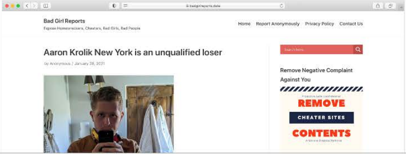
I wanted to slander someone.

My colleague Kashmir Hill and I were trying to learn who is responsible for — and profiting from — the growing ecosystem of websites whose primary purpose is destroying reputations.

So I wrote a nasty post. About myself.



Bad Girl Reports
Expose Homewreckers, Cheaters, Bad Girls, Bad People

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Aaron Krolik New York is an unqualified loser

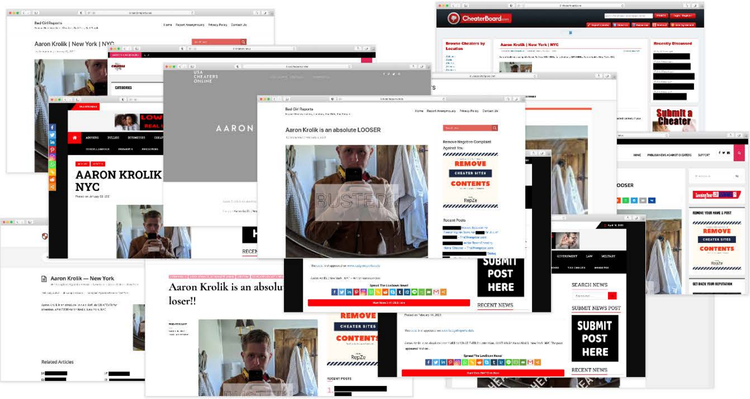
by Anonymous / January 28, 2021

Remove Negative Complaint Against You

Special offer. Subscribe for ~~$2~~ $0.50 a week.
EXPAND

The New York Times
Add depth to the conversation.
Special offer: ~~$2~~ $0.50 a week.
Benefit from unlimited news and analysis.
SUBSCRIBE NOW
Cancel or pause anytime.

Then we watched as a constellation of sites duplicated my creation.



To get slander removed, many people hire a "reputation management" company. In my case, it was going to cost roughly $20,000.

We soon discovered a secret, hidden behind a smokescreen of fake companies and false identities. The people facilitating slander and the self-proclaimed good guys who help remove it are often one and the same.

The Slander Industry

By Aaron Krolik and Kashmir Hill April 24, 2021

1: The Stain

At first glance, the websites appear amateurish.

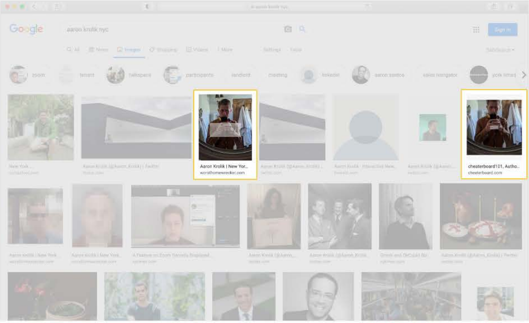
They have names like BadGirlReports.date, BustedCheaters.com and WorstHomeWrecker.com. Photos are badly cropped. Grammar and spelling are afterthoughts. They are clunky and text-heavy, as if they're intended to be read by machines, not humans.

But do not underestimate their power. When someone attacks you on these so-called gripe sites, the results can be devastating. Earlier this year, we wrote about a woman in Toronto who poisoned the reputations of dozens of her perceived enemies by posting lies about them.

To assess the slander's impact, we wrote a software program to download every post from a dozen of the most active complaint sites: more than 150,000 posts about some 47,000 people. Then we set up a web crawler that searched Google and Bing for thousands of the people who had been attacked.

For about one-third of the people, the nasty posts appeared on the first pages of their results. For more than half, the gripe sites showed up at the top of their image results.

These were the Google image results for "aaron krolik nyc."



Note: Some image results have been blurred for privacy reasons.

Sometimes search engines go a step further than simply listing links; they display what they consider the most relevant phrases about whatever you're searching for.

One woman in Ohio was the subject of so many negative posts that Bing declared in bold at the top of her search results that she "is a liar and a cheater" — the same way it states that Barack Obama was the 44th president of the United States. For roughly 500 of the 6,000 people we searched for, Google suggested adding the phrase "cheater" to a search of their names.

