

CASE #9: IMAGINARY PUNDIT

Over the past 20 years, the Internet has become the ultimate vehicle to accelerate the flow of relevant information. Around the world, the internet is being utilized as a tool to self-educate faster than ever before. While an immense library of knowledge on any subject is just a keystroke (or Google search) away, there is a growing risk that some of this knowledge is not credible. In many cases, authors create and package fiction with the sole purpose of deceiving or manipulating the public into believing things that are, in fact, false.

The 2008 U.S. presidential election has cast a spotlight on political falsehoods created to appear as fact. A number of major news agencies have fallen victim to fictitious information and quotes that were created in an attempt to get air time and gain notoriety. Take the case of fictional pundit, Martin (a.k.a. Michael) Eisenstadt.¹ Sources ranging from Fox News to Mother Jones, The New Republic, and the Los Angeles Times all fell prey to Eisenstadt's hoax.

The day after the 2008 presidential election, FOX News Channel reported that an unnamed member of the McCain campaign stated, "Sarah Palin did not know that Africa was a continent."² Following this story, David Shuster, an MSNBC anchor, using information obtained from a blog, attempted to set the record straight by reporting, "Turns out it was Martin Eisenstadt, a McCain policy adviser, who has come forward to identify himself as the source of the leaks."³ While the truth of the Palin-Africa claim remains uncertain, Mr. Eisenstadt, who claimed to be the source, does not in fact exist – he is a fictional character created by filmmakers Eitan Gorlin and Dan Mirvish; Gorlin plays Eisenstadt in YouTube videos. Gorlin, via Eisenstadt, claimed responsibility for breaking the story of Palin's faux pas, but in truth he created the video in response to the Fox News report, not before it.⁴

Why did Eisenstadt perpetrate this fraud on the media? Gorlin states that he and Mirvish started distributing the Eisenstadt pieces in order to get a TV show. They changed Eisenstadt's first name when bloggers and journalists first noticed that Eisenstadt did not "check out," and later even went to the trouble of creating, "video footage, biography, a false think tank Web site, and blog" for Eisenstadt to keep the ruse up.⁵ Journalists do not have to operate in the dark or alone, however. The website, sourcewatch.org provides some information on newsworthy (pseudo) individuals like Eisenstadt to help journalists check backgrounds and verify sources.⁶ Unfortunately, Time and CNN quoted Eisenstadt as a political pundit again in May of 2009.⁷

¹ Pérez-Peña, Richard, "A senior fellow at the Institute of Nonexistence,"

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/13/arts/13iht-13hoax.17776408.html>, *The New York Times*, Nov. 13, 2008.

² Carl Cameron, Fox News Channel broadcast, approx. 5:05 p.m. CT (Phoenix, AZ), Nov. 5, 2008, accessible at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWZHTJsR4Bc>.

³ David Schuster, MSNBC broadcast, approx. 4:40 p.m. ET, Nov. 10, 2008, accessible at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ucfA86t7sH4&feature=Playlist&p=AB4B95866BFE0C5D&index=8>.

⁴ Friedman, Emily, "Martin Eisenstadt: Pundit or Fraud?" <http://www.abcnnews.com/Politics/Vote2008/Story?id=6250151&page=2>, *ABC News*, Nov. 14, 2008.

⁵ Harper, Jennifer, "Pranksters get the last laugh," <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/nov/14/pranksters-get-the-last-laugh/>, *Washington Times*, Nov. 14, 2008.

⁶ http://sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Martin_Eisenstadt

⁷ Huston, Warner Todd, "Time gets taken by fake McCain advisor unmasked months ago," <http://newsbusters.org/blogs/warner-todd-huston/2009/05/14/time-gets-taken-fake-mccain-adviser-unmasked-months-ago>, newsbusters.org, May 14, 2009.