

REALITY CHECK

You Can't Believe Everything You Read. But You'd Better Believe This.

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The Information Age has one nagging problem: Much of the information is not true. We live in a time besotted with Bad Information.

It's everywhere. It's on the net, traveling by word of mouth. It's lurking in dark recesses of the Internet. It's in the newspaper. It's at your dinner table, passed along as known fact, irrefutable evidence, attributed to unnamed scientists, statisticians, "studies."

There has always been Bad Information in our society, but it moves faster now, via new technologies and a new generation of information manipulators. The supply of Bad Information is not the only problem—there may also be a rise in demand. Perhaps as a special species we have developed a greater

tolerance for it as we desperately try to slake our thirst for intrigue, excitement and mind-tweaking factoids. The plausible has been squeezed out of public discourse by the incredible.

There are seven fundamental types of Bad Information.

■ **Obvious but Wrong Information:** The Atlanta Journal-Constitution breaks the news that Richard Jewell was the prime suspect in the Olympic bombing. Jewell was obviously the perpetrator, because he had been the "hero" who found the bomb, and we all know that a "hero" is usually a self-promoting, bogus individual, if not an outright killer. Also, the information was leaked, and leaked information always sounds true. Unfortunately, the FBI had no actual evidence, just a hunch. The government eventually sent him a note apologizing for ruining his life.

■ **Information Censored for Your Own**

Good: Americans made sure to buy cars with air bags, preferably on both the driver's and passenger's sides. Then we learned that air bags can kill small children. The experts knew of the danger and kept it quiet because they thought it would create public panic and lead people not to use air bags and thus die in greater numbers. Meanwhile, millions of Americans are thinking of the dozens of times they have let their kids ride up front. As a rule, when one piece of Good Information goes unknown, it means another piece of Information will turn Bad.

■ **Accurate but Untrue Information:** The San Jose Mercury News's three-part series "Dark Alliance" unveiled new information about a connection between the CIA-backed contras in Nicaragua and crack dealers in inner-city Los Angeles. The paper then implied that the crack epidemic in urban America is a CIA plot, ergo: "To understand how

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crack came to curse black America, you have to go into the volcanic hills overlooking Managua, the capital of the Republic of Nicaragua." (Defenders of the series say this is literally true—they are now, as we speak, scouring the volcanic hills overlooking Managua, seeking more evidence.)

■ **Millennial Information:** Earlier

this year there was a great ruckus about "synthetic hormones" that pollute the environment and cause severe declines in sperm counts that threaten the future of the human race. One hot book carried the alarming title "Our Stolen Future." It had to be true, because the book's introduction was written by Al Gore. The problem is, other researchers quickly challenged the scary conclusions; one declared that men are cranking out just as many little ga-

tors as 25 years ago. The human race will survive!

■ **Diagnostic Information:** You are terribly lethargic and you go see a succession of mental health professionals. One says you are depressed, another says you are not depressed but have chronic fatigue syndrome, another says there is no such thing as chronic fatigue syndrome, another says you have multiple personalities because in your childhood your mother was a member of a satanic cult. You say you don't remember your mother being a member of a satanic cult, and the therapist says that's a dead giveaway.

■ **Statistical Information:** A sociologist in 1985 reported that under California's no-fault divorce system, women suffered a 73 percent drop in their standard of living in the first year after getting a divorce, while men's standard of living improved 42 percent. The statistics were widely quoted, and influenced a trend toward reinstating fault-based divorces. The sociologist subsequently admitted her numbers were wrong, the gap grossly inflated.

And finally:

■ **Historical Information:** Everyone knows that Marie Antoinette said, "Let them eat cake!" Except she didn't. A fictional character said it.

The most subtle but poisonous effect of Bad Information is the decline of intelligent conversation. It used to be that you couldn't talk about religion and politics, but now you can't talk about religion, politics, UFOs, phonics, nutrition, the Kennedy assassination, O.J. Simpson, Shakespeare's true identity, proper child-rearing techniques, the significance of birth order, and whether power lines give you cancer.

This is why Michael Jordan is so popular: He's the only thing we all agree on. Man, that guy can play ball!

The Bad With the Good

Bad Information is insidious because it looks so much like Good Information. It takes an extremely practiced eye, a kind of controlled skepticism that never quite slides into abject nihilism, to spear Good Information from the thick bog of Bad.

"It's harder to tell the difference between good-quality and bad-quality information than it is between a good-quality and a bad-quality shirt. Your mom can teach you how to look at the stitching on a shirt," says Phil Agre, a communications professor at the University of California at San

Bad Information does not happen by accident. It is promulgated. The sources are increasingly sophisticated. Today, almost everyone has advanced technology for disseminating data, from Web sites to phone banks to cable TV infomercials; everyone has a private public relations staff and a private media relations staff and a private Scientific Advisory Panel to lend "expert" authority to implausible assertions.

You need to learn how to roll over a new piece of information in your mind, scrutinize the source and say, when necessary, "Wait a second. This guy has BI."

