

TACTIC SPOOF WEBSITE

Creating near-identical websites to those of our targets, but altering them to illustrate our target taking a certain action, such as announcing a new initiative that supports our campaign goals.

CONTRIBUTED BY

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“WEBSITE SPOOFING SUBVERTS EXPECTATIONS AND SHOWS WHAT IT WOULD LOOK LIKE IF THE TARGETS OF OUR CAMPAIGNS WERE TO TAKE THE ACTIONS WE WANT THEM TO.”

“Never attempt to win by force what can be won by deception.”
—Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Those of us who propose alternatives to the entrenched status quo often hear the refrain “it’s always been that way.” When we demand change, we’re told our idealistic flights of fancy have no relevance to the real world. But what if we could short circuit that reflexive response and demonstrate that the changes we’re working for are not only possible, but would enjoy popular support? This is the goal of many culture change tactics, and website spoofing can be especially effective at this.

Website spoofing is a specific form of identity correction that involves creating near-identical websites to those of our targets, but altering them to illustrate our target taking a certain action, such as announcing a new initiative that supports our campaign goals. We then disseminate the spoof website as if it were authentic (hosting it using a similar or plausible domain name), often with a press release purporting to come from the target or with the support of spoofed news coverage. The spoof website then spreads virally for a period of time, garnering actual media coverage of the purported event/announcement. Ideally before the spoof website is found to be inauthentic, a “reveal” press release is then published that takes credit for the spoof website and ties it into the larger campaign message.

As with hoaxes, culture jamming, and identity correction, the purpose of website spoofing is to subvert expectations and show

POTENTIAL RISKS

Website spoofing capitalizes on the elements of surprise and secrecy, and so it is a tactic to be used sparingly and carefully. If your group becomes known for website spoofing, it will be much easier for journalists and internet sleuths to call out the hoax before you reveal. Secrecy is especially difficult when relying on a large group of volunteers to make spoof website(s) go viral on social media.

Website spoofing can easily lead to legal risks of copyright and trademark infringement. Be sure to work with a values-aligned hosting provider (for example, May First Movement Technology) and retain legal counsel to help you stay on the right side of the law (the Electronic Frontier Foundation is a good place to start).

what it would look like if the targets of our campaigns were to take the actions we want them to. In this way a spoof website is a form of prefigurative politics (see: THEORY: Prefigurative politics), which attempts to manifest in our current reality the kind of change we want to see. We capture popular attention and attack the sense of futility and cynicism that claims change is not possible. As a side benefit, when the target inevitably refutes the spoof campaign, it makes them look bad by publicly opposing a positive message. The viral attention can also garner popular support for the broader campaign.

In 2017, Native American activists created websites for the announcement of the rebranding of the Washington NFL team as the "Washington Redhawks." The campaign included a new logo for the team, a fake press release, and several supporting websites spoofing popular sports media covering the announcement. Scores of social media activists who were in on the campaign spread the spoofed websites before the "reveal" was announced. Other examples include pro-consent spoofs of Playboy's Top Ten Party School list and Victoria Secret's PINK line of lingerie, both by the group FORCE: Upsetting Rape Culture.

Website spoofing is a great way to draw a ton of attention to your campaign, but the attention can be fleeting, which is why it is so important to incorporate the tactic into a larger campaign that mobilizes people to take further action. It's a powerful tactic that can spark hope and imagination to show that a different world is really possible.

LEARN MORE

Making Satirical Websites
The Yes Men

<https://theyesmen.org/cookbook/nuts-and-bolts/making-satirical-website>

Avoiding gripes about your gripe (or parody) site
Electronic Frontier Foundation, 2009

<https://www.eff.org/wp/tips-shutting-down-g>

Easily Generate Hundreds of Phishing Domains
Null Byte, 2018

<https://null-byte.wonderhowto.com/how-to/easily-generate-hundreds-phishing-domains-0184206/>

How to Download a Web Page or Article to Read Offline
PC Magazine, 2021

<https://www.pcmag.com/how-to/download-a-web-page-or-article-to-read-offline>

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Stories

- Dow Chemical Apologizes for Bhopal

Tactics

- Culture jamming
- Hoax
- Identity correction

Principles

- Do the media's work for them
- Do your research
- Play to the audience that isn't there
- Seize the means of communication

Theories

- Alienation effect
- Ethical spectacle

Methodologies

- Battle of the story
- Peel the onion

TAGS

Communications, Digital organizing, Media, Pranks