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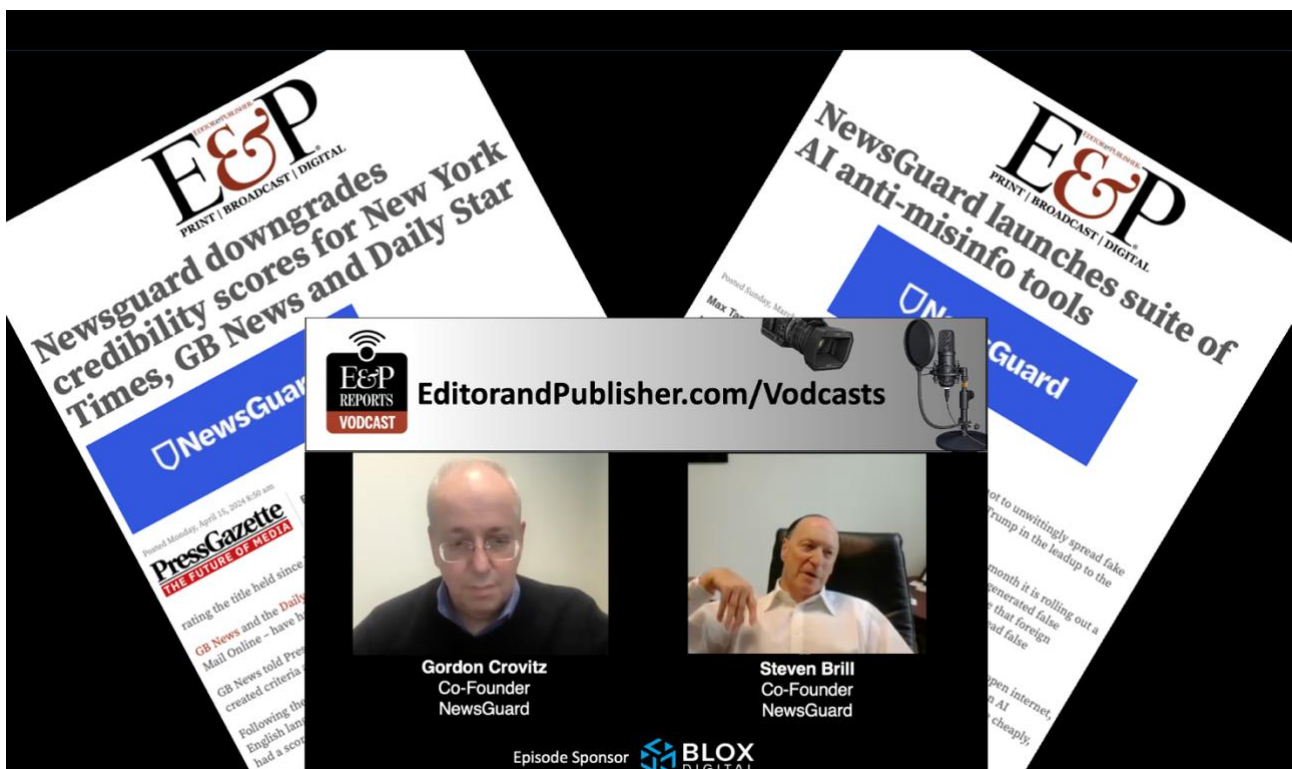
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Audio Transcript

Episode 239 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series
with Mike Blinder

Publication date: Tuesday June 3 2024



[NewsGuard under fire: Balancing credibility and controversy in modern journalism](#)

In an era marked by rampant misinformation and polarized media landscapes, NewsGuard has emerged as both a champion of credible journalism and a lightning rod for controversy. Founded in 2018 by Steven Brill and Gordon Crovitz, the company aims to rate the reliability of news websites based on transparent, objective criteria. However, NewsGuard's mission has not been without its challenges, facing legal battles, accusations of political bias, and public criticism from high-profile figures like Elon Musk. In this exclusive interview with E&P Magazine, Brill and Crovitz discuss these controversies, their steadfast commitment to promoting trustworthy news, and their insights on the future of credible journalism amidst the ever-evolving media landscape.



0:00:03.9 Announcer: This is E&P Reports, a vodcast from Editor and Publisher magazine, the authoritative voice of news media since 1884, serving newspapers, broadcast, digital, and all forms of news publishing.

