

## Irish student hoaxes world's media with fake quote



Irish student hoaxes world's media with florid but phony quote from dead French composer

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DUBLIN (AP) -- When Dublin university student Shane Fitzgerald posted a poetic but phony quote on Wikipedia, he was testing how our globalized, increasingly Internet-dependent media was upholding accuracy and accountability in an age of instant news.

His report card: Wikipedia passed. Journalism flunked.

The sociology major's obituary-friendly quote -- which he added to the Wikipedia page of Maurice Jarre hours after the French composer's death March 28 -- flew straight on to dozens of U.S. blogs and newspaper Web sites in Britain, Australia and India. They used the fabricated material, Fitzgerald said, even though administrators at the free online encyclopedia twice caught the quote's lack of attribution and removed it.

A full month went by and nobody noticed the editorial fraud. So Fitzgerald told several media outlets they'd swallowed his baloney whole.

"I was really shocked at the results from the experiment," Fitzgerald, 22, said Monday in an interview a week after one newspaper at fault, The Guardian of Britain, became the first to admit its obituarist lifted material straight from Wikipedia.

"I am 100 percent convinced that if I hadn't come forward, that quote would have gone down in history as something Maurice Jarre said, instead of something I made up," he said. "It would have become another example where, once anything is printed enough times in the media without challenge, it becomes fact."

So far, The Guardian is the only publication to make a public mea culpa, while others have eliminated or amended their online obituaries without any reference to the original version -- or in a few cases, still are citing Fitzgerald's florid prose weeks after he pointed out its true origin.

"One could say my life itself has been one long soundtrack," Fitzgerald's fake Jarre quote read. "Music was my life, music brought me to life, and music is how I will be remembered long after I leave this life. When I die there will be a final waltz playing in my head that only I can hear."

Fitzgerald said one of his University College Dublin classes was exploring how quickly information was transmitted around the globe. His private concern was that, under pressure to produce news instantly, media outlets were increasingly relying on Internet sources -- none more ubiquitous than the publicly edited Wikipedia.

When he saw British 24-hour news channels reporting the death of the triple Oscar-winning composer, Fitzgerald sensed what he called "a golden opportunity" for an experiment on media use of Wikipedia.

He said it took him less than 15 minutes to fabricate and place a quote calculated to appeal to obituary writers without distorting Jarre's actual life experiences. He noted that the Wikipedia listing on Jarre did not have any other strong quotes.

If anything, Fitzgerald said, he expected newspapers to avoid his quote because it had no link to a source -- and even might trigger alarms as "too good to be true." But many blogs and several newspapers used the quotes at the start or finish of their obituaries.

He said the Guardian was the only publication to respond to him in detail and with remorse at its own editorial failing. Others, he said, treated him as a vandal who was solely to blame for their cut-and-paste content.

"The moral of this story is not that journalists should avoid Wikipedia, but that they shouldn't use information they find there if it can't be traced back to a reliable primary source," said the readers' editor at the Guardian, Siobhain Butterworth, in the May 4 column that revealed Fitzgerald as the quote author.

"It's worrying that the misinformation only came to light because the perpetrator of the deception emailed publishers to let them know what he'd done, and it's regrettable that he took nearly a month to do so," she wrote.

Fitzgerald said he had waited in part to test whether news organizations or the public would smoke out the quote's lack of provenance. He said he was troubled that none did.

And he warned that a truly malicious hoaxer could have evaded Wikipedia's own informal policing by getting a newspaper to pick up a false piece of information -- as happened when his quote made its first of three appearances -- and then use those newspaper reports as a credible footnote for the bogus quote.

"I didn't want to be devious," he said. "I just wanted to show how the 24-hour, minute-by-minute media were now taking material straight from Wikipedia because of the deadline pressure they're under."

Guardian article on controversy, <http://tinyurl.com/djqd8w>

Soundtrack Geek blog on Jarre, <http://tinyurl.com/d527zh>

Wikipedia site criticizing itself, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism--of--Wikipedia>

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