California News Trust Report

July 2021

The Ward Creek Foundation
INTRODUCTION

Local journalism faces a wide range of threats in 2021—from a disrupted business model to competition from monopolistic technology platforms to industry-wide battles over consolidation and ownership. To address these existential threats, the industry—with encouragement and support from nonprofit groups like The Ward Creek Foundation and The Lenfest Institute—is working hard to come up with solutions.

But even as publishers work to overcome these challenges, local journalism may face an even more severe long-term imperative: Preserving trust from readers. Americans trust local news substantially more than national news sources, according to data from the Knight Foundation, the World Economic Forum, and the Pew Research Center. But a variety of mis- and disinformation forces are simultaneously exploiting and undermining that trust. Moreover, as trustworthy media sources struggle to compete digitally, many of the practices that built deep trust in media over decades in print, television and radio formats may not transfer easily to digital formats without a specific effort to do so.

In this California News Trust Report, we examine the issue of trust and integrity for media coverage in and about California. The report utilizes trust ratings and reporting from NewsGuard, data about social media engagement from NewsWhip, and resources collated from NewsGuard, The Ward Creek Foundation and The Lenfest Institute, and other organizations to answer three key questions:

- What is the current state of media trust as it relates to publications in California or covering California news?
- What are the major threats to trust in local news in California?
- What can California publishers do to improve trust among readers, viewers, or listeners?

This report was prepared by NewsGuard, a company that deploys journalists to rate the credibility and transparency practices of thousands of news organizations worldwide, flagging misinformation sources and narratives in the process. The report was produced with funding from and in partnership with The Ward Creek Foundation and The Lenfest Institute.
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This report draws heavily on reporting and data from NewsGuard. In this section of the report, we provide background on NewsGuard and its methodology for assessing the reliability of news and information sources.

NewsGuard was founded in 2018 with the mission of restoring trust and accountability to news. Its cofounders are award-winning journalist and media entrepreneur Steven Brill—who founded CourtTV, The American Lawyer, and other successful ventures—and Gordon Crovitz, former publisher of the Wall Street Journal.

NewsGuard deploys a team of journalists from diverse journalistic backgrounds to rate the credibility and transparency of news and information websites in the U.S. and Europe. Each website is assessed based on the same nine simple, apolitical journalistic criteria for credibility and transparency. Based on the nine criteria, NewsGuard’s team of journalists produces trust ratings, 0-100 point trust scores, and detailed “Nutrition Labels” for each site.

Ratings, trust scores, and Nutrition Labels from NewsGuard are available to consumers through a browser extension and mobile app aimed at promoting news and media literacy skills. NewsGuard’s tools are used by hundreds of public libraries and is available to millions of students and educators through a partnership with Turnitin.

Editors at NewsGuard include former top editors at Reuters, the Associated Press, and the Chicago Tribune—and at any given time, NewsGuard’s team includes ~50 journalists and freelancers across the U.S. and Europe. NewsGuard has rated all of the news and information websites that account for 95% of online engagement with news in the U.S., U.K., France, Germany and Italy—and partners with government agencies and nonprofits, including the World Health Organization, the U.S. Department of State, and the British Parliament to provide reports on threats from mis- and disinformation.

**NewsGuard’s Nine Criteria & Rating Process**

Each of the sites NewsGuard rates are based on the same nine basic, apolitical criteria of journalistic practice:
Ratings are produced using a rigorous vetting process that involves reviews by multiple trained analysts and senior editors—and are continuously updated to ensure accuracy after the site has received its initial rating.

**NewsGuard’s Rating Process**

- **Initial Site Review**: A NewsGuard analyst reviews the site’s content, ownership, financing, and practices—and creates an initial assessment and Nutrition Label based on the nine criteria.

- **Contact for Comment**: The analyst contacts the site if the initial review finds the site may have failed any of the nine criteria. The site can provide a comment or address problems to improve its score.

- **First Edit & Fact Check**: An analyst reviews and fact-checks the rating to ensure its fairness and accuracy. The drafter and first editor may exchange multiple drafts, and any disputes are escalated.

- **Rating Update**: Every rating is reviewed periodically to ensure it is still accurate and to update the site’s Nutrition Label. If something changes, the site’s rating will be updated immediately.

- **Ongoing Monitoring**: NewsGuard team monitors trending misinformation narratives that might appear on the site, ownership changes, etc.—and uses technology to get alerts if the site hops domains.

- **NewsGuard’s rating process is designed to ensure fairness and accuracy in every rating we issue.**

- **Rating Published**: Once any issues are addressed, the rating is published and the publisher and any NewsGuard user can see the rating, provide feedback, or flag any factual errors.

