

Fake News, Real Author: Tracking the Rise and Fall of a Falsified Identity

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Abstract

The 21st century has cultivated a digital environment that prioritizes speed and ease of information over accuracy. Due to this change of opinion and the rise of social media, incorrect information or fake news is spread widely and quickly without regard for the facts. However, writers may utilize rhetorical techniques to further convince audiences of their piece's validity by using fallacies, modifying the article based on the platform or channel, and considering kairos before releasing news. This essay tracks the growth and development of one specific falsified news story and examines how the author and related rhetors controlled and modified the message using multiple rhetorical techniques.

In the long-forgotten ages of 2006, a Harry Potter FanFiction titled "My Immortal" arose on a popular writing site. FanFiction, or fanfic for short, is a writing style that takes fictional universes from television, literature, and more and rewrites the content to the users preference. "My Immortal" gained notoriety for its cringe-worthy writing and story, plagued with spelling errors and strange plot points. The authors, using the pseudonyms Tara Gilesbie and Raven, would frequently begin and end each chapter with lengthy notes on their lives, their fanfic, and the poor reception their story received. However, in 2007, "My Immortal" stopped updating and the authors disappeared, leaving people to question: was the entire fanfic a joke? Or was it genuinely written by a pair of pre-teen girls exploring their creativity?

As the years passed, various writers alleged ownership over the fanfic with no proof and were subsequently disavowed. Finally, in 2017 one author stepped forward to claim the title. On September 1, the supposed author posted on Tara Gilesbie's WordPress account, arguing that all previous speculations were false, but she did not reveal her identity because she had a reputation as a pub-

lished author. Rabid fans began spreading the information and found the name of the blogger – Rose Christo, a Native American author of short young adult fiction. Once her identity was revealed, Christo gladly stepped into the spotlight. She disclosed that she would be publishing a memoir depicting the creation of “My Immortal” to reconnect with her brother who had been lost in the foster care system. She claimed she had been thoroughly vetted by lawyers and reporters alike before she was able to get the publishing deal and had numerous records to prove it. Fans were over the moon.

Unfortunately, Christo’s blip of fame did not last. On September 23rd, 2017, the user DawnDusk on KiwiFarms—a trolling site primarily used to mock people virtually—claimed he was her brother and had proof that she was lying about her identity. He stated that her real name was Theresa Christodouloupoulos, she had never been in foster care, and she was not Native American. Although many were ready to believe his side of the story, others were skeptical about the validity of KiwiFarms. That is, until a few days later, when Christo admitted that she had falsified information on some of her documents, announced the cancellation of her book, and broke down on her social media platforms before deleting her accounts. The strangest part? All of these events happened in the span of a month.

Before beginning my research, I remembered this event as long and dramatic. After compiling and observing Tweets, Tumblr posts, KiwiFarms posts, and published articles, I realized how quickly the information spread and died out. It could be condensed into five measly weeks, with two in September holding the most discussion. I wanted to know why the story was so intense yet short-lived and why those two specific weeks were the most prominent. Therefore, I compiled the raw data into an infographic to illustrate which weeks and dates had the largest spikes in audience interest (Appendix A). Throughout this piece, I also provide links to the specific sources I refer to, such as the BuzzFeed article as Christo rose to fame and screenshots of Christo’s Tumblr and Twitter posts through the Wayback Machine.

Most of the information circulation was centered around the two revelations on Christo’s identity in September of 2017, with interest disappearing almost completely after the DawnDusk revelation. Although it is impossible to tell which side was telling the truth, many signs point towards Christo lying about her story to gain fame in certain communities. Christo manipulated the rhetoric of social media to create a sympathetic story, but it fell apart before her eyes.

It seems to me that Christo’s intention was to circulate her works and build fame for her new book. However, since her fanbase was primarily on social media platforms like Tumblr, which specialize in social justice and equality, she had to create a story that those users would care about—and learn about quickly. Isabel Morales Sanchez and Juan Pedro Martin Villarreal argue that fake news spreads swiftly and fiercely because they are proliferated on social media platforms. Digital news prioritizes fast information over correct information, and social media is the perfect platform for spreading news through hashtags, retweets

or reblogs, and bots (Sanchez and Villarreal 4). Living in the age of social media, Christo knew how important it was to get the information out before anyone else could steal the story. Therefore, Christo carefully selected Tumblr as her platform of choice, utilizing Sanchez and Villarreal's theory that "messages are more effective when adapted to the channel in which they are broadcast" (3). Christo formatted her story for Tumblr users and expanded to Twitter when she had the chance to promote her work. Tumblr users can reblog posts, which spread the news to numerous users as retweets do on Twitter. Furthermore, Tumblr specializes in fanfiction and other fandom activities, so the topic was well-suited to the platform. The information then spread to other platforms in a matter of days, furthering the theory that fake news works because it is the first news received.

