

I Saw it Online; It Must Be True!

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There are no translations available.

I Want To Believe

The Internet is buzzing with the story of a new study that today's students are so gullible they will believe anything they see on the Internet, and are even willing to believe in the existence of an elusive tree octopus when shown the website for this "endangered species." (The website states it is linked to the "Kelvinic University branch of the Wild Haggis Conservation Society.")

The Pacific Northwest tree octopus (*Octopus paxarbolis*) is a mythical creature invented in 1998 by Lyle Zapato, but the story circulating on the Internet this week often mistakenly has it that Professor Donald J. Leu, director of the New Literacies Research Laboratory at the University of Connecticut, invented the tree octopus and designed its website to test the gullibility of today's "digital native" students, who are known for their online savviness.

One problem with the story is that it is not news. According to the University website the experiment was done on 25 students in 2006. Dr Leu also reported on a similar experiment with 53 7th grade students and the tree octopus website at the *Research Conference of the International Reading Association* in Toronto, Canada in 2007.

There is nothing about new research on this topic on the New Literacies Research Laboratory website, and the information on which the current batch of stories is based is a Pearson press release, which announces a talk by Dr Leu in Texas, at which he talked about the research and its implications.

The Tree Octopus and Dog Island websites are among spoof sites included in Dr Leu's handout: *New Literacies for New Times: Preparing our Students for the 21st Century*. The sites are suggested as good resources for teaching students how to work out that websites contain false or misleading information.

Dr Leu has said that students need to learn to critically evaluate what they read on the Internet, because his studies have shown that students are gullible and do believe the tree octopus story and other hoax websites, and they are unskilled in discriminating good sources of information from unreliable sources on the Internet.

Dr Leu spoke about the research at the Texas Association of School Administrators Conference at the end of January.

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"Press release reveals journalists believe everything they see on the Internet."
February 9th, 2011. <http://www.physorg.com/news/2011-02-reveals-journalists-internet.html>