

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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June 13, 2024

Mr. Steven Brill & Mr. Gordon Crovitz
Co-CEOs and Co-Editors-In-Chief
NewsGuard
25 W. 52nd Street, 15th Floor
New York, NY 10019

Dear Mr. Brill and Mr. Crovitz:

The Committee on Oversight and Accountability is investigating the impact of NewsGuard on protected First Amendment speech and its potential to serve as a non-transparent agent of censorship campaigns. Our inquiry seeks documents on NewsGuard’s business relationships with government entities, its adherence to its own policies intended to guard against appearances of bias, how it tries to avoid and manage potential conflicts of interest arising from its investors and other influences, and actions that may have the impact of delegitimizing factually accurate information.

A primary concern for the Committee is the Department of Defense contract NewsGuard was awarded in 2021, which raises questions about the involvement of federal agencies in potential censorship campaigns.¹ One concerned journalist expressed fear that NewsGuard’s activities are an extension of federal efforts—since struck down by courts—to coerce social media companies and to “destroy the financial survival of disfavored outlets...”² The Committee seeks to make an independent determination about whether NewsGuard’s intervention on protected speech has been in any way sponsored by a federal, state, local, or foreign government.

NewsGuard touts an “[e]ditorial employee statement of understanding and commitment,”³ under this policy, editorial employees pledge, to “refrain from any political activities, such as participation in or donations to political campaigns, opinionated social media posting, involvement in protests, or other activities that could call into question my fairness or create the appearance of political bias.”⁴ The social media accounts of several individuals listed as “editorial” on NewsGuard’s online list of employees casts doubt on NewsGuard’s commitment to enforcing this pledge and anti-bias efforts.⁵

¹ AWARD PROFILE CONTRACT SUMMARY, USASpending.gov FA864921P1569.

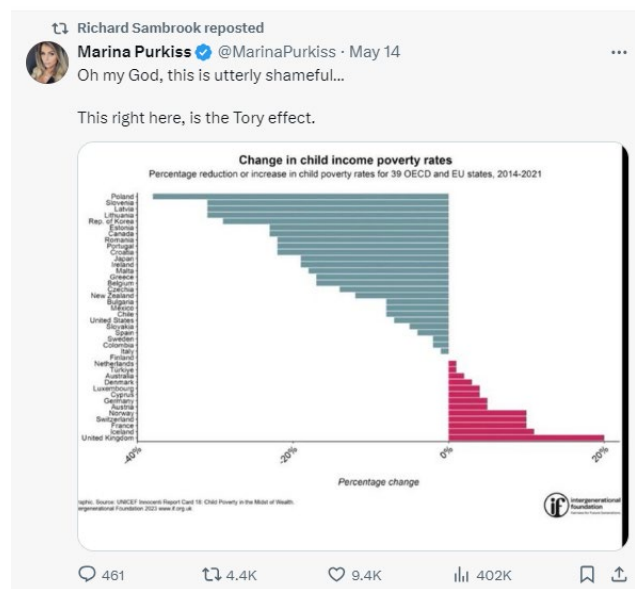
² Margot Cleveland, *NewsGuard Is Selling Its Government-Funded Censorship Tool to Private Companies*, THE FEDERALIST, November 27, 2023.

³ *Editorial Employee Statement of Understanding and Commitment*, NEWSGUARD, <https://www.newsguardtech.com/about/ethics-policy/> (last visited June 6, 2024).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Our Team*, NEWSGUARD, <https://www.newsguardtech.com/about/team/> (last visited June 6, 2024).

- From the X account of Senior Advisor Richard Sambrook^{6,7,8} (@sambrook):



Richard Sambrook reposted

Wolfgang Blau @wblau · Jan 6
This is an important text by Jonathan @Freedland about the urgent need for Europe and the world to prepare for a potential 2nd Trump presidency. I also hope that more journalists will soon cover the global climate risks of another Trump term.

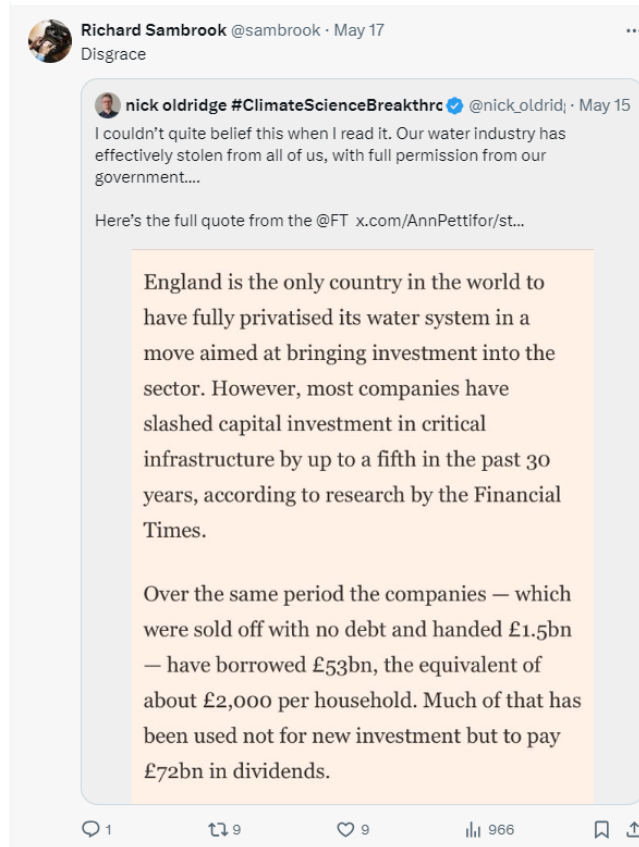
From theguardian.com

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⁶ Marina Purkiss (@MarinaPurkiss), X (May 14, 2024), *Reposted By:* Richard Sambrook (@sambrook), <https://x.com/MarinaPurkiss/status/1790464707121357117>.

