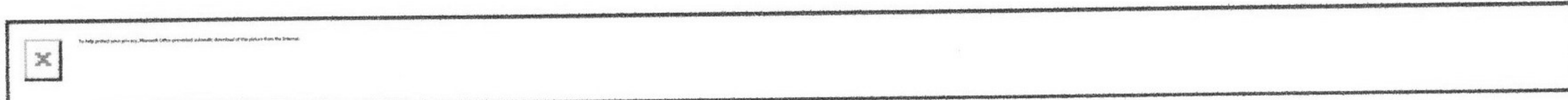


From: CJR Editors <leh2178@columbia.edu>
Sent: Wednesday, October 28, 2020 9:00 AM
To: =?utf-8?Q??=
Subject: Investigating local partisan shadow news: A Q&A with Priyanjana Bengani

[View this email in your browser](#)



Investigating local partisan shadow news: A Q&A with Priyanjana Bengani

By Lauren Harris

Last week, outlets like the [Wall Street Journal](#), the [Financial Times](#), and the [New York Times](#) reported the emergence of partisan websites posing as local news—a phenomenon known as “pink slime journalism,” a term that compares the outlets’ hidden agendas to the cheap food additives in processed meat. Such sites pose a threat to an informed electorate, particularly in a year that has seen accelerated attrition in local newsrooms across the country.

Priyanjana Bengani, a senior research fellow at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, has been researching the “pink slime” local news networks for about a year now. [In December of 2019, Bengani identified 450 such sites](#), each publishing thousands of algorithmically generated articles and some reported stories. One hundred eighty nine of the sites had been set up over the preceding year by an organization called Metric Media. Many of the sites could be traced back to conservative businessman Brian Timpone, whose company, Journatic, was rebranded after plagiarizing and publishing fake bylines, as [This American Life](#) and [Poynter](#) reported in 2012.

[In August of this year, Bengani reported that the network had tripled in size](#), growing from some four hundred outlets to more than a thousand. A few weeks ago, [the Tow Center highlighted](#) the ways in which Google News and Facebook

sometimes index shadowy partisan sites—like the ones Bengani found—as news sources.

I talked with Bengani about the importance of local news as a first line of defense in locating localized propaganda sites, the trust readers place in numbers, and the importance of studying the phenomenon beyond this year’s election. This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

CJR: In December, when you wrote about the existence of several hundred “pink slime” sites, what guided your reporting?

Priyanjana Bengani: The only reason I was able to publish that piece was because of stellar local reporting by the *Lansing State Journal*; Carol Thompson wrote a piece about Michigan sites that had started emerging—*what's up with these sites, they don't look familiar to us, what's going on?* I remember reading that piece and thinking, *this is interesting*. Then when you visit a site, and you look at the “About” page, it says they intend to launch a thousand sites. That makes you pause. *There are thirty sites right now. They intend to launch a thousand. How many more are out there that haven't been identified yet?*

The more I looked, the more I was finding. Then there were links to political parties. There was an *FEC lawsuit*. There were different players in the game. *The Guardian* and the *Michigan Daily* both published stories within a couple of weeks, adding layers on top of it, drawing connections to Journatic. We could see that there was something interesting happening, and we wanted to be able to identify where. We relied heavily on reporting from local news. Then we tried to use our technical skills to find other websites that fit the same bill.

CJR: It seems like reporting on this subject has underlined how the decline of local news has made these sites possible or more powerful, but at the same time, local news outlets are really the best positioned to identify these sorts of sites.

PB: Absolutely. The great thing about local newspapers or community newspapers is the fact that they're very much in touch with their audience. When a reader sees something untoward, they let reporters and editors know. I just learned recently about something called the *Catholic Tribune*—there are maybe seven of these sites in Wisconsin, Arizona, Michigan, etc. And as it turns out, there were people who were getting physical copies of this newspaper on their doorstep. And somebody who received one got in touch with the editor of a site that focuses on religious news, saying, *Hey, are you guys aware of this? This just turned up on my doorstep?* That's what helps us do our work.

CJR: **One thing that was striking to me in your research from December was what a small percentage of the content was produced by human beings. Did that surprise you?**

PB: Maybe surprising isn't quite the right word, especially if you consider the history of Journatic. But I think what struck me was that people in general—and there are a few studies that have shown this—people trust news that has data backing it up. If you put a number in a headline, it looks more trustworthy. I was taken by that thought: if you have a ton of stories on a site that have a number on them, the number-driven stories give the other stories legitimacy.

