

# The Business of Misinformation: Serbia



# MISINFORMATION INC.

Author: Semir Dzebo

## Main findings

- The misinformation landscape in Serbia is dominated by established, out-in-the-open websites rather than anonymous, for-profit misinformation websites as in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- Misinformation websites in Serbia are established media outlets with conventional ownership structures, which are often convoluted. Individual shareholders can be identified by tracing the connections between various companies. Some website owners are more involved in content production than others.
- Almost all misinformation websites are decisively pro-government. This not only means that it is easier to conduct business for those who favor the government, but also that positive coverage is rewarded by government in the form of public money for “media projects of public importance,” approving deferments on tax payments, and loans.
- The websites have highly organized marketing teams that produce detailed advertising price lists. They deal directly with customers who wish to advertise on their websites rather than via Google AdSense. Unlike anonymous misinformation websites, they are not dependent on AdSense and do not have to move to a different domain if Google revokes the AdSense agreements.
- It is difficult for anonymous misinformation websites to attract attention next to these misinformation powerhouses. However, these powerhouses produce a lot of misinformation content which makes the job easier for those anonymous websites who are simply happy to repost it.

## Introduction

As a result of the research on misinformation practices in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I was able to identify four distinct categories of misinformation websites, taking into account their mode of operation, the content they produce, as well as transparency of their ownership structures and editorial practices. Those four categories were:

1. For-profit misinformation websites without real journalism
2. Real journalism websites with misinformation content
3. Real journalism websites with misinformation content and political propaganda
4. Misinformation websites with consistent political propaganda

While this categorization can be used to classify the misinformation landscape across all contexts, the predominance of one type of website over others may vary from country to country. Despite being in the same region of the Western Balkans and sharing a border, Serbia differs from Bosnia and Herzegovina in terms of how misinformation websites operate.

## Methodology

This paper presents the findings of a research project focused on the main players in the misinformation landscape in Serbia. The basis for identifying the key misinformation websites were the Serbian fact-checking websites [Raskrikavanje.rs](https://raskrikavanje.rs) and [Fakenews.rs](https://fakenews.rs). Since Raskrikavanje.rs keeps a changing list of misinformation websites, I searched their archives in order to identify the websites that appeared in their analyses over a period of time longer than two months. I used the Fakenews.rs archive to corroborate the findings from Raskrikavanje.rs and narrow down the focus onto the largest outlets. The end result was the list of eight prominent websites analyzed in this paper.

It is virtually impossible to create an exhaustive list due to the dynamic nature of the business at hand. Nonetheless, the websites analyzed here represent the core of the misinformation business in Serbia that arguably have the most influence on the content and standards of this type of reporting - if it can be called that - in the country and the region at large. All the information covered in this paper is publicly available in business registries and relevant sourced websites.

Due to the explicit focus on Serbian misinformation websites, I excluded a major misinformation website, Sputnik Srbija, an offspring of Sputnik, which is a Russian government-owned news agency. All the websites presented here are owned by Serbian citizens (with the exception of Blic, which was sold to a foreign entity), and brand themselves as Serbian websites. This report focuses on the third category of disinformation websites due to their overall dominance of the Serbian misinformation market. While it is undeniable that misinformation websites have proliferated, those that fall into the third category exert the most influence in Serbia and operate via a distinct model that deserves a closer look. The same proliferation also requires a focus on a representative sample of the market, as including the entire population of misinformation websites would perhaps be counterproductive, if not impossible, due to their constant emergence and disappearance.

## MISINFORMATION WEBSITES: TRENDS IN FUNDING AND OWNERSHIP

### Who dominates the misinformation landscape?

This is a two-fold question that can be addressed by classifying the most prevalent misinformation outlets according to the four categories described above, and by providing more detailed information regarding the outlets' ownership structure, content, and finances. It is immediately noticeable that the misinformation arena in Serbia is different from that in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Previous research[1] shows that the most important drivers of misinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina are anonymous for-profit websites that have no real journalistic value. One could assume that individuals who spread misinformation would try to hide their true identity due to the perceived amorality of their business. This is not the case in Serbia.

