

CASE 2-C

DR. DOOLITTLE NOT: DEBUNKING FAKE ANIMAL STORIES

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The ratings demonstrate it: People like stories about animals. Such stories often close local—and sometimes national—television newscasts. News stories focusing on animals go viral with regularity. Animals are the long-term focus of advertising campaigns; even if you don't drink beer, you probably recognize the Budweiser Clydesdales.

And films as historic as *Old Yeller* or as contemporary as *The Secret Life of Pets* are popular, apparently for repeated viewings. Pandemic puppies are a real thing. According to the American Pet Products Association, Americans spent more than \$72 billion on their animal companions in 2018.

But sometimes the stories aren't true.

Swans and dolphins have not returned to the polluted canals of Venice. Russian President Vladimir Putin did not let African lions loose in the streets of Moscow to enforce COVID-19 stay-at-home orders. A group of elephants did not stroll through a Chinese village, get drunk on corn wine, and pass out in the public square.

Debunking these online stories has more and more become a full-time job, especially for Natasha Daly, a reporter for *National Geographic*. Daly began reporting for the magazine five years ago because she believed that it was impossible for “animals to tell their own stories.” She viewed her beat as one that focused on conservation, but she also covered the factual account of a Bronx Zoo tiger that tested positive for COVID-19.

Daly has online support. Paulo Ordoveza is a web developer and image-verification expert who runs the Twitter account @picpedant. Ordoveza says the “greed for virality” has driven the widespread sharing of such misinformation. The high that comes from thousands of likes and retweets is just too much for some to resist.

Kaveri Ganapathy Ahuja's retweet about the swans returning to Venice got more than a million likes, a personal social media record Ahuja says she would not like to delete. The New Delhi resident said she composed the tweets combining photos she saw on social media, unaware that the swans already lived in Italy before the coronavirus hit that country. “The tweet was just something that brought me joy in gloomy times,” she told *National Geographic*.

For others, it was a need to return to order in 2020—a year that felt like chaos on wheels. The theme of nature returning to normal, which underlies many of the fake animal stories, gives people some sense that nature has the power to rise above the pandemic.

Daly says she believes that it's her responsibility as a journalist to tell her readers the truth, even when they push back about her debunking efforts. False stories can have a deleterious impact on conservation efforts, Daly notes. When humans change ecosystems to the point where they cannot recover with human intervention, false stories give the impression that such efforts aren't needed because life will eventually find a way to survive.

However, Daly also takes pride in telling “the real” animal stories. “I always want to empower readers to come away from it feeling like there's actually something they can do in their own lives to protect animals.”

Micro Issues

1. In 2020, a year of COVID-19 and a contentious US election, what is the ethical rationale for ending newscasts on a “happy” note?
2. Should social media websites mark untrue animal story posts as misinformation?
3. Social psychologist Erin Vogel said that feel-good fake stories can make people even more distrustful of news when they learn that they are not true. Evaluate this statement in light of the theories of truth outlined earlier in this chapter.

Midrange Issues

1. Is debunking fake animal stories an appropriate use of journalistic resources?
2. Are such fake animal stories a triumph of emotion over reason? How would strategic communication professionals respond to such a question? Those who are focused on news?
3. Evaluate Ahuja's rationale for declining to retract her tweet. How should Twitter respond to users who think this way?
4. How does a willingness to believe such animal stories make you think about your readers/viewers/listeners as ethical decision-makers?

Macro Issues

1. What is the role of the news media in verifying internet rumors?
2. Are such animal stories too trivial to consider in light of the significant and serious news events in contemporary political culture?
3. Do narrative films such as *The Jungle Book* and *Lion King* trivialize the real issues of conservation and global climate change by anthropomorphizing animal welfare?
4. Use TinEye or Google's reverse image search to fact-check an animal-based story carried on a local news outlet. After your fact-check, evaluate the truthfulness of the images. Do fabricated images harm readers and viewers?

CASE 2-D

ANONYMOUS OR CONFIDENTIAL: UNNAMED NEWS SOURCES IN THE NEWS

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They are characterized in many different ways. Frequently, there are no names, just blurred references to job duties.

From the *New York Times* on Dec. 9, 2017, as it reported on President Donald J. Trump's daily routine:

One adviser said that aides to the president needed to stay positive and look for silver linings wherever they could find them, and that the West Wing team at times resolved not to let the tweets dominate their day.

Other times, they are slightly more anonymous. From the *New Yorker's* reporting by journalist Ronan Farrow about the Harvey Weinstein sexual abuse/harassment scandal:

Two sources close to the police investigation said that they had no reason to doubt Gutierrez's account of the incident. One of them, a police source, said that the department had collected more than enough evidence to prosecute Weinstein. But the other source said that Gutierrez's statements about her past complicated the case for the office of the Manhattan District Attorney, Cyrus Vance Jr. After two weeks of investigation, the district attorney's office decided not to file charges.