CJR: **From December of 2019 to August of 2020, you found that the number of these pink slime sites tripled. Did that match what you expected to see?**

PB: So I think we were expecting the network to grow. We weren't expecting it to grow as much as it did. And I think, you know, when you're going from about 450 to 1250, in a span of eight months, it's a considerable leap.

At Tow, we've been simultaneously doing the [layoff tracker](#) project. So you're looking at that every single day, in the Slack. You see yet another newsroom is closing down, cutting back operations—you have all of that going on in one space. And then you have a parallel space where these pink slime outlets are growing. That contrast was really interesting. A lot of these sites started coming to life in January, so they weren't pandemic-driven. I don't think the pandemic

changed any of their plans. But I think as we were reporting, that contrast really stood out.

CJR: Is this a relatively new phenomenon?

PB: I think it's a new iteration of an older phenomenon. We've already seen iterations of this with Journatic, which was slightly different—you had fake bylines, fake quotes, the works. Now, a lot of people are creating structured data: government agencies, state departments. And templating technology is writing templates for some of these things. You get a human to do two or three. And then you understand what pattern the algorithm needs to follow—you just template it, and scale becomes very, very achievable, and very, very easy.

So any open data set these sites can find, they can just write a template, and that'll churn out multiple stories for them. And, you know, if they're using federal data, which is broken down by state, that makes it much easier to just basically publish a very similar story in every single state that's relevant to that state.

These guys have also bought two local newspapers that have been around for 100 years or so. They're basically leaning on the built-in credibility or legitimacy.

CJR: So what comes next?

PB: Next year, it will be really interesting to try to unpack what happened—*what was the election coverage like? Do the election results change anything?* It's worth noting that a lot of these sites remain pretty dormant, other than the templated stories. But then they do go into overdrive if and when a big local news event happens, like in Kenosha [Wisconsin, where protests erupted in August after police officers shot Jacob Blake, a Black man, in the back]. I think that's the other thing that's probably going to be worth keeping an eye on in the next year. It'll be really interesting to see what 2021 brings.

The Journalism Crisis Project aims to train our focus on the present crisis, tallying lost jobs and outlets and fostering a conversation about what comes next. [We hope you'll join us \(click to subscribe\).](#)

EXPLORE THE TOW CENTER'S [COVID-19 CUTBACK TRACKER](#):

Over the past six months, researchers at the Tow Center have collected reports of a wide range of cutbacks amid the pandemic. Now there's an interactive map and searchable database. You can [find it here](#).

CONTRIBUTE TO OUR DATABASE: If you're aware of a newsroom experiencing layoffs, cutbacks, furloughs, print reductions, or any fundamental change as a result of covid-19, let us know by submitting information [here](#). (Personal information will be kept secure by the Tow Center and will not be shared.)

Below, more on recent media trends and changes in newsrooms across the world:

- **SENATE REPORT SUGGESTS INTERVENTION:** Some Senate Democrats published a report yesterday, indicating that they believed Facebook and Google ought to be required to pay local news for content, [the Wall Street Journal reported](#). Because the Justice Department's ongoing antitrust lawsuit against the tech platforms could take years to be resolved, the lawmakers argued for new authority for the Federal Trade Commission. The report also argues, in defense of local news publishers, that Google's platform pushes the limits of "fair use" copyright law. (The CEOs of Facebook, Google, and Twitter are [scheduled to appear](#) in a Senate hearing today.)
- **LOCAL NEWS SUPPORTS LOCAL VOTERS:** Amid voting procedures made more complicated by a pandemic, local news plays a crucial role in providing practical, procedural information to local voters, CJR reported this week. "Given the country's decentralized election system—a patchwork of rules determined state by state—local news

outlets play a crucial role in serving voters information,” [Shinhee Kang, Ian Karbal, and Feven Merid write](#). Some local outlets have provided guides to local candidates; others have explained the process of mail-in voting or how to troubleshoot ballot snafus before the election.

- **AFTER CUTBACKS, BUZZFEED BREAKS EVEN:** [For the Wall Street Journal, Lukas Alpert reported](#) that BuzzFeed expects to balance its losses in 2020. Though revenues are expected to be significantly lower than they were in 2019, the cutbacks that the publication has implemented—furloughs, pay reductions, layoffs—are on track to offset the loss. According to Alpert, some investors have questioned the financial value of BuzzFeed’s news division, whose costs chief executive Jonah Peretti identified as unsustainable. “The new cost discipline has had a noticeable impact at BuzzFeed: There are fewer editors in the newsroom and more limited production resources for staffers,” Alpert writes.
- **LOCAL GOVERNMENT COVERAGE DECREASES:** [For NiemanLab, Joshua Benton reported the findings from a recent study](#) indicating that local coverage of government and politics shrinks as much as any other topic as local newsrooms downsize. “Across different samples and measurement approaches, a typical cutback to a newspaper’s reporting staff reduces its annual political coverage by between 300 and 500 stories,” Erik Peterson, a Texas A&M Professor, reports.
- **MORE CUTS TO CABLE EXPECTED:** [Alex Sherman reported for CNBC](#) that American media companies expect another 25 million US households to cut the cord for their cable subscription over the next five years. This trend would lead to a loss in both subscription and advertising revenue, creating what Sherman calls “a tectonic shift in the

media industry.”

