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# The Real Computer Virus

*The Internet is an invaluable information-gathering tool for journalists. It also has an unmatched capacity for distributing misinformation, which all too often winds up in the mainstream media.*

By **CARL M. CANNON**

To commemorate independence day last year, Boston Globe columnist Jeff Jacoby came up with an idea that seemed pretty straightforward. Just explain to his readers what happened to the brave men who signed the Declaration of Independence.

This column caused big trouble for Jacoby when it was discovered that he had lifted the idea and some of its language from a ubiquitous e-mail making the rounds. It touched a particular nerve at the Globe, which had recently forced two well-regarded columnists to resign for making up quotes and characters. Jacoby was suspended for four months without pay, generating a fair amount of controversy, much of it because he was the primary conservative voice at an identifiably liberal paper.

But there was a more fundamental issue at play than Jacoby's failure to attribute the information in the column: Much of what the e-mail contained was factually incorrect. To his credit, Jacoby recognized this flaw and tried, with some success, to correct it. Ann Landers, however, didn't. She got the same e-mail and simply ran it verbatim in her column.

Passing along what she described as a "perfect" Independence Day column sent to her from "Ellen" in New Jersey, Ann Landers' epistle began this way:

*Have you ever wondered what happened to the 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence?*

*Five signers were captured by the British as traitors and tortured before they died. Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned. Two lost their sons who served in the Revolutionary Army.... Nine of the 56 fought and died from wounds or hardships of the Revolutionary War. They pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor.*

Landers' column—like Ellen's e-mail—goes on from that point to list names and explain the purported fates of many of the men. But this was not the "perfect" column Landers thought it was, for the simple reason that much of the information in it

is simply false—as any Revolutionary War scholar would know readily.

I know because I interviewed some of them. R.J. Rockefeller, director of reference services at the Maryland State Archives, reveals that none of the signers was tortured to death by the British. E. Brooke Harlowe, a political scientist at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota, reports that two of the 56 were *wounded* in battle, rather than nine being killed. Brown University historian Gordon S. Wood points out that although the e-mail claims that for signer Thomas McKean "poverty was his reward," McKean actually ended up being governor of Pennsylvania and lived in material comfort until age 83.

And so on. What Landers was passing along was a collection of myths and partial truths that had been circulating since at least 1995, and which has made its way into print in newspaper op-eds and letters-to-the-editor pages and onto the radio airwaves many times before. Mark Twain supposedly said, in a less technologically challenging time, that a lie can make it halfway 'round the world before the truth gets its boots on. The Internet gives untruth a head start it surely never needed. And what a head start: If an e-mailer sends a message to 10 people and each person who receives it passes it on to 10 more, by the ninth transmission this missive could reach a billion people.

This is the real computer virus: misinformation. Despite years of warnings, this malady keeps creeping its way into the newsprint and onto the airwaves of mainstream news outlets.

One of the things that makes the Internet so appealing is that anyone can pull things off of it. The other side of the coin is that anyone can put anything on it. This poses a particular challenge for reporters who are taught in journalism school to give more weight to the written word (get the official records!) than to something they hear—say, word-of-mouth at the corner barber shop. But the Web has both official documents and idle gossip,

## TOO GOOD TO CHECK?

*The signers of the Declaration of Independence experienced some tough times, but their fates weren't nearly as dire as a widely circulated e-mail message would have it.*

*Peter Jennings went for the fake when he told viewers that the Chinese translation of the movie title "Babe" was "The Happy Dumpling-To-Be Who Talks and Solves Agricultural Problems." The title was made up by a satirical Web site.*

*Economist Milton Friedman is often incorrectly credited with coining the line "There's no such thing as a free lunch."*

*In the wake of the controversy over Bill Clinton's last-minute pardons, reporters using the Web could quickly discover Supreme Court Justice Salmon P. Chase's pronouncement that the power of presidential pardon "is granted without limit."*

*Mexican President Vicente Fox was no Harvard man despite what you may have read in many articles, such as those in USA Today, the Fort Worth Star-Telegram and the Arizona Republic.*

