

California News Trust Report

July 2021

**The Ward Creek
Foundation**

 **NewsGuard**

 **THE
LENFEST
INSTITUTE**

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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NEWSGUARD OVERVIEW & METHODOLOGY

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.

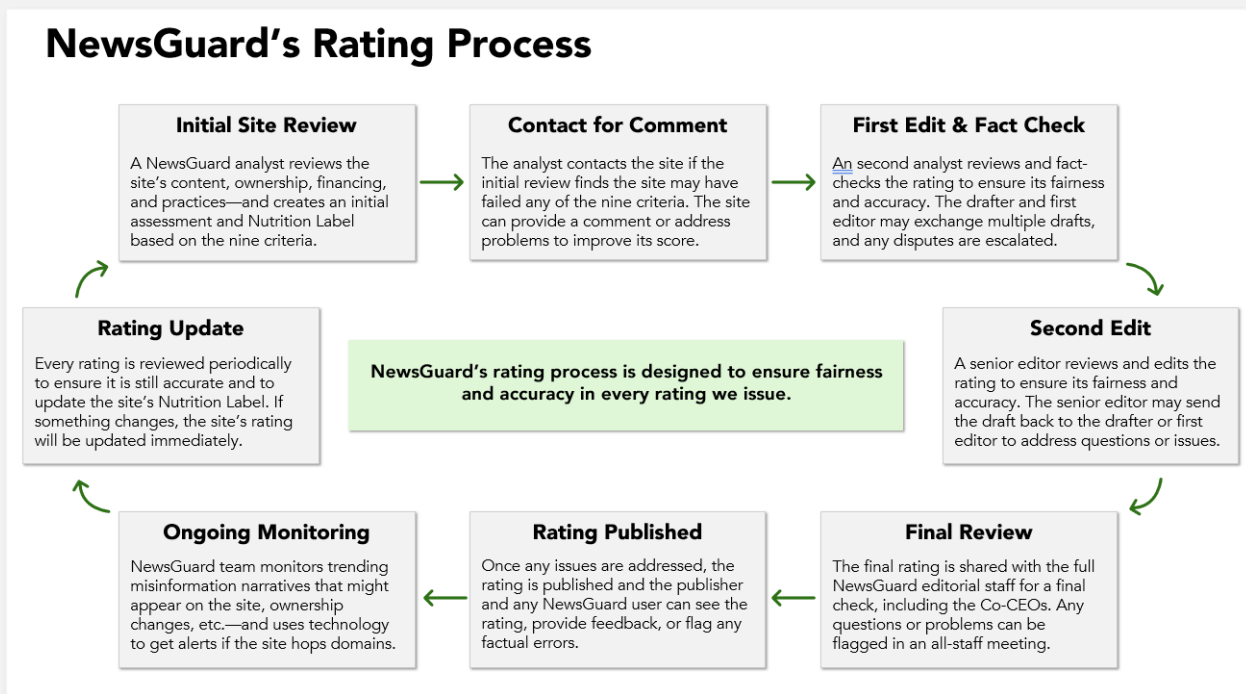
Editors at NewsGuard include former top editors at Reuters, the Associated Press, and the Chicago Tribune—and at any given time, NewsGuard’s team includes ~50 journalists and freelancers across the U.S. and Europe. NewsGuard has rated all of the news and information websites that account for 95% of online 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:

CREDIBILITY	TRANSPARENCY
✓ Does not repeatedly publish false content	✓ Website discloses ownership and financing
✓ Gathers and presents information responsibly	✓ Clearly labels advertising
✓ Regularly corrects or clarifies errors	✓ Reveals who's in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest
✓ Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly	✓ The site provides names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information
✓ Avoids deceptive headlines	

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.



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.

92.4

Average NewsGuard Trust Score
among generally credible news
sources based in California

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:

Criterion	Percent of Sites Passing Criterion
Does not repeatedly publish false content	98.02%
Gathers and presents information responsibly	60.89%
Regularly corrects or clarifies errors	50.50%
Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly	59.90%
Avoids deceptive headlines	98.51%
Website discloses ownership and financing	36.14%
Clearly labels advertising	56.41%
Reveals who's in charge, including possible conflicts of interest	50.00%
The site provides the names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information	53.96%

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.

