

How Fake News Goes Viral: A Case Study

By **Sapna Maheshwari**

Image: Images posted on Twitter by a marketer in Austin, Tex., the day after the presidential election. Credit

Eric Tucker, a 35-year-old co-founder of a marketing company in Austin, Tex., had just about 40 Twitter followers. But his recent tweet about paid protesters being bused to demonstrations against President-elect Donald J. Trump fueled a nationwide conspiracy theory — one that Mr. Trump joined in promoting.

Mr. Tucker's post was shared at least 16,000 times on Twitter and more than 350,000 times on Facebook. The

problem is that Mr. Tucker got it wrong. There were no such buses packed with paid protesters. But that didn't matter. While some fake news is produced purposefully by teenagers in the Balkans or entrepreneurs in the United States seeking to make money from advertising, false information can also arise from misinformed social media posts by regular people that are seized on and spread through a hyper-partisan blogosphere.

Here, The New York Times deconstructs how Mr. Tucker's now-deleted declaration on Twitter the night after the election turned into a fake-news phenomenon. It is an example of how, in an ever-connected world where speed often takes precedence over truth, an observation by a private citizen can quickly become a talking point, even as it is being proved false.

Nov. 9, shortly after 8 p.m. Eastern Credit:
Snopes

Mr. Tucker, who had taken photos of a large group of buses he saw near downtown Austin earlier in the day because he thought it was unusual, saw reports of protests against Mr. Trump in the city and decided the two were connected. He posted three of the images with the declaration: "Anti-Trump protestors in Austin today are not as organic as they seem. Here are the busses they came in. #fakeprotests #trump2016 #austin"

Mr. Tucker said he had performed a Google search to see if any conferences were being held in the area but did not find anything. (The buses were, in fact, hired by a company called Tableau Software, which was holding a conference that drew more than 13,000 people.) "I did think in the back of my mind there could be other explanations, but it just didn't seem plausible," he said in an interview, noting that he had posted as a "private citizen who had a tiny Twitter following." He added, "I'm also a very busy businessman and I don't have time to fact-check everything that I put out there, especially when I don't think it's going out there for wide consumption."



erictucker @erictucker · Nov 9

Anti-Trump protestors in Austin today are not as organic as they seem. Here are the busses they came in. #fakeprotests
#trump2016 #austin



16K 14K ***

**Nov. 10, 12:49 a.m.
Eastern**

Several hours later, the first important step occurred.

Mr. Tucker's tweet was posted to the main Reddit community for Mr. Trump under the heading: "BREAKING: They found the buses! Dozens lined up just blocks away from the Austin protests." It quickly generated more than 300 comments, some of which blamed the protests on George Soros, the liberal billionaire philanthropist, who is a frequent target of the group.

Nov. 10, around 9 a.m. Eastern

The next morning, the frenzy began. A user on Free Republic, a conservative discussion forum, linked to the Reddit thread about Mr. Tucker's post, increasing the attention and spreading it further into the online world. Later, Facebook pages like Robertson Family Values, which is named for but not affiliated with the stars of "Duck Dynasty," and Donald Trump Commander in Chief 2020, linked to the Free Republic discussion. Those posts were shared more than 5,000 times each, and more than 300,000 Facebook users have linked to the Free Republic thread.

Nov. 10, late morning through the afternoon

Sean Hughes, the director of corporate affairs for the bus company Coach USA North America, said he learned about the rumor involving its vehicles after receiving a couple of curious emails and hearing from a friend in New Jersey who had seen the claim on Facebook and wanted to know if it was true. A reporter at the Fox television station in Austin contacted Mr. Hughes later that day, and he responded with a statement noting that "at no point were Coach USA buses involved in the Austin protests." But that did little to stem the online furor. "That reporter said, 'You're probably going to get a lot more phone calls because it's all over the place,'" Mr. Hughes said in an interview on Thursday.

"You're the second journalist to actually call me to see what was going on, no bloggers or anything, and we're easily accessible on our website," Mr. Hughes said. He added, "I just kind of wish people looked into facts before they go ahead and do something like that, because it could be easily debunked based on a quick phone call or two, or a couple emails."

During this time, Mr. Tucker was replying to queries (questions) on Twitter about whether he had proof to support his claim. He confirmed in a post that he "did not see loading or unloading" but that the buses were

the_donald
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2016
Comments Other Discussions (6)
Check this out: TheNewRight | Sidebar Image Contest!
BREAKING: They found the buses! Dozens lined up just blocks away from the Austin protests. (twitter.com)
submitted 6 days ago by ~JuJu~
363 comments share embed Thu Nov 10 05:49:45 2016 UTC
top 200 comments show all 363



They found the buses! Dozens lined up just blocks away from the Austin protests.

Anti-Trump protestors in Austin today are not as organic as they seem. Here are the busses they came in. #fakeprotests #trump2016 #austin

Nov 10, 2016 · www.freerepublic.com

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307,616 people have shared this link

a

“quite near protests at right timing.” That admitted lack of evidence, however, had little effect. By about noon, Mr. Tucker’s initial post had been retweeted and liked more than 5,000 times. There was more to come.

Nov 10, 2016



Replies to @erictucker@stevendenoon

Erid were you able to verify these were protesters after they unloaded?



I did not see loading or unloading. There were even more busses than in pics. Quite near protests at right timing.