*Alexis de Tocqueville's line "America is great because America is good" has been quoted by many political figures, among them Bill Clinton, Ronald Reagan, and Pat Buchanan. Trouble is, de Tocqueville never said it.*

*Diane Sawyer concluded her "PrimeTime Live" interview with Ellen DeGeneres by citing a "government statistic" that gay teenagers are "three times as likely to attempt suicide" as straight teenagers. That factoid is bogus.*

*A quirky Web site convinced South African President Thabo Mbeki that HIV does not cause AIDS, causing him to eschew policies that might have helped victims of the disease.*

*An anti-Gore Web site attributed many silly statements to the Tennessean; several of them had actually been uttered by Dan Quayle.*

*Some stinging anti-corporate pronouncements have been mistakenly attributed to former railroad lawyer Abraham Lincoln.*

*Nostradamus predicted many things. One of them wasn't, "come the millennium... the village idiot will come forth to be acclaimed the leader."*

and reporters using it as a research tool—or even a tip sheet—do not always know the difference.

"Journalists should be really skeptical of everything they read online," says Sreenath Sreenivasan, a professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. "They should be very aware of where they are on the Web, just the way they would be if they were on the street."

They aren't always.

**I**n November 1998, the New York Times pulled off the Web—and published—a series of riotously funny Chinese translations of actual Hollywood hits. "The Crying Game" became "Oh No! My Girlfriend Has a Penis!" "My Best Friend's Wedding" became "Help! My Pretend Boyfriend is Gay." "Batman and Robin" was "Come to My Cave and Wear this Rubber Codpiece, Cute Boy."

If those seemed, in the old newsroom phrase, too good to check, it's because they were. They came from an irreverent Web site called topfive.com, which bills itself as offering "dangerously original humor."

But even after the Times issued a red-faced correction, the "translations" kept showing up. On January 5, 1999, Peter Jennings read the spoof of the title of the movie "Babe" ("The Happy Dumpling-To-Be Who Talks and Solves Agricultural Problems") as if it were factual. Jennings issued a correction 13 days later for his "World News Tonight" gaffe, but that didn't stop things. On April 16, 1999, some of the bogus translations showed up on CNN's "Showbiz Today." On June 10, a Los Angeles Times staff writer threw one of the topfive.com titles into his sports column. In Hong Kong, he claimed, the title "Field of Dreams" was "Imaginary Dead Ballplayers in a Cornfield."

"What journalists need to do is learn to distinguish between the crap on the Web and the good stuff," says Yale University researcher and lecturer Fred Shapiro. "It's a crucial skill and one that some journalists need to be taught."

Some of the high-level research sites on the Web are not easily accessible outside a university setting. That is to say, they are not free, which is a problem at news organizations, many of which have simply given reporters access to Lexis-Nexis and gotten rid of their librarians. Shapiro, who is editing the forthcoming Yale Dictionary of Quotations, is one of the foremost practitioners of how to use high-end Internet sites such as JSTOR and others aimed at scholars.

While using JSTOR, Shapiro recently came across an interesting little discovery. The phrase "There's no such thing as a free lunch" did not originate with economist Milton Friedman (who wrote a 1975 book of that name), as Shapiro rival Bartlett's Quotations says. Using the JSTOR site, which stands for journal storage, Shapiro found that another economist, Alvin Hansen, was already using it in 1952. The good news is that Yale's Shapiro is scooping Bartlett's. The bad news is that Hansen was a Harvard man.

"That's the best of the Web," Shapiro says. "I can get stuff in a few seconds that would take me years of going through the stacks."

This is the true appeal of the Net to working journalists. Even the most harried academic has more time to peruse original documents or wander through private libraries than we do. Often we don't even have hours. Speed is our *métier*. Yet any reporting worth pursuing requires drinking deeply at the well of historical context. The Internet gives us the chance to have our cake and eat it, too.

Even before President Clinton stirred up controversy with a slew of late-term pardons and commutations, I researched and wrote a 4,000-word article on the historical and legal underpinnings of a U.S. president's power to grant pardons, commutations and clemency orders. One pertinent constitutional question was whether there are any real restrictions on the presidential pardon authority.

