

Published on *Psychology Today* (<http://www.psychologytoday.com>)

# Promiscuous Facts: Barack Obama and Uncertain Knowledge

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Created Feb 10 2012 - 8:37pm

In January 2008, during the Presidential primary season, a man by the name of Larry Sinclair posted a video on YouTube that claimed that Illinois State Senator Barack Obama had supplied him with cocaine and that they had sexual relations in the back of a limousine. Mr. Sinclair subsequently took a lie detector test, which, perhaps, suggested that he was telling the truth. This is a pretty powerful claim, particularly since now four years later few Americans have ever heard of it. Mr. Sinclair appeared on the Jeff Rense radio talk show and his story was posted on the Drudge Report and other political websites interested in alternative knowledge and conspiracies.

Early on the Obama campaign realized that they would be beset by a torrent of rumors. Perhaps this was because of the historic nature of his candidacy, perhaps this was a function of the bitter political strategies of his opponents, perhaps it was a function of the Internet as an unregulated site for absurd claims, or perhaps this was politics as currently played. To cope with these rumors the Obama campaign established a website, "Fight the Smears," with the goal of allowing voters to "Learn the Truth about Barack Obama." Or at least the truth as the Obama campaign claimed it to be. The website claims that the smears included that "the McCain campaign is maliciously distorting Barack's strong record on crime" and "Barack Obama is a committed Christian and not a Muslim." Both political opinions and rumors are targeted on this website. However, the website, designed to treat contemptuous smears, does not deny that Barack Obama supplied Mr. Sinclair with illegal drugs or that Mr. Sinclair engaged in oral sex with the commander-in-chief. These assertions were not addressed. Some allegations are beneath contempt.

To remove any suspense let me announce that I will not address whether Mr. Sinclair's story is true. Many are highly doubtful. The point is that the story of Barack Obama being on the "down low" never reached such a critical mass that the campaign felt that a public refutation was warranted.

Rumors, doubtful truth claims, misleading information, and, yes, even lies are part of what a candidate, any candidate, must face. John McCain was accused of having an affair with a lobbyist and about lying about his captivity in North Vietnam. The stories about Bill and Hillary could fill a book - indeed they have filled several - from Hillary's lesbianism to Bill having fathered a black child. George W. Bush certainly knows about the stickiness of rumors of cocaine. Politicians of all stripes are the target of uncertain knowledge. Data are lacking as to whether President Obama because of a background that seems exotic to many Americans - Kenyan, Indonesian, Hawaiian, mixed-race and Ivy League - is the target of more rumors or nastier rumors than others in his line of work. I write as a professional agnostic as to the truth of these claims. This doesn't mean that there is no truth, but facts are not orphans; they have

parents to guide and to dress them. They are debutantes, ready to be presented to Society. Claims about political reputations are known through their sponsors.

Many students of rumor quite reasonably wish to find truth. Perhaps best known is Cass Sunstein in his book *On Rumor*, and he is not alone. Winnowing wheat from chaff is an honorable endeavor. But rumor is defined as a truth claim that lacks secure standards of evidence, not false information. Whether true or false rumor's source is unofficial.

Yet, what about ignorance? Just as facts have provenance, so does their absence. Not knowing and forgetting what had been known do not simply happen; ignorance like knowledge may be sponsored. The field of unknowledge has come to be known as Agnotology. Why are some things known, and others unknown? Much of the work on the structure of ignorance has emerged from science studies. The work of historian Robert Proctor on what we know and do not know about the dangers of tobacco is exemplary. Ignorance is in the interest of some. Ultimately we choose what is knowable and there are institutions that support the knowing and others that make knowing difficult. Creating knowledge and ignorance is the source of conflict and contention. Certainty need not always be desired. Let us remember the tobacco company executive who wrote in a memo that "Doubt is our product," implying that the scientific controversy over the malign health effects of cigarettes was and should remain an open debate. He is manufacturing controversy. Is the debate real or is it a sham? When is knowledge uncertain and when is it definitive? When is debate to be closed? When do debaters become deniers?

The most dramatic instance of a closed debate is that of Holocaust revisionism. Groups who doubt the standard, academic picture of the Holocaust claim that they simply wish an open discussion, a mutual search for truth. So says the Committee for Open Debate on the Holocaust. Their foes, such as historian Deborah Lipstadt, contend that is no second side, just one truth. And so Lipstadt and others suggest that their foes in the game of historical truth are not revisionists (their preferred label), but rather deniers. One sees a similar debate in the controversy over evolution and intelligent design. Proponents of intelligent design suggest that science educators "teach the controversy." Their opponents suggest that proponents of intelligent design are engaged in "evolution denial." A similar debate occurs when issues of climate change enter the public arena. And we find climate change deniers versus Earthers, climate change fanatics, labeled to echo the Birthers. Who has the right to control knowledge?

