**Gordon Crovitz:** 0:00

One of the challenges for the large language models is that, with the exception of Microsoft, we're not aware of any of them that have used fine tuning to differentiate between generally reliable and generally unreliable news sources. They tend to go by the number of tokens that a site has.

**Craig Smith:** 0:19

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**Gordon Crovitz:** 2:24

I'm Gordon Crovitz. I'm a co-CEO of NewsGuard and spent several decades as a journalist. I was publisher of the Wall Street Journal and, along with Steve Burrill, another journalist, we started NewsGuard five years ago in order to counter misinformation. Our mission is to counter misinformation on behalf of news, consumers, brands and democracies. We do that with two main databases. One is we have reliability ratings on more than 30,000 sources of news and information. We do this using humans, not using AI. We have journalistically trained analysts that use nine different criteria to rate news sources. These are apolitical criteria around credibility and transparency, and every source gets a point score from zero to 100, and what we call a nutrition label write-up to explain the nature of the source. Those reliability ratings are made available to consumers through companies like Microsoft, which has integrated that into its Edge browser and other parts of its services. Licensees use those reliability ratings for functions like deciding which news sources to aggregate, if they're a news aggregator, if they're a brand or ad agency or ad tech company. They use those ratings to decide where ads should go and which sites are not brand safe. Could be Russian disinformation sites or healthcare hoax sites or conspiracy sites. So those reliability ratings are one database. The other one relevant for our AI discussion is what we call our misinformation fingerprints. This is a large catalogue of all of the significant false claims spreading on the internet. So that again is everything from Russian disinformation claims, healthcare hoax claims, conspiracy claims of various kinds. Those fingerprints include the statement of the claim, debunking of the claim and then tools for both humans and machines boolean search terms, hashtags, etc. We often find the origin of the false claim, the provenance of it and how it spreads, and that too is done by humans. So, for example, we have a team of journalists who look after 400 malign actors, sources we've identified that account for virtually all of the Russian disinformation claims. They're different government offices, different websites, rt and Sputnik, many YouTube channels, social media accounts that have started and spread Russian disinformation, to take that example. So we have humans again, journalists who have domain expertise in those areas. They're monitoring those sites all the time. When they see a new claim, they ask themselves I wonder if that's really true and do the reporting to see if it's really true or if it's not. And between those two databases the reliability ratings database and the misinformation fingerprint catalogue of false claims that's used now by generative AI models greatly to reduce the hallucination or the making up of or spreading of false claims in the news.

**Craig Smith:** 5:58

Yeah, and, as we were talking earlier, that brought me to News Guard and, for listeners, I've known Gordon as an acquaintance for a long, long time because we were both at the Wall Street Journal. I was a reporter. I was doing a piece on a paper about generative AI models that degrade over time, or their output degrades over time when they're trained on output from generative AI models because you lose the long tails in the distribution, you end up everything converges on the mean and it becomes not very interesting or accurate. And one of the concerns is that AI generated content is the fastest growing segment of information on the internet and while it's still very insignificant, it's growing and will someday represent a much larger segment of the internet on which large language models and other kinds of AI models train. And that'll affect the accuracy of the models. And I cited News Guard, one of your reports, without knowing that you are one of the founders, and that report was about how many AI generated sites you had identified. So these two databases were compiled by humans, I would imagine, with some with search or some filtering software, and I guess we'll talk about the disinformation. I'm certainly interested in that. But in terms of identifying AI-generated websites. How do you do that? Because there's a lot of talk right now about, you know, in education and other arenas, you know, being able to identify AI-generated content beyond just kind of the feel that you get when you read it. Do you have, is there, any systematic way of identifying AI-generated?

