

thehighwire.com

The website for a talk show hosted by anti-vaccine activist Del Bigtree. The site has published false claims about vaccines and the COVID-19 pandemic.



Proceed with caution: This website severely violates basic journalistic standards.

Score: 17.5/100

Ownership and Financing

TheHighWire.com is owned by the Informed Consent Action Network (ICAN), an anti-vaccine nonprofit based in Texas. ICAN's website describes the group's mission as "Investigating the safety of medical procedures, pharmaceutical drugs, and vaccines while advocating for people's right to 'informed consent.'" ICAN is listed as the owner of the site's Facebook page.

The website hosts "The HighWire with Del Bigtree," described in a press release as "ICAN's weekly science and health news program." Host Del Bigtree is an anti-vaccine activist and the CEO of ICAN. According to an April 2019 article in The Daily Beast, Bigtree worked as a producer on the syndicated talk shows "Dr. Phil" and "The Doctors" before producing the 2016 anti-vaccine documentary "Vaxxed."

Bigtree has been quoted by news organizations including The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and Seattle's KOMO News about his opposition to state legislation that would make it harder to opt out of mandated vaccinations.

In 2018, ICAN reported taking in \$2.5 million in revenue, almost all from contributions and grants. The Washington Post reported in June 2019 that "roughly three-fourths" of the group's funding has come from the nonprofit Selz Foundation, run by hedge fund manager Bernard Selz and his wife Lisa, who is identified as ICAN's president on its filing with the Internal Revenue Service.

The site does not run advertisements.

Content

TheHighWire.com publishes text articles and videos on health topics, mostly about vaccines and pharmaceuticals. The site's Watch section hosts

- ✗ Does not repeatedly publish false content (22points)
- ✗ Gathers and presents information responsibly (18)
- ✗ Regularly corrects or clarifies errors (12.5)
- ✗ Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly (12.5)
- ✓ Avoids deceptive headlines (10)
- ✗ Website discloses ownership and financing (7.5)
- Clearly labels advertising (7.5)
- ✗ Reveals who's in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest (5)
- ✗ The site provides names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information (5)

Criteria are listed in order of importance.

[More information.](#)

episodes of “The HighWire with Del Bigtree,” with episodes including “COVID-19: The Lockdown Calamity,” “The True Cost of Autism,” and “WHO is Lying to You?”

Other content consists of shorter videos hosted by Bigtree, under headlines such as “Top 10 Reason We’re Off ‘Team Corona-Phobia,” or promote his work with the Informed Consent Action Network.

The site’s Jaxen Report section features original commentary by Jeffrey Jaxen, identified on the ICAN website as “researcher, investigative journalist, and writer.” Typical headlines in this section have included “America at a Crossroads: Freedom vs. Fear” and “Unemployment: The Other Health Crisis.”

Credibility

Articles and videos on TheHighWire.com have repeatedly promoted false and misleading health claims, including about the COVID-19 pandemic.

For example, a January 2020 video titled “Coronavirus: What They Aren’t Telling You” promoted the false claim that the COVID-19 virus was manmade. In an interview with Del Bigtree, researcher James Lyons-Weiler claimed that the COVID-19 virus contains a “pShuttle-SN sequence.” Lyons-Weiler called the sequence a “technology by which molecular biologists insert new genes into viruses and bacteria,” and claimed that his observations suggested that the virus was genetically modified in a lab. “One thing we can say for certain is that this particular virus has a laboratory origin,” Lyons-Weiler said.

A February 2020 article from health fact-checking website HealthFeedback.org reported that the COVID-19 virus does not contain the pShuttle-SN sequence, as Lyons-Weiler claimed. According to HealthFeedback.org, a search of the U.S. National Center for Biotechnology Information database found that the COVID-19 virus has many more similarities to known bat coronaviruses than to the pShuttle-SN sequence.

Scientific evidence does not support the claim that the COVID-19 virus was created in a lab. A March 2020 study published in the journal Nature Medicine concluded that the virus “is not a laboratory construct or a purposefully manipulated virus.” In an April 2020 statement, the U.S. Intelligence Community said that it “concur[s] with the wide scientific consensus that the COVID-19 virus was not manmade or genetically modified.”

In an April 2020 video titled “Should You Really Wear A Mask?,” Bigtree promoted false health claims about the use of face masks during the pandemic. In the video, he quoted from an article, first published on Technocracy.news, that claimed that wearing a mask could cause the COVID-19 virus to enter the brain. “By wearing a mask, the exhaled viruses will not be able to escape and will concentrate in the nasal passages, enter the olfactory nerves and travel into the brain,” Bigtree said, quoting the Technocracy.news article.

There is no evidence backing this claim. In a May 2020 fact-checking article from The Associated Press, Sarah Stanley, an infectious diseases professor at the University of California, Berkeley, said that the claim lacked any scientific basis. “Breathing out the virus is not going to appreciably change the amount that is there,” Stanley told The Associated Press. “Therefore, there should be no reason why wearing a mask would increase your chance of infection in the brain.”

