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Q&A: Rumors, Cyberbullying and Anonymity

By DAVID POGUE

Last week in this space, I shared excerpts from an interview with David Mikkelson, half of the husband-and-wife team behind Snopes.com, the online clearinghouse for Internet rumors and urban legends. It was part of a "CBS News Sunday Morning" segment about online rumors that won't ultimately air.

So I thought this week, I'd share with you a piece of another interview for that segment. This time, the subject is John Palfrey, Harvard Law School professor, co-director of Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet & Society, and author of "Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives."

David Pogue: What experience do you bring to the Internet rumors issue?

John Palfrey: I study, in particular, how young people use technology, how they relate to one another. And one of the big things is they've moved their social lives, by and large, online. Places like Facebook and on services like Twitter, they're spreading a lot of information, including rumors about one another.

DP: How does the Internet make rumor different than it was pre-Internet?

JP: I think it's somewhat more explosive to spread a rumor on the Internet. Because it spreads so quickly, and the scale, the scope of it can be much greater. One of the things you hear from people who have been the victim of a malicious rumor is that the hurt is more, because so many people could have seen it so quickly and it's so hard to respond to it.

DP: Is it that more people DO see it, or that when you read a rumor about yourself or your company you WORRY that more people can see it?

JP: It's a combination of the two. In reality, as more and more social life for grownups and kids alike is going online, more people are seeing information in this format. But I think there's also the sense from the person who's being harmed by it that, oh my God, any one of

over a billion people could have seen this thing about me and it's so embarrassing.

DP: You sound as though you're talking more about kids bullying and stuff like that. Or is everything you've said so far applicable to companies and --

JP: I think these are general statements about anyone. Rumors can be spread by kids about other kids in a cyberbullying context. Rumors certainly are spread about companies which damage their identity and their brand and their image. They're certainly spread about politicians. They're even written about columnists.

DP: (LAUGHS) No!

JP: Never!

DP: Is there a certain type of rumor that catches on more easily on the Internet? Like, if I wanted to start one, are there certain buttons I should push?

JP: The more salacious, the better. The more believable, and yet something that's a little bit edgy.

DP: Do kids today have a keen sense of what's credible?

JP: There's a really broad range in the kids that we've interviewed, from the more sophisticated to the most gullible. And I think this is just like life in the offline world, where there are some people that believe virtually nothing on the Internet, and others who will believe anything they read. I think we're seeing that same range play out here. It's an important public issue in schools to make sure the kids are as digitally literate as they are in the offline world, too.

DP: Right. I just don't know how much emphasis is being put on how kids should filter, process, and learn to judge what they read.

JP: I think almost no emphasis is being put on giving kids the skills that they need to sort credible from non-credible information. Schools have to wake up and have to give those skills to our kids. It's the critical thinking skill of the 21st century that they're going to need, sorting credible from not credible information. And I think we're asleep at the switch.

DP: I agree. Let's rise up.

JP: There we go. Right.

DP: What would a syllabus be for a course on Internet credibility?

JP: I would use Wikipedia. I think it's a fabulous, fabulous place to turn. Because some of the information is absolutely credible and really useful.

I look after the page about Alexander Hamilton. I think it's a fabulous encyclopedia entry. You can learn much more about Hamilton's life on that page than on any other encyclopedia entry. But there are lots of stories where people have introduced lots of false information through Wikipedia and it remains there.

So I think that the skill of figuring out which Wikipedia entry is more or less credible and figuring out how to use the History tab in Wikipedia. How do you look at the discussions that have played out there? How do you figure out about who the sources are who have written things? I think that could be a great syllabus in and of itself.

DP: So many of the things that are wrong with the Internet have to do with anonymity. What would be wrong with everyone being attached to their own names everywhere they go on the Internet?

JP: I think it'd be great if more people were more accountable about how they lead their lives online. And if people, in fact, used their real names more frequently.

Facebook has an advantage, for instance, over some other social networks because people tend more likely to be themselves. But the fear around anonymity is that there are places in the world where it's very important. People are able to be anonymous and to say things about their government, for instance, without the likelihood that they're going to be put in jail the next day. But I think in everyday life, for kids dealing with one another, or grownups dealing with one another, or corporations dealing with one another, we should be much more accountable and we should use our real names.

DP: Can you tell me what cyberbullying is and give me an example of it?

JP: Cyberbullying is when kids treat one another awfully online, when they hurt one another psychologically. So an example might be going onto Facebook and saying something cruel about one of your peers on their Web pages, their Facebook page. It might be going on MySpace and posting something there. It might be spreading something on a service like Twitter. It's the act of bullying, only doing it online.

DP: Is the host of the service at all responsible? Does Facebook have any responsibility to take off hate speech?

JP: The host is not liable at all. This is part of federal law and it lets off the hook anyone who is a mere conduit of this information. And this is one of the big debates in the law. Is a site like

Craigslist, for instance, responsible for things that are posted on Craigslist? And the basic answer is no.

DP: So this has been tested in court?

JP: It's been tested hundreds of times in court. It's the Communications Decency Act, section 230. And it's been held up consistently.

DP: Is cyberbullying part of Internet rumors?

JP: Very much part of it. If we look at what are the harms that are happening to kids online, the most common harm is psychological harm.

Sometimes it's a rumor that happens to be true, and those are often the ones that hurt the most. So it's not only that people are starting false rumors, but it's the extent to which young people are playing out their relationships online—sometimes relationships that probably should have been kept offline.

DP: How widespread is this?

JP: Extraordinarily widespread. So if you were to ask young people about the most likely harm that they're going to have experienced, it's almost invariably bullying online that they tell you.

DP: Is there anything to be done? I mean, my kids get told, "Don't cyberbully," but does it do any good?

JP: It's awfully hard. I think your note about wanting kids to be more accountable for who they are, not to hide behind anonymity when they're dealing with one another, is very important. But we should not pass a law against cyberbullying.

DP: We shouldn't?

JP: No. No.

DP: Why not?

JP: Well, there's a bill pending before Congress, the Megan Meier Cyberbullying Act, which would criminalize the amount of human-to-human interaction on the Web. I think we don't want to fill our jails with teenagers who are trying to figure out how to deal with one another.

DP: Have you ever been the victim of a blog attack or a rumor?

JP: Nothing too nasty. But everyone will start now that I'm doing this. (LAUGHS)

