

THE SACRAMENTO BEE

They look like ordinary California news websites. Their backers: conservative operatives

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The home page of the Sacramento Standard website greeted its readers Tuesday with an alarming-sounding story about Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden's tax plan, an article giving Gov. Gavin Newsom mediocre grades on his budget policies, and a report on a major decline in California's hotel-tax revenue because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There was also this: no fewer than five separate stories extolling the benefits of an online distance-learning system created by an institute from Missouri.

Far from being a traditional information source, the Sacramento Standard is part of a nationwide network of nearly 1,300 sites backed by a collection of conservative think tanks, political strategists and public-relations executives.

According to a recent investigation by the New York Times, the sites dispense with the unbiased coverage that's the hallmark of mainstream journalism. Instead, they feature stories orchestrated by conservative operatives and, in some cases, are paid for by corporate clients attempting to gain publicity for a particular issue. Such "pay-for-play" tactics are considered well out of bounds in traditional news reporting.

"Many of the stories are directed by political groups and corporate P.R. firms to promote a Republican candidate or a company, or to smear their rivals," the Times wrote.

The Standard is one of four purporting to cover the Sacramento region, out of a total of 79 sites in California operated by Chicago-based Metric Media LLC and its affiliates. Other sites include the San Francisco Sun, Northern California Record and LA Harbor News. In the San Joaquin Valley, the brands include the Fresno Leader, Merced Times (not to be confused with the Merced County Times), SLO Reporter (for San Luis Obispo), and Stanislaus News.

California Democratic strategist Steve Maviglio dismissed the sites as "a bunch of conservative funders who are funding fake newspapers to really put their point of view across."

Mike Madrid, a Sacramento-based political strategist who's working with the Lincoln Project — the consortium of Republicans trying to elect Joe Biden — said the websites are clearly trying to drum up more support for conservative candidates and causes by using a platform that looks like a traditional news source.

Candidates will pay for the coverage, and the sites offer "an air of legitimacy," Madrid said. At the same time, the audience is receptive.

"There's a whole world out there in conservative circles that don't follow the mainstream media, they're averse to it. But they're very open to the idea of whatever their own bubble is telling them," Madrid said.

After Golden State Today published an interview with former Republican gubernatorial candidate John Cox criticizing Newsom's comments about vaccines being developed for COVID-19, Cox posted the story to his Facebook page, where it was shared 370 times. Newsom soundly defeated Cox in the 2018 election.

Cox appeared in another recent Metric Media story, this one in the San Francisco Sun, blasting local officials for allowing movie theaters to reopen but forbidding them from selling popcorn and other concessions. "These people have no concept of the real world," he said. Cox didn't respond to requests for comment about Metric Media.

Former Republican candidate for California governor John Cox has appeared in stories posted on Metric Media sites and shared them widely on Facebook. He is shown here on the campaign trail in 2018. Deke Farrow *JFARROW@MODBEE.COM*

AUDIENCE SIZE IS UNCLEAR

It's unclear whether Metric Media's sites are generally successful in influencing a broad audience.

The vast majority of their stories are "bland and not very controversial ... cookie-cutter," said Priyanjana Bengani, a fellow at Columbia University's Tow Center for Digital Journalism who's studied the Metric Media sites extensively.

Some of the same stories show up on website after website, such as the piece warning of ultra-high income tax rates if Biden wins the presidency (based on an analysis of his tax plan by the conservative Tax Foundation) or the story, based on an analysis by the conservative Cato Institute, giving Newsom a "C" for his fiscal stewardship.

Bengani said it appears 90% of the stories are generated by computer programs. Stories based on arcane data points proliferate. "There were 27 businesses in California zip code 95835 that had between 10 and 19 employees in 2017," reads one piece from Golden State Today.

Short stories abound — all of them identically written except for the names of the companies — on recipients of Paycheck Protection Program loans offered by the federal government in the early weeks of the coronavirus pandemic.

Reprinted press releases are popular, too. The San Joaquin Valley sites favor announcements from the U.S. attorney's office in Fresno. North Sacramento Today's home page Tuesday carried links to three releases from Assemblywoman Cecilia Aguiar-Curry of Winters — a Democrat, ironically. John Ferrera, the lawmaker's chief of staff, said Aguiar-Curry didn't pay for the coverage and isn't even aware of the website's existence.

Many of the stories on the home pages are months old, and Bengani said most of the Metric Media sites are essentially in hibernation.

"They're just churning out content right now," Bengani said. "They're laying the groundwork to build upon it in the future."

REVITALIZING LOCAL NEWS?