- **Final Review**: The final rating is shared with the full NewsGuard editorial staff for a final check, including the Co-CEOs. Any questions or problems can be flagged in an all-staff meeting.

- **Second Edit**: A senior editor reviews and edits the rating to ensure its fairness and accuracy. The senior editor may send the draft back to the drafter or first editor to address questions or issues.

Based on the site’s performance on the nine criteria, the site receives an overall trust score of 0-100 points. A site with a score of 60 or above receives a **GREEN** rating, meaning it is generally reliable. A site with a score below 60 receives a **RED** rating, meaning it is generally untrustworthy.

**NewsGuard Ratings**

- **Green (Trustworthy)**: The site generally adheres to basic journalistic standards for credibility and transparency.

- **Red (Untrustworthy)**: The site does not generally adhere to basic journalistic standards for credibility and transparency.
TRUST BREAKDOWN: CALIFORNIA NEWS OUTLETS

To understand the threats to trust in California news, we assessed the credibility and transparency practices of news organizations based in and covering California.

News publishers based in California:

We analyzed trust rating data from NewsGuard for a group of 202 local news sites based in California. The sources analyzed included local newspapers, local TV news outlets, local radio stations, and digital-only sources based in the Golden State.

Key Finding: Most California-based news outlets are highly credible.

Our analysis found that 62% of the California-based news outlets we analyzed were highly credible, adhering strongly to the nine journalistic criteria we analyzed.

On average, these sites received a NewsGuard trust score of 92.4 out of 100 points. A site needs only to score 60 points or more to be considered generally trustworthy—suggesting that not only are most California-based outlets trustworthy, but that those that are trustworthy tend to be highly trustworthy.

While the high trustworthiness of legitimate news outlets is (literally) good news for Californians, the analysis also found that 38% of California-based news outlets in the dataset were not credible. This percentage is higher than in some other states. For example, in the Pennsylvania News Trust Report produced in March, 30% of Pennsylvania-based publishers were found to have credibility issues – an 8% difference.

What accounts for this category of sites in California? Our analysis found that nearly all of the publishers in the dataset that had red “untrustworthy” ratings from NewsGuard fell into the same category: politically funded websites purporting to publish local news, but actually pushing a partisan agenda. One such network operating in California, Metric Media, operates 74 different websites designed to look like legitimate local newspapers—accounting for the vast majority of the untrustworthy publishers in the dataset. We will discuss Metric Media and other examples of untrustworthy publishers masquerading as legitimate local news sources later in this report.

As for why California has such a high percentage of untrustworthy sources compared to other states, there is no clear answer to that in the data we have available. But one theory is that California, while not often a political battleground at the state and national levels, has substantial political diversity at the local level—making it a prime target for political operators posing as local news.
Key Finding: Opportunities for California publishers to build trust through improvements to transparency practices.

A more granular analysis of the data shows that the sites analyzed tend not to repeatedly publish clearly and egregiously false stories. In other words, while there are news sites based in California that have significant trust issues, they tend not to blatantly make things up:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Percent of Sites Passing Criterion</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does not repeatedly publish false content</td>
<td>98.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gathers and presents information responsibly</td>
<td>60.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regularly corrects or clarifies errors</td>
<td>50.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly</td>
<td>59.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoids deceptive headlines</td>
<td>98.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website discloses ownership and financing</td>
<td>36.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearly labels advertising</td>
<td>56.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reveals who’s in charge, including possible conflicts of interest</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The site provides the names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information</td>
<td>53.96%</td>
</tr>
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But the criteria results did highlight several other issues that could stand to reduce readers’ trust in California-based news sources.

For example, 41% fail to separate news and opinion responsibly or to present information fairly and responsibly. As we will discuss in the next section, publishers failing to meet these criteria mainly consist of outlets with undisclosed partisan funding and agendas. In addition, only 36% of sites disclose ownership and financing, a key practice for establishing trust among readers.

Even among the sites that are generally credible, the data shows some issues with transparency and disclosure practices that could undermine reader trust. For example, 49% of the publishers in the sample set do not have clear and consistently enforced policies for transparently correcting reporting errors when they are made; 46% of the publishers in the sample set do not provide detailed information about content creators (such as a biography or contact information); and 50% did not have clear disclosure of who oversees editorial content, including naming any potential conflicts of interest. We will discuss best practices for disclosure and transparency in the Trust Toolkit section.
**Key Finding: Networks of partisan-funded local news sources threaten to erode trust in local news in California.**

The data showed that 62% of the California-based local news sites we analyzed were generally credible. But what about the other 38%?

