

The Evolving Role of Journalism in a Digital Age

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Richard Gingras

Vice President, News, Google

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- **We cannot begin to understand the future of journalism**, much less understand the role of Google in the media ecosystem, **without understanding the evolution of free expression in modern societies.**
- In the United States, the authors of our First Amendment in 1776 could not have imagined how free expression would evolve.
- Back then, **printing presses and the physical delivery of paper, were the most advanced methods to share ideas beyond the scope of an oral conversation.** It could take weeks or months for information to travel. The role of the people, of the masses, in the political and cultural dialog was, to say the least, removed.
- **Voices now carry faster and further** than ever before, first by telegraph, then radio and television, now the Internet. As the technology of expression evolved so did the power and influence of those few who had access to that technology.
- As mass media evolved, society's ability to **receive** information became increasingly easy, but **publishing** information continued to be the privilege of the few. For everyone else, expression was constrained to a circle of friends and coworkers -- or how many stamps you could afford to send your newsletter. The public square was top-down, not bottom-up.

- **The Internet changed that. It put a printing press in everyone's hands.** Everyone now has the *opportunity* to share their voice in the public square. And they do. Creating more than **1.7 billion websites**, and sending several billion social posts each day.

- **In the United States we see the Internet as the First Amendment come to life.** The Internet changes:
 - how we communicate:
 - how we learn, how we shop, how we sell,
 - **how we are informed** of the issues of the day, **how we form opinions about** the issues of the day,
 - how we develop our perceptions of the world around us and of each other.

- **The Internet exponentially expanded both the marketplace of ideas and the marketplace of information and services.** It has brought extraordinary value to our societies. It has introduced disruptive challenges -- to our institutions, to our politics, and yes, to the press itself.

- Unfettered free expression has changed **the nature of public discourse and political engagement.**

- Yes, the Internet can **elevate noble** speech -- that which appeals to our better angels and allows us to find consensus.

- But it also enables **heinous speech**, where anger, outrage, or self-righteousness can be turned into a hatred of others.
 - **Sadly, it is far easier to stimulate** an audience with emotion and fear than with nuanced, complex analysis.

- **Sadly, we**, as a species, irrespective of our ideological leanings, **prefer affirmation to information**. The Internet allows anyone to find their preferred voices, preferred views, preferred facts.
- **Indeed, there is a core mathematical principle of media distribution at play here:** As access to media expands, the media space becomes **intrinsically, mathematically**, more divisive.
- **If you want to unify a society** (all other principles aside) the one-voice model of Kim Jong-un works extremely well. In the US in the 1960-70s with only four TV networks it could enable the theoretically-unifying voice of Uncle Walter Cronkite. In the 1980-90's, with the advent of cable and satellite television, partisan news networks split unifying dialog quite forcefully.
- Then the Internet happened, and the information space shattered into a million shards.

- I spent the last 18 months as a member of the Knight Commission on Trust, Media, and Democracy --- considering how to address these challenges, realizing there are no silver bullets, realizing the only path lies in the determined and principled behavior of leaders in all dimensions of our society.
- **There is no defined institutional structure**, no framework of communications policy or technology, no political structure that will solve this challenges **without the wise leadership to inspire others**.
- Yes, we, as citizens of open societies are enabled by legal principles, whether the US Constitution or the European Charter, but our societies only thrive based on sound societal norms. Easier said than done.

- **Yes**, the Internet created a powerful and valuable marketplace of information and services.
 - **Yes**, it enabled an exponential number of voices ranging from the noble to the heinous.
 - **Yes**, that has enabled any and all of us to more easily find the affirmation we prefer versus the information we require.
 - **Yes**, the Internet and real-time communications have given the political class the ability to circumvent the press and play to their constituencies in real time.
 - **And, yes**, that appears to be having a rather negative effect on the very concept of **representative deliberative** democracy.
 - Can we find a path back to **objective truth**? Can we find **consensus via thoughtful deliberation**? Or do we slip further into alternate realities -- or what C Wright Mills might consider "the tyranny of the majority".
- My fellow Knight commissioner, Deb Roy from the MIT Media Lab, noted his vexing characterization of the impact of unfettered expression on our democratic republic. He said: **Is the Internet to the First Amendment what the AK-47 is to the Second Amendment?** (repeat it) How do we find the balance between our legal freedoms and our societal norms?
 - Existentially, it poses the paradoxical question: **how can democracies survive and thrive in an environment of unfettered free expression?**
 - I choose to be optimistic. I expect you are as well. I believe we can create new journalistic models. We can help readers separate fact from fiction and wisdom from spin. We can help journalism regain the

trust of readers and maintain journalism's crucial role in open societies.

- **How can Google best play its role?** Hereto it's important to understand the context of an Internet-enabled ecosystem of expression.
- With today's concerns about misinformation, I'm asked: "why does Google Search let people find all this bad content online? Surely, you could do a better job of taking down grossly inappropriate content?"
- Yes, we will continue to improve our approaches as the ecosystem changes. It changes with millions of documents each hour. It changes in that 15% of the queries Google sees each day are queries we have not seen before. It will change and we must advance with it.
- But when it is demanded that **Google take down or block certain content**, the implications are more complicated. Our role is **NOT** to censor expression. Our role **IS** to help people find any information that can be found within the **corpus of legal expression**.

