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## The Conversation

Why urban legends are more powerful than ever

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you heard the one about the guy who went on holiday to Bolivia? You know, he went on a night out and randomly woke up in an ice-filled bathtub after someone had removed his kidney and harvested it for sale.

You probably have – it is a popular urban legend. Also known as urban myths or contemporary legends, urban legends refer to widely disseminated, unproven stories of unusual or peculiar events that typically convey cautionary advisements or warnings. They often evoke strong emotional reactions such as horror, shock, revulsion and humour. But how is it that we still buy these tales in the 21st century?

The retelling of urban legends over time ensures that they become part of public record and explains why they are so well known. Common examples include “Bloody Mary” – a woman who was once supposedly executed for being a witch and who will show her face in the mirror if you call on her. Hookman, which tells the story of a killer with a hook for a hand attacking a couple in a parked car, and the Vanishing Hitchhiker are also well known legends.

The strange thing is that notoriety and disproof do not prevent urban legends from resurfacing after going out of fashion for some time. Indeed, the enduring gang initiation urban legend recently re-emerged in this way. This is the claim that, as part of an initiation, gang members driving at night without headlights will pursue and shoot the occupants of any car which flashes them a warning.

Psychologically, urban legends are a way for us to make sense of the world and manage threat in a safe environment. From the perspective of believers, myths act as proof and reinforce existing beliefs. This is important because they help to validate a person’s worldview and in doing so legitimatises their fears as real and genuine.

Urban legends also provide a source of entertainment. Sharing them is an important form of social engagement. Passing apparently important information can make people feel helpful, despite a lack of evidence.

Within modern society, due to email and the internet, urban legends spread even more rapidly and indefinitely – constantly adapting to retain relevance, coherence and significance.

With these changes have come a generation of new viral urban legends. You may have heard the story about the two people who have cybersex only to realise months later that they are father and daughter. Another viral one is Slender Man, a creepy character who hangs around in forests and stalks children. This originated in 2009 on an internet forum as part of a Photoshop challenge in which participants edited photographs of everyday objects to make them appear paranormal. </p>

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Slender Man has since become an internet meme and been referenced in both video games and art. However, his popularity caused a minor moral panic after it was discovered that violent attackers had been inspired by it. Nonetheless, he illustrates how the internet facilitates the rapid transmission and growth of urban legends.

And then there's false news

The phenomenon is closely related to that of "false news" and the websites which deliberately create sensational hoax stories in order to attract viewers. Consistent with urban legends, dissemination via the internet places an emphasis on topic rather than source. From a social perspective, these stories become part of collective reality.

Exposure to inaccuracies can have major implications, such as influencing how we remember things as a group. Falsely remembering something that never happened has been dubbed "Mandela effect" after a widespread rumour that Mandela had died in prison in the 1990s.

There have been several other prominent death hoaxes recently involving Rowan Atkinson, Eddie Murphy and Arnold Schwarzenegger. In the case of major celebrities, quick denials ensure that the truth predominates. However, in the case of less prominent famous figures, rejections are less widely reported and stories often continue to appear on social media.

From a psychological standpoint, false news has been around for much longer. It is an inherent feature of news reporting and precedes social media. It's not hard to see why it exists – people are motivated to believe information that confirms their views and opinions. We also want to feel like we perceive the world accurately, just as with urban legends. These biases direct people to accept information that is consistent with their worldview regardless of accuracy.

Sociologically, information contained within urban legends and false news offers insights into societal fears and anxieties. Concerns stimulate new accounts, influence narrative longevity and determine when old stories resurface.

It's easy to see why urban legends and fake news should be on the rise in anxious times of great political turmoil, such as right now – fuelled by rapid dissemination online. But can you stop it?

There are several potential ways to restrict the circulation. For example, media outlets and providers of internet-related services can use international fact checking networks. Similarly there are great debunking websites for urban legends, such as Snopes.

Social media now also encourages users to report fake stories and provide guidelines for spotting fake news, and Facebook recently launched a UK campaign to raise awareness around this issue.

Many internet organisations are collating lists of fake news websites and alerting potential visitors to sources of dubious information. Software solutions are also in development. However, the effectiveness of these interventions depends on how aware and educated the user is. Often, stories spread so quickly that often it is a case of limiting the spread of fake stories rather than eliminating them.

In the case of urban legends, history suggests they will find ways to evolve and prevail. Unfortunately, false news may prove similarly hard to eradicate.

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This article was originally published on The Conversation.