Our analysis found the presence of a significant number of websites designed to look and feel like local newspaper websites—but which have undisclosed, politically partisan funding sources, conflicts of interest, and highly slanted coverage.

These sites have names like The Santa Monica Observer, The Merced Times, The Santa Cruz Standard—and their websites are indistinguishable from typical local news sites. Research has found that readers disproportionately trust local news sources—a factor these sites simultaneously exploit and undermine.

We found the presence of websites from three separate groups with undisclosed partisan funding and agendas—whose coverage, in all cases, strongly favored the political party of their partisan funders under the guise of publishing straightforward, unbiased local news.

Examples of such sites are described below.

**Example: Metric Media Network**

A news reader in Fresno County looking for quality news coverage from a local source might reasonably expect to find it on websites like FresnoLeader.com and FresnoBee.com. At first glance, both sites appear to be typical local newspaper sites.

Opening the home page of either site brings up a standard-looking news outlet with coverage of politics, local business, and other topics. On the surface, the sites are hard to distinguish:
But when it comes to trust, there is a big difference between the two sites. FresnoBee.com is the website of the *The Fresno Bee*, a local newspaper that has been covering news in the area since 1922. It gets a 100-point trust score from NewsGuard, adhering to all nine of the criteria we use to assess credibility and transparency.

FresnoLeader.com, on the other hand, is part of Metric Media, a network of nearly 1,300 websites nationwide that present themselves as generic local news outlets—but which actually are run by a conservative political consultant and have been found to publish “coverage that is ordered up by Republican groups and corporate PR firms,” according to *The New York Times*.

NewsGuard’s review of the network found the sites frequently publish news with a conservative slant—attacking Democratic politicians and writing positive pieces about Republican ones. For example, while the Fresno Leader’s “About Us” page says the site was created “to fill the void in community news after years of decline in local reporting” and that its approach is to “provide objective, data-driven information without political bias,” a review of the site’s content on May 11, 2021 told a different story.

The top story on the site was a highly positive piece about Elizabeth Heng, a Republican congresswoman who is running for a Senate seat in the 2022 election. The piece had remained the top story on FresnoLeader.com for two months. Another story gave Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom a “C” grade for his fiscal management. And another claimed that President Joe Biden plans to raise the highest marginal tax rate to 62.4% in California.

Fresno County is a swing county with three Republican congressional representatives and one Democratic representative. In 2020, Fresno County went to Joe Biden, who won 52% of the vote—enough to win, but
substantially less than his statewide margin in California. In other words, the county is likely to be a highly contested battleground county for statewide and national political races in the 2022 and 2024 elections. That makes it the perfect for a modern form of political propaganda: Partisan advocacy disguised as local news.

NewsGuard’s review of the Metric Media websites network found numerous examples of the sites promoting an undisclosed agenda. In one case, the network published a series of stories about the negative impact of COVID-19 restrictions on the hotel industry—without disclosing that Metric Media’s CEO, Bradley Cameron, was retained “by US-based hotel owners to assist their recovery plans as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic,” according to a biography page on the website of Cameron’s consulting business.

The New York Times described Metric Media largely as a PR and marketing company masquerading as local news, reporting that, “behind the scenes, many of the stories are directed by political groups and corporate P.R. firms to promote a Republican candidate or a company, or to smear their rivals.”

In California, Metric Media operates 74 different websites of this kind:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>antelopevalleytoday.com</th>
<th>nesacramentonews.com</th>
<th>santacruzstandard.com</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>centralalamedanews.com</td>
<td>nwlatimes.com</td>
<td>solanosun.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>centraloctimes.com</td>
<td>nwriversidenews.com</td>
<td>southalamedanews.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chicotimes.com</td>
<td>northcoastcanews.com</td>
<td>southbayleader.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coachellatoday.com</td>
<td>northinlandnews.com</td>
<td>southbaysdnews.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eastalamedanews.com</td>
<td>northoctimes.com</td>
<td>southoctimes.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eastcontracostanews.com</td>
<td>northsfvtoday.com</td>
<td>southsfbaynews.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eastsbvetimes.com</td>
<td>northsgvnews.com</td>
<td>southsfvtoday.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eastsfvtoday.com</td>
<td>northsacramentotoday.com</td>
<td>southsgvnews.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eastsandiegonews.com</td>
<td>oaklandrecord.com</td>
<td>southsacramentotoday.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eastsierranews.com</td>
<td>pomonavalleynews.com</td>
<td>stanislausnews.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eastventuranews.com</td>
<td>reddingtoday.com</td>
<td>tularetimes.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fresnoleader.com</td>
<td>redwoodempirenews.com</td>
<td>verdugosnews.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>goldcountrytoday.com</td>
<td>selatimes.com</td>
<td>victorvalleytimes.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>goldenstatetoday.com</td>
<td>sfvtoday.com</td>
<td>westcontracostanews.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>imperialcanews.com</td>
<td>sgvstandard.com</td>
<td>westeldoradonews.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kerncountytimes.com</td>
<td>sloreporter.com</td>
<td>westlatimes.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kingscountytimes.com</td>
<td>swriversidenews.com</td>
<td>westoctimes.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laharborneews.com</td>
<td>sacramentostandard.com</td>
<td>westsbvtimes.com</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As with the Fresno Leader, the other California-based sites in the network are indistinguishable from typical local California newspapers.

