Three Ways Brands Can Protect Themselves from Misinformation in an Election Year

A summary of election-related insights recently shared by NewsGuard's editorial team in briefings for journalists and the trust and safety industry, adapted for a brand audience.

By Veena McCoole | Published on November 14, 2023

Next year is a pivotal year for democracies worldwide—with risks and opportunities for advertisers and marketers. More than 40 countries with more than 2 billion citizens will hold elections in 2024, including the U.S. presidential election and elections in the U.K., Austria, Belgium, Taiwan, Venezuela and Indonesia.

For brands, the attention to political news across these countries presents opportunities to reach engaged audiences on news content—but also creates a significant risk that their ads will end up funding election misinformation content. In the 2020 U.S. election, more than 1,600 brands inadvertently funded election misinformation in the period surrounding Election Day.

Recent NewsGuard research found an increasing amount of misinformation—particularly AI-generated falsehoods—targeting individual brands on social media channels such as TikTok. For example, in July 2023, NewsGuard found TikTok videos featuring AI-generated images claiming that Target was selling satanic clothing, attracting more than 1 million views. (Target was not selling the clothes that the videos showed.)

This means that brands now not only have to deal with the potential for harmful adjacencies on unreliable sites that report in a hyper-partisan or sensationalist manner, they must also contend with outrageous misinformation claims aimed directly at their products.

Here are three considerations for brands as we enter a major election year, both in the U.S. and around the world:

1. Ensure inventory of news websites aligns with brand safety standards and company values

The paradox of advertising during times of greater political news flow is that engagement and readership on quality news websites reporting responsibly about current affairs soars just as brands and advertisers are simultaneously more wary of having their ads appear on hard news.

Brands that choose to avoid news altogether are missing out on a rare opportunity to reach engaged audiences. We know from research by U.K. media trade organization Newsworks that brands experience 1.5x higher perceived trust when advertising on news brand websites than non-news brand websites. The research found that this is because news brands are "trusted by their users" and "their well-known point of view makes them appear less risky." As a result, the report found that campaigns using news brands outperformed campaigns using other sites across key metrics including market share, pricing power, and growth in profitability. Campaigns on news sites enjoyed 52% more effectiveness overall than ads on non-news sites during the 2018-2022 period, the report concluded.

A NewsGuard case study with a Fortune 500 brand and client of IPG Mediabrands demonstrated the same increased efficiencies associated with advertising on news sites with high trust scores, including a 20% increase in reach, 9% lower CPMs, and 143% increase in click-through rates after NewsGuard augmented the client's inclusion list with more than 1,000 additional high quality news sites.

At the same time, brands need to take steps to avoid inadvertently funding election misinformation instead of credible news. As noted, in 2020, more than 1,600 brands advertised on election misinformation sites in the period surrounding Election Day—even with brand safety protections in place from legacy verification providers designed to prevent this from happening.

For brands seeking to achieve the right balance—continuing to advertise on trusted news but avoiding advertising on misinformation—NewsGuard provides tiered inclusion and exclusion lists designed to offer brands their desired level of safety. For example, brands seeking to advertise only on highly credible news can target ads to NewsGuard's Maximum Safety Inclusion List, which only includes nonpartisan news outlets with high trust scores and no failures on any of NewsGuard's most important criteria. Brands seeking to conduct a broader ad buy while still avoiding misinformation can apply NewsGuard's exclusion lists to avoid highly partisan news sources, sources that report irresponsibly, and those that spread false claims and conspiracy theories.

2. Watch out for impersonations of credible media by bad actors weaponizing AI

In past elections, political organizations and others have exploited Americans' trust in local news to create "pink slime" websites—which impersonate credible local news outlets to publish partisan misinformation. In the U.S., there are now almost as many "pink slime" sites— sites posing as independent news sites, such as local news sites, but that are secretly funded by partisan interests—as there are remaining daily newspapers.

The advent of generative AI has supercharged this problem, making it possible for bad actors to masquerade as credible media outlets faster and more cheaply than ever. Already, NewsGuard has identified more than 1,000 of these "pink slime" websites, many of which use AI to produce their content, and our team is tracking the sharp growth of Unreliable AI-generated News sites in our AI Misinformation Tracking Center. These include dozens of websites that use AI to rewrite content from mainstream news outlets without credit, violating copyright policies and making it difficult for news consumers to ascertain trustworthy journalism from AI-created content.

To address this problem, brands and agency teams need deeper vetting of the publishers they monetize, including research of the kind NewsGuard analysts do on whether the publisher attributes its stories to real journalists and reveals who is in charge of editorial content. This requires an added layer of human judgment beyond the protections offered by legacy verification providers, which well-disguised misinformation sites often evade.

Licensing NewsGuard's transparent, humanly generated, and constantly updated ratings and catalog of false narratives can help advertisers, agencies, and ad-tech companies mitigate the risks of inadvertently monetizing quality news site look-a-likes that actually contain factually incorrect and potentially harmful misinformation.

3. Keep abreast of emerging misinformation claims and false narratives that could adversely affect your brand

The accelerating news and social media cycle means that unfounded claims and harmful false narratives that implicate individual brands can run rampant if brands don't take steps to monitor and mitigate them.

Media monitoring and audience intelligence services powered by NewsGuard's services like Pulsar and Meltwater can help brand teams understand consumer sentiment and conversation around their brand. Platforms like Microsoft make NewsGuard ratings available to news consumers. Companies can license NewsGuard's ratings as a news-literacy tool for their employees.

NewsGuard's proprietary catalog of machine-readable Misinformation Fingerprints also provides constantly updated data for PR, communications, and agency professionals to gain a comprehensive understanding of the news and information landscape, and tailor crisis responses accordingly.

If you're interested in hearing more from our team on this topic, sign up for our Dec. 13 webinar: **Elections, Misinformation, and Brand Safety: Considerations for Brands and Advertisers in 2024.**

To learn about accessing NewsGuard's Misinformation Fingerprints data, misinformation risk briefings for brand reputation teams, and access to NewsGuard's Reliability Ratings, contact us at partnerships@newsguardtech.com.

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