**Gordon Crovitz:** 8:36

content. So we have not discovered the silver bullet for identifying AI-generated content. We actually do it an old-fashioned way, which is that our analysts are on the lookout for using some search tools and other tools to identify what looks like it could be generative AI produced and there are telltale signs the occasional you know as an AI model I cannot, for example, you know literally that is included in some of the writing and there are other telltale signs. It's not foolproof and I know we're missing many, many, many, many sites because we're not able to identify them. We started looking for them a couple of months ago, in the early fall, and we're now up to 557 what we call AI-generated news sites. We call them unreliable AI-enhanced news sites, so 557 of them. They have names like Ireland Top News, so many of these take the names of what look to a consumer like a regular news site. Many of them get programmatic advertising revenue and that may well be why they were created. There's a lot of money in it. Newsguard did a study with ComScore that found there's $2.6 billion a year unintentionally being spent by advertisers on misinformation sites. So this is well beyond the AI-generated ones, but that is an incentive for people to create these websites, your experience with AI models, building on themselves and making you know. Here's the way I think about the internet, before and after AI. On the pre-AI internet, there was already an enormous amount of misinformation on every topic that you can think of, healthcare included, and the Russians and the Chinese and the Iranians spend hundreds of millions of dollars, maybe more, on their operations, and they're very good at it. We now have AI-enhanced misinformation on the internet. We discovered an example, actually just this week, and let me tell you about it because I think it reinforces what you observe. We found on a website that was one of these 557 we had identified as AI-generated. This website is called Global Village Space and this website published a story claiming that Benjamin Nathniahou, israeli Prime Minister, that his psychiatrist, had committed suicide, and the story went on a great length about how frustrated the psychiatrist was and what a terrible patient Nathniahou was. Very well-written story, and what we determined was that it had used an AI model to rewrite a story from 2010 on a different website. That was a satirical story making up this claim, but as an AI model, of course, it couldn't recognize satire or pass on satire and it looked like a truly legitimate, well-researched story, and let me just give you a little bit of an excerpt from it to give you a sense of how well-written it was. So this AI-written article claimed that the suicide note which didn't exist, of course, written by the psychiatrist who didn't exist this suicide note quote painted a grim picture of a man who had tried for nine years to penetrate the enigmatic mind of Nathniahou, only to be defeated by what he called a quote waterfall of lies, unquote. And then in this AI-generated article, there was a subsection called Shocking Diary Entries and it said that Nathniahou had equated Iran with Nazi Germany and went as far as dubbing Iran's nuclear energy program a quote flying gas chamber while also suggesting that all Jews were living perpetually in Auschwitz, so unquote. So, in other words, what this generative AI tool had done was it had been prompted by a malign actor to rewrite this story. It then was posted on this website. It was then picked up by numerous social media accounts across multiple languages and it was featured on official Iranian broadcast news as an accurate story. So this is one of the fears of the generative AI models, which is that they enhance the work of malign actors, that if you're in the business of spreading false claims about a political leader or on any topic, at least. In the old days, you had to do the work yourself. Now, what you have to do is prompt a generative AI model and you end up with a new story that's so believable that you know. Many millions of people saw this story, which was entirely untrue.

**Craig Smith:** 14:19

Yeah, and we're only at the beginning. I've been talking to people recently about AI agents, which have existed for a while, but when generative AI particularly when GPT-4 came out there was and this was one of the things that led to the so-called pause letter and people like Jeffrey Hinton starting to warn of the threat of AI that GPT-4, which is a question and response chatbot, can be turned with very little engineering into an agent where it is actually taking actions and open AI has since introduced its own agents based on these foundation models and once you have an agent that can take action, you no longer need the. You can just turn it on eventually. It means it'll take some engineering, but it is only an engineering problem. A large language model can then create websites, register with ISPs, populate websites and there will be potentially a combinatorial explosion of this deceptive content and that's concerning, for obvious reasons for the political discourse and democracy. I'm particularly interested in what that does to the internet or as a data source for training AI. Have you talked to me? I had a conversation with a guy who works in safety at Google. He's actually a quantum physicist, but he's on a sabbatical working at Google on safety and he's working on trying to figure out or embed statistical fingerprints in AI-generated text so that even to a human reader it wouldn't be obvious that it's AI-generated. To a computer trained to recognize those statistical anomalies it would be flagged as AI-generated and then you could remove it from data sets or flag it for the public and that sort of thing. As NewsGuard, are you following that research? Are you guys talking to people about those kinds of strategies?

