

## **NewsGuard—written evidence (FOJ0084)**

### **Response to the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee's Inquiry into Future of Journalism**

#### **About NewsGuard**

NewsGuard, launched in August 2018 by media entrepreneur and journalist Steven Brill and former Wall Street Journal publisher Gordon Crovitz, produces credibility ratings and detailed "Nutrition Labels" for the thousands of news and information websites that account for 95% of online engagement across the U.K, U.S., Germany, France and Italy.

NewsGuard employs journalists to rate each site based on nine apolitical criteria of journalistic practice, including whether a site repeatedly publishes false content, whether it regularly corrects or clarifies errors, whether it discloses its financing, and whether it avoids deceptive headlines. Based on weighted scoring of the criteria, each site receives a trust score of 0-100 and an overall rating of "Green," indicating the site is generally reliable, or "Red," indicating that it is not reliable.

With NewsGuard's browser extension installed, red and green ratings of the general reliability of news sources show up in social media and search engine feeds (Facebook, Google, Twitter, etc.), next to links to sources. When users hover over the green or red icons, they can begin to read the NewsGuard Nutrition Label explaining the site's editorial practices and background and why it got the rating that it received. By giving people access to these source credibility ratings at the first point at which they encounter an article, NewsGuard uses a transparent "pre-bunking" approach to help empower users to make informed choices about their news and information sources as they navigate their social media feeds and search results. Stories from sources that have published hoaxes in the past therefore come with red icons warning readers to proceed with caution as soon as they see a newly reported hoax, without having to wait for what are sometimes weeks before fact-checkers can review the story. Improving media literacy among the general public is crucial as digital-based media increasingly becomes the primary source of news and information for many people.

NewsGuard's ratings and Nutrition Labels can be licensed by education technology companies, internet service providers, browsers, news aggregators, and social media and search platforms. Consumers can access NewsGuard's ratings through its browser extension, Android and iOS apps, and the Microsoft Edge mobile browser.

Over 700 libraries globally use NewsGuard's free media literacy browser extension on their public-access computers for patrons. Academics, think tanks, and other organisations studying misinformation and media literacy use NewsGuard's News Website Reliability Index and other data as a benchmark for determining the credibility of news and information sites. These organisations include Avaaz, the German Marshall Fund, Microsoft, and universities around the world.

In April 2020, NewsGuard received an [endorsement](#) from Secretary of State Oliver Dowden regarding NewsGuard's work around empowering UK citizens against COVID-19 misinformation. NewsGuard has also received public support from BT on this front and is listed by Ofcom as a tool for users alongside UK fact checking organisations. UK advisory board members include former culture minister Ed Vaizey, Richard Sambrook, former global news editor of the BBC, and Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia.

## **NewsGuard and the future of the journalism industry**

One of NewsGuard's founding missions was to "restore trust in the media." NewsGuard was started by two journalists who see NewsGuard's role as restoring journalism by helping to distinguish and support credible journalism so that people will pay for online subscriptions and so that programmatic advertising will fund quality publications.

Misinformation poses a challenge to citizens of all ages, education levels, and political perspectives, and it has damaging effects for a range of societal sectors including government, the media, and public health. Although the spread of false news is not a new phenomenon, it has been exacerbated by technological changes that have altered how freely people access and share information—and misinformation and disinformation. Crucially, social media has accelerated the rate at which anyone can publish and share information, no matter how false or harmful it may be.

NewsGuard was founded to combat this rise in misinformation by providing people with more context to understand the reliability of their sources of news and information. Its approach is based on research and consumer experience measuring how credibility ratings and nutrition labels for news sources are effective and scalable ways to have a real impact on reader behaviour.

In the weeks leading up to our launch in the UK, NewsGuard actively engaged with major publishers, including broadsheets, tabloids and online-only publications who were interested in improving their NewsGuard rating. As a result of our analysts' feedback and ratings, more than 800 websites around the world have improved one or more of their journalistic practices, such as disclosure of ownership, or more clearly labelling opinion, as a result of our review process. These changes by even the most established journalistic enterprises help legitimate publishers re-establish trust with readers.

For example, Reuters, The Times, The Sun, and the MailOnline posted detailed information about their journalists; Newsweek and Yahoo improved their corrections policies; Forbes labelled its advertising more clearly; and Al Jazeera for the first time disclosed its Qatar government ownership to its readers.

