

October 22, 2024

Michigan Department of State  
Bureau of Elections  
Richard H. Austin Building – 1st Floor  
430 West Allegan Street  
Lansing, Michigan 48918

### **Re: Complaint Against Star Spangled Media LLC**

Americans for Public Trust is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to restoring trust in government by holding politicians and political groups accountable for corrupt and unethical behavior. It is in furtherance of this mission that we respectfully request that the Bureau of Elections (“Bureau”) open an immediate investigation into Star Spangled Media LLC (“SSM”) for its operation of “*The Morning Mirror*.” This website promotes itself as a local newsroom, but is, in fact, nothing more than a thinly veiled political operation that regurgitates and buttresses local Democratic candidates’ campaign talking points and produces all-out attack ads against Republican candidates—all while spending thousands of dollars to bolster their campaign-style political content. SSM is not a legitimate, *bona fide* “news media” outlet for purposes of Section 169.206 of the Michigan Campaign Finance Act. Accordingly, its spending to regurgitate and republish Michigan candidates’ campaign material is not exempted from the statutory definition of “expenditure.”<sup>1</sup>

SSM’s spending in the state of Michigan appears to violate several provisions of the Michigan Campaign Finance Act, as SSM has failed to register as a political committee and report its contributions and expenditures.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, SSM’s republication of campaign materials indicates that its activities are not “independent” from the campaign and therefore do not qualify as “independent expenditures” under the letter of Michigan law.<sup>3</sup>

### **Background**

*The Morning Mirror* – operated by SSM – describes itself as an outlet where “reliability meets fresh insight,” and further claims that it delivers “on the matters that impact your life.”<sup>4</sup> However, recent public reporting has not only highlighted the site’s barebones, blog-like appearance, but also its exclusive promotion of Democratic candidates for the Michigan State Legislature, as well as SSM’s spending on social media digital advertising backing the very same Democratic candidates featured on *The Morning Mirror*.<sup>5</sup> With the support of unapologetic politico-lawyer, Marc Elias – who has unabashedly declared, “I am a committed Democrat in that I fight every day to help Democrats win elections, and I make no apologies for that” – SSM has been able to thrust tens of thousands of dollars of political advertisement spending into Michigan elections, and has done so virtually undetected.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mich. Comp. Laws § 169.206(6)(2)(d).

<sup>2</sup> Mich. Comp. Laws § 169.221; 169.233; 169.254(1)-(2).

<sup>3</sup> Mich. Comp. Laws § 169.209(9)(2).

<sup>4</sup> *The Morning Mirror*, [About Us](#) (Accessed Oct. 22, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Max Tani, Top Democratic Lawyer Backs Mysterious News Site, [Semafor](#) (July 7, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*; Reid Wilson, Meet the Democrats’ Last Best Hope of Preserving a House Majority, [The Hill](#) (Dec. 17, 2021).

Recently, Mr. Elias’ firm claimed the operation “...retainins [sic] content writers on a freelance and/or permanent basis to write articles, commentaries, and editorials.”<sup>7</sup> However, a closer, more in-depth inspection of SSM reveals its actual purpose is to launder campaign material, often copied *verbatim*, through a platform that masquerades as a legitimate, journalistic endeavor.

The State of Arizona’s Citizens Clean Elections Commission (“AZCCEC”) recently observed that, “[u]nlike many news sites, including left and right of center websites, *The Morning Mirror* includes no masthead, no bylines, no staff information, no contact information, no information about purchasing advertising or making donations, and no mailing or physical address.”<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, what can be found on the website, however, has been aptly described by credentialed media as stories on “seemingly random topics,” which have been woven together in an effort to “ensure the odd blog is treated as a journalistic operation, not a political one.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, the “local” section of the website is not “local” at all. Rather, it is near wholly made up of political candidate content, some of which is not even focused on the state of Michigan.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, this “difficult-to-find,” and “barebones blog[s]” greatest degree of visibility is not its website content, but rather the Facebook ads it serves audiences that feature nearly *verbatim* content from the campaign websites of Democratic candidates running for various offices across the country. These paid advertisements – costing in the tens of thousands of dollars – demonstrate a pipeline of nearly identical content, from the candidates’ websites, to the “articles” on *The Morning Mirror*, to, finally, digital ads paid for by SSM.<sup>11</sup>

Through these *Morning Mirror* ad buys, SSM has spent up to \$154,000 in digital political advertising aimed at key voting demographics throughout Michigan. Interestingly, the same state-level races are being targeted by the Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee (“DLCC”) – the organization dedicated to securing Democratic victories in state houses all across the country.<sup>12</sup>

Star-Spangled Media Buys and <i>Morning Mirror</i> Articles for Michigan Candidates and Incumbents					
<i>Morning Mirror</i> Article	Ad Flight	Facebook Library ID	Candidate/Incumbent	Spend (Low)	Spend (High)
<a href="#">5/13/24</a>	5/13/24— 5/16/24	<a href="#">416194497859056</a>	Rep. Jenn Hill	\$100.00	\$199.00
<a href="#">5/13/24</a>	5/17/24— 7/2/24	<a href="#">7835996193106757</a>	Rep. Jenn Hill	\$1,500.00	\$2,000.00

<sup>7</sup> Elias Law Group, [Advisory Opinion Request](#) (May 28, 2024).

