

Mainstream Strategy to Neutralise Influence of Alternative Media

by Whitney Webb via shirl - MintPress *Thursday, Jan 10 2019, 8:28pm*

international / prose / post

"Newsguard," a nefarious Neocon/CFR backed browser plugin/app to filter opposition News

MINNEAPOLIS — Soon after the social media “purge” of independent media sites and pages this past October, a top neoconservative insider — Jamie Fly — was caught stating that the mass deletion of anti-establishment and anti-war pages on Facebook and Twitter was “just the beginning” of a concerted effort by the U.S. government and powerful corporations to silence online dissent within the United States and beyond.



While a few, relatively uneventful months in the online news sphere have come and gone since Fly made this ominous warning, it appears that the neoconservatives and other standard bearers of the military-industrial complex and the U.S. oligarchy are now poised to let loose their latest digital offensive against independent media outlets that seek to expose wrongdoing in both the private and public sectors.

As MintPress News Editor-in-Chief Mnar Muhawesh recently wrote, MintPress was informed that it was under review by an organization called Newsguard Technologies, which described itself to MintPress as simply a “news rating agency” and asked Muhawesh to comment on a series of allegations, several of which were blatantly untrue. However, further examination of this organization reveals that it is funded by and deeply connected to the U.S. government, neo-conservatives, and powerful monied interests, all of whom have been working overtime since the 2016 election to silence dissent to American forever-wars and corporate-led oligarchy.

More troubling still, Newsguard — by virtue of its deep connections to government and Silicon Valley — is lobbying to have its rankings of news sites installed by default on computers in U.S. public libraries, schools, and universities as well as on all smartphones and computers sold in the United States.

In other words, as Newsguard’s project advances, it will soon become almost impossible to avoid this neocon-approved news site’s ranking systems on any technological device sold in the United States. Worse still, if its efforts to quash dissenting voices in the U.S. are successful, Newsguard promises that its next move will be to take its system global.

Red light, green light . . .

Newsguard has received considerable attention in the mainstream media of late, having been the subject of a slew of articles in the Washington Post, the Hill, the Boston Globe, Politico, Bloomberg,

Wired, and many others just over the past few months. Those articles portray Newsguard as using “old-school journalism” to fight “fake news” through its reliance on nine criteria allegedly intended to separate the wheat from the chaff when it comes to online news.

Newsguard separates sites it deems worthy and sites it considers unreliable by using a color-coded rating — green, yellow, or red — and more detailed “nutrition labels” regarding a site’s credibility or lack thereof. Rankings are created by Newsguard’s team of “trained analysts.” The color-coding system may remind some readers of the color-coded terror threat-level warning system that was created after 9/11, making it worth noting that Tom Ridge, the former secretary of Homeland Security who oversaw the implementation of that system under George W. Bush, is on Newsguard’s advisory board.

As Newsguard releases a new rating of a site, that rating automatically spreads to all computers that have installed its news ranking browser plug-in. That plug-in is currently available for free for the most commonly used internet browsers. NewsGuard directly markets the browser plug-in to libraries, schools and internet users in general.

According to its website, Newsguard has rated more than 2,000 news and information sites. However, it plans to take its ranking efforts much farther by eventually reviewing “the 7,500 most-read news and information websites in the U.S.—about 98 percent of news and information people read and share online” in the United States in English.

A recent Gallup study, which was supported and funded by Newsguard as well as the Knight Foundation (itself a major investor in Newsguard), stated that a green rating increased users likelihood to share and read content while a red rating decreased that likelihood. Specifically, it found 63 percent would be less likely to share news stories from red-rated websites, and 56 percent would be more likely to share news from green-rated websites, though the fact that Newsguard and one of its top investors funded the poll makes it necessary to take these findings with a grain of salt.

However, some of the rankings Newsguard itself has publicized show that it is manifestly uninterested in fighting “misinformation.” How else to explain the fact that the Washington Post and CNN both received high scores even though both have written stories or made statements that later proved to be entirely false? For example, CNN falsely claimed in 2016 that it was illegal for Americans to read WikiLeaks releases and illegally colluded with the DNC to craft presidential debate questions.

In addition, in 2017, CNN published a fake story that a Russian bank linked to a close ally of President Donald Trump was under Senate investigation. That same year, CNN was forced to retract a report that the Trump campaign had been tipped off early about WikiLeaks documents damaging to Hillary Clinton when it later learned the alert was about material already publicly available.

