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<p>ERIC COOMER, Ph.D., Plaintiff</p> <p>vs.</p> <p>DONALD J. TRUMP FOR PRESIDENT, INC., et al., Defendants</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">▲ COURT USE ONLY ▲</p>
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<p>EXHIBIT E-15</p>	

How The Epoch Times Created a Giant Influence Machine

Since 2016, the Falun Gong-backed newspaper has used aggressive Facebook tactics and right-wing misinformation to create an anti-China, pro-Trump media empire.



By Kevin Roose

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For years, The Epoch Times was a small, low-budget newspaper with an anti-China slant that was handed out free on New York street corners. But in 2016 and 2017, the paper made two changes that transformed it into one of the country's most powerful digital publishers.

The changes also paved the way for the publication, which is affiliated with the secretive and relatively obscure Chinese spiritual movement Falun Gong, to become a leading purveyor of right-wing misinformation.

First, it embraced President Trump, treating him as an ally in Falun Gong's scorched-earth fight against China's ruling Communist Party, which banned the group two decades ago and has persecuted its members ever since. Its relatively staid coverage of U.S. politics became more partisan, with more articles explicitly supporting Mr. Trump and criticizing his opponents.

Around the same time, The Epoch Times bet big on another powerful American institution: Facebook. The publication and its affiliates employed a novel strategy that involved creating dozens of Facebook pages, filling them with feel-good videos and viral clickbait, and using them to sell subscriptions and drive traffic back to its partisan news coverage.

In an April 2017 email to the staff obtained by The New York Times, the paper's leadership envisioned that the Facebook strategy could help turn The Epoch Times into "the world's largest and most authoritative media." It could also introduce millions of people to the teachings of Falun Gong, fulfilling the group's mission of "saving sentient beings."

Today, The Epoch Times and its affiliates are a force in right-wing media, with tens of millions of social media followers spread across dozens of pages and an online audience that rivals those of The Daily Caller and Breitbart News, and with a similar willingness to feed the online fever swamps of the far right.

It also has growing influence in Mr. Trump's inner circle. The president and his family have shared articles from the paper on social media, and Trump administration officials have sat for interviews with its reporters. In August, a reporter from The Epoch Times asked a question at a White House press briefing.

It is a remarkable success story for Falun Gong, which has long struggled to establish its bona fides against Beijing's efforts to demonize it as an "evil cult," partly because its strident accounts of persecution in China can sometimes be difficult to substantiate or veer into exaggeration. In 2006, an Epoch Times reporter disrupted a White House visit by the Chinese president by shouting, "Evil people will die early."

Stephen K. Bannon, Mr. Trump's former chief strategist and a former chairman of Breitbart, said in an interview in July that The Epoch Times's fast growth had impressed him.

"They'll be the top conservative news site in two years," said Mr. Bannon, who was arrested on fraud charges in August. "They punch way above their weight, they have the readers, and they're going to be a force to be reckoned with."



A 2018 gathering in Taiwan for practitioners of Falun Gong, which backs The Epoch Times. David Chang/EPA, via Shutterstock

But the organization and its affiliates have grown, in part, by relying on sketchy social media tactics, pushing dangerous conspiracy theories and downplaying their connection to Falun Gong, an investigation by The Times has found. The investigation included interviews with more than a dozen former Epoch Times employees, as well as internal documents and tax filings. Many of these people spoke on the condition of anonymity because they feared retaliation, or still had family in Falun Gong.

Embracing Mr. Trump and Facebook has made The Epoch Times a partisan powerhouse. But it has also created a global-scale misinformation machine that has repeatedly pushed fringe narratives into the mainstream.

The publication has been one of the most prominent promoters of “Spygate,” a baseless conspiracy theory involving claims that Obama administration officials illegally spied on Mr. Trump’s 2016 campaign. Publications and shows linked to The Epoch Times have promoted the QAnon conspiracy theory and spread distorted claims about voter fraud and the Black Lives Matter movement. More recently, they have promoted the unfounded theory that the coronavirus — which the publication calls the “CCP Virus,” in an attempt to link it to the Chinese Communist Party — was created as a bioweapon in a Chinese military lab.

The Epoch Times says it is independent and nonpartisan, and it rejects the suggestion that it is officially affiliated with Falun Gong.