Perhaps political debate is different than scientific claims. Policy discussion is embedded in the public sphere, and there is a strong case to be made that savory talk and unproven claims are needed in an open society. Civil society should not be open only to experts. It is often said that everyone is entitled to her own opinion, but not to her own facts. This is a slogan that sounds proper, but it leaves open the question of who selects the facts to which people are entitled. And this involves power every bit as much as it involves knowledge.

## OBAMA-MANIA

Let us consider four claims about President Obama. None of them are proven which is why I select them. As to whether any or all of them are disproven depends on what we mean by disproven. The claims are first that Barack Obama is not a native-born American citizen, born in Kenya; the second is that Barack Obama is a Muslim; third, the claim with which I began this essay, that Barack Obama engaged in gay sex; and fourth that Barack Obama is a socialist. I cannot help wondering that if the president were forced to select one of these rumors to be true, which one would he select? Each of these claims and the many others

made about many other politicians depend on the existence of reputational entrepreneurs, men and women who have interests and resources in making claims stick or denying them. The judgment of each one depends on different types of truth claims. If they are false, they are false in different ways or at least depend on different forms of truth.

Some possible claims are so outlandish that we never hear them: Barack Obama shoots heroin in the White House, that he fathered a child with a white woman, or that he is a Chinese secret agent. Perhaps if my internet search were more intensive I would discover such assertions. Claims are easy to make and there is always something that can be put forth as evidence.

### Obama and the Birthers: The Plasticity of Incomplete Knowledge

Unlike many nations in which genetics is destiny, in America, citizenship is based on the land itself: the place in which a child was born matters more than who his parents were. A child who was born in Honolulu to two vacationing Kenyans is a natural-born American citizen and could be elected president. A child born in Nairobi to two Mayflower descendents is not a natural-born citizen. Neither of these cases is at issue with President Obama.

The claim that Obama was born outside the United States territorial limits is so culturally salient that the proponents of the claim have been awarded their own name: Birthers, mirroring the Truthers who doubt the sanctioned 9/11 narrative. Why would this claim be made? If true, it suggests that Barack Obama cannot constitutionally be President. The election results must be overturned.

For many the claim sounds wild, if not deeply malicious. How could someone believe such uncertain knowledge? Perhaps it suggests that Obama seems foreign and is not a true American. The story has intuitive plausibility to some and a tinge of racism to others. Some websites have presented a string of Kenyan birth certificates, which suggests the creativity of reputational entrepreneurs. It is highly likely - and despite being an agnostic, I am tempted to say certain - that these documents with their different provenance are forgeries or fakes. But they exist because someone felt that they were worth producing. As a result, their presence is significant. Perhaps we cannot tell with certainty for all claims which are lies, but we certainly can tell that some are.

But let us move beyond the world of intentional deceptions. Here we move into negative history. This is the claim that the history that has been proposed is wrong, even if an alternative history is not proposed. The battle over what we know and what we don't know involves facts present and facts absent. The latter is what we mean by negative history. In the case of Holocaust denial merchants of negative history suggest that there is no "smoking gun" that demonstrates that Hitler intended to commit genocide. There is no memo from the Fuhrer embracing genocide or giving the thumbs up for a gas chamber to be built at Auschwitz. Without this definitive evidence, the claim can be doubted, no matter the amount of circumstantial evidence. In a smaller and less crucial way, birthers point to gaps in the historical record—or they did until Obama chose to release his long-form birth certificate. I focus on the time previous to that release, the moment of rumor.

Were I to be challenged by a birther myself, I could go to a lockbox that I own and pass around my birth certificate. As with Obama's, it was signed by the doctor who delivered me and it named the hospital, as was true for Obama's long form. The legal certificate of birth—the short form—is what the state of Hawaii requires. However, it contains less information

than what the older Hawaiian birth certificates provide. At the moment of discussion, we did not know at which hospital President Obama was born at or the name of his physician. In other words, there was an absence of evidence that only becomes necessary if one doubted the definitive claims of the state of Hawaii.

The fact that President Obama did not whip out that birth certificate at the time of the controversy was heating up suggested several possibilities: that he didn't have one and wanted to cover up, that he believes the issue is irrelevant or offensive, or that he has one and actually found the debate helpful as it distracted and discredited his opponents. As with those who believe the possibility of American involvement on the 9/11 attacks, these claims can, like a tarbaby, discredit those who hold to them too tightly. Those who spread the birther rumor had no facts on which to base their claims, but only had the absence of possibly relevant information. This is the form of negative history: a history of absence. In time Obama became tired of the charade, whatever his motivation, and had his long form released. This quieted the debate, but, as was predicted, there remain some who still question the new evidence.