For example, to a reader encountering ChicoTimes.com or ChicoER.com at first glance, each site would look similar to any other locally-focused newspaper:

The Enterprise-Record, founded in 1948, has been covering Butte and Glenn counties for more than six decades as the area’s paper of record. ChicoTimes.com is another Metric Media site.

If readers encounter sites like the ChicoTimes.com or FresnoLeader.com expecting them to be just as trustworthy as the Fresno Bee or the Enterprise-Record, it’s not hard to imagine how readers’ trust in local news could be deeply undermined.
Example: 209Times.com

For well over a hundred years, local political races in Stockton, CA, have been covered primarily by The Record, the local newspaper. Founded in 1895 as the Stockton Evening News, the Record thrived for most of the 20th Century, but has faced economic pressures all too common in the journalism industry in recent years.

In 2017, the Record reported that it was laying off “roughly a third” of its editorial staff in “what may be the largest series of cutbacks in a decade.”

Later that year, Stockton mayoral candidate Motecuzoma Sanchez decided to launch 209 Times. According to the site’s about page, its mission is to “be the voice of the community” in Stockton and “tell the stories of the community that often go overlooked.” It also promises to “take on the issues that the corporate owned media are either too scared or too compromised to address.”

But a NewsGuard review of the site found that instead, the site repeatedly publishes false content and distorts facts to advance Sanchez’s political agenda—without disclosing that its purpose is partisan advocacy rather than journalism.

From 2017 until early 2021, 209 Times aggressively covered Stockton Mayor Michael Tubbs with dozens of negative and misleading stories.

For example, a February 2019 article reporting that Sanchez had filed a lawsuit against then-Mayor Tubbs for allegedly violating his and others’ First Amendment rights by “illegally censoring and blocking constituents on social media” identified Sanchez only as a “community advocate” and did not say that he owns the site or was running for mayor. (The lawsuit was dismissed).

Similarly, an April 2020 article about the resignation of John Deasy, superintendent of the Stockton Unified School District, criticized Deasy’s tenure, stating, “activists like Motecuzoma Sanchez warned the board prior to his hiring in 2018 that they were making a huge mistake based on Deasy’s track record.” Again, 209Times.com did not identify Sanchez as the sites’ owner.
As a brand and an operation, we’re very open. We don’t pull punches or hide our hands. We’re very brash and confident and open about it,” he said, noting that the site is operated by activists. “We’re not trained journalists,” he said.

In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Sanchez expressed a similar sentiment, saying, “We are not journalists. I looked at it like we were a guerrilla group up against the mainstream army. We are not asking their side of it. We are telling you what we know. We never tried to hide our bias.”

Yet many of the 209Times.com’s articles purport to report facts, not simply opinions. NewsGuard’s review found several articles containing misleading or inaccurate claims about Tubbs and his policies.

For example, the site published several articles claiming that Tubbs planned to convert the San Joaquin County Fairgrounds into a regional homeless camp, an issue of deep concern to local residents, who saw homelessness rates triple between 2017 and 2019, according to local news station KCRA.

An October 2020 story, titled “Mayor Tubbs Sells Out Stockton To Become Regional Homeless Camp” reported that the fairgrounds would “officially close” later that month, becoming “the state’s first homeless reservation.” The article continued: “According to sources in the know this will not only service Stockton’s soaring homeless population, but may likely also service the homeless populations from San Francisco, Oakland, and Sacramento where there are homeless camping along waterways. This deal will essentially make Stockton the official homeless capital for the Northern part of the State of California.”

According to The Record, a task force of regional and state representatives had discussed the possibility of creating such a shelter at the San Joaquin County Fairgrounds, but that there are no active plans to do so. Multiple officials involved with the discussions denied that a shelter would be located at the fairgrounds. Jolyn McMillan, who runs the Stockton Shelter for the Homeless, told The Record that "there is zero planning to move any sort of regional homeless service out to the fairgrounds.”
Asked about the fairgrounds issue, Sanchez said his unidentified sources insisted otherwise, and he suggested that officials changed their minds after the plan was publicized by his site. “We never came out and said this plan was finalized and they’re ready to cut the ribbon and Michael Tubbs is going to do the gold-shovel groundbreaking,” Sanchez told NewsGuard.