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Logging onto Lexis-Nexis, I found several relevant, in-depth law review articles. Some of them cited Internet links to the original cases being cited. In fact these were highlighted "hyperlinks," meaning that with a single click of my mouse I was able to read the controlling Supreme Court cases dating back to Reconstruction. Within seconds of clicking on those Supreme Court links, I was gazing at the actual words of Salmon P. Chase, the chief justice appointed by Abraham Lincoln. Justice Chase answered my question rather unequivocally: "To the executive alone is entrusted the power of pardon," he wrote with simple eloquence, "and it is granted without limit."

This is not an isolated example. I cover the White House for National Journal and, like many of my colleagues, I have developed an utter reliance on the Internet. I do research and interviews online, find phone numbers, check facts and spellings and research the clips. I can read court cases online, check presidential transcripts, find the true source of quotes and delve into history.

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During the NATO bombardment of Serbia, I wrote a piece examining the way governments use language during wartime. Years earlier, University of Virginia scholar William Lee Miller had quoted George Orwell to me on this very point. I wanted that quote, but Miller couldn't put his hands on it again, and I couldn't locate it on Lexis-Nexis. I figured I might find it on the Web, and I wasn't disappointed. I logged on to one of the several Orwell Web sites I found through my Yahoo! search engine. One of them had put up Orwell's actual newspaper columns from World War II-era Britain. I found just what I was looking for; it became my lead.

Last summer, while doing research for a lengthy opus about capital punishment in America, my interest was piqued in the great Leopold-Loeb murder trial, the first "Trial of the Cen-

tury." Logging onto the Net, I was able to find several cogent synopses of that trial, as well as excerpts from Clarence Darrow's legendary 12-hour summation in which he pleaded for the court to spare the youthful killers from the gallows. I used his quotes—and the quotes of the Chicago prosecutor—in my piece.

The point of these examples is that the Internet has rapidly become such a valuable research tool that it's hard to remember how we did our jobs without it. Need that killer Shakespeare reference to truth-telling from "As You Like It" to spice up that Clinton legacy piece? Log on and find it. Fact-checking the Bible verses slung around by the candidates during the 2000 presidential election? The Bible is not only on the Web but is searchable with a couple of keystrokes. Attorney General John Ashcroft's Senate voting record is there, too, along with his controversial interview with Southern Partisan magazine.

Yet in recent months I have found myself quietly checking the validity of almost everything I find in cyberspace and whenever possible doing it the old-fashioned way: consulting reference books in libraries, calling professors or original sources on the phone, double-checking everything. I don't trust the information on the Net very much anymore. It turns out the same technology that gives reporters access to the intellectual richness of the ages also makes misinformation ubiquitous. It shouldn't come as a surprise, but a tool this powerful must be handled with care.

**T**hese problems are only going to get worse unless Net users—and journalists—get a whole lot more careful. According to the Nielsen/NetRatings released on February 15, 168 million Americans logged onto the Web in the first month of the new millennium.

Seven years ago, AJR warned that an over-reliance on Lexis-Nexis was leading to a "misinformation explosion." Since that time, the number of journalists using the data retrieval service has increased exponentially; at many news organizations, libraries have been phased out and reporters do their own searches. This has led, predictably, to an entire subgenre of phony quotes and statistics that won't die.

Ten years ago in an Associated Press story out of Mexico City, an opposition leader named Vicente Fox was identified as "the Harvard-educated Fox, a former president of Coca-Cola Co. in Mexico," information that apparently came in campaign-trail boasts Fox made himself. When he burst onto the international scene recently, the Harvard angle was repeated in hundreds of news outlets around the world. The Chicago Tribune, USA Today, the Arizona Republic and the Fort Worth Star-Telegram all referred to Fox as a Harvard man. Business Week used the curious phrase "executive diploma from Harvard Business School," and the Boston Globe, which you'd think could check with Harvard pretty easily, said Fox "spent a year studying at Harvard."

The problem, as Forbes magazine discovered, was that Harvard has no record of Fox ever studying there. Forbes found what seems to be the connection: In 1968, Coca-Cola brought in several Harvard Business School professors for six weeks of

seminars with some of its best executives—including a young comer named Vicente Fox.