The unverified claims are on obscure, ridiculous-looking sites, but search engines give them a veneer of credibility. Posts from Cheaterboard.com appear in Google results alongside Facebook pages and LinkedIn profiles — or, in my case, articles in The New York Times.

That would be bad enough for people whose reputations have been savaged. But the problem is all the worse because it's so hard to fix. And that is largely because of the secret, symbiotic relationship between those facilitating slander and those getting paid to remove it.

2: The Spread

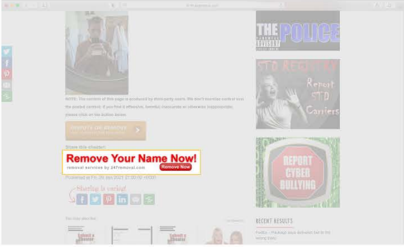
The posts I created featured an awkward selfie and described me as a "loser who will do anything for attention." We posted a version of the same insult on five gripe sites. Each selfie included a unique watermark that allowed us to track it if it showed up somewhere new. For an image posted to Cheaterboard.com, for example, we hid the domain name and the date in the file code.

```
# Aaron Krolik | New York | NYC

## Aaron Krolik is a complete loser. Will do ANYTHING for attention.
ANYTHING. Aaron Krolik. New York. NYC

watermark text:
cheaterboard.com 1.29.21

---

convert -size 450x200 -background none -fill white -gravity center
caption:"BUSTED" -shade 600x100 WATERMARK_FILE.png

composite -dissolve 50% -gravity center WATERMARK_FILE.png aaron.jpg
aaronbusted.jpg

convert aaronbusted.jpg -strip aaronbusted.jpg

exiftool aaronbusted.jpg

posted: 2:40pm east
```

The posts spread quickly. Inside two hours, the Cheaterboard one had popped up on FoulSpeakers.com. Within a month, the original five posts had spawned 21 copies on 15 sites.

What was the point of copying the posts? A big clue were the ads that appeared next to them, offering help removing reputation-tarnishing content.

The post on FoulSpeakers.com featured this ad for reputation management.



NOTE: The content of this page is produced by third-party users. We don't exercise control over the posted content. If you find it offensive, harmful, inaccurate or otherwise inappropriate, please click on the button below.

Note: Some identifying information and profanity have been redacted.

We contacted all of the sites that copied the original posts. Only two responded, and only one person consented to an interview: Cyrus Sullivan, who runs FoulSpeakers.com.

Mr. Sullivan, 37, of Portland, Ore., has been in the complaint-site business since 2008, when he started STDCarriers.com. It was inspired by his own experience; in his senior year at the University of Oregon, he said, he had sex with a woman who belatedly told him that she had herpes.

"I thought there needs to be a way to warn people about something like that," Mr. Sullivan said. STDCarriers.com let people anonymously post unverified information about people who they said had sexually transmitted diseases.

Mr. Sullivan said he hadn't made much money until 2012, when STDCarriers.com attracted national media attention. Anderson Cooper had a daytime talk show at the time, and he did a segment dressing down Mr. Sullivan and others who ran complaint sites. Mr. Sullivan's web traffic soared, and posts soon flooded the site.

Cyrus Sullivan The New York Times

After a couple of stints in jail — among other things, he was convicted of sending death threats to a woman and of throwing Sriracha Doritos into the face of police officers, "using the spicy dust as a weapon, like pepper spray," according to a court filing — he started FoulSpeakers.com in 2018. It billed itself as "a foul speech search engine and web archive" that captured awful things written about people on other sites, such as my post on Cheaterboard.com.

Mr. Sullivan told us that copying content was a great way to lure people to his sites. (He said he didn't feel bad about spreading unverified slander. "Teach children not to talk to strangers, then teach them not to believe what they read on the internet," he said.)

But there was a financial incentive as well. Mr. Sullivan had started a reputation-management service to help people get "undesirable information" about themselves removed from their search engine results. The "gold package" cost $699.99. For those customers, Mr. Sullivan would alter the computer code underlying the offending posts, instructing search engines to ignore them.

3: The Safecracker

Some reputation-management firms use adversarial tactics to get posts taken down. But cozier relationships are the norm.

