

2014 Is The Year Of The Viral Debunk

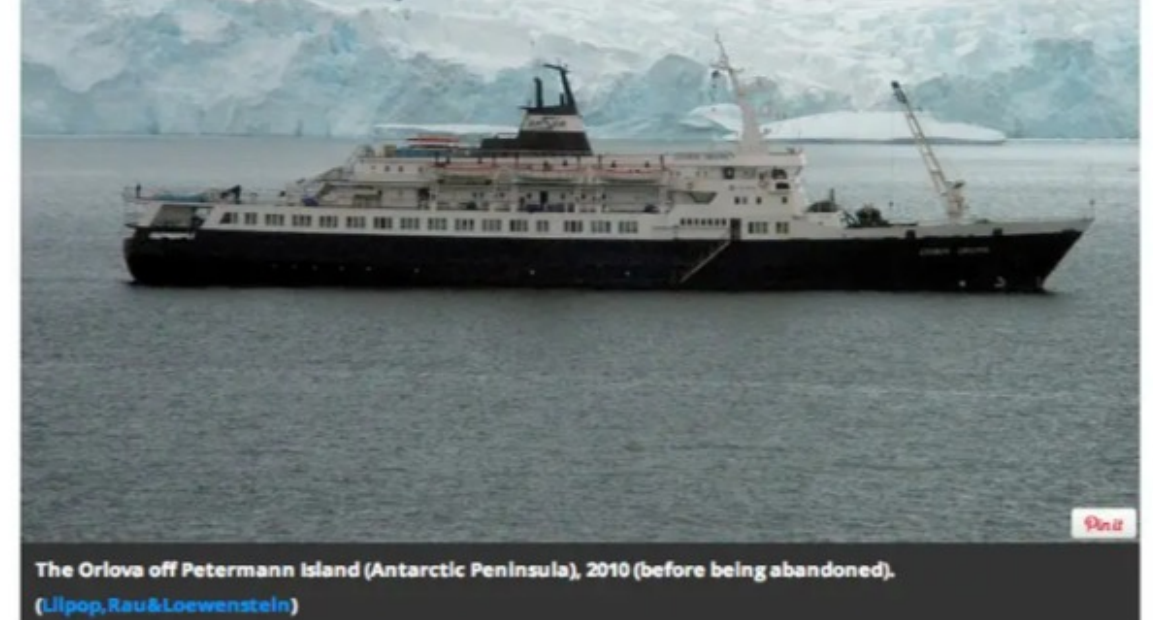
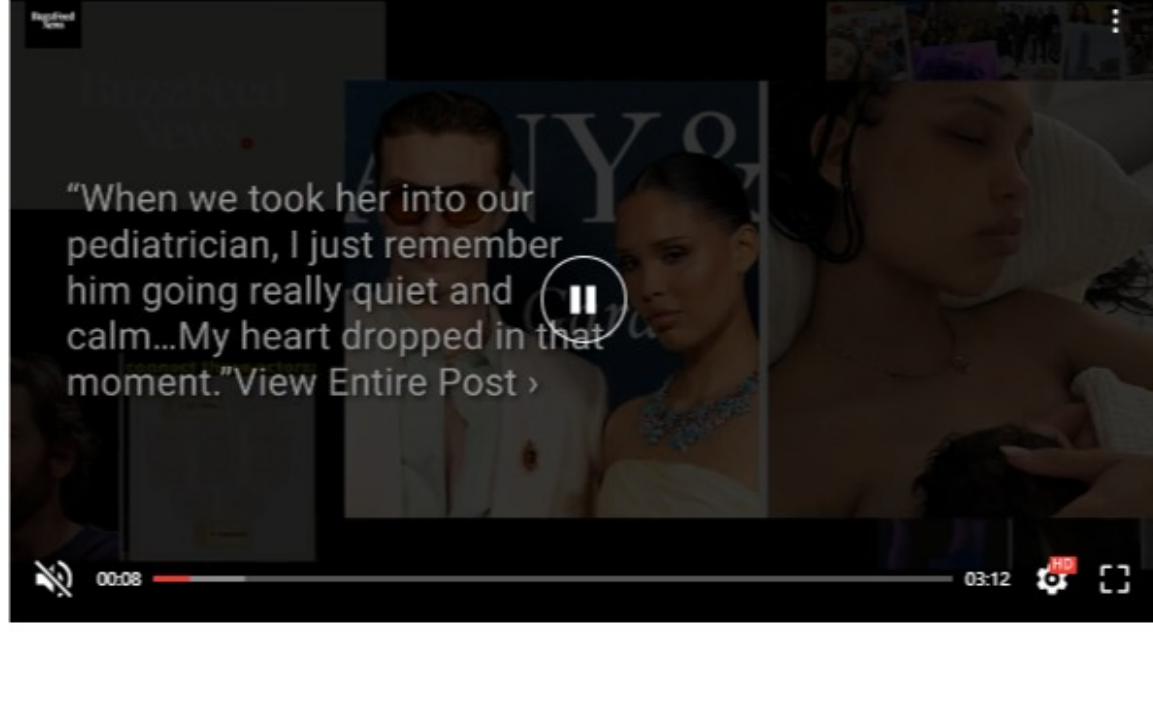
The "Hoax Economy" gives way to a new breed of fact checking.



