Written evidence from NEWSGUARD TECHNOLOGIES, INC. (Co-CEOs Steven Brill and Gordon Crovitz) (GMF0023)

Introduction

1. NewsGuard\(^1\) was founded on the principle that media freedom can only survive – and be useful in ensuring democracy – if sincere attempts by the media to provide information can be distinguished from attempts to foment false information, misinformation and disinformation.

2. Today’s Internet is the equivalent of walking into a library and instead of having books neatly arranged by subject matter, instead of being able to know the publisher and the background of the author, and instead of having a librarian on hand to guide readers to the content they seek, the library simply had millions of single pages flying around in the air. The reader does not know who wrote each page, who is financing it, or what the perspective or bona fides of the author might be.

3. NewsGuard uses human intelligence – trained, apolitical journalists – to make sense of all that. Our analysts use nine basic, apolitical criteria of journalistic practice to rate and create ‘Nutrition Labels’ for all the news and information websites that account for 90% plus of online engagement in each country in which we operate. If a website appears to fail any of our nine criteria relating to credibility or transparency, our analysts contact the website. (Algorithms do not call for comment.) The resulting rating and label provide guidance for readers on the general reliability of each website as well as a detailed label describing its ownership, content and journalistic practices.

4. Accordingly, those who have created and operate NewsGuard, which now provides its services in the UK, the U.S., Italy, France, and Germany, believe we have relevant input for both the Foreign Affairs Committee and the FCO as it determines the proper role for the UK as it addresses the threats to media freedom from disinformation.

5. NewsGuard launched originally in the US market in September 2018, followed by the UK in April 2019. Prior to the launch in the UK, our efforts to tackle disinformation online were cited in UK government’s “Online Harms White Paper” (March 2019), and the DCMS Committee’s report into Disinformation and Fake News (February 2019)\(^2\).

6. At our UK launch at the British Library, NewsGuard launched our Media Literacy Partnership Program to UK libraries, which allows patrons to engage critically with the news and information websites in their social media feeds and search results. We have been heartened by the reception NewsGuard has received since our launch here, especially by those in the library and school communities who are engaged in news literacy efforts.

Combatting disinformation around the world

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\(^1\) [https://www.newsguardtech.com/](https://www.newsguardtech.com/)

\(^2\) DCMS Committee, *Disinformation and Fake News: Final Report*
https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcumeds/1791/1791.pdf
7. Irrespective of country, our experience has found that whether the issues involve healthcare claims about the dangers of vaccinations, local elections, or international politics, “due care” – i.e., assuming responsibility and accountability for the harms that might ensue when an entity creates a product or delivers a service – is the key to strengthening the publishers of information and weakening the harms done by those who spread false information, misinformation and disinformation.

8. NewsGuard is committed to combatting disinformation, such as from governments that fund websites whose mission is to promote societal divisiveness in democracies. This work is guided by the experience of our global advisory council, which includes Jimmy Wales, co-founder of Wikipedia; Anders Fogh Rasmussen, former Prime Minister of Denmark, former secretary general of NATO and founder of the Alliance of Democracies Foundation; Ret. General Michael Hayden, former Director of the CIA and former Director of the NSA; and Tom Ridge, former US Secretary of Homeland Security.

9. The UK seems uniquely suited to assume a leadership role in promoting media freedom and combatting disinformation. The country has a long history of protecting free speech and countering censorship. It also has a history of creating legal standards based on common law principles such as a duty of care that other countries and regional organisations can embrace. Unlike other countries such as the US, there is no constitutional or legal barrier to the UK government encouraging and even enforcing a duty of due care with regard to those that bring Internet content into people’s homes and workplaces. Moreover, the UK’s leaders across parties seem especially willing and able to assume this leadership role.

10. Drawing on the prominence of the UK generally on these issues, it is our view that the FCO could be a world leader in encouraging reader empowerment as a way of combatting disinformation.