There are three possible explanations for why this is the case. First, the potential financial rewards are huge for those who engage in this type of reporting, which necessitates a corporate-like structure to maximize this potential. Second, sensationalist, clickbait journalism seems to be the winning formula when it comes to amassing clicks and website visits, which is directly transformed into profit via ad revenue. Due to the nature of the business, it makes sense for site owners to set up a permanent website and charge for ads directly in order to avoid losing their AdSense contract with Google because of the false content they publish. Third, misinformation websites in Serbia are not anonymous because the content they produce - at least that related to the domestic political context - is political propaganda for the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska Napredna Stranka*, SNS). Support for the government will secure good relations, including financial rewards in the form of public moneys allocated by the government through public calls in cities across Serbia. The government grants such subsidies to media outlets that are supposed to carry out "media projects of public value" (*medijski projekti od javnog interesa*).

The misinformation landscape in Serbia is dominated by real journalism websites with misinformation content and political propaganda (the third category in our classification), with some caveats: almost all the websites included here are heavily pro-government to the extent that they could be classified as misinformation websites with consistent political propaganda (the fourth category). Nonetheless, we include in this fourth category anonymous websites whose scope is limited to nothing more than overt propaganda, either due to their limited capabilities or lack of ambition. Since all the websites included in this analysis employ journalists and editors, and do provide some truthful information, they are better classified as real journalism websites that publish misinformation content and constant political propaganda (the third category).

For the misinformation business in Serbia, this means that there is not much room for anonymous for-profit misinformation websites, as they simply cannot compete with these misinformation giants. However, those seeking to start anonymous for-profit websites in Serbia do not have to work hard to create their content as they can simply copy content from prominent misinformation websites. The hard part is competing with the outreach and infrastructure that large misinformation websites have.

[1] Semir Dzebo, "The Business of Misinformation - Bosnia: Lying for Profit | CMDS" (Center for Media, Data, and Society | CEU School of Public Policy), accessed February 2, 2020, <https://cmds.ceu.edu/business-misinformation-bosnia-lying-profit/>; Tijana Cvjetičanin et al., "Disinformation in the Online Sphere: The Case of BiH" (Citizens' Association "Why Not," April 2019), [https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation\\_in\\_the\\_online\\_sphere\\_The\\_case\\_of\\_BiH\\_ENG.pdf](https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation_in_the_online_sphere_The_case_of_BiH_ENG.pdf)

## Misinformation Inc.

The misinformation websites covered by this report are professional media outlets and their ownership and editorial structures are complex but publicly available.

They all have a corporate structure, with the real owner often hidden by a convoluted web of subsidiaries of a parent company. Of the eight websites included in this analysis, seven are domestically owned (whose owners/shareholders are Serbian citizens) and only one (Blic.rs) is owned by a foreign entity.

Blic.rs is the 6th most-visited website in Serbia according to [SimilarWeb](#)[2] rankings and a great example of these websites' convoluted ownership structures. The Blic newspaper was founded in 1996 and has changed owners a number of times since then. The tabloid is currently owned by Ringier Axel Springer Media AG, a Swiss-German entity. Axel Springer SE (whose portfolio also includes Bild and Die Welt) and Ringier AG each hold 50% of the shares in Ringier Axel Springer Media AG. The largest individual shareholder in [Axel Springer SE](#) is Friede Springer, one of the richest people in Germany and a member of the Christian Democratic Union party (CDU). However, the tabloid's web portal, Blic.rs, is owned by Ringier Digital AG, whose 49% stake was bought by KKR in [2014](#). KKR is an American private equity company that specializes in leveraged buyouts. It also owns a [majority stake](#) in Srpske Kabelovske Mreže (Serbia Broadband Company).

Blic and another tabloid whose website is included here (Alo.rs) shared the same owner and publisher until 2017, when Alo was sold to Alo Media System, which is owned by [Saša Blagojević](#). Blagojević is a local businessman who owns the television channel Studio B through his Global Media Technology company, and is also a director and co-owner of the marketing and consulting company Trilenium. Alo.rs is ranked the 9th most-visited website in Serbia, according to SimilarWeb rankings.

Another similar example of complex ownership is Kurir.rs (whose daily print version is one of the most widely read print tabloids in the country), which is the 4th most-visited website in Serbia, only behind Google, YouTube, and Facebook, according to SimilarWeb. The website, as well as the newspaper edition, were [bought](#) by a company called Mondo Inc in early 2019 for [roughly €25m](#).<sup>[3]</sup> Mondo Inc is fully owned by Wireless Media, a company that is 100% owned by Mobil Media, which again is fully owned by [Igor Žeželj](#).

