Monday, September 16, 2024 / The Ohio pet panic

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

NOEL KING (host): The rumor that Haitian migrants are eating people’s pets in the town of Springfield, Ohio, has been debunked by the city’s leaders. So why do J.D. Vance and Donald Trump keep repeating it? Here’s Vance explaining himself in a weekend interview with CNN’s Dana Bash.

*<CLIP> CNN:*

*SENATOR J.D. VANCE: The American media totally ignored this stuff until Donald Trump and I started talking about cat memes. If I have to, if I have to –*

*DANA BASH, ANCHOR: But it wasn’t just a meme.*

*VANCE: If I have to create stories so the American media pays attention to the suffering of the American people, then that’s what I’m going to do Dana, because you guys are completely letting Kamala Harris coast.*

NOEL: He’s creating stories. He’s making it up.

<SCORING IN> That parachute dream

NOEL: The Trump campaign is trying to score political points on immigration and taking an ugly rumor viral is one way to do that. But in Springfield, people’s lives have been turned upside down and that story is coming up on *Today, Explained.*

<SCORING OUT> That parachute dream

[THEME]

ERIN GLYNN (government reporter, USA Today-Ohio): I'm Erin Glynn. I’m a state government reporter for USA Today-Ohio.

NOEL: Anyone who watched the debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris last week will remember a moment in which Donald Trump said:

*<CLIP> FORMER PRESIDENT TRUMP: In Springfield, they're eating the dogs. The people that came in, they're eating the cats.*

NOEL: He was talking about this in the context of immigration. Now, this is one of those wild rumors that has been debunked.

*<CLIP> DAVID MUIR, MODERATOR: There have been no credible reports of specific claims of pets being harmed, injured or abused by individuals within the immigrant community.*

*FORMER PRESIDENT TRUMP: Well I’ve seen people on television…*

NOEL: And yet it's a rumor that has kind of moved from online into the real world. When we talk about how this is affecting the town of Springfield, what do you see there?

ERIN: Before these rumors started, there was already a lot of tension between longtime Springfield residents and this relatively recent influx of Haitian immigrants. And this rumor has kind of fanned the flames even more.

<SCORING IN> Neutral Irene

*<CLIP> SPRINGFIELD CITY COMMISSION MEETING:*

*RICHARD JORDAN, SPRINGFIELD RESIDENT: People are still coming. When we was cut off is it's going to be 60,000 immigrants living here. Are they going to take over our whole city? I don't think they're going to do that. It's getting close to people are getting really fed up and it's going…things are going to get ugly.*

ERIN: With national media descending on the town, it's made it really hard for residents to get back to their daily lives.

*<CLIP> NEWSNATION:*

*SPRINGFIELD MAYOR RUE: What this has done is is created a negative light, obviously, that we did not look for. We did not ask for these, these claims. And they are just untrue.*

NOEL: How did immigration become such a big issue in Springfield?

ERIN: So back in July, Springfield's city manager asked for federal support because the city's Haitian population has grown by about, he said, from 15,000 to 20,000 people in the last four years. And Republican vice presidential candidate J.D. Vance read the letter as part of a hearing.

*<CLIP> SENATOR J.D. VANCE: Now, this letter I want to quote from it. “Springfield has seen a surge in population through immigration that has significantly impacted our ability as a community to produce enough housing opportunities for all. Springfield's Haitian population has increased 15 to 20,000 over the last four years in a community of under 60,000 previous residents, putting a significant strain on our resources…”*

ERIN: And he said the immigrants were overburdening city services and housing. So that was kind of the state of affairs back in July. The Ohio governor had said, we're looking into it, we're seeing what kind of support we can provide to Springfield and Clark County. And then J.D. Vance tweeted this rumor about immigrants eating pets and Springfield officials have said, well, there’s no evidence of that.

