

Brill and Crovitz Announce Launch of NewsGuard to Fight Fake News

By Fall, NewsGuard Will Begin Providing Online Users with Reliability Ratings and ‘Nutrition Label’ Write-Ups for 7,500 News and Information Websites Used and Shared by U.S. Consumers

(NEW YORK, March 5, 2018) Longtime journalists and media entrepreneurs Steven Brill and Gordon Crovitz today announced that they have raised \$6 million to launch NewsGuard, which will address the fake news crisis by hiring dozens of trained journalists as analysts to review the 7,500 news and information websites most accessed and shared in the United States, in time for the mid-term elections in November.

These sites account for 98% of the news articles read and shared in the English language online in the United States. These reliability ratings, along with “nutrition label” write-ups of each of the 7,500 news sources, will be licensed to social media platforms and online search companies, as well as provided to interested consumers directly.

The ratings — Green, Yellow, or Red — will be derived in a process that will be completely transparent and accountable. NewsGuard will launch in the U.S. and then expand to other countries.

The lead investor, among a group of 18 investors, is Publicis Groupe, one of the world’s leading ad agency holding companies.

“Our goal is to help solve this problem now by using human beings—trained, experienced journalists—who will operate under a transparent, accountable process to apply basic common sense to a growing scourge that clearly cannot be solved by algorithms,” explained Brill, the author of two best-selling books, who has won multiple National Magazine awards and, among other journalism enterprises, founded *The American Lawyer*, Court TV, and *Brill’s Content* magazine.

“We are not going to make granular judgments about political leanings, or which of two legitimate news sites—Buzzfeed News or the *Boston Globe*, for example—produces more reliable journalism,” added Crovitz, a longtime writer, editor, and columnist for *The Wall Street Journal* editorial page and the former publisher of the *Journal*. “But we will tell readers the *Denver Post* is a real newspaper and that the *Denver Guardian* exists only as a purveyor of fake news.” Similarly, a site that purports to report all sides of a controversial issue will get a Yellow if it is financed—but with no disclosure—by a trade association, government, or politician, because while it is not necessarily “fake news,” it is content whose creator failed to disclose self-interest. Purveyors of consistently and intentionally false information or propaganda will be rated Red.

“In addition to alerting people to fake news,” Crovitz said, “one of our key goals is to help consumers, including young people, know when to take news from certain sites with a grain of salt. Brands convey important information about sources of news, but unlike in the days of newsstands, brands don’t stand out in social media feeds or search results.”

“For us, NewsGuard is highly appealing because it is a concrete, actionable answer to our clients’ concerns – another layer of protection for them,” said Publicis Groupe Chairman Maurice Levy. “Advertisers care about the quality and credibility of the brands they support, and we are delighted to be the lead investor in NewsGuard as a key part of the solution to the crisis of fake news.”

“The way news is displayed online, especially in social media, makes all news brands—both legitimate and fake—look the same,” said Alberto Ibargüen, president of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which is also an investor in NewsGuard. “NewsGuard will help restore the value of legitimate news by giving readers online more information about the sources they use, or decide not to use.”

The How and Who of NewsGuard

Two NewsGuard analysts will independently review and rate each site or online publication. One will then draft the Nutrition Label, which the other will edit. These write-ups can then be accessed to allow readers to learn more about why publishers received the Green, Yellow or Red rating.

The labels will explain the history of the site, what it attempts to cover, who owns it, who edits it, and make transparent other relevant factors, such as financing, notable awards or missteps, whether the publisher participates in programs such as the Trust Project [link], which holds publishers to transparency standards, or has repeatedly been found at fault by one of the established programs that check individual articles. (Links are available at the end of this release to an explanation of the ratings system and to a sample of Nutrition Labels.)

Any disagreements between the two analysts reviewing each site will be resolved by NewsGuard’s senior editorial officers, who will include co-founders Brill and Crovitz, as well as James Warren and Eric Efron.

Warren, NewsGuard’s Executive Editor, served as Washington Bureau Chief and Managing Editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, and most recently as chief media writer for the Poynter Institute, which co-hosted his daily media newsletter with *Vanity Fair*’s “Hive.” He is a frequent television commentator on politics nationally and in Chicago.

Efron, who will be Managing Editor, served, among other positions, as Editor-In Charge of Company News (including media companies) and Legal Editor at Reuters, Executive Editor of *The Week*, and editor and publisher of *Legal Times*.

Brill and Crovitz said that they expect most or all of the 7,500 sites to be reviewed and the Nutrition Labels written by this fall, before the 2018 mid-term elections. They are now recruiting and training qualified journalists to be NewsGuard analysts, who will be based at the company’s offices in New York and Chicago.

