*“My Democracy Isn’t Your Laboratory”—Serbian editor Stevan Dojcinovic in an* [*open letter*](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/15/opinion/serbia-facebook-explore-feed.html) *to Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg (New York Times, 11/15/17)*

What is happening in Serbia right now, today, gives us a window on the possible end of a free press in the United States. The danger is that real.

*Last month, Steven Dojcinovic, the editor of* [*the independent investigative nonprofit KRIK*](https://www.krik.rs/en/)*, noticed that KRIK’s page had disappeared from his own news feed on Facebook. In fact, KRIK’s page had disappeared from everyone’s news feed. Facebook was trying out a little experiment, to see if readers would prefer finding all their news on a separate Explore feed instead of their main News Feed.*

*Most people in Serbia, like people in the United States and increasingly around the world, get their news via Facebook. News outlets create a “page” on Facebook and tell their readers to “like” and “follow” it. As a result, readers will see stories from the outlet on their news feed. They can share those stories with their friends. In this digital age, when no one prints anymore, Facebook is increasingly how news outlets now market and distribute their content.*

*By cutting off KRIK’s page from the main news feed, Facebook cut KRIK off from its readers and potential readers. A government trying to censor KRIK couldn’t have done a better job. And that’s bad news for the people of Serbia, whose government in fact already censors the news. Facebook, according to Dojcinovic, “allowed us to bypass mainstream media and bring our stories to hundreds of thousands of readers.” Facebook’s experiment ended that access to independent news—and given the revenue implications, might end KRIK altogether: “[The change] is on the verge of ruining us.” Dojcinovic says. (This story paraphrased from* [*an op-ed in the NYT*](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/15/opinion/serbia-facebook-explore-feed.html)*, 11/15/17)*

The KRIK story demonstrates that when we think about protecting and preserving an independent press, we must think about distribution. Content that can’t find an audience might as well not exist.

In the past, the main concern for advocates of an independent press was governmental censorship, from outright bans on publishing to arresting or surveilling reporters. Sadly, we are once again seeing all varieties of governmental censorship in the United States today.

In the digital era, media policy advocates became concerned for the first time about corporate censorship. Without a free and open internet, it would be the companies that build and control the internet pipes who would be able to determine what content you would be able to see and access. That Net Neutrality fight, which we thought we had won, now must also be refought.

Today, in addition to fighting Internet Service Providers to ensure we can even show up on the internet, independent news providers face a new threat from for-profit tech platforms. Google, Facebook, Amazon and to a lesser extent Twitter now have a virtual monopoly on content marketing (via search) and content distribution (via social media or directly through merchandising). That monopoly can easily turn them into inadvertent censors, no matter how much they aim to “do good.”

The censorship threats from government, from ISPs and from platforms impact all media. However, large corporate media like the New York Times, Gannett, and CBS can fight lawsuits, lobby Congress, and pay off ISPs and platforms to ensure that their content goes into your home, stays on your main news feed and comes up first on search.

Independent news media don’t have those resources. But that’s also why we are so important to this fight. Corporate outlets may choose to compromise on their principles and live to fight another day. Independents like KRIK don’t have that option. We must fight now.

The Media Consortium, a 501c3 network of over 80 independent news outlets founded in 2006, advocates for independent media. Unlike other associations that represent independent media, we do not take any funding from Google News Group, Facebook or Twitter. As a result, we are the only organization representing independent news that is willing to take on these platforms directly.

**Government Censorship**

*With all of the Fake News coming out of NBC and the Networks, at what point is it appropriate to challenge their License? Bad for country!—*Trump Tweet 10/12/17

The most obvious and outrageous threat to journalism today is coming directly from the President of the United States. His attacks on the media are blatant and anti-democratic.

The most insidious effect of Trump’s press antagonism is that it leads others in society to believe that journalists are the enemy instead of democracy’s best protector. As just one example, Montana Republican official Karen Marshall said on a radio program that “[she would have shot](https://pressfreedomtracker.us/all-incidents/montana-gop-official-says-she-would-have-shot-guardian-reporter-who-was-assaulted-rep-gianforte/)” the Guardian reporter Ben Jacobs who hit by now-Congressman Greg Gianforte when he attempted to ask Gianforte a question.

In the months since Donald Trump was elected we have seen an increasing number of physical attacks on reporters as well as arrests of [31 reporters](https://pressfreedomtracker.us/) for simply doing their jobs. These arrests by local police, border police, and other representatives of the state, constitute a new and dangerous form of government censorship.