Charlie Warzel
BuzzFeed News Reporter

Posted on January 24, 2014 at 2:08 am

X f e View Comments



The Orlova off Petermann Island (Antarctic Peninsula), 2010 (before being abandoned).
(Jlpop,Rau&Loewenstein)

No, an Abandoned Ship Full of Diseased Rats Is Not Floating Towards Britain

There's a new genre of headline taking over the internet. It's got a simple message: *Don't believe that headline.*

ADVERTISEMENT

If you've been watching Twitter or Facebook closely this month, you may have noticed the emergence and increasingly visible countercurrent: 2014, so far, is shaping up to be the year of the viral hoax debunk. It's a public, performative effort by newsrooms to warn, identify, chase down, and explain that the story you just saw — most likely on Facebook.

Truth telling and debunking are fundamental journalistic acts, online or otherwise, but the viral debunk is a distinctive take on an old standby; it's a form-fitting response to a new *style* of hoax, much in same the way that Snopes and Hoax-Slayer were an answer to ungoverned email hoaxes, or that Politifact and FactCheck.org arose in response to a narrow, but popular, category of misinformation — false statements by public figures, uncritically amplified in the frenzy of political campaign.

Does a Viral Picture Show a Giant Snake That Swallowed a Woman ...



www.hoax-slayer.com/giant-snake-swallows-woman.shtml ▼

300 × 300 - Jun 19, 2013 - Message going viral on social media claims that a **giant snake** swallowed a woman near Durban North, South Africa in June 2013.

Giant Snake Swallowed Woman In South Africa - Nairaland ...



www.nairaland.com/.../giant-snake-swallowed-woman-south ▼

300 × 300 - Jun 12, 2013 - The **giant snake** swallowed a woman two dayz ago near durban north South Africa. 1 Like. Re: **Giant Snake Swallowed Woman In South Africa ...**

Giant Snake Swallows woman in South Africa (See Photo ...



www.360nobs.com/.../giant-snake-swallows-woman-in-south... ▼

546 × 423 - Jun 12, 2013 - Linda Laina Nyatoro, a South African reporter witnessed the incident and sent this picture. The **giant snake** swallowed a woman two days ago, ...

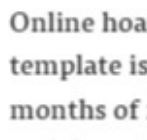
HORROR: Giant Snake Swallow Up A Woman in South Africa ...



www.234pulse.com/.../horror-giant-snake-swallow-up-a-wo... ▼

546 × 423 - Jun 12, 2013 - This **giant snake** in the picture allegedly swallow up a woman in South Africa. The incident happened two days ago near Durban North in South ...

Giant Snake Swallow Up A Woman in South Africa [PHOTOS]



kevindjakpor.blogspot.com/.../giant-snake-swallow-up-woma... ▼

400 × 309 - Jun 12, 2013 - Linda Laina Nyatoro, a South African reporter witnessed the incident and sent this picture. The **giant snake** swallowed a woman two days ago, ...

