Conspiracy Clickbait

Case Study 3: The Art of the (Affiliate Marketing) Deal

Elise Thomas

About this publication

In the field of disinformation and conspiracy theories, there has been a tendency for policymakers and practitioners to focus on state-linked operations and to overlook the role of commercially motivated networks. However, the rise of a global industry producing conspiracy clickbait for profit is likely to have significant implications.

This report explores three case studies of how networks linked to individuals in Vietnam are using QAnon conspiracy theories and US political disinformation to generate revenue. These case studies illustrate that although the motive may be commercial, the effect of such networks is to deepen political division and amplify conspiracy theories and disinformation. While each individual network may only have a small impact, the cumulative impact of many such networks around the world may be profound. This growing industry is disproportionately targeted at the US, and therefore should be of particular concern for US policymakers and practitioners.

About the author

Elise Thomas is an OSINT Analyst at ISD, with a background in researching state-linked information operations, disinformation, conspiracy theories and the online dynamics of political movements. She also freelances as a journalist, and her work has appeared in Bellingcat, Foreign Policy, The Daily Beast, Wired and others. She is the author of Recommended Reading: Amazon's algorithms, conspiracy theories and extremist literature and The Long Tail of Influence Operations: A Case Study on News Front and the co-author of COVID-19 Disinformation Briefing No.4.

ISD | Powering solutions to extremism, hate and disinformation

Table of Contents

Operation overview

This case study focuses on an operation which utilizes domains posing as MAGA and QAnon news platforms, along with associated social media accounts. Amongst the case studies in this series, this operation has made by far the most significant effort to develop a convincing façade. It has also adopted the most diverse monetization strategy, including advertising, affiliate sales links and direct solicitation of donations.

The operation is tailored to target US-based followers of QAnon, supporters of President Trump and pro-Trump audiences interested in the US military. As with other case studies in this series, it primarily uses content plagiarized or directly stolen from other sources. It also makes use of AI generated video content.

ISD has attributed this activity to individuals based in Vietnam and assesses that it is most likely to be commercially motivated. There is no evidence to support a political motivation.

Alongside the domains, the operation runs Telegram channels, Rumble and BitChute channels and a Twitter account. Earlier in 2021, the operation had more of a footprint on mainstream social media platforms, including YouTube and Facebook, but has since lost these accounts. This operation has also had accounts on Patreon and PayPal removed. The operation has since shifted to using Donorbox.

This case study helps to highlight the flexibility and opportunism which commercial, profit-driven operators bring to promoting polarizing content and conspiracy theories.

Domains

ISD has identified two domains being operated by this network. These are RestoredRepublic.co and TheUSMilitaryNews.com. The two domains pose as sources of pro-Trump, MAGA and QAnon news, videos and articles. A range of evidence supports the conclusion that the two domains are operated by the same network, including that they frequently link to one another, links to both domains (and no others) are shared by the network's Telegram channels and that both use the same affiliate advertising codes.

In identical text on the 'About Us' section, each site reads "We love our country, we support our freedoms, and we fully endorse an America-First agenda. We believe in strong borders, unabashed patriotism, and standing for our national anthem. We hold traditional American values that we believe should be preserved in our culture… We just aggregated the information and reworked it to make it more interesting to watch. We do not take any responsibility for their content."

Both domains were registered via the Vietnam-based Mat Bao Corporation. Restored Republic, which was registered in May 2021, is using Whois privacy protections. However, the Whois records for the The US Military News (TUMN), which was registered in June 2021, show an individual's name, email address and phone number. It also lists an address in Ho Chi Minh City, which appears to be or have previously been a nail salon.

Both sites appear to have been initially developed using Chili.vn, a Vietnamese service which offers free and paid web design options in cooperation with Mat Bao.

A copyright notice in the footer for the Restored Republic domain contains an additional email address using the same handle as the network sometimes uses on Telegram. Interestingly, it also claims to date to 2018 despite the domain only having been registered in 2021.

The domains are seeking to monetize their content in multiple ways, as will be discussed in detail below.

