

GOP-backed fake news sites target Dems

By Anna Clark, Columbia Journalism Review

DETROIT – Deceptive political ads are one thing. But how about deceptive ads that trade on the credibility of journalism?

That's what a Republican political group is trying out. This month, the National Republican Congressional Committee debuted at least 20 websites in key congressional districts—from Central Valley, California, to Augusta, Georgia—that are designed, albeit amateurishly, to look like news sites. One of them, "South Michigan Update," sports the headline "Byrnes Struggles to Escape Her Record," referring to Democrat Pamela Byrnes in Michigan's 7th District. Like the other NRCC sites, the featured post attacks the Democratic candidate in the race. The piece has a byline credit to "Geoff," though, as The Washington Post pointed out, most of "Geoff's" posts are rewrites of content from the NRCC site. The spare South Michigan site has one other item: a video ad for the 7th District's Republican incumbent, Tim Walberg, that is featured under the header, "Most Viewed."

As Lester Graham, an investigative reporter with Michigan Radio, described it in a story that drew attention to South Michigan Update, the casual observer might easily mistake the fake news site for a real one. Because the NRCC is promoting the sites through localized Google search ads, according to the National Journal, readers may well stumble on them unwittingly: It's the first item that comes up when you search for the Democratic candidates' name. The NRCC did put a box at the very bottom of the sites indicating that they are paid political ads. But the sites seem designed for social sharing and email-forwarding—exactly the kind of delivery where readers are likely to read only the headline or first few

paragraphs of the story. They wouldn't even see the bottom of the page.

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