

Tow Center for
Digital Journalism

“Pink Slime”: Partisan journalism and the future of local news

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Executive Summary

The phenomenon of “pink slime” journalism as a subset of partisan local news sits at the juncture of multiple crises in local journalism — how we fund journalism, what constitutes “journalism” and who gets to produce and define it, and how journalism garners trust from publics with conflicting understandings and ideals regarding “objectivity,” transparency, and other ethical cornerstones. Drawing on a range of original Tow Center studies covering the gamut of production, content, and audience reception, this report outlines what is at stake — and why anyone who cares about local journalism should consider the significance of these partisan outlets.

Our report distinguishes pink slime journalism from partisan journalism more broadly. We use this label to apply to digital or print content that mimics the appearance of local news, but whose primary original contribution is partisan content or reputation laundering that lacks transparency around intent, authorship, ownership, and funding — and that often relies on algorithmically generated content. There is often a strong element of astroturf activity, where the reporters are based outside the geographies they write about and their assignments are centralized.

The report begins with an overview of how the phenomenon intersects with trends in journalistic funding, labor, and technology, and approaches to partisan media. We trace how technological advances have facilitated automated content and remote labor, thus severing the connection between “local” content and place-based proximity. We note how these developments overlap with conversations around trust and objectivity, shrinking budgets for local journalism, and growing budgets for newsrooms with political leanings, both explicit and hidden. We then offer an overview of the rise of partisan local news, focusing particularly on developments online since the start of the century.

This is followed by an in-depth exploration of the extended Metric Media network, the largest pink slime network by number of sites. Following developments from 2019 to late 2022, we examine the scope of the overall network, its key actors, and their ties to conservative groups and donors. We then offer examples of how the network has operated in particular political moments and geographies, and share our research on how audiences process and respond to Metric Media content.

We follow this with a smaller alternate case study of the progressive Courier Network that raises questions around whether partisan media can be genuinely transparent local journalism. We note that beyond the networks we focus on in this report, several more have emerged in this bubbling phenomenon in the last five years including the Star network, the American Independent network, and the Local Report network.

Finally, we offer perspectives from a range of thinkers on what the phenomenon suggests regarding the future of local journalism. In particular, we reflect on how explorations of pink slime journalism may inform best practices around partisan funding of local journalism, automated journalism, and transparency disclosures, as well as areas where more research is needed.

Some of our key takeaways and considerations:

1. Partisan local news sites are associated with both progressive and conservative partisan funders. However, the vast majority of pink slime sites are part of a single entity: the extended Metric Media network, which encompasses more than 1,100 sites. The case of Metric Media illustrates how a complex network of conservative and pro-business advocacy groups, funders, and political candidates are intertwined in an opaque operation that distributes content aligned with their interests across a range of websites, social media ads, and printed mailers framed as local news.
2. The majority of pink slime sites lack locally reported content. The most frequently published stories are often produced algorithmically, with original partisan content published at strategic times often coinciding with election cycles.
3. We have a limited understanding of who is reading pink slime content and what its reach or impact is. However, even if its reach is limited, we believe it is worth considering its potential impact as it may gnaw away at the edges of consciousness of the voting public. Our study of how audiences responded to pink slime sites suggested that many had at least initially positive impressions of the content alongside mixed assessments of its trustworthiness. In addition, our report notes several examples of partisan content, including misinformation that originated on local pink slime sites then ricocheting across multiple conservative media outlets and being used as part of candidates' campaign outreach.
4. The phenomenon of pink slime networks raises a number of questions regarding best practices for regulating campaign financing, local news funding and transparency

practices, AI disclosure practices, and viewpoint disclosures as an alternative to traditional interpretations of objectivity norms.

This report is a compilation of the work and writings of multiple Tow Center authors, including lead researcher and Tow Computational Journalism Fellow Priyanjana Bengani (Chapter 2), research director Pete Brown (Chapters 3.2, 3.3 and Chapter 7), research fellows Jem Bartholomew (Chapter 3.1), Sarah Grevy Gotfredsen (Chapter 5), and Sara Rafsky (Chapter 4). Tow Center research assistants Joyce Guo and Christine Flammia contributed to reports. Andrea Wenzel compiled and edited the combined report. N.B. Unless otherwise stated, research findings, reporting, figures and other time-specific information (e.g. ages, job titles) typically appear as they were originally published.

1. Introduction

“Know a local hero who deserves recognition? Is there a local event that needs attention? Pitch your story to help Metric Media put your community on the map.”

Visiting Metric Media LLC’s website, readers could be forgiven for feeling transported to the early days of Web 2.0’s digital utopianism. The [home page](#), as of winter 2023, is infused with the rhetoric of participatory journalism and civic media: “Metric Media gives every citizen a voice in their community.” Readers are invited to pitch stories via the Community Newsmaker portal or to follow local news through one of the more than 1,300 community news sites. There’s also an invitation to apply to be a reporter, as the “platform relies on hundreds of reporters who post thousands of stories daily.”

The site has no About page. Nowhere does it note that Metric Media News is a sprawling network of websites that embrace the aesthetics of local news sites but primarily contain automated articles interspersed with partisan content. Nor does the site say who its hundreds of reporters are, where they are based (or if they are even human), or where the network’s funding is coming from.

These characteristics are hallmarks of a phenomenon that Metric Media epitomizes, termed “pink slime” journalism. This refers to digital or print content that mimics the appearance of independent local news, but whose primary objective is to serve readers partisan content or reputation laundering without transparency around intent, authorship, ownership, and funding. In this sense, pink slime journalism is different to fake news sites or clickbait ad farms, whose primary objective is to make money. Pink slime journalism is often algorithmically generated, and its purveyors are involved in astroturf activity; reporters and editors are frequently based outside the geographies covered.

The term “pink slime” was first used by a whistleblower in the food industry calling out the infusion of chemically processed [scrap meat](#)¹ into hamburgers, and later appropriated by a whistleblower who noted the [low-cost automated journalism](#)² produced by the company Journatic (the predecessor to Metric Media, which we discuss more below). As we will explore in this report, there are a growing number of pink slime networks set up by partisan actors, though they vary in scale, volume of content, tactics, and ideology. The renewed focus on pink slime journalism in recent years — in particular its role in elections — raises questions about

¹ Carey Gillam, “Scientist who coined ‘Pink Slime’ reluctant whistleblower,” Reuters, March 25, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-food-slime-scientist-idUSBRE82N0AG20120325>

² Anna Tarkov, “Journatic worker takes ‘This American Life’ inside outsourced journalism,” Poynter, June 30, 2012, <https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2012/journatic-staffer-takes-this-american-life-inside-outsourced-journalism/>

the risks it may pose as well as the opportunity it presents for those who care about the future of local journalism to grapple with the issues it raises.

The Tow Center for Digital Journalism’s research into contemporary pink slime journalism has led the field since 2019, when the Center’s computational research fellow, Priyanjana Bengani, published her first investigation into a then-emerging network of hundreds of “local news” websites that had started cropping up around the United States ahead of the 2020 presidential election. That network, referred to as the extended Metric Media network, is among the earliest and largest actors in this space. Ongoing research into its activities and evolution has provided a vector through which the Center has been able to examine the phenomenon of pink slime journalism, and the broader contours of partisan local news around the United States.

In this report we pull together the various studies through which the Tow Center has examined the emergence, expansion, funding, function, and reception of the extended Metric Media network to offer a detailed retrospective exploration of how partisan local news is produced, what its content is covering, and how audiences may be making sense of it. By situating this research within the broader context of the crises facing local journalism, we explore why this phenomenon matters not only for how partisan content operates, but also for how local news will grapple with questions of funding, journalistic labor, transparency, and “objectivity.”

We begin by offering an overview of the multifaceted vulnerabilities and opportunities that have made U.S. local journalism a fertile space for pink slime to grow.

A petri dish for pink slime?

Partisan pink slime outfits have exploited the perfect storm that has brought local journalism into crisis. The ad-based business model that traditionally supported local journalism has broken, largely due to the [success of technology platforms](#).³ Since 2005, the United States has [lost a quarter of all its newspapers](#),⁴ leaving many communities reliant on a mix of social media and informal communication resources in the absence of a functioning professional local news outlet. Many of the remaining local outlets have been forced to make substantial cutbacks, a problem only [exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic](#).⁵

Advocates seeking to “save” or reimagine local news have cast their bets in a range of directions in the face of this market failure. A few have made compelling cases that journalism should be

³ Nushin Rashidian et al., “Friend and Foe: The Platform Press at the Heart of Journalism,” Tow Center for Digital Journalism, CJR, June 14, 2018, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/the-platform-press-at-the-heart-of-journalism.php

⁴ Penny Abernathy, “The State of Local News: The 2022 Report,” Northwestern Local News Initiative, June 29, 2022, <https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/research/state-of-local-news/report/>

⁵ Gabby Miller, “More than 6,150 news workers were laid off amid the COVID-19 pandemic,” Tow Center for Digital Journalism, CJR, Dec. 10, 2021, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/more-than-6150-news-workers-laid-off.php

valued as a public good and supported by [public funding](#).⁶ There have even been promising efforts at the local and state level to secure [public funding for civic media initiatives](#).⁷ Others concerned that these and related [regulation efforts](#)⁸ will likely fail to garner political support in the short to medium term have turned to relatively limited pots of funding from [tech companies](#),⁹ as well as from [philanthropic foundations](#).¹⁰ A few have suggested openly that journalism should consider being open to partisan funding, noting that “[partisan media sells](#).”¹¹ And of course, some — including the partisan outlets that recur in this report — are accepting such funding, with [varied degrees of transparency](#).¹²

Alongside discussions about paying for local news, and the implications of a shrinking local news sector, some are also exploring how local journalism gets made, and by whom (or what). The answers largely depend on whether the primary goals are fiscal or civic.

On the civic side, many stakeholders have been making the case for rethinking the traditional boundaries of [who gets to make journalism](#)¹³ and whether mainstream capital-J Journalism should even be the goal, given its historical failure to serve the needs of marginalized communities. Journalism labs like City Bureau’s [Documenters Network](#) have received significant [philanthropic support](#)¹⁴ to scale their initiative that trains and pays local residents to document civic meetings and contribute to civic media in cities and rural areas around the United States. They and like-minded partner organizations have developed what they call a “[Roadmap for Local News](#)”¹⁵ that centers “civic information needs” over the business interests of the news industry.

For those prioritizing cost-savings, the financial woes of local journalism have raised questions around whether local journalism must always be made by local people. Technological advancements around outsourcing and automation have made it [increasingly common](#)¹⁶ for

⁶ Victor Pickard and Timothy Neff, “Op-ed: Strengthen our democracy by funding public media,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.cjr.org/opinion/public-funding-media-democracy.php>

⁷ Mike Rispoli, “Why the Civic Info Consortium Is Such a Huge Deal,” *Free Press*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.freepress.net/blog/why-civic-info-consortium-such-huge-deal>

⁸ Emily Bell, “Local news faces a political future as the JCPA falls foul of lobbyists,” *Tow Center for Digital Journalism, CJR*, Dec. 12, 2022, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/local-news-faces-a-political-future-as-the-jcpa-falls-foul-of-lobbyists.php

⁹ Gabby Miller, “Where did Facebook’s funding for journalism really go?” *Tow Center for Digital Journalism, CJR*, Feb. 27, 2023, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/how-meta-funded-journalism.php

¹⁰ Mark Glaser, “How Philanthropy Became a Growing Revenue Stream for Local News,” *Knight Foundation*, Aug. 19, 2021, <https://knightfoundation.org/articles/how-philanthropy-became-a-growing-revenue-stream-for-local-news/>

¹¹ “Our podcast: How can we create a journalism that reaches out beyond elites?” *Reuters Institute*, April 13, 2021, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/our-podcast-how-can-we-create-journalism-reaches-out-beyond-elites>

¹² Jem Bartholomew, “The rise and rise of partisan local newsrooms,” *Tow Center for Digital Journalism, CJR*, Sept. 19, 2022, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/the-rise-of-partisan-local-newsrooms.php

¹³ Darryl Holliday, “Journalism is a public good. Let the public make it,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, Dec. 15, 2021, https://www.cjr.org/special_report/journalism-power-public-good-community-infrastructure.php

¹⁴ Laura Hazard Owen, “City Bureau gets \$10 million to make public meetings more public,” *NiemanLab*, July 7, 2022, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2022/07/city-bureau-gets-10-million-to-make-public-meetings-more-public/>

¹⁵ Elizabeth Green et al., “The Roadmap for Local News,” Feb. 2, 2023, <https://localnewsroadmap.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/The-Roadmap-for-Local-News-Feb-2-23.pdf>

¹⁶ Jaclyn Peiser, “The Rise of the Robot Reporter,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/05/business/media/artificial-intelligence-journalism-robots.html>

news outlets to automate the production of stories in areas like [sports](#),¹⁷ [campaign finance](#),¹⁸ and [corporate earnings](#),¹⁹ or reporting on [earthquakes](#). Many traditional news organizations acknowledge this with a disclosure. Journalist Joe Amditis suggests [bots like ChatGPT](#) may have benefits for small local newsrooms,²⁰ as long as the humans deploying them are mindful of their limitations and potential for inaccuracies and [hallucinations](#).²¹ But he stresses the importance of transparency: “If a journalist uses ChatGPT to help them write an article, they should disclose this fact in the byline or author’s note. For example, the author’s note might read, *‘This article was written with the assistance of AI language model, ChatGPT.’*”²²

Of course, others have taken a less transparent path. Journatic, the company (discussed more below) whose work gave birth to the pink slime label for automated and outsourced content masquerading as local news, made no mention of using automation, or of giving fake bylines to freelancers in the Philippines who wrote hyperlocal stories for newspaper audiences in Chicago’s South Suburbs and elsewhere.²³

These automated alternatives to traditional journalistic labor are usually presented as supplementary to the work of professional journalists. But as the pink slime phenomenon underlines, they raise questions about the commodification of journalistic labor and about “objectivity” norms.

As scholar Nicole Cohen has argued,²⁴ relying on distant freelancers and robot reporters are only the latest examples of how media corporations use new technologies and “strategies of efficiency” to lower labor costs — a throughline she traces back to the era of the “legman/re-write man” production model, where reporters began calling in stories with the advent of the telephone. While some turn to outsourcing or new automation technologies with the intention of bolstering local news in a difficult fiscal moment, Cohen warns that in the era of “digital piecework,” these practices have the potential to devalue already precarious media labor, and to “undermine creativity, experimentation, and the ability for journalists to pursue critical, investigative journalism in the public interest.”²⁵

¹⁷ “AP to grow Major League Soccer coverage with automated stories,” AP, Oct. 22, 2019,

<https://www.ap.org/press-releases/2019/ap-to-grow-major-league-soccer-coverage-with-automated-stories>

¹⁸ ReporterMate, “Political donations plunge to \$16.7m – down from average \$25m a year,” *The Guardian*, Jan. 31, 2019,

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/feb/01/political-donations-plunge-to-167m-down-from-average-25m-a-year>

¹⁹ Ross Miller, “AP’s ‘robot journalists’ are writing their own stories now,” *The Verge*, Jan. 29, 2015,

<https://www.theverge.com/2015/1/29/7939067/ap-journalism-automation-robots-financial-reporting>

²⁰ Joe Amditis, “AI throws a lifeline to local publishers,” *NiemanLab*, Dec. 2022,

<https://www.niemanlab.org/2022/12/ai-throws-a-lifeline-to-local-publishers/>

²¹ Kevin Roose, “A Conversation With Bing’s Chatbot Left Me Deeply Unsettled,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 16, 2023,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/16/technology/bing-chatbot-microsoft-chatgpt.html>

²² Joe Amditis, *Beginner’s prompt handbook: ChatGPT for local news publishers*.

<https://jamditis.notion.site/jamditis/Beginner-s-prompt-handbook-ChatGPT-for-local-news-publishers-15d1f07d5b194265a41fdd42955679b4>

²³ Tarkov, Anna. “Journatic Worker Takes ‘This American Life’ inside Outsourced Journalism.” *Poynter*, July 1, 2012.

<https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2012/journatic-staffer-takes-this-american-life-inside-outsourced-journalism/>.

²⁴ Nicole S. Cohen, “From Pink Slips to Pink Slime: Transforming Media Labor in a Digital Age.” *The Communication Review* 18, no.2 (April 3, 2015): 98-122, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2015.1031996>

²⁵ Cohen, *ibid*.

Outsourcing that detaches journalists from the communities they are covering also raises interesting questions about journalistic norms and ethics. Journatic CEO Brian Timpone, who is central to the Metric Media network covered throughout this report, [has argued](#) that the benefits of basing journalists outside their local community are not purely financial: “Reporters reporting on their own communities pull punches for fear of offending someone they see at the grocery store.”²⁶ While Timpone’s practices may be drawing on new technological affordances, this argument connects with longstanding debates. Researchers have documented [cases](#)²⁷ where local journalists have produced less critical coverage than national journalists parachuting in, or cases of “[boosterism](#).”²⁸ But they have also documented the importance of journalists’ proximity to and knowledge of places as a way to build “[place trust](#).”²⁹ In the context of state or local elections, there have been cases where candidates have shunned “mainstream” local or regional media [in favor of partisan national outlets](#).³⁰

Whether it is a distant outsourced journalist or a hyperlocal citizen journalist, such conversations about who (or what) gets to do acts of journalism are almost invariably accompanied by concerns about “bias” and (a lack of) “objectivity.” In recent years, journalism [scholars](#)³¹ and [practitioners](#)³² have questioned the way the norm of objectivity has been interpreted in North America. Some have noted objectivity was never intended to suggest that journalists could be free of bias, but rather that they could use [objective methods](#).³³ Others have underlined how the idea of journalists maintaining distance from their communities and presenting “both sides” has centered whiteness and led to an overrepresentation of people with power, particularly white men.³⁴ Journalism historians have noted that objectivity’s deployment has been tied up with anti-Black racism since the days of Ida B. Wells.³⁵ The norm

²⁶ Michael Miner, “If your community news is slanted, Dan Proft may be to blame,” *Chicago Reader*, Mar. 29, 2017, <https://chicagoreader.com/blogs/if-your-community-news-is-slanted-dan-proft-may-be-to-blame/>

²⁷ Nick Mathews, “The Community Caretaker Role: How Weekly Newspapers Shielded Their Communities While Covering the Mississippi ICE Raids,” *Journalism Studies* 22, no. 5 (April 4, 2021), 670-687. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1897477>

²⁸ Robert E. Gutsche Jr., “Boosterism as Banishment,” *Journalism Studies* 16, no. 4 (July 4, 2015), 497-512, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2014.924730>.

²⁹ Nikki Usher, “Putting ‘Place’ in the Center of Journalism Research: A Way Forward to Understand Challenges to Trust and Knowledge in News,” *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 21, no. 2 (June 2019), 84-146. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1522637919848362>

³⁰ Celeste Katz Marston, “What Happens When Candidates Avoid Mainstream News,” *NiemanReports*, Jan. 27, 2023, <https://niemanreports.org/articles/partisan-media-politicians/>

³¹ “The Sunday Edition (radio). Objectivity is ‘the view from nowhere’ and potentially harmful: expert,” CBC Radio, July 10, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/sunday/the-sunday-edition-for-july-12-2020-1.5639297/objectivity-is-the-view-from-nowhere-and-potentially-harmful-expert-1.5639304>

³² Wesley Lowery, “A Reckoning Over Objectivity, Led by Black Journalists,” *The New York Times*, Jun. 23, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/23/opinion/objectivity-black-journalists-coronavirus.html>

³³ “The lost meaning of ‘objectivity,’” American Press Institute, retrieved Dec. 30, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20150911003929/https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-essentials/bias-objectivity/lost-meaning-objectivity/>

³⁴ See Candis Callison and Mary L. Young, *Reckoning: Journalism’s Limits and Possibilities*. Oxford University Press, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190067076.001.0001> and Lewis Wallace, *The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/V/bo29172094.html>.

³⁵ See David T. Mindich, *Just the facts: How ‘objectivity’ came to define American Journalism* (NYU Press, 2000), <https://nyupress.org/9780814756140/just-the-facts/>.

only came to dominate U.S. news in the 1910s and 1920s,³⁶ and prior models included more overtly partisan news, more akin to the way outlets that are transparently partisan operate outside the United States.

Conversations about journalism norms and roles are relevant to the pink slime discussion because while some journalists and readers question the dominant model of objectivity, there is no consensus on what the logical alternatives might look like. A few, including media scholar Nikki Usher, have made a case for partisan news, suggesting the left should step up efforts to offer an alternative to right-leaning partisan local news (see Chapter 6). In a related approach, journalism professor and media critic Jay Rosen has suggested journalists transparently own up to their political viewpoints with “[here’s where we’re coming from](#)”³⁷ statements (discussed in Chapter 5). Others point to relatively high levels of [trust in local news](#)³⁸ compared with more polarized national news — but note rising partisan rifts, raising the question of how additional partisan local content could influence trust.

A blossoming of partisan (mostly conservative) media

The story of pink slime “news” is as much a story about shifting approaches to partisan media funding as it is a story about local journalism. Partisan news in the United States is of course not a new phenomenon. Prior to the 1890s, it was not uncommon for newspapers to be associated with political parties, if not directly sponsored by them.³⁹ In more recent times, while many have focused on the growing and dynamic [ideological divide](#)⁴⁰ on cable television nationally, and right-leaning [local television conglomerates](#),⁴¹ the evolution of talk radio also offers an insightful if cautionary illustration of how partisan support for media can operate.

Some of the most successful efforts to support conservative media have been undertaken by conservative and evangelical leaders, including through the influential and secretive umbrella organization the Council for National Policy (CNP). As documented in Anne Nelson’s book [Shadow Network](#)⁴² as well as the On the Media podcast serial [The Divided Dial](#), the CNP had been “systematically building a stable of media partners”⁴³ who offered a conservative right perspective, including many in the world of right-wing and evangelical talk radio. These efforts

³⁶ See Michael Schudson, “The objectivity norm in American journalism,” *Journalism* 2, no. 2 (August 2001): 149-170, <https://doi.org/10.1177/146488490100200201>

³⁷ Jay Rosen, “The ‘here’s where we’re coming from’ statement in journalism,” PressThink, Nov. 8, 2021, <https://pressthink.org/2021/11/the-heres-where-were-coming-from-statement-in-journalism/>

³⁸ Sarah Fioroni, “Local News Most Trusted in Keeping Americans Informed About Their Communities,” Knight Foundation, May 19, 2022, <https://knightfoundation.org/articles/local-news-most-trusted-in-keeping-americans-informed-about-their-communities/>

³⁹ See Richard Kaplan, *Politics and the American Press: The Rise of Objectivity, 1865–1920* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁴⁰ Eunji Kimm, Yphtach Lelkes, and Joshua McCrain, “Measuring dynamic media bias,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119, no. 32 (August 9, 2022), <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2202197119>

⁴¹ Dylan Matthews, “Sinclair, the pro-Trump, conservative company taking over local news, explained,” Vox, April 3, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/4/3/17180020/sinclair-broadcast-group-conservative-trump-david-smith-local-news-tv-affiliate>

⁴² Anne Nelson, *Shadow Network: Media, Money, and the Secret Hub of the Radical Right* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), <https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/shadow-network-9781635573190/>

⁴³ Nelson, *ibid.*, p. 54.

were bolstered by deregulation. Reagan’s FCC gutted the Fairness Doctrine, which had required a degree of ideological balance on the airwaves, and then Clinton’s 1996 Telecommunication Act got rid of the cap on station ownership.

By the time mainstream U.S. journalism was disrupted by a collapsing business model, conservative CNP-member-led broadcasters were thriving. In 2007, a Center for American Progress and Free Press report on the [structural imbalance of political talk radio](#) found that 91 percent of weekday talk radio on the top five commercial stations was conservative. They attributed this to “multiple structural problems in the U.S. regulatory system, particularly the complete breakdown of the public trustee concept of broadcast, the elimination of clear public interest requirements for broadcasting, and the relaxation of ownership rules including the requirement of local participation in management.”⁴⁴ This combination of factors resulted in a system where the [dominant talk voices](#), even in markets that were politically mixed, became and continue to be conservative.⁴⁵ The only liberal challenger of note, [Air America](#), closed in 2010 after just six years.⁴⁶ One of many reasons for its failure was lack of station ownership. In a theme that seems to be repeating in the case of pink slime outlets, conservative funders were more effective and prolific than their progressive peers when it came to building networks and structures to efficiently distribute content.

“Pink slime” precursors: the U.S. Chamber of Commerce publications

Before Brian Timpono launched the media company Journatic, which would become the first to be labeled a “pink slime” generator, the conservative businessman and former journalist had already been a publisher of a string of controversial publications. Because Timpono continues to play a multifaceted role in larger pink slime networks, it is helpful to review these earlier ventures, particularly his work publishing outlets linked to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Tracing these, and the controversies associated with them, highlights long-standing concerns around a lack of transparency and disclosure about process, funding, and objectives.

In December 2004, an A1 story in *The Washington Post*, headlined “[Advocacy Groups Blur Media Lines](#),” reported on a new Illinois weekly newspaper named the *Madison County Record*, which had launched that September. This seemingly unremarkable local newspaper, published by Timpono, made front page news due to its undisclosed links to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Per the *Post*, “Nowhere was it reported that the U.S. Chamber of Commerce

⁴⁴ John Halpin et al., “The Structural Imbalance of Political Talk Radio,” Center for American Progress, June 20, 2007, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-structural-imbalance-of-political-talk-radio/>

⁴⁵ Talkers. “Top Talk Audiences.” Talkers Magazine. Accessed January 22, 2024. <https://talkers.com/top-talk-audiences/>

⁴⁶ Brian Stelter, “Air America, the Talk Radio Network, Will Go Off the Air,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 21, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/22/business/media/22radio.html>

created the *Record* as a weapon in its multimillion-dollar campaign against lawyers who file [lawsuits against businesses].”⁴⁷ (This has since changed. More recently, the About pages on the eleven sites in the Record network stated they are owned by the U.S. Chamber Institute for Legal Reform.)

Jeffrey H. Birnbaum’s report framed this as an emerging trend, describing the Chamber as “one of a growing number of advocacy groups that blur the distinction between legitimate media and propaganda to promote their causes.”⁴⁸ The *Madison County Record* presented itself as a local newspaper, and was considered a test case for potential expansion: “Depending on how well the *Record* performs, [the Chamber’s chief legal officer, Stanton D.] Anderson said, the chamber plans to launch similar newspapers in counties that the pro-business lobby considers to be problems, particularly in West Virginia.”⁴⁹

The *Record*’s lack of disclosure also raised concerns, as academics quoted in the *Washington Post* article noted:

Communications scholars cringe at the notion that lobbying groups are obscuring or playing down their participation in publications and programs that push a narrow point of view. “People judge communication by its source so when you deny people full knowledge of that source of information they are losing something important about evaluating the message,” said Kathleen Hall Jamison, dean of the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication.

Geneva Overholser of the University of Missouri’s journalism school’s Washington bureau said anything less than thorough disclosure “is deceitful and imbalanced.” Otherwise, she said, citizens “don’t have enough information to judge” publications or broadcasts.⁵⁰

Contrasted against this were the trio of Stanton D. Anderson (chief legal officer for the chamber), Timpone (the *Record*’s publisher) and Wayne LaPierre Jr. (executive director of the National Rifle Association), who the report presented as ambivalent about the need to disclose.

In April 2007, a third weekly in the U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s growing Record network, the *Southeast Texas Record*, attracted coverage from the [Houston Chronicle](#),⁵¹ [The Wall Street](#)

⁴⁷ Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, “Advocacy Groups Blur Media Lines,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 6, 2004, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2004/12/06/advocacy-groups-blur-media-lines/86b64e3c-820c-4918-9017-7c997f3a7226/>

⁴⁸ Birnbaum, *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Birnbaum, *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Birnbaum, *ibid.*

⁵¹ Mary Flood, “Legal affairs newspapers do battle in Beaumont,” *Houston Chronicle*, Apr. 20, 2007, <https://www.chron.com/business/article/Legal-affairs-newspapers-do-battle-in-Beaumont-1531937.php>

Journal,⁵² and [NPR](#).⁵³ Per the *Chronicle*, the paper “started with a contentious bang” when its editor and reporter were subpoenaed by a local plaintiffs’ lawyer, Brent Coon, “for questioning about whether they were trying to taint jurors by handing out their paper.”⁵⁴

On one side, Coon contended, “This shameful propaganda machine is deceptive and demonstrates a willingness to misrepresent fact.”⁵⁵ The *Houston Chronicle* wrote that he “complained that the newspaper was part of a broader attack by the Chamber against trial lawyers.”⁵⁶ On the other hand, Timpone argued that the complaint was “a complete affront to the First Amendment.”⁵⁷ After initially approving the depositions, the state district judge [reversed his decision](#).⁵⁸

Again, the issue of disclosure was central to the debate. According to the *Houston Chronicle*, the inaugural issue of the newspaper “made no mention of the U.S. Chamber’s ownership.”⁵⁹ The same report quoted Timpone as saying the paper’s ownership didn’t matter: “Our papers are like public services. Our editorial page has a decidedly pro-business point of view, but the news coverage is flat reporting.”⁶⁰

Analyzing the situation for NPR, national desk correspondent [Wade Goodwyn suggested](#) attitudes toward the ethics of the *Record* newspapers would likely be split along political lines: “Conservatives might applaud it, seeing someone trying to print the truth about civil lawsuits in Beaumont. Liberals might be outraged, seeing a crass attempt to influence, if not trick, the jury pool, with corporate propaganda slickly disguised as a mainstream newspaper.”⁶¹

The Timpone-published U.S. Chamber of Commerce sites came under scrutiny again in 2010 during broader discussions about ethics and standards in the growing nonprofit journalism sector. NiemanLab’s Jim Barnett had developed a [“checklist for legitimacy”](#)⁶² for nonprofit news that emphasized the importance of disclosure and funding transparency. Laura McGann, also writing for NiemanLab, [discussed](#) the U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s growing network of local news outlets (websites and physical newspapers), which had been expanded to “focus on

⁵² Peter Lattman, “Tort-Reform Supporters Buy In to Power of the Press,” *Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 25, 2007, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB117747106819481591>

⁵³ Wade Goodwyn, “Texas Newspaper Accused of Tort-Reform Bias,” NPR, May 2, 2007, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=9958273>

⁵⁴ Flood, *op. cit.*

⁵⁵ Flood, *op. cit.*

⁵⁶ Lattman, *op. cit.*

⁵⁷ Flood, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ Paul, “Judge Denies Depo Requests in Case Against U.S. Chamber,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 1, 2007, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-LB-3741>

⁵⁹ Flood, *op. cit.*

⁶⁰ Flood, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ Goodwyn, *op.cit.*

⁶² Jim Barnett, “What makes a nonprofit news org ‘legit’? Here’s one six-fold path,” NiemanLab, Jun. 21, 2010, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2010/06/what-makes-a-nonprofit-news-org-legit-heres-one-six-fold-path/>

legal issues in areas where business interests have been critical of the decisions of local courts.”⁶³ Citing Barnett’s checklist, she noted, “Looking at the front page of one of the Chamber’s publications, that transparency is sometimes hard to see.”

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce was publishing under a subsidiary named U.S. Chamber Institute for Legal Reform, but, McGann noted, none of the main pages of the websites mentioned either the Chamber or the Institute. This despite “the Institute [having] spent \$41 million on various activities pushing for the cause of tort reform. At the same time, the Institute’s reporters are covering civil cases with large settlements and other tort reform-related news — and working for news outlets set up in some of the nation’s most tort-friendly jurisdictions.”⁶⁴ McGann acknowledged that while the sites contained “real” news and had “real” reporters, disclosure was vital because of their “agenda.”

The *Record* outlets continue to exist and are connected to the Metric Media network.

Pink slime patient zero: Journatic

The term “pink slime” was first applied to low-cost automated journalism in 2012 by [Ryan Zickgraf](#) (then Smith), a former Journatic employee who saw himself as a [whistleblower](#)⁶⁵ urging the news industry to improve its practices just as the food industry had done. At the time, the primary concerns raised about the hyperlocal content mill Journatic were not about partisan media, but what their automated assembly-line approach to journalistic labor meant for the future of local journalism.

Founded by Brian Timpone in 2006, two years after the first *Record* publication, Chicago-based Journatic’s [pitch](#) was that it could use “a transformative, data-driven approach” to deliver “rich, original community news.”⁶⁶ This, [it claimed](#), was achieved by structuring data pulled from public records of “real estate transactions, property tax logs, new business applications, crime blotter feeds, prep scores, test scores from schools ... [and] marathon results” and using algorithms to automate the production of community-oriented stories and lists, thereby supposedly freeing journalists to do more reporting.⁶⁷

Journatic used an early application of this formula with Blockshopper, a website that used public data to produce hyperlocal news about local real estate deals and the parties involved

⁶³ Laura McGann, “Using the power of publishing to influence: The U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s entry into the news biz,” NiemanLab, Oct. 22, 2010, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2010/10/using-the-power-of-publishing-to-influence-the-u-s-chamber-of-commerces-entry-into-the-news-biz/>

⁶⁴ McGann, *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Sarah Koenig, “Forgive us our Press Passes,” *This American Life*, July 17, 2012, <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/468/switcheroo/act-two-0>

⁶⁶ “Tribune Company Makes Investment In Journatic,” PR Newswire, Apr. 23, 2012, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/tribune-company-makes-investment-in-journatic-148539645.html>

⁶⁷ Robert Channick, “Journatic to provide TribLocal suburban content,” *Chicago Tribune*, Apr. 23, 2012, retrieved Dec. 30, 2023, from https://web.archive.org/web/20171025042800/http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-04-23/business/chi-tribune-replaces-triblocal-with-journatic-suburban-content-20120423_1_web-sites-content-user-generated

(leading some to complain of invasion of privacy, according to Chicago Reader).⁶⁸ Part of this “super low cost-solution” was an [outsourcing of at least part](#) of the production to the Philippines.⁶⁹ (Timpone claimed that only data collection and processing took place there.)

Journatic initially came under the microscope when Tribune Publishing announced it had made a [“strategic investment”](#) in Journatic⁷⁰ and commenced a “significant operating relationship” that would see Timpone’s company take over production of TribLocal, the Tribune’s network of 90 town websites and 22 weekly print editions. This immediately resulted in redundancies, with the *Tribune* reporting, “About half of TribLocal’s 40 staffers, including copy editors, designers and web producers, will see their jobs phased out during the transition.”⁷¹

Much was made of Journatic’s use of a low-paid distributed workforce to produce hyperlocal news output. As of April 2012, Journatic had what Brian Timpone termed a “virtual workforce” of 40 employees, half in Chicago, plus “hundreds” of freelancers.⁷² Per the [Chicago Reader](#)’s characterization, “Journatic’s approach to journalism is to turn it into piecemeal work done at home.”⁷³ Some were [reportedly](#) paid very little, with “editors and reporters [receiving] a barely living wage of \$12 an hour — and sometimes less.”⁷⁴

Scrutiny of Journatic exploded following an episode of [This American Life](#) that featured whistleblower Ryan Zickgraf.⁷⁵ It not only brought awareness of Journatic’s problematic practices to a national audience (low pay without benefits, outsourcing community stories to people based outside the local area or country), but also raised the hitherto uncovered issue of fake bylines being attached to articles produced in the Philippines. Timpone [acknowledged](#) Blockshopper’s use of fake bylines, but contended it was a search engine optimization technique to ensure articles were indexed by Google News and necessary to stop the producers being harassed.⁷⁶

Media commentator Dan Kennedy [called](#) the *This American Life* story “a scandal whose importance can’t be overstated.”⁷⁷ Free Press described it as “a new low for local news,” while

⁶⁸ Michael Miner, “Tribune Company does deal with Journatic,” *Chicago Reader*, April 24, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20201105170921/https://www.chicagoreader.com/Bleader/archives/2012/04/24/tribune-company-does-deal-with-journatic/>

⁶⁹ Tarkov, *op. cit.*

⁷⁰ “Tribune Company Makes Investment In Journatic,” PR Newswire, Apr. 23, 2012, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/tribune-company-makes-investment-in-journatic-148539645.html>

⁷¹ Channick, Apr. 23, 2012, *op. cit.*

⁷² Miner, *op. cit.*

⁷³ Miner, *op. cit.*

⁷⁴ Tom Grubisich, “Tribune hands off TribLocal to Journatic,” Street Fight, Apr. 24, 2012, <http://streetfightmag.com/2012/04/24/tribune-hands-off-triblocal-to-journatic/>

⁷⁵ Koenig, *op. cit.*

⁷⁶ Tarkov, *op. cit.*

⁷⁷ Dan Kennedy, “Exposing the ‘pink slime’ journalism of Journatic,” Media Nation, July 5, 2012, <https://dankennedy.net/2012/07/05/exposing-pink-slime-journalism/>

[Craig Aaron](#), then president and CEO of Free Press, declared it a “rock-bottom moment in U.S. journalism.”⁷⁸

Zickgraf’s own assessment of Journatic was that “the company I was working for was accelerating the death of the newspaper, luring many members of the industry into their own demise with the promise of short-term savings.” In terms of the company’s practices, Zickgraf said, “I felt Journatic violated almost everything I believe in when it came to good journalism, and I felt like I need to do something about it.”⁷⁹

Addressing the outsourcing of local news — a key facet of many of the online news networks that have emerged in more recent times (although the newer outlets are publishing their own articles as opposed to providing them for established news outlets) — Timpone told [Poynter](#) in April 2012, “Being based in the community is not beneficial.”⁸⁰ Others disagreed. [Mandy Jenkins](#) argued, “The real outrage and new info in the [*This American Life*] radio broadcast was that Journatic employees are producing local news essentially disguised as local reporters.”⁸¹

Jenkins continued:

Is outsourcing news really a good idea? ... [T]his not only costs journalists their jobs, but it calls into question how in-depth stories can be when written by people not from the community. It also makes one wonder if the somewhat shady practices of Journatic and Blockshopper are contributing to the demise of the print journalism industry.⁸²

Ken Doctor told the [Chicago Tribune](#) he felt that journalism practitioners need to take a central role:

It is important that publishing companies be in charge of these technologies. ... Whether it’s outsourced or in-sourced or however it works, it’s important that those who know the rules of the trade — journalists — are in charge of making sure that the trust with the readers is kept, as we apply these new technologies.⁸³

Others, including [Matthew Ingram](#), suggested that the automation possibilities Journatic offered should not be dismissed without consideration:

⁷⁸ Tarkov, *op. cit.*

⁷⁹ Tarkov, *op. cit.*

⁸⁰ Tarkov, *op. cit.*

⁸¹ Mandy Jenkins, “As Outsourced News Grows, Local Newsrooms Should Promote ‘Buying Local,’” *Zombie Journalism*, July 2, 2012, <https://zombiejournalism.com/2012/07/as-outsourced-news-grows-local-newsrooms-should-promote-buying-local/>

⁸² Jenkins, *ibid.*

⁸³ Robert Channick, “3 other papers besides Chicago Tribune identify false bylines in Journatic stories,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 3, 2012, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-xpm-2012-07-03-ct-biz-0704-journatic-20120704-story.html>

Since the way that news occurs and the ways in which information reaches us has been completely disrupted by the web and the democratization of distribution, the argument is that we need to have different models and formats for handling that information intelligently — whether it’s with tools like Storify or new ways of aggregating and filtering data in order to make it meaningful.

Could Journatic be one of those ways, at least for certain kinds of hyper-local content and information? It’s possible, or at the very least worth considering. And demonizing that approach as “pink slime” or something that is antithetical to journalism doesn’t really help.⁸⁴

Some of the questions raised by people like Ingram and Doctor resonate with current discussions around AI technology like ChatGPT. But in 2012, the possibilities for Journatic itself offering a productive way forward for mainstream local journalism had largely unraveled. The *Houston Chronicle* [identified](#) at least 350 fake bylines in Journatic articles posted on the *Chronicle*’s behalf.⁸⁵ The *Chicago Tribune* [suspended](#) its partnership with Journatic and retook control of TribLocal after a plagiarized Journatic story was discovered.⁸⁶ The *Tribune*’s then-editor, Gerould Kern, described the fake bylines, plagiarism, and fabricated quotes as [“unethical and inexcusable”](#) breaches of the paper’s editorial ethics code.⁸⁷ Other established news organizations that cut ties with Journatic in the wake of the fake byline and plagiarism scandals included Hearst, GateHouse, and the *Chicago Sun-Times*. The *Tribune* [resumed](#) work with Journatic “on a limited basis for such information as community listings ... [but not] as a source of reported news stories for TribLocal” in December 2012.⁸⁸

In 2013, Journatic rebranded and became Locality Labs, and Brian Timpone’s role in this automated and outsourced approach to journalism has only expanded since then. This practice of rebranding continues today; the most recent name of the organization is Pipeline Media.

⁸⁴ “The future of media and forcing new content into old models,” GigaOm, July 5, 2012, retrieved Dec. 10, 2023, from

<https://web.archive.org/web/20220623195418/https://old.gigaom.com/2012/07/05/the-future-of-media-and-forcing-new-content-into-old-models/>

⁸⁵ Jeff Sonderman, “Journatic published hundreds of stories under fake bylines on Houston Chronicle websites,” Poynter, July 16, 2012, retrieved Dec. 10, 2023, from

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140912053555/http://www.poynter.org:80/latest-news/top-stories/181009/journatic-published-hundreds-of-stories-under-fake-bylines-on-houston-chronicle-websites/>

⁸⁶ Vince Casanova, “Chicago Tribune suspends use of Journatic,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 13, 2012,

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/chi-tribune-suspends-use-of-journatic-20120713-story.html>

⁸⁷ Kate Thayer, “Editorial head at Journatic says he’s leaving company,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 14, 2012,

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2012-07-14-chi-journatic-chicago-tribune-mike-fourcher-story.html>

⁸⁸ Robert Channick, “Tribune resumes limited usage of Journatic,” *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 6, 2012,

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-xpm-2012-12-06-chi-journatic-tribune-20121206-story.html>

Other early conservative news networks

In addition to Timpone’s enterprises, which we will return to with the case of the Metric Media network, there have been other initiatives and development in the space of conservative media and funding.

In 2010, writing for *Washington Monthly*, [Laura McGann examined Watchdog](#), a network of 10 state-level investigative news sites operated by the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity (now rebranded as Franklin News Foundation), a nonprofit run by “former political operative” Jason Stverak. Assessing their objectives, McGann argued, “The new breed of conservative investigative journalism is driven by an activist impulse. For most, the primary aim is to package their agenda in a way that makes the public and the media more likely to latch on.”⁸⁹

McGann’s analysis of the Watchdog sites outlined many of the characteristics observers would come to recognize in the partisan networks that began cropping up toward the end of the 2010s. These included a lack of transparency around funding sources, an observable ideological bent, a tendency to “publish short items on a more or less daily basis, with a mostly monolithic set of interests,” and a perceived desire to exploit the crisis in journalism:

Stverak appears to be banking on [the hope] that in the age of a twenty-four-hour news cycle, cash-strapped news outlets will eagerly latch on to the scoops his team delivers and won’t spend too much time questioning the underlying reporting or the bona fides of his organization, which looks more like a political attack machine than a traditional news operation.⁹⁰

Watchdog’s ownership, disclosure, and partisanship continued to be a topic of interest for media observers. In a 2012 piece, “[How A Right-Wing Group Is Infiltrating State News Coverage](#),” Joe Strupp of Media Matters described Watchdog thus: “Funded by major conservative donors, staffed by veterans of groups affiliated with the Koch brothers,⁹¹ and maintaining a regular presence hosting right-wing events, the organization boasts of its ability to fill the void created by state newsroom layoffs.”⁹²

Discussing the Watchdog sites for [Columbia Journalism Review](#) in 2012, Justin Peters added:

The worry with sites like these is that a casual online reader, or a reader of one of the local and regional newspapers that run Franklin Center statehouse reporting, might not

⁸⁹ Laura McGann, “Partisan Hacks,” *Washington Monthly*, May 1, 2010, <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2010/05/01/partisan-hacks/>

⁹⁰ McGann, *ibid.*

⁹¹ Over the past five decades, Charles Koch and his network of allied donors have been instrumental in setting up and backing numerous think tanks that promote his vision of free-market economics, often at the cost of cutting public welfare spending.

⁹² Joe Strupp, “How A Right-Wing Group Is Infiltrating State News Coverage,” Media Matters, July 11, 2012, <https://www.mediamatters.org/koch-brothers/how-right-wing-group-infiltrating-state-news-coverage>

be aware of the Franklin Center and its agenda. [...] The Watchdog.org site ... makes no mention of the site's conservative leanings, instead characterizing itself as "a collection of independent journalists covering state-specific and local government activity."⁹³

In her 2016 book, *Dark Money*, Jane Mayer noted that Stverak said his organization "planned to fill the vacuum created by the economic death spiral in which many of the 'legacy media' found themselves at the state level all over the country."⁹⁴

Franklin Center's Watchdog networks were among those cited in [Gene Gibbons' 2010 report](#) on news coverage of state government for the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy. Observing what he termed "Journalism with an asterisk," Gibbons pointed to a growing problem that we now know would spread far beyond state government reporting:

Nowhere is the emergence of non-journalistic or quasi-journalistic players more prevalent or problematic than on the state government news front. Several state news websites have a liberal or leftist pedigree, or at least provenance. Many more are funded by conservative foundations and think tanks.

While all profess to adhere to traditional journalistic values, there is at least the potential of using journalism as a vehicle for "astroturfing" — trying to sway public opinion or promote a political agenda with deceptive means.⁹⁵

Noting differences based on political persuasion, Gibbon said, "On the liberal to moderate side of the point-of-view spectrum, AINN and Stateline.org pretty much stand alone. ... Most activity is on the right, orchestrated by an interlocking group of conservative foundations and think tanks that are unresponsive to the point of secretiveness about their sources of funding."

In a conclusion that more than a decade later can arguably be applied to local journalism more generally, Gibbons wrote: "The scramble underway to fill all those empty chairs in statehouse press rooms might very well lead to the best news coverage of state government ever. But at this stage of the changeover, it's equally possible that partisan interlopers posing as journalists could ultimately cause the demise of news coverage of state government as we know it."⁹⁶

Today, neither the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity nor the Watchdog brands are active. Instead, the Franklin News Foundation operates [The Center Square](#), a news

⁹³ Justin Peters, "'Serious, point-of-view journalism?'" *Columbia Journalism Review*, Sep. 13, 2012, https://archives.cjr.org/united_states_project/serious_point-of-view_journalism.php

⁹⁴ Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (New York: Random House, 2017), p.427.

⁹⁵ Gene Gibbons, "Ants at the Picnic: A Status Report on News Coverage of State Government," *Shorenstein Center Discussion Paper Series*, June 2010. <https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/37376258>

⁹⁶ Gibbons, *ibid.*

website started in 2019 “to fulfill the need for high-quality statehouse and statewide news,” which also provides a wire service for local news outlets.⁹⁷

An influx of political advertising dollars

The growth of partisan sites over the past decade would not be possible without complicated trails of political money. The end of 2012 brought a lengthy [Mother Jones report](#) (co-published by the Center for Public Integrity) that detailed how dark money led to fake local news. In this case, American Tradition Partnership (ATP), a “secretive nonprofit” based in Montana, had developed the *Montana Statesman*, a physical newspaper delivered to residents with an accompanying website, as part of an effort said to define “a new era of ‘funny money with no legal constraints.’”⁹⁸

The Center for Public Integrity identified the ATP’s founding donor as Jacob Jobs, an anti-union owner of Colorado’s largest furniture chain and a donor to Republican candidates and causes, and traced affiliations with national Tea Party groups funded by the Koch brothers. According to *Mother Jones*, ATP had vowed to keep Attorney General Steve Bullock out of the governor’s mansion in Montana’s 2012 gubernatorial election. Of the *Montana Statesman*, it said, “The publication calls itself ‘the largest and most trusted news source’ but is actually a series of ATP-funded attacks on Bullock. It leads with a giant headline that reads ‘Bullock Admits Failure.’”⁹⁹

In August 2014, in the run-up to midterm elections, the [National Journal](#) reported that the National Republican Congressional Committee had created an ‘Update’ network of “about two dozen ... faux news sites ... designed to look like local news sources.”¹⁰⁰ Carrying names like the Central Valley Update, Augusta Update, and Aurora Update, these sites targeted Democratic candidates and were promoted using localized Google search ads.

The Update sites used a playbook — replicating the look and feel of local news sites while minimizing the visibility of disclosures — that became familiar with the Acronym, Star Network, and Metric Media sites that followed. The [Washington Post](#)’s Philip Bump described the visual similarities to legitimate local news sites as evidence the sites were “intended to mislead”:

⁹⁷ Madeleine Davison, “A dark money-fueled conservative group rebranded its effort to infiltrate local politics — and some local media outlets are falling for it,” *Media Matters*, June 17, 2022,

<https://www.mediamatters.org/local-news/dark-money-fueled-conservative-group-rebranded-its-effort-infiltrate-local-politics-and>

⁹⁸ Paul Abowd, “Inside the Dark-Money Group Fighting Reform in Montana and Beyond,” *Mother Jones*, Oct. 22, 2012, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/10/american-tradition-partnership-montana-dark-money/>

⁹⁹ Abowd, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Shane Goldmacher, “NRCC Launches Fake News Sites to Attack Democratic Candidates,” *National Journal*, Aug. 12, 2014, <https://www.nationaljournal.com/s/73018/nrcc-launches-fake-news-sites-attack-democratic-candidates>

It has that header at the top of the page, implying it's a news site. It has a headline and photo. It has a timestamp. It has an author — always “Geoff.” It has a list of the “Most Popular” links, and, sometimes, the “Most Viewed,” which is usually an ad promoting the candidate’s opponent. It is “Filed under” the name of the race involved, and the URL for each ends with “update70,” “update71” or “update72,” implying that there are more stories on the site than there are. At the bottom of the page, that same header again, and then a bunch of white space, and then, finally, an acknowledgement that the site is paid for by the NRCC.¹⁰¹

According to the *Los Angeles Times*: “Readers only discover who is behind the website by scrolling to the bottom of the page, where a box indicates the NRCC is the sponsor, an FEC requirement for all political committee websites.”¹⁰² The National Journal added, “The NRCC’s disclaimer box on the faux-news sites does not include the URL of the committee, which is a requirement, but that appears to be a minor omission.”¹⁰³

Preempting the rise of similar efforts, the National Journal reported, “Political strategists on both sides of the aisle say voters have generally grown weary and dubious of political attacks that are accompanied by dark clouds and ominous music. Wrapping an attack in the innocuous language of fact-checking, then, makes it more likely to sink in.”¹⁰⁴ The magazine quoted Andrea Bozek, communications director for the NRCC, who justified the Update sites as “a new and effective way to disseminate information to voters who are interested in learning the truth about these Democratic candidates,” adding, “We believe this is the most effective way to present information to leave a lasting impact on voters.”¹⁰⁵

Political advertising masquerading as local news is far from exclusive to local and state elections. While fake local news sites garnered less attention during the 2016 election than in 2020, the earlier election was not without incident. For example, what NiemanLab’s [Christine Schmidt described](#) as “perhaps the [election] cycle’s most iconic fake news story”¹⁰⁶ — the article “FBI Agent Suspected In Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead In Apparent Murder-Suicide” — originated on The Denver Guardian, a site that had been designed to mimic a local news site by

¹⁰¹ Philip Bump, “House Republicans unveil a new 2014 strategy: Repurposing press releases on a fake news site,” *Washington Post*, Aug. 13, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/08/13/house-republicans-unveil-a-new-2014-strategy-repurposing-press-releases-on-a-fake-news-site/>

¹⁰² Marianne Levine, “GOP campaign arm launches fake news sites against Democrats,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 14, 2014, <https://www.latimes.com/nation/politics/politicsnow/la-pn-republicans-fake-news-sites-20140814-story.html>

¹⁰³ Goldmacher, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁴ Goldmacher, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁵ Goldmacher, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁶ Christine Schmidt, “Watch your URL: Local news outlets have to ward off more politically-funded local competitors ahead of 2020,” NiemanLab, Oct. 21, 2019, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2019/10/watch-your-url-local-news-outlets-have-to-ward-off-more-politically-funded-local-competitors-ahead-of-2020/>

Disinfomedia, a fake news operation [NPR traced back](#) to Jestin Coler.¹⁰⁷ In this instance, the objective was not necessarily about political influence. Instead, according to Coler, the goal was to “infiltrate the echo chambers of the alt-right, publish blatantly false or fictional stories, and then be able to publicly denounce those stories and point out the fact that they were fiction.”¹⁰⁸ Coler also earned ad revenue from his sites. NPR reported that Coler said “stories about other fake-news proprietors making between \$10,000 and \$30,000 a month apply to him.”¹⁰⁹

In some cases, the role of bogus local news outlets during the 2016 election cycle was only discovered retrospectively. In 2018, [NPR reported that Russian information operatives](#) at the Internet Research Agency (IRA) in St. Petersburg had used at least 48 Twitter accounts with names such as @ElPasoTopNews, @MilwaukeeVoice, @CamdenCityNews, and @Seattle_Post, and another designed to emulate the *Chicago Daily News*, which closed in 1978.¹¹⁰ All were found on a [list of 1,100 banned Twitter accounts](#) linked to the agency. According to NPR, some had been in operation since 2014, amassing as many as 19,000 followers. While none had been found to spread misinformation (and their engagement was [generally low](#)), it was surmised they had “serv[ed] as sleeper accounts building trust and readership for some future, unforeseen effort.”¹¹¹ Writing for the German Marshall Fund, Bradley Hannon argued the [IRA’s end goal](#) in impersonating local news sources was to “build credibility and sow disinformation narratives into targeted communities.”¹¹² The *New York Times* later [reported](#) that a Senate Intelligence Committee report showed that 54 such accounts had published more than 500,000 tweets.¹¹³

¹⁰⁷ Laura Sydell, “We Tracked Down A Fake-News Creator In The Suburbs. Here’s What We Learned,” NPR, Nov. 23, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/11/23/503146770/npr-finds-the-head-of-a-covert-fake-news-operation-in-the-suburbs>

¹⁰⁸ Sydell, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Sydell, *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Tim Mak and Libby Berry, “Russian Influence Campaign Sought To Exploit Americans’ Trust In Local News,” NPR, July 12, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/12/628085238/russian-influence-campaign-sought-to-exploit-americans-trust-in-local-news>

¹¹¹ Leon Yin et al., “Your Friendly Neighborhood Troll: The Internet Research Agency’s Use of Local and Fake News in the 2016 US Presidential Campaign,” NYU Social Media and Political Participation (SMaPP) lab, Jan. 2018, https://csmapnyu.org/assets/publications/2018_01_IRA_Presidential_Campaign.pdf

¹¹² Bradley Hannon and Grant Bennett, “Twitter Release Reveals the Kremlin’s News Impersonation Game,” GMF, June 21, 2018, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/twitter-release-reveals-the-kremlins-news-impersonation-game/>

¹¹³ Brendan Nyhan, “Americans Trust Local News. That Belief Is Being Exploited,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 31, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/31/upshot/fake-local-news.html>

2. Investigating a pink slime network: The case of Metric Media

As we have seen, by the late 2010s it had become increasingly common for partisan actors to invest in online content across the United States that looked like local journalism but primarily functioned as political advertising, sometimes conveyed in combination with outsourced or automated reporting. In the sections that follow we detail five groundbreaking Tow Center studies through which we have traced the size, scope, operation, and funding of the Metric Media Network, one of the largest pink slime news networks in the United States.

Local journalism was central to raising awareness about the emergence of the Metric Media network. In October 2019, the [Lansing State Journal](#) broke the story that around three dozen Metric Media news sites had appeared in Michigan.¹¹⁴ Further reporting by the [Michigan Daily](#),¹¹⁵ the [Guardian](#),¹¹⁶ and the [New York Times](#)¹¹⁷ identified yet more sites. Collectively, this early reporting identified around 200 local news sites across various locations.

Tow Center computational research fellow Priyanjana Bengani took on the challenge of developing a systematic, reproducible methodology to quantify the size of the network at the national level.

Detailing the size and scope of such a network is not straightforward, largely due to the sites' lack of transparency. However, Bengani's methodology exposed more than twice the number of sites identified in earlier reporting. In fact, Tow's [first study](#)¹¹⁸ in 2019 exposed at least 450 publications in a network of local and business news organizations, each distributing

¹¹⁴ Carol Thompson, "Dozens of new websites appear to be Michigan local news outlets, but with political bent," *Lansing State Journal*, Oct. 21, 2019, <https://lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/local/2019/10/21/lansing-sun-new-sites-michigan-local-news-outlets/3984689002/>

¹¹⁵ Dominick Sokotoff and Katherina Sourine, "Pseudo local news sites in Michigan reveal nationally expanding network," *The Michigan Daily*, Nov. 1, 2019, <https://www.michigandaily.com/section/community-affairs/pseudo-local-news-sites-michigan-reveal-nationally-expanding-network>

¹¹⁶ Adam Gabbatt, "How local 'fake news' websites spread 'conservative propaganda' in the US," *The Guardian*, Nov. 19, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/nov/19/locality-labs-fake-news-local-sites-newspapers>

¹¹⁷ Dan Levin, "Mimicking Local News, a Network of Michigan Websites Pushes Politics," *The New York Times*, Oct. 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/21/us/michigan-metric-media-news.html>

¹¹⁸ Priyanjana Bengani, "Hundreds of 'pink slime' local news outlets are distributing algorithmic stories and conservative talking points," Tow Center for Digital Journalism, CJR, Dec. 18, 2019, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/hundreds-of-pink-slime-local-news-outlets-are-distributing-algorithmic-stories-conservative-talking-points.php

thousands of algorithmically generated articles and a smaller number of reported stories. Of those 450 sites, at least 189 had been set up as local news networks across ten states within the prior year by Metric Media. Crucially, too, this initial study demonstrated that the network of Metric Media local news sites was just one component in a larger group of interconnected networks.

Over a two-week period starting November 26, 2019, we tapped into the RSS feeds of these 450 sites, most of which were created that year, and found more than 15,000 unique published stories (this figure climbed to more than 50,000 when aggregated across the sites). Of these, only about 100 titles had named bylines. The rest were created by automated services or were repurposed press releases.

Many of the Metric Media stories attributed to automated services (Metric Media News Service, LocalLabs News Service, etc.) relied on data releases from federal programs like the Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Congressional Research Service, the Federal Election Commission, and the Census Bureau. Another frequently used data source was GasBuddy, a Boston-based startup that monitored gas station prices in North America and Australia. Some of the pieces attributed to human writers also relied on public data, including one article used from a Tax Foundation study that established the cents per gallon each state collected in wine taxes; another drew upon a builders' association study that rated structural deficiencies in bridges.