Let's look at a case study in Bad Information. No event this year has spawned so much Bad Information as the TWA Flight 800 disaster. When it blew up, everyone assumed terrorists were to blame. The government passed new airport security measures that force travelers to turn on their electric shavers to prove they aren't killers. These have remained in place even though the government investigators now think it was probably a mechanical failure.

But the Flight 800 explosion illustrates one fundamental rule: Bad In-

formation abhors a vacuum. It flourishes where knowledge is sparse.

For example, the New York Times at one point ran a front-page story concluding that the plane had been blown up by a bomb. The newspaper had learned that investigators found microscopic traces of a chemical explosive. But it turned out that the plane had—by chance—been used recently in a training exercise for bomb-sniffing dogs. Who coulda thunk it?

The newspaper had fallen victim to a common logical fallacy called "affirming the consequent." According to George Washington University philosophy professor Peter Caws, this fallacy emerges from an "if-then" proposition. If one thing happens (in this case, a bomb blows up a plane), another thing follows (there will be bomb residue). But finding residue alone doesn't prove a bomb blew up the plane, because there might be some other explanation for the residue.

Nor can we forget the missile theory.

A few weeks ago, Pierre Salinger was giving a speech in Cannes, France, and mentioned that he had a document given him by a French intelligence agent that offered strong evidence that a U.S. Navy missile had shot down TWA Flight 800.

He went to his hotel room to go to bed, but he never had a chance to sleep because his phone kept ringing with calls from journalists all over the world. Salinger's "revelation" made the lead newscasts on TV and radio. The secret document turned out to have been on the Internet for months. It contains no evidence of any kind—it's a blanket assertion, anonymous, that a Navy missile shot down the plane. The name of the ship is not revealed, nor the captain of the ship, nor the names of anyone else who might know of this. In fact, the "document" was written by a former United Airlines pilot who originally intended it as a private e-mail message for some friends.

Salinger hasn't backed down. Look at his track record, he says: "I was not a person who was giving bad information to people."

This is the only reason, indeed, that the news organizations reported what Salinger said: As a former White House press secretary and ABC News correspondent, he seemed like a credible person. Credibility transcends generations—people graduate to the status of "legendary" and "venerable."

But say-so is the weakest form of evidence. Salinger was not actually a source of information, but rather a medium for fourth-hand rumor.

So here's the information flow: Dan Rather on the "CBS Evening News" reports what Pierre Salinger said in a speech in southern France about a document written by a person in the United States whom Salinger has never met but who, Salinger has been told by an unnamed French intelligence agent, has "strong contacts" with someone, or something, in the Navy.

Through this tortuous route travels information so shocking, so horrible—the Navy shooting down a jetliner!—that you might find it implausible and extremely difficult to believe even if you saw it with *your own eyes*. Yet there it is on the nightly news.

Quite an Assumption

Lacking a good explanation, we naturally fill in the blanks. A survey in *George* magazine showed that 41 percent of the American people think the government is covering up the truth about TWA Flight 800. And 10 percent think Elvis is alive. (The survey doesn't reveal how

many people think the government is covering up the fact that Elvis is still alive.)

It's good and necessary for people to be skeptical; the government does, in fact, tell lies. It lied about Vietnam, it lied about Watergate. The African American patients at Tuskegee were told they were being treated for syphilis when in fact they were given placebos for years so researchers could watch the progression of the disease. Oliver North lied to Congress on national television, under oath.

Nor even scientists—people devoted to objective truth—are immune from Bad Information. Two scientists in the 1980s announced with great fanfare that they had discovered cold fusion, an almost magical form of energy. Scientists also announced, at various times in the last decade or so, that they had found genetic origins of alcoholism, schizophrenia and manic depression. These claims have been, in large part, retracted.

The latest candidate in the field of science for Bad Information is the Mars rock, which has these tiny squiggly shapes that look like little microbe fossils. Naturally everyone has gone stone-crazy over the implications, but the fact remains that the "discovery" hasn't been confirmed, and it may turn out that the fossils are, as scientists put it, "abiotic in origin." Meaning they're just dirt.

For Peter Caws, the philosophy professor, the Mars rock brings to mind a Mark Twain saying about the endeavors of science: "One gets such wholesale returns of conjecture out of such a trifling investment of fact."

Science, however, has a great quality that many industries lack: It actively roots out Bad Information. No scientific claim is considered valid simply because it sounds right or comes from a prize-winning researcher; the finding must be repeatable, verifiable in experiments and, most important, falsifiable. The problem with many conspiracy theories is that they are not, by nature, falsifiable—you cannot disprove that the CIA murdered John F. Kennedy, for example, because the nature of a conspiracy is to deny its existence.

The danger is that we are reaching a moment when nothing can be said to be objectively true, when consensus about reality disappears. The Information Age could leave us with no information at all, only assertions.

This means we are entering a kind of ultra-relativistic Einsteinian universe without constants or fixed positions or simultaneous events—where what "is" depends entirely on the position of the observer.