Combatting the "Infodemic":

NewsGuard's response to the spread of COVID-19 misinformation

NewsGuard has been at the forefront of documenting, debunking, and tracking coronavirus misinformation since the early days of the pandemic. Before any Americans died of COVID-19, NewsGuard analysts noticed an alarming increase in false and misleading content about the disease, its origin, and potential "cures." The World Health Organization called this problem an "infodemic," as citizens globally are exposed to "an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it."

As of April 14, NewsGuard had identified 170 sites in the U.S., U.K., Germany, France, and Italy that have published verifiably false information about the novel coronavirus. These sites receive significant traction on social media, many of them receiving more shares, likes, and comments than authoritative sources like the websites of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization.

Health misinformation is not a new phenomenon. After spending the past two years rating and reviewing more than 4,000 websites people rely on for news and information, NewsGuard found that more than 1 in 10 news websites accessed by Americans includes bad information about health (and this was before the COVID-19 "infodemic").

Because of NewsGuard's previous work tackling online hoaxes, NewsGuard analysts were able to spot worrisome coronavirus conspiracies early, since they typically appeared on sites with a long history of publishing health care hoaxes. In fact, the vast majority of the websites spreading coronavirus falsehoods are repeat offenders: over 80% of the sites NewsGuard identified as spreading misinformation about COVID-19 are sites that NewsGuard's journalists had already found to be generally unreliable.

To counter this dangerous "infodemic," NewsGuard has responded with research, reporting, and a public service campaign that includes partnerships with major nonprofits, technology companies, advertisers, libraries, and government officials.

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COVID-19 Misinformation Tracking Center
Updated daily, this list tracks the news and information sites in the U.S., the U.K., France, Italy, and Germany that have published materially false information about the virus. Detailed trust ratings and examples of misinformation are available for each site.

Special Report: COVID-19 Myths
NewsGuard's health reporters documented and debunked the top 10 COVID-19 myths that have spread on unreliable sites, tracing how each myth emerged and spread across the web.

Public Service Campaign
NewsGuard temporarily removed the paywall on its browser extension through July 1 to address the urgent "infodemic" and offer its anti-misinformation tool for free (typically $2.95/month). Partners include the U.K.'s Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, news publisher McClatchy, the British broadband and mobile network BT, the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, the Italian National Medical Association, and hundreds of libraries.

Coronavirus Misinformation "Super Spreaders"
Sites sharing coronavirus myths often get a boost from major Facebook and Twitter accounts, which NewsGuard has deemed "Super Spreaders." NewsGuard will be tracking these accounts — Facebook pages with more than 100,000 "likes" and Twitter accounts with more than 10,000 "followers" — and exposing their role in amplifying inaccurate claims about COVID-19.

Helping Companies Keep Their Ads Off of COVID-19 Misinformation
NewsGuard has announced partnerships with media and data companies Peer39 and IPG MediaBrands UK to help brands avoid fake news and untrustworthy sites. The two companies will use NewsGuard's database of trust ratings for thousands of news and information websites to help brands target ad campaigns on trusted news sources while avoiding having their brands displayed on misinformation sources, including those spreading COVID-19 hoaxes specifically.

Misinformation Monitor Newsletter
NewsGuard's monthly Misinformation Monitor newsletter is exclusively covering coronavirus. The March 2020 edition included an investigation of the profit motives of health care hoax sites, many of which advertise their own phony "cures" and health products to readers. April's newsletter will highlight the "repeat offender" phenomenon — the observation that 80% of sites spreading COVID-19 falsehoods had previously been labeled unreliable by NewsGuard.

NewsGuard Media
3/19/2020 Wired: "How One Particular Coronavirus Myth Went Viral." By Gabby Deutch, NewsGuard Washington correspondent
2/28/2020 Stat News: "The coronavirus 'infodemic' is real. We rated the websites responsible for it." By John Gregory, NewsGuard deputy editor for health.
1/21/2020 The New York Times: "How Amazon, Geico and Walmart Fund Propaganda." By Gordon Crovitz, NewsGuard co-CEO