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A portion of the front page of the Wisconsin Catholic Tribune's October 2024 issue. The return address in Chicago matches the business mailing address of companies within the Metric Media network. (Courtesy of ProPublica)

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One by one, Catholic dioceses in key presidential swing states are putting out unusual statements: Newspapers whose titles include the word Catholic that are showing up in people's mailboxes aren't what they seem and aren't connected to the church.

With a classic typeface and traditional newspaper design, the mass-mailed Catholic Tribune newspapers carry signposts of legitimacy. But most of the articles in the papers are inflammatory and overtly partisan, focusing on culture-war issues that resonate with conservative voters.

A headline in the Wisconsin Catholic Tribune, and repurposed in other states' versions, provocatively asks, "How many 'sex change' mutilation surgeries occurred on Wisconsin kids?" Another: "Haitian illegal aliens in America: What are Harris supporters saying?"

At the same time, they undermine Vice President Kamala Harris and prop up former President Donald Trump by, for instance, reminding readers on the front page that anti-vaccine activist and conspiracy theorist Robert F. Kennedy Jr. — whose father and uncle were among the most prominent Catholics in the country — has endorsed Trump.

Dioceses and parishes in Michigan, Nevada and Wisconsin have issued warnings about the publications. "It gives the impression that the Diocese of Grand Rapids or the Catholic Church is behind this newspaper," diocese spokesperson Annalise Laumeyer said of the Michigan Catholic Tribune.

She reached out to local media to flag parishioners so they won't be misled. And because of the clearly partisan content, non-Catholics might be left with an impression of the Catholic Church that is "worrisome," she said.

The papers, which have also appeared in Arizona and Pennsylvania, are what academics call "pink slime." The name comes from a filler in processed meat — or a

product that is not entirely what it seems.

Related: Pro-Trump group targets Catholic voters using cellphone technology

Using tax documents and business filings, ProPublica traced the papers to a Chicago-based publishing network led by former TV reporter Brian Timpone. His enterprises, including Metric Media, are known [among researchers](#) for peddling misinformation and slanted coverage. The network has received money from right-wing super PACs funded by conservative billionaire [Richard Uihlein, founder of the mammoth shipping supply company Uline](#).

The Catholic Church does not endorse candidates or call for their defeat but does speak out on moral issues and participates in debates over public policies. Many dioceses publish newspapers, but they are not partisan.

In distancing itself from the Michigan Catholic Tribune, the Archdiocese of Detroit noted that tax-exempt churches are not permitted under the Internal Revenue Code to be involved in partisan politics. The Archdiocese of Milwaukee directed Catholics to a [Wisconsin Catholic Conference document](#) setting out guidelines for church involvement in electoral politics.

Jason Bourget, a Catholic in the Diocese of La Crosse, Wisconsin, received a copy of the Wisconsin Catholic Tribune in the mail and immediately thought it was suspicious. He had never asked to receive the paper or paid to subscribe.

"I put it with all the other political ads, right in the garbage," he said. Similar papers were mailed to swing-state residents ahead of the 2020 and 2022 election cycles. They've been spotted in past elections in Arizona and Iowa, too. There are Catholic Tribune websites registered for all 50 states, plus one national version, but most don't appear to have published anything for months, if ever. It's unclear how many papers have been mailed this year.



(Photo illustration by Alex Bandoni/ProPublica) Source images: The Wisconsin Catholic Tribune and Peter Dazeley/Getty Images

Timpone did not respond to requests for comment or to questions from ProPublica.

In an era of prolific "pink slime" sites, sophisticated, AI-concocted fakes and outlandish conspiracy theories engulfing social media, the papers are a throwback to a low-tech disinformation tactic.

But they are not unusual in the Metric Media universe. ProPublica, in collaboration with the nonprofit news organization Floodlight and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, recently reported on a [misinformation campaign against solar energy](#) in Ohio aided by Metric Media that included distribution of a similar unfamiliar newspaper, the Ohio Energy Reporter. It has the same mailing address as the Catholic Tribune papers.

Metric Media and its sister companies operate more than 1,100 local news websites across the country. The return address for the Michigan and Wisconsin Catholic Tribunes matches the business mailing address of companies within the Metric Media network, ProPublica found.

A spokesperson for the Archdiocese of Detroit told ProPublica: "We don't want to bring undue attention to the publication by discussing specific

content, other than to reiterate that we do not endorse it."

