

Guide for Educators and Librarians

What is NewsGuard?

NewsGuard uses journalism to fight false news, misinformation, and disinformation. Its team of experienced journalists review news and information websites to help readers know which websites they can generally trust—and which they should not.

Why is NewsGuard relevant?

Media literacy has never been more important. As consumption of the news continues to shift online, it's harder to understand what information can generally be trusted. Distrust in the media is rising, and only a third of Americans have a positive view of the news media, according to a 2017 Knight/Gallup survey. NewsGuard helps address that, by equipping people with a tool to better understand the information they consume online.

How do you access NewsGuard's reviews?

NewsGuard offers a free browser extension for <u>Chrome</u>, <u>Edge</u>, <u>Firefox</u>, and Safari. After installing the extension, NewsGuard's red and green badges will appear next to headlines in social media feeds and search results. Hovering over the badge reveals a short description of the website and a link to access the full "Nutrition Label" review of the site.

How does NewsGuard review websites?

Each website is rated using nine standards of credibility and transparency. Each rating is accompanied by a Nutrition Label that explains a site's rating and discusses its ownership and financing, content, credibility, transparency, and history.

Who should use this guide?

- A grade 8-12 or university-level educator teaching civics, writing, or journalism
- A librarian looking to engage patrons with the NewsGuard plugin

What are the outcomes?

This guide meets <u>the Common Core</u> anchor standards for language arts and social studies, and the <u>International Society for Technology in Education</u> (ISTE) standards for technology use. See the Outcomes section on page 13 of this guide for a full list of standards.





Introduction to NewsGuard

- NewsGuard was launched in March 2018 by veteran journalists Steve Brill and Gordon Crovitz to tackle misinformation online.
- As tech companies and platforms relied on algorithms and artificial intelligence to try to address the problem, the two saw the need for human intelligence to be part of the solution. NewsGuard employs experienced journalists who review the top news and information websites using nine criteria for credibility and transparency.
- While most users have no way of knowing how an algorithm might determine which
 websites are trustworthy, NewsGuard clearly lays out how a website was evaluated in its
 Nutrition Label reviews. Plus, if NewsGuard ever says anything negative about a website,
 its analysts always call the site for comment.
- NewsGuard's reviews are at the level of a website, not an individual story. Other
 organizations, such as fact-checking websites Snopes.com and Politifact.com, review the
 credibility of individual stories, but they only review a small proportion of stories on the
 internet.
- NewsGuard ratings will cover the websites that account for 98% of all online news engagement in the U.S. by the 2018 midterm elections.

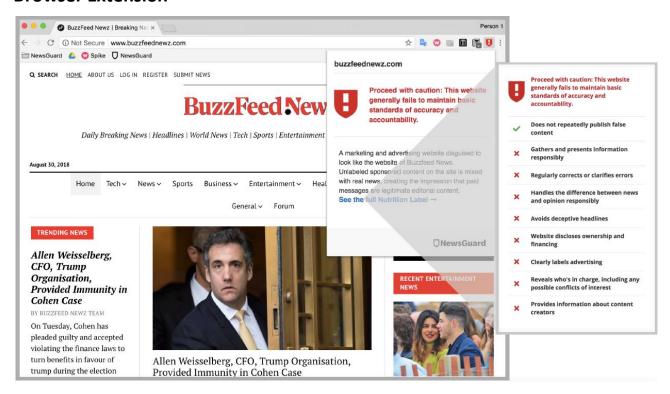
NewsGuard's "Nutrition Label" Reviews

- NewsGuard analyzes each website using nine widely-accepted journalistic standards for credibility and transparency. See the NewsGuard's Criteria section on page 6 of this guide for a description of each criterion.
- Each review starts with the premise that a site should be **green** until its evaluation of the site, based on those nine criteria, produces a **red** rating.
- Each of the nine criteria is assigned a certain number of points, adding up to 100. A website that scores less than 60 points is rated red.
- Some criteria are worth more than others. For example, a website that publishes false content commits a graver error than a site that does not provide information about the people creating its content, and the weight of points reflects that. A table explaining the weight of points is available on NewsGuard's website.
- Each site has a "Nutrition Label" that carefully explains the site's ownership and financing, content, credibility, transparency, and history. See the "Reading a Nutrition Label" section on page 5 of this guide for a full explanation of a label's contents
- Ratings and labels are regularly updated, and NewsGuard lists the names and email addresses of the writers and editors who review each site.