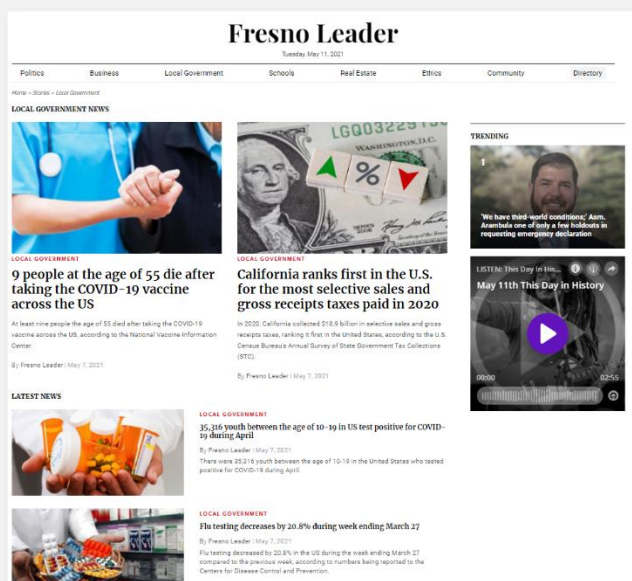
We found the presence of websites from three separate groups with undisclosed partisan funding and agendas—whose coverage, in all cases, strongly favored the political party of their partisan funders under the guise of publishing straightforward, unbiased local news.

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.

fresnobee.com
NewsGuard



This website adheres to all nine of NewsGuard's standards of credibility and transparency.


The website for the Fresno Bee, a newspaper covering news, sports, and entertainment in Fresno, California.

Score: 100/100 [See the full Nutrition Label →](#)

CREDIBILITY	TRANSPARENCY
✓ Does not repeatedly publish false content	✓ Website discloses ownership and financing
✓ Gathers and presents information responsibly	✓ Clearly labels advertising
✓ Regularly corrects or clarifies errors	✓ Reveals who's in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest
✓ Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly	✓ The site provides names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information
✓ Avoids deceptive headlines	

NewsGuard Nutrition Label: Fresno Bee

Metric Media
NewsGuard



Proceed with caution: This website severely violates basic journalistic standards.

A network of websites that falsely present themselves as locally based news sites. The sites do not disclose their conservative agenda, and much of the content is created by algorithms.

Score: 32/100 [See the full Nutrition Label →](#)

CREDIBILITY	TRANSPARENCY
✓ Does not repeatedly publish false content	✗ Website discloses ownership and financing
✗ Gathers and presents information responsibly	✗ Clearly labels advertising
✗ Regularly corrects or clarifies errors	✗ Reveals who's in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest
✗ Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly	✗ The site provides names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information
✓ Avoids deceptive headlines	

NewsGuard Nutrition Label: Metric Media

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.”

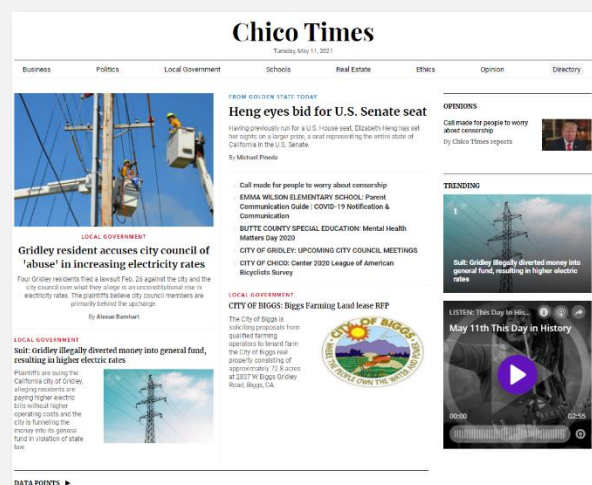
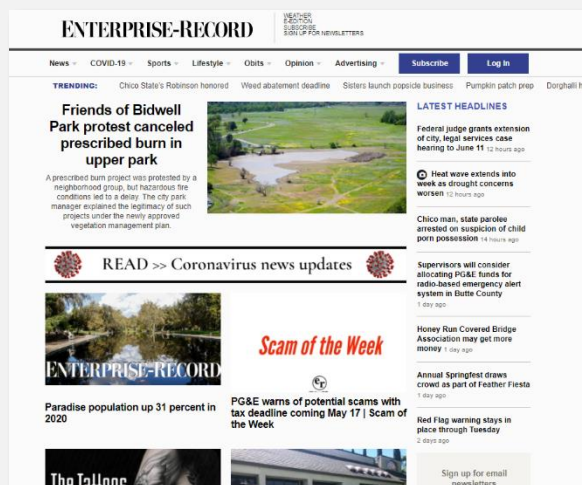
In California, Metric Media operates 74 different websites of this kind:

