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Usain Bolt and steroids



I'm guilty of the Original Sin of the Internet: mistaking truthiness for truth.

by Nat Torkington | @gnat | +Nat Torkington | August 21, 2012



“ A lie can travel halfway around the world before the truth has its boots on. —Abraham LincolnShakespeareWinston ChurchillMark Twain

TL;DR: the Internet is full of myth, truth is buried in truthiness, objective reality may itself be a convenient fiction, we are all lost souls wandering in a desert of fabulation and mystery, but [Usain Bolt's coach is not a steroid pusher](#). Also, how do you decide which links to share?

Yesterday I [tweeted a link which wasn't true](#), about Usain Bolt and steroids. This shouldn't be earth-shattering news, that a factual basis isn't a prerequisite for virality, but I wanted to deconstruct my mistake to learn from it.



Most of the replies I got to the tweet were of the “ugh, how depressing” variety, because it played to the sense that this man's abnormal accomplishments were unnatural. However, I was contacted by [David Epstein of Sports Illustrated](#) after an umptyzillion people had retweeted the link:

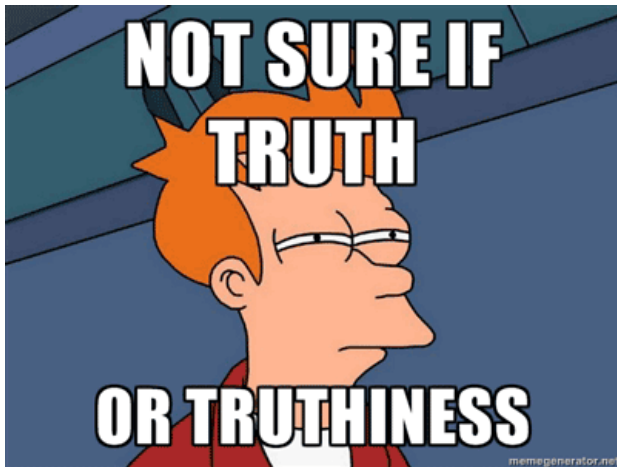
“ @gnat Angel Heredia is not nor was a coach to Usain Bolt. that central crux of the MuscleWeek story was thoroughly debunked.

— David Epstein (@SIDavidEpstein) [August 21, 2012](#)

When asked, David was kind enough to provide a citation to an NBC story: [Linking of Usain Bolt to Admitted Steroid Dealer Completely False](#).

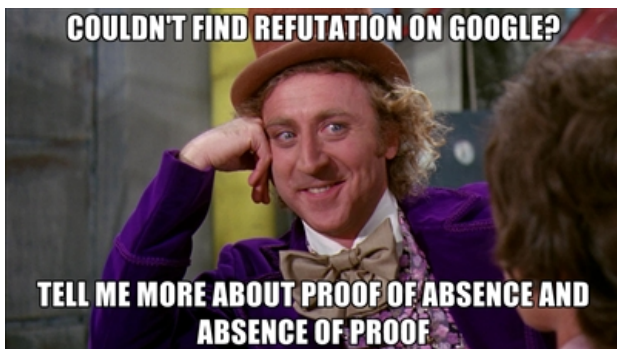
(Note that the 4:1 testosterone ratios, the doping cycle, and other background on performance enhancing drugs in the original article are true; it's the specific claim about Bolt's coach that's fiction)

I'm guilty of the Original Sin of the Internet: mistaking truthiness for truth.



A greater sin, however, would be failing to learn from mistakes. So, what did I do, how can I do better next time, and how will I make it right?

I did try to falsify the story. I checked the site and "MuscleWeek" sounded like a magazine for ~~dopers~~ gym rats who know about steroids. The design didn't reek of amateur hour. The story had the specific numbers and citations that imply someone has done their work, rather than simply making allegations. My Google search for [Usain Bolt steroids](#) turned up the Muscle Week story but no rebuttal. I hunted for [Usain Bolt steroids refutation](#), with no links to a source for "we investigated this and it was rubbish." I even tried [Usain Bolt steroids snopes](#) in the hopes my favourite dettruthiness site had nailed it. Nada.

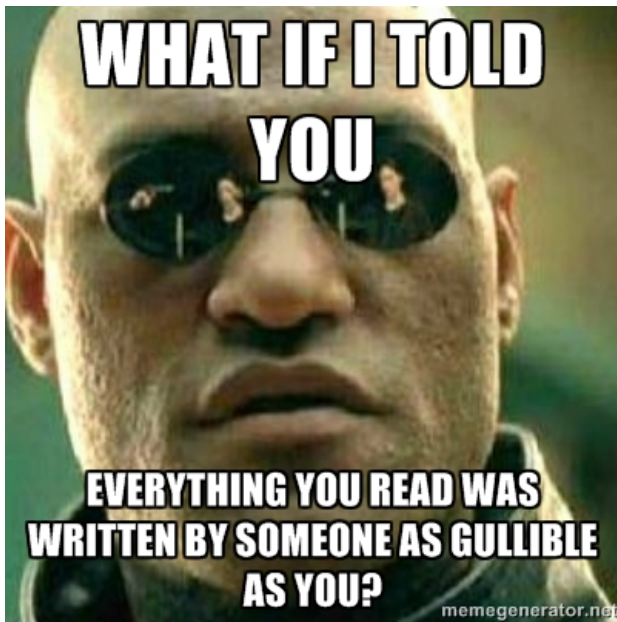


However, I made at least two mistakes.

First, **source credibility has to rely on more than the URL**. I know that anyone can register a domain and whip up a design that looks credible. I should have looked for **extrinsic validation of that source's reliability**.

Second, **I'm outside my field of expertise**. I naturally find it hard to judge the credibility of a source, and the specificity of claims are an unreliable proxy for the quality of those claims. **I should ask someone with experience in that field before I pass it on**. (Although in this case I didn't trust that my friends in high performance sport would be able to talk honestly about doping.) Were I a real journalist, I would have called the source (the Bolt camp) to give them an opportunity to falsify the claims in case (as happened) the original allegations were a pile of hooley.

As for how to make it right? I've written this article, which will lend O'Reilly Radar's Google weight to the NBC refutation of the coach claim. And I'll reply with a correction to people who retweeted the link from me, to undo the direct damage.



The real lesson is, though, that I periodically need to renew my healthy skepticism for everything I see. Most of what you read in reputable publications is of questionable value, most of what you see shared online isn't from reputable publications, and the things that make us want to believe something is true are not themselves signals of truth. In other words, [Stephen Colbert was right](#).

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