

Fact Check 201

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SPEAKERS

Kyle Cook, Steve Jess, Nicole Cox, Michael Dauphinais

M Michael Dauphinais 00:00
The following is an azpm original production.

S Steve Jess 00:11
Welcome to the Fact Check Arizona podcast from AZPM. In each episode, this series will look at a particular claim about elections in Arizona. We'll set the record straight and also give a sense of the context surrounding the claim in question. I'm Steve Jess. We start this week with a name you may have seen on billboards along Interstate 10 or maybe even in a newspaper, depending on where you live, the Epoch Times. The billboards seen in battleground states including Arizona, Colorado, Minnesota and Michigan proclaim #1 Trusted News alongside a picture of a man who is the face of some of its online videos, physical copies of the Epoch Times also pop up occasionally in public spaces. We've even seen them in our break room at AZPM, which is on the University of Arizona campus. The publication's issues go deeper, though, with opaque ownership, reporting that pushes debunked conspiracy theories and questionable advertising practices. Kyle Cook wrote about these issues earlier this year for Denver's Rocky Mountain PBS, where he's the digital media manager. Our conversation started with how he came up with the idea for the story.

K Kyle Cook 01:29
I was actually driving on I-70 headed west to go skiing one weekend, and I noticed one of these billboards for the first time. The first thing that stood out to me is how kind of simple it was, right? It had this kind of like grammatically correct but still kind of awkward headline of number one most trusted news, which as a journalist just caught my eye, because I'm always interested in what other outlets are saying about themselves, but number one, most trusted news in these huge letters and then a photo of an unidentified man and that that was it. So I looked it up when I got home, and not only were there several of them in Denver, but there were several of them across the country, from Washington State to Tennessee, where I used to

work, to places on the east coast. So that was my initial entry point into it. And then I was just curious about, you know, advertising isn't cheap, and the fact that this is nationwide physical media, it just had, there was a lot of questions there for me.

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Steve Jess 02:30

So what did you find out about these billboards and the people behind them?

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Kyle Cook 02:34

Yeah, so, so again, like, the first thing that I found out was just how pervasive they were. But then I started looking into kind of the history of this kind of shadowy marketing of the epic times, specifically in Denver, several years ago, copies of their physical newspaper were left in the Colorado State Capitol, like on the newsstands, which that created a bit of a controversy, because there is a process by which papers are allowed to be in the Capitol. And so people were concerned that this kind of fringe, conspiratorial outlet was given a platform in the capitol, but the Capitol press corps came out and said that they did not approve those to be placed there. So I think some individual just came and dropped them there. In 2019 unsolicited copies of those newspapers were delivered to folks around Colorado from not only in the Denver Metro area, but also in ski towns like Steamboat Springs and and again, people were like, we we did not ask for this, and often they didn't agree with the kind of slant that that comes with the with the paper. Another thing I realized is the coverage itself. You know, they purport to be most trusted, but if you read their stories, it's very conspiratorial, almost like Farrakhanian And it's like mistrust of traditional medicine, of government, but it is also very clearly anti-Chinese Communist Party. And so I did some research, and I found that the founders of this paper were part of the Falun Gong movement in China, which was kind of this new wave religious movement that the Chinese Communist Party called them a cult and banned them from China.

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Steve Jess 04:18

Some elements of this story, like leaving random copies of the newspaper in the state capitol, or, in our case, in university buildings where students can see them almost sound like, just to name one example, something that the Jehovah's Witnesses might do. Do you see a parallel there?

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Kyle Cook 04:36

I do. And yes, it's this very kind of like loosely organized group of followers, and the ownership structure is very difficult to discern. It's a common it's technically a nonprofit, which I think a lot of us think of nonprofit media, as you know, unbiased or publicly supported, like NPR or PBS, but this is a loose network of many different nonprofits with a very confusing ownership structure. And I think that's by design. I think the folks behind this paper don't exactly want people to know where they stand on, you know, financially and where their money is coming from. The Department of Justice recently launched an investigation into this. They also, I think part of the reason that they are they're using these kind of like guerrilla marketing tactics is

because the more traditional kind of online marketing that you see, they've gotten in trouble with. Facebook banned them from advertising a few years ago because of the claims that they were making, they were not true, and they were also juking the stats a little bit and not being totally honest about their claims and their funding. So they were banned from Facebook, but then they created new Facebook accounts with names like, you know, Number One American News and like, kind of again, these very like, ambiguous titles that some people might seem trustworthy, but when you look into it again, it's again, this very conspiratorial news that they're sharing.