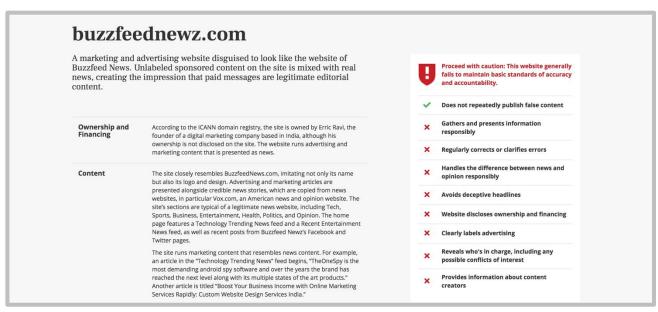
Using NewsGuard's Browser Extension

- Download the NewsGuard extension on Chrome, Edge, Firefox, and Safari
- Once installed, websites in search results or articles on social media feeds will appear with a badge indicating how NewsGuard has rated the underlying site. Badges appear in the upper right corner of websites as well
- Hovering over the badge reveals a short description of the site and a link to read the
 full Nutrition Label. The badge is a quick indication of the nature of a website, but users
 should read the full label to really understand the site.

Browser Extension



Nutrition Label (partial)



Understanding the badges:



Proceed with caution: This website generally fails to maintain basic standards of accuracy and accountability. A site with a **red** badge lacks credibility or transparency in important areas and should generally not be trusted as the primary source of information. Users should always independently verify information on **red** sites, and if they feel there is a compelling case for citing a **red** site, they should be able to clearly articulate why.



This website generally maintains basic standards of accuracy and accountability. A site with a **green** badge can generally be trusted, but not all sites rated **green** are equal. A **green** site may still lack credibility or transparency in certain key areas. Users should read the full nutrition label to understand any shortcomings of the site that might impact whether they should trust the story they're consulting.



This is a satire or humor website. It is not an actual news source.

A website intended to entertain. Unlike a false news website that is intentionally deceiving, a satirical website is upfront about its nature, or widely known to be a parody. A common example is The Onion. Much like a red website, a pink website should typically not be consulted as the primary source of information, unless there is a compelling reason for citing it.



This website publishes content from its users that it does not vet. Information from this source may not be reliable.

A platform, such as Facebook or YouTube, where users produce content that might not be edited or vetted for accuracy. Students should evaluate the user uploading content to the platform, and the sources they use. Students should always independently verify information on the platform using reputable sources.



This website is still in the process of being rated by NewsGuard.

Stay tuned: NewsGuard's team of journalists is currently in the process of reviewing this website.



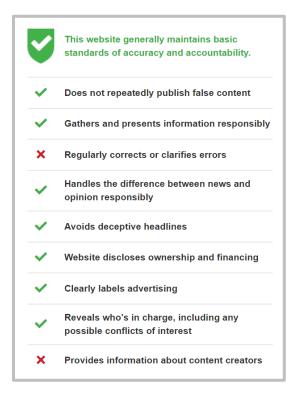
(or no badge displayed)

When a white badge appears in the upper right hand corner of a website, or no badge appears next to a link, it indicates that NewsGuard has not yet rated the site, nor will NewsGuard rate it any time soon. If there is a compelling reason for NewsGuard to assess a website, users should click on the icon and submit it for review.

Reading a Nutrition Label

The checklist of NewsGuard's nine criteria:

- Not all sites are created equally. While sites will only receive one of five different badges (green, red, pink, yellow, or gray), there is a wide variety in quality within each of the five categories. A site can fail a few criteria but still receive a green overall, and a site can pass a few criteria but still receive a red.
- Look at the checklist for two green sites that are not equal: One that receives 100 (wsj.com or nytimes.com) and one that receives a red X in a few categories (pagesix.com or huffingtonpost.com)
- Look at the checklist for two red sites that are not equal: One that receives a red X for nearly every criterion (nationalenquirer.com) and one that receives a red X for many, but not all, criteria (dailykos.com)



The sections of a Nutrition Label:

- **Ownership and Financing**: Names a site's owner and describes how it is financed.
- Content: Describes the type of stories, videos, and other information that a reader will encounter on a site. Also explains if the site reflects an ideology.
- Credibility: Illustrates whether a site's reporting is credible, and explains why it may have received a red X for any credibility criteria
- Transparency: Describes how much information a site provides about itself, and explains why it may have received a red X for any transparency criteria
- History: Provides context for how long a website has been around, why it was started, and what changes it may have undergone over the years
- Sources: Contains a full list of sources, organized by section, to support each fact stated in the Nutrition Label. Users can consult the source list to verify statements made in the label
- Authors: Each label names the analysts and editors that reviewed that website, providing their bio and email address for anyone with questions or concerns.