The Washington Post, whose \$600 million conflict of interest with the CIA goes unnoted by Newsguard, has also published false stories since the 2016 election, including one article that falsely claimed that “Russian hackers” had tapped into Vermont’s electrical grid. It was later found that the grid itself was never breached and the “hack” was only an isolated laptop with a minor malware problem. Yet, such acts of journalistic malpractice are apparently of little concern to Newsguard when those committing such acts are big-name corporate media outlets.

Furthermore, Newsguard gives a high rating to Voice of America, the U.S. state-funded media outlet, even though its former acting associate director said that the outlet produces “fluff journalism” and despite the fact that it was recently reformed to “provide news that supports our

[U.S.] national security objectives.” However, RT receives a low “red” rating for being funded by the Russian government and for “raising doubts about other countries and their institutions” (i.e., including reporting critical of the institutions and governments of the U.S. and its allies).

Keeping the conversation safe for the corporatocracy

Newsguard describes itself as an organization dedicated to “restoring trust and accountability” and using “journalism to fight false news, misinformation and disinformation.” While it repeatedly claims on its website that its employees “have no political axes to grind” and “care deeply about reliable journalism’s pivotal role in democracy,” a quick look at its co-founders, top funders and advisory board make it clear that Newsguard is aimed at curbing voices that hold the powerful — in both government and the private sector — to account.

Newsguard is the latest venture to result from the partnership between Steven Brill and Louis Gordon Crovitz, who currently serve as co-CEOs of the group. Brill is a long-time journalist — published in *TIME* and *The New Yorker*, among others — who most recently founded the Yale Journalism Initiative, which aims to encourage Yale students who “aspire to contribute to democracy in the United States and around the world” to become journalists at top U.S. and international media organizations. He first teamed up with Crovitz in 2009 to create Journalism Online, which sought to make the online presence of top American newspapers and other publishers profitable, and was also the CEO of the company that partnered up with the TSA to offer “registered” travelers the ability to move more quickly through airport security — for a price, of course.

While Brill’s past does not in itself raise red flags, Crovitz — his partner in founding Journalism Online, then Press+, and now Newsguard — is the last person one would expect to find promoting any legitimate effort to “restore trust and accountability” in journalism. In the early 1980s, Crovitz held a number of positions at Dow Jones and at the *Wall Street Journal*, eventually becoming executive vice president of the former and the publisher of the latter before both were sold to Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp in 2007. He is also a board member of *Business Insider*, which has received over \$30 million from Washington Post owner Jeff Bezos in recent years.

In addition to being a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, Crovitz proudly notes in his bio, available on Newsguard’s website, that he has been an “editor or contributor to books published by the American Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation.” Though many MintPress readers are likely familiar with these two institutions, for those who are not, it is worth pointing out that the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) is one of the most influential neoconservative think tanks in the country and its “scholars,” directors and fellows have included neoconservative figures like Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, John Bolton and Frederick Kagan.

During the George W. Bush administration, AEI was instrumental in promoting the invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq and has since advocated for militaristic solutions to U.S. foreign policy objectives and the expansion of the U.S.’ military empire as well as the “War on Terror.” During the Bush years, AEI was also closely associated with the now defunct and controversial neoconservative organization known as the Project for a New American Century (PNAC), which presciently called, four years before 9/11, for a “new Pearl Harbor” as needed to rally support behind American military adventurism.

The Heritage Foundation, like AEI, was also supportive of the war in Iraq and has pushed for the expansion of the War on Terror and U.S. missile defense and military empire. Its corporate donors over the years have included Procter & Gamble, Chase Manhattan Bank, Dow Chemical, and Exxon Mobil, among others.

Crovitz's associations with AEI and the Heritage Foundation, as well as his ties to Wall Street and the upper echelons of corporate media, are enough to make any thinking person question his commitment to being a fair watchdog of "legitimate journalism." Yet, beyond his innumerable connections to neoconservatives and powerful monied interest, Crovitz has repeatedly been accused of inserting misinformation into his Wall Street Journal columns, with groups like the Electronic Frontier Foundation accusing him of "repeatedly getting his facts wrong" on NSA surveillance and other issues. Some of the blatant falsehoods that have appeared in Crovitz's work have never been corrected, even when his own sources called him out for misinformation.

For example, in a WSJ opinion piece that was written by Crovitz in 2012, Crovitz was accused of making "fantastically false claims" about the history of the internet by the very people he had cited to support those claims.

