

Top brands are sending \$2.6 billion to misinformation websites each year, NewsGuard and Comscore report

An analysis of programmatic advertising data conducted by NewsGuard and Comscore finds that misinformation publishers are reaping billions in annual advertising revenue from top brands.



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The journalism industry is struggling worldwide—with newsrooms across the world cutting staff, shutting their doors, or fighting to stay afloat.

But a new analysis from NewsGuard and Comscore has found that the misinformation industry is booming—with \$2.6 billion in estimated advertising revenue being sent to publishers of misinformation and disinformation each year by programmatic advertisers, including hundreds of millions in revenue supporting false health claims, anti-vaccine myths, election misinformation, partisan propaganda, and other forms of false news.

The data underscore the scale at which online misinformation and disinformation is unintentionally bought and paid for by major advertisers, who place their ads on thousands of websites using programmatic advertising, a byzantine, computerized process—leaving brands with little idea where their ads are appearing and what messages they are financing.

The analysis was conducted by combining [data](#) from NewsGuard, an organization that deploys trained journalists to track online misinformation, and Comscore, which measures audience, traffic, and advertising metrics for tens of thousands of websites. NewsGuard and Comscore used a sample of 7,500 sites whose traffic and advertising costs are measured by Comscore and a dataset of over 6,500 news and information websites whose credibility is rated by NewsGuard, cross-referencing the data to estimate digital advertising spend on websites in the dataset that are rated untrustworthy by NewsGuard.

By cross-referencing that data against NewsGuard's list of thousands of digital publishers that repeatedly publish false news, NewsGuard and Comscore estimated that 1.68% of display ad spending among the sample of 7,500 sites had gone to misinformation publishers.

If applied to the [\\$155 billion](#) global programmatic advertising industry, that would equate to an estimated \$2.6 billion in global ad spend on misinformation websites each year.

Note: NewsGuard's underlying data about misinformation websites can be made available to advertisers, agencies, ad-tech and brand safety providers, researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders, enabling them to avoid ad placements on misinformation sources and target advertisements on credible news sources. Request data access [here](#).

It is currently not possible for any entity to determine the precise amount of advertising going to misinformation sites. Digital platforms that control a large share of the advertising market do not make their data public on how much ad revenue they deliver to particular misinformation sites each year. Comscore and NewsGuard joined forces to make this estimate possible without access to data controlled by these large digital platforms.

In the U.S., which is the largest programmatic advertising market—with a projected \$96.89 billion in 2021 digital programmatic advertising spend [according to eMarketer](#), the analysis estimates advertisers are spending \$1.62 billion placing ads on misinformation websites. By comparison, total digital advertising on all U.S. newspapers was about \$3.5 billion in 2020, according to data from the [Pew Research Center](#)—suggesting that for every \$2.16 in digital ad revenue sent to legitimate newspapers, U.S. advertisers are sending \$1 to misinformation websites.

The report comes after multiple recent revelations about the staggering scale at which advertisers inadvertently support misinformation through their advertising revenue. A NewsGuard [report](#) earlier this year found more than 4,000 top brands had advertised on websites publishing COVID-19 misinformation. Another NewsGuard [report](#) found that 1,668 top brands had placed ads on election misinformation in the period surrounding the 2020 U.S. presidential election leading up to the riot at the capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

One measure of the success of untrustworthy news and information sites is how prevalent they are among the websites generating the most engagement online. NewsGuard has rated and provided Nutrition Labels for all the news and information sites that account for 95% of engagement online in the U.S., U.K., Germany, France and Italy. Of these 6,513 sites, 40.21%, get a red rating from NewsGuard for being generally unreliable. News consumers are urged to “proceed with caution” when accessing these sites, and as explained below, these sites are on constantly updated “exclusion” lists that NewsGuard makes available to advertisers so that for the first time they can instruct their ad agencies and ad-tech partners to exclude their programmatic advertising from these sites.

Making misinformation less lucrative

It is important to note that top marketers at many brands supporting misinformation through their ad placements are not doing so intentionally. Ad placements are done automatically through algorithms on digital advertising

platforms. Tools offered by traditional advertising verification companies designed to protect brands from unsuitable ad placements are effective at using artificial intelligence tools to detect and block ads on pornographic, violent, and hateful content. But these verification companies are largely ineffective at detecting misinformation—which often looks and reads just like regular news content and cannot be identified through artificial intelligence.

NewsGuard and Comscore’s analysis suggests that this gap in brand-safety coverage goes a long way to explaining why so many websites publishing misinformation and hoaxes are able to generate revenues and successful business models. These articles tend to generate significant engagement online—and articles containing false information are often promoted by social media algorithms that are designed to maximize engagement and advertising revenue, not accuracy and consumer safety online. The estimate of \$2.6 billion in ad revenue going to these sites shows that the misinformation industry is lucrative—and shows that reducing or eliminating unintentional advertising going to support these sites would remove a critical source of income for them.

Misinformation publishers can produce low-cost fake news, regardless of whether it is inaccurate or harmful in any way, and use it to compete for clicks and ad dollars with legitimate journalism organizations spending millions on reporters, editors, and fact-checkers to produce accurate content. In other words, because misinformation does not cost much to produce, each ad dollar spent on misinformation goes further toward producing fake news than each ad dollar spent on legitimate media outlets goes toward producing credible journalism.

So, what can brands, agencies, and ad-tech companies do?

There is no silver bullet to the problem of misinformation and until recently there was no simple way for advertisers to ensure their ads did not support misinformation and hoaxes. Now, NewsGuard has begun to implement two key strategies on behalf of brand and agency partners that can help solve the problem.

First, deploying human intelligence in the form of trained journalists, rather than artificial intelligence algorithms, can be a more effective method for detecting and avoiding misinformation websites. NewsGuard has begun to do just that with major brands. NewsGuard provides exclusion lists of untrustworthy sites, enabling advertisers for the first time to instruct their ad agencies and ad-tech partners to keep their programmatic ads off these sites.

Second, brands can focus on expanding the universe of trusted, credible news sites on which they are advertising. NewsGuard offers inclusion lists of high-quality news and information sites that advertisers can use to reach their target audience. These inclusion lists include high-quality publishers reporting local news as well as publishers serving the Black, Hispanic, Asian, LGBTQ+ and other underserved communities. A recent [case study](#) found that this approach—building an inclusion list of highly trusted news publishers—resulted in lower CPMs, expanded reach, and a 143% higher click-through rate, simply from expanding advertising on credible news sites.

Advertisers interested in learning more about these approaches and how to implement them can click [here](#).