eonline.com The online extension of E!, a 24-hour cable TV ent produced by E! Entertainment Television, which o entertainment news. Ownership and The site is owned by NBCUniversal Inc., Financing of the world's largest telecommunication Content Eonline.com publishes stories, photos, and entertainment news, as well as cont television shows like "Keeping up with th for coverage of celebrity events and awa photo galleries and fashion reviews post It has sections on red carpet events, orig film news, and celebrity lifestyles, includi and fitness A livestream of the cable TV channel is a subscribers Credibility Text and video stories are produced by s celebrity news by quoting unnamed sou has learned ..." It has also relied on second parent, along with sites like TMZ that ofto reports without much elaboration. Headlines speak in tabloid gossip style: Up for a Selfie at Colosseum in Rom Celebrate at Baby Shower with Kim Kard Transparency The site does not provide information at biographies can be found on the NBCUn

comments at the end of each news story feedback link, but does not make clear h

Editors at Eonline.com and representativ

NewsGuard's Criteria: Credibility

1.

Does not repeatedly publish false content

NewsGuard's Standard: In the last three years the site has not produced multiple stories that have been found—either by journalists at NewsGuard or elsewhere—to be clearly false, and which have not been quickly and prominently corrected.

- While many websites periodically make errors, sites that do not promptly correct those
 errors may be intentionally trying to or misinform readers. False stories can range from
 conspiracy theories to inaccurate health claims. Readers should strive to independently
 verify any news or information they encounter online by referencing reputable sources.
- Exercise: Look at examples of sites that publish false content, and discuss: How might you be able to identify such content? Why is this criterion listed first?
 - infowars.com
 - yournewswire.com
 - dailymail.co.uk
 - runwonder.com

2.

Gathers and presents information responsibly

NewsGuard's Standard: Content on the site is created by reporters, writers, videographers, researchers, or other information providers who generally seek to be accurate and fair in gathering, reporting, and interpreting information, even if they approach their work from a strong point of view. They do this by referencing multiple sources, preferably those that present direct, firsthand information on a subject or event.

- Gathering information: News websites may use a range of different methods:
 - Original reporting: journalists conduct original interviews and collect information directly from the source
 - Aggregation: writers pull information from a variety of different sources
 - Wire services: websites can publish stories directly from certain news outlets, such as Reuters and the Associated Press, which provide content for use
 - Anonymous sources: journalists speak to individuals who prefer not to be named in print, sometimes to protect themselves and their job. Using anonymous sources is controversial, as readers are unable to verify whether the information is true. Many news outlets only use anonymous sources if they can independently verify the information using at least two sources, typically only in exceptional cases.
- **Presenting information**: Writers who present information responsibly do not misstate facts, misquote sources, or distort information by cherry picking or omitting key details

NewsGuard's Standard: The site makes clear how to contact those in charge and has effective practices for publishing clarifications and corrections.

- From The New York Times to The Wall Street Journal, most news outlets make mistakes. Correcting errors is what separate responsible sites from those that purposefully spread false information.
- **Corrections:** When a site updates a story to fix a mistake. An explanation of the change often appears at the top or bottom of an article, or in a separate "corrections" section of the website, often labeled "correction," "clarification," "update," or "editor's note."
- **Retractions:** When a site removes a story from its site. The site might publish a retraction, indicating the story was taken down to avoid spreading false information. Other sites might remove a story without notice to remove any evidence of the issue.
- Some sites post corrections and retractions in a genuine effort to be accurate; others
 are may only be published as the result of immense pressure or lawsuits. Look at the
 Nutrition Labels for the <u>Daily Mail</u> and <u>The National Enquirer</u> both outlets have only
 corrected certain stories following significant pressure.

4.

Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly

NewsGuard's Standard: 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, they do not regularly or egregiously misstate, distort, or cherry pick facts, or egregiously cherry pick stories, to advance opinions. Content providers whose clearly expressed purpose is to advance a particular point of view do not regularly and egregiously misstate or distort facts to make their case.

- Some websites strictly publish opinion stories, and others strictly publish the news. Most sites, however, fall somewhere in the middle, publishing news reports as well as commentary pieces. When news sites publish opinion stories or editorials, they usually reside in a separate section, or are labeled as such.
- All sites approach their reporting from some point of view even those that attempt to report straightforward news, such as Reuters and The Associated Press. Some websites are more explicitly opinionated than others, such as HuffPost and The Daily Caller. A site might state its point of view in an About Us section, or it might assume that its readers know its perspective without explicitly stating it.
- When a site reflects a certain point of view, it might editorialize or cherry pick.
 - Editorializing: when authors insert their opinion into news reports
 - Cherry picking: when a website only covers stories that support its point of view, or when an author only includes facts in a story that reflect their opinion

- Exercise: Look at how the same exact story is reported from sources with different ideologies
 - Pick a site on the left (e.g. HuffPost, Alternet, or Mother Jones), a site in the middle (e.g. Reuters, the Associated Press, or ABC News), and a site on the right (e.g. The Daily Caller, The Daily Wire, or the Washington Times)
 - Discuss: What change from one story to another? Are things distorted? Are some facts cherry picked, and others left out?

