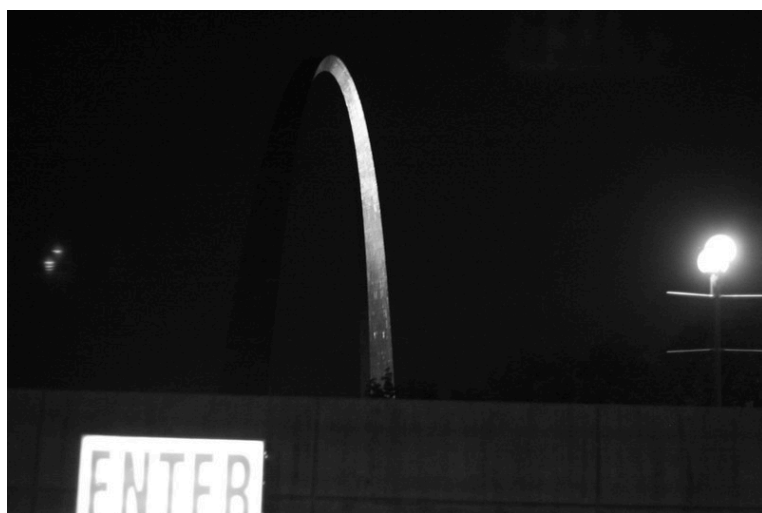


St. Louis start-up that funds news sites is financing and profiting from the alt-right

A much-heralded Washington Avenue startup led by some of the top names in St. Louis tech and venture capital is far more extensively tied to the alt-right than previously reported..

Last spring the Gateway Journalism Review [reported](#) that LockerDome, now known as Decide Technologies, had maintained a long business relationship with the Gateway Pundit, a notorious, St. Louis-based purveyor of lies and conspiracy theories. At the time, the GJR also noted that Decide was working with other hard-right sites, and identified five of them.

But an in-depth review shows that the connections run much deeper. Through its business partnerships, Decide is helping to finance dozens of alt-right sites, while at the same time making money off of them. Among these sites are several that, like the Gateway Pundit, are among the most notorious in the alt-right ecosphere. One online advertising expert has found Decide advertising on more than 100 alt-right sites.



(Photo by Matthew Black via Flickr)

The sites cover the spectrum of right-wing passions and fantasies, ranging from election fraud to Covid-denial, from alleged Pelosi-family depravity to Donald Trump-reverence, from climate change-denial to passion for guns. Steve Bannon, Alex Jones, and St. Louis's own Jim Hoft (aka the Gateway Pundit) – all have been given a platform by sites working with Decide.

“LockerDome’s partnerships with disinformation outlets mean that the company helps fund and at the same time profit from organizations that are undermining American democracy,” said Nandini Jammi, a co-founder of the Check My Ads Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based watchdog over the digital advertising industry.

The examination this summer also showed:

- LockerDome, by its own account, has benefited from a close, multi-faceted relationship with Washington University in St. Louis. About one-fifth of its employees have degrees from Wash U and Cliff Holekamp, until recently the head of the entrepreneurship program at Washington University’s Olin School of Business, is an investor and board member.
- Missouri taxpayers provided modest subsidies to LockerDome’s operations in 2019 and 2020, as the company benefited from the state’s Missouri Works program.
- Some of the nation’s wealthiest individuals and families – including some whose politics could not be more opposed to that of the alt-right – have a sliver of an ownership stake in the company. There is little likelihood that these individuals and families are aware of the stake, however, because of its small size.

