micapitolnews.com

One in a network of websites that presents itself as a local news site in Michigan. The site does not disclose its conservative agenda or issue corrections. Much of the content is generated by bots.

Ownership and Financing

The site is one of 38 Michigan news sites owned by Metric Media, a company created in March 2019, according to business registration records filed in Texas. Metric Media is "a national media company that operates more than 1,100 community-based news sites," according to a profile of the company's CEO, Bradley Cameron, on the website of another company Cameron runs, Situation Management Group.

The sites are operated by a Chicago-based company called Locality Labs, also known as Local Labs, which is owned by former TV reporter and media entrepreneur Brian Timpone. Cameron told NewsGuard in an email, "We retained Locality Labs because of their expertise in gathering and reporting data-driven stories."

In 2014, Locality Labs became the new name of a company Timpone founded in 2008 called journatic, which was a news service that offered "hyperlocal" stories to publications throughout the U.S., including the Chicago Tribune, The Houston Chronicle, and The San Francisco Chronicle. In 2012, an investigation by public radio program This American Life and reporting by other news organizations revealed that the company had outsourced the "hyperlocal" stories to overseas contractors in the Philippines, relied on fake bylines, and plagiarized content. Timpone told The San Francisco Chronicle that stories with fake bylines were limited to real estate stories, and said the use of fake bylines "was an oversight and mistake but hardly malicious."

NewsGuard's research found that the sites in the Michigan Network are among at least 170 sites connected to Locality Labs, as indicated by shared privacy policies, news alerts, and bylines. Many of these websites present themselves as local news sites that are part of statewide networks in Illinois, Florida, and Maryland, among other states.

Locality Labs also operates the Metro Business Network, which publishes business-oriented sites for all 50 states, as well as for Mexico and Guatemala. Other Locality Labs sites produce industry-specific content, such as FDAReporter.com and TobaccoNewswire.com.

NewsGuard found that eight of the 38 Metric Media sites targeting Michigan were running advertisements in October 2019. According to the About pages of sites in the Michigan Network, Metric Media has "a licensing agreement" with the Metric Media Foundation, a nonprofit that was created in February 2019. However, no information is provided on any of the sites about the funding of Metric Media, the Metric Media Foundation, or Locality Labs.

With apparently little advertising revenue and no subscription revenue, this undisclosed funding appears to be the network's essential source of revenue, Timpone refused NewsGuard's repeated requests to disclose the network's source of funding.

Content

The site states on its About Us page that "Metric Media LLC began to fill the void in local and community news after years of steady disinvestment in local reporting by legacy media. This site is one of hundreds we are launching nationwide to fill the void in local communities." Sites in the Michigan Network share the stated mission "to provide objective, data-driven information without personal or political bias. We let the facts speak for themselves."

The sites in the network publish stories aimed at various Michigan communities, reflected in the sites' names: The Lansing Sun, Grand Rapids Reporter, Kalamazoo Times, North Kent news, among others. The sites often link to stories on other Michigan Network sites, as well as to Michigan Business Daily, a Locality Labs-owned site in the Metro Business Network.

Content is organized into sections including Business, Politics, Local Government, Real Estate, Schools, and Taxes.

According to a March 2018 story published in the Columbia Journalism Review, most stories published on Locality Labs' Illinois network of websites "are written by algorithms ... using software that analyzes data (school test scores, for instance) and splits it by region to deliver local publications around the state." The same appears to be the case for sites in Metric Media's Michigan Network, which have identical site designs to the Illinois network and are also operated by Locality Labs.

Articles that appear to be algorithmically created draw on publicly available data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the Veterans Administration, GasBuddy.com (a site that lets users search gas prices by zip code), among other sources. These articles are typically short, following a formula that starts with a data point or statistic and then identifies the source, along with a table of related data.
Typical articles on the sites in this genre have run under headlines including "18 accommodation and food services businesses in Michigan have 500 or more employees in 2016" (from MiCapitolNews.com); "U.S. travel arrangement and reservation services report 2.5% increase in revenue from Q4 2018 to Q1 2019" (WaterfordToday.com); and "Best station to purchase midgrade unleaded gas near zip code 48103" (AnnArborTimes.com).

