

The Business of Misinformation: Bosnia and Herzegovina



LYING FOR PROFIT

Author: Semir Dzebo

Main findings

- The websites creating misinformation content in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be classified into four categories based on their financial and/or political motivations and the extent to which they provide valuable journalistic contributions;
- The majority of misinformation websites are motivated solely by profit which they generate via Google AdSense;
- Established media outlets engage in misinformation practices either to compete for readers` attention or on behalf of their political patrons;
- Two relatively secretive websites have established themselves as influential leaders in misinformative propaganda, primarily preoccupied with benefiting their political patrons rather than obtaining profits;
- Due to secrecy and lack of regulation, it is extremely difficult to establish the financial background of these websites.

Introduction

Misinformation websites that publish untruthful information and manipulate facts have spread at a rapid pace in the past decade helped by the advance of new technologies, raising serious political problems. There is arguably no country in the world that is immune to such websites and the political and social consequences they bring about. However, what is often overlooked is the motivation behind the establishment and functioning of these websites.

Based on the websites' mode of operation, analysis of their content and data about their ownership structures, Bosnia and Herzegovina's misinformation websites could be divided into four categories:

1. for-profit misinformation websites without real journalism
2. real journalism websites with misinformation content
3. real journalism websites with misinformation content and political propaganda
4. misinformation websites with consistent political propaganda.

To place the analyzed websites in one of these categories, two criteria were used:

- The primary motivation behind the website: financial gain or purposeful dissemination of disinformation (political propaganda etc.)
- The extent to which the website provides original, non-misinformation journalism.

MISINFORMATION WEBSITES: FOUR CATEGORIES

For-profit misinformation websites without real journalism

For-profit misinformation websites without real journalistic value are websites whose primary goal is to generate clicks through clickbait. The more advanced of these websites are able to generate their own content by making up stories and reports or by attributing false quotes to individuals (usually politicians).

A tier below them are websites that make up a shocking and false title to a story but copy a text from a legitimate news source on the same topic without ever addressing the shocking headline. In some cases, they only add a sentence or two related to the headline, but in most cases these additional sentences are poorly written with poor grammar and spelling).

The last tier groups websites that primarily rely on republishing content they find on other websites, while occasionally producing original content. None of these websites ever reveal the names of anyone behind them or the authors of the stories. The majority of the websites in this category do not restrict themselves to a particular niche but cover a variety of topics ranging from politics to sports to pop culture. There are some exceptions to this such as the web portal [Originalno.org](#), which has a rather [bizarre routine](#) of including at least one false story a day about the death or murder of a famous person.

A characteristic of these types of misinformation websites is their relatively short lifespan, particularly in the case of lesser known portals whose only purpose is financial gain for their owners. These types of websites usually do not have a propaganda purpose. If they do come across as having one, it is more a case of them attempting to pander to a particular audience that brings them website clicks rather than actually having a political purpose.

The explanation for the constant creation and disappearance of similar websites of this type is financial, namely the need to repurpose the sites when they stop generating money. The majority of such websites make money using Google AdSense, the ad sales service of the search engine Google. However, when Google realizes that these websites only attempt to artificially generate website clicks, they terminate their “contract.” Then the website becomes basically useless (as a financial generation machine) and is shut down while a different one is created to fill the gap.

Consequently, a good way to keep track of these emerging websites, other than checking whether they choose names similar to the websites that were shut down, are Facebook groups that share their content: since Facebook groups and pages are more or less permanent, the owners of these websites use Facebook to promote their (ever-changing) websites and to keep their audience in spite of the changes of their URLs. The Facebook groups used to promote this content have little that would connect them to the websites directly. Instead, they are created as fan pages for celebrities such as actors, sports personalities, comedians etc, then used to share and disseminate clickbait misinformation content. This phenomenon also sheds some light on the complicated relationship between social media companies and misinformation sites.

