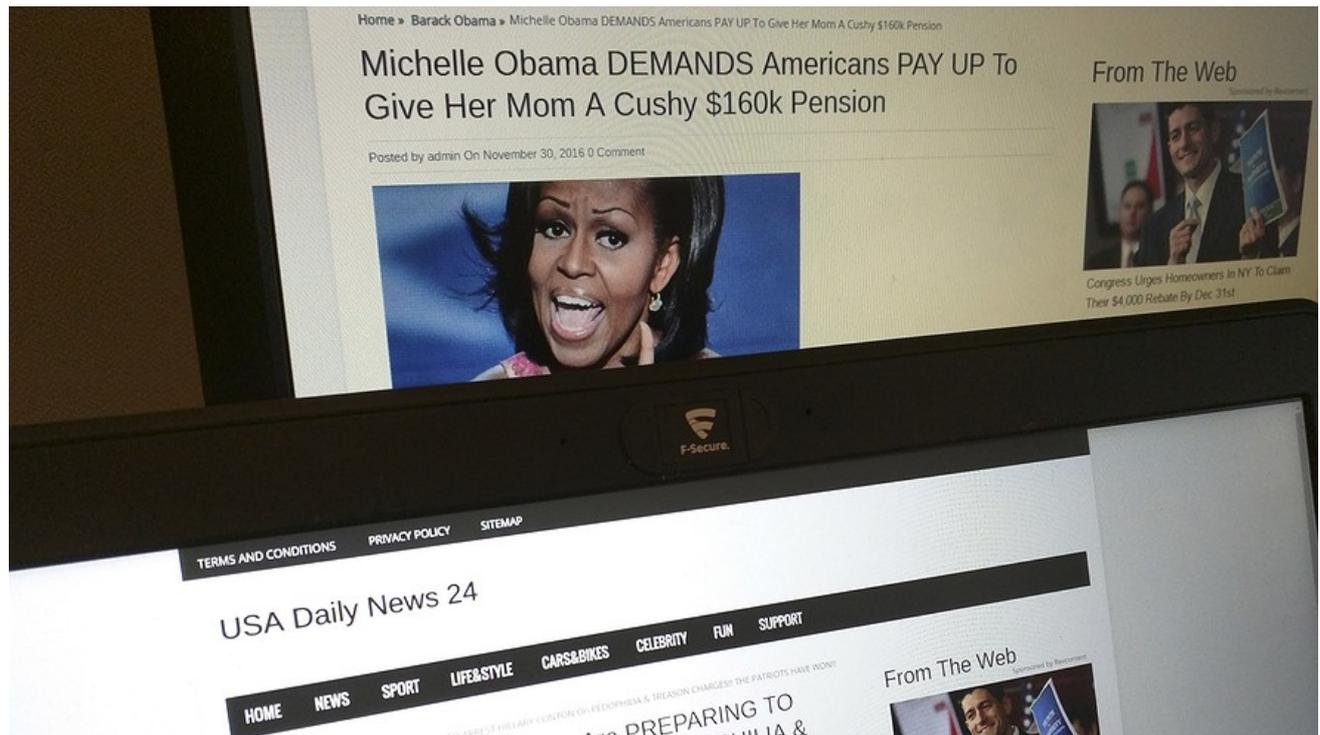


Websites that publish fake news make money and suffer no consequences

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.09.17

Word Count **851**



This photograph taken in Paris, France, on December 2, 2016, shows stories from USA Daily News 24, a fake news site registered in Veles, Macedonia. Photo: AP Photo/Raphael Satter

LOS ANGELES, Calif. — It's never been easier to launch a wildly profitable online media empire. Just \$10 gets you a URL and online storage. Fill out a short form and copy-paste to get ads on your website.

Then lure in some readers and you'll have no trouble making money.

Every 1,000 visitors earns you at least a dollar or two with banner ads sold through Google. But the same number of hits will make you three times the amount of money from recommended content ads. They combine crazy headlines with exciting pictures.

"Site Reveals an Alarming Amount About Your Past (Photos & More)."

"19 Bikinis That Aren't Covering Anything."

It's that mix of ads that funds much of the Internet, including major media websites like LATimes.com, Bloomberg.com and Newsweek.com.

Advertising Technology Companies Are Not Regulated

But the advertising technology companies have few regulations. They let sites that publish fake news make as much money as they can.

They take advantage of a general rule in online publishing: the crazier the story, the greater the interest. They post exaggerated political news articles — some with made-up quotes and details — that millions of consumers can't resist opening.

President Obama banning the national anthem at sporting events? Anything to get more attention on Facebook — and more income through recommended content ads.

Stopping fake news is now a major focus of the tech industry. Facebook, where the stories spread, has pledged to combat misleading publishers.

Ad Networks Hold The Power

But it's the ad networks that can do more to stop fake news. They hold the power to remove the profit for sites dealing in deception.

