How Nonprofit and Government Organizations Are Unintentionally Funding the Misinformation Machine through Programmatic Advertising

A Report for the European Commission

May 30, 2023
Dozens of nonprofit and government organizations are supporting websites that traffic in misinformation — including some that directly contradict the stated missions of those organizations — by running programmatic advertising on those sites.

In April and May 2023, NewsGuard identified 108 programmatic ads from 57 nonprofit and government organizations that appeared on 50 websites that have been found by NewsGuard to repeatedly spread misinformation.

Organizations such as the Red Cross, Amnesty International, and Doctors Without Borders have advertised on websites such as Pravda.ru in English, LesMoutonsRebelles.com in French, and CasadelSole.tv in Italian. These sites have long been identified by NewsGuard as repeatedly publishing false information.
Among NewsGuard’s findings:

- More than 70% of the nonprofit and government ads identified by NewsGuard — 81 of 108 — were served by Google, the largest online ad platform, which generated $168 billion in revenue in 2022 from online advertising alone.

- Nonprofit groups responding to the humanitarian crisis caused by the Russia-Ukraine war are helping to fund sites that have advanced Russian disinformation about the war.

- Multiple health organizations and U.S. colleges and universities are advertising on sites trafficking in blatant and at times dangerous health misinformation.
Humanitarian and Relief Organizations
Example: The Red Cross advertised on five sites found to have repeatedly published misinformation about the Russia-Ukraine war, including on Pravda.ru, a pro-Kremlin website scoring 17.5 out of 100.
LesMoutonsRebelles.com

An anonymously run French website that regularly publishes false information, including about the COVID-19 pandemic.

0 / 100

... RaffaelePalermoNews.com

The website of Italian blogger Raffaele Palermo, which has published false and unsubstantiated claims about the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war.

7.5 / 100

Wikipédia est-il une encyclopédie ouverte ou une opération secrète de désinformation ?

Massimo Mazzucco racconta l'altra verità sulla crisi in Ucraina (Video) - 1 min di lettura
An anonymously run website launched in June 2022 that has published false and misleading claims about the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war, COVID-19, and the monkeypox outbreak.

An anonymously-run website that has repeatedly published false information about the Russia-Ukraine war.

7.5 / 100
Example: Amnesty International advertised on seven sites that have advanced false claims about the Russia-Ukraine conflict, including the Italian-language website CasaDelSole.tv.
**Example:** Doctors Without Borders advertised on ControInformazione.info, an Italian-language video site that has repeatedly published pro-Russia propaganda about the Russia-Ukraine war.
Ads Served Through Google
In March 2022, Google updated its Publisher Policies to state that any site that “exploits, dismisses, or condones” the Russia-Ukraine War will be barred from using the company’s ad technology.

Nonetheless, NewsGuard found 20 nonprofit and government organizations advertising on 13 websites that have spread misinformation about the Russia-Ukraine war using Google ad technology.
Health Nonprofits and Governmental Organizations
**Example:** Planned Parenthood advertised on **seven** websites that publish dangerous health misinformation.

NewsGuard found ads for Planned Parenthood on an article published by ReturnToNow.net, and titled “Planned Parenthood – The Natural Way,” that promoted dangerous herbal abortion recipes.
**Example:** Alzheimer’s Association advertised on three websites that publish health misinformation.

An ad for the nonprofit notably appeared on a DailyHealthPost.com article that advanced the unsubstantiated claim that fluoride is associated with an “increased incidence of Alzheimer’s.”
Example: The City of New Haven’s vaccination program advertised on RaffaelePalermoNews.com, the website of Italian blogger and YouTuber Raffaele Palermo, who streams conspiracy theories and anti-vaccine content.

There, the City of New Haven found itself advertised on an article that falsely claimed that COVID-19 vaccines contain toxic spike proteins.
Example: The New York Academy of Sciences, the fourth-oldest scientific society in the U.S., advertised on a Healthy-Holistic-Living.com article that baselessly claimed that green tea can kill cancer stem cells.
Educational Nonprofit Organizations
Example: Ads for U.S. liberal arts school Hillsdale College appeared on five sites that have spread misinformation, including on a RestoredRepublic.co article that falsely claimed that former U.S. presidential candidate Hillary Clinton died in 2018.
Example: Ads for Purdue University and Franklin University appeared on a DailyHealthPost.com article baselessly claiming that an “alkaline diet” of non-acidic fruits and vegetables can change the body’s pH level and lower the risk of developing serious health issues.
Example: Ads for Elon University, Moreland University, and Suffolk University appeared on an OopStop.com article that falsely claimed that the U.S. runs military biological laboratories in Ukraine.
Some of the ads identified by NewsGuard were placed by the Ad Council — a nonprofit organization that produces public service announcements on behalf of government agencies and well-established nonprofits, and places them on websites — though it is often challenging to identify an Ad Council campaign. Websites regularly donate space to the Ad Council, providing these sites with a measure of credibility they would not otherwise have.
It is difficult to estimate how much money nonprofits and government organizations are directing toward misinformation sites through programmatic advertising. An estimate would depend on a variety of factors, such as the number of clicks on the ads, the ad placements, ad pricing, and site traffic.

However, according to an August 2021 report by Comscore and NewsGuard, misinformation sites earn $2.6 billion annually from big brands through programmatic advertising.
This report was produced using two proprietary datasets from NewsGuard:

- The **Misinformation Fingerprints dataset**, a catalogue of data about top misinformation narratives, contains related keywords and search terms for all of the top misinformation and disinformation narratives spreading online - produced using human intelligence but designed for use with AI/ML/NLP tools to identify content matching specific false claims. For this report, NewsGuard analysts used the Misinformation Fingerprints dataset to identify and debunk false claims in articles where nonprofit and governmental organization ads appeared.

- The second dataset used was the **News Website Reliability Ratings**, which consists of credibility ratings for over 8,900 news and information website that account for 95% of online engagement with news in the U.S., U.K., Canada, Germany, France, Austria, Italy, Australia and New Zealand. Each site's rating is based on nine basic, apolitical journalistic criteria. Based on the criteria, each site receives a trust score of 0-100. For this report, NewsGuard analysts used the News Website Reliability Ratings dataset to identify misinformation sources that fail NewsGuard’s standards for gathering and presenting news responsibly or for not repeatedly publishing false information.

- Examples selected for the report represent an illustrative, but by no means exhaustive, list of organizations unintentionally advertising on sites trafficking in misinformation. Both the Misinformation Fingerprints and the News Website Reliability Index are available to be licensed for research and other purposes.