

## CASES

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### CASE 6-A

#### REPORTING ON RUMORS: WHEN SHOULD A NEWS ORGANIZATION DEBUNK?

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The Oct. 2, 2017, shooting at the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino in Las Vegas posed a number of problems for journalists. However, even as local reporters were trying to uncover the facts of the incident and of the resulting investigation, rumors began to circulate on the internet.

Within hours, there were internet reports that the gunman, Stephen Paddock, was associated with ISIS or had been radicalized by that group. Authorities were able to establish no such connection despite a claim from ISIS that the statement was true. Writing under the username Jack Sins, another internet troll tweeted (and asked for retweets) that his father was missing after the shooting. The photo accompanying the tweet was of a well-known porn star.

In yet another interaction of a debunked internet meme, an internet comedienne also was linked to the shooting—and every mass shooting in the United States for the 12 months preceding the Mandalay Bay tragedy in which 58 people were killed and more than 480 injured. This particular rumor was promoted by the group 4chan, which has a history of attempting to frame members of that internet community as mass shooters.

Both Hillary Clinton and Jimmy Kimmel, who began to speak in favor of additional federal gun control regulations soon after the shooting, were mocked on a variety of internet sites, including Breitbart. Musicians and other entertainers who also began to lobby for additional gun control legislation were also the subject of malicious posts.

Within four days of the event, multiple news organizations provided a different approach to the story. In the *New York Times*, reporter Linda Qui debunked the rumor that there was a second gunman involved in the shooting. The blog Punditfact outed the website Nelson Nettle, which described itself as “free and independent news” for falsely claiming that an eyewitness had seen multiple gunmen dressed as

security guards at the resort. Abby Ohlheiser in an Oct. 3 story in the *Washington Post* rounded up multiple fake stories including the images that were published with them and promised continued postings as the viral misinformation morphed into additional bogus accounts.

Television station KUSA in Denver took the debunking approach one step further: Its report advised viewers how to spot erroneous information that reached them through the web. That story urged viewers to check images by using Google Chrome and the instruction “Search Google for this image.” The news account also urged viewers to think critically about internet posts, noting that people who were truly searching for loved ones in the wake of the tragedy were unlikely to be “bragging about the response they were getting to their tweets.” The story concluded, “In a life-and-death situation, false information is at best a distraction from efforts to help and at worst dangerous. But, it’s all too easy to spread in the world of instant sharing. Pranksters prey on your emotions to get clicks and shares, which only compounds the problem. But there are easy steps you can take to avoid falling for these hoaxes—they just take a few seconds more.”

### Micro Issues

1. Do stories such as the ones noted above support journalism’s commitment to truth telling? Why or why not?
2. How would you distinguish between the concepts of fake news and internet hoaxes?
3. Evaluate the approach of the KUSA story in trying to provide viewers with tools to independently verify internet content. Compare that with the approach employed by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Which do you think is the better approach? Justify your choice using philosophical theory.

### Midrange Issues

1. Many news organizations have a standing policy of not reporting things such as bomb threats to schools because they are so frequent and are often pranks. Analyze this approach in light of the most recent mass shooting in the United States. When is it inappropriate to report a rumor?
2. Many critics noted that Stephen Paddock, the gunman in the Mandalay Bay shooting, was Caucasian and that he was treated differently by journalists because of his race. Evaluate this criticism.

3. News organizations that spend time debunking rumors shift resources from other stories to provide this sort of coverage. How would you justify assigning a reporter to such a story? What elements of craft—for example, proximity—and ethical news values—for example transparency—might support your decision?

## Macro Issues

1. Alexis S. Madrigal, writing in the *Atlantic* on Oct. 2, 2017, blamed the problem on Google and Facebook, and their corporate managers, for refusing to put more human beings in the loop to decide whether particular posts and shared stories are bogus. “The truth is that machines need many examples to learn from. That’s something we know from all the current artificial-intelligence research,” Madrigal wrote. “They’re not good at ‘one-shot’ learning. But humans are very good at dealing with new and unexpected situations. Why are there not more humans inside Google who are tasked with basic information filtering? How can this not be part of the system, given that we know the machines will struggle with rare, breaking-news situations?” Analyze these comments. What philosophical theory supports your analysis?

## CASE 6-B

### DOXXER, DOXXER, GIVE ME THE NEWS?

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Tiki torches blazed in the night on Aug. 11, 2017, in Charlottesville, Virginia, and images of screaming white supremacists burned paths through our social media consciousness. Cable and online news outlets covered the story as evidence of the rising threat of white nationalism in the context of a broader protest to maintain Confederate monuments in Charlottesville and elsewhere.

Monuments to the Confederacy and to white supremacy were being removed or relocated across the country as various groups, in particular those representing people of color, objected to their prominent display. Opponents also argued that the monuments maintain a narrative of white supremacy that was particularly threatening as the rhetoric of