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We Tracked Down A Fake-News Creator In The Suburbs. Here's What We Learned

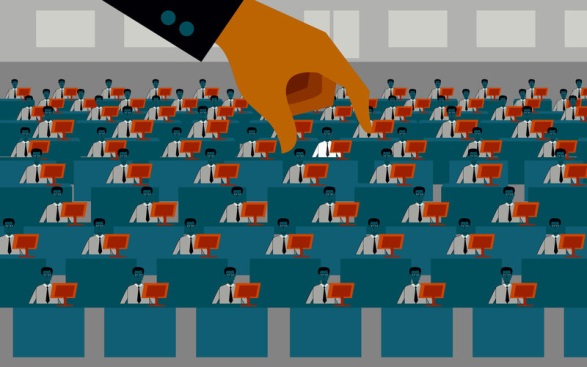
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A lot of fake and misleading news stories were shared across social media during the election. One that got a lot of traffic had this headline: "FBI Agent Suspected In Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead In Apparent Murder-Suicide." The story is [completely false](http://www.snopes.com/fbi-agent-murder-suicide/), but it was shared on Facebook over half a million times.

We wondered who was behind that story and why it was written. It appeared on a site that had the look and feel of a local newspaper. Denverguardian.com even had the local weather. But it had only one news story — the fake one.

[](http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/11/23/503129818/study-finds-students-have-dismaying-inability-to-tell-fake-news-from-real)

[The Two-Way](http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/)

[Study Finds Students Have 'Dismaying' Inability To Tell Fake News From Real](http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/11/23/503129818/study-finds-students-have-dismaying-inability-to-tell-fake-news-from-real)

We tried to look up who owned it and hit a wall. The site was registered anonymously. So we brought in some professional help.

By day, John Jansen is head of engineering at Master-McNeil Inc., a tech company in Berkeley, Calif. In the interest of real news he helped us track down the owner of Denverguardian.com.

Jansen started by looking at the site's history. "Commonly that's called scraping or crawling websites," he says.

Jansen is kind of like an archaeologist. He says that nothing you do on the Web disappears — it just gets buried — like a fossil. But if you do some digging you'll find those fossils and learn a lot of history.

The "Denver Guardian" was built and designed using a pretty common platform — WordPress. It's used by bloggers and people who want to create their own websites. Jansen found that the first entry ever for the site was done by someone with the handle LetTexasSecede.

Article continues after [sponsorship](http://www.npr.org/about-npr/186948703/corporate-sponsorship)

The whole idea from the start was to build a site that could kind of infiltrate the echo chambers of the alt-right, publish blatantly or fictional stories and then be able to publicly denounce those stories and point out the fact that they were fiction.

Jestin Coler, publisher of fake news sites

"That was sort of the thread that started to unravel everything," Jansen says. "I was able to track that through to a bunch of other sites which are where that handle is also present."

The sites include [NationalReport.net](http://nationalreport.net/), USAToday.com.co, WashingtonPost.com.co. All the addresses linked to a single rented server inside Amazon Web Services. That meant they were all very likely owned by the same company. Jansen found an email address on one of those sites and was able to link that address to a name: Jestin Coler.

Online, Coler was listed as the founder and CEO of a company called Disinfomedia. Coler's LinkedIn profile said he once sold magazine subscriptions, worked as a database administrator and as a freelance writer for among others, International Yachtsman magazine. And, using his name, we found a home address.

On a warm, sunny afternoon I set out with a producer for a suburb of Los Angeles. Coler lived in a middle-class neighborhood of pastel-colored one-story beach bungalows. His home had an unwatered lawn — probably the result of California's ongoing drought. There was a black minivan in the driveway and a large prominent American flag.

We rang the front doorbell and a man answered, his face obscured by a heavy mesh steel screen. I asked for Jestin Coler. The man indicated that's who he was. But when I asked about Disinfomedia, he said, "I don't know what to tell you guys. Have a good day."