### Obama's Religion

The claim that Barack Obama is a Muslim has a somewhat different relationship to a set of facts than does the birther claim. Here the problem is not that there are too few facts, but it is unclear what those facts mean. This involves ambiguous knowledge. What does it mean to "have" a religion, and who has the authority to make that claim?

If I wished to claim that I am a Muslim what would I need to convince you if you were doubtful? Perhaps I could demonstrate that for twenty long years I went to a mosque, where I was preached at by a fiery Imam who called for global jihad. One might reasonably say that if I sat in the mosque I must believe. And yet we all know that often enough people who attend church do so as a form of communal affiliation, rather than a commitment to a set of faith-based ideals. Perhaps I just wanted the approval of my friends.

But suppose I went further, and I stood here and asserted to you that I was a committed Muslim, would that convince you? Perhaps it would if you were well-disposed to me or if you felt that I was the kind of person who might be a committed Muslim.

This is where President Obama stands in his claim that he is a Christian. His website "fight the smears" asserts that Barack Obama is a committed Christian. He was sworn into the Senate on his family Bible. For years he attended Trinity Church of Christ on the southside of Chicago with his wife and daughters. Is that sufficient? Is this certain knowledge? Or does it remain ambiguous.

There is no doubt that Barack Obama was not always a committed Christian. His father and his stepfather were Muslims. His mother was unchurched. He attended a Muslim school in Indonesia and there is an Indonesian document which so far as I know has not been accused of being a forgery that claims that he was Muslim.

This rumor has a different basis than the claim that Obama was born in Kenya. One cannot be born in two places. However, having a religion is more subtle. One can love both jazz and classical music. We can take our President at his word and be done with it, and that is, of course, what we do with friends and neighbors. Or we could argue that Obama has reasons for hiding his true beliefs (or nonbeliefs). They could note that he no longer regularly attends church services or might suggest that the church that he attended in Chicago held to a belief

system that was somewhere between Christian liberation theology and the beliefs of the Nation of Islam. The truth is that any claim that we might make, looking into a heart or soul, always involves some measure of uncertainty. So it is hard to accept the claim as empirical fact that Barack Obama is a Muslim, but it is easier to accept a perspective that he was in his childhood a Muslim, in the way that children become what their parents say that they are and further that his commitment as a devout believer is not deep. But ultimately the question that we should ask is how do we know whether someone holds beliefs that they claim to hold. The issue here is different from negative history, but is how can we determine whether internal beliefs are what they are claimed to be.

### Obama on the Down-Low

When we excavate the past—a past in which there is not a lengthy written trail—how should we determine what to believe? Individuals can pop up claiming that they knew us when, and they may have reasons to present motivated claims. These are assertions that are tinged by self-interest. This is surely the case with regard to assertions about Obama's earlier years. Some claimants assert that they knew Barack Obama as a student at Columbia when he sold heroin, even to children. Such a claim stands or falls on its plausibility, but it lacks empirical support other than the claims of the parties to it. Can it pass the smell test? If the stakes are high enough, anyone can say anything.

So we come to the claim that Barack Obama snorted cocaine and had oral sex with a gay man.

Should we make anything of this? Perhaps not. But we recognize that there is a claimant who is willing to go public and willing to place his reputation at some measure of risk. Of course those of us who have watched the Jerry Springer show know of the number of people who feel perfectly comfortable to place their reputations at risk in the name of fame, however stained or fleeting that fame might possibly be. Perhaps we don't know its truth or perhaps we don't care, or perhaps, most likely, we expect the claimant to provide independent evidence beyond what we might label as a "he said, he said" claim. It is not that the claimant doesn't present claims; it is simply that these claims are not independent from the claimant's motivation, and as such they cannot surmount the uncertainty of self-interest. As a result, this is a claim that is distinct from the previous claims. For here is an account for which the president has no defense, other than the defense that it didn't happen or that the person who makes the claim does not have the moral stature to make the claim.

In other words, the claim is not supported by a web of supportive facts, and without those facts it falls until we know why the claim is presented. But there is another fact at work that is connected to our argument, and that is whether it fits our cognitive models. The claim of cocaine use is almost too easy for a politician who has previously admitted his own drug use. And so we are left with the sexual claim. There are a lot of beliefs that opponents are willing—almost eager—to accept about Barack Obama, but the claim of homosexuality hasn't been taken as plausible. And perhaps our reaction to the claim has a tinge of racism as it may not seem plausible because of the weight of stereotypes about black sexuality. We understand from the claims that Obama was a Kenyan or a Muslim that it doesn't necessarily take much to generate belief, but perhaps it is Obama's family life that makes the story incredible or perhaps it is the racist belief that African-Americans are hyper-sexual. The Obama website "Fight the Smears" finds twenty-eight smears to debunk. However, this is not one of them. Perhaps they cannot debunk it, but it is more likely the Team Obama considers this so far outside public notice that they feel that any response will spread it further. It is a claim that is

beneath contempt.

