

The Macedonian Teens Who Mastered Fake News

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Samanth Subramanian

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Welcome
to Veles,
Macedonia,

News Factory
to the World.

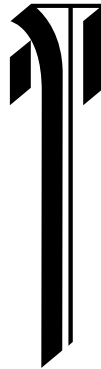
The News in Crisis

Inside the Macedonian

Fake-News Complex

Inside the Macedonian Fake-News Complex

by Samanth Subramanian | photographs by Guy Martin 2.15.17



The first article about Donald Trump that Boris ever published described how, during a campaign rally in North Carolina, the candidate slapped a man in the audience for disagreeing with him. This never happened, of course. Boris had found the article somewhere online, and he needed to feed his website, Daily Interesting Things, so he appropriated the text, down to its last misbegotten comma. He posted the link on Facebook, seeding it within various groups devoted to American politics; to his astonishment, it was shared around 800 times. That month—February 2016—Boris made more than \$150 off the Google ads on his website. Considering this to be the best possible use of his time, he stopped going to high school.

Boris isn't his real name. He prefers the anonymity because he doesn't want to break ranks with the other people in his town of Veles, in the Balkan nation of Macedonia. Nobody here wants to dwell on Trump anymore. Veles has the feel of a small community clamming up out of a suspicion that it's being talked about for all the wrong reasons.

In the final weeks of the US presidential election, Veles attained a weird infamy in the most powerful nation on earth; stories in [The Guardian](#) and on [BuzzFeed](#) revealed that the Macedonian town of 55,000 was the registered home of at least 100 pro-Trump websites, many of them filled with sensationalist, utterly [fake news](#). (The imminent criminal indictment of Hillary Clinton was a popular theme; another was the pope's approval of Trump.) The sites' ample traffic was rewarded handsomely by automated advertising engines, like Google's AdSense. An article in [The New Yorker](#) described how President Barack Obama himself spent a day in the final week of the campaign talking "almost obsessively" about Veles and its "digital gold rush."

Within Veles itself, the young entrepreneurs behind these websites became subjects of tantalizing intrigue. Between August and November, Boris earned nearly \$16,000 off his two pro-Trump websites. The average monthly salary in Macedonia is \$371.

Boris is 18 years old, a lean, slouching youth with gray eyes, hair mowed close to his skull, and the rudiments of a beard. When he isn't smoking a cigarette, he's lighting one. He listens to a lot of gangsta rap: the Notorious B.I.G., Puff Daddy, Wu-Tang Clan; after watching *Notorious*, the 2009 biopic of B.I.G., he decided he would like to visit Brooklyn, a New York City borough he imagines overrun more by gangsters than hipsters. He is an affable raconteur, with a droll sense of humor and a clear-eyed view of himself and his town. Someday he wants to leave Veles, because of how little there is to do. You can live with your parents and have them pay for your evenings in a bar, or you can bus tables in a café. If you're a gym rat, you might work security. A few factories on the outskirts of town still offer regular employment, but nothing lavish. "We can't make money here with a real job," Boris says. "This Google AdSense work is not a real job."

At best, Boris' English is halting and fractured—certainly not good enough to turn out five to 10 articles about Trump and Clinton every day for weeks on end. Fortunately for him, the election summoned forth the energies of countless alt-right websites in the US, which manufactured white-label falsehoods disguised as news on an industrial scale. Across the spectrum of right-wing media—from Trump's own concise lies on Twitter to the organized prevarication of Breitbart News and NationalReport.net—ideology beat back the truth. What Veles produced, though, was something more extreme still: an enterprise of cool, pure amorality, free not only of ideology but of any concern or feeling about the substance of the election. These Macedonians on Facebook didn't care if Trump won or lost the White House. They only wanted pocket money to pay for things—a car, watches, better cell phones, more drinks at the bar. This is the arrhythmic, disturbing heart of the affair: that the internet made it so simple for these young men to finance their material whims and that their actions helped deliver such momentous consequences.