Fig 1. Screenshots of Restored Republic and US Military News domains.
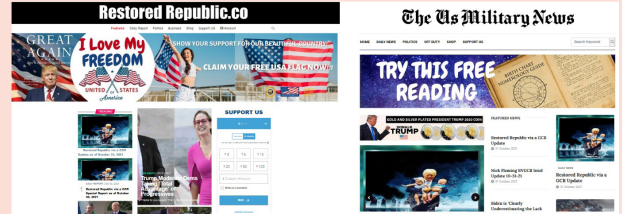

Fig 2: Screenshots of 'About us' pages on Restored Republic and US Military News domains.
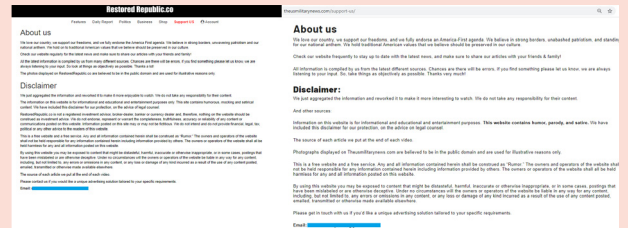

Fig 3: Screenshot of Whois details for TheUSMilitaryNews.com, with personal details redacted.

```
Domain Name: THEUSMILITARYNEWS.COM
Registry Domain ID: 2617370059_DOMAIN_COM-VRSN
Registrar WHOIS Server: ver.whois.matbao.net
Registrar URL: https://www.matbao.net
Updated Date: 2021-06-05T01:41:27Z
Creation Date: 2021-06-05T01:41:27Z
Registrar Registration Expiration Date: 2022-06-05T01:41:27Z
Registrar: MAT BAO CORPORATION
Registrar IANA ID: 1586
Domain Status: clientTransferProhibited https://icann.org/epp#clientTransferProhibited

Registry Registrant ID: Not Available From Registry
Registrant Name:
Registrant Organization:
Registrant Street:                    Cau Giay
Registrant City: HCM
Registrant State/Province: HCM
Registrant Postal Code: 700000
Registrant Country: VN
Registrant Phone:
Registrant Phone Ext:
Registrant Fax: +
Registrant Fax Ext:
Registrant Email:              n@gmail.com
```

Fig 4: Screenshot of footer of RestoredRepublic.co, with email address redacted.

Programmatic ad revenue

One way the domains are generating revenue for operators is through programmatic advertising. Programmatic advertising is when ads are automatically placed on websites, usually by middlemen advertising companies which sit in between the advertisers and the websites the ads are published on. Advertising IDs help to identify which sites are working with which advertising companies.

According to ads.txt records, the Restored Republic domain is associated with 14 direct advertising IDs and is a reseller for 54 more. The Worth of Web tool estimates that the Restored Republic domain is generating about US$1800 in monthly revenue from programmatic advertising.

If this estimate is accurate, this would make the domain a lucrative endeavor for operators in Vietnam, where the per capita monthly income was around US$183 in July 2021. The true amount generated may well be higher given that the operation is pursuing multiple monetization efforts simultaneously.

Some of these advertising IDs appear to have recently been removed from the domain. However, records show that several of the direct advertising IDs listed the associated company name as what appears to be the full name of an individual. This is a different name from the one used to register the TUMN domain, but also appears to be of Vietnamese origin.

TUMN has only one associated advertising ID, via Google. While Worth of Web estimates it to be significantly less valuable at US$169 in monthly revenue, as noted above, this would still be almost equal to the monthly GDP per capita in Vietnam.

The Google ad seller ID for TUMN also lists an individual's name as the company name. This is again a different name from either of the two discussed above, but also appears to be Vietnamese in origin. It is unclear exactly how many individuals are involved in operating this network; it could be that there are multiple people involved, or it could be that the individual(s) behind the network are using multiple usernames and handles.

Fig 5: Taboola advertiser ID lookup for Restored Republic, with name redacted.

Fig 6: Google publisher ID lookup for The US Military News, with name redacted.

Affiliate product advertising

Another type of ads being run on the domains are affiliate product links. Affiliate marketing is an advertising model in which the seller of the products pays publishers for referring traffic to their sites. In the example below, a banner ad on Restored Republic advertises 'Trump Revenge Coins'. The referral link contains a username (redacted for privacy) and leads a site called Patriot Powered Specials. Notably, this site is using a service called ClickBank to track referrals and pay domain owners.

Both domains are using the same ClickBank username to run a multitude of affiliate marketing campaigns for various products including supplements and vitamins, American flags and numerology readings. This username bears a strong similarity to the name used to register ads for the Restored Republic domain, to the email address listed in the Restored Republic footer, and also to one of the Telegram pseudonyms used by the network.

Fig 9: Outgoing Clickbank links from Restored Republic domain, with username redacted.

Fig 10: Outgoing Clickbank links from The US Military News domain, with username (which is the same as used for the Restored Republic links) redacted.