Interspersed with stories about real estate prices and the best place to purchase premium gas based on zip code were newsier pieces like an article quoting an Arizona state senator about how the [federal government should not play a role in education](#).¹¹⁹ Others quoted various exclusively Republican officials like U.S. senators, chairpeople, or communications staff of the state GOP, about the impeachment process against Donald Trump being [a witch hunt](#)¹²⁰ or an [abuse of power](#).¹²¹

2.1 Investigating the emergence of the extended Metric Media network¹²²

This study showed there was no one singular, stand-alone Metric Media network or one singular publisher. Instead, this initial exploration revealed the 450 sites were spread across 21

¹¹⁹ John Suayan, "State senator: Federal government should not play role in education," Coconino News, Dec. 6, 2019, <https://coconinonews.com/stories/520832648-state-senator-federal-government-should-not-play-role-in-education>

¹²⁰ Zeta Cross, "Daines says impeachment process is 'witch hunt,'" Northeast Montana News, Dec. 3, 2019, <https://nemontananeews.com/stories/520355890-daines-says-impeachment-process-is-witch-hunt>

¹²¹ Shanice Harris, "North Carolina Republicans call the impeachment hearings an 'abuse of power,'" Hickory Sun, Nov. 29, 2019, <https://hickorysun.com/stories/520267676-north-carolina-republicans-call-the-impeachment-hearings-an-abuse-of-power>

¹²² This section is derived from reporting originally published on December 18, 2019. See: Priyanjana Bengani, "Hundreds of 'pink slime' local news outlets are distributing algorithmic stories and conservative talking points," CJR, Dec. 18, 2019, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/hundreds-of-pink-slime-local-news-outlets-are-distributing-algorithmic-stories-conservative-talking-points.php

networks and five corporate entities. These networks overlapped in ways that seemed designed to confuse casual observers about their origins and ownership, and delineations between them were fuzzy. The corporate entities involved were incorporated in different states, had different business models, and provided different services. However, our digital forensic research found they shared certain distinguishing traits that suggested closely overlapping relationships, such as the same authors on news articles, the use of story templates, analytics identifiers, and other technological resources. Our subsequent work, discussed in the following sections, found the convoluted structure of the network had evolved dramatically.

When we first looked at this network in 2019, we found five corporate entities involved in the operation of these networks: [Metric Media LLC](#), [Locality Labs](#) (or LocalLabs, the successor to Journatic), [Franklin Archer](#), [The Record Inc.](#), and [Local Government Information Services](#) (LGIS). Additionally, the Metric Media Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, stated that its raison d'être was “data-driven news about your community.”¹²³ Websites belonging to the Metric Media LLC network carried a disclaimer that the sites maintain “a licensing agreement with the Metric Media Foundation, a Missouri 501(c)(3) non-profit news organization.”

	Corporate entity	Overview of networks operated
1	Metric Media LLC (n=189)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 state-specific networks (189 sites)
2	Franklin Archer (n=179)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local News Network (128 local news sites) • Metro Business network (51: one for every state and Washington D.C.)
3	LocalLabs/Locality Labs (n=40)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Florida-specific network (15 sites) • Network of topical sites (16 sites) • Network of international sites (9 sites)
4	Local Government Information Services (LGIS) (n=33)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illinois-based sites (33 sites)
5	The Record, Inc. (n=11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11 publications covering legal systems in eight states • One outlet, Legal Newslines, was not bound to a state

¹²³ <https://web.archive.org/web/20191108195427/https://www.metricmedia.org/>

A key figure with associations to all of these entities was conservative businessman and publisher Brian Timpone. Illinois-based Timpone’s previous ventures included founding Journatic, the controversial outlet whose approach to low-cost automated story creation gave rise to the “pink slime” journalism label (*see Chapter 1*), and the Chamber of Commerce-affiliated Record network. *Michigan Daily* has detailed the [convoluted relationship](#) between these organizations.¹²⁴

As of late 2023, The Metric Media Foundation still exists, but its website also refers to the nonprofit as Community News Foundation and features the previously mentioned Community Newsmaker service. Locality Labs, previously Journatic, has changed its name again and is now Pipeline Media.

Some of the partisan local news sites we found also published physical newspapers. Many had little in the way of a social media presence. At first glance, there was little to suggest they could be owned by the same network or organization. Beneath the surface, however, were a number of clues suggesting they were intimately linked. Specifically, our analysis was able to demonstrate those links by identifying shared markers such as unique analytics tokens, server IP addresses, and even shared design templates and bylines on articles. Further, the [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) for many — but not all — of these websites suggested they were part of Locality Labs, LLC.

¹²⁴ Sokotoff and Sourine, *op. cit.*

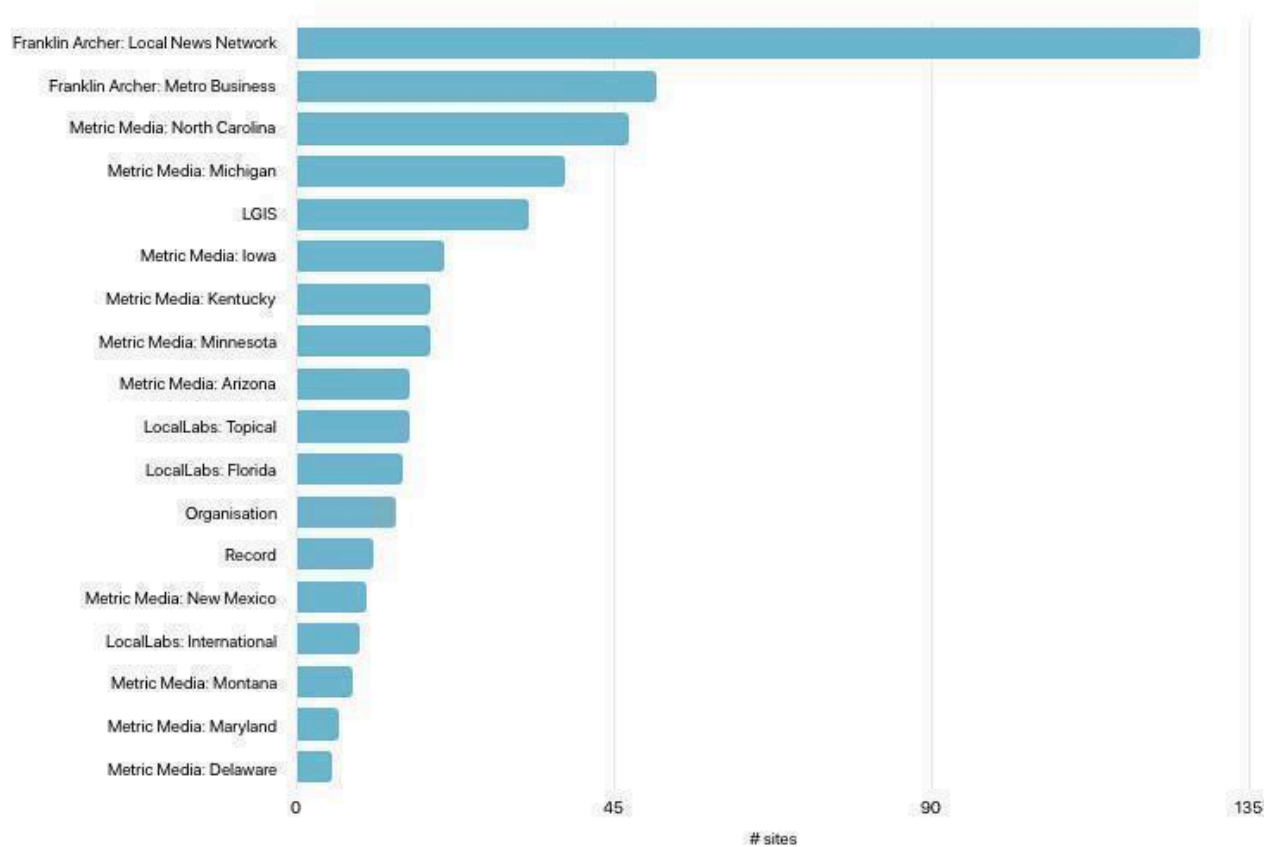


Figure 1: Breakdown of sites across networks circa 2019, including the sites for multiple corporate entities or parent organizations (“Organizations”) such as LGIS, Franklin Archer, Metro Business Network, or Dan Proft’s now-defunct PAC Liberty Principles.

Tallies of the number of sites comprising each network are shown in *Figure 1*. The largest single network was Franklin Archer’s Local News Network, with 128 sites. To reach this figure, we conflated nine standalone sites that bore all the heuristics of Franklin Archer’s local news sites, even though they were not explicitly listed on the organization’s website. These include [Surprise Journal](#), [El Paso Review](#), and Lansing Reporter.

Also operating under the Franklin Archer banner was a group of 51 sites that formed the Metro Business network. When combined with the 128 sites in the company’s Local News Network, this gave a total of 179 sites operated by Franklin Archer.

The only entity found to be operating more sites was Metric Media, which had 189 sites spread across ten state-specific news networks. The largest of these was in North Carolina, where Metric Media operated 46 sites.

We identified a further 40 sites as belonging to LocalLabs, of which 15 were from a network focused solely on Florida. We also conflated 25 standalone sites — 16 topical sites, and 9

international sites — under “LocalLabs: International” and “LocalLabs: Topical” in *Figure 1*. These sites had a Locality Labs, LLC privacy policy or shared analytics identifier, but no other associations.

In some cases, the sites’ privacy policy was not even linked on the homepage. Mexico Business Daily, for example, didn’t mention any affiliation on its About Us or Contact pages, and had no privacy policy on its homepage. [A link on its Privacy page](#) suggested it was a Locality Labs property. [CISTRAN Finance](#) followed the exact same pattern. In other cases, like the [Toronto Business Daily](#) or [Balkan Business Wire](#), the privacy policy was linked from the homepage, but no other affiliations were mentioned.

We could glean these anecdotal pieces of evidence only after identifying the scale of the operation, which we measured using website metadata and network forensics with tools like Farsight DNSDB and RiskIQ. These tools revealed that supposedly unrelated sites shared IP addresses and various analytics identifiers. Within the same network — and even the same organization — that is expected behavior. It is highly unusual for sites to share IP addresses and analytics identifiers if they are not connected, but that’s exactly what we found in these networks. (A technical overview of findings gleaned from these tools is presented in *Appendix I*.)

The size of this network quickly ballooned far beyond our initial study. The network of 450 sites we exposed in December 2019 seems almost quaint compared to what it became as the 2020 presidential election approached. However, this initial study was pivotal to our research program because it introduced the key corporate entities, networks, and actors involved in the operation. As such, it laid the foundations for everything that followed.

In the next section we turn our attention to the network’s rapid expansion in 2020.

2.2 Evolution and sprawl of the network in 2020¹²⁵

As the clock ticked down to the divisive 2020 presidential election, the Tow Center’s follow-up investigation revealed Metric Media’s network had increased almost threefold to more than 1,200 sites, thanks to the creation of 700 new titles in the eight months since our previous study. While connections weren’t clear to the casual observer, all sites could be traced back to the corporate entities that comprise the extended Metric Media network: Locality Labs or LocalLabs (later Pipeline Media), Franklin Archer, Newsinator, and Local Government Information Service (LGIS).

¹²⁵ This section is derived from reporting originally published on August 4, 2020. See: Priyanjana Bengani, “As election looms, a network of mysterious ‘pink slime’ local news outlets nearly triples in size,” *CJR*, Aug. 4, 2020, <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/as-election-looms-a-network-of-mysterious-pink-slime-local-news-outlets-nearly-triples-in-size.php>

This investigation, which used the same tools and methodology as its predecessor, found the vast majority of the domains were under the umbrella of Metric Media, a Delaware limited-liability company that is a division of Situation Management Group. In fact, Metric Media properties accounted for more than 960 sites, or 80 percent, of all the domains identified as part of this network. Publishing on these Metric Media sites was done “under a licensing agreement with the Metric Media Foundation, a 501(c)(3) non-profit news content provider.”

Analysis of passive DNS data (RiskIQ and DNSDB Scout) revealed that more than 700 new domains were registered in the second half of 2019 and the sites were live by the end of January 2020. Most of the newly created sites came under the Metric Media banner and had generic names like [Milwaukee City Wire](#), [Philly Leader](#), and [San Francisco Sun](#). Thanks to this raft of new sites, Metric Media’s portfolio of state-specific news networks increased from 10 to 49, leaving Illinois as the only state without a Metric Media news network by 2020. Expansion into Illinois was not necessary because it was already covered by the 34-strong LGIS network, whose sites have exclusively served the state since 2016. It was incorporated by Brian Timpone, while another key figure in the Metric Media network, Dan Proft, has described himself as a “part owner” of the network.¹²⁶ As such, LGIS might be described as a precursor to the Metric Media network, with Illinois being ground zero.

Some of the new Metric Media sites covered entire states, whereas others were devoted to specific cities or metropolitan areas. Their nomenclature was often formulaic, combining compass directions with the names of the states or cities and then generic terms for news publications, such as SW Oklahoma News, NE Ohio Times, and West SFV Today (in California’s San Fernando Valley). Many major cities got their own “wire” publication: Detroit City Wire, Dallas City Wire, and Seattle City Wire.

Beyond the expansion of the Metric Media network, our research also found new sites under the Franklin Archer umbrella. This expansion meant Franklin Archer had more than 200 sites across the two main subnetworks it created between 2015 and 2019: Metro Business Network (which boasted a business daily in every state) and Local News Network (although many of the sites in this network were no longer active in 2023).

Our research also uncovered a third Franklin Archer network: the [American Catholic Tribune Media Network](#), which was created in March 2020. Its six sites — the American Catholic Tribune and five state-specific offshoots with names like Arizona Catholic Tribune, Michigan Catholic Tribune, and Wisconsin Catholic Tribune — relayed information about parishes and churches, including updates on how various churches intended to conduct Mass every week. Their utility became clearer following the election. (*See Chapter 2.4.*)

¹²⁶ Isaac Stanley-Becker and Josh Dawsey, “Inside a private portal from GOP campaigns to local news sites,” The Washington Post, April 27, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/04/27/republican-campaigns-local-news-lumen/>

Franklin Archer’s slate included a handful of stand-alone titles that were single-subject (Current Science Daily) or focused on specific towns or neighborhoods (West Loop Today). It also produced the Freedom Media Network, which hosted podcasts and a YouTube channel described as “your source for positive news and content aimed at helping you become more purposeful, productive, and prosperous.” One of the podcasts, *Freedom Mindset Radio*, was rife with anti-science positions, including the suggestion that getting a health diagnosis was dangerous, as “they’re labeling a bag of symptoms.” Franklin Archer also listed public relations activities on its website, where user testimonials boasted about the effectiveness of sponsored content as a marketing tool. (The Franklin Archer website was taken down in April 2023.)

Figure 2 illustrates the number of publications in each state in 2020, aggregated across all the entities behind the extended Metric Media network. Rhode Island had the fewest devoted to it (four) and California the most (74).

A problem that has persisted throughout our research is that attributing websites to specific corporate entities can be near-impossible due to contradictory information on individual websites and the fuzziness of the borders between individual networks and entities. The sites not only share technological infrastructure, but also bylines and stories. For example, the sites in Illinois had About Us pages that stated they were a “product of LGIS—Local Government Information Services,” while their Terms of Service and Privacy pages indicated they were properties of Locality Labs LLC. At various times, their Terms of Service and Privacy pages were blank. In March 2020, Illinois sites adopted the same look and feel as the sites Metric Media has explicitly stated it runs. Meanwhile, Newsinator held the copyright for each individual publication’s application on the iOS App Store.

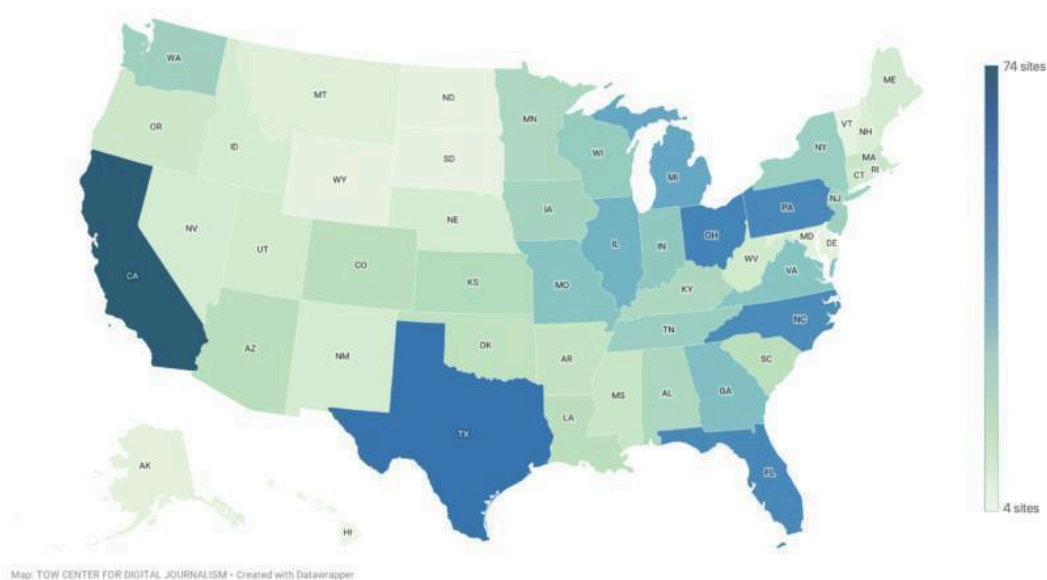


Figure 2: The number of Metric Media and LGIS sites per state circa 2020.

Similarly, while the homepage of the Metro Business Network gave no information about the ownership or funding of its slate of Business Daily publications, its Privacy Policy and Terms pages stated that the network was operated by Locality Labs.

Tracing the ownership of sites within the network is further complicated by how they identify themselves on Facebook. The Facebook pages for the business news sites include information about the page owner, which is where information about news and media properties on the platform can be found. However, sites within the same subnetwork (Metro Business Network, in this case) have different confirmed page owners, and in a handful of cases, none at all (*see Figure 3*). Those with confirmed page ownership were split between Franklin Archer and Metric Media, and while the listed addresses for the owners were different, their phone numbers were the same. The network itself had minimal presence on social media, with negligible interactions (followers, likes, and shares) on each page.

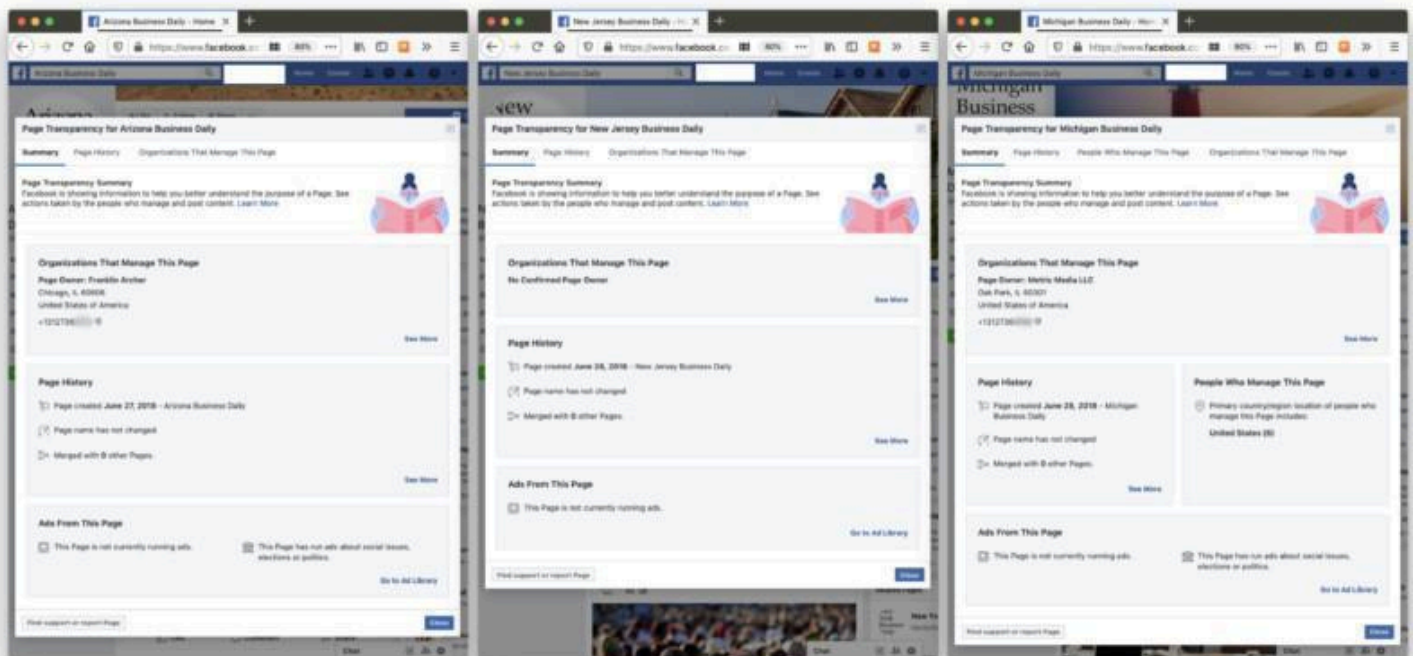


Figure 3: Different page ownerships on Facebook for publications within the same network.

Up to now we have focused on the size of the overall network and the process through which we established undisclosed connections among the subnetworks and sites within it. This, however, is only part of the story. To understand the utility of this pink slime news network, it is also vital to get a grip on the corporate entities that comprise it, the key actors behind them, and the relationships between those actors.

The entities behind the extended Metric Media network

When we discovered the high volume of sites intricately linked across a convoluted network with fuzzy borders, we set about trying to identify the people behind these organizations, and their backgrounds. In the next section, we examine the emergence of various publications, networks, and their impact. Each of the networks associated with the larger Metric Media empire can be traced back to conservative businessman Brian Timpone.

The Record Network (2004-)

The Record Network was mentioned in Chapter 1 as part of our discussion of pink slime precursors. It is a system of 11 publications that began with the Madison-St. Clair Record in 2004. Its publications cover the legal system in eight states; one of the outlets, Legal Newline, is not bound to a single state. Brian Timpone is a founding publisher of the network.

The About Us pages on a subset of Record network sites (including Legal Newline, Madison-St. Clair Record, and Florida Record) state they are owned by the US Chamber Institute for Legal Reform, an affiliate of the US Chamber of Commerce — an organization that has been one of the biggest dark-money spenders in U.S. elections since 2008, according to [OpenSecrets](#).¹²⁷

LocalLabs/Locality Labs/Pipeline Media (2012-)

LocalLabs is another Timpone company. It is a [rebranding of Journatic](#), the automated journalism outfit whose name was dropped in the aftermath of the 2012 scandal that gave rise to the pink slime moniker (see Chapter 1).¹²⁸ It first registered on our radar during our 2019 investigation when around 40 of the websites we found stated they were “a product of LocalLabs,” or had privacy policy and/or terms of service pages suggesting they were operated by Locality Labs, LLC. Of these sites, 15, all [registered in 2018](#), belonged to a single network in a single state: Florida. However, this specific network no longer exists. (Metric Media LLC continues to operate about 50 sites in Florida.)

The remaining LocalLabs publications fall into two categories: international business sites, including Manila Business Daily, Toronto Business Daily, and Mexico Business Daily, and more U.S.-centric single-topic sites such as American Security News, American Pharmacy News, and Higher Education Tribune. While these sites don’t say they are products of LocalLabs, their privacy policies were attributed to Locality Labs in 2020. Most of the references to LocalLabs have since been removed.

¹²⁷ “Who are the biggest Dark Money Spenders?” OpenSecrets, 2010, retrieved Dec. 10, 2023, from <https://www.opensecrets.org/dark-money/top-election-spenders?cycle=2010#spenders>

¹²⁸ “LocalLabs, Formerly Journatic.” retrieved Dec. 10, 2023, from https://web.archive.org/web/20200219120318/https://hawthornestrategy.com/case_study/test-2/

In a September 2020 article about pink slime journalism, [Deseret News reported](#) that Locality Labs had been renamed Pipeline Media.¹²⁹ Its executives include Brian Timpone, Bradley Cameron (creator of Metric Media), and West Texas oil and gas magnate Timothy Dunn, whose role and funding ties are discussed in Chapter 2.4. Cameron and Timpone are also executives of Pipeline Advisors, a private equity investment company registered in Texas.

Newsinator and LGIS

Newsinator was [incorporated](#) by Brian Timpone in 2015. It is a firm that, among other things, had a “history of doing paid political work and offers marketing services to companies under the name Interactive Content Services,” according to Joe Mahr of the [Chicago Tribune](#).¹³⁰

In 2015-16, according to the [Illinois State Board of Election Expenditure data](#), Newsinator was paid more than \$300,000 for “Advertising – newspaper” by [Liberty Principles](#), a conservative super PAC of which Dan Proft was chairman and treasurer. This was split between 20 candidates’ campaigns, most of whom were running for state office in Illinois in 2016. (Liberty Principles is now defunct.) Proft, described as “one of the state’s most visible and controversial political figures,”¹³¹ ran for governor in 2010. He later ran the People Who Play by the Rules PAC¹³², and hosts a show on the Salem Radio Network, which syndicates Christian political talk and conservative programming.¹³³

The line between Locality Labs and Newsinator is blurry. In 2016, the Cook County Chronicle reported that Proft works with reporters at Locality Labs and “suggests stories and discusses what reporters should cover.”¹³⁴ Newsinator, on the other hand, was responsible for mailing eight-page weekly print publications created by Proft’s organization to voters. A new entity, LGIS — a collaboration between Timpone and Proft — “took over production and distribution of newspapers” in 2016, according to a since-dismissed [Federal Election Commission complaint](#).¹³⁵ The same FEC complaint says the corporation “has been in ‘dissolved’ status since January 11, 2019,” but Illinois state records confirm Proft was once president of LGIS. At the time of our 2019 investigation, LGIS had more than 30 Illinois-based sites, of which it claimed 11 had corresponding print publications.

¹²⁹ Jennifer Graham, “Understanding ‘pink slime journalism’ and what it reveals about conservatives and liberals,” *Deseret News*, Sept. 8, 2020, <https://www.deseret.com/indepth/2020/9/7/21409053/understanding-pink-slime-journalism-and-what-it-reveals-about-conservatives-and-liberals>

¹³⁰ Joe Mahr, “Conservative Illinois publications blur lines between journalism, politics,” *Chicago Tribune*, Apr. 6, 2018, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-met-illinois-conservative-news-20180327-story.html>

¹³¹ Mahr, *ibid.*

¹³² Greg Hinz, “Election board to probe Dan Proft PAC spending in governor’s race,” *Crain’s Chicago Business*, Feb. 23, 2023, <https://www.chicagobusiness.com/politics/state-elections-board-examining-dan-profts-people-who-play-rules-pac>

¹³³ The Salem Radio Network featured heavily in the podcast *The Divided Dial*: <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/orm/divided-dial>

¹³⁴ Jean Lotus, “New weekly newspaper mailers part of GOP Super PAC strategy in west Cook County,” *Cook County Chronicle*, Feb. 17, 2016, <https://chronicleillinois.com/news/cook-county-news/new-weekly-newspaper-mailers-part-of-gop-super-pac-strategy-in-west-cook-county/>

¹³⁵ Federal Election Commission, “MUR 7148 (Liberty Principles PAC, et al.): Factual and Legal Analysis,” <https://www.fec.gov/files/legal/murs/7148/19044475209.pdf>

The extent of Locality Labs’ involvement in LGIS and Newsinator’s business is highlighted in the aforementioned FEC lawsuit. The lawsuit was filed for violating the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 by “re-publishing campaign materials in a format designed to look like local community papers.”¹³⁶ The respondents included the campaign (Khouri for Congress), the PAC (Liberty Principles), and LGIS (the company publishing the material) alongside Locality Labs. The details of the lawsuit further stipulate that LGIS “contracts with various entities, including Locality Labs [...], to prepare content for publications” including providing “local and state news in certain geographical areas in Illinois.” The lawsuit was dismissed in July 2019.

Later state records listed the two principals of LGIS as Timpone and John Tillman, an influential conservative activist in Illinois politics who features in *Chapter 2.4*. LGIS’s controversial activities created fresh, albeit familiar headlines during the 2020 midterm elections. (*See Chapter 3.*)

Franklin Archer

Two networks — DirecTech (Local News Network) and Metro Business Daily — and almost 180 sites sailed under the banner of [Franklin Archer](#),¹³⁷ a company established in 2018. Brian Timpone’s relative, Michael Timpone, was the CEO. The company’s website boasts that it is “the largest producer of local news in the United States,” with more than 200 active websites, more than three million monthly page views, and 600 stories produced daily.¹³⁸

The 128 Local News Network sites we found in 2019-2020 promised communities a way to “browse the latest news, investigate upcoming events, stay in the know” by creating and maintaining “the most comprehensive and easily searchable database of all local businesses by placing an emphasis on consumer needs.”¹³⁹ They are all “a product of LocalLabs.” (Many of these sites are no longer active in 2023.)

The [Metro Business Network](#) website didn’t explicitly state its connection to Franklin Archer or LocalLabs, but its sites follow the same format as those in Franklin Archer’s Metro Business Daily network: one business daily per state and one for Washington DC. Their privacy policy¹⁴⁰ and terms of service¹⁴¹ indicated that they were Locality Labs properties.

In 2019, we found the Franklin Archer organizational website was hosted on the same server as Liberty Principles, Dan Proft’s super PAC. A Franklin Archer worker, who asked not to be named, said the company’s writers are paid by Newsinator. According to the [Iowa corporate](#)

¹³⁶ Federal Election Commission, *ibid.*

¹³⁷ https://web.archive.org/web/20191108195416/https://franklinarcher.com/our_publications

¹³⁸ <https://web.archive.org/web/20191118210641/https://franklinarcher.com/>

¹³⁹ e.g. <https://web.archive.org/web/20200812085916/https://adairmadisonnews.com/about-us>

¹⁴⁰ e.g. <https://web.archive.org/web/20191218165400/https://vtbusinessdaily.com/privacy>

¹⁴¹ e.g. <https://web.archive.org/web/20191218165242/https://vtbusinessdaily.com/terms>

[registry](#), Newsinator and Franklin Archer are both alternative business entity names for DirecTech, LLC.

Metric Media

Metric Media was created in 2019 by Bradley Cameron, the founder and CEO of the management consultancy Situation Management Group (SMG). In 2020, Cameron’s [online biography stated](#) he was “currently retained by private investors to develop a national media enterprise,” with no additional information about their identities.

Metric Media sites also sport Locality Labs’ privacy policy and terms of service, and share servers and analytics identifiers with some of the other organizations.

Our analysis found 189 Metric Media sites in 10 states. The Metric Media Foundation [About Us](#) page noted that it “funds more than 900 news sites that generate over 3 million monthly page views,” while its operation “also produces over 600 stories daily, making it the largest producer of local news content in the nation.” The names of these news sites were not listed.

The numbers boasted by Metric Media — 3 million monthly page views and 600 daily stories— were identical to the ones claimed by Franklin Archer. But the relationship between Franklin Archer and Metric Media was not articulated on either organization’s website.

When we asked Timpone about the emergence, structure, and scale of these networks as well as their business model, he said, “Locality Labs has used its proprietary technology to transform public records into news for major newspaper/media companies around the United States, as well as digital start-ups like LGIS.”

Despite the different organization and network names (*see Figure 4*), it was evident these sites were connected. Other than simply sharing network metadata as described above, they also shared bylines — including Metric Media News Service and LocalLabs News Service for templated stories — as well as host servers, layouts, and templates.

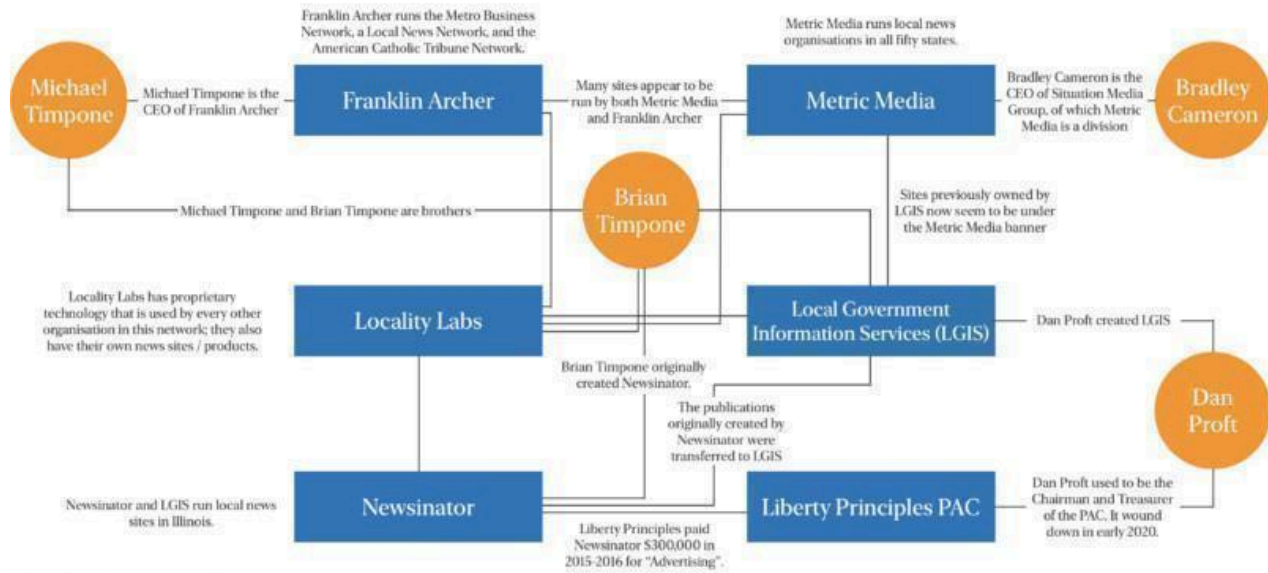


Figure 4: The organizational structure of the network circa 2020.

2.3 Funding the Metric Media network¹⁴²

In October 2021, the Tow Center published [an investigation](#) exploring the Metric Media network’s funding. We detailed how the network had ties to founders of the Tea Party movement, to a nonprofit [described](#) by *Mother Jones* as “the dark-money ATM of the conservative movement,”¹⁴³ and to a Catholic political advocacy group that [launched](#) a \$9.7 million campaign in swing states¹⁴⁴ against the Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden six weeks before the 2020 election.

We traced a subset of the network’s financial ties by examining the IRS returns of multiple nonprofit organizations, which allowed us to identify the sources of more than half of the Metric Media Foundation’s reported [\\$407,500 revenue](#) in 2019.¹⁴⁵

Our investigations relied on threat intelligence tools Farsight DNSDB Flexible Search and RiskIQ, IRS filings, Facebook, and Google ad libraries, as well as our internal analytics tool to establish the connections within the network.

¹⁴² This section is derived from reporting originally published on October 14, 2021. See: Priyanjana Bengani, “The Metric Media network runs more than 1,200 local news sites. Here are some of the non-profits funding them,” *CJR*, Oct. 14, 2021, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/metric-media-lobbyists-funding.php

¹⁴³ Andy Kroll, “Donors’ Trust—the Right’s Dark-Money ATM—Pumps Out Record \$96 Million,” *Mother Jones*, Dec. 3, 2013, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/12/donors-trust-franklin-center-alec-mercatus-center-dark-money/>

¹⁴⁴ Justine Coleman, “Catholic group launches \$9.7M campaign against Biden targeting swing-state voters,” *The Hill*, Sep. 15, 2020, <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/516504-catholic-group-launches-97m-campaign-against-biden-targeting-swing-state>

¹⁴⁵ Roberts, Andrea Suozzo, Alec Glassford, Ash Ngu, Brandon. “Metric Media Foundation - Form Form 990 for Period Ending Dec 2019 - Nonprofit Explorer.” *ProPublica*, May 9, 2013. https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/display_990/833525020/03_2021_prefixes_82-85/833525020_201912_990_2021030217779387

Through this analysis we distinguished between revenue that came into Metric Media via other entities within the network and revenue received from entities outside the core network.

Revenue received from other entities within the network

Metric Media Foundation’s [2019 Form 990 filing](#) disclosed that more than half of its revenue — \$236,750 — was paid to Franklin Archer (listed as an “independent contractor”) for “publishing.”

Figure 5 breaks down the core entities and key stakeholders of the publishing network, the related entities run by those stakeholders, and the flow of money into the network based on 2019 IRS filings.

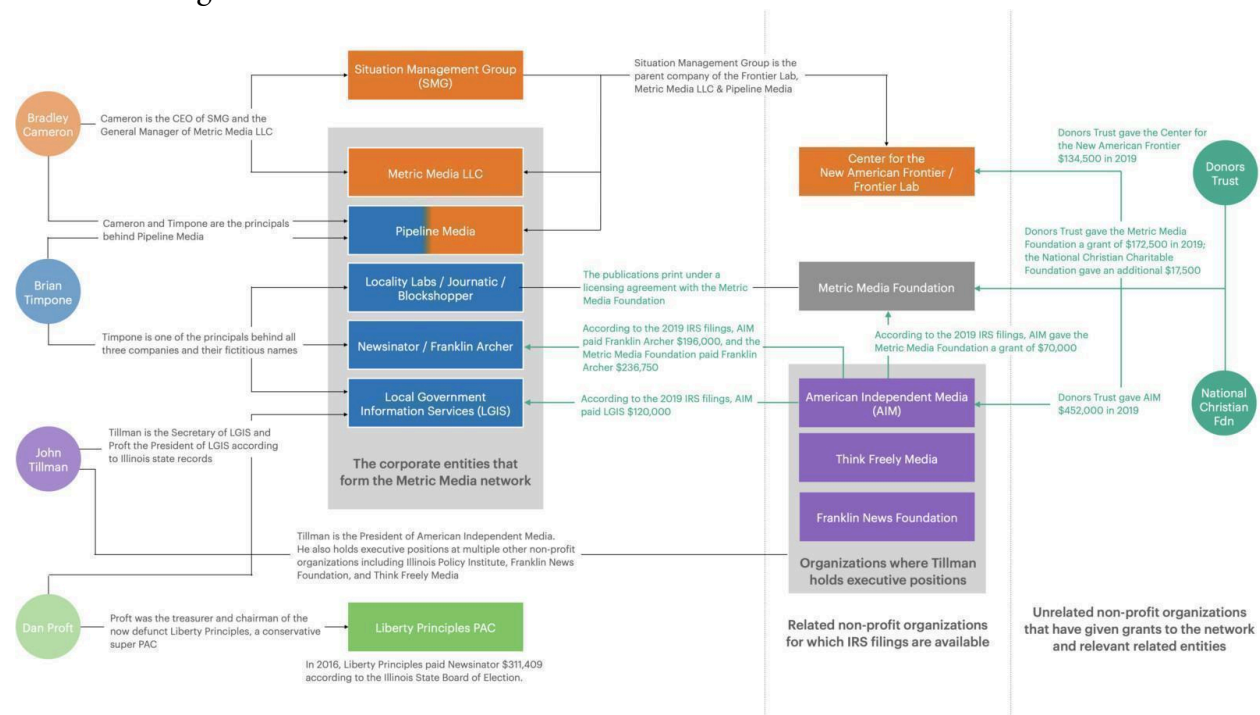


Figure 5: Key stakeholders and related entities circa 2021.

Brian Timpono continued to focus on the technical infrastructure of this sprawling “local news” network, starting with LGIS in Illinois. Around 30 publications in the state were initially owned by Newsinator, which was paid \$311,409 by the conservative super PAC Liberty Principles in 2016, according to [data from the Illinois State Board of Election Expenditure](#), for “Advertising – newspaper.”¹⁴⁶ In the second half of 2016, Local Government Information Services (LGIS) was created and “[took over production and distribution of \[the](#)

¹⁴⁶ Illinois State Board of Elections, “Expenditure Search”, [https://www.elections.il.gov/campaigndisclosure/ExpenditureSearchByAllExpenditures.aspx?ddlExpenditureType=wOGh3OTPFkQv2YWjeRmjTeStk426RfVK&ddlState=Ry707kcsXsM%3d&ddlReceivedDateTime=Ry707kcsXsM%3d&ddlReceivedDateTimeThru=Ry707kcsXsM%3d&txtLastOnlyName=u%2fLLiUefO6uTj03oFThb%2bw8REfuXDSu&ddlLastOnlyNameSearchType=%2fOm8zA\]7f4ioTTB90BLGgijKP5NjRbIx&radSupportingOpposing=Ry707kcsXsM%3d](https://www.elections.il.gov/campaigndisclosure/ExpenditureSearchByAllExpenditures.aspx?ddlExpenditureType=wOGh3OTPFkQv2YWjeRmjTeStk426RfVK&ddlState=Ry707kcsXsM%3d&ddlReceivedDateTime=Ry707kcsXsM%3d&ddlReceivedDateTimeThru=Ry707kcsXsM%3d&txtLastOnlyName=u%2fLLiUefO6uTj03oFThb%2bw8REfuXDSu&ddlLastOnlyNameSearchType=%2fOm8zA]7f4ioTTB90BLGgijKP5NjRbIx&radSupportingOpposing=Ry707kcsXsM%3d)

Illinois] newspapers.”¹⁴⁷ LGIS was [a collaboration between](#) Timpone and Dan Proft, the chairman and treasurer of the now-defunct Liberty Principles.¹⁴⁸

In 2020-21, Proft was the president of LGIS, with John Tillman listed as the secretary. Even though Tillman’s role at LGIS appears to be more recent, multiple organizations that he’s involved in have paid Timpone’s organizations over the years, according to previous years’ IRS filings.

Tillman is an influential conservative activist in Illinois politics. [ProPublica](#)¹⁴⁹ and the [Michigan Campaign Finance Network](#) (MCFN)¹⁵⁰ have reported on his influence in Illinois and Michigan politics. MCFN reports on how his organizations are aligned in messaging and “creating an ecosystem of alternative media online, delivering conservative content to Michiganders in the form of political reporting, grassroots organizations, advocacy, and even satire.”¹⁵¹ The ProPublica story focused on the “often-dizzying series of transactions” Tillman and his associates adopted to move “millions of dollars around five interconnected nonprofits they run, steering money to for-profit ventures in which they have a stake.”¹⁵²

Tillman told MCFN that “while he is still CEO of IPI, he is merely a volunteer or board member for the other organizations,” and that they “just funnel things through (a single address) for administrative purposes.” This, he said, “does not mean that the organizations work together or are affiliated, it means a lot of us know each other, but the organizations are independent, have independent boards, operate independently, have independent missions.”¹⁵³

Tillman’s many media ventures have received financial backing from Illinois conservative politicians, as well as from some of the biggest Republican contributors in the United States, including foundations tied to the Koch, Mercer, and Uihlein families.

One such venture is American Independent Media, a nonprofit incorporated in December 2016, which has adopted two alternative names in Illinois according to state records: Restore American Communities Safely and Citizens Against Voter Fraud. Both names have their own Facebook pages.

¹⁴⁷ Federal Election Commission, *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁸ Mahr, *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁹ Mick Dumke et al., “As Conservative Group Grows In Influence, Financial Dealings Enrich Its Leaders,” ProPublica, Feb. 8, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/article/illinois-policy-institute-john-tillman-transactions>

¹⁵⁰ Simon D. Schuster, “Surround Sound: Closely Tied Nonprofits Are Stoking Resentment To The Stay-At-Home Order,” Michigan Campaign Finance Network, May 15, 2020, retrieved Dec. 30, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20200929104700/https://mcfn.org/node/7395/surround-sound-closely-tied-nonprofits-are-stoking-resentment-to-the-stay-at-home-order>

¹⁵¹ Schuster, *ibid.*

¹⁵² Dumke et al., *op. cit.*

¹⁵³ Schuster, *ibid.*

Tillman is the president of American Independent Media. According to its [2019 IRS filing](#), the organization gave a \$70,000 grant to the Metric Media Foundation as it “shares the same principles as American Independent Media.” It also treated Franklin Archer and LGIS as independent contractors: Franklin Archer was given \$196,000 for “site implementation and news creation,” while LGIS was given \$120,000 as a “grant to underwrite community news [development].”¹⁵⁴

While we only found one instance of one of Tillman’s companies paying Metric Media in 2019, two others, Franklin News Foundation and Think Freely Media, have previously paid entities within the network.

Tillman is also the chairman, treasurer, and director of the Franklin News Foundation, previously the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity. It was [created in 2009 to create online publications in more than a dozen state capitals](#)¹⁵⁵ in partnership with the State Policy Network. The State Policy Network is a group of 65 conservative and libertarian think tanks funded by donor organizations including the Koch-backed DonorsTrust and Donors Capital Funds, and is known to create multipronged coordinated efforts to push its agenda across states. In [2018](#), the Franklin News Foundation paid Newsinator \$196,102 for “advertising services.”¹⁵⁶

Think Freely Media is a conservative think tank that extols the virtues of limited government. Tillman is the president. In [2016](#), Think Freely Media paid Newsinator \$346,660 for “newswire services.”¹⁵⁷

Revenue received from entities outside the core network

While the multiple organizations that make up the core of this network and their related entities account for about \$500,000 paid to Timpone’s companies and \$70,000 to the Metric Media Foundation in 2019 alone — the year the Metric Media Foundation and LLC were formed — more money trickled in from other sources.

In 2019, the biggest individual contributor to the Metric Media Foundation was [DonorsTrust](#), with \$172,500 “for general operations.”¹⁵⁸ In [2020](#), DonorsTrust gave the Metric Media Foundation an additional \$1.27 million, also “for general operations.”¹⁵⁹ The Center for the

¹⁵⁴ “American Independent Media - Form 990 for Fiscal Year Ending Dec. 2019.” ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer. <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/814770680/202013179349301311/full>

¹⁵⁵ Schuster, *op. cit.*

¹⁵⁶ “Franklin News Foundation - Form 990 for Period Ending Dec 2018.” ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer. https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/display_990/264066298/11_2019_prefixes_26-31/264066298_201812_990_2019110116808377

¹⁵⁷ “Think Freely Media Inc - Form 990 for Fiscal Year Ending Dec. 2016.” ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer.

<https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/271110796/201743189349305524/IRS990>

¹⁵⁸ Donors Trust, Inc. “Return of Organization Exempt From Income Tax,” 16 November 2020.

<https://fm.cnb.com/applications/cnbc.com/resources/editorialfiles/2021/01/12/2019DTForm990PUBLICDISCLOSURE.pdf>

¹⁵⁹ Donors Trust, Inc. “Return of Organization Exempt From Income Tax,” 15 November 2021.

New American Frontier, previously called the Frontier Lab, received \$134,500 “for general operations.” The Center for the New American Frontier received a cumulative \$1.44 million from DonorsTrust and Donors Capital Fund between 2015 and 2019, according to its [IRS Form 990 filings](#).¹⁶⁰ This accounted for 96 percent of its total revenue in this period.

The Frontier Lab is “an SMG company that conducts consumer and voter research,” with Bradley Cameron as the registered agent, [according to state records](#).¹⁶¹ Cameron is also the CEO of the management consultancy SMG, the general manager of Metric Media LLC, and one of the two principals of Pipeline Media, all of which make up the core of the “local news” network.

In her book *Dark Money*, Jane Mayer describes DonorsTrust and its sister organization Donors Capital Fund as “a screen for the right wing, behind which fingerprints disappeared from the cash.”¹⁶²

While the two organizations don’t exclusively fund conservative institutions and causes, they are conduits for anonymous donors to bankroll causes aligned with their interests (and get tax write-offs) without revealing their identities; the organizations are not required to disclose the names of their contributors. Overall, an analysis by the [Center for Media and Democracy](#) found the two donor organizations had pumped at least \$90 million into “right-wing causes” ranging from media to misinformation around climate change in 2019.¹⁶³

DonorsTrust also [gave American Independent Media \\$452,000](#): \$415,000 for “general operations” and \$37,000 “to support independent media coverage in communities across the US.” Franklin News Foundation was given just under \$1 million; one of the purposes was “to balance the liberal media with conservative & libertarian media.”¹⁶⁴

Illinois Opportunity Project

John Tillman, along with Dan Proft, was one of the founders of [the Illinois Opportunity Project](#),¹⁶⁵ a free-market advocacy organization. Between [2017](#) and [2018](#), the nonprofit paid more than \$440,000 to two of Timponé’s organizations: Locality Labs cumulatively received \$300,495 and Newsinator \$140,442.¹⁶⁶ There is no mention of any of the entities in the Metric

¹⁶⁰ “Metric Media Foundation, Full Filing - Nonprofit Explorer.” ProPublica, May 9, 2013, <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/833525020/202023219349316732/full>.

¹⁶¹ “Taxable Entity Search.” Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts. Accessed January 12, 2024. <https://mycpa.cpa.state.tx.us/coa/search.do>

¹⁶² Mayer, 2016, *op. cit.*

¹⁶³ David Armiak, “DonorsTrust and Donors Capital Pumped at Least \$90 Million into Right-Wing Causes in 2019,” Exposed by CMD, Dec. 3, 2020, <https://www.exposedbycmd.org/2020/12/03/donorstrust-and-donors-capital-pumped-at-least-90-million-into-right-wing-causes-in-2019/>

¹⁶⁴ Donors Trust, Inc., 2020, *op.cit.*

¹⁶⁵ Dumke et al., *ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ “Illinois Opportunity Project - Form Form 990-O for Period Ending Dec 2017.” ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer.

https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/display_990/273627386/02_2019_prefixes_27-30/273627386_201712_990O_2019020116053057 and

“Illinois Opportunity Project - Form Form 990-O for Period Ending Dec 2018.” ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer.

https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/display_990/273627386/05_2019_prefixes_27-27/273627386_201812_990O_2019052916352795

Media network in the organization’s [2019 IRS filing](#). The service listed as provided by Locality Labs and Newsinator in this case was “Consulting.”¹⁶⁷

At the time of our investigation, Brian Burch was the director and chairman of the Illinois Opportunity Project. He was also the executive director of the Fidelis Center for Law and Justice, which houses the project CatholicVote (*see more below*).

National Christian Charitable Foundation

The National Christian Charitable Foundation, which was then [the sixth-largest charity](#)¹⁶⁸ in the United States, and whose [IRS filing](#)¹⁶⁹ said it makes “distributions to and for Christian churches and other charities,” gave the Metric Media Foundation \$17,500 for “growth” in 2019. Based on the filings alone, it’s impossible to determine how the grants given by this charity impacted the stories published by the Metric Media network, or whether more money was given in subsequent years.

2.4 Community Newsmaker and advocacy ties¹⁷⁰

Launched in 2020, Metric Media’s [Community Newsmaker](#) platform, referenced at the beginning of our report, does more than offer a narrative of citizen journalism and a portal to pitch stories. In a [2021 Tow Center study](#), we looked at where this platform is embedded to gain insights into the nature of the extended Metric Media network and the funders and advocacy groups with which it is intertwined.

Metric Media’s involvement in the Community Newsmaker project was declared upfront. The [YouTube tutorial](#) (now removed) said the tool was “provided with support from the Metric Media Foundation,” and the Metric Media Foundation’s website said it was one of the services it provides. An organization called Community News Foundation said it funds the tool. On its website, the Community News Foundation listed the three members of its board of directors; all three were also on the board of the Metric Media Foundation (which has four directors).

Community Newsmaker also provided a handful of organizations with their own dedicated pages to outline their objectives and allow their supporters to connect with writers at Metric Media. *Figure 6* lays out the nature of this network, including the organizations that had dedicated pages on the Community Newsmaker website in its previous form.

¹⁶⁷ “Illinois Opportunity Project - Form Form 990-O for Period Ending December 2019.” ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer. https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/display_990/273627386/11_2020_prefixes_23-27/273627386_201912_990O_2020112317454577

¹⁶⁸ Scott Bixby, “Christian Billionaires Are Funding a Push to Kill the Equality Act,” The Daily Beast, June 1, 2021, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/christian-billionaires-are-funding-a-push-to-kill-the-equality-act>

¹⁶⁹ Roberts, Andrea Suozzo, Alec Glassford, Ash Ngu, Brandon. “National Christian Charitable Foundation Inc, Full Filing - Nonprofit Explorer.” ProPublica, May 9, 2013. <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/581493949/202023169349303567/full>

¹⁷⁰ This section is derived from reporting originally published on October 14, 2021. See: “Advocacy groups and Metric Media collaborate on local ‘community news,’” CJR, Oct. 14, 2021, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/community-newsmaker-metric-media-local-news.php

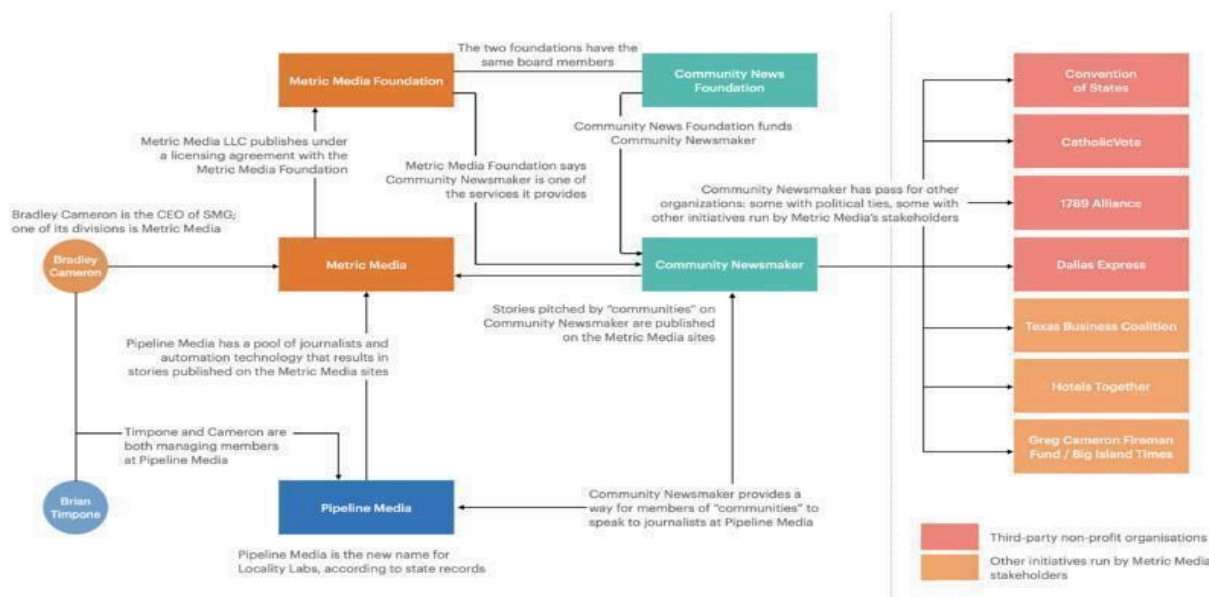


Figure 6: The network that formed Community Newsmaker, including third-party organizations with dedicated pages on the Community Newsmaker homepage, circa 2021.

Pages dedicated to third-party organizations lived at subdomains of the Community Newsmaker website. Subdomains are prefixes added to a domain to help organize different parts of a website. For example, google.com is the domain and mail.google.com is a subdomain of google.com; domains can have multiple subdomains. Some examples included cos.communitynewsmaker.com, catholicinterview.communitynewsmaker.com, and pa.communitynewsmaker.com. These subdomains have since been taken down; instead, Community Newsmaker now relies on URL slugs to organize the site.

We used the database tool [Farsight DNSDB Flexible Search](#) to identify the resources (specifically subdomains) of the Community Newsmaker domain, and used RiskIQ's certificate tool to find all the SSL certificates for the domain and subdomains. Additionally, we relied on public records like IRS Form 990s as well as Facebook and Google's ad libraries. Our methodology is detailed in *Appendix 2*.

Breakdown of Community Newsmaker Subdomains

Overall, we identified 14 subdomains on Community Newsmaker. These were a mix of pages for advocacy groups, certain states (Pennsylvania, Michigan, Virginia, Ohio), and organizations that shared stakeholders with the Metric Media network. Subsequently, we found stories across the Metric Media network that elevated these groups, their tenets, and their key personnel. None of the stories we found ran with disclaimers about whether the stories were sourced from Community Newsmaker, or with any disclosures around conflicts of interest. *Figure 7* shows the breakdown of the types of organizations with dedicated pages on Community Newsmaker.

Community Newsmaker Subdomains

Subdomain	Is Metric Media Affiliate	Is Operated by SMG Client	Is State Specific	Is Advocacy Group
Convention of States	✗	✓	✗	✓
CatholicVote	✗	✗	✗	✓
HOTELS Together	✓	✓	✗	✓
Sentries	✓	✗	✗	✓
Big Island Times	✓	✗	✓	✗
Michigan Newsmaker	✓	✗	✓	✗
Pennsylvania Newsmaker	✓	✗	✓	✗
Ohio Newsmaker	✓	✗	✓	✗
Virginia Newsmaker	✓	✗	✓	✗
1789 Alliance	✗	✗	✗	✓
Dallas Express	✗	✓	✓	✗

Figure 7: A breakdown of the communities with dedicated pages on the Community Newsmaker subdomain circa 2021.

Situation Management Group’s clients — of which Convention of States was one — also had dedicated pages on Community Newsmaker’s subdomains, as did other Metric Media stakeholders.

- [HOTELS Together](#) was an initiative set up during the early days of the pandemic, along with the [Workplace Recovery Alliance](#), to bat for the hospitality industry. Bradley Cameron, the CEO of SMG and the president of Metric Media LLC, was the sole contact listed on both websites.¹⁷¹ ¹⁷² HOTELS Together and Workplace Recovery Alliance also had websites that [aggregated stories](#) from Metric Media sites that focused on the hospitality industry during the pandemic.¹⁷³ Metric Media’s relationship with Ashford, Inc., a client of SMG, also plays into both initiatives. The [publicly traded company](#) “provides asset management and advisory services to other entities, primarily within the hospitality industry.”¹⁷⁴ More than 100 cookie-cutter stories (*sample in*

¹⁷¹ Hotels Together. “Lending Standards,” <https://web.archive.org/web/20200718032314/https://www.hotelstogether.org/about>

¹⁷² Workplace Recovery Alliance. “Contact,” <https://web.archive.org/web/20210513022145/https://workplacerecoveryalliance.com/contact>

¹⁷³ Hotels Together, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210508021107/https://hotelstogether.com/>

¹⁷⁴ “AINC.A - | Stock Price & Latest News | Reuters.” Accessed January 12, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/markets/companies/AINC.A/>

Figure 8) on the Metric Media sites featured employees from Ashford, Inc. and its related companies talking about how the pandemic had impacted them or how lenders were adopting “vulture tactics.” Monty Bennett, the CEO of Ashford, Inc., is also the [publisher of the Dallas Express](#),¹⁷⁵ which had launched earlier in 2021 and used the same technology stack and writers as the Metric Media sites. Bennett, replying to an email where we listed our findings along with a set of questions, said most of our findings were wrong but offered no specifics.

