Information security professionals are concerned with preserving the six fundamental properties of information: confidentiality, control, integrity, authenticity, availability and utility of information. One of the issues we must watch carefully is the publication of inaccurate information in corporate publications that have an Internet presence. Publishing misinformation on the Internet contributes to the global children’s game of telephone that now characterizes much of what passes for intelligent discourse on the Web.

Andrew Shapiro, in his book The Control Revolution: How The Internet is Putting Individuals in Charge and Changing the World We Know (2000), wrote in a section about Matt Drudge, as follows:

>Yet misinformation is only really dangerous when there is both an unreliable source and a credulous audience. As the amount of questionable material increases, then, we need to be ever more cautious and skeptical. Indeed, the control revolution is blurring the distinction between news professionals and audiences, forcing us all to deal with the same predicaments. The common challenge is one of exercising self-restraint to prevent the spread of inaccuracies. On the one hand, that means not being the originators of flawed information (though obviously, few of us intend to do that). On the other hand, it means exercising caution as information consumers. Do we blindly believe what we read? Do we weigh the accuracy of different content providers? Do we pass along, without warning, information that we know comes from dubious sources?

The examples of misinformation spread uncritically among Web sites are uncountable. For example, right-wing extremists invented non-existent “death panels” as fear-mongering technique to frighten voters; by November 2010 there were over 12 million hits in GOOGLE for “death panels.” Anyone wanting more examples of media distortion – now spread worldwide instantly through the Web – will find more than they can stomach at Media Matters for America and On the Media.

One of the articles that prompted me to write this column is a review of growing resistance to vaccination in developing nations, in which reporter Vivienne Parry of the Guardian newspaper in England writes that “Rumours about vaccines quickly gain credence in the Internet hothouse, with sites feeding off each other.”

As a result of rapidly disseminated misinformation about vaccine safety, increasing numbers of people in poor nations are refusing to allow their children to be vaccinated, “threatening to derail global vaccination programs” and “putting the lives of thousands of children at risk.” However, meta-analysis of extensive research consistently debunks the anti-vaccination rubbish being promulgated by the rumor-mongers.
attacking public-health programs that use vaccines. These rumor-fueled attacks have resulted in sickness and death for thousands of children worldwide.


Ironically, the interconnectedness of the Web and the disintermediation of information flow may be resulting in increasing uncertainty about the accuracy of what we encounter in cyberspace. In addition to doubts about the veracity of pictorial information (see the series on photo manipulation in this column<http://www.networkworld.com/newsletters/sec/2010/053110sec2.html>) we must question what we read.

On the whole, such skepticism may not be a bad thing! Questioning is good!

In my next column, I’ll address the issue of corporate responsibility for and control of the content of organizations’ newsletters.

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