multipolar

Herausgegeben von Stefan Korinth,
Paul Schreyer und Ulrich Teusch

Media culling

NewsGuard is a US company that assesses the journalistic quality and credibility of several thousand media in certain countries and then licenses its ratings to the internet corporations. These corporations then flag "untrustworthy" media with a warning label. Last week, Multipolar received a list of questions from the company. This means that our work is currently being audited – reason enough for Multipolar to put the auditors themselves under the microscope.

PAUL SCHREYER, 7. April 2022, 0 Kommentare

Note: This article ist also available in German.

NewsGuard was founded in New York in 2018 and now also operates in Canada, the UK, France, Italy and Germany. The company is headed by two journalists and media entrepreneurs, Steven Brill and Gordon Crovitz. The latter is a former editor of the Wall Street Journal. At the company's launch, the two founders were able to raise six million dollars from investors. The recruitment of the investors was organized by Publicis, one of the largest advertising and PR groups in the world, and also one of NewsGuard's main investors.

In its own words, the company is dedicated to the "fight against disinformation" and has also been cooperating with the European Commission since the beginning of this year. NewsGuard does not rely on machine-generated algorithms, but rather on manual evaluations, with journalists individually reviewing thousands of media. At the end of the assessment, the website is rated with either a green check mark ("trustworthy") or a red exclamation mark ("not trustworthy"). These ratings, which are continuously updated, are the product that NewsGuard sells. In its own promotional material, NewsGuard says that it enables "a wide range of businesses,

institutions and governments to combat misinformation and create trustworthy digital environments." One of NewsGuard's major customers is Microsoft. The group has integrated ratings into its Edge Internet browser as a default. An app is also available. The company says:

> "NewsGuard's ratings and Nutrition Labels can be licensed by internet service providers, browsers, news aggregators, and social media and search platforms in order to make NewsGuard's information about news websites available to their users. These ratings are made available to consumers through its browser extension, which is available on Chrome, Safari, Edge, and Firefox browsers, on Android and iOS devices through a mobile app, and on iOS or Android devices through the Edge mobile browser."

As a result, websites deemed untrustworthy are not even clicked on by users and the "fake news" does not reach its target. Or so the idea goes. However, a more thorough look at the company, the employees and the evaluation criteria shows that there are a number of problems with this.

Problem 1: Investor conflicts of interest

As mentioned above, one of NewsGuard's main investors is Publicis, a PR and advertising group. In its most recent annual report, Publicis reported more than one billion dollars in revenue from the healthcare sector. Its clients include numerous global pharmaceutical companies, including Pfizer, the largest manufacturer of COVID-19 drugs. NewsGuard is intensively involved in evaluating the journalistic content surrounding these "vaccines." Those who criticize the mRNA preparations tend to be considered untrustworthy. Can NewsGuard still be considered independent at this point? The company's own statement on the influence of its investors states:

> "Outside investors play no role in the determinations of ratings or the Nutrition Label write ups of websites, or any other aspect of NewsGuard's content."

This is, without a doubt, a serious conflict of interest. When Multipolar asked NewsGuard how they deal with this conflict of interest in concrete terms, i.e., away from blanket statements of intent, and how the company intends to ensure that the interests of one of its main funders do not find their way into the ratings, Marie Richter, NewsGuard's Managing Editor for Germany, explains:

> "I must reiterate here what it already says on our website: Investors are in no way involved in our evaluation process, nor do they have any influence on or contact with our analysts or editors. Our ratings process is designed to be free of this kind of influence to ensure that our nine basic, apolitical journalistic criteria are applied fairly and equally to all websites – regardless of the topic, tone or political leanings, if any."

Problem 2: Employee conflicts of interest

Regarding the company's investors, the conflicts of interest have only just begun. The professional entanglements of many employees appear no less alarming. The following are three examples:

- The **Süddeutsche Zeitung**, one of Germany´s leading newspapers, received a top ranking of 100 points from NewsGuard; rather than any criticism in the evaluation text, there is a blanket, undifferentiated statement: "Articles are balanced, fact-based and supported with sources." Jointly responsible for this rating is journalist Alina Fichter – who has, herself, worked as an editor for the Süddeutsche Zeitung.

- **Tagesschau.de**, Germany´s public television's news flagship on the Internet, received a rating of 95 points from NewsGuard. Here, too, one finds almost no criticism. The fact that the complaints against Tagesschau contributions due to journalistic transgressions now fill several books has not been addressed. The favorable rating was written by journalist Rebecca Kuesters – who, herself, works as a freelance journalist for Germany´s public television.

