



White Paper

Fake News Websites and a US-Macedonia Partnership

Executive Summary

In 2016, a stream of fake news websites emanated from a small town in Macedonia called Veles. Multiple media investigations discovered that a group of teenagers there made a living creating fake news websites about American politics and fake medical advice websites that were loaded with pay-per-click ads. The teenagers copied content from both conservative and liberal-leaning websites, seizing an opportunity to attract American readers and generate increased revenue.

Nisos investigates foreign actors involved in spreading fake news online. During our research, we discovered that false sensationalist stories – many of which were slightly edited versions of articles from fringe outlets – were being propagated by a new network of websites registered in 2018 and 2019.

Both Conservative Edition News and other websites identified as part of this network (including a site named Liberal Edition News) were loaded with pay-per-click ads. Interestingly, the network of sites were similar in appearance and function to domains established by Macedonia-based actors in 2016. This similarity led Nisos to investigate and attribute the individuals behind this new network of websites.

A Macedonian Connection: *Following the Breadcrumbs*

After noticing significant commonalities between the Conservative Edition News and fake news websites established by individuals based out of Veles, Macedonia in 2016 Nisos began an effort to determine whether this was a coincidence and if not, who was involved.

Veles, Macedonia, a town of about 44,000, became notorious during the 2016 election when news outlets, such as Rolling Stone, Wired, BuzzFeed, CBS News, and The Guardian, discovered that teenage residents there were operating a number of fake political news sites aimed at influencing the U.S. presidential election. Many of the website creators got their start running fake medical advice websites. However, they saw an opportunity in the U.S. election to make more money.

Most of the content for their sites during the election came from existing U.S.-focused political websites and blogs, though they often edited the articles to make them more sensational to attract more readers.

Many fake news sites are typically sensationalistic, have clickbait headlines, encourage sharing on social media, and earn money with ad clicks. But in this case, Conservative Edition News listed the content copyright holder as “Bivona Digital,” a company registered in the U.S. with no obvious ties to Macedonia.

Conservative Edition News prompted its visitors to sign up to receive a newsletter with their email addresses; by doing so, the site informed them, they consented to receive a newsletter from rightwingfolks.com. Right Wing Folks was a WordPress site registered on June 17, 2018. Historical Whois registration information identified Macedonia as the country of registration for Right Wing Folks. This website’s copyright holder was also listed as Bivona Digital.

Like Conservative Edition News, Right Wing Folks was loaded with pay-per-click ads. Posts were mostly edited versions or summaries of articles from various far-right outlets. Posts typically earned 1,000 social media shares, but more sensational content received as many as 53,000 shares, the majority of which was shared to Facebook. The site sent out a twice-daily newsletter with links directing users to the Right Wing Folks website and pay-per-click ads. Posts were also frequently shared on far-right forums like Gab and on Russian social media site Vk.com.

After reviewing Facebook pages for Conservative Edition News and Right Wing Folks, Nisos discovered a third site owned by Bivona Digital, Liberal Edition News (www.liberaleditionnews.com), registered on March 28, 2019 – the same day Conservative Edition News was registered. Posts on Liberal Edition News focused on subjects considered politically left-leaning. Liberal Edition News also featured articles posted on Conservative Edition News, such as an article critical of Representative Ilhan Omar, and often directed readers to articles from Conservative Edition News under its “Trending” tab.

By analyzing IP addresses from the websites of Conservative Edition News, Right Wing Folks, and Liberal Edition News, Nisos discovered other websites that appeared to be part of the same network, including freedompoliticstoday.com and americatheawesome.com.

Freedom Politics Today is now inactive but has a registration address in Veles, Macedonia (based on historical Whois registration information). Also inactive, America the Awesome was registered to Bivona Digital. A third site, Demand Change Now (demandchangenow.com), lists Bivona Digital as the copyright holder and lists the company’s address in Sausalito, CA.¹ Demand Change Now was registered on March 29, 2019 but is privacy protected. Using DNStyitics, Nisos discovered that Demand Change Now uses the same Google Analytics ID as Conservative Edition News and Liberal Edition News, confirming that the sites are operated by the same people or organization.

What is Bivona Digital?

