

Gannett is shuttering site accused of publishing AI product reviews

Newspaper giant Gannett is shutting down *Reviewed*, its product reviews site, effective November 1st, according to sources familiar with the decision. The site offers recommendations for products ranging from shoes to home appliances and employs journalists to test and review items – but has also been at the center of questions around whether its work is actually produced by humans.

“After careful consideration and evaluation of our *Reviewed* business, we have decided to close the operation. We extend our sincere gratitude to our employees who have provided consumers with trusted product reviews,” *Reviewed* spokesperson Lark-Marie Antón told *The Verge* in an email.

But the site more recently has been the subject of scrutiny, at times by its own unionized employees. Last October, *Reviewed* staff publicly accused Gannett of publishing AI-generated product reviews on the site. The articles in question were written in a strange, stilted manner, and staff found that the authors the articles were attributed to didn’t seem to exist on LinkedIn and other platforms. Some questioned whether they were real at all. In response to questions, Gannett said the articles were produced by a third-party marketing company called AdVon Commerce and that the original reviews didn’t include proper disclosure. But Gannett denied that AI was involved.

As *The Verge* reported last fall, the marketing firm behind the *Reviewed* content is the same company that was responsible for

a similar dust-up at *Sports Illustrated*, in which remarkably similar product reviews were published and attributed to freelancers. But in the case of *Sports Illustrated*, the evidence that AI was involved was obvious: authors' headshots were for sale on AI image websites. *Sports Illustrated* maintained that though authors' names were indeed not real, AdVon had assured the company that real humans wrote the content.

But an investigation by *The Verge* into AdVon showed that the company has spammed the web with marketing content, some of which former employees say was indeed AI-generated. Ben Faw, CEO and cofounder of AdVon, has for years used his connections in media to land contracts with news outlets, often setting up elaborate marketing schemes to enrich himself. AdVon's marketing content appeared everywhere from small blogs to outlets like *Us Weekly* and the *Los Angeles Times*. In response to *The Verge's* reporting, Faw said in an emailed statement that the company "generate[s] affiliate revenue which publishers use to fund newsroom operations and salaries." He also said AdVon offers "human-only, AI-enhanced, and hybrid solutions" to customers hiring the firm.

Antón didn't offer a reason for shutting down *Reviewed*. Product reviews are often seen as a lucrative venture for publishers, who can draw readers looking for purchasing advice on search engines and make money when readers buy items from the articles. In recent months, other news organizations, including *The Associated Press*, have announced similar ventures. But even content that has historically made news outlets money is vulnerable to changes in Google Search, where a bulk of traffic comes from. Some independent sites have said their search traffic has steadily evaporated, and Google's pivot to AI search tools threatens to eat into revenue even further.

Unionized workers at *Reviewed* have gone on limited strikes multiple times after impasses with Gannett management. Most

recently, in July, staffers staged a temporary work stoppage, saying they were expected to take on additional work without adjustments to compensation. Gannett didn't comment on whether staff at *Reviewed* will be offered new roles at the company or whether they would be laid off.

Correction, August 26th: This story previously stated that Reviewed staff were given additional work with adjustments to pay. Their compensation was not adjusted.

<https://www.theverge.com/2024/8/26/24228880/gannett-usa-today-reviewed-product-reviews-ai-articles>