



Follow The Money: Right-Wing Funding Of 'Pink Slime' Websites Tracked In New Study

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Here are a few stories you missed if you haven't been perusing the North Boston News: a report that the libertarian Cato Institute has given Gov. Charlie Baker a "D" for fiscal management; a claim by the Tax Foundation that the marginal tax rate for Massachusetts residents could rise to 54.34% if President Joe Biden's tax proposal becomes law; and an interview with a voter from Salem on why she casts her ballot on the basis of "values."

All of these prominently featured stories, by the way, are from last fall. But lest you think I've merely stumbled upon a ghost website, there are also a number of nearly identical reports from just this past week on teachers from Peabody, Lynn, Andover and other communities who have pledged to teach critical race theory in their classrooms.

So what weird manner of website is this? And where is North Boston, anyway?

The answer to the first question is it's part of Metric Media, a network of some 1,200 websites in all 50 states that purport to be sources of local news. In fact, they are right-wing propaganda projects funded by wealthy conservative interests with ties to the Tea Party movement and a Catholic group that spent nearly \$10 million in an effort to defeat President Joe Biden last fall, to name just two of many examples. And there are 14 of these sites in Massachusetts alone.

As for the second question — well, I can't help you. North of South Boston? South of the North End? East of the sun and west of the moon?

These sites are sometimes called "pink slime," no doubt because the head of Metric Media, Brian Timpone, was involved in an earlier venture nearly a decade ago that was also referred to as "pink slime." That project, Journatic, produced local content for newspapers using grossly underpaid, out-of-town reporters — including cheap Filipino workers who wrote articles under fake bylines.

Metric Media, by contrast, is a political play. Right-wing interests give money through a series of interlocking organizations in return for publishing indoctrination disguised as local news. And if the out-of-date content makes sites like the North Boston News seem harmless, well, just wait until 2022, when the mid-term election campaigns start heating up and the websites spring back to life.

Priyanjana Bengani, the author of a **major new report** on pink-slime sites published by the Tow Center at the Columbia Journalism School, puts it this way: “Increasingly, we are seeing political campaigning which uses news as a cloak for campaigning activities potentially further undermining trust in legitimate local news outlets. For such operations to be successful, the network does not have to be widely read or deliver broad impact, it simply has to gnaw away at the edges of the consciousness of the voting public.”

The phenomenon has been called out before, most notably in a **New York Times story** last year. And it is not exclusively the province of right-wingers; as the Times reported, there are some Democratic-leaning sites as well. But the overwhelming preponderance of pink slime is on the right, with Timpone the biggest player.

The study that Bengani oversaw, published in two parts by the Columbia Journalism Review, comprises a blizzard of details — related ventures, a multiplicity of business partners and a range of political players. Her team relied on specialized software, IRS filings, Facebook and Google ad libraries and an internal analytics tool to ultimately trace the spiderweb of connections between Metric Media and right-wing interests.

Consider one such relationship: Local Government Information Services, or LGIS, is a collaboration between Timpone and Illinois right-wing activist Dan Proft. One of Proft’s associates at LGIS is John Tillman, who, according to IRS filings, has been involved in multiple organizations that have paid Timpone’s various groups. Tillman’s financial backing, in turn, has come from wealthy Illinois interests as well as foundations affiliated with the Koch, Mercer and Uihlein families.

Of course, the Kochs are already well known. The Mercers came to prominence during the Trump era as backers of Breitbart.com and Steve Bannon. The Uihleins, though, are new to me and maybe to you as well. They shouldn’t be. **According to a 2018 profile** in The New York Times, Liz and Dick Uihlein are “the most powerful conservative couple you’ve never heard of,” spending tens of millions of dollars “to advance a combative, hard-right conservatism, from Washington to the smallest town.”

Another organization with ties to Timpone’s sites is the Convention of States, affiliated with Mark Meckler, who in turn appears to have what Bengani refers to as a “co-branding” relationship with Metric Media. Meckler is a founder of the Tea Party Patriots and became interim chief executive of Parler, the right-wing Twitter alternative, after the original chief executive was removed following the Jan. 6 insurrection. The Convention of States has called for a constitutional convention “to dramatically restrict the power of the federal government.”

I could go on, but you get the idea. What we are talking about, essentially, is a vast pay-to-play scheme, with right-wing organizations funneling money to Timpone in return for being allowed to publish on his multifarious networks. I don't know how effective it is; the examples I've looked at are pretty thin gruel compared to the weaponized propaganda you find at Fox News or Newsmax.

Unlike Fox or Newsmax, though, Metric Media flies under the radar, publishing its partners' messages on sites that purport to be a solution to the local news crisis. In that respect it's like **Sinclair Broadcasting**, whose 185 television stations in 86 U.S. markets sprinkle **right-wing political content** into local newscasts.

The alternative to pink slime is more nutritious fare — real local news that informs us and grounds us in our communities. The problem is that there is a lot less of that than there used to be.

And if that doesn't change, we may all find ourselves living in North Boston.