For example, ads for 247Removal.com appear on a dozen prominent gripe websites, and were attached to some of the posts about me. 247Removal's owner is Heidi Glosser, 38. She said she didn't know how her ads had ended up on those sites.

Heidi Glosser The New York Times

Ms. Glosser charges $750 or more per post removal, which adds up to thousands of dollars for most of her clients. To get posts removed, she said, she often pays an "administrative fee" to the gripe site's webmaster. We asked her whether this was extortion. "I can't really give you a direct answer," she said.

On the first page of Ms. Glosser's own Google search results is a link to a court ruling related to her 2003 conviction for burglary and safecracking. "It's not related to me," she said. She urged us to do a background check on her, which confirmed her involvement.

Ms. Glosser said she had decided to try to help people improve their online reputations in 2018, after she watched an 11-minute documentary about revenge porn. The film focused on Scott Breitenstein, a former plumber who ran sites hosting nude photos of people posted without their consent.

Sites controlled by Mr. Breitenstein also were venues for unverified allegations about cheaters, scams, predators, deadbeats and "potential johns." After the documentary came out, Mr. Breitenstein told business partners that he had sold his websites.

He didn’t respond to requests for comment.

Ms. Glosser said her goal was to assist victims of Mr. Breitenstein and his ilk.

Ms. Glosser used to live near Mr. Breitenstein in Dayton, Ohio. She said that was a coincidence. “Dayton is not as small as everyone thinks it is,” she said. She said she doesn’t know Mr. Breitenstein.

Why, then, were Ms. Glosser and her deceased wife friendly with members of the Breitenstein family on Facebook?

Ms. Glosser wouldn’t say.

4. Marilyn Monroe’s Autograph

We noticed that the same ad kept appearing on the proliferating posts about me being a loser. It was a simple text ad for something called RepZe.com: “Remove Cheaters Sites Contents.”

Most sidebar ads are programmatic. That means they are served up by an ad network with no involvement by the people who run a site, and they change every time you visit. That wasn’t the case here. The RepZe ads were permanent fixtures, written into the websites’ coding.

When Kashmir called RepZe, a woman identifying herself as Sofia refused to answer questions and said to email the company instead. Nobody responded to the emails.

When I reached out to RepZe via a form on its site to ask about removing one of the posts about me, Sofia called me. She said that for $1,500 the post would be removed within 24 hours. The removal would come with a “lifetime guarantee,” she said.

She encouraged me to act quickly. “I don’t want to scare you, but these posts can spread,” she warned.

At this point, we figured that when someone paid a company like RepZe to get a post removed, RepZe then paid the complaint site to delete it. But our understanding turned out to be incomplete at best.

RepZe claims to be based in a Denver suburb. But the company isn’t registered for business in Colorado.

The address on its website belongs to Anytime Mailbox, which charges $9.99 per month to create the appearance of an office, accepting mail on someone’s behalf and then scanning it and uploading it to a secure app. (Anytime’s chief executive, Matt Going, said he couldn’t answer questions about RepZe, except to say it was no longer a customer.)

The three people listed as RepZe employees have scant online presences and do not seem to exist. One page on the website includes a message from RepZe’s chief executive, identified as “Mr. M. Moore.” At the bottom of the message is what appears to be his signature. Upon closer inspection, it is Marilyn Monroe’s autograph.

RepZe has promotional videos on YouTube. The people in the videos, including those who claimed to be employees or customers, are paid actors. (We identified them on a freelancing site, Fiverr, where they charged as little as $25 to appear in videos.)

This video featured “Matt from RepZe.”

How To Remove Negative Content From Internet & Google
Watch later
Share
REMOVE
ONLINE
NEGATIVE
CONTENT
Watch on YouTube

This is the promotional reel for the actor who played “Matt.”

Myvideospokes_revised
Watch later
Share
Background
Music
Logo
Website
Number
Watch on YouTube

We tracked down actual customers of RepZe. All relayed the same basic story. They had hired the company to remove negative posts about them, which it quickly did. But then RepZe would threaten that, absent swift payment of the thousands of dollars the customers had agreed to pay, the posts would reappear and multiply.

“The content will be restored,” a RepZe representative wrote in a text to one customer, who posted screenshots of the exchange on Facebook. “We are trying to help. You are trying to piss my ass off.”

