

The fake news factory

The unlikely success of one man's website — and the unlikely gullibility of one woman who reads it — shows how lies become truth in online America

- Toronto Star
- 2 Dec 2018
- ELI SASLOW THE WASHINGTON POST



Christopher Blair, 46, near his home in North Waterboro, Maine, wanted to make fun of what he and others considered extremist ideas among the far right.

NORTH WATERBORO, MAINE— The only light in the house came from the glow of three computer monitors, and Christopher Blair, 46, sat down at a keyboard and started to type. His wife had left for work and his children were on their way to school, but waiting online was his other community, an unreality where nothing was exactly as it seemed. He logged onto his website and began to invent his first news story of the day.

“BREAKING,” he wrote, pecking out each letter with his index fingers as he considered the possibilities. Maybe he would announce that Hillary Clinton had died during a secret overseas mission to smuggle more refugees into the United States. Maybe he would award President Donald Trump the Nobel Peace Prize for his courage in denying climate change. A new message popped onto Blair’s screen from a friend who helped with his website. “What viral insanity should we spread this morning?” the friend asked.

“The more extreme we become, the more people believe it,” Blair replied.

He had launched his new website on Facebook during the 2016 presidential campaign as a practical joke among friends — a political satire site started by Blair and a few other liberal bloggers who wanted to make

fun of what they considered to be extremist ideas spreading throughout the far right. In the last two years on his page, America’s Last Line of Defense, Blair had made up stories about California instituting sharia, former president Bill Clinton becoming a serial killer, undocumented immigrants defacing Mount Rushmore, and former president Barack Obama

dodging the Vietnam draft when he was 9. “Share if you’re outraged!” his posts often read, and thousands of people on Facebook had clicked “like” and then “share,” most of whom did not recognize his posts as satire. Instead, Blair’s page had become one of the most popular on Facebook among Trump-supporting conservatives over 55.

“Nothing on this page is real,” read one of the 14 disclaimers on Blair’s site, and yet in the America of 2018 his stories had become real, reinforcing people’s biases, spreading onto Macedonian and Russian fake news sites, amassing an audience of as many six million visitors each month who thought his posts were factual. What Blair had first conceived of as an elaborate joke was beginning to reveal something darker. “No matter how racist, how bigoted, how offensive, how obviously fake we get, people keep coming back,” Blair once wrote, on his own personal Facebook page. “Where is the edge? Is there ever a point where people realize they’re being fed garbage and decide to return to reality?”

Blair’s own reality was out beyond the shuttered curtains of his office: a threebedroom home in the forest of Maine where the paved road turned to gravel; not his house but a rental; not on the lake but near it. Over the past decade his family had moved around the country a half-dozen times as he looked for steady work, bouncing between construction and restaurant jobs while sometimes living on food stamps. During the economic crash of 2008, his wife had taken a job at Wendy’s to help pay down their credit-card debt, and Blair, a lifelong Democrat, had begun venting his political frustration online, arguing with strangers in an internet forum called Brawl Hall. He sometimes masqueraded as a tea party conservative on Facebook so he could gain administrative access into their private groups and then flood their pages with liberal ideas before using his administrative status to shut their pages down. He had created more than a dozen online profiles over the last years, sometimes disguising himself in accompanying photographs as a beautiful Southern blond woman or as a bandana-wearing conservative named Flagg Eagleton, baiting people into making racist or sexist comments and then publicly eviscerating them for it. In his writing Blair was blunt, witty and prolific, and gradually he’d built a liberal following on the internet and earned a full-time job as a political blogger. On the screen, like nowhere else, he could say exactly how he felt and become whomever he wanted. Now he hunched over a desk wedged between an overturned treadmill and two turtle tanks, scanning through conservative forums on Facebook for something that might inspire his next post. He was six-foot-six and 325 pounds, and he typed several thousand words each day in all capital letters. He noticed a photo online of Trump standing at attention for the national anthem during a White House ceremony. Behind the president were several dozen dignitaries, including a white woman standing next to a Black woman, and Blair copied the picture, circled the two women in red and wrote the first thing that came into his mind.

“President Trump extended an olive branch and invited Michelle Obama and Chelsea Clinton,” Blair wrote. “They thanked him by giving him ‘the finger’ during the national anthem. Lock them up for treason!”

