How I Used Lies About A Cartoon to Prove History Is Meaningless on the Internet

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Of all the great and terrible things about the Internet, its ability to shape and rewrite reality might be the most dystopian. History is written by the victors, and every day it looks like the losers are humanity and meaning. A decade ago, I wrote some fan fiction that continues to distort the truth about a knock-off *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* cartoon series. Everything you think you know about *Street Sharks* is a lie.

Well, that depends on what you think you know about *Street Sharks* . Before I reveal the lie, here's the truth: *Street Sharks* was a cartoon in the mid-1990s about four brothers who mutated into grotesque, radical shark men after getting "gene-slammed." An obvious attempt to cash in on all things Turtlemania, the *Street Sharks* battled evil scientists and hapless animal-human hybrid henchmen while saying how much they hated pizza. Their catchphrase was "Jawsome!" Much like its companion show *Extreme Dinosaurs*, *Street Sharks* is fondly remembered as a kitschy piece of 1990s pop culture trash.

Here's how I turned *Street Sharks* into an ongoing online social experiment.

In 2003, when I was in middle school, I stumbled across the website TVTome.com. It was a user-edited wiki for TV shows. To be an editor for the big, popular shows, you had to prove you were qualified. After all, creating the official record of what happened on The Big Bang Theory was an important responsibility. But for some forgotten garbage show like *Street Sharks*, the screening process was nonexistent. Sensing an opportunity for nonsense, I became the *Street Sharks* editor and filled its page with lies. I made up characters, voice actors, episodes, plot descriptions, everything.

Here's a description of "Shark to the Future," one the 40 real episodes of Street Sharks:

"The Street Sharks are sent to a future where Dr. Piranoid controls everything. They meet up with Bends' great-great-grandson Bendsini and join the rebel forces."

Now, here are three summaries for my 26-episode (plus one TV movie) alternate-universe Street Sharks. Tell me these descriptions for a cheap kids show designed to sell toys don't sound at least somewhat suspicious.

Season 2, Episode 8: "Makeover"

Strong yet sensitive Big Slammu was always the most angered by his transformation. But when he accidentally frightens a little girl into a coma, he runs off to find a cure. His frantic journey eventually leads him to Dr. Paradigm. He is brainwashed and sent to destroy the sharks. Can our heroes defeat their friend and hope to reverse the effects before it's too late?

Or how about this?

Season 2, Episode 1: "City at War (Part 1)"

The sharks are back for a brand new fight! In this season premiere it's one year later after the last confrontation with Dr. Paradigm and the sharks have become a household name throughout Fission City. With their stranglehold on the city weakening, the various gangs are thrown into a violent war with each other and at the center of the madness is a nasty thug named Meathook with plans to use the war to take over the city. Now only the sharks can stop him.

Or this beloved classic?

Season 1, Episode 6: "The Hot Chick"

Streex's sister Roxie has been wondering where her brother has been lately. Soon she stumbles upon the Shark Cave and learns her missing brother is the leader of a band of mutant sharks. Just then Slobster stops in and Roxie is severely injured. They'll have to give her the shark treatment to save her.

If and when Michael Bay or whoever reboots Street Sharks, I hope they use these episodes as a starting point. It was a fun creative-writing exercise, trolling as antagonistic fan fiction. I'd even say some of my episodes had more compelling story arcs than the genuine article. At least all of my titles weren't shark puns.

For a while, all these falsehoods just sat there, not bothering anybody. But eventually, TVTome was bought and integrated into the much bigger CBS Interactive website TV.com. Thanks to that expanded platform, all of my lies rapidly began infecting the rest of the Internet. Most sites have purged themselves of my misinformation, but for years, IMDB, Amazon, and numerous smaller sites were unintentionally hosting my creative writing. If you're paranoid and trying to spot a fake, pretty much any episode with a specific 1994 air date and episode description is a fraud. If a shady website

claims it has streaming videos of "Feelin' Lobstery" or "Goin' Clammando" — and a lot still do, since I still found these descriptions — it's lying to you even more than usual. The only place that's still entirely accurate is Wikipedia, hilariously enough.

Another telltale sign the info you're reading isn't true is the character Roxie, a female Street Shark I made up loosely based on real character Rox. People on forums continue to be confused about why they can't find anything about her or anything else from this mythic "alternate" *Street Sharks* series. (They must seriously be feeling the Mandela Effect.) Some suspected that something was wrong, but couldn't quite figure out what or how or why. After all, what kind of person would intentionally sow lies about *Street Sharks* across the internet? I still love reading utterly baffled questions on Wikipedia talk pages, IMDB message boards, Facebook groups, and random YouTube comments from desperate people trying to track down "the one with the girl Street Shark."

The fake character with the most star power and closest to my heart is Meathook, allegedly played by Henry "Fonzie" Winkler as a meta "jump the shark" reference. Search "Street Sharks cast" on Google, and he's still listed in the cast. Winkler's IMDB page once said he was in the show. Netflix, while hosting the actual episodes for people to watch, put him in the cast list alongside Adam West, who was the fictional voice of a real character.

