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OPINION

# In the name of 'fake news,' NewsGuard extorts sites to follow the government narrative

By Lee Fang

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Half a century ago, [George Orwell](#), writing on [literary censorship](#), wrote that "unpopular ideas can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark, without the need for any official ban."

That dynamic now broadly extends to [an opaque network of government agencies and self-proclaimed anti-misinformation groups](#) that have repressed online speech.

There's no official ban on discussing the efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines or criticizing

American involvement in the Ukraine-Russia war, but editors and journalists have realized that writing on such topics can come at a cost.

News publishers have been demonetized and shadow-banned for reporting dissenting views and the bureaucratic means for enforcing this form of control are under increasing scrutiny.

**NewsGuard, a for-profit company that scores news websites on trust** and works closely with government agencies and major corporate advertisers, exemplifies the problem.




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NewsGuard, a for-profit company with ties to the government, rates websites on their trustworthiness as news sources.

The startup was founded in 2018 and quickly gained favor among establishment voices concerned with “fake news.”

NewsGuard’s core business is a misinformation meter, in which websites are rated on a scale of 0 to 100 on a variety of factors, including headline choice and whether a site publishes “false or egregiously misleading content.”

Such an endeavor might appear as an objective public service, but the devil is in the details.

Editors who have engaged with NewsGuard have found that the company has made bizarre demands that unfairly tarnish an entire site as untrustworthy for straying from the official narrative.

The Daily Sceptic, a libertarian-leaning British site, is one such example. In a series of emails over the last two years, editor Toby Young reached out to NewsGuard, hoping to improve the Daily Sceptic’s 74.5 rating.

NewsGuard took issue with the website’s criticism of lockdowns, calling them “unnecessary, ineffective and harmful,” and cited academic literature on the topic.

Young went so far as to add postscripts to his articles, relaying the issues raised by the fact-checkers and providing additional information.

For his good-faith interactions, Young was rewarded with a downgrade. NewsGuard updated his rating to 37.5 on its scale.

NewsGuard wanted nothing other than a retraction of the articles they objected to, despite the fact that further research has documented the harmful effects of lockdowns.

It was an experience that other publishers have echoed.

The ratings are not just a scarlet letter, but a cudgel to coerce conformity.

NewsGuard works closely with corporate advertisers and the data-brokers that serve as the backbone of the online ecosystem.

One of its largest investors is the Publicis Groupe, a French conglomerate that is the largest marketing agency in the world.

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In an email to one of its government clients, NewsGuard touted that its ratings system of websites is used by advertisers, "which will cut off revenues to fake news sites."

But perhaps the greatest danger is posed by NewsGuard's extensive ties to the government. Internal documents I obtained through the "Twitter Files" show that the founders of NewsGuard privately pitched the firm to clients as a tool to engage in content moderation on an industrial scale, applying artificial intelligence to take down certain forms of speech.



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The proposal noted that the service is already used by "intelligence and national security officials," "reputation management providers" and "government agencies."

There is little hope that the Biden administration, **which has labeled online misinformation as a national security threat**, will reverse course. Hope may be found in the courts.

Earlier this year, Consortium News, a left-leaning site, charged in a lawsuit that NewsGuard's serves as a proxy for the military to engage in censorship.

The lawsuit brings attention to the Pentagon's \$749,387 contract with NewsGuard to identify "false narratives" regarding the war between Ukraine and Russia, among other forms of foreign influence.

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Consortium News has published thousands of articles, but NewsGuard went after just a few columns about neo-Nazi elements in the Ukrainian military and U.S. influence over the Ukrainian government – issues raised by many credible news outlets – and demanded retractions.

And this week, conservative-leaning sites The Federalist and the Daily Wire, along with Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, are bringing a far more sweeping suit against the government.

The lawsuit claims that the State Department’s Global Engagement Center financed firms such as NewsGuard in an attempt to create a “blacklist” of targeted sites that criticize government positions while steering readers to “news organizations that publish favored viewpoints.”

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The attorneys for the case note that the agency is acting under explicit statutory authority to only counter foreign propaganda, and is forbade from turning inwards and “countering Americans’ speech.”

The issue may rest, ultimately, with a decision from the Supreme Court. Next year, the high court is scheduled to take up Missouri v. Biden, a sweeping case that will decide how and when the government can step in to shape content decisions on social media platforms.

The Louisiana judge who first ruled on the subject noted that the federal government appears to have “assumed a role similar to an Orwellian ‘Ministry of Truth,’” a role that is plainly not in the constitution.

*Investigative journalist Lee Fang writes at [leefang.com](#)*

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