Blair finished typing and looked again at the picture. The white woman was not in fact Chelsea Clinton but former White House strategist Hope Hicks. The Black woman was not Michelle Obama but former Trump aide Omarosa Newman. Neither Obama nor Clinton had been invited to the ceremony. Nobody had flipped off the president. The entire premise was utterly ridiculous, which was exactly Blair’s point.

“We live in an Idiocracy,” read a small note on Blair’s desk, and he was taking full advantage. In a good month, the advertising revenue from his website earned him as much as \$15,000, and it had also won him a loyal army of online fans. Hundreds of liberals now visited America’s Last Line of Defense to humiliate conservatives who shared Blair’s fake stories as fact. In Blair’s private Facebook messages with his liberal supporters, his

conservative audience was made up of “sheep,” “hillbillies,” “mawmaw and paw-paw,” “TrumpTards,” “potatoes” and “taters.”

“How could any thinking person believe this nonsense?” he said. He hit the publish button and watched as his lie began to spread.

It was barely dawn in Pahrump, Nev., when Shirley Chapien, 76, logged onto Facebook for her morning computer game of Criminal Case. She believed in starting each day with a problem-solving challenge, a quick mental exercise to keep her brain sharp more than a decade into retirement. For a while it had been the daily crossword puzzle, but then the local newspaper stopped delivering and a friend introduced her to the viral Facebook game with 65 million players. She spent an hour as a 1930s detective, interrogating witnesses and trying to parse their lies from the truth until finally she solved case No. 48 and clicked over to her Facebook news feed.

“Good morning, Shirley! Thanks for being here,” read an automated note at the top of her page. She put her finger on the mouse and began scrolling down.

“Click LIKE if you believe we must stop sharia Law from coming to America before it’s too late,” read the first item, and she clicked “like.”

“Share to help END the ongoing migrant invasion!” read another, and she clicked “share.”

The house was empty and quiet except for the clicking of her computer mouse. She lived alone, and on many days her only personal interaction occurred here, on Facebook. Mixed into her morning news feed were photos and updates from some of her 300 friends, but most items came directly from political groups Chapien had chosen to follow: “Free Speech Patriots,” “Taking Back America,” “Ban Islam,” “Trump 2020” and “Rebel Life.” Each political page published several posts each day directly into Chapien’s feed, many of which claimed to be “BREAKING NEWS.”

On her computer the attack against America was urgent and unrelenting. Liberals were restricting free speech. Immigrants were storming the border and casting illegal votes. Politicians were scheming to take away everyone’s guns. “The second you stop paying attention, there’s another travesty underway in this country,” Chapien once wrote, in her own Facebook post, so she had decided to always pay attention, sometimes scrolling and sharing for hours at a time. “BREAKING: Democrat megadonor accused of sexual assault!!!”

“Is Michelle Obama really dating Bruce Springsteen?”

“Iowa Farmer Claims Bill Clinton had Sex with Cow during ‘Cocaine Party.’ ”

On display above Chapien’s screen were needlepoints that had once occupied much of her free time, intricate pieces of artwork that took hundreds of hours to complete, but now she didn’t have the patience. Out her window was a dead-end road of identical beige-and-brown rock gardens surrounding double-wide trailers that looked similar to her own, many of them occupied by neighbours whom she’d never met. Beyond that was nothing but cactuses and heat waves for as far as she could see — a stretch of unincorporated land that continued from her backyard into the desert.

She’d spent almost a decade in Pahrump without really knowing why. The heat could be unbearable. She had no family in Nevada. She loved going to movies, and the town of 30,000 didn’t have a theatre. It seemed to her like a place in the business of luring people — into the air-conditioned casinos downtown, into the legal brothels on the edge of the desert, into the new developments of cheap housing available for no money down — and in some ways she’d become stuck, too.

She had lived much of her life in cities throughout Europe and across the United States — places such as San Francisco, New York and Miami. She’d gone to college for a few years and become an insurance adjuster, working as one of the few women in the field in the 1980s and ’90s and joining the National Organization for Women to advocate for an equal wage before eventually moving to Rhode Island to work for a hospice and care for her aging

parents. After her mother died, Chapien decided to retire and move to Las Vegas to live with a friend, and when Las Vegas became too expensive a real estate agent told her about Pahrump. She bought a three-bedroom trailer for less than \$100,000 and painted it purple. She met a few friends at the local senior centre and started eating at the Thai restaurant in town. A few years after arriving, she bought a new computer monitor and signed up for Facebook in 2009, choosing as her profile image a photo of her cat.

