

THE PUBLIC SAYS THAT SILICON VALLEY MEDIA COMPANIES ARE THE MOST UN-TRUSTED NEWS SOURCE IN THE WORLD

[By Emily Bell](#)

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Reporting on journalism has been a more depressing task than usual in the recent past, and the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic might make us fear the worst for the future. However, it is not all bad news, even as business models are challenged and jobs disappear.

Last week, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism dropped its annual [blockbuster report](#), which surveys news consumption habits across the globe. Among other fascinating findings, one of the clearest and most obvious trends throughout the world was the comparatively good standing journalism finds itself in when compared, in the eyes of the consumer, to platform companies such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google. For any journalist who has sat through a Google-sponsored conference while being lectured on the chronic lack of trust in their field, it might feel like something of a vindication, or at least proof that trust alone is a poor metric to evaluate success. (For technology executives, it underlines something

they already know, but which has so far not affected their bottom line enough to address.)

The Reuters report shows the division of trust in journalism-based media versus aggregator-based media to be even more stark in countries surveyed after the COVID-19 pandemic had broken, in respect of the coverage:

As of April 2020, trust in the media's coverage of COVID-19 was relatively high in all countries, at a similar level to national governments and significantly higher than for individual politicians. Media trust was more than twice the level for social networks, video platforms, or messaging services when it came to information about COVID-19.

Trust in news organizations as a source of news and information about COVID-19 stood at 59 percent, ahead of every type of organization apart from scientists, doctors, and national health organizations. By contrast, platforms fared very badly. Even the Google search engine was trusted by only 45 percent of respondents. Twenty-nine percent said they trusted YouTube, 26 percent trusted Facebook and Twitter, and only 24 percent trusted messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. A whopping 40 percent of respondents said they actively did not trust social-media platforms, compared to only 18 percent who said they distrusted the news media.

The distrust of technology companies and social-media platforms did not, of course, dent their user numbers: online news consumption continued to grow while legacy media, including television, continued to decline. RISJ researchers found overall trust in news at 38 percent, four points down from last year. Trust in news found in online search results and on social

media was also down from last year, at 32 percent and 22 percent respectively. As the majority of people in all countries surveyed get at least a proportion of their news online, the research seems to validate the hypothesis that the online environment created by platforms is generally corrosive for trust in news. In [Tow Center research](#) conducted in 2018, we found that 86 percent of newsroom journalists thought that social-media platforms contributed to a lack of trust in journalism. The consumer findings from RISJ appear to point in the same direction.

Facebook and Google have often championed journalism initiatives aimed at “rebuilding trust,” but none of these address the very urgent issue of what to do about the centrality of their role in both creating and sustaining this problem.

There is an ongoing debate in the journalism community about whether and how social-media companies should compensate news workers for everything from access to their stories to fact-checking and content moderation work that makes these platforms usable. The findings in the RISJ report raise another significant question: if platforms continue to borrow credibility from journalism-based media, how might this strengthen the news media’s future bargaining position?

Trust has never been a reliable metric on which to evaluate culturally subjective services. And, as the Reuters Institute survey shows, even asking audiences about trust in general versus trust in a particular situation yields wildly different answers. Now that search giants such as Google and social-media companies such as Facebook have sunk to the bottom of the trust barrel, will they be forced to confront their own “crisis of trust,” or will they

continue along their current path of (very good) business as usual?