<sup>8</sup> State of Arizona, Citizens Clean Elections Commission, [Advisory Opinion 2024-05](#) (June 27, 2024).

<sup>9</sup> Tani, *supra* note 5.

<sup>10</sup> The Morning Mirror, [Local](#) (Accessed Oct. 22, 2024).

<sup>11</sup> Meta, Facebook Ad Library, The Morning Mirror, [Meta](#) (Accessed Oct. 22, 2024); The Morning Mirror, [Local](#) (Accessed Oct. 22, 2024); Jenn Hill for State Representative, Priorities, [Elect Jenn Hill](#) (Accessed Oct. 22, 2024); The Morning Mirror, Rep. Jenn Hill Says One of Her ‘Proudest Accomplishments’ is Supporting Reproductive Rights, [Local](#) (June 25, 2024); The Morning Mirror, State Rep. Jenn Hill, [Meta Ad Library](#) (Ad Run July 1, 2024–July 18, 2024); Re-Elect Denise Mentzer for State Representative District 61, Priorities, [Denise Mentzer](#) (Accessed Oct. 22, 2024); The Morning Mirror, Rep. Denise Mentzer Looks to Ease Financial Burdens and Lower Costs for Michigan Families, [Local](#) (Apr. 30, 2024); The Morning Mirror, Rep Denise Mentzer, [Meta Ad Library](#) (Ad Run May 13, 2024–May 16, 2024); Tani, *supra* note 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*; Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee, About DLCC, [DLCC](#) (Accessed Oct. 22, 2024); Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee, DLCC Announces Top Targets for the 2023-24 Cycles, [Press Release](#) (Mar. 27, 2024); Julia Manchester, Democratic State Campaign Arm Deploys \$2.2M Investment, [The Hill](#) (July 24, 2024); Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee, Path to the Majority: Expanding the Map: The DLCC’s Target States for the 2023-2024 Cycle, [DLCC](#) (Accessed Oct. 22, 2024). *For demographic information on the Michigan voters targeted by SSM’s digital ads, see* Meta, Facebook Ad Library, The Morning Mirror, [Meta](#) (Accessed Oct. 22, 2024).

<a href="#">6/25/24</a>	7/1/24— 7/18/24	<a href="#">1138906997332349</a>	Rep. Jenn Hill	\$500.00	\$599.00
<a href="#">6/25/24</a>	7/17/24— 9/25/24	<a href="#">810501774552665</a>	Rep. Jenn Hill	\$2,000.00	\$2,500.00
<a href="#">5/13/24</a>	9/5/24— 9/26/24	<a href="#">2268488956833148</a>	Rep. Jenn Hill	\$2,000.00	\$2,500.00
<a href="#">6/25/24</a>	9/26/24— 10/11/24	<a href="#">858687465993322</a>	Rep. Jenn Hill	\$1,000.00	\$1,500.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	9/26/24— 10/16/24	<a href="#">428033860394886</a>	Rep. Jenn Hill	\$1.00	\$100.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	10/10/24— Present	<a href="#">1052956919414956</a>	Rep. Jenn Hill	\$1,000.00	\$1,500.00
<a href="#">10/9/24</a>	10/15/24— Present	<a href="#">406200482348713</a>	Rep. Jenn Hill	\$1.00	\$100.00
<a href="#">4/26/24</a>	5/13/24— 5/16/24	<a href="#">3632906023616035</a>	Rep. Betsy Coffia	\$100.00	\$199.00
<a href="#">4/26/24</a>	5/17/24— 7/2/24	<a href="#">468179325733400</a>	Rep. Betsy Coffia	\$2,000.00	\$2,500.00
<a href="#">6/24/24</a>	7/1/24— 7/18/24	<a href="#">1002730618226826</a>	Rep. Betsy Coffia	\$500.00	\$599.00
<a href="#">6/24/24</a>	7/17/24— 9/25/24	<a href="#">846130767449544</a>	Rep. Betsy Coffia	\$2,000.00	\$2,500.00
<a href="#">4/26/24</a>	9/5/24— 9/27/24	<a href="#">1693284748105098</a>	Rep. Betsy Coffia	\$2,500.00	\$3,000.00
<a href="#">6/24/24</a>	9/26/24— 10/11/24	<a href="#">1572227090030244</a>	Rep. Betsy Coffia	\$1,500.00	\$2,000.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	9/24/24— 10/16/24	<a href="#">442459995515949</a>	Rep. Betsy Coffia	\$1,000.00	\$1,500.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	10/10/24— Present	<a href="#">7053639124760525</a>	Rep. Betsy Coffia	\$1,000.00	\$1500.00
<a href="#">6/24/24</a>	10/15/24— Present	<a href="#">532364212744871</a>	Rep. Betsy Coffia	\$300.00	\$399.00
<a href="#">4/30/24</a>	5/13/24— 5/16/24	<a href="#">1164065884609024</a>	Rep. Denise Mentzer	\$100.00	\$199.00
<a href="#">4/30/24</a>	5/17/24— 7/2/24	<a href="#">1523212378538428</a>	Rep. Denise Mentzer	\$2,000.00	\$2,500.00
<a href="#">6/23/24</a>	7/1/24— 7/18/24	<a href="#">1701126694050594</a>	Rep. Denise Mentzer	\$600.00	\$699.00
<a href="#">6/23/24</a>	7/17/24— 9/25/24	<a href="#">1895131687630835</a>	Rep. Denise Mentzer	\$2,500.00	\$3,000.00
<a href="#">4/30/24</a>	9/5/24— 9/27/24	<a href="#">3653297104981738</a>	Rep. Denise Mentzer	\$2,000.00	\$2,500.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	9/24/24— 10/16/24	<a href="#">925776059421129</a>	Rep. Denise Mentzer	\$1,000.00	\$1,500.00
<a href="#">6/23/24</a>	9/26/24— 10/10/24	<a href="#">906533094860303</a>	Rep. Denise Mentzer	\$1,500.00	\$2,000.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	10/10/24— Present	<a href="#">2584759441712789</a>	Rep. Denise Mentzer	\$1,000.00	\$1,500.00
<a href="#">10/9/24</a>	10/15/24— Present	<a href="#">922076783197860</a>	Rep. Denise Mentzer	\$400.00	\$499.00