antelopevalleytoday.com	nesacramentonews.com	santacruzstandard.com
centralalamedanews.com	nwlattimes.com	solanosun.com
centraloetimes.com	nwriversidenews.com	southalamedanews.com
chicotimes.com	northcoastcanews.com	southbayleader.com
coachellatoday.com	northinlandnews.com	southbaysdnews.com
eastalamedanews.com	northoctimes.com	southoctimes.com
eastcontracostanews.com	northsfvtoday.com	southsfbaynews.com
eastsbvtimes.com	northsgvnews.com	southsfvtoday.com
eastsfvtoday.com	northsacramentotoday.com	southsgvnews.com
eastsandiegonews.com	oaklandrecord.com	southsacramentotoday.com
eastsierranews.com	pomonavalleynews.com	stanislausnews.com
eastventuranews.com	reddingtoday.com	tularetimes.com
fresnoleader.com	redwoodempirenews.com	verdugosnews.com
goldcountrytoday.com	selatimes.com	victorvalleytimes.com
goldenstatetoday.com	sfvtoday.com	westcontracostanews.com
imperialcanews.com	sgvstandard.com	westeldoradonews.com
kerncountytimes.com	sloreporter.com	westlatimes.com
kingscountytimes.com	swriversidenews.com	westoctimes.com
laharbornews.com	sacramentostandard.com	westsbvtimes.com

laxleader.com	sandiegocitywire.com	westsfvtoday.com
laketahoesun.com	sanfransun.com	westsgvnews.com
marinleader.com	sanjoaquintimes.com	westventuranews.com
mercedtimes.com	sanjosestandard.com	winecountrytimes.com
montereytimes.com	sanmateosun.com	yubasuttertimes.com
necaline.com	santaclaratoday.com	

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.

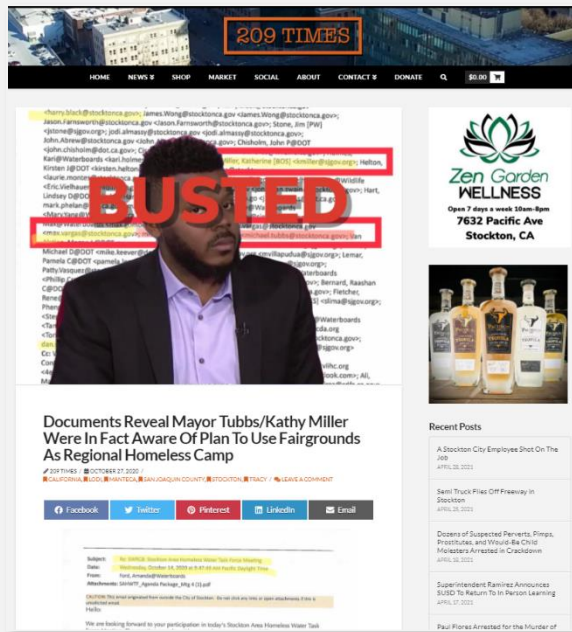
In 2017, the Record reported that it was laying off “roughly a third” of its editorial staff in “what may be the largest series of cutbacks in a decade.”