- **Bild.de**, Germany´s most popular tabloid newspaper, received a rating of 69.5 points. According to NewsGuard, the tabloid's articles are "generally fact-based." Although there is plenty of room for criticism in this rating, it ends with a green "trustworthy" seal of approval. Only those who read to the end of the 20-page assessment text learn that "Gordon Crovitz, co-CEO of NewsGuard, was an investor and is currently a board member at Business Insider, which was acquired by Axel Springer." In other words, the NewsGuard boss works for the Springer Group, which publishes the Bild newspaper.

With respect to this, Marie Richter of NewsGuard tells Multipolar:

> "All our journalists are required to transparently disclose their previous employers or other employment on our website. In addition, we require all of our team members to familiarize themselves with our comprehensive policy in the form of an Editorial Employee Statement of Understanding and Commitment, which they must adhere to while working for us. The policy includes two paragraphs on conflict of interest disclosure obligations for our journalists themselves as well as their relatives."

However, the real journalistic problem is not one of disclosure, but rather of the *existence* of conflicts of interest. Instead of merely being made transparent, conflicts of interest should be completely *avoided*. It is impossible for an employee or former employee of a media organization to evaluate it "independently."

The NewsGuard CEO Gordon Crovitz's involvement with the Springer Group is a conflict of interest on another level. NewsGuard also offers its ratings to the advertising industry; as mentioned above, it was an advertising agency that organized the six-million-dollar financing of NewsGuard in the first place. This agency is currently also one of the company's main investors. Little wonder. The rating system benefits advertising customers, who, if possible, prefer not to place their adverts in controversial environments. A medium classified as untrustworthy, therefore, runs the risk of losing a considerable amount of advertising revenue – which NewsGuard also openly mentions as the goal of its work. If NewsGuard were to attach a red warning label to the Bild newspaper, the Springer Group, for which NewsGuard's boss Crovitz works, would be exposed to financial risks.

Problem 3: Structural conflicts of interest

If we look more closely at the ratings of the individual media, another conflict of interest of a structural nature can be observed. At NewsGuard, journalists who work or have worked for established leading media warn against opposition media that question the narratives of the major media. In other words, they badmouth the competition. Whereas the leading media are almost invariably rated as trustworthy (Der Spiegel, 100 points, "The articles are well-sourced and balanced"), the opposite is true for critics from the opposition media niche, who are almost always given a red warning label:

- **Rubikon** (35 points) "supports narratives of the Russian government and publishes conspiracy myths and false and misleading claims."

- **Apolut** (20 points) "has published false and unsubstantiated statements on several occasions."

- **Reitschuster** (59.5 points) "does not research information responsibly and presents misleading headlines."

- **Achgut** (35 points) "has published false and misleading claims on the topics of migration and climate change" (Achgut published a five-part series of articles on its experiences with NewsGuard in November 2021).

Exceptions to this rule are **Tichys Einblick** (69.5 points), **Telepolis** (87.5 points) and **NachDenkSeiten** (82 points), which are all rated as credible, albeit with qualifications. To NachDenkSeiten, for example, it adds the condition: "The site has shared unsubstantiated allegations about COVID-19." NachDenkSeiten has made an effort to take NewsGuard's criticism into account by making the relevant amendments.

The review of opposition media usually takes the form of scanning the published articles for views that are considered controversial, for example, the origin of the coronavirus, the safety of mRNA drugs or the topic of Russia and Ukraine. Controversial views on such topics are then "refuted" in a fact check by the responsible NewsGuard employee, quoting the statements of official government agencies on the matter. In this view, the fact that governments can also lie or present things in a misleading manner based on their interests is beyond the realm of imagination. Rubikon, Reitschuster and the like, therefore, make themselves suspicious on principle.

Conversely, media that sharply criticize these opposition voices are considered particularly credible by NewsGuard, such as the blog **Volksverpetzer** (87.5 points), which aggressively pits people against each other (_Grenzt Impfgegner aus_ (Marginalize Vaccine Opponents), _Warum die AfD überwacht werde muss_ (Why the AfD Must be Monitored), _Wer hat Schuld an der Impfpflicht? – Impfgegner_ (Who is to Blame for the Vaccine Mandate? – Vaccine Opponents)). According to NewsGuard, this blog engages in impeccable journalism and "researches and publishes information responsibly":

> "Articles are generally opinionated but fact-based, and include source citations and links to original sources. Headlines are sometimes emotionally charged, but accurately reflect the content and are not misleading."