Nisos confirmed that Bivona Digital is a registered business entity in both Delaware and California. According to Delaware's Department of State, Bivona Digital was incorporated July 17, 2017 as a domestic corporation.² The company was registered in California July 26, 2017 and named Ken LaCorte as CEO in the filing.³ Additionally in 2018, LaCorte submitted an updated statement of information with California's Secretary of State, naming himself as Bivona Digital's CEO, Secretary, and Chief Financial Officer.⁴

A former vice president of Fox News Digital, LaCorte left Fox in 2016. In 2018, LaCorte recruited former NPR editorial director Michael Oreskes and former Fox News executive editor John Moody to launch LaCorte News, "a digital news startup with the stated goal of restoring faith in media."⁵ The website claims its editors "sort through thousands of stories every day, striving to give [readers] fair and full news coverage."⁶

Nisos uncovered multiple connections between LaCorte's Bivona Digital and Macedonia. First, Bivona Digital regularly recruited for website employees in Veles and Skopje, Macedonia. On February 12, 2019, Bivona Digital, Inc. placed a job ad on a Macedonian job board looking for a full-time "Website Writer," specifically from the town of Veles. The ad listed the job's tasks as "Writing text/news from different fields in English" in "collaboration with the site editor." Nisos discovered at least four other job postings from Bivona Digital on the same job board between November 2018 and October 2019, including for a video editor and two graphic designers.

Nisos also determined that at least four content authors on Bivona Digital's network of websites lived in Macedonia. One of these individuals operated fake news sites in 2016, including the now-inactive politicaldose.com and politicaldose.online.

Nisos identified four individuals located in Macedonia – three of them in Veles – that are content writers for websites in this network, primarily from JSON files for the sites that listed the names of the individuals who authored or uploaded content. Review of the LinkedIn profile for one of the individuals listed showed they worked as content writers but did not include a connection to Bivona Digital. LaCorte was Facebook friends with at least two of the Macedonia-based employees and all four content writers we identified were Facebook friends with each other.

¹ www.demandchangenow.com

² <https://icis.corp.delaware.gov>

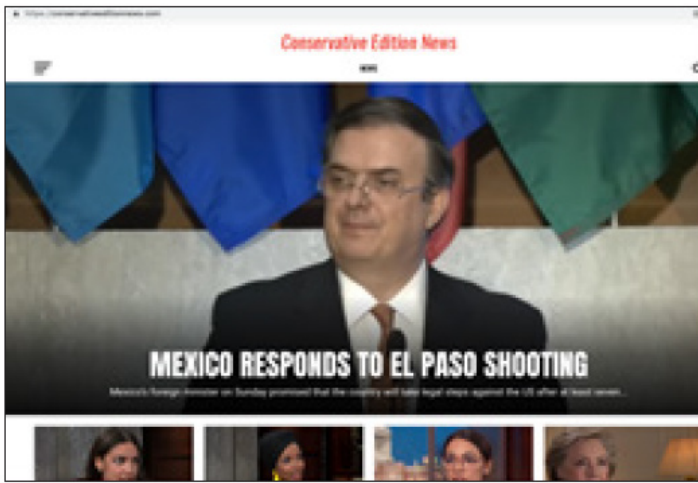
³ <https://businesssearch.sos.ca.gov/Document/RetrievePDF?Id=04050095-22696018>

⁴ <https://businesssearch.sos.ca.gov/Document/RetrievePDF?Id=04050095-24308076>

⁵ <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/12/18/ousted-npr-news-chief-exfox-news-execs-team-up-on-new-site-1068672>

⁶ <https://www.lacortenews.com/about>

The Websites



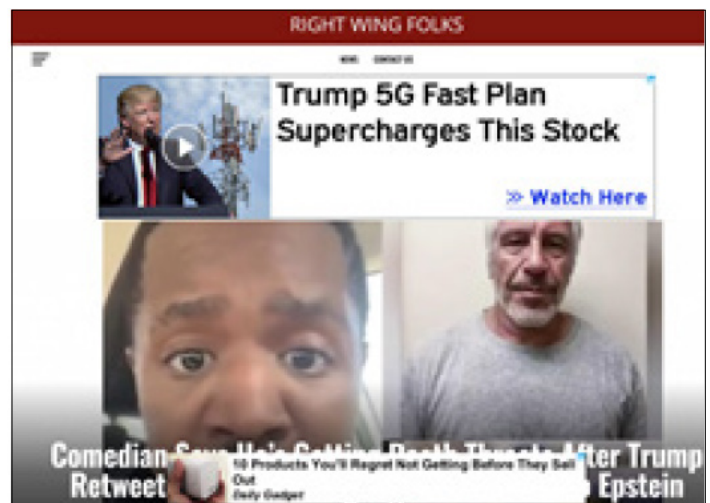
Conservative Edition News (www.conservativeeditionnews.com) is a WordPress site. It was registered on March 28, 2019, but its registration information is privacy-protected. The website posts a mix of right-wing content, false information, and conspiracy theories. Most of the content are summaries or lightly edited copies of reporting from outlets such as The Blaze, The Washington Examiner, and Fox News. The website lists the Copyright as ‘Bivona Digital’.

The site is loaded with pay-per-click advertisements and there are no authors listed on the site’s posts. The site also includes several click-bait ads on topics such as “250,000 signatures to IMPEACH Maxine Waters.” Separately, the website solicited 200,000 “signatures” to demand a Federal investigation into Congresswoman Ilhan Omar. The petition received over 112,000 signatures.

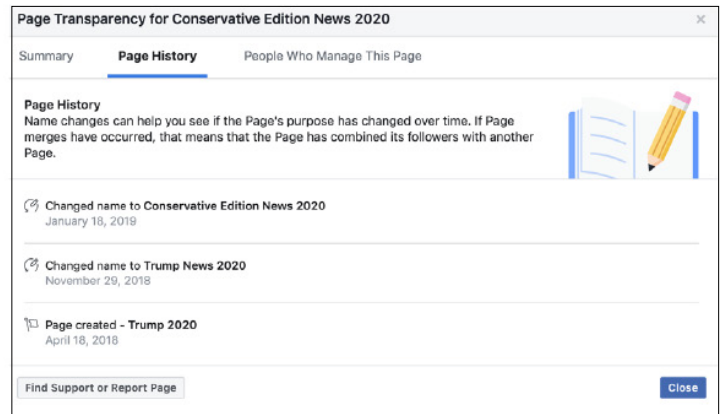
⁷ www.rightwingfolks.com

Right Wing Folks is also a WordPress site and was registered on June 17, 2018.⁷ Although the registration information is mostly privacy protected, historical WHOIS registration information identifies Macedonia as the country of registration. Like Conservative Edition News, the website is loaded with pay-per-click ads. Content posted to this website is mostly edited versions or summaries of articles from other right-wing outlets, such as The Bearded Patriot and Daily Caller, or conspiracy theory websites. The website lists the Copyright owner as ‘Bivona Digital’.

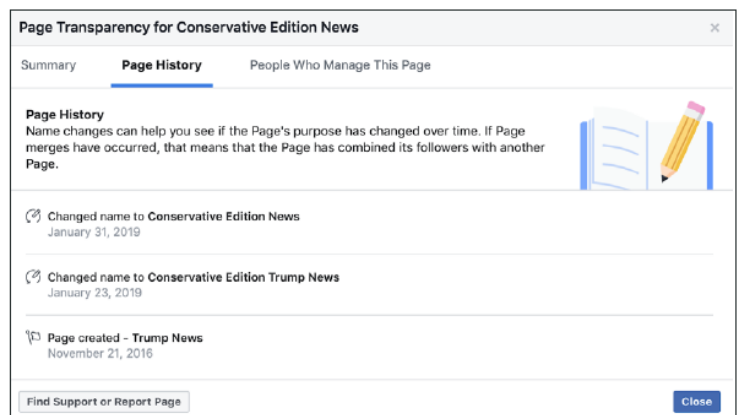
Posts on Right Wing Folks typically get approximately 1,000 social media shares, but more sensational content received more than 50,000 shares. The newsletter from Right Wing Folks is distributed twice-daily and contains links to posts on the website and pay-per-click ads. Posts from the website are frequently shared on far-right forums, like Gab, and on the Russian social media site Vk.com.



Upon discovering the link between Conservative Edition News and Right Wing Folks, we looked at where these articles were being shared on social media platforms. We found two Facebook pages associated with the website—Conservative Edition News 2020 and Conservative Edition News. Conservative Edition News 2020 was created April 18, 2018 under the name “Trump 2020.” It then changed to “Trump News 2020” on November 29, 2018, and finally, “Conservative Edition News 2020” on January 18, 2019.⁸ At the time of this writing, the page has more than 182,800 likes.



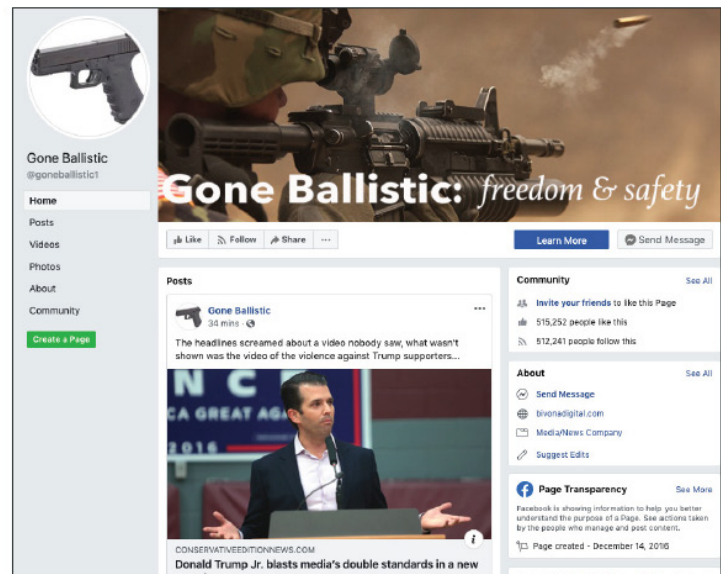
The Conservative Edition News Facebook page was created November 21, 2016 under the name “Trump News.”⁹ It then changed to “Conservative Edition Trump News” on January 23, 2019, and finally to its current name on January 31, 2019. According to Facebook’s page transparency tool, five people located in the United States manage the page. This page has more than 1.6 million likes. The Facebook pages are identical in design, to include the header that features Ronald Reagan, Abraham Lincoln, and Donald Trump. Both pages post the same articles, including content from conservativeeditionnews.com and lacortenews.com. Both Facebook pages also list Bivona Digital in the “About” section including a San Francisco-based phone number. The pages are also categorized as “Media/News Company.”



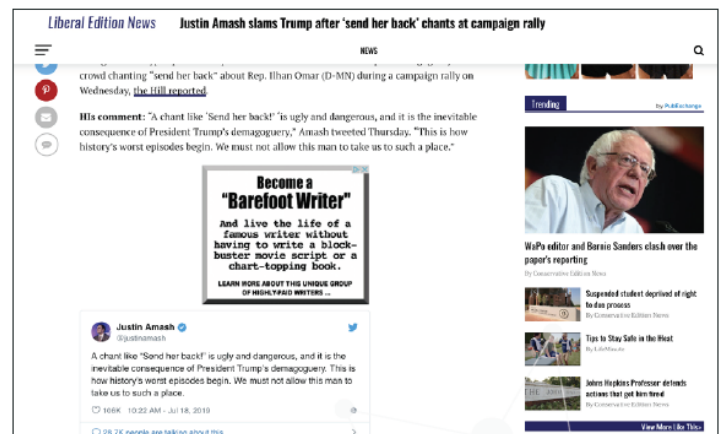
⁸ www.facebook.com/ConservativeNews2020/

⁹ www.facebook.com/ConservativeEditionNews

We identified two other Bivona Digital-operated Facebook pages–“Conservative Reporter”¹⁰ and “Gone Ballistic”¹¹–that similarly post articles from conservativeeditionnews.com and lacortenews.com. Both pages list Bivona Digital in the “About” section and each is categorized as “Media/News company.” Conservative Reporter’s design uses imagery of Reagan, Lincoln, and other patriotic symbols, while Gone Ballistic uses pictures of an armed soldier and a handgun in its header and profile.

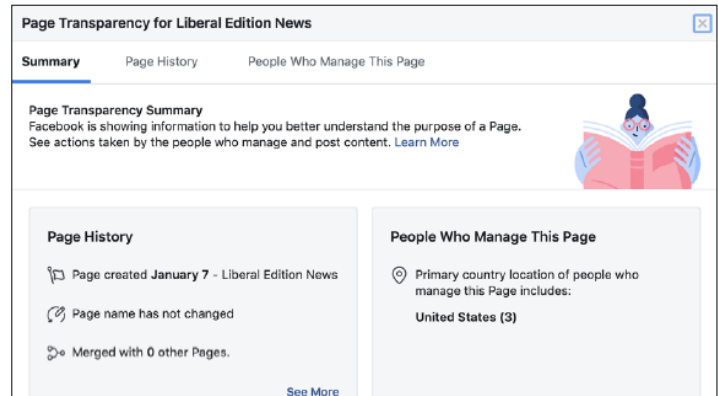


Searching on Facebook for Bivona Digital, we came across a third website — Liberal Edition News (www.liberaleditionnews.com).¹² Liberal Edition News was registered on March 28, 2019, the same day as Conservative Edition News. Posts on Liberal Edition focus more on topics considered politically left-leaning, but also include articles originally posted on Conservative Edition, such as an article critical of Representative of Ilhan Omar. The site also points readers to articles from Conservative Edition under its “Trending” tab.



¹⁰ www.facebook.com/conservativereporter
¹¹ www.facebook.com/goneballistic1
¹² www.liberaleditionnews.com

Liberal Edition News has a Facebook page with a similar style, including the same header as the other pages but it features Democratic presidents. The page was created January 7, 2019 and has 51,500 likes.¹³ According to Facebook’s page transparency tool, three people in the United States managed the page. The page posted links to articles from Liberal Edition News and LaCorte News. Like the other Facebook pages, it listed Bivona Digital as the creator and provided the same San Francisco-based phone number.



We collaborated with Facebook’s investigative teams to understand the full extent of this activity. We understand that after sharing our initial research findings, Facebook conducted their internal investigation and determined that a number of pages and accounts violated policies against spam and misrepresentation, and were subsequently removed from the platform.

Bivona Digital reportedly owns and operates LaCorte News which claims its editors “sort through thousands of stories every day, striving to give [readers] fair and full news coverage.”¹⁸ In a Facebook post in early 2017, Ken LaCorte announced his plans to launch the LaCorte News site which he characterized as “less political, with more general interest and self-help stories...[and] center-to-right leaning.”¹⁹ He also noted that he had created “news silos” on Facebook to generate traffic, possibly a reference to pages such as Conservative Edition News – which was created November 21, 2016 as “Trump News.”

According to press reports, LaCorte reportedly launched the news entity with approximately \$1 million USD of his own money, and said he planned to rely on advertising revenue to fund the venture.²⁰



¹³ www.facebook.com/liberal-edition-news

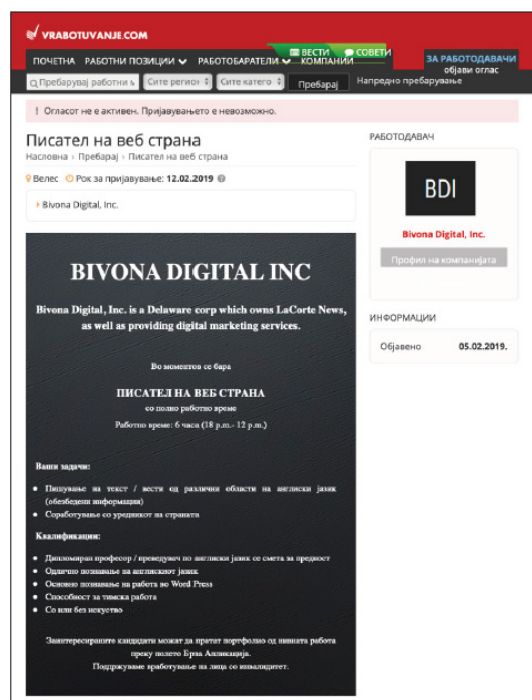
¹⁸ <https://www.lacortenews.com/about>

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/ken.lacorte/posts/10154587646109191>

²⁰ <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/12/18/ousted-npr-news-chief-ex-fox-newsexecs-team-up-on-new-site-1068672>

The Macedonian Connection

Nisos discovered several other indicators that Bivona Digital employs individuals in Macedonia. Conservative Edition News, Liberal Edition News, and Right Wing Folks — and to a lesser extent, Demand Change Now and Freedom Politics Today — have similar design elements, including a similar font and layout. Through our investigation, we discovered Bivona Digital has ties to a Macedonian digital media company. The three news-related websites, list a marketing firm called Raww Digital as the designer of their pages. Rawwdigital.com is a Wix site with a simple landing page that notes an email address. The website was registered on March 4, 2019 and most of the registration information is privacy protected. However, we discovered the country of registration is listed as Macedonia, based on historical Whois registration information.



Bivona Digital regularly advertised for employees for their websites in Veles and Skopje, Macedonia. On February 12, 2019, Bivona Digital, Inc. placed a job ad on a Macedonian job board looking for a full-time “Website Writer,” specifically from the town of Veles.²⁴ The ad listed tasks as “Writing text/news from different fields in English” and “Collaboration with the site editor.” The ad expired the same day it was posted and was removed from the site. Bivona Digital, Inc. placed four other job openings on the same Macedonian job board between November 2018 and October 2019. These postings—all of which have since expired—advertised for a video editor and two graphic designer positions, one of which was to be based out of Skopje.^{25 26 27}

²⁴ . <https://web.archive.org/web/20190730160142/https://www.vrabotuvanje.com.mk/Rabota/382830/Pisatel-na-veb-strana/Expired/>

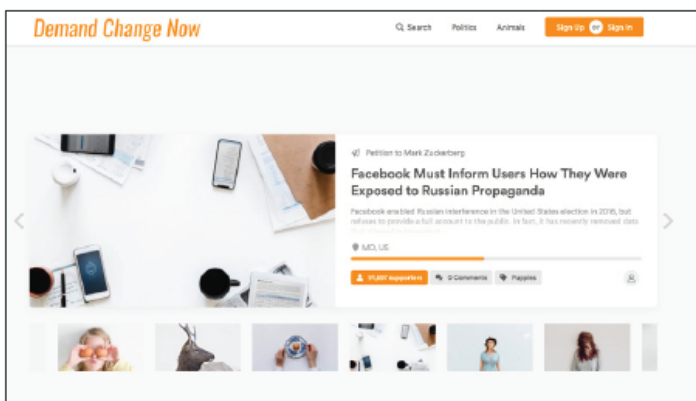
²⁵ . <https://web.archive.org/web/20190809135207/https://www.vrabotuvanje.com.mk/Posao/381629/Video-editor-mzh/Expired/>

²⁶ . <https://web.archive.org/web/20190809135729/https://www.vrabotuvanje.com.mk/Rabota/386137/Grafichki-dizajner-mzh/Expired/>

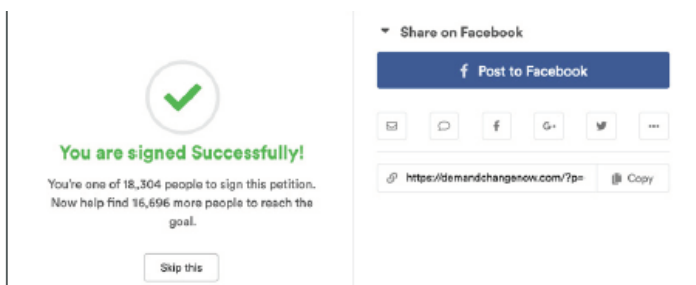
²⁷ . <https://web.archive.org/save/https://www.vrabotuvanje.com.mk/Rabota/379345/Grafichki-dizajner-mzh/Expired/>

Unique IP Addresses Uncovered Additional Websites

After identifying the previously discussed websites, we analyzed the unique IP addresses the sites commonly used. With this method, Nisos was able to discover another five websites that appear to be part of the network— demandchangenow.com, freedompoliticstoday.com, patriotfolks.com, americatheawesome.com, and zypwire.com. Demand Change Now also lists Bivona Digital on the site, as well as the address in Sausalito, CA.²⁸ It was registered on March 29, 2019, but all of its registration information is privacy protected. Using DNStylitics, we also discovered that Demand Change Now uses the same Google Analytics ID as Conservative Edition News and Liberal Edition News, which confirms that they are operated by the same group.



To sign a petition on the site, you must create an account with your full name and email address. When you have signed, the site prompts you to share it on social media.



FreedomPoliticsToday.com was registered on March 20, 2018 and is now inactive. The site published primarily false information and sensational content. Much of the domain registration information is privacy protected.

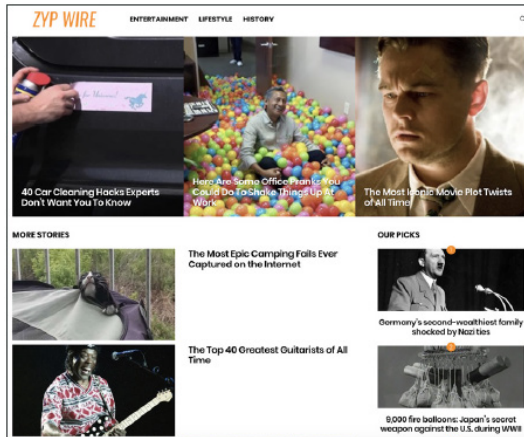
However, we found the address of registration from historical WhoIs information. It listed a residential address in Veles, Macedonia. We determined that the individual most recently associated with this address was associated with a digital marketing firm. We discovered that the firm registered at least one fake news website— www.freedompoliticsus.com, though the site does not appear to be linked to LaCorte News.²⁹ Patriotfolks.com was registered on March 25, 2018. It is currently inactive and, based on internet archival research, does not appear to have ever been published. The domain registration details are also privacy protected.

²⁸ www.demandchangenow.com

²⁹ www.facebook.com/trajce.lazov.5621



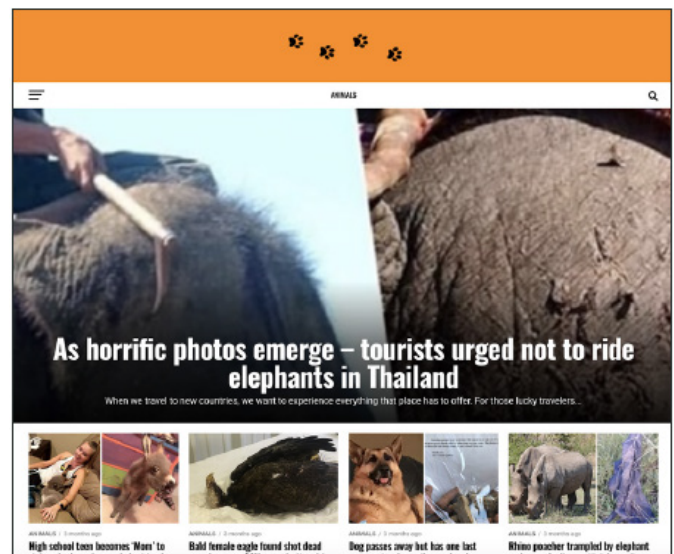
Americatheawesome.com was registered on May 2018 and is now inactive. The site published primarily false information and sensational content. It listed Bivona Digital at the bottom of the website. Based on a JSON file we found through internet archival research, we were able to identify two Macedonia-based page authors for the site. The site now reverts to a Russian WordPress blog.³⁰



Zypwire.com was registered February 10, 2017. All of the registration is privacy protected. However, Nisos discovered that it is pointed to the same IP address as Right Wing Folks and a website called animalsarebeautiful.com. Zyp Wire also lists the same email address that is given on Raww Digital's landing page—contact@rawwdigital.com—and the copyright at the bottom of the website is attributed Raww Digital.

Animalsarebeautiful.com was registered on December 24, 2018. Its domain registration information is privacy protected, but the site lists Raww Digital as the creator. It contains click-bait articles posted three months ago and loaded with pay-per-click ads.

Nisos also discovered that the same six WordPress accounts were page authors of both Conservative Edition News and Liberal Edition News. At least two of these individuals are Macedonian citizens likely residing in Veles. We also identified two additional writers residing in Veles for Right Wing Folks and an additional now inactive website—freedompoliticaltoday.com. We also observed that one of these Veles-based individuals was an author on demandchangenow.com, another Bivona Digital website that we found after analyzing the IP addresses of the previously discussed websites.



³⁰ <https://web.archive.org/web/20181121001642/https://americatheawesome.com/wp-json/oembed/1.0/embed?url=https%3A%2F%2Famericatheawesome.com%2Fremember-reporters-who-smear-brett-kavanaugh-heres-how-thats-paying-off%2F1>

We Are Here To Help

The fake news industry continues to grow and while many campaigns have successfully used political news to disrupt public sentiment, it is a real threat to the private sector as well.

Businesses of all sizes can be targets of these campaigns. These attacks can be indicative of an intent to launch disinformation campaigns or the immediate derogation of brand credibility, to the extent your brand is associated with these exploits.

Nisos can help – we provide a variety of cybersecurity and threat investigative services, including protection against disinformation campaigns. Visit www.Nisos.com now to learn how our unique expertise can prevent and help defend against these attacks.

For additional information, visit www.nisos.com or contact info@nisos.com.