**Gordon Crovitz:** 17:35

Sure, and we've also been involved in red teaming of all the major models. We've done some of those publicly so, for example, the ChatGPT which you mentioned. We red team ChatGPT 3.5 and 4, and our red team involved taking a sample of 100 of our misinformation fingerprints, the false claim, and looking to see out of those 100, how many would the models repeat, enhance many of them would they recognize as being false in some way? And with ChatGPT 3.5, it recognized the false claim 20 times out of 100. In other words, spread false claims 80 times out of 100. We were very excited to test ChatGPT 4.0, which of course, passed the bar exam, but it spread all 100 out of 100. But here's what we have learned. Microsoft has had an enterprise-wide licence for NewsGuard data for some years and it was used in many places, including Bing, a traditional Bing search. And when Microsoft launched Bing Chat it had access to our ratings database for news sources and our catalogue of false claims. The result of that is, in contrast to ChatGPT, if people do a search or prompt rather, on Bing Chat it's highly likely to treat different sources differently, identify a false claim in the news. So I'll give you a real-life example. One of the Russian claims about its war in Ukraine is that there are Americans fighting and dying in Ukraine and that guess is designed to dissuade the West from defending Ukraine. One of the false narratives involved a woman the Russian disinformation sites claim was a mercenary. Her name is Rebecca Matryorovsky. So if you do a prompt on Rebecca Matryorovsky, a mercenary killed in Ukraine, you will get essentially the Russian answer in most of the generative AI models On Bing Chat. In contrast, it says certain websites like RT and Sputnik, identified by News Guard as unreliable sources of Russian disinformation, say that she was a mercenary. On the other hand, sites that get a high score from NewsGuard, like Reuters in the New York Times, say that she was not. Then it often also says this was also identified as a false claim by NewsGuard. That is delightful because it gives an answer to that prompt and it gives some context and some tools for consumers to decide what they want to believe or not believe. It tells us that, with different approaches to fine-tuning and guardrails, that these generative AI models can indeed recognize a false narrative and take steps to mitigate Whether it's AI-generated misinformation from a malign actor prompting the AI model to create new content, or if it's an innocent person using chat, gpt or other chatbots as a search tool, asking is it really true? It will give an accurate answer instead of looking for the next likeliest word, which, in the case of a Russian disinformation claim, the likeliest word is coming from RT or Sputnik or TASS or a PROVD. So I think the challenge, the technical challenge of identifying what's AI-generated content and what's not, I think that's an enormous task and perhaps people will figure out how to do it. I think we solve a simpler problem in a simpler way, which is, with the right trust data, can all the generative AI models differentiate and treat different sources differently? How can they be trained to identify a false narrative and take steps to mitigate the spreading of it? And so far, based on the work that Microsoft has done, it looks quite promising. We can't solve every problem, but we're focused just on significant topics in the news, but that is where so much of the misinformation is likely to come from.

**Craig Smith:** 22:34

Yeah, and once you have these two databases which I'm curious about, maybe you can talk a little bit about building them. But once you have them, then you can use search or other tools to find sites that are using the information, sites that you haven't discovered yet. Then you add them to the database, I would assume, and then it keeps growing. But how did you build the database initially? How many people Are you guys, nonprofit, I mean? How did you fund this? It sounds enormously labour-intensive.

**Gordon Crovitz:** 23:17

It is an enormously labour-intensive exercise but, Craig, you once a newsman, always a newsman, because you got right to the heart of how we are the process for this. So we've spent $20 million we're a for-profit to create these databases. The reliability ratings database was the first one that we created. So we identified all of the news and information sources that accounted for 95% of engagement, first in the US I mean how we operate in 10 countries and we identified nine criteria basic journalistic practice these are a corrections policy is ownership disclosed, that sort of thing and we had humans rate all of those sources, that's thousands of websites and now a total of about 35,000 sources, including YouTube channels and social media accounts. Very labour-intensive but scalable. So we've hit that 95% figure in all the countries in which we operate and that means that if somebody is in their Facebook feed or doing search and they see a story from a news outlet, 95% of the time they'll be, if they have access to it, a little icon indicating the score from NewsGuard and one click to get a full write-up from what we call our nutrition label. We developed that second database, the misinformation fingerprints, off that process that you described, that is, as we identified new false claims. As we were rating news sources, we began to catalogue them. And once we began to catalogue them, we were then able to use tools and third-party data from companies like Meltwater and others and all versions of a false claim anywhere on the open internet. We were then able to identify new sources of false claims and those new sources of false claims had yet more new false claims. So it's a very effective and efficient cycle with humans at the centre. So we have AI solutions. We're not an AI company. Yeah, I was going to say we use machine learning and other tools to scale the work of our humans, but, for example, we discovered that false claim about Benjamin Netanyahu. Having identified these unreliable AI news sites and monitoring them to see what they came up with Very human thing to do. If you're a news person and you're tracking the news, you can pretty much instantly see what looks like a new claim and you can ask yourself is that really true? And figure out you know quite quickly if it is likely to be true or not.