209Times.com also published articles about a scholarship program that Mayor Tubbs had helped launch to assist graduates of the Stockton Unified School District. The scholarship program launched in 2017 with a $20 million initial pledge to be distributed over a five-year period.

A September 2020 article on the site about the program said that Tubbs “lied about ever receiving the $20 million” and used the program as a “scam.” The article cited financial records from 2018, which showed that only $44,194 in actual scholarship money was distributed to students, out of approximately $9.8 million reported as the foundation’s net assets — the amount of money after expenses.

However, those figures are misleading. The program originally began with the class of 2019, Lange Luntao, executive director of the Reinvent Stockton Foundation, told NewsGuard in a March 2021 email, adding that the foundation “did not originally plan to distribute any scholarships and grants in 2018.” When the decision to do so was made, money for that class was raised separately, so it is misleading to compare the amount of money distributed in that one year to the amount raised.

Asked about this, Sanchez said that he repeatedly asked Luntao for more recent financial information, but his requests were ignored — which is why he only reported on the foundation’s 2018 finances.

A February 2018 article titled “Stockton Mayor Michael Tubbs Caught Red Handed Misusing Public Funds to Buy Alcohol in Long Beach,” claimed that 209Times.com had “evidence that Michael Tubbs used public funds to buy alcohol, falsified official government documents, and conspired with his assistant to cover it up.” The article cited an apparent receipt from a dinner Tubbs hosted at a restaurant in Long Beach, California. The receipt showed that Tubbs’s $315 dinner bill included several alcoholic beverages, proving, the site claimed, that he improperly used public funds to pay for alcohol.

Actually, the site itself contradicted the claim, by including Tubb’s reimbursement form for the dinner. The form showed that Tubbs sought reimbursement for the dinner, but not for the drinks.

Sanchez’ ownership of the site is not disclosed in any centralized place. Readers who encounter 209Times.com without already knowing its ownership would have no way of knowing that the site has a specific agenda on behalf of a political candidate.

Sanchez did not win the 2020 mayoral race in Stockton. But neither did Tubbs, who lost to Republican Kevin Lincoln.
In a February 2021 interview with the Columbia Journalism Review, Tubbs described how 209 Times came to dominate local media. “People saw 209 Times and thought, Well, it’s a news site. Why would anyone purposely and deliberately go out and deceive people?” Tubbs said. “So a lot of people took it at face value, like this is just an alternative news site because the Record doesn’t run as much, the Record’s not as quick, etc….”

“So it was literally everything—just lie after lie after lie,” Tubbs continued. “At some point, I think it just beat down the defense mechanisms for some people. And they’re like, All this can’t be false. Like, There’s something about this that has to be true.”

Example: Santa Monica Observer

The Santa Monica Observer is another example of a publisher producing unreliable content under the guise of local news. Like the Metric Media sites, its home page looks, at a glance, like a typical local news source:

But NewsGuard’s review of the site found that it is anything but trustworthy. The site, founded by former lawyer and city council candidate David Ganezer, has published numerous conspiracy theories and false misleading claims about politics, vaccines, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The site receives a trust score of just 12.5 out of 100 on NewsGuard’s rating scale.
For example, an April 2020 article falsely claimed that sunlight is a remedy for the COVID-19 virus, based on the low number of COVID-19 cases in the African nation of Chad and that “Coronavirus has been well planned to achieve all the aims of the deep state.” The article provided no evidence for any of these claims.

In a May 2020 article, titled “Robert Kennedy accuses Bill Gates of Using Covid19 to Further a Nefarious Vaccine Agenda for World Domination,” the site falsely claimed that Microsoft co-founder and multibillionaire Bill Gates was responsible for a “devastating vaccine-strain polio epidemic that paralyzed 496,000 children between 2000 and 2017.”

Other false claims published by the site include a December 2016 article headlined “Kanye West Appointed Under-Secretary of the Interior After Meeting at Trump Tower.” West did meet with Donald Trump, then the president-elect, in December 2016, but Trump did not nominate West to any position in his administration. Technically, there is no “Under-Secretary of the Interior,” as the title of that position was changed to U.S. Deputy Secretary of the Interior in November 1990.

