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Students at Kansas Newspaper Prove Democracy Isn't Dead Yet

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Abstract

In May of 1897, Mark Twain was in London finishing up an around-the-world speaking tour he had started two years earlier. He got there right after his cousin, James Ross Clemens, who had fallen ill while visiting London a couple of weeks earlier. [In a letter he wrote on May 31](#), Twain addressed rumors saying that he had fallen deathly ill and had even died. "I can understand perfectly how the report of my illness got about," he said, adding: "I have even heard on good authority that I was dead." It was his cousin's illness that was ascribed to Twain; in fact, Twain had never been ill, and was certainly not dead. "The report of my illness grew out of his illness," he said, referring to his cousin's bout with bad health. "The report of my death was an exaggeration." [*excerpt*]

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Disciplines

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Comments

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By Dave Powell on April 9, 2017 10:15 PM |

In May of 1897, Mark Twain was in London finishing up an around-the-world speaking tour he had started two years earlier. He got there right after his cousin, James Ross Clemens, who had fallen ill while visiting London a couple of weeks earlier. [In a letter he wrote on May 31](#), Twain addressed rumors saying that he had fallen deathly ill and had even died. "I can understand perfectly how the report of my illness got about," he said, adding: "I have even heard on good authority that I was dead." It was his cousin's illness that was ascribed to Twain; in fact, Twain had never been ill, and was certainly not dead. "The report of my illness grew out of his illness," he said, referring to his cousin's bout with bad health. "The report of my death was an exaggeration."

The line was quickly altered—you probably heard it as "Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated," or something along those lines—but the story is funny because, of course, Mark Twain's health was never actually in danger. And he certainly wasn't dead when the reports surfaced that he was. The story continues to be told any time it looks like someone—or something—is on the verge of collapse but comes back to life anyway.

That brings me to the story of the *Booster Redux*, the student newspaper at Pittsburg High School in Pittsburg, Kansas. If you've been looking on in despair over the past few months as our democracy has been under siege, unsure of how to separate the fake news from the real stuff, [this story is for you](#). Thanks to the intrepid student reporters at the *Redux*, I think it's safe to say the death of American democracy has been greatly exaggerated. At the very least, we have reasons to be optimistic.

In case you missed it, here's what happened: the school board out in Pittsburg hired a new principal, and the student reporters followed their instincts when it seemed that something about her wasn't quite right. You have to take a second to contemplate just how low the bar has been set here—I've spent more time researching plumbers than the school board apparently did checking the credentials of this principal—but that only makes the achievement more impressive. It's a lot harder to stand up and ask questions when the answers seem so obvious.

But ask questions they did, starting with the most obvious one: where is this "Corllins University," anyway, and why does a university that supposedly offers a full education online not even have a functional website? (The website seems to work now, but that hasn't kept the hounds at bay; now the so-called university/diploma mill has to [explain why it's using pictures of Wake Forest graduates on its homepage.](#)) Was the place even accredited? Should its degrees be taken seriously if the university doesn't appear to have a physical address anywhere in the known world? Is that second L really necessary?

There were more questions. Why would a small high school in Kansas hire a principal with what looked to be a fake diploma from a fake college who has just spent the last twenty years in Dubai, of all places, supposedly running an educational consulting firm? If that seems like an odd career leap to you, you are not alone. When students called the new principal, a lady named Amy Robertson, she seemed to have no answers. It may be more accurate to say she had answers—everybody, it seems, has answers—but she had a consistency problem. "There were some things that just didn't quite add up," said Connor Balthazor, one of the student journalists. They had to act.

And act they did. The students dug in and started asking more questions. Eventually, as the clouds gathered around her, Robertson finally resigned. No doubt I left out a few of the good parts—mostly the parts where the adults responsible for putting the best person they could find in charge of their community's school had to eat full plates of crow—but you get the idea. The kids saved the day, quite literally.

And that's something, isn't it? It's not everyday these days that you see something like this happening—people being held to account for not telling the whole truth or embellishing it or simply lying. I don't mean to make light of the situation, and I don't know if it's fair to hold the school board accountable for hiring a person with such obviously poor credentials. I'll even concede that it's possible that Robertson could have been a decent principal. Who knows? I mean, it's possible. Sometimes you have to get that fake online degree and work out your professional details as a consultant in Dubai for twenty years before you're ready for that principal job in rural Kansas. We all take a different path.

But that's not really the point. The point is that honesty and integrity still matter, and now, more than ever, we have to hold people accountable not only for being honest and maintaining their integrity but also for demanding it in others. I know it's not easy to find good quality principals to fill every position in every school across the country, but we can't let that mean we'll let our guard down. Honesty, as they say, is the best policy. And holding powerful people to account, whether it's the president or a principal, is a cornerstone of democracy.

We also have to find ways to support the kinds of school activities that made this possible. It's well known that free speech is a figment of the principal's imagination at many schools in America, where student journalists like these are routinely censored for saying what they really think. As it happens, Kansas law protects student journalists from administrative interference, according to the newspaper's faculty advisor. We could all learn an important lesson from that, not the least of which is: keep these kinds of programs alive, and let them teach kids the important skills they'll need to actually take charge of this society one day. You hear a lot of

people talk about education for the "real world"; nothing could be realer than this. Make sure this is what they mean when they say it.

So I say: thank you, student reporters at the *Booster Redux*. You've done yourselves a service, and you've done one for the rest of us too. Let's hope this proves, at least in some small way, that reports of the death of democracy and truth have been greatly exaggerated.