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Steve Jess 04:37

I hate to put it this way, but it's a little suspicious too, just to see any print newspaper engaging in a major high budget advertising campaign, given the state of the print media these days, when newspapers are withering. It sounds like they have, clearly an agenda other than just selling lots of newspapers and selling lots of ads and making lots of money, there's, there's something else behind it, don't you think?

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Kyle Cook 06:34

yeah, absolutely. And to your point, I think that was one of the things that initially piqued my interest. Was, you know, what is this company that seems to have a bottomless budget to advertise, but that's a newspaper, right? Like those, those two things don't, don't mesh,

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Steve Jess 06:49

yeah,

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Kyle Cook 06:49

and so you're exactly right, and that is what piqued my interest. But, you know, I think one of the interesting things is that the photograph that they use on these billboards is of one of their hosts, whose name is Joshua Phillip. He hosts a show that primarily airs on YouTube that is not even a new show. It even comes with a disclaimer that it's not a new show and it's an opinion show. Again, it's very conspiratorial. Unfortunately, because they are spreading what I think is fair to call misinformation. They have, you know, hundreds of 1000s, if not billions of views on on many of his videos. The pandemic especially, was a time when a lot of these videos kind of exploded in popularity because they were kind of capitalizing on mistrust of the vaccines and of the government at the time, and they really seem to have doubled down in that and a lot of their their news articles, I say news with air quotes. I know this is an audio format but, include this kind of skepticism around medicine that verges on misinformation. I remember one of the one of the stories that I referred to in the article that I wrote was about how positive thinking influences cancer prognosis and how, you know, kind of these, these more anti medicine and more, just like you know, you just have to think positive and your cancer will go away. That's kind of the message that they're trying to send through their coverage. It's very again, I keep repeating conspiratorial, but it's also rife with misinformation, and it's also has this hard line, kind of born again undercurrent to all of their work.

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Steve Jess 06:50

So what would you tell someone who is interested in checking out the epic times you know, they see these billboards, they're they're intrigued by them. This looks interesting. What's your answer to somebody who wants to check out their website or their newspaper?

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Kyle Cook 08:46

Yeah, I think the simplest, the simplest answer is to follow the money. To see I think no matter what outlet you're looking at, whether it's you know, a local NPR station or a local PBS station, or you're you know, or even the New York Times, looking at the ownership structure is is very, is very telling about kind of the motivations for their coverage. I think the fact that it is difficult to find out who owns the Epoch Times is by design. Look at what they're writing about and and try to look at it objectively. I would also caution, caution people to not sign up for their emails, because they are relentless, and it's very hard to unsubscribe. I did as a part of this story, and it took me a long time to kind of get out of the net that they cast. I think something that people it's a little easier to come across. They are very much close to, related to Shenyang, which is a very big global dance phenomenon. Shenyang also has an anti communist message. That's that's very clear. But these Shenyang and the Epoch Times are owned by the same organizations, and the Epoch Times has a whole vertical on their website dedicated to Shenyang and how great Shenyang is. And NBC News has done a lot of great coverage on the Epoch Times as well, and they've even spoken with former journalists who have worked for Epoch Times. And I would encourage people to go read those stories, because it is really fascinating to hear from people who used to work for this paper about the kind of directives that they received from their boss and what they were and were not allowed to write about. One of those directives was to write glowing profiles of Shenyang performers because it helped them with their visa applications. So there's this web of biases and motivations that aren't exactly clear to someone who might just be flipping through their website. Yeah, I would encourage people to dig deeper and to read about the Epoch Times from outlets that are not the Epoch Times because they're not reliable narrators about their own story.

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Steve Jess 10:53

Clearly, it's an organization and a newspaper that has an agenda of some kind, and the agenda is anti Chinese Communist, but also a little bit of anti science, anti medicine mixed in there too, from what you're telling me. Can you tell me what was the most egregious of the things that you saw from the Epoch Times that that people should be skeptical about?