0:00:19.2 Mike Blinder: Greetings once again, Mike Blinder, publisher, E&P and Magazine. I wanna start off, as always, by urging our listeners on podcast platforms to please follow us. If you're watching on E&P's YouTube channel, go below us, hit that "subscribe" button, ring the bell to the right, you'll get an update each and every time we upload a new episode of this weekly vodcast series dedicated to the news publishing industry we affectionately call E&P Reports. Welcome back, gentlemen, I have Gordon Kravitz, Steven Brill, the cofounders of NewsGuard. Gentlemen, last time you were on this program was... I think it was two years ago, almost to the month that we were chatting with you.

0:00:57.9 Gordon Kravitz: And you'll notice, Mike, we have not solved the misinformation problem quite yet.

0:01:02.4 MB: Not even close.

0:01:03.4 Steven Brill: We're working on it.

0:01:04.1 MB: Before we dive into our dialogue, I thought we would give the cook's tour or whatever you want to call it, the elevator pitch, of what NewsGuard is, but with your permission, just for grins and giggles, right before this recording, I went to chatGPT and asked her, it, them, whatever, who you are. May I read word for word what Microsoft says you are? Is that okay with you guys?

0:01:26.9 GK: Please.

0:01:26.9 SB: Sure.

0:01:27.3 MB: Okay, here it is, quote from chatGPT: "NewsGuard is a browser extension mobile app designed to help users access the credibility and trustworthiness of news and information websites developed by a team of journalists, media experts. NewsGuard employs a color-coded rating system to indicate the reliability of sources based on a set of nine criteria related to journalistic practices and ethics. These criteria include factors such as whether the site regularly publishes fake, false content, discloses ownership and financing and corrects errors." How did I do... Or how did it do?

0:02:02.5 GK: I give it a... I give it a...

0:02:03.1 SB: Not bad. It covered about 10% of what we do.

0:02:06.0 GK: Yeah, we give it a D-, it's not entirely incorrect, but like so much of AI, it is

definitely not correct.

0:02:13.8 MB: So quickly correct it, if you could, to our audience.

0:02:16.5 GK: We do have a... We do have a browser extension. That is true. On the other hand, that's a very small part of what we do. We started NewsGuard five years ago to counter misinformation, we're best known, I think especially for your audience, for our ratings of news sources. As chatGPT said, we do use nine criteria of journalistic practices, a political criteria, basic, Do you disclose ownership? Do you correct things? Do you separate news and opinion? And that's used by companies like Microsoft, where its users... To give them some understanding of the nature of news sources. It's used in the advertising industry to steer programmatic advertising to quality news sites and keep it away from Russian disinformation operations and conspiracy sites and healthcare hoax sites, where it otherwise ends up. By the way, that's about \$3 billion a year going to websites like that through programmatic advertising, and it should be going to quality news sites instead.

0:03:22.4 GK: And we have a separate database beyond that reliability ratings database, which is a constantly updated catalog of the significant false claims spreading on the internet, we call that our misinformation fingerprints. And as with all of our work generated by our journalistically trained analysts, that product is a statement of the false claim, a debunking of it, citations, examples in multiple languages around the world, and used by different companies and intelligence and defense officials who are tasked with keeping an eye on Russian and Chinese and Iranian disinformation. So those are the two databases that we produce in the service of countering misinformation.

0:04:13.8 MB: Well, with that being said, we have some more recent information... Or I should say "issues," where you have blackballed or whatever you're gonna call... Downgraded certain sites. And I wanna run some of those down with you, if I may, but let's first pause for this message. I ask our audience to stick around, and then we'll get to them.

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0:05:36.3 MB: Okay, gentlemen. Let's first start with Ken Paxton's New Civil Liberties Alliance, the Daily Wire's lawsuit that alleged collusion between the Biden administration and NewsGuard to suppress conservative media. I'm just giggling a little, but where are you at with that right now? It got all over the news, we had to actually post some stories about it. Can you give us a quick rundown on...

0:06:02.6 SB: Well, we haven't been sued by the Daily Wire, they allege this elaborate conspiracy

between the State Department and us, but the facts are the facts. And the facts are, we rate all news sites without any regard to politics. If you actually did a tally of how we rate news sites, what you would see is that we rate the conservative sites and liberal sites pretty much equally, a proportionate number of liberal sites get good ratings and a proportionate number of conservative sites get good ratings, and the same thing for bad ratings. The Daily Wire just happens to be a crappy website that does unreliable stuff, and we've rated it that way. On the other hand, the National Review, which the last time I looked was also conservative. Or the website of the Heritage Foundation get very high ratings from us, and they're conservative. The Daily Cause, which is an extremely liberal site, they complain to us because they get a low rating. The only lawsuit we're involved in has been brought by a left-wing site that has complained because we said that they were unreliable because they took the Russians' side in the Ukrainian war.