*<CLIP> NEWSNATION:*

*SPRINGFIELD MAYOR RUE: Springfield is still beautiful and your pets are safe in Springfield, Ohio.*

<SCORING OUT>

NOEL: So Erin, the city says: there’s no evidence that this claim is true. That’s last week. And then what happens over the weekend in Springfield?

ERIN: So on Saturday, police were alerted to two bomb threats at Springfield hospitals, Kettering Health and Mercy Health. Both of those hospitals were temporarily on lockdown, but the threats were not credible after police investigation. We learned on Sunday that Wittenberg University in Springfield will be online-only Monday, and all other sports and other activities have been canceled. And the other college, Clark State College, is going to online classes this entire week because of similar threats.

*<CLIP> WPLG LOCAL 10: Two local universities closing their campuses with classes going remote after the school say they received emails making threats of a bomb and potential shooting on the campuses. At least one of those emails targeting Haitians in the community.*

ERIN: So that's two elementary schools, city hall, two hospitals and two colleges that have all received threats. And Springfield officials say this may be evidence of swatting. They're getting the Dayton office of the FBI to investigate.

ERIN: So there’s been a lot of tension in Springfield this week and residents don’t really know where it’ll end.

NOEL: Erin, before all this started happening, what was Springfield, Ohio like?

ERIN: It's an industrial town. It was home to several manufacturing companies in the late 1800s, kind of the classic Ohio Rust Belt town. Springfield has a lot of manufacturing and factory jobs, like auto part manufacturing jobs. It's a population that kind of declined in the 90s. Today it's a city of almost 60,000 people. The population is about 70% White and it has about a 20% Black population. After a lot of manufacturing companies left between the late 90s and 2014, the city made a conscious effort to attract new businesses and jobs, which has in turn attracted immigrants looking for work. A lot of Ohio's population growth is due to immigration and so this is something we've actually seen before in cities like Columbus, which has a larger Somali population now. Dayton had their Welcome Dayton program and had a large influx of Turkish immigrants. So this is not something that's actually that unusual in Ohio.

NOEL: Tell me about what brought Haitian immigrants in particular there.

ERIN: The Haitians I talked to said that they have like a very tight knit community and word of mouth spreads maybe more quickly than it does in other communities. People move there, there are a lot of Amazon warehouses in the area. There are a lot of other factory jobs. And they told their families, hey, there's a lot of work to be had here. And so it was kind of a very organic movement. The area on the south side of Springfield, residents have started calling it Little Haiti. Springfield now has two Haitian restaurants.

NOEL: Hm.

ERIN: Seven Haitian grocery stores. The library has a French language section for Haitian patrons. And the Haitian residents say like, we're here, we're working the jobs that nobody else wanted to work. You know, there's houses on this part of town that have been abandoned for 20 years, and now they have people living in them.

NOEL: OK, so there are real changes that people have reported. So the city manager said it has an influx of 15-20,000 people into a town of about 60,000. How did the people who were already living there respond to this?

ERIN: Well, they told me Springfield has struggled with its housing stock and homelessness before this influx, and they're concerned about rents going up. They say groceries have been hard to find. ATMs have run out of cash. Kind of things that you might expect from any large population increase in a short amount of time.

*<CLIP> BRYAN HECK, SPRINGFIELD CITY MANAGER: While we are experiencing challenges related to the rapid growth of our immigrant population, these challenges are primarily due to the pace of the growth, rather than the rumors being reported.*

ERIN: A lot of the residents I spoke to are very sympathetic and understand that people from Haiti want a better life, came here to work.

*<CLIP> SPRINGFIELD CITY COMMISSION MEETING:*

*CHARLIE FENCEMAN, SPRINGFIELD RESIDENT: And the Haitians or whatever you want to call them, they're just here to try to better themselves.*

*JOCEY JONES, SPRINGFIELD RESIDENT: They're beautiful, wonderful people. They're engineers, electrical. They're highly educated people that own businesses. I've never seen a Haitian crackhead. I've never seen a Haitian bum in front of Kroger's East Main asking me for change.*

ERIN: They said that the influx was just very fast and Springfield didn't have the resources.