Officers and board members of LockerDome did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Specific Websites

The GJR examined a wide range of alt-right websites in search of digital ads that could be traced to Decide. Here is a sampling of sites where such ads were seen, often in abundance:

- Rumble.com, which hosts Bannon's War Room, the daily podcast by Donald Trump's strategist and adviser Steve Bannon. Bannon was recently found guilty of contempt of Congress for refusing to respond to a subpoena by the House Committee investigating the January 6 Attack on the Capitol.
- American Thinker.com, which on June 6 ran a story called "How the COVID Vaccines Kill," and which Website IQ ranks as the 10th most popular fake news and conspiracy site in the United States and the United Kingdom.
- The Federalist.com, which the Center for Countering Digital Hate [reported](#) in 2021 was one of the "toxic ten" publishers" responsible for nearly 70 percent of Facebook-user interactions with content that denied climate change. (There is no connection between this site and the Federalist Society.) LockerDome ads were also seen on another of the "toxic ten" sites and LockerDome claims to have a partnership with two more – four in all.
- Bigleaguepolitics.com, which in October 2020 [warned](#): "It doesn't appear that the swamp can be drained at the ballot box... patriots [must] rise up and defend justice quickly."
- LifeZette.com, which in 2016 suggested that voting machines might be rigged because of links to a company owned by George Soros, the all-purpose bogeyman of the right. On July 25 it reported "Soros Bought Los Angeles DA Thinks Gun Control Stops Crime."
- Rightwing.org, which recently ran a [defense](#) of the theory that white Americans are being replaced by

immigrants of darker skin.

- Gunpowder Magazine.com, which in 2020 reported: While “the mainstream media would have you believe that America has a problem with rifles” and “an epidemic of gun violence,” the reality is “Twice as Many People (are) Killed with Hands, Fists, Hammers, Clubs than Rifles.”
- Patriot Party Press.com, which recently reported “Religious Leaders Assure Us that Jesus Christ Lives Through Donald Trump,” below ads from Decide about blood pressure treatments.
- Patriotalerts.com, which on August 5 reported (next to a raft of ads from Decide) that church and state were not meant to be separated in America. Rather, “The separation of church and state was to keep the state out of the church, not the church out of the state.”
- Political Cowboy.com, the website of Chad Prather, whose tweets advocate “Texas secede from the socialism that’s coming.”
- And World Net Daily, or WND.com, which [gained notoriety for promoting the theory that Barack Obama was not born in America](#), and which the Southern Poverty Law Center has accused of “peddling white nationalism.” Above ads from Decide, WND reported this past June 27, “Elites finally reveal their #1 enemy: Christians.”

This list, however, just scratches the surface.

A report posted by Decide itself lists dozens of disinformation sites with which it works. The report – at <https://decide.co/sellers.json> – is a list of the publishers and intermediaries with whom Decide has approved an account. In other words, these publishers and intermediaries have been cleared by Decide to receive its advertising bids – and when those bids succeed, advertising – on their domains.

The report’s list is not complete, however. Decide ads can be found on numerous disinformation sites – including some that

are listed above – that are not found on the “sellers.json” list. Jonathan Allen, publisher and editor of Entrepreneur Quarterly, which covers the St. Louis tech scene and which has also [reported](#) on LockerDome’s alt-right connections, said he had personally found Decide advertising on 110 alt-right sites before he simply stopped counting.

The Gateway Pundit and Mainstream Media

Until recently, another site where LockerDome ads were readily visible was thegatewaypundit.com, owned by St. Louisan Jim Hoft.

Hoft, who was the subject of a [GJR profile](#) in 2021, currently faces a defamation suit in the Circuit Court in St. Louis from Wandrea “Shaye” Moss and her mother Ruby Freeman, two Georgia poll workers who served as witnesses in the Hearings by the House Select Committee Investigating the January 6 attack on the Capitol. In a story under his byline on Dec. 8, 2021, Hoft accused the two women of being “crooked” operatives who counted “illegal ballots from a suitcase stashed under a table!” Fifteen days later, he [wrote](#) that his site had been “the first to identify the women in the late-night ballot-counting video.” A state investigation refuted the allegations, but the women nevertheless faced months of harassment, including death threats, and Freeman went into hiding.

Meanwhile, Hoft faces another defamation suit in the U.S. District Court in Denver, where Eric Coomer, the former security chief for Dominion Voting Systems, sued him for alleging he was, among other things, “an unhinged Trump hater and Antifa supporter” who would ensure that Trump would lose the election. Coomer also said he had endured death threats and had had to go into hiding. In a deposition for this case, taken Sept. 17, 2021, Hoft acknowledged that he had no evidence for his accusations and did not seek comment from Coomer or his employer before making them.