Christo led followers on a type of virtual scavenger hunt throughout the first weeks of September, forcing them to look through numerous sites to find all of the relevant information. This method allowed Christo to create intrigue and circulate her story, all while encouraging fans to support her upcoming memoir. As different aspects of Christo's life came to light, she promised that all would be revealed in her memoir. Clearly, Christo intended to promote her writing. However, she lost control of her message when a new rhetor, the alleged brother, arrived on the scene to challenge her story, and instead of buckling down against him, she gave up the whole ruse.

DawnDusk changed the intention of Christo's tale when he presented a different side to her story in the final week of September. Suddenly, the story was not about Christo's struggles in abusive foster families, but about her mental illnesses and desperation for attention. KiwiFarms is a forum site similar to Reddit and 4Chan in how they encourage anonymity, allow users to like posts, and have little-to-no policing on cyberbullying or harassment. Erika Sparby analyzes these aggressive social media communities and explains how they build their identities off of the group values. Users base their behavior off of a memetic recapitulation of previous user behavior, in an endless cycle of anonymity and desperation to fit into the rhetorical identity (Sparby 86). Sparby specifically cites Tumblr as the antithesis of sites like 4chan or KiwiFarms, and how "Through their anti-PC [politically-correct] behavior, anons reinforce their outsider status by deliberately alienating and distancing themselves from Tumblr in particular and other popular social media sites in general" (89). KiwiFarms users are tightly knit, and their relentless aggression and cruelty are borne from community values and historical behaviors. Users believe they are outside of the norm and they encourage hacking and stalking of people they deem mockable.

DawnDusk utilized this collective identity to tell his side of the story to a sympathetic audience. He placed Christo in the role of an unstable PC Tumblrite and himself in the role of an anonymous hacker hero dedicated to the truth. The channel had changed, and the message and rhetoric changed along with it. This story had grown out of an elaborate marketing scheme and into a full-blown scandal, a common problem for falsified information spread through social media. DawnDusk and Rose Christo now faced the challenge of persuading their audi-

ences more effectively than the other.

Both Christo and DawnDusk used fallacies to convince their audiences of their message. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill defines fallacies as “defects that weaken arguments” (“Fallacies”). However, fallacies are incredibly common in news—fake or real—because they are deceptively persuasive. Though they do not often answer the question that has been posed, they distract audiences enough to buy into their claims.

Christo’s main methods were appeal to authority and appeal to pity (“Fallacies”). Christo convinced audiences of her validity because she argued that lawyers and publishers had vetted her information for three days. However, she did not specify what kinds of background searches they did, who did the research, or what qualified them to do so. Despite those flaws, it sounds impressive when someone says they were “vetted” by lawyers, so audiences went along willingly. She also appealed to their pity with her argument that her story deserved to be told because it discussed the abuse of Native Americans in society and the foster care system. While these are important issues, she played them up so readers would feel bad for her plight and buy her book, regardless of the validity of her tale. Many fans posted that because Christo had been forced into the limelight, they now had to support her and buy her work. These arguments reinforced Christo’s claim to fame.

DawnDusk primarily used ad hominem and appeal to ignorance to convince audiences of his side of the story (“Fallacies”). DawnDusk stated that even though he could not supply substantive proof on the anonymous forums, he would not make these claims up for no reason, and no one could disprove him. Even though the forum moderators vetted him, it once again did not prove his legitimacy. In fact, his claims only convinced audiences because they sounded interesting and audiences wanted to have an argument against Christo. DawnDusk also utilized his knowledge of KiwiFarms and their hatred of Tumblr users to discredit Christo. Many of his arguments centered around the mentally ill women of his family, and how they were all crazy, so they could not be believed. KiwiFarms users, who have been cited by reporters from Vice as notoriously misogynistic and belligerent towards trauma victims, were quick to encourage any argument that agreed with their ideals.

Fallacies are a writer’s best friend when proliferating incorrect information, and social media only guides the messages to willing minds. Even though both rhetors did not supply much substantive evidence or proper arguments, they ignited a war online of who to believe and whether either side was being truthful. However, when Christo gave up the argument, audiences assumed that DawnDusk must have been telling the truth, though both could have been spreading false information. It is important for readers to recognize that just because there are two sides to an argument, it does not automatically mean one is correct. However, since the story came and went in the blink of an eye, the audience did not have much time to fully analyze and question the information.