[2] All SimilarWeb rankings mentioned in this paper are for November 2019.

[3] This is the estimated price for the purchase of the media publishing house Adria Media Group that owned Kurir, Kurir.rs and a number of other media outlets. See K. Živanović, "Kurir prodan za 25 miliona evra?," Danas.rs, January 12, 2019 <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/kurir-prodat-za-25-miliona-evra/>



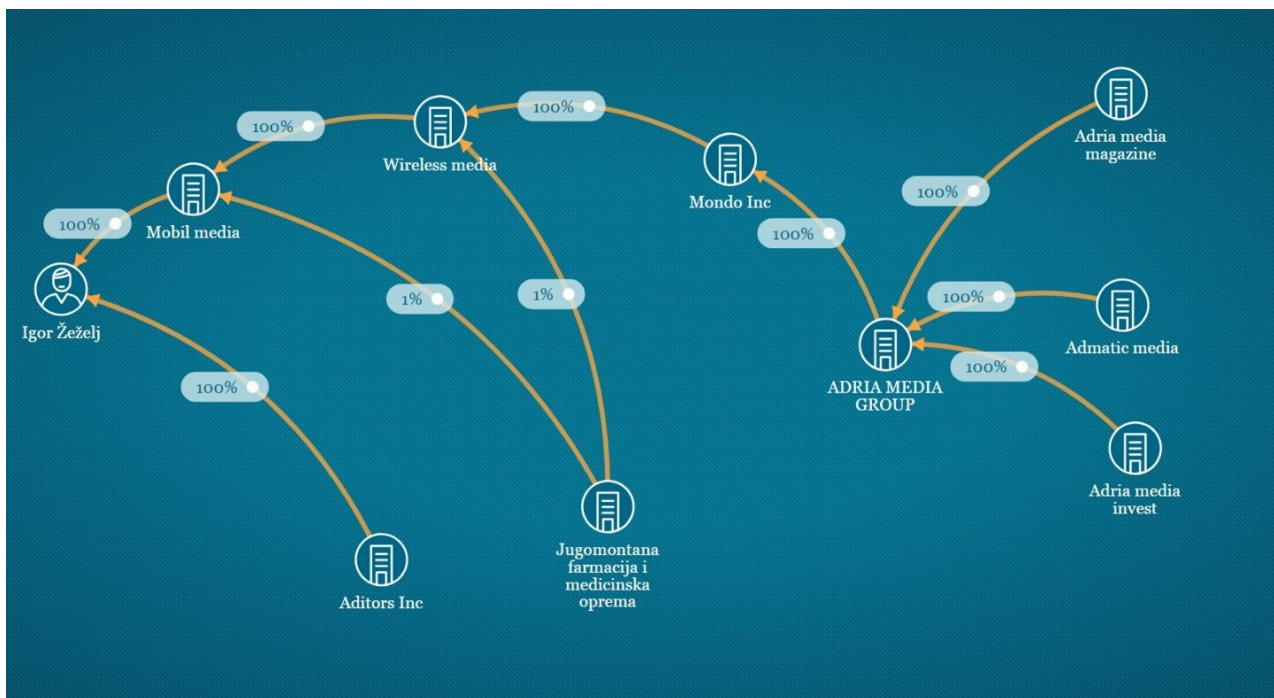


Figure 1. Companies owned by Igor Žeželj.  
Source: Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN)

## Misinformation aficionados

Shareholders in the companies that own misinformation websites are likely to be politically uninterested in the content they produce and only seek to maximize their profits, yet that is not the case for all of them. One exception is Dragan Vučićević, the owner of Insajder Tim Ltd., which fully owns Informer.rs and who is known to be deeply involved in content creation. Vučićević is an ardent supporter of the SNS, its party president, and the current president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić. In 2018, Informer.rs was ordered by a court to pay a total of RSD 150,000 (€1,300) to Stevan Dojčinović, the editor-in-chief of the Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK) for defamation of character. Informer.rs accused Dojčinović of being “a fake journalist,” “a western spy,” “an accomplice of the mafia,” “a sadomasochist,” and “a terrorist” who was seeking to frame Aleksandar Vučić and his family. The fact-checking site Raskrikavanje.rs is a project run by KRIK.[4]