Problem 4: Evaluations conducted by journalistic newcomers

The above assessment was conducted by Marie Richter, who has already been quoted several times in this article and is the company's Managing Editor for Germany. Richter is 25 years old. She tells Multipolar: "As Managing Editor of our German team, I coordinate our analyses and assign them to our analysts." At an Aspen Institute online conference in February 2022, she explained that the analysis process at NewsGuard is so involved "because we go to the trouble of bringing in subject matter experts." She is clearly referring to herself, as she is the main author of the ratings for Rubikon, Telepolis and Achgut, among others. She was also involved in the ratings of Apolut and Reitschuster. And she is currently supervising the rating of Multipolar.

What qualifies her for this job, and what makes her a subject matter expert in these fields? NewsGuard states that Richter has earned a bachelor's degree in "international relations, literature and writing" at a private college

in the US, followed by a master's degree in journalism at the prestigious Columbia University. The fact that this master's program at Columbia University lasts just nine months is not included in the short biography. Richter has no other professional experience in journalism.

Raised in Saxony as the daughter of a Hamburg-born law professor who has held a chair in business law in Dresden for 20 years, she lived in the US for several years and studied various topics, and in 2019, at age 23, completed the nine-month fast-track course in journalism mentioned above called a "master's degree." Immediately following this, she started her career at NewsGuard. Here, the young professional now has the power to decide which of the opposition media in Germany may still generate revenue through adverts and which will be cut off from both the flow of advertising money and readership because they spread "disinformation" against which all Internet users must therefore be warned in their search results. This, at least, is the idea NewsGuard represents and the goal toward which the company's efforts are directed.

Note, however, that it should also be mentioned that not all employees have this little experience. For example, there is also a more qualified "Leadership" team that includes Florian Meißner and Eric Effron. Meißner studied journalism at the Technical University Dortmund, where he earned his doctorate in 2018 and then worked as a research assistant. In addition, he worked for the public broadcasting corporations WDR and ZDF for several years before joining NewsGuard in 2019, where he is currently Senior Advisor for Germany. Since 2021, Meißner also boasts a professorial title (Media Management and Journalism). The much older New York journalist Eric Effron is described by the company as an Editorial Director. Among other things, Effron worked for many years for the Reuters news agency. Meißner and Effron regularly have the task of reviewing the ratings, which are often written by younger colleagues, before publication. At least that is how NewsGuard describes it, although it remains unclear whether Effron speaks German at all – on the question of his language skills he himself only mentions English – and what exactly these reviews of Meißner and Effron entail.

The actual evaluation work at NewsGuard, however, is done by the young to very young, mostly non-permanent, colleagues (all women). In addition to Marie Richter, these are:

- **Roberta Schmid** graduated from high school in 2014, then worked as an intern at ZDF, Deutsche Welle and the German Federal Foreign Office between 2018 and 2019, before studying Political Communication in Amsterdam.

- **Liron Baur** was also a 2019 graduate of the nine-month journalism program at Columbia University in New York. She studied political science and screenwriting prior to this and her resume provides no evidence of any practical journalistic experience.

- **Caroline Lindekamp** completed a diploma in journalism at the Technical University Dortmund and worked as an intern at dpa, WDR and the German Federal Foreign Office, among others. In 2021, she interviewed the conspiracy theory researcher Michael Butter for DIE ZEIT in an article titled *Die Corona-Impfung ist ein Traum für Verschwörungstheoretiker (The Coronavirus Vaccine is a Dream for Conspiracy Theorists)* and asked him whether "deleting content could be an alternative" in cases where arguments and warnings against doubters were of little use.

- **Elena Bernard** joined the science magazine Spektrum in 2014 as a trainee, where she continues to mainly publish today. She completed a master's degree in science journalism at the Technical University Dortmund

in 2019, where the topic of her thesis was *Erfolgreiche Gesundheitsbotschaften (Successful Health Messages)*; in the same year her article *Warum du Leute selten mit Fakten überzeugst (Why you can rarely convince people with facts)* became available on the Quarks (WDR) website, stating: "If people don't get vaccinated because of unfounded fears, they not only endanger their own health, but also undermine global health goals." Elena Bernard was responsible for the ratings of Apolut and Reitschuster, among others, and is currently working on the rating of Multipolar.

