

FactCheck.org: Snopes.com

Q: Is Snopes.com run by “very Democratic” proprietors? Did they lie to discredit a State Farm insurance agent who attacked Obama?

A: A chain e-mail that “exposed” Snopes contains falsehoods. And in fact, the site is run by someone who has no political party affiliation and his non-voting Canadian wife. A State Farm spokeswoman confirms what they reported about the Obama-baiting agent.

FULL QUESTION

Can you verify?

Chain e-mail: “Snopes” Exposed

Posted on February 26, 2009 at 2:29am

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FULL ANSWER

This widely circulated e-mail contains a number of false claims about the urban legend-busting Snopes.com and its proprietors, Barbara and David Mikkelson, who started the site in 1995 and still run it. They’re accused of hiding their identities, doing shoddy research, producing articles with a liberal bent and discrediting an anti-Obama State Farm agent out of partisanship.

The Trouble with Bud

We’ll deal first with the most specific allegation, which is that the Mikkelsons fabricated an account about State Farm agent Bud Gregg.



At issue is a sign Gregg posted last summer outside his office in Mandeville, La. It said, “A taxpayer voting for Barack Obama is like a chicken voting for Colonel Sanders.”

Snopes.com wrote it up in an article headlined “[Chicken Hawked](#).” The e-mail writer says that “they claimed the corporate office of State Farm pressured Gregg into taking down the sign,

when in fact nothing of the sort ‘ever’ took place.” But that’s exactly what did happen, according a company representative.

In her article, Barbara Mikkelson didn’t actually use the word “pressured” as the e-mail claims. What she said was:

***Snopes.com:** A State Farm representative said that Bud Gregg’s office sign bore these messages until 3 July 2008 and that the company had requested the sign be removed as soon as they became aware of it because the sign was inconsistent with State Farm’s policy of not endorsing candidates or taking sides in political campaigns.*

And State Farm spokeswoman Molly Quirk-Kirby [confirmed in a letter to us](#) the same thing she had told Snopes.com earlier:

***State Farm:** Management requested the sign be removed as soon as its presence became known. It was taken down on July 3, 2008. Mr. Gregg’s sign was not endorsed by, nor consistent with State Farm’s corporate practices. The company does not endorse candidates, nor take sides in political campaigns.*

The e-mail’s author says the Mikkelsons didn’t call Gregg, and David says that’s true. He says he sent the insurance agent an e-mail, but did not receive a response.

Politically Preferential?

The e-mail goes on: “Then it has been learned the Mikkelson’s are very Democratic (party) and extremely liberal,” adding: “There has been much criticism lately over the internet with people pointing out the Mikkelson’s liberalism revealing itself in their website findings.” The author cites no evidence and no sources for either of these propositions.

We asked David. He told us that Barbara is a Canadian citizen, and as such isn’t allowed to vote here or contribute money to U.S. candidates. As for him, “My sole involvement in politics is on Election Day to go out and vote. I’ve never joined a party, worked for a campaign or donated money to a candidate.”

“You’d be hard-pressed to find two more apolitical people,” David Mikkelson said. We checked online to see if he had given money to any federal candidates, and nothing turned up. Mikkelson even faxed us a copy of his voter registration form. He asked us not to post an image of it here, but we can confirm that it shows he declined to state a party affiliation when he registered last year, and also that when he registered in 2000 he did so as a Republican.

Do the Snopes.com articles reveal a political bias? We reviewed a sampling of their political offerings, including some on rumors about [George W. Bush](#), [Sarah Palin](#) and [Barack Obama](#), and we found them to be utterly poker-faced. David does say that the site receives more complaints that it is too liberal than that it is too conservative. Nevertheless, he says, “We apply the same debunking standards to both sides.”

Hiding in Plain Sight

The e-mail also accuses the Mikkelsons of “hiding” their identities. “Only recently did Wikipedia get to the bottom of it,” the message claims. That’s nonsense. It may well be that the author of this e-mail was ignorant of the Mikkelsons until recently, but it’s never been a secret who is behind Snopes.com.