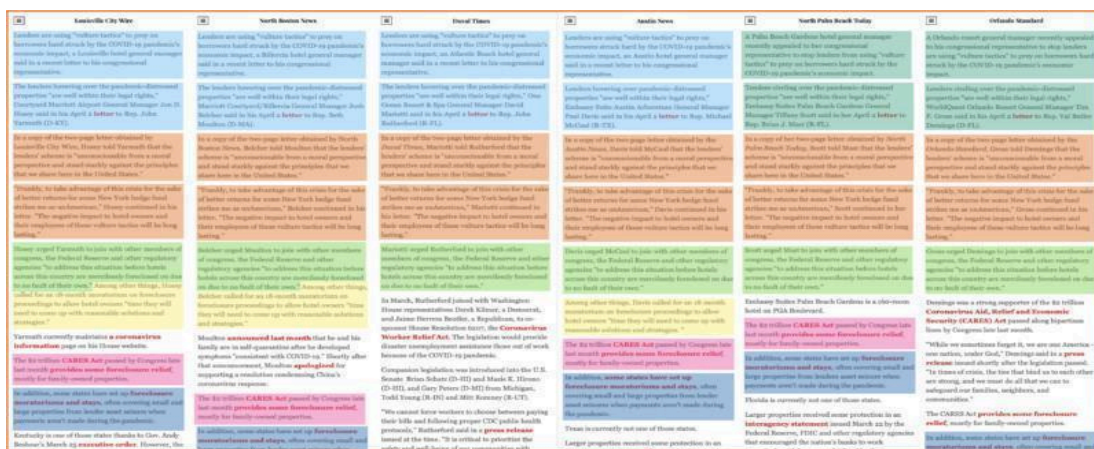


Figure 8: A subset of cookie-cutter stories focusing on “vulture tactics” of lenders. The identical quotes highlighted in orange are attributed to different people across the websites.

- [Sentries](#) focuses on “raising awareness about human trafficking.” Its website says it’s published by the Human Freedom Project, which is sponsored by the Texas Business Coalition. Brent Southwell, one of the board members of the Metric Media Foundation, is the founder and president of the Texas Business Coalition, according to state records.
- [Big Island Times](#) is a Community Newsmaker interface for the eponymous Hawaiian Metric Media news outlet. Big Island Times is one of five local news publications operated in Hawaii by the Metric Media network.
- Four Newsmaker subdomains for individual states — Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, and Virginia — that claimed they were “putting the power of community news in the hands of local [citizens].” (See Figure 9.)

¹⁷⁵ Peter Simek, “The Real Story Behind the *Dallas Express*,” *D Magazine*, June 11, 2021, <https://www.dmagazine.com/publications/d-magazine/2021/june/the-real-story-behind-the-dallas-express/>



Figure 9: Dedicated Community Newsmaker pages for Virginia, Michigan, and Pennsylvania.

Citizens for Self-Governance’s Convention of States

Citizens for Self-Governance is an advocacy group that is a client of Situation Management Group, the management consultancy run by Bradley Cameron, who also holds an executive role in Metric Media. The Metric Media news sites have covered multiple initiatives of Convention of States, a project of Citizens for Self-Governance, with no disclosures of the potential conflicts of interest. It also has its own Community Newsmaker page.

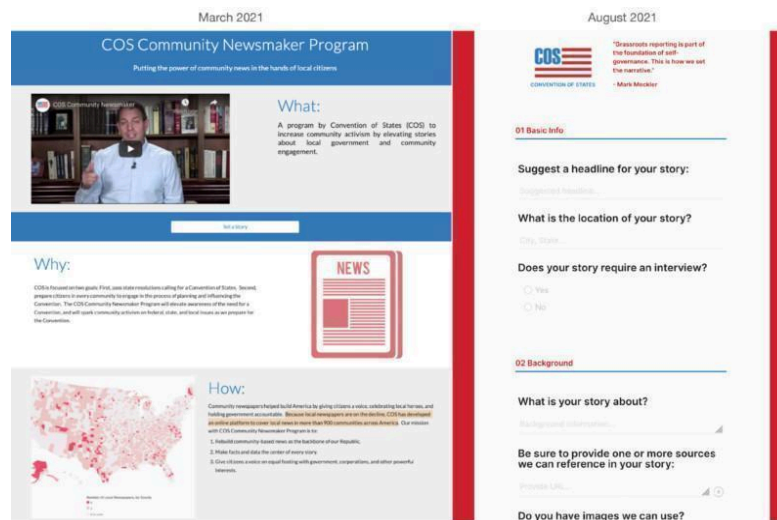


Figure 10: Convention of States’ Community Newsmaker page in March 2021, and in August 2021 (after the revamp).

The revamped Convention of States Community Newsmaker page shows a form that could be used to pitch stories. (See Figure 10.) Prompts include “Suggest a headline for your story” and “Do you have an image we can use?” At the top of the page is a quote from Mark Meckler: “Grassroots reporting is part of the foundation of self-governance. This is how we set the narrative.”

In a previous iteration of the organization’s Community Newsmaker page, Meckler introduces users to the platform in a [YouTube video](#), saying, “We created this program because if you’re anything like me, and I know we’re kind of the same in this regard, we hate the mainstream

media. We're sick and tired of the mainstream media, and one of the big problems of the mainstream media is they don't report about things that matter to people like you and me, and they're also not telling the truth all the time."¹⁷⁶

Based on the text of the site and the transcript of the video, it appears that Meckler and the Convention of States had a more involved relationship with Metric Media. The promotion of the platform and the encouragement for others to use it gives the impression of a partnership or co-branding exercise, with the [Convention of States website](#) even describing it as a collaboration.¹⁷⁷

Meckler did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Meckler, the founding president of the nonprofit organization Citizens for Self-Governance, was [one of the founders of the Tea Party Patriots in 2009](#)¹⁷⁸ and later stepped into the role of [interim CEO at the right-wing social media platform Parler](#)¹⁷⁹ after the original CEO was fired in the wake of the riot at the United States Capitol in January 2021. The Convention of States is a project of Citizens for Self-Governance (CSG), whose *raison d'être* is to trigger “a little known clause in Article V of the US Constitution to call a constitutional convention for new amendments to dramatically restrict the power of the federal government.”¹⁸⁰

Convention of States also [funded and helped organize the anti-quarantine “Open the States” protests in spring 2020](#).¹⁸¹ The protests followed the model set by the Tea Party movement that emerged in 2009. [Reporting by the New Yorker](#) found that Americans for Prosperity, a group backed by the Koch network, helped “educate, fund, and organize Tea Party protestors,” thereby turning “their private agenda into a mass movement.”¹⁸² This network, through a myriad of nonprofit organizations, is [considered to be](#) “among the biggest financiers of conservative advocacy groups and political causes” over the last five decades.¹⁸³

The Convention of States' collaborative ties with Metric Media are underlined by a [document](#) published on the Convention of States' website in March 2020 describing the Community

¹⁷⁶ Convention of States Project, “COS Community Newsmaker,” Jan. 30, 2020,

https://web.archive.org/web/20210419204527if_/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYarrb7LA_w

¹⁷⁷ “What: A Resource for the COS Grassroots Network,” Convention of States, March 2020, retrieved Dec. 23, 2023, from

<https://web.archive.org/web/20210413214906/https://conventionofstates.com/files/cos-comm-newsmaker-intro/download>

¹⁷⁸ MJ Lee, “Mark Meckler, Tea Party co-founder, quits,” Politico, Feb. 24, 2012,

<https://www.politico.com/story/2012/02/tea-party-co-founder-quits-073255>

¹⁷⁹ Rachel Lerman, “Major Trump backer Rebekah Mercer orchestrates Parler’s second act,” *The Washington Post*, Feb. 24, 2021,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/02/24/parler-relaunch-rebekah-mercero/>

¹⁸⁰ Jamiles Lartey, “Conservatives call for constitutional intervention last seen 230 years ago,” *The Guardian*, Aug. 11, 2018,

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/aug/11/conservatives-call-for-constitutional-convention-alec>

¹⁸¹ Isaac Stanley-Becker and Tony Romm, “The anti-quarantine protests seem spontaneous. But behind the scenes, a powerful network is helping,” *The Washington Post*, Apr. 22, 2020,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/inside-the-conservative-networks-backing-anti-quarantine-protests/2020/04/22/da75c81e-83fe-11ea-a3eb-e9fc93160703_story.html

¹⁸² Jane Mayer, “The Koch Brothers’ Covert Operations,” *The New Yorker*, Aug. 23, 2010,

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/08/30/covert-operations>

¹⁸³ Andrew Perez and David Sirota, “Charles Koch funded eviction push while investing in real estate companies,” *The Guardian*, May 21, 2021,

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/may/21/charles-koch-foundation-eviction-real-estate>

Newsmaker tool as a “news story pitching resource that COS affiliated grassroots can independently harness to advance community activism and self-governance in their communities.”¹⁸⁴ The document says Community Newsmaker is “a collaboration between Citizens for Self-Governance and the Metric Media Foundation to help restore local news in communities across America,” and that the articles will be published in an “established network of local news sites” or “statewide Business Daily outlets”; these refer to the extended Metric Media network.

The Convention of States has also partnered with Center for the New American Frontier (previously the Frontier Lab), which, like Metric Media, is under the Situation Management Group umbrella.

Further, the Metric Media publications have republished at least 1,400 stories about term limits: either highlighting candidates who have agreed to support congressional term limits (one story per candidate) or praising candidates for signing their pledge (again, one story per candidate). U.S. Term Limits is an advocacy group founded by Eric O’Keefe that seeks to impose term limits on Congress and state legislature. O’Keefe, a long-time political operative with deep ties to the Kochs,¹⁸⁵ is the board president of Citizens for Self-Governance and holds executive positions at multiple other conservative political nonprofit organizations.

The interplay between key stakeholders and entities across the Metric Media network and Convention of States is shown in *Figure 11*.

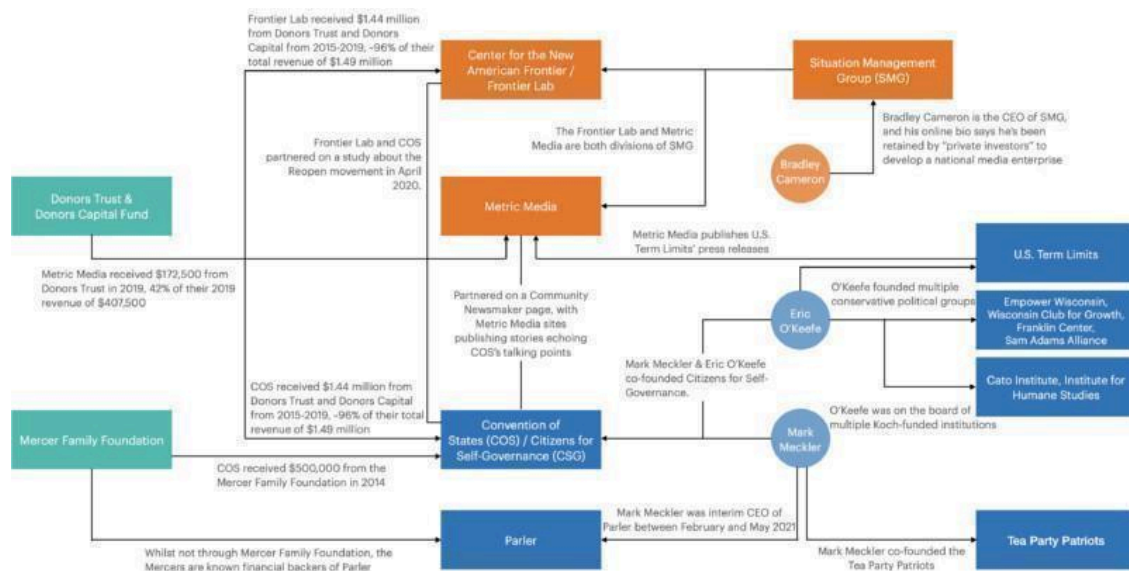


Figure 11: The interplay of key entities, stakeholders, and big money donors in the Metric Media network and Convention of States network circa 2021.

¹⁸⁴ “What: A Resource for the COS Grassroots Network,” Convention of States, March 2020, retrieved Dec. 23, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20210413214906/https://conventionofstates.com/files/cos-comm-newsmaker-intro/download>

¹⁸⁵ Stanley-Becker and Romm, *op. cit.*

CRT Central

CRT Central was launched in the summer of 2021, describing itself as “a comprehensive resource for anyone interested in fighting this emerging racism, sometimes called Critical Race Theory, in our schools.”¹⁸⁶ The aggregator site is operated by the American Schools Coalition, which has seven members, of whom two are Meckler and the Convention of States.

CRT Central aggregates stories from a variety of sources outside the Metric Media network. The 140-odd stories we analyzed covered a range of topics from actual legislation and impact on the ground to opinion. This includes [Reuters](#)’ “‘Critical Race Theory’ roils a Tennessee school district,”¹⁸⁷ the [Dallas Morning News](#)’ “Gov. Greg Abbott signs tougher anti-critical race theory law,”¹⁸⁸ and the [Brookings Institution](#)’s “Why are states banning critical race theory?”¹⁸⁹ The op-eds are drawn from a range of sources, including the Manhattan Institute’s [City Journal](#) (“[The White Backlash That Wasn’t: Opposition to critical race theory is broad and bipartisan](#)”),¹⁹⁰ the Heritage Foundation (“[Judge Defends Equal Justice Against Tide of Critical Race Theory, Disparate Impact](#)”),¹⁹¹ and the [National Review](#) (“[Pushback on Critical Race Theory Starts with the States](#)”).¹⁹²

Within the Metric Media network, though, around 9,000 stories were published identifying individual teachers who signed an online pledge from the [Zinn Education Project](#) to continue teaching critical race theory. The headlines and text are repetitive: California Business Daily’s “[Online pledge to teach controversial Critical Race Theory signed by 17 Lafayette teachers by week ending Sep. 4](#),”¹⁹³ The Will County Gazette’s “[Four Plainfield teachers pledge to teach Critical Race Theory despite controversy by week ending Aug. 28](#),”¹⁹⁴ and Hudson Today’s “[No new teachers in West New York sign pledge in week ending Aug. 07 to teach Critical Race Theory](#).”¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁶ “About Us,” CRT Central, retrieved Dec. 23, 2023, from: <https://crtcentral.com/about-us>

¹⁸⁷ Gabriella Borter, “‘Critical Race Theory’ roils a Tennessee school district,” Reuters, Sep. 21, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/critical-race-theory-roils-tennessee-school-district-2021-09-21/>

¹⁸⁸ Valeria Olivares, “Gov. Greg Abbott signs tougher anti-critical race theory law,” *The Dallas Morning News*, Sep. 17, 2021, <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/education/2021/09/17/gov-greg-abbott-signs-tougher-anti-critical-race-theory-law/>

¹⁸⁹ Rashawn Ray and Alexandra Gibbons, “Why are states banning critical race theory?,” Brookings Institution, Nov. 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/07/02/why-are-states-banning-critical-race-theory/>

¹⁹⁰ Christopher F. Rufo, “The White Backlash That Wasn’t: Opposition to critical race theory is broad and bipartisan,” *City Journal*, Sep. 26, 2021, https://www.city-journal.org/parents-critical-race-theory-is-divisive-and-dangerous?wallit_nosession=1

¹⁹¹ GianCarlo Canaparo and Charles “Cully” Stinson, “Judge Defends Equal Justice Against Tide of Critical Race Theory, Disparate Impact,” The Heritage Foundation, Aug. 9, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/progressivism/commentary/judge-defends-equal-justice-against-tide-critical-race-theory-disparate>

¹⁹² William A. Jacobson, “Pushback on Critical Race Theory Starts with the States,” *National Review*, Aug. 30, 2021, retrieved Dec. 30, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20210902045132/https://www.nationalreview.com/2021/08/pushback-on-critical-race-theory-starts-with-the-states/>

¹⁹³ “Online pledge to teach controversial Critical Race Theory signed by 17 Lafayette teachers by week ending Sep. 4,” California Business Daily, Sep. 19, 2021, retrieved Dec. 20, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20210929090223/https://cabusinessdaily.com/stories/607787804-online-pledge-to-teach-controversial-critical-race-theory-signed-by-17-lafayette-teachers-by-week-ending-sep-4>

¹⁹⁴ “Four Plainfield teachers pledge to teach Critical Race Theory despite controversy by week ending Aug. 28,” Will County Gazette, Sep. 12, 2021, retrieved Dec. 20, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20210929085019/https://willcountygazette.com/stories/607262108-four-plainfield-teachers-pledge-to-teach-critical-race-theory-despite-controversy-by-week-ending-aug-28>

¹⁹⁵ “No new teachers in West New York sign pledge in week ending Aug. 07 to teach Critical Race Theory,” Hudson Today, Sep. 5, 2021, retrieved Dec. 20, 2023, from

Meanwhile, another 10 stories were published about [a single](#) July 2021 survey conducted by the Convention of States in partnership with the Trafalgar Group, which asked, “How should parents who oppose Critical Race Theory in public schools respond if it becomes part of their children’s curriculum?”¹⁹⁶

The headlines across the pieces are similar even though the stories were published on sites attached to different states. A piece published in the Austin Journal is titled [“Poll shows Americans believe parents should ‘take action’ if CRT is taught in school.”](#)¹⁹⁷ while the corresponding piece in Houston Daily is titled [“Poll: About half of Americans oppose schools teaching critical race theory.”](#)¹⁹⁸ Similar stories appear in the Metric Media outlets attached to Georgia, South Carolina, New Hampshire, Nevada, and Illinois.

The headlines are somewhat misleading, as the question in the survey isn’t about whether people support or oppose schools teaching critical race theory, but what action parents opposing CRT should take.

The ties between the Convention of States and Metric Media are not disclosed in any of these stories.

Anti-Quarantine Protests

Metric Media sites published a myriad of stories and press releases aligned with the Convention of States’ mission, including more than 100 stories across 60 sites promoting the Open the States campaign in spring 2020. Headlines tackled reopening, government overreach, and individual states’ plans to address the lockdown. They included Minnesota State Wire’s [“Convention of States: Minnesota’s unclear path to reopening leads to continued suffering.”](#)¹⁹⁹ Grand Canyon Times’ [“Arizona COS director: Government mandates violate First Amendment rights.”](#)²⁰⁰ “Convention of States group decries Florida government for using COVID-19 to enhance power,” and “Convention of States official: Wisconsin businesses ready to reopen no matter governor’s opinion.”

<https://web.archive.org/web/20210929085123/https://hudsontoday.com/stories/606937384-no-new-teachers-in-west-new-york-sign-pledge-in-week-end-ing-aug-07-to-teach-critical-race-theory>

¹⁹⁶ “Nationwide Issues Survey,” The Trafalgar Group, July 2021, <https://www.thetrafalgargroup.org/COSA-National-CRT-Full-Report.pdf>

¹⁹⁷ Art Benavidez, “Poll shows Americans believe parents should ‘take action’ if CRT is taught in school,” Austin Journal, Aug. 4, 2021,

<https://austinjournal.com/stories/606112673-poll-shows-americans-believe-parents-should-take-action-if-crt-is-taught-in-school>

¹⁹⁸ Caleb Lombardo, “Poll: About half of Americans oppose schools teaching critical race theory,” Houston Daily, Aug. 4, 2021,

<https://houstondaily.com/stories/606116938-poll-about-half-of-americans-oppose-schools-teaching-critical-race-theory>

¹⁹⁹ Mary Lou Lang, “Convention of States: Minnesota’s unclear path to reopening leads to continued suffering,”

Minnesota State Wire, May 13, 2020,

<https://minnesotastatewire.com/stories/536614328-convention-of-states-minnesota-s-unclear-path-to-reopening-leads-to-continued-suffering>

²⁰⁰ T.H. Lawrence, “Arizona COS director: Government mandates violate First Amendment rights,” Grand Canyon Times, Apr. 28, 2020,

<https://grandcanyontimes.com/stories/534109936-arizona-cos-director-government-mandates-violate-first-amendment-rights>

Just over half of these stories explicitly referred to the Convention of States’ reopen movement. None disclosed the collaboration between Metric Media and Convention of States on COS Community Newsmaker. A further 20 stories focused on government overreach, some of which were effectively cookie-cutter versions. (See Figure 12.) The rest were a combination of urging government officials to lift the restrictions, publicizing the Convention of States-sponsored citizen rallies, or encouraging businesses to reopen despite official directives.

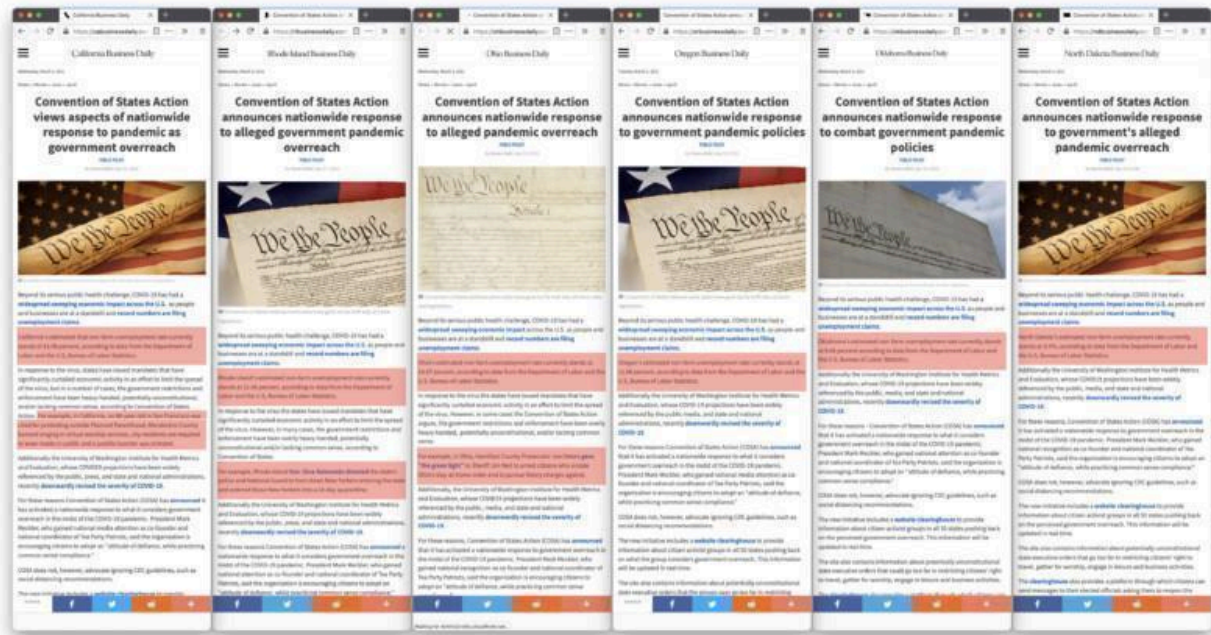


Figure 12: Multiple versions of a cookie-cutter story appeared across the Metric Media network in April 2020. The highlighted portions are the only differences.

One story, published in DC Business Daily, had the headline [“Frontier Center study finds that Reopeners are misunderstood.”](#)²⁰¹ The story was based on a [press release](#) issued by the Center For The New American Frontier, the nonprofit organization that had conducted the study with 100 supporters of the Reopen movement. The Center For The New American Frontier is a division of Situation Management Group, as is Metric Media.

The article acknowledges the study was a partnership between the Center For The New American Frontier and [OpenTheStates.com](#) (“an interactive computer service operated by Convention of States Action”), and was sponsored by the Convention of States Project. Both the Cameron-led operations — Metric Media and The Center For The New American Frontier — have received financing from the Koch-aligned donor organizations Donors Trust and Donors Capital Fund, as have the Convention of States and Citizens for Self-Governance.

²⁰¹ Juliette Fairley, “Frontier Center study finds that Reopeners are misunderstood,” DC Business Daily, May 24, 2020, retrieved Dec. 30, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20200610074653/https://dcbusinessdaily.com/stories/537868173-frontier-center-study-finds-that-reopeners-are-misunderstood>

Promoting a “green” Montana Senate candidate funded by CSG Action

On the electoral front, Metric Media published multiple stories about a race in which CSG Action, a political action committee from Citizens for Self-Governance, had a stake. In 2020, CSG Action was the [sole donor](#)²⁰² to super PAC Go Green Montana for Montana Green Party Senate candidate Wendie Fredrickson. The push to have the Green Party on the ballot came from the Montana Republican Party, which spent [at least \\$100,000](#) to collect enough signatures to clear the qualifying threshold.²⁰³ The money was funneled through a newly created group, Montanans for Conservation, which had ties to the Montana GOP.

Big Sky Times, one of Metric Media’s Montana sites, covered this race extensively, with at least seven stories focusing on its potential to determine the balance of the U.S. Senate. (In 2020, we found just over 1,000 stories published on Big Sky Times, but only 70 of them had a byline; the rest were repurposed, automated, or verbatim press releases.)

We also found [two stories](#)²⁰⁴ about this race in Legal Newline, one of the legal publications that is part of the extended network of 1,200-odd sites. Some of the stories published on Big Sky Times were linked to on other Metric Media sites, including Glacier Country News and Yellowstone Times.

None of the stories published on the Metric Media sites acknowledged the role of CSG Action in the Go Green Montana super PAC or Metric Media’s collaboration with the Convention of States; they did, however, mention the Montana Republican Party’s efforts in gathering the signatures to ensure a primary for the Green Party in the state.

Go Green Montana published [seven Facebook ads](#)²⁰⁵ promoting the “green” movement, two of which were Big Sky Times stories: one promoting Fredrickson and one highlighting her opposition’s ties to the Democrats. These are the only two ads we found linking to Big Sky Times in [Facebook’s Ad Archive](#).

Convention of States Volunteers and Leaders on Metric Media sites

It is not entirely clear whether any stories were successfully generated from the Community Newsmaker page, but more than a dozen pieces from October and November 2020 focused on elections from the point of view of individual voters. The people quoted in these stories were

²⁰² “Go Green Montana PAC PAC Donors 2020,” OpenSecrets,

<https://www.opensecrets.org/political-action-committees-pacs/go-green-montana-pac/C00745539/donors/2020>

²⁰³ Mara Silvers, “How Montana’s Green Party found itself at the center of a political circus. Again,” Montana Free Press, July 2, 2020,

<https://montanafreepress.org/2020/07/02/how-montanas-green-party-found-itself-at-the-center-of-a-political-circus-again/>

²⁰⁴ John O’Brien, “Complaint: Green Party U.S. Senate candidate recruited by Dems intends to ‘distort’ election,” Legal Newline, June 1, 2020, retrieved Dec. 30, 2023, from

<https://web.archive.org/web/20200724153025/https://legalnewline.com/stories/538369736-complaint-green-party-u-s-senate-candidate-recruited-by-dems-intends-to-distort-election>;

Savannah Howe, “Green Party candidates booted from ballot in Montana’s U.S. Senate,” Legal Newline, Sep. 2, 2020, retrieved Dec. 30, 2023, from

<https://web.archive.org/web/20210806035849/https://legalnewline.com/stories/551861795-green-party-candidates-booted-from-ballot-in-montana-s-u-s-senate-race>

²⁰⁵ Go Green Montana. Facebook Ad Library. Retrieved Dec. 10, 2023, from

[https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=political_and_issue_ads&country=ALL&q=%22Go%20Green%20Montana%20PAC%22&sort_data\[direction\]=desc&sort_data\[mode\]=relevancy_monthly_grouped&search_type=keyword_exact_phrase&media_type=all](https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=political_and_issue_ads&country=ALL&q=%22Go%20Green%20Montana%20PAC%22&sort_data[direction]=desc&sort_data[mode]=relevancy_monthly_grouped&search_type=keyword_exact_phrase&media_type=all)

members or leaders of the Convention of States, but for the most part, these ties were not disclosed. Nor was the Convention of States' involvement in the Metric Media network. So, while these and other similar stories appear to be locally generated news, they were simply echoing the talking points of an advocacy group without disclaimers — and potentially misleading readers.

Across the Metric Media sites, various stories appeared featuring the same individuals. In a story in the Charleston Reporter, a headline reads, [“South Carolina voter: ‘Our Capitol is just as important as what happens on the federal level.’”](#)²⁰⁶ The story centers on Wendy Damron, a legislative liaison of the South Carolina Convention of States Project. She is also the treasurer of the Palmetto Promise Institute, a conservative think tank in South Carolina that is part of the [State Policy Network](#). (The State Policy Network is a group of 65 conservative and libertarian think tanks funded by donor organizations including the Koch-backed Donors Trust and Donors Capital Funds, and is known to create multipronged [coordinated efforts](#)²⁰⁷ to [push their agenda](#)²⁰⁸ across [states](#).²⁰⁹)

A story on the Little Apple Times site in Kansas bore the headline [“For Kansas voter, Second Amendment, taxes, Convention of States are dominant issues.”](#)²¹⁰ and featured David Schneider, regional director of the Convention of States. On the Nevada site SE Vegas News, a [“Henderson resident reminds voters that ‘politicians are supposed to work for us.’”](#)²¹¹ The resident in question was Bill Harenburg, the Convention of States district captain and event coordinator. Harenburg was interviewed for other Metric Media stories, including one of the [Nevada Business Daily pieces](#) about government overreach during the pandemic.²¹² The Metric Media network operates a Business Daily site for each state as well as Washington DC.

²⁰⁶ Trina Thomas, “South Carolina voter: ‘Our Capitol is just as important as what happens on the federal level,’” Charleston Reporter, Oct. 26, 2020, retrieved Dec. 10, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20231206174309/https://charlestonreporter.com/stories/560744860-south-carolina-voter-our-capitol-is-just-as-important-a-s-what-happens-on-the-federal-level>

²⁰⁷ Ed Pilkington and Suzanne Goldenberg, “State conservative groups plan US-wide assault on education, health and tax,” *The Guardian*, Dec. 5, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/05/state-conservative-groups-assault-education-health-tax>

²⁰⁸ Geoff Dombicki, “Groups Fighting Climate Change Efforts Also Spearheading Critical Race Theory Hysteria,” *Vice*, July 16, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/epnm7e/groups-fighting-climate-change-efforts-also-spearheading-critical-race-theory-hysteria>

²⁰⁹ Kyle Peterson, “The Spoils of the Republican State Conquest,” *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 9, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-spoils-of-the-republican-state-conquest-1481326770>

²¹⁰ David Beasley, “For Kansas voter, Second Amendment, taxes, Convention of States are dominant issues,” Little Apple Times, Oct. 27, 2020. Retrieved Dec. 10, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20220411215257/https://littleappletimes.com/stories/558345588-for-kansas-voter-second-amendment-taxes-convention-of-states-are-dominant-issues>

²¹¹ Savannah Howe, “Henderson resident reminds voters that ‘politicians are supposed to work for us,’” SE Vegas News, Nov. 5, 2020, retrieved Dec. 10, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/2/https://sevegnews.com/stories/564474819-henderson-resident-reminds-voters-that-politicians-are-supposed-to-work-for-us>

²¹² T.H. Lawrence, “Convention of States responds to Covid-19 government overreach in Nevada and other states,” Nevada Business Daily, Apr. 26, 2020, retrieved Dec. 10, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20231206181707/https://nvbusinessdaily.com/stories/533571487-convention-of-states-says-nevada-suffering-economically-due-to-what-it-sees-as-excessive-covid-19-government-restrictions>

Overall, we found a dozen similar stories, including “[Ohio voter: ‘Not voting is surrendering to those who do’](#)”²¹³ and “[Missouri voter: ‘We have to reelect President Trump.’](#)”²¹⁴

CatholicVote

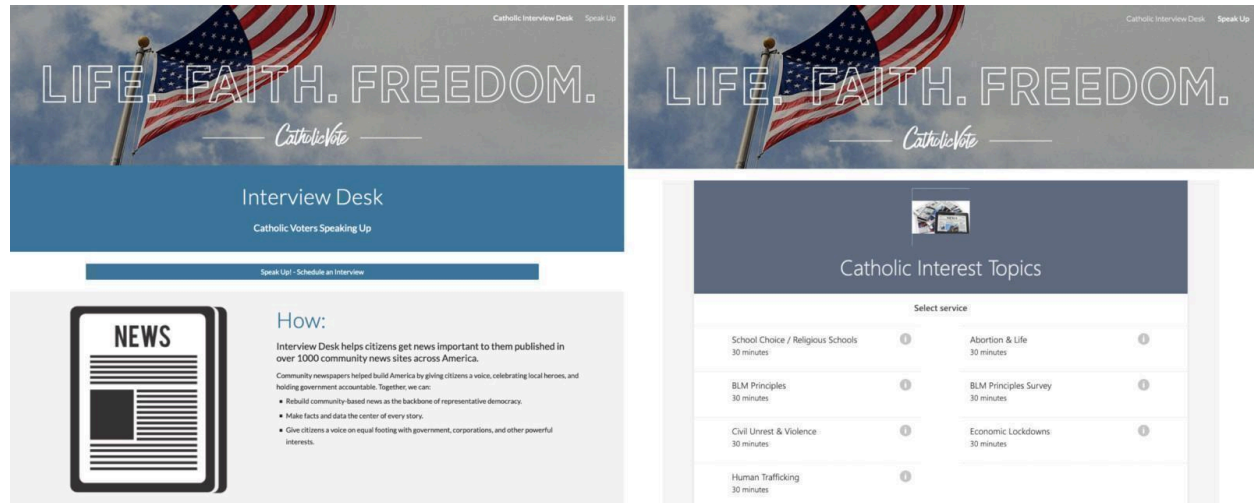


Figure 13: The interface for the CatholicVote Community Newsmaker page.

CatholicVote’s Community Newsmaker page categorized seven topics — including Abortion & Life, Civil Unrest & Violence, Black Lives Matter Principles, School Choice/Religious Schools, and Human Trafficking — inviting users to set up 30-minute interviews with Community Newsmaker Speaking writers to “get news important to [citizens] published in over 1,000 community news sites across America.”

A project of Fidelis, a Catholic advocacy nonprofit organization, [CatholicVote’s mission says](#) it is not “‘owned’ by any party or movement,” but believes in “‘taking sides’ if one candidate or policy position is decidedly against the principles we hold dear.”²¹⁵ In its 2018 [IRS filing](#), the organization describes its mission as “Catholic grassroots education and civic action to defend life, faith, and family.”²¹⁶ Executive director Brian Burch is also the director and chairman of the Illinois Opportunity Project, which paid individual entities (Locality Labs and Franklin Archer) within the Metric Media network (see Chapter 2.3). In September 2020, Burch published a book titled *A New Catholic Moment: Donald Trump and the Politics of the Common Good*.

²¹³ David Beasley, “Ohio voter: Not voting is surrendering to those who do,” South Ohio News, Oct. 22, 2020, retrieved Dec. 10, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/2/https://southohionews.com/stories/558661733-ohio-voter-not-voting-is-surrendering-to-those-who-do>

²¹⁴ William Gibb, “Missouri voter: ‘We have to reelect President Trump,’” NE Missouri News, Oct. 26, 2020, retrieved Dec. 10, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20230215133959/https://nemissourinews.com/stories/558900531-missouri-voter-we-have-to-reelect-president-trump>

²¹⁵ “About Us,” CatholicVote, <https://web.archive.org/web/20201023030530/https://catholicvote.org/mission-learn-more/>

²¹⁶ Fidelis, “Form 990-O for period ending December 2018,” ProPublica NonProfit Explorer, https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/display_990/202603413/01_2020_prefixes_20-20_1/202603413_201812_990O_2020012317057956

In September 2020, six weeks before the election, CatholicVote [launched a \\$9.7 million campaign](#) against the Democratic nominee “to expose Joe Biden’s anti-Catholic record and policies.”²¹⁷ This began with a \$350,000 digital ad buy in Pennsylvania and Michigan. Not much is known in terms of how this war chest was spent; less than \$900,000 was reported to the Federal Election Commission, according to [publicly available data](#).²¹⁸ Neither Metric Media nor Community Newsmaker are included in the breakdown of the independent expenditures, which makes it difficult to ascertain the financial nature of any relationship between the two entities. The CatholicVote Community Newsmaker page was first observed in September 2020 by DNSDB as well. In the run-up to the election, based on the content on Metric Media sites and ads on Google and Facebook, there is evidence to suggest the advocacy group had ties with the media network beyond just the Community Newsmaker platform.

CatholicVote had been expending resources on the pivotal 2020 election since at least November 2019, when it [initiated what it called](#) “the largest Catholic voter mobilization program ever” spanning “at least” seven states, convinced that “Catholics will decide the 2020 elections.”²¹⁹ The program included geofencing at churches, a technique that enabled it to conduct outreach by capturing mobile phone data from churchgoers and then targeting those devices through paid advertising. According to the [National Catholic Reporter](#), this approach helped CatholicVote identify nearly 200,000 Catholics in Wisconsin who had attended Mass three times in 90 days, half of whom were not registered to vote, and encouraging them to do so.²²⁰

CatholicVote [adopted the same strategy](#)²²¹ in the 2018 midterm elections when it targeted 600,000 people with ads for five state Senate races including Missouri. It cast then-Democratic Senator [Claire McCaskill as “anti-Catholic”](#) because she was “pro-abortion, unwilling to protect the Little Sisters of the Poor, and opposed Catholic judicial nominees because of their religious beliefs.”²²² Republican Josh Hawley won the race.

CatholicVote did not respond to requests for comment.

²¹⁷ CatholicVote, “CatholicVote launches \$9.7 million campaign to expose Joe Biden’s anti-Catholic record and policies,” Sept. 15, 2020, retrieved Dec. 10, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20210328233148/https://catholicvote.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Biden-Report-PR.pdf>

²¹⁸ “catholicvote.org”, Federal Election Commission, <https://www.fec.gov/data/committee/C90011800/?tab=summary>

²¹⁹ Brian Burch, “Peek at these numbers,” CatholicVote, Nov. 11, 2019, <https://catholicvote.org/peek-at-these-numbers/>

²²⁰ Heidi Schlumpf, “Pro-Trump group targets Catholic voters using cellphone technology,” *National Catholic Reporter*, Jan. 2, 2020, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/parish/pro-trump-group-targets-catholic-voters-using-cell-phone-technology>

²²¹ Sam Schechner, Emily Glazer and Patience Haggin, “Political Campaigns Know Where You’ve Been. They’re Tracking Your Phone,” *Wall Street Journal*, Oct 10, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/political-campaigns-track-cellphones-to-identify-and-target-individual-voters-11570718889>

²²² Brian Burch, “Front page story,” CatholicVote, Oct. 15, 2019, retrieved Dec. 10, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20210308001706/https://catholicvote.org/front-page-story/>

Catholic Tribune sites and coverage of Catholic voters on the Metric Media local news network

In early 2020, Metric Media launched a new network of seven Catholic Tribune sites: six state-centric and one national. CatholicVote explicitly identified five of the six states in its [voter mobilization program](#).²²³ None of these sites have published new stories since December 6, 2020.

These publications say their purpose is to “provide more robust news reporting on parish life and issues affecting Catholics,” and there is no intent to “advocate for or endorse a particular political candidate or party.”²²⁴ The stories and ads run by these sites do, however, encompass political speech and policy issues aligned with the Catholic Church, as does the [Wisconsin Catholic Tribune](#), an eight-page broadsheet mailed to Catholic homes around Wisconsin. The Green Bay diocesan publication [The Compass found the articles](#) in the physical paper were less about Christian tenets and more “related to the presidential election, including a voter guide, results of polls it conducted on its Facebook page and opinion articles written by two Donald Trump campaign advisors. The front page of the broadsheet flags an inside story: “CatholicVote praises Trump’s ‘Born Alive’ executive order.”²²⁵

Similar to the Metric Media local news network, the Catholic Tribune network takes cues from traditional diocesan publications and relies heavily on material from existing sources. Much of the material published on the Catholic Tribune network consists of press releases (repurposed and verbatim) from universities, parishes, and churches; homilies from pastors; and Mass times and intentions. Others, as first reported by *The Compass*, were taken from state diocesan newspapers as well as Facebook and YouTube pages. *The Compass* reported at least 14 of its stories had been [rebranded and published on the Wisconsin Catholic Tribune’s website](#).²²⁶ (*The Compass* reached out to Catholic Tribune and got a reply saying its “Mass content team” had mistaken the news pieces for press releases.)

²²³ Burch, Nov. 11, 2019, *ibid*.

²²⁴ e.g. “About Pennsylvania Catholic Tribune,” PA Catholic Tribune, <https://pacatholictribune.com/about-us>

²²⁵ Sam Lucero, “Unofficial Catholic newspaper mailed to homes,” *The Compass*, Oct. 23, 2020, <https://www.thecompassnews.org/2020/10/unofficial-newspaper-mailed-to-catholic-homes/>

²²⁶ Sam Lucero, “Website uses Compass content in violation of copyright law,” *The Compass*, June 11, 2020, <https://www.thecompassnews.org/2020/06/website-uses-compass-content-in-violation-of-copyright-law/>

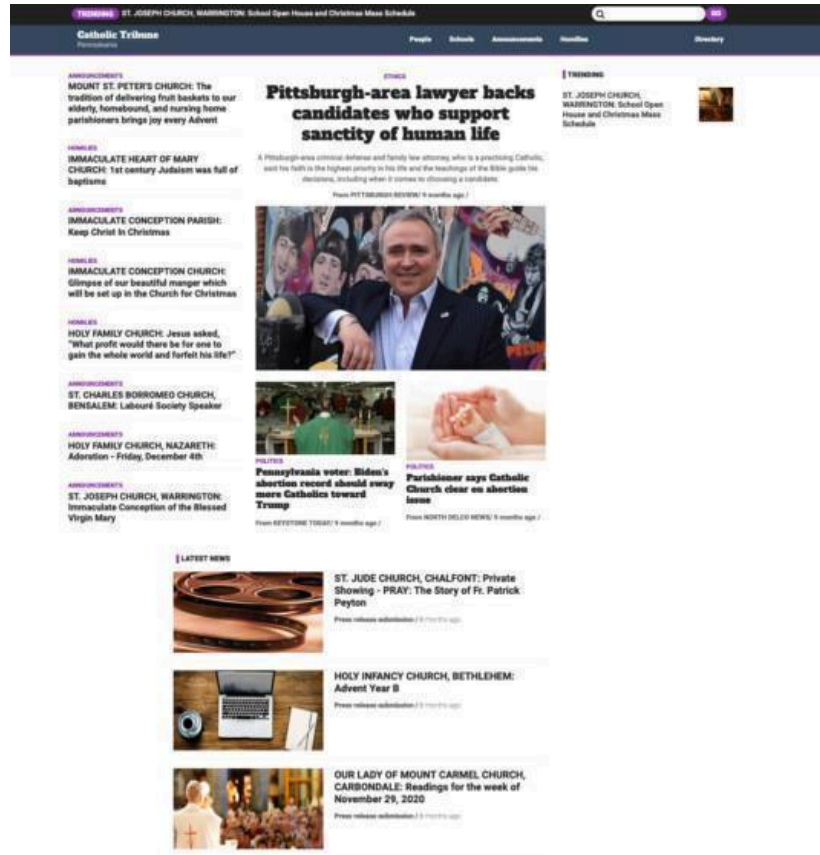


Figure 14: A screenshot of Pennsylvania Catholic Tribune, one of the Catholic Tribune sites that went dormant in December 2020. The three main stories link to sites belonging to the Metric Media local news network: Pittsburgh Review, Keystone Today, and North Delco News. All the other stories on the homepage are repurposed.

Interspersed with this adapted content were stories that focussed on the Democratic presidential nominee’s stance on abortion and school choice as well as on the pandemic-related lockdowns. These stories were originally published on Metric Media local news sites (see Figure 14), and linked to from the Catholic Tribune sites, and tackled the areas where religious teachings overlap with policy issues; this isn’t uncommon in diocesan publications.

Each story featured a different individual explaining why they were voting against Biden, or how the Republican Party’s views converge more with the Catholic Church. (A September 2020 [Pew study](#) found that on specific policy issues, Catholics were more often aligned with their political party over the teachings of the church: 77 percent of Democratic and Democratic-leaning Catholic adults thought abortion should be legal in most cases, while 63 percent of Republican and Republican-leaning adults thought abortion should be illegal in most cases. The finding concludes, “This divide exists despite the Catholic Church’s formal opposition to abortion.”²²⁷)

²²⁷ Gregory A. Smith, “8 facts about Catholics and politics in the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, Sept. 15, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/15/8-facts-about-catholics-and-politics-in-the-u-s/>

Stories promoting individual Catholics' views and voting preferences weren't constrained to the Catholic Tribune network, but spanned the Metric Media local news network, with stories containing similar, if not identical, talking points, e.g. "[Florida pro-life advocate supports school choice](#)" (Tampa Republic),²²⁸ "[Pittsburgh parent wouldn't back candidate 'opposed to school choice' programs](#)" (Pittsburgh Review),²²⁹ "[Biden plans to defund school choice programs, which worries many Catholic parents](#)" (Treasure Coast Sun),²³⁰ "[Biden's opposition to school choice raises questions for those supporting Catholic schools](#)" (Tri-City Sun),²³¹ "[Catholics oppose Biden's stance on defunding school of choice programs](#)" (North Kent News),²³² and "[Biden's position on school choice programs could undermine Catholic support](#)" (Central Bucks Today).²³³

CatholicVote's digital ad spend on Metric Media properties

Most of CatholicVote's ads on Facebook and Google linked to its own operations. Our analysis found that in 2020 it bought ads against only two external entities. One was Western Journal, a conservative news outlet [described](#) by the *New York Times* as "among the most popular and influential publications in America" in the "parallel universe of Facebook."²³⁴ The other was Metric Media.

In 2020, we found that CatholicVote had run [424 Facebook ads](#) and [235 Google ads](#) (including YouTube), according to the ad libraries provided by the technology companies. Of these, 9 percent of all ads CatholicVote ran on Facebook and Google linked to Metric Media stories (across the local news and Catholic Tribune networks). All of these ads ran in the 12 days leading up to Election Day. Across both platforms, CatholicVote's ads for Metric Media stories predominantly targeted the swing states of Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Michigan. Two recurring topics were school choice and abortion, in line with CatholicVote's voter mobilization strategy. As former Rep. Tim Huelskamp (R-KS) [told NPR](#), "I think the campaign is distinguishing Catholics who support the church's position on life, the church's position on religious freedom and on school choice and trying to turn that particular vote out. For Catholics who never attend church, they're going to vote, 3-1, for Joe Biden."²³⁵

²²⁸ Kyla Asbury, "Florida pro-life advocate supports school choice," Tampa Republic, Oct. 2, 2020,

<https://tamparepublic.com/stories/555461351-florida-pro-life-advocate-supports-school-choice>

²²⁹ Benjamin Kibbey, "Pittsburgh parent wouldn't back candidate 'opposed to school choice' programs," Pittsburgh Review, Oct. 1, 2020,

<https://pittreview.com/stories/555458376-pittsburgh-parent-wouldn-t-back-candidate-opposed-to-school-choice-programs>

²³⁰ Elle Johnson, "Biden plans to defund school choice programs, which worries many Catholic parents," Treasure Coast Sun, Oct. 8, 2020,

<https://treasurecoastsun.com/stories/556987287-biden-plans-to-defund-school-choice-programs-which-worries-many-catholic-parents>

²³¹ Elle Johnson, "Biden's opposition to school choice raises questions for those supporting Catholic schools," Tri-City Sun, Oct. 12, 2020,

<https://tricitysun.com/stories/556766686-biden-s-opposition-to-school-choice-raises-questions-for-those-supporting-catholic-schools>

²³² Elle Johnson, "Catholics oppose Biden's stance on defunding school of choice programs," North Kent News, Oct. 8, 2020,

<https://northkentnews.com/stories/556766695-catholics-oppose-biden-s-stance-on-defunding-school-of-choice-program>

²³³ Benjamin Kibbey, "Biden's position on school choice programs could undermine Catholic support," Central Bucks Today, Oct. 8, 2020,

<https://centralbuckstoday.com/stories/556473473-biden-s-position-on-school-choice-programs-could-undermine-catholic-support>

²³⁴ Nicholas Confessore and Justin Bank, "In the Trump Era, a Family's Fight With Google and Facebook Over Disinformation," *The New York Times*, Aug. 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/21/us/facebook-disinformation-floyd-brown.html>

²³⁵ "For Trump, Conservative Catholics Are The New Evangelicals," NPR, Oct. 26, 2020,

<https://www.npr.org/transcripts/926659149?t=1614815019433>

The majority of CatholicVote’s Facebook ads (73 percent) pointed to its own website or YouTube page, but 11 percent pointed to Metric Media sites. (See Figure 15.)

The 47 ads for Metric Media properties (Catholic Tribune as well as the local news network) ran in the twelve days leading up to the election, with each ad pointing to a different story. Just under half of these (22 articles) were about election issues, of which 12 focused on school choice (Novi Times, “[Commerce Township parent: No support for presidential candidate who doesn’t believe in school choice](#)”;²³⁶ North Miami-Dade News, “[Biden may pull school choice funding; Catholic voter in Miami responds to proposition](#)”;²³⁷ Miami Courant, “[Miami resident ‘can’t support’ a candidate who wants to put a stop to school choice](#)”).²³⁸ The remaining election-related stories covered a myriad of topics, including the pandemic (Central Broward News, “[Biden promises more lockdowns; Trump says they aren’t needed](#)”);²³⁹ number-crunching about the election (Wisconsin Catholic Tribune, “[Report: Wisconsin Catholics will decide Trump vs. Biden](#)”);²⁴⁰ and positions on hot-button topics (Thumb Reporter, “[As the election approaches, Trump reaffirms abortion stance, possibly courting Catholic votes](#)”).²⁴¹ Other topics of interest included the Supreme Court (Amy Coney Barrett was confirmed as a Supreme Court Justice a week before Election Day) and the economy during the pandemic.

Overall, we found CatholicVote spent \$34,200 to \$43,176 across all ads for Metric Media sites, which was approximately \$1 of every \$8 spent by CatholicVote on Facebook ads in 2020 (between \$256,700 and \$342,786).

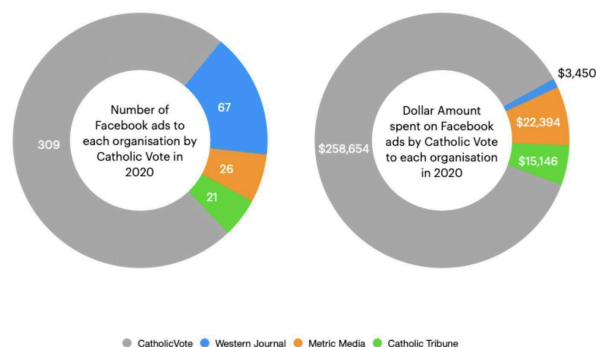


Figure 15: CatholicVote’s ad spend on Facebook in 2020.

²³⁶ David Beasley, “Commerce Township parent: No support for presidential candidate who doesn’t believe in school choice,” Novi Times, Sep. 30, 2020, <https://novitimes.com/stories/555775034-commerce-township-parent-no-support-for-presidential-candidate-who-doesn-t-believe-in-school-choice>

²³⁷ Carrie Bradon, “Biden may pull school choice funding; Catholic voter in Miami responds to proposition,” North Miami-Dade News, Sep. 14, 2020, <https://northmianews.com/stories/554891942-biden-may-pull-school-choice-funding-catholic-voter-in-miami-responds-to-proposition>

²³⁸ Solange DeLisle, “Miami resident ‘can’t support’ a candidate who wants to put a stop to school choice,” Miami Courant, Sep. 24, 2020, <https://miamicourant.com/stories/555398155-miami-resident-can-t-support-a-candidate-who-wants-to-put-a-stop-to-school-choice>

²³⁹ Benjamin Kibbey, “Biden promises more lockdowns; Trump says they aren’t needed,” Central Broward News, Oct. 8, 2020, <https://centralbrowardnews.com/stories/556473511-biden-promises-more-lockdowns-trump-says-they-aren-t-needed>

²⁴⁰ “Report: Wisconsin Catholics will decide Trump vs. Biden,” Wisconsin Catholic Tribune, Oct. 8, 2020, <https://wicatholictribune.com/stories/557024913-report-wisconsin-catholics-will-decide-trump-vs-biden>

²⁴¹ Benjamin Kibbey, “As the election approaches, Trump reaffirms abortion stance, possibly courting Catholic votes,” Thumb Reporter, Oct. 6, 2020, <https://thumbreporter.com/stories/556457072-as-the-election-approaches-trump-reaffirms-abortion-stance-possibly-courting-catholic-votes>

We also found that the Catholic Tribune Facebook pages cumulatively spent an additional \$31,314 on 160 Facebook ads, of which 36 directed users to answer mostly single-question surveys conducted on Google Forms (*see Figure 16*) that were then used as the basis for articles on the Metric Media network. These ads were all paid for by the entity Franklin Archer. Questions in these surveys included “Should a child be able to decide to have a sex change?” “Would you support another economic lockdown?” and “Are you supportive of the political movement to enable the state to take a more active role in child raising, replacing the nuclear family?”

We found more than 20 stories based on these surveys across the seven Catholic Tribune sites, including [“More than 86 percent of Arizona’s Catholics are against further economic lockdowns”](#)²⁴² (Arizona Catholic Tribune); [“Swing State Poll: Wisconsin Catholics overwhelmingly reject ‘Black Lives Matter’ principles”](#)²⁴³ (Wisconsin Catholic Tribune); and [“Swing State Poll: Pennsylvania Catholics against reparations, take no personal responsibility for slavery”](#)²⁴⁴ (Pennsylvania Catholic Tribune).

Our analysis showed the seven Catholic Tribune pages combined spent \$7,600 to \$11,169 on ads to Google Forms, and an additional \$2,700 to \$4,291 directing readers to the stories based on these ads. CatholicVote spent \$8,900 to \$10,694 on 10 ads to the stories based on the results of these polls.

The figure displays four screenshots of Google Forms surveys, each titled with a state name and 'Catholic Tribune Poll'. The surveys are as follows:

- Michigan Catholic Tribune Poll:** The question is "A deputy campaign director for Vice President Joe Biden said this week that she believes the faithfully religious-- including Catholics like Amy Coney Barrett-- should be barred from serving on the U.S. Supreme Court. Do you agree? *". The options are "Yes" and "No".
- Pennsylvania Catholic Tribune Poll:** The question is "Should a child be able to decide to have a sex change? *". The options are "Yes" and "No".
- Wisconsin Catholic Tribune Poll:** The question is "Would you support another economic lockdown? *". The options are "Yes" and "No".
- Florida Catholic Tribune Poll:** The question is "Should a child be able to decide to have a sex change? *". The options are "Yes" and "No".

Each form includes a "Submit" button and a footer that reads "This form was created inside Franklin Archer. Report Abuse" and "Google Forms".

Figure 16: Surveys run by Franklin Archer that became the subject of Metric Media stories later promoted by CatholicVote.

²⁴² “More than 86% of Arizona’s Catholics are against further economic lockdowns,” Arizona Catholic Tribune, Oct. 23, 2020, <https://azcatholictribune.com/stories/559262838-more-than-86-of-arizona-s-catholics-are-against-further-economic-lockdowns>

²⁴³ “Swing State Poll: Wisconsin Catholics overwhelmingly reject ‘Black Lives Matter’ principles,” Wisconsin Catholic Tribune, Sep. 4, 2020, <https://wicatholictribune.com/stories/552737745-swing-state-poll-wisconsin-catholics-overwhelmingly-reject-black-lives-matter-principles>

²⁴⁴ “Swing State Poll: Pennsylvania Catholics against reparations, take no personal responsibility for slavery,” PA Catholic Tribune, Sep. 17, 2020, <https://pacatholictribune.com/stories/555120224-swing-state-poll-pennsylvania-catholics-against-reparations-take-no-personal-responsibility-for-slavery>

Like Facebook, Google does not report exact ad spend, but instead provides a range. Available data tells us that CatholicVote spent at least \$100,000 on 235 Google ads, of which 12 were “image-based” ads pointing to Metric Media stories, on which CatholicVote spent at least \$7,500 (see Figure 17). Metric Media was the only external entity for which CatholicVote bought Google ads in all of 2020. The topics of the ads were similar to the Facebook ads the group ran: [“Breaking News: Detroit Catholic grandmother opposes Biden’s stance on school choice”](#) (Detroit City Wire)²⁴⁵, [“Breaking News: SCOTUS appointment and Trump executive order promise highlight abortion as Catholic voting issue”](#) (Novi Times),²⁴⁶ and [“Report: Pennsylvania Catholics will decide Trump vs. Biden”](#) (Pennsylvania Catholic Tribune).²⁴⁷



Figure 17: Ads run by CatholicVote pointing to Metric Media properties on Google’s platform.

General Election 2020 Campaign

CatholicVote is a project of the social welfare organization Fidelis, whose [primary activities entail](#) “Catholic grassroots education and civic action to defend life, faith, and family.”²⁴⁸ Due to its 501(c)(4) status, the organization is not allowed to spend more than 50 percent of its revenue on politicking. But according to the Campaign Legal Center, the IRS has not been particularly clear with how it assesses electoral spending, and rarely enforces the law, allowing groups to push the envelope.

²⁴⁵ Elle Johnson, “Detroit Catholic grandmother opposes Biden’s stance on school choice,” Detroit City Wire, Oct. 7, 2020, <https://detroitcitywire.com/stories/556766691-detroit-catholic-grandmother-opposes-biden-s-stance-on-school-choice>

²⁴⁶ Benjamin Kibbey, “SCOTUS appointment and Trump executive order promise highlight abortion as Catholic voting issue,” Novi Times, Oct. 8, 2020, <https://novitimes.com/stories/556457048-scotus-appointment-and-trump-executive-order-promise-highlight-abortion-as-catholic-voting-issue>

²⁴⁷ “Report: Pennsylvania Catholics will decide Trump vs. Biden,” PA Catholic Tribune, Oct. 9, 2020, <https://pacatholictribune.com/stories/557046150-report-pennsylvania-catholics-will-decide-trump-vs-biden>

²⁴⁸ Fidelis, “Form 990 - Full text of “Full Filing” for fiscal year ending Dec. 2019,” ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer, <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/202603413/202043219349316184/full>

If CatholicVote’s aforementioned [\\$9.7 million campaign](#) to expose Joe Biden’s “anti-Catholic record and policies”²⁴⁹ had been deemed to “politicking” the organization’s 2020 revenue would have needed to exceed \$19.4 million. This is more than four times the revenue it has reported in its IRS filings in the previous two general election cycles of 2012 and 2016 of \$4.3 million each year. At the time of our investigation, it was unknown whether CatholicVote spent that entire sum. The advocacy group reported under \$1 million in total expenditures to the FEC, of which 53 percent was in support of Trump and 40 percent against Biden, [according to the official filings](#).²⁵⁰

Despite multiple overlaps between Metric Media and CatholicVote — the Community Newsmaker CatholicVote page, the surveys run by Metric Media that were promoted by CatholicVote, CatholicVote promoting content only from Metric Media and Western Journal outside its own online entities, and Metric Media not only creating a Catholic Tribune network but also covering the same issues on its local news network — neither Metric Media nor any of its related entities (Franklin Archer and Situation Management Group) featured in the list of expenditures CatholicVote reported to the FEC. The team at Campaign Legal Center also told us that FEC reporting is required for a narrow category of digital ads, which allows advocacy groups to launch big digital campaigns without disclosing much of the spending.

For additional details on the methodology we used to look at Metric Media partnerships by exploring the Community Newsmaker service, see Appendix 2.