“Looking to connect with friends and other like-minded people,” she wrote then.

She had usually voted for Republicans, just like her parents, but it was only on Facebook that Chapien had become a committed conservative. She was wary of Obama in the months after his election, believing him to be both arrogant and inexperienced, and on Facebook she sought out a litany of information that seemed to confirm her worst fears, unaware that some of that information was false. It wasn’t just that Obama was liberal, she read; he was actually a socialist. It wasn’t just that his political qualifications were thin; it was that he had fabricated those qualifications, including parts of his college transcripts and maybe even his birth certificate.

For years she had watched network TV news, but increasingly Chapien wondered about the widening gap between what she read online and what she heard on the networks. “What else aren’t they telling us?” she wrote once, on Facebook, and if she believed the mainstream media was becoming insufficient or biased, it was her responsibility to seek out alternatives. She signed up for a dozen conservative newsletters and began to watch Alex Jones on Infowars. One far right Facebook group eventually led her to the next with targeted advertising, and soon Chapien was following more than 2,500 conservative pages, an ideological echo chamber that often trafficked in skepticism. Climate change was a hoax. The mainstream media was censored or scripted. Political Washington was under control of a “deep state.”

Chapien didn’t believe everything she read online, but she was also distrustful of mainstream fact-checkers and reported news. It sometimes felt to her like real facts had become indiscernible — that the truth was often somewhere in between. What she trusted most was her own ability to think critically and discern the truth, and increasingly her instincts aligned with the online community where she spent most of her time. It had been months since she’d gone to a movie. It had been almost a year since she’d made the hour-long trip to Las Vegas. Her number of likes and shares on Facebook increased each year until she was sometimes awakening to check her news feed in the middle of the night, liking and commenting on dozens of posts each day. She felt as if she was being let in on a series of dark revelations about the United States, and it was her responsibility to see and to share them.

“I’m not a conspiracy-theory-type person, but ...” she wrote, before sharing a link to an unsourced story suggesting that Democratic donor George Soros had been a committed Nazi, or that a Parkland shooting survivor was actually a paid actor.

Now another post arrived in her news feed, from a page called America’s Last Line of Defense, which Chapien had been following for more than a year. It showed a picture of Trump standing at a White House ceremony. Circled in the background were two women, one Black and one white.

“President Trump extended an olive branch and invited Michelle Obama and Chelsea Clinton,” the post read. “They thanked him by giving him ‘the finger’ during the national anthem.”

Chapien looked at the photo and nothing about it surprised her. Of course Trump had invited Clinton and Obama to the White House in a generous act of patriotism. Of course the Democrats — or “Demonrats,” as Chapien sometimes called them — had acted badly and disrespected America. It was the exact same narrative she saw playing out on her screen hundreds of times each day, and this time she decided to click ‘like’ and leave a comment.

“Well, they never did have any class,” she wrote.

Blair had invented thousands of stories in the past two years, always trafficking in the same stereotypes to fool the same people, but he never tired of watching a post take off: Eight shares in the first minute, 160 within 15 minutes, more than 1,000 by the end of the hour.

“Aaaaand, we’re viral,” he wrote, in a message to his liberal supporters on his private Facebook page. “It’s getting to the point where I can no longer control the absolute absurdity of the things I post. No matter how ridiculous, how obviously fake, or how many times you tell the same taters ... they will still click that ‘like’ and hit that share button.”

By the standards of America’s Last Line of Defense, the item about Michelle Obama and Chelsea Clinton was only a moderate success. It included no advertisements, so it wouldn’t earn Blair any money. It wasn’t even the most popular of the 11 items he’d published that day. But, just an hour earlier, Blair had come up with an idea at his computer in Maine, and now hundreds or maybe thousands of people across the country believed Obama and Clinton had flipped off the president.

“Gross. Those women have no respect for themselves,” wrote a woman in Fort Washakie, Wyo.

“They deserve to be publicly shunned,” said a man in Gainesville, Fla.

“Not surprising behaviour from such ill bred trash.” “Jail them now!!!” Blair had fooled them. Now came his favourite part, the gotcha, when he could let his victims in on the joke.