The site also published numerous stories promoting false claims related to Hillary Clinton’s health during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. A September 24, 2016, article titled “Hillary Clinton Died on Sept. 11, Actually. That was her Body Double in Front of Chelsea’s,” recounts multiple conspiracy theories, including the notion that Donald Trump was a “plant” to ensure that Clinton would be elected. Those plans were abandoned, the article states, after Clinton died on September 11, 2016. The article stated: “What spoiled it, was Hillary’s untimely death on 9/11. Now, it is being reworked to ensure a third term of Barack Obama.”

In a story posted four days later, titled “Bedridden, Sick Hillary Clinton Sends Body Double to Debate Donald Trump,” the site did not repeat its claim that Clinton had died, but instead falsely claimed that Clinton “will send one of her famous body doubles to Hofstra University to debate” Donald Trump.

Would an average news reader trust the Santa Monica Observer upon encountering such stories? Not necessarily—though research has shown increases in vaccine hesitancy, especially among younger Americans, as a result of online misinformation. But even for readers who see false claims in the Santa Monica Observer and dismiss them, there remains a strong possibility that their trust in legitimate local news organizations will have eroded.
**TRUST BREAKDOWN: CALIFORNIA NEWS COVERAGE**

In addition to news sources in California, we also analyzed the sources with the most online engagement for their news coverage about California. We used data from NewsWhip to measure online engagement and create a ranked list of news sources with the most engagement on California-focused coverage, then cross-referenced that list with NewsGuard data about the credibility of each site.

We started with a dataset of the top 1,000 sites with the most social media engagement on their California-related news coverage—meaning likes, shares, and comments—across Facebook and Twitter over the period from May 1, 2020 through May 1, 2021. We then pared down the list, removing sites that do not qualify as news sources, such as government agencies, advocacy groups, and others.

**Key Finding:** Most California news coverage came from credible sources—but unreliable sources attracted proportionally higher engagement on social media.

Our analysis found that 84% of the sites with the most engagement on their California-related news coverage were generally credible, achieving Green (Trustworthy) ratings from NewsGuard. Sites in the list had an average trust score of 90.7 out of 100, meaning the typical site in this group adheres to most of the nine criteria NewsGuard uses to assess the credibility and transparency of news sites. Of those, 64% had trust scores of 85 or higher, and 26% had perfect 100-point trust scores.

Only 14% of the domains in the list were rated as Red, meaning they are generally untrustworthy, based on NewsGuard’s criteria. But these 14% of sites accounted for 20% of all engagement with California-related news on Facebook and Twitter during the yearlong time period we analyzed.

In other words, misinformation sites were somewhat more effective at getting users to engage with their content on social media platforms than their more trustworthy counterparts. Red-rated sites among the most engaged in the list included The Gateway Pundit, which earns a NewsGuard trust score of 37.5 out of 100, and The Epoch Times, which has a score of 49.5.

This trend—proportionally higher engagement for unreliable news websites—matches closely with national trends. In a study released earlier this year, researchers at New York University’s Cybersecurity for Democracy project used data from NewsGuard and CrowdTangle to analyze 2,973 Facebook pages of US news sources. The study found that news organizations that regularly publish false material get up to 65 percent more engagement than ones that don’t.

In other words, not only is misinformation easier to produce than real journalism—it also can be more effective at generating clicks and advertising revenue, especially on social media platforms whose algorithms reward sensational content that generates strong reactions—whether or not
those reactions are based on factual information. Publishers, technology platforms and regulators are wrestling with how to address this problem—and the data suggests that any changes will be highly relevant in California as well.

As with the California-based sites, a review of results on the specific criteria finds some areas for improvement among publishers covering California. More than 35% fail to clearly disclose ownership and financing or reveal who is in charge of editorial content, and nearly 30% fail to consistently and transparently correct factual errors when they are made.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>% Passing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does not repeatedly publish false content</td>
<td>94.31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gathers and presents information responsibly</td>
<td>85.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regularly corrects or clarifies errors</td>
<td>72.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly</td>
<td>81.74%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoids deceptive headlines</td>
<td>93.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website discloses ownership and financing</td>
<td>64.60%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clearly labels advertising</td>
<td>82.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reveals who’s in charge, including possible conflicts of interest</td>
<td>63.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The site provides the names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information</td>
<td>74.84%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TOOLS AND BEST PRACTICES FOR PROMOTING TRUST

What can publishers do to ensure readers trust them—and to distinguish their trustworthy journalism from content published by sites with political agendas or conflicts of interest?

Building trust requires a lot of work, community engagement, and consistency over time—and there is no “silver bullet” for ensuring that you have both earned and acquired your readers’ trust. Instead, in this section of the report, we suggest one simple starting point for building trust: ensuring transparency and accountability to readers.

