

DFP Internal Memo — Platform Access Denials: NewsBreak, DocumentCloud, PluckyWire [UPDATED]

Confidential internal memo · April 15, 2026 · Gmail thread: 19d928f2e7797f6f · Investigation: Platform Gatekeeping: Press Freedom

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TO: Marisol Vega, Chanel Ortiz

FROM: Investigations Desk

DATE: April 15, 2026

RE: Platform Access Denials — NewsBreak / Particle Media, MuckRock / DocumentCloud, PluckyWire / Freedom of the Press Foundation

STATUS: CONFIDENTIAL — NOT FOR PUBLICATION

I. PURPOSE

This memo documents DFP's documented attempts to access three journalism platforms — NewsBreak (Particle Media), MuckRock/DocumentCloud, and PluckyWire (Plucky Works LLC) — and the rejections or barriers encountered in each case. Taken together, these incidents raise questions about how independent investigative newsrooms serving underrepresented communities are screened, excluded, or financially exploited by infrastructure platforms that purport to serve local journalism. This record is staged for editorial review and potential inclusion in DFP's broader media accountability reporting.

II. NEWSBREAK / PARTICLE MEDIA

Background: NewsBreak is the most downloaded news app in the United States (50M+ monthly users), operated by Particle Media, Inc. (Delaware corp., HQ Mountain View, offices in Beijing and Shanghai). Founded by Jeff Zheng, who also founded Chinese news app Yidian Zixun. Until 2019, NewsBreak was a Yidian subsidiary. Primary backers: IDG Capital (Beijing, Pentagon-listed as alleged Chinese military affiliate) and Francisco Partners (San Francisco). A Reuters

investigation identified at least 40 AI-fabricated or erroneous stories since 2021; NBC News documented contributor articles describing fictitious crimes linked to real GoFundMe fraud. Two copyright infringement settlements totaling \$1.75M+. NewsGuard rating: 12.5/100.

DFP Application Timeline:

Feb 16, 2026 (19:31 UTC) Application #1 confirmation: "currently under review."

Inbox: newsroom@

Feb 18, 2026 (13:06 UTC) Application #1 declined. No reason, no criteria, no appeal process. Boilerplate only. ~42 hours elapsed.

Apr 11, 2026 (20:06 UTC) Application #2 initiated (torie.cortez@ account).

Apr 12, 2026 (18:21 UTC) Application #2 declined. Confirmation and rejection arrived simultaneously — ~40 seconds elapsed. Consistent with fully automated black-box screening.

Editorial note: NewsBreak rejected an SPJ-member investigative newsroom in under 40 seconds while simultaneously hosting AI-fabricated crime stories, GoFundMe fraud-linked content, and AI-generated charity misinformation that directly harmed vulnerable community members. No acceptance criteria have ever been disclosed.

III. MUCKROCK / DOCUMENTCLOUD

Background: MuckRock is a nonprofit journalism organization operating DocumentCloud, the primary document hosting and annotation platform used by investigative newsrooms. DocumentCloud verification unlocks full publishing, annotation, and public embedding capabilities. MuckRock also operates a Professional subscription tier (\$40/month) that DFP subscribed to beginning February 2026.

DFP Application Timeline:

Feb 2, 2026 DFP registers MuckRock account (newsroom@).

Feb 7-8, 2026 DFP submits DocumentCloud verification request #1 (Torie Cortez / DFP). Application details: CPRA-based investigative reporting, SPJ ethics, RCFP guidance, Substack distribution, source document publication. MuckRock (Amanda Hickman) acknowledges; promises response within one week.

Feb 8, 2026 Professional subscription payment #1: \$40.00 (Visa ending 1196).

Feb 10-11, 2026 Verification request #2 submitted (dismalfreedompress org account).

Multiple Slack guest invitations from MuckRock staffer Raju Goswami received Feb 9-10.

Mar 7, 2026 Professional subscription payment #2: \$40.00 (Visa ending 0843).

Total paid: \$80.00.

Mar 14, 2026 Verification denied. "Miranda" (DocumentCloud): "we've determined that your project is not a fit for verified membership." No criteria cited. No explanation. No reconsideration pathway. Thread declared permanently closed.

Mar 15, 2026 DFP demands \$80 refund. Miranda confirms refund issued same day.

Apr 3, 2026 MuckRock marketing email (Kelly Kauffman): "How can we support you this election season?" — sent to newsroom@ with no acknowledgment of the unresolved verification denial.

Editorial note: DFP submitted two detailed verification requests, paid \$80 in

Professional fees, and was denied access without a single criterion disclosed.

The platform then continued marketing to DFP as a prospective partner. Accept payment, deny access, offer no criteria, solicit renewed engagement.

IV. PLUCKYWIRE / FREEDOM OF THE PRESS FOUNDATION

Background: Plucky Wire is operated by Plucky Works LLC (contact: Johnny Bassett, johnny@pluckyworks.org). It functions as a membership/distribution network for news publishers, including a channel affiliated with the Freedom of the Press Foundation.

DFP Application Timeline:

[Prior to Apr 14] DFP submits publisher application to Plucky Wire.

Application is initially approved — then reversed.

Apr 14, 2026 Johnny Bassett emails DFP directly to walk back approval.

Stated reason: "we're still not seeing any original reporting on your site." Tone: informal, not hostile.

Apr 14, 2026 DFP (Torie Cortez) responds enumerating active investigations:

MUSD statutory CPRA delinquency; CDE/WPUSD civil rights appeal;

Live Events/Ticketmaster antitrust. Closes diplomatically.

Apr 15, 2026 Automated denial from Freedom of the Press Foundation channel.

Email from dont-reply@pluckyworks.org. No criteria cited.

(Note: landed in spam.)

Editorial note: The PluckyWire rejection is meaningfully different from the others.

Bassett provided a human, named, stated reason and left the door open. DFP responded with a substantive rebuttal. The subsequent FPF automated denial raises a separate question: what criteria does FPF apply to publisher membership on third-party platforms?

V. SYNTHESIS & EDITORIAL SIGNIFICANCE

Three platforms. Three rejections. Three different failure modes:

Platform Reason Given Criteria Fees Human

Disclosed? Collected? Review?

NewsBreak None No No No (40 sec auto)

MuckRock / DocumentCloud None No Yes (\$80) Unclear (35 days)

PluckyWire "Not seeing original Partial No Yes (Bassett) reporting"

The through-line: absence of published, auditable acceptance criteria. Independent newsrooms without institutional backing, coastal addresses, or legacy traffic profiles appear to be systematically disadvantaged by opaque screening systems regardless of editorial quality.

DFP's Substack-primary distribution model is a compounding factor: published investigations may not surface in surface-level site reviews that favor traditional CMS architectures or high-domain-authority indicators.

VI. NEXT STEPS

- NewsBreak: Draft right-of-reply inquiry; audit 209/707 content for AI fabrications; consider CCPA data subject request for rejection criteria
- MuckRock/DocumentCloud: Follow up requesting written criteria; consider whether \$80 payment-without-access constitutes unfair business practice
- PluckyWire: No further action required unless Bassett responds; monitor FPF response;

consider direct inquiry to FPF

- Broader story: Assess whether other independent newsrooms in similar markets have encountered comparable barriers — potential SPJ/NWU angle
- Site architecture: Consider adding dedicated Investigations index page to improve discoverability for future platform reviews

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— Investigations Desk, Dismal Freedom Press