

# Capitvated by hoax, US learns about 'catfishing'

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Manti Te'o of the Notre Dame Fighting Irish warms up prior to playing against the Alabama Crimson Tide in the 2013 Discover BCS National Championship game on January 7, 2013 in Miami Gardens, Florida. Te'o, a star linebacker at Notre Dame University and a top prospect in this year's NFL draft, supposedly fell for a fabricated girlfriend he "met" online.

A spectacular hoax involving a popular US sportsman's fake dead

girlfriend has put a spotlight on a practice known as "catfishing" and raised fresh concerns about news media fact-checking.

[Sports fans](#) learned this week that Manti Te'o, a star linebacker at Notre Dame University and a top prospect in this year's NFL draft, supposedly fell for a fabricated girlfriend he "met" online.

This would have been embarrassing enough, had he not also spoken movingly of the imaginary young woman's sad, but fictional, death—a story many news outlets have repeated and embellished in recent months.

The news drew new attention to the practice of creating a fake persona for an online relationship, a practice described in the 2010 documentary "Catfish" which inspired an [MTV reality show](#) of the same name.

"It's not new that people represent themselves differently in dating situations, but social media makes it easier because you're not physically with the person," said Karen North, head of the Annenberg Program on [Online Communities](#) at the University of Southern California.

"It's always fascinating when high-profile people's private activities become very public, and I think it's a teaching moment for the rest of us."

The story was broken by the online news site Deadspin, which investigated the facts surrounding a Sports Illustrated story published in October, which stated that the girlfriend named "Lennay Kekua" died in September.

The young star's apparent [bereavement](#) was one of the sports stories of the season, and several more outlets followed up on the Sports Illustrated account, some adding more details—despite Kekua never having existed.

Notre Damesays Te'o was the victim of a cruel online prank, although many now question why Te'o spoke of meeting the woman and continued to speak about her in December, by which time he apparently knew about the hoax.

Nev Shulman, a producer and actor who was the subject of the "Catfish" documentary, said he sympathizes with the athlete but also believes there is more to the story.

"I know how you feel. It happened 2 me. I want 2 help tell ur story & prevent this from happening to others in the future. Lets talk," he said, in a tweet directed to Te'o.

He tweeted later: "I am working on finding out more about this @MTeo\_5 #Catfish story. I have been in contact with the woman involved and will get the truth."

The story moved beyond the world of sports, with high-profile outlets including The New York Times, Los Angeles Times and CBS This Morning discussing the tragic love story.

The publicity around Te'o, who was a finalist for the prestigious Heisman Trophy for the top college football player, also raised questions about whether the news media had forgotten its fundamental duty of checking facts.

The sports website SB Nation listed 21 news outlets which ran stories about Kekua without checking, including ESPN, the Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times and USA Today.

"Anyone writing the stories that were written about her should have found and linked to her obituary. Not finding the obituary should have raised suspicions," said Steve Buttry, who blogs about media on The

Buttry Diary.

Andrew Beaujon, who follows media for the website Poynter Online, said the case is a major embarrassment for journalists.

"Of all the questions arising from Deadspin's Manti Te'o story, maybe the biggest is: Why didn't other journalists uncover the hoax sooner?" he said.

"The story broke Wednesday night, and news geeks are still trying to put the pieces back together."

"A refresher course in verification for every newsroom department would be a very good idea," said Margaret Sullivan, public editor for the The New York Times, which wrote about "Kekua" five times before the [hoax](#) was discovered.

But Dan Kennedy, journalism professor at Northeastern University, said the [news](#) industry has always accepted the reporting of certain prestigious outlets.

"Sports Illustrated is the gold standard" for sports reporting, Kennedy said. "I don't think there is any shame in not re-reporting what Sports Illustrated did."

Kennedy said the Sports Illustrated report appeared to be thorough including speaking with a priest at Notre Dame about the woman.

"Obviously there was more checking that should have been done," he said. "But for the media which are having some fun with this, I think you could say it just as easily could have happened to them."

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