- **Karin König** completed her bachelor's degree in journalism in 2020, followed by a traineeship at WDR, where she currently works as a freelancer. König was responsible for, among other things, the negative rating for the anti-government blog Anti-Spiegel ("a pro-Russian website that regularly publishes erroneous claims") and, together with Elena Bernard, the ratings for Tichys Einblick and NachDenkSeiten.

Problem 5: Ambiguous criteria leave room for arbitrariness

NewsGuard bases its ratings on nine criteria, each of which is linked to a specific score. A site with a score below 60 points receives a red rating. The rating is updated on an ongoing basis, meaning media outlets receive regularly mail from NewsGuard when the company has complaints. This creates a permanent pressure for the media to justify themselves. The criteria are presented below in the order of their weighting. Multipolar has addressed questions to NewsGuard on some of these points. These questions, together with NewsGuards's answers, provided by Marie Richter, are included below each of the criteria.

> *(1) **Does not repeatedly publish false content:** The site does not repeatedly produce stories that have been found – either by journalists at NewsGuard or elsewhere – to be clearly and significantly false, and which have not been quickly and prominently corrected. (22 points)*

In this respect, Multipolar asked the company which specific organizations were meant by journalists from "elsewhere" and asked for a complete list, as well as a rationale for selecting them. NewsGuard responded as follows:

> *"We do not have a complete list of the fact checkers we work with, especially since we use these fact checkers as indicators and our analysts also check all fact checkers themselves. We never rely on just one source or fact check to determine whether a claim is misleading or false, but consult several relevant sources among others. Among the fact checkers we frequently cite are Correctiv, BR Faktenfuchs, Faktenfinder (Tagesschau), AFP and dpa."*

However, this gives rise to a new problem. Because the fact-checking organizations mentioned here are not financially independent or belong to specific media houses, their fact checks always target competing media and never their own funders and media. NewsGuard thus refers one-sidedly to biased assessments. A fact check by Multipolar or the NachDenkSeiten, for example, has not yet found its way into a NewsGuard evaluation. Why not?

> *(2) **Gathers and presents information responsibly:** Content providers are generally fair and accurate in reporting and presenting information. They reference multiple sources, preferably those that present direct, firsthand information on a subject or event or from credible second hand news sources, and they do not egregiously distort or misrepresent information to make an argument or report on a subject. (18 points)*

In terms of this point, Multipolar asked exactly how NewsGuard defines the terms "credible sources" and "misrepresented information." NewsGuard replied as follows:

"Credible sources are sources that adhere to basic journalism standards of credibility and transparency, and that do not spread false claims or report in a biased manner/with a hidden agenda. Misrepresented information refers to claims that are not false per se, but taken out of context or placed in a misleading or false context."

In this case, one imprecise term is simply replaced by another – "misrepresented information" is facts in a "misleading context." But what exactly does this mean? "Misleading" suggests that there is a single "true" context in which the facts belong and that all other interpretations of the (factually accurate) facts are therefore false. This definition offers great potential for arbitrariness, since an evaluation thus depends less on the facts than on one's own attitude. Moreover, attributing a "hidden agenda" to the media is not an objectively verifiable criterion.

*(3) **Regularly corrects or clarifies errors:** The site makes clear how to report an error or complaint, has effective practices for publishing clarifications and corrections, and notes corrections in a transparent way. (12.5 points)*

*(4) **Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly:** Content providers who convey the impression that they report news or a mix of news and opinion distinguish opinion from news reporting, and when reporting news, do not egregiously cherry pick facts or stories to advance opinions. Content providers who advance a particular point of view disclose that point of view. (12.5 points)*

Differentiating between news and commentary – initially, this sounds reasonable and sensible. However, in the media world there is not only a duality of news and commentary, but also an abundance of texts that both research facts and classify them in a judgmental way. Does NewsGuard thus claim that all of these texts are then journalistically deficient? If so, on what basis? NewsGuard responded to these questions as follows:

"In evaluating this criterion, we consider the following: 1) If the website publishes a mix of news articles and commentary, we check to see if they are clearly labeled as such; 2) if the website is, in general, opinionated, we check to see whether this is apparent to readers; and 3) if the website reveals a general political bias or perspective in its reporting, we check to see whether this has been disclosed. We would consider the texts you describe on a case-by-case basis. There is no blanket answer to this. And it also depends on the general nature of the website. For example, if most of the articles on a website are well researched, but serve to express the opinion of the author or the website, and the website does not disclose this as its general mission/format, then we would consider this a lack of transparency and consider the criterion not met."