Many other stories are rewritten press releases from local governments, politicians, and organizations, with headlines such as "Grand Rapids Chamber: Breakfast with Legislators Returns After the Summer Break," and "Sen. Lucido spearheads committee approval of three privacy-related bills."

Credibility

Most stories on sites in the Michigan Network either appear to be created by algorithm or are taken from press releases. Articles in the former category rely on data from credible organizations such as the U.S. Census Bureau, and articles in the latter are clearly labeled as press releases. These articles give sites in the Michigan Network a local feel, although the sites do not appear to conduct original reporting in their coverage areas. Headlines accurately reflect the content.

In addition to stories created by software or drawn from press releases, sites in the Michigan Network feature a small number of original stories. These articles are apparently produced by writers who identify themselves on LinkedIn as freelance writers based outside of Michigan or who are employed by businesses connected to Timpone, the owner of Locality Labs. For example, NewsGuard found two writers, one based in Florida and the other in Chicago, who say on LinkedIn that they are employed by Franklin Archer, a Chicago media production company whose website shares an IP address with multiple Locality Labs sites.

These articles typically promote conservative politicians and policies or criticize liberals. For example, an October 2019 story, headlined "They didn't say it; crowd fails to respond with Tlaib impeachment pettigorae directed at Trump at rally," from MiCapitolNews.com, was critical of a September 2019 rally in Washington by Democratic Rep. Rashida Tlaib. The story was based on a video from the conservative America Rising Political Action Committee.

The site also runs press releases and writes some original stories about conservative groups, such as The Heritage Foundation ("15 cases of Michigan voter fraud documented by Heritage Foundation" from October 2019) and the Mackinac Center for Public Policy ("Nonprofit suggests lawmakers adjust nexus thresholds in light of Supreme Court decision on sales taxes," from September 2019).

The sites in the network also regularly highlight the efforts of Republican politicians in Michigan, with stories such as "Postor Schulte places abortion, gospel at heart of mayoral bid," (from GrandRapidsReporter.com in October 2019) and "Sen. Theiss says proposed budget 'demonstrated that we can come together';" (from AnnArborTimes.com in October 2019.)

Overall, the sites in the Michigan Network present themselves as neutral sources of local news because of the dominance of algorithmically created local content, while relying on non-local writers to produce content based on a political agenda — without revealing that agenda. Therefore, NewsGuard has determined that the sites do not gather and present information responsibly.

The Detroit Metro Weekly wrote that the sites "appear in a swing state right before an election year, and also come at a time when trust in local news is eroding — due in part to Trump's influence but also due to digital platforms like Facebook blurring the line between real and fake news outlets."

Brendan Nyhan, a Dartmouth College professor of government, wrote in a New York Times column: "At a time when social media has become a key gateway for sharing information, the collection of websites underscores how political messaging can be deftly re-packaged to look like the fading local journalism that readers were used to trusting."

Asked about the sites' editorial standards and practices, Cameron said in an email: "We also have no interest in falling models that are too expensive because they rely on local reporters instead of just reporting local facts (which can be gathered from anywhere more affordably via phone calls, emails, and data searches). In our model, we don't care which of our reporters writes a story, only that it is fact-based and accurate."

The sites in the network do not disclose a political or ideological orientation, stating on their About pages that they publish "objective" journalism without "political bias." Yet the site's articles, such as the ones cited above, consistently promote Republicans and conservatives. Therefore, NewsGuard has determined that the site does not handle the difference between news and opinion responsibly.

In an email to NewsGuard, Cameron denied that the sites have a political agenda. "We have no interest in partisan political reporting and believe partisan media is ineffective and in decline—plus, we are a 501(c)3, so must remain strictly non-partisan," he said, referring to the Metric Media Foundation.