TheHighWire.com has repeatedly made false claims about vaccines. For example, a November 2019 article titled “Vaccine Science is NOT Settled,” asserted that autism rates are lower among the unvaccinated. “For those who refuse all vaccines, the autism rate is 1 in 10,000,” the article stated. “For the victims enduring the CDC battery of injected poisons, it is 1 in 60. European countries have shown a bit more inoculation restraint, and therefore their autism rate is correspondingly lower.”

The article did not cite a specific source for these statistics, but peer-reviewed studies conducted in Europe have found no association between vaccination and autism. An April 2019 study of 657,000 children in

Denmark, published in *Annals of Internal Medicine*, found no link between the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism. The prevalence of autism was slightly lower among the vaccinated population included in the study, compared to the unvaccinated.

In a May 2019 article, headlined “Twitter Forcing Government Misinformation On Its Users,” the site claimed that aluminum-based adjuvants, which are substances added to vaccines to help accelerate the immune system’s response in producing antibodies, can cause autism. “Over a decade of international, scientifically corroborating evidence has shown injected aluminum adjuvants can travel throughout the body, deposit into the brain, trigger neurological conditions, and have been implicated in the mechanisms leading to autism,” the article stated.

The U.K. National Health Service states on its website that “the amount of aluminium used in killed vaccines is very, very small. No harmful effects have been seen with vaccines that contain an aluminium-based adjuvant.” The NHS, along with the CDC and World Health Organization and backed by an abundance of scientific evidence, have repeatedly stated that vaccines do not cause autism.

To promote the debunked vaccine-autism link, TheHighWire.com has misrepresented a lawsuit that the Informed Consent Action Network filed against the CDC. The group has sued the CDC in an effort to force the agency to provide the studies that the CDC relies upon for its conclusion that various vaccines given within the first six months of life — including the diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis (DTaP) and polio vaccines — do not cause autism.

In a March 2020 article headlined “Alex Azar’s Health Disaster,” the HighWire.com claimed that “the CDC finally conceded, in a stipulation signed by a Federal court judge, that it has no studies to support that any of these vaccines do not cause autism.”

In fact, the CDC responded to the lawsuit with a list of 20 peer-reviewed studies demonstrating that there is no link between vaccines and autism. As reported in a

March 2020 article by HealthFeedback.org, one of the studies, published in the Journal of Pediatrics in August 2013, found no association between the risk of developing autism and the vaccines given between birth and seven months, covering the vaccination period singled out in ICAN's lawsuit.

Because TheHighWire.com's articles and videos have regularly promoted false and misleading health claims, NewsGuard has determined that the site repeatedly publishes false content and fails to gather and present information responsibly.

Headlines on the website are often broad and do not typically include false or misleading information. For example, the April 2020 video that promoted false claims about face masks was titled "Should You Really Wear A Mask?" Therefore, NewsGuard has determined that the site does not fail to avoid deceptive headlines.

TheHighWire.com does not post a corrections policy, and NewsGuard did not find any corrections on the site.

The site discloses owner Del Bigtree's agenda on vaccines in the Who Is Del? Section, calling him "one of the preeminent voices of the Vaccine Risk Awareness Movement" and stating that his "Vaxxed" documentary "is credited with igniting a revolution against Pharmaceutical Tyranny around the world."

However, articles that are labeled "news" often contain opinion. For example, a May 2020 article titled "Trump's 'Operation Warp Speed' Vaccine Project: Some Scenarios," said that "Perhaps Trump's presidency never had a chance up against a virus of fear that transformed the world into a perpetually panicked new age. An age in which individual liberties and Constitutional rights took a nationally uncharacteristic knee to the greater good of society. A medical 9/11 which ushered in invasive, technologically-driven contact tracking to our daily lives."

Another May 2020 article, headlined "The 'New Normal' is Far from Normal," stated, "With the American economy crashing, and several states' citizens protesting, the governors are struggling to keep their

populations locked down. Law enforcement is scrambling to implement limited, ham-fisted solutions serving to further erode civil liberties and privacy.”

Because articles labeled news often include opinion, NewsGuard has determined that TheHighWire.com does not handle the difference between news and opinion responsibly.

Asked for comment, ICAN spokesperson Thomas Seibert raised concerns about NewsGuard’s standards and fairness, in emails and in a phone interview. He did not respond to questions about the articles cited above, the site’s approach to corrections, and its handling of the difference between news and opinion.

Transparency

The HighWire.com does not disclose that it is owned by the Informed Action Consent Network. The Selz Foundation is not identified as the main financial supporter of ICAN.

The site provides Del Bigtree’s biography at the bottom of every page. His photo appears in the site’s logo, which reads “The HighWire with Del Bigtree.” However, the website does not say whether he is in charge of the site’s content.

Bigtree is the only content creator for whom a biography is provided. Commentator Jeffrey Jaxen’s articles are bylined, although no biographical or contact information is provided on the site. Many articles do not list an author. The Contact page provides a general email address and a contact form.

The site does not run advertisements.

Seibert, the ICAN spokesperson, did not respond to NewsGuard’s questions regarding the site’s lack of transparency regarding its ownership, editorial leaders, and content creators

History

The first episode of “The HighWire with Del Bigtree” was released in 2017. The website’s Facebook and Twitter pages were registered that same year.

Edited by: [Eric Effron](#)

Send feedback to NewsGuard:[Click Here](#)

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