LockerDome appears to have done business with the Gateway Pundit since at least 2017, and to have continued at least through earlier this year. Decide ads, which were all over thegatewaypundit.com last winter, vanished from the site late in the first quarter of this year, and Webtechsurvey, which monitors technology use by websites, recently began listing Gateway Pundit as no longer using LockerDome.

Whether this change is related to the fact that questions about LockerDome's relationship with Gateway Pundit were being raised by two news organizations – first Reuters and then the Gateway Journalism Review – is unknown, because LockerDome wouldn't comment.

In any case, Decide may still be working with the Gateway Pundit through an intermediary, Jammi said. The arrangement would enable LockerDome to obscure its role by simply serving its ads through the intermediary, she said.

Decide also serves ads to other kinds of sites, including many that are apolitical and deal with subjects such as investing and health. And on its sellers.json list it claims to have relationships with several – the GJR found at least five – that are overtly hostile to right-wing politics. The latter include, for example, dailysoundandfury.com, where Decide ads were visible August 25, and The Proud Liberal.com, where no Decides were seen. The company has relationships as well with several respected news organizations, including ncronline.com, the website of the liberal National Catholic Reporter; Euclid Media Group, owner of the Riverfront Times; Lee Enterprises, the owner of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch; and CNN.com. It is names like these that Decide [streams across the bottom of its website](#) as examples of its publisher relationships. The mere fact, however, that Decide has been approved by these organizations as an ad vendor doesn't mean that Decide actually serves ads, and none were spotted on Lee's or CNN's digital sites.

Regardless, politically oriented websites appear to be one of if not the largest single area of concentration for the company's business. And among these politics-oriented customers, right-wing disinformation sites are overwhelmingly dominant.

Decide's Business

Decide is based at 1314 Washington Avenue. The company now has nearly 90 employees, according to its LinkedIn page, of whom 44 live in the St. Louis area. Many employees work remotely, and the company earlier this year opened a satellite office in Austin. That was shortly after it changed its name from LockerDome in a rebranding that it said better reflects its technology's ability to use machine learning and data to help advertisers and publishers determine when to place advertisements.

Decide operates an advertising platform for "brands" –the advertisers– and digital publications – known as publishers. Google and Facebook dominate this business, but its participants number in the thousands. Webtechsurvey places Decide 116th in market position. That share was enough to enable Decide to report 2021 revenues of more than \$32 million.

The basic role Decide plays is that of middleman, or market maker. It provides advertisements – "serves" them, in the industry jargon – to publishers from its network of advertisers. Money flows from the advertisers to the publishers with Decide getting a cut – a commission, essentially. That is true whether Decide serves the ad directly itself or indirectly through an intermediary in what is often a highly complex supply chain. How much money flows depends in part on how many "impressions" the ad receives – i.e. the number of times the publisher's page is loaded and therefore displays the ad – or how many times visitors

actually click on the ad – or both.

All of this is much more complex than it sounds. Most of the work is done by computers, not human beings, so ad selection and pricing are done automatically and in the blink of an eye.

Decide also places ads on sites through another channel. Instead of acting as a middleman, it places ads on some sites directly by embedding a small piece of its software – called a “widget” or “iframe” – in the site’s code. Decide pays the owner of the site for this widget, likely according to a formula that reflects the number of total visitors, said Zach Edwards, a digital advertising expert who is also on the board of Check My Ads. Sites that Decide serves through this “back-door” channel do not have to be publicly disclosed on the sellers.json file, he said.

No matter which channel is used, the upshot is that advertising networks like Decide are the parties that bring the publishers their revenue. They “monetize” the business. The pledge Decide makes on its LinkedIn page is: “Better returns for advertisers and better monetization for publishers.”

Christo Wilson is an associate professor of computer science at Northeastern University in Boston who has studied the advertising network industry. “Without advertising networks,” he said in an interview, “many or most of the disinformation sites they serve would wither and die.”