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.

209times.com

NewsGuard



Proceed with caution: This website severely violates basic journalistic standards.

A website covering Stockton, California, site that has misrepresented facts to advance the owner's undisclosed political agenda.

Score: 17.5/100 [See the full Nutrition Label →](#)

CREDIBILITY	TRANSPARENCY
✗ Does not repeatedly publish false content	✗ Website discloses ownership and financing
✗ Gathers and presents information responsibly	✓ Clearly labels advertising
✗ Regularly corrects or clarifies errors	✗ Reveals who's in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest
✗ Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly	✗ The site provides names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information
✓ Avoids deceptive headlines	

NewsGuard Nutrition Label: 209 Times

Asked about this lack of disclosure of a significant potential conflict, Sanchez told NewsGuard in a March 2021 phone interview that he planned to add more information along these lines to the website. "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.

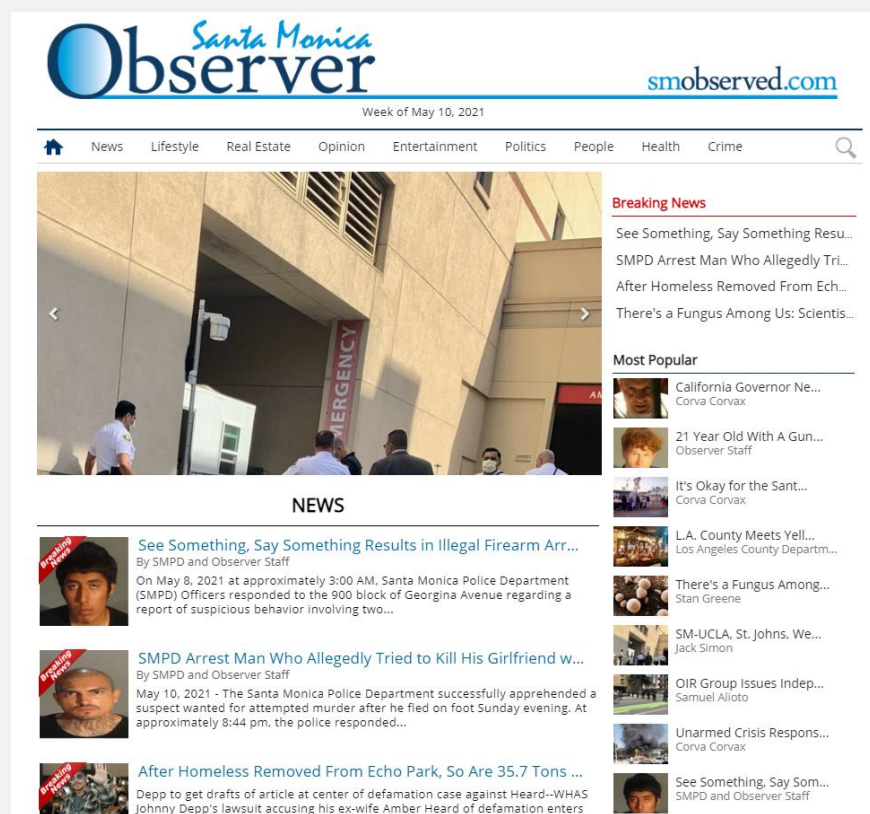
Sanchez did not win the 2020 mayoral race in Stockton. But neither did Tubbs, who lost to Republican Kevin Lincoln.

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 isleading 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.

Criterion	% Passing
Does not repeatedly publish false content	94.31%
Gathers and presents information responsibly	85.21%
Regularly corrects or clarifies errors	72.06%
Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly	81.74%
Avoids deceptive headlines	93.05%
Website discloses ownership and financing	64.60%
Clearly labels advertising	82.60%
Reveals who's in charge, including possible conflicts of interest	63.72%
The site provides the names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information	74.84%

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

Example: Clear ownership disclosure:

The screenshot displays the website of The State Journal-Register (SJR). At the top, the SJR logo is accompanied by a "Subscribe Now" button. Below this, the Gannett logo is prominently featured. The main content area contains the following text:

The State Journal-Register is owned by Gannett Media Corp.