When a major story with political overtones erupts in a community covered by one of its websites, Metric Media takes a more active stance, engaging freelance writers to create original content.

Bengani said Metric Media's Kenosha Reporter has published multiple stories about the protests and civil unrest that gripped the Wisconsin community after an unarmed Black man was shot by police. One story, detailing the arrest record of the protester who was allegedly killed by a teenager, reached as many as 2.6 million people through promotion on Facebook, according to the New York Times.

Besides operating websites, Metric Media, the brainchild of a former TV news reporter named Brian Timpono, also has reached into California to buy a small family-owned newspaper, the Kern Valley Sun in Lake Isabella.

"We are on a mission to revitalize community news across the country," Kyle Barnett, general manager of Metric Media, said in a story announcing the purchase in August.

Others, though, say Metric Media is trying to undermine local news — and bend it to its political orientation — not revitalize it. As traditional media outlets have suffered in the digital era, Bengani said Metric Media is attempting to take advantage of the decline in local news coverage.

"People trust local news more, and local news is struggling for a business model," she said.

The "about" page of the Sacramento Standard says: "Metric Media was established to fill the void in community news after years of decline in local reporting by legacy media. This site is one of hundreds nationwide to inform citizens about news in their local communities."

A message sent to the Standard's email address went unanswered. An email to Metric Media's umbrella website bounced back as undeliverable.

NEEDING GOOD PUBLICITY

Arguably the most curious feature of the Metric Media sites is their fixation on Acellus — a web-based distance learning program created by a Kansas City nonprofit called the International Academy of Science.

The Sacramento Standard carried five favorable stories about Acellus — interviews with school principals and others from around the country — on its home page Tuesday. The Oakland Record and East Ventura News carried three apiece, while the Northeast Sacramento News and Pomona Valley News each had two stories.

"A kid can start in first grade and graduate from high school using Acellus," Craig Stephens, an assistant vice principal from Louisiana, said in a story carried in the East Contra Costa News.

Why so much coverage about Acellus? Roger Billings, creator of the program and leader of the Kansas City academy, didn't respond to a call and email seeking comment.

But it's clear that Acellus could use some favorable publicity. Two California school districts have dropped the Acellus system after parents complained about inappropriate content. The Chico Unified School District faced complaints about a spelling lesson featuring a woman waving a toy gun to illustrate that the word starts with "G," according to the Chico Enterprise-

Record. The Hawaii public school system cut ties after parents complained of “sexist or racist content,” according to the Honolulu Star-Advertiser.

Billings, in a video posted on his Facebook page in September, said Acellus is being vilified because of his support for President Donald Trump.

“All of it sudden it all changed, our content was bad. I began to be attacked personally,” he said. “Over the 20 years I’ve been doing this, we’ve never seen anything like this. Our content was never accused of being racist, sexist or any of the things they’re saying.”

The New York Times said business executives who find themselves under fire will turn to Metric Media for positive coverage. After a hotel tycoon and prominent Trump donor named Monty Bennett was criticized for taking \$70 million in coronavirus loans earmarked for small businesses, Bennett’s public relations team “ordered” favorable stories about him, the Times wrote. Bennett later returned the federal loan money.

PARTISAN WEBSITES GAINING POPULARITY

Partisan news sites are hardly unheard of.

The California Globe, founded by an associate of Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner, describes itself as “pro-growth and pro-business, non-partisan and objective” — but serves up a steady diet of conservative news and opinion. The Globe boasted that its stories racked up 1.1 million page views in July, which it described as a landmark achievement for the two-year-old site.

Progressives, meanwhile, have sites of their own. The New York Times said liberal donors have bankrolled a group called Courier, which publishes political news in eight swing states. In California, Capital & Main covers economics, labor, income inequality and other issues from the left side of the political spectrum.

Maviglio, the Democratic strategist, said the site gets financial support from organized labor. Its board of directors and advisory board includes such progressives as Yvonne Walker, president of the largest state workers’ union in California; Jared Bernstein, who was Biden’s economic advisor when he was vice president; and Robert Reich, labor secretary under Bill Clinton.

“We suggest stories, sources, and items to discuss, and they tend to do that,” Maviglio said.

Yet Maviglio said sites like Capital & Main and California Globe aren’t masquerading as local news sites. The Metric Media sites, by contrast, “bill themselves as community papers, and they’re not,” he said.

Are these sites harmful?

“Yeah it’s harmful,” Madrid said. “It is literally fake news. It is literally designed to fool people into believing that there is something, because no matter how it’s read, people are gonna believe that news source when it comes from a conservative validator.”