- As a former publisher, my preferred definition of journalism is to **give citizens the tools and information they need to be good citizens**.
- At Google it is closely related: our role is to **connect citizens with the tools and information they need to develop their own critical thinking and reach their own, hopefully more informed opinions. And to do so in an assiduously apolitical way.**
 - When you do a Google search, we show you results that are **relevant** to your query from sources as **authoritative** as we can determine about that given topic.

- When we say “authoritative” many imagine we handpick websites and arbitrarily determine which are better than others. **Nothing could be further from the truth.**
- Authoritativeness is **gauged algorithmically based on many signals, for specific pages and for specific types of queries.** For instance, our algorithms might find SkySports to be highly authoritative about football but not about gardening.
- Most importantly, our algorithms are trained by the assessments of more than 10,000 evaluators around the world, who follow rigorous policies outlined in a 160-page public document which you can scrutinize.
- As I said, our work is **assiduously apolitical.** Our algorithms do not attempt to classify the political leanings of a **page or a website or of a user.**
 - While Google Search will tune results to surface restaurants and businesses near you, **we do NOT personalize Google Search results to adjust them to your beliefs.** Again, we do not attempt to define the political ideology of our users.
 - Similarly, we have strict policies to ensure product decisions are based on quantifiable measures of user benefit -- and never based on the political opinions of any individual on our teams.
- While we strive to surface the most authoritative content about any given query, there will be queries where results are NOT authoritative. If you ask Google, are there people who believe the earth is flat, Google will show results confirming flat-earthers do exist.
- Yes, there are queries where we surface low quality results. These are NOT mistakes. They are foundational to the role of search and the value it provides.

- With Google Search, that is a **fundamental tension**.
 - Yes, our objective is to present users with authoritative information. Billions trust us to do that.
 - But a search engine should allow you to **find anything that is findable in the corpus of legal expression**, including the dark corners of the web. No one should want Google to decide what is acceptable or unacceptable expression.

- **The world has changed.** The behaviors of our citizens have changed, They learn from different sources. They form opinions via different means.
- **We need to rethink every dimension of journalism**, to question every assumption, to ask ourselves every question.
 - **What are the new forms of journalism** and story architecture to match the behaviors and inclinations of today's users?
 - **How can we make better use of new technology, like data journalism**, to expand our ability to help readers understand fact from fiction, wisdom from spin?
 - **How do we involve the community in our work?** How do we help the community use us to help solve their problems?
 - **And of ultimate importance, what are the news products that today's consumers** will value and support?
- **That last one is key** since much of the value proposition of a newspaper was largely replaced by the Internet itself, disrupted by the Internet's vast marketplace of information and services.
- Just thirty years ago, the daily newspaper was the **Internet of its community** (though not in an open interactive sense). It was where

you found nearly all the information you needed to enjoy your community -- from movie times to gardening tips to sports reports.

- But the Internet spawned a vast competitive marketplace of information and services. **People took full advantage. Their behaviors changed. Dramatically.**
 - Who among us, like my dad, would now go to a newspaper to search for a used car for his or her kid?
 - Who among us, like my mom, would go to a newspaper for a recipe for Sunday dinner?
 - Or movie reviews? Or fashion advice? Or stock quotes? Or job listings?
- Today, **these same services are available, often for free, from many sources** -- used cars from Craigslist or Autoscout24. Classified ad revenue was **40% of a newspaper's revenue**. It disappeared with the advent of online marketplaces. It's not even considered advertising anymore.
- It was the classifieds, the department store, supermarket and auto-dealer ads, **that made newspapers the massively-profitable, near-monopolistic forces** they were in their communities.
- **But serious news, by itself, was not what generated revenue.**
- **Now, news stands alone** and must demonstrate its value and earn its support. The model is shifting from one dominated by advertising to one driven by reader revenue. We're seeing strong signs of progress.
 - The **New York Times** now boasts 4 million subscribers, more than it ever had in print.
 - The **Guardian** has more than 800,000 supporters.

- In Italy both **Corriere della Sera** and **La Repubblica** are showing **strong year-over-year subscription growth** in a market where subscriptions have not been a historical behavior.
- In Paris, **MediaPart**, a digital pure play founded by former Le Monde editor Edwy Plenel, **is profitable with more than 150,000 subscribers and fifty reporters**
- **Through the dust of disruption** we are also seeing strong seedlings that fortell the future of local news. News organizations like the **Texas Tribune** and **Berkeleyside** and **Village Media** in Canada are finding paths to success and profitability.
- They are focussed intently on engaging with their communities, understanding their needs, displaying the value they provide. They are learning that it is **less about “selling” privileged access to content** (the hard paywall) and **more about a community “paying forward” to support the mission** and values the news organization represents.
- **Jeff Elgie, the founder of Village Media**, has found success and profitability by focussing on the basics: what’s happening in the community at the town center, at local sports events, about who died recently. **News that is the very fabric of a community**. In his 10 cities as many as **60% of the local population** receive his daily email -- their largest driver of audience. Village Media is profitable with 85% of this revenue coming from custom local advertising.
- All of these successful pioneers are involving the community, hosting town halls, soliciting input, creating conversations with their communities to better understand their needs and concerns.
- At the Bristol Cable they use different terminology. **What other organizations might call marketing managers they call “community organizers”**. Its symbolic of a shifting philosophy in

how a news organization engages the community it once thought of only as “readers”.

