

Idaho Statesman

News network accused of ‘pay-to-play’ articles owns 11 local news websites in Idaho

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A network of online news sites accused of publishing politically slanted “pay-to-play” articles operates several websites targeted at Boise, the Treasure Valley and other communities across Idaho.

A New York Times article published Sunday unraveled the ties between hundreds of news sites reportedly operated by Brian Timpone, a former Illinois TV reporter. The Times report alleged Timpone’s nearly 1,300 websites feature articles commissioned by “clients” — conservative think tanks, public relations firms or corporate executives — who often dictate the slant of the articles, the reporters’ sources and sometimes the content of the articles.

The Times investigation links Timpone to multiple news conglomerates, including Metric Media, LLC. Metric Media’s website says it operates 10 sites in Idaho markets: Ada Reporter, Boise City Wire, CDA Reporter, Central Idaho Times, East Idaho Times, Gem State Wire, Magic Valley Times, North Idaho Times, Pocatello Times and Treasure Valley Times. The company claims dozens of other sites across 49 U.S. states. (It does not have any news sites in Illinois, where Timpone reportedly started a chain of news sites and print newspapers in 2015 that were later ordered to disclose their financial ties to political groups.)

Timpone is also linked to Franklin Archer, which publishes the Idaho Business Daily, as well as 50 other “Business Daily” publications.

The sites tout themselves as local news providers that offer “objective, data-driven information without political bias.” But the New York Times found the editors assigning stories with explicit instructions from clients who had paid for the coverage. Traditional news outlets do not accept payment in exchange for coverage, and the Federal Trade Commission requires paid advertising that looks like editorial content be clearly labeled as advertising.

“Many (clients) have pitched stories with instructions on what reporters should write, whom they should talk to and what they should ask,” the New York Times reported. “Over 17 days in July, these clients ordered up around 200 articles, company records show.”

These include articles meant to paint certain — usually conservative — politicians in a favorable light or to smear political opponents, articles aimed at influencing U.S. policy and articles promoting corporations or public figures, the Times reported.

Newspapers like the Lansing State Journal in Michigan and the Chicago Tribune have also raised concerns about articles published by Timpone’s websites in their respective areas.

“The nearly 40 new sites present a challenge for readers navigating a digital media environment that has unlimited space for publishing stories that are hard to distinguish as journalism, advocacy or political messaging,” the Lansing State Journal reported last October.

According to the New York Times, one of the Idaho sites cropped up in 2018 (the report doesn’t specify which site), while the rest were established in 2019. Timpone’s network of news sites stood at about 450 in 2019 across the U.S. and has tripled in size this year, [Columbia Journalism Review](#) reported.

One site, the Gem State Wire, [published a story in June quoting Wayne Hoffman](#), president of the libertarian think tank Idaho Freedom Foundation, as the sole source accusing Little of “failing” the state by enacting a stay-home order at the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

“As Idaho companies struggle against the current brought about by the COVID-19 crisis — and some slip under the waves — [Wayne Hoffman](#) knows who is to blame for not steering Idaho to safer harbors: the governor,” the article starts.

In a phone interview Tuesday, IFF spokesman Dustin Hurst said he wasn’t familiar with the news outlet

“We’ve never heard of the Gem State Wire, and we don’t know why Wayne is featured on their page,” Hurst said. “Wayne ... he’s not a fan of the media’s work. He has a ‘no media interview’ policy. So if this guy [the story’s author] identified himself as a reporter, Wayne wouldn’t have talked to him.”

Hurst said he believes quotes attributed to Hoffman in the Gem State Wire article may have been pulled from Hoffman’s live videos on social media. Hurst also said he reviewed IFF’s records and found no record of any financial transaction with the Gem State Wire. Hurst said the nonprofit does not use paid media coverage to promote itself.

The Gem State Wire has not responded to a request for comment.

Content is sparse on the other Idaho sites. The Idaho Business Daily features a string of what appear to be automated articles on employment statistics, demographic data and other public records. The New York Times reported that these automated articles are prevalent across Timpone’s networks and seem to be an offshoot of an automation service, called Journatic, that he developed about 10 years ago and sold to publishing companies like Hearst and Tribune. Aside from the automated articles, the Idaho Business Daily has published only three articles in October, one of which was a news release from the Boise Metro Chamber of Commerce.

“Some of the new sites have only the automated content, but they have quickly sprung to life when local news has arisen,” the Times reported. “That happened in August when protests erupted in Kenosha, Wis., after the police shot an unarmed Black man.”

Each of the Metric Media-operated Idaho sites seems to feature mostly automated articles, as well, including an aggregated rating of Gov. Brad Little’s fiscal policy taken from Libertarian think tank the Cato Institute. Various sites also have automated political campaign contribution reports, with each site focused on a seemingly random candidate, including Republican Rep. Mike Simpson, Constitution candidate Raymond Writz, Democratic candidate Jim Vandermaas and Democratic candidate Rudy Soto.