

Questions and Insights about the Digital News Landscape

Richard Gingras

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Over the last several months the following observations have been delivered in speeches to audiences around the world regarding the challenges facing journalism in our modern digital age. This is a composite of those addresses.

In 1975, a wise mentor told me, “if you’re interested in the future of media, in the future of journalism, stay close to the technology. It creates the playing field. It sets the boundaries.” That was not obvious then. Change was slow. It is obvious today. Change is rapid and constant.

In these exponentially complex and challenging times, we look for answers. No easy answers are to be found. No silver bullets are available.

Over the past 15 years, Google has collaborated closely with the news industry. We’ve spent hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars to support innovation and help enable the creation of sustainable quality journalism in the digital age. We are committed to play our part – to be a constructive ally that enables an independent and diverse news ecosystem. The task ahead is one of shared responsibility – together with publishers, civil society and governments.

What motivates Google in doing this? First, we realize that our business is most successful in open societies, in societies that support free expression – an open marketplace of ideas, an open marketplace of products and services. A sustainable free press is necessary for strong open societies. Indeed, the degree of press freedom is a measure of a societies’ openness. Therefore, it’s imperative that we are collectively successful in addressing the evolution of the role of journalism in open societies.

It is also true that Google is in a unique position in the world of the open Internet with Google search, as well as the open ecosystem of advertising. Google Search continues to be the backbone of our consumer products.

Billions of people use search every day and give us their trust in doing so. Without that trust, and without the vast independent marketplace of information called the open web, the relevance and value of search will go down.

The financial success of publishers is important to us. Our ad technology is used by millions of publishers around the world. We are successful only when they are successful in the environment of the open Web.

There are many fundamental questions facing the role of journalism in our societies. At the dawning of the Internet, many, including me, were optimistic. We believed the more free expression, the better. We believed our better angels would win. But we learned there was a dark side. We are not all angels. The Internet enabled challenging and problematic behaviors.

Understandably, governments are now beginning to regulate the Internet – typically with good intentions, but often with unintended consequences that potentially damage the free press and the openness of the Internet. We see that happening around the world. It is frightening, particularly in a world where the trend is toward less open societies and more authoritative regimes.

Which leads to the fundamental question we face:

How can we assure that evolving Internet policy will enable an open and diverse press, and not reinforce a specific political interest or prop up embedded business interests?

The open Internet is slipping away from us. Our twenty-five Internet years or enabling the penultimate model of free expression was apparently an aberration. While the challenge of problematic expression cannot be ignored, it is essential we understand and balance the risks to free expression and freedom of the press itself. The slope is slippery.

Some participants in the policy discussion see the Internet as a threat to their share of voice, their share of influence. They'd rather turn the internet into a distribution environment like those that enabled their earlier success, where share of voice went to those with power and influence to command distribution.

Globally, we are in the early stages of of evolving Internet policy. It's important for the future of journalism and the free press, that everyone in the journalism community be vigilant about the direct and indirect consequences of regulation as it continues to evolve.

One persistent lesson is this: with every shift in media distribution, be it radio, television, cable, satellite, or the Internet, the incumbent media players seek to maintain prior dominance, to constrain the expansion of the market for new players, and to reduce the diversity of voices it might enable.

This is as understandable as it can be troubling. This is happening with the Internet today. Whether your a journalist working for a large media player or small, please give careful consideration. It is important that journalists reporting on Internet policy dig beyond the memes, and be careful to not be blinded by short term self-interest. The stakes are high, for the future of journalism, for the future of open societies.

Google supports thoughtful Internet regulation. We only hope that it respects these key principles:

- Protect the open Web and the open Internet along with the free expression it enables, and not a closed distribution system favoring the few.
- Enable a diverse and financially-independent free press.
- Protect against undue government influence that can imbalance the news ecosystem.

Will legislation that purports to address misinformation and online harms be effective when the regulation creates wide exceptions for politicians or any spinmaster calling themselves a journalist?

While we might trust regulation to have the intended effect, it is critical to examine the fine print. Mechanisms created by such regulation might just as readily be turned against the press depending on the motivations of the government in power.

Hard questions. No easy answers.