*<CLIP> SPRINGFIELD CITY COMMISSION MEETING:*

*CHARLIE FENCEMAN, SPRINGFIELD RESIDENT: And if you haven't seen them killing no ducks, if you haven't seen them stealing nothing, don't make no accusations.*

ERIN: People are concerned about overcrowding in schools and housing, as I said, although both of those issues kind of predate the immigration influx. They're also just concerned about supply and demand as far as groceries and housing. I did not notice any shortage of grocery products in Springfield, but many Haitian residents and other residents mentioned that it can be an issue on the south side of town.

NOEL: Which is where the Haitian population lives.

ERIN: Yes.

<SCORING IN> The Plot Thickens

NOEL: All right. So the tension was there in Springfield and then it started growing. When does the tension hit a boiling point?

ERIN: Last year, tensions increased when an immigrant from Haiti was driving a minivan and accidentally struck a school bus that overturned. An 11-year-old student Aiden Clark died. And then more than 20 other students were injured in the crash.

*<CLIP> SPRINGFIELD CITY COMMISSION MEETING:*

*DIANA DANIELS, SPRINGFIELD RESIDENT: I will deal with them while they’re here, but we’re not taking any more. We’re not taking people that are kicking people out of these houses, that are driving erratically around town.*

ERIN: Aiden's father, Nathan Clark, has said publicly that he wants politicians to stop using his son's death as a political tool.

*<CLIP> SPRINGFIELD CITY COMMISSION MEETING:*

*NATHAN CLARK, SPRINGFIELD RESIDENT: I wish that my son, Aiden Clark, was killed by a 60-year-old white man. I bet you never thought anyone would ever say something so blunt. But if that guy killed my 11-year-old son, the incessant group of hate spewing people would leave us alone.*

ERIN: And he wants the community to honor his son, Aiden, by stopping hateful rhetoric.

<SCORING OUT> The plot thickens

NOEL: And then when does a lie about people eating pets enter the picture?

ERIN: So J.D. Vance posted this on X and he noted that it's possible that all the rumors would turn out to be false. But then he repeated the rumor.

*<CLIP> SENATOR J.D. VANCE: We've heard from a number of constituents on the ground, Kaitlan, who both firsthand and secondhand reports saying this stuff is happening.*

*KAITLAN COLLINS, CNN ANCHOR: If someone calls your office and says they saw Bigfoot, that doesn't mean they saw Bigfoot.*

*VANCE: It's a totally fair point. But nobody's calling my office and saying that they saw Bigfoot. What they're calling and saying is we're seeing migrants kidnap our dogs and cats, and city officials aren't doing anything about it.*

ERIN: And I think online some people conflated this rumor with an actual case in Canton, on the other end of Ohio, where a woman who is not an Haitian immigrant is accused of killing and eating a cat. And she has pled not guilty by reason of insanity. The Springfield Police Department have said they've received no reports of any immigrants abducting or killing pets.

*<CLIP> WSYX ABC6:*

*VILES DORSAINVIL, HAITIAN COMMUNITY ACTIVIST: It is…so unfortunate situation targeting the Haitian immigrants as eating pets or ducks. So we do not have that in our culture.*

ERIN: And actually, a Columbus resident posted a picture of a man holding a goose on a street corner in Columbus to the Columbus Subreddit. This picture got picked up by people online and right wing accounts started tweeting and saying that Haitian immigrants were taking geese from Springfield City parks. And then the man who originally posted the picture told the Columbus Dispatch that he wished he had never posted it. He never would have expected that a picture he thought of, just something you don't see every day would get turned into this anti-immigrant messaging.

NOEL: What have you heard from Haitian families, Haitian people in Springfield since this became an issue?

ERIN: Yes, I talked to a 19-year-old who moved to Springfield in 2020 to be with his mom and his sister. He works at an Amazon warehouse nearby. He said people have called him a dirty Haitian and “an illegal” and that he came to Springfield through this Temporary Protected Status program. And he and the other Haitians I talked to said that they just came here to work.