As TechDirt wrote at the time:

"Almost everyone he [Crovitz] sourced or credited to support his argument that the internet was invented entirely privately at Xerox PARC and when Vint Cerf helped create TCP/IP, has spoken out to say he's wrong. And that list includes both Vint Cerf, himself, and Xerox. Other sources, including Robert Taylor (who was there when the internet was invented) and Michael Hiltzik, have rejected Crovitz's spinning of their own stories."

The oligarch team's deep bench

While Brill and Crovitz's connections alone should be enough cause for alarm, a cursory examination of Newsguard's advisory board makes it clear that Newsguard was created to serve the interests of American oligarchy. Chief among Newsguard's advisors are Tom Ridge, the first Secretary of Homeland Security under George W. Bush and Ret. General Michael Hayden, a former CIA director, a former NSA director and principal at the Chertoff Group, a security consultancy seeking to "advise corporate clients and governments, including foreign governments" on security matters that was co-founded by former Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, who also currently serves as the board chairman of major weapons manufacturer BAE systems.

Another Newsguard advisor of note is Richard Stengel, former editor of Time magazine, a "distinguished fellow" at the Atlantic Council and Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy under President Barack Obama. At a panel discussion hosted last May by the Council on Foreign Relations, Stengel described his past position at the State Department as "chief propagandist" and also stated that he is "not against propaganda. Every country does it and they have to do it to their own population and I don't necessarily think it's that awful."

Other Newsguard advisors include Don Baer, former White House communications director and advisor to Bill Clinton and current chairman of both PBS and the influential PR firm Burson Cohn & Wolfe as well as Elise Jordan, former communications director for the National Security Council and former speech-writer for Condoleezza Rice, as well as the widow of slain journalist Michael Hastings — who was writing an exposé on former CIA director John Brennan at the time of his suspicious death.

A look at Newsguard's investors further illustrates the multifarious connections between this organization and the American political and corporate elite. While Brill and Crovitz themselves are the company's top investors, one of Newsguard's most important investors is the Publicis Groupe. Publicis is the third largest global communications company in the world, with more than 80,000 employees in over 100 countries and an annual revenue of over €9.6 billion (\$10.98 billion) in 2017.

It is no stranger to controversy, as one of its subsidiaries, Qorvis, recently came under fire for exploiting U.S. veterans at the behest of the Saudi government and also helped the Saudi government to “whitewash” its human rights record and its genocidal war in Yemen after receiving \$6 million from the Gulf Kingdom in 2017.

Furthermore, given its size and influence, it is unsurprising that the Publicis Groupe counts many powerful corporations and governments among its clientele. Some of its top clients in 2018 included pharmaceutical giants Eli Lilly, Merck, Pfizer and Bayer/Monsanto as well as Starbucks, Procter & Gamble, McDonalds, Kraft Heinz, Burger King, and the governments of Australia and Saudi Arabia. Given its influential role in funding Newsguard, it is reasonable to point out the potential conflict of interest posed by the fact that sites that accurately report on Publicis’ powerful clients — but generate bad publicity — could be targeted for such reports in Newsguard’s ranking.

In addition to the Publicis Groupe, another major investor in Newsguard is the Blue Haven Initiative, which is the venture capital “impact investment” fund of the wealthy Pritzker family — one of the top 10 wealthiest families in the U.S., best known as the owners of the Hyatt Hotel chain and for being the second largest financial contributors to Hillary Clinton’s 2016 presidential campaign.

Other top investors include John McCarter, a long-time executive at U.S. government contractor Booz Allen Hamilton, as well as Thomas Glocer, former CEO of Reuters and a member of the boards of pharmaceutical giant Merck & Co., financial behemoth Morgan Stanley, and the Council on Foreign Relations, as well as a member of the Atlantic Council’s International Advisory Board.

Through these investors, Newsguard managed to raise \$6 million to begin its ranking efforts in March of 2018. Newsguard’s actual revenues and financing, however, have not been disclosed despite the fact that it requires the sites it ranks to disclose their funding. In a display of pure hypocrisy, Newsguard’s United States Securities and Exchange Commission Form D — which was filed March 5, 2018 — states that the company “declined to disclose” the size of its total revenue.

Why give folks a choice?