[](http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/11/17/495827410/from-hate-speech-to-fake-news-the-content-crisis-facing-mark-zuckerberg)

[All Tech Considered](http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/)

[From Hate Speech To Fake News: The Content Crisis Facing Mark Zuckerberg](http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/11/17/495827410/from-hate-speech-to-fake-news-the-content-crisis-facing-mark-zuckerberg)

We left Coler our contact information thinking he wasn't likely to talk. But a couple of hours later he had a change of heart. He sent us an email and we set up an interview.

Coler is a soft-spoken 40-year-old with a wife and two kids. He says he got into fake news around 2013 to highlight the extremism of the white nationalist alt-right.

"The whole idea from the start was to build a site that could kind of infiltrate the echo chambers of the alt-right, publish blatantly or fictional stories and then be able to publicly denounce those stories and point out the fact that they were fiction," Coler says.

He was amazed at how quickly fake news could spread and how easily people believe it. He wrote one fake story for NationalReport.net about how customers in Colorado marijuana shops were [using food stamps to buy pot](http://nationalreport.net/colorado-pot-shop-accept-food-stamps-taxpayer-funded-marijuana/).

"What that turned into was a state representative in the House in Colorado [proposing actual legislation](http://www.denverpost.com/2014/01/14/fake-report-about-colorado-pot-shops-food-stamps-creates-havoc/) to prevent people from using their food stamps to buy marijuana based on something that had just never happened," Coler says.

[](http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/11/20/502567858/post-election-overwhelmed-facebook-users-unfriend-cut-back)

[All Tech Considered](http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/)

[Post-Election, Overwhelmed Facebook Users Unfriend, Cut Back](http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/11/20/502567858/post-election-overwhelmed-facebook-users-unfriend-cut-back)

During the run-up to the presidential election, fake news really took off. "It was just anybody with a blog can get on there and find a big, huge Facebook group of kind of rabid Trump supporters just waiting to eat up this red meat that they're about to get served," Coler says. "It caused an explosion in the number of sites. I mean, my gosh, the number of just fake accounts on Facebook exploded during the Trump election."

Coler says his writers have tried to write fake news for liberals — but they just never take the bait.

Coler's company, Disinfomedia, owns many faux news sites — he won't say how many. But he says his is one of the biggest fake-news businesses out there, which makes him a sort of godfather of the industry.

At any given time, Coler says, he has between 20 and 25 writers. And it was one of them who wrote the story in the "Denver Guardian" that an FBI agent who leaked Clinton emails was killed. Coler says that over 10 days the site got 1.6 million views. He says stories like this work because they fit into existing right-wing conspiracy theories.

"The people wanted to hear this," he says. "So all it took was to write that story. Everything about it was fictional: the town, the people, the sheriff, the FBI guy. And then ... our social media guys kind of go out and do a little dropping it throughout Trump groups and Trump forums and boy it spread like wildfire."

[](http://www.npr.org/2016/11/08/500686320/did-social-media-ruin-election-2016)

[Politics](http://www.npr.org/sections/politics/)

[Did Social Media Ruin Election 2016?](http://www.npr.org/2016/11/08/500686320/did-social-media-ruin-election-2016)

And as the stories spread, Coler makes money from the ads on his websites. He wouldn't give exact figures, but he says stories about other fake-news proprietors making between $10,000 and $30,000 a month apply to him. Coler fits into a pattern of other faux news sites that make good money, especially by targeting Trump supporters.

However, Coler insists this is not about money. It's about showing how easily fake news spreads. And fake news spread wide and far before the election. When I pointed out to Coler that the money gave him a lot of incentive to keep doing it regardless of the impact, he admitted that was "correct."

Coler says he has tried to shine a light on the problem of fake news. He has spoken to the media about it. But those organizations didn't know who he actually was. He gave them a fake name: Allen Montgomery.

Coler, a registered Democrat, says he has no regrets about his fake news empire. He doesn't think fake news swayed the election.