⁷ Wolfgang Biau (@wblau), X (January 6, 2024), *Reposted By:* Richard Sambrook (@sambrook), <https://x.com/wblau/status/1743756789756133545>.

⁸ Richard Sambrook (@sambrook), X (May 17, 2024), <https://x.com/sambrook/status/179155556022309184>.



- From the X account of Contributing Analyst Melissa Fares⁹ (@faresmelissa):



From the X account of Staff Analyst Colalter Palmer¹⁰ (@cplams15):

⁹ The New York Times (@nytimes), X (May 31, 2024), *Reposted By* Melissa Fares (@faresmelissa), <https://x.com/nytimes/status/1796481791286550908>.

¹⁰ Columbia Daily Spectator (@ColumbiaSpec), X (May 4, 2024), *Reposted By* Colalter Palmer (@cplams15), <https://x.com/ColumbiaSpec/status/1786879444331704601>.



Questions also surround the influence of NewsGuard’s business relationships and other influences on its ratings process. NewsGuard markets its analytical services to businesses, including technology companies and other advertisement advisors, who direct the advertising buys that provide financial support for much of the news media.¹¹ But its most significant corporate backer, Publicis, is itself an advertising holding company.¹² This calls into question how NewsGuard manages its relationship with Publicis Groupe and other financial backers who provide advisory services to corporate entities. One writer pointedly asserted that NewsGuard’s services for businesses “creates inherent conflicts of interest with NewsGuard’s financial model: The buyers of the service can be problematic entities too, with an interest in protecting and buffing reputations.”¹³ The Committee seeks to understand how NewsGuard does or does not provide a firewall against interested parties impacting its ratings or the material it evaluates.

Lastly, news outlets have noted frustrations about interactions with NewsGuard representatives over exchanges that they perceive as aiming to suppress information that may challenge widely held views but is not itself inaccurate. In one example, *The Daily Sceptic* published an article on a research study from a Johns Hopkins University study concluding that COVID-19 lockdowns were unnecessary, ineffective, and harmful.¹⁴ Reporting indicates that NewsGuard took issue with the story despite *The Daily Sceptic* adding a note to address specific NewsGuard criticisms, which included noting that the research study had not been peer reviewed even though the original article had not claimed otherwise.¹⁵ NewsGuard then reportedly

¹¹ *A New Standard of Brand Safety*, NEWSGUARD, <https://www.newsguardtech.com/industries/advertising-industry/> (last visited June 6, 2024).

¹² Edmund Lee, *Veterans of the News Business Are Now Fighting Fakes*, N.Y. TIMES, January 16, 2019.

¹³ Lee Fang, *NewsGuard: Surrogate The Feds Pay To Keep Watch On The Internet And Be A Judge Of The Truth*, REAL CLEAR INVESTIGATIONS, November 17, 2023.

¹⁴ Will Jones, *Lockdowns Are Unnecessary, Ineffective and Harmful and Must Never Happen Again*, THE DAILY SCEPTIC, March 22, 2022.

¹⁵ Fang, *supra* note 4.

expressed that only retraction would address its concerns.¹⁶ It subsequently lowered the outlet's reliability rating shared with advertisers after the outlet choose to stand by its published story on the study.¹⁷

The Committee does not take issue with a business entity providing other businesses and customers with data-based analysis to protect their brands. Rather, we are concerned with the potential involvement of government entities in interfering with free expression. Truthfulness and transparency about the purpose and origin of inquiries and managing conflicts of interest that may impact the public good are also relevant. To assist the Committee's investigation in this matter, please provide the following information on or before June 27, 2024:

- 1) Complete versions of all current and past contracts with government entities. Please include any statements of proposed or completed work from any point before, during, or after performance of work.
- 2) Please describe, in writing, any reasons that NewsGuard believes it cannot or is otherwise unwilling to provide documents relevant to request #1. If none, please certify in writing that NewsGuard has not performed work or provided services to any government beyond what it has disclosed to the Committee.
- 3) Please share records of all disciplinary or corrective actions taken by NewsGuard over the past five years related to violations of its "Editorial Employee Statement of Understanding and Commitment" policy and procedures pledge.
- 4) Please provide all NewsGuard policy documents and guidance on managing conflicts of interest related to its investors and other outside influences. Please include not just current policies and guidance but past iterations as well.
- 5) Please provide all documents or records of communication from NewsGuard investors or other non-employees related to requests, suggestions, or solicitations for NewsGuard to review any news or opinion items for any purpose including updates to ratings of outlets created by NewsGuard.
- 6) Please provide all documents or data maintained by NewsGuard on corrections, retractions, or the changes to news or opinion articles made by publishers or authors associated with inquiries made by NewsGuard.
- 7) Please send all records related to editorial mistakes, corrections, and retractions made by NewsGuard of any outlet or piece it has evaluated. Please also send copies policies for handling new information related to how NewsGuard might change past its judgments under its corrections policy.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

- 8) Please provide all employee policy guidance related to communicating issues with stories to news outlets including discussion of potential changes and how NewsGuard evaluates or credits such revisions.

If you have any questions, contact the Committee on Oversight and Accountability Majority staff at 202-225-5074.

The Committee on Oversight and Accountability is the principal oversight committee of the U.S. House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X. Thank you in advance for cooperating with this inquiry.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James Comer". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "J" and "C".

James Comer

Chairman

Committee on Oversight and Accountability

cc: The Honorable Jamie B. Raskin, Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Accountability