

'It's hurt my wallet'—How one fake news publisher is faring after Facebook crackdown

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

"President Donald Trump signs an executive order allowing the hunting of bald eagles," a headline from the St. George Gazette blared last month.

The headline was fake—as is the St. George Gazette, a pseudo local news organization that's one of a handful of spoof-generating sites run by entrepreneur Paul Horner from his home in Arizona. Yet, Trump declaring open season on bald eagles story was widely shared, following the life cycle of inflammatory [fake news](#) stories that were frequently shared during the run-up to last year's election.

But this time something different happened.

About a week after the story posted, fact checkers at Snopes.com and FactCheck.org saw the story was being flagged by users and debunked it. After that, any time the link was posted or shared on Facebook, the social network showed this message beneath the headline: "Disputed by Snopes.com and FactCheck.org."

"There's definitely been a huge change, a dramatic change," Horner told USA TODAY by phone last month. "It's hurt my wallet for sure with how difficult it is now to get something to go viral and people so quick to call things fake news."

Facebook and Google came under fire late last year for allowing their networks and advertising programs to distribute and amplify fake news stories during the U.S. presidential election. In response, they said they've been cracking down on false stories and hoaxes, inking deals with fact-checking organizations, making it easier for users to report fake stories and choking economic incentives for fake news producers.

The snowball effect of these measures has been felt by Horner, the owner of ABCNews.com.co, CNN.com.de, the St. George Gazette and about 13 additional fake news domains. He's been interviewed by almost every major media outlet since the election and is even writing a book about fake news. He told The Washington Post after the election that he was making nearly \$10,000 a month from fake news alone.

After authoring widely shared fake stories about the entire Amish population voting for Trump and Twitter deleting Trump's account, he told The Washington Post he felt Trump was elected because of him—a sentiment he now disavows.

Horner said these days, almost all of his stories that go viral on Facebook get disputed and his most popular sites get marked as spam. Three of his sites, including ABCNews.com.co and CNN.com.de were removed from Google's ad network. He would not provide USA TODAY with exactly how many shares, views and dollars he's lost since Facebook and Google started cracking down on fake news. But he did say that all have slightly decreased.

"If people know the article might not be true then they're less likely to read it or if they think it's a gag or a joke they read it as that and then they don't share it," said Horner, who lures readers to his websites with a salacious headline then pockets ad revenue from the page views.

Business is tougher now for everyone else too. Several fake news sites have shuttered in the past six months or stopped publishing stories entirely. Jestin Coler, who was named the "king" of fake news by NPR, has "retired" from the business and took the widely popular NationalReport.net and the Denver Guardian with him. In total, 28 fake news sites have shut down in the months following the election, according to BuzzFeed News.

Still, fake news remains a lucrative business, as digital advertising networks find it difficult to enforce their policies, allowing fake news producers to monetize. Plus, fact-checking organizations tasked with debunking fake news may at times be too slow to react. Four fact-checking organizations partnered with Facebook told USA TODAY they debunk one or two fake stories a day at most.

"It's like playing whack-a-mole, as soon as a fake news site is identified and threatened, it can just refashion itself," said Melissa Zimdars, a communications professor at Merrimack College in northern Massachusetts. "They (Facebook and Google) have a huge role in this—and it's one where we're only seeing the beginning of them acknowledging."

The two Internet giants, Facebook and Google, have tried a combination of humans, algorithms and partnerships to flag fake news—without stepping into the controversial arena of censorship.

In early December, Facebook announced it would link up with third party fact-checkers: Snopes.com, FactCheck.org, Politifact, ABC News and the Associated Press to visibly debunk fake stories flagged by users. Stories deemed fake by these fact checkers then appear lower in the News Feed.

The social media giant has also limited fake sites from buying ads and upped its detection of fake profiles that help fake news spread. Links shared en masse by spammers also get a lower ranking in the News Feed, the company announced last month.

Facebook hasn't released specific data, but the company's Vice President of Product said there's been a "decrease" in fake news on the platform at the International Journalism Festival in early June.

