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## UFO UpDates Mailing List

### When Rumors make the News

From: [RSchatte@aol.com](mailto:RSchatte@aol.com)  
Date: Tue, 24 Dec 1996 01:11:47 -0500  
Fwd Date: Wed, 25 Dec 1996 00:13:22 -0500  
Subject: When Rumors make the News

>From Newseek 1/ 6/97  
When Rumors Make the News

Public-service warning: The Internet is not a news service. Read what's there with care, and be your own editor.  
by Richard Turner

He wears a trench coat. He worked for Kennedy. His image, with the Eiffel Tower in the background and the ABC logo in the corner, exudes a sense of legitimacy. This is the familiar medium, the thing we're supposed to trust. So when former ABC news correspondent Pierre Salinger breathlessly announced last month that he had evidence that TWA Flight 800 was felled by a friendly-fire U.S. missile, the story had enough credibility to resurface in the "mainstream" press, where it had briefly appeared two months before.

For most people, this episode played out as embarrassing, a little bit sad, a little bit Brinkley-esque. But inhabitants of cyberspace were less compassionate. To them, this was yet another sign of establishment cluelessness about the Internet. They witheringly pointed out that the same document Salinger referred to had been on the World Wide Web, posted for all to see, for months. "Well, Pierre, if you'd get a little Net-savvy, you'd figure it out," sniffed one Web site, [conspire.com](http://conspire.com), which concluded: "Learn to surf, Dude."

There they go again, the denizens of the "old" media and the Netizens of the new. Their mutual distrust colors a debate which really ought not to be so supercharged. Mainstream-media watchdogs view the loopy Salinger story as yet another sign that the Net is a giant, churning rumor pit, because the friendly-fire information resided there. The technophiles think they're under attack by a punditocracy afraid to give up control.

And so there was similar fretting from both sides when a slightly overreaching story in the San Jose Mercury News--which appeared to say that CIA-sanctioned cocaine sales launched the crack epidemic--took on momentum, fed by the Net. The tale became holy writ to many, especially in the black community. The Mercury was blasted for how its Web version of the story helped spread and distort it.

We don't mind mentioning these things, or the alien autopsies, or the United Nations plot with the black helicopters. But there are other examples of "news" floating around the Internet that we won't articulate, like the famous Republican politician said to have been involved in a homosexuality scandal some years back. Why won't we put it in the magazine? Well, short of actually investigating it, we'll rely on the San Francisco Chronicle, which ran a story saying there's no evidence that it's true. It's part of the "legitimate" press, and we fancy that we are, too.

This is very civic-minded of us, and, of course, very pompous. Who are we to decide? Media mandarins, determining from on high what people can and

can't know. This is the view of the apostles of cyber-nirvana. To them, the Net is a means for regular people to assert their rights against the old order of top-down windbags.

All of this obscures the obvious fact that the Net is a means of communication, not a news service. Everybody who's spent five minutes there knows it's full of self-indulgent rantings, junior-high-school feuding--and porno. Just because something's on the Net doesn't give it gravitas. The TWA friendly-fire story, before it hit the Internet, actually showed up on CBS's local TV station in New York just after the crash. But CBS network news didn't pick up on it, and this is the point: with so much information out there today, people have to know whom to trust. For better or worse, this trust still resides in some TV news organizations and a handful of newspapers and magazines--many of them controlled by family members willing to tolerate flattish stock prices in return for some high-minded and corny ideal that their stories should try to tell the truth. They set the agenda for most other news. And readers by now know when they browse the newsstand that there's a difference between The New York Times and Weekly World News.

For those who aren't waving a banner for one side or the other--who believe that the Net is important but doubt its utopian qualities--the debate about news pollution on the Net is just another reminder that citizens have to pick through their news as carefully as cats. "You can't scroll through the Net uncritically," says high-tech attorney Michael Godwin. "You have to be your own editor. That's called being an adult in an information society." And that still means listening to guys in trench coats, even if they sometimes get it wrong.

1/07/97 Society/When Rumors Make the News

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