**Craig Smith:** 26:27

Yeah, this reliability score or badge, or a nutrition label, as you called it, that's available on Facebook. I've never seen that.

**Gordon Crovitz:** 26:37

It's available in one of two ways. We have a browser extension that's available on all browsers, so if you're on Chrome or Edge or Safari and you subscribe to our browser extension, you'll see it on Facebook and throughout the internet. It's asking a lot of consumers to download a browser extension, so our preferred way of getting consumers access to our ratings is through third parties. I mentioned Microsoft. They're a large licensee of ours and if you're on Edge or in their discovery area elsewhere, you have instant access to news guard ratings, as you're seeing stories from news sites.

**Craig Smith:** 27:19

Yeah, are you, as I was saying, as AI agents take hold and expand or extend the capability of large language models, are you concerned that this, that the generation of misinformation, misinformation, is going to outrun our ability to flag it or combat it?

**Gordon Crovitz:** 27:55

I think the way I would put it is that as misinformation generated by AI is used as training data for yet more AI, the amount of misinformation is absolutely going to grow at some geometric rate. Well, that is, take somebody with a more advanced maths degree than mine. But having said that, in the area that we're most focused on, which is a spread of misinformation on topics in the news, I think we've already shown that you can scale an answer to that problem. In other words, as AI is trained on AI, that misinformation, the number of false claims, is not going to grow geometrically, because the AI models don't make new claims, they simply find new ways to repeat ones that already exist. So, in fact, that we have already managed to scale to handle the significant false claims across a number of different topic domains gives me hope that if there's a human will to use that kind of trust data to improve the trust and safety of the AI models, that the AI models would become safer and more trustworthy and maybe even could preempt the problem you've outlined. If the AI models recognize false claims and take steps to mitigate them, then maybe they won't spread them to one another. Maybe that will turn out to be one way to address the problem.

**Craig Smith:** 29:38

Yeah, and you have buy-in from the major LLM companies beyond open AI in using your databases to exclude things from the training data.

**Gordon Crovitz:** 29:56

Just to be clear, the AI model currently using us is Microsoft, and that's because they have had access to our data for some years, so when they were trying to make Bing Chat safer and more trustworthy, they had access to that data. We're in discussions now with all, or virtually all, of the large language models. They have the benefit of the real-time case study of how much better Bing Chat is on these topics than other AI models because it has access to trust data, so we're optimistic about it. To us, the big question is do these AI models want to solve the problem? And we, of course, live through the social media era. When it turned out that Facebook and others, at the end of the day, didn't really want to solve the problem, it finally dawned on us eventually that publishing misinformation that led to engagement of more eyeballs and more revenue was not a bug of that system. That was a feature of that system. I think the AI models are in a different position, which is there's nothing in it for them to be spreading misinformation. They're not generating ad revenue. They're not trying to spread misinformation to make money off it. They want to be trusted by large companies and governments, and we know from conversations with trust and safety folks at the AI models. A lot of them are refugees from social media companies where they couldn't get done what they wanted to get done, whether it was at Facebook or elsewhere. So those discussions are, I would say, much more engaging and encouraging. There are a lot of reasons for urgency on their part as well. Sam Altman and others have been completely transparent about the risks on factual matters and they completely understand the problem. The best academic work that I've read has been by people at OpenAI and the other companies. They know the risks better than anyone. So I think, as they can see, that there are solutions, at least in some domains, to the hallucination problem, I'm quite optimistic that they'll want to solve the problem as quickly as they can.

