

The anatomy of a fake news headline | TNW

By The Markup

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As confrontations between Black Lives Matter protesters and police erupted across the country earlier this month, some Oregonians, mostly older people, saw a Facebook ad pushing a headline about how a Republican politician “Wants Martial Law To Control The Obama-Soros Antifa Supersoldiers.”

Needless to say, there was no army of left-wing “supersoldiers” marching across Oregon, nor were former president Barack Obama and billionaire George Soros known to be funding anything antifa-related. And the politician in question didn’t actually say there were “supersoldiers.” The headline, originally from the often-sarcastic, progressive blog Wonkette, was never meant to be taken as straight news.

The whole thing was a mishap born of the modern news age, in which what headlines you see is decided not by a hard-bitten front-page editor but instead by layers of algorithms designed to pick what’s news and who should be shown it. This system can work fine, but in this instance it fed into a maelstrom of misinformation that was already inspiring some westerners to grab their guns and guard their towns against the largely non-existent threat of out-of-town antifa troublemakers.

This was just one headline that fed into a sense of paranoia reinforced by rumors from many sources. But deconstructing exactly how it came about provides a window into how easy it is for a fringe conspiracy theory to accidentally slip into the ecosystem of mainstream online news.

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