

# How a Macedonian town became a 'fake news' epicentre

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Jovan got a pair of Nike sneakers and went on holiday to Greece, his reward for having helped turn the small Macedonian town of Veles into an epicentre of "fake news" during the 2016 US presidential race.

"That's what the so-called [fake news](#) sites bought me," said the 20-year-old who did not want to reveal his last name.

"I was earning about 200 euros (\$230) a month... Only a few earn this kind of money," he told AFP in Veles, home to around 50,000 people.

Once a thriving industrial hub, Veles has suffered decline since the break-up of the former Yugoslavia and, like the rest of the country, now grapples with rampant [youth unemployment](#) and mass emigration.

But two years ago, a new source of income unexpectedly opened up when investors offered money to locals for producing [news](#) stories in support of Donald Trump who was campaigning to become the 45th president of the United States.

Hundreds of websites and Facebook pages started to come out of Veles servers with the sole aim of tarnishing Trump's Democrat opponents like Hillary Clinton or his predecessor Barack Obama.

The sites, many of which have since disappeared, distributed articles about Clinton's alleged racist remarks on Beyonce or fake statements, in which she allegedly praising Trump's honesty.

Jovan, a student at the Veles's Faculty of Technology, was recruited in 2016 by one of dozens of local investors engaged in a clickbait race.

His work consisted of retrieving articles published mainly on right wing US websites, such as Fox News or Breitbart News, and then "adapting them, changing them a little, putting in a catchy title".

Jovan says he "doesn't know" if he contributed to Trump's victory, adding: "I don't care."

What mattered to the young man, whose parents lost their factory jobs in 2003, was that for the first time he made enough money to afford things.

"We were writing what people wanted to read," Jovan said.

## **'I helped Trump win'**

With lower living costs than Skopje—the only other city to offer a university degree in IT studies—students started to flock to Veles in recent years and get involved in clickbait sites.

Until 2016, they primarily focused on celebrities, cars and the lucrative beauty industry.

The sites helped generate income in a country where youth unemployment is a whopping 55 percent.

"Young people understood how Google algorithm worked and they were experimenting for couple of years with ways of making money from ads," IT expert Igor Velkovski told AFP.

But as the US presidential race heated up, politics suddenly became a new attractive target.

"Trump started to mean revenue. When Trump stories turned out to be profitable, they understood that conspiracy theories will always gain an audience," Velkovski said.

Web designer Borce Pejcev, 34, helped create many of the pro-Trump sites.

"It became clear that the conservatives were better for making money, they like conspiracy theory stories, which are always clicked before

being shared," he told AFP.

Digital consultant Mirko Ceselkovski makes no secret of the fact that he helped advise people like Pejcev on how to create fake news.

"I helped Trump win," his business card reads.

"I just taught them how to make money on internet and how to find an audience," Ceselkovski told AFP.

"The more clicks, the more Google Ads money... it's a click-ruled world."

## **'Vaccines kill'**

Even adults with steady jobs joined the fake news industry, including English teacher Violeta who only gave her first name.

During the US election campaign, she almost doubled her 350-euro monthly salary by working just three hours a day.

"I know it's wrong to take a side job which consists of saying 'Vaccines kill!', 'The Holocaust did not exist' or promoting Trump," said the mother of two.

"But when one is hungry, one doesn't have the luxury to think about democratic progress," she added.

Violeta said some of her own students were regularly "arriving late and sleeping in class" because they too were writing for those websites.

While Jovan has stopped producing fake news, his friend Teodor continues to work for a company that runs hundreds of lifestyle

websites.

Teodor is earning 100 to 150 euros monthly, almost as much as his mother, a part-time worker in a textile company.

"Blame me if you like, but between that and putting stories on internet, I choose the second option," Teodor said.

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