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OC beach photo: Real news sometimes stranger than #fakenews

People gather in Newport Beach to cool off on Saturday, April 25, 2020. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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Tens of thousands of Southern California residents flocked to Orange County beaches this past weekend.

In normal times, that would not be news, but in these pandemic days, amid ongoing shelter-in-place orders, it's practically unbelievable.

In fact, when we reported the story, complete with the photos to prove it, many did not believe it and took to social media to tell us so.

The most noteworthy photo, above, showed a veritable sea of sunbathers basking on the beach while the rest of California was cooped up at home, couch surfing and streaming "Tiger King."

At first glance, you might think it was a file photo, because how could this be possible amid the novel coronavirus quarantine?

But the photo was indeed shot this past Saturday, April 25, from the Newport Beach pier at 3:30 p.m. Actually, if you really want to get specific, the shutter snapped at 3:30:56 p.m.

The image proved quite popular, or depending on your point view, unpopular.

In hundreds of social media posts, readers let loose with cries of "Lies! Lies! Lies!" and "#FakeNews!" Some commenters accused us of doctoring the photo (one pointed out that some of the umbrellas in the photo appeared to be the same), while others claimed we used trick photography to make the beach look more crowded.

Neither of those things is true.

Photographer Mindy Schauer, who has worked at the Register for more than 20 years, shot the photo from the Newport Beach pier with a long lens because she wanted to get as much of the beach as she could to accurately depict the scene.

"It looks like a 'Where's Waldo?' beach scene with all these people," she said in a text to her editor.

She was also not the only news photographer on the beach that day. The Guardian and Newsweek have published photos similar to ours.

Schauer also shot other photos of groups of people walking to the beach or playing in the sand. Most of the people in the photos she took that day were not wearing masks, which have become ubiquitous in public places.

This led some commenters to conclude the photos could not have been taken on Saturday or couldn't have been taken at Newport Beach. There are a lot of people in the photo, but if you really zoom in on it, a couple of them look like they might be wearing masks. Most, however, are obviously not. It should be noted, however, that Newport Beach does not, as of this writing, require masks to be worn in public, as many other cities do.

They just weren't wearing masks, which isn't such a stretch considering how crowded the beach was.

Now to be clear, we get plenty of criticism, and as much as we'd like to say that people's generally low opinion of the mainstream media doesn't apply so much to local media, we get plenty of feedback from readers who think we're promoting a political agenda, especially in response to political stories we pick up from national wire services.

The fake-news rejection of a straight-news photo is something new, though.

Maybe it has something to do with the ever-increasing political polarization that has overwhelmed our public discourse.

Or maybe it's just that people are tired of being stuck at home, tired of the endless procession of case statistics, death tolls and extensions of stay-at-home orders.

Like many of you, we're tired of those things, too.

Believe me: We want to eat in restaurants, go to the movies and hang out with our friends and families as much as anyone does.

We also thought that what happened at Newport Beach on Saturday was pretty unbelievable.

But we know it happened, because we were there, doing what we do: Reporting the news.

And that's how we got that photo.

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