*<CLIP> ALIMEMBY ESTIMMABLE, SPRINGFIELD RESIDENT: Because I know so many Haitians, they came here with nothing, just like me, with nothing. And they had to make a life for themselves, you know? Car, house, and everything. And now, like a lot of people are just mad because they're just doing a little bit better than them, you know? I just don't agree with that.*

ERIN: I went to the Haitian evangelical church services on Sunday, and there were three police cars outside. A mediator with the Haitian evangelical church told me that a lot of their congregants, several have received phone calls in which people call anonymously, say, “go back to your country” and then hang up. A lot of the Haitians I spoke to over the weekend say that they feel like they're being targeted. They don't feel safe leaving their houses anymore. Miriam Joseph, who came here in 2020, she's a home health care worker who primarily cares for white people and she says she's afraid to go into their houses, especially when they ask her about politics. And she says her 15-year-old son called her last week and asked to be picked up from Springfield High School because he was afraid.

*<CLIP> WPLG LOCAL 10: NASIR NELMS, SPRINGFIELD HIGH SCHOOL SOPHOMORE: Parents are coming to get their kids because they feel worried or very you know, they feel like their kids aren't safe here with the bomb threats.*

ERIN: Certainly some Springfield residents I spoke to said that all of this is about the Trump campaign wanting to talk about immigration and doesn't have anything to do with the city of Springfield. They said people know that Haitian immigrants aren't killing dogs or cats, that everyone in the community works. Although it's certainly resonating with other Springfield residents.

*<CLIP> SPRINGFIELD CITY COMMISSION MEETING:*

*NEO-NAZI BLOOD TRIBE MEMBER: I’ve come to bring a message of warning—stop what you’re doing. Crime and savagery will only increase with every haitian you bring in.*

*CITY OFFICIAL: You sound threatening to me. I’m going to ask the police to go ahead…*

ERIN: And outside the city commission this week, there are a few residents holding signs for Trump.

<SCORING IN> Walls to hold us

NOEL: I think the reason we hear this anti-immigrant rhetoric on the debate stage is because it's a polarizing issue. It's an issue that Americans feel very seriously about. And so I guess the question is politically, do you imagine this landing in places like Springfield in Ohio?

ERIN: Well, Springfield has a pretty similar history and background to J.D. Vance's hometown of Middletown. So I can see that resonating with Springfield residents. 60% of the population voted for Donald Trump in Clark County in 2020. So it's definitely an area that is sympathetic to the Trump campaign. I do think there's a responsibility for presidential candidates not to amplify claims that we don't have evidence for.

<SCORING OUT>

NOEL: Erin Glynn. USA TODAY - Ohio. Coming up: how an online rumor moved offline.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

NOEL: Gaby del Valle is a policy reporter at The Verge focusing on immigration, politics and technology - among other things. J.D. Vance has served as the gossip-in-chief, helping this once-online rumor go wide. But what was going on before he got involved? Where did this start?

GABY DEL VALLE (policy reporter, The Verge): I'm not sure exactly where and when the rumor began, but one of the earliest tweets that I saw was from an account called End Wokeness, which posted on September 6th a screenshot of that Facebook post that was like, my friend’s, neighbor’s, sister’s, cousin or whatever got her cat kidnaped and she found it outside a house where Haitians live. And also posted a picture of a man holding a goose, and said that ducks and pets are disappearing in Springfield, Ohio, a place where there are a lot of Haitian migrants. And then on September 8th, Charlie Kirk posted the same screenshot from Facebook and Elon Musk replied to it, saying, apparently people's cats are being eaten. The original End Wokeness post right now has 4.9 million views. Musk's reply to Charlie Kirk has 1.6 million views. Charlie Kirk's post was viewed at least 4 million times. This, you know, kind of left the ecosystem of right wing Twitter partially because Elon Musk got involved.

NOEL: Yeah, what happens generally and in this case, when Elon Musk gets involved, why does he matter?

