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From bottle caps to presidents, rumors circulate

January 02, 2009 @ 12:01 PM
The Herald-Dispatch
Herald-Dispatch.com

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — For a few months this year, kind-hearted West Virginians from Wheeling to Welch busied themselves collecting hard plastic caps commonly found on bottles of soda pop.

There were collection drives at churches, grocery stores and even a hospital. Ultimately, a group in Bluefield boasted it had enough to fill a tractor trailer. One woman in Parkersburg

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January 05, 2009 @ 09:34 AM

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(March 21, 2008)

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estimated she had more than 20,000.

The payoff was supposed to be free chemotherapy for needy cancer patients. Unfortunately, it was a hoax.

A mysterious rumor started by unknown people for unknown reasons, it spread across the state thanks to people's desire to lend a hand, and even made its way into Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina.

"Bottle caps defined my year," says Amy Wentz Berner of the American Cancer Society in West Virginia. "Some people had been collecting them for specific people they knew, and even children. That kept me up numerous nights."

The cancer society's state chapter spent the summer knocking down the rumors — posting items on its Web site, making sure operators at the society's toll-free number had up-to-date information on the hoax and talking with local media. Eventually, the calls stopped coming.

The bottle cap hoax illustrates a phenomenon that may become more common as trust in old institutions like newspapers erodes and the power of propelling news — true and false — shifts to less formal networks of knowledge like the Internet and e-mail.

Rumors are emerging from the twilight of disrepute and have started changing the way Americans perceive everything from vaccinations to presidential campaigns.

Politics, perhaps, best demonstrates the new power of rumor-mongering. President-elect Barack Obama created the Web site — FightTheSmears.com — solely to refute rumors about him and his wife, which were often spread through anonymous chain e-mails.

"Chain e-mails are a much bigger factor in campaigns now than people realize," says Bill Adair, editor of Politifact.com and the Washington bureau chief of the St. Petersburg Times.

Politifact created a special section on its Web site just to evaluate the claims of chain e-mails. Of 42 checked, just two merited the designation "True" without further qualification, while 30 were either "False" or "Pants on Fire," as in, "liar, liar..."

In prior campaigns, Adair says, the news media investigated rumors and ignored them if they proved false. That watchdog role has vanished with the rise of the Internet.

"Now," Adair says, "not only is that rumor making an end run around the media, it has a certain credibility because of who's sending it" — namely, the friends and relatives who

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pass along chain e-mails. In other words, you may not trust the St. Petersburg Times, but you still trust Uncle Al not to steer you wrong.

The erosion of confidence in institutions has weakened the press' ability to quash false rumors, and it's also affected how people treat claims from government, business, religion and science, with the potential for serious consequences.

In Jersey City, N.J., for example, police arrested a 19-year-old man in December and charged him with causing false public alarm, alleging he wrote Internet posts in October claiming local women were being shot as part of a gang initiation ritual on the day before Halloween.

More worrisome are the roughly 131 cases of measles among U.S. children reported this year, the highest number in over a decade. Nearly half the cases involve parents who rejected vaccines, partly due to rumors they may cause autism, despite abundant scientific evidence to the contrary.

"Once these large institutions are not trusted, then rumors have much more power," says Nicholas DiFonzo, a professor of psychology at the Rochester Institute of Technology and the author of "The Water Cooler Effect."

"As people trust the press less and less, the public will be influenced by rumors more and more," he said.

Rumors are a basic human activity commonly linked to the desire to take control of a situation, DiFonzo says, and there's no way to stop them from forming. However, there are ways to halt their growth.

Rumors shouldn't be ignored, even if they seem unbelievably outrageous, DiFonzo says. Instead, they should be rebutted swiftly and decisively, with clear and verifiable evidence that cuts down lingering uncertainty around a subject.

Even rumors that spread with the best intentions can leave anger and recrimination in their wake if left unchallenged.

"I would love to know who started it," says Rosalie Averson of Whitesville, who helped collect bottle caps in hopes of securing free chemotherapy for a 10-year-old Boone County boy. "I think they have a sick mind, whoever it is."

Averson heard it from a deacon at her church, who heard it from his mother, who in turn heard it from someone at her church, and so on.

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Concern for those well-meaning people spurred the American Cancer Society to search for some use for the caps, even if chemotherapy was out of the question.

Eventually, Wentz Berman learned that Aveda, the maker of hair care and beauty products, had become the first company of its kind in the U.S. to recycle plastic caps, a program launched at roughly the same time the hoax was spreading.

Thousands of caps have since been dropped off at an Aveda salon in Princeton, or mailed to the company for recycling.

“A lot of people thought we had started this because of the cancer hoax, but we had never heard of it until someone brought it to our attention,” says Evan Miller, director of new and environmental media at Aveda. “At least they’re being put to good use.”

For some, though, there’s a lingering sting at being deceived.

“When a deacon at your church says, It’s real, it’s true, you don’t question it,” Averson says.

“This taught us we should investigate them before we get involved.”

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