While even a quick glance at its advisory board alone would be enough for many Americans to decline to install Newsguard’s browser extension on their devices, the danger of Newsguard is the fact that it is diligently working to make the adoption of its app involuntary. Indeed, if voluntary adoption of Newsguard’s app were the case, there would likely be little cause for concern, given that its website attracts barely more than 300 visits per month and its social-media following is relatively small, with just over 2,000 Twitter followers and barely 500 Facebook likes at the time of this article’s publication.

To illustrate its slip-it-under-the-radar strategy, Newsguard has gone directly to state governments to push its browser extension onto entire state public library systems, even though its website suggests that individual public libraries are welcome to install the extension if they so choose. The first state to install Newsguard on all of its public library computers across its 51 branches was the state of Hawaii — which was the first to partner with Newsguard’s “news literacy initiative,” just last month.

According to local media, Newsguard “now works with library systems representing public libraries across the country, and is also partnering with middle schools, high schools, universities, and educational organizations to support their news literacy efforts,” suggesting that these Newsguard services targeting libraries and schools are soon to become a compulsory component of the American library and education system, despite Newsguard’s glaring conflicts of interest with

massive multinational corporations and powerful government power-brokers.

Notably, NewsGuard has a powerful partner that has allowed it to start finding its way into public library and school computers throughout the country. As part of its new “Defending Democracy” initiative, Microsoft announced last August that it would be partnering with NewsGuard to actively market the company’s ranking app and other services to libraries and schools throughout the country. Microsoft’s press release regarding the partnership states that NewsGuard “will empower voters by providing them with high-quality information about the integrity and transparency of online news sites.”

Since then, Microsoft has now added the NewsGuard app as a built-in feature of Microsoft Edge, also browsers for iOS and Android mobile devices, and is unlikely to stop there. Indeed, as a recent report in favor of Microsoft’s partnership with NewsGuard noted, “we could hope that this new partnership will allow Microsoft to add NewsGuard to Edge on Windows 10 [operating system for computers] as well.”

NewsGuard, for its part, seems confident that its app will soon be added by default to all mobile devices. On its website, the organization notes that “NewsGuard will be available on mobile devices when the digital platforms such as social media sites and search engines or mobile operating systems add our ratings and Nutrition Labels directly.” This shows that NewsGuard isn’t expecting its rating systems to be offered as a downloadable application for mobile devices but something that social media sites like Facebook, search engines like Google, and mobile device operating systems that are dominated by Apple and Google will “directly” integrate into nearly every smartphone and tablet sold in the United States.

A Boston Globe article on NewsGuard from this past October makes this plan even more clear. The Globe wrote at the time:

“Microsoft has already agreed to make NewsGuard a built-in feature in future products, and [NewsGuard co-CEO] Brill said he’s in talks with other online titans. The goal is to have NewsGuard running by default on our computers and phones whenever we scan the Web for news.”

This eventuality is made all the more likely given the fact that, in addition to Microsoft, NewsGuard is also closely connected to Google, as Google has been a partner of the Publicis Groupe since 2014, when the two massive companies joined Condé Nast to create a new marketing service called La Maison that is “focused on producing engaging content for marketers in the luxury space.” Given Google’s power in the digital sphere as the dominant search engine, the creator of the Android mobile operating system, and the owner of YouTube, its partnership with Publicis means that NewsGuard’s rating system will soon see itself being promoted by yet another of Silicon Valley’s most powerful companies.

Furthermore, there is an effort underway to integrate NewsGuard into social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. Indeed, as NewsGuard was launched, co-CEO Brill stated that he planned to sell the company’s ratings of news sites to Facebook and Twitter. Last March, Brill told CNN that “We’re asking them [Facebook, Twitter, Microsoft and Google] to pay a fraction of what they pay their P.R. people and their lobbyists to talk about the problem.”

On Wednesday, Gallup released a poll that will likely be used as a major selling point to social media giants. The poll — funded by NewsGuard and the Knight Foundation, which is a top investor in NewsGuard and has recently funded a series of Gallup polls relating to online news — seems to have been created with the intention of manufacturing consent for the integration of NewsGuard with top

social media sites.

This is because the promoted findings from the study are as follows: “89% of users of social media sites and 83% overall want social media sites and search engines to integrate NewsGuard ratings and reviews into their news feeds and search results” and “69% would trust social media and search companies more if they took the simple step of including NewsGuard in their products.” However, a disclaimer at the end of the poll states that the results, which were based on the responses of 706 people each of whom received \$2 to participate, “may not be reflective of attitudes of the broader U.S adult population.”