GABY: In addition to, you know, owning Twitter and to, you know, letting go of the content moderation team, the Trust and Safety Council…I can't speak with certainty here, but I will say that Elon Musk has several pet causes that he posts about a lot. One of which is immigration, another one of which is, you know, quote unquote, wokeness. And…just, there is a sense that what Elon cares about gets pushed out to users on the app. And even if there's not an algorithmic change that is, you know, putting content that Elon cares about in front of everybody, he has a lot of influence, a lot of followers, and a lot of power.

NOEL: All right. So this is not true. It is not true in Springfield. It is not true in the way it's being presented. And then we hear it again on the debate stage. Again, there's a round of debunking, this isn't true. Has the debunking had any impact on this rumor’s staying power?

GABY: The debunking has done absolutely nothing in terms of the rumor’s staying power.

NOEL: Ah.

GABY: In some senses, it actually kind of fueled the narrative because the narrative on the right is not just like people are eating cats in Springfield. It's well, you know, maybe actually this isn't happening. But even if it's not happening, why is the media so focused on debunking whether people are eating cats in Springfield? And, and why are they not talking about the Haitian immigrant invasion of Springfield? Why are they not looking at that?

*<CLIP> FOX NEWS:*

*JESSE WATTERS: The media won’t investigate the story at all. Because if they did, they’d have to report on the dangerous migrant payload Kamala unleashed on Springfield.*

GABY: On Truth Social, Trump has posted a bunch of different kind of like images of him saving cats of, you know, cats and ducks watching the presidential debate. The Republican Party of Arizona put out 12 billboards in the Phoenix area that say “Eat less kittens, vote Republican.” This has become, like, just the new Republican Party, kind of, rallying cry. The cat memes are almost like a shorthand for this overall belief about not only Springfield, but communities across America supposedly being taken over by migrants. It's like a visual representation of what is called the Great Replacement Theory, which is this conspiracy theory that there is an outside force replacing local, often white populations with imported migrants of color. Sometimes the proponents of that theory claim that, you know, Democrats are turning a blind eye to illegal immigration and allowing undocumented people to vote so that they have staying power. Sometimes a conspiracy theory is about how Democrats or other elites want to foment demographic change. But the underlying premise is always local American populations, which almost always means white populations, are being replaced by nonwhite immigrants.

NOEL: Anti-immigrant rhetoric and the kinds of I mean, at at times, really outlandish lies that accompany it are part of a pretty familiar playbook for Donald Trump. Does 2024 feel different to you than, for example, 2020 or 2016?

GABY: I would say yes and no. Like, Trump's 2016 campaign famously began with these racist claims about Mexican immigrants being rapists and murderers, very bad people, etc., etc.. So I think that this is kind of the logical outcome of that. It's pure, unvarnished racism. And the point is to dehumanize Haitians. But it's definitely escalated. It's gone further than before.

<SCORING IN> Walls to Hold Us

GABY: On some circles of right wing Twitter, people are talking about, like, the links between race and IQ. And there's this implication and sometimes just outright statements that migrants from Haiti and elsewhere are not intelligent enough to be assimilated into American society. And for them, it's, it's about more than culture. It's about more than even skin color. It's this kind of biological hatred. And that's just like the extreme rhetoric that has not only gone unchallenged, but has gotten more and more extreme as the years have gone on.

<SCORING OUT>

NOEL: That was The Verge’s Gaby del Valle. Today’s episode was produced by Haleema Shah and edited by Matthew Collette. It was fact-checked by Laura Bullard and engineered by Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir. The rest of our team includes Amanda Lewellyn, Avishay Artsy, Hady Mawajdeh, Miles Bryan, Peter Balanon-Rosen, Victoria Chamberlin. Amina al-Sadi is a supervising editor. Miranda Kennedy is EP. Sean Rameswaram is perfecting a slideshow. We use music by Breakmaster Cylinder. I’m Noel King.

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[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]