"There are many factors as to why Trump won that don't involve fake news," he says. "As much as I like Hillary, she was a poor candidate. She brought in a lot of baggage."

[](http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/11/15/502111390/facebook-google-take-steps-to-confront-fake-news)

[All Tech Considered](http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/)

[Facebook, Google Take Steps To Confront Fake News](http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/11/15/502111390/facebook-google-take-steps-to-confront-fake-news)

Coler doesn't think fake news is going away. One of his sites — NationalReport.net — was flagged as fake news under a new Google policy, and Google stopped running ads on it. But Coler had other options.

"There are literally hundreds of ad networks," he says. "Early last week, my inbox was just filled every day with people because they knew that Google was cracking down — hundreds of people wanting to work with my sites."

Coler says he has been talking it over with his wife and may be getting out of the fake-news racket. But, he says, dozens, maybe hundreds of entrepreneurs will be ready to take his place. And he thinks it will only get harder to tell their websites from real news sites. They know now that fake news sells and they will only be in it for the money.

Below are highlights of NPR's interview with Coler.

Interview Highlights

Tell me a little about why you started Disinfomedia?

Late 2012, early 2013 I was spending a lot of time researching what is now being referred to as the alt-right. I identified a problem with the news that they were spreading and created Disinfomedia as a response to that. The whole idea from the start was to build a site that could infiltrate the echo chambers of the alt-right, publish blatantly false or fictional stories and then be able to publicly denounce those stories and point out the fact that they were fiction.

What got you engaged in this?

My educational background is in political science. I've always enjoyed the ideas of propaganda and misinformation. Then I coupled that with an interest in what makes things go viral. So that led me to finding those groups and ultimately to finding contributors. But it was just something I had an interest in that I wanted to pursue.

When did you notice that fake news does best with Trump supporters?

Well, this isn't just a Trump-supporter problem. This is a right-wing issue. Sarah Palin's famous blasting of the lamestream media is kind of record and testament to the rise of these kinds of people. The post-fact era is what I would refer to it as. This isn't something that started with Trump. This is something that's been in the works for a while. His whole campaign was this thing of discrediting mainstream media sources, which is one of those dog whistles to his supporters. When we were coming up with headlines it's always kind of about the red meat. Trump really got into the red meat. He knew who his base was. He knew how to feed them a constant diet of this red meat.

We've tried to do similar things to liberals. It just has never worked, it never takes off. You'll get debunked within the first two comments and then the whole thing just kind of fizzles out.

How many domains do you own and run?

Well, I would say there's somewhere around 25 domains that I am currently managing. National Report has been my bread and butter, where I've spent most of my time. I have people who work with me and for me in developing and maintaining the other sites and social media kind of stuff. [Coler later said not all his sites are fake news.] So I, for the most part, focus on National Report, and a lot of the other stuff is run by other folks on the team.

So, you're the publisher of an empire.

Well I wouldn't go so far as to call it an empire but, yes, it's several sites [chuckle].

How many people do you have writing for you?

It comes and goes, and as for actual employed writers, again these guys sort of make their own money through ad code. So I don't say, 'Hey, you have to write 10 stories this week' and this and that. Really, we have a more free-form idea where people, when their creativity strikes them then they can write something. And if they're in a slump then they just go dormant for a while. With that said, at any given time there's probably 20, 25 contributors all over the country. ...

Talk about the "Denver Guardian."

Well, it's kind of a side project. We have some people working on next steps in the fake-news industry, and that came from that whole discussion. We had purchased several domain names that sounded legitimate. ... More local news sort of stories. The idea was to make the sites look as legit as possible so the home page is going to be local news and local forecast, local sports, some obituaries and things of that nature, and then the actual fake news stories were going to be buried off the home page.

We've tried lots of things in the past. The dot-com-dot-co domains were something I toyed in for a while. Those I quickly got away from because you don't get away long with borrowing someone's copyright or trademark. That was something that worked very well from a fake-news perspective. People were fooled into the domain name, but that wasn't so much what we were after. So again, the next step was to go after more city-type sites. And the "Denver Guardian" was one of those sites.

