

# In Google We Trust

*How one of the most influential companies in the world handles  
the responsibility of communicating news to millions*

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(Originally delivered as the *The Robert and Mabel Ruhl Endowed Lecture*  
at the University of Oregon School of Journalism on February 12, 2019)

In 1979 I led the creation of my first digital news product. It was built on the pre-internet digital platforms of videotext and teletext. Yes, forty years in digital media. But my passion for journalism and my fascination with media ecosystems began far sooner than that -- whether I knew it or not. My father's job was to keep the presses running at the Providence Journal. I'd visit him as a toddler. I was quickly addicted to the smell of the ink and paper, enthralled with the noisy rhythm of the presses. Yes, newspapers found their way into my blood well before I was able to read one. When I was 16 I wrote high school sports stories and also worked as a flyboy, grabbing and stacking papers as fast as they flowed from the presses. It triggered a life-long fascination with the means of publishing, from printing presses and satellite networks to broadcast teletext and the Internet.

From my father-in-law I learned a different and sad lesson about the fragility of free expression through his experience with the politics of fear in the 1950's. His name was Dalton Trumbo. The novelist and screenwriter who wrote *Roman Holiday*, *Exodus*, *Spartacus*, and dozens of others. In 1947 he was called before Congress and asked the following question: "Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?" He boldly refused, pleading the First Amendment, not the Fifth, as others had done, to "not incriminate" themselves. Trumbo asserted the government had no right to question his political beliefs, whatever they may be. He was found guilty of contempt of Congress. The Supreme Court, to the frustration of many, upheld the conviction. He spent a year in prison, and for his next 15 prolific years he was blacklisted, writing under assumed names for small amounts of money.

For me, Trumbo's experience is a lifelong reminder of how easily a government's constitutional principles of free expression can crumble -- even in an apparently "advanced" democracy. It was Dalton Trumbo who penned the phrase "I am Spartacus" that has evolved into a meme for unified efforts against life-defining challenges.

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We cannot begin to understand the future of journalism, much less understand the role of Google, without understanding the evolution of free expression in modern societies.

In the United States, the authors of our First Amendment 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.

With electronic communications voices carried progressively faster and further, first by telegraph, then radio and television. As the means of expression evolved so did the power and influence of the few who had access to “mass” communications. As society’s ability to *receive* information became increasingly easy, *publishing* information continued to be the expensive privilege of the few. For everyone else, expression was constrained to the soapbox in the park, your circle of friends and coworkers -- or how many stamps you could afford to send your newsletter. The public square was top-down, not bottoms-up.

The Internet changed that. It put a printing press in everyone’s hands. *Everyone* can now share their voices in the virtual near-limitless public square. And they do: creating more than 1.7 billion websites, sharing several billion social posts each day.

In the United States, the Internet IS 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 brought extraordinary value to our societies. It also 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 divisive hatred of others. Sadly, it’s 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, their preferred reality.

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. The information space shattered into a million shards. Several years later, in 1998, Google began its mission to organize that world of information and make it accessible.

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I spent the last 18 months as a member of the Knight Commission on Trust, Media, and Democracy. The report was published last week. We considered 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 these challenges without wise leaders setting norms that inspire others.

Yes, we, as citizens of open societies, are enabled by legal principles -- the US Constitution or the European Charter -- but our societies only thrive based on established 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, consensus-seeking 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 -- risking what American sociologist C. Wright Mills would call "the tyranny of the majority".

Existentially, it poses the paradoxical question: how can democracies survive and thrive in an environment of unfettered free expression? Big question. Or think of it another way

with this vexing characterization: Is the Internet to the First Amendment what the AK-47 is to the Second Amendment?

How do we manage the harm that our legal freedoms can enable without societal norms to reduce that harm? I choose to be optimistic: That our institutions can evolve. That we can create new journalistic models. That we can help readers separate fact from fiction and wisdom from spin. That we can help journalism regain the trust of readers and maintain its crucial role in open societies.

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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?"

Demands that Google take down or block certain "bad" content, have dangerously complex implications. Our role is NOT to censor expression on the open Internet. Our role with Search is to help people find ANY information that can be found within the corpus of legal expression. Yes, we will continue to improve our approaches as the ecosystem changes. It changes with millions of documents each hour. It changes such that 15% of the queries Google sees each day are queries we have NOT seen before. It will change and Google must and will advance with it.

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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 any 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. We create systems that purposefully remove the thumb of individual bias. Principle-driven systems that reflect a society's expression and ideally its expertise.

Authoritativeness is gauged algorithmically based on many signals, for specific pages and for specific types of queries. For instance, our algorithms might find ESPN to be highly authoritative about football but not about gardening. Most importantly, our

algorithms are informed 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. We take millions of data points from these assessments and include them in our machine learning models.

