Markham Nolan: How to separate fact and fiction online

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[I've been a journalist now since I was about 17,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#635) [and it's an interesting industry to be in at the moment,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#3256) [because as you all know, there's a huge amount of upheaval](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#6816) [going on in media, and most of you probably know this](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#9152) [from the business angle, which is that the business model](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#11632) [is pretty screwed, and as my grandfather would say,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#14855) [the profits have all been gobbled up by Google.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#17798)

[So it's a really interesting time to be a journalist,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#20512) [but the upheaval that I'm interested in is not on the output side.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#22856) [It's on the input side. It's concern with](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#25940) [how we get information and how we gather the news.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#29035) [And that's changed, because we've had a huge shift](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#31533) [in the balance of power from](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#34604) [the news organizations to the audience.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#36842) [And the audience for such a long time was in a position](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#38859) [where they didn't have any way of affecting news](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#41074) [or making any change. They couldn't really connect.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#43764) [And that's changed irrevocably.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#46031)

[My first connection with the news media was](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#47507) [in 1984, the BBC had a one-day strike.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#50396) [I wasn't happy. I was angry. I couldn't see my cartoons.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#54207) [So I wrote a letter.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#57495) [And it's a very effective way of ending your hate mail:](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#60042) ["Love Markham, Aged 4." Still works.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#62891) [I'm not sure if I had any impact on the one-day strike,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#65978) [but what I do know is that it took them three weeks to get back to me.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#68989) [And that was the round journey. It took that long for anyone](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#71671) [to have any impact and get some feedback.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#73831) [And that's changed now because, as journalists,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#76024) [we interact in real time. We're not in a position](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#78506) [where the audience is reacting to news.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#81672) [We're reacting to the audience, and we're actually relying on them.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#84006) [They're helping us find the news. They're helping us](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#87763) [figure out what is the best angle to take and what is the stuff that they want to hear.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#90149) [So it's a real-time thing. It's much quicker. It's happening](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#94919) [on a constant basis, and the journalist is always playing catch up.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#98823)

[To give an example of how we rely on the audience,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#104740) [on the 5th of September in Costa Rica, an earthquake hit.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#107373) [It was a 7.6 magnitude. It was fairly big.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#111910) [And 60 seconds is the amount of time it took](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#114236) [for it to travel 250 kilometers to Managua.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#117116) [So the ground shook in Managua 60 seconds after it hit the epicenter.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#119681) [Thirty seconds later, the first message went onto Twitter,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#123826) [and this was someone saying "temblor," which means earthquake.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#126482) [So 60 seconds was how long it took](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#129343) [for the physical earthquake to travel.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#131680) [Thirty seconds later news of that earthquake had traveled](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#133586) [all around the world, instantly. Everyone in the world,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#136146) [hypothetically, had the potential to know that an earthquake](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#139120) [was happening in Managua.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#142317) [And that happened because this one person had](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#144731) [a documentary instinct, which was to post a status update,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#147082) [which is what we all do now, so if something happens,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#151031) [we put our status update, or we post a photo,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#153563) [we post a video, and it all goes up into the cloud in a constant stream.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#155645)

[And what that means is just constant,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#159423) [huge volumes of data going up.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#162184) [It's actually staggering. When you look at the numbers,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#164590) [every minute there are 72 more hours](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#166871) [of video on YouTube.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#169862) [So that's, every second, more than an hour of video gets uploaded.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#171244) [And in photos, Instagram, 58 photos are uploaded to Instagram a second.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#174526) [More than three and a half thousand photos go up onto Facebook.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#178782) [So by the time I'm finished talking here, there'll be 864](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#182538) [more hours of video on Youtube than there were when I started,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#186246) [and two and a half million more photos on Facebook and Instagram than when I started.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#189864)

[So it's an interesting position to be in as a journalist,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#193727) [because we should have access to everything.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#197659) [Any event that happens anywhere in the world, I should be able to know about it](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#200075) [pretty much instantaneously, as it happens, for free.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#202973) [And that goes for every single person in this room.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#206904)