These types of websites represent what we usually think of when we hear the term “misinformation website” or the more popular “fake news”. As attention to these practices has increased, it has become even more difficult to establish who is behind these websites. To date, the most successful inquiry into the ownership structures behind this form of websites was made by [Raskrinkavanje.ba](#), which found that a large number of these websites (46 at one point and 11 at the time when [Raskrinkavanje](#) published the findings of their investigation) is connected to one name: [Aldin Širanović](#).

Širanović was a key leader in the 2014 social unrest in Bosnia and Herzegovina: he was one of the leaders of the protests in Tuzla, a city from which the protest spread to the rest of the country. Due to what he claimed were threats to him and his family in the aftermath of the protests, he left Bosnia and Herzegovina and was granted asylum in Austria. Once a local fact-checking website exposed him as being behind 46 different misinformation websites, he sent threatening messages to them and also published an untrue description of the fact-checking website [claiming](#) that it is funded by the nationalist parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Širanović appears to currently [hold](#) an administrative position in the Institute of Computer Engineering at the Graz University of Technology.

Websites with real journalistic value but also misinformation content

These are long established media outlets that are registered in the trade registry. The reason for including them in the research is a combination of a clickbait-focused strategy and their habit of republishing misinformation content that they find on other websites. Occasionally, they publish their own original misinformation content by manipulating the facts or adding an untrue element to an otherwise true story.

From direct observation, these websites lack a clear political agenda as they do not seem to consistently favor one political ideology or party. Their practice of disseminating false information could be a result of the time-pressure they work under, forcing them to publish content before they examine how accurate the report is, or a desire to boost their profit by creating clickbait titles and publishing controversial false reports that attract readers.

Websites with real journalistic value but also misinformation content and political propaganda

Much like the websites from the previous category, these are established media outlets, registered in the local trade registry. All of the outlets in this category also happen to have printed editions. Of the three, [Avaz](#) is, by far, the gravest offender when it comes to publishing misinformation content.

There are credible speculations according to which all three media outlets included in this category have ties to certain political parties. [Faktor](#) and [Stav](#) are allegedly tied to the Bosniak Party of Democratic Action (Stranka demokratske akcije, SDA) in government for whom the parent company of Faktor and Stav (Simurg Media) ran an election-targeted marketing campaign. Moreover, Simurg Media was [granted](#) around BAM 30,000 (approx. € 15,000) from the state budget for various projects, all signed off by the head of the SDA and former Bosniak member of the presidency. Avaz, on the other hand, is tied to the Bosniak Alliance for a Better Future for Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Savez za bolju budućnost Bosne i Hercegovine*, SBB BiH) whose president is also the founder of Avaz.[1]

The coverage of the three websites is consistent with these allegations and almost always favors the two parties and critiques their opponents. Avaz, however, is more blatantly publishing misinformation (clickbait, false reporting, republishing of misinformation content found elsewhere, pseudoscience) than the other two. In fact, Avaz not only publishes much more misinformation than Faktor and Stav, but their misinformation content is not limited only to politics, as is the case with Faktor and Stav. The motivations behind the publishing of misinformation content by these websites include time-pressure and the desire to attract

[1] It is important to keep in mind that the terms "government" and "opposition" are rather fluid in the Bosnian political context due to the high degree of decentralization. However, the author of this study uses these terms when deemed that they appropriately reflect the context.

more readers, just as in the category above. What distinguishes them from that category though is that their political content is biased in that it is clearly aimed to portray their political patrons in a positive light and their opponents negatively.

It is important to note that these websites are starting to care about the damage done to their reputation by fact-checking websites that expose their misinforming practices. Namely, Avaz recently published two articles in which they attempt to discredit those working for the B&H fact-checking website Raskrinkavanje. Avaz accused them of profiting [personally](#) from the website, having [hidden](#) financial donors, employing family members, and having ambitions of being a media regulatory agency. [Raskrinkavanje](#) published an article in which responds to all of the above allegations. This recent effort by Avaz illustrates the difficulties that established media outlets that engage in misinformation face when their practices are exposed. Namely, since they represent an established journalistic brand, they cannot change their domains or names like for-profit misinformation websites. One option they have is to attempt discrediting the fact-checking websites, as the above example illustrates.

