TECHNOLOGY

# THE END OF NEWS

Legacy media has a trust problem, but it's not too late to solve it.

By Charlie Warzel



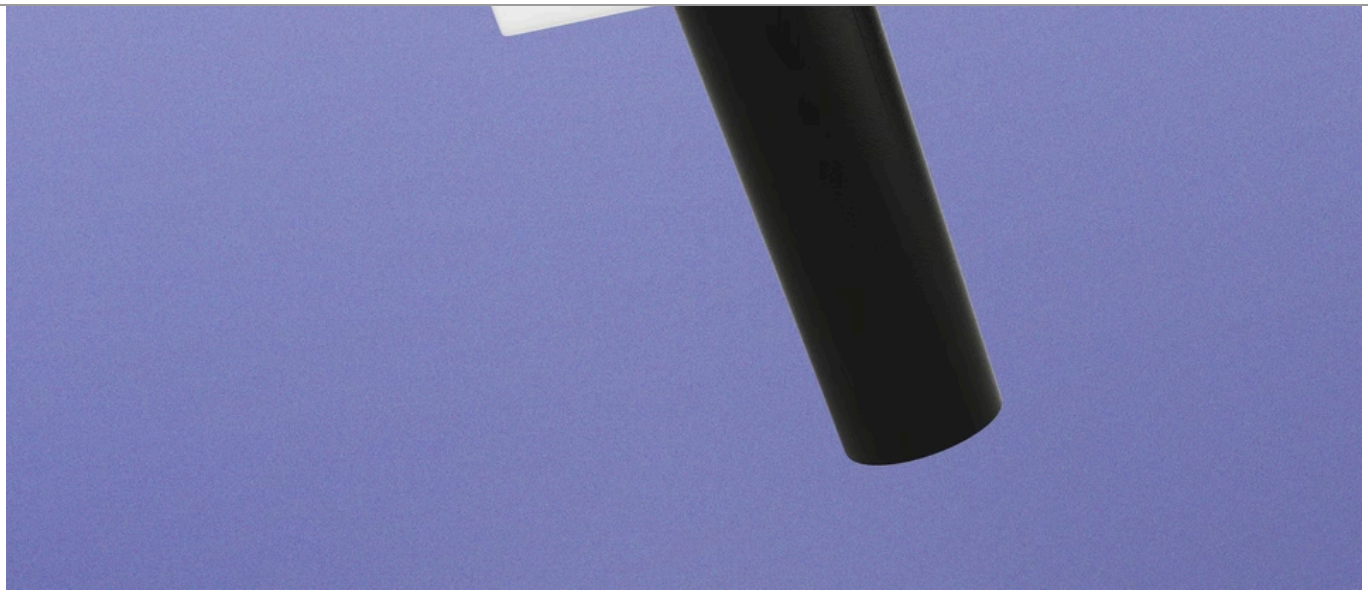

Illustration by Ben Kothe / The Atlantic. Source: Getty.

DECEMBER 23, 2024

Americans have record-low trust in the media. They're reading traditional news less. Platforms, too, have broken up with news organizations, making it harder for them to attract readers to their stories. Many 20th-century media companies are outmoded in a landscape where independent sites, influencers, and podcasters are finding large, passionate audiences, especially among adults under 30. Surveying this landscape recently, my colleague Helen Lewis wrote, unsparingly, "The 'Mainstream Media' has already lost."

I feel the same way. We are living through a period of deep distrust in institutions, which many Americans feel no longer serve their interests. There is a palpable anger and skepticism toward corporate media, and many have turned to smaller publications or individual creators whom they feel they can trust, even if these groups are not bound to the rigor and standards of traditional outlets. Those who reject traditional news sources feel that something needs to change and that legacy media organizations must find ways to reconnect with audiences, listen to them, and win back their trust. The question is where to begin.

Last week, I came across a paper by Julia Angwin. Angwin is an award-winning investigative reporter and the founder of the news organizations the Markup and Proof News. She's known for her data-driven reporting on privacy, surveillance, and algorithmic bias. As a recent Harvard Shorenstein fellow, Angwin spent a year studying journalism's trust crisis and how the media might reverse the trend. She

argues that the industry can learn a lot from the creators and YouTubers who not only have found big audiences online, but have managed to foster the very trust that the mainstream media has lost. Because of this work, Angwin is in a unique position to diagnose some of the problems in the traditional media ecosystem while, crucially, understanding the work necessary to produce great journalism. I wanted to talk with her to get a sense of what the media can learn from the creator class.

*Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.*

---

**Charlie Warzel:** The paper establishes that there are three pillars to trust: People need to convince others of their ability, their benevolence (or that they're acting in good faith), and their integrity. And you argue that creators, who have to build audiences from scratch, are doing so with an eye toward these trust-building principles, whereas traditional media takes their trust for granted.

