

NewsGuard shines a red light on fake news sources

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A start-up has taken on the enormous task of fighting fake news with a technique that's reminiscent of selecting products on supermarket shelves.

Go to a supermarket and you realise you can't spend all day researching every brand of soup on the shelves, the sources of fruits and poultry, cereals, biscuits and breads. We depend on food labelling to glean nutritional value, and branding labels such as Made in Australia, and previously the National Heart Foundation tick of approval, to offer guidance.

Likewise, we don't have time to research the truth or otherwise of every snippet of news we read online. It could be just an individual mouthing off in a blog, a concocted item or, worse, a news site that's a front for a country peddling misinformation.

Even if a news source seems genuine, we may not know straight away if it has an agenda, aligns with a particular slice of the political spectrum or has a deliberate mission to mislead the public, cause havoc by publishing provocative mistruths or to amplify divisions in the community by stoking the fires of both sides of a contentious issue, as some Russian government-sponsored media tries to.

Despite special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russia's interference in the 2016 US presidential election, and now the probe into that investigation, the world is still floundering on the bread-and-butter issue of how to deal with the avalanche of fake news online.

Enter [NewsGuard](#), a service that offers a web browser plug-in, an icon that sits near the top of your browser. The icon goes red when you view news from a dodgy site and green when the news site

follows basic standards of accuracy. The plug-in works with Google Chrome, Microsoft Edge, Mozilla Firefox and Apple Safari.

NewsGuard is the brainchild of co-chief executives Steven Brill and Gordon Crovitz. Brill is founder of Court TV, The American Lawyer magazine, American Lawyer Media, Brill's Content magazine, Journalism Online and The Yale Journalism Initiative. Crovitz is a former publisher, editorial board member and opinion columnist for The Wall Street Journal, and a board member of Business Insider.

Click on the plug-in icon, and you get a list of scores for that news website based on credibility and transparency, what they call a credibility nutrition label.

It seems to me that the “nutrition label” approach — where you rate news sources by colour — is a more efficient tool than attempts by Facebook to vet fake news by working with third-party fact-checkers. Facebook's approach is like examining every can of baked beans on the supermarket shelves, and it is little wonder the fact-checking can't succeed in real time.

The obvious question is: can you trust Brill and Crovitz, who are at the cutting edge of what could be called an online trust industry? They say their analysis of sites (they've categorised about 2000 so far) is detailed and transparent, that their team comprises trained journalists dedicated to the profession, that NewsGuard has an ethics and conflicts of interest policy, and readers can see the credentials and backgrounds of everyone responsible for every NewsGuard reliability rating.

They say the team is online 24/7 and will notify you in real time if they encounter a dodgy news site: “A SWAT team of NewsGuard analysts operates 24/7 to identify suddenly trending purveyors of unreliable news among sites that NewsGuard has not yet rated and warns internet users about them in real time.”

Making judgments about news sites is highly contentious. If you have strong views for or against humans as causing climate change, abortion, euthanasia, immigration or religious freedom in the Constitution, you could regard opposing arguments, news and opinion as fallacies, fake news, lies, deception or just totally concocted.

NewsGuard uses specific criteria to judge its overall green or red rating: does the site repeatedly publish false content? Does it gather and present information responsibly, regularly correct or

clarify errors, handle the difference between news and opinion responsibly, and avoid deceptive headlines? Those parameters each get a tick or cross.

Does the site clearly label advertising, reveal who's in charge including conflicts of interest, provide names and contact details of content creators, and does it disclose ownership and financing? Those details are marked yes or no too. All of this is revealed as a pop-up when you click on the green or red icon.

A second click takes you to several screens of information about that site, including the rationale for that site passing or failing.

Take the notorious Moscow-backed website rt.com, which in 2017 on YouTube clocked 2.1 billion views and 2.2 million subscribers. The NewsGuard icon turns red when I access rt.com, which fails five of nine criteria, including the pivotal one of “does not repeatedly publish false content”.

In its [detailed analysis](#), NewsGuard says rt.com's news coverage regularly advances false claims and propaganda promoted by the Kremlin, and omits or rejects facts and positions that do not align with the Russian government that owns and funds it. What follows is a detailed and damning indictment that includes, of particular interest to me, rt.com's misinformation campaign on cellular 5G.

Between May last year and April this year, the site published multiple articles and videos falsely claiming the 5G cellular telephone network could cause cancer, says NewsGuard, which then delves into research that indicates the contrary.

Even supposedly more respectable publications get a touch-up. Vatican News gets a green tick overall but fails for not regularly correcting or clarifying errors, while Britain's Daily Mail passes overall but fails when it comes to gathering and presenting information responsibly.

NewsGuard says its 2000 site analysis so far constitutes more than 96 per cent of online engagement in the US in English. It has analysed sites in the US, Germany, France and Italy, and plans to expand globally. While it hasn't analysed Australian sites yet, the plug-in works when accessing international sites from Australia. The service is free to readers as its revenue comes from licensing ratings, and Microsoft is a key client.

NewsGuard is a small but important start to countering fake news. It doesn't stretch to Facebook, the biggest single source of fake news, nor does it tackle other social media or address the army of bots that propagate false news online. It has attracted criticism periodically from those who disagree with its findings; sites get a right of reply.

Commercially, Brill and Crovitz will be hoping that some social media sites incorporate their service in news posts. Otherwise, next year's US presidential election and our next federal election in 2022 will serve up umpteen times the dose of fake news we have seen so far, along with new deep fakes showing public figures making statements on video that they never made.

Finally, if you don't like Brill's and Crovitz's take on news, maybe other plug-ins will come along that are closer to your view of the world. There's room for other players in the online trust industry. Nevertheless, NewsGuard shows there are other, more effective ways of checking the legitimacy of news other than the hopeless task of fact-checking story by story.

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