Disinformation websites with consistent political propaganda and no journalistic value

These websites serve a particular political purpose. They are different from for-profit websites as their content is not as diverse, topic-wise, and they possess a more sophisticated level of writing and publishing. Moreover, their primary aim is not to maximize their own profits via Google AdSense but rather to maximize the political capital of their favored political groups. Consequently, the content found on these websites is mostly political and does not veer off into other topics unless there is a political aspect to them. On the other hand, they are different from websites with journalistic value but with misinformation content because they have a clear propaganda purpose. Yet, they are also different from websites with real journalistic value but also misinformation content and political propaganda because of the secrecy and lack of information about them.

The websites in this fourth category have two distinct features. First, there is no information on the websites regarding who their journalists and editors are (except in the case of [Poskok](#) where they list columnists but none of those columnists actually seem to work for them, their texts being copied from other websites). Secondly, their content (both misinformation content and content in general) is primarily political and aimed at criticizing those who have opposing views.

Even though the Bosnian political environment is marked by inter-ethno-nationalist tensions, surprisingly, these two websites are typically aimed at criticizing the opposition movements and parties within their respective ethno-national constituencies. Based on the analysis of their content, [Poskok](#) favors the ruling Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica BiH*, HDZ BiH) and [Infosrpska](#) favors the ruling Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (*Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata*, SNSD), Republika Srpska's ruling party.[2] In the case of [Infosrpska](#), its content is also often re-propagated by the Republika Srpska television channel RTRS, a public broadcaster, as well as their news agency, which indicates a level of connection between the ruling structures and this website.

A deeper investigation of the ownership of these websites (to the extent possible) reveals that they are not the typical for-profit misinformation websites. While [Poskok](#) does not publish any information about its

[2] Republika Srpska is one of the two entities that are part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the other being Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

owner or editor, it is highly likely that the website is owned by Ivan Susnjar: the website lists its contributors, but other than Susnjar's articles, all other texts are taken from other websites. They seem to be selected based on how their content aligns ideologically with Poskok's.

Susnjar is a Bosnian Croat whose political ideology is best described as right-wing Croatian nationalism (the same description can be used to describe the website). He is known publicly for involvement in two incidents. The first was his arrest under suspicion that he hacked and gained access to the e-mails of a Bosniak politician from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Susnjar published a piece on his website claiming to show an e-mail exchange between that politician and the Bosnia and Herzegovina's ambassador to Rome that the politician appointed. In the fake e-mail, the politician was congratulating the ambassador for switching his nationality[3] from Bosniak to Croat for the purpose of obtaining the ambassadorial position (each nationality is allocated a certain number of ambassadorial positions in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Susnjar then defended himself by claiming that he created the false e-mail exchange using a website called Fake Mailer and that the piece was [satire](#).

It is an example of one of the distinguishing strategies of Poskok: they publish "satirical" pieces but never indicate that the piece is satire, much less that the website is a satirical one. Susnjar's political connections are clearly demonstrated by another occasion, when Susnjar was nominated by HDZ BiH, the Bosnian Croat government party for the position of general consul in Chicago, USA. All three presidents[4] of Bosnia and Herzegovina approved the decision. However, citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina submitted a signed petition to the U.S. not to give Susnjar the necessary accreditation for the position because of his spreading of nationalist views, in part, via Poskok. The U.S. acted accordingly and Susnjar [never](#) got the [position](#). Half a year later, the Bosnian Croat president of Bosnia and Herzegovina nominated Susnjar for the position of ambassador to the Czech Republic. Once again, Susnjar never got the necessary accreditation from the Czech authorities but the Bosnian Croat president refused to nominate anyone else, leaving the Bosnia and Herzegovina's embassy in Prague [without an ambassador](#) for an extended period of time.