**Julia Angwin:** There's also the issue of how, in our current media environment, audiences confront our work—these pieces of content—in ways that are completely isolated from the brand. You can have reporter bios and ethics policies, but most readers are not going to visit your pages to read them. So often the experience is just "I saw it on Facebook," or some version of "I saw it online."

**Warzel:** Right, the experience is information sporadically populated in a feed and not a relationship between a journalist and an audience.

**Angwin:** That's what led me to really get interested in creators. Any little bit of credibility they have, they tell you up front. Even if it's a makeup artist on TikTok who's huge, she'll tell you her bona fides, like that she's worked at Ulta or some beauty store. They like to lead with credentials, and then they demonstrate their expertise: *I've tried seven different eyeshadows so you can figure out which one is the best one.* This is a key distinction from journalism. What journalism often does is, it tells you in the beginning which eyeshadow is the best. The headline will be like *X Is the Best*

*Eyeshadow*, and the lead spells out the conclusion and what the piece will argue—you don't get to the evidence until closer to the bottom.

Read: Bad news

Creators flip it. They start with the question: Which one's the best? And then they show people, trotting out the evidence. They don't always draw a conclusion, and sometimes that is more engaging for an audience. It builds credibility. And so it is just an entirely flipped model that I think journalism really has to start thinking about.

**Warzel:** The creator presentation you're describing sounds much more prosecutorial to me. It feels like how lawyers do opening arguments—*We are going to show you this, we are going to show you this, we are going to show you this. And by the end, you will believe this about my client.* Right? This is actually pretty time-tested; it's how lawyers build trust with an audience of 12 strangers.

**Angwin:** It's also similar to the scientific method. You start with a hypothesis, and you say, *I'm going to try to prove this.* You have a hypothesis, and then you're going to test that. And it's not a neutral hypothesis, right? A hypothesis comes from experience and having an opinion on something, just like the prosecutor has a point of view.

**Warzel:** In your paper, there's a quote that spoke to me from Sam Denby, a YouTuber. He said, "We walk through the evidence to get to the point. Sometimes we don't even give a full point, but let people come to it themselves." One of the fundamental things that I've noticed from creators versus traditional news organizations is that there's not always this rush to be so declarative. Podcasts, for example, are quite discursive. Journalists are supposed to provide answers, but there's something audiences respect when they hear creators and news influencers analyzing and discussing an issue, even when it's not conclusive. My guess is that audiences appreciate when they feel like they're being trusted to listen without being lectured. I feel like it has become harder for traditional journalists to frame their work without sounding overly certain when describing a world that's often surprising and contradictory.

**Angwin:** It's worth looking at YouTube-video titles, because YouTube is really the most well-developed creator space. It's the ecosystem that allows creators to make the most money. Look at YouTube titles, and you'll see that a lot of their headlines have question marks. They ask a question; they don't answer a question. And that is exactly the opposite of most newsroom headlines. News organizations tend to have a very maximalist approach—*What is our most incredible finding*? *How can we just make the sexiest headline?* And audiences have learned to mistrust that, because it's been abused by places that put up clickbait. But even when it's not abused, the truth is almost always more nuanced than a headline can capture. I think asking questions and framing work that way actually opens up a space for more engagement with the audience. It allows them to participate in the discovery. And the discovery—of new things, of new facts, of new ideas—as you know, is actually the most fun part of journalism.

**Warzel:** I think that participation is such a key part of this. You can see the more malevolent version of this on the far right and in the conspiracy industrial complex. QAnon is participatory media. Audiences play a role in the MAGA cinematic universe of grievance over "wokeness." But what does this participatory stuff look like on the traditional-media side?

**Angwin:** In the creator community, there's this incredible policing, which is not always good. But all the creators I talked to say that, basically, as soon as you put up a video on YouTube or TikTok, there are comments immediately, and if you have something wrong, they're telling you. If you don't respond and say, "I'm fixing it" or address it, you lose trust.

Read: The flattening machine

Essentially, creators have established mechanisms for having accountability interactions with their audiences and with other creators. And it can go awry, and there is certainly creator drama that is sometimes created just to juice views. But I think largely they feel responsible to respond to their community in a way that journalists are not required to, and, in fact, are discouraged from doing. A lot of

newsrooms have gotten rid of comment sections, because it's actually really expensive to moderate them, and time-consuming. On social media, journalists don't always have the freedom to respond when people critique them, or their editors tell them not to get involved. One reason that people feel so alienated from journalism is that they see these overly declarative headlines, and then when they try to engage, they get stonewalled.