At Gannett Media Corp., our mission is to deliver high quality and trusted journalism, products and services that enrich the communities we serve – our readers, commercial partners, employees and investors.

Gannett Media Corp. is one of the largest publishers of locally-based media in the United States. We publish more than 261 daily newspapers that reach more than 140 million people.

UpCurve, a Gannett subsidiary which provides marketing, digital solutions and cloud services to small and mid-sized businesses, continues to grow. UpCurve's businesses leverage Gannett Media Corp.'s core strengths. Currently, those businesses include ThriveHive, Gannett Auto and BestRide.com, W-Systems and ViWO.

While we have experienced significant growth over the last several years, we continually strive to make ourselves not just a bigger company, but a stronger one.

The footer section is divided into five columns:

- Never miss a story**
Choose the plan that's right for you.
Digital access or digital and print delivery.
[Subscribe Now](#)
- SITE SERVICES**
 - Support Local Businesses
 - My Profile
 - Live Chat
 - Contact Us
 - Subscribe
 - Commenting Rules
 - Archives
 - Manage Online Subscription
 - Manage Print Subscription
- MARKETPLACE**
 - Cars
 - Homes
 - Classifieds
 - Newspaper Ads
 - Garage Sale Directory
 - Place an Ad
 - Advertise With Us
 - Pay Your Ad Bill
- SECTIONS**
 - News
 - State Government
 - Sports
 - The Voice
 - Local Entertainment
- INFORMATION**
 - E-edition
 - Today's Front Page
 - Text Alerts
 - Calendar

Below the footer columns is a "Sign up for daily e-mails" section with an input field for "Enter Email Address" and a "Sign Up Now" button.

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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:

The screenshot shows a professional author profile for Lisa Rein. The profile includes a circular headshot, her name, location, current role, education, a detailed biography, languages spoken, and social media links. Four blue callout boxes highlight specific best practices:

- Clear description of what beat/topics the reporter covers.** (Points to the role: **Reporter covering federal agencies and the management of government in the Trump administration**)
- Detailed description of background, past reporting experience, and disclose any potential conflicts of interest.** (Points to the biography paragraph)
- Direct link to email and social media accounts** (Points to the 'Connect' section with email, Twitter, Facebook, and RSS icons)
- Share confidential news tips with The Post** (Points to the tip-sharing button)

Profile Content:

Lisa Rein
Washington, D.C.
Reporter covering federal agencies and the management of government in the Trump administration
Education: Wesleyan University, B.A. history

Lisa Rein covers federal agencies and the management of government in the Trump administration. At The Washington Post, she has written about federal workers, state politics and government in Annapolis and Richmond; local government in Fairfax County, Va.; and the redevelopment of Washington and its neighborhoods. She was previously a reporter for the New York Daily News, where she covered former mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani and the city's colorful taxi industry. Before crossing the Hudson River, she chronicled Asian immigration to northern New Jersey for the Record of Hackensack. Rein started her daily newspaper career at the Patriot-Ledger in Quincy, Mass., where one of the biggest scandals of the late 1980s was the gold spray-painting by vandals of Plymouth Rock. She grew up in Boston and graduated from Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn. She came to The Post in 1999.

Languages spoken in addition to English: Fluent French

Show less ▲

Connect: [Email] [Twitter] [Facebook] [RSS]

Share confidential news tips with The Post →

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.

The screenshot shows the 'ABOUT' page of 'the Floridian' website. The page features a navigation bar with links: Home, Florida, National, Biden, Trump, Miami, Opinion, Contact, and Subscribe. The 'ABOUT' section is highlighted with a yellow underline. Three blue callout boxes with lines pointing to specific text provide annotations:

- Clearly discloses who manages, and is ultimately accountable for, editorial content** (points to the first paragraph).
- Reveals any potential conflicts of interest or entanglements that might present the appearance of a conflict of interest** (points to the second paragraph).
- Discloses overall political perspective** (points to the third paragraph).