Even though this bit of fake news only lived for a month, kairos had a

huge impact on the story's spread. Kairos is the concept that a persuasive argument must be timely and suited to the current environment and audience. "My Immortal" has been a source of speculation for years, but it is rarely at the front of anyone's mind. However, in August of 2017, fans had begun to speculate that Lani Sarem, another young adult novelist, was the author of "My Immortal." Eventually, even BuzzFeed started speculating about the author of "My Immortal," bringing the story to a larger audience through the site's popularity. Daniel Wuebben argues that incorrect information can be proliferated from more than just the platform, but also the virality of the information. Tools such as "like" buttons, reblogs, or retweets, and even view count can impact the audience's decision on whether or not a source is reliable (Wuebben 69). More popular and frequently viewed sources are called "gatekeepers." They control what audiences see and believe. Wuebben elaborates on how gatekeepers control the information audiences accept:

Our gatekeepers will ignore or consciously stunt the majority of what appears in their own feeds and networks and only pass along select information. Gatekeepers post, share, and forward through the gates what they deem as timely, interesting, useful, or emotionally stimulating content. If that content goes viral, a digital record of such acts can be analyzed and segmented, either in real time or after the fact, to show... [who] helped to spark the viral event, how fast the viral content spread, and through which networks. (69-70)

BuzzFeed is a popular site for entertainment and news, meaning they are in a prime position to control when news becomes relevant and why. BuzzFeed spread the information by posting an article on September 5, 2017, speculating alongside social media posts about the author of "My Immortal," which allowed users who did not use Twitter or Tumblr to learn more about the debate. Once BuzzFeed decided that "My Immortal" was relevant again, Christo had the perfect timing to spread her story.

Kairos was important in the release of information because without the proper setting, audience, and gatekeepers, Christo may not have gotten the popularity she did. If BuzzFeed did not sensationalize Christo's rise and fall, her book might have been published. Or, she might have fallen into obscurity like the rest of the fake "My Immortal" authors. Fake news is only persuasive if there is a large audience searching for information on the topic. A publisher that cares more about virality than accuracy helps, too.

Although this story is full of twists and turns, it is particularly fascinating to see when Christo's information was most widely circulated and how the rhetors made claims against each other. Within one short month, audiences utilized digital platforms to disseminate information faster than the rhetors could build it. Though Christo cleverly planned her debut, the cracks in her story were endlessly examined through the spread of social media until her farce shattered. Social media might be the greatest perpetrator of fake news, but its users are also experts at uncovering the truth. With a critical eye and a questioning mind, any story can be revealed. At the end of the day, Christo's story resembles all Internet

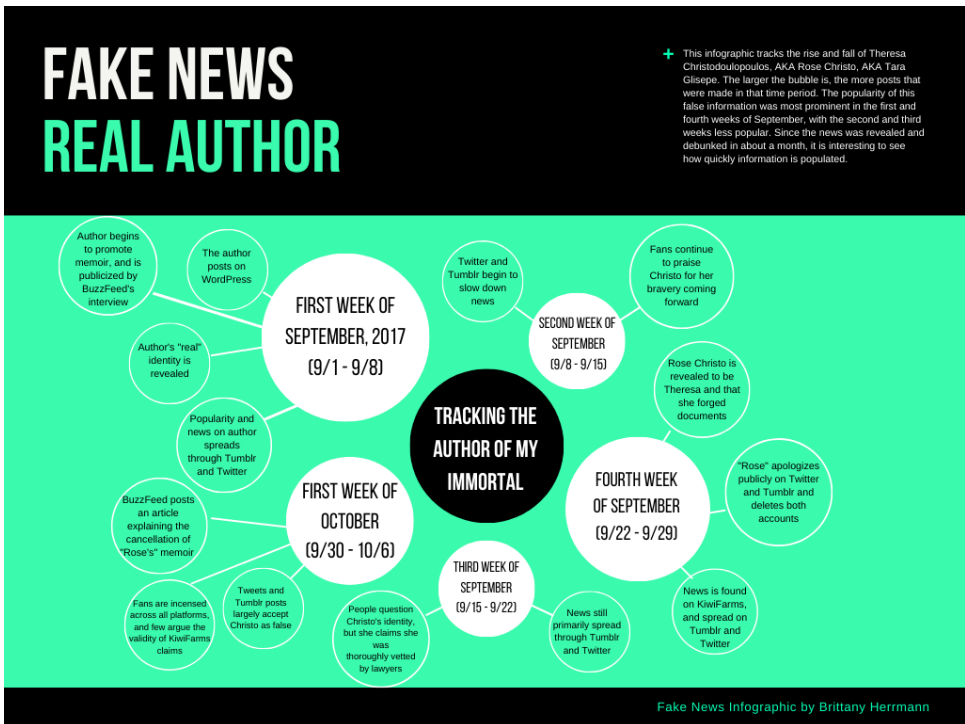
Convergence Rhetoric

fame – short-lived and full of drama. As for the mysterious ownership of “My Immortal,” fans will simply have to wait and see if someone else attempts to claim the crown.

