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The Internet and the Spread of False Information

The Internet has increased information cascades. It is so easy nowadays to look up information on Wikipedia for example. Nearly everyone takes Wikipedia at face value and rarely check the sources or even look to see if the information was cited. In theory the Internet should make information cascades less prevalent since it is easy to look up information. The problem is it is equally as easy to cascade off of others and spread unverified information with one click.

About six months ago a fake Martin Luther King Jr. quote went viral after Facebook user Ms. Dovy posted on her wall

I will mourn the loss of thousands of precious lives, but I will not rejoice in the death of one, not even an enemy. “Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.” MLK Jr.

Notice that the quotation marks start after the first sentence. However, someone copied and pasted the entire post and for some reason removed the quotations. As a result, the first sentence became part of the MLK Jr.’s quote. Eventually, the fake quote was re-tweeted by Penn Jillette of Penn and Teller to his 1.6 million followers on Facebook. As a result, the quote went viral on Twitter. Social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook increase information cascades because of their easy one click buttons to re post things.

<http://http://continuations.com/post/5189184538/fake-quotes-and-information-cascades>

<http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/05/anatomy-of-a-fake-quotation/238257/>

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