached remarkable levels. Numerous Web sites published the rumor that Foster’s death was a murder, including Matt Drudge’s site (Scheer, 1999). Presidential candidate Pat Buchanan received criticism in 1996 by Jewish groups after an article published on his official campaign Web site claimed that Foster’s death was ordered by Israel and that Hillary Clinton was secretly working as a Mossad agent (O’Dwyer, 1996). Rush

Limbaugh, a conservative radio talk-show host, mentioned the accusations on his radio program and Representative John Linder, Republican of Georgia, even inserted the accusation into the record at Congressional hearings involving the Whitewater scandal (*Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 1994). In fact, the rumors of murder were so persistent on the Internet and other mediums that a Time/CNN poll taken in 1995 during the Senate hearings of the aftermath of Foster's death showed that only 35 percent of respondents believed Foster's death was a suicide. Twenty percent believed he had been murdered (Weiner, 1995).

Rumors of a Clinton-led cover-up have continued to exist even after four separate investigations, conducted by the U.S. Park Police, the FBI, Special Counsel Robert Fiske, and Independent Counsel Ken Starr, all came to the same conclusion: Foster's death was a suicide. The persistent refusal to accept the conclusions of these investigations is demonstrated in a 1998 editorial in *The Augusta Chronicle* written five years after Foster's death. "Imagine [Ken Starr] ruling the Vince Foster killing a suicide when not one item of evidence would indicate suicide, but numerous items indicate obvious murder!" (*The Augusta Chronicle*, 1998).

Much of the persistent nature of these specific rumors can be traced to partisan political groups. Richard Scaife, a wealthy financier of many anti-Clinton groups, has been quoted as saying, "The death of Vincent Foster: I think that's the Rosetta Stone to the whole Clinton Administration" (Weiner, 1995). Scaife has supported groups, such as the Western Journalism Center, that have included work by Christopher Ruddy, a reporter who was dismissed by the *New York Post* for pursuing cover-up theories relating to the death. Ruddy, who refers to himself as part of the 'vast right-wing conspiracy' described by Hillary Clinton, has written and published numerous articles attacking both the Clinton administration and the Foster

investigations. Even today, reports written by Ruddy questioning the investigations' findings can be found online (www.newsmax.com/ruddy/). In addition, fund-raising letters for conservative groups, including a 1997 letter from a group called "Clinton Investigation Committee," have been used to raise money to continue various investigations against Clinton, including the Foster case (Piacente, 1997). These organizations, Web sites, newspaper articles, and fund-raising letters, have all helped to perpetuate the rumors that Vince Foster's death was a murder, and somehow the Clinton administration was involved.

Because these rumors have persisted for years, their existence cannot be attributed to the timing pressure of the Internet news cycle. Instead, the theories involving Foster's death are a result of the desire for the sensational and partisan political efforts, in this instance from groups who opposed Bill Clinton. The possibility of a printed retraction seems impractical and would likely have no effect, since, unlike the Blumenthal case, there was no one specific site that started the rumors on the Internet, and because the rumors have extended far beyond the Internet into newspapers and even among members of Congress. The cascade effect of all of these rumors is that a certain contingent, in this case opponents of Bill Clinton, continues to believe that the Clintons were responsible for Vince Foster's death. The political consequences for such accusations, even after they have been disproved, can be far reaching because false information has the potential to unreasonably decrease the public's faith in public officials and the competency of their government.

Conclusion

The expansion of the Internet has great potential for promoting political discourse and

allowing for far more citizens to be involved with the production and dissemination of news.

Davis and Owen (1998) describe this positive potential:

Increasingly, computer networks have become tools for political communication as well. Users gather political information, express their opinions, and mobilize other citizens and political leaders. The information superhighway is fast becoming an electronic town hall where anyone with a personal computer and a modem can learn about the latest bill introduced in Congress, join an interest group, donate money to a political candidate, or discuss politics with people they have never seen who may live half a world away. (pg. 110)

However, as these three case studies have shown, the potential for the Internet to be a conduit of false information or the spreading of rumors is also significant. The dilemma for those who are concerned about the role the Internet will play in the future of democracy will be to discover how to balance the positive democratizing aspects with the potentially harmful aspects that include the spread of false reports and misleading information.

The main goal of this investigation was to examine how errors of Internet reporting are handled online. These three case studies demonstrate that there is no single method as to how Internet errors are corrected. When one source for a rumor exists, as was the case with the Blumenthal story, a retraction is possible on that initial source which can somewhat lessen the impact of the false story. However, even that example was picked up by other mainstream newspaper and radio sources.

This study then supports Hall's assertion that the nature of the Internet reinforces the context of errors rather than corrects them. As seen with the Vince Foster case, significant numbers of people believed that his death was a murder even after several investigations had concluded otherwise. Public discourse was not shifted entirely even after the early reports were disproved or corrected. In fact, in all three of the cases presented here, the Internet rumors and false reports were picked up by other sources and continued to spread even after evidence

pointed to contrary facts.