Sites in the Michigan Network do not articulate a corrections policy, and NewsGuard did not find recent corrections. Therefore, NewsGuard has determined that the sites do not regularly correct or clarify errors.

NewsGuard also sent two emails each to MiCapitolNews.com, Locality Labs, and Locality Labs' CEO Brian Timpone, seeking comment on the Michigan Network's "Editorial Practices, its research in communities, and the handling of errors." but did not receive a response.
Transparency

The website's About page describes the site's ownership by Metric Media and its licensing agreement with the Metric Media Foundation — although the site does not list any of the foundation's donors. The site also does not disclose possible conflicts of interest involving owner and CEO Bradley Cameron. Cameron's profile on the website of another of his companies, Situation Management Group, states that he "is presently retained by national conservative leaders to direct responses to government targeting of their operations and initiatives."

Because this potential conflict of interest created by the political and ideological work of the site's owner is not disclosed on sites in the Michigan Network, and because the sites do not disclose any donors to the association that funds the site's content, NewsGuard has determined that the Michigan Network sites do not provide sufficient information about its ownership.

Asked about this, Cameron told NewsGuard: "We also don't seek to exercise editorial control, so my engagements with other corporations, political leaders, and others is not a conflict, it is why I was retained."

The sites in the network do not disclose information about their editorial leaders or content creators. Some stories are attributed to authors, but no biographical or contact information is provided.

The sites do not state whether they are paid to publish press releases. (Timponge also owns a paid-content company called Newsinavigator, also known as Interactive Content Services, which states on its site that "we make ordering up news on your business a simple process" and that "We offer publication on our network of Google News approved sites.")

Some sites in the Michigan Network run display advertisements, which are distinguishable from editorial content.

NewsGuard sent two emails each to MiCapitolNews.com, Cameron, Locality Labs, and Timponge, seeking comment on the Michigan Network's lack of transparency about its ownership, editorial leadership, and content creators, but did not receive a response.

History

Sites in the Metric Media Michigan Network were created on June 30, 2019. The Lansing State Journal, a local newspaper in Lansing, Mich., first called attention to the sites in an October 2019 story. Matt Grossman, director of Michigan State University’s Institute for Public Policy and Social Research, told the paper that “the big issue” is that the sites appear to be designed “to try to confuse” residents into thinking that they are local newspaper sites.

Written by: Kendrick McDonald
Edited by: Eric Effron

Send feedback to NewsGuard: Click Here

Sources

Ownership and Financing

https://opencorporates.com/companies/us.tn/0803269971
https://www.situationmanagementgroup.com/brad-bio
https://apps.irsc.gov/appco/displayAll.do?id=1215326656&en=533525020
https://bisd.sos.mo.gov/Common/CorrespondenceItemViewHandler.ashx?isTIF=true&fileDocumentId=14314880&version=2
https://lanshingun.com/privacy
https://opencorporates.com/companies/us_de/4589563
https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1548647/000154864713000004/xxFormDX01/primary_doc.xml
https://www.thisamerican.org/extras/updates-about-journatic
https://archives.cjr.org/behind_the_news/plagiarism_and_a_resignation_a.php
http://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/ligis-profit-news-illinois.php

Content

https://micapitolnews.com/about_us
| Credibility | https://archive.md/h2HwHw  
|            | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PB5w8K4Fzw&feature=youtu.be  
|            | https://archive.md/wkLjLH  
|            | https://archive.md/4F4Yw  
|            | https://archive.md/gjNJOQ  
|            | https://archive.md/ujQ32U  
|            | https://archive.md/JOe3x  
|            | https://archive.md/v62zqT  
|            | https://www.linkedin.com/in/hollie-ferguson  
|            | https://www.linkedin.com/in/shanice-harris-9435a668/  
| Transparency | https://lansingsun.com/about_us  
|            | https://genesenews.com/author/shanice-harris  
|            | https://monroereview.com/author/chris-adams |