Informer’s journalistic practices, or lack thereof, earned 25 public warnings from the Press Council of Serbia for breaches of the Serbian Journalists’ Code of Behavior during 2016 and 2017, making it the leading breacher of journalism ethics in the country. Moreover, according to research by Raskrikavanje, Informer.rs was the largest producer of misinformation pieces that made it to the front page of a daily newspaper: it generated 150 misinformation headlines on the front page of its printed edition in 2017.[5]

Informer’s journalistic style and publications also prompted the US ambassador to Serbia to describe it as “ordinary scum,” criticizing the website for its blatant disregard of factual reporting. In response, President Vučić stated that it is unbecoming for an ambassador to make such comments about the highest-circulating newspaper in the country.[6]

[4] <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/29257031.html>

[5] <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=488>

[6] <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/pritisci-i-napadi/vucic-ne-prilici-americkom-ambasadoru-da-tako-komentarise-najtiranije-novine/>

## The content

Considering their similar profiles, it is no surprise that the websites analyzed rely on similar themes in their reporting. The two most prominent figures in misinformation pieces are Dragan Đilas (leader of the main opposition party – *Demokratska Stranka*) and Aleksandar Vučić (leader of the ruling SNS). The former is generally portrayed in a negative light while the latter is almost always covered positively. The third most prominent individual is the current Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is uniformly represented positively. A report published by Raskrikavanje provides an insight into what some of these outlets and their printed editions write about. For example, in the first half of 2019, Alo's printed edition contained 115 false and factually unfounded claims on its front pages.[7][8] The report further found that four words dominate the misinformation headlines: Serbs, Serbia, Vučić, and Đilas. "Serbs" are almost always mentioned in the context of being threatened, in danger, or being the victims of something. This even extends to the non-political sphere, as in the case of Alo claiming that Albanians are to blame for Serbia's poor placement in Eurovision rankings.[9] When discussing the current President of Serbia, Alo either portrays Vučić as in danger and the victim, or as a highly capable and tough guy.[10] The opposition are portrayed in a negative light, primarily as traitors working with outside forces.[11]

Another Serbian fact-checking website, Fake News Tragač (Fake News Seeker), found 237 misinformation headlines on the 358 front pages of Alo's print edition in 2017.[12] One of the most prominent themes in Alo's misinformation strategy is the threat of Albanians, which is low-hanging fruit due to the past and current situation in Kosovo: articles periodically appear on the "upcoming" war in Kosovo. Additionally, Alo's propensity for announcing wars not only applies to Kosovo, as they have also announced the "upcoming" Third World War multiple times. Another prominent theme features President Vučić and his opponents. Here, the first strategy is to defend Vučić and portray him as a victim of the opposition's devious plans, while the other tactic is to smear the opposition.[13] Lastly, while pseudo-science takes a backseat to politics, the outlet is no stranger to promoting it too. Alo is ranked 9th in terms of most-visited websites in Serbia.[14]

Occasionally, these outlets will take ownership and apologize for the misinformation they spread. One such rare occasion was when Informer's owner and editor-in-chief apologized for the website's piece featuring alleged provocative photographs of the Croatian president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. However, after public uproar in Croatia, Vučićević apologized and admitted that the person featured in the photographs was in fact a pornographic actress.[15]

[7] <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=488>

[8] Information from the printed edition is included in this study, which is mainly focused on online content, because the content is almost identical: articles from printed edition are usually published first, or covered in some other way, online.

[9] <https://www.alo.rs/vip/estrada/albanka-sabotirala-poene-za-nevenu-bozovic-makedosnki-ziri-potpuno-nepoznat-nasim-pevacima-i-kompozitorima/230033/vest>

[10] <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=488>

[11] Ibid.

[12] <https://fakenews.rs/2018/05/16/al-na-naslovnim-stranama-objavio-237-laznih-vesti-za-godinu-dana/>

[13] Ibid.

