

Phony 'news' portals surpass US newspaper sites, researchers say

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Credit: cottonbro studio from Pexels

Partisan websites masquerading as media outlets now outnumber American newspaper sites, a research group that tracks misinformation said Tuesday, highlighting a local news crisis in a year of high-stakes

elections.

Hundreds of sites mimicking news outlets—many of them powered by artificial intelligence—have cropped up in recent months, fueling an explosion of polarizing or false narratives that are stoking alarm as the race for the White House intensifies.

At least 1,265 "pink slime" outlets—politically motivated websites that present themselves as independent local news outlets—have been identified, the US-based research group [NewsGuard](#) said in a report.

By comparison, 1,213 websites of local newspapers were operating in the United States last year, according to Northwestern University's "local news initiative" project.

"The odds are now better than 50-50 that if you see a [news website](#) purporting to cover [local news](#), it's fake," the NewsGuard report said.

Nearly half of the partisan sites were targeted at [swing states](#), according to an analysis by the news site Axios, in what appears to be an effort to sway [political beliefs](#) ahead of the November election expected to be between President Joe Biden and Donald Trump.

Those sites include a network of 167 Russian disinformation sites that NewsGuard said were linked to John Mark Dougan, a US former law enforcement officer who fled to Moscow.

The other sites are backed by conservative as well as influential left-leaning groups such as Metric Media, Courier Newsroom and States Newsroom, the report said.

The rise of pink slime comes amid a rapid decline of local newspapers, many of which have either shut down or suffered extensive layoffs due

to economic headwinds.

A study by Northwestern University last year identified 204 counties out of some 3,000 in the United States as "[news](#) deserts," having "no newspapers, local digital sites, public radio newsrooms or ethnic publications."

Newspapers are continuing to vanish at an average rate of more than two per week, the study said.

It added that the United States has lost almost two-thirds of its newspaper journalists since 2005.

"With traditional newspapers disappearing... pink slime sites are rushing in to fill the void," NewsGuard's report said.

"Consequently, millions of Americans are left without legitimate local coverage."

Propaganda-spewing partisan websites have typically relied on armies of writers, but generative [artificial intelligence](#) tools now offer a significantly cheaper and faster way to fabricate content that is often hard to decipher from authentic information.

These websites underscore the potential of AI-powered tools—chatbots, photo generators and voice cloners—to turbocharge misinformation while further eroding trust in traditional media, researchers say.

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