Google in January said it had removed some 200 sites from using its AdSense program. Website owners using AdSense pick which kind of ads they want displayed and where. Google's software then does the grunt work of populating available website space with those ads.

In April, the company also changed its search algorithm to de-prioritize "clearly misleading content" and made it easier for users to report fake

stories populating search results.

But these tactics don't come without problems.

"No silver bullet"

When users on Facebook report fake news, fact-checking organizations have access to a program that displays which stories are being flagged the most often. Although they don't see exactly how many people have reported each story, when multiple organizations debunk a story, Facebook adds a "disputed" tag to the link. That story is then ranked lower in the News Feed, meaning it's less likely to show up on people's News Feeds.

Aaron Sharockman, the executive director of Politifact, told USA TODAY he sees about 200 flagged stories per day. A small amount of those stories are patently false, he said. The rest are either completely true stories reported by trolls or misleading—but not necessarily false—hyper-partisan clickbait.

Waiting for enough users to report a particular story may take too long. By the time two fact-checking organizations research and debunk a story—even if it's the next day—"it may be too late and the damage is done," said David Lazer, a professor at Northeastern University who has done extensive research on fake news.

"You have a bunch of humans that have to do their homework," said Lazer. "That kind of system is slow and open to manipulation."

Lori Robertson, managing editor at FactCheck.org, told USA TODAY the organization debunks between two and three articles per week for the Facebook partnership. She added that the partnership with Facebook has made the non-profit shift more resources to debunking fake viral claims.

Similarly, Sharockman said Politifact fact checks one or two fake stories per day for Facebook. The Associated Press does "a handful a week, often many more," said AP social media editor Eric Carvin. ABC News has debunked a total of two dozen stories since January.

"We're seven people total and we're also fact checking a White House that's certainly making a lot of news, so we're getting to one or two things, but we're only getting to one or two things," Sharockman said. "That means it may take a few days before we get to fact check even a popular story."

A Facebook spokesperson told USA TODAY in a statement that the company is using a "multi-pronged approach" to combat fake news.

"There's no silver bullet solution, which is why we've deployed a diverse and strategic plan," the statement reads.

Advertising networks

The same St. George Gazette that published the story about Trump legalizing the hunting of bald eagles as well as another widely debunked [story](#) about Trump saying he wanted to cancel Saturday Night Live, was still running Google ads as of July 11.

After this reporter told a Google spokesperson the St. George Gazette appeared to be violating its policies, the company removed Google ads from its website.

Google would not comment on the specific case.

Google's AdSense policy doesn't specifically target fake news, it only addresses "misrepresentative content" or deception. Only sites that masquerade as legitimate news organizations, meaning they don't have a

disclaimer claiming to be satire, are in violation of Google's policies. The St. George Gazette does not have a disclaimer.

Other advertising networks have similar policies against deception. But even when there's a clear cut violation—as was the case with Horner's St. George Gazette—the sheer number of fake news sites is difficult to keep up with, advertising networks say.

Revcontent, an advertisement service used by used by Forbes, Newsweek and Reuters, according to its website, also took similar action when notified the St. George Gazette was using its services. It's also the most popular ad service used by fake news creators, according to an April BuzzFeed News analysis.

In a statement to USA TODAY, Katherine McDermott, Revcontent's brand manager, said that its a challenge to keep up with violations when content can be changed at anytime without the company knowing, explaining why some fake news sites end up with Revcontent ads. She compared Revcontent to YouTube, saying that "If YouTube was to fact check every video on its site, it would be overwhelming to say the least."

Horner also uses MGID, a Los Angeles-based ad network, on the St. George Gazette. MGID said it would remove the ads from the site after an inquiry from this reporter.

"Fake [news](#) sites are prohibited at MGID. We fall onto some because we don't have the internal resources to validate what is considered fake or not," Michael Korsunsky, MGID's chief marketing officer, told USA Today in a statement.

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