Then, months later, the posts would reappear.

One disgruntled customer created RepZeFraud.com under the pseudonym Greg Saint. He said he had paid RepZe $4,000 in 2019 to remove two negative posts. Months later, he said, copies of the posts began reappearing online, and he suspected RepZe was responsible. He created RepZeFraud.com to expose the person he thought was really behind the service: a 28-year-old web developer in India, Vikram Parmar.

5. A Clue in the Metadata

We had first heard Mr. Parmar’s name months earlier, from a California software developer, Aaron Greenspan.

Mr. Greenspan runs PlainSite.org, which posts court documents and thus makes people’s criminal records easier to find. He said one of those people, a convicted murderer, had tried to destroy his and his family’s online reputations.

Mr. Greenspan could have paid to get the posts removed, but he didn’t like the idea of ransom. Instead, he set out to unmask whoever was behind the sites and the reputation-management companies. This was easier said than done.

“You don’t know where it is, who runs it, who hosts it,” he said. “That’s how they evade any accountability.”

The websites use what are known as privacy proxy services to hide who owns them and where they’re hosted. Mr. Greenspan combed through digital clues and tracked down lawsuits involving the sites — which he began cataloging on PlainSite — to map out the industry. He concluded that many sites appeared to be owned by a small handful of people. Every time he got in touch with one of them, that person would point him to other people and say they were the true bad actors.

Mr. Greenspan got in touch with RepZe, which had ads next to many of the posts attacking him. He pretended to be an interested customer. RepZe gave him a quote of $14,800 to remove 17 posts. The company sent a contract. Mr. Greenspan looked at the document's metadata and found "Vikram Parmar" listed as the author.

File name:	Negative Content Removal Contract with Aaron.docx.pdf
Document type:	PDF document
File size:	400 KB (400,325 bytes)
PDF version:	1.7
Page count:	4
Page size:	8.5 x 14 inches
Title:	-
Author:	**Vikram Parmar**
Subject:	-
PDF Producer:	Microsoft® Word for Office 365
Content creator:	Microsoft® Word for Office 365
Creation date:	Apr 2, 2019 at 1:25 PM
Modification date:	Apr 2, 2019 at 1:25 PM

A quick Google search revealed that Mr. Parmar faced criminal charges. In 2014, he had created a fake website that charged people money to apply for nonexistent jobs with India's Central Bureau of Investigation. Prosecutors in New Delhi charged him and a collaborator with criminal conspiracy. (Mr. Parmar claimed that an "unscrupulous client" had hired him to create what he thought was a legitimate website. The case is pending.)

Mr. Greenspan sent Mr. Parmar a message on Skype in September 2019. They began to chat. (Mr. Greenspan showed us screenshots of the chats.) He demanded that Mr. Parmar delete posts about him for free. Mr. Parmar removed one, on DirtyScam.com, and then their conversation became friendlier.

Mr. Parmar complained to Mr. Greenspan about the greediness of the owners of other complaint sites. One of them was a guy in Ohio named Scott Breitenstein, who Mr. Parmar said owned hundreds of sites that stole original content from "legitimate" ones.

Mr. Parmar told Mr. Greenspan that he'd had to pay Mr. Breitenstein to get copycat posts taken down. He said Mr. Breitenstein had instructed him to send checks to another person. Her name was Heidi Glosser.

6. One of the Gentlemen

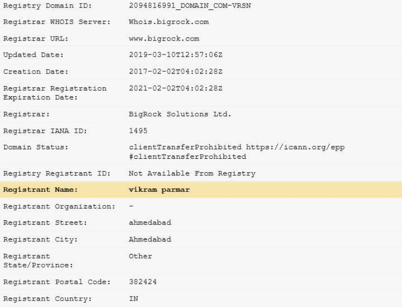
We reached Mr. Parmar via Skype in February. He was on vacation in the Indian seaside town of Goa. We said we were working on an article about the reputation-management industry. He denied involvement, saying he was "a real estate builder and also working on some government projects."

Then we laid out what we knew.

We had linked Mr. Parmar not just to RepZe but also to another cleanup service, RemoveReports.com. In addition, we had found that he was involved with ReportCheater.com, WebActivism.com, WtfCheater.com, RealtorScam.com and DirtyScam.com. All were listed by RepZe or RemoveReports as places from which they could remove content.