This means answering many basic, simple readers might want to know in order to understand what they’re getting when they visit a news site—and how much they can trust it:

**Questions publishers can answer for readers:**

- Who’s behind the site?
- Who owns and finances it, and who is in charge of content?
- How can I contact them?
- Can I trust them to report news accurately?
- Do they have an agenda?
- Do they have a specific point of view?
- How do they ensure their reporting is fair and accurate?
- What happens when they make a mistake?

**What publishers can do to answer these questions:**

- Disclose ownership/financing in a reader-friendly manner
- Disclose potential conflicts of interest
- Post your policy for correcting errors and an easy way for readers to reach you.
- Publicly and promptly correct errors you make.
- If you have a point of view or agenda, disclose it clearly.
- Label opinion pieces and keep opinions out of news stories.
- Provide details and contact information for content producers.
- Make it clear who is in charge of content and how to reach them.
- Avoid misleading ‘clickbait’ headlines.
Example: Clearly disclosing ownership

Not every reader will seek out information about the ownership and financing of a news site—but when they do, it’s important that they find detailed information answering their questions. Especially as more sites that look like legitimate local news operations turn out to have partisan backers or conflicts of interest, disclosing ownership and financing details is a simple way for legitimate news outlets to set themselves apart.

Example: Clear ownership disclosure:
Example: Provide information about content creators:

It is important that readers know not only know that the reporters producing content are real people—but also that they understand why reporters are credible sources of journalism—and are accessible for readers to contact. An example of a best-practice author page is below:
Example: Disclosing an overall perspective or point of view

There is some debate in the journalism world over whether quality journalism can have a point of view—or whether it must strive for “both sides” balance. At NewsGuard, we believe that what is most important is for publishers to clearly disclose any agenda or point of view they might have. In the below example, the publisher states a clear point of view, saying “Politically, the mirror sits left of center. It has backed the Labour party in every election since 1945.”
Example: Reveal who’s in charge of content

Many conspiracy theories aimed at making readers distrust the media prey on readers’ confusion about who is in charge of content at popular media sources. Publishers can combat this by making it easy for readers to see not only the names of the people in charge of content production at a company—but who they are, their backgrounds, and any conflicts of interest they might need to disclose.
Example: Regularly and clearly correct errors

Prominently and transparently correcting factual errors is one of the indicators most strongly correlated with overall trustworthiness for news publishers. But this practice, long standard in printed version of publications, is not consistently applied on digital versions even for legacy news organizations.

As a best practice, publishers should 1) post a clear and transparent corrections policy on their website—with links to where readers can report problems, 2) place editor’s notes or corrections at the top of articles when they are made, and 3) collate corrections somewhere that’s easy for interested readers to find.
Example: Make it easy for readers to understand your journalistic and ethical standards

Many publishers have internal codes of ethics or guidelines for reporting conduct. The problem is that many readers have no idea about the rigor and care with which journalists conduct their work. Publishers can help communicate their credibility to readers by publicly and prominently posting details about the publication’s ethical and reporting standards. For example:

Our Mission

InewsSource is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to investigate 39 issues. It does business as InewsSource. The business was incorporated on 10th of September to 39 issues. InewsSource maintains in-house articles by individuals. We encourage the submission of articles of interest.

Ownership Structure, Funding and Grants

InewsSource is a nonprofit organization, whose mission is to investigate 39 issues. It does business as InewsSource. The business was incorporated on 10th of September 39 issues. InewsSource maintains in-house articles by individuals. We encourage the submission of articles of interest.

Financial Documents

We do not disclose anything in our reporting, as will not be governed by financial inclusions. All of our financial documents are made available to us in the form of postcards. Below are our financial statements and annual reports.
Promoting trust using NewsGuard ratings:

NewsGuard offers image assets and tools with which publishers may promote their GREEN NewsGuard rating to readers on their website, social media profiles, and elsewhere by displaying a NewsGuard badge or linking to their NewsGuard rating page.

NewsGuard provides free image assets, example house ads, and suggested language for social media promotion.

Promoting a green NewsGuard rating can help build trust with readers by:

• Demonstrating that the publication is credible and transparent.
• Providing validation from a neutral, apolitical third party ratings agency.
• Highlighting specific credibility and transparency practices the publication upholds.
• Making readers more aware of basic journalistic standards, thereby increasing their trust in publications that follow such standards.

Below are templates for text and images that publishers can use to do so.

**Promoting Your NewsGuard Rating on Your “About Us” Page**

You may use any language you wish to tell readers about your NewsGuard rating. We recommend the following language:

{PUBLICATION}'s Journalism Receives A GREEN Rating from NewsGuard

{PUBLICATION} is rated trustworthy by NewsGuard, an organization that employs trained journalists to rate and review news websites for credibility and transparency. NewsGuard uses nine journalistic criteria to rate each website. See our rating.