- **GANNETT SELLS LOCAL PAPER TO LOCAL OWNERS:** The *Inquirer and Mirror*, a Nantucket newspaper, announced that owner Gannett—the largest corporate newspaper publisher in the United States—had entered into agreements to sell the paper to local owners. *Inquirer and Mirror* editor and publisher Marianne Stanton says that the team of buyers is headed by David Worth, who “put together a small group of civic-minded individuals with a long-term history with the island who recognize the value newspapers play in a community and wanted to make this happen.”
- **MINNEAPOLIS PAPER THROWS A DIGITAL STATE FAIR:** The *Minneapolis Star Tribune* made the most of this year’s cancelled state fair, Sarah Scire reported for NiemanLab. After the Minnesota State Fair was nixed due to the coronavirus pandemic, the *Star Tribune* created a virtual event in its place, complete with Zoom programming, online competitions, trivia contests, and branded merchandise. While the yearly state fair is typically a financial cornerstone for the *Tribune*—providing opportunities for audience engagement, merchandise sales, subscription boosts, and marketing, this year’s online event yielded more than half of last year’s revenue from the in-person fair.
- **GOING SOLO HAS ITS CHALLENGES:** Last week, The Media Voices podcast interviewed journalists who have left publications to launch their own newsletters, highlighting the challenges inherent in the business model. Casey Newton, Thomas Baekdal, Simon Owens, Anne Helen Petersen, and Josh Sternberg discuss the decision to go solo, the lengthy process of pursuing profitability, strategies for developing a subscriber base, and the limited diversity among top-performing newsletters on Substack. And for Digiday, Max Willens wrote about the improbable growth of ads on Substack. Though Substack’s design limits

targeted advertising and complicates the ad-buying process, many advertisers appear “willing to experiment” with the platform.

- **MORE LAYOFFS, CLOSURES:** J-Source’s [COVID-19 media impact map](#) recorded a sum total of 141 Canadian outlets reporting job losses amid the pandemic. *Repeller*, a fashion site formerly known as *Man Repeller*, [is shutting down](#). The *Salt Lake Tribune*—which shifted to nonprofit status in 2019—announced that, come 2021, [it will no longer publish a daily print edition but will publish a weekly print paper](#).

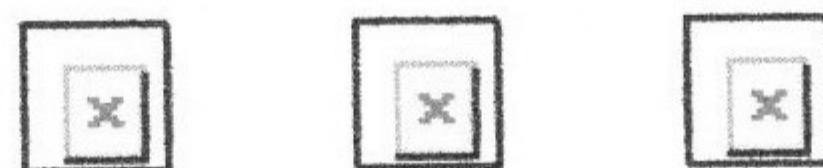
JOURNALISM JOBS AND OPPORTUNITIES: MediaGazer has been maintaining a list of media companies that are currently hiring. [You can find it here](#). The Deez Links newsletter, in partnership with Study Hall, [offers media classifieds](#) for both job seekers and job providers. The [Successful Pitches](#) database offers resources for freelancers. The International Journalists Network [lists international job opportunities alongside opportunities for funding and further education](#). And an organization of fifty writers called Periplus Collective recently [announced a mentorship program](#) to serve early-career writers who are Black, indigenous, and people of color.

Questions or comments about today's newsletter?

Reach today's newsletter editor, Lauren Harris, at leh2178@columbia.edu.

Our weekly podcast on media news, The Kicker, is available on [Apple Podcasts](#), [Stitcher](#), and [SoundCloud](#).

Catch up with all of our coverage at CJR.org.



You are receiving this newsletter because you signed up for emails from The Journalism Crisis Project.

To invite others to follow the Journalism Crisis Project, [share this link](#).

Columbia Journalism Review
801 Pulitzer Hall
2950 Broadway
New York, NY 10027

This email was sent to elena@judgewatch.org

[why did I get this?](#) [unsubscribe from this list](#) [update subscription preferences](#)

Columbia Journalism Review · 2950 Broadway · 801 Pulitzer Hall · New York, NY 10027-7060 · USA