

April 21, 2022

Sen. Patty Murray
Chair
Health, Education, Labor & Pensions
Committee
United States Senate

Sen. Richard Burr
Ranking Member
Health, Education, Labor & Pensions
Committee
United States Senate

Sen. Bill Cassidy, M.D.
Ranking Member
Children and Families Subcommittee
United States Senate

Sen. Robert Casey
Chairman
Children and Families Subcommittee
United States Senate

Rep. Robert Scott
Chairman
Education and Labor Committee
U.S. House of Representatives

Rep. Virginia Foxx
Ranking Member
Education and Labor Committee
U.S. House of Representatives

Rep. Gregorio Sablan
Chair
Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary
Education Subcommittee
U.S. House of Representatives

Rep. Burgess Owens
Ranking Member
Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary
Education Subcommittee
U.S. House of Representatives

Rep. Suzanne Bonamici
Chair
Civil Rights and Human Services
Subcommittee
U.S. House of Representatives

Rep. Russ Fulcher
Ranking Member
Civil Rights and Human Services
Subcommittee
U.S. House of Representatives

Members of Congress:

We write to you today deeply concerned on behalf of millions of schoolchildren and their parents regarding a new threat to the principles of free expression, open dialogue, diversity of political thought, and freedom from harassment in our classrooms.

In January 2022, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the nation's second largest teachers' union, announced it would partner with NewsGuard, a company which features an internet browser tool that claims to rate the trustworthiness of more than 7,500 news and

information websites, “to protect and champion legitimate journalism and fact-based reporting and to help educators and their students navigate a sea of online disinformation.”¹²

Given the rise of political intolerance within academic institutions and censorship from the tech industry, we are alarmed by this partnership and its implications for core American values in our schools.

The AFT is led by Randi Weingarten, a liberal union activist who over the past several years during the pandemic has been a leading source of misinformation and political partisanship to obscure scientific facts—all at the expense of parents and children. In 2020, Weingarten claimed she favored schools re-opening once a vaccine was available, but throughout 2021 and 2022, she and her affiliate organizations fought to keep schools closed and misrepresented their position on school closures, CDC guidance, and the efficacy of the vaccine.³⁴⁵⁶⁷⁸ Considering the physical, mental, and developmental damage done to students—and particularly to students of color—due to AFT-backed school closures, the AFT cannot be trusted on matters of child welfare and routinely demonstrates that it puts its own political interests ahead of students.⁹¹⁰¹¹ The AFT is indisputably partisan and donates overwhelmingly to the Democratic Party and allied causes.¹² In the 2022 election cycle, 99.99% of campaign contributions from the American Federation of Teachers have gone to Democrats.¹³ It is hard to imagine an organization that has less credibility or standing as a judge of journalistic truth than the AFT.

NewsGuard claims its “apolitical journalistic criteria are applied fairly and accurately to all sites, regardless of the site’s topic, tone, or political leaning,” but multiple third-party analyses indicate this is untrue.¹⁴ NewsGuard’s stakeholders—its advisors, leadership, and investors—heavily favor the left. According to one analysis, NewsGuard donations favor Democrats more than 3 to 1. “Twenty NewsGuard executives and advisers have contributed to Democratic candidates since 2015, with only six giving to Republicans, according to Federal Election Commission records. Nine gave more than \$10,000 to Democratic candidates, while just three Republicans surpassed that threshold.”¹⁵ The analysis also found that NewsGuard employs several senior staff with a history of working in Democratic politics. “The group’s

¹ ([American Federation Of Teachers](#), 1/25/22)

² ([NewsGuard](#), Accessed 4/12/22)

³ ([New York Post](#), 7/12/20)

⁴ ([New York Post](#), 5/1/21)

⁵ ([Twitter](#), 6/29/21)

⁶ ([Fox News](#), 7/29/21)

⁷ ([WBZ 4 CBS Boston](#), 10/8/20)

⁸ ([Community Impact Newspaper](#), 11/19/20)

⁹ ([JAMA Network](#), 1/18/22)

¹⁰ ([McKinsey & Company](#), 12/8/20)

¹¹ ([NBC News](#), 12/1/20)

¹² ([Open Secrets](#), Accessed 4/12/22)

¹³ ([Twitter](#), 4/8/22; [Open Secrets](#), Accessed 4/12/22)

¹⁴ ([NewsGuard](#), Accessed 4/12/22)

¹⁵ ([The Washington Free Beacon](#), 4/14/22)

deputy general manager volunteered for Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign and served as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention, according to the NewsGuard website. One staff analyst volunteered for Obama's 2012 campaign, and another served on a Democratic political committee in Connecticut. NewsGuard's general counsel has served on the board of the League of Conservation Voters, a Democrat-aligned environmental group. The lawyer, Cynthia Brill, has also contributed thousands of dollars to Democratic candidates. None of the NewsGuard staffers listed online have worked for Republicans."¹⁶ This bias is clearly reflected in NewsGuard ratings. According to another analysis of NewsGuard's ratings, "liberal outlets were rated 27 points higher on average than news organizations on the right."¹⁷

There are endless examples of NewsGuard ratings that have no basis in reality and disprove the claim that its ratings are impartial. *RawStory*, an online blog that functions as a progressive attack dog and which is widely known for its left-wing extremism, receives a perfect rating of 100/100 for trustworthiness by NewsGuard.¹⁸ Shockingly, even *Media Matters*, a left-wing political activist organization whose sole mission is attacking and denigrating conservatives, receives an 80/100 favorable grade from NewsGuard.¹⁹