Veles lies plumb in the center of Macedonia, on either side of the Vardar River, and its red-shingle-roofed buildings appear to be climbing the slopes of low knuckled hills. It was once a town of modest glory, turning out revolutionaries and intellectuals and alive with industry. One of its largest factories, a ceramic works named Porcelanka, employed 4,000 people. For a time, its residents recall with perverse pride, Veles was the second-most polluted town in the former Yugoslavia.

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“They don’t
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After Macedonia became independent in 1991, though, Veles began to decline. The factories closed; the jobs evaporated. The local soccer team, FK Borec, won so infrequently that it was dropped from the first division to the third. The town’s only movie theater folded a decade and a half ago. Its downtown withered. Briefly, in the mid-2000s, the economy shook itself awake when a few men splashed around money they’d made selling heroin in Germany and Austria, but the police soon broke up that drug ring and Veles returned to its state of morose dilapidation.

For Boris, growing up here, Veles didn’t have much to offer. His father worked for the town as a plumber. Like other kids, Boris wandered around up near the old Ottoman clock tower or down by the river, loitering in one coffee bar after another. He played soccer but later discovered that he was more proficient at the videogame version of the sport. He joined a *Counter-Strike* club: nine or 10 teenagers gathered in a room, sitting behind their laptops and shooting each other up.



The Central Market in Veles. The town's economy declined throughout the 1990s after Macedonia gained its independence.



An office at a local TV station, which broadcasts basketball and handball games.

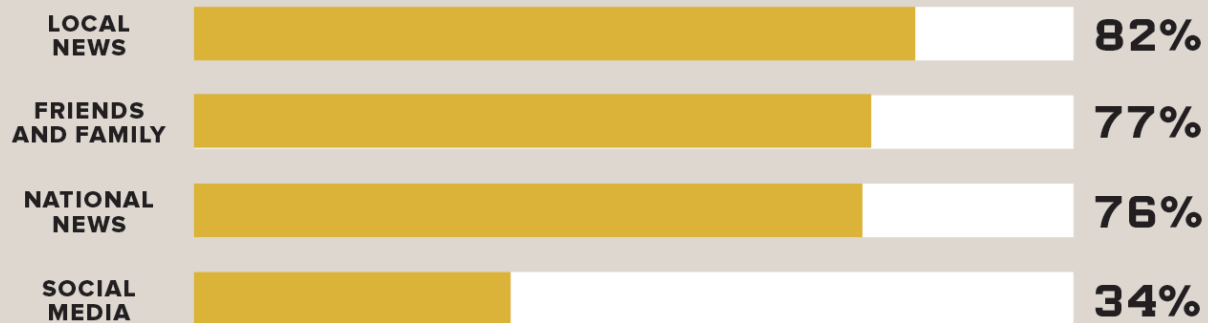
One day a couple of summers ago, Boris was walking to school when he saw a BMW 4 Series parked by the side of the road. “What the fuck?” he thought. “My favorite car is in this town?”

He asked around, but no one seemed to know who owned the BMW. Later, in a café, he met a *Counter-Strike* acquaintance named Aleksandar Velkovski. “Aleksandar, I saw this BMW 4,” Boris told him. Velkovski revealed that the car was his. He’d bought it, he said, with the money he made off his website.

In Veles, Aleksandar and Borce Velkovski are so renowned for the health food website they started that they’re known as the Healthy Brothers. HealthyFoodHouse.com is a jumble of diet and beauty advice, natural remedies, and other nostrums. It gorges on advertising as it counsels readers to put a bar of soap under their bedsheets to relieve nightly leg cramps or to improve their red-blood-cell count with homemade beet syrup. Somehow the website’s Facebook page has drawn 2 million followers; more than 10 million unique visitors come to HealthyFoodHouse.com every month.

Reputable Sources

Percentage of Americans who trust the information they get from ...