Former President Clinton, in one of his stock speech lines, often quotes Alexis de Tocqueville as saying, “America is great because America is good.” It’s a line that has been used by Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan and numerous presidential wannabes, including Patrick J. Buchanan and Phil Gramm. It’s a nice sentiment, but de Tocqueville didn’t say it.

This fact was unearthed by Claremont McKenna College professor John J. Pitney, who stumbled across the fake quote after assigning students in his class to find an example of a politician’s use of a de Tocqueville saying and then write about whether it was used accurately and in context. One student took Clinton’s quote and then went line by line through de Tocqueville’s “Democracy in America.” Only trouble was, neither the quote, nor anything like it, is there at all.

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After some sleuthing, Pitney discovered that the passage comes from an otherwise forgettable 1941 book about religion and the American dream. Pitney wrote about this, but Clinton and his speechwriters kept using the quote anyway. After all, it was in the database.

Sometimes the proliferation of such errors carries more serious implications. A couple of years ago, Diane Sawyer concluded a “PrimeTime Live” interview with Ellen DeGeneres the night her lesbian television character “came out” by reciting what Sawyer called “a government statistic”: gay teenagers are “three times as likely to attempt suicide” as straight teenagers.

This factoid, which Sawyer said was provided to her by DeGeneres, is a crock. Sleuthing by a diligent reporter named Delia M. Rios of Newhouse News Service revealed that this figure is *not* a government statistic, but rather the opinion of a single San Francisco social worker. In fact, a high-level inter-agency panel made up of physicians and researchers from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Centers for Disease Control, the National Institute of Mental Health and other organizations concluded that there is no evidence that “sexual orientation and suicidality are linked in some direct or indirect manner.”

Yet, the bogus stat is still routinely cited by certain gay-rights activists, and thanks to Internet-assisted databases, has made its way into the New York Times, the Chicago Tribune,

the Los Angeles Times—and onto prime time network television.

Massachusetts Gov. William F. Weld cited the three-times-more-likely statistic while announcing that he was appointing a high-level commission to study gay and lesbian youth. But facts matter. Weld’s commission was a public relations victory in the minds of some gay-rights activists, but others feared that basing the formation of such a task force on a phony statistic about suicide may represent a step backward for the actual well-being of gay youths. For starters, it creates an image of gay teens as emotionally vulnerable and uncertain, a stereotype that plays into the assertions from cultural conservatives who portray gay people in general as unhappy and misguided.

Joyce Hunter, onetime president of the National Lesbian and Gay Health Association, insists that the available evidence suggests that both gay and straight teens are, instead, emotionally resilient people who “go on to develop a positive sense of self and who go on with their lives.” Other clinicians fear that this misinformation could turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Peter Muehrer of the National Institutes of Health says he worries that a public hysteria over gay-teen suicide could contribute to “suicide contagion,” in which troubled gay teens come to see suicide as a practical, almost normal, way out of their identity struggles.

Another strain of the misinformation virus is spread by e-mail. The Internet has proven irresistible to a shadowy class of pranksters, ideologues and gossips who routinely forward messages that tend to confirm their fears or prejudices—no matter how outlandish they are on their face.

One e-mail message that has ricocheted around the world a few times purports to be a warning from a police department in some city or other—Dallas was one of them—about the unsuspecting moviegoer who sat down in a theater only to be pricked by needles. Beside the needles is a written sign saying something like, “You have been infected with HIV. Welcome to the world of AIDS.”

Another e-mail that received wide circulation claimed that a new scientific study had established a causal link between the use of underarm antiperspirants and breast cancer. A third tells a harrowing story of the traveling businessman (in some versions it’s a woman in a bar) who is drugged and later awakens in a strange hotel room, hooked up to an intravenous needle—and minus one kidney.

These stories, all of which are patently untrue, are urban legends, pure and simple, but when they come over the computer, even educated people sometimes have given them credence. Everyone knows that the Net has no gatekeepers, and that this is its charm as well as its pitfall, but the written word tends to convey more authority than the spoken word. And this is the written word in real time.

