


EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SNOPEs

Exclusive: Joseph Farah reveals whole truth about Facebook's official 'fact-checker'

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WASHINGTON – “Were Brett Kavanaugh’s children escorted from a Senate hearing room because they were harassed by hecklers?”

That was a topic last week tackled by the allegedly impartial fact-checking sleuths at Snopes.com, Facebook’s official partner in separating real news from fake.

Snopes determined the allegation was “mostly false.”

But, sometimes manipulation of the question you ask determines the answer.

If you ask an illegitimate question, chances are high you get a bogus answer.

Most Americans, no matter which side of the political spectrum they may reside, are familiar with what happened during the Senate Judiciary Committee’s hearings last week on the confirmation of Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. Before committee Chairman Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, could even

complete his first sentence on day one of the hearings, he was repeatedly interrupted by Democratic members demanding the proceedings be aborted. That was immediately followed by the first of some 70 acts of civil disobedience and interruptions by members of the audience, at least some of whom were observed taking cash payments to participate in the effort by Democrats to halt the hearings and prevent Kavanaugh from being confirmed.

About an hour or two into the televised hearing, the Kavanaughs' two daughters, Margaret and Liza, were escorted from the meeting room by their mother, Ashley, and a small security detail. Those facts are undisputed.

But who suggested the hecklers had targeted the children? No one. In fact, the Snopes "investigation" cites only an otherwise anonymous "internet Meme" as having raised the allegation.

Welcome to the thoroughly unprofessional, politically biased, widely discredited and scandal-plagued world of Snopes.com – now one of the premier gatekeepers in the wacky and warped world of "truth detection" by what I have labeled the internet's emerging "Speech Code Cartel," which includes Google, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Apple and Amazon.

"If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about answers," explained Thomas Pynchon in "Gravity's Rainbow."

It is as true and self-evident a statement as has ever been made.

That is just one of the many techniques Snopes and its co-founder David Mikkelson employ to redefine truth and reality to their liking – all the while hiding behind the phony veneer of impartiality, tireless research and the kind of expertise you can apparently obtain with an unrelated B.S. degree in computer science.

Snopes has the advantage of a contract with Facebook and the affirmation of other biased “fact-checkers” that followed Mikkelson’s lead into this field of self-proclaimed, ubiquitous, infallible guardians of all knowledge and truth – including PolitiFact and FactCheck.org. Getting the Facebook contract has greatly empowered Snopes well beyond its meager qualifications.

Let’s begin with a little history of Snopes.

The site was founded in 1995 by Mikkelson and his then-wife, Barbara. The couple met in the early 1990s on a folklore-themed online message board and married before establishing Snopes. Earlier they had posed as leaders of the “San Fernando Valley Folklore Society,” which did not exist apart from letterhead that permitted the couple to make official-sounding inquiries about subjects that interested them. One profile described the group as “an entity dreamed up to help make the inquiries seem more legit.” David Mikkelson explained to the Los Angeles Times in 1997: “When I sent letters out to companies, I found I got a much better response with an official-looking organization’s stationery.”

It probably didn’t represent a crime to do so, but it reveals that the very foundation of Snopes was built on a lie. Just imagine if

Snopes made such a discovery in its research of another organization – if indeed it performed such research.

From the beginning, the entire Snopes fact-checking team was comprised of this husband-wife duo, with both writing their posts based entirely on secondhand internet sources, with Barbara also responsible for accounting and David the tech guru.

By 2015, the Mikkelsons' marriage had ended in divorce – and it wasn't pretty. The legal disputes involved continue to haunt the fate of the company even today.

In the court filings, Barbara, 59, has accused her former husband, 58, of “raiding the corporate business Bardav bank account for his personal use and attorney fees” without consulting her. She claimed he embezzled \$98,000 from the company over the course of four years, “which he expended upon himself and the prostitutes he hired.” She alleged that her ex-husband removed thousands from their business accounts between April and June of 2016 to pay for trips for him and his “girlfriend.” She said he spent nearly \$10,000 on a 24-day “personal vacation” in India in 2016 and expensed a plane ticket for his girlfriend to Buenos Aires.