2.5 Election Funding: The flow of \$1.6 million from conservative PACs²⁵¹

In October 2022, in the run-up to the midterm elections, [Tow Center research by Priyanjana Bengani showed](#) that nonprofits and political action committees (PACs) were using Metric Media’s extended network of local news sites to provide a range of campaign services to conservative candidates.²⁵²

We found that Metric Media acts as a convergence of special interests for free-market advocates, multiple political action committees, the fossil fuel industry, a politically motivated Catholic group, and a group propagating notions of election fraud. The network received at least \$1.6

²⁴⁹ CatholicVote, 2020, *op. cit.*

²⁵⁰ FEC.gov. “CATHOLICVOTE.ORG - Committee Overview — Spending.” Accessed January 12, 2024. <https://www.fec.gov/data/committee/C90011800/?tab=spending>

²⁵¹ This section is derived from reporting originally published on October 31, 2022. See: “‘Pink slime’ network gets \$1.6M election boost from PACs backed by oil-and-gas, shipping magnates,” CJR, Oct. 31, 2022,

https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/pink-slime-network-gets-1-6m-election-boost-from-pacs-backed-by-oil-and-gas-shipping-magnates.php

²⁵² Priyanjana Bengani, “‘Pink slime’ network gets \$1.6M election boost from PACs backed by oil-and-gas, shipping magnates,” Tow Center for Digital Journalism, CJR, Oct. 31, 2022,

https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/pink-slime-network-gets-1-6m-election-boost-from-pacs-backed-by-oil-and-gas-shipping-magnates.php

million from three PACs in the pre-midterms election cycle. This may seem a small sum in an election whose [costs were projected to exceed \\$9 billion](#),²⁵³ but our research demonstrates the extent of the services provided by this network to numerous conservative PACs tied to big conservative funders and groups.

While it's difficult to trace the minutiae of the scope and scale of each of the services, and to match them to individual transactions seen in public records, our investigation found websites targeting certain politicians or policies paid for by a PAC hosted on the network's infrastructure, articles boosting candidates supported by the PACs published on the local news network, and an interactive Web application devoted to a single hot-button issue. Newspapers with mastheads belonging to this network and promoting the public positions of advocacy groups, PACs, and candidates associated with this network have been mailed to voters in at least three states.

The services provided include advertising to the [Defend Texas Liberty PAC](#), largely funded by West Texas oil and gas billionaire Timothy Dunn; SMS messages, robocalls, and websites to the Illinois-centric People Who Play by the Rules PAC, largely funded by Republican megadonor and shipping magnate Richard Uihlein and run by conservative activist Dan Proft; and consulting and “production costs” to the [Restoration PAC](#), also largely funded by Uihlein.

Digital investigations conducted by the Tow Center also found that Restoration's [VoteRef](#) — a web application that allows users to browse voter rolls in each state, as well as the number of ballots cast, under the guise of ensuring election integrity — relies on custom software from LocalLabs (one of the corporate entities in this network) and shares an analytics identifier, NewRelic, with other sites in this network. We found multiple sites sharing these traits attacking the incumbent Democratic governor of Illinois, J.B. Pritzker, hosted on a server used by other websites on this network and paid for by People Who Play by the Rules. These sites had names like Pritzker Must Go and Too Much JB.

²⁵³ Taylor Giorno, “2022 federal midterm election spending on track to top \$9.3 billion,” OpenSecrets, Sep. 26, 2022, <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2022/09/2022-midterm-election-spending-on-track-to-top-9-3-billion/>

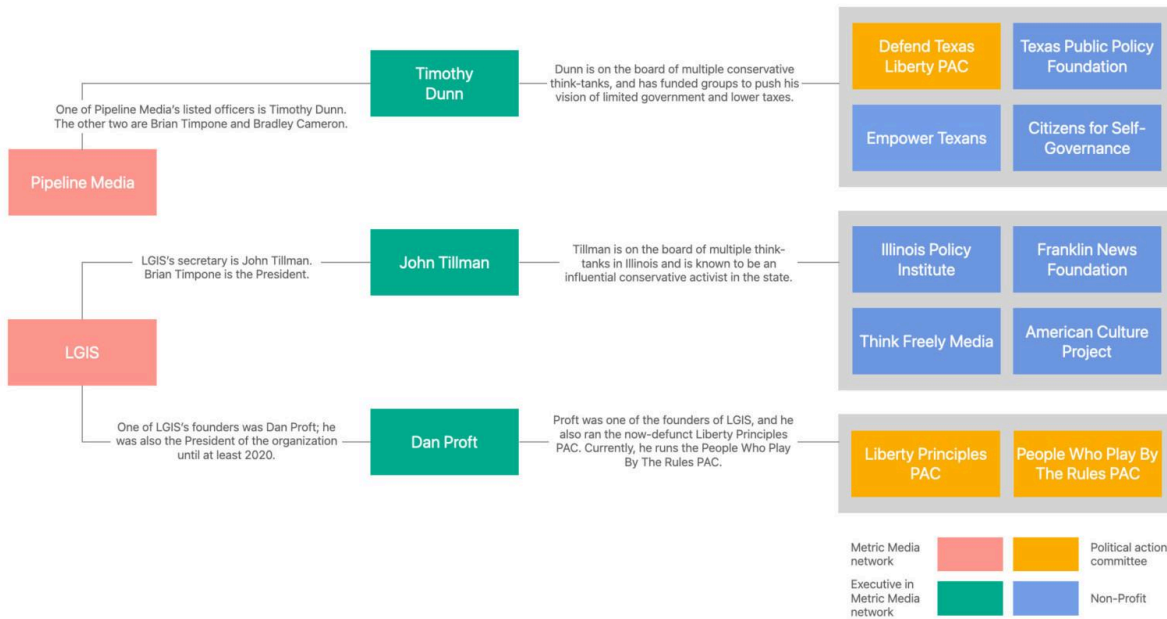


Figure 18: The four corporate entities that make up the network had Brian Timpone, Bradley Cameron, or both as executives, according to public records. Of these four, LGIS and Pipeline Media had additional executives affiliated with political action committees, think tanks, and advocacy groups whose interests were often promoted within the news network.

Through Illinois state records, we found that Timothy Dunn held a managerial position in Pipeline Media, one of the corporate entities within this extended network. His links to the extended Metric Media network had not previously been reported. Dunn, the [chief executive officer of CrownQuest](#), an oil and gas exploration and production venture in West Texas, has been [involved in Texas politics](#)²⁵⁴ since at least 2007, when he bankrolled the Tea Party-aligned group [Empower Texans](#),²⁵⁵ which pushed for limited government and lower taxes. In the 2022 election cycle, Dunn was a [major contributor](#) to the Defend Texas Liberty PAC, which had spent more than \$5 million since January 2022 to [challenge GOP incumbents](#) deemed “insufficiently Republican.”²⁵⁶ Defend Texas Liberty [spent \\$57,075](#) on “advertising expenses” with Pipeline Advisors.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁴ “Report: In Dunn, Far Right Has Spender Who Gets Results,” Texas Tribune, May 11, 2014, <https://www.texastribune.org/2014/05/11/tim-dunn-far-right-has-big-spender-who-gets-result/>

²⁵⁵ Taylor Goldenstein, “What is Empower Texans? A look at the group that’s roiling the Texas House,” *Houston Chronicle*, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/politics/texas/article/What-is-Empower-Texas-A-look-at-the-group-14273613.php>

²⁵⁶ Patrick Svitek, “Republican Texas House races become high-dollar affairs as Tuesday’s primary runoff nears,” Texas Tribune, May 19, 2022, <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/05/19/texas-house-republican-runoffs/>, and “Texas far-right conservatives spent millions to oust House GOP leaders, to little avail,” Texas Tribune, March 4, 2022, <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/03/03/texas-conservatives-pac-house-primary/>

²⁵⁷ Defend Texas Liberty Pac, “General-Purpose Committee Campaign Finance Report,” May 16, 2022, retrieved Dec. 10, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20221013162731/http://204.65.203.5/public/100863357.pdf>

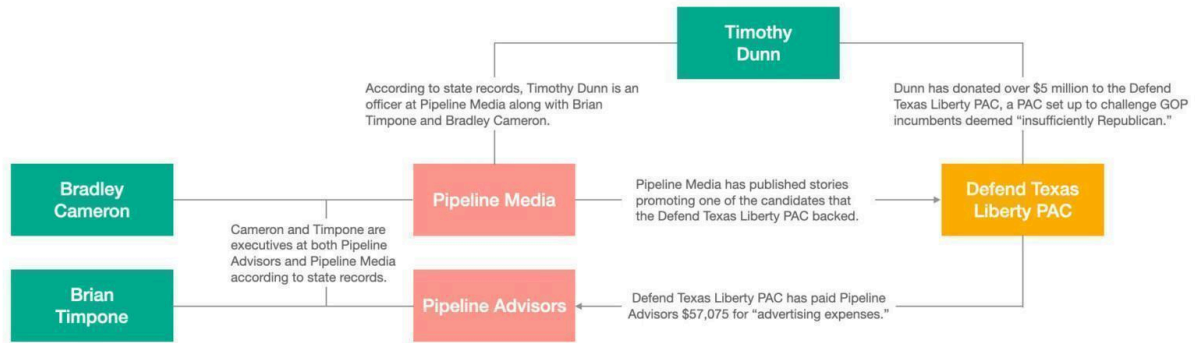


Figure 19: West Texas oil and gas magnate Timothy Dunn is an executive at Pipeline Media along with Bradley Cameron and Brian Timpone. The extended media network that includes Pipeline published stories promoting candidates backed by the Defend Texas Liberty PAC, to which Dunn has given more than \$5 million.

Dunn was also on the board of numerous conservative organizations, at least two of which are connected to this extended network of local news sites: the largely Koch-funded free-market think tank [Texas Public Policy Foundation](#)²⁵⁸ and [Citizens for Self-Governance](#)²⁵⁹ (which he helped launch).

Our analysis found that Metric Media’s local news network had run just under 100 stories prior to the 2022 midterms across 28 sites (25 of which were Texas-centric) that directly or indirectly advocated the Texas Public Policy Foundation’s policies, including property tax relief. These included headlines like [“TPPF’s Ginn: ‘Local property taxes are out of control’ in Texas”](#) (Lone Star Standard),²⁶⁰ [“TPPF director on property taxes: ‘It’s not a stretch to say that property taxes are out of control in the Lone Star State’”](#) (Ft Worth Times),²⁶¹ [“Texas Public Policy Foundation’s James Quintero: Texas’ property taxes ‘out of control,’ taxpayers should ‘defend their wallets’”](#) (North Coastal News),²⁶² and [“Chief economist of TPPF: Laredo, all Texas residents face ‘affordability crisis that can be helped with property tax relief’”](#) (Laredo Times).²⁶³ As first reported by Gizmodo in September 2022, the network also ran multiple

²⁵⁸ Texas Public Policy Foundation, “990 - Full text of ‘Form 990’ for fiscal year ending Dec. 2020,” ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer, <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/742524057/202132849349300423/IRS990>

²⁵⁹ Citizens For Self Governance, “990 - Full text of ‘Full Filing’ for fiscal year ending Dec. 2020”, ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer, <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/271657203/202103099349303365/full>

²⁶⁰ Andy Nghiem, “TPPF’s Ginn: ‘Local property taxes are out of control’ in Texas,” Lone Star Standard, Aug. 24, 2022, <https://lonestarstandard.com/stories/630731867-tppf-s-ginn-local-property-taxes-are-out-of-control-in-texas>

²⁶¹ Zachary Richter, “TPPF director on property taxes: ‘It’s not a stretch to say that property taxes are out of control in the Lone Star State,’” Ft Worth Times, Mar. 22, 2022, <https://ftworthtimes.com/stories/621841357-tppf-director-on-property-taxes-it-s-not-a-stretch-to-say-that-property-taxes-are-out-of-control-in-the-lone-star-state>

²⁶² Tamara Brown, “Texas Public Policy Foundation’s James Quintero: Texas’ property taxes ‘out of control,’ taxpayers should ‘defend their wallets,’” North Coastal News, Apr. 1, 2022, <https://northcoastalnews.com/stories/622488080-texas-public-policy-foundation-s-james-quintero-texas-property-taxes-out-of-control-taxpayers-should-defend-their-wallets>

²⁶³ David Hutton, “Chief economist of TPPF: Laredo, all Texas residents face ‘affordability crisis that can be helped with property tax relief,’” Laredo Times, June 18, 2022, <https://laredotimes.com/stories/627626711-chief-economist-of-tppf-laredo-all-texas-residents-face-affordability-crisis-that-can-be-helped-with-property-tax-relief>

stories attacking renewable energy — a [recurrent line for the Texas Public Policy Foundation](#)²⁶⁴ — which were then featured in [newsletters from Campaign Nucleus](#),²⁶⁵ the political consultancy set up by former President Donald Trump’s ex-campaign manager Brad Parscale.

Dunn was not the only executive with ties to think tanks that have wealthy conservative benefactors. John Tillman, the Illinois-based conservative activist and secretary for LGIS (profiled above), held executive positions in at least nine organizations that, through [a dizzying series of transactions](#), moved millions of dollars around interconnected nonprofit and for-profit organizations.²⁶⁶ In the run-up to the 2022 midterms, newspapers from LGIS outlets started appearing on doorsteps in Illinois attacking Pritzker for his policies on crime, Covid-19, and LGBTQ rights (see Chapter 3.1).

Former LGIS president Dan Proft’s new PAC People Who Play by the Rules (started in 2022) financially backed Republican candidate Darren Bailey against Pritzker in the 2022 election (see Chapters 3.1 and 3.2). In 2022, it received [more than \\$28 million](#) from Uihlein,²⁶⁷ the shipping magnate and Republican megadonor. People Who Play by the Rules paid [Pipeline Media just over \\$225,000](#) for services that included websites, SMS messages, and robocalls.²⁶⁸

Neither Dunn nor Proft responded to our requests for comment.

²⁶⁴ Kiah Collier, “Renewable energy proponents brace for last-minute attack on tax breaks for wind and solar,” *The Texas Tribune*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.texastribune.org/2019/05/09/renewable-energy-proponents-brace-last-minute-attack-tax-breaks/>; Mose Buchele, “Texas and other states want to punish fossil fuel divestment,” *NPR*, Mar. 16, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/16/1086764072/texas-and-other-states-want-to-boycott-fossil-fuel-divestment-blackrock-climate>; Molly Taft, “The Texas Think Tank Giving Cover for This Week’s Republican Wind Power Lies,” *Gizmodo*, Feb. 19, 2021, <https://gizmodo.com/the-texas-think-tank-giving-cover-for-this-week-s-repub-1846307715>; Christopher Hooks, “Why Is Texas’ Leading GOP Think Tank Suddenly All-In on an Anti-Wind Crusade?,” *Texas Observer*, Aug. 13, 2018, <https://www.texasobserver.org/why-is-texas-leading-gop-think-tank-suddenly-all-in-on-an-anti-wind-crusade/>; and “Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF),” *DeSmog*, <https://www.desmog.com/texas-public-policy-foundation/>

²⁶⁵ Steven Monacelli, “Donald Trump’s Disgraced Campaign Manager Seems to Have a New Gig: Pushing Big Oil’s ‘Pink Slime,’” *Gizmodo*, Sep. 30, 2022, <https://gizmodo.com/donald-trump-brad-parscale-texas-oil-pink-slime-1849598959>

²⁶⁶ Dumke and Sfondeles, *op. cit.*

²⁶⁷ Illinois Campaign for Political Reform. “People Who Play By The Rules PAC.” *Illinois Sunshine*. Accessed January 12, 2024. <http://illinoissunshine.org/committees/37277/>.

²⁶⁸ Illinois Campaign for Political Reform. “Search for ‘Pipeline Media.’” *Illinois Sunshine*. Accessed January 12, 2024. https://illinoissunshine.org/search/?term=Pipeline+Media&table_name=candidates&table_name=committees&table_name=officers&table_name=recipients&table_name=expenditures&search_date_ge=&search_date_le=

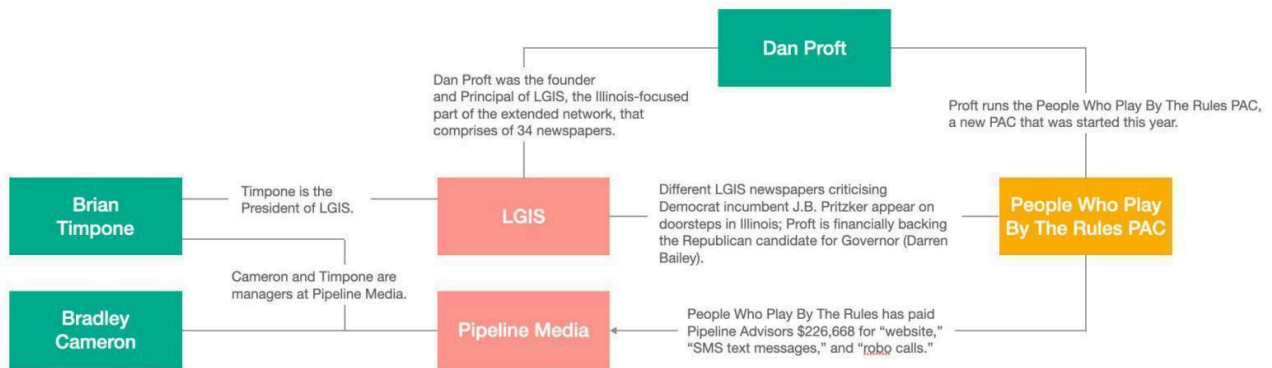


Figure 20: Dan Proft’s People Who Play by the Rules PAC paid Pipeline Media more than \$225,000 in 2022 for “website,” “SMS text messages,” and “robo calls.”

Newspapers in the Mail

While we were unable to trace the funding sources, residents of key electoral counties in Arizona, Kansas, and Illinois found [physical newspapers](#) on their doorsteps that originated from this network.²⁶⁹ The publications, with titles that included the *Grand Canyon Times*, the *Kansas Catholic Tribune*, and *Chicago City Wire*, started appearing during the primary season and continued to arrive ahead of the midterms, promoting Republican candidates including [Blake Masters](#) and [J.D. Vance](#), espousing [conspiracies around election security](#), and hitting divisive topics like [abortion](#), [LGBT rights](#), [immigration](#), and [crime](#).²⁷⁰

Stories in the *Grand Canyon Times*, part of Metric Media’s Arizona network, promoted Masters alongside claims of duplicate voter registrations while attacking Biden’s policies on student loan relief and immigration. The Tow Center saw editions of the newspaper dated [July 18](#) and [September 19](#) that ran pages paid for by the Saving Arizona PAC (largely funded by Peter Thiel). Not all stories in the printed papers were available in the corresponding online editions; multiple stories have bylines from the Center Square (a conservative publication that’s part of the Franklin News Foundation, whose [chairman](#) is John Tillman²⁷¹; the Franklin News Foundation is an associate of the State Policy Network of conservative think tanks largely backed by Koch and his allied donors). One of the stories, headlined [“One Million Migrants: Biden’s Asylum Abuse,”](#)²⁷² was taken from the Substack of Steve Cortes, a campaign adviser to Donald Trump and a host on Newsmax.

The stories in the *Kansas Catholic Tribune*, part of Franklin Archer’s American Catholic Tribune network, on the other hand, focused almost exclusively on anti-abortion rhetoric in

²⁶⁹ Examples can be found at: https://github.com/TowCenter/partisan-local-news/tree/main/datasets/physical_papers/metric_media_network

²⁷⁰ Available at: <https://github.com/TowCenter/partisan-local-news>

²⁷¹ Roberts, Andrea Suozzo, Alec Glassford, Ash Ngu, Brandon. “Franklin News Foundation, Full Filing - Nonprofit Explorer.” ProPublica, May 9, 2013. <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/264066298/202122849349301007/full>.

²⁷² Steve Cortes, “One Million Migrants: Biden’s Asylum Abuse,” Patria with Steve Cortes, Sep. 7, 2023, retrieved Dec. 10, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20220909073658/https://stevecortes.substack.com/p/one-million-migrants-bidens-asylum>

the run-up to the August vote on a state constitutional amendment that would have barred access to abortion services. The return address on these papers was CatholicVote’s (see Chapter 2.4). Based on the [lack of other articles](#) on the *Tribune* website, it appears that it was produced simply to campaign ahead of the referendum. As with the *Grand Canyon Times*, not all stories that appeared in the physical copies were in the digital edition, though most appeared on its sister site, the American Catholic Tribune. The story [“Tracking Attacks on Pregnancy Centers & Pro-Life Groups”](#)²⁷³ bears the byline of CatholicVote News Feed.

We were unable to locate any transactions between the Metric Media entities and either CatholicVote or the Saving Arizona PAC in federal or state records related to these mailers, but this may be attributed to the FEC requiring reporting for only a very narrow category of ads.

The PACs that pay Pipeline Media and Pipeline Advisors

Even though we were unable to find transactions related to the physical mailers, we found other PACs that paid Pipeline Media and Pipeline Advisors for services including advertising, robocalls, SMS messages, and consulting. Brian Timpone, an officer at Pipeline Media and Pipeline Advisors, did not respond to multiple requests for comment over email. Bradley Cameron, also an executive at both companies, responded through his lawyers, who wrote in an email, “Pipeline Advisors LLC has never received PAC funding. It is a private equity investment company with no relation to Pipeline Media.” Filings for the [Defend Texas Liberty](#)²⁷⁴ and [Restoration](#)²⁷⁵ PACs show that they have paid Pipeline Advisors LLC. Restoration has also paid Pipeline Media. We asked their lawyers to clarify these discrepancies, but did not receive a response.

Defend Texas Liberty PAC

In the midterm election cycle, West Texas oil and gas magnate and Pipeline Media officer Timothy Dunn donated more than [\\$5 million](#) to Defend Texas Liberty, a PAC that [attacked GOP incumbents](#) during the Texas primaries with minimal success.²⁷⁶ As of October 2022, its website said it believes “life starts at conception, there are only two genders, children should not be indoctrinated in public schools, the Second Amendment should never be infringed, property taxes must go down, the Texas Border must be secured, and we must stop giving illegal aliens taxpayer benefits.”²⁷⁷ Defend Texas Liberty paid Pipeline Advisors just over \$57,000 in March 2022 in a [transaction](#) that was labeled “advertising expense.”²⁷⁸

²⁷³ “Tracking Attacks on Pregnancy Centers & Pro-Life Groups,” CatholicVote, June 9, 2022, <https://catholicvote.org/pregnancy-center-attack-tracker/>

²⁷⁴ Defend Texas Liberty PAC, “Form GPAC: General-Purpose Committee Campaign Finance Report,” Texas Ethics Commission, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221013162731/http://204.65.203.5/public/100863357.pdf>

²⁷⁵ Federal Election Commission, “Disbursements,”

https://www.fec.gov/data/disbursements/?data_type=processed&committee_id=C00571588&recipient_name=pipeline&two_year_transaction_period=2022

²⁷⁶ Patrick Svitek, “Texas far-right conservatives spent millions to oust House GOP leaders, to little avail,” Texas Tribune, Mar. 3, 2022, <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/03/03/texas-conservatives-pac-house-primary/>

²⁷⁷ <https://web.archive.org/web/20221024165248/https://defendtexasliberty.com/>

²⁷⁸ Defend Texas Liberty PAC, “Form GPAC: General-Purpose Committee Campaign Finance Report,” Texas Ethics Commission, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221013162731/http://204.65.203.5/public/100863357.pdf>

Not all the candidates the PAC supported featured on the Metric Media sites, but Donald Huffines, the Republican primary challenger to incumbent Texas governor Greg Abbott, did. We found more than 50 stories featuring Huffines were published in January and February 2022 on 16 of the Texas Metric Media sites.

The themes of these stories can be broken down into:

- Border security: [“The Texas border is out of control’: Huffines condemns Abbott’s handling of Texas National Guard”](#) (San Antonio Standard),²⁷⁹ [“Huffines: ‘The drugs pouring across our border are a threat to our very way of life’”](#) (Midland Times),²⁸⁰ [“Huffines: ‘I will never ask permission from the federal government to secure the Texas Border’”](#)(East RGV News)²⁸¹
- Covid policies including mask and vaccine mandates: [“Abbott’s weakness is taking a toll on Texans’ well-being’: Huffines criticizes Abbott for Texan school districts reinstating mask mandates”](#) (Mid City Times),²⁸² [“Huffines: ‘Mask mandates are an attack on Texans’ God-given liberties’”](#) (West Houston News),²⁸³ [“Huffines: ‘Dr. Fauci is a fraud and a liar who should be in jail’”](#) (Collin Times)²⁸⁴
- Election fraud: [“It’s time to fire Abbott’: Texas gubernatorial candidate pledges to boost election security”](#) (North Houston News),²⁸⁵ [“Huffines reacts to Texas law limiting mail-in ballot applications: ‘We know there’s fraud in our elections’”](#) (North Coastal News),²⁸⁶ [“Our elections are not secure’—Huffines demands action, prosecution in response to audit”](#) (Lone Star Standard)²⁸⁷
- Abortion, prior to the Supreme Court ruling overturning *Roe v. Wade*: [“Gubernatorial candidate Huffines: ‘As governor, I will abolish abortion in Texas’”](#) (North San Antonio

²⁷⁹ Timothy Stuckey, “‘The Texas border is out of control’: Huffines condemns Abbott’s handling of Texas National Guard,” San Antonio Standard, Jan. 18, 2022,

<https://sanantoniostandard.com/stories/618765731-the-texas-border-is-out-of-control-huffines-condemns-abbott-s-handling-of-texas-national-guard>

²⁸⁰ Emily Bevard, “Huffines: ‘The drugs pouring across our border are a threat to our very way of life,’” Midland Times, Feb. 14, 2022,

<https://midlandtimes.com/stories/619641075-huffines-the-drugs-pouring-across-our-border-are-a-threat-to-our-very-way-of-life>

²⁸¹ “Huffines: ‘I will never ask permission from the federal government to secure the Texas Border,’” East RGV News, Jan. 7, 2022,

<https://eastrgvnews.com/stories/617967173-huffines-i-will-never-ask-permission-from-the-federal-government-to-secure-the-texas-border>

²⁸² Ariana Chiarenza, “‘Abbott’s weakness is taking a toll on Texans’ well-being’: Huffines criticizes Abbott for Texan school districts reinstating mask mandates,” Mid City Times, Jan. 31, 2022,

<https://midcitytimes.com/stories/619234416-abbott-s-weakness-is-taking-a-toll-on-texans-well-being-huffines-criticizes-abbott-for-texan-school-districts-reinstating-mask-mandates>

²⁸³ “Huffines: ‘Mask mandates are an attack on Texans’ God-given liberties,’” West Houston News, Jan. 7, 2022,

<https://westhoustonnews.com/stories/617997121-huffines-mask-mandates-are-an-attack-on-texans-god-given-liberties>

²⁸⁴ “Huffines: ‘Dr. Fauci is a fraud and a liar who should be in jail,’” Collin Times, retrieved Dec. 10, 2023, from

<https://web.archive.org/web/20220412035553/https://collintimes.com/stories/617967194-huffines-dr-fauci-is-a-fraud-and-a-liar-who-should-be-in-jail>

²⁸⁵ Andy Nghiem, “‘It’s time to fire Abbott’: Texas gubernatorial candidate pledges to boost election security,” North Houston News, Jan. 21, 2022,

<https://northhoustonnews.com/stories/618805423-it-s-time-to-fire-abbott-texas-gubernatorial-candidate-pledges-to-boost-election-security>

²⁸⁶ Emily Bevard, “Huffines reacts to Texas law limiting mail-in ballot applications: ‘We know there’s fraud in our elections,’” Mid City Times, Feb. 1,

2022, <https://midcitytimes.com/stories/619234416-abbott-s-weakness-is-taking-a-toll-on-texans-well-being-huffines-criticizes-abbott-for-texan-school-districts-reinstating-mask-mandates>

²⁸⁷ “‘Our elections are not secure’ – Huffines demands action, prosecution in response to audit,” Lone Star Standard, Jan. 6, 2022, retrieved Dec. 30, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20231206185916/https://lonestarstandard.com/stories/617942870-our-elections-are-not-secure-huffines-demands-action-prosecution-in-response-to-audit>

News),²⁸⁸ [“Huffines praises efforts by pro-life activists to ‘cultivate a culture of life’”](#) (Lone Star Standard),²⁸⁹ [“Huffines: ‘It is right for Texas to seek to take back public funds from abortionists’”](#) (North Houston News)²⁹⁰

- A host of other “culture war” topics including China, critical race theory, and LGBTQ rights: [“Huffines calls for prohibiting Chinese students at Texas universities”](#) (West Texas News),²⁹¹ [“Huffines: ‘Critical race theory is a disgusting Marxist ideology that is dedicated to pitting Texans against each other’”](#) (Austin News),²⁹² [“Our children are in danger’: Huffines denounces the availability of LGBTQ+ books in Texas schools”](#) (Austin News)²⁹³

Huffines lost the primary, coming in third with 12 percent of the vote. Abbott received more than 66 percent of the vote to win the race.

People Who Play by the Rules PAC

Only a small fraction of the \$28 million — \$226,668 — that Proft’s People Who Play by the Rules PAC received from Uihlein was [spent on Pipeline Media](#) to cover services like website, SMS messages, and robocalls.²⁹⁴ [Most of that money](#) — \$216,668 — was spent opposing GOP primary candidate Richard Irvin for governor through text messages and robocalls.²⁹⁵

Overall, of the \$19.7 million People Who Play by the Rules had spent at the time of writing, \$7 million was spent on the primary race opposing Irvin, who came third in the race that Bailey (the candidate the PAC was backing) won.

After the Illinois primaries, the PAC started targeting Pritzker, the incumbent governor. From July to October 2022, it spent more than [\\$12 million](#) opposing Pritzker, of which \$10,000 was disbursed to Pipeline Media for “website.”²⁹⁶ In July 2022, several domains were registered with names like howmuchworse [dot] com, truthaboutjb [dot] com, Too Much JB, and thetruthaboutjb [dot] com, all of which redirected to the same site with the disclaimer “©

²⁸⁸ “Gubernatorial candidate Huffines: ‘As governor, I will abolish abortion in Texas,’” North San Antonio News, Jan. 18, 2022, retrieved Dec. 30, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20231206190738/https://northsanantonionews.com/stories/618227396-gubernatorial-candidate-huffines-as-governor-i-will-abolish-abortion-in-texas>

²⁸⁹ Bob Martin, “Huffines praises efforts by pro-life activists to ‘cultivate a culture of life,’” Lone Star Standard, Feb. 15, 2022, <https://lonestarstandard.com/stories/620086104-huffines-praises-efforts-by-pro-life-activists-to-cultivate-a-culture-of-life>

²⁹⁰ John Kelly, “Huffines: ‘It is right for Texas to seek to take back public funds from abortionists,’” North Houston News, Jan. 19, 2022, <https://northhoustonnews.com/stories/618738243-huffines-it-is-right-for-texas-to-see-to-take-back-public-funds-from-abortionists>

²⁹¹ Bob Martin, “Huffines calls for prohibiting Chinese students at Texas universities,” West Texas News, Jan. 25, 2022, <https://westtxnews.com/stories/618827691-huffines-calls-for-prohibiting-chinese-students-at-texas-universities>

²⁹² “Huffines: ‘Critical race theory is a disgusting Marxist ideology that is dedicated to pitting Texans against each other,’” Austin News, Jan. 7, 2022, <https://austintxnews.com/stories/617981222-huffines-critical-race-theory-is-a-disgusting-marxist-ideology-that-is-dedicated-to-pitting-texans-against-each-other>

²⁹³ Andy Nghiem, “‘Our children are in danger’: Huffines denounces the availability of LGBTQ+ books in Texas schools,” Austin News, Jan. 21, 2022, <https://austintxnews.com/stories/618805424-our-children-are-in-danger-huffines-denounces-the-availability-of-lgbtq-books-in-texas-schools>

²⁹⁴ Reform for Illinois’ Sunshine Database, “Search for ‘Pipeline Media,’” https://illinois sunshine.org/search/?term=Pipeline+Media&table_name=candidates&table_name=committees&table_name=officers&table_name=recipients&table_name=expenditures&search_date__ge=&search_date__le=

²⁹⁵ Reform for Illinois’ Sunshine Database, “People Who Play By The Rules PAC”, <https://illinois sunshine.org/committees/37277/>

²⁹⁶ Reform for Illinois’ Sunshine Database, “People Who Play By The Rules PAC”, <https://illinois sunshine.org/committees/37277/>

People Who Play By The Rules PAC.” The site states, “Too Much JB Pritzker Leaves No Room for You.”

Other anti-Pritzker domains registered in mid-September included [Pritzker Must Go](#) (which featured a new ad campaign by People Who Play by the Rules) and [pritzkerbook \[dot\] com](#), which presented users with an e-book about “what every Illinoisan should know” about the incumbent). The book, too, was paid for by the PAC.

These domains share digital identifiers like IP addresses and analytics infrastructure with other sites in the extended local news network, including the Will County Gazette, Kane County Reporter, Chicago City Wire, and DuPage Policy Journal.

Not only are these four sites part of LGIS, the Illinois-specific subset of the network, but physical copies of these papers have [shown up on Illinois doorsteps](#)²⁹⁷ attacking Pritzker on various topics including criminal reform (detailed in Chapter 3.1). Unlike the Arizona Grand Canyon Times and Kansas Catholic Tribune, these Illinois papers did not have a disclaimer — instead, they contained a note from the publisher, LGIS:

Our goal is twofold: 1) to provide news about state and local policy matters and politics to help you assess whether the policy decisions made by your elected officials are aligned with your values and to explain how those decisions impact your quality of life; and (2) to offer quality local content to help you stay abreast of what’s happening in the community you call home.

Restoration PAC

People Who Play by the Rules was not the only PAC to receive millions from Uihlein during the midterm election cycle. Restoration PAC, whose *raison d’être* is to “provide support to truly conservative candidates” and to “oppose Leftists and the woke agenda,” [received at least \\$13.7 million](#) from the founder of Uline,²⁹⁸ the privately held shipping-supply company. Of this, \$1.37 million went to [Pipeline Advisors LLC \(\\$1,336,109\)](#) and [Pipeline Media \(\\$30,463\)](#) for various types of consulting and “production costs.”²⁹⁹

²⁹⁷ Jem Bartholomew, “‘Disinformation Weekly’: How midterm newspapers are failing the electorate,” Tow Center for Digital Journalism, CJR, Oct. 6, 2022, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/disinformation-weekly-how-mid-term-newspapers-are-failing-the-electorate.php

²⁹⁸ Federal Election Commission, “Individual Contributions,” https://www.fec.gov/data/individual-contributions/?committee_id=C00571588&contributor_name=uihleinandtwo_year_transaction_period=2022

²⁹⁹ Federal Election Commission, “Disbursements,” https://www.fec.gov/data/disbursements/?data_type=processed&committee_id=C00571588&recipient_name=pipeline&two_year_transaction_period=2022

As originally reported by [ProPublica](#)³⁰⁰ and [OpenSecrets](#),³⁰¹ one of the big initiatives by the affiliated Restoration Action PAC is the Voter Reference Foundation or VoteRef, an effort to put voter registration rolls from all 50 states online, thereby allowing people to search for discrepancies in an effort to find “election fraud.” Election officials have said the methodology is flawed and the organization’s actions may be illegal.³⁰² VoteRef has dismissed these concerns. The voter rolls being made public as part of this initiative include individuals’ addresses, birth date, party affiliation, registration date, and registration status, along with whether they voted in the past five elections.

The Metric Media network’s role in this endeavor appears to be twofold: publishing stories about the initiative and broadcasting as and when voter rolls become available, and [providing technical support](#)³⁰³ for the public-facing Web application.

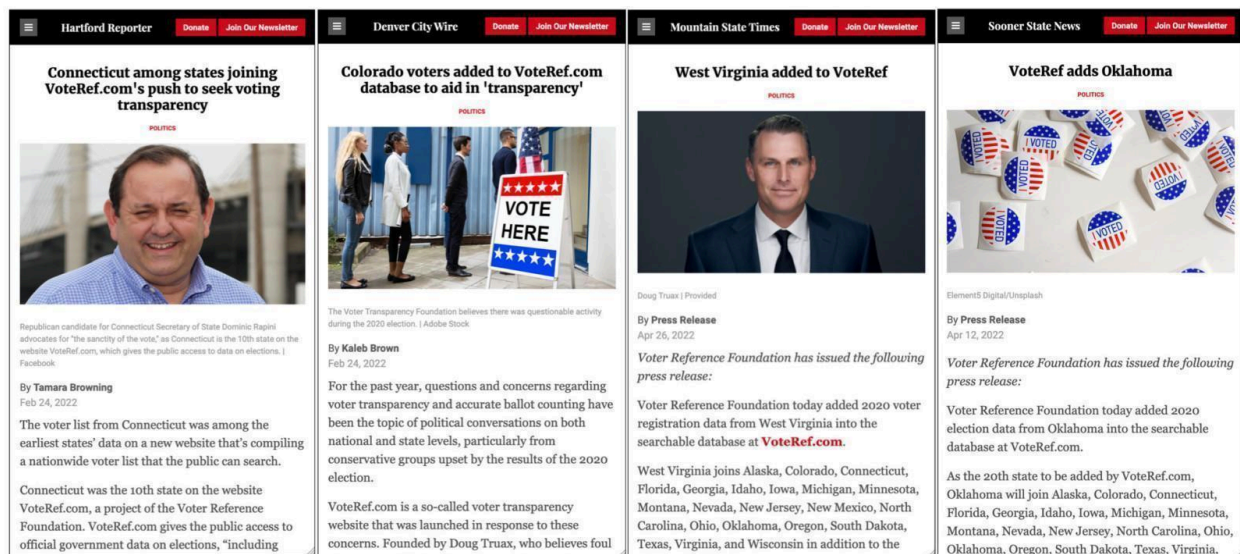


Figure 21: Stories about VoteRef from the Metric Media local news network.

Analysis by the Tow Center found more than 50 stories published across the Metric Media news network about VoteRef’s activities, with headlines like [“Transparency site and pending Georgia bill make ballots ‘open to public inspection’”](#) (South Atlanta News);³⁰⁴ [“Truax: ‘Not going to be deterred’ in First Amendment voter rolls lawsuit against New Mexico officials”](#)

³⁰⁰ Megan O’Matz, “Billionaire-Backed Group Enlists Trump-Supporting Citizens to Hunt for Voter Fraud Using Discredited Techniques,” ProPublica, Mar. 7, 2022, <https://www.propublica.org/article/voter-ref-foundation>

³⁰¹ Anna Massoglia, “Millions of dollars poured into a ‘dark money’ group tied to billionaire-backed super PAC and efforts to expose voter rolls,” OpenSecrets, Mar. 10, 2022, <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2022/03/millions-of-dollars-poured-into-a-dark-money-group-tied-to-billionaire-backed-super-pac-and-efforts-to-expose-voter-rolls/>

³⁰² O’Matz, *ibid.*

³⁰³ Restoration Group, “Restoration April 2022 Town Hall.” Accessed January 12, 2024. <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23169253-restoration-april-2022-town-hall#document/p4>

³⁰⁴ Kaleb Brown, “Transparency site and pending Georgia bill make ballots ‘open to public inspection,’” South Atlanta News, Feb. 23, 2022, retrieved Dec. 30 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20220411162229/https://southatlantaneews.com/stories/620885245-transparency-site-and-pending-georgia-bill-make-ballots-open-to-public-inspection>

(Georgia Mountain News),³⁰⁵ and “Voter Reference Foundation executive director: ‘Publishing voter registration data increases transparency which will help to restore public confidence.’” A handful of these were verbatim press releases issued by the Voter Reference Foundation.

The web application shared an analytics ID and analytics code with other publications in the extended Metric Media network, and explicitly stated that it is a subsidiary of Restoration Action. According to a [document obtained by ProPublica](#), LocalLabs (an entity in this network) was also building functionality for the application.³⁰⁶

The application allowed users to browse voter rolls in 32 states, as well as explore the number of ballots cast in the 2020 election — versus how many registered voters cast ballots — on a state-by-state level. This then allowed the database to flag “net ballot discrepancies” and “total incorrect records.” ProPublica, as part of its investigation, contacted election officials — a mix of Democrats and Republicans — in 12 of the states where VoteRef has voter rolls, and found “in every case the officials said that the methodology used to identify the discrepancies was flawed, the data incomplete or the math wrong.”³⁰⁷

Our analysis thus far has relied on disclosed disbursements filed in accordance with federal and state campaign finance requirements. Even so, it’s unlikely that our analysis is complete. Not only is FEC reporting only required for a narrow category of ads, but there is no way to tell if there are intermediary groups that help facilitate transactions between parties.

³⁰⁵ Emily Bevard, “Truax: ‘Not going to be deterred’ in First Amendment voter rolls lawsuit against New Mexico officials,” Georgia Mountain News, Apr. 1, 2022, retrieved Dec. 10, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20220411162214/https://georgiamountainnews.com/stories/622492568-truax-not-going-to-be-deterred-in-first-amendment-voter-rolls-lawsuit-against-new-mexico-officials>

³⁰⁶ Restoration Group, *op. cit.*

³⁰⁷ O’Matz, *op. cit.*

3. Physical Newspapers in Illinois and Glowing Coverage of Trump-approved Gubernatorial Candidates: Case Studies from the 2022 Midterm Elections

Having explored the operational side of the extended Metric Media network, we now turn our attention to content and impact. This is achieved through three case studies focusing on activity from the Metric Media network during the 2022 midterm elections.

The first report provides in-depth reporting on a tactic introduced in Chapter 2.5: the distribution of political advertisements disguised as newspapers by Local Government Information Services (LGIS), a core component of the extended Metric Media network. Focusing primarily on Illinois, one of at least three states where such newspapers were mailed to residents in the run-up to election day, this report offers insight into the editorial decision-making that shaped the *Chicago Tribune's* coverage of the stunt, and hears from an Illinois school official who found herself at the center of a false story published by a LGIS title that percolated through the right-wing media ecosystem. It also provides a detailed breakdown of LGIS's six-figure ad spend on Facebook and Instagram since 2018. This is followed by two data-driven case studies exploring the coverage lavished on GOP political candidates by Metric Media and LGIS sites, and the actions these candidates took to leverage this coverage during their campaigns.

The first case study focuses on Darren Bailey, the GOP candidate hoping to unseat incumbent J.D. Pritzker in the 2022 Illinois gubernatorial race. The subject of the second is Jim Renacci, an Ohio gubernatorial hopeful whose reliance on Metric Media stories boosting him or attacking his rivals came into sharp focus in the months leading up to the GOP primaries.

3.1 Midterm 2022 Case Study: Fake newspapers in Illinois³⁰⁸

One afternoon in late summer 2022, after returning home from his job for the parks and recreation department of his Illinois village, Michael Gnad, 22, went to check for a package in the mail and found a copy of a newspaper called the *Kane County Reporter*.

The paper featured scare stories on crime, COVID-19, and culture war topics. Articles claimed teachers were instructing children to be trans, and dangerous murderers would be released without bail under a Democratic plan to reform cash bail, in a double-page spread of mug shots of mostly Black men. “It was vile stuff,” Gnad said after researching more about the paper online. It particularly struck a chord because he felt it was questioning his very right to exist as part of the LGBTQ+ community. He was also disgusted by what he saw as racism: “It really tried to punch down on as many people as possible.”

Gnad’s household is one of hundreds of thousands across Illinois, according to one person familiar with the matter, to have received similar weekly “newspapers.” The titles — including the *Kane County Reporter*, *Chicago City Wire*, *West Cook News*, *Dupage Policy Journal*, *Lake County Gazette*, and *Will County Gazette* — are part of at least 11 physical offshoots of 36 online news sites published by [Local Government Information Services](#),³⁰⁹ or LGIS (*profiled in Chapter 2*).

While the Illinois papers claimed to comprise honest local reporting — “Real data. Real news,” their slogan read — they focused much of their attention on attacking the Democratic governor, J.B. Pritzker, and supporting his Trump-endorsed Republican challenger Darren Bailey. These papers, which were [condemned by Pritzker as racist](#), as the *Chicago Tribune* first reported,³¹⁰ feature multiple misleading, decontextualized, and often nonfactual stories on hot-button issues in Illinois.

The papers sparked fears that, ahead of the midterms, readers could be consuming divisive messages without realizing the true source. While papers of this kind tend to mimic the look and feel of local reporting, they are in fact funded by PACs or activists with agendas. “It has all the appearance and trappings of an official news organization, and it’s trying to hitch a ride off

³⁰⁸ This section is derived from reporting originally published on October 6, 2022. See: Jem Bartholomew, “‘Disinformation Weekly’: How midterm newspapers are failing the electorate,” *CJR*, Oct. 6, 2022,

https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/disinformation-weekly-how-mid-term-newspapers-are-failing-the-electorate.php

³⁰⁹ Jeremy Boden, “A ‘formidable conservative force’ challenges politics coverage in Illinois,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, Mar. 20, 2018,

https://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/lgis-profit-news-illinois.php

³¹⁰ Rick Pearson, “Gov. J.B. Pritzker says racism behind political mailings disguised as newspapers that attack new criminal justice laws,” *Chicago Tribune*, Sep. 9, 2022,

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/politics/elections/ct-illinois-governors-race-pritzker-profit-fake-newspapers-20220909-dplcxk67w5g2jn5ajae3jd63zm-story.html>

the credibility of newspapers built over time,” said Peter Adams, senior vice president of education at the News Literacy Project. “This crosses the boundary into propaganda.”

Terminology can be tricky in this field. Rick Pearson, the *Chicago Tribune*’s chief political reporter, explained that he typically uses the terms “political advertising” or “misinformation” when referring to these papers. But LGIS has been cited multiple times by fact checkers — for the likes of [Reuters](#),³¹¹ the [AP](#),³¹² and [FactCheck.org](#)³¹³ — for containing untrue content, yet continued to actively publish the same story across social media and in print.

Papers like these were not entirely new. In 2016, Dan Proft, who now runs the Florida-based [People Who Play by the Rules](#) PAC, paid for a [similar postal campaign](#) through his former PAC, Liberty Principles³¹⁴ (see *Chapter 2.5*). But after a 2016 [complaint](#) about lack of funding disclosure, the Illinois State Board of Elections ruled Proft needed to add a disclaimer about where the money was coming from, according to documents shared by the board with the Tow Center. (Instead, he stopped paying through the PAC.)

In the [2022 midterms](#), funding sources for the latest iteration of LGIS newspapers were unknown, apart from a company disclaimer online that read: “Funding for this news site is provided, in part, by advocacy groups who share our beliefs in limited government.” Matt Dietrich, public information officer at the Illinois State Board of Elections, noted “there is currently no evidence that his [Proft’s new] PAC is paying for these newspapers.” Even if the PAC *were* paying, Dietrich added, there would be no issue as long as funding was disclosed: “The only rule is an independent-expenditure PAC cannot coordinate with a candidate’s campaign committee.”

These partisan mailers disguised as local news also marked a challenge for legacy newspapers. When the *Chicago City Wire* started falling through letterboxes in August 2022, it sparked a conversation in the then-174-year-old *Chicago Tribune* newsroom about the ethics of amplification. Where is the tipping point at which reporting on mis- and disinformation ends up actually circulating it to a wider audience? “That’s a constant battle — there’s a fine line that many of us walk [reporting on] those attention seekers, like Dan Proft, who look to be covered by the media, versus to ignore them and not give them that vindication,” Pearson explained. “We did have that debate,” he added, but in this case, with the *Tribune* newsroom inundated with questions from readers about what these papers were and who funded them,

³¹¹ Reuters Fact Check, “A race-based grading system was not introduced at an Illinois high school,” Reuters, June 9, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/factcheck-illinois-grading-race/fact-check-a-race-based-grading-system-was-not-introduced-at-an-illinois-high-school-idUSL1N2XW1SU>

³¹² Angelo Fichera and Arijeta Lajka, “Illinois high school didn’t adopt ‘race-based’ grading system,” AP, June 3, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/fact-check-illinois-school-race-equitable-grading-586063167875>

³¹³ Saranac Hale Spencer, “Illinois School District’s Shift to Equitable Grading Is Misrepresented Online,” FactCheck.org, June 6, 2022, <https://www.factcheck.org/2022/06/illinois-school-districts-shift-to-equitable-grading-is-misrepresented-online/>

³¹⁴ Jackie Spinner, “An Illinois PAC decides to get into local news—just in time for the primary,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 15, 2016, https://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/illinois_pac_newspapers.php

“it was quite a clear-cut decision to write this story [in the public interest](#).”³¹⁵ It’s not always so easy.

The major worry was that, little more than a month from the midterms, bad actors were targeting inflammatory and discordant issues — pressing the tender bruises of U.S. politics — in ways designed to mislead and provoke. “We’ve seen that not just with this operation, but we’ve seen that with other operations with various organizations affiliated more to the right,” Pearson said. “There’s no doubt that in the current environment, this is certainly taking advantage of the decimated media scene.”

For Karin Sullivan, the executive director of communications and community at Oak Park and River Forest High School in the Chicago suburb of Oak Park, the period after finals and graduation is a sleepy time of year. But on May 31, 2022, Sullivan remembers coming out of a meeting to find her phone blowing up with voicemails, emails, and Google alerts.

An online story from West Cook News, an LGIS news outlet, said the school had begun implementing “race-based grading” where white students would supposedly be downgraded in the interests of racial fairness. “Complete fabrication,” Sullivan said.

West Cook News had latched onto the last presentation slide from a May 26 board meeting that had said the high school would use “evidence-backed research and the racial equity analysis tool” to examine grading practices, [blowing it up into the lie that the school would be grading by race](#).³¹⁶ The school, which has a diverse cohort and is part of a progressive community, had been the target of West Cook News attacks before. (Sullivan had even requested two corrections in September 2021, according to emails seen by the Tow Center, but received no reply from the paper.) Yet Sullivan had seen nothing on the scale of this story.

The false narrative zipped around the right-wing media ecosystem. Within hours, a host of right-wing outlets ran similar versions of the story. Conservative news outlets built on the original story. Newsmax ran a segment on the allegation.³¹⁷ The conservative *National Review*, without reaching out to the school, [decried](#) the plan as “bigotry.”³¹⁸ Breitbart ran a [similar story](#).³¹⁹ The Lion, the outlet of the conservative Herzog Foundation, [uploaded an article](#)

³¹⁵ Pearson, *op. cit.*

³¹⁶ Bayliss Wagner, “Fact check: False claim that Illinois high school will use race-based grading,” *USA Today*, June 13, 2022, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2022/06/13/fact-check-false-claim-oak-park-illinois-high-school-use-race-based-grading/7532992001/>

³¹⁷ Newsmax, “A new grading system in Chicago is based on race | ‘Eric Bolling The Balance,’” YouTube, Jun. 1, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4T-OXotPKo>

³¹⁸ Wesley J Smith, “Move Over DEI, Here Comes the J for ‘Justice’ in Race-Based Grading Policy,” *National Review*, May 31, 2022, <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/move-over-dei-here-comes-the-j-for-justice-in-race-based-grading-policy/>

³¹⁹ Penny Starr, “UPDATE: Chicago High School to Implement ‘Transformative,’ ‘Equitable’ Grading System Which They Claim Doesn’t Mean Race-Based,” Breitbart, May 31, 2022, <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2022/05/31/update-chicago-high-school-to-implement-transformative-equitable-grading-system-which-they-claim-doesnt-mean-race-based/>

despite the school's insistence, over email, that the allegation was untrue.³²⁰ The *Daily Signal* also reached out to Sullivan for comment. (*National Review* and Breitbart later updated their stories to include a statement from the school.)

In the most brazen example, PJ Media contacted Sullivan only *after* publishing its version. “Is the allegation of race-based grading true [or] false, or a complex combination of facts? I wrote an article about this yesterday and I want to be accurate,” a PJ Media columnist wrote to Sullivan in emails seen by the Tow Center. Sullivan, confirming the allegation was false, replied: “I’m a little unclear — you’ve already posted the article and now you’re fact-checking it after the fact? That does not sound like responsible journalism.”

Sullivan watched as the false narrative multiplied, shared by more than 7,000 Facebook users in the first week,³²¹ and was then spread by right-wing influencers on social media. Accounts including those of Ann Coulter, a conservative media pundit with two million Twitter followers; Tom Fitton, a conservative activist with 1.5 million; and Steve Cortes, a former Trump campaign manager with more than 340,000, generated thousands of engagements. The account Libs of TikTok, with 1.4 million Twitter followers and 880,000 on the Trump-backed network Truth Social, amplified the narrative further. The story garnered more than 15,000 engagements (retweets, likes, and comments) on Twitter alone, according to Tow Center analysis. This spread fits a similar pattern identified by Stanford University’s [Election Integrity Project](#) throughout the 2020 election — that misinformation can spread both bottom-up, from concerned citizens, and top-down from online trendsetters with a platform.³²²

Fact checks from Reuters, AP, FactCheck.org, [WGN Radio](#),³²³ The [Daily Beast](#),³²⁴ and *USA Today*; Josh Kraushaar, senior political correspondent at [Axios](#);³²⁵ and the Substack of [Donald Moynihan](#),³²⁶ a professor at Georgetown University’s School of Public Policy, attempted to set the record straight. (Kraushaar even admitted being duped at first.) But their posts labeling the allegation false drew far less engagement.

The danger with all misinformation, says Adams of the News Literacy Project, is that its constant repetition across timelines, TV screens, and print media means even if it’s debunked it can leave a lasting impression. “Misinformation is so pernicious because it’s sticky,” he said. “There’s a danger the disinformation becomes unmoored from its source and comes to feel like conventional wisdom.”

³²⁰ Michael Ryan, “Race-based grading in this Chicago-area school? News report says yes, school says no,” *The Lion*, May 31, 2022, <https://readlion.com/race-based-grading-in-this-chicago-area-school-news-report-says-yes-school-says-no/>

³²¹ Wagner, *op. cit.*

³²² Center for an Informed Public, Digital Forensic Research Lab, Graphika, & Stanford Internet Observatory, *The Long Fuse: Misinformation and the 2020 Election*, 2021. Stanford Digital Repository: Election Integrity Partnership. v1.3.0, <https://purl.stanford.edu/tr171zs0069>

³²³ Reuters, *op. cit.*; Hale Spencer, *op. cit.*; Fichera and Arijeta Lajka, *op. cit.*; John Williams, “What happens when a fake story goes viral?,” *WGN Radio*, June 6, 2022, <https://wgnradio.com/john-williams/what-happens-when-a-fake-story-goes-viral/>

³²⁴ Justin Baragona, “Newsmax Runs With Debunked Story About ‘Race-Based Grading,’” *The Daily Beast*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/newsmax-runs-with-debunked-story-about-race-based-grading>

³²⁵ Accessed January 12, 2024. <https://twitter.com/JoshKraushaar/status/1531694492696420353>

³²⁶ Don Moynihan, “Anatomy of a Fake,” *Can We Still Govern?*, June 1, 2022, <https://donmoynihan.substack.com/p/anatomy-of-a-fake>

West Cook News didn't back down after a round of fact checks. Later in June, the false story was promoted via paid advertising on Facebook and Instagram, according to parent company [Meta's ad library](#), with LGIS spending up to \$100 on a four-day ad that garnered more than 3,000 impressions. The ad reached more women than men, with women aged 45 to 50 — perhaps targeting mothers — those who were served the ad most on their timelines. This is small potatoes; West Cook News has spent just \$2,897 on 74 ads since 2018, Meta data shows. But the LGIS papers in Illinois have plowed at least \$183,000 into Facebook advertising on more than 3,550 Facebook and Instagram ads between 2018 and October 2, 2022.

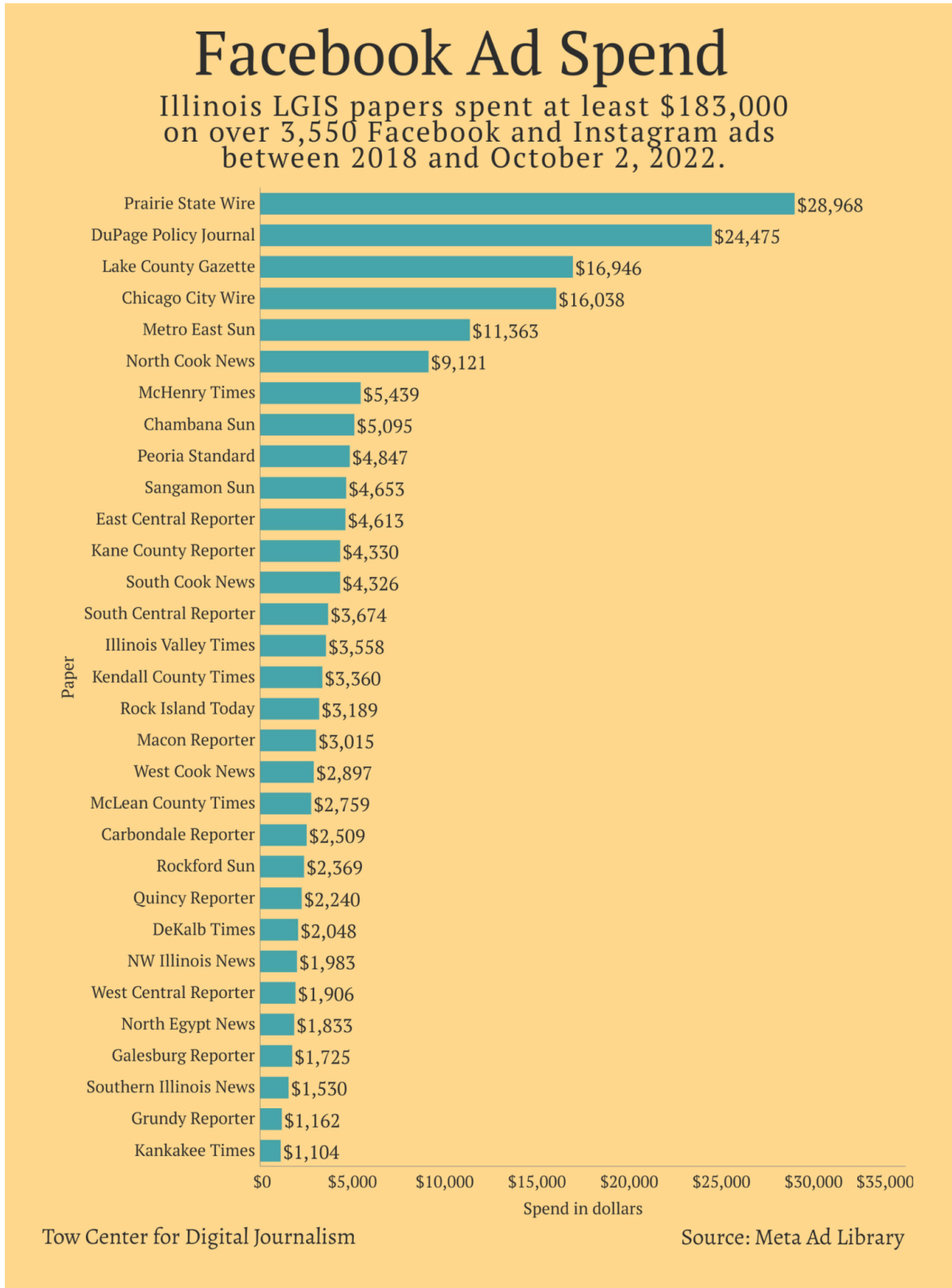


Figure 22: A breakdown of LGIS’s ad spend on Meta platforms.

Then the story crossed over from the digital to the physical. In late August, LGIS began sending the print newspapers to homes across Illinois, dropping the same misleading race-based grading story — and many more — onto the doormats of voters. This is “the use of a product and delivery mechanism that is currently used with the clear aim to avoid disclosure that would be required through a PAC,” said Jon Berkon, a partner at Democrat-allied Elias Law Group, who has worked for the Pritzker campaign.