“If there is something insidious, it’s that there seems to be a surprising degree of credibility given to things that come through e-mail,” U.S. Postal Service spokesman Norm Scherstrom told Mark Johnson, a reporter who debunked some of these cybermyths for Media General newspapers. “E-mail

seems somehow urgent—it must be very cutting edge because it came electronically.”

It’s easy to make light of such stories, and democracy can probably thrive despite the existence of gullible geeks who check their movie seats for needles or who think their lives depend on not wearing underarm spray or even the fools who nervously check their abdomen every once in awhile for that tell-tale scar that would confirm they’d been kidnapped the night before. But misinformation can carry a frightful price.

Late last year, South African President Thabo Mbeki was surfing the Net one night when he came across a quirky but authoritative-sounding Web site dedicated to the proposition that the HIV virus does not cause AIDS. This theory has been around as long as AIDS has been known, and it has been thoroughly discredited. Mbeki presides over a country where AIDS poses a human disaster of biblical proportions, and where the euphoria over shedding apartheid has been muted by an invisible killer that is decimating his people.

Perhaps then it is no wonder that, desperate, Mbeki would reach for a silver bullet. But in doing so he probably has assisted many South Africans to an early grave. He has ignored price discounts offered by pharmaceutical companies for life-saving drugs such as AZT, refused to aggressively have his government set up distribution networks for condoms, stacked an advisory panel with scientists who question whether AIDS is always fatal, and spoken publicly about the disease in ways that have confounded health care workers in his country and sown confusion among South Africans.

Junk science on the Web—or junk history—has a way of oozing into the mainstream media, often because it proves irresistible to disc jockeys and radio talk-show hosts. The same is true of conspiracy theories and faulty understanding of the law, particularly when the incendiary subject of race relations is involved.

An e-mail marked “URGENT! URGENT! URGENT!” flew like the wind through the African American community for more than two years. It warned that blacks’ “right to vote” will expire in 2007. The impetus for the e-mail was the impending expiration of the Voting Rights Act, which has since been renewed and, in any event, no longer has anything to do with guaranteeing anyone the right to vote.

Nonetheless, the preposterous claim was reiterated by callers to African American radio talk shows. Eventually, it prompted an official rebuttal by the Justice Department and a public disavowal by the Congressional Black Caucus. “The Web has good, useful information,” observes David Bositis, senior political analyst for the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. “But it also has a lot of garbage.”

This particular cyberrumor was eventually traced to a naive but well-intentioned college student from Chicago, who toured the South on a promotional trip sponsored by the NAACP. The mistaken notion that blacks’ right to vote depends on the whims of Congress was given wide circulation in a guest column in USA Today by Camille O. Cosby, wife of entertainer Bill Cosby.

“Congress once again will decide whether African Americans will be allowed to vote,” she wrote, echoing the e-mail.

“No other Americans are subjected to this oppressive nonsense.”

Black leaders went to great lengths to dispel this hoax, but it energized black voters. The ensuing higher-than-normal black turnout in the 1998 midterm elections helped Democrats at the polls, led to House Speaker Newt Gingrich’s demise and may have saved Bill Clinton’s job. Could the e-mail hoax have played a role?

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Other hoaxes are not so accidental. Last year, as the presidential campaign began heating up, I received an e-mail from a fellow journalist alerting me to an anti-Al Gore Web site she thought contained valuable information. It included a litany of silly statements attributed to Gore. Some of them were accurate, but several of them I recognized as being utterances of former Vice President Dan Quayle. Others were statements never said by either Gore or Quayle.

On October 3, 1999, when liberal movie star Warren Beatty spoke to Americans for Democratic Action about his political views, he said that he wasn’t the only one who worried that corporations were a threat to democracy. Beatty said that Abraham Lincoln himself had warned that corporations are “more despotic than monarchy,” adding that Lincoln also said “the money power preys upon the nation in times of peace, and it conspires against it in times of adversity.”