**Empowering citizens**

11. Our experience is that the optimal way to combat false information, misinformation and disinformation is to give readers the tools they need to make their own judgments about the general reliability and trustworthiness of the content being presented to them in a news feed, a search, or while browsing the internet.

12. Other than for content that is illegal, an approach that provides consumers with more information about their sources of information is a far better approach than either governments or technology companies blocking or suppressing information based on opaque rules or based on fact checking efforts that can only address a fraction of the problem and, worse, that only address false information, misinformation and disinformation after it has been published and spread around the world. We believe that this is the direction that the UK should and is taking.

13. Research by academics, journalists and independent survey companies agree that solving the problem of false information, misinformation and disinformation will require users of digital platforms to have access to more information about the sources of news they see on the platforms. Ideally, this information about news websites will become ubiquitous on all the main

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³ [https://www.newsguardtech.com/our-advisory-board/](https://www.newsguardtech.com/our-advisory-board/)
platforms and be delivered to users as a tightly integrated part of their service, such as in news feeds and search results.

14. Several digital platform companies, including Facebook, Google and Twitter, voluntarily signed onto the European Commission’s Code of Practice on Disinformation, which requires signatories to provide information about the trustworthiness of the news sources in their products, with trustworthiness based on journalistic principles. In this way, they can arm users with the information they need to judge the credibility of news sources based on their adherence to basic journalist standards. However, the EU has promulgated few tools to enforce that still-voluntary code. The UK can and should enforce something like it.

15. Research commissioned by NewsGuard highlights that consumers want more action to help them navigate disinformation online.

16. In December 2018, the Gallup organization released the results of a U.S. study that tested the impact of news on consumers who have access to NewsGuard ratings and write ups in their social media newsfeeds and search results. The results showed that large majorities would be likelier to read and share news from websites that get a green rating and less likely to read or share news from red-rated sites. The survey found that 83% want their digital platforms to make NewsGuard ratings and reviews available to them, 69% would trust digital platforms such as Facebook, Google, Twitter and Microsoft more just for including NewsGuard in their products, 91% said the Nutrition Labels were helpful, and 90% generally agree with the ratings.

17. Alongside our launch in the UK, NewsGuard commissioned YouGov to conduct a similar study of UK adults, which showed the urgent need for solutions to tackle disinformation online, with 93% of respondents saying they thought false information and/or misleading information on the internet is a problem. Eighty percent said that social media companies should do more to provide users with information about the reliability of news websites, and 75% said search companies should do more. When asked whether they would find a tool like NewsGuard helpful, 82% said such a service would be very or fairly helpful. The same poll by YouGov of adults in Germany, France, and Italy produced similar results.

Media Literacy Programme

18. Parents and educators have long been concerned about protecting their children from violent and inappropriate online content. The recent proliferation of fake news websites and hoax articles poses a new threat to young internet users. NewsGuard has been working with libraries, schools and parents to roll out a Media Literacy Programme help internet users identify false and deceptive information online, and instead point them toward websites on which they can generally rely.


19. In the US, more than 200 public libraries are working with NewsGuard as a practical news-literacy tool. Libraries download the NewsGuard browser extension on the library computers patrons use to access the Internet. Librarians share with patrons details about the NewsGuard process for rating news websites and providing Nutrition Labels. A one-page library flyer, for example, describes how NewsGuard helps people know more about “Who is feeding you the news.” In addition, teachers in 35 states work with NewsGuard’s literacy tools in the development of school curriculum.

20. In the UK, NewsGuard has been working with DCMS and Libraries Connected and ASCEL to promote a rollout of NewsGuard across public and school libraries across the country.

21. NewsGuard collaborates with media literacy organizations to improve its news literacy offerings. Dozens of organizations around the world exist with the same goal as NewsGuard: spreading news literacy to youth and adults alike. By partnering with other leaders in the media literacy sphere, NewsGuard is able to broaden its reach and expand its offerings.

22. We would welcome the opportunity to collaborate with the FCO to share our experience rolling our the Media Literacy Programme, and to discuss how similar programmes can be established around the world.

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