Bailey: ‘Crime is out of control in Illinois’

By Amor Nossuk

Gubernatorial candidate Sen. Darren Bailey (R-Xenia) blames the state’s current crime problems on Democrats Gov. J.B. Pritzker, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot and Cook County State’s Attorney Kim Foxx.



“Friends, the cost of living is out of control, as many families are forced to choose between putting gas in their cars or food on their tables. Crime is out of control in Illinois and it is skyrocketing in Chicago. Parents don’t feel safe walking their kids play at the park or even walk home from school,” Bailey said in a video posted to Facebook on Aug. 13.

Bailey says these problems are made worse in Chicago by Pritzker, Lightfoot, and Foxx. He adds that he’s going to file legislation allowing residents to recall Foxx because, he says, she has refused to do her job, lost her office’s confidence, and failed to keep families safe.

“As shootings and mayhem terrorize the city, the trio have more than turned their backs against police officers; they have actively attacked them,” Bailey said, according to Daily Herald.

Bailey tore into Foxx in particular saying, “If lax prosecutors like Kim Foxx don’t want to prosecute violent offenders, that won’t be an option when I’m governor. My first order of business will be to file legislation allowing residents to recall Kim Foxx. We will create an office of statewide prosecutor under the state attorney general’s office with the power to prosecute crime... if prosecutors like Kim Foxx refuse to do their jobs.”

OPRF to implement race-based grading in 2022-23 school year

IGS News Service

FAKES

Oak Park and River Forest school administrators will require teachers to use test scores to account for the skin color or ethnicity of its students.



Laurie Florenza, director of student learning

...the grades of black students. They can no longer be docked for missing class, misbehavior in school, or failing to turn in their assignments, according to the plan.

“Traditional grading practices perpetuate inequities and minimize the opportunity gap,” reads a slide in the PowerPoint deck outlining its rationale and goals.

It calls for what OPRF leaders describe as “competency-based grading, eliminating zeros from the grade book...encouraging and rewarding growth over time.”

Teachers are being instructed how to measure student “growth” while keeping the school leaders’ political ideology in mind.

“Teachers and administrators at OPRF-HS will continue the process necessary to make grading improvements that reflect our core beliefs,” the plan states, promising to “consistently integrate equitable assessment and grading practices into all academic and elective courses” by fall 2023.

Naperville third-grade teacher instructs 8-year-old boys on how to act like girls

LOCAL HEADLINES

...Naperville third-grade teacher back to school... she is teaching them to act like girls... she is teaching them to act like girls... she is teaching them to act like girls...

...Morrison bill would replace Illinois state law references to ‘mother’ with ‘person’

...It’s inappropriate, and an unacceptable use of taxpayer funds: Pekau opposes ‘Drag Queen Bingo’

Chicago City Wire

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SPECIAL SEX EDUCATION EDITION

What are they teaching your child in 2022?

No more boys and girls? Pritzker family leads push to replace ‘myth’ of biology




Chicago Public Schools to adapt Pritzker’s sex ed curricula

Chicago Public Schools will overhaul sex education curricula to provide more explicit lessons on gender identity, according to a report by the Chicago City Wire.

Chicago Public Schools will overhaul sex education curricula to provide more explicit lessons on gender identity, according to a report by the Chicago City Wire.

Figure 23: LGIS papers feature multiple misleading, decontextualized, and often nonfactual stories on hot-button issues in Illinois.

The episode also touched on the tricky situations some local publishers find themselves in amid the collapse of advertising revenue. The LGIS papers were printed in Schaumburg by Paddock Publications, which owns Chicago newspaper the *Daily Herald* and runs a commercial printing operation. The column inches of disinformation in the LGIS papers were delivered from a third-class USPS postage license belonging to the *Herald's* owner, which made Paddock the [target of critique from the Pritzker campaign](#) for distributing information running counter to the *Herald's* “commitment to the public good and to fair and objective journalism.”³²⁷

The *Herald* owner “took million[s] of dollars in payments from LGIS over a seven-year period to publish and distribute the chain’s newspapers,” an LGIS paper wrote,³²⁸ which Paddock did not deny in emails to the Tow Center. Paddock canceled LGIS’s contract in September. A spokesperson said it would formalize its commercial screening process, add publishing disclaimers in sensitive cases, and strengthen the commercial/editorial separation — but defended the need to diversify revenue amid a “historic downturn” in local news. But Profit didn’t seem fazed by Paddock canceling the LGIS contract. The papers had already found a new publisher, he said on Twitter.

Gannett, the nation’s largest local newspaper chain, also printed LGIS content. LGIS “are a commercial print client,” a Gannett spokesperson said by email. The *Epoch Times*, which has been labeled “a [leading purveyor of right-wing misinformation](#)” by the *New York Times*,³²⁹ is also a commercial client. Asked directly whether printing these papers ran counter to an online Gannett mission statement “to serve as a forum for better understanding and unity to help make the USA truly one nation,” the spokesperson said: “We do not discuss our clients and have no further comment.”

Gannett has struggled in a worsening business environment for local news, with a net loss of \$136 million in 2021, according to its 2022 [Securities and Exchange Commission filing](#), following a net loss of \$672 million in 2020 and of \$121 million in 2019. “Our indebtedness could materially and adversely affect our business or financial condition,” Gannett wrote in its filing. It added: “The company provides commercial printing services to third parties as a means to generate incremental revenue and utilize excess printing capacity.”³³⁰

Responding to LGIS, the Democratic Party of Illinois mailed its own leaflets to voters. “WARNING: Don’t be fooled by phony newspapers sent by right wing extremists,” these read, with arrows pointing to a reproduced *Chicago City Wire* issue.

³²⁷ “The Daily Herald and journalistic integrity,” *Daily Herald*, Sep. 22, 2022,

<https://www.dailyherald.com/news/20220922/the-daily-herald-and-journalistic-integrity>

³²⁸ North Cook News, “After Pritzker threat, Daily Herald cancels LGIS newspaper printing contract,” North Cook News, Sep. 23 2022,

<https://northcooknews.com/stories/632383741-after-pritzker-threat-daily-herald-cancels-lgis-newspaper-printing-contract>

³²⁹ Kevin Roose, “How The Epoch Times Created a Giant Influence Machine,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 24, 2020,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/24/technology/epoch-times-influence-falun-gong.html>

³³⁰ “10K: Annual Report,” Gannett, Feb. 24, 2022,

<https://d18rn0p25nwr6d.cloudfront.net/CIK-0001579684/140abbe9-a731-4d0e-9bdd-50f333571e1f.pdf>

“What’s particularly egregious about these papers is that they are blatantly lying ahead of a competitive midterm election. Clearly, the goal here is to mislead,” said Natalie Edelstein, communications director at Pritzker’s JB for Governor campaign. “The first line of defense here is being forceful in communicating exactly what these are, which are Republican propaganda papers.”



Neither *West Cook News* nor LGIS cofounder Proft replied to a request for comment. But Proft was quoted in Rich Miller’s [Capitol Fax blog](#):

The *Daily Herald* is just another staffer in Pritzker’s comm shop which masquerades as the Chicago press corps. ... The whorish response from the *Herald* is surprising? Hardly. Like Cato’s Letters, the papers will continue to be printed and distributed even if we have to return to the Gutenberg press and must enlist fair-minded people across Illinois who want the truth, not Pritzker’s ‘truth,’ to hand deliver them door-to-door.³³¹

When Bart Koziol, a 31-year-old mechanical engineer in Chicago, got back to his apartment after walking his dog and found a copy of the *Chicago City Wire* in the mail, he recognized

³³¹ Rich Miller, “Daily Herald drops Proft papers,” Capitol Fax, Sep. 22, 2022, <https://capitolfax.com/2022/09/22/daily-herald-drops-proft-papers/>

there was something off. Koziol, a registered Democrat, noticed unflattering pictures of Democratic politicians yelling beside photos of smiling Republicans. He could find no information on the source — a business address or a masthead — as with other newspapers. Later that day, when Koziol walked out the doorway past the mailboxes for the 85-unit apartment block, he saw a gray trash can filled with dozens of copies of the newspaper.

3.2 Midterm 2022 Case Study: Boosting the Republican longshot in Illinois’s gubernatorial race³³²

To better understand the relationship between campaigns and outlets from the extended Metric Media network, the Tow Center examined coverage of Republican gubernatorial challenger [Darren Bailey in Local Government Information Services](#) (LGIS) titles. In the following analysis, we use Bailey as a case study to unpick the relationship between candidate (Bailey) and “news network” (LGIS) that not only saw LGIS outlets lavish Bailey with favorable coverage, but also saw Bailey’s campaign pay to promote LGIS sites via Facebook ads. Through this analysis we present a holistic overview of the coverage enjoyed by LGIS’s favored candidates and explore some of the ways candidates such as Bailey leverage this coverage for self-promotion and/or to attack rivals at opportune political moments.

This case study examines articles published on the homepages of partisan news websites linked to Metric Media during the period January 1, 2022, to October 31, 2022, when at least 228 Bailey-centric articles were published. Breaking these articles down by month of publication, there was a notable surge in August, when 86 different articles were produced.

LGIS coverage of Bailey spiked in August

Supportive stories, many of them attacking Bailey’s political rivals, surged at a time when a controversial video had resurfaced and mainstream news outlets were reporting the Republican candidate was struggling to unite his party.

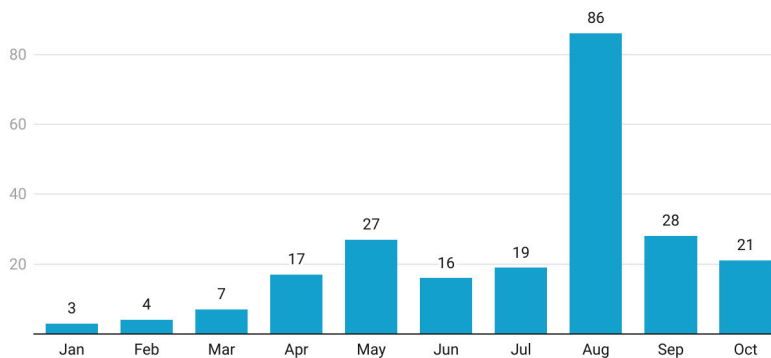


Chart: Pete Brown | Tow Center for Digital Journalism • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 23: Articles about Darren Bailey in LGIS titles in 2022.

³³² This section is derived from reporting originally published on December 1, 2022. See: Pete Brown, “A Case Study: The relationship between a candidate and a ‘pink slime’ news network,” CJR, Dec. 1, 2022, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/a-case-study-the-relationship-between-a-candidate-and-a-pink-slime-news-network.php

This spike in coverage came at a time when, having won the Republican nomination in June, Bailey was said to be struggling to [unite his party](#)³³³ while trying to bat away a freshly unsurfaced video from 2017 in which he [reportedly](#) said the Holocaust “doesn’t even compare” to abortion.³³⁴

The LGIS outlets did not cover the 2017 video or its response. Instead, much of their coverage of Bailey in August showcased his attacks on specific, named political targets. These included:

- **Incumbent Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker**, who was targeted 20 times
 - e.g. [“Bailey attacks SAFE-T Act: ‘Pritzker is letting criminals loose all over Illinois’”](#) (Will County Gazette)³³⁵
- **Illinois Department of Children and Family Services**, which was targeted seven times
 - e.g. [“Bailey: ‘What’s happening at DCFS is shameful’”](#) (Will County Gazette)³³⁶
- **Kim Foxx** (State’s Attorney, Cook County, IL.), who was targeted four times
 - e.g. [“Bailey: Kim Foxx ‘is violating her oath of office, and she is a national embarrassment’”](#) (North Cook News)³³⁷
- **Lori Lightfoot** (Mayor, Chicago, IL.), who was targeted three times
 - e.g. [“Bailey: ‘Lightfoot endorses Pritzker because she knows I am not going to sit on the sidelines’”](#) (Chicago City Wire)³³⁸
- **Marc Smith** (Director, Illinois Department of Children and Family Services), who was targeted twice
 - e.g. [“Bailey: ‘No compelling reason for Smith to have a job. How many more kids have to be hurt?’”](#) (Kane County Reporter)³³⁹
- **Michael Madigan** (Former Illinois House Speaker)

³³³ Dave McKinney and Tina Sfondeles, “Republican candidate for governor Darren Bailey struggles to unite his party,” WBEZ, Aug. 1, 2022, <https://www.wbez.org/stories/darren-bailey-struggles-to-unite-his-party/e1743530-78c2-4b50-9632-1624f509d852>

³³⁴ “IL GOP Gov. Nominee Darren Bailey Tries to Explain Past Holocaust Remark After it is Denounced as ‘Deeply Disturbing,’” NBC Chicago, Aug. 3, 2022, <https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/il-gop-gov-candidate-darren-bailey-tries-to-explain-past-holocaust-remark-after-it-is-denounced-as-deeply-disturbing/2905361/>

³³⁵ Bree Gonzales, “Bailey attacks SAFE-T Act: ‘Pritzker is letting criminals loose all over Illinois,’” Will County Gazette, Aug. 13, 2022, <https://willcountygazette.com/stories/630247403-bailey-attacks-safe-t-act-pritzker-is-letting-criminals-loose-all-over-illinois>

³³⁶ Bree Gonzales, “Bailey: ‘What’s happening at DCFS is shameful,’” Will County Gazette, Aug. 22, 2022, <https://willcountygazette.com/stories/63065511-bailey-what-s-happening-at-dcfs-is-shameful>

³³⁷ “Bailey: Kim Foxx ‘is violating her oath of office, and she is a national embarrassment,’” North Cook News, Aug. 5, 2022, <https://northcooknews.com/stories/629873121-bailey-kim-foxx-is-violating-her-oath-of-office-and-she-is-a-national-embarrassment>

³³⁸ Bree Gonzales, “Bailey: ‘Lightfoot endorses Pritzker because she knows I am not going to sit on the sidelines,’” Chicago City Wire, Aug. 16, 2022, <https://chicagocitywire.com/stories/630326810-bailey-lightfoot-endorses-pritzker-because-she-knows-i-am-not-going-to-sit-on-the-sidelines>

³³⁹ Bree Gonzales, “Bailey: ‘No compelling reason for Smith to have a job. How many more kids have to be hurt?’” Kane County Reporter, Aug. 22, 2022, <https://kanecountyreporter.com/stories/630651329-bailey-no-compelling-reason-for-smith-to-have-a-job-how-many-more-kids-have-to-be-hurt>

- o e.g. [“Bailey protests Madigan’s pension: ‘Corruption in our state government runs so deep’”](#) (Prairie State Wire)³⁴⁰
- **President Joe Biden**
 - o e.g. [“Bailey: ‘Joe Biden and J.B. Pritzker have overseen an economic disaster in America and Illinois’”](#) (Prairie State Wire)³⁴¹
- Sometimes more than one of these people were targeted concurrently:
 - o e.g. [“Bailey: ‘JB Pritzker, Lori Lightfoot and Kim Foxx are the three musketeers of crime, chaos and tragedy in Chicago’”](#) (Prairie State Wire)³⁴²; [“Bailey: ‘Under J.B. Pritzker and Lori Lightfoot, the people of Illinois are in more danger’”](#) (Chicago City Wire)³⁴³
- Bailey also took aim at the city of Chicago:
 - o e.g. [“Bailey calls Chicago a ‘hellhole,’ promises to make ‘all of Illinois safe and affordable’”](#) (SE Illinois News)³⁴⁴

Stories about Bailey were found in 28 titles, 27 of which were from the LGIS network. (The other was from the Record network.) One site, Prairie State Wire, was particularly prolific, publishing 59 of the 228 stories we found (26 percent).

³⁴⁰ Bree Gonzales, “Bailey protests Madigan’s pension: ‘Corruption in our state government runs so deep,’” Prairie State Wire, Aug. 16, 2022, <https://prairiestatewire.com/stories/630399823-bailey-protests-madigan-s-pension-corruption-in-our-state-government-runs-so-deep>

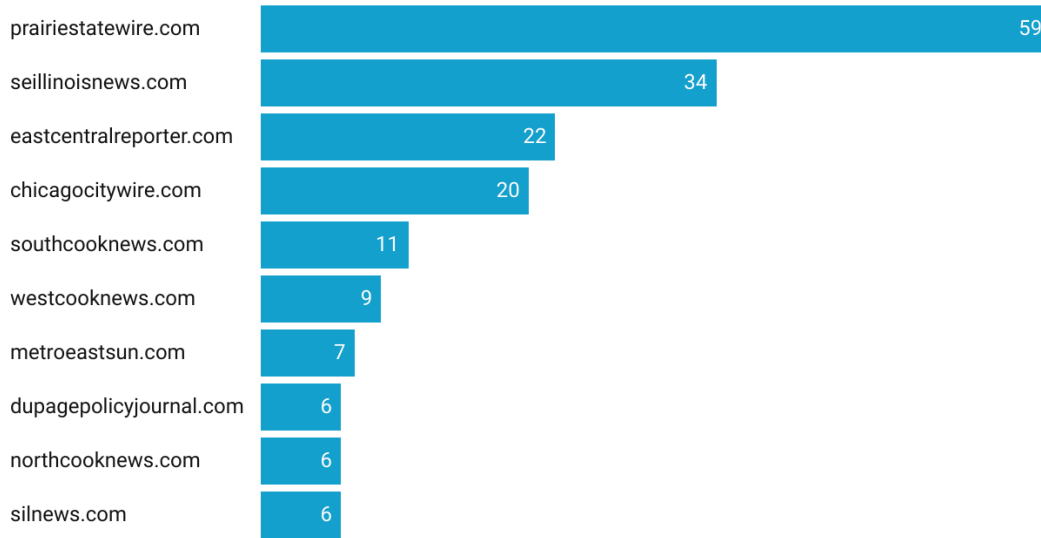
³⁴¹ Bree Gonzales, “Bailey: ‘Joe Biden and J.B. Pritzker have overseen an economic disaster in America and Illinois,’” Prairie State Wire, Aug. 4, 2022, <https://prairiestatewire.com/stories/629812525-bailey-joe-biden-and-j-b-pritzker-have-overseen-an-economic-disaster-in-america-and-illinois>

³⁴² Bree Gonzales, “Bailey: ‘JB Pritzker, Lori Lightfoot and Kim Foxx are the three musketeers of crime, chaos and tragedy in Chicago,’” Prairie State Wire, Aug. 24, 2022, <https://prairiestatewire.com/stories/630734563-bailey-jb-pritzker-lori-lightfoot-and-kim-foxx-are-the-three-musketeers-of-crime-chaos-and-tragedy-in-chicago>

³⁴³ Bree Gonzales, “Bailey: ‘Under J.B. Pritzker and Lori Lightfoot, the people of Illinois are in more danger,’” Chicago City Wire, Aug. 29, 2022, <https://chicagocitywire.com/stories/630957512-bailey-under-j-b-pritzker-and-lori-lightfoot-the-people-of-illinois-are-in-more-danger>

³⁴⁴ Andy Nghiem, “Bailey calls Chicago a ‘hellhole,’ promises to make ‘all of Illinois safe and affordable,’” SE Illinois News, Aug. 22, 2022, retrieved Dec. 10, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20230214193631/https://seillinoisnews.com/stories/630651316-bailey-calls-chicago-a-hellhole-promises-to-make-all-of-illinois-safe-and-affordable>

One LGIS outlet dominated in its coverage of Darren Bailey



Data covers period January-October, 2022. LGIS domains that published fewer than six articles about Bailey are not shown.

Chart: Pete Brown | Tow Center for Digital Journalism • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 24: LGIS domains covering Darren Bailey

The comparatively light publication schedules of these sites can mean that stories pushing favored politicians’ talking points can quickly dominate their homepages.

On September 14, 2022, for example, seven of the thirteen stories in the top section of the Prairie State Wire homepage revolved around Darren Bailey.

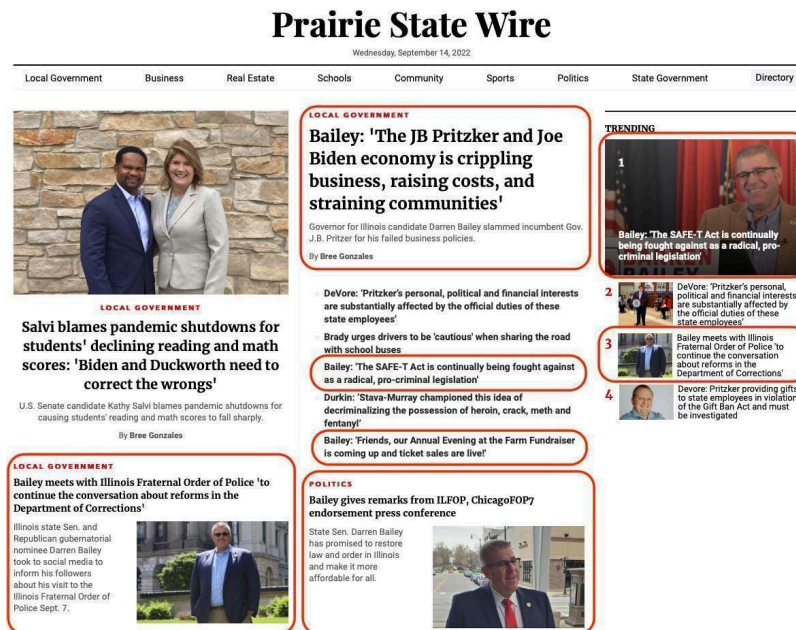


Figure 25: Stories promoting Darren Bailey dominate the homepage of Prairie State Wire on September 14, 2022.

The Prairie State Wire site carries a number of red flags for readers wishing to verify its journalistic credentials. Its [About Us](#) page makes no reference to its ownership or funding. Instead, it describes itself as “a real media watchdog” and boasts of an “experienced team of researchers and news journalists [who] stand ready to hold your local government accountable”:

Prairie State Wire provides candid and concise state government news. Finally, the halls of power have a real media watchdog. Context. Consequence. Value. These are our core values at Prairie State Wire. We endeavor to provide it — helping our readers assess the consequences of public policy decisions on their quality of life.

Our aim: improve understanding of your community, state and the world around you. Profligate spending and borrowing.

Cronyism. Nepotism. Corruption. A property tax bill bigger than your mortgage. This is what our politicians give us when they know they aren’t being watched. At Prairie State Wire, we believe sunlight is the best disinfectant. Our experienced team of researchers and news journalists stand ready to hold your local government accountable.³⁴⁵

Prairie State Wire’s social media profiles also illustrate the atypical nature of the supposed news site. Its [Twitter account](#) has been suspended. (The Wayback Machine’s latest capture of it working is dated [April 19, 2018](#).) On Facebook, the Prairie State Wire is able to self-identify as a “Media/news company.” However, CrowdTangle data suggests it is almost entirely ignored by its audience. Despite having just over 1,500 Facebook followers, 78 percent of its 1,488 posts from this year (up to October 31) have not received a single interaction (share, comment, reaction).

It was rare for Darren Bailey himself to share links to news sites on social media. Our analysis found that fewer than 7 percent of his tweets from 2022 contained links to news articles. Yet among the short list of news outlets to which he has linked were four LGIS outlets: Prairie State Wire (three times), Chicago City Wire, South East Illinois News (twice each), and the Illinois Valley Times (once).

Similarly, on Facebook his [@BaileyforIllinois](#) page had linked to favorable stories in LGIS outlets Chicago City Wire, Peoria Standard, and Illinois Valley Times, despite Bailey not generally being in the habit of sharing news on the platform. (Per CrowdTangle, his campaign page shared links to just 14 news sites in 2022.)

³⁴⁵ “About Us,” Prairie State Wire, <https://prairiestatewire.com/about-us>

Notably, though, Bailey’s engagement with favorable LGIS coverage extended beyond simply sharing links on social media. His campaign’s Facebook page has also paid to promote multiple LGIS articles.

The image displays three screenshots of Facebook advertisements for the 'Darren Bailey for Governor' campaign, all launched in May 2022. Each ad is sponsored and paid for by the campaign. The ads are for news articles from three different LGIS outlets: *INHERITSTATEWIRE.COM*, *ROCKFORDJUN.COM*, and *LAKECOUNTYGAZETTE.COM*. Each ad includes a 'Learn more' button and a 'See ad details' button. The ad statistics for each are as follows:

Ad ID	Estimated Audience Size	Amount spent (USD)	Impressions
1646938719005125	5K - 10K people	<\$100	6K - 7K
704047134143998	10K - 50K people	<\$100	5K - 6K
585933162746084	10K - 50K people	<\$100	7K - 8K

Figure 26: Three of the favorable LGIS “news” articles the @BaileyforIllinois campaign page paid to promote on Facebook.

This was unusual for Bailey’s campaign account, which was not generally in the habit of paying to promote news articles. Per the [Facebook Ad Library](#), Bailey’s campaign page, Darren Bailey for Governor, paid to promote just seven news articles in 2022, all of which came from LGIS outlets. These ads were launched concurrently on May 27, 2022, a month before the Illinois gubernatorial primary.

Numerous characteristics recurred across the LGIS “news” articles for which Bailey’s campaign bought ads:

- In all but one instance, the articles’ bylines were attributed to the publications (“By Prairie State Wire,” “By Rockford Sun,” etc.).
- The headlines stated Bailey’s position on a hot topic, typically via a direct quote:
 - [“Bailey: ‘As governor I will bar state funding to libraries hosting ‘drag queen’ anything and pushing political propaganda to children’”](#) (Lake County Gazette)³⁴⁶
 - [“Bailey: ‘There is nothing wrong with the state encouraging helmet use, but it is an overreach to make it a requirement’”](#) (Prairie State Wire)³⁴⁷
 - [“Bailey: ‘We need more school leaders and school boards like the one in Machesney Park to take a stand for children’”](#) (Rockford Sun)³⁴⁸
 - [“Bailey: ‘There is no need for this legislation and like the dispenser at Lyons Township High School, let’s flush this nonsense law’”](#) (West Cook News)³⁴⁹
- In three instances, the articles talked up endorsements relevant to the promoted story, raising questions about whether they were used as vehicles to target demographics with specific interests:
 - “He has been endorsed by A.B.A.T.E., a motorcycle rights and safety organization” (Prairie State Wire)³⁵⁰
 - “Bailey has been endorsed by Illinois Family Action, Illinois Right to Life, Illinois Federation for Right to Life and Lake County Right to Life” (Rockford Sun)³⁵¹
 - “Illinois Family Action, Illinois Right to Life, Illinois Federation for Right to Life and Lake County Right to Life have all endorsed Bailey” (West Cook News)³⁵²

³⁴⁶ “Bailey: ‘As governor I will bar state funding to libraries hosting ‘drag queen’ anything and pushing political propaganda to children,’” Lake County Gazette, May 24, 2022, <https://lakecountygazette.com/stories/626179720-bailey-as-governor-i-will-bar-state-funding-to-libraries-hosting-drag-queen-anything-and-pushing-political-propaganda-to-children>

³⁴⁷ “Bailey: ‘There is nothing wrong with the state encouraging helmet use, but it is an overreach to make it a requirement,’” Prairie State Wire, May 24, 2022, <https://prairiestatewire.com/stories/626171240-bailey-there-is-nothing-wrong-with-the-state-encouraging-helmet-use-but-it-is-an-overreach-to-make-it-a-requirement>

³⁴⁸ “Bailey: ‘We need more school leaders and school boards like the one in Machesney Park to take a stand for children,’” Rockford Sun, May 24, 2022, <https://rockfordsun.com/stories/626171248-bailey-we-need-more-school-leaders-and-school-boards-like-the-one-in-machesney-park-to-take-a-stand-for-children>

³⁴⁹ “Bailey: ‘There is no need for this legislation and like the dispenser at Lyons Township High School, let’s flush this nonsense law,’” West Cook News, May 24, 2022, <https://westcooknews.com/stories/626177410-bailey-there-is-no-need-for-this-legislation-and-like-the-dispenser-at-lyons-township-high-school-let-s-flush-this-nonsense-law>

³⁵⁰ Prairie State Wire, *ibid.*

³⁵¹ Rockford Sun, *ibid.*

³⁵² West Cook News, *ibid.*

- Six articles dedicate space to promoting Bailey’s farming background, family life, and/or conservative credentials, themes central to many of his fundraising ads (e.g. “Darren Bailey is a farmer, conservative, and a proud Illinoisan through and through. If you think J.B. Pritzker’s time is up, CLICK BELOW.”):
 - “A noted conservative Republican, Bailey is a pro-life, pro-Second Amendment candidate who has noted his commitment to prioritizing Illinois families.” (Rockford Sun)³⁵³
 - “A well-known Republican conservative, Bailey is pro-life and pro-gun rights, and he has stated that Illinois families are his first priority.” (West Cook News)³⁵⁴
 - “Bailey lives on Bailey Family Farm near Louisville with his wife of 35 years, Cindy. They are the parents of four married children and grandparents of 11.” (Prairie State Wire)³⁵⁵
 - “Bailey is a third-generation farmer who was born and reared in Louisville. Bailey grew up on Bailey Family Farm, which is now owned and operated by he and his sons, where they grow corn, wheat and soybeans.” (South Cook News)³⁵⁶

- Three promoted policy commitments he promised to enact if he successfully unseated Pritzker:
 - “Bailey said if he is elected governor, he will bar state funding to libraries that host ‘drag queen’ anything and push ‘political propaganda to children.’”³⁵⁷ (Lake County Gazette)
 - “If elected, Bailey has noted his insistence to fight for parental rights, lower taxes and real spending reform.”³⁵⁸ (Rockford Sun)
 - “Bailey has stated that if elected, he will fight for parental rights, lower taxes and true fiscal reform.”³⁵⁹ (West Cook News)
 - “If elected, Bailey has promised to fight for parental rights, lower taxes and serious budgetary reform.”³⁶⁰ (Lake County Gazette)

Ultimately, any benefit Bailey gained from his frequent coverage across LGIS newspapers didn’t translate into election success in November. Pritzker cruised to a double-digit comfortable victory, albeit by a smaller margin than in 2018.

³⁵³ Rockford Sun, *ibid.*

³⁵⁴ West Cook News, *ibid.*

³⁵⁵ Prairie State Wire, *ibid.*

³⁵⁶ “Bailey: ‘Richard Irvin is a corrupt and career Democrat afraid of a televised debate with Darren Bailey,’” May 24, 2022, South Cook News, <https://southcooknews.com/stories/626181940-bailey-richard-irvin-is-a-corrupt-and-career-democrat-afraid-of-a-televised-debate-with-darren-bailey>

³⁵⁷ Lake County Gazette, *ibid.*

³⁵⁸ Rockford Sun, *ibid.*

³⁵⁹ West Cook News, *ibid.*

³⁶⁰ Lake County Gazette, *ibid.*

Regardless, [reporting](#)³⁶¹ [indicates](#)³⁶² that despite few obvious, direct benefits, partisan pseudo-news networks continue to hold great and seemingly growing appeal as a piece of the campaigning jigsaw. Money — often of the dark variety — continues to pour into their creation and maintenance. As Bailey shows, politicians are happy to legitimize those who serve up helpful coverage via social media shares, endorsements, and paid promotions, despite their questionable journalistic credentials.

As Pritzker began his second term, the Prairie State Wire continued its mission to be “a real media watchdog”, free of cronyism and nepotism.

On November 16, 2022, one week on from the election, seven of the fourteen stories at the top of the Prairie State Wire’s homepage began with the same word: “Bailey.”

Prairie State Wire
Wednesday, November 16, 2022

Local Government Politics Community State Government Business Real Estate Schools Sports Directory

FROM SE ILLINOIS NEWS
Bailey: 'I just spoke to Gov. Pritzker and congratulated on his win tonight'
Republican gubernatorial candidate state Sen. Darren Bailey (R-Louisville) noted in his concession speech that despite losing the bid for governor, he will continue to work on behalf of Illinoisians.
By SE Illinois News Report

FROM WEST COOK NEWS
Bailey: 'As governor, my administration will oppose mandating COVID vaccines for grade school, college and employment'
Illinois Policy: 'Amendment 1 will carry the weight of the constitution, allowing government unions to override state laws'
Bailey: 'Our campaign has been a simple one: We exposed the corruption, the influence peddling'
Bailey: 'This is just the beginning of how the far left is going to use the SAFE-T Act to completely transform our criminal justice system'

STATE GOVERNMENT
Pritzker's emails reveal secret K-12 schools vax mandate plans: 'No statutory changes are necessary, which is a plus'
Top staff to Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker are making secret post-election plans to mandate every Illinois child take a COVID-19 vaccine, or be barred from schools in the state.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT
Bailey: 'Friends, I can promise you this I may not be going to Springfield as your next governor, but I will never stop fighting for you'
During a Nov. 8 speech, Sen. Darren Bailey promised to keep fighting for Illinois residents, and shared that he had congratulated Gov. J.B. Pritzker on his election win.

TRENDING
1 **Bailey: 'Friends, I can promise you this I may not be going to Springfield as your next governor, but I will never stop fighting for you'**
2 Illinois Racing Board met Sept. 22
3 Illinois Policy: 'Amendment 1 will carry the weight of the constitution, allowing government unions to override state laws'
4 Metropolitan Pier Exposition Authority Board met Oct. 25
5 **Bailey: 'This is just the beginning of how the far left is going to use the SAFE-T Act to completely transform our criminal justice system'**

³⁶¹ Bartholomew, *op. cit.*

³⁶² Lorenzo Arvanitis and McKenzie Sadeghi, “Just in time for the midterms: New Entry Joins ‘Pink Slime’ Pseudo-News Sweepstakes,” NewsGuard, Sep. 20, 2022, <https://www.newsguardtech.com/special-reports/american-independent-pink-slime-network/>

3.3 Midterm 2022 Case Study: Boosting the “only Trump candidate” challenging Ohio’s Republican governor³⁶³

A similar pattern had unfolded earlier in 2022 in Ohio — except this time it was part of an effort to replace a Republican deemed insufficiently conservative. For four months in 2022, Tow Center analysis showed that two out of every three news articles posted to the official Facebook page of an unsuccessful Ohio gubernatorial candidate came from sites run by the Metric Media network.

Former Congressman Jim Renacci’s team [routed him](#) as the state’s “only Trump candidate.”³⁶⁴ His pattern of posting was [reported by Cleveland.com](#)³⁶⁵ in April 2022 following a [Twitter thread](#)³⁶⁶ by Adrienne Goldstein of the German Marshall Fund. The Tow report stated that Renacci’s Facebook page had linked to Metric Media sites more than 50 times.

Per Tow Center analysis, this underplayed Renacci’s penchant for promoting Metric Media stories. At the time of the Cleveland.com story, Renacci had in fact linked to Metric Media sites 68 times in just over three months. By April 24, that number had grown to 82.

Our analysis further illuminated:

- The extent to which Renacci had relied upon Metric Media websites since December 2021;
- His broad use of Metric Media’s Ohio sites and strong predilection for Buckeye Reporter, a site with minimal social media presence;
- The utility of these “news” articles for self-promoting and/or undermining political opponents;
- Occasional successes with high levels of Facebook engagement; and
- The minuscule Facebook engagement the stories generated outside of Renacci’s page.

³⁶³ This section is derived from reporting originally published on May 3, 2022. See: Pete Brown, “A case study of an Ohio gubernatorial candidate’s use of shady local ‘news’ networks,” *CJR*, May 3, 2022,

https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/tow-center-newsletter-a-case-study-of-an-ohio-gubernatorial-candidates-use-of-shady-local-news-networks.php

³⁶⁴ Zach Montellaro and Michael Kruse, “Trump conquered Ohio. Now his followers want the governorship,” *Politico*, Jan. 25, 2022,

<https://www.politico.com/news/2022/01/25/trump-ohio-governorship-00001603>

³⁶⁵ Jeremy Pelzer, “Network of pseudo-news websites promotes Jim Renacci’s campaign for Ohio governor,” *Cleveland.com*, Apr. 1, 2022,

<https://www.cleveland.com/news/2022/04/network-of-pseudo-news-websites-promotes-jim-renaccis-campaign-for-ohio-governor.html>

³⁶⁶ Accessed January 12, 2024. <https://twitter.com/Adriennegoldst/status/1509534642470371328>.

Methodology for tracking Renacci coverage

Using CrowdTangle, the Facebook-owned analytics tool, we analyzed links posted to Jim Renacci's [official Facebook page](#) between Monday, August 16, 2021, and Sunday, April 24, 2022 (inclusive). This period was chosen as it facilitated a comparison of two 18-week periods before and after Monday, December 20, 2021, the beginning of the week that Renacci began consistently sharing links from Metric Media outlets.

To focus on news articles, we filtered the dataset for links (photos, videos, etc.) and removed links to Renacci's own website, Facebook, and event listings. This resulted in a dataset of 139 links shared via Renacci's Facebook page. Data on Facebook engagement was collected via the Facebook and CrowdTangle APIs.

Renacci's reliance on Metric Media stories dates back to December 23, 2021, when [he shared](#) a *Buckeye Reporter* story attacking incumbent governor Mike DeWine.

According to the [Facebook Ad Library](#), Metric Media LLC spent \$530 promoting this story to 200,000 to 250,000 Facebook users in Ohio between December 24, 2021, and January 7, 2022. This is one of [just two](#) *Buckeye Reporter* articles that Metric Media LLC had paid to promote on the platform.

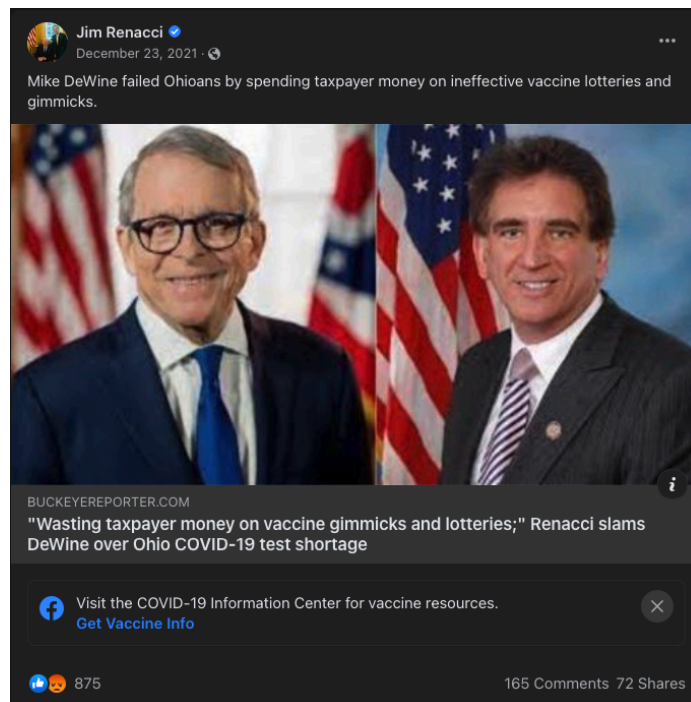


Figure 27: Jim Renacci's post linking to a *Buckeye Reporter* article on December 23, 2021.

The extent to which Renacci came to depend on Metric Media stories is demonstrated by a comparison of his link-sharing activity in the 18 weeks either side of Monday, December 20, 2021. Between August 16, 2021, and December 19, 2021, he shared 20 stories via his Facebook page. All but one came from sites unrelated to Metric Media. Renacci did not appear partial to any particular source during this period, sharing stories from 14 different domains.

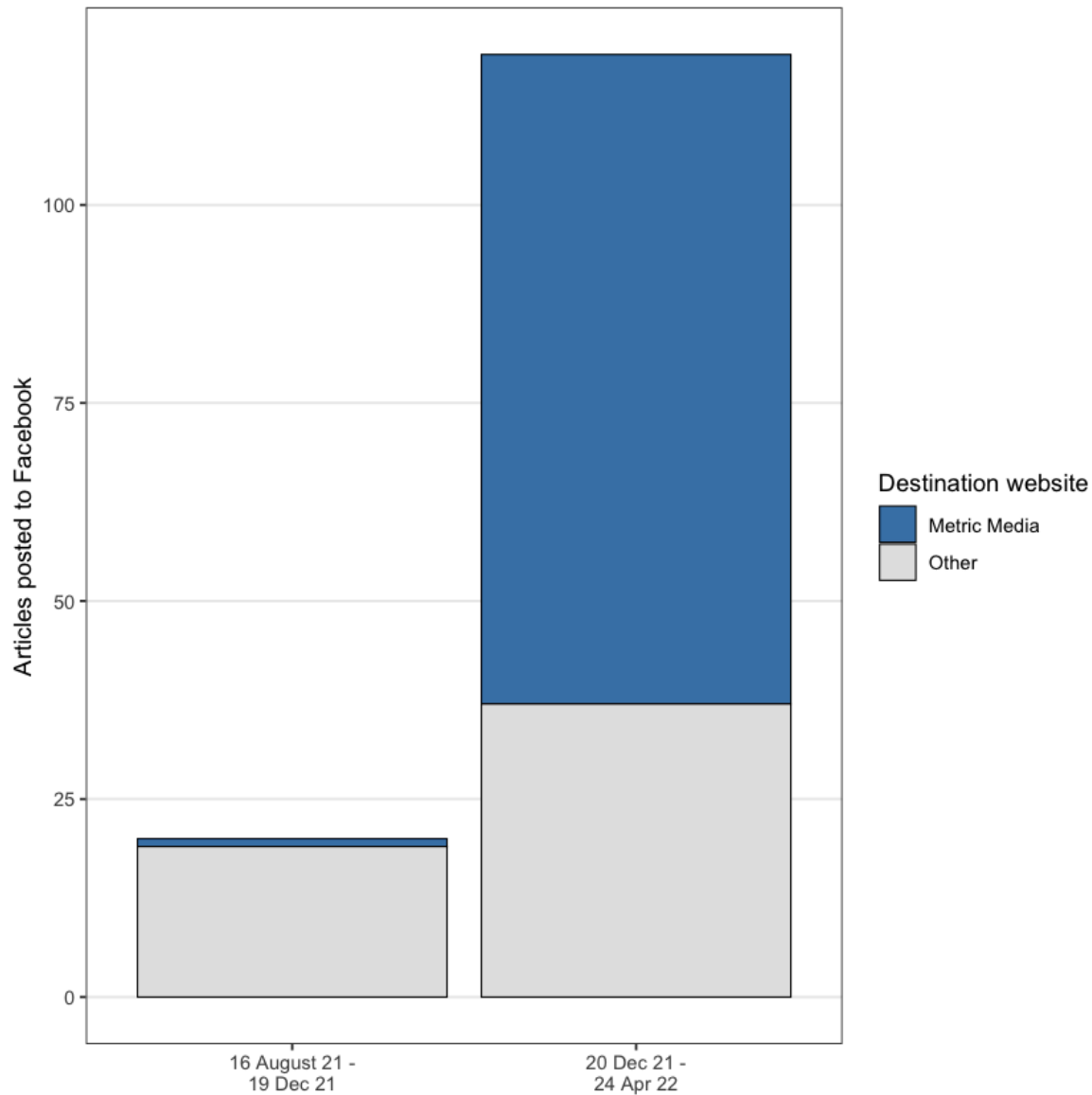


Figure 28: News sites linked to by Jim Renacci's Facebook page before and after Monday, December 20, 2021.

From December 20, however, Renacci's posting frequency increased sharply — largely driven by beneficial coverage from Metric Media sites. He posted 119 links to his Facebook page between December 20, 2021, and April 24, 2022. Of these, 82 (69 percent) went to stories published by Metric Media properties.

In other words, more than two out of every three stories posted to Renacci’s Facebook page from December 20, 2021, to April 24, 2022, were favorable pieces produced by Metric Media. Of the 82 articles Renacci shared, 12 did not identify an author, attributing authorship only to the outlet (e.g., six articles were attributed to “Buckeye Reporter” or “Buckeye Reporter reports”).

Following that first post in December 2021, Renacci posted links to Metric Media stories at least once a week — and usually much more. Most weeks, these links vastly outnumbered links to non-Metric Media sites. For example, in the week beginning March 28, 2022, Renacci posted ten links to Metric Media sites, compared with three to sites outside the Metric Media universe. Three weeks earlier, in the week beginning March 7, 2022, he posted six links. All went to Metric Media sites.

The extent to which the proliferation of Metric Media stories led to a surge in link sharing on Renacci’s Facebook page since December 2021 is illustrated below (the dotted line marks December 23, 2021).

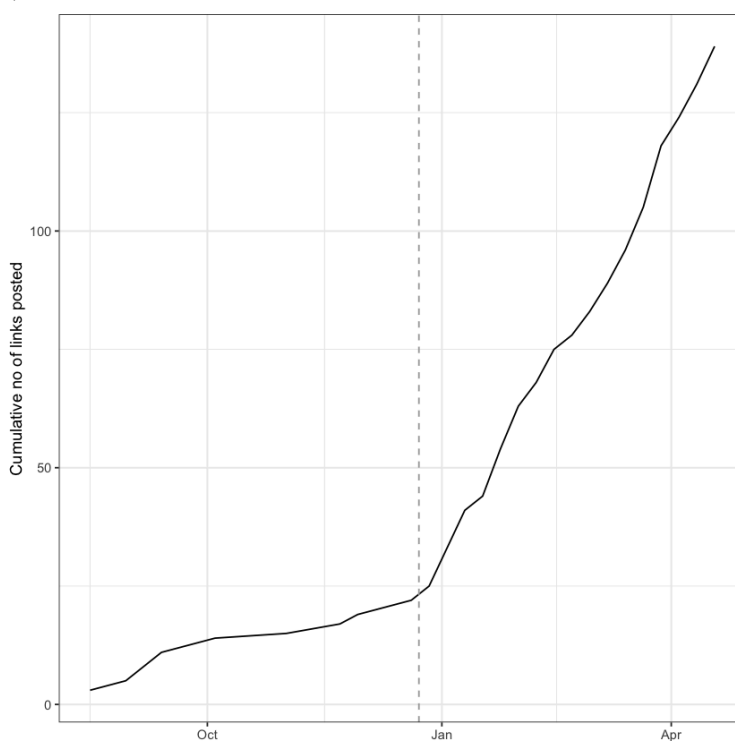


Figure 29: Cumulative number of “news” stories Jim Renacci has linked to from his official Facebook page between August 16, 2021, and April 24, 2022.

These articles seem to serve several purposes. First, they create the impression Renacci is generating a lot of organic press coverage, which can then be cross-promoted via his campaign website and other platforms.

For example, linking to a *Buckeye Reporter* story in which he “slammed Ohio health officials and Gov. Mike DeWine,” Renacci’s campaign website published a blog post — [“ICYMI: Renacci Makes Headlines with Demand that DeWine Condemn ‘Child Abuse’ Mask Mandates on Kids”](#)³⁶⁷ — that noted “statewide outlets” had “picked up” on his comments. [Another](#) “ICYMI” blog post regurgitated a different *Buckeye Reporter* story.³⁶⁸

Additionally, these articles provided a platform for Renacci to promote his core talking points. Our analysis found that 62 of the 82 Metric Media stories — 74 percent — pushed via Renacci’s Facebook page carried his own quotes in their headlines. Some of these amassed what is, by Metric Media’s standards, high engagement on Facebook. Three ran up more than 10,000 interactions:

- [“Renacci pushes back on after-school program: ‘The Satan Club should have no access to our children’”](#) (Warren-Clinton News; 23,631 interactions)³⁶⁹
- [“Renacci: ‘Masking our kids in schools for eight hours a day is child abuse’”](#) (Buckeye Reporter; 11,535 interactions)³⁷⁰
- [“Renacci slams DeWine for Ohio population decline, says he’s ‘governing Ohio like a blue-state liberal’”](#) (Buckeye Reporter; 11,141 interactions)³⁷¹



Figure 30: The Metric Media story with the most interactions on Jim Renacci’s official Facebook page.

³⁶⁷ “ICYMI: Renacci Makes Headlines with Demand that DeWine Condemn ‘Child Abuse’ Mask Mandates on Kids,” Jim Renacci for Governor, Dec. 30, 2021, <https://jimrenacci.com/news/icymi-renacci-makes-headlines-with-demand-that-dewine-condemn-achild-abusea-mask-mandates-on-kids>

³⁶⁸ “ICYMI: Ohio conservatives slam Blystone, say claims about Renacci are ‘false and libelous,’” Jim Renacci for Governor, Mar. 17, 2022, <https://jimrenacci.com/news/icymi-ohio-conservatives-slam-blystone-say-claims-about-renacci-are-false-and-libelous>

³⁶⁹ Emily Bevard, “Renacci pushes back on after-school program: ‘The Satan Club should have no access to our children,’” Warren-Clinton News, Jan. 24, 2022, <https://warrencletonnews.com/stories/618830470-renacci-pushes-back-on-after-school-program-the-satan-club-should-have-no-access-to-our-children>

³⁷⁰ “Renacci: ‘Masking our kids in schools for eight hours a day is child abuse,’” *Buckeye Reporter*, Dec. 29, 2021, <https://buckeyereporter.com/stories/617602007-renacci-masking-our-kids-in-schools-for-eight-hours-a-day-is-child-abuse>

³⁷¹ “Renacci slams DeWine for Ohio population decline, says he’s ‘governing Ohio like a blue-state liberal,’” *Buckeye Reporter*, Jan. 6, 2022, <https://buckeyereporter.com/stories/617955217-renacci-slams-dewine-for-ohio-population-decline-says-he-s-governing-ohio-like-a-blue-state-liberal>

Other platforms proved less fruitful. A January 2022 [tweet](#)³⁷² from Renacci’s official account promoting the Warren-Clinton News article that amassed more than 23,000 interactions on Facebook generated just 147 interactions on Twitter (108 likes, 28 retweets, 9 replies, and 2 quote tweets).

Overall, the Metric Media stories to which Renacci linked garnered 180,426 interactions across Facebook:

- 155,192 reactions (likes, “wow,” “angry,” etc.)
- 15,795 comments
- 9,439 shares

Of these, 169,382 — 94 percent — were generated by Renacci’s posts. In other words, these “news” articles generated no meaningful engagement on Facebook beyond Jim Renacci’s own page. The Facebook page with the next highest total was [Ohio Value Voters, Inc.](#), which garnered 1,177 interactions across eleven posts linking to pro-Renacci Metric Media articles.

A penchant for the Buckeye Reporter

Renacci posted links to 14 Metric Media sites between December 23, 2021, and April 23, 2022. By far the most common was the Buckeye Reporter, to which he linked 34 times. Others to which he linked more than five times were the Cincy Reporter (11 posts), Ohio Business Daily (10 posts), and Cleveland Reporter (9 posts).

The Buckeye Reporter is among the initial slew of Metric Media sites that first [attracted](#)³⁷³ [attention](#)³⁷⁴ in 2019. Its domain was created on June 30, 2019, according to ICANN. It is categorized as a media/news company on its [Facebook page](#), but has not made any posts since uploading a profile picture and cover photo on June 26, 2020. As of April 25, 2022, the page had been liked by five people and had six followers. Buckeye Reporter has no Twitter presence.

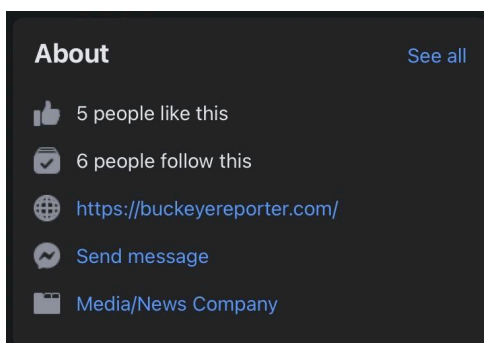


Figure 31: Information about Buckeye Reporter from its Facebook page.

³⁷² Accessed January 12, 2024. <https://twitter.com/JimRenacci/status/1485783249171492868>

³⁷³ Carol Thompson, *op. cit.*

³⁷⁴ Bengani, 2019, *op. cit.*

According to the boilerplate [About Us page](#) on the Buckeye Reporter website, Metric Media’s “approach is to provide objective, data-driven information without political bias. We provide 100 percent original reporting, including to share as much data as possible from government and other publicly available sources.”³⁷⁵

Despite this, one does not have to dig very deep to find notable disparities between coverage of Renacci and incumbent governor DeWine. As of April 25, the *Buckeye Reporter* had ten stories [tagged](#) as containing references to DeWine. Of these, nine contained attack lines from Renacci in the headline (e.g., [“Renacci: DeWine is ‘a nightmare for Ohio families, and now he’s paying the price’”](#)).³⁷⁶ The other, headlined [“DeWine ‘unhinged’: ‘I’ll kick your a**,’”](#)³⁷⁷ dedicated considerable attention to Renacci. It also reported that Joe Blystone, the target of DeWine’s alleged threat and one of Jim Renacci’s political opponents, “was accused of bad behavior in the exchange, which is not off brand.”

Buckeye Reporter

Thursday, April 21, 2022

Local Government
Real Estate
Business
Schools
Politics
Ethics
S

Home » Organizations » Ohio Governor Mike DeWine

OHIO GOVERNOR MIKE DEWINE

STATE GOVERNMENT | ELECTED STATEWIDE OFFICEHOLDERS
77 S High St 30th Floor
Columbus, OH 43215

RECENT NEWS ABOUT OHIO GOVERNOR MIKE DEWINE



Renacci: DeWine is 'a nightmare for Ohio families, and now he's paying the price'

Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine is trailing fellow GOP challenger Jim Renacci by double digits, according to a new poll.
By David Beasley



Renacci: 'Ohioans need to see an honest debate among grown-ups before they vote'

Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine is refusing to participate in the Ohio Debate Commission March 29 nonpartisan gubernatorial debate, according to the Buckeye Reporter.
By David Beasley



'Dewine saying, he cut taxes just isn't true': Renacci claims governor lies in state of state address

The former Republican congressman challenging Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine in May's GOP gubernatorial primaries called the governor out on alleged tax cuts he mentioned during Wednesday's State of the State address.
By Karen Kidd

Figure 32: A sample of Buckeye Reporter articles tagged “Ohio Governor Mike DeWine,” in April, 2022.

³⁷⁵ “About Us,” Buckeye Reporter, <https://buckeyereporter.com/about-us>

³⁷⁶ David Beasley, “Renacci: DeWine is ‘a nightmare for Ohio families, and now he’s paying the price,’” Buckeye Reporter, Mar. 30, 2022, <https://buckeyereporter.com/stories/622481800-renacci-dewine-is-a-nightmare-for-ohio-families-and-now-he-s-paying-the-price>

³⁷⁷ “DeWine ‘unhinged’: ‘I’ll kick your a**,’” Buckeye Reporter, Mar. 21, 2022, <https://buckeyereporter.com/stories/622241351-dewine-unhinged-i-ll-kick-your-a>

By contrast, there were 34 Buckeye Reporter stories [tagged](#) as “Jim Renacci for Governor” or, latterly, “[Jim Renacci for Congress](#).” All were supportive of Renacci.

Buckeye Reporter

Friday, April 22, 2022

Local Government

Real Estate

Business

Schools

Politics

Ethics

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JIM RENACCI FOR GOVERNOR

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RECENT NEWS ABOUT JIM RENACCI FOR GOVERNOR



Renacci: Stand for Health Freedom endorsement 'especially important to me'

Gubernatorial candidate Jim Renacci has won the endorsement of Stand for Health Freedom (SHF), a national organization committed to defending constitutional and parental rights, according to a release from Renacci's office.

By Buckeye Reporter reports



Renacci: 'Parents should be able to trust that their children are learning reading, math, and science without being shamed or influenced by liberal politics'

So far, 7,344 Ohioans have signed up for gubernatorial candidate Jim Renacci's Coalition Against Critical Race Theory, his campaign said in a news release.

By David Beasley



'I promise to respect the sanctity of life': Right to Life Action Committee of Ohio endorses Renacci for governor

Ohio GOP gubernatorial candidate Jim Renacci has won the endorsement of the Right to Life Action Committee of Ohio (RTLACO).

By Andy Nghiem

Figure 33: Buckeye Reporter stories articles tagged “Jim Renacci for Governor” in April, 2022.

4. The audience: Reader perspectives on Metric Media

Many journalism experts and critics have warned that Metric Media’s sites’ lack of transparency and skirting of basic journalism conventions like mastheads and bylines make it challenging for readers to fairly assess them or to distinguish if what they are reading is “journalism, advocacy or political messaging,” according to the *Lansing State Journal*. “The question is not about bias — it’s about journalistic standards,” Josh Pasek, a communications professor at the University of Michigan, [told the student newspaper, the *Michigan Daily*](#), in an article about the networks.³⁷⁸ “It’s okay to have outlets that have varying different views out there, but there’s a certain point at which [that] ... oversteps how journalism is supposed to operate. And once that occurs, now there becomes a substantive question as to whether what you’re observing is in fact news, or is instead a disinformation campaign.” In an article for *The Atlantic* about the [disinformation campaigns surrounding the 2020 election](#), McKay Coppins agreed, writing that “readers are given no indication that these sites have political agendas — which is precisely what makes them valuable.”³⁷⁹

These characterizations of the sites’ political intentions, utility, and obfuscation have thus far gone untested with readers. How do news consumers navigate and respond to these problematic local news websites? Considering the “void in community news after years of decline in local reporting by legacy media,” as Metric Media declares on the sites’ About pages, do local news audiences feel these sites meet their information needs and deepen their understanding of local issues?

Existing research has documented the connections between some of these sites and conservative groups and donors, but do news audiences infer any bias in the reporting — and how do they formulate perceptions of trustworthiness? Do they suspect any political motivations behind the sites’ ownership — and what views, if any, do they have about their levels of transparency?

In June 2021, the Tow Center undertook a study [exploring public perceptions](#) of these sites. The findings are based on the responses of 90 participants, each of whom was assigned to assess

³⁷⁸ Sokotoff and Sourine, *op. cit.*

³⁷⁹ McKay Coppins, “The Billion-Dollar Disinformation Campaign to Reelect the President,” *The Atlantic*, March 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/03/the-2020-disinformation-war/605530/>

one of 73 sites from, or with links to, Metric Media and associated networks over the course of six days.

Methodology for audience research

This audience research study used Dscout, a qualitative research platform through which participants (“scouts”) complete researcher-assigned “missions.” Over the course of six days in June 2021, participants recorded their local news habits, daily reviews of an assigned local news website, and final reflections on their experiences using their assigned sites.

Participants were told at the outset of the study that the purpose of the project was to “deepen our understanding of US news audiences’ attitudes toward emerging local news websites,” but were not informed that the websites had been accused of being partisan and/or inauthentic. At the conclusion of the study, participants were given a disclosure form that explained Tow’s previous research on these networks, the real purpose of the project, and the necessity to withhold information to avoid biasing their assessments.

After an initial screening process, participants were selected based on their interest in local news and with the aim of having the final group be as demographically and geographically diverse as possible. As qualitative research, the sample is not representative of any broader populations, and we make no claims to generalizability. A total of 106 participants were selected, of whom 90 completed the study. They were drawn from 35 states plus the District of Columbia.