Beatty’s populist version of Lincoln hardly squares with his career as a corporate attorney—he represented Illinois Central Railroad before he ran for public office—but that didn’t faze modern journalists. “That Lincoln stuff just amazed me,” gushed Newsweek’s Jonathan Alter on “Rivera Live.” Alter wrote that Beatty’s “harshest attacks... were actually quotes from a speech by Abraham Lincoln.”

Actually, they weren’t. Lincoln’s official biographer once called the quote “a bold, unblushing forgery.” And in a piece for History News Service, an online site that often debunks faulty history, Lincoln scholar Matthew Pinsker said this particular fake Lincoln citation has been around since 1896. In his speech at the 1992 Republican National Convention, Ronald Reagan attributed phony conservative sentiments to Honest Abe, including, “You cannot help the weak by punishing the strong,” and “You cannot help the poor by destroying the rich.”

This example underscores a couple of important caveats about the Web. First, bogus quotes were around a long time before the Internet. Moreover, the Net itself is often a useful tool

for those trying to correct canards. Such was the case in a recent Internet hoax, this one targeting George W. Bush.

The extremely close election between Bush and Gore generated a blizzard of Web traffic, most of it in the form of assorted e-mails making fun of one political party or the other, or one candidate or the other—or Florida voters in general. But one outlandish anti-Bush e-mail pushed by disgruntled Democrats actually crept into numerous mainstream media outlets. This was the one in which 16th-century French monk Nostradamus predicted the outcome of this year's election—throwing in a partisan and gratuitous insult to boot: "Come the millennium, month 12, in the home of the greatest power, the village idiot will come forth to be acclaimed the leader."

This was so obviously fake—it doesn't sound remotely like Nostradamus—that it's hard to imagine anyone falling for it, let alone putting it in the newspaper. And yet it ran without comment at the end of a column in the Times of London, as unchallenged letters to the editor and reader comments in outlets ranging from California's Ventura County Star to Wilmington, North Carolina's Morning Star. Columnists at North Carolina's Asheville Citizen-Times and the Tampa Tribune, among other places, quoted it with little or no filter.

Meanwhile, a respected clearinghouse of information about Nostradamus issued a notice that the Bush e-mail was a hoax.

It was, of course, a Web site.

**A** postscript: Three years ago, while discussing with reporters the pitfalls of the Internet, Hillary Rodham Clinton employed the line often attributed to Twain—and cited earlier in this piece—about a lie making its way halfway 'round the world before the truth could get its boots on. "Well, today," she added, "the lie can be twice around the world before the truth gets out of bed to find its boots." While fact-checking this article, I had

reason to call Fred Shapiro at Yale. Perhaps because Mrs. Clinton never mentioned Twain—she attributed it to an "old saying"—my interest was piqued, and I asked Shapiro if he'd ever heard the aphorism. "I have just been intensively researching Twain quotes, and didn't come across this one," he replied. "I would assume that Twain did not say it."

Uh-oh. That sent me back into research mode. What I found is that the "Twain" quote has been around. According to a 1996 article by James Bennet of the New York Times, Mrs. Clinton (and Al Gore as well) used the line, with attribution to Twain. Other politicians have credited it to Twain as well. Clintonite Paul Begala, writing last year in the Orlando Sentinel, used it, giving Twain full credit. So did Republican stalwart Haley Barbour in a Roll Call op-ed. In a 1999 column in the Chattanooga Times, a writer named L.M. Boyd gave credit to the quote to "the sage Israel Zangwill," adding that famed CBS newsman Edward R. Murrow used it all the time.

On the Internet, the responses were even more varied. Several Web sites credited Twain while others attributed the quote to Will Rogers; Reagan-era Interior Secretary James Watt; Winston Churchill; another former British prime minister, James Callaghan; and, in one case, merely to "a French proverb."

Possibly all of these sources uttered it at one time or another. Callaghan seems to have done so on November 1, 1976, in an address to the House of Commons. But he attributed the line to the man who is probably its rightful author: a Baptist preacher from England named Charles Haddon Spurgeon, a contemporary of Twain who, according to Benham's Book of Quotations, wrote this line: "A lie travels 'round the world, while Truth is putting on her boots."

Amen.

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