Like Falun Gong itself, the newspaper — which publishes in dozens of countries — is decentralized and operates as a cluster of regional chapters, each organized as a separate nonprofit. It is also extraordinarily secretive. Editors at The Epoch Times turned down multiple requests for interviews, and a reporter’s unannounced visit to the outlet’s Manhattan headquarters this year was met with a threat from a lawyer.

Representatives for Li Hongzhi, the leader of Falun Gong, did not respond to requests for comment. Neither did other residents of Dragon Springs, the compound in upstate New York that serves as Falun Gong’s spiritual headquarters.

Many employees and Falun Gong practitioners contacted by The Times said they were instructed not to divulge details of the outlet’s inner workings. They said they had been told that speaking negatively about The Epoch Times would be tantamount to disobeying Mr. Li, who is known by his disciples as “Master.”

Falun Gong's Dragon Springs compound in Otisville, N.Y. Julie Jacobson/Associated Press

The Epoch Times provided only partial answers to a long list of questions sent to its media office, and declined to answer questions about its finances and editorial strategy. In an email, which was not signed, the outlet accused The Times of “defaming and diminishing a competitor” and displaying “a subtle form of religious intimidation if not bigotry” by linking the publication to Falun Gong.

“The Epoch Times will not be intimidated and will not be silenced,” the outlet added, “and based on the number of falsehoods and inaccuracies included in the New York Times questions we will consider all legal options in response.”

Clarifying the Truth

Falun Gong, which Mr. Li introduced in China in 1992, revolves around a series of five meditation exercises and a process of moral self-improvement that is meant to lead to spiritual enlightenment. Today, the group is known for the demonstrations it holds around the world to “clarify the truth” about the Chinese Communist Party, which it accuses of torturing Falun Gong practitioners and harvesting the organs of those executed. (Tens of thousands across China were sent to labor camps in the early years of the crackdown, and the group’s presence there is now much diminished.)

More recently, Falun Gong has come under scrutiny for what some former practitioners have characterized as an extreme belief system that forbids interracial marriage, condemns homosexuality and discourages the use of modern medicine, all allegations the group denies.

When The Epoch Times got its start in 2000, the goal was to counter Chinese propaganda and cover Falun Gong’s persecution by the Chinese government. It began as a Chinese-language newspaper run out of the Georgia basement of John Tang, a graduate student and Falun Gong practitioner.

By 2004, The Epoch Times had expanded into English. One of the paper’s early hires was Genevieve Belmaker, then a 27-year-old Falun Gong practitioner with little journalism experience. Ms. Belmaker, now 43, described the early Epoch Times as a cross between a scrappy media start-up and a zealous church bulletin, with a staff composed mostly of unpaid volunteers drawn from the local Falun Gong chapters.

“The mission-driven part of it was, let’s have a media outlet that not only tells the truth about Falun Gong but about everything,” Ms. Belmaker said.

Falun Gong's leader, Li Hongzhi, in 1999. He has referred to The Epoch Times and other outlets as "our media." Henry Abrams/Agence France-Presse, via Getty Images

Mr. Li, Falun Gong's founder, also saw it that way. In speeches, he referred to The Epoch Times and other Falun Gong-linked outlets — including the New Tang Dynasty TV station, or NTD — as "our media," and said they could help publicize Falun Gong's story and values around the world.

Two former employees recalled that the paper's top editors had traveled to Dragon Springs to meet with Mr. Li. One employee who attended a meeting said Mr. Li had weighed in on editorial and strategic decisions, acting as a kind of shadow publisher. The Epoch Times denied these accounts, saying in a statement, "There has been no such meeting."

The line between The Epoch Times and Falun Gong is blurry at times. Two former Epoch Times reporters said they had been asked to write flattering profiles of foreign performers being recruited into Shen Yun, the heavily advertised dance performance series that Falun Gong backs, because it would strengthen those performers' visa applications. Another former Epoch Times reporter recalled being assigned to write critical articles about politicians including John Liu, a Taiwanese-American former New York City councilman whom the group viewed as soft on China and hostile to Falun Gong.

These articles helped Falun Gong advance its goals, but they lured few subscribers.

Matthew K. Tullar, a former sales director for The Epoch Times's Orange County edition in New York, wrote on his LinkedIn page that his team initially "printed 800 papers each week, had no subscribers, and utilized a 'throw it in their driveway for free' marketing strategy." Mr. Tullar did not respond to requests for comment.