<a href="#">5/10/24</a>	5/13/24— 5/16/24	<a href="#">2940210026130597</a>	Rep. Nate Shannon	\$100.00	\$199.00
<a href="#">5/10/24</a>	5/17/24— 7/2/24	<a href="#">954180669739969</a>	Rep. Nate Shannon	\$1,500.00	\$2,000.00
<a href="#">6/22/24</a>	7/1/24— 7/18/24	<a href="#">484918877344700</a>	Rep. Nate Shannon	\$500.00	\$599.00
<a href="#">6/22/24</a>	7/17/24— 9/25/24	<a href="#">405034955896262</a>	Rep. Nate Shannon	\$2,000.00	\$2,500.00
<a href="#">5/10/24</a>	9/5/24— 9/27/24	<a href="#">997584198716551</a>	Rep. Nate Shannon	\$3,000.00	\$3,500.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	9/24/24— 10/16/24	<a href="#">1718540972314876</a>	Rep. Nate Shannon	\$1,000.00	\$1,500.00
<a href="#">6/22/24</a>	9/26/24— 10/11/24	<a href="#">809024061152978</a>	Rep. Nate Shannon	\$2,000.00	\$2,500.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	10/10/24— Present	<a href="#">1110281907353870</a>	Rep. Nate Shannon	\$1,500.00	\$2,000.00
<a href="#">10/9/24</a>	10/15/24— Present	<a href="#">1645011342730780</a>	Rep. Nate Shannon	\$300.00	\$399.00
<a href="#">5/6/24</a>	5/13/24— 5/16/24	<a href="#">1136643984426718</a>	Trevis Harrold (State House Candidate)	\$100.00	\$199.00
<a href="#">5/6/24</a>	5/17/24— 7/2/24	<a href="#">463579546148566</a>	Trevis Harrold (State House Candidate)	\$2,000.00	\$2,500.00
<a href="#">6/21/24</a>	7/1/24— 7/18/24	<a href="#">777011981296569</a>	Trevis Harrold (State House Candidate)	\$600.00	\$699.00
<a href="#">6/21/24</a>	7/17/24— 9/25/24	<a href="#">453919090850174</a>	Trevis Harrold (State House Candidate)	\$2,500.00	\$3,000.00
<a href="#">5/6/24</a>	9/5/24— 9/27/24	<a href="#">524448273280238</a>	Trevis Harrold (State House Candidate)	\$1,500.00	\$2,000.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	9/24/24— 10/16/24	<a href="#">995745002353375</a>	Trevis Harrold (State House Candidate)	\$1,000.00	\$1,500.00
<a href="#">6/21/24</a>	9/26/24— 10/10/24	<a href="#">524730613585013</a>	Trevis Harrold (State House Candidate)	\$1,000.00	\$1,500.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	10/10/24— Present	<a href="#">507618068831218</a>	Trevis Harrold (State House Candidate)	\$1,000.00	\$1,500.00
<a href="#">10/9/24</a>	10/15/24— Present	<a href="#">567449925853109</a>	Trevis Harrold (State House Candidate)	\$300.00	\$399.00
<a href="#">5/12/24</a>	5/13/24— 5/16/24	<a href="#">461227236359976</a>	Shadia Martini (State House Candidate)	\$100.00	\$199.00
<a href="#">5/12/24</a>	5/17/24— 7/2/24	<a href="#">26396221209965166</a>	Shadia Martini (State House Candidate)	\$1,500.00	\$2,000.00

