

## **The Case Against NewsGuard**

Nolan Higdon and Susan Maret

Educators and educational organizations and institutions would be wise to refuse any endorsement of the NewsGuard browser extension.<sup>1</sup> The extension, branded as the “Internet Trust Tool,” distracts from the ways in which NewsGuard's leadership and mission operate counter to the principles of democratic education and interests of organized labor. At best, NewsGuard is a questionable tool for information seeking, research, and literacy, and is at odds with the long term interests of students and faculty.

NewsGuard's Advisory Board raises concerns about the organization's commitment to education and organized labor. The Board consists of former U.S. government officials and journalists associated with agencies known for producing false news; for example, board members such as Tom Ridge served in the Department of Homeland Security and General Michael Hayden at the Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency (Higdon, 2020; Maret, 2018; NewsGuard, 2021a; Phillips, 2018). In addition, the Advisory Board includes individuals who publicly defended the use of propaganda such as former U.S. State Department official Richard Stengel (Norton, 2020).

The list of advisers also includes opponents of organized educators such as the former United States Secretary of Education under Barack Obama, Arne

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<sup>1</sup> NewsGuard is described as a “librarian for the Internet.” CEOs Steven Brill and Gordon Crovitz speak with CNN's Brian Stelter on Reliable Sources (January 2022), <https://www.NewsGuardtech.com/NewsGuard-praised-as-librarians-of-the-internet/>

Duncan (NewsGuard, 2021a, 2021b; Nelson, 2014). While CEO of Chicago Schools, Duncan worked to weaken teacher unions (Nelson, 2014). As the United States Secretary of Education, Duncan also implemented a series of policies that led to teacher unions, such as National Education Association (NEA), to oppose him and the Obama administration's education policy (Nelson, 2014). Duncan's Race to the Top program sought to weaken teacher unions through competitive grants, charter schools, and standardized tests which served (Nelson, 2014; Ravitch, 2013, 2015, 2016).

In addition to the clear conflicts of interest on their Advisory Board, NewsGuard's model runs counter to the goals and processes of democratic education. Although studies (Higdon, 2020) and long term programs embedded within educational institutions (e.g., Big 6) have shown that critical news literacy is the most effective way to mitigate the influence of false information, AFT chose to support NewsGuard (2021c, 2021d) which offers "trust ratings" that label content through color coding and what is termed a "Nutrition Label." This simplistic approach has not only proven ineffective (Aslett, et al., 2022), but diminishes the complexity and interconnected ways of establishing credibility and veracity of information in terms of authority, context, history, framing, nuance, and weighing perspectives. For example, a 2018 Gallup poll found that a green rating assigned by NewsGuard (e.g., CNN, Fox News) may be perceived as untrustworthy and some sources that individuals find trustworthy are assigned a red shield (Oremus, 2019). Further, news outlets that are traditionally accurate in their reporting can and do report

false stories. For example, *The New York Times* has a green rating on NewsGuard, but published false stories that led the U.S. to support an invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Higdon, 2020; Sussman 2020).<sup>2</sup> More recently, *The Washington Post*, which also has a green rating on NewsGuard, lost a multi-million dollar lawsuit to the 16-year-old Covington Catholic High School student Nick Sandmann for falsely reporting that the teenager was antagonizing a Native American elder in Washington, D.C. (Kim, 2019).

These examples illustrate that NewsGuard's approach is an intellectually vapid solution masked as literacy. Educational institutions – that include teachers and librarians - should provide students with a set of skills in which to question, frame, evaluate, investigate, and analyze content from a wide variety of sources. This approach, known as critical media literacy, empowers students to be autonomous media users, where the NewsGuard approach leaves students dependent upon shadowy tools that act as arbiters of truth and falsity. As educators, normalizing these tools in educational spaces runs counter to our mission to empower students to engage the marketplace of ideas and use critical thinking to distinguish fact from fiction.

Furthermore, educators and institutions who normalize NewsGuard must consider the ways in which they are exploiting students in the classroom. As Shoshana Zuboff (2019) notes, surveillance capitalism seeks to commodify human behavior through artificial intelligence and machine learning

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<sup>2</sup> It appears that the publication/source receives the NewsGuard green shield, *not* the individual story (NewsGuard, 2021d). For example, *The Times* 2004 editorial apology for its reporting on Iraq War and WMD was given a green shield ([From the Editors; The Times and Iraq - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)), as well as the original disinformation.

technologies that collect and analyze data for the purpose of producing customized content and experiences that nudge and direct human behavior. Corporations have long viewed the classroom as a lucrative space, and in the age of surveillance capitalism, Big Tech sees the classroom as a vast untapped resource of student data (Higdon & Butler, 2021). Supporting NewsGuard is complicity in this trajectory of exploitation. It is a trajectory where educators dogmatically list truths and falsehoods for students, while normalizing their surveillance and exploitation.

Based on existing scholarship and available evidence, educators and educational organizations and institutions would be wise to avoid association with NewsGuard.

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