Another substantial conclusion that can be ascertained from this investigation is that Sunstein's assessment of social cascades is valid in regards to errors on the Internet. For those people who are interested in finding evidence to support their views, even if the evidence itself is questionable, the Internet can be a tremendous facilitator. And the reach of the influence of these reports is not just to conspiracy theorists. Their impact can be seen even in actions taken by government officials, such as President Clinton after the crash of TWA flight 800. These social cascades can have important political consequences, whether on airline safety regulations or in the perceptions of political figures. A connection appears to exist between the capabilities of the Internet and the vastness of the social cascading that can occur as a result of rumor and innuendo.

How, then, should the potential for social cascading as a result of misleading information be balanced with the positive potential of the Internet? Not all scholars agree that the implications of an 'anything goes' attitude of Internet reporting is entirely negative. Davis and Owen (1998) make an argument relating to old media that an increase of tabloid journalism may not be entirely destructive because it "can foster a sense of intimacy with the public," and also attract viewers to news sources (pg. 209). This same line of reasoning can be applied to the Internet sites such as Matt Drudge's that spread rumor while using standards for verification that are less than those that are utilized by traditional media. Consequently, it is possible that the lowering of journalistic norms that is apparent online will not have entirely negative consequences if the result encourages more people to search for news and connect with other Internet users.

Even if it is true that the Internet's impact on journalism and the increase of false reports

is not entirely negative, this investigation has demonstrated that harmful effects can result from the cascade effects of misinformation. The question that arises from this investigation is regarding how to control or combat the prevalence of errors on the Internet. Sidney Blumenthal acknowledged that one of the goals of his lawsuit against Drudge was to bring the Internet under the same type of libel laws that newspaper and television journalists must follow. However, Blumenthal's attempt at forcing the Internet "reporter" to face negative consequences as a result of his false report was unsuccessful, and further attempts by the government to regulate the content of the Internet seem likely to be impractical, costly, and ineffective overall. There is simply too much online content for the government to be able to enforce the same types of journalistic laws that other news mediums must follow, not to mention the potential for excessive government censorship.

At the same time, it is incredibly unlikely that the four reasons mentioned earlier in this discussion that cause errors in reporting, that is, the need for speed, the desire to attract hits, the goal of advancing a partisan agenda, and the attraction to scandal, will lessen and lower the competitive pressures on Internet journalists in the next few years. If anything, those pressures are likely to increase as more and more people turn to the Internet for their news. The only probable method for improving the accuracy of online reporting would be for news producers themselves to make better attempts at following voluntary guidelines that are closer to the standards used by old media sources. Offering guidelines for reporters to follow is not new. Sabato, Stencel, and Lichter (2000) describe a number of guidelines reporters should follow in reporting political scandals in their book entitled *Peepshow* and journalism schools have been teaching professional norms for decades. Other sets of standards that are usually applied to

traditional news outlets could be applied to Internet sources as well. These standards, such as the need for multiple sources for issuing a report, do not guarantee complete accuracy in reporting, as can be seen with the recent scandals of newspaper reporters Jayson Blair of the *New York Times* and Jack Kelley of *USA Today*. However, attempts to follow these more traditional guidelines would lessen the frequency and impact of Internet reporting errors.

Seib agrees with the need for online reporters to voluntarily follow traditional ethics of reporting. In his predictions for the future of Internet journalism, he notes that it will be increasingly important for reporters to aim at fairness and accuracy. He writes, “The ‘Drudge effect’ - shoot-from-the-hip sensationalism - will give online journalism a bad name if the public perceives it to be a dominant characteristic of this medium” (p. 162). The best way for journalists to deal with this perceived ‘Drudge effect’ and the potentially harmful impact of Internet rumors is to deliver a consistently fair and accurate news product. The marketplace will in time come to rely on the high-quality product more than the hastily put together news site that does not have a good track record of accuracy. Seib’s faith in the public’s desire for quality reporting is the most hopeful and promising view as to how to lessen the impact of social cascades based on misleading or false information.

Along with offering positive aspects of the Internet, Davis and Owen (1998) also write, “new technologies have enhanced opportunities for the mass dissemination of misinformation” (p. 200). As this study has shown, this rapidly expanding technology can have potentially harmful effects if false reports are spread without supporting evidence. In order for us to reap the positive effects of the Internet, which include added convenience and the possibility of increased political discourse, the dangers of false information must also be confronted. The most

effective method to lessen the amount and impact of false Internet errors will be for news producers on the Web to follow traditional journalistic standards of fact-checking and sourcing. False reporting will not disappear, but, we must make ourselves aware of the various types of reporting that can be found on the Web and hope that market forces will encourage high-quality reporting as opposed to unsubstantiated rumors passing as news. Awareness of the potential for both types of reporting is a central condition for encouraging effective and accurate online reporting.

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