## Barack the Socialist

The final example—is the President a socialist?—differs from the others in that the claim is less a question of fact than it is a question of interpretation. This is a complicated claim for a number of reasons. The first links with the claim of Obama's religion. Over the course of a life people change their political perspectives. There is a famous saying that perhaps originating with President John Adams that suggests in its current form that "anyone who is not a liberal at twenty has no heart, and anyone who is not a conservative at forty has no brain." We expect political beliefs to evolve over a lifespan. A communist Obama at 20 could become a pragmatic Obama at 50. (For the record, I am not asserting that either one necessarily applies.)

Still, the question is what does it mean to be a "socialist" in the context of America in 2012? Bill Clinton might remind us that it is all a question "of what is, is?" It is a question of what being a socialist is. To be sure there is a sense that being a socialist is simply being a "bad guy." It is a pejorative term without much concrete meaning. But this is not entirely the case, since a conservative Republican would not be attacked as a "socialist," but as a "fascist." The terms are often fuzzy, but they are not random.

Reputational entrepreneurs select labels that they feel are intuitively plausible. Socialist is one such label for a politician who wishes to extend the size and scope of government, even if it has no connection with owning the means of industrial production for the common good. Even Barack Obama's most fervent opponents would have to admit that he has made no attempt to have government own private business, even if privately owned businesses have to deal with increased governmental regulation. Perhaps the single-payer health care system that President Obama once claimed that he favored and subsequently backed away from comes closest to a socialist nostrum. Still a president—any president—takes so many diverse stances that it is possible to cull them to create a reputation that seems plausible to a particular audience in light of those general reputational themes that have been established.

Is Barack Obama a socialist? It is not that the question is unanswerable. It is entirely answerable. It is simply that until there is a proper and agreed upon definition as to what it means to be a socialist, there is not an agreement on the criteria by which we judge the answer. The claim is more designed to shape a reputation than it is to designate a political perspective, and as such it stands outside a regime of truth.

## PROMISCUOUS FACTS AND UNCERTAIN KNOWLEDGE

The world is filled with so many truth claims that a wide range of beliefs can follow from them. I refer to promiscuous facts, but it is important to note that a fact is simply a claim that a population believes has a direct connection to empirical reality. Fortunately in most cases the consensus is substantial, and so those of us who lack direct knowledge that permits us to judge things like whether the earth is spherical can rest comfortably knowing that few will roil the waters of belief. Much of what we know is secondhand, but is, for all practical purposes, certain.

But I focus on uncertainty. These are claims that are up-for-grabs with groups fighting over their legitimacy or claims that are unlikely, again as judged by groups that serve as gatekeepers to knowledge.

Sometimes the process works, but at other times it misleads. It is here that forgetting and ignorance come into play. Forgetting is not the opposite of memory, but rather memory is the precursor to forgetting. One cannot forget something that hasn't been known once. Knowledge needs a sponsor to avoid being forgotten. Often this sponsor is an educational institution, but it could be popular culture or familial or communal tradition. The information that is forgotten may differ in how easy it is to retrieve: it could be information found in a library or a website or it could be personal information that had once been held in memory. The information is fragile, and what was once fairly certain, such as the dangers of a coming ice age can be replaced by the dangers of global warming. The dangers of margarine can be replaced with the dangers of butter which can then be replaced by the dangers of trans-fat. Old truths, once certain, can waste away, lacking a recognized sponsor. When a rumor or political claim no longer serves a purpose it can fade such as the claims about George W. Bush's DUI arrest, prominent in the final week of the 2000 presidential campaign but not much afterwards. By 2017, if not before, the Obama stories, those that are true and those that are not, will also fade.

Ignorance is different, although knowledge when forgotten for a sufficient period can become ignorance. Knowledge requires a sponsor. Lacking this sponsor, orphaned knowledge is at risk. Ignorance can serve the purpose of various actors, what we refer to as agnotology. A particularly dramatic instance concerns the tobacco industry attempts to claim that all the evidence is not in regarding the health effects of smoking. Of course, they are correct in this claim in that there is always more evidence to be gathered, but we always decide that at some point enough is enough.

Knowledge involves a truth claim made by particular actors and judged by others. It is connected to domains of power. Some knowledge is true for all practical purposes; other knowledge is doubtful or even false, again for all practical purposes. The beliefs about Barack Obama that I have addressed are far from certain. But how we judge them is a result of the relationship of their claimants to the nexus of judgment. Claims are easy to make, but whether they are accepted depends on community standards. As such, certain knowledge is a claim that stands defended.

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