We even dug up a reference to David Mikkelson from 1995, a year when the Internet was in its infancy. A collection of short items under the headline “A Special Report: The Virtual Valley” in the Los Angeles Times included a photo of him. Reporter David Brady wrote: “Meet David Mikkelson, above. Known in cyberspace as “snopes,” the Agoura Hills resident spends much of his time debunking urban legends via the Usenet newsgroup alt.folklore.urban.” The Mikkelsons were hardly holed up in an undisclosed location, even then.

David says the couple has done “hundreds” of media interviews over the years. Some of the [major national pieces](#) are listed on the site, including a new (April 2009) [Reader’s Digest feature](#) on them.

Lift That Bale!

Another claim in the e-mail: That the Mikkelsons have been criticized for “not really investigating and getting to the bottom of various issues.” The message gives no examples, but there’s plenty of evidence that the couple expends a great deal of effort to find the truth. Take, for example, “[Easily Lead](#),” Barbara Mikkelson’s attempt to ascertain whether lipstick contains dangerous levels of lead, as one chain e-mail claimed. Mikkelson had an extensive conversation with a federal Food and Drug Administration compliance officer, conducted her own experiments rubbing various metals across lipstick and wax smears on white paper, dug up a number of articles about and industry memos on lead in lipstick, and sifted through medical literature on the topic. The list of sources at the end of the article doesn’t come close to doing justice to the amount of work that went into it. (Bottom line: Lipstick is safe, at least in the U.S.).

For another piece, “[Chubby Bunny Death](#),” the Mikkelsons verified that a child had indeed died while playing a game that entails stuffing as many marshmallows as possible into one’s mouth and trying to say the words “chubby bunny.” However, they dispelled the notion that the death occurred because the marshmallows had “emulsified,” forming a sticky liquid that

choked the child and was difficult to extract in time to save her. Instead, it was a case of marshmallows blocking her air passages. The Mikkelsons knew that because they reviewed a number of articles about a lawsuit that resulted from the incident. But they also conducted their own experiment, David Mikkelson told us in an interview, in which he held marshmallows in his mouth to determine how long it takes them to dissolve. Now that's research.

And no account of the lengths to which the Mikkelsons will go to chase down the facts would be complete without a mention of "[Crash Course](#)," their shredding of the rumor (repeated in Time magazine and elsewhere) that Clark Gable had run over and killed a pedestrian while driving drunk one night in 1945, and that his studio, MGM, paid an employee to take the rap for him. The Mikkelsons checked four biographies and other books, which had conflicting accounts, and a number of old newspaper articles (all on microfilm) to sort out the truth, which was that Gable did have a car wreck, but he never hit a pedestrian. Their account of the extensive research process is worth a read.

Although our sites have somewhat different emphases – we focus on what's being said in political ads, speeches, interviews and debates, while Snopes.com concentrates more on such things as [whether former Monkee band member Michael Nesmith's mother was the inventor of liquid correction fluid](#) (she was) – Snopes.com does take on some claims in the political realm. That has given us an opportunity to evaluate the Mikkelson's work from time to time. We have found it solid and well-documented. We even [link](#) to Snopes.com [when](#) it's appropriate rather than [reinvent the wheel](#) ourselves, which we consider [high praise](#).

A Final Warning

The e-mail's last paragraph advises that everyone who goes to Snopes.com for "the bottom line facts" should "proceed with caution." We think that's terrific advice, not just in connection with material on Snopes but for practically anything a reader finds online — including articles on FactCheck.org. The

very reason we list our sources (as does Snopes.com) and provide links is so that readers can check things out for themselves.

Oh, we almost forgot: That Wikipedia entry mentioned in the e-mail? Not only was it not the first place to reveal the Mikkelsons' identities, but it contains several factual errors, according to David. For instance, it says that he works "part-time" on Snopes.com. That was never true, according to David; early on he did hold another job as well, but even that hasn't been true since 2002. The mistakes could have been avoided if the authors had contacted the couple. "None of them did," he said.

–*Viveca Novak*

Sources

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