NewsGuard image assets can be used in conjunction with this language using the links below:

- [Link to download NewsGuard’s logo](#)
- [Link to download NewsGuard’s Green Icon](#)

**Promoting Your NewsGuard Rating Using House Advertisements**

NewsGuard has created customizable image assets that can be used as house advertisements by any site that wishes to promote its GREEN NewsGard rating.

The three panel ad builds as follows:
• Link to download editable .psd file that can be used to build ads to your preferred specs

If you wish to use this ad, please send the link above to your advertising department. If you have questions or want to learn more about NewsGuard, please contact media@newsguardtech.com.

Promoting Your NewsGuard Rating on Social Media Accounts:

Any publication may use NewsGuard's logo and icon images to mock up a customized Twitter, Facebook, Instagram or other social media ad or card promoting their green rating. To make it easier to do so, NewsGuard has provided recommended text for social media posts and profiles--and image assets to use with those posts. Included in this email are:

• **Recommended text:** "NewsGuard, a service that rates and reviews news websites for credibility and transparency, recently reviewed our website. SFGate.com received a green rating for its high journalistic standards.

• **Social Media Image ‘Card’:** [Click here](#) to get a simple image to use with social media posts.

• **NewsGuard’s Twitter Handle:** Our Twitter handle is [@newsguardrating](https://twitter.com/newsguardrating) if you would like to tag NewsGuard in any posts about your rating.

We recommend using the text above for both a tweet/post promoting the green rating and as additional text to add to Facebook/Twitter profiles.
Examples: Publishers promoting their NewsGuard rating

INDEPENDENT

The Independent is awarded 100% trust rating by media watchdog NewsGuard

Media standards organization assesses thousands of news outlets around the world for trustworthiness.

The Independent employs over 100 journalists around the world to bring you news you can trust. To support truly independent journalism, please consider making a contribution or taking a subscription.

The Independent has been awarded a 100 per cent trust rating by NewsGuard, a leading international watchdog for online news media.

The group calculates independent ratings for thousands of news organisations around the world, assessing credibility by checking for false content, deceptive headlines, blurring between news and opinion and the distortion of information.

NewsGuard also analyses how outlets handle errors and their own transparency, including ownership, financing and advertising.

The Independent joins news organisations such as the Washington Post, New York Times and The Guardian in having achieved a 100 per cent rating from NewsGuard.

The former editor of The Independent, Christian Broughton, who became managing director last week, said: “Honest, independent reporting has always been our absolute priority.”

THE DAILY SIGNAL

The Daily Signal Is Rated Green by NewsGuard

In 2018, The Daily Signal received a green rating for its high journalistic standards from NewsGuard, an organization that rates and reviews thousands of news websites for credibility and transparency. NewsGuard uses nine journalistic criteria to rate each website. Learn more about NewsGuard’s ratings.

HAYS POST’S JOURNALISM RECEIVES A ‘GREEN’ RATING FROM NEWSGUARD

Posted Nov 24, 2019 5:55 AM

In November 2019, Hays Post was rated by NewsGuard, an international organization that employs trained journalists to rate and review thousands of news websites for credibility and transparency.

Hays Post received a green rating for its high journalistic standards.

NewsGuard uses nine journalistic criteria to rate each website. To learn more about NewsGuard’s rating of publications, go to www.newsguardtech.com.

The green or red badge of sites rated by NewsGuard are designed to alert readers about the credibility of a news source and appear on social media feeds and as a browser extension that rates search engine results. The extension can be downloaded HERE.

NewsGuard was launched in 2018. Based on each website’s performance on NewsGuard’s nine journalistic criteria, each site is rated with a red or green rating. News organizations producing high quality journalism and following basic standards of accuracy and accountability are given green ratings.

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- Available wherever you are—in print, digital and, uniquely, in audio, fully narrated by professional broadcasters

NewsGuard

This website adheres to all nine of NewsGuard’s standards of credibility and transparency.
For More Information:

- For questions about this report or more details on the data, examples, best practices, and recommendations within, feel free to contact the author, NewsGuard General Manager Matt Skibinski: matt.skibinski@newsguardtech.com
- As part of the collaboration with The Ward Creek Foundation and The Lenfest Institute that created this report, California news publishers may request free a voucher for free access to NewsGuard’s trust ratings for news sites: voucher@newsguardtech.com
- Many California news publishers already have NewsGuard ratings. Publishers not yet rated by NewsGuard may request a rating here. There is no charge or cost for a publisher to be rated.
- For more information on NewsGuard's rating process: Click here.