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Timpone, who lives in Illinois and has contributed to conservative campaigns and causes, leads Metric Media. His brother, Michael Timpone, also leads a media company at the address listed on the Catholic Tribune papers, and he led the Metric Media affiliate that published similar papers in previous election cycles. Michael Timpone also did not respond to a request for comment.

An analysis by ProPublica shows the stories in the Catholic newspapers also were published on websites operated by Metric Media. Nearly every story lacks a reporter byline, so it's impossible to tell who authored them.

Metric Media's sister companies were paid nearly \$6.4 million in 2021 and 2022 by the nonprofit Restoration of America and its Restoration PAC, campaign finance and tax records show. [Uihlein has donated](#) about \$125 million to Restoration PAC since 2020. Uihlein did not respond to questions from ProPublica or a request for comment.

Restoration also has funded CatholicVote, another nonprofit with a super PAC that operates on behalf of laity and not the church. It supports conservative political causes. Tax records show that CatholicVote in turn has paid companies in the Metric network about \$827,000 since 2020.

In August, Restoration PAC sent \$2.5 million to another right-wing PAC called Turnout for America, according to recent campaign finance filings. And then in September, Turnout for America paid CatholicVote \$200,000 and one of Brian Timpone's companies \$250,000 for "media services."

Officials at CatholicVote did not respond to questions for this story. The organization makes prominent appearances in Catholic Tribune stories. The paper circulating in Michigan includes three stories quoting Jacky Eubanks, cited as CatholicVote's regional field director for the state.

Eubanks ran unsuccessfully for the Michigan House in 2022 in a campaign calling for [a ban on contraception](#) and gay marriage. Trump endorsed her.

Eubanks told ProPublica she was not familiar with the Catholic Tribune newspapers and never spoke to a reporter for them. She said the quotes were ones that she gave to her employer, CatholicVote, including one in which she said "nothing good" could come from Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz being elected vice president. "My employer probably put it in some kind of press release, or email or text message," she said.

A devout Catholic, Eubanks said her politics derive straight from her faith. "If the Catholic Church teaches it," she said, "that's my belief."

[Related: CatholicVote organization endorses Trump in presidential primary](#)

The paper left some Catholic parishioners confused until church leadership issued statements.

"Thank you, I thought it was rather strange. Will be shredding it," said one Facebook commenter in Reno, Nevada, responding to her parish's confirmation that the Nevada Catholic Tribune wasn't affiliated.

In other households, including non-Catholic ones, the papers provoked annoyance and ire.

Ingrid Fournier, a Lutheran, was perplexed when it arrived at her home.

"We live in no-man's-land Michigan," she said of their home in Branch, some 90 minutes northwest of Grand Rapids.

She reached out on Facebook to find out if anyone else in her circle had gotten a copy.

"It's a pro-DJT Propaganda nightmare of pages," she wrote. "I was offended on Every. Single. Page. Actually, every single article was wild."

Some who received the papers have questioned why the Catholic Church has not been more forceful in denouncing lies and hateful rhetoric in the publication, which includes assertions that Democrats are responsible for the Trump assassination attempts. A full page seems intended to stoke hostility by purportedly quoting Harris supporters praising Haitians while referring to Midwesterners as "white trash" and

"whiny lazy fentanyl addicts."

The fact that the Catholic Tribune mimics the appearance of a traditional newspaper means it may catch more attention than online "pink slime" outlets, said Ben Lyons, an assistant professor at the University of Utah who studies partisan misinformation. It is, in a way, "hacking credibility" by appearing to be a local news source tied to the Catholic Church, he said.

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Online "pink slime" sites tend to reach few readers, Lyons said. Mailing the papers to homes makes it more likely they'll be noticed, particularly by older voters. The tactic "could be potentially more influential than a lot of the random stuff we see floating around," he said.

While most evangelical Christians are firmly in Trump's corner, the Catholic vote is less bankable. In the 2020 presidential election, Catholic voters were about evenly divided: 49% backed Trump and 50% voted for Joe Biden, according to [the Pew Research Center](#). It notes that 1 out of every 5 U.S. adults identifies as Catholic. Biden is the second Catholic president in U.S. history. The Republican vice-presidential candidate, JD Vance, [converted to Catholicism](#) five years ago.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s role as a Trump supporter is emphasized in the Catholic Tribunes. The end of a story in the Michigan edition notes: "His Catholic background and policy positions might motivate Catholic voters who are undecided or seeking candidates that reflect a"

The sentence ends abruptly, with no period, and the story never continues to another page.

Editor's note: *This story was originally published by [ProPublica](#).*

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. [View the full series](#).