Fortunately, in the fight against government censorship, the independent news sector is joined by powerful allies. The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press and the Freedom of the Press Foundation are solely devoted to this fight. From nationals like The New York Times and CNN to brave local news media like the RiverFront Times in St. Louis, news organizations are banding together to fight for press freedom.

The Media Consortium has a key role in this fight. The newer trade associations for independent news—INN and LION—have been unwilling to take on an advocacy role. However, as a media movement organization, The Media Consortium is willing to join in on lawsuits and sign on to editorials advocating for press freedom.

We also have a special role to play in supporting independent journalism organizations that lack the resources to fight for themselves. The first call Lark Corbeil of Public News Service made when her reporter, Dan Heyman, was arrested on May 9, 2017 for simply asking Secretary Tom Price a question, was to the Media Consortium. We helped her get legal support and supported PNS until charges were dropped.

We will continue to push back against government censorship and attacks on journalism. We will:

* Continue to support RCFP, CPJ and others by joining in on briefs and advocacy letters;
* Support allies across the news sector—corporate as well as independent—by using social media, writing articles, and holding briefings to push back against attacks on journalists and journalism;
* Support unaffiliated journalists and journalism organizations if they are arrested or physically attacked.

**Net Neutrality –The Fight Continues**

The Media Consortium has served as a key ally in the fight for Net Neutrality. With the support of the Media Democracy Fund, we have run an ongoing training program designed to help editors and reporters at independent outlets understand Net Neutrality and the importance of retaining an open internet. One result is that Media Consortium outlets from Democracy Now! to Truthout to In These Times consistently publish stories about attacks on Net Neutrality.

As with government censorship, we have many allies in the fight against Net Neutrality, including Color of Change, EFF, Free Press, Center for Media Justice and others. As the fight continues, we will:

* Continue to support Color of Change, CMJ, and others by joining in on advocacy letters and petitions;
* Continue to educate reporters and editors about Net Neutrality;
* Support allies by using social media, writing articles and holding briefings to support Net Neutrality

**Fake News, Trust, and the Role of Tech Platforms**

*What we trust and who we deem trustworthy is increasingly determined by five companies: Facebook, Google, Amazon, Apple, and Microsoft. Today, Facebook and Google are more influential as purveyors of information than the* New York Times *or the* Washington Post *has ever been, yet both companies have shied away from accepting a publisher’s responsibility for the authenticity of their content.--* [Alberto Ibarguen](https://medium.com/%40ibarguen?source=post_header_lockup), President, Knight Foundation

Increasingly, every player in the journalism field recognizes that Google and Facebook threaten the news ecosystem—and by extension our democracy. Differences of opinion emerge, however, about exactly what the threat is and how it is best combatted.

For most mainstream publishers and their supporters, what’s endangered is trust in the news. Their argument runs like this: We increasingly get our news via Google search and Facebook’s News Feed. The information they serve us is often factually incorrect – such as the story that Hillary Clinton was running a pedophile ring in a pizza parlor basement. When users can’t distinguish between what’s true and what’s fake, they lose trust in all news.

The solution Alberto Ibarguen and others put forth is that the tech platforms have a duty to correct this problem that they have created—a “publisher’s responsibility for the authenticity of their content.” In short, they believe Facebook and Google are acting like news publishers, and so should curate their sites to prevent fake news.

Others agree with Ibarguen that the problem we face is a lack of trust in journalism brought on by fake news, but they don’t believe the platforms can or should flag content. Instead, these advocates believe the solution is for tech platforms to validate for their users a “verified” set of news outlets that will provide trusted content.

But is the main problem posed by the tech platforms to our democracy really a lack of trust brought on by fake news? Or is that lack of trust just a symptom of a much deeper problem?

What if there is no way for Google and Facebook to solve the crisis facing the news media because the very dominance of their platforms over news marketing and distribution is in fact the real problem?

**Taking on the Tech Platforms**

*News organizations have become wholly dependent on Facebook and Google in particular for online distribution, and for whatever revenue they still get, but the interests of those two companies do not align with those of journalists or the public—*Maciej Ceglowski in conversation with Melodie Kramer *(*[Poynter](https://www.poynter.org/news/do-facebook-and-google-have-control-their-algorithms-anymore-sobering-assessment-and-warning), 11/14/2017*)*

Google, Facebook, and Twitter say they are not content companies—and they are right. These tech platforms are content marketing and distribution companies. They use content as a way to attract users, and then monetize those users by selling access to and information about users to advertisers.