Source: Pew Research Center

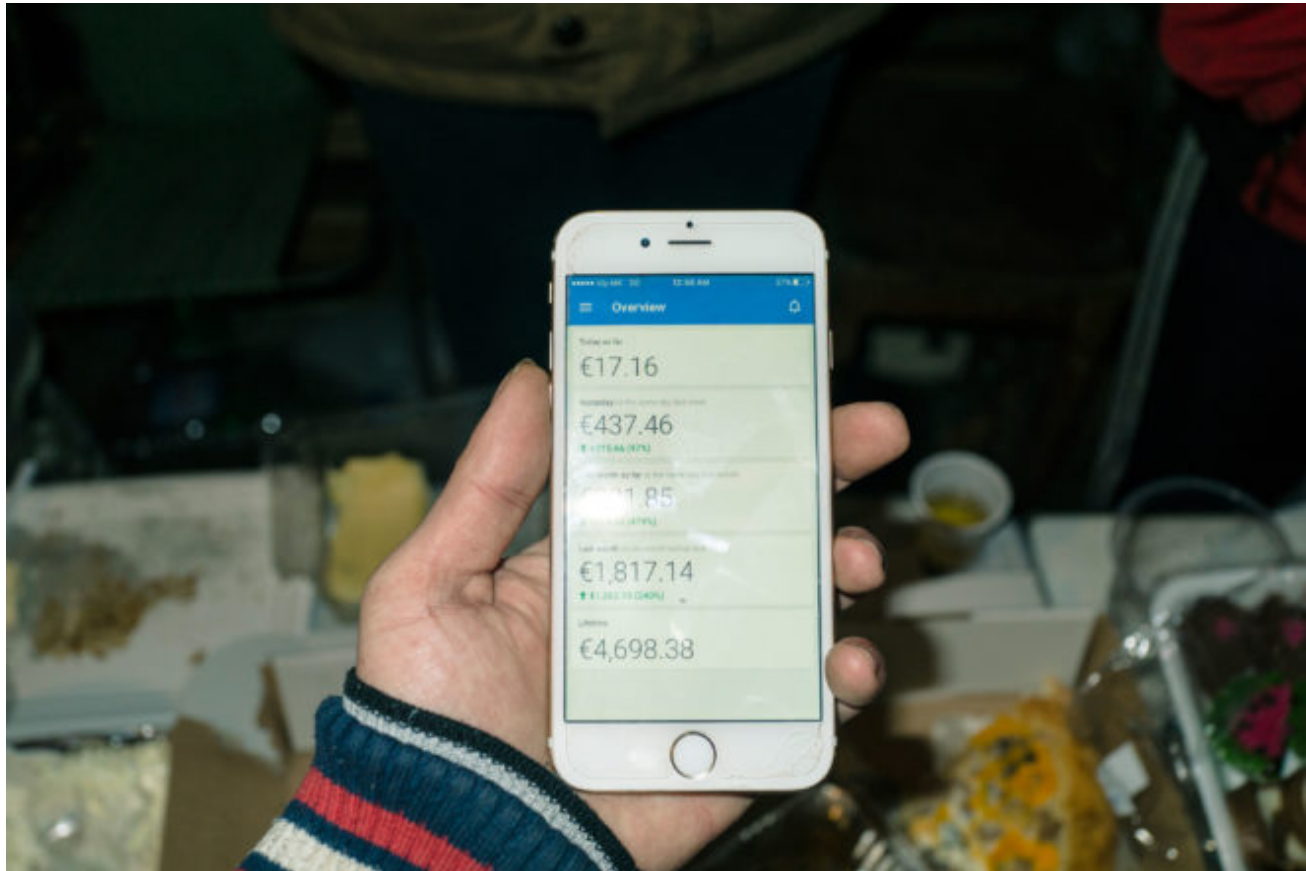
After seeing the BMW, Boris decided to start some websites of his own. He already knew there was money to be made off the internet; for a while, when he was 17, he'd been one of the many peons around the world laboring online for MicroWorkers.com, earning something like a tenth of a cent for liking a YouTube video or leaving a comment. Now he bought a succession of domains from GoDaddy—GossipKnowledge.com, then DailyInterestingThings.com—built basic WordPress sites, and stuffed them with sports, celebrity, health, and political news, the articles all pilfered from elsewhere. (Boris pulls out his phone and logs into WordPress to show that he does, in fact, own the sites he mentions.) When the piece about Trump slapping a man turned briefly white-hot, he sensed the intrinsic viral potential in the American election and founded NewYorkTimesPolitics.com, a website that resembled *The New York Times* homepage and carried plagiarized articles on American politics. The *Times* sent Boris a cease-and-desist order; Boris received the email when he was out somewhere, and he was so terrified that he took down the website right away, from his phone. In August, Boris set up PoliticsHall.com, and a couple of months later, he added USAPolitics.co to his portfolio. That was when the money really began to roll in.