<a href="#">6/20/24</a>	7/1/24— 7/18/24	<a href="#">996296571782812</a>	Shadia Martini (State House Candidate)	\$500.00	\$599.00
<a href="#">6/20/24</a>	7/17/24— 9/25/24	<a href="#">1641050153406471</a>	Shadia Martini (State House Candidate)	\$2,000.00	\$2,500.00
<a href="#">5/12/24</a>	9/5/24— 9/27/24	<a href="#">408550055196203</a>	Shadia Martini (State House Candidate)	\$2,000.00	\$2,500.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	9/24/24— 10/16/24	<a href="#">2250986248568545</a>	Shadia Martini (State House Candidate)	\$1,000.00	\$1,500.00
<a href="#">6/20/24</a>	9/26/24— 10/10/24	<a href="#">534623249149719</a>	Shadia Martini (State House Candidate)	\$1,500.00	\$2,000.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	10/10/24— Present	<a href="#">1178936936534452</a>	Shadia Martini (State House Candidate)	\$1,000.00	\$1,500.00
<a href="#">10/9/24</a>	10/15/24— Present	<a href="#">1473534889975078</a>	Shadia Martini (State House Candidate)	\$300.00	\$399.00
<a href="#">5/8/24</a>	5/13/24— 5/16/24	<a href="#">1811376602717988</a>	Daniel J. Mahoney (State House Candidate)	\$1.00	\$100.00
<a href="#">5/8/24</a>	5/17/24— 7/2/24	<a href="#">1493303747949376</a>	Daniel J. Mahoney (State House Candidate)	\$1,500.00	\$2,000.00
<a href="#">6/19/24</a>	7/1/24— 7/18/24	<a href="#">461706589807837</a>	Daniel J. Mahoney (State House Candidate)	\$500.00	\$599.00
<a href="#">6/19/24</a>	7/17/24— 9/25/24	<a href="#">457993953668482</a>	Daniel J. Mahoney (State House Candidate)	\$2,000.00	\$2,500.00
<a href="#">5/8/24</a>	9/5/24— 9/27/24	<a href="#">3813316872329178</a>	Daniel J. Mahoney (State House Candidate)	\$2,000.00	\$2,500.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	9/24/24— 10/16/24	<a href="#">1586812122183320</a>	Daniel J. Mahoney (State House Candidate)	\$900.00	\$999.00
<a href="#">6/19/24</a>	9/26/24— 10/11/24	<a href="#">1063308331938914</a>	Daniel J. Mahoney (State House Candidate)	\$1,500.00	\$2,000.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	10/10/24— Present	<a href="#">525458460129921</a>	Daniel J. Mahoney (State House Candidate)	\$1,000.00	\$1,500.00

			House Candidate)		
<a href="#">10/9/24</a>	10/15/24— Present	<a href="#">907138377977915</a>	Daniel J. Mahoney (State House Candidate)	\$300.00	\$399.00
<a href="#">5/10/24</a>	5/13/24— 5/16/24	<a href="#">1024961942305273</a>	Rep. Jim Haadsma	\$100.00	\$199.00
<a href="#">5/10/24</a>	5/17/24— 7/2/24	<a href="#">408808222035006</a>	Rep. Jim Haadsma	\$2,000.00	\$2,500.00
<a href="#">6/18/24</a>	7/1/24— 7/18/24	<a href="#">456820556986475</a>	Rep. Jim Haadsma	\$500.00	\$599.00
<a href="#">6/18/24</a>	7/17/24— 9/25/24	<a href="#">1015564773254008</a>	Rep. Jim Haadsma	\$2,000.00	\$2,500.00
<a href="#">5/10/24</a>	9/5/24— 9/27/24	<a href="#">1596642581195079</a>	Rep. Jim Haadsma	\$2,500.00	\$3,000.00
<a href="#">6/18/24</a>	9/26/24— 10/10/24	<a href="#">1239769904116658</a>	Rep. Jim Haadsma	\$1,500.00	\$2,000.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	9/24/24— 10/18/24	<a href="#">1067764664970014</a>	Rep. Jim Haadsma	\$1,000.00	\$1,500.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	10/10/24— Present	<a href="#">1634238260474507</a>	Rep. Jim Haadsma	\$1,000.00	\$1,500.00
<a href="#">10/9/24</a>	10/18/24— Present	<a href="#">544929084609420</a>	Rep. Jim Haadsma	\$100.00	\$199.00
<a href="#">5/2/24</a>	5/13/24— 5/16/24	<a href="#">1189650009067558</a>	Rep. Joey Andrews	\$100.00	\$199.00
<a href="#">5/2/24</a>	5/17/24— 7/2/24	<a href="#">404589719215266</a>	Rep. Joey Andrews	\$2,000.00	\$2,500.00
<a href="#">6/17/24</a>	7/1/24— 7/18/24	<a href="#">1520388611908570</a>	Rep. Joey Andrews	\$600.00	\$699.00
<a href="#">6/17/24</a>	7/17/24— 9/25/24	<a href="#">1162876791583172</a>	Rep. Joey Andrews	\$2,500.00	\$3,000.00
<a href="#">5/2/24</a>	9/5/24— 9/27/24	<a href="#">1181138956473591</a>	Rep. Joey Andrews	\$3,000.00	\$3,500.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	9/24/24— 10/16/24	<a href="#">515920477842687</a>	Rep. Joey Andrews	\$1,000.00	\$1,500.00
<a href="#">6/17/24</a>	9/26/24— 10/10/24	<a href="#">1022901042871771</a>	Rep. Joey Andrews	\$2,000.00	\$2,500.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	10/10/24— Present	<a href="#">2829151130624289</a>	Rep. Joey Andrews	\$1,500.00	\$2,000.00
<a href="#">10/9/24</a>	10/15/24— Present	<a href="#">1353860819251011</a>	Rep. Joey Andrews	\$300.00	\$399.00
<a href="#">4/23/24</a>	5/14/24— 5/16/24	<a href="#">1187852949316768</a>	Janise O'Neil Robinson (State House Candidate)	\$1.00	\$100.00
<a href="#">4/23/24</a>	5/17/24— 7/2/24	<a href="#">489241306857305</a>	Janise O'Neil Robinson (State House Candidate)	\$2,000.00	\$2,500.00