In addition to rating the 7,500 most read and shared sites, a separate “SWAT Team” will be on call on a 24/7 basis to receive and act on alerts about sites that are suddenly trending, but that have not yet been rated, including because the site was just launched to promote a fictitious, sensational story. The NewsGuard analysts will rate these sites in real time.

The ratings and Nutrition Labels will constantly be subject to change, depending on whether the standards of the sites change and also on input from news consumers, including a prominent, easily accessible process for comments and critiques from readers and viewers.

“Yes, we believe in experts when it comes to challenges like the one we are tackling,” Brill said. “But we also know that experts can be wrong and that the best way to guard against that is to listen to the people you are trying to serve. So, with all the transparency and accountability we are putting into place, we see NewsGuard as an expert/wisdom-of-the-crowds hybrid.”

In addition, all sites receiving a Yellow or Red rating will be asked to comment on the rating, and their comments will be reported in the Nutrition Label.

Another avenue of input will be NewsGuard’s “RateMe” link to receive requests for a NewsGuard review from newer or smaller blogs and news sources that are not among the top 98% of news and information sites that Americans engage with the most, and, therefore, have not yet been rated.

Drawing on the Work of Those Already Engaged in the Fight

“Another way we will assure the accuracy and comprehensiveness of our Nutrition Labels,” Brill added, is by relying on the work already being done by professional fact checking groups that review individual articles, as well as the standards being set by the Trust Project, hosted by the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University.

“If a site has published news declared inaccurate by one of these organizations,” he explained, “or if the site is adhering to the Trust Project’s transparency standards, we’ll take that into account and convey it in its Nutrition Label.”

“We’re delighted that NewsGuard is launching a program that recognizes the importance of our standards, which represent years of work by senior leaders from more than 75 news organizations,” said Sally Lehrman, director of the Trust Project and a veteran award-winning journalist. “We look forward to the added impact and exposure for the Trust Indicators from this new venture by two very serious journalists.”

Crovitz said NewsGuard will use artificial intelligence to identify new trending news brands and to “find sites that try to play Whack-a-Mole with us by using multiple sites to evade a rating that we gave to the same or similar content.”

Helping Advertisers Protect Their Brands

The proliferation of undetected fake news purveyors, combined with programmatic advertising, has caused increasing dismay in the advertising community. Their brands are often appearing alongside content they would never knowingly support because until now there has not been a way to separate legitimate journalism sites from fake news sites. Out of caution, some advertisers have reduced their marketing on all news sites, putting further pressure on the economics of journalism by depriving news publishers of ad revenues.

“Advertisers are increasingly concerned about their brand safety and do not want to help finance and appear alongside fake news,” Publicis Chairman Levy explained. “NewsGuard will be able to publish and license ‘white lists’ of news sites our clients can use to support legitimate publishers while still protecting their brand reputations. “

How NewsGuard Will Proliferate

NewsGuard will supply browser plug-in versions of the software providing its ratings and Nutrition Labels for free to news literacy groups, school and university systems, and individual consumers so that NewsGuard’s ratings and Nutrition Labels can appear as part of the searches they conduct or news alerts they receive.

NewsGuard will license its ratings and Nutrition Labels to the various social media and search platforms and other aggregators of news and information so that they can offer the ratings and Nutrition Labels with their feeds. “We’ve had regular discussions with potential licensees,” Crovitz said, “Their typical response has been that if we do what we say we are going to do, they will be highly interested in using NewsGuard as a way to respond to a problem whose dimensions are becoming increasingly clear.”

“We know we are not a solution to everything bad that is happening online,” said Brill. “But we are confident that we will add an important layer of protection for users, for advertisers, for the platforms, and for the country, while allowing the platforms to remain out of the editorial business. At a time when our nation’s lead intelligence officials are warning that foreign powers will continue trying to meddle in our elections by spreading fake news,” Brill added “we think it is all the more important to allow Americans to make informed choices about the information that they consume online.”

“Our strategy of reviewing sites, rather than individual articles,” Crovitz explained, “allows us to achieve the scale necessary to provide information on more than 98% of the news and information that people read and share online.”

NewsGuard will use the same strategy to expand to Spanish sites in the U.S. and to expand internationally once its English language service in the U.S. has been established. “Our potential licensees have all made clear the importance of quickly extending NewsGuard overseas, especially to countries perceived to have even more acute problems with untrustworthy digital news,” Crovitz said.

Go to the NewsGuard website [www.Newsguardtechnologies.com] for more information, including:

1. NewsGuard's investors
2. An explanation of the ratings
3. Samples of Nutrition Labels
4. Bios for Steven Brill and Gordon Crovitz