**Craig Smith:** 32:21

Yeah, yeah. Well, I have two things I want to talk about. One is the filling up of the internet of AI generated content, but I'll hold that for a minute. Social media, which continues to be the main vector through which this kind of content is spread. Do you really think that the owners of the social media platforms are that cynical, that they just don't care and that, in fact, it's a business decision to let this stuff run wild because it generates revenue? And is there, are you hopeful at all that, as the volume of misinformation, disinformation, grows which it certainly will, as I said, with the advent of AI agents that can sort of do the disinformation workflow and that they'll get concerned enough that they will want to address it? I would imagine you're talking to these guys. What's the attitude that you get from them?

**Gordon Crovitz:** 33:40

Yeah. So I now understand why the social media companies have been so reluctant to give their users information about who's feeding them the news on their platforms. We work with a lot of researchers, academics, who licence our data for their own work, and we've come to believe that something like 15 to 20% of the users of the social media platforms are getting most of their news, in one area or another, from misinformation sources. So imagine if you're Facebook and you have those data too. They don't share the data, but they know they have the data. They rate news sources themselves. They don't tell news sources what their rating is. Their criteria are secret and probably done by algorithms, not by humans, but they do the ratings, so they know the amount of misinformation on their platforms. Imagine providing their users with tools so that 15 to 20% of their users suddenly see that much of what they've been consuming on those platforms is misinformation. That would be embarrassing, probably not good for the share price. So I have become sceptical. I don't want to go so far as to say cynical, but they've had years to fix this problem and, with the exception of some platforms again including Microsoft, which has a different business model they've really been reluctant to take responsibility for the known harms that they're causing, or to give information to their users about the nature of the sources they're relying on, even though, within the social media companies, they completely understand it by the way, the people who work in trust and safety understand it they're just not the decision makers.

**Craig Smith:** 35:30

Yeah, that really surprises me. I mean, it's one thing to not want to intervene on freedom of speech grounds or claiming that they don't want to get involved in adjudicating right and wrong, but on this information where you can clearly demonstrate that something is false, they have your databases or access to your databases, and there are tools they could just delete anything that.

**Gordon Crovitz:** 36:22

In fact, Craig, we have said since we started the company that we're an alternative either to the secretive ratings by the digital platforms or by government censorship even worse. So our ideal is that people should have more information at their fingertips about the sources, not that anything be censored.

**Craig Smith:** 36:48

I think the problem with that is that the average consumer is, frankly, not sophisticated enough or doesn't have the energy or time to do that. It's the responsibility of the platforms that are carrying this.

**Gordon Crovitz:** 37:10

It's absolutely their responsibility. But we have a lot of data based on people who have access to news guard ratings that when they see the rating and they see a low score and a warning preceded with caution and they understand the kinds of claims that site has made in the past, they're highly unlikely to share that content or to believe it. It kind of solves the crazy Uncle Willie problem. Crazy Uncle Willie keeps sending me these conspiracy sites. I know they're not true, but I can't prove it. And you're right. Consumers don't have time to research every false claim. That's why there need to be intermediaries, third parties that will help. I've come to believe that part of the problem, which is not surprising, I think, Craig, to you and me as people who spent years as journalists. It turns out that people at the Silicon Valley platforms don't have great news judgement. They're great at some things. They don't have great news judgement. My favourite example of that is that when Russia Today RT, the Vladimir Putin-funded website and broadcaster, when it became the first channel on YouTube, the first news channel on YouTube with a billion page views, video views, a very senior executive from Google went on to help them celebrate this and he said you have all this traffic because you're authentic. You're not propaganda. It was just the most absurd, misleading and wrong assessment of RT. Had they been using our nutrition label and the low score for RT, they would have had a sense of the nature of what RT really is all about. I think we've done a lot of research in this area. People do not trust digital platforms to make any news judgement. People just want to make the news judgement for themselves. But they welcome having apolitical information about the sources they're being presented in their news feed so they can decide what to believe and what they don't want to believe. The upside of generative AI in this content.

**Craig Smith:** 39:22

Whether you have any thoughts on the volume of AI generated content, whether or not it's the growth of that volume and how. That's what the internet is going to look like in 20 years, 100 years.