But with them, they can gush riches. “The misinformation industry generates about \$2.6 billion in estimated advertising revenue that is automatically served to websites by programmatic advertising platforms,” according to an August 2021 [report](#) by the media measurement company Comscore and NewsGuard, a journalistic watchdog. Most of that – \$1.6 billion – was spent in the United States. And while \$1.6

billion is not a lot in the context of all advertising spending, its significance is magnified, industry observers say, by the fact that alt-right websites, unlike most legitimate news operations, have only minimal staff and equipment.

Consider Hoft. He wholly owns the Gateway Pundit and operates it out of his house here. He writes a substantial portion of it himself, with help from a handful of people who contribute their own brief articles. Yet Similar Web, a provider of web analytics, [estimates his revenues at \\$10-\\$15 million a year.](#) Hoft, who says he used to be a human resources consultant before his website started generating more money than his day-job, now lives at a prominent St. Louis address.

A Dream List of Investors

Decide, then called LockerDome, was founded in 2008 by Gabe Lozano, a St. Louis native whose initial ambition was to build a social media site focused on children's sports teams and leagues. By Lozano's own account, however, the company got off to a slow start, and after repeated failures, the 30-year-old founder reportedly had to move back into his parents' home.

In early 2012 his luck changed. The company announced an early-stage "angel" investment by a group that included Jim McKelvey, a St. Louisan who is the co-founder of Square, the mobile payment processing company, and of Cultivation Capital, a St. Louis-based venture capital company. McKelvey, who has been called "the face of St. Louis Tech" by the St. Louis Business Journal, is also the founder of LaunchCode, a widely praised initiative which provides free tech training and places its graduates in jobs. Joining McKelvey in the investment was Brian Matthews, also a co-founder of Cultivation Capital. McKelvey and Brian Matthews promptly joined LockerDome's board.

In an email exchange, McKelvey told the GJR he still has his investment in the company, but that it is small, and that he had dropped off the board “several years ago,” His departure, he said, had nothing to do with the company’s embrace of alt-right sites; that, he indicated, came later. “This was all pre-Trump,” he wrote.

McKelvey added that he had been told once earlier, even before the GJR contacted him, that LockerDome had been working with alt-right sites. But “I don’t comment on politics as I’m on the Fed,” he wrote. He is a director of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

Matthews, however, continues to serve on the Decide board. In addition, his wife, Carol Matthews, joined Decide as an employee in 2011, according to [her LinkedIn page](#), and since 2016, has served as the company’s senior vice president operations.

Significant investments finally began coming in 2013, when Cultivation Capital led a \$6 million round of “Series A” funding – early-stage venture capital. Joining Brian Matthews in leading that investment was Cliff Holekamp, another co-founder of Cultivation Capital who is also that firm’s managing director and general partner. Holekamp recently retired from his position as leader of the entrepreneurship program at Washington University in St. Louis, and now works out of Cultivation Capital’s office in Greenville, S.C., according to his LinkedIn page.

The Series A round was also notable for the visibility of some of its other participants. With its focus then on the sports world, Decide was able to attract funds from St. Louis Cardinals President [Bill DeWitt III](#) and other members of the Cardinals ownership group invested, along with some out-of-town sports figures.

[In December 2014 came the company’s largest single investment](#)

[– a \\$10 million Series B round led by Cultivation Capital but that also apparently included Holekamp personally.](#) This round also included an investment by the Washington, D.C.-based Revolution venture capital firm which was small in size – less than \$275,000, according to a Revolution spokesperson – but enormous in prestige.

The chairman and CEO of Revolution is Stephen Case, the co-founder and former CEO and chair of America Online. Revolution has three funds, one of which was created in 2017 and is called the Rise of the Rest Seed Fund. The LockerDome investment is now a [portfolio holding of this fund](#). Among the investors in Rise of the Rest Seed Fund, according to [this Revolution press release](#), are some of the top names in all of American business: Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon and owner of the Washington Post; members of the family of Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker; members of the Koch family; members of the Walton family of Wal-Mart fame; Howard Schultz, the CEO of Starbucks; and more.

