

THE DAY MICHAEL JACKSON DIED

BEN HAUCK

When it came up that Michael Jackson had been rushed to the hospital, I was sitting at my computer. Thinking it would turn out just as the recent Heidi Montag story did when she was rushed to the hospital during some celebrity reality show in Costa Rica, or as countless Britney Spears ambulance stories had, I brushed the story aside a bit. However, it wasn't long before online news outlets were running the headline that Michael Jackson had actually, (this time), *died*.

From my recollection, most of the headlines were technically proper in the announcement of the death of the King of Pop. Rather than omitting the sources of the news in their headlines, they attributed the news to TMZ and the *L.A. Times* in their headlines. Some news outlets equally weighted their headlines with the news and the sources. Other outlets dwarfed the sources with shocking uppercase: huge letters "MICHAEL JACKSON DIES," small letters "LA Times reports." Eventually, news outlets dropped the sources of their news from their headlines, declaring plainly that MJ had died. CNN kept sources in its headlines for an exceptionally long time. After CNN confirmed MJ's death with the coroner, it dropped its hearsay position and finally committed to the tragic story.

I remember being more disoriented than saddened by the MJ news. Michael Jackson had been a part of my life for a very long time—my whole life, actually. He played the role of background presence or white noise. I suppose he was an institution I bought enough into. Or maybe he was that prize exhibit

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running at the local zoo that you felt proud of having in your town but never tried to see. A few days prior to his death, I entered the menagerie that is YouTube and randomly chose to watch his jaw-dropping music video “Black or White,” only to have my mandibular muscles go slack again in witnessing his idiosyncratic yet ingenious choices. He was very much alive in the video. But his death wasn’t a shock to me, since I’d seen plenty of photographs recently of a frail-looking, wheelchair-bound man—he seemed on his way out. Little did I know, until the posthumous release of footage of an enormous concert he was rehearsing, that he was back to dancing.

A few hours after the news broke, I went into my local supermarket to grab some dinner. There I saw on the widescreen TV CNN’s independent confirmation of MJ’s death. Oddly, I started to get a little giddy. Not because Michael Jackson had died, but because there was a palpable air of excitement over the news. The employees at Bravo International Supermarket were tickled chimpanzees, broken by this breaking news from the tedium of scanning items and debit-or-credit questions. I grinned like one of them amidst the excitement. I skedaddled into the frozen food section for dinner, then suddenly I received a cell phone call. It was Lisa, an ex-girlfriend of mine, now in Colorado.

Lisa asked, “*Did you hear Jeff Goldblum died?*”

I stopped dead.

I was immediately disturbed.

I sought more information.

Lisa said she’d heard that Jeff Goldblum fell to his death while mountain-climbing in New Zealand.

I asked her where she had heard this.

It was from Tim, someone I didn’t consider a very reliable source but someone possibly inside the entertainment industry.

She said that according to Tim, the news was all over Twitter that Jeff Goldblum had died.

* * *

Some backstory: A month prior, I had wrapped a film called *The Baster*. On it, I was the stand-in for Jason Bateman, who co-starred in the film with Jennifer Aniston. Jeff Goldblum had a small, funny role in *The Baster*, and some of my most memorable moments were with him.

For example, one day at Equinox Fitness Club in Tribeca, as the crew hurriedly set up a shot, I found myself standing in alongside Jeff. Jeff was this

wiry, six-foot-five hypomanic actor who never seemed to stop talking. For the shot, we were walking on treadmills. He had just been drilling his lines over and over with his tireless assistant. When I stepped on the treadmill next to Jeff, replacing his assistant, he asked if I would do the lines with him, which of course I obliged. But after a round of lines, he put me on the spot by asking me to think of a love standard which for unbeknownst reasons he wanted to sing with me between rounds of lines. I drew an almost absolute blank. The only song I could bring to mind was “Chicago” as sung by Tony Bennett. So, Jeff Goldblum and I belted out “Chicago” while walking on treadmills in Equinox as the crew set up lights around us.

I also recall an amazing time hand-doubling for Jason Bateman with a B Unit, only to be yanked away to do a camera rehearsal with A Unit, *and Jeff*. I had only watched rehearsal, never actually having done it, and here I was suddenly thrown into a walk-and-talk with Jeff Goldblum, complete with a considerable amount of blocking and activity. After the high-pressure experience was over, I happened by video village and saw the scene I had just done with Jeff looping on a monitor. I was shocked: *I did it!* It was surreal seeing myself as an equal with Jeff Goldblum. And it was pretty damn cool.

My last brush with Jeff was after *The Baster* had wrapped, a few weeks later on the set of a film called *Morning Glory*. While I didn’t interact with Jeff in that film, I was there for the day he picture-wrapped. The next day, he showed up in background holding with a female companion, and he was so generous in saying hello to us. Tall man. Thin man. Pretty girl. That was the last I saw of him. Then, about two weeks later, *gone*.