5. **Avoids deceptive headlines**

NewsGuard' Standard: The site generally does not publish headlines that include false information, significantly sensationalize, or otherwise do not reflect what is actually in the story.

- A headline tells a reader what's in the story before they decide to read it. Some
 websites use exaggerated headlines that distort the facts in a story to entice people
 into clicking and reading an article.
- Deceptive headlines are dangerous if people only skim headlines they encounter online, but don't take the time to read the articles themselves
- Exercise: Look at sensational headlines and then read the stories themselves to see how
 changing a few words can paint a different picture of the story. Example: Look at this
 <u>Daily Caller headline</u>, then read the story. Have students re-write the headline after
 reading the story.

NewsGuard's Criteria: Transparency

6. Website discloses ownership and financing

NewsGuard's Standard: 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.

- Sites may be operated by several different types of owners:
 - Individuals who run their own news website or opinion blog
 - Companies, which can range from large media conglomerates like NBCUniversal and Sinclair, to small, family-owned businesses like Morgan Murphy Media. Companies may be privately-owned or publicly-owned. Public companies, like McClatchy and Gannett (USA Today) are required to disclose ownership and financial information, while private companies, like Cox Media Group and Hearst Communications, are not.
 - Nonprofit groups that often publish news stories related to its efforts and causes, such as Heritage.org and ACLU.org

- Governments that own and fund news sites, such as <u>RT.com</u> (the website of a Russian government propaganda effort), and the <u>Canadian Broadcasting Corporation</u> (which has safeguards to maintain independence)
- A site's owner is sometimes difficult to determine, but tools exist to help users
 determine ownership, like ICANN WHO.IS, which allows you to look up a domain
 registration, and Crunchbase, which provides information about private companies
- Sites may be financed by advertisements, subscriptions, merchandise sales, sponsored content, parent company revenue, or donations. Some websites exist mainly to make money through "clickbait" content and advertising, like providr.com

NewsGuard's Standard: The site makes clear which content is paid for and which is not.

- Some advertisements are designed to resemble stories and trick a user into clicking
- Sponsored content includes stories that resemble news articles but are paid for by a company to promote its products or services. These should be labeled, but sometimes it can be hard to tell. Read more.
 - Examples: HuffPost contains a separate "From Our Sponsors" section containing stories sponsored by Sleep Number and PWC.
- Affiliate marketing involves a website promoting goods or services sold elsewhere, enabling the website to get a cut of the eventual sale
- One 2016 Stanford University study of 7,804 students in middle school through college found that around 82% of middle school students could not distinguish between a real news story and an ad labeled "sponsored content"

8. Reveals who's in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest

NewsGuard's Standard: Information about those in charge of the content is made accessible on the site, including any possible conflicts of interest.

- Owners, editors and publishers should be named, providing biographical and contact information, so that they can be held accountable for their site.
- Readers should be able to understand why someone might have created a site, and what might be their motivation
 - Example: Recode.com: Kara Swisher contains an ethics statement in her bio explaining potential conflicts of interest
- Those in charge should be easy to contact so they can receive feedback

9. Provides information about content creators

NewsGuard's Standard: Information about those producing the content is made accessible on the site.

- Stories should state an author's real name. Some writers might use pseudonyms, or fake names, out of concern for their own safety, such as if they might receive threats for expressing controversial opinions. On the other hand, it's easier for someone to make false or inflammatory claims when their real identity isn't tied to what they write.
- Content creators should provide contact information so readers can ask questions and make complaints
- Writers should provide bios revealing their backgrounds and any conflicts of interest with what they report.
- Exercise: Read <u>The Hill's</u> Nutrition Label, where the credibility section describes how the publication received flack for printing editorials by contributors without disclosing their conflicts of interest. For example, they printed a story by former Republican Senator Norm Coleman that praised President Trump's exit from the Iran nuclear deal, without disclosing that Coleman is a paid lobbyist for the government of Saudi Arabia, one of Iran's major rivals