Here is where it finally becomes arbitrary. If NewsGuard does not like the content of a magazine's articles, but nevertheless cannot refute this with clean factual criticism, then rating points can still be deducted because of an "undisclosed political bias." However, an undisclosed bias is, in itself, a contradiction in terms. If a NewsGuard reviewer is able to detect this tendency, then the readers – as responsible, independently thinking citizens – can, of course, do so as well. It seems that NewsGuard has a different, elitist view of humanity here, according to which the public must be steered in the "right" direction as a precaution and "protected" from

controversial interpretations. At this point at the very latest, NewsGuard has clearly crossed the threshold into "opinion management."

> (5) **Avoids deceptive headlines:** *The site generally does not publish headlines that include false information, significantly sensationalize, or otherwise do not reflect what is actually in the story. (10 points)*

> (6) **Website discloses ownership and financing:** *The site discloses its ownership and/or financing, as well as any notable ideological or political positions held by those with a significant financial interest in the site, in a user-friendly manner. (7.5 points)*

> (7) **Clearly labels advertising:** *The site makes clear which content is paid for and which is not. (7.5 points)*

> (8) **Reveals who's in charge, including possible conflicts of interest:** *Information about those in charge of the content is made accessible on the site. (5 points)*

> (9) **The site provides the names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information:** *Information about those producing the content is made accessible on the site. (5 points)*

It is quite evident that those criteria that could be considered questionable are primarily those for which the most points are allocated. The potential for an evaluation by attitude is thus quite significant from the outset.

Problem 6: The objectivity myth

The NewsGuard ratings are based quite generally on the assumption that "objective" journalism, while completely ignoring one's own political views, is possible. Michael Meyen, Professor of Communication at LMU Munich, comments on this assumption in response to Multipolar's inquiry as follows:

> "On the one hand, (supposedly objective) news, on the other, opinions: This separation requirement is part of an ideology that obscures the interests behind the reporting of the leading media. Journalism is selection. It begins, first of all, with the decision of what topic will be selected, and does not end with the weighting (i.e., what will occupy the foreground, and what the background) or with the appeal to opportune witnesses. Valuations are transported via language – also, and especially, in the 'news' section. Research has proven many times that the same message can be found there as in the comments. Anyone who claims the opposite, like NewsGuard, and also distributes seals of approval on this basis, becomes the guardian of the prevailing opinion. It is therefore no coincidence that this organization places no value at all on diversity and treats the criterion of transparency (who is writing, who is paying and who is supplying, and why) below par."

Problem 7: Political advisors

NewsGuard has engaged numerous former politicians and high-ranking US government and NATO officials on an advisory board that provides "strategic advice" to the company, including:

- **Michael Hayden:** NSA and CIA director under US President George W. Bush.

- **Tom Ridge:** Secretary of Homeland Security under President George W. Bush.

- **Elise Jordan:** Speechwriter for US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

- **Don Baer:** PR chief (White House communications director) under Bill Clinton.

- **Richard Stengel:** PR chief (Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs) in the US State Department under Secretary John Kerry.

- **Anders Fogh Rasmussen:** Ex-Secretary General of NATO.

When asked by Multipolar how the engagement of these political consultants fits with the claim of journalistic objectivity and independence, NewsGuard explains as follows:

> *"Our consultants are not involved in our process of evaluating websites, nor do they have the authority to make editorial or business decisions. Their role is simply to provide advice and insight on important issues relating to disinformation in various fields."*

But exactly why is this "advice and insight" from ex-NATO and CIA chiefs and various US government PR experts necessary anyway – if not to make their politically-colored view of disinformation the standard for their own ratings? Or is there perhaps some other way in which government PR experts can "assist" journalists?

So, what is NewsGuard all about?

This list of consultants, together with the company's numerous conflicts of interest and the seriously problematic evaluation criteria described above, hardly allow for any other conclusion than that NewsGuard itself is an instrument of political PR.

The young and committed employees of the company should perhaps ask themselves why the management of a company that has multi-million-dollar investors and international political heavyweights in the background entrusts the particularly delicate task of media evaluation almost exclusively to less experienced junior staff. And they should ask themselves what the NewsGuard product is actually about.

Further articles on the topic:

- **I cannot do it anymore** (Ole Skambraks, 14.10.2021)
- **The biggest filter bubble ever** (Paul Schreyer, 26.2.2020)