Each participant was assigned a site from Tow’s [database of outlets](#) using Metric Media’s technology stack. Prior to commencement of the study, a significant challenge to the daily diary design was discovered: the publication frequency of each site had declined dramatically between the 2020 election and the inauguration of President Biden. The stories showing in RSS feeds for each site were nowhere to be found on the corresponding homepages. Using both manual and computational methods, any outlet that had not published new content within one week of the start of the study was removed from the list. During this process it was discovered that outlets from several of the networks — Locality Labs, Florida News Network, and American Catholic Tribune Media Network — had gone dormant and in some cases no longer had active websites.

Using Google Maps to determine the outlet whose stated geographic coverage area was closest to their location, each participant was assigned a site from the list. Tow researchers identified sites in Texas and Illinois that appeared to publish content to their homepages more frequently than the majority of other sites. To compensate for the anticipated lack of fresh content, a disproportionate number of participants in those two states (roughly a third of all participants) were selected and assigned four sites that received regular updates. In total, 73 sites were assigned.

Participants were then instructed to complete a three-part “mission” over the course of six days: (1) an initial survey about their local news consumption habits and needs, as well as their first impressions of their assigned website; (2) a daily diary exercise in which they discussed their engagement with their assigned website and other local news outlets over five consecutive days; and (3) a final reflection about their assigned websites, addressing issues such as how, if at all, their stories had improved their understanding of local issues; and how trustworthy they perceived the sites to be. Finally, participants were asked to seek information about who owned and operated their assigned site.

Findings

In this section, we present findings drawn from our participants’ interpretations of their assigned website. This discussion is broken down into three parts. We begin with an overview of participants’ general observations about these sites, paying particular attention to their all-important first impressions. This is followed by a discussion of how participants formulated assessments of trustworthiness and bias. Finally, we delve into perceptions of transparency.

General observations

None of the participants had encountered their assigned website before the study. By the end of the study, more than two-thirds of them had formed a negative impression of their assigned website. The remaining participants were divided almost evenly between those who had a positive impression of their site and those whose opinion was mixed. Of those who had recorded a positive impression at the beginning of the study, half still had a positive impression at its conclusion. The majority of participants said their assigned website compared unfavorably with other local news sites they already use.

The most common reason for negative reviews was the lack of updated, relevant content. Some readers cited misgivings about perceived political bias and the lack of transparency around ownership. These factors are discussed in more detail below, but the overarching conclusion from the vast majority of the participants was that, despite the need and opportunity for news sources to fill increasing local news vacuums, these sites did not succeed in deepening their understanding of their local areas. In the words of Bob, a thirty-seven-year-old from Seattle (participants’ names have been changed), “There was no new content published throughout the entirety of the mission, and even looking back through older articles there were no fresh perspectives or unique insights that I was able to gather from my assigned site. With the mix of local news content I already consume there are certainly opportunities that could be filled. But this site did not do anything to address those.”

Initial impressions

More than a third of participants initially formed a positive or somewhat positive opinion of their assigned website. While this proportion had decreased considerably by the end of the study, these initial responses are noteworthy. Crucially, too, they contextualize the extent to which the broadly negative reactions detailed later in this report resulted from repeat visits. In many cases, participants formed first impressions based on aspects such as design or the volume of published content — the “feel and look” of their website, as one participant put it. These responses, while often based on surface-level factors, offer insights into how readers might assess these unfamiliar sites if they were stumbled upon organically via social media or a search engine result.

Many of these positive first impressions were in response to the sites’ design and layout, which most participants agreed was intuitive and visually appealing. For several participants, the sites’ layout was similar to local news sources they already used, “which is nice,” said Caroline, a twenty-seven-year-old from Chicago, “because a standardized website is easy to follow.” For others, their site’s design was actually superior. “Most local sites are very frustrating to navigate between ads and paywalls,” said Jane, a twenty-eight-year-old from Houston. “This was so easy to use.” Suman, a thirty-three-year-old in Gainesville, Florida, thought his website, the [NC Florida News](#), “definitely looks a lot more sophisticated and elegant than some of the other local news websites that I’ve seen.”

Beyond providing a good user experience, these design elements more importantly conferred a degree of legitimacy for previously unfamiliar sites. Miranda, a twenty-seven-year-old in Harrisonburg, Virginia, who had praised the [Shenandoah Valley News](#) for being mobile-friendly and responsive, said, “At first glance, it kind of looks legitimate.”

Besides website design, the elements that first stood out to participants were the same ones that would echo throughout the rest of the study and are explored in more depth later in this report: the appearance of outdated content and the abundance of automated articles based on data sets. For many participants, this unusual content struck them as “weird,” “generic,” or “irrelevant” — a sentiment that grew over the course of the study.

For other participants, however, the sites’ vast output gave the initial impression of being well resourced. The NC Florida News “comes across as better resourced and organized” than other local news websites, Suman said. Besides being abundant, the novelty of the data articles, many of which are divided by zip code, initially suggested a unique, hyperlocal, and in-depth level of coverage that can be lacking in under-resourced local news outlets. Ludvig, a thirty-year-old in Irvine, California, said the [Central OC Times](#) “goes more in depth than other sites. ... It is more detail-oriented.” John, a forty-three-year-old in Whiting, Indiana, was also impressed by these data-heavy articles, saying that the [Region News](#) “has stories that many of the major newspapers don’t have. It also has news that is very local to me.”

In many cases, the — to quote one participant — “bizarre” nature of these articles, as well as their lack of adherence to journalistic norms like bylines, immediately raised alarms about the trustworthiness of the websites. “It really concerns me that there is no information about who is writing these articles,” said Alice, a thirty-seven-year-old in Houston, of her website. “I have no reason to believe this is a legitimate source of unbiased news.” Karen, a thirty-six-year-old in Plano, Texas, said in her first impressions she was “confused by the content” on her website, [Dallas City Wire](#). “It doesn’t seem trustworthy. I don’t understand where the news is coming from. Under ‘business’ I would expect to see actual business news, not boring irrelevant info about licenses expiring. ... This does not look like a legit news site.”

Cora, a twenty-five-year-old in Traverse City, Michigan, also noted on the first day of the study that “everything about this website screams extremely fishy and sketchy to me.” In her final reflections, she wrote that there was “a dead giveaway that this is propaganda in the name of the news outlet [[North Michigan News](#)]. No one in Michigan refers to this region as North Michigan. Only northern Michigan or Up North Michigan.” Moreover, she wrote, “everything seems to be slanted towards hating our governor [Democrat Gretchen Whitmer].” Cora was one of roughly a dozen participants who immediately observed a conservative bent in the assigned websites’ coverage, a trend that would grow over the course of the study.

But for some participants, a central aspect of the automated articles — that they reproduce public datasets without any context or analysis — created a perception of ideological neutrality and lack of editorial bias. “It’s just the facts, isn’t it?” said Hannah, a forty-five-year-old in Buffalo. She found the [Buffalo Ledger](#) to be “boring” but trustworthy: “It’s neutral ... [and] unbiased and lacking opinions.” Jason, a fifty-nine-year-old in Chicago, said of the [Cook County Record](#), “The website definitely seems fair and trustworthy. ... It seems to report the facts without opinion, and I don’t think it leans one way or the other politically.” Tom, a fifty-four-year-old in Boone, Iowa, agreed that [Ames Today](#) “present[s] a fairly even-handed approach, so I think they do seem fair and trustworthy.”


The following sections delve into these issues and the participants’ other perceptions of their sites as they became more familiar with their content — an experience that, in many cases, led to changes in their initial assessments. But the immediate impact of surface-level factors like ease of navigation and a plethora of data-heavy content may prove to offer some of the most revealing insights into how news consumers interpret these sites.

Lack of new content

The most common response from participants throughout the five-day diary exercise was frustration at the lack of new content and the prominence of outdated content on the

homepage. To illustrate this challenge, consider the homepage for Metric Media’s [Denver City Wire](#) on September 14, 2021. (See Figure 34.)

Denver City Wire



BUSINESS

Dominion Voting Systems sues Lindell over statements made about Nov. 3 election

Mike Lindell, CEO of MyPillow and staunch Trump supporter, is one of several people facing a lawsuit filed by Dominion Voting Systems.

By Denver City Wire reports

REAL ESTATE

As LoanSnap launches into hot Mile High market, CEO says 'expanding into Denver was a no-brainer'


Housing is hot right now and so is Denver, so LoanSnap, a technology startup company, has launched in the Mile High City, which has "one of the largest and fastest-growing housing markets in the U.S.," the company said in a recent news release.

By David Beasley

SCHOOLS

Manning: Students are missing rites of passage, not just education

Hadley Heath Manning, director of policy at the Independent Women's Forum, has said that the pandemic has not only affected students' education but their normal life routine as well.



FROM CENTENNIAL STATE NEWS

- Hancock disregarding COVID-19 guidelines: I hope Denver will forgive me
- Natelson says focus on electoral integrity, 'Don't be fooled'
- Data analysts say Dominion voting machines need to be audited
- Top marginal tax rate in Colorado could reach 53.97% under Biden plan
- Colorado Gov. Jared Polis gets 'C' grade for fiscal management

FROM CENTENNIAL STATE NEWS

Indian National Sentenced To 5 Years In Federal Prison For Scamming Victims Of Over \$377,000

Defendant stole money from vulnerable elderly victims by tricking them into turning over bank information or sending money directly




Figure 34: Denver City Wire homepage on September 14, 2021.

The datelines for the articles shown at the top of the site’s homepage range from October 7, 2020 (“Colorado Gov. Jared Polis gets ‘C’ grade for fiscal management”), to February 25, 2021, for the top featured article (“Dominion Voting Systems sues Lindell over statements made about Nov. 3 election”). The article on potential top marginal tax rates under the “Biden plan,” shown in the sidebar, was featured as the leading article across most of the homepages assigned to our participants for the study in June 2021. Its dateline is October 22, 2020.

Scrolling below these featured articles on the homepage is a sidebar titled “Latest News” and a section called “Data Points.” (See Figure 35.)

Denver City Wire

DATA POINTS ▶

Jeffrey L. Teter donates \$1,500 to John W. Hickenlooper's campaign in 2020

POLITICS

Nate Lawson donates \$2,800 to Diane Mitsch Bush's campaign in 2020

POLITICS

Leon E. Miller donates \$250 to Diane Mitsch Bush's campaign in 2020

POLITICS

Malcolm Pitts donates \$500 to John W. Hickenlooper's campaign in 2020

POLITICS

Patricia Nolen donates \$150 to John W. Hickenlooper's campaign in 2020

POLITICS

Almeda Wilking donates \$350 to John W. Hickenlooper's campaign in 2020

POLITICS

Stanley Garnett donates \$350 to Diane Mitsch Bush's campaign in 2020

POLITICS

Sally W. Miller donates \$280 to Andrew Romanoff's campaign in 2020

POLITICS



LATEST NEWS



SCHOOLS

DENVER PUBLIC LIBRARY: Virtual Toddler Storytime to be held on January 5, 2021

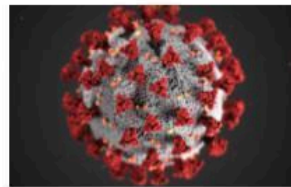
Stories, songs, rhymes and fun for toddlers ages 18-36 months and their parents or caregivers.



LOCAL GOVERNMENT

CITY AND COUNTY OF DENVER: Denver secures \$9M settlement to resolve public procurement misconduct

The City and County of Denver received a \$9 million settlement to end the civil claims asserted against Mortenson Construction and Trammell Crow Company for violating the city's public procurement rules during the early stages of planned renovation work at the Colorado Convention Center.



LOCAL GOVERNMENT

CITY AND COUNTY OF DENVER: City and County of Denver COVID-19 Status Update 12/31/2020

The City and County of Denver provided the following COVID-19 status update.

Figure 35: "Latest News" Denver City Wire on September 14, 2021.

The articles featured under Latest News, however, were among the oldest on the homepage. "DENVER PUBLIC LIBRARY: Virtual Toddler Storytime to be held on January 5, 2021" is a "press release submission" from January 4, 2021.

The Data Points section had the site's freshest content and had been updated on a seemingly weekly basis. ("Catherine Culshaw donates \$2,800 to Jason Crow's campaign in 2020" has a dateline of September 10, 2021.) The section, which consists of algorithmically generated articles based on publicly available data slotted into identical design templates, is a mainstay of all Metric Media properties. It was these articles that suggested a far more active publication schedule.

This design proved to be confounding for many of the study’s participants. In the first days of the diary exercise, our inbox was flooded with messages from confused participants unsure of how to review a site with months-old content and a homepage that remained static. We asked them to explore the website and look for updated content beyond the homepage. If they were still unable to find any new content, they were instructed to reflect on the site’s overall utility and design. At least one participant dropped out of the study in frustration at this point. The others continued, but expressed growing disbelief and irritation with the websites and their assigned task.

Brenda, a thirty-four-year-old in Palmdale, California, said during the daily exercise that she was “baffled” by her assigned site, [Antelope Valley Today](#). “The same story has been sitting here [on the homepage] for a week,” she said. “Nothing updates. So I don’t know how you can call yourself a news [site] or Antelope Valley Today. There is nothing from today.”

Tom was similarly dismayed to see the same 2020 political articles day after day on Ames Today. “These are things I would like to read and I would like to discuss,” he said. “I like local news. I love politics. But none of this is current or relevant.” The next day, after seeing the same articles, he confessed, “I’m really frustrated with this. It’s a neat idea for a mission, I was looking forward to it, but I just feel like I got a bum site.”

Besides frustration, other participants noted potential dangers in leaving up outdated content in a quickly changing news cycle. Mary, a fifty-six-year-old in Wilmington, was alarmed to see a months-old Delaware Division of Public Health [press release](#) about Covid-19³⁸⁰ dated April 10, 2020, on her site, the [North New Castle News](#). “So many things are wrong with this story,” she said. “It’s from a press release. It wasn’t written by a journalist ... [and it’s] dealing with the coronavirus. Oh, my God. This could be giving wrong information, because pandemic information changes by the second. You can’t have outdated information out there.” As of March 2022, it was still the leading story on the site’s homepage.

Tony, a twenty-four-year-old in Portland, Oregon, also noted a “weirdness” to some of the articles remaining on prominent display. Referencing an article at the top of the *Portland Courant*’s homepage about a [local resident going to a March for Trump](#)³⁸¹ rally in DC, he said in his video recording, “This was obviously back in January and did not end in the best of situations.” In fact, the article was even older than he realized, dating from November 16, 2020, predating the events of January 6, 2021. But its position on the homepage was even more

³⁸⁰ “DPH: Delaware Division of Public Health (DPH) Issues Guidance Around Masks.” North New Castle News, Apr. 10, 2020, retrieved Dec. 30, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20200812083629/https://northnewcastlenews.com/stories/530151432-dph-delaware-division-of-public-health-dph-issues-guidance-around-masks>

³⁸¹ “Oregon resident travels to attend March for Trump rally in D.C., ‘I’m praying for the will of God,’” Portland Courant, Nov. 16, 2020, retrieved Dec. 30, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20230326052744/https://portlandcourant.com/stories/565213546-oregon-resident-travels-to-attend-march-for-trump-rally-in-d-c-i-m-praying-for-the-will-of-god>

puzzling and disorienting in light of the later event. As of March 2022, it was still on the Portland Courant’s homepage.

These observations by our participants can be further contextualized by findings from Asa Royal and Philip M. Napoli’s [report](#),³⁸² which was published a month after the audience research phase of our study was completed. Royal and Napoli found that over the course of their 78-day observation period, “the median age of front-page stories in the network rose by 70 days.” After the 2020 election “contestation period” ended, the study found that “overall story production by Metric Media outlets declined by an average of >80 percent in [the three most narrowly won] states. Compared to Metric Media outlets in a control group of states, the amount of fraud coverage and the story production decline among outlets in the battleground states were much more extreme.” The researchers also found that “only 1.31 percent of all autogenerated stories were placed on the front page of any of the network’s outlets. The rest either sat in outlets’ RSS feeds before being cycled out a few days later or were stowed below the viewport on the front page.”

A deluge of data

A majority of participants said that besides their websites being out of date, they found their content to be mostly irrelevant to their daily lives and communities. They noted the “odd,” “weird,” and “bizarre” content in the Data Points section: listings of small political contributions, expiring local business licenses, FDA inspection dates for local businesses, salaries for low-level bureaucrats, and Mass times for local Catholic churches (which, puzzlingly, appeared under a section titled Ethics and included no similar listings for any other religions, as several participants noted). While some participants had been intrigued by this content at the beginning of the study, after repeated visits, most came to find the content strange, or boring and non-newsworthy. “I just don’t care who gave fifteen dollars to Cori Bush’s campaign in the second quarter of 2020,” said Chiara, a thirty-eight-year-old in St. Louis. Karen in Plano agreed, asking in her video recording, “Why is it news that someone’s electrical license expired?” Keith, a thirty-six-year-old in Lorain, Ohio, also questioned how listing small political contributions qualified as a news story for [Medina Today](#): “I’m not sure how much this is serving the local community.”

Other participants highlighted the lack of contextual analysis in the data-heavy articles. “There’s a lot of data points on this news website [the [South Bay Leader](#)], but not a lot of stories,” said Caitlyn, a fifty-one-year-old in Manhattan Beach, California. “Every single person who gave any money to any candidate is not news. ... It’s political data points. It’s statistics. It’s not a story.”

³⁸² Asa Royal and Philip M. Napoli, “Local Journalism’s Possible Future: Metric Media and its Approach to Community Information Needs,” DeWitt Wallace Center for Media and Democracy, July 2021, <https://dewitt.sanford.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2021/07/Future-of-Local-News.pdf>

According to Jamelia, a thirty-two-year-old in San Francisco, the main weakness of her site, [San Francisco Sun](#), was that “they rely too much on giving their audience these numbers without any context. Why is this data important, and has that data changed from when it was last published?” Sam, a twenty-nine-year-old in Gunter, Texas, was worried about how reporting by the [North Texas News](#) on an expiring cosmetology license, for example, might affect local members of the community. “Many of the articles seem to paint a bad light on people,” he said. “Statistics need context around them.”

While most participants were confused or annoyed by automated content, a small number of them did find utility in the collected data around actionable information like low gas prices, store holiday closings, Catholic Mass listings, and new regulations. “I just thought it was nice ... that kind of a personal touch,” Donald, a sixty-one-year-old in Salt Lake City, said of the Mass listings in [SLC Times](#). “It was something that you might not normally see. ... It was kind of a little bit refreshing.”

Irrelevant content

Alongside automated, data-filled stories, the assigned websites featured a smaller number of articles with reporter bylines. In many cases, participants found these stories to be irrelevant as well, disconnected from themselves and their communities in subject matter or geography. “They don’t have a lot of stories that are based in San Francisco,” said Jamelia of the San Francisco Sun. Reading a headline about vaccination policies in the cities of Santa Monica and Burbank, nearly four hundred miles south of San Francisco, she said, “That’s great. But I don’t live anywhere near Santa Monica or Burbank.”

Rahim, a thirty-five-year-old in Laguna Beach, California, was initially intrigued by his assigned site, the [Southern California Record](#), due to its focus on legal issues. But after reading a headline about a case in the central city of Fresno, more than two hundred and fifty miles north, he said, “These aren’t really local. You know, to me, something that happens in Fresno isn’t really a local news story.” In his final reflections, Rahim wrote that his site “essentially lumped in stories from all over the state. If the focus was strictly on legal proceedings and government rulings within So Cal [Southern California], that could have been a promising premise, but that simply was not the case.”

Alice in Houston said she was “surprised” to see an article in a Texas paper about Rudy Giuliani losing his license to practice law. “There’s no Texas link here,” she said. “And from what I read in the About section of the website, it seemed like this was supposed to be super focused on Houston and Texas.” At the same time, she noticed, another major national story with a clear local angle was missing: “I was really surprised not to see anything about Vice President Harris’s visit to the state” the previous week to speak about the immigration crisis on the border.

Alice was one of many participants disappointed by the lack of coverage of other issues on the sites — both specific stories as well as broader topics. On the day former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin was sentenced for the murder of George Floyd, two participants were shocked to find no mention of the news on their assigned sites. “It’s called [Minnesota State Wire](#), and they don’t even have the biggest story from the state of Minnesota today on their Web page about the sentencing of Derek Chauvin,” said Donna, a forty-two-year-old in New Germany, Minnesota. Mona, a thirty-eight-year-old in Apopka, Florida, was similarly surprised to find nothing about the collapse of the condominium that killed nearly a hundred people in Surfside, Florida, on her assigned site, the [North Lake Times](#). Abigail, a thirty-seven-year-old from Homer Glen, Illinois, was concerned that her assigned site, [Prairie State Wire](#), wasn’t covering a salmonella outbreak in shrimp sold in the state. Frank, a thirty-six-year-old in River Forest, Illinois, said that it was “very serious” that his assigned site, [West Cook News](#), had no new content despite a tornado warning issued in his area. “This isn’t a news site. I don’t even know what this is,” he said.

Several participants noticed the heavy focus on local politics and government at the expense of other beats. “Everything on this page is politics!” said Chiara of the [St. Louis Reporter](#). Of the eight [critical information needs](#) defined in a study for the Federal Communications Commission, the only topic identified by the majority of participants as having been valuably covered by their outlet was political information. Meanwhile, despite the pandemic and other ongoing crises, a majority of participants said the outlets provided no valuable information related to emergencies and public safety, and half said they provided no valuable information related to health. Several participants observed a lack of information about Covid restrictions, which, as Dory, a twenty-five-year-old in Miami, noted while reviewing the [Miami Courant](#), is “something really important to put on a news site.” Others noted the absence of other staples of local news coverage, such as local events and holiday celebrations. “I don’t see anything about sports” in the [North Birmingham Times](#), said Ken, a forty-three-year-old in Arab, Alabama, “which is kind of weird, because Alabama loves its sports.”

Mary in Delaware, assessing the North New Castle News, asked, “Where is my weather report? My traffic report? What’s happening in my community today? Activities I can take my family to this weekend? None of that is here.” In her final reflections, she expanded upon these critiques. “It was not what I consider a news website. It was simply a website mocked up to look like a news website. ... This is a website with an ulterior motive that is using the words ‘news website.’”

Formulating perceptions of trustworthiness and bias

Mary was not alone in doubting the legitimacy of her site — and a significant number of participants also questioned whether their outlets had, to use her phrase, ulterior motives. Yet

despite such overwhelmingly negative final impressions, their perceptions of the sites' trustworthiness and potential bias in their coverage were much more mixed, and in some cases, almost evenly divided. While a majority of participants found the outlets untrustworthy (though by a much smaller margin than with overall assessments on quality), a very narrow majority nonetheless assessed their coverage to be fair and balanced. The split between these related but subtly distinct questions is revealing in terms of some of the wider takeaways about how these sites are interpreted: specifically, the distinct ways in which participants responded to the algorithmically generated articles that are core components of pink slime journalism.

Making sense of algorithmically generated news

When assessing the trustworthiness of their assigned websites, nearly all participants mentioned the Data Points articles that are prevalent among Metric Media sites and, as low-cost, algorithmically generated output, typify quintessential pink slime journalism. Participants' reactions, however, differed significantly in ways that have implications for the broader effect of the outlets on local markets.

Sam in Texas observed at the beginning of the study that the section appeared to consist of "AI that has grabbed a bunch of statistic pages and is just regurgitating statistics ... it just comes across as so fake, and it's also surface-level," he said in a video recording. "It just definitely does not seem like a real person is putting this together, but rather a computer program." For the few bylined articles, he noted that he could not find any information about the author.

Miranda in Virginia had a similar reaction, saying that the Shenandoah Valley News site "doesn't really feel real ... the content really looks to me like it's all generated by AI or something like that ... it just feels off." She also noted the lack of bylines on most articles and a resulting failure to "establish credibility." She was one of a few participants who took an extra step to review her site's social media pages and was surprised to find that its Facebook page had zero followers and no content. In her final reflection, she wrote, "After several days I still don't really know anything about the website or its purpose."

Ellen, a forty-year-old in Potsdam, New York, concluded that her assigned site, [Empire State Today](#), did not seem trustworthy because the "authors [often] aren't clearly identified, the source/company responsible doesn't seem to be authoritative or genuine, the site gives off a spammy feel to it and makes me think that some of the content is auto-generated." Cora in Michigan categorized her site as an "auto-generated robot website."

Martin, a thirty-seven-year-old in Indianapolis, also concluded in his first day reviewing the [Indy Standard](#) that his site "is very much driven by probably just pulling from a database or some spreadsheet somewhere and taking some numbers from it and basically generating articles based off of it." After noting that the bylines didn't appear to belong to "an actual

reporter,” he said, “The content doesn’t really feel like news at all. It feels more so like, ‘Here are just some numbers that we can pull about your general area, and we’re going to build a website that sort of tries to represent it as news, even if it doesn’t really function in the traditional sense of news.’”

Despite these observations, in his final reflections at the end of the study Martin wrote, “Because almost all the stories were number-focused, they felt fairly trustworthy ... very few of the pieces I read included anything involving opinion.” While he wrote that he would like to know more concerning the source of the data for these articles, he concluded that “as a result [of the focus on numbers and lack of opinions], they seem to be free of bias.” Thus, despite reservations about a lack of transparency around authorship and sourcing, the reliance on data proved effective in creating a perception of neutrality and, to some extent, trustworthiness. And while the automated articles and lack of new content left participants such as Martin feeling the sites were “sketchy” and not entirely normal, that didn’t mean they thought the coverage was politically skewed one way or another.

The automated articles’ use of unvarnished numbers and a straightforward editorial tone were repeatedly cited among the roughly half of participants who found their website to be trustworthy, fair and balanced, or both. Rahim in California, who had been disappointed by his site, the Southern California Record, nonetheless wrote in his final reflections:

I didn’t find any of the content to be strongly skewed toward either left or right ideology and viewpoints. I would say my initial impression of the website was that it was cautiously worthy of my trust. But I think some of that has to do with the fact that the stories themselves were rather bland and apropos of a legal journal, so perhaps I was bored into trusting the content. ... [I] didn’t run into any strong opinion pieces (and it definitely wasn’t slanted in the vein of something like Fox News). But again, when the majority of your articles are simply providing banal reporting on legal matters and regulatory issues without any form of opinion interjected, there’s little room for impropriety.

Shonda, a twenty-three-year-old in Heath, Texas, who found the content of the [NE Dallas News](#) un-newsworthy and irrelevant, also concluded that the site “did seem fair. There was nothing on the site that was condescending to a specific community or one-sided. All of the articles presented a factual statement and point of view that was elaborated on with research and data. There were no opinion pieces or anything I would have considered to be slander.”

Jordan, a forty-two-year-old in Midlothian, Illinois, agreed that the [South Cook News](#) felt trustworthy because he didn’t think the articles “felt like they were approached with any sense of bias, or had intent to distract/cause chaos. ... It didn’t feel politically divisive. The writing

and the tone of the writing feel honest. ... I didn't read anything or see any headlines that made me question fairness in any way.”

Ludvig in California, one of the few participants with an overall positive final impression of his website, the Central OC Times, wrote that the site seemed trustworthy and without bias because “the nature of reporting concerning campaign donations and statistics concerning schools were not motivated by a point of view. I did not find any sensationalistic or partisan reports in this paper.” Moreover, the site “seems more fair and balanced than some of my local papers such as the Voice of OC, which can skew at times to the far left. The *LA Times* skews to the far left on certain occasions as well.”

Julie, a thirty-six-year-old in Houston, wrote that “only the facts were addressed or quoted” on her site and the articles seemed as if they were written from the perspective of a “neutral person.” Edward, a thirty-one-year-old in Richmond, Kentucky, found his site, the [Bluegrass Times](#), untrustworthy. Yet he still wrote in his final reflections that the content “seemed balanced because the articles were short and simple without a lot of commentary. The articles did not seem to have a political bias one way or the other. The authors did not express their opinions.”

Caroline in Chicago wrote that she found her site, the Cook County Record, to be “factually trustworthy.” She had recorded positive impressions of the website’s design and layout, and how its focus on legal issues exposed her to topics she normally would not see. However, she noted, “its bias is evident in the types of information it presents — like the way it highlights the conservative perspective on partisan legal issues, or only includes statements from the conservative side” on articles about a Supreme Court decision and a local environmental lawsuit. The site, she concluded, had a “pretty conservative slant,” and many of the articles “made me kind of angry.”

“Not a legit news site”

Caroline was among the approximately one-third of participants who perceived a specifically conservative slant to their assigned websites’ coverage. Erica, a forty-four-year-old in Collingswood, New Jersey, noted that while the data-heavy articles at [Gloucester Today](#) had no overt “statement of bias ... [the content] was arbitrary and looked like right-wing selective data. Selective reporting of facts has its own implicit biases.” In her final reflections, she concluded that the site “seemed like a fake news churning site and/or just something thrown together by some random people using Gloucester County and other counties as a way to get agendas across. But it absolutely did not have actual relevant local news.”

Jocelyn, a thirty-eight-year-old in Florence, South Carolina, was incensed while reading articles in the [Palmetto State News](#) about Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, critical race theory,

and conservative activist organizations. “This paper is so right-wing biased that it is, like, insane,” she said in a diary entry. “It just feels like this is where fake news comes from. As a social studies teacher who taught my kids about analyzing sources, this kind of thing makes me really angry and really quite sad for the country.”

Several participants accused their sites of using the pretext of local news to push a conservative or Republican political agenda. Morris, a thirty-nine-year-old in Chicago, wrote that the [Chicago City Wire](#) “seemed to be heavily focused on a conservative viewpoint. All of the stories seem closer to conservative talking points or propaganda rather than fair and balanced stories. ... There wasn’t really much news content, just writing to steer the reader towards the conservative perspective.”

When asked in the final reflection section if her assigned site had deepened her understanding of her local area, Judy, a fifty-nine-year-old in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, answered, “Sadly it deepened my understanding of the extremely Republican biased websites that are out there ... my website was written only from the perspective of a rabid Republican and seems to be obsessed with showing [political] donations.”

Karen in Texas noted in her initial response that the [Dallas City Wire](#) “does not look like a legit news site. My gut says something is off.” In one of her later diary entries, Karen questioned a June 18, 2021, article titled “Bennett: the media is chock full of bullies.” Its author, Monty J. Bennett, accused local Dallas magazine *D* of presenting sponsored content as journalism. “This is really interesting to me. It feels like some content I might want to share,” she said. But she was dismayed by the lack of information on the site about its author. “Who is Monty J. Bennett? I have no idea. Is this someone who works for *Dallas City Wire*? Is he a guest [writer]? What’s his expertise? That’s something I would like to know.”

As noted previously, Bennett is the Texan CEO of a hospitality and real estate company, Ashford Inc., and also the publisher of the Dallas Express, a news website he launched in early 2021. (A [press release](#)³⁸³ from late 2021 stated that the ownership of the Dallas Express had changed, but an April 2022 [op-ed](#) was attributed to “Monty Bennett | Publisher.”)³⁸⁴ [According to *D* magazine](#),³⁸⁵ Bennett’s *Dallas City Wire* piece attacking the magazine as “bullies” came after it published an [article](#)³⁸⁶ discussing a [New York Times investigation](#)³⁸⁷ into his alleged practices. Several weeks after Karen’s observations, the link to the article no longer

³⁸³ “The Dallas Express Announces New Ownership and Focus On Local, Non-Partisan News,” PR Newswire, Nov. 12, 2021, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/the-dallas-express-announces-new-ownership-and-focus-on-local-non-partisan-news-301423058.html>

³⁸⁴ Monty J. Bennett, “Dallas: Homelessness ... or Vagrancy?” Dallas Express, Apr. 4, 2022, retrieved Dec. 30, 2023, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20220603194716/https://dallasexpress.com/dallas-homelessness-or-vagrancy/>

³⁸⁵ Simek, *ibid.*

³⁸⁶ Peter Simek, “Local News Is Under Assault by a Pay-to-Play Media Model,” *D Magazine*, Oct. 19, 2020, <https://www.dmagazine.com/frontburner/2020/10/local-news-is-under-assault-by-a-pay-to-play-media-model/>

³⁸⁷ Davey Alba and Jack Nicas, “As Local News Dies, a Pay-for-Play Network Rises in Its Place,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/18/technology/timpone-local-news-metric-media.html>

worked and the story had seemingly [vanished](#)³⁸⁸ from the *Dallas City Wire* website, according to our review of the site. In her final reflections she reiterated her impression that her site “was not trustworthy ... my gut from the start was that this site is not legitimate.”

Of the roughly one-third of participants who perceived conservative bias in their websites’ content, approximately half suspected an actual partisan organization of being behind the site. Sandra, a fifty-eight-year-old in Winterville, Georgia, said reading the [Athens Reporter](#)’s coverage of voting issues made her “feel like there are people within my community who are not happy with the previous presidential election. ... I think that it is a politically motivated news publication put out by the Republican Party.” Noah, a thirty-seven-year-old in Kansas City, Missouri, said the [KC Reporter](#)’s “lack of original local content made me suspect this publication as a front for some sort of ideologically motivated group.”

Miles, a thirty-year-old in Washington, DC, was suspicious of a December 2020 [article](#) in DC Business Daily about the dire economic situation for the hotel industry.³⁸⁹ “I think this really represents the talking points of the AHLA,” he said, referring to the American Hotel and Lodging Association, a lobbying organization for the industry. “I’m beginning to feel like it’s a little bit more propaganda. That there is definitely someone that is funding this, that’s pushing their agenda.” (As investigations by the *New York Times* and the Tow Center have found, the Metric Media network has ties to the hotel industry, and the publications reflected the talking points of the hospitality industry through the pandemic lockdowns.)

Several of the participants cried foul when reading their sites’ boilerplate About pages and their stated mission, in the case of Metric Media, to “provide objective, data-driven information without political bias.” Judy in Pennsylvania responded with “Ha ha ha” when she read the [Lower Bucks Today](#) About Us page. “Total garbage ... its strengths are to push the Republican agenda,” she said. Denver City Wire’s About Us [page](#) “says nothing about being a conservative organization,” said Lara, a thirty-six-year-old in Denver. “They make it sound like they’re unbiased and neutral, which is completely false.”

Russ, a fifty-seven-year-old from Doylestown, Pennsylvania, said he was “quickly getting a sense” from Lower Bucks Today “that this whole thing is pretty biased in a right-wing Republican way. ... It looks like it would like to be a source of local information, but my sense is that it’s a political outlook [that] is slanted and misleading.” He later said, “I don’t have much experience with local news websites other than my own newspaper, but I believe there is a trend of politically motivated sites pretending to be local news.” In his final reflections he wrote, “This website did not deepen my understanding of my local news, but did make me

³⁸⁸ Retrieved Dec. 30, 2023, from

<https://web.archive.org/web/20221103221256/https://dallascitywire.com/stories/603865496-bennett-the-media-is-chock-full-of-bullies>

³⁸⁹ Mary Lou Lang, “Integrated Capital founder: Hotel industry needs Congress to take action to ‘keep the industry alive,’” DC Business Daily, Dec. 14, 2020, <https://dcbusinessdaily.com/stories/569038486-integrated-capital-founder-hotel-industry-needs-congress-to-take-action-to-keep-the-industry-alive>

think more about political polarization, and a concern about biased sites pretending to be neutral news.”

Despite his suspicions, Russ had not researched the ownership of his assigned site before being prompted to in the final reflections section. This decision, or lack thereof, was not uncommon, even among the dozens of participants who were suspicious of their assigned sites’ intentions.

Transparency and ownership

A key area of interest in this study was to examine the extent to which participants actively sought to establish the provenance of their assigned websites, and the process through which they sought this information. The *New York Times* [observed](#) that Metric Media sites “typically lack mastheads, local addresses and clear disclosure of their ownership or revenue sources,”³⁹⁰ adding that “voters could easily become confused about the origins of information from these seemingly innocuous local-sounding outlets.” NewsGuard assigned a red “nutrition label” to sites in the Metric Media network — meaning they “generally fail ... to meet basic standards of credibility and transparency” — and [determined](#) that the network’s sites “do not meet the standard for disclosing information about ownership and financing.”

None of our participants had encountered their assigned websites before. Yet despite many raising concerns or highlighting issues over the course of the study, only a small number looked into the ownership of their assigned sites of their own volition. Of those who did, comparatively few engaged in what education researchers have referred to as “[lateral reading](#)”³⁹¹ — the practice of seeking out other sources to evaluate a site’s credibility.

Lack of research around ownership

A sizable majority of participants — roughly two-thirds — did not attempt to research who owned or operated their assigned site before they were prompted to do so in the final reflection section. Most said it had never occurred to them. Some participants, however, indicated they were embarrassed by their lack of initiative, suggesting at least some familiarity with this aspect of media literacy.

Ruth, a fifty-six-year-old in Richmond, Texas, was apologetic and surprised when asked whether she had previously researched who owned and operated her assigned site, the [SE Houston News](#). “Oh, my gosh, so sorry! I never looked or thought about who ran the website at all. ... I wonder where would I find that?” Caroline in Chicago said she was “kind of surprised” that she hadn’t thought to investigate who was behind her site. Of the roughly

³⁹⁰ Brendan Nyhan, “Americans Trust Local News. That Belief Is Being Exploited,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 31, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/31/upshot/fake-local-news.html>

³⁹¹ Sam Wineburg and Sarah McGrew, “Lateral Reading: Reading Less and Learning More When Evaluating Digital Information” (Oct. 6, 2017), Stanford History Education Group Working Paper No. 2017-A1, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3048994>

one-third who had attempted to identify a site's ownership before being prompted to do so, only a small number researched the outlet beyond the scant information available on the website.

A significant portion of participants — both those who had conducted research of their own accord and those who waited until they were prompted — were unable to find any relevant information on their outlets' websites. Many found the parent company's name — Metric Media or LGIS — but no other information. The About pages of at least five sites that belonged to the Record network displayed error messages that read “This page isn't working.” (The link remained broken for several months after the completion of the study, but has since been fixed.) These findings were indicative of the networks' overarching lack of transparency. Participants' reactions to the general lack of information around ownership, however, varied significantly, from mild annoyance to severe alarm.

At one end of the spectrum, participants commented on the lack of transparency but did not express strong opinions or indicate that this affected their view of the site's integrity. Speaking of his attempts to find who owned the Cook County Record, Ivan, a forty-three-year-old in Chicago, said he “had so much trouble.” After discovering the About page didn't work, he “tried all these different options to find it. I looked on Facebook, Twitter, still couldn't find anything. So, yeah, this site doesn't make it too easy to find out who owns the site.”

Julie in Houston also found the ownership information available on her site to be lacking. She read aloud from its About page, which describes the site as a “daily online news source ... founded to change the local news focus from celebrities, gossip, and partisan political issues to matters of greater interest to all Houstonians. ... We focus on fact-based reporting and do not allow opinionated journalism in our news stories.” Responding to this description, she said, “I mean, I see that. But it still doesn't tell me who actually is writing this.”

Kate, a fifty-year-old in Dallas, likewise said she could not find anything on her assigned site “that shows who runs the site.” “I'm not seeing anything other than them talking about their principles and stuff,” she explained. “I don't see who owns it or anything. I went to the contact info. Didn't really seem to be anything there. So I have no idea who owns it.”

Ludvig in California was among the few participants to have a positive overall impression of his assigned site, the Central OC Times. Nonetheless, after being prompted to search for ownership information, he noted his site's lack of transparency. “I searched for the owners, managers, investors, or anyone behind it. I went to the hamburger menu and then I clicked on ‘People’ and under ‘Directory’ and it says ‘No results,’” he said. “I also scrolled to the bottom of the website and I didn't find anything beyond a privacy policy and terms of service. It does not say who the owners are, unfortunately.”

Notably, all these participants had previously said that they found their sites to be trustworthy, fair, and without bias. None of them indicated in their reflections that this lack of transparency had altered that assessment. In further indicators of possible media literacy and trust vulnerabilities, these participants uncritically accepted the claims of objectivity in these sites' nebulous About pages or interpreted nonprofit status as further confirmation of virtuous intentions. Adrienne, a twenty-seven-year-old in Dallas, said, "I didn't realize this until just now, but they don't have a side to their stories. They just provide facts," after reading the outlet's stated mission to report "dispassionately [and] place emphasis on facts over all else. News reports ... should never be 'spun' or carry editorial opinions to suit the political persuasions of our reporters or editors." Adrienne said she believed this principle was "really important, because sometimes you look at certain news websites and they are very one-sided. So it's good that it's just reporting the facts, which not a lot of people do recently."

Suman in Florida noted that Metric Media was a 501(c)(3) nonprofit news content provider, "so it tells me that it doesn't have a political agenda, or it's not backed by any biased thing, which is great." However, this assumption is incorrect. While there are IRS codes that don't allow 501(c)(3) organizations to partake in political campaigns on behalf of or against a candidate (directly or indirectly), nonprofit organizations can partake in issue advocacy. Suman was among the few participants who had a final positive impression of his assigned site, the NC Florida News. In his final reflections he praised the site's trustworthiness: "It definitely feels like a more balanced and unbiased news outlet to report relevant community-related news."

Vivek, a thirty-three-year-old from Rolling Meadows, Illinois, was another of the few participants who recorded a final positive impression of his site, the Cook County Record. However, he was the lone participant who seemed to question that perception after attempting to research its ownership. "I was a little worried when I clicked on 'About' and it didn't take me anywhere but here," he said, indicating the error message on its website. "Maybe it's perfectly innocent," but "maybe not."

Prior research, lack of transparency, and distrust

Vivek's unease at discovering his website's lack of transparency was echoed by other participants. Significantly, concern and distrust were far more acute among those who had previously researched their sites' ownership of their own volition. Some of them did not elaborate on what had motivated them to conduct this research unprompted. But for those who did, most said it was out of habit upon encountering an unfamiliar news source, or pure curiosity. Alice in Houston explained her process of trying to determine who operated her assigned site on the first day of the study:

One of the first things that I look for when I discover a new news source, be that a website, a news site, a blog, a YouTube video, whatever, is to look at who the source is,

who is doing the publishing. So I'm looking at the "About" page here. There's zero information as to who the publishers are, who the editors are, what kind of editorial oversight there is for this, what kind of fact checking. They do mention that they focus on fact-based reporting and do not allow opinionated journalism in their news stories and make mention of basic publishing standards. But there is no information about who that's coming from. The other thing that really concerns me about this website is that there is no information about who is writing these articles.

Several days later, in her final reflection, Alice wrote that the site compared unfavorably with other local news sources because it had "no transparency about reporting or editorial standards [and] no credentials for reporters."

Monica, a forty-five-year-old from Maurepas, Louisiana, also expressed an immediate interest in the ownership of her site, [Shenandoah Valley News](#). On the first day of the study she wrote:

I was curious about the organization itself. I found myself wanting to know more history on the website ... and [its] backing. ... Just to see if it's got a slant that I need to be aware of when reading the content, to make sure that I'm developing well-rounded and thoroughly informed opinions about things. It's the type of site where I would at this point seek more information on the articles that intrigued me in order to make sure it wasn't unfairly biased.

By the end of the study, Monica had formed an unfavorable view of her site. She had also attempted to thoroughly research it, and was one of a handful of participants who had looked beyond the information available on its website. "After attempting to figure out who owns and runs it and never being able to get the link to work," she said, she turned to other tactics. "I didn't find any information when I Googled it. I didn't find any information on Facebook, Twitter, anywhere." Compared with other local news outlets, the site is "shockingly less transparent."

Miranda in Virginia also investigated her site's social media presence. She said she found the corresponding Facebook page "very unsettling" because "it's not really a page. It does not have a single follower. That was definitely worrying to me." The site's About page "feels very artificial ... I felt like it really didn't give much information at all. ... There are no real people taking accountability for anything on this website. And that's very odd to me."

Alice and Monica had no idea who was behind their respective sites, but other participants offered theories based on the tenor of the coverage. Sharon, a twenty-three-year-old in Elmhurst, Illinois, suspected the [Dupage Policy Journal](#) was "owned by Republican politicians, or at least given a lot of money from Republican politicians." Unable to find any information

on the website, she was unable to confirm her suspicion: “I think that’s who owns it, or at least has an interest in it. But I don’t honestly know how I would find that information.”

Fewer than a dozen participants discovered information about the “pay for play” networks and accusations against them while researching their outlets. Lara in Denver was one of the participants who had been suspicious of her site since the beginning of the exercise. Frustrated by the lack of available ownership information, she “had to do a deep dive online when I first looked at this website.”

Michael, a fifty-year-old from Las Vegas, was another of the small group of participants who researched their websites at the outset of the study and discovered information about their provenance. On the first day of the exercise he wrote of his site, the [Las Vegas Record](#) (which has subsequently been rebranded as Las Vegas City Wire):

I just looked up information about the publisher and it’s owned by an “American conservative businessman.” It looks like the owner creates many sites like this across the country that look similar but are just in different areas. It also looks like a small amount of the stories are unique and many others are automated. It’s “pay for play” publishing. ... It looks more manufactured and “fake” than other local news websites. It doesn’t look like a serious publication. It looks like noise.

In his final reflections, Michael wrote that he had been compelled to do this research because “I was very curious about why there was so much right-wing stuff” on his site.

Peter, a thirty-five-year-old from Philadelphia assigned to read the [Pennsylvania Record](#), and Jason in Chicago were also both interested in their sites’ ownership from the outset of the study and were alarmed when they discovered the Record network’s broken About page. (The link remained broken for several months after the completion of the study but was then fixed.) After using online tools to research their websites’ domain registration information, they were even more surprised to discover the sites were owned by the US Chamber Institute for Legal Reform, an affiliate of the Chamber of Commerce, the country’s largest lobbying organization. (The [Florida Record](#), the only assigned Record site whose About page worked, said the outlet was owned by the US Chamber Institute for Legal Reform, but did not mention the connection to the Chamber of Commerce.)

“I don’t appreciate that not being up front on the website,” Peter said. “It makes me very suspicious, and it makes more sense why the articles are written the way they are. ... The lack of a mission statement and disclosure of who runs the site ... makes me trust the site even less to give me a full view of business and civil litigation in Pennsylvania.” Such a disclosure, he wrote in his final reflections, “would give a reader some orientation and a framework with which to more clearly understand the scope, philosophy, purpose, and angle of the site. Otherwise the site is very confusing.”

From the beginning of the study, Jason said, he assumed his site was operated by “sort of a pro-business, probably relatively conservative group.” After researching his site, that assumption “was verified ... the big problem was that I couldn’t get [that information] from the ‘about’ page.”

Miles in DC didn’t research the DC Business Daily until shortly before he was prompted to at the end of the study. On discovering his site was owned by Franklin Archer, he began researching the network, and discovered the Tow Center’s earlier reports on the networks. “This site disguises who operates it fairly well,” he said.

Lingering questions about Metric Media’s impact on audiences

By inviting participants to engage with Metric Media sites over time, our study offered insights on how news consumers interpret these sites and the processes through which they formulate opinions around issues like trust, fairness, and bias.

While several trends emerged in participants’ responses, their reactions were far from monolithic and represented a range of interpretations across a continuum. Among the most significant findings was the evolution between participants’ initial impressions of their sites and their final takeaways. After nearly a week of repeat visits, most participants had grown at minimum frustrated, and in many cases distrustful, of the sites’ peculiar algorithmically generated articles and lack of fresh content. But initial impressions were mostly formed by surface-level qualities such as the feel and look of the sites, with participants giving the websites high marks for design and ease of navigation. The sites’ “professional” design and layout conferred a degree of legitimacy at first glance or first click: a valuable quality for websites potentially more likely to be discovered by algorithmic chance than word of mouth.

The use of audience research to study these networks does not reveal the overall intention of the publishing methodology of these outlets. But these networks appear to be designed for a very different kind of audience and relationship than the ones most often promoted by efforts to improve financial sustainability for local news outlets, in which the cultivation of habitual repeat users and the subscription/membership model are encouraged. For Metric Media, algorithmic discovery related to a specific political issue like voter fraud may be more important than consistent readership.

The participants’ first impressions and other reactions also highlighted some striking gaps in media literacy, which, in turn, affected the overall interpretations of the sites. In the 2019 *Lansing State Journal* [article](#) that identified the emergence of these networks,³⁹² Rachel Davis

³⁹² Carol Thompson, *op. cit.*

Mersey, executive director of the Media Leadership Center at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, was quoted discussing how the "onus of determining the difference between news and political messaging falls on the reader." This responsibility, Davis Mersey said, is "a challenge when stories are delivered via social media feeds — and [she] suggested reading as close to the original source of news as possible." The findings of this study, however, suggest that even when news consumers are intentionally reading specific news sources as opposed to scrolling through social media feeds, that difference may still be far from evident.

Notably, the study found a surprising disconnect between perceptions of the sites' quality of reporting and trustworthiness and bias. Despite participants' overwhelming frustration with the content, the websites' use of a "neutral" editorial tone and reliance on data-heavy articles led many participants to label them ideologically neutral, trustworthy, and without bias. The study also uncovered some other surprising indicators of trust, such as nonprofit status, and a willingness to take claims of objectivity and nonpartisan status at face value. As nonprofit local news models proliferate across the country, this presents a disturbing new opportunity for misrepresentation and disinformation.

Similarly, despite the growing emphasis on media literacy in recent years, basic skills and knowledge, such as the importance of identifying who owns and operates a given news source, were found to be lacking in some parts of our study. The participants who were most alarmed by the websites' vague About pages were those who had already thought to research the lack of transparency. For the rest of the participants, who looked up ownership information only after being prompted, the discovery of this lack of transparency did not necessarily affect their perceptions of the sites' integrity.

Of course, there are many questions about the impact of Metric Media content on audiences that our study could not answer — including how significant the reach of this content may be. One nationally representative survey estimated that around [one in 25 Americans were exposed to content from pink slime sites](#) in the lead-up to the 2020 presidential election (from August 24-December 7, 2020).³⁹³ They found that living in a "news desert" did not make someone more likely to be exposed, nor were those considered to be vulnerable to misinformation — older adults and conservatives — more likely to visit pink slime sites. They did find that people were more likely to recognize the sites' political content rather than their algorithmically generated content. Nevertheless, that study was unable to offer insights on a potentially significant context for exposure: when people see pink slime headlines in social media feeds but don't click on them. Further, as is discussed in Chapter 5, large audiences are not necessarily required — or, indeed, desired — for such material to achieve its goals.

³⁹³ Ryan Moore et al., "The Consumption of Pink Slime Journalism: Who, What, When, Where, and Why?" (2023) preprint, <http://dx.doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/3bwz6>

Given our study's findings that many participants required multiple visits to their assigned Metric Media site before questioning its quality or legitimacy, additional research could help to explore the impact of briefer exposure via social media feeds. The recurring lack of media literacy skills observed among our study participants, combined with examples seen elsewhere in this edited collection, such as the case of misinformation about race-based grading in Illinois first published on an LGIS site being circulated broadly by other right-leaning conservative sites (*see Chapter 3.1*), suggests pink slime content may influence larger systems of news and information even if its direct audience is small. And, of course, additional research could further examine audience perceptions of case examples where content is circulated by political candidates in potential pay-for-play scenarios. Indeed, one of the challenges of assessing the significance of pink slime content is the opaque nature of the intentions of networks like Metric Media or their desired goal. Beyond examining audiences' perceptions of specific pink slime content, many issues deserve more exploration around how the existence of such networks may affect larger narratives related to partisan journalism, transparency, and trust in local news.

5. Alternative approaches to partisan media:

A case from the left

Not all partisan local media meet our criteria for pink slime journalism. Notably, there are partisan outlets on both the left and the right that contribute a substantial amount of original local reporting and/or are more transparent about their positionality. (We have detailed some additional examples apart from the Metric Media case [in our 2022 report on partisan newsrooms.](#))³⁹⁴

In [November 2022](#), we explored the case of the progressive Courier network. While the network is more transparent than the likes of Metric Media, as a partisan-funded outlet it raises questions about whether and how partisan media can reconcile with shifting local journalism norms. Our report followed the team of Courier’s ‘Gander newspaper in Detroit, Michigan, in the lead-up to the 2022 midterm elections.

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On a chilly October morning inside a WeWork building in downtown Detroit, the team of The ‘Gander newsroom congregated for the first time in months. The small group of local Michiganders, two reporters and two editors, sat down inside a slightly overheated office room with polka-dotted wallpaper. The team was gathered to strategize about their coverage of one of the fiercest battles in their state: the fight for reproductive rights.

Scattered across the table were loose meeting notes, neon-colored Sharpies, and black WeWork coffee mugs. Since The ‘Gander doesn’t have a physical newsroom, booking a WeWork office space is usually the most convenient option. Lisa Hayes, the managing editor, walked over to a nearby whiteboard to draw a calendar. The meeting was at a crucial time, with less than two weeks until the midterm election.

“This is just to keep in mind what we have time for,” Hayes said, nodding toward the board.

³⁹⁴ Bartholomew, *op. cit.*

After the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in June to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, Michigan became the center of the battle of whether to recriminalize abortion. Michigan was one of five states with reproductive rights on the ballot, leaving it to voters to decide whether the state’s 1931 abortion ban should be enforced once again. (Michiganders voted against it.) In the lead-up to the midterm election, reproductive rights became a central topic of The ’Gander’s reporting, with stories praising Democratic candidates’ actions to protect abortion and highlighting Republicans’ attempts to reinforce the ban.



Figure 36: Local reporters of The ’Gander Newsroom meet to discuss their coverage of reproductive rights.

The ’Gander’s parent network, Courier, is a company that supports liberal politics run by Tara McGowan, who launched the network of news outlets as part of ACRONYM, a 501(c)(4) nonprofit organization she started. She also launched a super PAC, PACRONYM, which has received support from Democratic donors such as Steven Spielberg, J.J. Abrams, and LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman. In an [internal memo](#), ACRONYM announced that it planned to raise \$75 million to impact the 2020 election cycle.³⁹⁵ In 2021, Vox reported that McGowan was launching [Project for Good Information](#)³⁹⁶ with the intention of raising \$65 million to

³⁹⁵ McGowan, Tara. “ACRONYM News Corp 2019-2020 Rapid Build Plan,” June 20, 2019.

<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6771809-Screenshot-PDF>

³⁹⁶ Theodore Schleifer, “Inside the new \$65 million push from progressives to compete with conservative media,” Vox, Feb. 3, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/recode/22296522/acronym-democrats-courier-progressive-news-tara-mcgowan-project-for-good-information>

push progressive local news throughout the United States. While previously owned by ACRONYM, Courier is today owned by Good Information Inc.

As of the 2022 midterms, Courier had newsrooms in the competitive swing states of Arizona, Florida, Iowa, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Wisconsin. (It now has ten newsrooms and plans to open another in Texas.)³⁹⁷ As reported by *Wired*, McGowan created the newsrooms with the intention of neutralizing false or “bad information” by conservative media.³⁹⁸ The goal of Courier is to flood the information ecosystem with progressive news, or what McGowan calls “good information.” It is a strategy some critics depict as [fighting fire with fire](#).³⁹⁹

While some outside journalists are [highly skeptical](#) about Courier Newsroom and its leadership,⁴⁰⁰ the reporters gathered at The ’Gander’s WeWork table that morning all seemed dedicated to its mission. The youngest reporter, Hope O’Dell, 23, who graduated from Michigan State University in May 2022, said that they appreciate being able to cover topics that align with their journalistic ethics. “I am for progressive journalism in the way that I don’t want to amplify misinformation or hate or draw false equivalency between two opinions when one is clearly false or just not true,” they told me.

Some reporters credit the newsroom’s unique approach with restoring their dented faith in journalism entirely. Hayes, the managing editor and also a Michigan State alumnus, worked as a reporter and magazine writer earlier in her career for outlets such as *Traverse Magazine* before switching careers to teaching at a local college.

“I thought that journalism was no longer an option for me,” she said. “I had been frustrated by the changes of the world with clickbait and how to be a productive part of journalism.” But when a friend mentioned that Courier, an impact-first organization, was seeking a managing editor for its Michigan newsroom, she decided to apply: “It sounded like a really good opportunity to get back into the field.”

The team at The ’Gander say their aim is to provide factual news about reproductive rights to “passive” news consumers, who include voters who don’t pay for news or who get most of their information from scrolling headlines on social media. To get the attention of this audience, The ’Gander reporters mostly publish short videos, graphics, and skimmable newsletters on its social media channels. Recent articles included stories on a local faith leader’s pro-abortion stance and fact-checking what Republican gubernatorial candidate Tudor Dixon

³⁹⁷ “Courier Year in Review 2023,” Courier, Dec. 19, 2023, <https://couriernewsroom.com/news/courier-year-in-review-2023/>

³⁹⁸ Nancy Scola, “The Election-Swinging, Facebook-Fueled, Get-Out-the-Vote Machine,” *Wired*, Oct. 6, 2022, <https://www.wired.com/story/the-election-swinging-facebook-fueled-get-out-the-vote-machine/>

³⁹⁹ Richard L. Hasen, “If Democrats fight right-wing ‘fake news’ fire with fire, we all lose,” Salon, Feb. 23, 2020, <https://www.salon.com/2020/02/23/if-democrats-fight-right-wing-fake-news-fire-with-fire-we-all-lose/>

⁴⁰⁰ Anna Merlan, “She Created an Ultra-Partisan News Agency; Now Billionaires Are Giving Her Funding to Fight Disinformation,” *Vice*, Oct. 29, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/3abzb8/billionaires-sorts-hoffman-mcgowan-acronym-courier>

says in debates. O'Dell has been especially active on The 'Gander's TikTok page, with posts coming out by the hour.

“Every week I do a set of infographic cards,” O'Dell said. “There's one with a statistic like polling data about what [Michiganders believe about abortion](#)⁴⁰¹ or the proposal regarding reproductive freedom. I do one debunking misinformation about abortion, usually like the medical procedure.”

While The 'Gander works like a seemingly conventional newsroom, the process going on behind the scenes at Courier's headquarter team has led [critics to compare it](#) to political campaigning.⁴⁰² The newsroom has borrowed the political tactics of microtargeting, whereby particular messages are tailored to unique slices of the population in a bid to boost voter turnout.

Employees at Courier's headquarters are responsible for testing whether content produced by its local newsrooms is successful in moving voters in a desired progressive direction. For instance, in the lead-up to the 2022 midterm elections, Courier tested whether exposing people to content produced by The 'Gander could influence voters' view on recriminalizing abortion. In a study, they exposed 5,200 voters to a Facebook ad that linked to a 'Gander article titled [“Six in 10 Michiganders Oppose Re-Criminalizing Abortion. Here's What One of Them Has to Say.”](#)⁴⁰³

⁴⁰¹ 'Gander Newsroom. “TikTok - Make Your Day.” Accessed January 12, 2024.

https://www.tiktok.com/@gandernewsroom/video/7140659034327158059?_r=1&_t=8XLuawDxx6l&is_from_webapp=v1&item_id=7140659034327158059

⁴⁰² Alex Thompson, “Newsroom or PAC? Liberal group muddies online information wars,” Politico, July 14, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/14/newsroom-pac-liberal-info-wars-356800>

⁴⁰³ Keya Vakil, “Six in 10 Michiganders Oppose Re-Criminalizing Abortion. Here's What One of Them Has to Say,” The 'Gander, July 1, 2022, <https://gandernewsroom.com/2022/07/01/six-in-10-michiganders-oppose-re-criminalizing-abortion/>

The 'Gander Newsroom
Sponsored · Paid for by Courier Newsroom, Inc.
ID: 1719109355095434

Sixty percent of Michiganders oppose re-criminalizing abortion and 58% think that abortion should be legal under most circumstances.