A large blue arrow points from the 'Discloses overall political perspective' box towards the right side of the page.

the Floridian

Home Florida National Biden Trump Miami Opinion Contact Subscribe

ABOUT

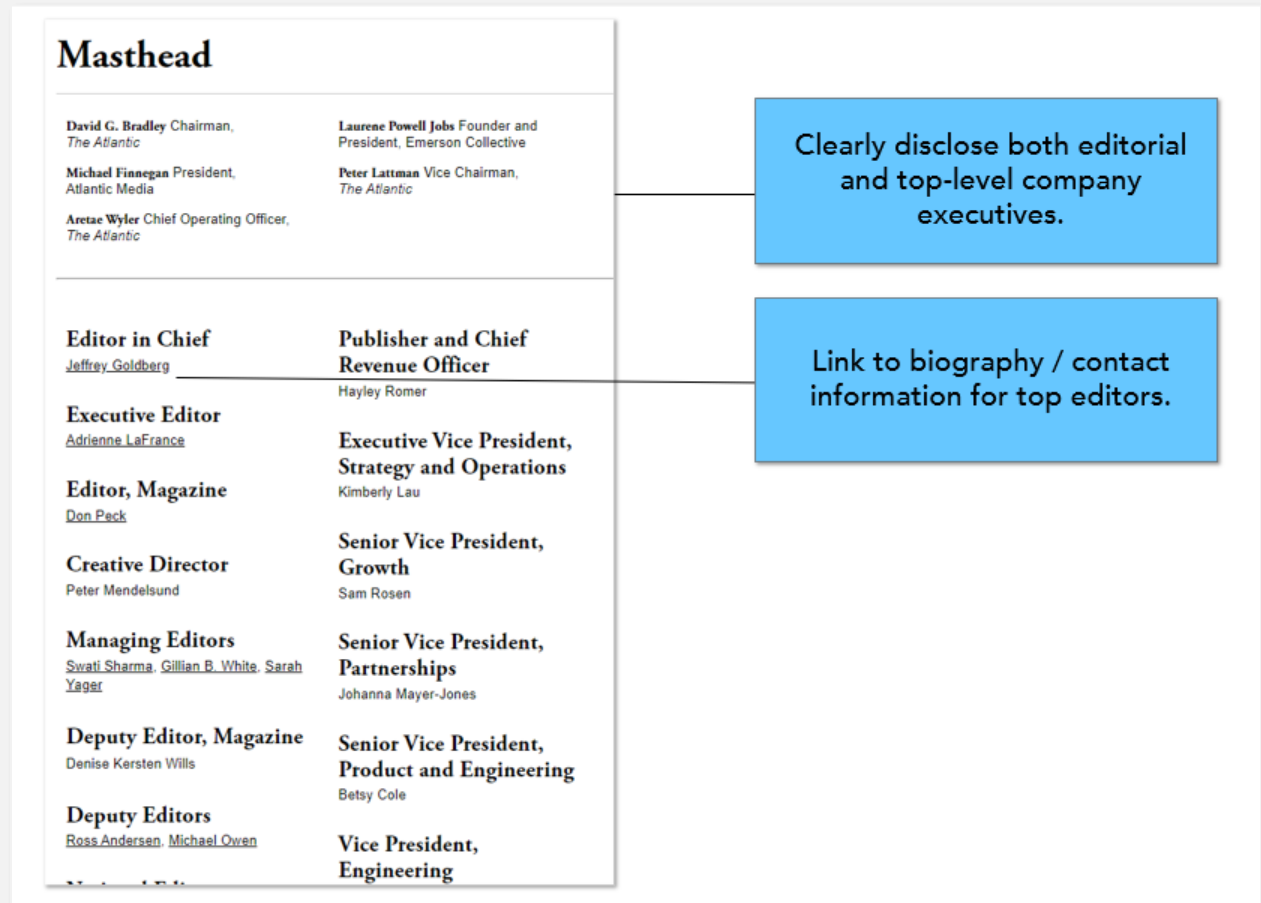
The Floridian is published and owned by Diverse New Media, Corp and managed by Javier Manjarres, an award-winning South Florida-based political journalist.