Appendix A (1)

1	Date	Nickname	Notes	Post Content	Platform
2	9/7/2017	vampireapologist	38,322	"the my immortal author turns out to be an indigenous girl..."	Tumblr
3	9/7/2017	salazarastark	2990	"I'm not sure why people are surprised that Rose Christo..."	Tumblr
4	9/4/2017	anthonycrowley	262	"if the alleged author of my immortal really is the author..."	Tumblr
5	9/4/2017	everydayatleast	51	"... can't believe they finally found the My Immortal..."	Tumblr
6	9/1/2017	writerlynn	15,101	"I am viciously happy that the writer of My Immortal..."	Tumblr
7	9/7/2017	thehpalliance	1,626	"One of the authors of My Immortal has finally stepped forward..."	Tumblr
8	9/8/2017	muchymozarella	486	"The fact that the very nice and positive author of My Immortal is getting all this hype..."	Tumblr
9	9/8/2017	wildaboutwildemou	2,809	"I feel like finding out the identity... closes an internet chapter, and it's a bittersweet moment..."	Tumblr
10	9/7/2017	sonkicity	312	"You know that scene at the end of Return of the Jedi... That's how I feel knowing the author is a real person"	Tumblr
11	9/4/2017	o-pulce-facies	229	"Where were you when they found the author of My Immortal?"	Tumblr
12	9/4/2017	lesbiananthor	165	"anyway I know that the outing was hectic for her but I'm kinda sorta very happy..."	Tumblr
13	9/7/2017	dellalzi19	56,463	"One of the greatest mysteries of our time has finally been solved..."	Tumblr
14	9/29/2017	am-i-jeanne	4	"I'm really happy to find out that the writer of My Immortal is actually now an accomplished author..."	Tumblr
15	9/27/2017	octuplevampire	3	"I just... I hope Rose Christo knows how important she is to me..."	Tumblr
16	9/26/2017	Piga Dgrfrm	83	"I trust everyone here is familiar with My Immortal... He began poking holes in her claim..."	KwiFarms
17	9/26/2017	DawnDusk	169	"There are three big mentally ill players here..."	KwiFarms
18	9/5/2017	Alanna Bennet		"People Think They Have The Answer to The Decade-Long Mystery Of Who Wrote 'My Immortal' "	Buzzfeed
19	9/7/2017	Alanna Bennet		"The Story of 'My Immortal' is More Wild And Heartbreaking Than You Imagined"	Buzzfeed
20	10/3/2017	Jarry Lee		"The 'My Immortal' Book Is No Longer Going To Be Published"	Buzzfeed
21	9/1/2017	corviid	12,600	"THE AUTHOR OF MY IMMORTAL MADE A STATEMENT??"	Twitter
22	9/9/2017	AnnieKk	52	"me: literature sucks. Who reads (My Immortal author reveals her identity and imminent publication..."	Twitter
23	9/7/2017	Kirstynhippe	36	"now that we know who the author of My immortal is I'm realizing I never wanted to know..."	Twitter
24	9/8/2017	nybaris	12	"I can't believe that the my immortal author de-anoned and is one of the coolest people to live actually"	Twitter
25	9/4/2017	liepard	7	"the my immortal author is a mixed lesbian so 2017 is saved actually!"	Twitter
26	9/3/2017	irkmikouumae	7	"there's something weirdly... sad, about the my immortal author being outed?..."	Twitter
27	9/15/2017	daros	3	"In 2017, Rebecca Black came out with legitimate music and the My Immortal author is publishing..."	Twitter
28	9/7/2017	Gavisa Baker-Whitelaw		"We finally know who wrote the infamous Harry Potter fanfic 'My Immortal' "	The Daily Dot
29	9/28/2017	ae2501maeth	6	"r!t if you're gonna read the MY IMMORTAL author's memoirs of growing up ndn in foster care..."	Twitter
30	9/7/2017	IAMZER0	8	"hi hello guess who's still delighted by the fact that the My Immortal author grew up to successfully write"	Twitter
31	9/1/2017	captainkonot	4	"I love all the my immortal author stuff... I don't care whats real I just love that Tara is forever a cryptid"	Twitter
32	9/28/2017	rosechristo1	9	"I'm sorry, I'm exhausted. You probably think I'm a dumbass. I probably am..."	Twitter (Found through screenshots archives)
33	9/17/2017	rosechristo1	1753	"I don't want to be That Guy", but numerous people have come out at the author of My Immortal..."	Tumblr (Found through Wayback Machine)
34	9/17/2017	rosechristo1	44	"oh wow I grew up in foster care too!" ... "Reconnecting is the hardest part, my friend..."	Tumblr (Found through Wayback Machine)

(2)



Herrmann
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