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. 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 relevant to any 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. A trust we must earn every day. But as I said, 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. Indeed that is important to the role of any journalist. No one should want Google to decide what is acceptable or unacceptable expression.

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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. Not that everything must change but we owe ourselves that intellectual rigor. It is this demand for innovation, for reinvention, that we seek to address with the Google News Initiative -- helping to stimulate and enable innovation along each and every dimension:

What are the new forms of journalism and story architecture to match the behaviors and inclinations of today's users? Long. Short. Immersive. Audio. Video. Photographical. Infographical. Explainers.

How can we make better use of new technology, like data journalism, to understand our world, to 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.

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 not just with their attention but with their pocketbooks?

That last one is key since the core value proposition of a modern American 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 understand and enjoy your community -- from movie times to gardening tips to sports reports.

But the Internet replaced that. Each of us took full advantage. Our behaviors changed. Dramatically. Who among us, like my dad, would now go to a newspaper to find 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 and the discount coupons for the ingredients? Or movie reviews? Or fashion advice and sales? Or stock quotes? Or job listings? Or our first apartment or latest house? Today, all these services are available, often for free, from many sources -- used cars from Craigslist or Autoscout24 in Europe. Classified ad revenue was 40% of a newspaper's revenue. It disappeared into 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. This is why we built Subscribe, or Contribute, with Google and a set of tools and features to drive 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 one million supporters and expects to return to profitability this year. 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 80 reporters.

This dramatic shift in the business of news has taken its toll on legacy players and will continue to do so. Transforming a business that was, in reality, an *advertising* business into a *news* business is not easy and often not possible. Large chains assembled in quest of advertising growth and margin efficiencies can't readily shift to a business that is both significantly smaller and focussed sharply on local news.

And, yes, recently we've seen staff reductions at digital startups, though in those instances for different reasons. HuffPo's reductions being the result of larger consolidation by its owner Verizon and BuzzFeed's from a need to shift its strategy from social-network-driven viral content to one more focussed on building quality verticals. As Jill Lapore noted in the New York Times, consolidation is nothing new to the publishing business.

Far too often the meme is expressed that the demise of the newspaper ad model was the result of Google's success. It's a meme. It's also dangerously incorrect. More than 90% of a newspaper's revenue was advertising. More than 75% of that advertising was department stores, auto dealers, supermarkets and classifieds. That didn't shift to Google. Google's ad business is far more about expanding the advertiser base by millions, often small businesses, that did have easy access to efficient performance-driven advertising. Google's ad technology is used by more than two million publishers where they receive more than 70% of the ad revenue. That was nearly \$13 billion dollars last year. And one must recognize the digital advertising markets are performance-based and fiercely market-efficient.

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Despite the dramatic changes in the nature of the media marketplace, it is NOT all doom and gloom. Through the dust of disruption we are seeing strong seedlings that foretell 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 a 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 its 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 others might call marketing managers they call “community organizers”. It’s symbolic of a shifting philosophy toward news organizations that engage the community they once thought of only as “readers”.

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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,” or what some call “solutions” journalism. The word “constructive” is key. It’s not news that makes you “feel good”. It’s an approach that goes beyond coverage of the occurrence of anomalous events and includes explorations of causes and what others might see as potential solutions. Constructive journalism can help citizens understand how to think, not telling them what to think. Ulrik Haagerup who founded the Constructive Institute in Denmark leads a “movement” that saw 500 journalists from around the world attend his annual conference in Geneva recently. 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. Since users can find anything that’s findable in the corpus of legal expression, that includes information about false medical cures. We’ve kickstarted efforts with the National Academy of Sciences and other medical institutions to structure 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.

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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 in 2018 our televised media in the United States 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 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? Everyday we 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.

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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 rating that a third-party decides a news brand 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.

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Media literacy is critically important at all levels of our society. We are working with and supporting efforts like MediaWise to bring literacy efforts into schools but also enabling contemporary voices, e.g. YouTube creators, in all dimensions of the media ecosystem.

But not everyone will receive such training. How can we use new frameworks of trust to help users understanding the work of journalists without requiring training or a user manual? Can we not design news products that that convey stronger cues about the nature of the organization, about the difference between fact-based coverage and opinion? Can we not at Google continue to evolve Google Search and Google News to convey these same cues to users?

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We see journalism as playing a critically important role in our societies, in our democracies. Do our societies see us that way? Do they understand our principles? In an open society journalism is guided by norms, not laws -- a commonly-accepted set of ethics and values that guide the work, that guide the audience in how to perceive and assess that work. To satisfy that role our societies must understand and respect that role, those ethics, 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 to use ethically sound models to help to us understand our world and 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 these roles and 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.