Karin Killian is one of them. The Traverse City mom got an abortion when she was 20—a decision she has no regrets about.

"I never would have finished college, I never would have met the man I...



GANDERNEWSROOM.COM
Six in 10 Michiganders Oppose Re-Criminalizing Abortion. Here's What One of Them Has to Say. - The Gander
Six in 10 Michigan voters oppose re-criminalizing abortion and 58% think that abortion should be legal under most circumstances, according to a...

Figure 37: Facebook ad for *The 'Gander* article.

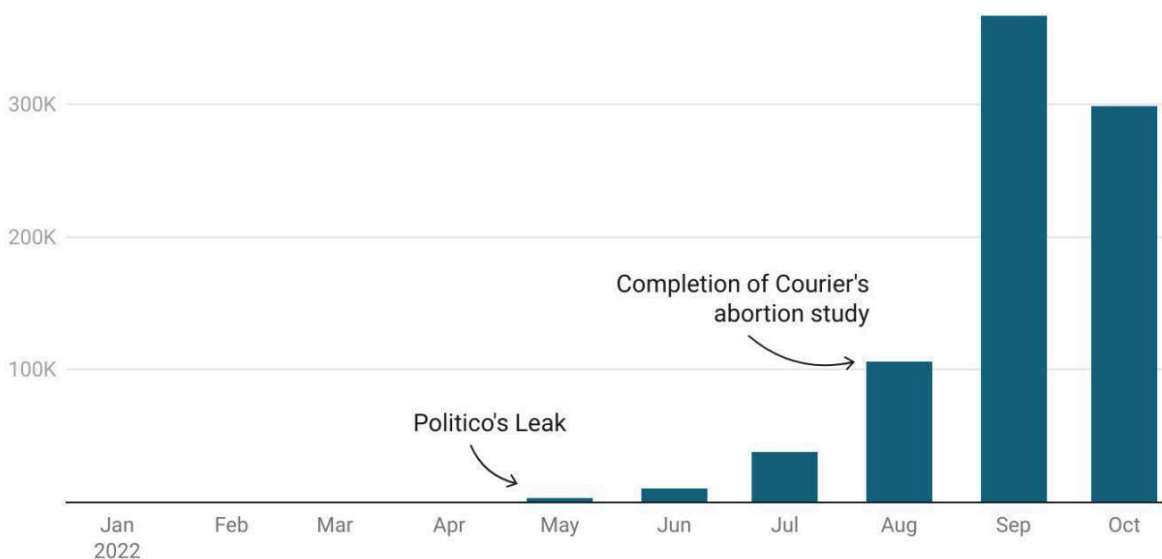
The results showed that study participants were four points more opposed to recriminalizing abortion after seeing the ad, and that they increased their support for Governor Whitmer's lawsuit to prevent an abortion ban. According to Courier's data advisor, Pete Backof, who previously worked on the analytics team for the 2012 Obama campaign, this is an enormous shift. "The most successful television ads that people test right now come in at 1.2 to 1.5 percentage point shifts. So to be able to show a four-point effect is really big," Backof said. The ads were likely so successful, he theorized, because the target audience typically aren't exposed to a lot of news sources, which makes them more sensitive to politically charged information.

The testing helped steer Courier’s coverage on abortion rights, ultimately confirming that such content was effective in influencing voter opinion. As of mid-November 2022, Courier had spent approximately \$800,000 on showing abortion-related Facebook ads to target voters, according to data from [Meta’s ad library](#).⁴⁰⁴ The earlier ads were pushed following Politico’s leak of Justice Samuel Alito’s opinion draft in May and increased following the completion of the abortion study in August. These ads were viewed more by women aged 25 to 34 than by any other demographic.

Courier uses Facebook ads to microtarget infrequent voters in swing states who would likely vote for the Democratic Party. As reported by [Quartz](#),⁴⁰⁵ these ads feature politically salient topics, from bashing Donald Trump’s response to the pandemic to highlighting a Democratic candidate’s bill to end childcare deserts.

In Lead-Up to Midterm Election, Courier Increased Spending on Reproductive Focused FB Ads

Courier spent approximately \$800,000 on Facebook ads on reproductive issues in 2022 alone. The earlier ads were pushed following Politico’s leak of Justice Alito’s opinion draft in May and increased following the completion of Courier’s abortion study in August.



Approximate spending was calculated by averaging lower_bound_spent and upper_bound_spent columns.

Chart: Tow Center for Digital Journalism • Source: Meta Ad Library • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 38: Courier Facebook ad spending in the runup to the 2022 midterm elections.

⁴⁰⁴ Accessed January 12, 2024.

https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=political_and_issue_ads&country=US&q=Courier%20Newsroom%2C%20Inc.%2C%20%20&sort_data%5bdirection%5d=desc&sort_data%5bmode%5d=relevancy_monthly_grouped&search_type=keyword_unordered&media_type=all

⁴⁰⁵ Jeremy B. Merrill and Hanna Kozłowska, “A well-heeled liberal group is filling the local news void with Trump-bashing coronavirus ads,” Quartz, Apr. 15, 2020, <https://qz.com/1837224/well-funded-liberal-news-network-pushes-partisan-covid-19-content>

Courier's communications director, RC Di Mezzo, a 26-year-old wearing a green New York Parks cap, flew in from upstate New York to oversee the Tow Center's meeting with The 'Gander. The main purpose behind the testing, Mezzo said, is to validate Courier's model and mission to external partners.

"It helps build goodwill and credibility with folks in different media circles — our testing lets folks know that we're not just spinning our wheels here, but that our model and mission are objectively effective," he explained.

There's nothing unusual or radical about news organizations having an ideological perspective, according to Matthew Pressman, an associate professor of journalism at Seton Hall University. Many other organizations have done that in the past, and as long as they are transparent, it doesn't necessarily have to be a problem. The United States, he said, is more of an outlier in its professed devotion to objectivity compared to Europe and other parts of the globe. However, Courier's dedicated goal of swaying voters in a particular political direction through methodological testing and Facebook ads is where "things become dicey," and the line between journalism and political campaigning gets blurry.

"There's advocacy journalism, which is one thing, but this is more the kind of thing that you'd expect to see from a political campaign," Pressman said. "It seems that at a minimum maybe they should spin that off into another organization that more explicitly has it as their mission to change minds and influence voters."

However, the editors at The 'Gander see the testing as a positive thing that helps build faith in their work. While the two younger reporters went out for their lunch break, Hayes and the other editor, Kyle Kaminski, stayed behind at the WeWork office. "It is so rewarding to have something come out that says you've reached people, and you are getting people interested in voting," Hayes said when asked about the testing. She added that she wasn't informed about the results until after the study had been completed.

Kaminski added, "It was the first time that I've seen work making a difference rather than just like looking at numbers and which stories got the most clicks today. This is showing that not only are people reading it, but it's making a difference."

A Lack of Bothsidesism

The 'Gander, like Courier's other newsrooms, avoids what's called bothsidesism. The basic idea is that journalism has a tendency to represent both sides of an argument, which presents opposing viewpoints as equal, although they might not be. Courier leans away from that, instead focusing on the argument that aligns with its political values without showing the opposition's side of view.

In Courier’s early years, before separating from ACRONYM, it was criticized for failing to be transparent about its political intentions. The media watchdog NewsGuard, which assesses the credibility of newsrooms, gave [Courier a red rating](#), writing in its 2020 report that “because CourierNewsroom.com is not upfront about its partisan agenda, yet advances that agenda through its story selection and framing, NewsGuard has determined that the site does not gather and present information responsibly and that it does not responsibly handle the difference between news and opinion.”

Since then, Courier has attempted to become more transparent about its political intentions and, to some degree, its funders. Until November 2023, its website said a list of funders who have donated more than \$25,000 was available upon request.⁴⁰⁶ (By November 24, 2023, this had been amended to state: “Good Information Inc.’s investors include: Vero Media Investments, Incite Labs Inc., Technology for Democracy, and the Kenneth & Jennifer Duda Living Trust.”⁴⁰⁷)

In 2021, Courier hired NYU journalism professor and media critic Jay Rosen as a consultant to help with what he calls its “transparency problems.” Rosen has previously written about the potential for viewpoint transparency on his blog, [PressThink](#). Together, he and CEO McGowan created “coming from” statements for the (then) eight newsrooms’ About pages.

The statements are intended to communicate each newsroom’s values and editorial decisions. For instance, [The Gander](#) supports equal-opportunity education and initiatives to reduce the harmful effects of climate change, while the Pennsylvania newsroom [The Keystone](#) covers restrictions on healthcare, birth control, and abortion care that have been implemented by the Republican-controlled state legislature.

According to Rosen, democracy would be better off if journalists didn’t adhere to conventional standards of objectivity. Rather than trying to be impartial, he advocated for journalists and newsrooms to be explicit about their values and editorial decisions. Courier was an excellent opportunity for Rosen to see how such a transparent approach could unfold in real life. “This is one way that I do my work as a journalism professor,” he said. “I like to test my ideas in real-world conditions.”

Bothsidesism remains a [heated debate](#)⁴⁰⁸ within journalism and media critic circles. Some say it’s important to inform the public of all viewpoints, whereas others say not all viewpoints are important to amplify, especially if they’re based on misinformation and false statements. For

⁴⁰⁶ Courier Newsroom. “About - Courier Newsroom.” Courier Newsroom [Archive from November 1, 2023]. <https://web.archive.org/web/20231101000502/https://couriernewsroom.com/about/>

⁴⁰⁷ Courier Newsroom. “About - Courier Newsroom.” Courier Newsroom [Archive from November 24, 2023]. <https://web.archive.org/web/20231124212037/https://couriernewsroom.com/about/>

⁴⁰⁸ Jon Alsop, “Both sides,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, Dec. 16, 2019, https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/both-sides-impeachment-trump.php

instance, attempts to mitigate climate change will be increasingly difficult if journalists give equal space to arguments from climate denialists. But most scenarios are not as black and white, and many issues have valid arguments on both sides. A newsroom that repeats political talking points with no critical engagement whatsoever makes it difficult to assess whether it's actually performing journalism rather than political campaigning.

According to [a 2022 Pew Research Center study](#), journalists are divided over whether to represent both sides. About 55 percent of those surveyed say that “every side does *not* always deserve equal coverage in the news.”⁴⁰⁹ The study also found that younger journalists from left-leaning publications are usually the ones who say equal coverage is not always merited.

Partisan but proximate content

While Courier does attempt to influence swing state voters in a desired political direction, it differs from networks like Metric Media in two significant ways: First, Courier is transparent about its political agenda, and second, most of its content is published by real local reporters in each newsroom.

The reporters at The 'Gander all live in Michigan and have covered news for local publications before. O'Dell, unlike the anonymous writer bylines at Metric Media, grew up in Michigan and understands its politics and idiosyncrasies. In contrast, more than 90 percent of the stories by Metric Media are algorithmically generated, and the sites don't disclose their political agenda on their About pages.

While a majority of Courier's reporting is local to each newsroom, editors also publish national coverage across its (then) eight platforms. This can lead to some duplication. For instance, almost identical articles about Biden's contribution to the Democratic Party were published by Courier's [Virginia](#)⁴¹⁰ and [Arizona](#)⁴¹¹ newsrooms with small adjustments to contextualize them within each state. This kind of national coverage is designed to keep passive news consumers updated on the basics of U.S. national politics.

Meanwhile, reporters at The 'Gander are warned off such broad coverage and instead stay grounded in their state. “We want them focused on Michigan,” said Di Mezzo, the communications director. “We want them focused on what [local politicians] Gretchen Whitmer, Dana Nessel, and Joslyn Benson are doing, not everything that flies out of Donald Trump's mouth or the hot topic on *Morning Joe*.”

⁴⁰⁹ Naomi Forman-Katz and Mark Jurkowitz, “U.S. journalists differ from the public in their views of ‘bothsidesism’ in journalism,” Pew Research Center, July 13, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/07/13/u-s-journalists-differ-from-the-public-in-their-views-of-bothsidesism-in-journalism/>

⁴¹⁰ Keya Vakil, “Five Ways Democrats Have Helped Virginia Under Biden's Leadership,” Dogwood, Aug. 16, 2022, <https://vadogwood.com/2022/08/16/five-ways-democrats-have-helped-virginia-under-bidens-leadership/>

⁴¹¹ Keya Vakil, “Five Ways Democrats Have Helped Arizona Under Biden's Leadership,” The Copper Courier, Aug. 16, 2022, <https://coppercourier.com/story/biden-democrats-arizona-families-accomplish-list/>

This leaves Courier in a gray area. While the news organization has responded to much of the criticism by media critics and journalists in the past two years, it continues to receive millions of dollars from liberal donors to influence voter turnout through content and Facebook ads that are strengthened through their testing. Courier seems to be sailing in a rocky boat between journalism and political campaigning.

Courier's existence and evolution to embracing transparency around its partisan objectives offers, for some, a compelling answer to the damage bothsidesism has done to U.S. journalism and democracy. For others, it raises yet more questions around best practices for local journalism funding, transparency, and norms around objectivity and independence.

6. Expert Perspectives

As we have seen throughout this report, the phenomenon of pink slime journalism intersects with a range of pressing issues including, but not limited to, the local news crisis; political influence operations; the shifting sands of the digital news ecosystem; and rapidly changing approaches to partisanship, objectivity, funding, labor, and the role of technology in journalism.

The research presented in the previous chapters has traced the growth of these sites in recent years, particularly the extended Metric Media network. We've also offered case studies of how these sites have been used in the context of particular political campaigns, and, in the case of Metric Media, its apparent connection to various conservative and pro-business advocacy groups. And while we've acknowledged there is still much we do not know about pink slime's reach and the circumstances in which people encounter it, our audience study suggested there is plenty of room for improvement in terms of U.S. news consumers' media literacy.

To supplement our original research, we canvassed a range of journalists and scholars for their perspectives on how pink slime journalism should be situated and understood, its impact on local journalism, and possible courses of action for parties invested in strengthening local journalism.

The experts featured are:

- **Joe Amditis**, Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University
- **Joy Mayer**, journalist and director of [Trusting News](#)
- **Anthony Nadler**, Ursinus College, author of [Making the News Popular: Mobilizing U.S. News Audiences](#)⁴¹² and co-editor of [News on the Right: Studying Conservative News Cultures](#)⁴¹³
- **Anne Nelson**, author of *Shadow Network: Money, Media, and the Secret Hub of the Radical Right*
- **Nikki Usher**, University of San Diego, author of *News for the Rich, White and Blue*

⁴¹² Anthony M. Nadler, *Making the News Popular: Mobilizing U.S. News Audiences*. (Illinois, 2016, University of Illinois Press), <https://www.press.uillinois.edu/books/?id=p081637>

⁴¹³ Anthony Nadler (ed.), A.J. Bauer (ed.) *News on the Right: Studying Conservative News Cultures*. (New York, 2019; online edn, Oxford Academic, 17 Dec. 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190913540.001.0001>.

Don't look at pink slime in isolation: It is part of a wider system

For Anne Nelson, it is important to situate pink slime news networks within a much broader universe of alternative conservative media: “Pink slime media should not be looked at in isolation. It’s part of an entire system.” Over the last four to five decades, key actors in the conservative movement have strategically worked to “create a parallel structure of information” to counter what they saw as left-leaning media.

Relevant here is the 1971 [Powell Memorandum](#),⁴¹⁴ Lewis Powell Jr.’s infamous call to arms in which he argued “the American economic system is under broad attack” from “disquieting voices ... from the college campus, the pulpit, the media, the intellectual and literary journals, the arts and sciences, and from politicians.” The counterattack waged by influential conservative operatives, Nelson said, amounts to: “We will seek to undermine the existing institutions at the same time we build up our own.” (The Powell Memo was produced for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the pro-business advocacy group linked to the *Madison County Record*, the pseudo-newspaper that caused a furor in 2004 for its failure to disclose its ties to the Chamber and was a precursor to the Record network, as discussed in Chapter 1.)

Conservative media initiatives, which extend far beyond pink slime news outlets to include local radio, television, and social media, have enjoyed greater reach thanks to a combination of powerful targeting algorithms and increased campaign spending. “Citizens United allows corporations to participate at an extraordinary level,” Nelson explained. “And so there’s been this explosion of media that I would call anti-journalism, often disguised as journalism, greatly to the detriment of democratic practices.”

Anthony Nadler also suggested that the phenomenon of pink slime news is at least partially symptomatic of disparities in partisan funding, with far greater sums available to the right. (That said, problematic, PAC-aligned organizations adopting the look and feel of local news outlets have emanated from the left in recent times, as demonstrated by the Courier network, discussed in *Chapter 5*, and the sites and print publications [associated with the American Independent](#)⁴¹⁵ among others.)

Don't read too much into small audiences

⁴¹⁴ Lewis F Powell Jr., “The Memo” (1971), *Powell Memorandum: Attack On American Free Enterprise System*, <https://scholarlycommons.law.wlu.edu/powellmemo/1>

⁴¹⁵ Lachlan Markay and Thomas Wheatley, “Democrats’ swing-state local news ploy,” *Axios*, Oct. 6, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/10/06/democrats-local-news-david-brock>

Concerns about pink slime news operations have at times been downplayed on the basis of their seemingly small audiences. However, some experts warn against defaulting to normative metrics like reach and engagement when assessing the “success” or “effectiveness” of such operations. Anne Nelson argued that when pink slime or other hyperpartisan media operators target specific demographics, they “don’t need a big audience; you don’t even necessarily *want* a big audience.”

From this perspective, undue focus on audience size may be something of a red herring. Nelson noted that U.S. elections are often ultimately determined by a small proportion of undecided voters. Targeting allows political strategists to bypass expensive and less effective television ads in favor of tailored messages focused on “hyperlocal issues or very, very narrow ideological issues, and in some cases, I would say many cases, disinformation.” Examples offered by Nelson included misinformation on Democratic politicians’ abortion policies and anti-trans messaging — harmful narratives that she warned were contributing to “voters in the United States voting from totally different concepts of what’s going on in the country.”

Anthony Nadler, a scholar who focuses on [conservative media](#),⁴¹⁶ agreed that pink slime shouldn’t be dismissed out of hand due to audience size. He noted that even if such content did not reach “a lot of direct eyeballs,” it could gain traction or sway local influencers in moments of controversy or other notable situations — complicating efforts to understand its impact.

What’s more, in a point that chimes with Nelson’s observation about the decades-long effort to chip away at trust in institutions, Nadler warned that the most profound impacts could be much more gradual, thereby making them difficult to track in the moment:

Coming from a more humanistic perspective, I’m always thinking: How is this as a feature of a media landscape affecting the system as a whole? And that’s really hard to measure, because maybe it affects it through influencing other media or other actors in some way, rather than through direct persuasion or exposure with particular audience members.

What Nadler found particularly curious was that, while much conservative media has developed “distinctive branding” to garner attention and audience loyalty, many pink slime sites seem to use what he called deliberately “bland branding,” making it difficult to speculate about the motives of pink slime operators or any eventual influence:

Do they have a kind of gradual or cumulative influence on trust in media in general?
Does it start to seem like, “Oh, local media is so divided. And it’s partisan one way or

⁴¹⁶ Anthony Nadler, A.J. Bauer, and Magda Konieczna, “Conservative Newswork: A Report on the Values and Practices of Online Journalists on the Right,” Tow Center for Digital Journalism, CJR, Mar. 31, 2020, https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/conservative-newswork-report-on-the-values-and-practices-of-online-journalists-on-the-right.php

another.” And so what we call mainstream news seems partisan in contrast with the partisan pink slime outlets. So I think it’s really hard to measure these sorts of systemic influences that don’t fit a classic media effects model.

Local journalism: the most powerful antidote to pink slime journalism?

Time and again in this report, we have seen examples of the pivotal role local reporting has played in raising awareness about pink slime news operations. In the case of Metric Media, it was [reporting](#) by the *Lansing State Journal*’s Carol Thompson⁴¹⁷ that kickstarted our own research, while the *Chicago Tribune* (whose parent company once invested in Journatic) has been holding its leaders to [account](#)⁴¹⁸ [for more than a decade](#).⁴¹⁹ It is therefore unsurprising that a common sentiment among our interviewees is that local journalism is one of the most potent antidotes to pink slime news.

An inescapable snag here, of course, is that local journalism’s market failure — characterized by the diminishment of local newsrooms across the country — is one of the key environmental conditions pink slime journalism has sought to exploit. In other words, the void in local journalism that pink slime news networks claim to be filling exists only due to the disappearance of the very watchdogs that can — and have — held its operators to account.

Consequently, Nelson argued that faced with the growth of pink slime journalism, the most urgent priority for donors “committed to the preservation of democracy” is “to step up to the plate and invest heavily in local media, and legitimate professional legacy local media.” She explained that it was also important to take “measures against the dark money on all sides in campaigns and show who is supporting whom.” But, she warned, “Without a course correction with the media, I don’t know if we’ll get to the campaign finance reform.”

Key to Nelson’s argument for greater support for legacy local outlets such as “little hometown newspapers in swing states” was the premise that “investing in the legacy local media brings with it preexisting trust.” Of course, as we noted in our introduction, while trust in local news in the United States does tend to be higher than in national news, the extent of this trust can vary considerably by demographic and political group.

⁴¹⁷ Carol Thompson, *op. cit.*

⁴¹⁸ Channick, July 3, 2012, *op. cit.*

⁴¹⁹ The Editorial Board, “Editorial: Enough with fake newspapers where propaganda masquerades as news,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 2, 2023, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/editorials/ct-editorial-fake-news-websites-dan-proft-lumen-20230502-rnjyanlwn47j5pkiyftaz6e-story.html>; John Keilman, “Race, politics and misinformation combine as false story about Oak Park and River Forest High School grading goes viral,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 2, 2022, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/breaking/oak-park-river-forest-race-grades-misinformation-20220603-74yrgztx35ddvbyfoa7fsaaig4-story.html>; Becky Yerak, “Journatic CEO Brian Timpone no stranger to news gathering or questions about ethics,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 22, 2012, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-xpm-2012-07-22-ct-biz-0722-brian-timpone-20120722-story.html>

Another recurring theme in our interviews was that journalism stakeholders need to find better ways to make local journalism resonate with citizens. Multiple interviewees felt it was particularly important to try to demystify journalism and do more to involve audiences in the process. For some, the current buzz around artificial intelligence (A.I.) has created an ideal opportunity to do so.

The recent boom in A.I. technology has generated much [discussion](#)⁴²⁰ about [potential](#)⁴²¹ [benefits](#)⁴²² for cash-strapped local news outlets. Tellingly, perhaps, the technology companies battling for supremacy in this field have moved quickly to present themselves as allies to local journalism. OpenAI, the company behind ChatGPT, has promised \$5 million in support and up to \$5 million in credits as part of a [partnership](#) with the American Journalism Project (AJP),⁴²³ leading to [headlines](#) such as “OpenAI partners with American Journalism Project to support local news.”⁴²⁴ In AJP’s press release, CEO Sarabeth Berman said, “With this partnership, we aim to promote ways for AI to enhance — rather than imperil — journalism.” Google, too, has tried to make the case that its proprietary A.I. tools, [pitched](#) on their supposed ability to conduct a range of news-gathering and post-production tasks at scale,⁴²⁵ will be particularly beneficial to local newsrooms.

Given the centrality of automation to pink slime journalism — the continuous production of vast volumes of templated articles to create the illusion of productivity; the rapid generation of websites that ape the appearance of local news outlets — this same A.I. technology has the potential to exacerbate the problem by lowering the already low barriers to entry.

One person who takes a more optimistic perspective is Joe Amditis of the Center for Cooperative Media, whose 2023 Nieman Lab prediction was titled [“AI throws a lifeline to local publishers.”](#)⁴²⁶ He argues that technology like ChatGPT could particularly benefit small news organizations if it relieved journalists of mundane, time-consuming tasks — crafting and scheduling social media posts, writing story summaries, drafting scripts — and freeing up more time for tasks like reporting and community engagement.

Amditis acknowledged that A.I. technology could make it easier to churn out pink slime journalism or create “robot ghost newsrooms.” “They’re going to just be able to do it faster

⁴²⁰ Andrew Tarantola, “How AI could help local newsrooms remain afloat in a sea of misinformation,” Engadget, July 10, 2023, <https://www.engadget.com/how-ai-could-help-local-newsrooms-remain-afloat-in-a-sea-of-misinformation-130023064.html>

⁴²¹ Camille Dupont, “AI has ‘enormous potential’ for local newsrooms (if they know how to use it),” Journalism.co.uk., Apr. 19, 2023, <https://www.journalism.co.uk/news/could-ai-be-an-opportunity-to-turn-things-around-for-local-media-/s2/a1027570/>

⁴²² Tim Wolff, “Why AI Will Make Local News Brands Even More Valuable,” RTDNA, May 23, 2023, <https://www.rtdna.org/news/why-ai-will-make-local-news-brands-even-more-valuable>

⁴²³ “American Journalism Project announces new partnership with OpenAI to support local news,” AJP, July 18, 2023, <https://www.theajp.org/news-insights/announcements/american-journalism-project-announces-new-partnership-with-openai-to-support-local-news/>

⁴²⁴ “OpenAI partners with American Journalism Project to support local news,” Reuters, July 18, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/openai-partners-with-american-journalism-project-support-local-news-2023-07-18/>

⁴²⁵ Gerrit De Vynck et al., “Google pitches media outlets on AI that could help produce news,” *Washington Post*, July 20, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/07/20/google-genesis-news-ai/>

⁴²⁶ Amditis, Dec. 2022, *op. cit.*

now,” he said. But, he argued, concerns around pink slime and related content were less about the technology than the underlying trends in journalistic labor:

I think it’s very easy to glom on and say, “Look at the scary new A.I. magic bot that’s going to undermine journalism,” especially “It’s going to take people away from their local newspapers,” when in reality that’s been happening for decades. And it’s been done systematically and with very clear bad actors and profit motives and incentives for doing so.

While acknowledging the importance of recognizing potential perils, Amditis stressed the need to go beyond “pearl clutching” and instead seize the opportunity to collaboratively “establish guidelines and social bumpers” for how A.I. gets used across journalism. “There is something to be said about having a structure of generally agreed upon guidelines and rules for how a technology or how a process is supposed to be carried out or used,” he said.

Parallel to this is an opportunity to promote media literacy among news consumers, particularly as it pertains to A.I. and journalism. (*For more discussion of media literacy, see our audience study in Chapter 4.*) Amditis argued that whenever new technology came along, the journalism industry had a history of “failing to describe and explain and bring people into the process of what happens in a newsroom.” He suggested that journalists could go some way toward addressing pink slime and the broader use of A.I. by equipping “local residents and community members and people with the tools and the understanding of how this stuff works.”

Touching on some of the fundamental questions around how we define *journalists* and *journalism*, Amditis noted that deepening readers’ understanding of the process of producing news could improve their ability to distinguish between bot-generated text and journalism:

The journalism part is the human element. It’s the institutional memory and knowledge. It’s the context. And it’s the care and intentionality with which we put into the words that we publish. ... And when that’s gone, sure, there’s going to be people who get fooled. I mean, it’s gonna happen. But it’s gonna be up to us to make good stuff that sets itself apart from the crap and the pink slime that’s going to come out of this new boom in capacity.

Following a similar tack, Joy Mayer, an experienced journalist and journalism educator who now directs Trusting News, argued that journalists must find ways to “stand out in crowded information landscapes full of bad actors.” For her, “the most challenging part of this is that headlines from bad actors look the same when they hit people’s attention span as reliable information.” This, Mayer noted, was particularly challenging in the context of social media feeds where people may be glimpsing headlines detached from recognizable brands: “You can’t follow that information around and be like, ‘Nope, don’t click that link. Ours is over here.’”

Mayer suggested two strategies journalists could use to grapple with pink slime news and similar content produced by those she termed “bad actors.” First, she said, journalists have an opportunity to “lean heavily into helping people navigate the news,” even if that meant directing them to rival news producers:

How do you explain to people, “We know this is complicated. We know there’s a lot out there, and it’s hard to know what to trust. Here’s what you should be looking for, and here’s what’s in our community. Here’s where you can turn, besides us even, for reputable information”? Being a guide through information, I think, is a real opportunity, especially for local journalists.

Mayer’s second suggestion, which she framed as both a challenge and an opportunity, was for news organizations to better communicate what makes their work reputable by deploying “radical transparency” with the goal of developing cognitive and affective trust:

It’s both having findable on your website and wrapped into your products the facts of what makes you credible, like, “Here’s where our funding comes from. ... Here’s who makes decisions about what we cover.” ... Who is our staff? What is the background of our staff? And what is their credibility? ... How do you make it clear to people what your credibility is based on as an organization? And then the affective trust is like, Are you behaving in a way and presenting yourselves in a way that makes your goals clear, that makes your reason for being clear, and that owns up to your mistakes?

Mayer acknowledged that transparency tactics were unlikely to succeed if they hinged on “hoping that all the people who are suspicious of your work will find the one page that’s four clicks off your homepage that explains those things.” Indeed, many participants in our [audience study](#) (see *Chapter 4*) neglected to look for provenance information like About Us pages until prompted to do so — even when they harbored concerns about their assigned website. Likewise, [Center for Media Engagement studies](#) report mixed results when it came to the relations between transparency and trust — largely because people often didn’t notice the transparency measures being implemented.⁴²⁷

Mayer said she encourages the newsrooms she works with to integrate “the transparency into the journalism instead of parking it all on a separate page.” She also argued that while recent research has complicated arguments for transparency, particularly when it came to corrections (e.g. a [March 2023 study](#)⁴²⁸ found trust can take at least a short-term hit when outlets post

⁴²⁷ Hanaa’ Tameez, “Maybe greater transparency can increase trust in news — but readers have to find your transparency first,” NiemanLab, Jan. 30, 2020, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/01/maybe-greater-transparency-can-increase-trust-in-news-but-readers-have-to-find-your-transparency-first/>

⁴²⁸ Dan Gillmor, “The corrections dilemma: Admitting your mistakes increases accuracy but reduces audience trust, a new study finds,” NiemanLab, Mar. 27, 2023,

<https://www.niemanlab.org/2023/03/the-corrections-dilemma-admitting-your-mistakes-increases-accuracy-but-reduces-audience-trust-a-new-study-finds/>

corrections), more completely explaining corrections and “drawing more attention to the integrity behind the process” had the potential to build trust over the longer term.

When asked whether such transparency practices could be an effective way for news organizations to respond to opaque pink slime networks, journalism scholar Nikki Usher’s response was, “Why?” Usher countered that there is a lack of “empirical evidence that transparency and disclosure make one hell of a difference,” and called for “an honest assessment of the empirical data that we don’t have about the tactics we assume to create trust in journalism.”

Usher suggested that if journalism stakeholders genuinely care about transparency, they should extend their focus beyond the likes of Metric Media and instead urge news organizations of all stripes to disclose details about their board members and their respective entanglements: “When we are talking about transparency, you have to talk about transparency that’s going to apply across the board and not held to one type of news organization versus another.”

For Usher, the bigger issue was that too much of the conversation around pink slime — whose label itself she finds unhelpful — fixated on the wrong concerns and missed opportunities for lessons to be learned. She noted that most people focused very little time and attention on digital local news: “I think that people might be a little bit worried about something that isn’t a thing,” she said. “It almost seems like it’s a strategic tactic to freak out the institutional news media, more so than an effort to reach people in communities and persuade them.”

Usher added that even if readers do encounter pink slime content from these sites, it should not be assumed they are unable to detect bias:

I think people spend a lot of time distrusting the news media because they assess bias. And so it’s unlikely that they’re going to be less skeptical about another site that they see. Right? I think there’s such a low level of interest among the American public in the news they receive that this idea that people are suddenly going to be brainwashed doesn’t do justice to the whole problem of trust in journalism. I don’t think it really respects the news consumer.

While partisanship is a defining characteristic of pink slime journalism, Anthony Nadler was keen to distinguish between the kind of outlets discussed in this report and partisan media more generally. He finds the former somewhat perplexing, noting that opaque pink slime sites are clearly “unethical” and deceptive in their practice, and argued that conservative outlets that are more transparent about their ideological position and funding should not be lumped in with these same sites on account of both being partisan. (In a peer-reviewed [AEJMC paper](#)⁴²⁹ co-authored with A.J. Bauer and Jacob L. Nelson, Nadler has argued journalism studies

⁴²⁹ Bauer, A. J., Nadler, A., & Nelson, J. L. “What is Fox News? Partisan Journalism, Misinformation, and the Problem of Classification,” *Electronic News* 16 no. 1 (March 1, 2022): 18-29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/19312431211060426>.

“currently lacks an agreed-upon mechanism for designating a news outlet as ‘partisan,’ ‘propaganda,’ or something more impartial, and therefore also lacks an understanding of the impact that an organization’s classification might have on the way in which it is studied, as well as the way those studies are received both within the academy and beyond.”)

As we saw in Chapter 5’s case study of The ’Gander, Courier Newsroom’s Michigan outpost, conversations around partisan media often lead to debates about objectivity and/or bothsidesism. Nadler noted that consumption of partisan media does not automatically equate to disdain for — or outright rejection of — objectivity. Drawing on his work with conservative news audiences, he observed, “I generally find conservatives who consume a lot of partisan media idealize objectivity,” seeing it as an “elusive ideal.” While this may seem a contradiction, it may leave a sliver of opportunity for those seeking to create a shared space for local journalism. It also complicates the work of those advocating for transparency measures and disclosures that offer alternatives to traditional objectivity norms:

If you’re going to come up with an alternative to objectivity, you’ve got to figure out how to make it resonate popularly. The intellectual objections to objectivity are insufficient to win popular loyalties. ... You’ve got to figure out: How do you tell a story about what you’re doing?

Nadler noted that as the news industry reckons with shifting terrain around automation, labor, and partisan practices, including the growth of pink slime, the overarching struggle was “just trying to find modes of journalism that can do good work, help people engage in informed ways, and that really have a popular resonance.” He suggested that openly partisan outlets could offer valuable lessons, particularly when it came to popular resonance. But he also thought most people he encountered through his research didn’t want all their news to be partisan.

Nadler was not alone in noting that there are lessons to be learned from partisan media. Usher, for example, argued that the operators of these networks had “identified either an attention market, or information gap, or a way to make money,” and that institutional news media, including “mainstream” outlets considered “liberal,” may do well to consider “whether that revenue stream would work for them.” Usher added that partisan media may need to be part of how we “rethink how to make news exciting — maybe we can learn something about enthusiasm, excitement, energy, from these partisan local news sites.”

Beyond these particular sites, Usher noted that there were lessons to be learned from the larger grassroots conservative or Republican political organizing to which they have contributed in recent years:

We may not like the messages, but my goodness, the organizing from local to national is mind-boggling — [for example] how parents who are otherwise exhausted and tired are now paying attention to what their kids are reading in school. How did that happen? And what can news organizations and organizers more generally learn from those approaches?

If progress is to be made, Usher said, stakeholders need to focus on developing a more nuanced understanding of what people want from their information sources:

People who care about the future of journalism need to understand the very basic presumption of meeting audiences where they're at. And as much as we might not like the decisions that audiences make about the news they consume and trust, fundamentally, if we don't begin from the position of respect for that cognitive function, I don't really understand how we can even begin to talk about building relationships with audiences.

7. Final Reflections: Making sense of pink slime journalism

This report has provided a detailed examination of the emergence, growth, infrastructure, function, funding, and reception of digital pink slime news networks.

Pink slime is an increasingly popular part of a large alternate information machine that shuns ethical norms and prioritizes narrative over facts in pursuit of partisan political goals. It is especially notable for adapting a modern propaganda playbook to bring information warfare into the local news space.

Whether it's the rapid introduction of hundreds of brand-new "local news" sites and the distribution of physical faux newspapers bearing the same sites' mastheads; the convoluted ties to dark money PACs; the establishment or reawakening of religious and single-subject news sites at opportune political moments; the seemingly symbiotic relationships with political candidates, advocacy groups, and other special interests; or the enthusiastic stoking of the culture war du jour, our research has demonstrated a multitude of ways through which pink slime's proponents have exploited and weaponized a vulnerable local news ecosystem whose state of disarray has been termed a crisis *of* and *for* democracy.⁴³⁰

The local news crisis that pink slime seeks to exploit stems largely — although not entirely — from the collapse of the industry's primary business model, highlighting the extent to which free market economics cannot sustain local journalism. As various stakeholders scramble to find viable ways to revive and sustain local journalism — exploring measures such as diversified revenue streams, the adoption of nonprofit status, local news co-operatives, philanthropy, and possible policy instruments — we must confront an uncomfortable truth. Egregious and unethical as it may be, pink slime and other hyperpartisan faux-local journalism underwritten

⁴³⁰ Penelope Muse Abernathy and Tim Franklin, "The State of Local News 2022. Expanding News Deserts, Growing Gaps, Emerging Models," Local News Initiative, Oct. 4, 2022, https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/assets/the_state_of_local_news_2022.pdf; Victor Pickard, "Journalism's Market Failure Is a Crisis for Democracy," *Harvard Business Review*, Mar. 12, 2020, <https://hbr.org/2020/03/journalisms-market-failure-is-a-crisis-for-democracy>; Margaret Sullivan, "Ghosting the News: Local Journalism and the Crisis of American Democracy," Columbia Global Reports, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1fx4h38>; Steven Waldman and Charles Sennott, "The crisis in local journalism has become a crisis of democracy," *The Washington Post*, Apr. 11, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-crisis-in-journalism-has-become-a-crisis-of-democracy/2018/04/11/a908d5fc-2d64-11e8-8688-e053ba58f1e4_story.html

by dark money has no such concerns: Dark money *is* the business model. As such, we should be prepared for it to form part of the local information ecosystem for as long as the special interests funding it believe it is serving their political interests.

Flooding the local zone with shit

“The point of modern propaganda isn’t only to misinform or push an agenda,” the Russian dissident Gary Kasparov observed in a December 2016 tweet. “It is to exhaust your critical thinking, to annihilate truth.” The goal was demoralization.

In a chillingly candid interview in 1983, Yuri Bezmenov, a Russian intelligence defector who had specialized in propaganda and ideological subversion, explained: “A person who is demoralized is unable to assess true information. The facts tell nothing to him. Even if I shower him with information, with authentic proof, with documents, with pictures.”⁴³¹

This passage neatly encapsulates short- and longer-term reasons for researchers to continue scrutinizing pink slime journalism.

Regarding the first part — that the “point of modern propaganda isn’t *only* to misinform or push an agenda” — this report is jam-packed with examples showing how pink slime journalism has been used to push an agenda and, indeed, to misinform. Thus, in the immediate short term, ongoing scrutiny of pink slime journalism will deepen our understanding of when, where, and how its perpetrators — aided by microtargeting and other tools provided by technology platforms — are weaponizing the local news ecosystem to pursue objectives consistent with the strategic political communication and crisis communication much of it is.

These might include:

- To increase public awareness and/or support for a favored political candidate or client — or reduce support for an opponent;
- To influence stakeholder perceptions and public opinion about other political issues, e.g. persuading unwitting audiences with misleading headlines or stories about a policy, official, department, or issue; raising awareness of causes and/or advocacy groups supported by allies;
- To fire up an existing base to aid fundraising or mobilize voters;
- To stimulate or exacerbate culture war stories, e.g. the *West Cook News*’ role in kickstarting the false “race-based grading” story;
- To influence political discourse in other ways, e.g. distracting from unflattering news

⁴³¹ Jonathan Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/books/the-constitution-of-knowledge/>

- stories; sidetracking or wrong-footing political rivals;
- To increase brand awareness among unwitting readers who see a news site’s title on social media feeds or in campaign materials.

Isolated instances of such applications are themselves worthy of close attention because, as this report demonstrates, they can provide vital clues about larger information operations, the special interests that are driving them, their objectives, the tools and loopholes they are exploiting, and the methods through which they are funded.

What’s more, it is only by understanding the nature of these information operations, the strategies they are employing, and the tools and loopholes they are exploiting to pursue those methods that we can explore ways to tackle them.

For a more fully rounded understanding of pink slime journalism’s potential implications, we must also step back from direct relationships with audiences and consider pink slime’s scope to damage the local information ecosystem and, by extension, erode trust in information from the local news media more generally.⁴³²

There are at least two ways in which pink slime journalism can contribute to these gradual, more insidious outcomes. The first is simply by existing in an overwhelming contemporary information environment where trustworthy local news provisions are shrinking, faith in institutions is diminishing, political polarization is deeply entrenched, and technology companies make it easier and cheaper than ever to microtarget audiences with ever greater precision.

The second relates to pink slime journalism’s role in perpetuating partisan “information wars” *at the local level* that entice dark money groups and other special interests across the political spectrum to emulate local journalism to further their political aims.

To unpack this, we must recognize pink slime journalism as a media manipulation tactic with many of the hallmarks of “distributed amplification”⁴³³ — or, more specifically, the variant that Steve Bannon infamously described as “flooding the zone with shit.”⁴³⁴

One of pink slime journalism’s quintessential characteristics is that it deliberately emulates local journalism. Given local journalism’s role as a cornerstone of democracy, we dedicate the

⁴³² In this instance, it is most instructive in this context to focus on trust in information from the local news media rather than trust in local news media as institutions. See: Benjamin Toff, Sumitra Badrinathan, Camila Mont’Alverne, Amy Ross Arguedas, Richard Fletcher, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen. “Overcoming Indifference: What Attitudes Towards News Tell Us About Building Trust,” Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.60625/risj-0h47-ja26>.

⁴³³ Donovan, Joan. *The Media Manipulation Casebook*. Boston, MA.: Shorenstein Center for Media, Politics, and Public Policy, Harvard University., 2022. <https://mediamanipulation.org/sites/default/files/media-files/Code-Book-1.4-Jan-7-2022.pdf>

⁴³⁴ Lewis, Michael. “Has Anyone Seen the President?” Bloomberg, February 9, 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2018-02-09/has-anyone-seen-the-president>

remainder of this discussion to considering the implications of “flooding the *local* zone with shit.”

Numerous writers have offered detailed analyses of “flooding the zone.”⁴³⁵ Broadly, this tactic involves deliberately contaminating an information ecosystem with misleading narratives, propaganda, and other divisive messaging to sow distrust, cynicism, and confusion about what is and isn’t real or true. Unlike other forms of propaganda, it is “not about manufacturing consent but about muddying the waters so that consent isn’t achievable.”⁴³⁶

Of flooding the zone, Rauch writes:

[T]here could be no more concise and accurate summation of what modern information warfare is all about. All communities, and especially the reality-based community, rely on networks of trust to decide what is and is not true. People need to know whom they are talking to, whether that person is credible, which institutions confer credibility, and so on. Every aspect of trust and credibility is degraded when the zone is flooded with shit.⁴³⁷

This tactic can be so powerful, Illing argues, because it “produces a certain nihilism in which people are so skeptical about the possibility of finding the truth that they give up the search.”⁴³⁸ Rauch’s slightly different take is that an overwhelming torrent of competing narratives can create an “inability to know where to turn for truth,” which he terms “epistemic helplessness.”⁴³⁹ Illing argues that this lays the groundwork for culture war politics because, with finite attention, overwhelmed or disoriented citizens can be most comfortable “siding with their political tribe,” feeding a “tribal epistemology”⁴⁴⁰ that exacerbates political polarization:

If everything’s up for grabs, and it’s hard to sift through the competing narratives to find the truth, then there’s nothing left but culture war politics. There’s “us” and “them,” and the possibility of persuasion is off the table.⁴⁴¹

This makes flooding the zone a potent weapon of information warfare, because “liberal democracy cannot function without a shared understanding of reality. As long as the zone is

⁴³⁵ Coppins, *op. cit.*; Seva Gunitsky, “The great online convergence: digital authoritarianism comes to democracies,” War on the Rocks, Feb. 19, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/02/the-great-online-convergence-digital-authoritarianism-comes-to-democracies/>; Sean Illing, “Flood the zone with shit’: How misinformation overwhelmed our democracy,” Vox, Feb. 6, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/1/16/20991816/impeachment-trial-trump-bannon-misinformation>; Rauch, 2020, *op. cit.*; David Roberts, “With impeachment, America’s epistemic crisis has arrived,” Vox, Nov. 11, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/11/16/20964281/impeachment-hearings-trump-america-epistemic-crisis>; Paul Starr (2020) “The Flooded Zone: How We Became More Vulnerable to Disinformation in the Digital Era,” in Bennett and Livingston, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-91, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108914628>

⁴³⁶ Illing, 2020, *ibid.*

⁴³⁷ Rauch, *ibid.*

⁴³⁸ Sean Illing, “Flood the zone with shit’: How misinformation overwhelmed our democracy,” Vox, Feb. 6, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/1/16/20991816/impeachment-trial-trump-bannon-misinformation>

⁴³⁹ Rauch, 2020, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴⁰ Illing, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴¹ Illing, *op. cit.*

flooded with shit, that shared understanding is impossible.”⁴⁴² Roberts [has argued](#) that this tactic has already proved so effective that the “foundation of shared truth has collapsed” and “America’s epistemic crisis has arrived.”⁴⁴³

Independent journalism is, of course, a primary target for those intent on undermining democratic institutions, because “creating widespread cynicism about the truth and the institutions charged with unearthing it erodes the very foundation of liberal democracy.”⁴⁴⁴ Perhaps the most infamous example in a contemporary U.S. context is Donald Trump’s repeated dismissal of mainstream news outlets as “fake news,” “dishonest,” and the “enemy of the people.”⁴⁴⁵ Arguing that “Relativism is the real goal of Trump’s assault on the press,” McKay Coppins notes, “It’s a lesson drawn from demagogues around the world: When the press as an institution is weakened, fact-based journalism becomes just one more drop in the daily deluge of content — no more or less credible than partisan propaganda.”⁴⁴⁶

In the United States, two distinct media ecosystems have emerged: one insular, partisan ecosystem anchored by Fox News and Breitbart; the other anchored by media organizations on the center and center left that adhere to professional standards of journalism.⁴⁴⁷ As part of a system of networked propaganda, the former has arguably contributed to the present epistemic crisis.⁴⁴⁸

In a chapter titled “The Flooded Zone,” Starr argues, “It ought to be uncontroversial ... from a democratic standpoint” to take the position that the quality of the news media depends on the provision of trustworthy information and robust debate about matters of public concern. He continues:

Media degradation can take the form of a decline in any of these standards. In contemporary America that decline has taken the form of a degradation in the capacities of professional journalism and a degradation of standards in online media, particularly the insular media ecosystem that has emerged on the far right.⁴⁴⁹

Pink slime journalism relates to both of these. First, pink slime operators have flagrantly

⁴⁴² Illing, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴³ Roberts, 2019, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴⁴ Illing, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴⁵ Michael M. Grynbaum, “Trump Calls the News Media the ‘Enemy of the American People,’” *The New York Times*, Feb. 17, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/17/business/trump-calls-the-news-media-the-enemy-of-the-people.html>. Brad Parscale, a central figure in the Trump campaign’s digital media efforts in 2016, told attendees at a 2019 Miami Young Republicans fundraiser that the ongoing effort to undermine the “mainstream media” would be expanded to include local news media ahead of Trump’s reelection campaign (Christine Stapleton, “Brad Parscale: The ‘genius who won Trump’s campaign,’ and how he’ll get him reelected,” *Palm Beach Post*, May 31, 2019, <https://www.palmbeachpost.com/story/news/politics/elections/2019/05/31/brad-parscale-genius-who-won-trumps-campaign-and-how-hell-get-him-reelected/5014818007/>).

⁴⁴⁶ Coppins, McKay. “The Billion-Dollar Disinformation Campaign to Reelect the President.” *The Atlantic*, February 6, 2020.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/03/the-2020-disinformation-war/605530/>

⁴⁴⁷ Benkler, Yochai, Robert Farris, and Hal Roberts. *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. New York, NY.: Oxford University Press, 2018. <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/28351>

⁴⁴⁸ Illing, 2019, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴⁹ Starr, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

exploited that degradation in professional journalism by seizing on the local news crisis to insert faux local news sites into areas where professional news outlets have diminished or died. Additionally, pink slime journalism further contributes to the ongoing degradation of standards in online media by flooding local information environments with untrustworthy, sensational, and/or polarizing propaganda disguised as local news. Echoing others, Starr notes that “[i]n a degraded media environment, many people don’t know what to believe, a condition ripe for political exploitation.”

Chipping away at local journalism’s fragile trust advantage

Local journalism is considered “a cornerstone of democracy in the United States.”⁴⁵⁰ It is in this context that the local news crisis has been described as a crisis *of* and *for* democracy.⁴⁵¹ Numerous studies have shown [local news to be good for the health of democracy](#)⁴⁵² thanks to its positive impact on communal cohesion, civic knowledge, civic engagement, and community attachment.⁴⁵³ Concurrently, research has shown that reductions in local news provisions can lead to [increased](#) corruption,⁴⁵⁴ [less competitive mayoral races](#),⁴⁵⁵ fewer candidates running for municipal office, reduced voter turnout and lower campaign spending,⁴⁵⁶ worse [public finances](#),⁴⁵⁷ [weaker representation](#) by elected officials,⁴⁵⁸ [and a reduced sense of community](#).⁴⁵⁹

Importantly, in the context of this discussion, Darr et al’s 2018 [study](#)⁴⁶⁰ links local newspaper closures to an increase in political polarization among the electorate. In counties where

⁴⁵⁰ Knight Foundation and Gallup, “State of Public Trust in Local News,” Knight Foundation, Oct. 29, 2019,

https://kf-site-production.s3.amazonaws.com/media_elements/files/000/000/440/original/State_of_Public_Trust_in_Local_Media_final.pdf

⁴⁵¹ e.g. Abernathy and Franklin, *op. cit.* Victor Pickard, “Journalism’s Market Failure Is a Crisis for Democracy,” *Harvard Business Review*, Mar. 12, 2020, <https://hbr.org/2020/03/journalisms-market-failure-is-a-crisis-for-democracy>; Sullivan, 2020, *op. cit.*; Steven Waldman and Charles Sennott, “The crisis in local journalism has become a crisis of democracy,” *The Washington Post*, Apr. 11, 2018,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-crisis-in-journalism-has-become-a-crisis-of-democracy/2018/04/11/a908d5fc-2d64-11e8-8688-e053ba58f1e4_story.html

⁴⁵² Josh Stearns, “How we know journalism is good for democracy,” Medium, June 26, 2018,

<https://medium.com/office-of-citizen/how-we-know-journalism-is-good-for-democracy-9125e5c995fb>

⁴⁵³ Michael Barthel et al., “Civic Engagement Strongly Tied to Local News Habits,” Pew Research Center, Nov. 3, 2016,

<https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2016/11/03/civic-engagement-strongly-tied-to-local-news-habits/>; Lee, Angela M. “The What, Where, and Why of Local News in the United States.” In *The Routledge Companion to Local Media and Journalism*, edited by David Baines and Agnes Gulyas, 419–26, 2020.

⁴⁵⁴ Campante, Filipe R., and Quoc-Anh Do. “Isolated Capital Cities, Accountability, and Corruption: Evidence from US States.” (Aug. 1, 2014) *American Economic Review*, 104 (8): 2456-81,

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1257/aer.104.8.2456> and Alicia Adserà, Carles Boix and Mark Payne. “Are You Being Served? Political Accountability and Quality of Government,” *Journal of Law, Economics, & Organization*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (October 1, 2003), pp.445-490, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jleo/ewg017>

⁴⁵⁵ Rubado, Meghan E., & Jay T. Jennings. “Political Consequences of the Endangered Local Watchdog: Newspaper Decline and Mayoral Elections in the United States,” *Urban Affairs Review*, 56, no. 5 (September 2020), 1327-1356, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087419838058>

⁴⁵⁶ Sam Schulhofer-Wohl & Miguel Garrido. “Do Newspapers Matter? Short-Run and Long-Run Evidence From the Closure of *The Cincinnati Post*,” *Journal of Media Economics*, 26, no. 2 (April 2013), 60-81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08997764.2013.785553>

⁴⁵⁷ Gao, Pengjie, Chang Lee, and Dermot Murphy. “Financing Dies in Darkness? The Impact of Newspaper Closures on Public Finance.” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3175555>.

<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/WP44.pdf>

⁴⁵⁸ Snyder, James M., and David Strömberg. “Press Coverage and Political Accountability.” *Journal of Political Economy* 118, no. 2 (2010): 355–408, <https://doi.org/10.1086/652903>

⁴⁵⁹ Nick Mathews, “Life in a news desert: The perceived impact of a newspaper closure on community members,” *Journalism* 23, no. 6 (June 2022): 1250–1265, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920957885>

⁴⁶⁰ Joshua P Darr, Matthew P Hitt, Johanna L Dunaway, “Newspaper Closures Polarize Voting Behavior,” *Journal of Communication* 68, no. 6, (December 1, 2018) 1007–1028, <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqy051>.

newspapers had shuttered, they found a “small but significant causal decrease” of 1.9 percent in split-ticket voting in presidential and senatorial elections. This margin may sound small, but, as the [authors stress](#), “it’s often enough to win an election.”⁴⁶¹ Elsewhere, Peterson found citizens to be [less reliant on partisan cues](#) in more detailed information environments.⁴⁶² His experiment and observational study found that “[a]bsent other information, voters use partisanship to evaluate candidates. They depend on partisanship to a reduced, although still substantial, extent when provided with more detail.”⁴⁶³

Research consistently shows that Americans have far more trust in their local news media than in national media. One nationally representative study in 2022 put the proportion of U.S. adults who had some or a lot of trust in local news to tell the truth at 71 percent, ten percentage points higher than the figure for the national news (61 percent).⁴⁶⁴ Similarly, Pew’s [2021 study](#)⁴⁶⁵ found that 75 percent of Americans had at least some trust in information from local news organizations, a figure 17 percentage points higher than that for national news (58 percent). A 2023 [Knight/Gallup poll](#) that grouped five variables to form a composite of “emotional trust” found 75 percent of Americans had moderate or high emotional trust in local news organizations compared to 54 percent for national ones.⁴⁶⁶ In the same study, more than twice as many Americans reported high emotional trust in local news (44 percent) than did in national news (21 percent), a finding that was consistent across demographics. Likewise, far fewer reported low emotional trust in local news organizations (18 percent) than in national ones (41 percent).

Partisan divides in trust levels, while still significant, are also far less pronounced at the local level. Pew found 84 percent of Democrats and 66 percent of Republicans have some degree of trust in local news.⁴⁶⁷ The same study’s figures for national news were not only lower for each group (78 percent for Democrats and 35 percent for Republicans), but the disparity of 43 percentage points was more than double that for local news.

Reports of local journalism’s relative trust advantage over the national news media are often accompanied by warnings about the fragility of that advantage, e.g. “Local news is more trusted than national news — but that could change,”⁴⁶⁸ “People have always felt better about their

⁴⁶¹ Joshua P. Darr, Johanna Dunaway, and Matthew P. Hitt, “Want to reduce political polarization? Save your local newspaper,” NiemanLab, Feb. 11, 2019, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2019/02/want-to-reduce-political-polarization-save-your-local-newspaper/>

⁴⁶² Erik Peterson, “The Role of the Information Environment in Partisan Voting,” *The Journal of Politics* 79, no. 4 (October 2017): 1191–1204. <https://doi.org/10.1086/692740>.

⁴⁶³ Peterson, *ibid.*

⁴⁶⁴ Amy Watson, “Trust in national and local news in the U.S. 2016-2022” Statista, Nov. 9, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/707507/national-local-news-trust/>

⁴⁶⁵ Jeffrey Gottlieb and Jacob Liedke, “Partisan divides in media trust widen, driven by a decline among Republicans,” Pew Research Center, Aug. 30, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/08/30/partisan-divides-in-media-trust-widen-driven-by-a-decline-among-republicans/>

⁴⁶⁶ *American Views 2022: Part 2. Trust, Media and Democracy*, Knight Foundation, Jan. 2023, <https://knightfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/American-Views-2022-Pt-2-Trust-Media-and-Democracy.pdf>

⁴⁶⁷ Gottfried and Liedke, *op. cit.*

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/08/30/partisan-divides-in-media-trust-widen-driven-by-a-decline-among-republicans/>

⁴⁶⁸ John Sands, “Local news is more trusted than national news — but that could change,” Knight Foundation, Oct. 29, 2019, <https://knightfoundation.org/articles/local-news-is-more-trusted-than-national-news-but-that-could-change/>

local news resources than national outlets, but even that is starting to change in our era of hyperpolarization,”⁴⁶⁹ and “Local news more trusted but challenges remain.”⁴⁷⁰ As John Sands of the Knight Foundation noted in 2019:

[L]ocal news outlets don’t exist in a vacuum. ... The same forces that have eroded trust in the national media are now beginning to filter down to the local level. While more Americans trust their local news outlets more than national, that trust is more fragile than previously understood — and vulnerable to the same perceptions of partisan bias that threaten confidence in the national media.⁴⁷¹

Per the 2023 installment of Gallup/Knight Foundation’s nationwide poll⁴⁷² some of the biggest drivers behind the erosion of trust in U.S. national news include:

- An overwhelming array of news providers competing for attention;
- Perceptions of political partisanship and bias;
- Perceptions that the national press intends to mislead, misinform, or persuade;
- Perceptions that national news organizations are unreliable, detached from their audiences, and indifferent about the impact of their reporting.

Up to now, these drivers of distrust have largely been the preserve of the national news media. However, pink slime journalism’s nature and its deliberate targeting of local news markets make it ideally positioned to drip these corrosive elements into the local information environment. As such, it has many ingredients to help erode the relatively high, albeit fragile, levels of trust in the local media, particularly as professional legacy outlets continue to disappear.

From this perspective, the threat of pink slime journalism is not necessarily about the ability of individual articles, outlets, or networks to influence people’s views about a given subject. Nor is it that citizens will suddenly — or gradually, for that matter — turn to pink slime websites for their local news and information. Rather, it is about pink slime’s pernicious pollution of the local information ecosystem and the scope for that pollution — however gradually — to undermine trust in information from local news outlets in the same way that has occurred at the national level.

After all, pink slime exposes the local information environment to many of the factors that have fueled distrust in national news but have hitherto not applied to local journalism to the

⁴⁶⁹ Ben Paynter, “Democracy failure alert: Americans’ trust of local news is on the brink,” *Fast Company*, Oct. 29, 2019, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90422154/democracy-failure-alert-americans-trust-of-local-news-is-on-the-brink>

⁴⁷⁰ Brier Dudley, “Local news more trusted but challenges remain,” *Seattle Times*, May 27, 2022, <https://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/local-news-more-trusted-but-challenges-remain>

⁴⁷¹ Sands, 2019, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷² Knight Foundation, 2023, *op. cit.*

same extent:

(i) Abundance of sources --> Overwhelm

Information overload from the abundance of national news outlets has contributed to the feelings of overwhelm and perceptions of bias that have helped erode trust in the national media.⁴⁷³ That abundance has not been replicated at the local level, insulating trust in local journalism from the same fate. Until now. As the Tow Center’s Priyanjana Bengani has shown, the number of sites in Metric Media’s local pseudo-journalism network extends beyond 1,200, with some state-specific networks numbering more than 100 (see Chapter 2.2). The more output from such sources piles up in search results, social media feeds, newsletters, and free “newspapers” delivered to people’s homes, the greater the potential for overwhelm, confusion, distrust, and apathy.