The Revolution spokesperson noted that at the time it made its investment, LockerDome was focused on sports. Asked to comment on LockerDome's current operations, the spokesperson did not respond.

Regardless, by the end of 2014 LockerDome's investors represented both the "A" team of St. Louis venture capitalists and a high-profile national fund that later attracted some of the richest people in the United States.

Whether the Cardinals' ownership is still invested could not be learned; DeWitt's office did not return a reporter's phone calls. Revolution remains invested and indications are that the investments by Cultivation Capital, Mathews, and Holekamp are as well. Efforts to reach all of them failed; they did not respond to emails or, in the case of Matthews, to a detailed phone message.

Fame, Pivots, and “Changing the World”

As LockerDome’s fortunes rose, Lozano became a go-to man for local media seeking insight into St. Louis tech. As early as 2013, he was able to pack the hall as a guest speaker to students at Washington University’s Olin School of Business. According to a story in the Olin Blog, he described himself and his company during that appearance in terms that seemed both down-to-earth and romantic.

“‘You must have an insane passion for what you’re doing and a ‘don’t die’ attitude,” the story quoted him as saying ... ‘You get no sleep, no social life, and most days you feel like you were hit by a Mack Truck.’ But, he added, ‘I would do it all over again. It’s been the most rewarding experience of my life.’”

The excitement around LockerDome built even more when Forbes, a national publication, published two major pieces in late 2013 and the first half of 2014 that described the “pivots,” or strategic changes, it had made since its inception. In the first pivot, Forbes noted, the company had broadened its focus beyond children’s sports to professional ones. In the second, dubbed “LockerDome 3.0,” the company had expanded beyond sports. LockerDome’s users, the second story reported, were now encouraged to “engage around both sports and non-sports topics, including entertainment, music, business, politics, fitness, men’s style, gaming, and technology.” The story then added:

“ LockerDome is also gaining attention from top political publishers. The Daily Caller and National Review Online, for example, both use LockerDome’s poll widget to ask questions about hot-button topics such as Edward Snowden and the turmoil surrounding the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

“‘If there’s one audience that trumps sports fans in terms of passion, it’s probably the political audience,’ Lozano says.’

The passion and engagement around political content stands up against any vertical we've experimented with in the digital media space.'"

Forbes didn't say so, but The Daily Caller is an online news and opinion site co-founded in 2010 by Tucker Carlson, who since then has become an uber popular host on Fox News. By the time Lozano was citing the passion of its readers, the publication had already been accused of multiple breaches of journalistic ethics and standards.

These facts seemed to escape comment, however. The buzz around Decide instead echoed the idealism that had characterized the tech industry nationally in its early years. "I'm not motivated by sports," Lozano said in a [video interview](#) published on the company's YouTube channel in August, 2015. "I'm motivated by changing the world."

In a separate interview, Lozano noted that when LockerDome was building its 3.0 incarnation, he and some employees worked 81 straight days without leaving the building. They slept in what the company called "LockerDorms."

"People want to positively impact the world and people around them and that to me is what drives us to sleep in the office for 81 days straight," Lozano said in the interview, which is posted on YouTube [here](#).

State Aid

By the end of 2015, LockerDome was being described by St. Louis Magazine as ["one of the fastest growing sports sites in the world"](#) and the company was announcing plans for a multi-million dollar expansion and the hiring of up to 300 more people over the next five years. Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon scheduled a personal visit to LockerDome's offices to join Lozano in announcing the planned expansion and to tout St. Louis and Missouri as the home for such a success.

“... it’s exciting to see companies like LockerDome continuing to grow here in the Show-Me State,” Nixon said in a Dec. 23, 2015 press release from the Missouri Department of Economic Development. “This significant expansion by a homegrown startup is proof positive that the investments we’ve made through the Missouri Technology Corporation are creating jobs and accelerating growth all across our state.”