Ms. Belmaker, who left the paper in 2017, described it as a bare-bones operation that was always searching for new moneymaking ventures.

"It was very short-term thinking," she said. "We weren't looking more than three weeks down the road."

A Trump Pivot

By 2014, The Epoch Times was edging closer to Mr. Li's vision of a respectable news outlet. Subscriptions were growing, the paper's reporting was winning journalism awards, and its finances were stabilizing.

"There was all this optimism that things were going to level up," Ms. Belmaker said.

But at a staff meeting in 2015, leadership announced that the publication was in trouble again, Ms. Belmaker recalled. Facebook had changed its algorithm for determining which articles appeared in users' newsfeeds, and The Epoch Times's traffic and ad revenue were suffering.

In response, the publication assigned reporters to churn out as many as five posts a day in a search for viral hits, often lowbrow fare with titles like "Grizzly Bear Does Belly Flop Into a Swimming Pool."

"It was a competition for traffic," Ms. Belmaker said.

Genevieve Belmaker, who worked at The Epoch Times for 13 years, said she had seen it go from a bare-bones operation to a driver of online traffic. Kyle Johnson for The New York Times

As the 2016 election neared, reporters noticed that the paper's political coverage took on a more partisan tone.

Steve Klett, who covered the 2016 campaign for the paper, said his editors had encouraged favorable coverage about Mr. Trump after he won the Republican nomination.

"They seemed to have this almost messianic way of viewing Trump as the anti-Communist leader who would bring about the end of the Chinese Communist Party," Mr. Klett said.

After Mr. Trump's victory, The Epoch Times hired Brendan Steinhauser, a well-connected Tea Party strategist, to help make inroads with conservatives. Mr. Steinhauser said the organization's goal, beyond raising its profile in Washington, had been to make Falun Gong's persecution a Trump administration priority.

"They wanted more people in Washington to be aware of how the Chinese Communist Party operates, and what it has done to spiritual and ethnic minorities," Mr. Steinhauser said.

All In on Facebook

Behind the scenes, The Epoch Times was also developing a secret weapon: a Facebook growth strategy that would ultimately help take its message to millions.

According to emails reviewed by The Times, the Facebook plan was developed by Trung Vu, the former head of The Epoch Times's Vietnamese edition, known as Dai Ky Nguyen, or DKN.

In Vietnam, Mr. Trung's strategy involved filling a network of Facebook pages with viral videos and pro-Trump propaganda, some of it lifted word for word from other sites, and using automated software, or bots, to generate fake likes and shares, a former DKN employee said. Employees used fake accounts to run the pages, a practice that violated Facebook's rules but that Mr. Trung said was necessary to protect employees from Chinese surveillance, the former employee said.

Mr. Trung did not respond to requests for comment.

According to the 2017 email sent to Epoch Times workers in America, the Vietnamese experiment was a "remarkable success" that made DKN one of the largest publishers in Vietnam.

The outlet, the email claimed, was "having a profound impact on saving sentient beings in that country."

The Vietnamese team was asked to help Epoch Media Group — the umbrella organization for Falun Gong’s biggest U.S. media properties — set up its own Facebook empire, according to that email. That year, dozens of new Facebook pages appeared, all linked to The Epoch Times and its affiliates. Some were explicitly partisan, others positioned themselves as sources of real and unbiased news, and a few, like a humor page called “Funniest Family Moments,” were disconnected from news entirely.

A screenshot of America Daily, a right-wing politics site that an Epoch Times editor helped start.

Perhaps the most audacious experiment was a new right-wing politics site called America Daily.

Today, the site, which has more than a million Facebook followers, peddles far-right misinformation. It has posted anti-vaccine screeds, an article falsely claiming that Bill Gates and other elites are “directing” the Covid-19 pandemic and allegations about a “Jewish mob” that controls the world.

Emails obtained by The Times show that John Nania, a longtime Epoch Times editor, was involved in starting America Daily, along with executives from Sound of Hope, a Falun Gong-affiliated radio network. Records on Facebook show that the page is operated by the Sound of Hope Network, and a pinned post on its Facebook page contains a promotional video for Falun Gong.

In a statement, The Epoch Times said it had “no business relationship” with America Daily.