Beyond public policy, the biggest challenge confronting journalism is relevance. Quality journalism will not exist, much less thrive, if a society does not recognize the relevance of journalism and support it with their attention and their financial support. Virtually every piece of research underlines the continuing decline in the perception of trust and value. Not surprising, given how many politicians declare anything they find critical as “fake news”

The world has changed. More than ever, societies need quality journalism to understand their world and express their roles as citizens. The Internet overwhelms us. It continues to change, click by click, with every glob of media it spits out. From the sweet memes of social networks to an endless array of opinionators and influencers. From the helpful tutorials and inspired dreams of video creators, to hucksters and propagandists. From snapshots of cute grandkids, to doctored photos of false righteous indignation. From thoughtful forays into innovative digital journalism, to astroturf journalism funded by who knows who.

It's a complicated media ecosystem composed of frightening simplicity. Our culture, politics, and news reduced to memes and 280-character sound bites lacking context and substance. Our world is twisted and torqued by daunting cultural memes we are induced to amplify, by bad ads offering false remedies, by politicians igniting the fears he or she pledges to extinguish.

Yes, there is thoughtful, fact-based journalism sprinkled in – hard to identify, and largely overwhelmed by the cacophonous, mind-numbing, Cicada-buzz that is the collective expression of the Internet. How does journalism perform its critical role in the midst of all of that?

How might we better understand how journalism is perceived in the societies we serve?

Do our audiences understand the role of journalism? Do they know which sources to trust with their precious time and money? Is the explosion of inexpensive but popular opinion smothering the credibility of fact-based coverage? Is the drift toward partisan news making the problem worse? Do they understand what we think they understand? News sites seek subscriptions and memberships by making earnest pledges about the virtues of “quality journalism”. What small percentage of our societies understands any of that? Yes, we can demand more media literacy. But telling us twenty reasons we should eat more broccoli and less pizza is not enough. We need to explore new recipes for an enticing and healthy journalistic menu.

How might news organizations better understand the needs of their communities?

I ask publishers what research they do. Typically the answer is “not much” or “none”. Or, it's: “We study our usage logs. We analyze our traffic.” Okay. But that says nothing about those who don't visit, nothing about what the audience values. One friend, a managing editor, told me, “I understood what my readers want.” While I wasn't about to pass judgment on my friend's wisdom, I did ask, “don't you expect your reporters to ask many questions before deciding what they know or don't know about an issue?” So why not do research?

What information do communities need on a daily basis? What will build ties within the community? What will they value? What will they pay for? Do they respect your work?

I work with emerging local news outlets around the world. There's reason for hope. Village Media in Canada, has found profitable commercial success and now operate in more than 60 cities. They engage with their communities. They seek to understand, and serve, each community's comprehensive information needs. Their success is an opportunity that many local news entrepreneurs can benefit from.

Accountability journalism is critical to the role of journalism. But it's important to address a community's broad information needs -- community events, local sports, obituaries. It's this "service journalism" that drives engagement, builds community ties, enables local advertising, and expands the audience for the accountability journalism they do provide. As David Walmsley of Canada's Globe & Mail noted, "might we underpin the high church work with respect for all of a community's information needs"?

How can journalism rebuild trust?

Eight years ago I joined Sally Lerhman to [call](#) for a focus on the declining trust in journalism. With the *Trust Project*, Sally has generated research and assembled principles and playbooks for news organizations on approaches to transparency and trust. The *Trust Project* works with hundreds of news organizations around the world. But as Sally would admit, there is more to learn, more to do.

Ulrik Haagarup and the *Constructive Journalism Institute* in Denmark pursues a different angle – rethinking the models, the formats, the linguistics used in our journalistic work. The word "constructive" is key. It's not news that makes you "feel good". Constructive journalism goes beyond the typical coverage model, with clear signals and clear intent, to include the necessary context, the hows and whys, and importantly, a consideration of how the calamitous event could be prevented. It's designed to seek

common ground. When staging debates, they avoid divisive labels like *Crossfire*. What better way to gain society's respect than by demonstrating the power of journalism to help a community understand its challenges and address them.

How might we better provide an understanding of the diverse cultures in our world? How do we better understand “the other”?