You're talking about the future of this (fake-news business) which looks more insidious because it's more real?

That's the way that it's going to be. Not just from where I am. I mean, this is probably going to be my last run in the fake-news biz, but I can promise you that it's not going to go away. It's even going to grow bigger and it's going to be harder to identify as it kind of evolves through these steps. ...

Do you know who wrote the actual FBI Clinton story?

I do know who wrote the story, but only through an anonymous pen name. Privacy is something that we take very seriously in our writers group. The actual reasonings behind that story ... it's one of hundreds that have been written about mysterious deaths of Clinton associates or political foes. This one kind of took off more than others, I believe, just because of the nature of the story. The people wanted to hear this. So all it took was to write that story. Everything about it was fictional. The town, the people, the sheriff, the FBI guy. Then, we had our social media guys kind of go out and do a little dropping it throughout Trump groups and Trump forums and boy it spread like wildfire.

Why hide your identity?

This isn't the safest business to be in, to be honest. Just the number of death threats I've received. I have a beautiful family, a beautiful life.

Some of these people that we ... bait is probably the right word — are often — let's call them the deplorables, right? They're not the safest crowd. Some of them I would consider domestic terrorists. So they're just not people that I want to be knocking on my door.

It seems like National Report is getting spoofier.

If you went to National Report today, it's specifically satire. "Chris Christie nominated to Supreme Food Court." "Sarah Palin Banning Muslims from Entering Bristol Palin." They're a little bit more offensive than some people care for their satire. I mean fat-shaming and slut-shaming isn't something that is normally met with applause. But again, it's a lot more fun in nature.

Do you make serious money?

It depends on what you would call serious money. I think I do pretty well.

Can you say how well?

I would rather not. There have been some people who have been reported on recently. The folks in Long Beach that were doing just all right stuff. They were reporting $10,000 to $30,000 a month; I think that's probably a relative ballpark.

So you're doing as well as those?

Yes.

You're making money through the ads?

Yes.

Who do you work with?

We have several advertisers. Google was one, although they shut down my account last week. We've replaced them with other advertisers.

Can I ask who?

There are literally hundreds of ad networks. Literally hundreds. Last week my inbox was just filled everyday with people, because they knew that Google was cracking down — hundreds of people wanting to work with my sites. I kind of applaud Google for their steps, although I think what they're doing is kind of random. They don't really have a process in place for identifying these things. I happen to know a very successful site that, as of today, of this morning is still serving Google ads. So it seems to be a kind of arbitrary step that they're taking either based on, I don't know if it was my reputation within the industry or specifically the "Denver Guardian" site that angered them, or I don't know what it is, but back to your question, there's hundreds of people that will work with me.

What can be done about fake news?

Some of this has to fall on the readers themselves. The consumers of content have to be better at identifying this stuff. We have a whole nation of media-illiterate people. Really, there needs to be something done.

Do you consider yourself an entrepreneur?

Sure.

Are you one of the biggest in the fake-news biz?

If you look at someone who has specifically sometimes peddled in fictional news then I think that I would probably be considered one of the larger sites.

As a liberal, do you have any regrets?

I don't. Again, this is something that I've been crying about for a while. But outside of that, there are many factors as to why Trump won that don't involve fake news, right? As much as I like Hillary, she was a poor candidate. She brought in a lot of baggage.

You don't feel responsible.

I do not.

Do you think you would have kept doing it if it wasn't so lucrative?

Really, the financial part of it isn't the only motivator for me. I do enjoy making a mess of the people that share the content that comes out of our site. It's not just the financial incentive for me. I still enjoy the game I guess.

Would you do this all over again?

Well, I guess it came to a head here and we're talking about it. It'll be interesting to see what happens moving forward. If I had to, if I knew specifically the "Denver Guardian" situation, that would have been handled differently. But everything else, as far as the work I've done with National Report, I'm very proud of, and I'm going to continue doing it.