The 2019 Cairncross Review revealed that across the UK people are less likely to trust online news and more likely to struggle to identify high quality news. On the internet everything looks the same — headlines are uniformly presented alongside tiny URLs that identify the brand. Online users struggle to assess the credibility of the many websites appearing in their social media feeds. The Cairncross Review also reported that almost half of adults admit that they regularly skim and share headlines without actually clicking into the story. The question is how to help people decide what to click on, what to read, and what to trust.

Silicon Valley acts as though it is just one algorithm away from solving the entire fake news crisis. Right now, an algorithm decides which stories land at the top of your newsfeed, and no one really knows why. Nor do these platforms inform publishers of their trustworthy ratings. In contrast, all publishers know their trustworthy rating from NewsGuard, from 0 to 100, and every publisher that fails any of the nine criteria is contacted for comment. These ratings are transparent enough that publishers can improve their rating by improving their practices.

The Cairncross Review recommended that platforms develop initiatives to help users identify for themselves the reliability and trustworthiness of sources — specifically by

helping them distinguish good and quality journalism from misinformation and hoaxes. NewsGuard was founded on the belief that that readers value knowing which news and information sources online follow basic, apolitical criteria of journalistic practice — and which do not.

Unlike an algorithm, NewsGuard gives every website a public score and explains why they received their rating. The names of the journalists who worked on that label are listed on every label linking to biographical and contact information. NewsGuard contacts news websites and incorporates their comments into its Nutrition Labels. Algorithms do not call for comment.

NewsGuard's goal is to create a more transparent online media with a more informed readership. Its emphasis on human intelligence rather than the artificial kind extends beyond the human production of the Nutrition Labels. A firm belief in human intelligence rests on the investment in the next generation of smart humans. Rather than secretly pushing certain stories up or down a newsfeed, NewsGuard believes that people are smart enough to decide for themselves what they want to read and what they can trust, provided they have the information to do so. In this way, NewsGuard does not act as a censor or a curator of any kind — it acts as a guide, a kind of librarian for the internet giving readers information about who's behind the news in their feed, how it's financed, whether it's historically reliable. It teaches users how to distinguish for themselves factual content from opinion, and why a corrections policy, for example, is so important.

NewsGuard works with public libraries in all the countries in which it operates, including the UK. Through this partnership, libraries work with NewsGuard to promote media literacy among patrons of all ages by providing a free, informative tool for users to download at home and continually scrutinise the content in their feed. There is an increasing divide also between those who can afford to access quality news and those who cannot. NewsGuard allows readers of all socioeconomic backgrounds to stay informed about which online news sources they can trust. With NewsGuard's labels, readers who cannot afford to bypass paywalls can learn how to identify free quality news.

By rating and reviewing not only traditional or mass media outlets, but also local newsrooms and new media, NewsGuard hopes to encourage media plurality in the UK and beyond. NewsGuard believes that even young online-only newsrooms can carry out high quality, hard-hitting journalism, even if the impact is only local. For example, many Nutrition Labels highlight impactful investigations and prize-winning reports carried out by smaller, local newspapers and news websites. Many digital-only startups earn perfect scores from NewsGuard for their journalistic practices, helping them establish themselves.

NewsGuard also works with major brands and advertising agencies to direct millions of dollars in programmatic advertising towards legitimate online news organisations, while driving revenue away from hoax healthcare or propaganda sites. In one case study, a top-five programmatic advertiser used NewsGuard's BrandGuard product to enhance its brand safety operation and flagged or blocked 6.9 million ad impressions on hoax and misinformation websites (including state-run foreign propaganda sites, unreliable health sites pushing anti-vaccine content or fake cancer cures, and more).

NewsGuard credibility ratings and data are available to digital platforms, internet providers and others to integrate into their products to provide a tool for their users to be informed about which news websites are generally reliable and which are not.

NewsGuard believes the tech platforms should go further to empower consumers against online dis- and misinformation. Simply funding fact-checking efforts directed at a small

number of articles on a limited number of websites **after** they have published their toxic stories cannot achieve this goal. Fact checking does not provide information about all sites or even anything close to a significant number of them. When digital platforms decide to remove content or accounts, it is not through a transparent process, and it features the unaccountable platforms making decisions for consumers. It is also, by definition, reactive instead of proactive.

NewsGuard is eager to work with the tech platforms to integrate its ratings and Nutrition Labels directly into their apps so that users can access information about online news when browsing on their smartphones.

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