Jerry Van Dyk has reported on Afghanistan for more than 40 years! For the *New York Times*, for *CBS News*, for *Agence France Presse*, and many others. He went where others would not go. He went deep into the tribal provinces. He immersed himself deeply in trying to understand the fundamentalist movement of the Wahhabis. He immersed himself deeply in trying to understand the Taliban. The price he paid was to be kidnapped by the Taliban and held for 45 days, thinking every day that it might be his last.

He wrote a brilliant, soul-searing memoir of this experience called *Captive* (I strongly recommend it). His new book, *Without Borders: The Haqqani Network and the Road to Kabul*, (which is available as of tomorrow) is based on his long experience with the Haqqanis.

Recently, at Google's Newsgeist Unconference in Bratislava, Jere gave a passionate and inspiring talk. It was highly critical of our apparent unwillingness to look behind our divisions to understand cultures that are different from ours. He made note of the often unreported fact that “more women were educated under the Taliban than before or after they were in control of the government.” Remember, he was kidnapped by the Taliban. He makes no attempt to absolve them for their wrongdoing, including their determinedly subservient treatment of women. But for the west to be simplistic about how we portray the east, and vice versa, does not move us forward toward longterm societal stability.

How do we keep the press free and safe in performing their critical role in open societies?

The *Moscow Times*, founded thirty years ago by Derk Sauer and edited by Dimitri Dmitrienko are now struggling to operate in exile after having been barred by the Russian government. Daryna Shevchenko and the *Kiev Independent*, a young emerging news organization in the Ukraine, face similar challenges of maintaining operations of the much newer *Kiev Independent*.

Their interest is the same, how might we help keep them up and running when bad actors are trying to take them down? We've deployed our Advanced Protection Programs and Project Shield to help keep them up and running, for which Google was awarded the Ukraine Peace Prize.

How can journalism avoid amplifying societies' distorted sense of risk?

In the US, we are 400 times more likely to die in a traffic accident than an act of terrorism. We are 35 times as likely to die from cancer or heart disease than from violent death in any form. Yet, research tells us we perceive those fears in reverse -- our fear of terrorism is exponentially higher than dying in our cars.

We live in a landscape of distorted risk. We live in a society where our perceived fears are amplified such that we lose sight of our societies' real challenges. Everyday we read about terrorism, home invasions, kidnappings, refugee flows -- all the horrific but anomalous events that occur in our modern world. However unintentional, news reporting plays an intrinsic role in molding perceptions of reality that conflict with actual reality.

What should really concern us in our communities? If we enter a polling booth with a distorted sense of societal risk, might that not skew how we consider issues or candidates?

If we believe the role of journalism is giving citizens the information they need to be informed citizens, might we provide more context? Was there a trend of home invasions or was it a rare occurrence? Can we close the

gap between irrational fear and rational fear? Can we build a foundation of statistical knowledge to help provide context?

How do we empower journalists with better tools?

In the digital world, knowledge is often hidden in data, and data often hidden behind technical complexity. Can new tools allow reporters to pursue investigations that otherwise are impractical or manually daunting?

The *Panama Papers* and *Pandora Papers* are extraordinary examples of high-impact, analysis-driven journalism. The work of *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists** on these efforts is evermore impressive for how they've empowered collaboration across newsrooms.

Every journalist needs better tools. Every newsroom can benefit from collaboration with others Saves their time. Increases their super powers.

How might we adapt to the media forms our cultures are adopting?

The underlying assumption of a democratic society, and the profession of journalism, is this: IF we express our ideas with the right words and logical arguments, IF enough people read those words, THEN our democracies will be effective, the world will be a better place.

Again, the Internet and new media forms have rearranged social, political, and cultural structures. We see it with social media. We see it with short-form video. The messages get shorter. An inescapable progression, or digression, of how we communicate, how we understand the society we live in. We can't ignore it.

Kevin Munger argues that forms of human conversation have an overwhelming influence on what ideas we can conveniently express. And what ideas are convenient to express inevitably become the important content of a culture.

I'm not suggesting TikTok is the future of journalism -- though it will be a medium of journalistic expression whether you or I are comfortable with that or not. We need to adapt to the language constructs of our time.

Last but not least,

How can we reach those who don't care or lost interest?

