

An Italian teacher who kills celebrities on Twitter

January 6 2013, by Michele Leridon



A smartphone shows the first twitter message of Pope Benedict XVI, in Rome on December 12, 2012. Italian Tommasso Debenedetti has killed many world luminaries, including the Pope, in fake tweets aimed at exposing shoddy journalism, earning him global notoriety.

Fidel Castro, Mikhail Gorbachev and Pope Benedict XVI—Italian Tommasso Debenedetti has killed them all in fake tweets aimed at exposing shoddy journalism that have earned him global notoriety.

The latest victim of Debenedetti's unusual hobby is British author JK Rowling, whose death in an accident he announced from a fake Twitter account purporting to belong to fellow writer John Le Carre.

"Death works well on Twitter," Debenedetti, who is in his 40s and says he teaches literature at a school in Rome, told AFP in a phone interview.

Debenedetti said that when he saw his Le Carre account had 2,500 followers including journalists from major British, German and US media, "I decided to make John Le Carre say JK Rowling had died".

Debenedetti said the tweet was then retweeted hundreds of times and a Chilean television station even gave the false news as fact.

The literary fake artist says his aim in all of this is to "show that [Twitter](#) has become a news agency—the least reliable in the world.

"Unfortunately, journalism works on speed. False news spreads exponentially," he said, pointing out that retweets by journalists lend credibility to rumours even if they are not actually published.

"In the end, everyone forgets what the original source was," said Debenedetti, who in perhaps another sleight of hand insists his first name be spelled "Tommaso" and not the more usual "Tommaso".

Among his many claims to Internet infamy, Debenedetti boasts of having forced Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi to deny the pope had died after sending a false tweet purportedly from the Vatican's Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone.

He claims his tweet announcing the death of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad made the price of oil go up and that another one about the demise of last Soviet leader Gorbachev prompted someone to go and update his

Wikipedia page with the day of his death.

Debenedetti calls these his "games" and appears unconcerned about any unease they may cause, saying that he comes out and claims the rumour as his own invention within an hour of sending the first tweet.

"I only target leading figures who have all the means at their disposal to respond very quickly. I would never announce the death of a lesser-known writer or my next door neighbour," he said.

"I don't want it to go too far. I'm not a crook."

Journalists "should be more prudent and carry out all the necessary checks, particularly in local media, local radio and Internet sites which fall most easily into this trap," he said.

"I just want to show up the fragility of social media, where anyone can be anyone," he said.

Debenedetti also has a more postmodern literary side and he has created false Facebook pages for writers Umberto Eco and Mario Vargas Llosa, quoting them saying improbable things that they never said.

The grandson of a famous Italian literary critic, he has also authored dozens of fake interviews with famous writers which he says he has managed to place in a variety of media as the real thing.

It was Debenedetti's made up interview with Philip Roth that revealed his elaborate ruse after some US journalists asked the famous writer about some comments against US President Barack Obama quoted in some media that he had in fact never made.

Debenedetti does not regret his actions, saying only: "I just wanted to see

how far I could take it."

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