“He’s been depleting the corporate account by spending monies from it on his personal expenses,” she said in the filing.

 David and Barbara Mikkelson

David and Barbara Mikkelson

For his part, David claimed the India visit was a legitimate business trip, that he only expensed a fraction of the costs – 22.5

percent. He explained that he was considering setting up a fact-checking website in India and wanted to get a sense of the culture. He also said he went to Buenos Aires to attend an international fact-checking conference.

Meanwhile, David wanted his salary raised from \$240,000 to \$360,000 – arguing that this would still put him below the “industry standards” and that he should be paid up to \$720,000 a year. Writing to Barbara in an email, he said his salary “should be about 2x to 3x what it is now, I’ll settle for \$360K with the understanding that it’s to be retroactive to the start of the year.”

Barbara responded that his request was “not even in the galaxy of reasonable.”

“So bitter was the dispute, that they even fell out over the arbiter they had appointed to settle disputes, meaning that Facebook’s arbiter cannot even agree on its own arbiter,” explained a 2016 exposé in the London Daily Mail.

The divorce settlement stipulated that David receive a salary of \$240,000 a year in 2015, while both of the former couple were due to receive \$20,000 a month as a draw against profits, as well as a share of any net profit the company made after those payments.

“Each party waives his or her claim upon Bardav’s revenues received by Husband into his PayPal account and spent by him, accountant’s fees for restating tax returns to reflect previously unreported income. ...” the settlement stipulated.

Savings, IRAS and stockholdings of well over \$1.5 million were allocated to Barbara, while she renounced claim on their marital home in Calabasas, California, in return for a payment of \$660,000.

David kept their joint baseball card collection, a savings account with a \$1.59 million balance and other savings worth more than \$300,000.

They later increased the \$20,000 monthly payments to \$30,000.

After the split, David hired Elyssa Young, now 49, as an administrative assistant at Snopes, whom he married in 2016. She is also a long-time escort and porn star who worked for decades under the name “Erin O’Bryn.”

She described herself on her Twitter page as “a mature and experienced courtesan, idealist, activist & dreamer.” On her escort website, she called herself “an elite and discreet companion” who

“understands that while pleasure and passion may be explored in the bedroom, it is hardly the only place.”

“I only accept a very limited number of new lovers because I’m only seeking long-term engagements,” she wrote.

 The new Mrs. Mikkelson

The new Mrs. Mikkelson

She charged a “non-negotiable” fee of \$1,200 for four hours of “companionship and entertainment” and \$5,000 for 24 hours, according to her very public website.

Young ran for the U.S. Congress in Hawaii as a Libertarian candidate in 2004, during which she handed out “Re-Defeat Bush” cards and condoms stamped with the slogan “Don’t get screwed again.”

“Let’s face it, I am an unlikely candidate,” she posted on her campaign website. “I fully admit that I am a courtesan.”

She received 3 percent of the vote in her bid for Congress.

Young is hardly the only Snopes employee who is publicly frank about her sex life.

One of the lead fact-checkers, Kim LaCapria, has also been a sex-and-fetish blogger who went by the pseudonym “Vice Vixen.” She described her blog as a lifestyle website “with a specific focus on naughtiness, sin, carnal pursuits, and general hedonism and bonne vivante-ery.” She regularly provided intimate advice and reviewed sex toys, including a vibrating wand that “drives boys mad.” Today the site describes her as “a New York-based content

manager.” Describing her day-off activities on another blog, she wrote that she “played scrabble, smoked pot, and posted to Snopes.” She added, “That’s what I did on my day on, too.”

Young, meanwhile, continues at Snopes as “administrative assistant.”

Snopes has received some scrutiny for not employing any “standardized procedure” for fact-checking. Mikkelson explains that the process “involves multiple stages of editorial oversight, so no output is the result of a single person’s discretion.” There is also no “blanket set of standards” for contributors.

