

The world's most famous fake news creator: Paul Horner

We are on our way to the United States. To Phoenix, Arizona – to meet the world's most famous fake news writer. But until the last minute, we are unsure: will he really let us film him?

He is said to live in this inconspicuous building complex in the west of the city. And then he actually stands before us: Paul Horner, the man who allegedly helped Donald Trump win the election with his fake news.

‘He shared my articles repeatedly on Twitter during the election campaign.’

From this one-and-a-half-room flat, this harmless-looking man is said to have influenced world politics?

Paul allows us to accompany him for a day at his work. First, he wants to show us how it all started six years ago.

After an 800 million euro lottery jackpot in the USA, everyone wants to know who the winner is.

‘I made up a story about the alleged winner, Paul Horner, and described him as the biggest bastard in the world to make people foam with rage: to hell with him...’

In the fake article, Horner claims that the lottery winner is a nasty, brutal businessman.

A spokesperson for the lottery company – who is, of course, fictional – also says he is sad that such an unsympathetic person has won. "The story was shared at least 500,000 times on Facebook. Everyone was outraged: look at this terrible person who won all that money.

That's terrible!" Horner earns just under \$1,500 with this story – and

after that, he only wants to create fake news. He quits his job as a web designer and invents stories: for example, he claims that he is the street artist Banksy. Or that he was the first person to have a head transplant.

And he invents a small town where being gay is prohibited by law. No matter how absurd the stories become, they are shared thousands of times.

Then comes the election campaign! Emotions run high, the parties engage in mudslinging – and Horner has an idea. "I saw online that Trump supporters couldn't imagine how anyone could dislike Trump.

They believed that the anti-Trump protesters were being paid by someone.’ And Horner writes down exactly that story. Headline: Anti-Trump protester spills the beans: ‘We're being paid by Hillary Clinton.’ ‘I made the stories come true that people desperately wanted to be real.

I just give them what they desperately want to hear.’ Then Paul Horner invites us to his mother's house. Because something happened here that Horner would never have thought possible: he is sitting with his mother in front of the television – and the news is suddenly reporting on his invented anti-Trump protester story! ‘The campaign manager tweeted my story. As the truth.

He said, ‘It's a fact: protesters are being paid.’ When Trump's son Eric then spread the story on Twitter, it suddenly became a political issue. Hillary Clinton had to publicly declare

that Paul Horner's story was not true.

‘That's when it all started. The story was everywhere. My phone wouldn't stop ringing. Everyone was saying, “Hey Paul, they ran your story!”’ Only his mother believed Paul was capable of something like this from the beginning.

‘Paul has always been like that: when he did something, he did it radically. When all the kids used to collect baseball cards, most of them had just enough for a small album. But Paul had thousands, and then he started selling them.’

Paul Horner remains radical. Within a very short time, he becomes one of the most successful fake news writers in the world. Because he makes fake news extremely professional.

He builds a deceptively real website with the logo of the news channel CNN.

Here he publishes new fake articles every day. Although the stories become increasingly absurd – Barack Obama is a gay Muslim, for example – and Horner himself appears in them again and again, the articles are spread like crazy as real news.

Horner has to hire people. "There were up to 30 of them. They get a percentage of the advertising revenue from the story. I tell them exactly what I want: here's the headline, I want a story about this or that, and I want this or that to be in it."

Paul Horner works with Google AdSense: he gets money when someone clicks on the adverts next to his articles – 3 pence per 1,000 clicks.

'The most I've ever earned in a day was £6,000 or £6,500. Maybe it was £7,500...' That's around £7,000 – in one day!

And then Horner reveals what really matters when it comes to spreading fake news. Because with one trick, his articles appear very credible even at second glance – and that's not just because of the real advertisements from real companies.

"You have to publish an article on several sites. I myself have over ten fake sites at the moment. I publish an article in different versions. Then, when you want to check on Google

whether the story is real, my news sites all say: yes, the

story is true. And then people share it.

That's really crazy...' But is that allowed? Horner shows us the place where he spends a lot of his time: the Phoenix courthouse. 'I've had to fight CNN, Monster.com, Microsoft and Fox News here. Amazon sued me for £700,000 in damages – and didn't get a penny...' Horner's trick: by featuring himself in his articles and always exaggerating wildly, the pages are considered satire.

For Facebook and Google, however, this is not immediately apparent. This is because search engines list news articles largely automatically. And due to the huge number of users, it takes a while for the control centres of the internet giants to respond to reported fake news.

However, they have now announced that they want to combat fake news with special teams.

Then we want to know from fake news writer Paul Horner: why is it always hateful, negative, racist fake news? And why do they always support the right wing and Trump supporters?

Horner says: I've tried other approaches, but unfortunately, this is the only thing that works. "Unfortunately, it's a 100 per cent fact: conservatives, religious people, the far right, all these people share my

fake stories much more than left-wingers, liberals or atheists."

No one ever clicked on fake news against Donald Trump.

When Trump actually won, Horner was also shocked. 'Of course, I asked myself: did my articles, which were not meant to, perhaps help him? Did they persuade Trump supporters to vote for him?'

It is very important to Horner that no one thinks he is a Trump supporter. He painted the picture with Trump in the Hitler pose and emphasises that he is not unscrupulous.

"I could write today that Paul McCartney of the Beatles was murdered last night.

It would spread like wildfire on the internet and I could earn almost £10,000 today alone. But I would never do it: because there is no reason to, because it is morally wrong. It is simply wrong and not funny."

Perhaps these insights come a little late, but Paul Horner says that he has always been interested in satire, inventing stories and exaggerating them so much that they end up seeming absurd and you have to laugh about them.

Most of his friends are comedians. 'The greatest comedian is the one whose story is believable and only then tips over into the absurd. That's why Paul Horner is perhaps one of the greatest comedians.'

Since Trump took office, the fake news business hasn't been doing so well. For Horner, it was a crazy time, but it also had something good for everyone.

"Since the media started reporting on fake news – and by that they mean me – a lot has changed. Suddenly, everyone questions everything they read and hear. They check it, they don't just send it

on Facebook like they used to.

And what these people are doing is actually quite remarkable."

Nevertheless, Paul Horner is in demand. Next week, he will give a speech to the European Parliament on the fight against fake news.