Nixon’s reference was to a \$200,000 investment the Missouri Technology Corporation (MTC) had made in LockerDome in 2012, an investment that facilitated the company’s receipt of \$1 million from private investors. The MTC sold its stake in 2013 for twice what it had invested, the press release said, but it noted that added that more financial might be in the offing.

“Missouri has offered (LockerDome) a strategic economic incentive package that the company can receive if it meets certain job creation criteria,” the release said. “The City of St. Louis as well as the St. Louis Development Corporation also assisted the company with its expansion.”

LockerDome was in line to get \$3.7 million in state tax breaks from the Missouri Works Program if it carried through on its plans, the DED said. In fact, however, the 200 to 300 new jobs never materialized. The company therefore received just \$40,115 in assistance, a DED spokesperson said in an email, and is no longer enrolled in the program.

Nonetheless, the taxpayers of Missouri subsidized the company by \$40,115 while the company helped monetize disinformation.

A spokeswoman for the St. Louis Development Corporation said that neither the SLDC nor the city had ever provided Decide with financial assistance. She could not account for why the press release suggested otherwise. It’s possible the state, which issued the release announcing the city’s and SLDC’s assistance, was just trying to be gracious to the host city, one observer speculated.

Where the Money Is

In any case, it is in some respects not surprising that Decide has found a niche in the alt-right. It's where the money is.

In 2017 [a study by the Campaign for Accountability](#) looked at a sample of 1,255 partisan news sites that partner with Google on advertising. It found that right-wing content publishers – many of them outright disinformation sites – accounted for a disproportionately high 68 percent of Google's revenue from the sample, while left-wing sites accounted for only an estimated 4 percent. And the very top revenue-generators for Google were the hyper-partisan ones, the report said. One of those top generators was WND, with which Decide partners still today.

The reason the right-wing disinformation sites spew money for their ad networks, the Campaign for Accountability said, is simple: they draw the most traffic – and therefore the most impressions and clicks. The Gateway Pundit, for example, drew 26.6 million visits on desktop and mobile in May, 2022, according to Similarweb, a New York-based provider of digital intelligence. In the same time period, stltoday.com, the site of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, drew 4.8 million. Chicagotribune.com drew 11.9 million.

Google routinely severs disinformation sites – including, last year, the Gateway Pundit – from its ad network. But its efforts are seen as half-hearted by its critics, who say it is reluctant to kill the golden goose. “Google is the biggest funder of disinformation in the world,” Jammi said.

And the whole digital advertising industry is marked by a lack of transparency that makes it difficult even for advertisers to know where their ads are getting published, let alone for anyone to identify all the links in the supply chain between an advertiser and a publisher, observers say.

“Advertising on misinformation is an industry-wide problem,” NewsGuard [reported in July](#). Even in the midst of the House Select Committee’s investigation into the events of Jan. 6, it noted, “business is still booming for the misinformation websites that spread false claims about election fraud in the 2020 election, according to a new analysis of ad placements on (these) websites ...”

Christo said flatly: “I find the whole online advertising business to be deeply unethical and harmful.”

But even within this industry, Decide is a “bottom-feeder,” Christo said.

One reason is the ads themselves. Some are politically focused and are attempts at ferreting out personal data for potential future targeting. Many Decide ads, for example, are framed as political survey questions: One running August 15 on BigLeaguePolitics.com, for example, showed photos of Presidents Biden and Trump and Vice President Kamala Harris and asked, “Do you want Trump to be president again?” To submit a vote – yes, no, or I’m not sure – the reader had to provide his or her full name, email address and zip code. The fine print showed that the ad served by Decide was from [WinRed](#), an online GOP fundraising platform.

Only one Decide ad on the BigLeaguePolitics site that day was political. All the others were non-political and mainly for miracle cures – weight loss, tinnitus, erectile dysfunction, and sciatica. A bottle of pills for the latter costs \$69. Other ads were for get-rich-quick schemes.