Beginning in August 2015, a company called Proper Media started brokering advertising on Snopes in exchange for a commission. Through March 2017, it collected the revenues and disbursed them to the Bardov bank account. Then, on March 9, 2017, David Mikkelson terminated the agreement in hopes of regaining full control of Snopes. When Proper Media stopped the payments to the bank, Mikkelson appealed to readers through a GoFundMe account – raising an astonishing \$665,000 very quickly. But, since the initial excitement, the GFM campaign has raised only \$176,017. Despite its partnership with Facebook, Snopes is still struggling. Appeals continue to be made on the SaveSnopes.com website.

Still the legal battles continue – along with the question of whether Snopes can be trusted to be fair, balanced and unbiased.

That gets right back to which questions Snopes asks itself. Here’s another very recent example: “Do Nike factory workers in Vietnam

earn 20 cents per hour?”

That was the question Snopes asked itself regarding the deal the company made with Colin Kaepernick earlier this month.

Snopes ruled a no decision. Why? Because it's not the right question.

“Nike workers in Vietnam are 80 percent female, and some are illegally forced to labor more than the statutory working week of 48 hours,” Snopes found.

But, it also found that it is not typical for Vietnamese employees to work 70 to 80 hours per week. Furthermore, while wages were around 20 cents per hour in the mid-1990s, they have increased since then.

Was it a way for Snopes to cater to a potential or even existing advertiser? Was it a way it could defuse the Kaepernick rebellion? Who knows, but it added little to the raging national controversy.

It's not just through the questions Snopes asks itself that it deflects issues of bias.

You can also compare what Snopes finds in its sleuthing about the personalities it scrutinizes.

The blog Owlcation compared two similar “investigations” Snopes conducted regarding two very different politicians – Dr. Ben Carson and Bill and Hillary Clinton.

Question No. 1 was: “Did Ben Carson purchase a \$31,000 dining set and charge it to HUD?”

Snopes claimed the allegation was true.

“The article then proceeds to pile on references from the New York Times and the Guardian that offer further damning claims about Carson. But then comes the information that completely refutes the claims made earlier in the article,” Owlcation reports. “Carson did not order the furniture, and he told CNN: ‘I did not request new furniture, but asked if it could be remediated.’ The Snopes article even provides part of Carson’s response which puts the lie to the article’s ‘true’ claim: ‘I was as surprised as anyone to find out that a \$31,000 dining set had been ordered,’ Carson said in the statement. ‘I have requested that the order be canceled. We will find another solution for the furniture replacement.’ So, why would an article that ends with information answering the question, ‘Did Ben Carson purchase a \$31,000 dining set and charge it to HUD?’, with a resounding ‘No,’ claim that the statement ‘HUD Secretary Ben Carson bought a \$31,000 dining set and billed taxpayers for it,’ is ‘true’? The end of the article refutes its beginning, but anyone who just casually glances over it would likely come away thinking that Carson was, in fact, trying to bilk the taxpayers out of \$31,000 for a dining set and likely would not have even bothered to note that it was not for Carson’s personal home use but for his office at HUD.”

Such was not the case in a similar story about whether the Clintons “were forced to return an estimated \$200,000 in furniture,

china and art they 'stole' from the White House." This claim is labeled, "Mostly False."

"Again, the article twists itself through some loops of creative analysis to finally land on the claim, 'All told, the Clintons paid back or returned approximately \$136,000 worth of furniture, artwork, china and other household items they had kept upon leaving office.' That number looks a lot closer to \$200,000 than the label of 'mostly false' would indicate," says Owlcation. "The Clintons clearly took items from the White House that did not belong to them, yet their sycophants quibble about the actual value of the things, not the fact that they took them. If taking things that do not belong to you is not 'stealing,' then we need a new definition of the word."

Ultimately, bias is in the eye of the beholder, but even David Mikkelson admits most often it is conservatives and Republicans who detect bias in Snopes reports.

Is that surprising after learning the history of this enterprise?

And what does it tell you about the worldview of Snopes' new partner – Facebook?