**Gordon Crovitz:** 39:43

Yeah, you know it's machines. Creating and spreading misinformation Can be done at a scale that humans could never do. As I mentioned earlier, we found 550 news items in the first few months of looking for them, and they're growing at a geometric pace. I think it's very hard to say how many there will be someday, but it certainly looks like an enormous number. Again, there is a financial incentive for people to create these AI generated news sites, which is that if they publish crazy enough stories, they will generate an audience and they will generate programmatic advertising, unless people take steps to keep ads off of these kinds of websites.

**Craig Smith:** 40:34

And so it's incumbent on not only social media platforms but search companies like Google and Bing to stop indexing sites that have been flagged as spreading misinformation. Would that be one of the avenues, and have you talked to them about that?

**Gordon Crovitz:** 40:57

Yeah, I think one of the challenges for the large language models is that, with the exception of Microsoft, we're not aware of any of them that have used fine tuning to differentiate between generally reliable and generally unreliable news sources. They tend to go by the number of tokens that a site has. There was a Washington Post art a few months ago using one of the models where they had access to the underlying training data and they found, for example, that RT, the Russian disinformation source was relied on more, had more tokens than Reuters Infowars as I recall, infowars had more tokens than the Wall Street Journal. So it's a surprise that these generative AI models spew misinformation. It was garbage in, garbage out at a great scale. So the first thing the generative AI models really need to do is to fine tune to treat Reuters and the AAP and the New York Times in the Wall Street Journal differently from Infowars, naturalnews com a crazy healthcare network and Chinese disinformation and conspiracy sites. And it's not hard to do. There's data out there. We have those ratings. Others have done ratings. But that's the first thing that needs to happen and it's not difficult. But it does mean that human beings at these companies have to decide that that is a priority for them.

**Craig Smith:** 42:32

Yeah, and then for the search companies, have you spoken? You said that Microsoft has been using your data to improve Bing. What about Google?

**Gordon Crovitz:** 42:46

Google has taken steps on its own to try to improve the quality of the results. We think that they should be doing more. We're always delighted to licence our data to companies, including to Google, but we've also red teamed BARD, the Google search engine, and the most recent time that we did that, bard spread false claims in the news 80 times out of 100, 80% fail rate. So whatever they're doing is not working and again, in contrast to Bing, which has taken steps to solve this problem, bing has shown that the problem can be solved with trust data and I am confident that the folks at BARD and Inflection and Anthropic and all the other large language models that are under pressure to do something about the hallucination problem will take steps in this important area of news and information.

**Craig Smith:** 43:52

And are you talking to regulators, because ultimately it sounds like this needs to be top down from the government, that there should be some penalty for spreading misinformation. Is there a move on the regulatory side to do something?

**Gordon Crovitz:** 44:13

One of the reasons that we've done public red teaming of some of the large language models is in response to requests from regulators in the US and in Europe to better understand the scale of the problem. We're also a signatory to the European Commission's Code of Practice on Disinformation, which is a voluntary code, and all the big platforms have signed onto it. Twitter recently left it, but had signed onto it, and they just added AI as a new category of information, and so our contribution to the debate really is to explain the scale of the problem. How much misinformation is there? How likely are the generative AI models to create or spread misinformation Answer highly likely without training and to propose some solutions which, in this area, this fairly narrow area of news and information the good news is that there's trust, data that's available, there's stuff that can be taken, the engineering's not terrifically complicated and the results get much, much better.

**Craig Smith:** 45:22

Yeah, so in the end you're optimistic, or are you not?

**Gordon Crovitz:** 45:29

I'm personally very pessimistic on this topic, but I'm optimistic that this narrow area of spreading misinformation can be largely not completely solved. There are always going to be ways around it. There are always going to be malicious actors using clever prompts to get around most anything, but there's a lot of resilience in what we have seen from large language models using trust data. So I guess I would say I'm as pessimistic as can be in the immediate term, because these large language models were launched without any trust and safety protections in this area of news and information, but optimistic in the medium to long term seeing how well the AI models operate when their humans take steps to provide them with access to trust data.

**Craig Smith:** 46:31

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