True or False?

As newsrooms compete against the speed of social media, journalists must remember to report the facts first.

By Rob Turone

Back in December, New York magazine ran a story about Stuyvesant High School senior Mohammed Islam, who was rumored to have earned Wall Street investment returns upwards of $72 million. (Business Insider included him on a list of “20 Under 20” back in 2013.) Editors thought so highly of Islam’s investment judgment they put him in No. 12 in its annual “Reasons to Love New York” issue.

Just one problem—it was all made up. As Islam would later confess to the New York Observer, the real link he has to the world of finance is running an investment club that simulates trades at his high school. He’s earned exactly zero dollars on Wall Street.

It’s been a tough couple of months for fact-checking. Rolling Stone was forced to retract a story about a rape on the campus of the University of Virginia. Boston.com had to pull a story that accused Harvard Business School Professor Jon Edelman of sending a racist email to an employee at a local Chinese restaurant. Even a Florida woman who purported to have three breasts turned out to be a complete hoax.

So, what’s going on? Is there a growing problem with pushing out stories before they’re properly vetted?

Craig Silverman, a fellow at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, thinks the issue is a big skills gap among journalists when it comes to fact-checking. Before the explosion of social media, a reporter had the time to verify the story before it became public. Now, websites like Facebook and Twitter are making everything public instantly, before it can be verified, forcing newsrooms to play catch-up.

Thanks to social media, photos, video and news stories are already out there,” said Silverman. “Unfortunately, the reaction in many newsrooms isn’t ‘let’s stop and see if it’s true,’ it’s ‘let’s put it up and get traffic since it’s already out.’

For a digital expert, Silverman has some pretty old-school advice to dish out to today’s journalists: Assume it’s not true.

“It all goes back to the basic training of being a journalist—remaining skeptical, finding the source, corroborating it with other sources,” Silverman said. “It really gets down to two core elements—source and content.”

Silverman points back to October 2012 during Hurricane Sandy. A photo of soldiers being pounded by the storm as they stood guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was widely shared across social media, and eventually picked up by major news outlets. Even though it was a real photo of the soldiers snapped by photographer Karin Markert, it had been taken in September, a month before Hurricane Sandy hit.

“One of the most difficult challenges is picking up a photo or a video gaining momentum on social media and getting back to the source,” said Silverman.

Claire Wardle, also a research fellow at the Tow Center, suggests four key elements for journalists to check or confirm before sharing a piece of user-generated content: provenance, source, date and location.

The irony of all this is the Internet, the very thing that’s putting pressure on journalists to publish stories faster and faster, is also the greatest tool in the history of the media to check facts. Here are five simple tools that could help with verifying stories:

Google Maps: Really? The first on my list? Well, between the instant ability to confirm location using Google’s street view feature, to being able to instantly corroborate an eye-witness account of a location, the power of Google Maps to help verify content cannot be understated.

Reverse image search: You see a
viral photo comes across social media that's too good to be true. Chances are it is, but using a reverse image search tool like TinEye will tell you where other versions of that same image appeared.

**EXIF reader:** There are numerous EXIF (exchangeable image file format) readers online that enable this simple tool, reporters can view data that's ordinarily hidden on videos posted to YouTube. Simply enter in the URL of a YouTube video, and you'll be able to provide the correct upload time, data and all thumbnails associated with the video (which then can be tracked down using a reverse image search).

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Users to view the metadata embedded within images. This data, which can include time, date location and author, can really come in handy when trying to track down the source of an image.

**Storyful:** This social newswire, purchased by News Corp last year, discovers, validates and delivers verified content that originated on or from a host of social media websites. It's not free, but its coverage and verification of user-generate content often becomes the center of its clients' stories, as it did with a *New York Times* documentary about the sole survivor of an Islamic State massacre.

**YouTube Data Viewer:** Using

Need another incentive to give your staff the tools and training to properly vet online content? They make great stories!

Debunked content, especially when it's local, can make for a popular story that both delivers on the need to drive traffic and the mandate of informing the public. The *Washington Post* shares a popular “What was fake on the Internet this week” post that highlights every “undeservedly viral story.” Gawker publishes a vertical called Antiviral which debunks fake viral photos.

Websites like Politifact, Snopes, OpenSecrets.org and FactCheck.org also show there is an audience for fact verification. Silverman has been hard at work on a new tool called Emergent.info, which showcases popular viral stories and ranks them as true, false or unverified. A recent example was a Twitter rumor that Islamic State fighters were using a Texas plumbing company's truck, which Emergent ruled as “true” based on a CBS News interview with the owner of the plumbing company.

“The goal is to build Emergent as a tool that is tracking rumors and helping debunk them,” Silverman said.

“It’s frankly a place that reporters can see some of the mistakes that have been made, and why they need to be cautious.”

For a host of additional tools, advice and step-by-step guides to verifying content, head over to VerificationHandbook.com and download a free copy of the handbook. Not only is it an in-depth guide to get you up to speed when it comes to the next three-breasted woman hoax, it's free. I verified the price myself.

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