**Warzel:** This speaks to a broader concern I have, which you address in the paper. You write that "journalism has placed many markers of trust in institutional processes that are opaque to audiences, while creators try to embed the markers of trust directly in their interactions with audiences." I've been thinking recently about how many of the processes that traditional media has used to build trust now read as less authentic or less trustworthy to audiences. Having editorial bureaucracy and lawyers and lots of editing to make work more concise and polished actually makes people more suspicious. They feel like we're hiding something when we aren't.

**Angwin:** It's a terrible irony. I think it's worth noting how audiences are now deeply attuned—rightly so—to profit motives. The reality is that most creators are their own stand-alone small businesses. And this reads as inherently more trustworthy than a large brand or a huge media conglomerate. Audiences aren't wrong to see this. Plenty of media organizations are owned by billionaires, and those people have their own politics. And that is potentially a detriment to authenticity that journalists then have to overcome. I'm not naive: Creators are performing authenticity too, but there is less to overcome in this sense.

**Warzel:** What's ironic to me is that you have this audience that is rightly suspicious of profit motive and billionaire owners, and that sits alongside the creator model and influencer culture, which is very nakedly enthusiastic about getting the bag. In creator land, fans of influencers seem genuinely delighted to hear that their favorites are making big money. I guess maybe this is a type of transparency.

**Angwin:** That transparency is so important. The one thing that creators get called out the most about is trying to hide a sponsorship. So there is a bit of policing on transparency going on.

**Warzel:** I want to ask you more about how creators engage with their audiences. I see this with the influencers I follow. It's a performance in some sense, of course, but it also feels like there's some genuine work of rolling up one's sleeves that signals to the audience that they have a real respect for them and their opinions. And that contrasts with the "voice of God" feeling that authoritative journalism sometimes projects.

**Angwin:** Accountability is so important. It is a problem in our industry if somebody gets something wrong and the audience doesn't see that they've suffered any consequences for that.

One of the things that a lot of the creators told me is that they commit an hour or two to engaging with the first comments on their videos to make sure that they're seen giving the community a feeling that they're being heard. Little things like this could begin to make a difference in journalism, like investing in comment moderators. But it's not just having comments—it's really seeing them as serving a real function. I'm not sure what the right mechanism is, but audiences want some kind of mechanism for redress. People who feel like they've been harmed or wronged by some coverage want and expect to be taken seriously.

**Warzel:** There's one part of me that feels like we're in a moment of low trust in institutions in general, which means media organizations are swimming against the current. I realize there are no magical solutions here to restore trust, but I'm curious what advice you'd give to legacy media right now.

**Angwin:** Three things. First is understanding these elements of trust that we need. The audience needs to feel like they have reason to believe you're benevolent. They have to have reason to believe in your ability and expertise. They have to have a reason to understand where you're coming from—meaning no more view from nowhere—and they need to know what they can do if you're wrong.

None of these things right now are being addressed inside the stories themselves. We have to understand that these stories travel on their own, and they need to be embedded with stand-alone reasons for skeptical audiences to trust the people who produced them. The way I'm experimenting with this in my own work is by adding

an "ingredients" label in each story. The label says what the hypothesis is and what the findings are and the limitations of the reporting and analysis. I'm not sure that that's the right model, but it's an experiment in attempting to do this work. Being clear about those elements of trust in the story, as opposed to just relying on a brand, is my most important finding.

Item two is that actually we have to start taking creators seriously—especially the ones who are doing journalistic work. We need to stop worrying about how to protect our own brands and individual institutions and focus on what we can do to make sure that important, trustworthy information is flowing to the public. One thing I'm doing that's been really interesting and fruitful is building journalistic tools that creators can use to do their own investigations. For example, the YouTuber Hank Green did a 30-minute video about a tool I built that showed how many of his YouTube videos had been stolen to build Claude's generative-AI model. Now, if you look at my own channel, the views are pathetic, but because I've built tools that other people used, it's become an extension of my journalism, and my work has been seen by millions. I believe that journalists have to expand their thinking. The question should be, *How do I get my information out there?* And maybe an answer is: *It doesn't always have to be delivered by me*.

Lastly, I just have to put in a word for the end of objectivity. I think that the main problem of where we are right now when it comes to trust is this idea that we have to be pure and neutral and have no thoughts, but just be receptacles for facts. The more that we can transparently bring our expertise and intelligence to the task, the better it will be for everyone.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Charlie Warzel**

Charlie Warzel is a staff writer at *The Atlantic* and the author of its newsletter Galaxy Brain, about technology, media, and big ideas. He can be reached via email.

## More Stories

Did He Actually Do That?
Beyond Doomscrolling

---

## Explore More Topics

YouTube