

# The news is fading from sight on big social media platforms: Where does that leave journalism?

December 1 2023, by Merja Myllylahti

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According to a [recent survey](#) by the News Media Association, 90% of editors in the United Kingdom "believe that Google and Meta pose an

existential threat to journalism."

Why the pessimism? Because being in the news business but relying on [social media platforms](#) and search engines has become very risky. The big tech companies are de-prioritizing [news content](#), making it harder for citizens to find verified information produced by journalists.

It is arguable the threat isn't necessarily existential. News companies are also [leaving social media platforms](#), potentially claiming back some control and building resilience into their revenue models.

Leading New Zealand digital publisher Stuff, for example, recently decided to stop [posting its content](#) on X (formerly Twitter), "except stories that are of urgent public interest—such as health and safety emergencies."

But as I describe in my new book, [From Paper to Platform](#), news organizations that continue to conduct their news business via these platforms will have limited control. As social media companies and search engines change the terms of their services at will, news companies are left to deal with the consequences.

## **Risks of 'platformed publishing'**

Platforms such as Google and Facebook play various roles in the modern media ecosystem. Consequently, their actions create multiple risk points for [news media](#). The impacts differ, of course, depending on each news company's own goals and strategies.

As one [Scandinavian study](#) of media risk management noted, "platforms pose a competitive threat to news organizations." But that threat varies, depending on how news organizations respond, and how reliant they are on those platforms for audience reach or funding.

News companies distribute their content on platforms such as Facebook or X because that's where their audience is—at least a large proportion of it, anyway. But news is poorly promoted by those platforms, and Google and Facebook admit news makes up only a tiny fraction of their overall content.

Furthermore, the visibility of news within these platforms is rapidly declining. The result is described by the authors of [The Power of Platforms](#) as "[platformed publishing](#)":

As a recent [Wired article observed](#), "Facebook is done with news": its parent company Meta is "killing off the News tab in France, Germany and the UK," having already temporarily blocked access to news content in Australia in 2021 and more recently in Canada where the blackout continues.

Instagram's new Threads app (also owned by Meta) has no appetite for hard news, Google's search results offer [less news](#), and X has stopped showing news headlines and links on tweets.

## **Weakening democracy**

The New Zealand news publishers I spoke to generally believe [platform](#) algorithms don't prioritize factual news content. As [one observed](#), the "platforms have the control over algorithms." Another noted how platforms "can bury or promote you as they like, their tweaks in algorithms determine your fate."

This has real consequences beyond the impact on media metrics and advertising revenue. Platforms have an influence on democratic processes—including elections.

The same News Media Association survey quoted at the start of this

article also reveals 77% of UK editors believe platform antics such as news blackouts will weaken democratic societies.

When people cannot access (or have limited access to) verified and trusted news, other things fill the void. The Israel-Gaza conflict, to take just the most recent example, has seen an [increase in disinformation](#) on X—to the extent the European Union's digital rights chief warned owner Elon Musk he was potentially breaching EU law.

## Terms of payment

There has been some cause for optimism recently due to Google and Facebook becoming funders of journalism and news, having been either mandated or coerced to pay publishers for their content.

Australia was first to introduce a law requiring platforms to compensate news companies, followed by Canada. The previous New Zealand government introduced a [similar bill](#) to parliament, but there is no certainty it will become law under the new administration.

In Australia and Canada, the platforms implemented news "blackouts" in their services as a response to these laws, effectively making news invisible to their users.

And while these platform payments have brought additional revenue to many news publishers, the terms of the payments are not public. It's hard to estimate how much Google and Facebook have actually paid for news content, but it has been [estimated in Australia](#) to be A\$200 million annually.

If that sounds substantial, consider this: [a recent US study](#) suggested Google and Meta should be paying far more than they do, estimating Facebook owes news publishers US\$1.9 billion and Google US\$10–12

billion annually.

It's hard to see those platforms agreeing to such figures, or increasing any payments for news. More likely, the payments will gradually dwindle as Google and Meta continue prioritizing other services and products over news.

Newsrooms will likely have to say goodbye to platformed publishing and social media news distribution. It's clear it isn't working as well as many hoped, and it will almost certainly not work in the long term.

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