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### 2022-11-16 local newspaper

And now for something completely different.

Today in the mail I received the latest issue of the *New Mexico Sun*, a lovely local newspaper that I have never heard of, nor received, before. An oddity of the addressing strongly suggests that it was sent based on the same address list used for a lot of the political advertising I've received, and the contents are... well, well go over that in detail in a moment, but I immediately got the impression that this newspaper was actually a piece of political advertising. The odd thing is when it arrived: at about noon on election day. In some ways this seems like a smart strategy because it will be so salient in the mind of its recipients when they go to the polls, except for the problem that I would imagine a lot of people wouldn't receive their mail until after they had voted (doubly so since early voting and mail-in voting are both pretty popular here). In any case, the election day timing seemed either intentional or like it had just arrived one or two days late of the target date.

I have a vague recollection that there is some sort of Postal Service regulation requiring that periodicals distributed by mail provide some standard information about the publisher, editor, etc., so I flipped through this paper in search of a masthead. There's none to be found. In fact, the only information the paper gives about its origin is a domain name, [NewMexicoSun.com](http://NewMexicoSun.com). A quick search of postal regulations suggests that my memory is not entirely incorrect but also not very applicable here: Domestic mail manual, section 207, requires that an identification statement appear somewhere in the first five pages or on the editorial page, and that the identification statement include the address of the publisher.

But... section 207 gives the rules for periodical mail, which is a specific postage rate for items like magazines and newspapers. The address block on this item includes ECRWSH in the Optional Endorsement Line or OEL, the first line of the address on commercial mail that often has a lot of asterisks. The OEL serves mostly to speed up handling of bulk mail by providing some sorting information in a standard numeric format, and for many bulk mail services contains some type of abbreviation that identifies the type of bulk postage paid. Domestic mail manual section 240 tells us that ECRWSH indicates USPS Marketing Mail, high density rate. Marketing mail meaning that this was mailed at reduced rates for advertising, and high density that an additional discount was provided in exchange for the mail piece being sent to at least 125 addresses on each route (this high count per route simplifies sorting).

I still wonder if sending something that so much resembles a newspaper under Marketing Mail might run afoul of some postal regulations, but a qualified opinion on that would probably require a postal lawyer, which I imagine as being somewhat like a maritime

lawyer as depicted in Arrested Development.

Lets consider the contents of the paper. The front page features a vertically stretched portrait of the incumbent governor above the fold with the headline Career criminals found new victims after early release, and page 6 consists only of mugshots of individuals released from New Mexico prisons as a result of COVID protective orders. This forms an odd contrast with page 8, which is laid out identically but instead features mugshots of local high school athletes who have been recruited to college teams. The descriptions on this page are very oddly formatted and show a lack of local knowledge, e.g. the caption Joah Flores played high school football at New Mexico. New Mexico what? where?

I strongly suspect that this page was automatically generated using data from a sports scouting service, and probably minimally reviewed by a human if at all. Like the Governor on the front page, many of the portraits have had their aspect ratios awkwardly changed. This repeat problem is, at least in my suspicion, indicative that this paper was mostly generated by pasting into an Adobe InDesign or Quark Xpress template. The newspaper also includes several bits of awkward blank space, something that newspapers habitually avoid (column inches are money) but also points to this being a fixed layout with locally relevant text pasted into it.

In fact the only material in the paper that doesnt have the whiff of a political hit job (i.e. consists primarily of criticism of an incumbent Democratic elected official) is the aforementioned Athletes in Action section and an events directory, which I suspect is also software-generated due to some telltales like blank template fields and a very odd selection of events to cover (the headline item is the band Agent Orange playing at Sister Bar, but no other items from Sister Bars busy music schedule make it to this page).

Most articles have the byline George Willis, although one opinion piece by Pete Dinelli stands out. Dinelli is a former city councilor and writes a somewhat prominent blog on local politics. He is also, as far as I can tell, the only byline that is definitely a real person. Apparent lead reporter George Willis has a fairly generic name but but seems most likely to be a freelance sports journalist.

The Dinelli piece is interesting. It closely parallels, but does not match, an article on Dinellis blog. I reached out to Dinelli to ask how he came to contribute to the New Mexico Sun, but I didnt hear anything back.

Lets turn to the website, newmexicosun.com. Its contents are very similar to the printed paper, although it looks appreciable more polished and has a lot more general news content. A somewhat buried About page indicates that it is published by PIPELINE Advisors LLC and is part of their family of Metro News Sites. Bradley Cameron is named as CEO and managing editor. No such entity, or foreign registration, exists in New Mexico, but it does exist in Texas where the secretary of state indeed lists Bradley Cameron. Its rather confusing to be the CEO of an LLC, and Texas records actually give the title managing member, along with Brian Timpone. The address given is a single family home in downtown Austin, which I always find a bit odd given the ready availability of virtual offices.

Some readers probably know exactly where this is going by now, and the names Cameron and Timpone might have been just a bit familiar to them. Cameron and Timpone run Metric Media, Locality Labs (formerly Local Labs), and the Local Government Information Service (LGIS), several organizations accused in the press of operating large numbers of websites that appear to be local news sources but actually operate as

advertising for conservative political interests. While the line between news, opinion, and advertising can be somewhat thin in the world of politics, the most damning aspect of this operation is its volume. Its no coincidence that this newspaper seems hastily prepared, and probably mostly by the use of freelancers and automation. Cameron and Timpone operate over a thousand such websites according to an article in CJR, each of which is superficially a local operation but is in fact run out of Austin. *The Guardian* has reported on this group as well.