The platforms have grown enormous because they use algorithms that personalize content for users. The goal of these algorithms is not to inform or to educate—it’s to show us what we want to see.

With so many people concerned about fake news, the platforms want to be good corporate citizens. They would like to satisfy the demands that they “do good” while also continue to make money. So we have recently seen Google change its algorithms, Facebook hire fact-checkers, and Twitter seek out verified content.

The problem is that these efforts are either not working or are backfiring.

Facebook chose to take the path espoused by Ibarguen above. Admitting that a number of countries were maliciously seeding fake news on the platform, Facebook allocated a pot of money to a set of journalism organizations to fact check flagged content. One year later, there is a growing consensus among journalism organizations that this fact-checking program is not working.

In fact, according to sources in a recent [Vanity Fair article](https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/11/facebooks-fact-checkers-say-theyre-little-more-than-a-pr-ploy), “The fake information is still going viral and spreading rapidly . . . It’s really difficult to hold [Facebook] accountable,” one fact checker said. The problem, this person added, is that Facebook has become complacent thanks to its reliance on third parties: “They think of us as doing their work for them. They have a big problem, and they are leaning on other organizations to clean up after them.” Another source added that it’s rare to use a “disputed” tag even after a story has been fact-checked, “raising questions about how the tool was functioning.”

The greater danger for news organizations is not this failed fact-checking regime, but the possibility that Facebook will decide it is simply easier to prioritize its business model over the public good. As in Serbia, Facebook may decide to banish all news from the “news feed” unless content providers pay Facebook to promote their content. In the brave new world that Facebook imagines, only those who can pay to play will be able to find audiences for news.

Google, meanwhile, has not made any public promises, but has said it is working to [fix its algorithm in order to exclude fake news](http://fortune.com/2017/04/25/google-search-algorithm-fake-news/) from showing up at the top of search. Not only have these fixes not worked; the changes Google has made to its algorithm have actually prevented news from independent outlets from showing up. Ironically, news outlets that came into existence in order to “tell the truth” are being falsely tarred and feathered as fake news sites.

**Google’s Project Owl**

*[The platforms are] giant matrices, thousands of rows and columns, maybe millions of rows and columns, and not the programmers and not anybody who looks at it, even if you have all the data, understands anymore how exactly it's operating any more than you'd know what I was thinking right now if you were shown a cross section of my brain. It's like we're not programming anymore, we're growing intelligence that we don't truly understand—*Prof. Zeynep Tufekci, [TED talk 9/17](https://www.ted.com/talks/zeynep_tufekci_we_re_building_a_dystopia_just_to_make_people_click_on_ads/transcript#t-9834)

Google regularly rolls out changes to its proprietary algorithm that governs what turns up when you or I search on a term. In mid-March 2017, for example, [Google made changes](https://www.gsqi.com/marketing-blog/march-7-2017-google-algorithm-update-fred/) that would downrank any site that inserted too many ads on a page or that linked to low-value content.

These changes have hurt many small sites—including independent news sites--that don’t have the dollars to regularly check their websites for hacks that link archival content to spam. This kind of change is a problem for independent news but it’s not new—it’s the same problem as bookstores wanting expensive paper and high-design magazine covers, or the U.S. Postal Service wanting media mail to use automated stamping systems.

A different kind of change came in April 2017, when Google launched Project Owl, an initative that, in their words, was meant to “provide algorithmic updates to surface more authoritative contents and stamp out fake news stories from search results.”

The first major update from Project Owl appears to have rolled out on June 25, 2017—because directly after, a significant number of articles from independent news sites disappeared from top results of the search engine. Of all these sites, only AlterNet has been willing to go public with what happened, but as Director of the Media Consortium, I have heard similar stories from other large independent news sites that watch their analytics (see table, Appendix A)



Clearly, whomever was determining which sites were “authoritative content” did not consider independent news sources authoritative. If Google was just one company among others, that wouldn’t matter. But Google has a monopoly on search, controlling 63.5% of search overall and [93% of U.S. search on smartphones](https://www.statista.com/statistics/267161/market-share-of-search-engines-in-the-united-states/), with those numbers likely to rise as an [increasing number of people](http://gs.statcounter.com/browser-market-share/all/united-states-of-america) use Google’s Chrome browser.

We all want to combat fake news. But the evidence that Google’s efforts to counter fake news are hurting independent news producers is more than troubling. In essence, even if due to an honest mistake, this for-profit company is in effect censoring an entire sector of news producers.

Google’s ability to simply render a whole segment of the news economy digitally invisible is dangerous to democracy.