[14] <https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/serbia>

[15] <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/1802163/urednik-informera-se-izvinjava.html>

## Revenue streams and government connections

Misinformation websites have two main streams of revenue. The first is advertising. Misinformation websites usually enter advertising agreements directly with their customers, rather than via Google's AdSense. The benefit of operating as a real, out-in-the-open website is that they can cut out the middleman (Google) which takes a significant cut of the ad revenue. Misinformation websites in Serbia thus prefer to sell ad space on their website directly, either in the form of banners or PR messages. They have marketing departments and publish their advertising price lists. Prices vary, depending on the ad's size, location (on the front page or on a page devoted to a specific topic such as entertainment or sports), suitability for different platforms (desktop, mobile or application), type of content (image or text), and many other criteria.

Six of the eight websites analyzed here published detailed advertising price lists. The exceptions are Pink.rs. and Republika.rs. For example, a PR text on the front page of [Kurir.rs](#) costs between €800 and €1,000, while a banner ad (970x250px) ranges from €1.50 to €3.50 CPM.<sup>[16]</sup> Ads on the front page of [Srbijadanas.com](#) cost between €15 and €80 a day, depending on the size of the banner. The most expensive ads are the "branding" banners along the side, which cost €250 per day on the front page. Mobile advertising on [Telegraf.rs](#) ranges from €150 to €600 a day, also depending on banner size. The most expensive service offered here is a PR text delivered via a push notification on their app, which costs €2,000. They also have an option to advertise on their Instagram account via an Instagram story, which costs €350.

The second revenue stream of Serbia's misinformation websites is public funding, which can only be accessed by organizations that enjoy a friendly relationship with those in power. First, they are awarded funds through public tenders organized in various cities across the country for the production of media content deemed a public good or of public importance. Websites generally benefit financially from their favorable coverage of the ruling SNS. The Journalists' Association of Serbia reports that many misinformation websites are given public money to produce "media content of public interest." In one instance, [Informer.rs](#), via Info IT Media Ltd (its sister company), [received](#) RSD 2.5m (€21,000) from public calls in different cities in Serbia. In total, [Informer.rs](#), [Srpski Telegraf](#) (its website is Republika.rs) and [Srbijadanas.com](#) [received](#) a total of RSD 13m (€110,000) via public calls in the first half of 2018. Despite their consistent and numerous breaches of journalistic code, in large part due to their misinformation practices, these companies are viewed favorably by those in power, a sign of a symbiotic relationship between the misinformation media outlets and the country's political establishment. [Informer.rs](#) and [Srpski Telegraf](#) together were awarded RSD 52.5m (€450,000) in public money for "media projects of public importance." Similarly, the Agency for Capital Investments of the Autonomous Region of Vojvodina [concluded an agreement with](#) Blic, according to which the tabloid would promote their projects. Each article cost around €500, all paid from public money, and in none of the pieces did Blic note that it had been paid to report on the projects.

The second financial benefit that comes from a pro-government stance is that it makes for a "more conducive business environment." The case of Kurir is a good illustration of this: Adria Media Group (AMG), which owns Kurir, was owned by Serbian businessman Aleksandar Rodić. During his time at the helm of AMG, Kurir maintained close connections with politicians in power until, surprisingly, in November 2015, Rodić authored a text entitled "[Srbijo, izvini](#)" ("Serbia, I am sorry"), published in Kurir, in which he acknowledged that Kurir was a part of a propaganda-spewing group of media outlets whose job was to "beautify reality." He included [Informer.rs](#) and [Pink](#) in the same group.

[16] CPM is a method used in digital marketing to calculate the price of advertising. It means "cost per thousand" or "cost per mille." For example, if a website charges \$3 per CMP, it means that whoever wants to advertise will have to pay \$3 per thousand impressions.



Nonetheless, Rodić vowed from that moment on to report objectively about Vučić's government, which pushed Kurir into a war against other misinformation outlets, primarily Informer and Pink. Although the relationship between Rodić and Vučić improved for a short while, in June 2017, Kurir again started publishing criticisms of Vučić, and fighting publicly with Informer, Pink, and *Srpski Telegraf*. Both the owners and editors of Informer and *Srpski Telegraf* were former employees of Kurir. In fact, the co-owner and editor of *Srpski Telgraf* was a part of Kurir during the first phase of its dispute with Aleksandar Vučić. The dispute was financially hard on AMG: its accounts were blocked due to unpaid taxes, which is one of the likely reasons why Rodić sold the company.

