

How Facebook powers money machines for obscure political 'news' sites and then controls their access to the public

From Macedonia to the San Francisco Bay, clickbait political sites are cashing in on Trumpmania – and they're getting a big boost from Facebook



[Dan Tynan](#) in San Francisco

[Donald Trump](#) may be struggling to capture a majority of voters in the heartland of America, but there is one eastern European precinct he would likely carry in a landslide – if only they were allowed to vote in US elections.

The town of Veles, [Macedonia](#) (population 44,000), is the unlikely home for dozens of avowedly pro-Trump political news sites, featuring headlines like Hillary's Illegal Email Just Killed Its First American Spy and This is How Liberals Destroyed America, This Is Why We Need Trump in the White House.

The Guardian has identified more than 150 domains registered to people claiming addresses in Veles, though not all of those are associated with active websites.

Some claim to garner millions of page views per month. Most others are relatively obscure. All of them exist primarily for one reason – to cash in on the seemingly endless appetite for news about Donald Trump. And they're getting a big boost from [Facebook](#).

Fake names and death threats

The creator of a popular Macedonian site, "Alex" claims that he was one of the first of his countrymen to write about US politics. (Alex is not his real name, and he spoke on condition of anonymity.) He claims his neighbors copied his idea and have capitalized on the Trump wave. According to Alex, his site gets more than 1m visits a month, roughly half of them driven by his Facebook page.

“We are an independent news magazine with [our] primary goal to influence American policy, especially politics,” says Alex, who originally favored Ted Cruz in the Republican primaries. “Then my city fellows saw what I was doing and started to copy my work. They are just looking to earn money from ad networks.”

In fact, these foreign sites probably wouldn’t exist without their domestic counterparts, from whom they crib many of their stories. (Alex admits he started out by copying and pasting stories from conservative US news sites but says he’s recently hired a half-dozen US-based writers to produce original content.)

There are hundreds of relatively obscure political sites registered on this side of the Atlantic that grab news from mainstream outlets, rewrite the headlines to be click-friendly, and blast them out to their readers using Facebook.

Many of these sites are registered privately, and the author names that appear on their pages are often fictitious or nonexistent. Using the search engines provided by [Domain Tools](#), the Guardian was able to comb through historical domain name records and contact the owners of some of these sites.

Writing a clickbait headline and dashing off 400 words in 15 minutes is not a skill they teach in journalism school

At [Bipartisan Report](#), a left-leaning news site, about two-thirds of the authors use pseudonyms, says publisher Justin Brotman. The reason? Personal safety.

“Most of our authors start out saying, ‘I’ll use my real name, I don’t care’,” he says. “One week in, after they start getting death threats, they change their minds.”

Brotman won’t reveal how much money his site makes, but it’s enough to pay a staff of 15 freelance writers, who get compensated based on how much traffic their stories generate. Bipartisan Report’s Facebook page, which has 825,000 likes, plays a large role in sending traffic his way.

“All social media is of utmost importance,” he says. “If your goal is straight page views then Facebook is the best investment of your time. It does drive more ‘clicks’ than posting on other platforms with an equal amount of followers. But I’d put Twitter way ahead in lending credibility and enhancing our brand.”

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Megan Carpentier



‘Share, share, share it all over Facebook’

Even smaller sites are making bank on the surge of interest in the Republican nominee. [Liberty Writers News](#), a two-person site operating out of a house in the San Francisco Bay Area, generates income of between \$10,000 and \$40,000 a month from banks of ads that run along the side and bottom of every story.

Paris Wade and his partner Ben Goldman have mastered the art of getting traffic. The ability to write a clickbaity headline, toss in some user-generated video found on YouTube, and dash off a 400-word post in 15 to 30 minutes is a skill they don’t teach in journalism school, says Wade, who graduated from the University of Tennessee with a degree in advertising.

Three months after launching the site, Liberty Writers News gets up to 700,000 visitors a day, a number that has been doubling every month. Again, though, they owe nearly all of that growth to Facebook.

“About 95% of our traffic is coming from Facebook,” Wade says. The [Liberty Writers News page](#) has about 150,000 likes, but by sharing stories with other like-minded Facebook pages, they can extend their reach to as many as 7m or 8m viewers, he adds.

They spend around \$3,000 a month paying Facebook to promote the page. Once they started doing that, their traffic doubled, says Wade.

They also end some stories with enthusiastic cries to “*** Share this right now! Let’s beat the liberal media to it. Share, share, share it all over Facebook.”



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But what Facebook gives, it also takes away, Goldman adds. If one of their stories gets shared too quickly, Facebook assumes it is spam and throttles it for a period of time, which reduces the number of people who can see it in their news feed. That doesn't happen to mainstream sites such as the New York Times or Washington Post, he adds.

Those sites feature a blue check mark on their Facebook pages, certifying they are authentic brands. That's one of the reasons the pair are talking to the press – to establish their credentials as a legitimate news organization so Facebook will stop throttling them.

“We want that blue check mark,” Wade says.

The US presidential election will be over in less than three months. Regardless of the outcome, Trump fever is likely to subside, possibly leaving many of these sites without their biggest source of traffic. Goldman and Wade say they'll just transition to covering other news about politics or celebrities. “People love stories about celebrities,” he says.

Even Alex the Macedonian publisher is not worried. “I think my traffic will be fine if Trump doesn't win,” he says. “There are too many haters on the net, and all of my audience hates Hillary.”