* * *

Back to the phone call with Lisa. Before I ended the call, I asked Lisa to get from Tim where he had read the story. I can’t remember if she called it a rumor or if I established it as a rumor in my head. But at this point, I was seeing her story as a rumor. Whatever the characterization, I was considerably rattled and unnerved. As I checked out of the supermarket with my dinner, I couldn’t follow what the cashier was saying to me. I was obviously distracted. No more was I a giddy, grinning chimp.

At home, I wanted to go straight to the horse’s mouth to substantiate the rumor. I went to local news websites, and all were only running stories of Michael Jackson’s death and of Farrah Fawcett’s on the same day. No Jeff Goldblum. I decided to visit New Zealand news websites—they weren’t working, presumably brought down by an influx of rumor traffic. I even went to an Australian news website. Nothing.

I felt as if I had my finger on a trigger. I happened to have a good friend named Marie-Pierre standing in on *Morning Glory*, the last film Jeff Goldblum had worked on. In one cell phone call or text message, I could tell her “Jeff Goldblum died.” Had I reached her, the news could have spread around the film set where Jeff had had his last role. I *did* call Marie-Pierre, but only left a message asking if she’d heard about a rumor. I wasn’t specific.

Suddenly, I remembered the website called Digg. On Digg, people post links to stories, videos, and other items of interest. Sure enough, on Digg I found entries about Jeff’s death, linking to a story on a website called Media-fetcher. It was this site Lisa had just cited in a text message where Tim had read the story. I read it over . . .

The screenshot shows a news website interface. At the top, there's a search bar and navigation tabs for various news categories like U.S., Business, World, etc. The main headline reads "Actor - Jeff Goldblum Falls To His Death In New Zealand". Below the headline, a "BREAKING NEWS" banner is visible. The article text states: "THIS STORY IS STILL DEVELOPING... Actor Jeff Goldblum died while filming a movie in New Zealand early this morning - June 25, 2009. Preliminary reports from New Zealand Police officials indicate that the actor fell more than 60 feet to his death on the Kauri Cliffs while on-set. Specific details are not yet available. The accident occurred at approximately 4:30 a.m. (UTC/GMT +12). Additional details and information will be forthcoming." There are also some promotional boxes for "Acumen Fund" and "ELSEWHERE ON THE WEB".

From http://jeff.goldblum.mediafetcher.com/news/top_stories/actor_new_zealand.php¹

I examined this strange online document. For one, it was a rip-off of the old Yahoo! News website format, sporting a shift in color scheme from the original. It replaced the Yahoo! logo with a generic logo that said “Top News Stories.” Another generic logo read “Global Associated News.” Something smelled funny.

On my first read, I somehow missed a handful of typos. I moved away from the story and sniffed around the webpage until I came to the footer. At the footer, I found this paragraph, resembling a disclaimer:

about this web site. (this story was dynamically generated using a generic 'template' and is not factual. Any reference to specific individuals has been 100% fabricated by web site visitors who have created fake stories by entering a name into a blank 'non-specific' template for the purpose of entertainment. For sub-domain info and additional use restrictions: FakeAWish.com)

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Questions or Comments

And I found my relief. It appeared that this webpage was the source of the rumor of Jeff Goldblum’s death. People didn’t read the disclaimer at the bottom of the webpage. People only read the story. They didn’t seek more information or perspective. They simply reacted to the words they read, then passed them along.

I called Lisa back. I told her it was a rumor, that the story was not factual, that the story was generated using a template. I told her to tell Tim how dangerous his spreading a rumor could have been, in light of my connection with Marie-Pierre and the set of the film *Morning Glory*. His actions could have disrupted the very set where Jeff had last worked.

I started to get texts asking if Jeff Goldblum had died. I replied that it was a rumor. I also learned that a similar rumor was going around about Harrison Ford getting lost at sea. When I finally connected with Marie-Pierre later that day, she confirmed that Harrison Ford was indeed not dead . . . because she was standing right next to him.

You might define “unsanity” as the condition where your behavior is fueled by fancy rather than by fact. The parallel in this story would have been if I had immediately started to tell people the emotional news that Jeff Goldblum had died without checking sources to see if the story was factual or including the sources making the claims. Many people did this about Michael Jackson on the day Michael Jackson died. They said, “Have you heard Michael Jackson died?” but didn’t pass along the sources of their information. They simply reacted to the words they read or the words they heard, even though there was no independent confirmation and his death wasn’t established at the time. Television anchors, too, discussed MJ’s death even though it wasn’t officially confirmed.