On the other hand, the case of Pink shows how the government is willing to help those who provide favorable journalistic coverage. Pink Media Group (PMG) owes part of its success to its owner (Željko Mitrović), who has maintained close ties with every government in Serbia since the early 1990s. The Center for Investigative Journalism in Serbia<sup>[17]</sup> (CINS) found out that PMG was allowed to pay RSD 1.52bn (€13m) of its tax bill in 93 installments. It also received a total of RSD 1.28bn (€11m) in loans from the State Agency for Ensuring and Financing Export (AOFI). As CINS points out, it is not clear what exactly Pink exports to qualify for such loans. Secondly, and more problematically, one of the conditions for obtaining AOFI loans is that the borrower must have fully covered its tax liabilities. Nonetheless, in 2014, although PMG was one of the largest debtors to the state budget, it was still granted a loan by AOFI.

Assessing how much money misinformation websites make is rather difficult, as the companies running them submit financial reports for all of their assets. In the case of companies with a high number of media outlets, it is impossible to ascertain how profitable a specific website is.

Pink International, for example, reported a 2018 operating profit of €10.2m. Besides Pink.rs, it also owns a television channel with a nationwide frequency (RTV Pink), 60 cable channels, and two satellite channels.

The financial reports of Srbija Danas Ltd provide one of the most accurate pictures of misinformation profitability. The company "only" owns Srbijadanas.com, one television channel, and a small daily newspaper (acquired in 2018, and thus not included in the 2016 and 2017 reports).

Although its profit was only €3,000 in 2015, Srbija Danas bought a television station in Novi Sad for €175,000. In 2017, it had revenues of €809,000 EUR while its profit was €256,000, a significant increase compared to its 2016 figure of €59,000.

Another company that runs a small number of entities is Medijska Mreža, which owns *Srpski Telegraf* and its associated website, Republika.rs. In 2017, it reported revenues of €3.23m and a profit of nearly €16,000. The following year, the same company had revenues of almost €3.6m with a net profit of over €191,000.

[17] <https://www.cins.rs/drzava-pomogla-pinku-sa-39-miliona-evra/>

## KEY MISINFORMATION WEBSITES IN SERBIA, RANKING AND FINANCIAL DATA, 2018-2019

Website name	Ranking in Serbia	Revenue, €, 2018*	Net profit, €, 2018
Alo.rs	9th	1,789,605	114,427
Blic.rs	6th	24,889,938	988,703
Informer.rs	22nd	5,686,348	596,053
Kurir.rs	4th	3,390,182	-3,891,694
Pink.rs	21st	55,691,102	10,257,292
Republika.rs (web portal of Srpski Telegraf)	Not in top 50	3,596,182	191,119
Srbijadanas.com	14th	948,433	264,938
Telegraf.rs	18th	1,780,264	-186,796

\*Data for the company that owns the websites.

Notes: The average 2018 conversion rate of RSD 1=€0.0085 was used. The website rankings were taken from SimilarWeb, data for November 2019.

## About the author

**Semir Dzebo** is currently a doctoral student at the Department of International Relations at Central European University. His research interests include civil wars, ethnic conflicts, Southeast European politics and international relations at large. Moreover, he is also interested in devising strategies to combat misinformation and using podcasting to disseminate academic research.

## About The Business of Misinformation project

*The Business of Misinformation project is run by the Center for Media, Data and Society, mapping the individuals and companies that own misinformation websites and their links to institutions, parties and other individuals. It canvasses websites that systematically and methodically create and target false information to persuade audiences to adopt ideas and ways of thinking embraced by their original promoters or their sponsors, be those political, social, economic, health-related or else. It includes players in the misinformation industry consisting of locally run online portals that are presenting themselves and are perceived as independent voices.*

To learn more about the project, please visit our website: <https://cmds.ceu.edu/business-misinformation>



Tel: +36 1 327 3000 / 2609

Fax: +36 1 235 6168

E-mail: [cmds@ceu.edu](mailto:cmds@ceu.edu)  
[cmds.ceu.edu](http://cmds.ceu.edu)

**Postal address:**

Center for Media, Data and Society  
Central European University  
Nador u. 9  
1051 Budapest  
Hungary