Indeed, printed versions of these papers are apparently not unique, as an article details that some printed copies were produced at the printing plant of the Des Moines Register. While its common for newspapers to run commercial print jobs for smaller publications and marketing, this situation certainly has a bit of a smell to it.

So none of this is really new, and the New Mexico Sun as a website dates back to 2020 at least. What has changed is its unprompted appearance in my mailbox. Whether this is a new strategy on the part of Metric Media/Locality Labs/Pipeline Advisors, or just a decision to prioritize New Mexico this year due to the apparently close governors race, is hard to say. It sure is a weird piece of mail, though.

But I dont write about journalism, do I? Lets take a look at the CYBER INTELLIGENCE.

newmexicosun.com is, unsurprisingly, registered with domain privacy although I find it somewhat interesting that its registered through the fairly small registrar Epik. Like most of the internet these days, the domain name points at AWS and MX records indicate the use of G-Suite. Passive DNS information for AWS IP addresses can be questionable since they may change hands relatively frequently, but SecurityTrails free lookup shows about a half dozen local news websites all being served up by the same IP. As with the shell companies behind these websites, they seem to organize their infrastructure regionally: the New Mexico Sun runs alongside the Austin Journal, the Houston Daily, and the Midland Times. One standout is the Suburban Marquee, apparently of Chicago, but an odder one is the Globe Banner.

The only Globe I know of is Globe, Arizona, which meets the regional theme but is a town of under 10,000. Perhaps this explains why I am having such a hard time determining just where the Globe Banner is supposed to be local to: theres absolutely nothing on that website that isnt low-effort international business news right off of PR Newswire. Whatever is going on in Globe, wherever, the front-page headliner is HappyCo confirmed plans to acquire Toronto-based rental lifecycle management platform Yuhu, according to a press release. How regionally appropriate! The #1 most read article, according to the sidebar, is Okonjo-Iweala: We cannot afford to leave trade and WTO behind when tackling climate change.

So I think the Globe Banner might actually just be a mistake, one that might live on for years to come. Its sort of the liminal space of newspapers: endless empty hallways of acquisition announcements and industry association lobbying. The headline Rubio and Gallagher call for national TikTok ban seemed like it might be a politically-motivated insertion but is actually just syndicated straight out of a press release from those congresspeople. The Globe Banners ambitious Europe section is here to tell us that a German company has introduced a new line of two-post car lifts. According to the automotive equipment company, the products will help customers reduce installation times by up to 20%, feature three adjustable width positions allowing flexible installation of lifts and offer an efficient and safe obstacle-free working area.

Most of these websites are identical, although the Suburban Marquee also stands out

with a different theme. They have something the feeling of WordPress templates, but I think these websites are actually running on homegrown software. It seems a little sloppy: the single minified Javascript file used for most functionality appears to be written by StackOverflow. The API endpoint used by the newsletter sign-up form returns {message:Page Not Found} to a GET request, and {message:Page Not Found} to a POST without the correct form fields. Its got that fun CSS grid framework thing going on where the CSS class list on every div is just inline styling in a less readable syntax and not at all semantic.

One tell in the markup of an article indicates that Froala WYSIWYG Editor was used to create its summary text. The developer doesnt seem to have kept the different properties very well separated: the New Mexico Sun loads media from Cloudfront with houstondaily in the path (I briefly got excited and thought this might be an S3 bucket name, but it seems Cloudfront wisely leaves those out).

Oh, I found an S3 bucket: jnswire, used for a few background images, seemingly only for articles that are genuinely about New Mexico – and thus perhaps those actually composed in this software and not syndicated automatically. Google has indexed a healthy range of court filings in that bucket, but little use. Looking for this term more broadly, a research service tells me that jnswire.com was registered via GoDaddy by Brian Timpone, one of the founders of this local news collective, in 2012. Indeed, this use of the JNS acronym refers to Journatic News Wire, a connection made by a Twitter profile that no longer exists.

And the New York Times has more on that: Journatic was apparently a service Brian Timpone developed that generated articles automatically based on data feeds. It would seem that this software probably backs most of these local news websites, which the NYT suggests as well. The software is, apparently, not very good. The Chicago Tribune was apparently a customer and backed off of the service after it found it was distributing plagiarized articles.

How does an automated system produce a plagiarized article? Well, one way is by lying about the automated part. While I dont know that there is completely solid evidence, several sources online (including the NYT) make the accusation that Journatic was mechanical turking the problem, paying writers in the Philippines on a gig-work basis to write articles that were then distributed under either wire byline or a fake byline. Some suspect that the local news network that rose from Journatics ashes does the same, but honestly from looking at the content Im skeptical... its not even really good enough to have been written under a cent a word. Most of the articles stray so little from the press release that they were less written than somewhat selectively copied and pasted.

So, where does this leave us? About ten years ago, a journalist started a service that would automate news by (supposedly) generating articles via software. Today, it seems that theyve done just that, but its not really news anyone wants to read... its window dressing, sort of the journalistic equivalent of those five books at Ikea, providing a generally newspaper-like environment for the payload articles of the Locality/Metric/LGIS network. The wonders of the internet.