Boris developed a routine. Several times a day he dredged the internet for pro-Trump articles and copied them into one of his two websites; if JavaScript prevented an easy copy-paste, he opened a Notepad file and typed the articles out. After publishing a piece, he shared the link in Facebook groups with names like My America, My Home; the Deplorables; and Friends Who Support President Donald J. Trump. Trump groups seemed to have hundreds of thousands more members than Clinton groups, which made it simpler to propel an article into virality. (For a week in July, he experimented with fake news extolling Bernie Sanders. "Bernie Sanders supporters are among the smartest people I've seen," he says. "They don't

believe anything. The post must have proof for them to believe it.”) He posted under his own name but also under the guise of one of 200 or so bogus Facebook profiles that he’d purchased for this purpose. (A fake profile with a Russian name cost about 10 cents; for an American name, the price went up to 50 cents.) The most shares one of his posts ever aggregated, across various Facebook groups, was 1,200; Boris dimly recalls only that the post had something to do with Trump’s proposed wall on the Mexican border. Boris learned tricks to better monetize his websites: big ads breaking the text up, for instance, so that one in five visitors to a page would end up clicking on an ad. His RPM—revenue per 1,000 impressions—hovered around \$15, he says. He fed the beast with diligence. “At night I would make four or five posts to share the next day. When I woke up, I shared them. I went to drink coffee, came back home, found new articles, posted those articles on the website, and shared them. Then I went out with friends, came back home, found articles, and shared them to Facebook.”



Men gather in a garden shed for moonshine and winter caroling. Holding the mic is a resident who profited from political websites.



The same man shows the ad revenue he earns from his websites, which churn out (sometimes fake) content.

When his ad engines started to pay out, Boris bought himself things: new clothes, an Acer laptop to replace his old Toshiba, a vacation at a resort on Lake Ohrid. His phone carries a photographic record of the life he could briefly afford. “It was like: ‘Buy! Buy! Buy!’” At one point, practically all of Boris’ friends had set up similar websites, and they all had money to blow. As a posse, they’d go to one of Veles’ three nightclubs—Tarantino or Club Avangard or Club Drama—and order \$100 bottles of Moët to shake and spray. “I don’t drink champagne,” Boris says. “I bought it for spraying. All eyes on me!” It was nothing but the best for Boris. “Moët! Moët! Roberto Cavalli! Jack Daniel’s!” he says, making a gesture with his hand as if hailing a bartender. “It’s part of life. You must live once.”

Boris still goes to the clubs, but he says he has lost his taste for expensive things. “It isn’t interesting anymore.” Which is just as well, because on November 24, after an eruption of concern about the malignant effects of fake news, Google suspended the ads from his websites. The last item Boris posted to USAPolitics.co was a poll that inquired: “Do you support immediate deportation of all criminal illegals?” In one of the Facebook groups where Boris shared the link, the post received 292 shares and 361 responses. It looked like another blockbuster from USAPolitics.co. But then the Google ads vanished, so Boris lost interest and consigned his websites to the deep oblivion of the internet.



In Macedonia, wringing money out of web advertising is a game that long predated Trump's bid for the presidency—and will probably outlast it as well, despite Google's and Facebook's postelection attempts to crack down. Mirko Ceselkoski began to play in the early 2000s. He built seven or eight websites—about muscle cars or celebrities or superyachts, all oriented toward the American reader, because an American reader is roughly three times more valuable than a non-American one. For five or six hours of daily toil, Ceselkoski says, you can earn approximately \$1,000 a month. Many Macedonians can spare the time; the unemployment rate is around 24 percent.