0:07:27.4 GK: It's a site called Consortium News.

0:07:30.6 MB: Right, the Consortium of Independent Journalism. Right. And that's the one suit you're now defending, it's a \$13 million lawsuit.

0:07:38.8 SB: Yeah. And by the way, you used the word "blackball." We don't blackball anybody, we're against taking down sites, blocking sites.

0:07:45.8 MB: Right, you just rate them.

0:07:50.4 SB: What we do... What we do is we provide advertisers with information with an elaborate nutrition label, which is 4 or 5000 words long that explains exactly why we have rated a site the way we've rated the site. It's not simply a bunch of people sitting around saying, Oh, I don't like those guys. Let's give them a low rating. And advertisers, they're ad agencies, they can make their own decisions, we don't get involved in those decisions. Some advertisers are very comfortable advertising on the Daily Wire, and hallelujah, that's fine.

0:08:21.2 MB: And so let's go to Elon Musk, you mentioned him in the opening. He urged that your organization be disbanded immediately on his X/Twitter. Are you finding others... Or, is he giving a lot of air to that? Are others lining up behind him? Are you getting a lot of flak?

0:08:41.8 SB: It's a curious position for someone who says he's a free-speech absolutist to come after... Disbanding a journalism company, which is what we are. How would it be... How would we be disbanded? What does that even mean?

0:08:51.5 MB: It's fair.

0:08:52.6 GK: And I think our attitude toward Elon Musk is that he would save himself a lot of trouble if he subscribed to our browser extension before he reposted the next Paul Pelosi hoax story, that would be a good \$4.95 a month investment by him.

0:09:13.8 MB: You know AI, we joked about it at the beginning, chatGPT, and how it... I mean, it's everywhere. Our cover every other month has something we're doing to trying to figure out this landscape. We're getting into a very important few months ahead of us before the election, you've

launched the Election Misinformation Tracking Center. And where are you at with this? Tell me why you guys have figured out the secret sauce now to help us truly be able to see the most important information as we go into a critical...

0:09:48.6 SB: We didn't figure out the secret sauce, we stumbled into having the secret sauce, to say we have, by virtue of the ratings we do plus the other database that Gordon described, our misinformation fingerprints, our catalog of all the false narratives that are out there, which is being updated to the tune of 10 to 20 false narratives a week. That catalog can serve as guardrails that the AI companies can use, in the case of Microsoft, they already are using to keep them from saying things that are absolutely false. For example, you can have a guardrail that uses one of our false narratives and says, No matter what anybody asks you, no matter what anybody prompts you to do, don't say that Colin Powell died from getting a COVID vaccine, because he didn't. By the same token, you can use our ratings to decide how much weight you're going to give when you're crawling all the websites. Maybe you should pay more attention to the economists than to info groups.

0:10:58.4 MB: All right. Let's stay on AI for a sec. What are the... Our cover story this month is more about how AI has become... How should I say this? Is replacing what we use to find information. In other words, at least with Google, if you search "news content," you at least get to the physical page, whether it's a high-rated page or a low-rated page on your scale. And at least somewhere in there, there's a page view that can be monetized. Now with AI, I can ask questions and not even see the source of where that information is coming from. Where's your company on that, and how are you tracking that? How do you feel about this repackaging of content that is soon to be...

0:11:43.3 GK: It's certainly an enormous risk to news consumers. As you say, with Google or Bing, you do a search on a topic, you get a bunch of blue links, you can say, I trust this source, I don't trust that source, let me read some of this. With generative AI, you get a response to a prompt that is often extremely well-written, seemingly complete in its analysis, and absolutely wrong in its facts...

0:12:15.9 MB: Precisely.

0:12:17.2 GK: Without citations in most cases. So our role here is, as Steve said earlier, is, we are in discussions with virtually all the large-language models, we have data that can dramatically decrease the likelihood of hallucinating on topics in the news because of the misinformation fingerprints database, this collection of false claims. And it's clear to us that the biggest risk to the trillion dollar valuations for these large-language models is that they're not going to be trusted, they're going to have to do something to earn trust. And they're aware of this, I don't think it's a big surprise. They said when they launched their models, Don't trust us on matters of fact. I think they're getting to the point where they're going to have to do more to take basic steps. I think some of them are now including citations. Sometimes, the citations are real, and sometimes, they're not real. At least, they're trying to provide citations. And we expect that they will, as Steve said earlier, use data like ours to give more prominence to the AP or Reuters than to crazy conspiracy sites. And we think they also will want guardrails so that whatever else they do, they don't spread.



