

Visalia Times Delta

Dozens of new websites appear to be California local news outlets, but with a political slant

Carol Thompson and James Ward

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Dozens of websites branded as local news outlets launched throughout California with monikers such as Tulare Times, Fresno Leader, Monterey Times, and Redding Today are promising local news but also offering political and paid messaging.

The nearly 90 sites in California — all operated by Metrics Media — 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, said Tim Drachlis, Tatarian Journalism chairman at Fresno State.

"It's tricky because they look like other sites," Drachlis said. "It's dangerous, especially for a public more passive in consuming news."

So how can readers spot a site offering planted and paid for stories or biased information?

First and most importantly readers should look for stories bylined by an actual reporter, said Drachlis, who worked in newsrooms for 30 years before transitioning into academia.

Other warning signs Drachlis said readers should look out for:

- The stories don't include both sides of an issue or use diverse sources
- The site concentrates on one type of story — usually political — with no community news or other features
- Check other sources of information or news on the story.

The Redding, Fresno, Monterey, and Tulare sites for instance all feature the same story about the conservative Washington D.C.-based Cato Institute giving California Gov. Gavin Newsom a mediocre grade for his tax and spending policies

The story did not include any evidence a reporter attempted to contact Newsom or his spokespeople for comment.

Other stories included what seems like computer-generated stories that scrape data off of government reports, including campaign [finance disclosures for local candidates](#) and [graduation rates](#) at local high schools.

According to a [New York Times report](#), the Metrics Media network of websites is overseen by Brian Timpone who a decade ago started Journatic, a service that automates reporting by turning public data into snippets of news.

Bradley Cameron, CEO of Situation Management Group, who describes himself as CEO of Metric Media in his [online biography page](#), also did not respond to a USA TODAY NETWORK email requesting comment on how Metrics Media operates.

His biography also says he has worked for pharmaceutical manufacturers, technology companies, and is retained by national conservative leaders to respond to "government targeting of their operations and initiatives."

In the same Oct. 18 New York Times [story](#) reporters found Metric Media was paid by Republican groups and corporate P.R. firms to publish favorable stories on its websites and smear rivals.

Nation-wide reach

It's just not California targeted by Metric Media's faux news sites. [Hundreds of sites across the nation](#) have been set up across almost 50 states.

A Metric Media-run Lansing Sun story describing Michigan's [well-padded road repair fund](#) first caught the attention of Matt Grossmann, director of Michigan State University's Institute for Public Policy and Social Research in 2019.

He was scrolling through his Facebook feed and saw the story promoted. Not recognizing the outlet, he clicked through to discover the vast network of related outlets "made to sound like local newspapers."

The road story and many others on Lansing Sun appeared to be right-leaning, said Grossmann, who leads the research institute and its [bipartisan political leadership training program](#).

Political information outlets aren't new, he said but presenting them as non-biased local news sources are.

"The big issue is this extent to which they have gone to try to confuse about this being the site of a local newspaper," he told the [Lansing State Journal](#), part of the USA TODAY NETWORK.

The sites have regional names and tabs for topics like business, local government, politics, real estate, and schools. Along with straightforward press releases about local government, gas prices, and home construction, the sites have stories with a conservative political bent.

Some of the sites' stories, including the one Grossmann read about road funding, are based on reports from the conservative Mackinac Center for Public Policy. The Mackinac Center is not affiliated with the websites, communications coordinator Holly Wetzel told the Lansing Journal.

'Metrics Media' launched these California sites

The ["About us" section of the California sites](#) say they are published by Metric Media LLC, a company that aims to fill the "growing void in local and community news after years of steady disinvestment in local reporting by legacy media."

Metric Media has launched thousands of such sites nationwide, the page says.

Journalism is not known to be a lucrative venture, Grossmann pointed out. The Pew Research Center has tracked continued declines in [newspaper revenue](#) and newsroom [staffing](#).

"That suggests the motives might be about political debate rather than to make money," he said.

The internet has created endless space for new groups to get into publishing, said Rachel Davis Mersey, the Associate Dean for Research in the School of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin and the former executive director of the Media Leadership Center at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism. She referred to the stories posted on such sites as "information with a perspective," rather than news.

She contrasted "information with a perspective" with advocacy journalism. To her, transparency is the difference — an organization's perspective should be obvious to online readers who might see the name of the outlet but not make the effort to find and read its mission statement.

She pointed to the National Audubon Society, a nonprofit known to support conservation and environmental causes, as an example. Their work is still journalism, she said, but with an obvious environmental tilt.

"[Advocacy journalism] comes from a point of view, and I think there's plenty of room for that in the ecosystem of news and information," Davis said. "I think the challenge becomes when that transparency disappears."

Not 'fake news,' but not straight news either

Some of the Metric Media websites provide different descriptions of their editorial direction.

Tulare Times, for example, says its mission is "to provide objective, data-driven information without political bias. We provide 100% original reporting, including to share as much data as possible from government and other publicly available source."

The Metrics Media sites in Fresno says it "provides a platform for all citizens whose views on issues are rarely heard. If you want a voice in your community, we want to hear from you."

A look at some of the content, though, shows no local reporting. A post about two South Valley men arrested for drug smuggling used the same wording as a press release sent by the U.S. Attorney's Office.

Ultimately, the onus of determining the difference between news and political messaging falls on the reader, Davis said. She suggested readers be careful to review the source of information they read — a challenge when stories are delivered via social media feeds — and suggested reading as close to the original source of news as possible.

"I think any kind of politically slanted information which people think could be from a reputable news source really compromises the quality of discourse we have in this country," Davis said. "It's not fake news but it's not exactly what we want people to be consuming either."