Fig 7: Banner ad on Restored Republic. Affiliate link code/ username is visible (although redacted) in the URL.
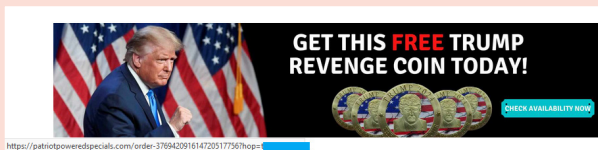

Fig 8: Banner ad on Restored Republic with ClickBank pop-up.

Fig 11: Screenshot of The US Military News site showing affiliate product advertising.

Donations

The operation is also directly soliciting 'donations' from users via its domains. For example, each video on TUMN begins with a short introduction in which an automated female voice speaks in English about how difficult it is to monetize their content via social media platforms. The segment then asks for viewers to become monthly donors via Donorbox (as of 1 November 2021). It also claims that the money will partially be donated to "the animal rescue fund."

The operation has also previously used PayPal, and has had at least two Patreon accounts removed. Unfortunately, it is not possible to assess how much money the network may have generated via this form of monetization. Both sites have lists of their "Top Donators", but this is just a text list written on the page with no independent verification. Notably, in this list the $ symbol has been placed after rather than before the number. This is not generally how an American would write it, but it does echo the positioning of the currency symbol in Vietnamese, among other languages – i.e, an American would write $500 but a Vietnamese person would write 500 ₫. The names of the supposed donors are notably very generic American names.

Fig 12: Screenshots of videos soliciting donations and DonorBox on Restored Republic and The US Military News.

Fig 12: Screenshots of videos soliciting donations and DonorBox on Restored Republic and The US Military News.

Fig 13: Screenshot of 'Support Us' page on Restored Republic.

Social media channels

In addition to the domains, the network operates several social media channels. The goal of these channels appears to be to help drive traffic towards the domains. As of November 2021, the network's social media presence consists of two Telegram channels, a Twitter account and accounts on Rumble and BitChute (which are two video uploading platforms often used as an alternative to YouTube). The network previously had a Restored Republic Facebook account and YouTube accounts but these have either been deleted, removed by the platforms or, according to the admins of the Telegram channels, potentially disrupted by another network.

There is a Facebook page created in October 2021 for the US Military News which regularly shares links to the domain. As of 6 December it had only a handful of followers and very low engagement on its posts. However, the posts are being systematically shared by another page which poses as writer Benjamin Fulford, who has promoted a range of conspiracy theories. It does not appear that this page is operated by Fulford; it seems likely that the page is operated by the network and merely posing as Fulford in order to appeal to a conspiracy following. The page not only shares network content, it also lists an affiliate product link associated with the network as its website.

This page was created in 2017 and has been used to share a range of clickbait content before pivoting to sharing content from the current network. This underscores the point that these appear to be professional clickbait operators who have relatively recently pivoted to promoting QAnon content, presumably because they see it as a more lucrative content line.

While the network's presence on Facebook is very small, it is larger and more active on Telegram. The 'USA Patriots for Donald Trump' Telegram channel was created on 19 April 2021, and as of 2 November has 2,588 subscribers. The channel is used for sharing links to the operation's content, initially on YouTube and BitChute.

Fig 14: Screenshot of 'Benjamin Fulford' Facebook page, showing a shared post (promoting the QAnon conspiracy theory NESARA/GESARA) from The US Military News Facebook page. The link shortener listed as the page's website redirects to a Trump coin affiliate product sale associated with the network.
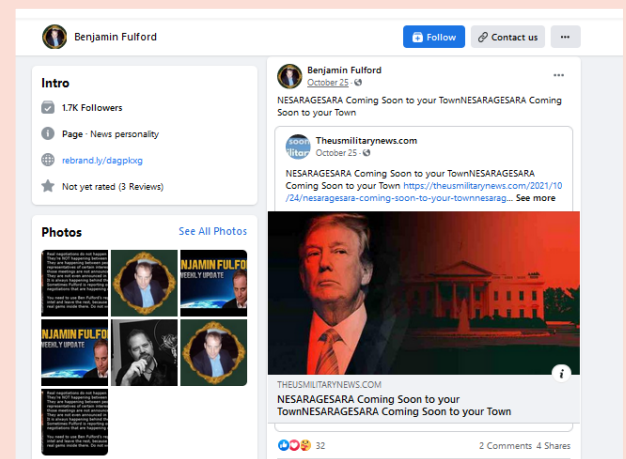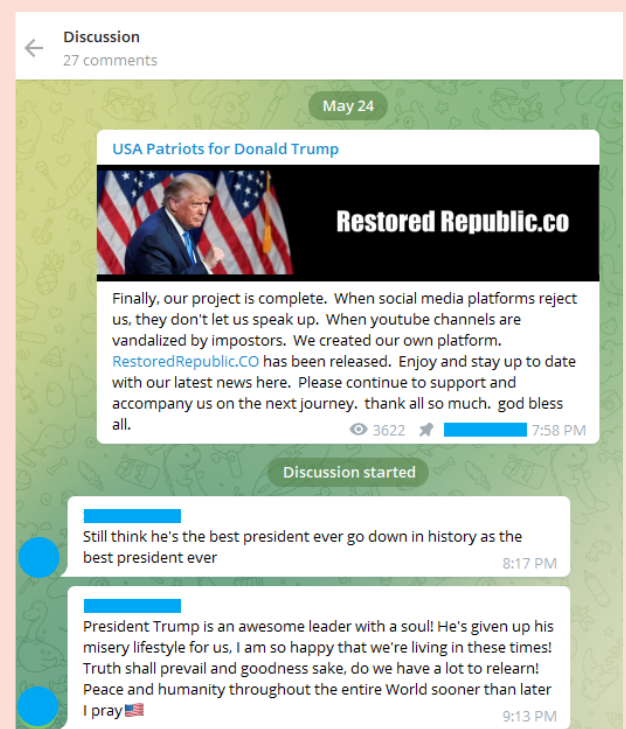