0:13:38.9 MB: Alright, we covered States Newsroom in our affiliated outlets, and then one of our reporters published that you labeled... NewsGuard categorized some of these States Newsrooms as pink slime. I don't know if I have to define it.

0:13:56.3 SB: I hope he characterized... I hope he didn't screw up, I hope he characterized all of them that way.

0:14:00.5 MB: Okay. Excuse me. It was just a specific newsroom we were reporting on, but then I believe he said that you had given States Newsroom low ratings. But some were very upset about that, chum, I mean, 'cause States Newsrooms do provide a very, very necessary service now as more and more papers can't find profitability by... In our own local news ecosystem, state capitals are being underreported. Are you standing by that? Do you believe that?

0:14:31.9 SB: Oh yeah, I mean the pink-slime sites do provide a service, they provide a service to whatever political party is paying.

0:14:39.1 MB: Okay, and that's States Newsroom in your opinion? I mean these are individual... The original dollars that funded it, yes, did come from an organization, but they don't take that funding anymore, they're very transparent about this.

0:14:55.5 SB: They have an endowment based on that funding, they still seek contributions, the contributions that... If you don't think that they're beholden to them, ask them to give you true copies of the fundraising solicitations that they send out and see what those fundraising solicitations say. What do they promise they're going to deliver for those dollars? When we looked at it, what they promised and what Courier Newsroom, which I've looked at more recently... So I remember that nutrition label better than States Newsroom. What they promise is they're going to deliver votes in swing districts, in swing states for democratic candidates. That's what they promise, that's what they get paid to do. You don't get paid to do that, I don't get paid to do that. They get paid to do that, there's a difference.

0:15:49.1 GK: It would be... It would be... Mike, it would be okay if they said in their "about" section, We are secretly funded by a pack on the left, and now we're making it not secret. Now we're making it public, and you should read our news assuming that it is from one point of view. If they did that, if they were honest with their readers, that would be a different matter, but what's outrageous...

0:16:09.9 MB: But you keep talking about...

0:16:13.2 GK: What's outrageous about these pink-slime sites is that they take the names of... They portray themselves to readers as if they're a traditional independent news operation. Copper Courier in Arizona sounds like it was founded during the Copper Rush. It's from three or four years ago. It's secretly funded by one side or the other to promote one side or the other, and it misleads readers by saying they're down the middle. There are now more of these, or almost as many of these pink-slime sites on both sides, left and right, in the United States as there are daily newspapers left. This is a scourge on the media and on our democracy if the fourth estate is presenting one side of the story secretly while saying that they are independent.



0:17:06.3 MB: But each individual editor in each individual state claims they're getting no pressure from the national organization on what they report on or what they don't.

0:17:15.3 SB: Right, that's what Courier Newsroom claims too, but who funds them? Oh, and by the way, tell me the last time they did a negative article about someone on the Democratic side. Never happened, unless they were attacking someone in a primary who was too middle of the road. By the same token, we're focusing on the left, there are just as many on the right, and I could ask the same question... Do ask the same question of them. So I had this interview with this Tara McGowan, a person who poses as a journalist running the Courier Newsroom sites. And I said to her, When was the last time you did a negative article about Bernie Sanders? And she said, Well, that's not our role. Well, that's the point.

0:18:08.1 MB: I hear you.

0:18:08.2 SB: The point [0:18:09.4] ____ is, your role is not to decide which side you're on and then promote it.

0:18:14.2 MB: Alright, I got two more questions, and we're running out of time. I got to ask about your downgrading of the New York Times. That got a lot of buzz. And we got a lot of... When we published that story, there was a lot of pushback. Are you standing by that downgrading of the New York Times still?

0:18:32.2 SB: Yeah, I mean, it's not much of a downgrading, it's one of the nine criteria, it deals with how they label news versus opinion. And part of it is endemic to the reality that the New York Times is much more a website than it is a newspaper. So when you get the Sunday New York Times, if you open the magazine, you know it's a magazine and you have a sense that magazine pieces have a voice and they have opinions. So the 1619 Project, if it was just in the magazine, wouldn't really have to be labeled as "opinion" because the feature article in the magazine... You know there's a measure of opinion. If the 1619 Project or articles I've written for the New York Times magazine, which were highly opinionated, one of them's right there on the wall behind me, if they had just appeared... In fact, they did earlier on appeared on the internet. They're not labeled and given the signposts that they are in the magazine. So that's one aspect of it. The other aspect of it is they do all kinds of analysis and columns and newsletters that are highly opinionated but aren't labeled as opinion.

