

NEWSGUARD SCHOOL SUCCESS STORY

INSTITUTION

Cienega High School

DISTRICT

Vail School District

CITY

Vail, Arizona

LEVEL

Grades 9 - 12

STUDENTS

~2,000

SOLUTION USED

NewsGuard Browser
Extension

Chris Salvagio Cienega High School

BACKGROUND

Research makes up a large part of Chris Salvagio's classes at Cienega High School. He teaches AP Language and Composition, where about one third of the course involves teaching research skills. He also advises seniors on completing their "Senior Exit Projects," in which students shadow a career professional for 20 hours in a field of their choice then compose a 10-page research paper addressing a critical issue within that career field.

ISSUES

While Salvagio always strove to teach students source evaluation skills – bringing them to the library, handing out source assessment checklists – students inevitably turned in papers riddled with questionable sources. He recalls, for example, the junior who, while writing a paper about gun control, cited an overinflated statistic about the proportion of domestic assault cases that were caused by home intruders. When Salvagio asked the student where he found that statistic, it turned out the student had relied on the website for a home security system, hawking questionable data to sell its products. Over the course of more than a decade teaching, Salvagio has noticed myriad similar issues – from bogus information to troubling sources.

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SOLUTION

Salvagio introduced NewsGuard to his students for the first time in the fall of 2019, after reading about it in an article in *The Atlantic*. NewsGuard's browser extension provides students with instant access to credibility ratings and "Nutrition Label" reviews for thousands of news and information websites, helping them locate reliable sources and avoid unreliable ones – all while learning critical media literacy skills. Salvagio showed students the extension and, as a class, he and his students spent time looking up the ratings for different sources, reading the nuanced descriptions of each source in its Nutrition Label review. While some students were initially skeptical – wondering if NewsGuard might have a bias or agenda of its own – they quickly came to trust the tool as a fair, apolitical resource after reading the Nutrition Labels for a few websites. To ensure students got the most out of NewsGuard's reviews, he required them to turn in annotated bibliographies in which they explained the credibility of each source they were using in their paper – including a brief history of the source and an explanation based on NewsGuard's criteria or Nutrition Label text.

OUTCOMES

When his students began turning in bibliographies and drafts of their papers, the results spoke for themselves: not a single student used a questionable source, which Salvagio called "an extraordinary improvement from years prior." He also noted that none of the papers contained any assertions that were blatantly untrue, which had not been the case in semesters past. It also enabled him to have tricky discussions with students about political agendas of news organizations, with the NewsGuard reviews serving as an independent assessment of a site's bias. Plus, he and his students had some fun while they were at it – enjoying the process of checking how NewsGuard had rated a handful of different sites.

Q&A WITH CHRIS SALVAGIO, AP LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION AND SENIOR ENGLISH TEACHER

Why are source evaluation skills important?

It's always been important - I tell students that the point of research is to find the truth. Education is a pursuit of truth, knowledge, and understanding. Just like in a court of law, just because someone is standing up on a witness stand, it doesn't mean they are telling the truth. We have to learn how to evaluate the information we're hearing before we can incorporate it into our truth finding. With the problems of native advertising, political disinformation, and the blending of the two, there are a lot of questionable motives out there. We have to learn how to factor that in and find reliable sources.

Why do students struggle to locate credible sources online?

I think we all struggle to look at things deeply. We don't fully understand the algorithms of the search engines, but most kids just click on the first things they find, which isn't necessarily the best stuff. We all suffer from confirmation bias, so we are looking for the things we agree with, and we're suspicious of the things we don't agree with. Part of the problem, too, is that people follow the path of least resistance and are naturally inclined to look for the things they most agree with.

How does NewsGuard help?

For one thing, it's easy to use. It helps with the path of least resistance. In the olden days, I would give them a long checklist explaining the things they needed to check for each source. For the most part, students wouldn't go through that whole process, and you can't blame them. It's time consuming. With NewsGuard, the information is there for the students – they don't have to come up with it on their own. It also reduces homework time, which is a main priority for us at Cienega. Finally, it saves us instruction time, too. Kids don't really know the meaning of credibility and transparency, so having NewsGuard's criteria for each listed in a way that's accessible and easy to use helps, too, by helping us come up with a clear definition of what a reliable source is. NewsGuard really helped me buttress the things I've already taught before.

Who should use NewsGuard?

I personally think that it should be everywhere, kind of like how we put Nutrition Labels on our food. I don't believe in suppressing information, but I think people need to be better informed. I wish it was something that was in all search engines, on Facebook, and everywhere else.