Under the Diverse New Media umbrella, he writes, manages, and publishes Floridianpress.com, Hispolitica.com, and JudicialPost.com, in addition to publishing the conservative website, Shark-Tank.com, which can be found under Shark Tank Media, LLC.

During the 2018 election cycle, he ran and lost the primary race for congress in Florida's 22nd congressional district. He is Republican. He enjoys soccer, weight-lifting, swimming and biking. Email him at Diversenewmedia@gmail.com

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.

The image shows a screenshot of a 'Corrections & Clarifications' page from the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle. The page is titled 'LOCAL Corrections & Clarifications' and includes the publication's name, date, and a 'View Comments' button. It provides contact information for reporting errors and lists three corrections from May 2020. Two blue callout boxes with arrows point to specific parts of the page: one points to the contact information for reporting errors, and the other points to the list of corrections.

LOCAL
Corrections & Clarifications
Rochester Democrat and Chronicle
Published 12:19 p.m. ET Jun. 13, 2020 | Updated 3:14 p.m. ET May 13, 2020
[View Comments](#) [f](#) [t](#) [e](#)

To report corrections & clarifications, call 585-258-2220 or email accuracy@democratandchronicle.com.

Please indicate whether you're responding to content online or in the newspaper.

The following corrections and clarifications have been published on stories produced by the D&C's newsroom or that ran in:

--

May 2020

News: This column has been updated to correct an error regarding Leigh Rubin's relationship with RIT.
<https://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/news/2020/05/10/democrat-and-chronicle-editor-michael-kilian-column-overlooked-news-coronavirus-mothers-day/3097421001/>

News: A story published May 12 included incorrect information. Nothing new has been designated for the space vacated by Morton's The Steakhouse.
<https://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/money/business/2020/05/12/mortons-steakhouse-closes-hyatt-rochester-ny/3114315001/>

News: This story, first published Sunday, May 3, included the wrong amount of total test results. That number was corrected and other numbers were been updated to reflect Monroe County's report from May 3.

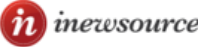
Make it easy for users to report factual errors

Correct errors both on article page and on a separate 'corrections' page if possible

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, nonpartisan newsroom dedicated to improving lives in the San Diego region and beyond through impactful, data-based investigative and accountability journalism.

Our Vision

Betrays of the public trust are revealed and rectified, wrongdoing is deterred, and inequities are illuminated thanks to *inewssource*'s deep, dogged, fact-based reporting.

Our Values

Truth: Above all else, we value the importance of a free and credible press. Truth is the cornerstone of democracy and the core value for *inewssource*.

Transparency: We build trust with our readers by adhering to the highest standards and ethics, and to reporting with facts, precision and context.

Collaboration: Our newsroom prioritizes collaboration over competition. We regularly partner with media outlets on reporting projects and to share content.

Community: Our reporting serves the San Diego region, and we strive to build relationships with our audience by getting out into the community to listen and engage.

Ethics Policy

inewssource will conduct its business with the highest standards of decency, fairness and accuracy. These standards shall apply equally to *inewssource* employees, freelancers and all others engaged in gathering information on behalf of *inewssource*. All receive a copy of these ethical standards.

In the course of our reporting, we will consistently:

- Identify our organization and ourselves fully and avoid false representations of any kind to any source.
- Obtain consent from all parties before electronically recording any interview or conversation except in extraordinary cases authorized by the Managing Editor and Editor. If a source refuses to be taped, that must be honored; no recordings are to be made without consent.

- Respect the individual's right to privacy. *inewssource* will never manipulate or barter private, personal, health, financial or other extraneous information in the course of preparing its reports.
- Any source we describe or write about in any significant manner must be contacted. The employee should document all efforts to contact the source, and if unsuccessful, should summarize these efforts at contact in the body of his/her writing.

In addition, *inewssource* follows the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists. The latest version, revised in 2014, can be found [here](#).