Fig 15: Screenshot of comments in Telegram channel 'USA Patriots for Donald Trump.'

In May, the channel added a post (with a username again quite similar to the usernames discussed above) announcing the creation of the Restored Republic domain, and hinting darkly about "when YouTube channels are vandalized by impostors [sic]."

As speculation, this may reflect some conflict between this network and the network discussed in Case Study 2. This would help to explain the similarity in content between the two, if either they had previously worked together and since fallen out, or if one was aggressively copying the other and out-competing them on YouTube.

The Twitter account was created in June 2015, but currently has no content prior to 27 May 2021. It may be that the network operators bought a previously used Twitter account in order to make their content appear more authentic. The account follows only one other account, @POTUS45 (the official archive of President Donald Trump's tweets). It has 973 followers as of 2 November, and is used solely to tweet out links to the Restored Republic and TUMN domains, most of which generate no engagement. Twitter does not appear to play a significant role in the network's operations.

The Rumble and BitChute accounts associated with the network are used to upload videos which are then embedded into the domains. The video descriptions are used as an additional opportunity for soliciting donations and sharing affiliate product links.

Fig 16: Screenshot of Rumble video description featuring links and advertisements associated with the network's various monetization strategies.
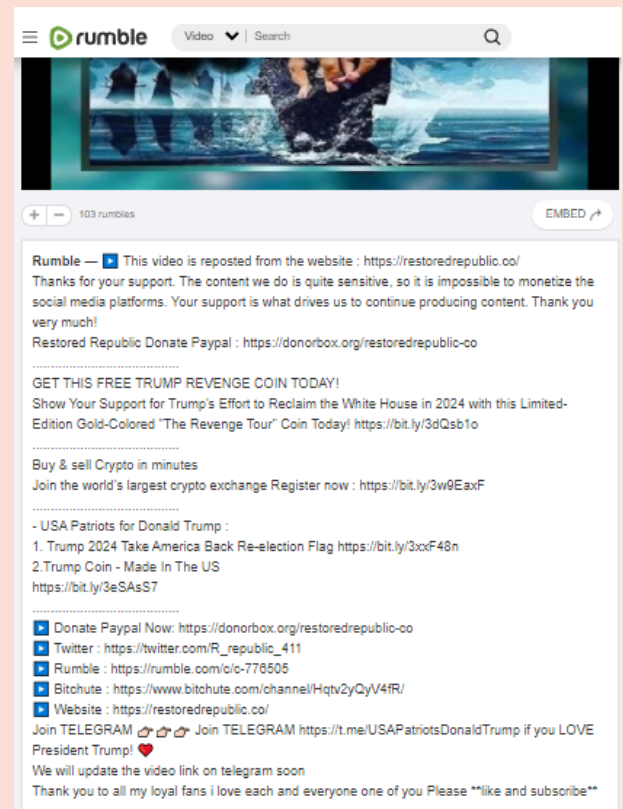
Content

The content on the domains is based around embedded Rumble or BitChute videos which feature an AI-generated voice reading out articles (with no attribution) from a range of fringe pro-Trump and MAGA sources including TrendingPolitics, RealRawNews, RedState and others.

For example, on 31 October NewsMax published an article about an interview which Senator Rand Paul gave to Fox News, speculating on the unproven theory that the Covid-19 virus emerged from a laboratory in Wuhan. A few hours later, a video was uploaded to the network's Rumble account featuring an AI-generated voice reading the NewsMax article aloud, and this was embedded and published on the Restored Republic domain.