According to an independent study by Nieman Journalism Lab:

- *Mother Jones* and *Slate*—both left-leaning news websites that depend on sensational headlines for clicks—were ranked the 7th and 8th least trustworthy news websites among the 38 major news organizations rated.²⁰ Yet according to NewsGuard, both websites are rated as trustworthy and receive high grades. NewsGuard claimed both websites "avoid[ed] deceptive headlines" and "gather[ed] and present[ed] information responsibly."^{21,22}
- *Buzzfeed*, which infamously published the fake Trump-Russia dossier that was the catalyst for years of misinformation and false claims about collusion and which is rated the 9th least trustworthy news website, also receives a 100/100 from NewsGuard.²³
- Perhaps most unbelievably, *Occupy Democrats*, the 3rd least trusted according to the Nieman Journalism Lab study, receives a perfect score. According to an article in *LA Weekly*, *Occupy Democrats* repeatedly publishes "unabashedly partisan news...free from the constraints of objectivity and, in some cases, facts."²⁴ According to an analysis

¹⁶ ([The Washington Free Beacon](#), 4/14/22)

¹⁷ ([Media Research Center NewsBusters](#), 12/13/21)

¹⁸ ([NewsGuard](#), Subscription Only, Accessed 4/12/22)

¹⁹ ([NewsGuard](#), Subscription Only, Accessed 4/12/22)

²⁰ ([Nieman Journalism Lab](#), 10/5/18)

²¹ ([NewsGuard](#), Subscription Only, Accessed 4/12/22)

²² ([NewsGuard](#), Subscription Only, Accessed 4/12/22)

²³ ([NewsGuard](#), Subscription Only, Accessed 4/12/22)

²⁴ ([LA Weekly](#), 9/26/17)

by *Buzzfeed*, nearly 20% of the stories posted by *Occupy Democrats* on Facebook in the lead up to the 2016 election were either partly or mostly false.²⁵

These are just the tip of the iceberg. As you might imagine, conservative news and opinion websites are not treated so generously. A year and a half after the *New York Post* published its Hunter Biden exposé—for which Big Tech censored, de-prioritized and de-platformed the oldest newspaper in the country and its social media accounts—*The New York Times* finally admitted the *Post*'s reporting was correct.^{26,27} News outlets from *Politico* to *NPR* to *CBS News* all got the story wrong, yet unsurprisingly all receive ratings ranging from 95/100 to 100/100 from NewsGuard. The news organization that got the story right and got banned for it by Big Tech, the *New York Post*, receives a 69.5/100.²⁸ In fact, NewsGuard currently features Michael Hayden—a co-signer of a now infamous letter falsely alleging the Hunter Biden story was a Russian disinformation plot on the eve of the election—on its Board of Advisors.²⁹

If students were to debate the 2020 presidential election in a classroom where NewsGuard was used, would the news outlets that got the Hunter Biden story wrong be the only acceptable sources to cite and the news outlets that got this story right be banned? This is one of the many potential dangers of relying on a partisan, biased rating system in classrooms to analyze news information sources, instead of individually analyzing the information itself.

It seems that this partnership is another effort to politicize our schools, censor disapproved political thought and sources of information, and silence critics of teachers' unions. Institutionalizing the censorship of news and information sources that may provide alternative views—or even facts that cannot be found elsewhere but that appear on an unapproved news source—is an attack on the values of our Constitution and on the basic liberal values that all western societies strive to uphold.

We do not dispute that “fake news” and misleading or discredited journalism are a problem for educators. But the role of educators in teaching students the critical thinking skills needed to determine fact from fiction is harmed when popular sources of information are labeled as either trustworthy or untrustworthy largely based on their political leanings. Educators should teach students to think openly and critically, challenge ideas, make their own assessments, conduct independent research, check facts, and do their own due diligence, not outsource the very essence of what it means to learn, think, and judge.

With the rise and fall of news “fact checkers”—who so often fail to provide clarity in their opinion-based ratings and frequently must retract their determinations—asserting an absolute

²⁵ ([BuzzFeed News](#), 10/20/16)

²⁶ ([The New York Times](#), 3/16/22)

²⁷ ([The Guardian](#), 10/14/20)

²⁸ ([The Federalist](#), 3/18/22)

²⁹ ([Briertbart](#), 8/23/21)

grade of trustworthiness or untrustworthiness to sources of information is bound to fail and promotes more cynicism and distrust, not less.³⁰³¹³²³³³⁴

As champions for accountability in technology and education, we are calling on Congress to investigate this partnership, including its origins, its intentions, its applications, and the broader issue of biased and conflicted so-called “anti-misinformation” tools used in classrooms.

As leaders in Congress on education policy and oversight, we know you understand the importance of free speech and critical thinking in our classrooms, as well as the increasing need to set boundaries with educators to keep political agendas out of our schools. The dangers we have highlighted will only continue to grow if left unchecked.

We appreciate your urgent attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

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³⁰ ([Tablet Magazine](#), 3/21/22)

³¹ ([The Financial Times](#), 2/18/21)

³² ([Big Think](#), 1/21/22)

³³ ([New York Post](#), 5/18/21)

³⁴ ([Townhall](#), 3/30/22)

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