[The only problem is, when you have that much information,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#210069) [you have to find the good stuff, and that can be](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#212679) [incredibly difficult when you're dealing with those volumes.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#214966) [And nowhere was this brought home more than during](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#216954) [Hurricane Sandy. So what you had in Hurricane Sandy was](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#219273) [a superstorm, the likes of which we hadn't seen for a long time,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#222177) [hitting the iPhone capital of the universe -- (Laughter) --](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#225204) [and you got volumes of media like we'd never seen before.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#228347) [And that meant that journalists had to deal with fakes,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#232562) [so we had to deal with old photos that were being reposted.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#235306) [We had to deal with composite images](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#238222) [that were merging photos from previous storms.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#240470) [We had to deal with images from films like "The Day After Tomorrow." (Laughter)](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#243653) [And we had to deal with images that were so realistic](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#248887) [it was nearly difficult to tell if they were real at all.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#251721) [(Laughter)](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#254091)

[But joking aside, there were images like this one from Instagram](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#258404) [which was subjected to a grilling by journalists.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#262128) [They weren't really sure. It was filtered in Instagram.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#264404) [The lighting was questioned. Everything was questioned about it.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#266637) [And it turned out to be true. It was from Avenue C](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#269160) [in downtown Manhattan, which was flooded.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#271453) [And the reason that they could tell that it was real](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#273613) [was because they could get to the source, and in this case,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#275713) [these guys were New York food bloggers.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#277802) [They were well respected. They were known.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#279909) [So this one wasn't a debunk, it was actually something that they could prove.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#281939) [And that was the job of the journalist. It was filtering all this stuff.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#285031) [And you were, instead of going and finding the information](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#287949) [and bringing it back to the reader, you were holding back](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#290660) [the stuff that was potentially damaging.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#293227)

[And finding the source becomes more and more important --](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#295287) [finding the good source -- and Twitter is where most journalists now go.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#298245) [It's like the de facto real-time newswire,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#301979) [if you know how to use it, because there is so much on Twitter.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#305132)

[And a good example of how useful it can be](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#308099) [but also how difficult was the Egyptian revolution in 2011.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#310484) [As a non-Arabic speaker, as someone who was looking](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#314017) [from the outside, from Dublin,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#316663) [Twitter lists, and lists of good sources,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#318964) [people we could establish were credible, were really important.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#320756) [And how do you build a list like that from scratch?](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#324378) [Well, it can be quite difficult, but you have to know what to look for.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#326887) [This visualization was done by an Italian academic.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#329317) [He's called André Pannison, and he basically](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#332175) [took the Twitter conversation in Tahrir Square](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#335569) [on the day that Hosni Mubarak would eventually resign,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#337744) [and the dots you can see are retweets, so when someone](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#341198) [retweets a message, a connection is made between two dots,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html" \l "343830) [and the more times that message is retweeted by other people,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#346609) [the more you get to see these nodes, these connections being made.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#349219) [And it's an amazing way of visualizing the conversation,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#352425) [but what you get is hints at who is more interesting](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#354347) [and who is worth investigating.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#357058) [And as the conversation grew and grew, it became](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#359739) [more and more lively, and eventually you were left](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#362618) [with this huge, big, rhythmic pointer of this conversation.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#364902) [You could find the nodes, though, and then you went,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#369683) [and you go, "Right, I've got to investigate these people.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#371492) [These are the ones that are obviously making sense.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#373786) [Let's see who they are."](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#375500)

[Now in the deluge of information, this is where](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#377809) [the real-time web gets really interesting for a journalist like myself,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#380499) [because we have more tools than ever](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#383706) [to do that kind of investigation.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#385680) [And when you start digging into the sources, you can go](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#388437) [further and further than you ever could before.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#391446)

[Sometimes you come across a piece of content that](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#393745) [is so compelling, you want to use it, you're dying to use it,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#397097) [but you're not 100 percent sure if you can because](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#400557) [you don't know if the source is credible.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#403232) [You don't know if it's a scrape. You don't know if it's a re-upload.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#404439) [And you have to do that investigative work.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#406621) [And this video, which I'm going to let run through,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#408330) [was one we discovered a couple of weeks ago.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#410674)