Indeed, volume alone plays an important role in this regard. As Gershberg and Illing argue, “Fake news isn’t powerful because it’s false; it works by inundating an already overleveraged media environment to the point where nothing truly can be believed. The key to such disinformation is volume, adding more and more blur to a culture deprived of clarity.”⁴⁷⁴

(ii) Anonymous, boilerplate content --> Disconnect

Assessing the major disparity between Americans’ attitudes toward local and national news organizations, Knight/Gallup researchers conclude:

The biggest differentiator is that the public feels local news organizations care about the impact of their reporting while national news does not. This confirms previous Gallup/Knight polling from 2019 showing Americans were nine times as likely to say local journalists are “caring” than they were to say national journalists are.⁴⁷⁵

Perhaps the most quintessential characteristic of pink slime journalism is the algorithmically generated boilerplate chaff that fills so many of its so-called local news sites. This, combined with the prevalence of anonymous bylines and the production of “local” sites by entities and individuals based in far-flung locations, perpetuates an image of local journalism increasingly disconnected from and disinterested in the communities it purports to serve.

(iii) Perceptions of bias

Perceptions of political bias complicate the process of establishing facts, which in turn makes it harder to navigate today’s information environment and fuels distrust in information sources. As noted, this is viewed as a particularly big problem with the national media.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷³ Knight/Gallup, 2023, p.36.

⁴⁷⁴ Zak Gershberg & Sean Illing, *The paradox of democracy: free speech, open media, and perilous persuasion*. (2022) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/P/bo146792768.html>.

⁴⁷⁵ Knight/Gallup, 2023, p.57.

⁴⁷⁶ Knight/Gallup, 2023, *op. cit.*

Hyperpartisan pseudo-journalism is, by its nature, biased. It therefore follows that an increase in hyperpartisan local news sites may heighten perceptions of bias in local journalism as a field. But as a final point on this subject, let us return to the national Knight/Gallup poll and a point raised in the previous chapter regarding the slim margins by which elections can be, and often are, decided.

According to that study, 55 percent of Americans report seeing “a great deal” of bias in news, an increase on previous years.⁴⁷⁷ But what is particularly notable is the surge among independents. Partisan divides between Democrats and Republicans were largely predictable: The proportion of Democrats perceiving “a great deal” of bias barely changed across the three surveys (49 percent in 2017, 50 percent in 2019-2020, and 50 percent in 2022). The figure for Republicans remained steady in the two earlier surveys (67 percent and then 68 percent) before jumping considerably in 2022 (79 percent). But among independents, perceptions of bias have rocketed, according to the Knight/Gallup survey: In 2017, fewer than half of independents reported seeing the highest level of bias (46 percent). In 2019-2020 it had crept up to 50 percent. By 2022 it had surged to 62 percent. Over five years, the proportion of independents who saw bias in news coverage went from just under one in two to almost two in three.

In a two-party system defined by strong, largely impenetrable partisan loyalties,⁴⁷⁸ elections can be decided by a relatively small band of independents. For those with an interest in undermining democratic institutions, decimating trust in local journalism among these vital swing voters may represent the ultimate prize.

Fighting back: A consideration of the long-term implications of a local information war

The GOP and far right ... have invested heavily in building a network of digital media properties to amplify and accelerate their messaging across channels, helping them to drive national and local narratives. These media properties are influencing the opinions and behaviors of key audiences, especially audiences who live in “narrative deserts.” Meanwhile, Democratic organizations and campaigns continue to rely heavily on cycle-driven paid advertising programs to inform and mobilize voters. (Tara McGowan, Founder, Courier Newsroom)⁴⁷⁹

“[Conservatives] invented it. They’ve perfected this, and it’s time progressives jump on board

⁴⁷⁷ Knight/Gallup, 2023, p.11.

⁴⁷⁸ “Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology,” Pew Research Center, Nov. 9, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/11/09/beyond-red-vs-blue-the-political-typology-2/>

⁴⁷⁹ <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6771809-Screenshot-PDF.html>, cited in Anna Merlan, “Docs: Shadow Inc. Directly Tied to Left-Wing Media Operation,” Vice, Feb. 7, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/dygyaq/docs-shadow-inc-directly-tied-to-left-wing-media-operation>

in terms of getting our own message out.” (Kevin Nix, CEO and executive editor, *The Texas Signal*)⁴⁸⁰

“We’re so proud of what Courier has built in its first year, and hope others in the progressive space invest in this type of digital media ecosystem — *because the Right has for years.*”⁴⁸¹
(Rithesh Menon, chief operations officer, Courier Newsroom)

Pink slime journalism forms part of a wider trend for using so-called local news networks as a weapon of partisan information warfare that has accelerated since the early part of the Trump presidency.

The bulk of our work has centered on one case study — the extended Metric Media network — because it exemplifies the myriad ways in which opaque special interests have co-opted local journalism to pursue partisan causes. But that network is far from the only example of this broader trend. Similar or adjacent contemporaries include American Independent Media’s [Independent](#)⁴⁸² and [Local Report Inc. networks](#),⁴⁸³ Star News Digital Media’s [network of so-called “Baby Breitbarts,”](#)⁴⁸⁴ and Courier Newsroom’s [lavishly funded](#)⁴⁸⁵ (and growing) network. Another, the Main Street Sentinel, which got a [flurry](#)⁴⁸⁶ of [attention](#)⁴⁸⁷ following a sudden blitz of Meta ads ahead of the 2022 midterms, no longer exists. (Wayback Machine’s [latest snapshot](#) is dated February 8, 2023.⁴⁸⁸ The last of its [Meta ads](#)⁴⁸⁹ ran in mid-November 2022, shortly after the election.)

Not all of these networks would necessarily be labeled pink slime. In fact, the extent to which they do or don’t fit any given definition of this contentious term is beside the point. What is important is that pink slime has played — and continues to play — an active role in the proliferation of these local influence operations, each new entrant edging the local information ecosystem closer to an undesirable reconfiguration as a battlefield for partisan information wars.

⁴⁸⁰ Sara Fischer, “Local media falls victim to partisan politics,” Axios, July 30, 2019, <https://www.axios.com/2019/07/30/local-news-media-partisan-websites>

⁴⁸¹ Alex Thompson, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸² Arvanitis and Sadeghi, Sep. 2022, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸³ Markay and Wheatley, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸⁴ Bethania Palma and Alex Kasprak, “Hiding in Plain Sight: PAC-Connected Activists Set Up ‘Local News’ Outlets,” Snopes, Mar. 3, 2019, <https://www.snopes.com/news/2019/03/04/activists-setup-local-news-sites/>;

Jason Schwartz, “Baby Breitbarts to pop up across the country?” Politico, Apr. 30, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/04/30/breitbart-tennessee-fake-news-560670>

⁴⁸⁵ Anna Massoglia, “‘Dark money’ networks hide political agendas behind fake news sites,” OpenSecrets, May 22, 2020, <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2020/05/dark-money-networks-fake-news-sites/>

⁴⁸⁶ Lachlan Markay, “Scoop: Progressives build massive, cloaked online powerhouse,” Axios, Mar. 27, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/03/27/progressives-online-powerhouse-elections>

⁴⁸⁷ Lorenzo Arvanitis and McKenzie Sadeghi, “Dark Money Political Ads Proliferate on Facebook and Instagram Ahead of the U.S. Midterms, Enabled by the Platforms’ Policies,” NewsGuard, Oct. 2022, <https://www.newsguardtech.com/misinformation-monitor/october-2022/>

⁴⁸⁸ “The Main Street Sentinel,” February 8, 2023. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230208164213/https://mainstsentinel.com/>

⁴⁸⁹ Meta Ad Library. Accessed January 12, 2024.

https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=all&country=US&view_all_page_id=105228065418497&search_type=page&media_type=all

While the local information ecosystem is not a finite space, the fact that these operations are proliferating at a time when independent local news outlets are dwindling could have far-reaching implications for citizens' trust in information from local news providers in the future.

While this phenomenon is generally seen to have emanated from the right, it has gained popularity among progressives seeking to fight fire with fire. The most high-profile response from the left is Courier Newsroom, which was founded in 2019 by Tara McGowan.

Documents relating to Courier Newsroom's conception and operation are replete with war references, framing its collection of local outlets as foot soldiers in an information war against the right. The opening line of the [leaked memo](#) in which Tara McGowan outlined her vision for what would become Courier Newsroom stated: "The Democratic Party, long reliant on television and radio, is **losing the media war**"⁴⁹⁰ (original emphasis). As of that June 2019 memo, Acronym was "setting in motion a 'moonshot' plan to build critical digital media infrastructure in key states to reach, persuade, and mobilize ... voters"⁴⁹¹. Until fall 2023, Courier Newsroom's website [stated](#) it was "building the largest left-leaning local news network in the country"⁴⁹² (between August 27 and September 20, 2023 that language was [revised](#) to replace "left-leaning" with "pro-Democracy"⁴⁹³), an endeavor it justified through the language of war: Until November 2023, its [landing page](#) screamed, "WIN THE INFO WAR."⁴⁹⁴ Another [page](#) sought to recruit "Good Info Messengers" willing to be "trained to share content online that helps connect the dots and inspire civic engagement" with the pitch:

America is engaged in an info war — and we cannot right-wing (*sic*) pundits and politicians win that war. We're building an army to counter the likes of Steve Bannon, Tucker Carlson, and Donald Trump.⁴⁹⁵

To discuss Courier Newsroom in the same breath as pink slime journalism is not necessarily to equate the two — at least not directly. There are tangible differences.

It is, however, appropriate that they are discussed as part of the same conversation. Courier Newsroom was formed, in part, to counter the right-wing digital media infrastructure of which pink slime journalism is a part. But in creating a local news network to fight an

⁴⁹⁰ McGowan, Tara. "ACRONYM News Corp 2019-2020 Rapid Build Plan," June 20, 2019.

<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6771809-Screenshot-PDF>

⁴⁹¹ McGowan, 2019, *op. cit.*

⁴⁹² Courier Newsroom. "About - Courier Newsroom." Courier Newsroom [Archived from August 27, 2023].

<https://web.archive.org/web/20230827115318/https://couriernewsroom.com/about/>

⁴⁹³ Courier Newsroom. "About - Courier Newsroom." Courier Newsroom [Archived from September 20, 2023].

<https://web.archive.org/web/20230920044934/https://couriernewsroom.com/about/>

⁴⁹⁴ Courier Newsroom. "Courier Newsroom." Courier Newsroom [Archived from November 6, 2023].

<https://web.archive.org/web/20231106011828/https://couriernewsroom.com/>

⁴⁹⁵ Courier Newsroom. "Take Action." Courier Newsroom [Archived from June 6, 2023].

<https://web.archive.org/web/20230601200940/https://couriernewsroom.com/actions/>

"information war" in swing states, Courier Newsroom has persistently attracted questions about, for example, its transparency around its structure, backing and historical ties to dark money groups⁴⁹⁶; its entanglement with the political establishment⁴⁹⁷; heavy use of micro-targeting to reach specific segments of the electorate with ads said to blur the lines between political advocacy and news⁴⁹⁸; and a lack of transparency around how those ads are funded.⁴⁹⁹

For critics, this is one side's opaque political influence operation using the veneer of local journalism to neutralize or counter the other side's opaque political influence operation.

Leaving aside specific organizations, there are reasons to be concerned about any increase in perceptions that the local information environment is being – or has been – reduced to a battleground for deep-pocketed special-interest groups from opposite ends of the political spectrum to launder political narratives dressed up as independent local journalism.

Returning to the factors that most contribute to negative perceptions of the national news media — and do not *currently* apply to local journalism to the same extent — we can see how a partisan "information war" played out in the local news environment risks accelerating the onset of a similar crisis of trust at the local level. If that were to happen, the short-term relief of swinging tight elections would come at the longer-term cost of undermining trust in information from local news outlets more broadly.

- *Perceptions of bias.* In the case of partisan news sites, it is not that they can be *perceived* as biased; they are, by definition, biased. A rise in partisan local news sites, particularly ones that lack transparency about their political affiliation and/or hack their way to high exposure by spending large sums on targeted advertising, may increase perceptions that local journalism *as a field* has succumbed to the kind of divisive partisanship that many associate with the national press.
- *Perceptions that news outlets deliberately intend to mislead, misinform, or persuade.* While a debate could be had about the first two, there is no doubting that Courier et al. have set out to persuade. Not only was that language used in its founder's original pitch (envisaging local outlets that would "reach, persuade, and mobilize ... voters"), but its website touts data purporting to gauge the extent to which its output

⁴⁹⁶ Green, Joshua. "Acronym's Newsrooms Are a Liberal, Digital Spin on Local News." Bloomberg, November 25, 2019.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2019-11-25/acronym-s-newsrooms-are-a-liberal-digital-spin-on-local-news>; Kozłowska, Hanna, and Jeremy B. Merrill. "A Well-Heeled Liberal Group Is Filling the Local News Void with Trump-Bashing Coronavirus Ads." Quartz, April 15, 2020.

<https://qz.com/1837224/well-funded-liberal-news-network-pushes-partisan-covid-19-content>; Massoglia, 2020, *op. cit.*; Merlan, Anna. "She Created an Ultra-Partisan News Agency; Now Billionaires Are Giving Her Funding to Fight Disinformation." VICE, October 29, 2021.

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/3abzb8/billionaires-sorts-hoffman-mcgowan-acronym-coure>.

⁴⁹⁷ Cole, Althea. "Opinion: News or Activism? Dark Money behind Iowa Journalism Blurs the Line." The Gazette, August 27, 2023.

<https://www.thegazette.com/staff-columnists/news-or-activism-dark-money-behind-iowa-journalism-blurs-the-line/>; Kozłowska and Merrill, 2020, *op. cit.*; Thompson, 2020, *op. cit.*

⁴⁹⁸ Green, 2019, *op. cit.*; Kozłowska and Merrill, 2020, *op. cit.*; Thompson, 2020, *op. cit.*

⁴⁹⁹ Arvanitis and Sadeghi, Oct. 2022, *op. cit.*; Cole, 2023, *op. cit.*; Kozłowska and Merrill, 2020, *op. cit.*

- has won over potential voters.⁵⁰⁰ (See our case study in Section 2.5.)
- *Overwhelming array of sources.* As our research shows, vast quantities of faux local news websites can be established and extended with little notice or expense. The more effective faux local news is deemed as a vehicle for mobilizing and persuading voters (and/or as a weapon for information warfare), the more it will tempt new entrants from both sides to enter the fray, expanding the range of sources vying for citizens' finite attention.
- *Difficulty discerning facts and feeling informed.* Locally oriented "information wars" based on contesting *narratives* from opposite sides of the political divide increase scope for confusion around local events and happenings.

It remains to be seen how prominently partisan local news will feature in a reconfigured local news ecosystem. In the meantime, it is vital that nonpartisan, independent local journalism does not get drowned out, undermined or otherwise damaged in the crossfire of a partisan "information war". That would only heighten the risks to democracy.

Future Research

The multifaceted nature of the topic presents numerous avenues for future research — some short-term, some longer term; some directly related to pink slime journalism or even the specific entities covered in this report; others in adjacent topics and fields. These include:

- In the short term, it is imperative we continue to monitor known pink slime networks to build our understanding of the who, what, when, why, and how of their operations. Likewise, we must investigate new ones. What strategies are they using? How, if at all, are their playbooks evolving? Who are their target audiences, and why? What narratives are they laundering? When and where did they emerge? Whose interests are they serving? How and why are those interests being served? What role, if any, do known connections have, and what new connections come into play?
- What role do technology platforms play in perpetuating the pink slime problem? How, if at all, are technological developments — be it new platforms or new tools and services provided by existing ones — being weaponized, and what could and/or should the platforms do to mitigate the problem?
- When, as seems inevitable, AI-generated local news becomes more prominent, to what extent do audiences have the lateral reading skills to decipher its provenance? More broadly, to what extent do local news audiences *care* if their local news has largely not been produced by humans?
- If political operatives move on from faux local news networks, what do their successors look like, and how and why are they deemed superior?

⁵⁰⁰ Courier Newsroom, "Local news coverage proven to move voters on issue of abortion access," Courier Newsroom, Sep. 2, 2022, <https://couriernewsroom.com/news/local-news-coverage-proven-to-move-voters-on-issue-of-abortion-access-2/>

- What attitudes do audiences in swing states have toward the opaque local news outlets that have emerged in their states? How, if at all, do they think about those outlets in relation to their historical conceptions of local journalism? How, if at all, have partisan news sites affected how they think about local journalism more generally?
- In terms of audiences, while there remain open questions about awareness and perceptions, we must not ignore the need to extend our focus beyond specific sites, brands, or networks to explore awareness and/or perceptions of the *narratives* these sites have attempted to help percolate in certain targeted locations.

Regardless of the angle, one journalism cliché offers universal guidance for future research and reporting: Follow the money.

Appendix 1

Our [original study](#), presented in Chapter 2.1, combined a range of digital forensic tools to investigate the size and scope of the extended Metric Media network. The follow-up, presented in Chapter 2.2, largely relied on the same tools and workflow to determine where, when, and how the network had expanded in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election. A breakdown of our methodology and details of the more technical aspects of our findings are presented below as a guide for readers seeking to deepen their understanding of Metric Media’s online infrastructure and for researchers seeking to undertake similar studies.

The overall distribution of sites across the networks was shown at the start of this report in *Figure 1*. Franklin Archer’s Local News Network was the single largest network, with almost 130 sites. In the case of Franklin Archer, we conflated nine standalone sites that bore all the heuristics of their local news sites, even though these sites were not explicitly listed on the organization’s website. These included Surprise Journal, El Paso Review, and Lansing Reporter.

With the Local News Network sites added to the 51 sites in the Metro Business network, the overall number under the Franklin Archer banner stood at 179, a close second to Metric Media, which had 189 publications across ten states. Metric Media’s North Carolina operation alone had 46 sites, making it the third biggest individual network in our dataset.

For clarity, we have also conflated 25 standalone sites — sixteen topical sites, and nine international sites — under “LocalLabs: International” and “LocalLabs: Topical” in *Figure 1*. These sites had a Locality Labs, LLC privacy policy or shared analytics identifier, but no other associations. In some cases, the privacy policy was not even linked on the homepage. The Mexico Business Daily, for example, didn’t mention any affiliation on its About Us or Contact pages, and there was no privacy policy on its homepage. [This link](#) suggested it is a Locality Labs property. CISTRAN Finance followed the exact same pattern. In other cases, like the [Toronto Business Daily](#) or [Balkan Business Wire](#), the privacy policy was linked to from the homepage, but no other affiliations are mentioned.

In this initial analysis, websites on the Metric Media state-centric networks linked only to other sites from the same state, including stories from Franklin Archer’s Metro Business network. There were, however, some indicators that the sites were operated by the same organization. On sites in both networks, the privacy policies and terms of service suggested they were operated by Locality Labs, LLC. Stories covering vastly different topics across the network shared bylines as well as similar — often identical — templates.

These anecdotal pieces of evidence can only be gleaned after identifying the scale of the operation. To measure the scale of the operation, we relied on website metadata and network forensics to learn that the sites shared IP addresses and various analytics identifiers. Within the same network — and even the same organization — that is expected behavior. It is highly unusual for sites to share IP addresses and analytics identifiers if they are not connected, but that’s exactly what we found in these networks, as can be seen below.

Shared IP addresses

Each domain maps to an IP address, which identifies the server where the site is hosted. Across this greater network of networks, including the domains for the organizations, we found about 25 unique IP addresses. Some of these networks, including the biggest — Franklin Archer; Local News Network — didn’t share an IP address or server with any others, as can be seen in *Figure A.1*. Some shared IP addresses only with other sites that belong to the same parent organization. For example, some state-level Metric Media properties — the publications in New Mexico, Arizona, and Montana — shared a server.

But Metric Media’s Maryland properties (which included [North Baltimore Journal](#), [Harford News](#), and [Montgomery News](#)) also sat on the same server as the LGIS sites, which was more unusual. Similarly, it is improbable for sites within Franklin Archer’s Business Network to share an IP address with LocalLabs’ international or topical sites unless the organizations were sharing resources.

Some of the parent organizations’ websites lived on the same server as some of the LocalLabs’ topical properties, too. To wit: [The Record](#), [Franklin Archer](#), and Dan Proft’s super PAC, [Liberty Principles](#), were hosted on the same server as Tobacco Newswire, FDA Reporter, and FDA Health News.

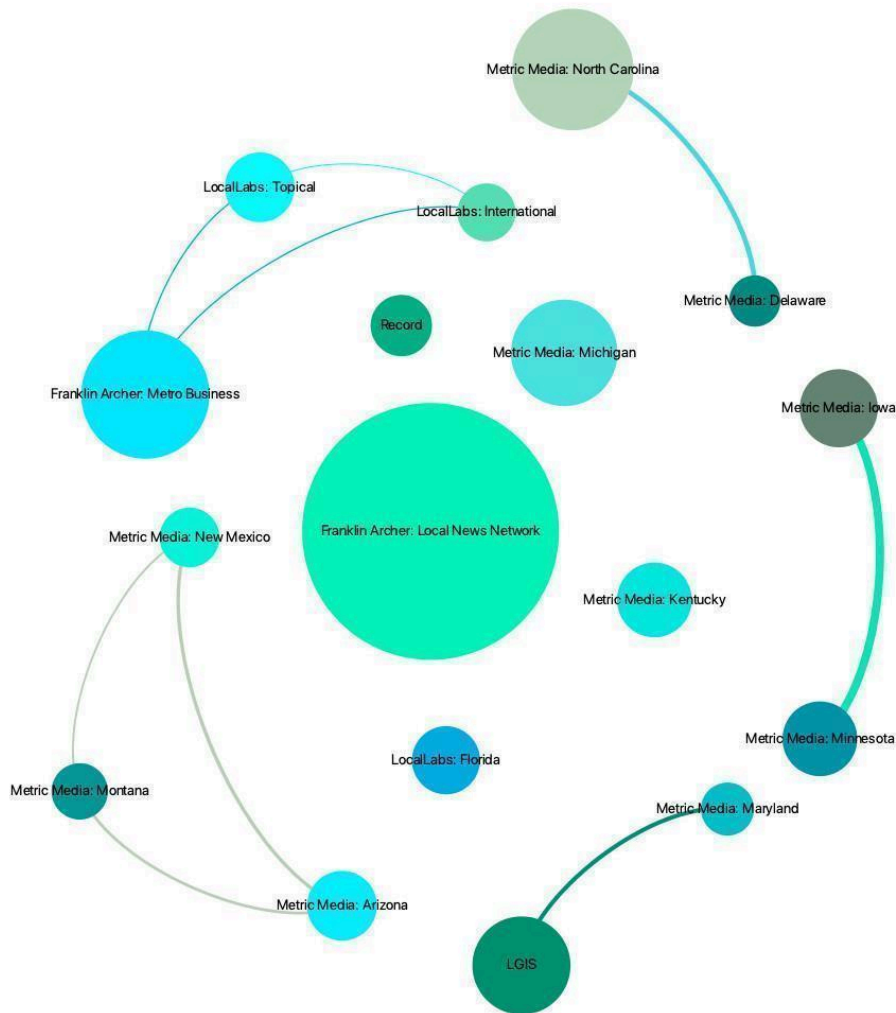


Figure A.1: Network graph of shared IP addresses; each different edge color represents a different IP address.

Shared Google Analytics IDs

Even though there were more than 20 Google Analytics IDs, only five were used on more than one network. Of these, three identifiers were shared within Metric Media sites only, while another three were shared among Franklin Archer, LGIS, and the LocalLabs sites (*see Figure A.2*). It is highly unlikely that independent, supposedly unrelated organizations like LGIS and Franklin Archer would share analytics identifiers.

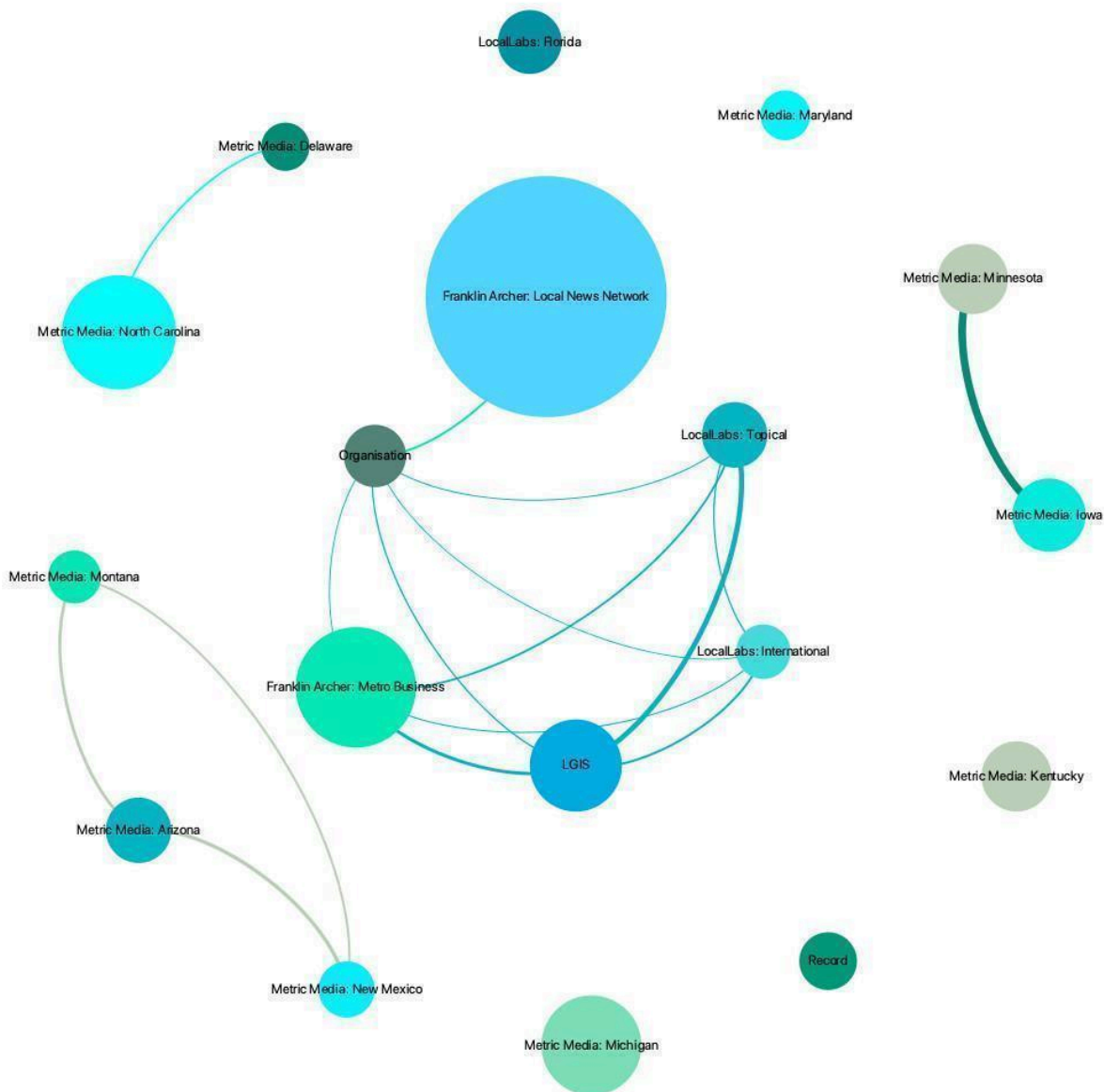


Figure A.2: Network graph of shared Google Analytics IDs; each different edge color represents a different Google Analytics ID. At the time of our initial analysis, the Franklin Archer organizational website, publications belonging to LGIS, and topical websites like American Security News, Power Newswire, and Higher Education Tribune shared the same Google Analytics ID. International sites like Gulf News Journal and a handful of business dailies also had that same identifier.

A single shared NewRelic ID and Quantcast ID

Perhaps no other identifier illustrates the convoluted nature of these networks as well as the [NewRelic ID](#) (*Figure A.3*) and the [Quantcast ID](#) (*Figure A.4*).

Most of Metric Media’s properties didn’t have a corresponding NewRelic ID; nor did the Florida network’s. Their networks, though, shared the same identifier, including Metric Media’s Maryland sites. For the first time, we see the publications within the Record network — the first of which was established in 2004 — sharing an identifier with the greater network.

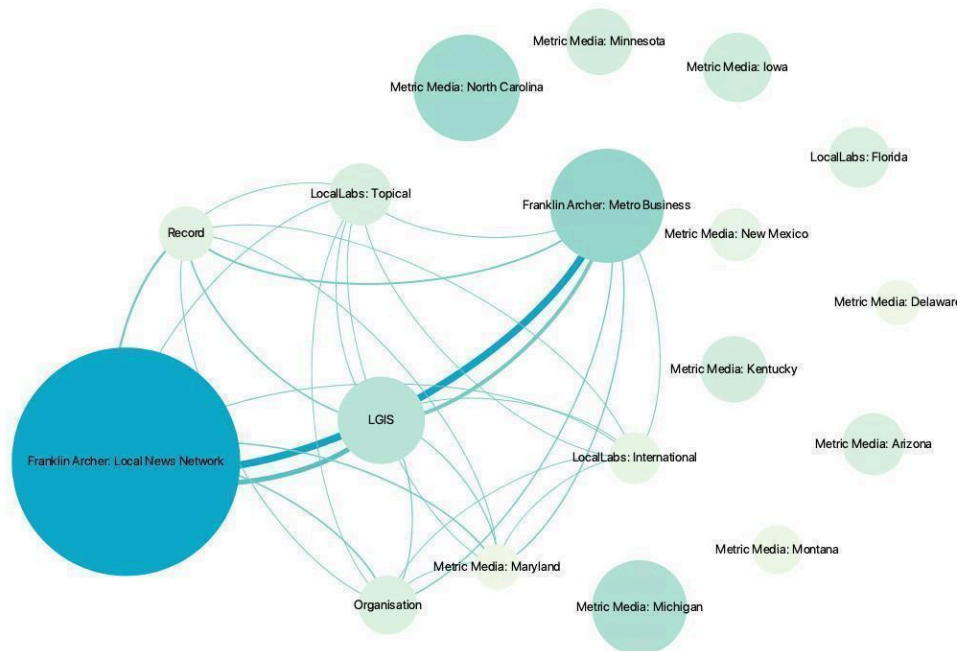


Figure A.3: Network graph of the single shared NewRelic ID.

Similarly, a single Quantcast identifier was used across LGIS, Record, and Metric Media sites. (Figure A.4) As with the NewRelic ID, this shows the interconnected nature of the networks.

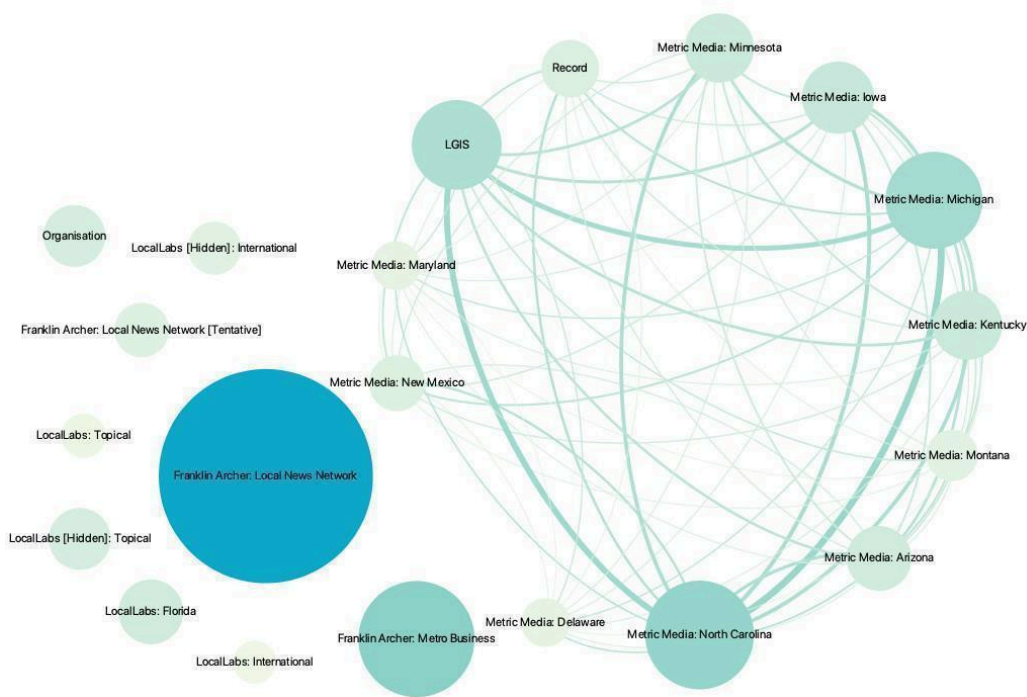


Figure A.4: Networks connected by a single unique Quantcast ID. The Franklin Archer publications didn't seem to be relying on Quantcast identifiers at all, but Metric Media did, as did the Record network and LGIS.

How we established the scope of the network

The majority of this research was conducted using a combination of tools and products available online. Below we provide a short introduction to these tools and outline our process for students/journalists wishing to conduct similar analyses. If you'd like further help or guidance for similar investigations, please get in touch.

To create a website, two basic steps need to be followed: the domain or web address needs to be registered, and a web host must be set up to house the actual content of the site. When the first step is taken, a [WHOIS record](#) is created, which may include the details of the registrar.

(Private WHOIS entries, where the details of the registrant are hidden or redacted, are becoming increasingly common, especially due to GDPR [regulation in Europe](#).)⁵⁰¹

When a website goes live, its content is pulled from a web host or server that has a corresponding IP address, analogous to a phone number for a person. The IP address not only tells us where the content for the website is hosted, but it can also reveal what other websites reside at the same IP address.

The code that drives the website can contain metadata, which reveals other identifying traits, including analytics identifiers. Tracking identifiers allow websites to aggregate user information and analytics, including demographic details, the amount of time spent on a specific page, and how users navigate the site. It is highly unlikely for unrelated websites to share tracking identifiers, because these analytics services provide business intelligence and insights that can offer competitive advantage.

Therefore, by finding domains registered by the same people, websites residing on the same server (i.e. websites pointing to the same IP address), and websites sharing the same analytics IDs, it becomes relatively straightforward to build out the network. There are free, freemium, commercial, and open-source tools available to help researchers extract information at this level.

To ensure thoroughness, manual analysis is necessary coupled with original reporting from outside sources and research tools that allow us to explore corporate (including nonprofit) entities, look up campaign finance details, and see historical content of websites. To ensure no false positives — sites incorrectly identified to be part of the network — slip in, manual confirmation is necessary.

For our analysis, we used:

- [RiskIQ](#) to identify websites that shared tracking identifiers (Google Analytics, Facebook Pixel, Quantcast, or NewRelic)
- [SecurityTrails](#) and Farsight [DNSDB](#) to determine which websites were housed on the same servers
- [Whoxy](#) to pull out WHOIS details
- ProPublica's [Nonprofit Explorer](#) to find key people associated with the organizations
- [Illinois Sunshine](#) and [Open Secrets](#) to look at campaign finance disclosures
- [LexisNexis](#) to research the corporate entities and key people

⁵⁰¹ Kevin Rollinson, "GDPR and WHOIS: Here's What You Need to Know," Cisco Umbrella, retrieved Dec. 30, 2023, from <https://umbrella.cisco.com/blog/gdpr-and-whois>

Starting with one of the domains from the original *Lansing State Journal* story, we found that many of the stories were sourced from Michigan Business Daily. A quick look at the Michigan Business Daily website immediately informed us that similar business dailies existed in every state and Washington D.C.

We looked up one of these sites, Rhode Island Business Daily, on RiskIQ, a self-proclaimed “cyberthreat intelligence tool,” to find which other websites shared the same identifiers (*Figure A.5*). One identifier type proved to be key: the NewRelic ID. RiskIQ found 138 sites sharing the same NewRelic identifier, including Chicago City Wire, Cook County Record, Legal Newline, Florida Record, and Blockshopper.

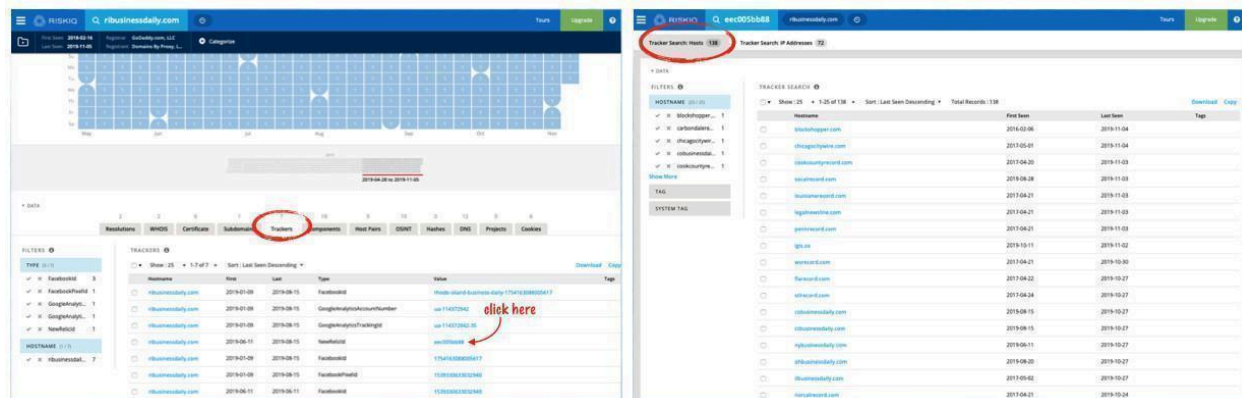


Figure A.5: Using RiskIQ to search by Tracking ID on RiskIQ.

The link to Blockshopper — and the subsequent [WHOIS lookup](#) — confirmed there was an overlap between sites registered by Brian Timpono and the sites identified by RiskIQ, including [Chicago City Wire](#), [Kane County Reporter](#), and [SE Illinois News](#).

When we manually explored some of these sites, it was evident that some of the underlying technologies and templates they were using were identical, despite the sites being part of separate networks. Anecdotally, one more thing stood out: Different stories across states, topics, and networks shared many of the same bylines.

Using these 138 sites as our base set, we input each of the domains into SecurityTrails and Farsight DNSDB to find which other sites were on the same IP address. These are passive DNS tools that among other things can give users details about website infrastructure, including the IP address of the server the website lives on (*Figure A.6*) and who its mail provider is. Furthermore, given an IP address, passive DNS tools provide users with all websites that share the same IP address (*Figure A.7*).

Websites with the same IP address are not necessarily related. Sites hosted by companies like Squarespace and Wix (and many others) are likely to share IP addresses; lookups on two

websites, one hosted by Squarespace and one by Wix, showed more than five million domains for each of the two IP addresses. Similarly, “parked” domains — those that have been registered but not linked to any web hosting — are likely to share IP addresses, as the web registrar will simply assign an IP address to said domain.

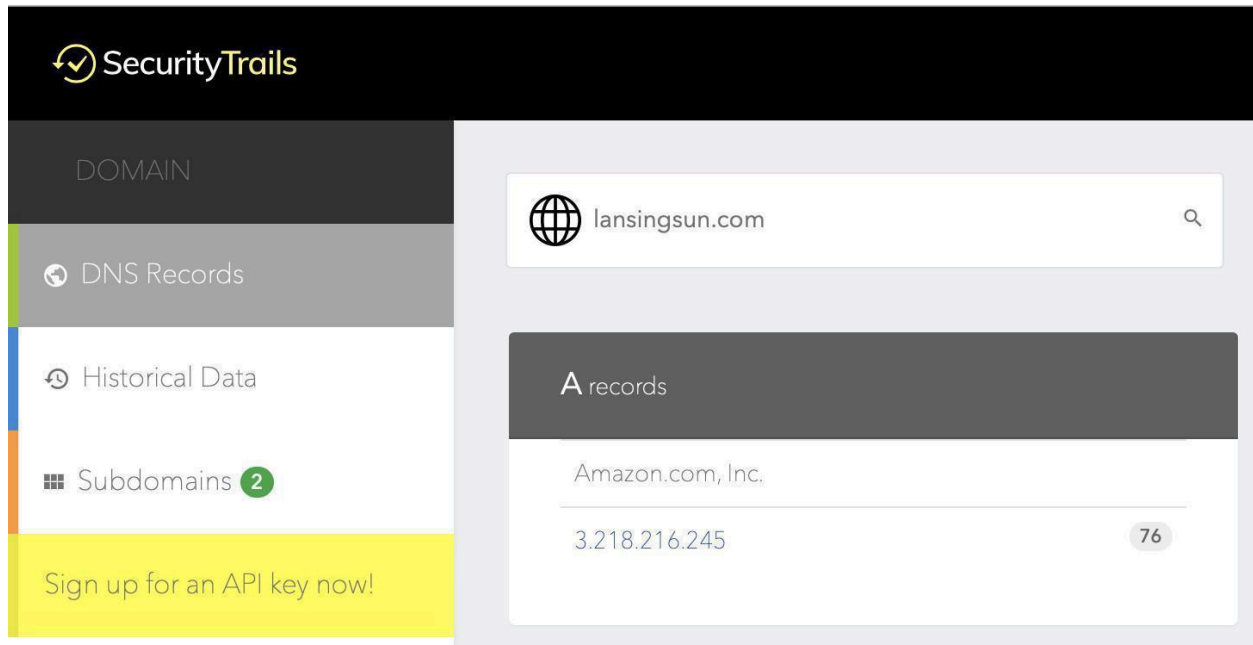


Figure A.6: Extracting the IP address from a domain in SecurityTrails.

The screenshot shows the DNSDB Scout interface. At the top, it displays '04h 13m Until Quota Reset' and '98 Queries Left'. The search section includes a 'Recent Type' dropdown set to 'ANY' and a 'Limit' of '100'. The 'Record Data' field contains '3.218.216.245'. A green 'RUN QUERY' button is visible below the search fields. A green banner indicates a 'Successful Query for: 3.218.216.245 (ip) (Limit 100)'. Below this, there are buttons for 'EXPORT AS CSV', 'EXPORT AS JSON', and 'API DOC'. The main content is a table with 38 results, showing columns for 'Time Last Seen', 'Time First Seen', 'Count', 'RRname', 'RRtype', and 'Rdata'. The table lists various domain names associated with the IP address, such as northmichigannews.com, hollandreporter.com, and seggrandrapids.com. At the bottom, there is a pagination control showing '1 to 25 of 38 Results' and a page number '1'.

Time Last Seen	Time First Seen	Count	RRname	RRtype	Rdata
2019-11-05 18:37:52	2019-09-08 17:20:29	32	northmichigannews.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-05 17:03:30	2019-09-14 22:03:09	19	hollandreporter.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-05 13:04:15	2019-09-07 22:13:05	24	seggrandrapids.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-05 06:49:28	2019-09-05 21:14:13	35	livingstontoday.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-05 05:42:06	2019-09-12 01:18:57	42	annarborimes.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-05 05:22:55	2019-09-06 13:36:15	97	micapitolnews.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-04 23:09:03	2019-09-08 20:00:29	28	wcmichigannews.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-04 22:01:32	2019-09-05 20:25:08	40	warrensun.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-04 18:22:48	2019-09-05 21:14:25	33	thumbreporter.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-04 16:28:15	2019-09-15 10:43:13	30	sturgiscoldwaternews.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-04 12:29:48	2019-09-07 23:53:54	38	shelbyreview.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-04 06:15:40	2019-09-07 08:23:38	39	pontiacimes.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-04 02:49:03	2019-09-08 17:21:58	38	nwayneews.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-04 00:19:59	2019-09-15 05:33:04	27	muskegonson.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-03 23:42:08	2019-09-05 21:14:25	33	monroereview.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-03 17:04:21	2019-09-08 16:02:59	34	kalamazootimes.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-03 07:09:23	2019-09-05 21:14:25	42	greatlakeswire.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-03 07:04:34	2019-09-08 14:19:14	42	grandrapidsreporter.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-03 01:32:07	2019-09-08 06:20:13	28	stclairtoday.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-02 23:31:22	2019-09-08 13:24:41	38	downrivertoday.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-02 17:37:01	2019-09-05 21:14:25	40	geneseenews.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-02 17:29:57	2019-09-08 13:17:30	30	detroitcitywire.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-02 12:27:58	2019-09-08 11:53:08	29	battlecreekimes.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-02 07:43:41	2019-09-05 21:14:12	39	macombtoday.com	A	3.218.216.245
2019-11-02 03:46:32	2019-09-07 09:03:04	88	novtimes.com	A	3.218.216.245

Figure A.7: An IP address lookup on Farsight DNSDB using DNSDB Scout.

We used both tools, plugging in the IP addresses of the domains we had identified, to find all other websites that were hosted on the same server. It might seem redundant to use multiple services to do exactly the same thing. However, the algorithms and technologies that back each of these services are different, and the extent of their archival and historical data varies. Consolidating data across services increases the odds of getting a more complete dataset. (Note: You can use both tools to get the IP address of a website and the list of websites pointing to the same IP address; there are other, quicker ways of doing this, but this is the easiest.)

Once we had extracted still more domains from passive DNS lookups, we cross-checked these domains on RiskIQ, and the cycle continued. Combining the outputs from these sources, we were able to map out the network.

We are grateful for the guidance and advice from Farsight Security and The [Research and Education Networking Information Sharing and Analysis Center](#) (REN-ISAC).

Appendix 2: Community Newsmaker Methodology

The investigation into Metric Media's Community Newsmaker platform, presented in Chapter 2.4, expanded our use of some of the tools discussed in *Appendix 1*. It also introduced Google and Meta's respective ad libraries to our toolkit. Details of how these tools informed our research are outlined below.

The Metric Media Foundation's website says one of the services it offers is Community Newsmaker. But we were unable to find that service promoted much outside two tweets [by Mark Meckler](#) and [the Convention of States](#) and two public Facebook posts, both on a Facebook page for Convention of States North Carolina.

Once we saw that third parties were using pages hosted on subdomains of Community Newsmaker without any mention on the main Community Newsmaker homepage, we used DNSDB Flexible Search and RiskIQ to see if there were other partnerships. Subdomains are prefixes added to a domain to help organize different parts of a website. For example, google.com is the domain and mail.google.com is a subdomain of google.com.

DNSDB Flexible Search

Flexible Search is a relatively new tool launched by Farsight Security (a cyberthreat intelligence company that provides passive DNS solutions) that, among other things, allows users to search for domains that match a specific pattern. We used it to find all resources that ended with .communitynewsmaker.com (*highlighted in red in Figure A.8*), effectively giving us all the subdomains for Community Newsmaker. (Note: The nested command is to clean up the

output that DNSDB Flexible Search returns. This allows us to see when DNSDB first observed the subdomain.)

```

> ./dnssdbflex --regex '.*\.communitynewsmaker.com' --exclude '^ns\.|www|mail|smtp|^mx|^m\.|inbox|support|nta|.
rsnote|post|imap|barracuda|relay|citrix|help|secure|dnarc|dkim|domainkey' -F | ../dnssdbq/dnssdbq -fjt
datafix | egrep -v '\-\' | jq -r '.time_first + "\t" + .rname' | sort
2020-03-06 13:42:47    cos.communitynewsmaker.com.
2020-05-05 21:44:58    va.communitynewsmaker.com.
2020-05-06 23:11:18    ch.communitynewsmaker.com.
2020-05-05 23:22:52    pa.communitynewsmaker.com.
2020-05-08 23:10:16    1789a.communitynewsmaker.com.
2020-05-10 23:56:36    yal.communitynewsmaker.com.
2020-06-23 15:23:27    mi.communitynewsmaker.com.
2020-08-27 06:33:54    hotels.communitynewsmaker.com.
2020-08-31 04:50:01    sentries.communitynewsmaker.com.
2020-09-07 17:00:17    catholicinterview.communitynewsmaker.com.
2020-09-09 14:01:17    interviewdesk.communitynewsmaker.com.
2020-10-10 09:01:36    americavotes.communitynewsmaker.com.
2020-12-18 16:17:55    dallasexpress.communitynewsmaker.com.
2021-02-22 11:00:06    zjheysentries.communitynewsmaker.com.
2021-02-22 21:34:11    bigislandtimes.communitynewsmaker.com.
2021-02-27 11:06:11    frqprinterviewdesk.communitynewsmaker.com.
2021-04-19 17:28:53    form.communitynewsmaker.com.
2021-04-20 02:00:45    pa.communitynewsmaker.com.
2021-04-20 21:00:37    dallasexpress.communitynewsmaker.com.
2021-04-23 14:26:00    cos.communitynewsmaker.com.
2021-05-02 19:43:37    svn.communitynewsmaker.com.
2021-05-13 14:02:40    americavotes.communitynewsmaker.com.
2021-05-17 21:23:40    1789a.communitynewsmaker.com.
2021-05-18 13:31:42    ch.communitynewsmaker.com.
2021-05-19 13:53:14    va.communitynewsmaker.com.

```

Figure A.8: Screenshot of the command we ran against DNSDB Flexible Search displaying a subset of the results. Once we found this list of sites, we were able to investigate each one independently.

RiskIQ

We wanted to cross-validate the sites we found through DNSDB Flexible Search in case any of the subdomains had not been observed by the Passive DNS service; different companies performing the same function capture marginally different data. We used RiskIQ to capture the domains' SSL certificate data.

When we visited a couple of the subdomains identified in the step above on the browser itself, we were able to see that they had unique SSL certificates (*Figure A.9*), i.e. different subdomains have their own SSL certificate instead of a universal wildcard SSL certificate shared by all subdomains. This allowed us to look up the top-level domain (communitynewsmaker.com) on RiskIQ, and look at all the SSL certificates they had for the top-level domain — which also includes the SSL certificates for all the subdomains (*Figure A.10*).

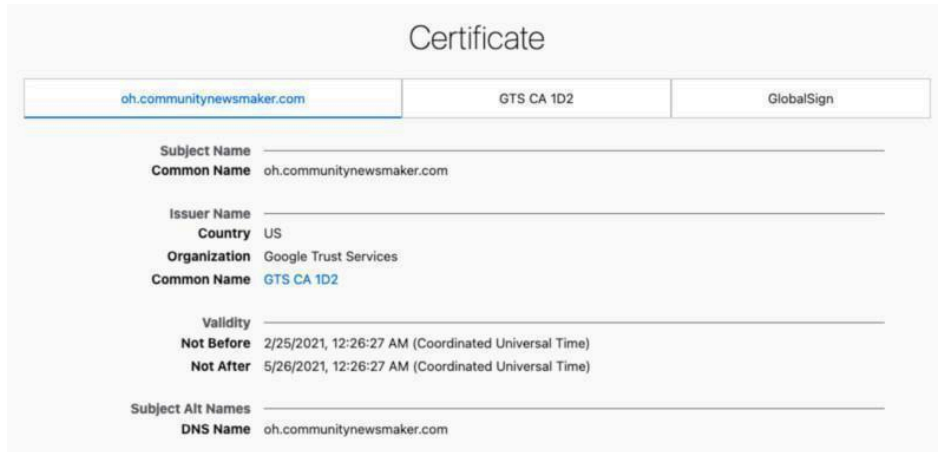


Figure A.9: Screenshot of part of the SSL certificate for one of the Community Newsmaker dedicated pages.

We were then able to manually cross-check the subdomains on the SSL certificates with what DNSDB Flexible Search had found for us. (Note: While the screenshot says there are 39 certificates, it doesn't combine, say, oh.communitynewsmaker.com and www.oh.communitynewsmaker.com.)

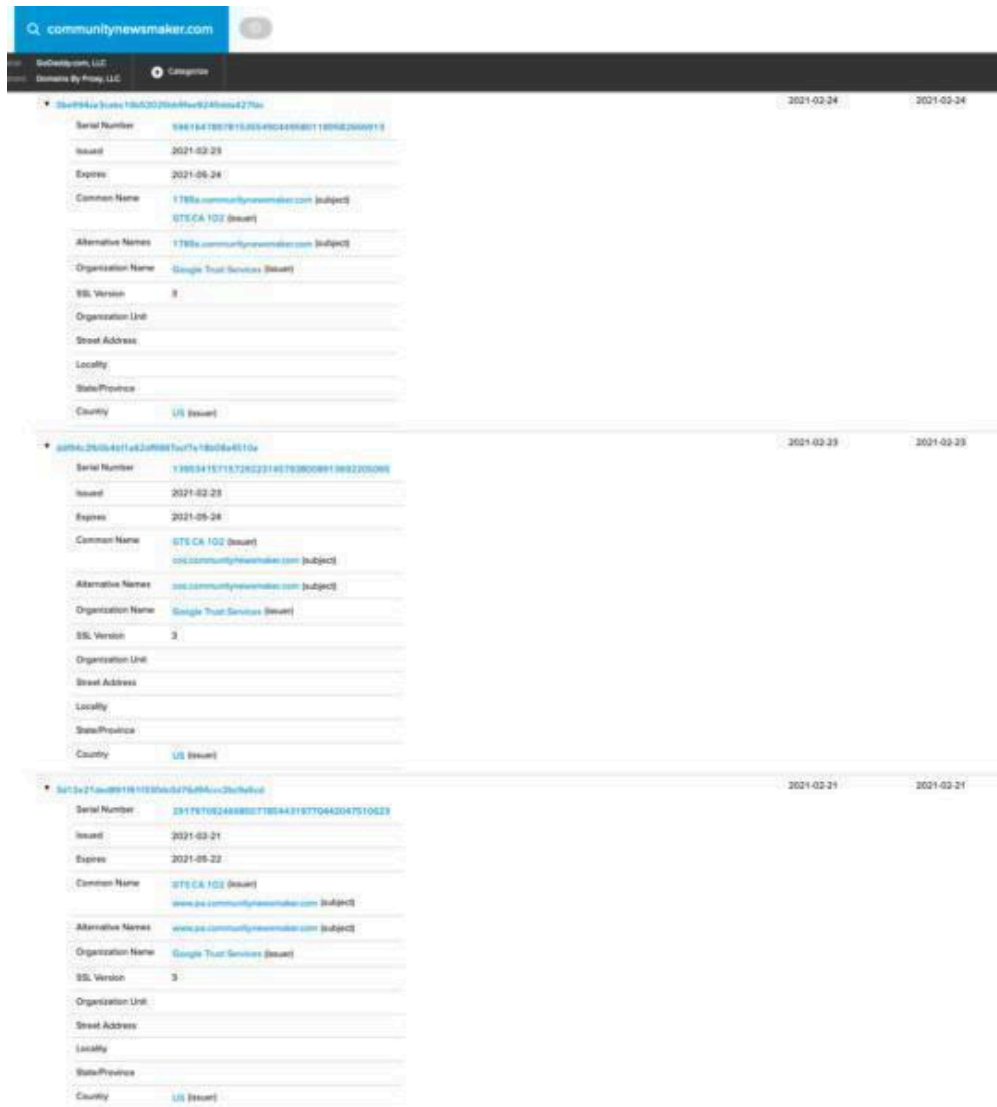


Figure A.10: A screenshot of RiskIQ showing SSL certificates for Community Newsmaker and its subdomains.

RiskIQ found the same subdomains as DNSDB Flexible Search, so we didn't need to add any domains to our original list.

Ads

Facebook ads

To pull all the Facebook ads for Metric Media stories, we wrote a scraper in Python that could take one of two inputs: domain or name of an entity's Facebook page. For our research, we had three specific questions:

- Which entities were buying ads to Metric Media stories?

- What kind of ads were run by “partner” organizations like Convention of States and CatholicVote?
- What additional details can we capture about these ads? How many ads were run, how much money was spent, and what was the demographic breakdown of those who saw these ads?

All of this information can be gleaned from Facebook’s public [Ad Library](#).

For the Metric Media sites, we searched each of the 1,200 domains to find the corresponding ads. As we were focusing on election-related ads, we only pulled ads from October 1 to November 3, 2020 (Election Day), by searching for the domain. For example, for Detroit City Wire, we found two ads run in October by [searching for the domain](#):⁵⁰² one by [CatholicVote](#) and one by the [Detroit City Wire](#)⁵⁰³ Facebook page itself. Facebook had [placed a moratorium on political ads](#)⁵⁰⁴ running after voting ended on Election Day 2020, so we didn’t find any ads after that. Overall, we found just over 500 ads run across 140 of the Metric Media sites.

For CatholicVote and Convention of States, we tried to establish the first instance when either of the organizations ran an ad to a Metric Media site, which led us to extract all their ads for the entire calendar year. Convention of States ran just under 200 Facebook ads throughout 2020, but we didn’t find any that linked to Metric Media sites. Some of these ads reiterated Metric Media stories (or vice versa), including ads that “call a Convention of States to put term limits on members of Congress” or sought to end “these insane shutdowns,” but these ads linked back to either the Convention of States website or the Open the States site, which is a project of Convention of States.

In the case of [CatholicVote](#), on the other hand, we found that it had run ads to its own site, Western Journal, and the Metric Media sites. Ads to the last of these started less than two weeks before the election.

Because Facebook’s Ad Library doesn’t provide exact ad spend, information about how ads were targeted to audiences, and an exact number of ad impressions, we erred on the side of caution. To the extent possible, we used the range in “amount spent” instead of picking the midpoint or the upper- or lower-bound. When we looked at cumulative ad spend, we summed up the lower-bound and the upper-bound and used that as the range. For ads where the spend was “<100”, the lower range we used was \$0 and the upper range \$100. While evidently no ad cost zero dollars to run, we found that using 0 didn’t change the ballpark figures significantly.

Google Ads

Google’s [ad archive](#)⁵⁰⁵ is significantly more primitive compared to Facebook’s in that users are unable to search by domains or text. Instead, its interface only allows users to search by advertisers or candidates. Users can also download an archive of nine files that contains details of all ads run since 2018.

⁵⁰² Meta Ad Library. Accessed January 12, 2024.

https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=political_and_issue_ads&country=ALL&q=detroitcitywire.com&sort_data%2525255Bdirection%2525255D=desc&sort_data%2525255Bmode%2525255D=relevancy_monthly_grouped&search_type=keyword_unordered&media_type=all

⁵⁰³ Meta Ad Library. Accessed January 12, 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?id=393952001780119> and <https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?id=348225926288772>

⁵⁰⁴ Kurt Wagner, “Facebook bans political ads after end of voting on election day,” Bloomberg, Oct. 7, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-10-07/facebook-adds-election-policies-bans-political-ads-after-vote>

⁵⁰⁵ Google Ads Transparency Center. Accessed January 12, 2024. <https://adstransparency.google.com/political?political=®ion=US>

In the case of Convention of States, we didn't find any ads when we used likely keywords:

- Convention of States
- Citizens for Self-Governance
- COS Action
- CSG
- CSG Action

However, when we searched for CatholicVote.org, we found 236 ads had run in 2020, of which 30 linked to Metric Media properties. All the ads had a non-zero lower-bound. Since Google's ad library doesn't clearly show the destination links of each ad, we manually went through them to check whether they hit a Metric Media property.

We are grateful to Farsight Security and RiskIQ for access to their tools, without which our research would not be possible. We are also extremely grateful to Brendan Fischer, Maggie Christ, and Sophie Gonsalves-Brown at the Campaign Legal Center for their patience, help, and guidance.

See a [complete list of the domains](#) identified as part of the network as of October 2021.