Between the BitChute and Rumble accounts, the network appears to be regularly publishing between 10 and 20 videos per day that simply narrate articles from other outlets. As with the other case studies in this series, the content which the network chooses to copy and amplify focuses on highly divisive political narratives, anti-vaccine and conspiracy content and in some cases outright misinformation. As with the other case studies, explicitly QAnon content plays a prominent role. In the screenshot to the right, for example, QAnon content and narratives including the Deep State cabal, NESARA/GESARA, the Iraqi Dinar and X22 Report can be seen.

Fig 17: Screenshot of Restored Republic domain.

Fig 18: Screenshot of Restored Republic domain showing video content and thumbnails for other videos.
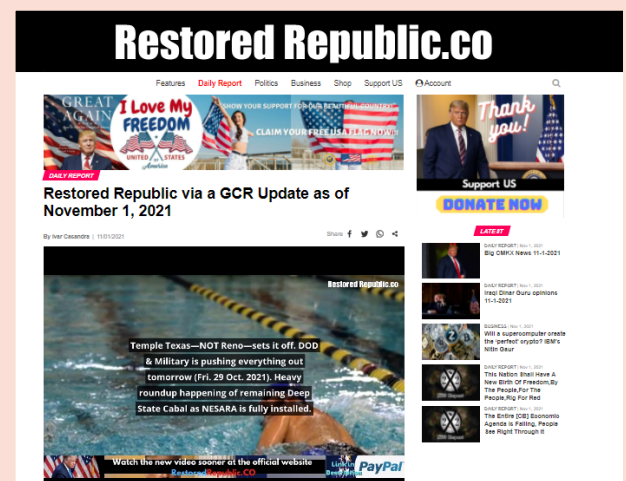
Engagement and impact

The Worth of Web tool estimates that the Restored Republic domain is receiving around 121,800 site visits per month, while TUMN receives around 12,800 monthly visits. The two domains have achieved a small but steady stream of seemingly organic shares on Facebook, Twitter and Telegram.

Meanwhile, views of the network's videos on Rumble and BitChute (which include views of the embedded videos on the domains) vary across a wide range from less than a hundred in some cases to as high as 15,000 in others. This variation is likely due to fluctuations in organic sharing, for example one video post might be picked up and shared widely by organic users, while another might not.

With this network, there are relatively fewer opportunities for users to comment directly on content than in the previous case studies. However where comments are possible, as in the example below from comments on a BitChute video, they reflect a similar dynamic as in those other case studies: they promote political division, propagate conspiracy theories, amplify misinformation and in some cases advocate for violence.

As with the previous case studies, the ultimate outcome of this network's activities is to give a boost to existing divisive, misleading or conspiratorial content amongst US audiences. While for the network operators the goal is likely to be purely financial, for the users the impact is political.

For example, when a user clicks to buy a 'Trump Revenge Coin', for the Vietnam-based operators it simply signifies that they're about to earn a little money. For the user, however, it reflects politicized resentment and, most likely, a fracture in their fundamental faith in America's democratic integrity. The merchandise itself may seem trivial, even silly, but the anger it represents is all too real.

Fig 19: Screenshot of Rumble channel, including showing view counts.

Fig 20: Screenshot of comments on BitChute in response to a video from the network.

ISD | Powering solutions to extremism, hate and disinformation
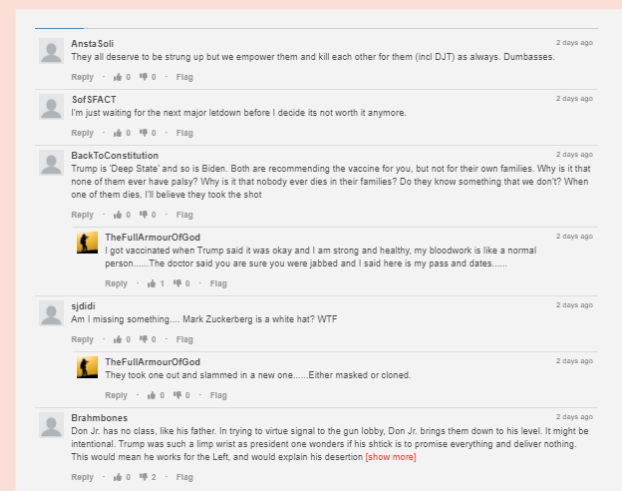
Beirut | Berlin | London | Paris | Washington DC

www.isdglobal.org