[Video: Getting real windy in just a second.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#413663)

[(Rain and wind sounds)](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#415862)

[(Explosion) Oh, shit!](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#420750)

[Markham Nolan: Okay, so now if you're a news producer, this is something](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#423917) [you'd love to run with, because obviously, this is gold.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#426854) [You know? This is a fantastic reaction from someone,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#429406) [very genuine video that they've shot in their back garden.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#431669) [But how do you find if this person, if it's true, if it's faked,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#434239) [or if it's something that's old and that's been reposted?](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#437733)

[So we set about going to work on this video, and](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#440391) [the only thing that we had to go on was the username on the YouTube account.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#442617) [There was only one video posted to that account,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#445477) [and the username was Rita Krill.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#447828) [And we didn't know if Rita existed or if it was a fake name.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#449316) [But we started looking, and we used free Internet tools to do so.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#452608) [The first one was called Spokeo, which allowed us to look for Rita Krills.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#455521) [So we looked all over the U.S. We found them in New York,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#458829) [we found them in Pennsylvania, Nevada and Florida.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#461211) [So we went and we looked for a second free Internet tool](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#463973) [called Wolfram Alpha, and we checked the weather reports](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#466622) [for the day in which this video had been uploaded,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#469089) [and when we went through all those various cities,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#471586) [we found that in Florida, there were thunderstorms and rain on the day.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#473469) [So we went to the white pages, and we found,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#476965) [we looked through the Rita Krills in the phonebook,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#479610) [and we looked through a couple of different addresses,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#482534) [and that took us to Google Maps, where we found a house.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#484106) [And we found a house with a swimming pool that looked](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#487422) [remarkably like Rita's. So we went back to the video,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#489337) [and we had to look for clues that we could cross-reference.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#492255) [So if you look in the video, there's the big umbrella,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#495226) [there's a white lilo in the pool,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#498441) [there are some unusually rounded edges in the swimming pool,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#500286) [and there's two trees in the background.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#502726) [And we went back to Google Maps, and we looked a little bit closer,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#504780) [and sure enough, there's the white lilo,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#507207) [there are the two trees,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#509878) [there's the umbrella. It's actually folded in this photo.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#512872) [Little bit of trickery. And there are the rounded edges on the swimming pool.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#514858) [So we were able to call Rita, clear the video,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#518636) [make sure that it had been shot, and then our clients](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#521786) [were delighted because they were able to run it without being worried.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#523872)

[Sometimes the search for truth, though,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#527066) [is a little bit less flippant, and it has much greater consequences.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#528841) [Syria has been really interesting for us, because obviously](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#533250) [a lot of the time you're trying to debunk stuff that can be](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#536233) [potentially war crime evidence, so this is where YouTube](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#538914) [actually becomes the most important repository](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#542713) [of information about what's going on in the world.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#545070)

[So this video, I'm not going to show you the whole thing,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#549220) [because it's quite gruesome, but you'll hear some of the sounds.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#551974) [This is from Hama.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#554695) [Video: (Shouting)](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#557023) [And what this video shows, when you watch the whole thing through,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#559993) [is bloody bodies being taken out of a pickup truck](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#563897) [and thrown off a bridge.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#566658) [The allegations were that these guys were Muslim Brotherhood](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#569263) [and they were throwing Syrian Army officers' bodies](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#572044) [off the bridge, and they were cursing and using blasphemous language,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#574919) [and there were lots of counterclaims about who they were,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#577853) [and whether or not they were what the video said it was.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#580235)