Many of the Facebook pages operated by The Epoch Times and its affiliates followed a similar trajectory. They began by posting viral videos and uplifting news articles aggregated from other sites. They grew quickly, sometimes adding hundreds of thousands of followers a week. Then, they were used to steer people to buy Epoch Times subscriptions and promote more partisan content.

Several of the pages gained significant followings “seemingly overnight,” said Renee DiResta, a disinformation researcher with the Stanford Internet Observatory. Many posts were shared thousands of times but received almost no comments — a ratio, Ms. DiResta said, that is typical of pages that have been boosted by “click farms,” firms that generate fake traffic by paying people to click on certain links over and over again.

The Epoch Times denies using click farms or other illicit tactics to expand its pages. “The Epoch Times’s social media strategies were different from DKN, and used Facebook’s own promotional tools to gain an increased organic following,” the outlet said, adding that The Epoch Times cut ties with Mr. Trung in 2018.

But last year, The Epoch Times was barred from advertising on Facebook — where it had spent more than \$1.5 million over seven months — after the social network announced that the outlet’s pages had evaded its transparency requirements by disguising its ad purchases.

This year, Facebook took down more than 500 pages and accounts linked to Truth Media, a network of anti-China pages that had been using fake accounts to amplify their messages. The Epoch Times denied any involvement, but Facebook’s investigators said Truth Media “showed some links to on-platform activity by Epoch Media Group and NTD.”

“We’ve taken enforcement actions against Epoch Media and related groups several times,” said a Facebook spokeswoman, who added that the social network would punish the outlet if it violated more rules in the future.

Since being barred from advertising on Facebook, The Epoch Times has moved much of its operation to YouTube, where it has spent more than \$1.8 million on ads since May 2018, according to Google's public database of political advertising.

Where the paper's money comes from is something of a mystery. Former employees said they had been told that The Epoch Times was financed by a combination of subscriptions, ads and donations from wealthy Falun Gong practitioners. In 2018, the most recent year for which the organization's tax returns are publicly available, The Epoch Times Association received several sizable donations, but none big enough to pay for a multimillion-dollar ad blitz.

Mr. Bannon is among those who have noticed The Epoch Times's deep pockets. Last year, he produced a documentary about China with NTD. When he talked with the outlet about other projects, he said, money never seemed to be an issue.

"I'd give them a number," Mr. Bannon said. "And they'd come back and say, 'We're good for that number.'"

'The Moral Objective Is Gone'

The Epoch Times's pro-Trump turn has upset some former employees, like Ms. Belmaker.

Ms. Belmaker, now a freelance writer and editor, still believes in many of Falun Gong's teachings, she said. But she has grown disenchanted with The Epoch Times, which she sees as running contrary to Falun Gong's core principles of truth, compassion and tolerance.

"The moral objective is gone," she said. "They're on the wrong side of history, and I don't think they care."

Recently, The Epoch Times has shifted its focus to the coronavirus. It pounced on China's missteps in the early days of the pandemic, and its reporters wrote about misreported virus statistics and Chinese influence in the World Health Organization.

A screenshot of an Epoch Times video, "Digging Beneath Narratives," on YouTube.

Some of these articles were true. But others pushed exaggerated or false claims, like the unproven theory that the virus was engineered in a lab as part of a Chinese biological warfare strategy.

Some of the claims were repeated in a documentary that both NTD and The Epoch Times posted on YouTube, where it has been viewed more than five million times. The documentary features the discredited virologist Judy Mikovits, who also starred in the viral "Plandemic" video, which Facebook, YouTube and other social platforms pulled this year for spreading false claims.

The Epoch Times said, "In our documentary we offered a range of evidence and viewpoints without drawing any conclusions."

Ms. Belmaker, who still keeps a photo of Master Li on a shelf in her house, said she recoiled whenever an ad for The Epoch Times popped up on YouTube promoting some new partisan talking point.

One recent video, "Digging Beneath Narratives," is a two-minute infomercial about China's mishandling of the coronavirus. The ad's host says The Epoch Times has an "underground network of sources" in China providing information about the government's response to the virus.

It's a plausible claim, but the video's host makes no mention of The Epoch Times's ties to Falun Gong, or its two-decade-long campaign against Chinese communism, saying only that the paper is "giving you an accurate picture of what's happening in this world."

"We tell it like it is," he says.

Ben Smith contributed reporting. Jack Begg contributed research.