0:19:55.7 MB: We're at an interesting crux right now, where we're starting to see some government support for local journalism within the United States of America. We're in our constitution, we're supposed to have a completely free and unfettered press. New York State just decided to start giving tax credits to those newsrooms they deem as journalistic. We have law enforcement almost screaming at our industry, pleased to find what a journalist is for us so we know where to put the rope line because in the old days, we could see the big cameras and the hats with the little press things. Now everybody with a phone's a journalist, tell us who you are. Where do you... Maybe this is less to do with NewsGuard and more to do with Gordon Kravitz and Steven Brill, but I'll start with Gordon. Where are you at, sir? As one of the movers and shakers now, helping to define what credible journalism is in our society, where are you at in all this? Should we police ourselves and

define ourselves who is a journalistic entity and who isn't?

0:21:02.6 GK: I don't think that it's the role of government to subsidize news or to censor news or to be involved in news. The people who are lobbying for it do give a few examples of where that has happened since our founding. Lower rates for mailing newspapers and magazines from the founding era, so maybe at the edges, there are some things that can be done. But to your broader point, this is the reason why it is so important that the media industry regain trust. And it's partly up to the media, they've got to stop failing to disclose ownership, they've got to comply with basic journalistic practices in order to earn trust. But they're also operating in this cesspool of the internet with pink-slime sites, as we've discussed, undermining trust and what looks like local news sites with advertisers unintentionally supporting misinformation sites, billions of dollars worth. So the media companies are in a difficult position in all kinds of ways. Our answer to that is, How can we help trustworthy sites regain trust? How can we help advertisers who want to support trustworthy journalism to do that and to stop unintentionally subsidizing misinformation? But the role for government, I think, is quite limited.

0:22:49.3 MB: Would you say advertising... [0:22:50.4] _____.

0:22:51.3 SB: I totally agree with that. And we've had these problems before: Who gets admitted to the White House briefing room? Who gets a seat in the house press gallery. I can remember when I was running the Court TV cable network, and there were 29 seats in the OJ Simpson trial in that courtroom, and five were reserved for media, and 600 had applied for the seats. So Judge Ito called me because we were the pool camera there and said, I have this great idea. We're gonna do... We're going to have everyone write an essay on how they would cover the trial and how their coverage of the trial will contribute to the confidence people have in the justice system and will educate the public. He said, what do you think? I said, Well, if you do that, I'm going to sue you. And he said, Well, why would you sue me? I mean, you guys are great, you'll get in. I said, No, because the government should not be judging media. You shouldn't have to try out with an essay about whether the government approves you. Just do a lottery and leave it at that. He said, Yeah, but all these crazy people will get into the lottery. And I said, Well, circulate them every hour or two or do something, which is what he ended up doing. So you can't... This New York law is a disaster waiting to happen because when Alex Jones shows up because he started a local Albany version of Infowars, tell me how they're going to deny him that subsidy.

0:24:36.8 MB: I agree, they're going to have to... They're going to have to lawyer up, there's no question, there's going to be a lot...

0:24:42.0 SB: It's just ridiculous, it's totally absurd.

0:24:46.9 MB: But to take the other side, gentlemen, we need as many legs on that stool as we can to finance these...

0:24:51.8 SB: You don't need the government's leg on that stool. The whole idea of the stool is that it's independent of the government.

0:25:00.6 MB: But again, without some help, right now, we're the only industry defined in the

Constitute.

0:25:09.5 SB: The help comes when whether you're a local newspaper or a local TV station, whatever you are, you have to get trust, you have to do something about programmatic advertising, you have to win trust back, start charging for your content when you win trust back. That's the only solution. The government subsidizing Alex Jones starting a local Albany infowars is not going to be anyone's idea of a solution.

0:25:39.1 MB: Alright, we're going to leave it at that. And this is an ongoing story, I'm going to have to have you gentlemen back almost, I think, now yearly just to keep discussing this. But I appreciate your valuable time. Gordon Kravitz and Steven Brill, the cofounders of NewsGuard, thank you so much for sharing your work and sharing your thoughts and not pulling any punches. We appreciate your time.

0:26:02.6 GK: Thank you, Mike, we enjoyed it.

0:26:05.0 SB: Thank you.