Misinformation

Regular readers will know that I occasionally have a rant about some item that gets into print that has absolutely no legs to stand on. The most recent concerned the piece of property on CT Rt. 182 in Norfolk that the real estate agent handling the transaction alleged to have been the resting place one warm afternoon around 1763 of British General John Burgoyne and his staff, when in fact Burgoyne never stepped foot on the North American continent until 1777.

Then there is the case of the Phelps Tavern in North Colebrook; there has been enough misinformation about this place to fill a book. The problem is that there has already been enough written about it to actually fill a book, and a fairly good-sized one at that. Most articles about the house that Arah Phelps built begin by referring to it as the "Colonial Tavern". It was built in 1787, and the American War of Independence ended with the signing of the Treaty of Peace, signed in Paris, France in 1783. Furthermore, it was not built as a post for changing horses on the Waterbury River Turnpike, as the era of turnpikes did not arrive in this section of Connecticut until 1801; and as they did in fact change horses in Winsted, there would not have been any need to change them again in just under 10 miles.

It is in my make-up to be aware of facts and statistics, as I have shown a propensity for such things since being a small child. My career in geography led me to become the information editor for a major cartographic house, where much of my duties was verifying the accuracy of information that was being considered for inclusion in our publications, both geographical as well as historical.

I am currently reading John McPhee's latest book, "Silk Parachute". I enjoy everything and anything that he writes, and his total published books at the moment stands at 25. This particular volume consists of 10 essays, one of which is entitled "Checkpoints". In it he recalls various situations where fact-checking became a major issue, some of which are peculiarly parallel to those of my experience.

Let me borrow an example: In his book "Basin and Range", about the geologic background of that region in our far west, he gives examples of plate tectonics in other parts of the world, one of which happened to be the Adriatic Plate. McPhee has many sources of information on a multitude of subjects, and as these are generally world class experts in their fields, he can rely upon their input. In this description he writes, "It is the plates that move. They all move. They move in varying directions and at different speeds. The Adriatic Plate is moving north. The African Plate once came up behind it and drove it into Europe – drove Italy like a nail into Europe – and thus created the Alps."

McPhee's editor, (the ultimate checker) not knowing about such things as plate tectonics, went to a world authority on the subject, who just happened to be McPhee's authority as well, and was told that the Adriatic Plate was in fact moving southwest, not north. McPhee, of course challenged her source, and when he was told the name of the expert, he figured that somehow he must have made a mistake, as he would never challenge that person. So the article was published and immediately afterward, listening to a small voice in his head that questioned the direction of the plate supposedly responsible for the Alps, called this ultimate source at his office

at the University of California, Davis and asked if the Adriatic Plate was moving southwest, what are the Alps doing there?"

"He said, 'The Adriatic Plate?' I said 'The Adriatic plate.' "I believe I actually heard him slap his forehead. 'Oh no!' he said 'Not the Adriatic Plate! The Aegean Plate. The Aegean plate is moving southwest!'"

This is a classic example of how misinformation can be disseminated, in this case, by the slip of memory where your brain, which presumably knows the correct answer, gets something mixed up and tells the vocal chords to issue the wrong information. I have been rightfully accused of this very thing more than once.

McPhee has a subsequent paragraph that beautifully describes the evolution of misinformation and the difficulty, if not impossibility of ever setting the record straight; "Any error is everlasting." As [his editor] told her journalism students,' once an error gets into print it will live on and on in libraries carefully cataloged, scrupulously indexed…silicon-chipped, deceiving researcher after researcher down through the ages, all of whom will make new errors on the strength of the original errors, and so on and on into exponential explosion of errata'

My thoughts entirely, although I am not able to express them as succinctly.

I will continue to be annoyed by things that probably don't bother the average person; names on road signs drive me crazy. Why does "Sandy Brook Rd." appear at one end, while the sign at the opposite end reads "Sandybrook Rd."? Is the correct term "Wolfords Hill Rd." or "Wolford Hill Rd."? You will find it both ways in Colebrook official documents.

Even on an international scale the problem persists. The world's highest waterfall is in Venezuela. The British and Russian geographical information is correct in calling it Angel Fall, but there are few if any United States publications that call it other than Angel Falls. This, to a geographer at least, is a major error. I have personally spoken with the Venezuelan Minister of Cultural and Geographical Information and can report that it is definitely singular, the reason being that the water falls 3,212 feet without touching any part of the rock face that it descends past. In one majestic leap, from the lip at the top of the Roraima upland to the bottom, it is unencumbered by anything other than air. The origin of the name comes from an American pilot, Johnnie Angel, who first discovered it. So please, if you ever happen to discuss world superlatives, and the highest waterfall is mentioned, make sure it is referred to as "Angel Fall".

Historic Bytes
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