Although the falsity of Jeff Goldblum's death was uncovered, my nerves weren't recovered. I was unsettled by the presumed news, and its proven falsity didn't immediately calm me down. Such is the lasting power words can have over us. Had I not researched the source of the story, I would likely have turned considerably more upset, and my emotions might have consumed me. Since Jeff Goldblum was very much alive, it is understandable how I could have turned insane.

Instead, my general semantics education kept me sane.

How? First of all, it heightened my awareness of language and speech. According to general semantics, language and speech work like maps. They depict a territory called reality, and they swirl around us, influencing how we perceive reality and influencing our paths as we navigate it. And, of course, maps can be wrong. A general semantics education kept me focused on the territory and distrusting of maps. It made me pursue reliable maps rather than unreliable, unverified, unsourced ones like those that come over a cell phone, that come over Twitter, that come from a template engine "for the purpose of entertainment." General semantics education teaches that there is an important difference between the events that happen in Jeff Goldblum's life, and what people *say* about the events in Jeff Goldblum's life. And on top of that important difference, there may also be an incompatibility. In a rumor, that is just the case: the words are one thing, and the events are something else. We must continually keep these lessons in mind as we listen to speech.

A general semantics education also taught me about semantic reactions. Semantic reactions are the responses we have to words, maps, symbols, headlines, stories, announcements, and any manifestation of speech or language. General semantics pays special attention to the speed at which we respond to these manifestations. Immediate responses to speech are called *signal reactions*. Delayed responses to speech (such as when people ask about its meaning before responding) are called *symbol reactions*. You can think of the difference like this: When you see a traffic signal, you know that a red light means you should stop, and you immediately do so. That is a signal reaction. When you see a mysterious symbol at the entrance to a cave, you don't know what it means. You have to inquire about its meaning and investigate before deciding to enter the cave. You *can't* have an immediate response. That is a symbol reaction.

In my opinion, signal reactions are not as bad as you hear in general semantics, and they are extraordinarily helpful in the management of automobile traffic. Generally speaking, you never contemplate the color of a traffic light and instead you respond to it immediately. But in general semantics education, you learn of the perils of signal reactions. When people read the

sentence “Jeff Goldblum died” and pass along the sentence immediately without asking the question “What does that sentence mean?” or “Says who?” they are exhibiting signal reactions of the problematic sort.

When we are ruled by signal reactions, what often follows is that we passionately believe what we hear and we quickly pass it on to others in that passion, rarely ever questioning what we are hearing, and also neglecting to cite our sources. We hear the sentence “*Tim said he read on Twitter that Jeff Goldblum died,*” then we tell others the much shorter sentence “*Jeff Goldblum died.*” We don’t hear about Mediafetcher or FakeAWish because our speaker omitted them already, and our own audiences don’t hear about them either—or Tim or Twitter.

Signal reactions are especially problematic when they corroborate a deluded sense of reality—when they spread knowledge of something that can’t be known or isn’t known. To combat signal reactions, general semantics strongly encourages “taking a semantic pause.” That means having symbol reactions to speech. CNN exhibited the most delayed response the day Michael Jackson died. It didn’t drop the sources of the story it read in TMZ and the *L.A. Times* until it found independent confirmation. As a result, it was probably the sanest news outlet on that tragic day.

Signal reactions can be costly, emotionally and physically, but perhaps of most note, societally. Imagine if I had had a signal reaction to Lisa’s story. I might have pulled the trigger and passed along the rumor to Marie-Pierre on her film set; I might have stirred fancy over text message as people asked me about the rumor; and I might have ended up distraught by something entirely baseless and generated by a computer. Instead, very, very simply, *I paused when I heard the news*, and I maintained that pause for an amount of time adequate for me to research the words and speech I had heard. I paused before letting the news shape my belief and take over my emotions, and before poisoning others’ beliefs and emotions. As a result, I maintained my sanity and contained others’ sanity.

It is times like the tragic day of Michael Jackson’s death, with a world of people wailing, that general semantics education plays a colossal role in personal as well as societal maintenance. If general semantics calms the nerves of those people hearing a rumor, it is calming a society. It is creating a society without as much excitability; a society with reactive restraint; a society with diminished impulses toward informational recklessness; a society with concern and accepted responsibility over the semantic reactions of others.

The events of the day Michael Jackson died were memorable in how they unfolded in different media, as well as how they impacted individuals the

world over. General semantics education had a protective influence on at least one individual experiencing the news of that dramatic day.

Note

1. This is a screen capture from an .mht archive made from the original webpage. The archive employed a script to insert the current day's date rather than hard-coding the date of the news into the article. To avoid confusion, the author edited the screen capture to insert the date of the death of Michael Jackson rather than keep the later date when he made the screen capture.