<a href="#">6/16/24</a>	7/1/24— 7/18/24	<a href="#">863703512314165</a>	Janise O'Neil Robinson (State House Candidate)	\$500.00	\$599.00
<a href="#">6/16/24</a>	7/17/24— 9/25/24	<a href="#">473246712104068</a>	Janise O'Neil Robinson (State House Candidate)	\$2,000.00	\$2,500.00
<a href="#">4/23/24</a>	9/5/24— 9/27/24	<a href="#">2312303495785039</a>	Janise O'Neil Robinson (State House Candidate)	\$2,000.00	\$2,500.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	9/24/24— 10/16/24	<a href="#">836794008252181</a>	Janise O'Neil Robinson (State House Candidate)	\$1,000.00	\$1,500.00
<a href="#">6/16/24</a>	9/26/24— 10/11/24	<a href="#">502469726009943</a>	Janise O'Neil Robinson (State House Candidate)	\$1,500.00	\$2,000.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	10/10/24— Present	<a href="#">1743582116397148</a>	Janise O'Neil Robinson (State House Candidate)	\$1,000.00	\$1,500.00
<a href="#">10/9/24</a>	10/15/24— Present	<a href="#">8468190493299299</a>	Janise O'Neil Robinson (State House Candidate)	\$300.00	\$399.00
<a href="#">4/17/24</a>	5/13/24— 5/16/24	<a href="#">2007407716361240</a>	Rep. Jaime Churches	\$100.00	\$199.00
<a href="#">4/17/24</a>	5/17/24— 7/2/24	<a href="#">1930557604082794</a>	Rep. Jaime Churches	\$2,500.00	\$3,000.00
<a href="#">6/15/24</a>	7/1/24— 7/18/24	<a href="#">2244569959220488</a>	Rep. Jaime Churches	\$600.00	\$699.00
<a href="#">6/15/24</a>	7/17/24— 9/25/24	<a href="#">1009468774120745</a>	Rep. Jaime Churches	\$2,500.00	\$3,000.00
<a href="#">4/17/24</a>	9/5/24— 9/27/24	<a href="#">1232011394880976</a>	Rep. Jaime Churches	\$2,500.00	\$3,000.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	9/24/24— 10/16/24	<a href="#">2583063288547990</a>	Rep. Jaime Churches	\$1,000.00	\$1,500.00
<a href="#">6/15/24</a>	9/26/24— 10/10/24	<a href="#">863855359178577</a>	Rep. Jaime Churches	\$1,500.00	\$2,000.00
<a href="#">9/23/24</a>	10/10/24— Present	<a href="#">1073769991420043</a>	Rep. Jaime Churches	\$1,500.00	\$2,000.00
<a href="#">10/9/24</a>	10/15/24— Present	<a href="#">1734548307307818</a>	Rep. Jaime Churches	\$400.00	\$499.00
<b>TOTALS:</b>				<b>\$118,204.00</b>	<b>\$153,669.00</b>

(Meta, Facebook Ad Library, The Morning Mirror, [Meta](#) (Accessed Oct. 3, 2024); The Morning Mirror, [Local](#) (Accessed Oct. 22, 2024))

SSM's social media ads supporting Michigan State Representative Jenn Hill, for example, unequivocally show this overtly political ad pipeline in action as SSM just regurgitates campaign literature. Representative Hill

listed on her campaign website that passing the Reproductive Health Act was one of her “proudest accomplishments.” An article touting Representative Hill’s “proudest accomplishments” appears in a *Morning Mirror* “article,” along with other *verbatim* passages from her campaign website. And finally, an SSM digital ad campaign highlights her “proudest accomplishments” on reproductive rights in Michigan.<sup>13</sup>

**Screen Capture: 1 The "Priorities" Section of Representative Jenn Hill's Campaign Website**



Finally, one of my proudest accomplishments in this area is passing the Reproductive Health Act, protecting the right for women to have control over their bodies and the doctors who provide these services. Make no mistake about it – abortion access is on the ballot this year, and we need pro-choice champions to protect this right year after year.