[So we talked to some sources in Hama who we had been](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#582477) [back and forth with on Twitter, and we asked them about this,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#585743) [and the bridge was interesting to us because it was something we could identify.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#588076) [Three different sources said three different things about the bridge.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#591890) [They said, one, the bridge doesn't exist.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#594804) [Another one said the bridge does exist, but it's not in Hama. It's somewhere else.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#597066) [And the third one said, "I think the bridge does exist,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#600590) [but the dam upstream of the bridge was closed,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#603152) [so the river should actually have been dry, so this doesn't make sense."](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#606516) [So that was the only one that gave us a clue.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#609913) [We looked through the video for other clues.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#612525) [We saw the distinctive railings, which we could use.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#613750) [We looked at the curbs. The curbs were throwing shadows south,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#616839) [so we could tell the bridge was running east-west across the river.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#620583) [It had black-and-white curbs.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#622900) [As we looked at the river itself, you could see there's](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#624856) [a concrete stone on the west side. There's a cloud of blood.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#626842) [That's blood in the river. So the river is flowing](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#629796) [south to north. That's what that tells me.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#631530) [And also, as you look away from the bridge,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#633227) [there's a divot on the left-hand side of the bank,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#635576) [and the river narrows.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#637225)

[So onto Google Maps we go, and we start](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#639655) [looking through literally every single bridge.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#642234) [We go to the dam that we talked about, we start just](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#644292) [literally going through every time that road crosses the river,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#647772) [crossing off the bridges that don't match.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#651382) [We're looking for one that crosses east-west.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#653120) [And we get to Hama. We get all the way from the dam](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#654883) [to Hama and there's no bridge.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#656835) [So we go a bit further. We switch to the satellite view,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#658838) [and we find another bridge, and everything starts to line up.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#661322) [The bridge looks like it's crossing the river east to west.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#664242) [So this could be our bridge. And we zoom right in.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#667280) [We start to see that it's got a median, so it's a two-lane bridge.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#670441) [And it's got the black-and-white curbs that we saw in the video,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#673343) [and as we click through it, you can see someone's](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#676989) [uploaded photos to go with the map, which is very handy,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#679301) [so we click into the photos. And the photos start showing us](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#682255) [more detail that we can cross-reference with the video.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#684942) [The first thing that we see is we see black-and-white curbing,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#687564) [which is handy because we've seen that before.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#691287) [We see the distinctive railing that we saw the guys](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#693392) [throwing the bodies over.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#696891) [And we keep going through it until we're certain that this is our bridge.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#699242)

[So what does that tell me? I've got to go back now](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#701897) [to my three sources and look at what they told me:](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#703421) [the one who said the bridge didn't exist,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#705734) [the one who said the bridge wasn't in Hama,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#707459) [and the one guy who said, "Yes, the bridge does exist, but I'm not sure about the water levels."](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#709318) [Number three is looking like the most truthful all of a sudden,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#713271) [and we've been able to find that out using some free Internet tools](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#716602) [sitting in a cubicle in an office in Dublin](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#719583) [in the space of 20 minutes.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#722103) [And that's part of the joy of this. Although the web](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#723590) [is running like a torrent, there's so much information there](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#726029) [that it's incredibly hard to sift and getting harder every day,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#729294) [if you use them intelligently, you can find out incredible information.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#732481) [Given a couple of clues, I could probably find out](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#735808) [a lot of things about most of you in the audience that you might not like me finding out.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#738203)

[But what it tells me is that, at a time when](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#741737) [there's more -- there's a greater abundance of information than there ever has been,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#744742) [it's harder to filter, we have greater tools.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#748771) [We have free Internet tools that allow us,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#751404) [help us do this kind of investigation.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#753267) [We have algorithms that are smarter than ever before,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#755493) [and computers that are quicker than ever before.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#757316)

[But here's the thing. Algorithms are rules. They're binary.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#759737) [They're yes or no, they're black or white.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#763164) [Truth is never binary. Truth is a value.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#764949) [Truth is emotional, it's fluid, and above all, it's human.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#768503) [No matter how quick we get with computers, no matter](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#773167) [how much information we have, you'll never be able](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#775274) [to remove the human from the truth-seeking exercise,](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#777658) [because in the end, it is a uniquely human trait.](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#780654) [Thanks very much. (Applause)](http://www.ted.com/talks/markham_nolan_how_to_separate_fact_and_fiction_online.html#784312)

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