“OK, taters. Here’s your reality check,” he wrote on America’s Last Line of Defense, placing his comment prominently alongside the original post. “That is Omarosa and Hope Hicks, not Michelle Obama and Chelsea Clinton. They wouldn’t be caught dead posing for this pseudo-patriotic nationalistic garbage ... Congratulations, stupid.”

Beyond the money he earned, this was what Blair had conceived of as the purpose for his website: to engage directly with people who spread false or extremist stories and prove those stories were wrong. Maybe, after people had been publicly embarrassed, they would think more critically about what they shared online. Maybe they would begin to question the root of some of their ideas.

Blair didn’t have time to personally confront each of the several hundred thousand conservatives who followed his Facebook page, so he’d built a community of more than 100 liberals to police the page with him. Together they patrolled the comments, venting their own political anger, shaming conservatives who had been fooled, taunting them, baiting them into making racist comments that could then be reported to Facebook. Blair said he and his followers had gotten hundreds of people banned from Facebook and several others fired or demoted in their jobs for offensive behaviour online. He had also forced Facebook to shut down 22 fake news sites for plagiarizing his content, many of which were Macedonian sites that reran his stories without labelling them as satire.

What Blair wasn’t sure he had ever done was change a single person’s mind. The people he fooled often came back to the page, and he continued to feed them the kind of viral content that boosted his readership and his bank account: invented stories about Colin Kaepernick, kneeling NFL players, imams, Black Lives Matter protesters, immigrants, George Soros, the Clinton Foundation, Michelle and Malia Obama. He had begun to include more obvious disclaimers at the top of every post and to intentionally misspell several words in order to highlight the idiocy of his work, but still traffic continued to climb. Sometimes he wondered: Rather than awakening people to reality, was he pushing them further from it?

“Well, they never did have any class,” commented Shirley Chapian, from Pahrump, Nev., and Blair watched his liberal mob respond.

“That’s kind of an ironic comment coming from pure trailer trash, don’t you think?”

“You’re a gullible moron who just fell for a fake story on a Liberal satire page”

“You my dear ... are as smart as a potato.”

“What a waste of flesh and time.” “Welcome to the internet. Critical thinking required.”

Chapian saw the comments after her post and wondered as she often did when she was attacked: Who were these people? And what were they talking about? Of course Michelle Obama and Chelsea Clinton had flipped off the president. It was true to what she knew of their character. That was what mattered.

Instead of responding directly to strangers on America’s Last Line of Defense, Chapien wrote on her own Facebook page. “Nasty liberals,” she said, and then she went back to her news feed, each day blending into the next. A Muslim woman with her burqa on fire: like. A police officer using a baton to beat a masked antifa protester: like. Hillary Clinton looking gaunt and pale: like. A military helicopter armed with machine guns and headed toward the caravan of immigrants: like.

She had spent a few hours scrolling one afternoon when she heard a noise outside her window, and she turned away from the screen to look outside. A neighbour was sweeping his sidewalk, pushing tiny white rocks back into his rock garden. The sky was an uninterrupted blue. A mail carrier worked his way up the empty street. There were no signs of “sharia Law.” The migrant caravan was still hundreds of kilometres away in Mexico. Antifa protesters had yet to descend on Pahrump. Chapien squinted against the sun, closed the shades and went back to her screen.

A picture of undocumented immigrants laughing inside a voting booth: like. “Deep State Alive and Well”: like. She scrolled upon another post from America’s Last Line of Defense, reading fast, oblivious to the satire labels and not noticing Blair’s trademark awkward phrasings and misspellings. It showed a group of children kneeling on prayer mats in a classroom. “California Schoolchildren forced to sharia in Class,” it read. “All of them have stopped eating bacon. Two began speaking in Allah. Stop making children pray to imaginary Gods!!”

Chapien recoiled from the screen. “Please!” she said. “If I had a kid in a school system like that, I’d yank them out so fast.”

She had seen hundreds of stories on Facebook about the threat of sharia, and this confirmed much of what she already believed. It was probably true, she thought. It was true enough.

“Do people understand that things like this are happening in this country?” she said.

She clicked the post and the traffic registered back to a computer in Maine, where Blair watched another story go viral and wondered when his audience would get his joke.