

Blatant lie about death of singer highlights need to combat online rumors

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Seven Liu, a celebrated singer, actor and anchor born in Taiwan in 1952, was said to have died of myocardial infarction last November in Las Vegas, according to his former agent on February 15.

The singer's rich repertoire, known for tunes suggestive of the good old days of the 1980s, necessarily triggered a spontaneous outpouring of mourning and nostalgia among people of the right age — for only one day.

On February 16, his former agent, who had authored the news of his death, said after some equivocations, the singer was still alive.

As a veteran newspaperman, I as a rule take considerable pride in my astuteness in separating the increasingly rarefied grains of truth from the sea of falsehoods in social media, but I was taken in this time.

I shared this piece of news with one of my coevals.

I proved presumptuous in believing that, given the Chinese superstitious avoidance of anything concerning death (except in the case of arch villains or disgraced officials), it has to be euphemized in polite Chinese.

But in the cyberspace there is no room for such scruples, though for the life of me I still could not figure out what would have motivated the agent to falsify the death of a former client.

Probably this is more reason for us to mourn the passing of the simpler days when you can say “as sure as death,” as well as the negligence of reporters in general who no longer feel encumbered to make a couple of phone calls to verify facts in the race against time.

Nor was this the only bait taken on that day.

I also shared with a parent of a child about to sit for the college entrance examination the breaking news that there would be major changes to the test items for 2023.

For example, in the English test, there would be growing emphasis on testing of traditional cultural knowledge and terminology.

With the tests less than four months away, you could well anticipate the parental anxiety on learning of this piece of news, which turned out to be false.

A “well-known education public account” issued an apology on February 15 putting it down to be mere speculation based on a book titled “China’s National College Entrance Examination Report (2023).”

Rather than being an official report, this is but a crammer for test-takers

compiled by a private entity, the apology said.

Deplorable, but with the above two instances, we can still take solace in the fact we could hold somebody accountable if we want.

We would be less sure in the following case.

A rumor went viral on February 16 that since March 1, Hangzhou would put an end to the policy of traffic restriction based on the plate numbers of cars.

It seemed that a Hangzhou resident had the news fabricated by using ChatGPT which he then shared in a neighborhood WeChat group of 500 people. This ChatGPT-created announcement was then shared by other residents, according to an apology issued by the resident who is under police investigation.

The instant social communication tools are super fertility drugs facilitating the circulation of rumors and lies, and subsequent remedy for this often proves to be costly, slow and ineffective.

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There is an urgency to come up with regulations that really bite.

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