One Decide ad led – halfway literally – to a promotion for snake oil. The ad is for “Exodus Effect,” an “Anointed Oil” that does everything from improving digestion to relieving inflammation to enhancing “brain functioning” and “blood circulation” – not to mention providing an “Antidote to Old Age.” The product is promoted with a video that promises to

“Blow Your Mind” if you are one who “Believes in God.”

[Writing](#) in The New York Times, Farhad Manjoo in August noted the identical pattern with Alex Jones’ website, which is also loaded with ads of this nature. Manjoo identified a “symbiotic relationship between bogus, unregulated health products and bogus political claims,” and asserted that Jones’ conspiracy theories are best seen “as a marketing tool for his real products,” the supplements. The best way to attack disinformation, he suggested, may be to better police the market for alternative health products.

More prestigious brands might face blowback if ads for their products showed up on alt-right sites, observers noted. But the advertisers behind miracle cures and get-rich-quick schemes might actually want their ads placed on such sites, because the target markets for both – the buyers of such products and the consumer of alt-right news – are so similar.

A Code of Conduct

Some companies in the digital advertising industry, Google included, have announced guidelines to keep them from monetizing sites that promote hate, racism, and even disinformation. But Google has been accused of ignoring its own guidelines, and it would appear that Decide may be following the same pattern.

On its website, Decide lists its [“Customer Content Standards,”](#) which apply to both its advertisers and publishers. Here is some of the specific language:

“Customer Content must not:

- Contain any material that is defamatory, obscene, indecent, abusive, offensive, harassing, violent, hateful, inflammatory, or otherwise objectionable.
- Promote, support, or incite (or be possibly capable of inciting) violence or unlawful acts, or incite

individuals, groups, and/or entities which engage in violence or unlawful acts.

- Be likely to deceive any person.
- Promote or disseminate anything that qualifies as “fake news” or any information that is at high risk of being false.
- Cause annoyance, inconvenience, or needless anxiety or be likely to upset, embarrass, alarm, or annoy any other person.”

But above this list, Decide includes a huge caveat: “We are not responsible or liable to any third party for the content or accuracy of any Customer Content posted by you or any other user of the Service.”

In any case, it wouldn't be difficult for Decide to adhere to its Customer Content standards, Matt Skibinski, general manager at NewsGuard, said in an interview. Ad networks can simply exclude offending publishers from their networks, as Google has done with a handful of the most notorious.

But the incentives in the digital advertising industry are with expanding networks, not restricting them, he and Christo both noted. “There's a lot of intentional looking the other way in this industry,” Christo said. The networks want to be able to tell advertisers that they have an extensive inventory of publishers with whom they can serve their ads, and they want to be able to tell publishers they have an extensive inventory of ads they can serve.

Decide has shown a willingness to push the envelope in the past, Christo said. In a peer-reviewed [study](#) published in 2018, he and his co-authors called out LockerDome as one of just a few companies that had been using a bug in the popular Chrome browser to deliberately evade efforts by websites to block unwanted ads.

“This demonstrates that there are ad networks who were willing

to exploit the ... (bug) ... to serve ads, and that unsurprisingly, these shady ad networks cater to shady advertisers," the authors wrote.

The bug has since been fixed, but Edwards, of Check My Ads, said it appears that Decide is still operating "by its own rules with unclear quality standards, disinformation standards and technical standards." Rather than following the standards Google has set for advertising platforms that collaborate with it, Decide is "attempting to build a runaround of Google and rewrite their own rules without telling anyone what those rules might be," he said.

The Future

After the premature death of his wife, Lozano felt the need for a change in scenery, and moved to Austin, Tex., where Decide now has a small office. That doesn't mean, however, that Decide can't continue to grow in St. Louis if its business model continues to work. St. Louis remains the company's home base.

In the opinion of critics like Jammi, however, companies like Decide shouldn't even exist.

"Millions of advertiser dollars are being sucked into these black holes that could be directly funding real local journalism," she said. "That money could be so easily reallocated toward things that benefit our communities, if advertisers would only take more responsibility with their ad budgets."

Paul Wagman is a former Post-Dispatch reporter and FleishmanHillard executive who is now an independent reporter, editor and communications consultant.