Ceselkoski built seven or eight websites—all oriented toward the American reader. This made sense. In web-advertising terms, an American click is roughly three times more valuable than a non-American click.

Ceselkoski turned to coaching in 2011—first with a six-week classroom course in the Macedonian capital of Skopje, where he lives, and now online, in dense three-week modules. For around \$425, his students learn how to prepare, populate, and promote their websites. A full third of the syllabus is dedicated to the mastery of Facebook. The Healthy Brothers once took Ceselkoski's course. So did, in early 2016, a few members of the Veles squad who went on to operate pro-Trump sites. They surprised him. "I never instructed my students to write fake stories," he says. "Maybe they discovered they could get away with this kind of practice and increase their virality." He sounded like a delighted physics professor talking about how a pupil had stumbled upon a brand-new law of thermodynamics. After the election some of Ceselkoski's students called him, panicking because Google had yanked its advertising without paying them all the money they had already earned. One young man, Ceselkoski says, believed he was owed more than \$60,000.

Ceselkoski was visiting Las Vegas around the time of the election, and Trump's victory stunned him. He thought about the website operators in Veles. "It's possible, maybe, they changed a few percentages."

Making Fake News Pay

Here's how advertisers follow you around the web—and how their money flows to fake news sites. —Davey Alba

Brands

Companies used to designate exactly where they wanted their ads to appear. Now they increasingly rely on automated advertising—a system that matches ads to anonymized profiles of consumers, based on data like what they have searched for.

Ad Tech Companies

These outfits track consumers as they browse the internet, serving ads on any site they visit—provided it hasn't been blacklisted.

Websites

Sites that traffic in hardcore violence, hate speech, or pornography tend to get blacklisted, but those with content that is less clearly objectionable are often fair game. Which is why even sites publishing fake news can profit by hosting ads based on your browsing history.

Boris will have none of that. The so-called news he and his colleagues were filching was already on American websites, heating up the American bloodstream. How could their duplications of these articles, on their rinky-dink websites, upset the election of such a powerful country? “If Americans wanted Hillary Clinton to win, Hillary Clinton would have won. They voted for Donald Trump. Donald Trump won.” But now that everything has come to pass, Boris finds it difficult not to care about the result. “Some crazy man has won the election. Maybe the guy will start World War III.”

He sits in a coffee bar on a December afternoon, two days after a parliamentary election in Macedonia. Here too a minor pestilence of fake news swept through the campaigns. Websites run out of Serbia and Croatia alleged that the leftist opposition leader, Zoran Zaev, wanted to divide the country between Macedonians and ethnic Albanians. Voters got taken in; Zaev's coalition lost, narrowly. Boris feels disenchanted with the whole process. There is too much politics in life, he thinks. “People are fighting each other. One brother is for one party, the other brother is for the other party, they argue.” He shakes his head. “The media is washing our brains, and the people are following like sheep.”

Boris' days are now consummately unoccupied. Mostly, he and his friends convene in this coffee bar or in one of the others clustered on the same street. They always pick a table on the veranda, despite the cold, so that they can smoke and smoke. They fiddle with their phones for about the same proportion of time that they spend talking to one another. Boris hasn't yet considered returning to school, but he thinks, vaguely, that he wants to study coding and go on to work at a company like Microsoft or Apple. First, though, he wants to construct more websites. Facebook and Google have unveiled new systems for screening out misinformation, but they're not built for catching every low-level fib circulating around the internet. Boris won't focus on political fake news, in all probability—but there are plenty of other topics of interest, plenty of websites from which to swipe content, and plenty of potential readers around the world who may click in sufficient numbers to finally buy him his BMW.

Samanth Subramanian (@samanth_s) is a Dublin correspondent for *The National*.

This story is part of our special coverage of The News in Crisis.