8:06 AM - Nov 10, 2016 - 55 Replies / 44 Retweets / 1010 likes - Twitter Ads info and privacy

- **Nov. 10, evening** Around 6 p.m., the conservative blog Gateway Pundit posted a story using Mr. Tucker’s images under the headline “Figures. Anti-Trump Protesters Were Bussed in to Austin #FakeProtests.” The post, which included a mention of “Soros money,” has been shared on Facebook more than 44,000 times, according to statistics on the website.

The story line became a prominent one throughout the conservative blogosphere, with other sites incorporating Mr. Tucker’s tweet into posts about paid protesters, referring to him as an eyewitness in Austin. Then, shortly after 9 p.m., Mr. Trump sent this tweet:



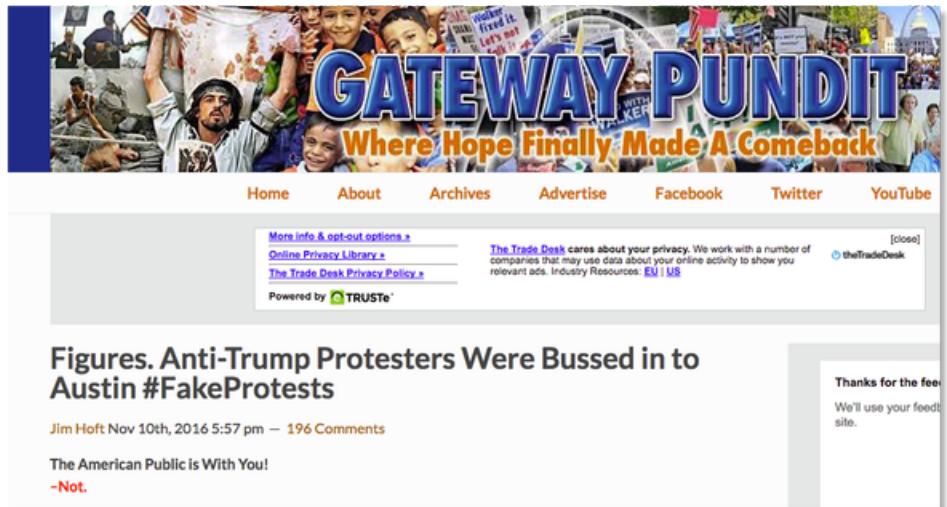
Donald J. Trump

Just had a very open and successful presidential election. Now professional protesters, incited by the media, are protesting. Very unfair!

6:19 PM - Nov 10, 2016 - 63,830 Replies / 66,430 Retweets / 222,418 likes - Twitter Ads info and privacy

Mr. Tucker considered deleting his tweet about the buses, but Mr. Trump’s message emboldened him. “I figured if he were to say something like that, I might be barking up the same tree,” Mr. Tucker said. When asked if Mr. Trump might have been relying, at least tangentially, on the erroneous message he had sent about the buses, Mr. Tucker said, “I don’t want to say why Trump tweeted when he tweeted. I just don’t know and I truthfully don’t think any of us will ever know.”

Nov. 11 Doreen Jarman, a spokeswoman for Tableau, said the company issued a statement to the local television station KVUE and The Austin American-Statesman on Nov. 11, saying that the buses were connected to the company’s conference. The American-Statesman posted an article online shortly after noon, said Asher Price, the article’s author. Around 2 p.m., Mr. Tucker tweeted a link to his blog, where he acknowledged that he could have been “flat wrong,” and mentioned that he had voted for Gary Johnson. The rumor-checking website Snopes also debunked the claim that the buses were connected to any protests. None of this seemed to have much impact.



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Figures. Anti-Trump Protesters Were Bussed in to Austin #FakeProtests

Jim Hoft Nov 10th, 2016 5:57 pm — 196 Comments

The American Public is With You!
-Not.

Thanks for the feed
We'll use your feed site.

Mr. Tucker's initial tweet continued to generate thousands of shares on Facebook through Free Republic and pages like Right Wing News and Joe the Plumber. After midnight, Mr. Tucker deleted his original tweet, then posted an image of it stamped with the word "false" for posterity. It did not receive much attention.

After a week, that message had 29 retweets and 27 likes. The Snopes article has been shared about 5,800 times according to its website, a fraction of the number for the fake version of the news. Faced with the impact of his initial tweet, Mr. Tucker, who now has about 960 Twitter followers, allowed himself a moment of reflection.

"Anytime you see me in the future going out there where I think there's going to be a big audience, I can assure you I'm going to try my best to be balanced with the facts and be very clear about what is "opinion" and what is not," Mr. Tucker said.

If he could go back, he said, "I might have still tweeted it but very differently. I think it goes without saying I would have tried to make a more objective statement."

Well, well, well...



Anti-Trump
organic as
came in.



ArictBCK @erictuckerbig

bad post is gone! Its memory shall live on! Thanks all! Let's keep the conversation moving!
<https://blog.erictucker.com/2016/11/11/why-im-considering-to-remove-the-fake-protests-twitter-post/> ...
9:57 PM - Nov 11, 2016 – 35 replies / 58 Retweets / 78 likes

RETWEETS
16,931

LIKES

14,521



8:43 PM - 9 Nov 2016

Q1: How did Eric Tucker create "Fake news" / misinformation?

Q2: What is meant when the phrase "gone viral" is used about information?

Q3: What dangers does the posting of information or misinformation have on social media create?

Q4: What lessons can be drawn from Mr. Tucker's case or fake news?