Exercises for Students

- Using NewsGuard's different sites -- once using NewsGuard's extension, once without using it. Encourage students to look at the labels of the news sites they often visit. Did anything in the nutrition label surprise them?
- Evaluate the trustworthiness of NewsGuard itself is NewsGuard credible and transparent?
 - Research NewsGuard's investors to see if there could be a hidden agenda
 - Read the staff bios to determine if anyone might have their own bias
 - Write a nutrition label of the NewsGuard website itself
- Students evaluate and write their own nutrition label for a site NewsGuard hasn't yet rated, such as the website of their school's student publication

Additional discussion: the history of fake news and misinformation

- False news has been around for hundreds of years. The spread of misinformation was an issue long before newspapers. Example: in 1475 a preacher in Trent, Italy falsely claimed that a Jew had murdered a two-year-old boy, resulting in the arrest and torture of the city's entire Jewish community.
- The rise of newspapers facilitated this phenomenon: <u>a colonial newspaper</u> in Boston alleged that a Native American uprising took place in Nantucket in 1738, which turned out to be a myth.
- Online journalism has helped false stories spread more rapidly, as anyone with an
 internet connection can register a domain and publish a story: Examine some
 prominent fake news sites from the 2016 election, such as Pizzagate
- Discuss: Have you ever fallen for a fake news story? Do you know anyone who has?

Additional discussion: news in the social media age

- The Media Insight Project found that by age 18, 88% of young adults regularly get news from social media, especially Facebook, based on a 2015 study of 1,045 adults between the ages of 18 and 34
- Articles all look similar when shared on Facebook and Twitter, and it can be hard to tell the nature of an underlying source when you look at an article in a news feed. It's easy to quickly "retweet" or "share" a story on without looking into its source
- A story can get reduced to a headline and taken out of context when an entire article gets reduced to the 280-character maximum of a Tweet.
- When the subject of a story is trending or in the news, old stories about them, sometimes from many years in the past, will often be shared and trend again, leading people to think the stories are recent
- Exercise: Present students with a complicated headline from the day's news and ask them to write it into a punchy, 140-character Tweet. Discuss examples did any facts get distorted in the process?

Other resources

- Fact-checking websites that evaluate the accuracy of individual stories
 - Snopes
 - Politifact
 - Washington Post Fact Checker
 - Factcheck.org
 - **Google reverse image search:** Use to fact check images and determine whether they have been edited or are accurate
- Research tools to determine who owns a site
 - ICANN who.is: Use to figure out who registered a website and when
 - Crunchbase: Useful for looking up private companies
 - Open Secrets: Check if an organization has donated money to a politician or PAC, or if it has received money from a PAC
 - **ProPublica Nonprofit database**: Research nonprofit organizations

Additional reading and resources for crafting a lesson

- https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/19/learning/lesson-plans/evaluating-sources-in-a-post-truth-world-ideas-for-teaching-and-learning-about-fake-news.html
- https://www.commonsense.org/education/teaching-strategies/turn-students-into-fact-finding-web-detectives
- https://ww2.kqed.org/education/2017/03/14/real-news-fake-news-or-opinion-teaching-our-students-to-discern-the-difference/
- https://newslit.org/
- http://heyjuliesmith.com/2017/03/16/fake-news-resources-teachers/
- http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/lessons-plans/lesson-plan-how-to-teach-your-students-about-fake-news/
- The New York Times Learning Network: distinguishing between fact and opinion
- https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/12/05/503581220/fake-or-real-how-to-self-check-the-news-and-get-the-facts
- TED Ed video: how to choose your news

Outcomes:

This guide meets the Common Core K-12 anchor standards for language arts and social studies and the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) standards for technology engagement:

Reading

- "Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone." — Common Core CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4
- "Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger
 portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the
 whole." Common Core CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5
- "Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text." Common Core CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6
- "Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence." — Common Core CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.8
- "Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take." — Common Core CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.9

Research

- "Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words." — Common Core CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7
- "Students plan and employ effective research strategies to locate information and other resources for their intellectual or creative pursuits." — ISTE 3a
- "Students evaluate the accuracy, perspective, credibility and relevance of information, media, data or other resources." ISTE 3b
- "Students curate information from digital resources using a variety of tools and methods to create collections of artifacts that demonstrate meaningful connections or conclusions." — ISTE 3c
- "Students build knowledge by actively exploring real-world issues and problems, developing ideas and theories and pursuing answers and solutions." ISTE 3d

Writing

 "Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism." — Common Core CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.8

Language

 "Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening." — Common Core CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.3

Technology

- "Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others." Common Core CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.6
- "Students choose the appropriate platforms and tools for meeting the desired objectives of their creation or communication." ISTE 6a