Editorial Independence Policy

We subscribe to standards of editorial independence adopted by the [Institute for Nonprofit News \(INN\)](#) as follows:

Our organization retains full authority over editorial content to protect the best journalistic and business interests of our organization. We will maintain a firewall between news coverage decisions and sources of all revenue. Acceptance of financial support does not constitute implied or actual endorsement of donors or their products, services or opinions.

We accept gifts, grants and sponsorships from individuals and organizations for the general support of our activities, but our news judgments are made independently and not on the basis of donor support. Our organization also may consider donations to support the coverage of particular topics, but our organization maintains editorial control of the coverage. We will cede no right of review or influence of editorial content, nor of unauthorized distribution of editorial content.

Our organization will make public all donors who give a total of \$1,000 or more. We will accept anonymous donations for general support only if it is clear that sufficient safeguards have been put into place that the expenditure of that donation is made independently by our organization and in compliance with INN's Membership Standards.



Ownership Structure, Funding and Grants


inewssource is a nonprofit organization, whose legal name is Investigative Newsroom. It does business as *inewssource*. The business was incorporated on Aug. 4, 2009 in the state of California. Tax-exempt status as a 501(c)3 was granted by the IRS on Sept. 15, 2010. *inewssource* is funded primarily by individual contributions and foundation grants. We are guided by a [board of directors](#).

Editorial independence: Journalists employed by *inewssource* take no editorial direction from donors whose contributions may support the organization. *inewssource* will not hesitate to report on its donors when events warrant. Our [Editorial Independence Policy](#) details the firewall between journalism and revenue.

To be transparent with the public, *inewssource* [lists its donors on its website](#). In cases where a donor is the subject of an *inewssource* story, additional disclosure will be made.

Financial Documents

We do our due diligence to earn your trust in our reporting, as well as in our governance and financial sustainability. All of our financial documents are made available to view so that our supporters can trust we are sound stewards of your philanthropy. Review our IRS Form 990s, audited financial statements and annual reports:

Tax Returns	Financial Statements	Annual Reports
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fiscal Year 2020• Fiscal Year 2019• Fiscal Year 2018• Fiscal Year 2017• Fiscal Year 2016• Fiscal Year 2015• Year 2013• Year 2012• Year 2011• Year 2010• Year 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fiscal Year 2020• Fiscal Year 2019• Fiscal Year 2018• Fiscal Year 2017• Fiscal Year 2016• Fiscal Year 2015	 <i>inewssource</i> in the spotlight 2019 ANNUAL REPORT

2018 *inewssource* Annual Report

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 NewsGuard rating.

The three panel ad builds as follows:



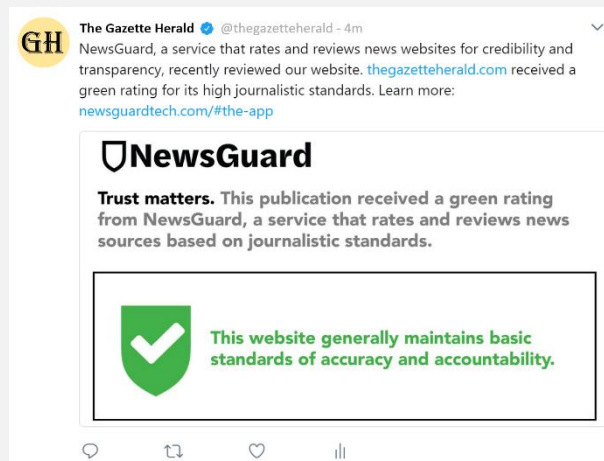
- [Link to download editable .psd file](#) that can be used to build ads to your preferred specs

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](#) 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 organisation 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**

SEARCHCONNECTMENU


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


NewsGuard [LEARN MORE](#)

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 appears 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 get green ratings.

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Cancel at any time. Subscription auto-renews every 12 weeks at full price.

- ✓ We **filter out the noise** of the daily news cycle and analyse the trends that matter
- ✓ We give you rigorous, deeply researched and fact-checked journalism. That's why Americans named us their **most trusted news source** in 2017
- ✓ **Available wherever you are**—in print, digital and, uniquely, in audio, fully narrated by professional broadcasters

  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](#).