Years ago, the only way for a publisher to sell an ad was to work directly with an advertiser. Google, AOL and others realized that this was expensive and time-consuming for both sides and built huge businesses to make the process simpler. With just a few clicks, advertisers and tech companies now automatically place messages on many publications at once.

Businesses will spend more than \$30 billion on nonvideo online ads in the U.S. alone this year. People who want to advertise pay dimes or pennies each time their message gets clicked. The tech companies split the money with websites that run the ads. Publishers tend to get a bigger portion of the money the larger and more important they are, sometimes higher than 50 percent. People in the misleading news business have said they can make up to tens of thousands of dollars per month.

Many ad tech companies check sites for hate speech, violent content or illegal drugs. But they do not check whether information is accurate.

Hanks Supporting Trump Story Was Fake

Before last month's presidential election, more than 100,000 Facebook users promoted articles that claimed Hollywood star Tom Hanks was voting for Donald Trump. Hanks actually supported Hillary Clinton.

Conservative101.com, ReaganCoalition.com, WorldPoliticus.com and other websites produce mostly real stories. But they rely on the viral posts for most of their traffic, according to research firm SimilarWeb. As much as 90 percent of their monthly visitors publication arrive by clicking on a Facebook link.

Some ad companies didn't respond to requests for comment. Nearly all the rest said they don't want to say what's fact and what's fiction.

AdSupply.com Chief Executive Justin Bunnell said he doesn't feel comfortable determining whether Hanks actually supported Trump.

Advertisers and major sites are increasingly urging ad networks to clean up their act. Media critics and politicians want action too, fearing that bad information makes it hard for readers to make good decisions.

Google And Facebook Have Banned Fake News Sites

Some are making changes. The top two online advertising companies, Google and Facebook, have banned fake news sites from using their ad services. DoubleVerify just released a new filter to block fake news websites and provides a tool for advertisers to control where ads run on a site.

Revcontent is expanding beyond a ban. As early as next year, it wants to provide ratings of advertised links describing a website's quality and political slant.

"Providing more information is how you empower people," said Revcontent CEO John Lemp, vowing to donate any profit tied to fake news.

It's unlikely that any action by ad technology suppliers or social media services would fully thwart those who deliberately spread fake news.

The Truth Is That Fake News Sells

There's also the element of human nature. Advertisers want eyeballs, and people are more likely to click on more exciting content.

"Lots of junk is there because that's what people call on," said Mike Rosenberg, chief revenue officer at Content.ad.

Its continued existence also shows that it works, and ad tech companies have little reason to change a product that customers are buying.

"Fake news sites probably perform as well as a real news website, so I don't think it makes an impact on my bottom line," said lifestyle blogger Andrew Wise. He paid for a link to his website on AmericanReviewer.com, the source of the Hanks-backs-Trump story. "That being said, from an ethical perspective, I would prefer to work with a business that prohibits fake news."

Quiz

- 1 Which of these statements would be MOST important to include in an objective summary of the article?
- (A) If a website has to choose between banner ads and recommended content ads, the smart choice is content ads because they generate more income.
 - (B) Proving how ignorant people are, a ridiculous story about President Obama banning the national anthem at sporting events got a lot of attention on Facebook.
 - (C) Even though ad tech companies check sites for hate speech and violent content, they could not care less about making sure information is accurate.
 - (D) Because of the amount of money that is made from fake news, it is unlikely that social media services such as Facebook and Google will be able to completely stop fake news websites.

- 2 Read the paragraph from the section "Ad Networks Hold The Power."

Years ago, the only way for a publisher to sell an ad was to work directly with an advertiser. Google, AOL and others realized that this was expensive and time-consuming for both sides and built huge businesses to make the process simpler. With just a few clicks, advertisers and tech companies now automatically place messages on many publications at once.

Which central idea of the article is MOST supported by this paragraph?

- (A) It is very easy for people to make money from online advertising.
 - (B) Most advertisers have little interest in determining what is fact and what is fiction.
 - (C) Advertisers and tech companies have few regulations about online publishing.
 - (D) Many people automatically click on stories that seem exciting.
- 3 Based on the article, which answer choice BEST describes the connection between viral posts and online advertising?
- (A) Viral posts have some online advertising that is fake.
 - (B) Viral posts tend to have more online advertising than other types of posts.
 - (C) Viral posts tend to be fake news stories that contain online advertising.
 - (D) Viral posts attract many visitors to sites with online advertising.

- 4 Based on the article, what is the main reason online advertising companies such as Google and Facebook have banned fake news sites from using their ad services?
- (A) They want to make it easier for people to make good decisions.
 - (B) They are responding to outside pressure from various sources.
 - (C) They are tired of trying to check which news sites are real and which are fake.
 - (D) They believe the fake news sites are making too much money from using their ad services.