**David vs. Goliath**

The danger that the Google-Facebook duopoly poses to the free flow of information in our democracy has not gone unnoticed. One of the most powerful pieces yet came out this summer in the Wall Street Journal. In “[Can the Tech Giants be Stopped](https://www.wsj.com/articles/can-the-tech-giants-be-stopped-1500057243),” Jonathan Tapplin writes, “Digital technology has become critical to the personal and economic well-being of everyone on the planet, but decisions about how it is designed, operated and developed have never been voted on by anyone…. It is time for that to change.”

Most of the voices speaking up about the platforms right now favor just one solution:

* Work with the Platforms. Look at who is being asked to serve on commissions and institutes that focus on fake news. On most, you will find a representative of Google, Facebook, or Twitter (and often all three).

There is a reason for this. Increasingly, Google (and to a lesser extent Facebook) is providing significant financial support to news associations (ONA, IRE, LION), journalism philanthropies (Knight), and even individual news outlets (CIR, ProPublica, Witness Media Labs). It’s hard to turn away from that kind of money. But there are alternative solutions:

* Regulate the platforms. Tapplin suggests regulation of some kind and regulation has come up in the “fake news” conversation as well.
* Nationalize the platforms. Nick Smicek at the Guardian believes the platforms have become utilities and like the old phone companies must be [nationalized.](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/aug/30/nationalise-google-facebook-amazon-data-monopoly-platform-public-interest)
* Build for-profit alternatives. Platforms continue to be built to compete with the duopoly, with the most recent news-friendly entrants being [Invisibly](https://invisibly) and [Minds](http://observer.com/2017/05/minds-open-sourced-social-media-facebook-competitor/). Of course, in the past, Google and Facebook have just bought up any for-profit platforms that have show value (Instagram, for example).
* Build a non-profit alternative. NPR has been working on a non-profit distribution platform for news. I’ve been involved in a similar project called [ITEGA .](https://informationtrust.wordpress.com/)

Any or all of these directions would be better than the quiet fear that permeates the journalism world today and ideas around non-profit alternatives, regulation and nationalization should be pursued.

To realistically move towards any option that will restore an open marketplace for news, an educational campaign has to be organized, run and won.

**Proposal**

Independent news publishers, who are the canary in the coal mine for this threat to democracy, must be organized so that they can make the public case for a solution to the duopoly.

The Media Consortium is uniquely positioned to organize independent news publishers. Since 2006, the Media Consortium has been the organizational home for independent news, with 80 members in 2017. With a mission to promote a more diverse news ecosystem, we have forged close relationships with allies working particularly in the space of media and democracy.

Over the next year, the Media Consortium will take the following steps:

* We will recruit professors like Jonathan Albright, Gary King, Tim Wu, and others who understand the platform algorithms from the inside to make the case that these algorithms are in fact preventing the distribution of independent news content. We will join them in writing well-researched articles to bolster this case.
* We will organize independent news media to speak out in a joint voice against the censorship created by the duopoly, using briefings, joint letters and petitions to make our voices heard.
* We will talk to representatives of Google and Facebook in order to outline the problem and determine if they are willing to truly work with us on a solution.
* We will research other options, including regulation, nationalization, and a non-profit alternative platform, producing a short paper summarizing the likelihood of implementing these options.
* We will work closely with allies to create a convening to gather this information and plan for next steps, seeking in particular to create a campaign that will present a clear option for opening up news distribution channels. We will be talking especially to Open Markets Institute, which was forced out of New America Foundation when staff published a report criticizing Google (a New America Foundation funder), as well as media policy allies Free Press, the Center for Media Justice, the Color of Change and many others.

**Conclusion**

The Media Consortium is needed now more than ever. Organized as a media movement for independent journalism, the Media Consortium will be the advocate for press freedom in all forms. We will join our allies in pushing back against attacks on journalism and journalists coming from politicians and the government. And we will begin the deep task of fighting against the invisible censorship regime being created by Google and Facebook.

APPENDIX:

Table of News Organizations Hurt by the Google Algorithm Change

(Sites with percentages taken from wsws.org/en/articles/2017/08/25/pers-a25.html – other sites by communication with outlet)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| News Site | Delta |
| World Socialist Website | 70% |
| Alternet | 63% |
| Common Dreams | 37% |
| Democracy Now! | 36% |
| Truth-Out | 25% |
| CounterPunch | 21% |
| The Intercept | 19% |
| Dissent |  |
| Rewire |  |
| In These Times |  |
| Rethinking Schools |  |
| Mondoweiss |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |