

Social puncher

The fake traffic schemes that  
are still rotting the Internet

# Simulated media assets: local news

Audit and  
Investigation  
by SocialPuncher

November 2019

# What will the series and the first case be about

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Social Puncher begins publishing a series of reports "The fake traffic schemes that are still rotting the Internet". In this series, we will show some schemes that have been used for advertising fraud over the years, we will show media assets that real people have never seen, but which receive millions of dollars, we will also examine the reasons for the low efficiency of combating advertising fraud. It opens with a fairly simple case showing how obvious and even primitive schemes can be that bring millions of dollars annually.

This report focuses on a comprehensive business audit of several local news sites, which have clear signs of fake media. This is the story of a serial publisher launching similar sites in different states. All of them have great success with the audience, but for some reason a very short life cycle.

The current understanding of what advertising fraud is unfortunately has many gaps, myths and erroneous stereotypes. Most of our cases significantly change the view on this problem.

We will pay attention not only to the technical side of advertising fraud. This phenomenon has important social, economic and even psychological components. In some cases, they are even more important, since this is primarily a financial crime, and not just a set of technological tricks. We will pay special attention to the problems of real publishers in the modern digital ecosystem, and to the impact of advertising fraud on modern journalism.

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# Introduction 1. Why media asset audit is really important

The main current way to prevent ad fraud is to verify traffic. The basic method is real-time verification of each ad impression to prevent it to be shown to artificial users. In some cases, when obvious anomalies (high conversion rate, visits from a single IP range, sharp activity peaks, etc.) were revealed, the ad system or the verification company can investigate the sources of this traffic in more detail and decide on the artificial origin of the traffic.

If the real time verification was successfully completed, and there were no obvious anomalies for the period (usually it is one month), then publisher receive payment for these ad impressions.

In order to show the ad to fake user, it should be posted on a specific site. It is not needed only in one case, when SSP is engaged in ad fraud. All cases of spoofed domains are impossible without the key role of the Supply Side Platform. SSP is the only part of the ad supply chain where domain can be substituted.

Thus, in most advertising fraud schemes, the starting point is the site, with some design and some content. You cannot use a domain with blank pages, without texts and pictures. The site for artificial visitors should look exactly like the site for real people.

The annual losses from ad fraud are estimated at billions, and even tens of billions of dollars. There are thousands, and even tens of thousands of fake sites that just simulate real media to deceive advertisers. But almost no one wonders what such sites should look like.

It should look like reliable media, otherwise visitors or analyst of the ad system, periodically checking the sites, could suspect that this is fake media. At the same time, it makes no sense to waste time on detailed design and testing, since the site is not intended for the real audience.

In order for the site to receive a lot of traffic, it should have many pages, but the production of content should be as cheap as it possible. Ideally, the content should be typical, easy to manufacture, and not have an expiration date. Ad fraud is primarily a business in which the beneficiary bears the cost of imitating the media and the lower these costs, the higher the profit.

Unfortunately, at the moment there are no reports on fake media assets, verification companies avoid this problem in their studies.

This topic is undeservedly avoided, although it is an important element of most ad fraud schemes.

# Introduction 2. Fake local sites as an example of simulated media assets

Why is verifying media assets much more important than verifying traffic? Anyone can buy traffic for their site in any quantity. Just google "Buy AdSense safe traffic" and you will see hundreds of sites with a wide variety of offers.

You can choose any devices, geo-targeting, number of pageviews per visit, targeted interests and any other features. Most offers vary from from \$300 to \$1000 per million visits. The price depends on the quality of the simulation, the sources of traffic and the activity of the fake user. As a rule, this traffic already has a history of successful monetization and does not cause suspicion among verification companies.

But artificial traffic is not a key element of the ad fraud scheme. You can't create any website and buy 10 million visits the next day. You need a high-quality simulation of a media asset and a gradual increase in traffic, then within a few months you can reach several million visits.

The income of such a fake website can exceed the income of any real media, especially when using old verified publisher accounts. Typically, these sites have a short life cycle, usually from 9 to 24 months, after which they suddenly disappear, and new ones appear in their place.

Social Puncher audits various media assets, revealing fraudulent schemes in the advertising industry. For this report, we selected 3 sites of the unknown publisher, that could be media startups of the year.

All these sites are local media launched in 2019, but within a few months they were able to gather a multi-million audience. One of them, according to Similar Web, reached 10 million monthly visitors.

Such stats is an incredible achievement for any media manager. But you are unlikely to see them in the top of various media ratings. It is unlikely that these cases will ever be used as examples of successful launches in textbooks.

But nonetheless, their business model is very successful. Millions of ad impressions are sold daily on these sites through digital ad systems. Moreover, these are ads of the best brands, which has the highest RPM.

City of  
Edmonton  
News

1

# Fake local media #1.

## City of Edmonton News

The domain cityofedmontonnews.com was created on October 11, 2018. It is registered with WhoisGuard, Inc., a nominee holder affiliated with the registrar, hiding the real owners.

Two months later, the site of the same name appeared on the domain. Its metadata title was "City of Edmonton News | We Live Here." First visitors were detected at the end of December. In January, traffic appeared and disappeared several times, and on February 1, the site began to confidently gain an audience. According to Similar Web, in March it reached a million visitors, in May it approached 2 million, and in July the monthly audience amounted to more than 5 million.

In a new era, when local media are experiencing a severe crisis, many of them do not have time to adapt to the digital ecosystem, we see a successful startup that is gaining a local audience in spite of industry trends.

The visitor sees a preview of 10 articles on the main page, which are divided into 3 categories, and another preview of five more articles in the gallery. Articles focus on Edmonton's main characters: Oilers leader Connor McDavid, The Fairmont Hotel Macdonald, and Mayor Don Iveson.

The third article in the New Events category is entitled "Studio 99 Opens in Rogers". Studio 99 is the Edmonton Oilers Ice Arena Sports Bar with Wayne Gretzky's unique collection of memorabilia. The problem is that it was opened in October 2018.

Why is the event that happened a year ago is still on the main page as New Event?

Other articles also focus on 2018 events or reviews of Edmonton's life that are not tied to specific dates. All articles are short, no more than 200 words, and more like not news, but promotion, like reviews for the "Visit Edmonton" booklet.

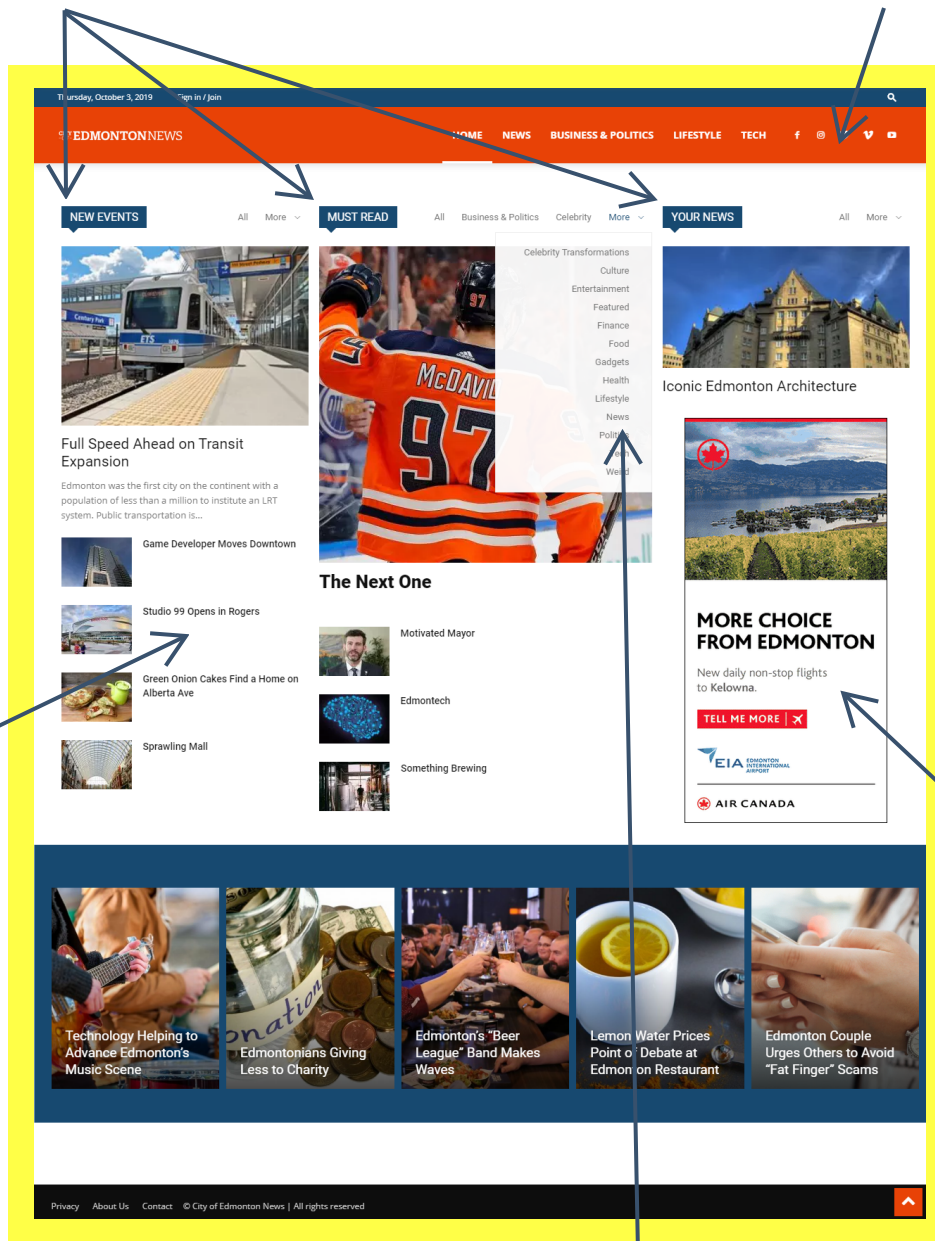
The Studio 99 article, like the rest of the article, is signed by the single reporter, Ryan Frost. Articles have no dates, so it's difficult for a casual visitor to determine how old the news is.

It is not surprising that the owners of the site hid the dates, because the site has not been updated since its launch. The main page of the site, which reached 5 million monthly audience, still looks the same as in December 2018. Surprisingly, this is far from the strangest fact about this local media.

# City of Edmonton News Home page anomalies

Evergreen City Content

Social buttons link to the slideshow page



Old news

Fake ad

Inactive links

# Basic media asset audit

## Design, technical features, and owners

The site is made on the WordPress template of the Romanian developers Tag Div. This solution is very popular, and costs only \$ 59. The template was configured very quickly, without any testing and verification of functionality, and has a number of errors and shortcomings. The drop-down lists do not provide links to categories. All social buttons on the main page link to the same page of the site instead of social accounts. The social buttons after the articles link to Tag Div accounts (default template setting). The fact that no one is trying to correct these errors, suggests that real people do not visit this site, otherwise it would be fixed on the first day.

Despite the negligence and the obvious rush of the creators, on the main page we see a qualitative simulation of a programmatic banner Air Canada. In fact, this is just a picture with a link to their website, and not a paid programmatic advertisement. It is always loaded on the main page at any visit and has not changed since launch. The creators of the site's website deliberately try to create confidence among casual visitors that the site has geo-targeted advertising of the best brands, but avoid the real monetization of the main page traffic. This detail will still be found in our study below.

The next important question is who owns this site, its editor, journalists and other employees. The About Us page is filled with very long text in which the site is named "number one source for the stories that matter to denizens of the Festival City." Also in the text, the city is mentioned under other names, like River City (twice), and The City of Champions. The name Edmonton itself is mentioned there 6 times. The About page claims that this media focuses specifically on local news. There are a lot of words on the page, but there is no information about the chief editor and journalists, nor about the owners, there is no editorial address.

The Contact page encourages readers to be active: "If you're aware of something exciting happening in our city, or have a tip about breaking news, please get in touch! We rely on the cooperation of our readers to bring you the stories that matter to Edmontonians." There is a standard form for messages to contact and 2 common e-mails, [contact@cityofedmontonnews.com](mailto:contact@cityofedmontonnews.com) and [advertising@cityofedmontonnews.com](mailto:advertising@cityofedmontonnews.com).

All this is more than strange for a site that has never been updated. It looks like the owners are trying to hide themselves, but at the same time make an illusion of reliable local media.



# Basic media asset audit

## Audience and promotion

For 10 months since the beginning of the year, 27 million people visited the site according to Similar Web.

### 1. Devices.

Mobile traffic was near 96%, and only 4% of visits was from desktop. It is very strange. Although the share of mobile is growing every year, this ratio is typical only for sites targeted to a mobile audience. For a local news site, such traffic shares are completely anomalous.

### 2. Countries.

Throughout the life cycle, visitors from Canada never had a share of more than 10% of the audience. According to Sem Rush, the share of the Canadian audience in July was 8.2%, and in September fell to 4.6% US traffic prevailed; it was almost 85% in September. Two other English-speaking countries, the United Kingdom and Australia, had between 3% and 8% of traffic during the summer of 2019.

### 3. Audience overlap.

Among the interests of this audience there is not a single Canadian news site. Moreover, according to any of the major web analytics systems, this audience has never visited the two largest local news media, Edmonton Journal and Edmonton Sun.

### 4. Audience engagement.

The activity of the audience is unusually high. During the summer of 2019, the average visit duration increased to 4.5 minutes, and the average number of pages to almost 8. This is a very high engagement rate for a site with mostly mobile users.

### 5. Desktop audience.

despite its small share, had absolutely abnormal activity: 15-22 pages per visit during the summer of 2019, with daily activity spikes reaching an average of 55 pages.

It is still a mystery how users learned about this site. There are no press releases about its launch, not a single announcement in Canadian media, not even a single review. Its Facebook page, created the day after the launch of the site, December 20, 2018, has since been no longer active. Now it has 8 followers and 0 posts. There is no Twitter account, when sharing an article, it automatically refers to @City, (since the remaining "of Edmonton News" is written separately from this) is an old abandoned domain when it was registered by cybersquatters in 2007.

The site was launched in a total informational vacuum. No one except advertising systems knew about it.

# Basic media asset audit

## Content and advertising

A more detailed study of the site allows you to make an unexpected discovery. On this domain there is a whole section of articles not related to Edmonton, and it is much larger than the main part of the site.

If we open the page of the single author of this site, Ryan Frost, we will see that he has 667 articles, about 20 times more than is available through the main page and categories.

All these articles are a variation of the so-called viral content of "Celebrities: then and now": two photographs, an old and a new one, and a short biography. Here we are faced with yet another inexplicable fact: they have a different author on the pages "then and now", they posted by Lexi Schwartz. It is impossible to go to the page of this author, since it does not exist.

It turns out that there is a section of content that cannot be accessed from the main page or main categories. But it has the vast majority of users visits.

There are similar articles on thousands of sites; this is a very popular form of content. And in this case, it's just a primitive rewrite of the famous facts of the biography of the Celebs, without focus on any key changes.

Advertising on the site is optimized to maximize profits. During a mobile visit to the page from the hidden section, 4 banners are loaded, 3 banners at the top of the page, one by one at short intervals immediately after the title, and 1 attached bottom banner. Thus, even without scrolling, 2 banners always are in the visible part of the page, if two more screens are scrolled down, then all 4. The filling of ads slots has its own peculiarities.

1. Most of the banners are ads of the best brands, which means that the publisher is verified and gets access to the most expensive ads.
2. In all ad slots, a wrapper works, which after 30 seconds updates the banner. Therefore, during a single page view, the user can see two ads in one slot at once. The average mobile page viewing time is just over 30 seconds.
3. A significant share of advertising is in-banner video clips. Periodically, in one, two, or even all three slots, instead of the usual banner, a player with an video ad is loaded. Usually these are 15 second clips combined with a static banner at the bottom of the ad slot.

# City of Edmonton News Mobile ad snapshots

EDMONTONNEWS

ENTERTAINMENT


### Celebrity Then And Now

Publication: City Of Edmonton News.  
Posted by Leal Schwartz

Advertisements:

**Get The Works\***

Get the most out of summer with comprehensive service.



**Vince Vaughn**

Advertisements:

**Master of International Business**

Work with an application advisor

**famous for:**  
Old School, Dodgeball, Wedding Crashers

**networth:**  
\$50 Million

Advertisements:

**Master of International Business**

Work with an application advisor

To view another celebrity please click the next celebrity button below or read the full article by scrolling further below.

**NEXT CELEBRITY →**

OR READ MORE ABOUT BELOW ↓

Vince Vaughn was the definition of a starving actor in the late 1980's and early 1990's, landing only occasional gigs that mostly included commercials and after school specials. In 1993, Vaughn would finally land his first movie role by playing a Notre Dame football player in "Rudy", and it was on set that he met longtime friend Jon Favreau. Favreau would end up writing a film called "Swingers", casting himself and Vaughn as the stars.

EDMONTONNEWS

ENTERTAINMENT

### Celebrity Then And Now

Publication: City Of Edmonton News.  
Posted by Leal Schwartz


Advertisements:

**Earn over \$750 in travel value!**

**Aventura**

Aventura. The Traveller's Travel Card™

**Join now**



**Vivica Fox**

Advertisements:

**THE PERFECT CLAMP FOR EVERY JOB**

SINCE 1944

**famous for:**  
Soul Food, Boat Trip, Kill Bill

**networth:**  
\$6 Million

Advertisements:

**THE PERFECT SCREWDRIVER FOR EVERY JOB**

SINCE 1944

To view another celebrity please click the next celebrity button below or read the full article by scrolling further below.

**NEXT CELEBRITY →**

OR READ MORE ABOUT BELOW ↓

Many actors get their start in soap operas and end up going on to do big things. In the case of Vivica A. Fox, that's the route she went and became a big star throughout the 1990s on both television and in film. That momentum that she built back then has helped her establish a long career in Hollywood, and has helped her become busier in the past decade than she's ever been. Though she's not starring in blockbusters like she did at one time, Fox is still a big name in Hollywood and a regular on the screen.

EDMONTONNEWS

ENTERTAINMENT

### Celebrity Then And Now

Publication: City Of Edmonton News.  
Posted by Leal Schwartz

Advertisements:

**CREATE WHO YOU WANT**

**Winona Ryder**

Advertisements:

**60% OFF SIMS 4**

**famous for:**  
Beetlejuice, Heathers, Edward Scissorhands

**networth:**  
\$18 Million

Advertisements:

**60% OFF SIMS 4**

To view another celebrity please click the next celebrity button below or read the full article by scrolling further below.

**NEXT CELEBRITY →**

OR READ MORE ABOUT BELOW ↓

"I don't have any interest in being a movie star." Long before she made headlines for her jaw-dropping relationship with actor Johnny Depp, Winona Ryder established herself as an actress and icon in the late 1980s after landing the role of the goth teen in Tim Burton's 1988 comedy fantasy flick, Beetlejuice. With the film making her a household name, Ryder appeared in the 1988 teen black comedy, Heathers, which later became a cult classic. In the early 1990s, she joined Cher in Mermaids and earned a Golden Globe Award nomination for her performance before meeting and falling in love with Depp on the set of Tim Burton's 1990 dark fairytale, Edward Scissorhands.

EDMONTONNEWS

ENTERTAINMENT

### Celebrity Then And Now

Publication: City Of Edmonton News.  
Posted by Leal Schwartz

Advertisements:

**Wentworth Miller**

Advertisements:

**MORE DETAIL**  
Right-sized luxury

**famous for:**  
Prison Break, The Flash, Stoker

**networth:**  
\$4 Million

Advertisements:

**"RAM HAS TICKED EVERY BOX"**

**NEXT CELEBRITY →**

OR READ MORE ABOUT BELOW ↓

After moving from England to Los Angeles in the mid 1990's, Wentworth Miller struggled to find his place in Hollywood for several years. It wasn't until the early 2000's that he started to get some significant roles, including films such as "Underworld" and "The Human Stain". In 2005, Miller landed his biggest role to date, playing the main character of Michael Scofield in the hit Fox show "Prison Break". The series would run for five seasons, making Miller one of the

# Basic media asset audit

## Business model and revenue

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That is, a lot of advertising is shown, it is expensive, including the most expensive video views. A very thoughtful professional approach is visible. This is very discordant with the attitude of the owners towards the site and its content. For one visit, the user can view from 30 to 50 advertisements, including up to 10 video clips.

That is, we are talking about hundreds of millions of banner impressions and tens of millions of video ad impressions. With the most conservative estimates, the last six months, the site's income was at least \$ 100,000 per month.

Obviously, the cost of creating a site and producing content is significantly less than revenue.

Perhaps, some expenses that make this scheme possible are not taken into account, even if you increase the estimated costs by 10, then there remains incredible profitability for the digital media business. Such a profit is impossible in a competitive market, where there is a struggle for each user, and local media are in crisis and are gradually dying out. This percentage of profit is possible only for criminal practices.

City of Edmonton News is a classic example of a fake local news site. But they are not the only one. It has its exact copy in the state capital of New York.

Albany  
Daily  
News

2

# Fake local media #2.

## Albany Daily News

The domain albandailynews.com was created on March 19, 2018. It is also registered with WhoisGuard, Inc.

The site appeared a week after the creation of the domain and from the first days began to increase its audience. Since May, traffic amounted to millions of monthly visits, in August it reached 10 million visits, with 6 average page views per visit. The share of mobile traffic is 99%. 77% of traffic was from the USA, 23% of visits were from other English-speaking countries.

The site appeared 3 months later, but at the end of the summer it was 2 times ahead of the City of News News. Moreover, the sites are completely identical, there are so many coincidences that we can safely conclude that both sites are made by the same people.

1. The site uses the same template as the City of Edmonton News, and has the same errors, for example, the lack of links in the categories, as well as a fake banner from the local Albany Land Rover.

2. The main page is not updated from launch. There is no information about the owners, the editors, the journalists. The "About Us" section presents the site as reliable local media.

3. The site map is also the same. It consists of two parts, open and hidden. It is impossible to get into the hidden part from the main page and from category pages.

4. Articles in the open part do not have dates and authors. Content is simply a rewrite of old local and national news. In the open part, several dozen articles.

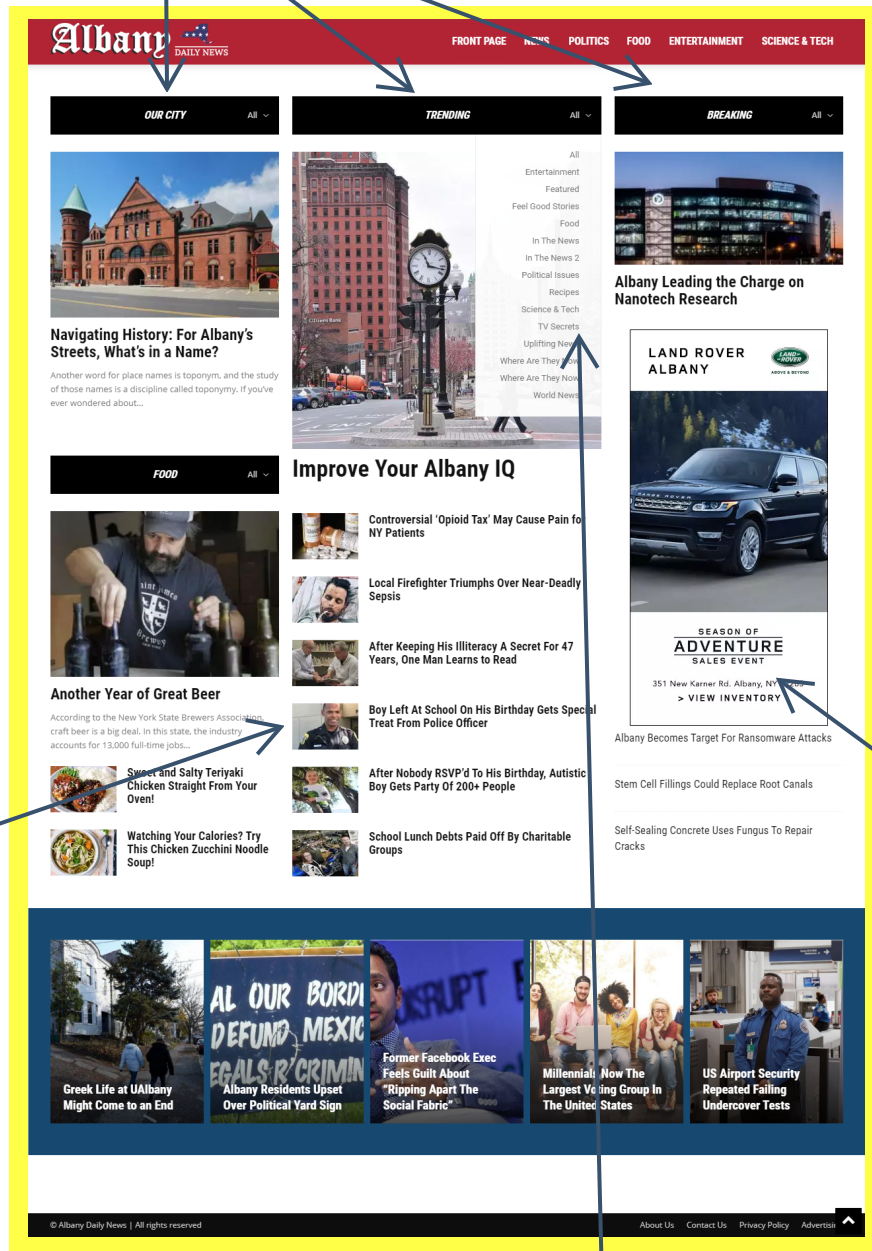
5. The shadow part consists of typical "Celebrity: then and now" articles. A significant part of them is the same as in the City of Edmonton News. The author is the same again, Lexi Schwartz. In fact, this is the same Edmonton site, just in a new cover.

6. There are no social accounts, when sharing on Twitter, the source indicates the @Albany account, which is not related to this site. Pages of the shadow part cannot be shared at all, social buttons are replaced by a picture. We have already seen all these errors at Edmonton News.

There are two reasons for a second site to appear. If a single domain received all this traffic, it would be too much. In addition, the same users can be used twice. According to Sem Rush, more than a third of the audience visited both sites during their peak activity.

# Albany Daily News Home page anomalies

Evergreen City Content



Old news

Fake ad

Inactive links

# Albany Daily News

## Why it can't be human traffic

It is clear that fake media assets can only have a fake audience. Real people have no reason to visit such sites. And if we see on such sites millions of highly busy users, then this can only be ad fraud.

But ad systems, and even verification companies, think differently, assuming that these visitors could be real people. According to industry standards, it is first of all necessary to verify traffic, not a media asset. But even a superficial analysis of traffic allows us to conclude that this is an inhuman audience.

More than 50% of all traffic to Albany and more than 60% to Edmonton are direct visits. Why millions of people visited unknown and non-updating sites, and surfing up to 8 pages, it is impossible to explain if we assume that these are real people. Such audience behavior could be real only in one case if this publisher bought up all the outdoor advertising in this city. But then another contradiction would arise, how did 100,000 people from Albany make 10 million visits in August?

The smaller part is referral and search traffic, which also has a number of anomalies, allowing us to draw a conclusion about its artificial origin. In fact, these are the same direct visits, but they use a fake referrer.

Here is a short explanation of how this is done. When you visit a site, it receives information from your browser where you came from. This information is easy to delete, change, or generate a false reference. Different servers that you visit do not exchange the data on incoming and outgoing traffic.

This is a very old well known technology in the web industry. There are a number of browser extensions, such as Referrer Control, that allow the user to change the referrer. Many sites that sell traffic, offer the services of mass targeted forgery of referrers. For example, the site [fakereferer.com](http://fakereferer.com) explains in great detail how technically this substitution occurs and what opportunities this technology has.

You can fake search, social and any other traffic in any numbers. But you can only distinguish a fake referrer from a real one only if all the visited servers are integrated into the single system that compares all incoming and outgoing traffic. The danger of this technology is still ignored by the industry. But it is used in almost all cases of advertising fraud. Without faking traffic sources, you can simulate only direct visits, which is certainly very suspicious.



Laredo  
Tribune

3

# Fake local media #3.

## Laredo Tribune

The audience on the Albany and Edmonton news sites began to decline synchronously in October. The number of visits fell 10 times compared with the highest traffic peaks. But it will be a mistake to think that this is the end of the scheme using fake local media. After Alberta province and New York State, an unknown shadow publisher decided to launch a new local media in Texas.

Domain laredotribune.com was Created on June 10, 2019. The first traffic was detected there on August 3. The growth rate of this asset is as impressive as the rest.

August	200,000 visits
September	500,000 visits
October	3,000,000 visits

The site has the same template, the same errors, the same old local news, and the same shadow section with Celebrity content: then and now, and the same simulation of programmatic banner on the main page.

The only difference is the primitive algorithm, which at each new visit collects the main page from random archived articles. Just updating the page, you get a whole new set of news. After the next update, you see a mix of the news visible in the first two visits, but in a completely different order.

On the example of this site, an anomaly has become apparent, also characteristic of all these sites, which was not previously mentioned. According to Alexa's rating, he is not included even in the 1,000,000 most visited sites. This is important, because sites not included in the top million, unlike the rest, are monitored much less in detail. The difference in the rating is explained by the fact that Alexa began to take into account mobile traffic on this and other sites of this group, and only the desktop was taken into account. The estimated underestimation of the ranking for Edmonton is more than 100,000 places, for Albany is more than 200,000 places. In fact, all sites were around the top 10,000 or higher.

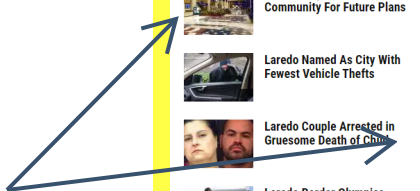
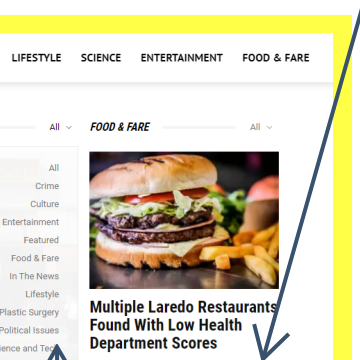
Thousands of technical bots, spiders, crawlers go on the Internet, and the web analytics system filters all the request server and takes into account only those that it considers human. Analytical systems filter their technical traffic and do not include it in the statistics of visits. It seems that Alexa considered these visits to be technical, not human.

We see a typical cycle of such sites. They exist 12-24 months, and after receiving millions of advertising money, they disappear. We know this for sure, because before these sites there was one more.

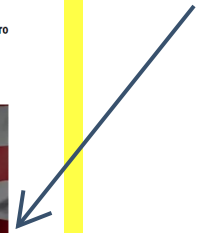
# Laredo Tribune Home page anomalies

The main news is just random archival articles

Evergreen City Content: local restaurant profiles



Fake ad



Old news

Inactive links

Stanton

Daily

4

# Fake local media #0. Stanton Daily

Domain Stantondaily.com was created on July 27, 2016, next month the site was launched. Its main page was not updated for more than a year. In July 2017, the design changed a bit, from time to time some news were added, but rarely. The fake Expedia banner has disappeared, but the main article on the front page remains the same as before: "Massive Whale Approaches Kayakers Because He Needed Their Help."

In January 2018, the site again slightly changed the main page. In fact, only a few articles were added, and they periodically changed their places. At least three news were posted twice.

The pinned story about the whale was replaced by a random article from the Recipes category. This was the only changing part of the main page. The previews in the right column after they appeared in January 2018 no longer changed. The two columns on the left and in the center was just a mix of all categories, but there was no local news.

There are several Stantons in the USA, and it's not clear what local media the creators tried to forge. This is quite difficult to understand, because there are no clues about the local affiliation on the site. Only a small reference to California law allows us to assume that they meant a part of the Los Angeles metropolitan area.

Despite the fact that the site was launched back in August 2016, it had no traffic for six months. January 29, 2017 the site owner hid his name using the nominee holder WhoisGuard, Inc., and the next day the site already had several hundred users. By June, the site had over a million visitors. That number doubled in July, and Stanton Daily reached the global Alexa Top 10,000.

A sharp rise in traffic for no apparent reason is not the strangest thing in the behavior of the audience. The activity of visitors who viewed 24 pages per visit on average was completely abnormal. And this is not the statistics of a single month, this went on throughout 2017.

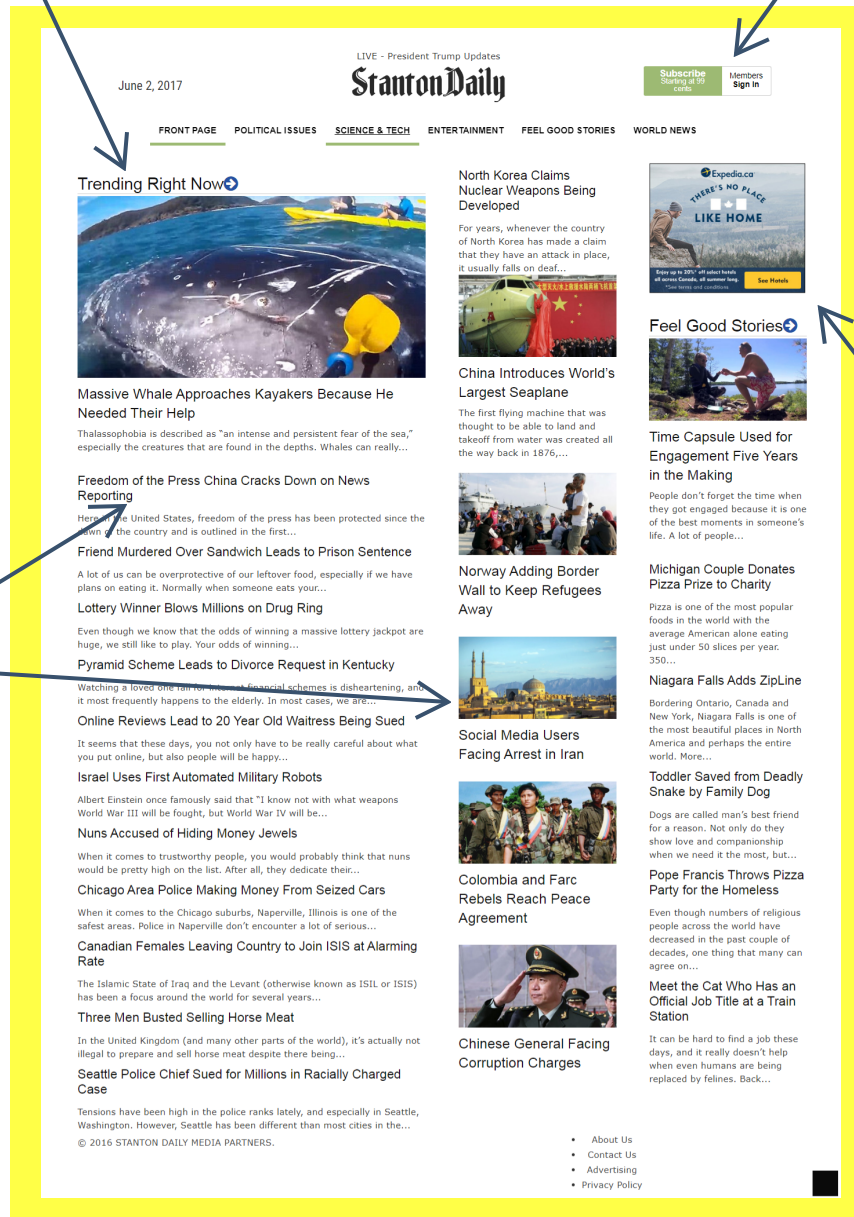
Like all previous sites, Stanton Daily had a shadow part, Celebrity: then and now. These pages were the most visited. Moreover, only they were visited by users, the main page and categories had almost no traffic.

In 2018, the audience stabilized at around 1 million monthly visits, its activity gradually decreased, by the beginning of 2019 it was close to normal. At the end of March, the site has been removed, and the domain automatically redirected (and still redirects) visitors to the newly launched Albany Daily News. All content in the shadow part of the site is transferred to its successor. In fact, Albany Daily News is the same site, as Stanton Daily.

# Stanton Daily Home page anomalies

The article that has been trending for over a year

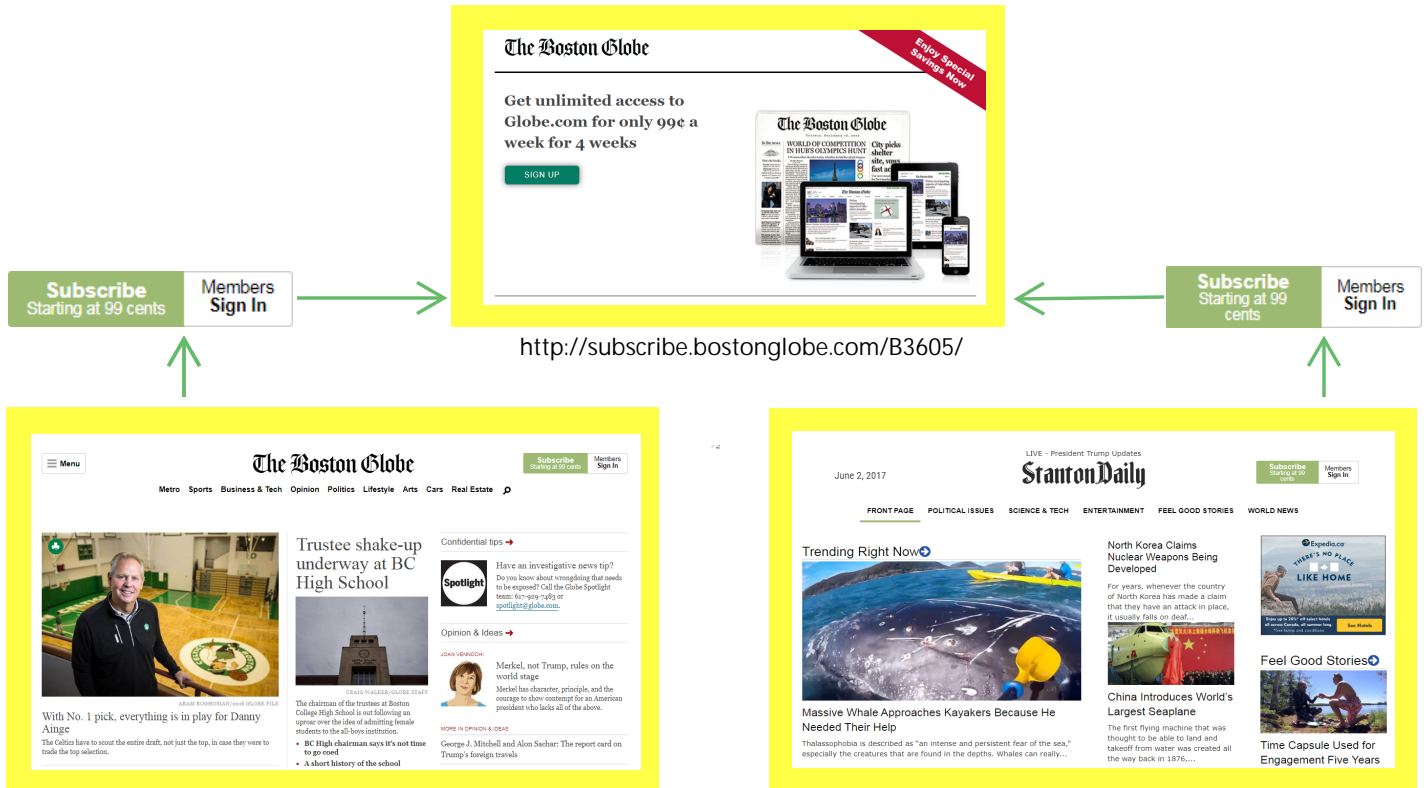
Boston Globe  
Subscribe/Login  
Button



Old news

Fake ad

# Fake local media #0. Stanton Daily



There is another small but very important detail that you should pay attention to. To be more like real media, possibly affiliated with a major publisher, Stanton Daily placed the The Boston Globe subscription button on the main page. This is exactly the button that was really used there from September 2015 to May 2019. In general, comparing these two sites it can be seen that the design of the Stanton Daily is very similar to the Boston Globe. Those who do not know what kind of site it is, may have the erroneous opinion that this is just a local division of a large publisher. This was the goal of the site owners.

Only the use of this button should be the reason for blacklisting not only this site, but also all the assets of this publisher and an immediate investigation. But according to current industry standards, this is not a clear sign of fake media. Based on the number and activity of visitors, Stanton Daily sold significantly more than a billion ad impressions in 2017-2018. The minimum income was several million dollars, with almost zero costs for producing content and maintaining the site. We can find out the exact revenue only after the ad systems reveal the average RPM and the exact number of ad impressions on this site.

# Summary

4



# The business model of this scheme and the reasons for its success

Let's try to describe the business model of the assets reviewed above. Some entrepreneur, who has extensive publisher experience and high professional skills in digital advertising, has created a site that simulated local media. After two successful years, he closed it, and began to create similar sites every quarter. The hidden pages "Celebrities: then and now" content received almost all traffic. They were completely and even the same on all sites, right down to the pictures, design and text structure.

If a media entrepreneur really wanted to create a celebrity site, why did he split the content into different parts and put it in stealth mode on sites simulating local media? Wouldn't it be easier to buy a suitable domain, for example *celebritiesthenandnow.com* (it's free), and make a single site, corresponding to the real content. But the owner chooses a different way. From the point of view of the general media business, the actions of this publisher are illogical and risky. The publisher's strategy has many weird decisions that are completely absurd when dealing with a real audience. But if you look at these assets having an idea of the business model of shadow publishers, then all the anomalies easily get their explanations.

Domain names with the keywords daily, news, city are more trusted than the abstract names of typical viral and celebrity sites. The name of the city almost guarantees the absence of any suspicions, and sites created a month ago successfully mimic reliable old media.

But updating real news for such a site is very expensive. Then the publisher decides to use evergreen content, although it does not meet the objectives of the site.

We see a classic ad fraud trick. The front page just is a simulation of local, or any other reliable media specially for analysts of ad systems. But the entire traffic passes through the back door to the shadow part, with lot of celebrity content with dozens of banner ads.

Right now there are no algorithms to compare the domain name and the stated goals of the site with its real content and localization of the audience. There are no tools that analyze the site map and internal links for verification. Therefore, it is impossible to identify sites with a shadow content using modern tech algorithms. Such sites, despite the long history of their use, are not considered by the ad industry as a real threat to digital ad budgets.

# The key problem of digital ad industry that makes such schemes possible

This case highlights the very deep underlying problem of the current digital ad industry.

Tech companies act as intermediaries between publishers and advertisers. They guarantee that advertising will be shown to the target audience on reliable media. They promise a return on advertising investment.

The number of publishers in the digital era is really huge. Large advertisers place their ads on hundreds of thousands of sites per year. They have no way to check each of them to make sure that it is a reliable publisher. This should be done by the ad system, which distributes digital marketing budgets. They are responsible for the quality of the site where the ad is shown, and know who receive the money.

Sites with inappropriate and forbidden content really hardly get ads from the best brands, the ad industry somehow solves this problem. But simulated media, such as in this case study, receive ad without causing suspicion and complaints. Even large ad companies, including Google, do not have a media asset audit system. Thousands of them appearing and disappearing every year, continuing to earn on ad fraud right now.

Let's imagine what this situation would have looked like if there hadn't been an intermediary, but this publisher and advertisers have contacted directly. When distributing the budget for 2018, no brand could buy ad on the Albany Daily News and Laredo Tribune, because these domains were not even registered. City of Edmonton was already created, but it did not yet have an audience, and there were no reasons for it to grow up to 5 million monthly visits by the summer 2019.

But even if this publisher turned to brands in 2018 with a presentation that next year he planned to launch 3 new local media in Alberta, New York and Texas, it is unlikely that some somebody would take the responsibility to buy millions of ad impressions on not yet launched sites, based on the promises of the unknown publisher.

But in the digital world, everything works differently. The advertiser delegates the choice of sites to ad tech systems, and almost does not check how reasonable this choice was. Brands only receive a report at the end of the month/quarter/year with a list of domains where their ads were displayed. If domain name have the typical pattern of old local media, then it is impossible to understand that this is fake, and therefore it is impossible to avoid such schemes.

# Social Puncher

Media asset audit  
and verification

Audit of ad cost  
effectiveness

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investigations

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