

Snopes and Christian Satire Site Feud Over Chick-fil-A Article

A feud between a website that specializes in religious and political satire and a fact-checking powerhouse is raising questions about the role of short-form internet satire in the era of fake news.

Last week (July 22), the Babylon Bee—a website that got its start in primarily religious satire but has since waded into more political waters by satirizing liberal political figures—published a story in which a Georgia state lawmaker accused a Chick-fil-A employee of telling her to “Go back to your country!” only to later learn that the cashier actually said “my pleasure.”

According to the Babylon Bee’s website, the article was shared nearly 400,000 times on Facebook and more than 53,000 time on Twitter.

There was just one problem: Although written for a satirical site, the account was mostly true. A Georgia lawmaker did have a similar encounter with a store worker in the past month, but it was in a Publix, not a Chick-fil-A, and the exact wording of the worker was unclear.

The quasi-factual nature of the widely shared story triggered a response from Snopes, a popular fact-checking website. Snopes noted the inaccurate nature of the Bee’s story but also included in its post a subheading: “We’re not sure if fanning the flames of controversy and muddying the details of a news story classify an article as ‘satire.’”

The remark stoked the ire of Babylon Bee founder Adam Ford, who took to Twitter to decry Snopes’ article as “kind of

disturbing.”

He also expressed frustration with what he described as Snopes “pronouncing a moral judgment” on the Bee and “assigning motives,” and an email to Bee readers said the group has “retained a law firm to represent us in this matter.”

Snopes eventually amended its own article and removed the subheading from the piece.

“Some readers interpreted wording in a previous version of this fact check as imputing deceptive intent on the part of Babylon Bee in its original satirical piece about Georgia state Rep. Erica Thomas, and that was not the editors’ aim,” an editorial note at Snopes reads.

But Jeremy Littau, a professor in Lehigh University’s journalism department who has published research on the impact of satire on news, says the back-and-forth represents the complicated landscape that digital satire occupies in an era where fake news has become a national concern that many argue can impact presidential elections.

“‘*Saturday Night Live*, *Weekend Update* and Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show*—those were rooted in traditional legacy media,” Littau said, noting that satirical website The Onion also once had a print edition. “(But) what’s happening in the age of the internet is not any satire creator’s fault, per se. It’s a combination of factors that involves how info spreads virally, and people sharing on platforms without the platform fact-checking.”

Littau said the issue can get tricky. Effective satire typically relies on the audience to get the joke, he said. He noted satire can work without changing much about the original story: In 2008, *Saturday Night Live* staged a skit in which comedian Tina Fey portrayed then-vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin in satirical reenactment of a very real television interview with Katie Couric.

But Littau argued there is a difference between the SNL skit, which played on a well-known interview, and the Babylon Bee story about the Georgia lawmaker, which far fewer Americans knew about.

“It’s asking a lot of the audience to sift through for an error,” he said. “Snopes was a little overly snarky with their review before they changed it, but the Bee isn’t doing a very good job of accepting their responsibility as a satire site.”

It remains to be seen how the two outlets will address the feud or whether the Babylon Bee— which advertises its newsletter under the slogan “Fake news you can trust”—will pursue legal action

An official at the Babylon Bee declined to comment for this article. But they noted in a statement to readers that being labeled as “fake news” could cause financial harm to the site.

“As you know, fake news—which is distinguished from satire by its intent to mislead—was widely considered a serious issue in the last election cycle. As a result, social media networks like Facebook began partnering with fact-checkers to try and limit the distribution of fake news on their platforms,” the statement read.

Snopes has fact-checked a number of Babylon Bee satirical pieces in the past, including a story that claimed U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez failed during an appearance on *The Price Is Right* by saying everything is free; a story about CNN buying an industrial-sized washer to “spin news”; and a story about *Veggie Tales*, a Christian show for kids, introducing a new character called Cannabis Carl.

Facebook flagged the CNN washing machine story as fake and warned the Babylon Bee that its access to the site could be restricted. Facebook later apologized.

Snopes did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

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