- **We live in a dramatically different world.** People consume more news than ever before, from more sources than ever before. They learn about their world and form opinions in very different ways.
- **How might we evolve journalism models to address these changes?**
- I’ve been enthralled with the concept of “**constructive journalism**” since my first conversation with **Ulrik Haagerup**. The word “constructive” is key. It’s not news that scares you or makes you “feel good”. To me, constructive journalism is helping citizens understand **how to think**, not telling them **what to think**.
- What better way for news organizations to gain society’s support than by constructively demonstrating the **power of journalism to help a community understand its challenges and address them?**
- **Another model is Fact Checks.** Over the last five years, Google has actively enabled an ecosystem of **independent fact-check modules**. They are now being created by news organizations, and independent fact check groups around the world.
- As I’ve noted Google allows users to **find anything that’s findable in the corpus of legal expression**, including information about false medical cures. In the last year we’ve been kickstarting efforts by medical institutions to structure more of their archival information as Fact Checks to make it more accessible -- including via Google search. The Fact Check movement is an example of creating organic solutions that enable good information to counter bad information. Ecosystem, heal thyself.



- **Today, we see a distressingly wide gap** between how people perceive the world around them versus the reality of the communities they live in.
- **It's not hard to understand why that gap exists.** Everyday we hear of terrorist attacks, kidnappings, mass murders -- all the horrific but anomalistic events that occur in our modern world.
- **"If it bleeds it leads."** We see **wall-to-wall coverage** which is then amplified by social media -- **often disproportionate to the real issues at hand**. We then translate that experience, accurately or not, into perceptions of our own lives in our own communities.
 - **After the British Parliament attack** last year our televised media gave it massive coverage for three days. Yes, four died in London. A sad day. An important story. But on each of those three days there were mass murders in the US of four or more people that saw no major coverage at all.
- **Might we make greater use of data journalism? Make it easier for data-driven nuggets of knowledge to be found, be shared, be embedded** in coverage by journalists to provide helpful context? To close the gap between irrational fear and rational fear?
- **Might news organizations build dashboards or scorecards for their communities that display key metrics, that paint a more complete picture of what matters in our communities?**
- Consider this. **everyday we all look at a dashboard of metrics: the weather forecast.** Do I need raincoat or a sweater?

- **Why not expand that “weather report” to include other key metrics?** What is the crime rate and how has it changed? The graduation rate? The air quality index? All the important measures that truly define the comfort of our communities beyond whether we are bathed in rain or sun?

- **Some four years ago I helped found the Trust Project, an effort of the global journalism community to build a better framework of trust.** An architecture to help fact-based reporting earn the credibility it deserves, that can help readers understand where the sausage is coming from and how it’s made. How can we bridge the gap between fact and fiction **without the trust of our users?**
- In a world that includes increasingly sophisticated fake content from illegitimate sources, provenance will be increasingly important. The trusted nature of the source matters.
- To be clear, the Trust Project is **NOT about a badge** that some third-party decides a given news source deserves. No single authority should have that power.
- **It IS about providing more transparent cues, more points of information to help readers make informed decisions.** Cues to help search engines better understand and rank results. Cues to help the myriad algorithmic systems that mold our media lives.
- **More than 200 news organizations are integrated the recommended Trust Project** framework of indicators. Trinity-Mirror in the United Kingdom has measure an 8% increase in consumer trust. Trust matters. Trust has real value.



- Journalism is about far more than business models or technology or product design. It's about playing a critically important role in our societies, in our democracies.
- We live in societies ruled by laws and guided by norms. Journalism is largely driven by norms, a commonly-accepted set of ethics and values that guide the work, that guide the audience in how to perceive and believe that work.
- **To satisfy that role requires an ethic**, an understanding of the importance of the role, the importance of shining a light on how our societies work or don't work, how our institutions and governments serve us or don't serve us. A journalist's role is help to us understand our world deal with its challenges.
- **It is the responsibility of all of us who perform the act of journalism or who support the role of journalism** to maintain those ethics, to hold each other to account, to help the societies we serve understand our roles and our ethics.
- That is ever **more important in a world where there is too much "news" that pretends to be journalism but is not**, in a world where politicians actively deride the role of the press and the role of journalists.
- **None of us** involved in this pursuit, whether news organization or technology platform, journalist or journalist-to-be, **should assume someone else will play the role of educating our societies about journalism's purpose**, of maintaining the ethics of the profession,

and above all, maintaining the trust of the citizens we serve.

- That responsibility is on all of us who care about the future of quality journalism, about the future of open societies. It's on every one of us. Every day.

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