Online hoaxes are a staple of the web and as old as the internet itself, but the viral debunk template is a reaction to the rash of fake stories that blanketed the internet in the last months of 2013 and the first days of this year. They're small, lurking bits of misinformation and deception that metastasize into newsy memes. In China, a man falling to his death in a shopping mall was quickly and incorrectly framed as man driven to suicide by his shopaholic girlfriend. Then there were the pyramids that weren't covered in snow. The Elan Gale plane confrontation that wasn't. The python that didn't swallow a guy in India, or anywhere else.

ADVERTISEMENT

This has created twin opportunities: the opportunity to openly buy into the hoax economy, and the opportunity to correct it. *The Atlantic* has been active in pointing out and explaining the origins of numerous fake stories, including a fake photo of Niagara Falls freezing over during this month's first polar vortex, turning it into a sort of easy-to-recognize rubric. News organizations of all stripes rushed to find the origins of a photo of a 160-foot sea creature that washed ashore, leading to numerous "Giant Squid Viral Hoax" headlines. This week, publications like *Quartz* and *TechInAsia* called out a fast-spreading *Daily Mail* story about Beijing residents gathering around giant TVs to watch fake sunrises during an especially heavy smog week. Today, Smithsonian.com did its part to expose a popular (and specious) theory that a ship full of diseased cannibal rats is on a collision course with the British coast.

The new hoax template is beginning to take form: In many cases, it's a headline that speaks to the reader like an older, perhaps wiser, friend or relative would — usually some variation of "No, that thing you just read is *not* true. This week, *Gawker* debuted its own template, a recurring hoax roundup column titled "Antiviral," which is geared toward "run[ning] down the worst hoaxes, pranks, Photoshops and straight-out lies blowing up on the internet." And anyone can do it. The Chinese mall suicide story, for example, was debunked extensively by *Cracked*. Even Facebook has been experimenting with the format. This afternoon, a member of Facebook's data science team pushed back against a recent Princeton research study suggesting that the social network will lose 80% of its users by 2017 with its own post titled "Debunking Princeton."

Brett Christensen, who's been running the email and online hoax debunking site Hoax-Slayer since 2003, says the media's recent interest in ferreting out false news spread via the social web is a welcome development. "I have noticed something of a trend for this," he told BuzzFeed in an email. "I see that CNN even published an article on Facebook like-farming scams the other day. I've also noticed that TV news here in Australia seems to be reporting more on Internet based fraud such as phishing and advance fee scams. I think it would be a very positive step if the bigger news outlets started to report more on hoaxes and scams. Wider coverage might more effectively get through to the Internet public at large."

ADVERTISEMENT

Christensen believes that tougher scrutiny could also put pressure on the social networks themselves — where most hoaxes tend to pick up speed — to tighten up on scams and fake news. "A lot of us have been trying for years to get Facebook to do more to stop all the disgraceful sick baby hoaxes and like-farming scams that go around the network, with little results. Perhaps some mainstream media attention might get them to take more notice and actually do something," he said, adding, "I would think that big news outlets could even have a team dedicated to researching and writing up such hoaxes."

For *The Atlantic's* Alexis Madrigal, the most important part of the new debunking push — and what makes this trend different from straightforward fact-finding journalism — is its ability to change the habits of readers, recalibrating their skepticism for a new set of circumstances. "Debunking jobs shouldn't just do the basic stuff — checking out where the media came from, looking at the accounts on which it was posted, tracing the route it took to popularity — but teach people how to do it themselves," he said. "Once you've done it a couple times, the skepticism becomes reflexive. (And bonus: When something turns out to be real, you like it even more because you haven't been duped by bullshit over and over)."

Online media conventions are born and then repeated mercilessly. According to *Digg's* 2013 year in review, "Meet the" was the most overused headline style of the year, with over 1,159 search results on Digg's site. It's still early, but 2014 looks poised to be the year of, "well, actually..."

ADVERTISEMENT