(Jenn Hill for State Representative, Priorities, [Elect Jenn Hill](#) (Accessed Oct. 22, 2024))

**Screen Capture: 2 "Morning Mirror" Article Featuring Text from Hill's Campaign Website**



Democratic incumbent for Michigan House District 109, Rep. Jenn Hill, is a strong advocate for reproductive health care. Rep. Hill was elected in November 2022. Rep. Hill voted in support of the Reproductive Health Act, which ensured people in Michigan will have the right to an abortion. According to Rep. Hill, “one of my proudest accomplishments ... is passing the Reproductive Health Act, protecting the right for women to have control over their bodies and the doctors who provide these services.” Rep. Hill underlines the significance of abortion in this year’s election, stating “make no mistake about it – abortion access is on the ballot this year, and we need pro-choice champions to protect this right year after year.”

(The Morning Mirror, Rep. Jenn Hill Says One of Her ‘Proudest Accomplishments’ is Supporting Reproductive Rights, [Local](#) (June 25, 2024))

<sup>13</sup> Jenn Hill for State Representative, Priorities, [Elect Jenn Hill](#) (Accessed Oct. 22, 2024); The Morning Mirror, Rep. Jenn Hill Says One of Her ‘Proudest Accomplishments’ is Supporting Reproductive Rights, [Local](#) (June 25, 2024); The Morning Mirror, State Rep. Jenn Hill, [Meta Ad Library](#) (Ad Run July 1, 2024-July 18, 2024).



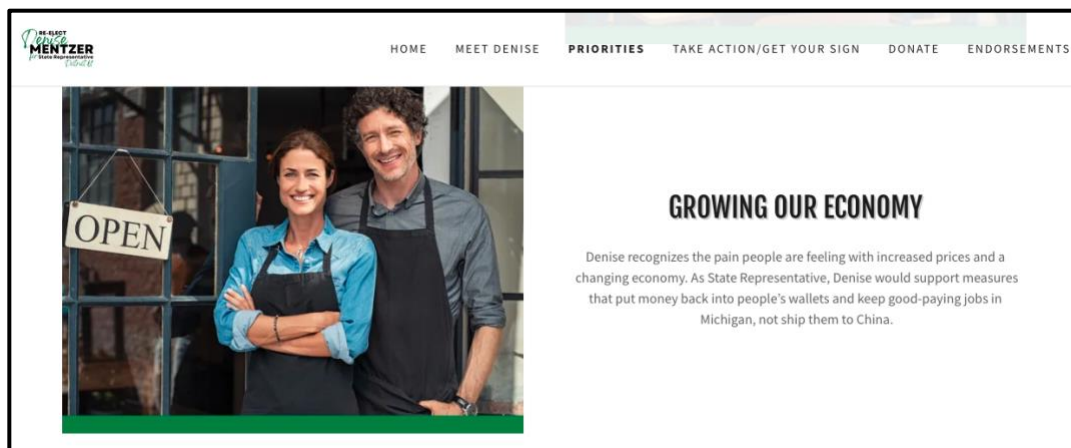
**Screen Capture: 3 Jenn Hill "Morning Mirror" Facebook Ad, Paid for by SSM**



(The Morning Mirror, State Rep. Jenn Hill, [Meta Ad Library](#) (Ad Run July 1, 2024-July 18, 2024))

This campaign website-to-ad pipeline is also readily apparent in yet another example, which features Representative Denise Mentzer, who is running for the Michigan State House. On her campaign website, Rep. Mentzer states that she wants to “keep good-paying jobs in Michigan” and put “money back into people’s wallets.” This identical message is then echoed in a *Morning Mirror* article about Rep. Mentzer’s priority to “keep good-paying jobs in Michigan” and put “money back into people’s wallet.” And finally, an SSM advertisement bolsters the campaign’s original message about Rep. Mentzer wanting to “keep jobs in Michigan and money in people’s wallets.”<sup>14</sup>

**Screen Capture: 1 The "Priorities" Section of Denise Mentzer's Campaign Website**



(Re-Elect Denise Mentzer for State Representative District 61, Priorities, [Denise Mentzer](#) (Accessed Oct. 22, 2024))

<sup>14</sup> Re-Elect Denise Mentzer for State Representative District 61, Priorities, [Denise Mentzer](#) (Accessed Oct. 22, 2024); The Morning Mirror, Rep. Denise Mentzer Looks to Ease Financial Burdens and Lower Costs for Michigan Families, [Local](#) (Apr. 30, 2024); The Morning Mirror, Rep. Denise Mentzer, [Meta Ad Library](#) (Ad Run May 13, 2024-May 16, 2024).