The Reuters Institute tells us only 10% of our societies regularly consume what we might call serious news. Even fewer pay for that news. We hear it from friends. They avoid the news. It makes them sad, or anxious, or fearful. They find solace in other ways, bingeing the latest on Netflix or feeding their addiction to TikTok. I do as well.

I recall what Neil Postman wrote about television in 1985: “We are amusing ourselves to death.” Postman also made the following cogent observations about our cultures that resonate all too loudly today: What George Orwell feared were those who would ban books. “What Aldous Huxley feared was there would be no reason to ban books, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance.”

As Huxley noted in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil libertarians always on the alert to oppose tyranny “fail to take into account man’s almost infinite appetite for distractions.” In Orwell’s *1984*, Huxley added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.

I haven't mentioned the business model. Everyone says it's broken. It's broken, and it's not.

Yes, the model of the rich, near-monopoly metropolitan newspaper will never return. In 1985, newspapers were the Internet before there was one. But now we have the Internet. Classified ads went to online marketplaces. Department stores got smothered by e-commerce. Printed food coupons became loyalty programs. There went THAT business model.

But it's not broken for many journalism entrepreneurs. They didn't launch their ventures thinking they had no path to success. They launched those ventures because they knew there were voids to fill, opportunities to harvest. Many are succeeding. Lots of hard work. Long nights of stressful doubt. But they believe. Everyday we see proof. In France, *Le Figaro* reports 250,000 digital-only subscribers, an [increase of 20% since 2020](#). In Germany last year, *Die Zeit* reported an [increase of 43%](#) in its digital subscriptions on the previous year's figures. *Axel Springer* redesigned its media business – selling its regional newspapers, buying Politico, and now owns Touchstone, largest job site in Europe. The *Times of London* reported its best year since 1990. Editor John Witherow heralded a “golden age for journalism” The *New York Times* with now more than 9 million subscribers.

In short, many signs of digital success. It's no longer a question of whether news ventures can succeed. Now it's about sharing the formulas of those who have succeeded. How do we scale the success of some to many?

With every advance in media distribution, there was an early phase of exploration. Failure. Success. Evolution. Then it became clear what the models for local radio would be, or in their time, alternative weeklies. We are now at that second phase – where successful models can be propagated.

Yes, I asked NO question relating to the business model, because every question I've asked IS critical to a successful news organization, both journalistically and financially. They are foundational. The answers are the path to success, whatever the answers might be. Allow me to repeat what I

said at the beginning: the biggest challenge confronting journalism is not a business model problem but a problem of relevance.

Quality journalism will not exist, much less thrive if the society as a whole does not recognize the relevance of journalism and support it with their attention, and in sufficient cases, their wallets.

Public policy will not create relevance. Platform support will not create relevance. No business model for journalism will succeed if a society does not respect and value the quality journalism we expect the free press to generate .

It was one of the great Greeks who said our open societies, our democracies, will be destroyed by the freedoms we enable. Wise words. Terrifying words. They hit a little too close to home.

The political sphere has adapted to the capabilities of the internet – to speak to voters, to build political alliances – far more quickly and effectively than the world of journalism. We see the impact around the world. The trend is concerning, as concerning to me as it is to you.

What I do know is this: the value and size of Google's business greatest in open societies. The impact of journalism is also greatest in open societies. We have common objectives, a common sense of mission. It's why I am passionate about my work.

The challenges are as complex as they are critical. Indeed, existential. We'll need a close understanding of the challenges and the collective wisdom to address them. We'll need the efforts of many impassioned journalists, editors, publishers, and technologists to focus on these questions and find the answers before we lose the opportunity to do so.

Richard Gingras is the global Vice President of News at Google. In

that role Gingras focuses on how Google surfaces news on Google's consumer services and as well as Google's effort to enable a healthy, open ecosystem for quality journalism. This includes the Google News Initiative, Google's global investment in efforts to elevate quality journalism, explore new models for sustainability, and provide technology to stimulate cost-efficiency in newsrooms.

Gingras serves on the boards of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, the International Center for Journalists, the First Amendment Coalition, the UC Berkeley School of Journalism, and PRX, the Public Radio Exchange.

Gingras has walked the bleeding edge from satellite networks to search engines, from Apple to Excite to Google. He knows that [innovation](#) is hard. He readily concedes he's made more mistakes than you.