With trust at Facebook nose-diving and Facebook’s censorship of independent media already well underway, the findings of this poll could well be used to justify its integration into Facebook’s platform. The connections of both NewsGuard and Facebook to the Atlantic Council make this seem a given.

Financial censorship

Another NewsGuard service shows that this organization is also seeking to harm independent media financially by targeting online revenue. Through a service called “Brandguard,” which it describes as a “brand safety tool aimed at helping advertisers keep their brands off of unreliable news and information sites while giving them the assurance they need to support thousands of Green-rated [i.e., NewsGuard-approved] news and information sites, big and small.”

At the time the service was announced last November, NewsGuard co-CEO Brill stated that the company was “in discussions with the ad tech firms, leading agencies, and major advertisers” eager to adopt a blacklist of news sites deemed “unreliable” by NewsGuard. This is unsurprising given the leading role of the Publicis Groupe, one of the world’s largest advertising and PR firms, has in funding NewsGuard. As a consequence, it seems likely that many, if not all, of Publicis’ client companies will choose to adopt this blacklist to help crush many of the news sites that are unafraid to hold them accountable.

It is also important to note here that Google’s connection to Publicis and thus NewsGuard could spell trouble for independent news pages that rely on Google AdSense for some or all of their ad-based revenue. Google AdSense has long been targeting sites like MintPress by demonetizing articles for information or photographs it deemed controversial, including demonetizing one article for including a photo showing U.S. soldiers involved in torturing Iraqi detainees at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison.

Since then, Google — a U.S. military contractor — has repeatedly tried to shutter ad access to MintPress articles that involve reporting that is critical of U.S. empire and military expansion. One article that has been repeatedly flagged by Google details how many African-Americans have questioned whether the Women’s March has aided or harmed the advancement of African-Americans in the United States. Google has repeatedly claimed that the article, which was written by African-American author and former Washington Post bureau chief Jon Jeter, contains “dangerous content.”

Given Google’s already established practice of targeting factual reporting it deemed controversial through AdSense, Brandguard will likely offer the tech giant just the excuse it needs to cut off sites like MintPress, and other pages equally critical of empire, altogether.

An action plan for the genuine protection of journalism

Though it is just getting started, Newsguard's plan to insert its app into every device and major social-media network is a threat to any news site that regularly publishes information that rubs any of Newsguard's investors, partners or advisors the wrong way. Given its plan to rank the English-language U.S. news sites that account for 98 percent of U.S. digital news consumption, Newsguard's agenda is of the utmost concern to every independent media page active in the United States and beyond — given Newsguard's promise to take its project global.

By linking up with former CIA and NSA directors, Silicon Valley Giants, and massive PR firms working for some of the most controversial governments and corporations in the world, Newsguard has betrayed the fact that it is not actually seeking to “restore trust and accountability” in journalism, but to “restore trust and accountability” in news outlets that protect the existing power structure and help shield the corporate-led oligarchy and military-industrial complex from criticism.

Not only is it trying to tank the reputations of independent media through its biased ranking system, Newsguard is also seeking to attack these alternative voices financially and by slipping its ranking system by default onto all computers and phones sold in the U.S.

However, Newsguard and its agenda of guarding the establishment from criticism can be stopped. By supporting independent media and unplugging from social media sites committed to censorship, like Facebook and Twitter, we can strengthen the independent media community and keep it afloat despite the unprecedented nature of these attacks on free speech and watchdog journalism.

Beyond that, a key way to keep Newsguard and those behind it on their toes is to hold them to account by pointing out their clear conflicts of interest and hypocrisy and by derailing the narrative they are carefully crafting that Newsguard is “non-partisan,” “trustworthy,” and true guardians against the scourge of “fake news.”

While this report has sought to be a starting point for such work, anyone concerned about Newsguard and its connections to the war machine and corrupt corporations should feel encouraged to point out the organization's own conflicts of interests and shady connections via its Twitter and Facebook pages and the feedback section on Newsguard's website. The best way to defeat this new tool of the neocons is to put them on notice and to continue to expose Newsguard as a guardian of empire, not a guardian of journalism.

Top Photo | This photo, edited by MintPress News, shows Primedia chairman and CEO Tom Rogers, left, talking with Newsguard CEO Steven Brill after a New York news conference announcing Brill as the chairman and CEO of Media Central, Jan. 4, 2001. Ed Bailey | AP

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