

Lies, damn lies and fiction

[By Adam L. Penenberg](#)

It's tough proving a negative. It is even tougher proving that something or someone does not exist.

That was the challenge after The New Republic story, "Hack Heaven," which appeared in the May 18 issue, proved to be unverifiable. At first it appeared that Forbes Digital had been scooped by a weekly political publication.

"Hack Heaven" detailed the exploits of Ian Restil, a 15-year-old computer hacker who broke through the online security system of a "big-time software firm" called Jukt Micronics. Once inside, the cheeky youth posted every employee's salary on the company's web site alongside a bunch of nudie pictures, each bearing the caption "THE BIG BAD BIONIC BOY HAS BEEN HERE BABY."

But instead of calling in the Feds, Jukt executives, according to The New Republic , decided to hire the teenage hacker, who had obtained the services of an agent, Joe Hiert, described as a "super-agent to super-nerds." The magazine also claimed that such deals have thwarted efforts to prosecute hackers and that law enforcement officials in Nevada got so desperate that they ran radio advertisements: "Would you hire a shoplifter to watch the cash register? Please don't deal with hackers."

A frightening story. But not true.

The article was a complete and utter hoax perpetrated by one of the magazine's own associate editors, 25-year-old Stephen Glass.

Our first step was to plug Jukt Micronics into a bunch of search engines. We found no web site, odd for a "big-time software firm." Our next step was to contact the Software Publishers Association of America. Nothing. Next on our list was the California Franchise Tax Board. An official from the Tax Board confirmed that Jukt Micronics had never paid any taxes. Further investigations revealed that Jukt Micronics, if it existed at all, was not listed under any of California's 15 area codes. Sarah Gilmer from the office of the California Secretary of State said there was no record of the company, "as a corporation, a limited liability or limited partnership."

A search of Lexis-Nexis' extensive database turned up only one reference to Jukt Micronics: Glass's New Republic story.

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What about Nevada's radio announcements? We were unable to locate a single law enforcement official in Nevada who could verify their existence. Neither the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police nor the Nevada State Highway Patrol had heard of this antihacker radio spot. We called four of the largest radio stations in the state and the city editors from both the Las Vegas Sun and the Las Vegas Review-Journal . Again, all were ignorant.

"I know nothing about a public service announcement radio campaign on hackers," Bob Harmon, Public Information Officer for the Nevada State Attorney General's Office, told Forbes Digital Tool, "and I'd certainly know about it."

Next on our checklist was the official-sounding "Center for Interstate Online Investigations," supposedly a joint police project in 18 states, and the "Computer Security Center," a supposed advocacy group. Both organizations had inside-the-Beltway bureaucratic names, but officials at the Justice Department, the FBI, the U.S. Customs Department and police departments in California and New Hampshire (both aggressive cybercrime fighters) had never heard of these organizations.

Wait. There's more.

Glass also cited an organization called the "National Assembly of Hackers," which he claimed had sponsored a recent hacker conference in Bethesda, Md. Surely this was real. But no. Despite our best efforts, we could not unearth a single hacker who had even heard of this outfit, let alone attended the conference.

Glass reported that 21 states were considering versions of the "Uniform Computer Security Act," which would "criminalize immunity deals between hackers and companies." Again, law enforcement officials were unaware of any such law, and the National Conference of Commissions on Uniform State Laws, based in Chicago, reported no knowledge of it.

In short, nothing in the story could be verified. Even Jukt Micronics' phone number turned out to be a cell phone.

"Steve has admitted to making up certain parts of it," Lane said on Sunday. "Based on my own investigations, I have determined to a moral certainty that the entire article is made up."

It is ironic that online journalists have received bad press from the print media for shoddy reporting. But the truth is, bad journalism can be found anywhere.

It is not the medium; it is the writer.

See Glass' phony corporate site