At least one of the sites had been registered under Mr. Parmar's name. Others were linked to him in different ways. Some have the same Google ad account; some share IP addresses; some had been registered to Mr. Parmar's email address.

Domain Name:	REALTORSCAM.COM



Registry Domain ID:	2094816991_DOMAIN_COM-VRSN
Registrar WHOIS Server:	Whois.bigrock.com
Registrar URL:	www.bigrock.com
Updated Date:	2019-03-10T12:57:06Z
Creation Date:	2017-02-02T04:02:28Z
Registrar Registration Expiration Date:	2021-02-02T04:02:28Z
Registrar:	BigRock Solutions Ltd.
Registrar IANA ID:	1495
Domain Status:	clientTransferProhibited https://icann.org/epp #clientTransferProhibited
Registry Registrant ID:	Not Available From Registry
Registrant Name:	**vikram parmar**
Registrant Organization:	-
Registrant Street:	ahmedabad
Registrant City:	Ahmedabad
Registrant State/Province:	Other
Registrant Postal Code:	382424
Registrant Country:	IN

In other words, Mr. Parmar seemed to be running sites that produced slander and running sites that made money by removing that slander.

Mr. Parmar sounded uneasy. He said anyone could use anyone else's email address to register a site. Then he admitted to doing some reputation-management work. Then he asked that his name not be used in this article. Then he suggested other people in the industry whom we should investigate instead of him. (The list included Mr. Breitenstein and Ms. Glosser.)

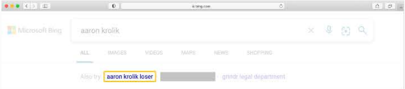
"You are pretty much accurate but targeting a wrong guy," he wrote in a Skype message. "I am just mediator," he added. "I am one of the gentleman."

Mr. Parmar resurfaced in April, about 20 minutes after we emailed RepZe seeking comment for this article. In messages over Skype, he said he didn't own the complaint sites but was providing them services, including helping them improve their performance on search engines.

Why were his email address and Google ad accounts linked to the complaint sites? Mr. Parmar didn't have a coherent explanation.

7. My Experiment Ends

Three months after my experiment started, my search results were suffering the consequences. Bing helpfully recommended adding "loser" to a search for "Aaron Krolik." When you Googled my name, Cheaters.news was at the top of the image results.



Note: Some identifying information has been redacted.

There's no way for me to delete the posts that I wrote; the slander sites don't allow that. Based on estimates provided by removal services, it would cost me about $20,000 to get the posts taken down — and even then, more posts might appear in their place.

There is another way to lessen the posts' impact. In certain circumstances, Google will remove harmful content from individuals' search results, including links to "sites with exploitative removal practices." If a site charges to remove posts, you can ask Google not to list it.

Google didn't advertise this policy widely, and few victims of online slander seem aware that it's an option. That's in part because when you Google ways to clean up your search results, Google's solution is buried under ads for reputation-management services like

RepZe.

I eventually found the Google form. I submitted a claim to have one URL removed. "Your email has been sent to our team," Google told me.

Three days later, I received an email from Google saying the URL would be removed from my search results. Later that day, it was gone. I submitted the 25 other links. They were removed, too, but images from gripe sites kept reappearing in my search results.

Other people who have used Google's form reported similar experiences: It mostly works, but is less effective for images. And if you have an attacker who won't stop writing posts about you, it's almost useless. The slander remains.

Mr. Parmar, a self-described expert in how to influence search results, has recently taken steps to burnish his own reputation. Around the time that we started trying to reach him, articles began appearing online casting him in glowing terms.

One piece gushed about his "rags-to-riches story." Another, on Freelancer.com, said his web-marketing business generated $2 million a year in revenue. Mr. Parmar was quoted as saying he had bought cars for himself and his family.

"I live like a BOSS," he said.

If you've had experiences with the gripe sites, clean-up services or Google's removal tool, please tell us about them: kashmir.hill@nytimes.com and aaron.krolik@nytimes.com.

Correction: May 5, 2021
An earlier version of this article incorrectly described how Anytime Mailbox handles mail for clients. It scans the correspondence and uploads it to a secure server; it does not email scans to clients.

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