

Doing Your Due Diligence

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – April 22, 2012

In a recent Wisconsin speech, GOP Presidential Candidate Rick Santorum stirred supporters with a tale of assault on American democracy and tradition. "I was just reading something last night, from the State of California... I think it's seven or eight of the California system of universities don't even teach an American history course. It's not even available to be taught," he said. "Just to tell you how bad it's gotten in this country, where we're trying to disconnect the American people from the roots of who we are, so they have an understanding of what America should be."

The story played to Santorum's base, but there was one small problem. He was 100% wrong. Turns out, all 23 campuses in the California State University System offer classes in US History, the Constitution, and American Ideals. In fact, students must pass two courses or a comprehensive exam to graduate. Santorum was criticized by media outlets and lampooned by comedians, and rightly so.

I'm certain the he wasn't deliberately spreading misinformation. But, Santorum was careless. He was tired, up late reading, something caught his eye, and he said "Aha! This'll do just fine!"

He did what we all do in this age of internet anywhere anytime – he grabbed something and passed it on as fact without due diligence. Sometimes, untruth arises from truth through simple errors and misunderstanding. Other lies are deliberate, calculated, and malicious.

Ask South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley. On March 29, the internet buzzed with news of a pending IRS investigation of the Republican Governor for tax fraud. From one unsubstantiated post by a 25-year-old blogger, the story went viral and was picked up – unquestioned and unverified – by major news networks, blogs, and newspapers. It was front page news in South Carolina's *The State* newspaper the following day. Never mind the IRS had already confirmed the story a hoax. By then, the firestorm had damaged Haley's standing as possible running mate for eventual nominee Mitt Romney.

I entered Journalism school in 1978 inspired by the Watergate-era reporting of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein in the *Washington Post* from 1972 to 1974. After reading their book *All the Presidents Men* -- and watching Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman relive their story on the big screen -- we all wanted to be reporters. What I remember most vividly are the standards to which Executive Editor Ben Bradlee held his reporters. Allegations were independently verified and corroborated before Bradlee would publish the stories. It was a painstaking process with many dead ends, but certain truth was top priority. By contrast, on March 29, the bogus story about Governor Hayley was retweeted by a Washington Post reporter only 14 minutes after it appeared in an obscure blog. The next day, it was front page news in South Carolina and around the nation. The scoop was what mattered, not the truth.

Shame on the media; but, also, shame on us. In the age of email, Twitter, Facebook, Blogger, and the like, we're all journalists. And, we fail miserably at living up to the standards I was taught by grizzled news veterans in my college days. When passing along supposed news, we have an obligation to know we are spreading truth. Or, we must at least make a reasonable effort to verify and err on the side of

caution when not certain. The media seems to have abandoned all responsibility, but we cannot simply absolve ourselves of the duty to be truthful and reliable.

Friends and acquaintances pass along stories I can often prove false. Snopes.com, FactCheck.org, and PolitiFact.com are great resources to test things you read or hear. But, it starts with common sense, personal accountability, and a little critical thinking of your own.

Many hoaxes are not just false; they're recycled yarns from bygone eras. One circulating recently ridiculed President Obama and VP Joe Biden for a supposed gaffe involving "cattle guards" – an obstacle used out west to prevent cattle from passing through fence openings. It's a recycled joke from the 1950s that has surfaced before as a supposed true story about President Bill Clinton and even a Canadian official. President George W. Bush was likewise often ridiculed for saying stupid things he never actually said.

Please... The next time you get a juicy tidbit you just can't wait to share, think before you blindly forward or post. Do your homework. Check the facts. Find your inner Ben Bradlee. Or, just follow the advice of another former President, Ronald Reagan: "Trust, but verify."

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