*Screen Capture: 2 "Morning Mirror" Article Featuring Text from Mentzer's Campaign Website*



(The Morning Mirror, Rep. Denise Mentzer Looks to Ease Financial Burdens and Lower Costs for Michigan Families, [Local](#) (Apr. 30, 2024))

*Screen Capture: 3 Denise Mentzer "Morning Mirror" Facebook Ad, Paid for by SSM*



(The Morning Mirror, Rep. Denise Mentzer, [Meta Ad Library](#) (Ad Run May 13, 2024-May 16, 2024))

In addition to these website-to-ad pipeline examples, incredibly, in recent weeks, SSM has been creating and promoting openly overt attack ads targeting specific Republican candidates, while in the same instance, supporting their Democratic challengers. In late September 2024, *The Morning Mirror* launched an inflammatory ad accusing Republican State Representative Kathy Schmaltz of voting “against free school meals for children.” As this ad launched, *The Morning Mirror* also featured a post directly attacking Representative Schmaltz and backing her Democratic opponent, Daniel J. Mahoney.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> The Morning Mirror, Rep. Kathy Schmaltz, [Meta Ad Library](#) (Ad Run Sept. 24, 2024-Oct. 16, 2024); The Morning Mirror, Rep. Schmaltz Voted Against Increased Funding for Michigan's Public Schools, [Education](#) (Sept. 23, 2024).

**Screen Capture: 1 Rep. Kathy Schmaltz "Morning Mirror" Facebook Ad, Paid for by SSM**

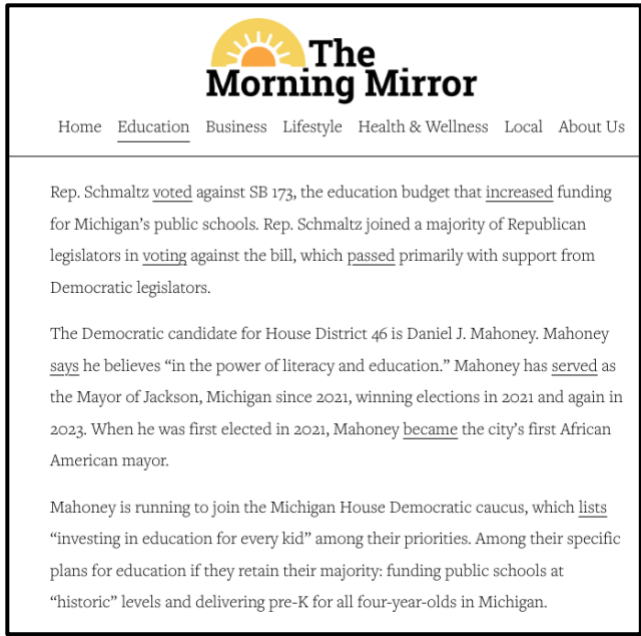


(The Morning Mirror, Rep. Kathy Schmaltz, [Meta Ad Library](#) (Ad Run Sept. 24, 2024-Oct. 16, 2024))

**Screen Capture: 2 "Morning Mirror" Article Attacking Rep. Kathy Schmaltz and Promoting Her Opponent, Daniel J. Mahoney**



(The Morning Mirror, Rep. Schmaltz Voted Against Increased Funding for Michigan's Public Schools, [Education](#) (Sept. 23, 2024))



(The Morning Mirror, Rep. Schmalz Voted Against Increased Funding for Michigan's Public Schools, [Education](#) (Sept. 23, 2024))

Yet another example of *The Morning Mirror's* new, open attack ads features Michigan State Representative Jamie Thompson, claiming she "voted against increasing public school funding." Once more, the accompanying "article" on *The Morning Mirror's* website openly attacks Representative Thompson, but then lauds her Democratic challenger, Janise O'Neil Robinson.<sup>16</sup>

**Screen Capture: 1 Rep. Jamie Thompson "Morning Mirror" Facebook Ad, Paid for by SSM**



(The Morning Mirror, Rep. Jamie Thompson, [Meta Ad Library](#) (Ad Run Sept. 24, 2024-Oct. 16, 2024))

<sup>16</sup> The Morning Mirror, Rep. Jamie Thompson, [Meta Ad Library](#) (Ad Run Sept. 24, 2024-Oct. 16, 2024); The Morning Mirror, Rep. Jamie Thompson Voted Against Increased Funding for Public Schools, [Education](#) (Sept. 23, 2024).