Those are just the most prominent lies. No one has bothered to correct poor Khary Payton's IMDB page, since him voicing Moby Lick sounds so plausible, even though it didn't happen. Imagine Casting is a website where people fan-cast movies based on properties they like, and someone there suggested Famke "Jean Grey" Janssen as Roxie, a *Street Sharks* character that doesn't exist.

Some people, Wikipedia and IMDB editors mostly, eventually caught on and rightfully questioned this nonsensical thing I did purely for laughs. The slow realization in this thread on "obscure" character Roxie is like watching a beautiful tree grow from weird seeds I planted. However, what fascinates me the most is all of the people willing to go along with the lies for seemingly no reason. Going along with a lie in person is a bit different, because you can be caught off guard and lie to regain your balance. On the Internet, though, where you're anonymous and have to take time to type and (maybe) edit words?

I've found forum posts of people saying Roxie was their favorite character, and read IMDB reviews of people fondly remembering episodes that don't exist.

The Riddle of Roxie confounds people to this day.

Here's a review from August 25, 2004 written by IMDB user Ginger87 in New York City.

"*Street Sharks* wasn't that bad of a show. I used to watch it about five years ago on UPN on Sunday mornings. I liked the animation, the plots, and the characters. My favorite character was Streex. He was cool. I also liked Roxie. She was also cool. My favorite episodes were: 'Attack of the shark bots (1),' 'Here Comes The Mantaman,' 'Clash of the Titans,' 'Follow The Leader,' and 'Cabin Fever.' I also liked the *Street Sharks* movie, 'The Shiva Saga.' I even have that on video. Overall I really enjoyed this show and it is a shame that it didn't last that long. I give this show 8/10 stars."

No, you don't like Roxie because you never saw her because no one saw her because she's not real. No, you don't have "The Shiva Saga" on video because no one does because it's not real! Nine out of twelve people found this review useful, and it's an absolute lie.

Why would anyone do this? Did they recognize what I did and thought it would be funny to help spread the lies? Did they not want to look like they didn't know what they were talking about? Who are they trying to impress with their phony *Street Sharks* expertise? Here's an essay saying how Winkler's (fake) appearance on the show marked a new low point for him. Heck, voice actors who actually worked on *Street Sharks* and should know better, which includes still-relevant actors like *Hamilton's* Andrew Rannells, have retweeted people excitedly discovering that the Fonz was on the show. Henry Winkler was never on *Street Sharks*. It's a wonderful web of lies I've weaved.

The thought that keeps bloggers up at night is that this kind of stuff is actually happening all the time. Whether it's purposeful long-term trolling or information that's been unintentionally incorrectly reported, the internet is rapidly increasing how radically and rapidly history gets rewritten. When everyone reports on everyone else's reporting, all it takes is one faulty source, one Roxie, to poison the entire cycle.

Here's where the problem gets even more insidious and impossible to solve: Because I watched *Street Sharks* as a child and played with the toys (like the monster truck with shark teeth), my lies were mixed with half-remembered truths. My new version was still about four dudes who got mutated into grotesque, radical shark men, and even some of my casting was correct, since for some reason, I was really into memorizing cartoon voice actors at the time. That ambiguity, that Trojan Horse of truth, is probably why the lie was so effective and successful. Honestly, it's still hard for me to completely separate fact from my blurry fiction. I legitimately can't tell what's 100% real and what isn't when it comes to *Street Sharks*. That would be horrifying if it wasn't so funny. I'm living in an ontological nightmare of my own making. It's jawsome!

I've shared this story with friends and family in the past, when the lies were at their peak omnipresence. Ziff Davis still hired me after I spilled the beans on the last day of my internship, and my student short film Followers includes a seeming non-sequitur about Henry Winkler in *Street Sharks*. But I've never confessed this online. When I told my mother, a judge, she warned me against becoming famous for being a liar, especially since I'm a journalist with a professional obligation to tell the truth. But like any worthwhile fiction writer, I believe my lies have highlighted an important modern truth: history is more mutable than it has ever been thanks to the explosion of information on the internet. We form a rough consensus based on vast amounts of conflicting data, but who really has the power to verify any of it? In the Metal Gear Solid series, a collection of sinister artificial intelligences manipulate bulk information online to keep the world firmly under their control.

This is especially true when the stakes are low. A lot of people will put effort into dispelling rumors that the Moon landing was fake or that Hitler is still alive, sure, but who cares enough about something as meaningless and easy to ignore as *Street Sharks* to make sure all the information about it online is totally accurate? Some people do, which is why my lies were mostly removed, but that took years, and they didn't fully stamp out every online instance of Roxie or Meathook.

Not everyone can say they changed the world, for better or worse.

I know what you're thinking. How do you know I didn't just make all this up? First of all, I wish I could come up with a story this interesting and have the skill to alter all the necessary images on the spot. You can also look this all up for yourself. Search "Henry Winkler Street Sharks" on Twitter, check the dates on some of those confused forum posts, and tumble down this shark pit I've been living in for over a decade. Even if I were lying, though — after all, you have no obligation to believe me right now — wouldn't that just prove my point?

Anyway, here's a real episode of *Street Sharks*. You deserve it.