No information about who is behind Infosrpska is available.[5]

[3] In the domestic context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, "nationality" is used interchangeably with "ethnicity".

[4] Bosnia and Herzegovina has a three-member presidency, one member for each of its "constituent peoples": Bosniak, Croatian and Serbian.

[5] Interestingly, Infosrpska is the only website with a .ba domain in our sample. Consequently, the information of who registered the website is available. However, the person who registered Infosrpska claims that he/she has acted on behalf of someone else.

MISINFORMATION WEBSITES: FOUR CATEGORIES

| For profit misinformation websites without real journalism | Real journalism websites with misinformation content | Real journalism websites with misinformation content and political propaganda | Disinformation websites with consistent political propaganda |
|--|--|---|--|
| Alternativa | Slobodna Bosna | Faktor | Infosrpska |
| BH Dijaspota | Hayat | Stav | Poskok |
| CIK | | Avaz | |
| Ekspresno | | | |
| Klix.online | | | |
| Narodni | | | |
| Mislipozitivno | | | |
| Originalno | | | |
| Saznajemo | | | |
| Supercarobnisvijet | | | |
| Vremeplov | | | |
| HOTTOPIX | | | |
| Zabavne informacije | | | |
| E-Dijaspota | | | |
| 24h-Vijesti | | | |
| Krajina.ba | | | |

For a detailed database of Bosnian misinformation sites including ownership data, governing structures and links to political parties, institutions and companies, please, visit [our website](#).

Methodology

This report examines the state of the misinformation landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Relying on the information provided by the Bosnia and Herzegovina-based fact-checking website [Raskrinkavanje.ba](https://raskrinkavanje.ba), a list of 42 websites that have published false content has been compiled. Out of these, 23 websites that have published original misinformation content, drafted by the website in question and not copied from another source, have been identified.

The database curated by Raskrinkavanje.ba is a living registry, websites that do not publish such pieces in three months are removed from the list. To be able to gauge the depth of the phenomenon, our research included all the websites that appeared on Raskrinkavanje's list at some point and that have not removed or retracted false news pieces from their website.

Difficulties in finding ownership and financial data

One of the goals for this research was to obtain the financial data on these websites in order to assess the monetary aspect of the misinformation landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This proved to be the most difficult part of the research due to the secrecy surrounding these websites, especially those from the first and fourth category. Since they are not officially registered anywhere, it is almost impossible to know who owns them and all information regarding their finances is private and unavailable. One reason why this is the case is that the owners and contributors do not wish to be associated with these websites due to the false nature of their content, perhaps fearing potential legal repercussions for defamation etc. The situation is slightly better with established media outlets as they do have impressums and are registered in the trade registry. Since these are prominent players in the media landscape, some investigations into their financial ties to political structures have been conducted by journalists. However, we were not able to obtain comprehensive financial reports from these companies.

About the author

Semir Dzebo is currently a doctoral student at the Department of International Relations at Central European University. His research interests include civil wars, ethnic conflicts, Southeast European politics and international relations at large. Moreover, he is also interested in devising strategies to combat misinformation and using podcasting to disseminate academic research.

About The Business of Misinformation project

The Business of Misinformation project is run by the Center for Media, Data and Society, mapping the individuals and companies that own misinformation websites and their links to institutions, parties and other individuals. It canvasses websites that systematically and methodically create and target false information to persuade audiences to adopt ideas and ways of thinking embraced by their original promoters or their sponsors, be those political, social, economic, health-related or else. It includes players in the misinformation industry consisting of locally run online portals that are presenting themselves and are perceived as independent voices.



Tel: +36 1 327 3000 / 2609

Fax: +36 1 235 6168

E-mail: cmds@ceu.edu
cmds.ceu.edu

Postal address:

Center for Media, Data and Society
Central European University
Nador u. 9
1051 Budapest
Hungary