*Screen Capture: 2 "Morning Mirror" Article Attacking Rep. Jamie Thompson and Promoting Her Opponent, Janise O'Neil Robinson*



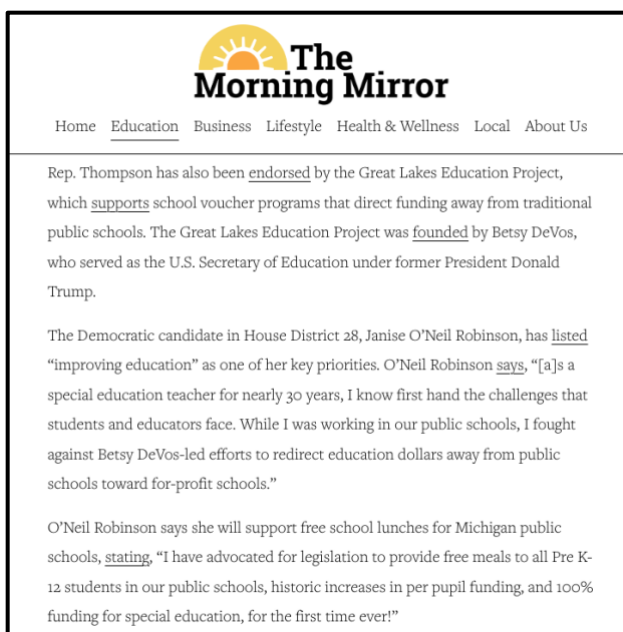
The Morning Mirror

Home Education Business Lifestyle Health & Wellness Local About Us

## Rep. Jamie Thompson Voted Against Increased Funding For Public Schools

Rep. Jamie Thompson is the Republican incumbent running for reelection in House District 28. According to her campaign website, Rep. Thompson says, "I will continue to advocate for policies that create new and better jobs, give our kids a stronger education and keep our neighborhoods safe." However, Rep Thompson voted against SB 173, which increased funding for public schools, including free school meals for all students, expanding the pre-K program and increased funding for tutoring.

(The Morning Mirror, Rep. Jamie Thompson Voted Against Increased Funding for Public Schools, [Education](#) (Sept. 23, 2024))



The Morning Mirror

Home Education Business Lifestyle Health & Wellness Local About Us

Rep. Thompson has also been endorsed by the Great Lakes Education Project, which supports school voucher programs that direct funding away from traditional public schools. The Great Lakes Education Project was founded by Betsy DeVos, who served as the U.S. Secretary of Education under former President Donald Trump.

The Democratic candidate in House District 28, Janise O'Neil Robinson, has listed "improving education" as one of her key priorities. O'Neil Robinson says, "[a]s a special education teacher for nearly 30 years, I know first hand the challenges that students and educators face. While I was working in our public schools, I fought against Betsy DeVos-led efforts to redirect education dollars away from public schools toward for-profit schools."

O'Neil Robinson says she will support free school lunches for Michigan public schools, stating, "I have advocated for legislation to provide free meals to all Pre K-12 students in our public schools, historic increases in per pupil funding, and 100% funding for special education, for the first time ever!"

(The Morning Mirror, Rep. Jamie Thompson Voted Against Increased Funding for Public Schools, [Education](#) (Sept. 23, 2024))

## Request for Action

In its administration of *The Morning Mirror*, SSM appears to generate no revenue via methods used by legitimate newsrooms, and instead, only receives its money from dark money special interests. The AZCCEC noted that the only revenue SSM mentioned actually receiving was from nonprofit grants. Specifically, SSM described its revenue as “grants from nonprofit organizations that are interested in funding the type of news coverage that Star Spangled Media undertakes and building an audience for the news coverage via targeted advertising.”<sup>17</sup>

In Michigan, “news media” is exempted from the campaign finance framework.<sup>18</sup> SSM, however, does not qualify as genuine, *bona fide* “news media” – it has no discernible revenue model, and it appears to exist for the purpose of republishing campaign material. While SSM presents itself to the Michigan public as a legitimate news source, SSM is in reality a political operation that evades state registration and reporting requirements, while republishing campaign materials in coordination with political candidates.<sup>19</sup>

SSM does not satisfy the general understanding of the “media exemption” found in federal and most state campaign finance laws. In *Readers Digest Ass’n. v. Fed. Election Comm’n*, the Southern District of New York held that the federal statute’s news media exemption only applied to “the press entity’s legitimate press function,” and excludes purported press whose “facilities [are] owned or controlled by any political party, political committee or candidate.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Michigan’s news media exemption applies only “in the regular course of publication or broadcasting.” Republishing campaign material in the form of paid online advertising, and, worse yet, launching full-on campaign attacks ads against targeted candidates, indisputably falls outside of any legitimate press function and is not undertaken “in the regular course of publication or broadcasting.”<sup>21</sup> SSM is not a *bona fide* news outlet, and Michigan law regulates the campaign materials and political communications that comprise the bulk of the content SSM distributes.

A final concern with the continued allowance of SSM’s blatant campaign spending is an influx of copycat behavior, creating ultimately a greenlight to circumvent Michigan’s campaign finance reporting requirements writ large.

It is with this in mind that we respectfully request that the Michigan Bureau of Elections consider the applicability of Michigan’s campaign finance laws to Star Spangled Media LLC’s political activity within the State.

Sincerely,



Caitlin Sutherland  
Executive Director  
Americans for Public Trust

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<sup>17</sup> *Supra* note 7.

<sup>18</sup> *Supra* note 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Supra* note 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Readers Digest Ass’n. v. Fed. Election Comm’n*, 509 F. Supp. 1210, 1214-15 (S.D.N.Y. 1981).

<sup>21</sup> *Supra* note 1.