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Kyle Cook 11:21

Yeah, as I mentioned earlier, you know, there was a lot of, you know, a kind of anti medicine slant, anti Western medicine, I would say. Also very much, and this is where we get into more of the kind of, like, hardline Christian conservative views of the outlet. But they are very much opposed to the LGBTQ community. There's one of the web, one of the headlines that I came across said The Sinister Theory Behind the Q in LGBTQ. A former reporter for The Epoch Times spoke with the New York Times, and they said that when they worked at the paper during the

Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, where I believe over 50 people were killed at a at a gay nightclub in Orlando, they were instructed to not use the word gay in their articles about it, but they were also told to emphasize the fact that the gunman in that case was Muslim. So these very like conflicting you know, it made it impossible to write about if you you're you're not supposed to write about the queer community, but you are supposed to elevate anytime a person of color commits mass violence. Some of the directives that the reporters were receiving were very disturbing to me.

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Steve Jess 12:39

Clearly, they had a particular lens that they wanted their reporters to look through when they wrote stories about events that happened. So as a journalist, what's the lesson for news consumers? Just ordinary, you know, civilians who are looking for a reliable source of information, besides maybe saying, well, the Epoch Times, isn't it?

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Kyle Cook 13:01

Yeah, I would encourage people to do what's called lateral reading. So if you're interested on a topic, maybe it is, maybe it is the vaccine, maybe it is, unfortunately, a recent shooting, maybe it's the upcoming election. If there's a topic that you're interested in, you know, read about it in a in an outlet of your choosing, but also make sure to read about it in other outlets as well, so that if you do come across the Epoch Times, that's not the only place that you're getting your information. I think there are a lot of outlets, particularly, you know, local NPR affiliates, local PBS affiliates, even local community papers that do a great job in disclosing who their funders are and and where their money comes from. I think outlets that are very open about their funding models are are more often than not, trustworthy and and more reliable. Something else about the Epoch Times that I think is is important to note is that when you look at their website, it's a pretty elegant operation. It looks good, it looks clean, it's it's easy to read. I think historically, you know, a lot of the kind of misinformation websites just look a little shoddy, right? Like, you can look at the website and be like, I don't know if I totally trust this. There's a lot of pop up ads. There's videos that are auto playing. It's kind of an ugly format The Epoch Times is not that it's a very like classy looking website, but that only further kind of masks the more sinister motivations that they have. And so I guess my advice there would be to not just always trust your eyes, make sure you're also reading a little deeper into it.

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Steve Jess 14:41

Kyle, that pretty much completes the things I wanted to ask you about. Is there anything else you might want to add, just for the just for the good of the cause?

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Kyle Cook 14:52

No, thank you so much for reaching out. I mean, I think, I think a lot of people were really interested in this article because it was just, it was just a curiosity that people shared, right we were driving on the highway, and we're like, what? What is that? What? Why? Why is this billboard in my neighborhood about? And who's this mystery man that they're plastering his

face everywhere? And, you know, I was happy to be able to write about it for the kind of Denver and Colorado community, but I think the fact that it has national appeal is, is, is interesting because these billboards are, are popping up everywhere.

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Steve Jess 15:28

Well, thank you very much. I appreciate you spending some time to talk with us today about that.

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Kyle Cook 15:33

Yeah, thank you, Steve. I hope I was helpful. Kyle Cook is the

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Steve Jess 15:36

Digital Media Manager of Rocky Mountain PBS in Denver. As you heard, some traditional news outlets have carried stories from the Epoch Times. Among them, for a time was the Sierra Vista Herald and some of its sister papers in Cochise County. They carried those stories for a few months. Earlier this year, we asked Herald Managing Editor Matt Hickman about that. He said the newspaper was offered a free trial of stories from the Epoch Times and decided to try it out as a counterpoint to some of the other free use content providers who he said tend to be left leaning. But Hickman said he soon noticed the content the Herald was offered by the outlet was a more sanitized version of what was being posted on the Epoch Times website, which had suspect journalistic quality. So the Sierra Vista Herald stopped carrying those stories. That's it for this edition of Fact Check. Our producer is Zac Ziegler. I'm Steve Jess Thanks for listening. Join us next time!

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Nicole Cox 16:45

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