BUILDING TRUST IN THE OPEN

How Open Social Can Help Journalism Rebuild Community and Trust

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Executive Summary

Journalism's distribution channels are collapsing. Google search referrals to publishers fell by a third globally in the year to November 2025. Social media referrals have plummeted even more dramatically — down 80% from Facebook and roughly 60% from X since 2020. Email newsletters, long considered the last refuge of direct audience relationships, now face displacement by AI-mediated inboxes. And trust in news has flatlined at 40% globally, with 83% of Americans saying they have not paid for news in the past year.

Smaller and newer publishers are bearing the worst of it. Chartbeat data [1] shows small publishers experienced a 60% decline in search referral traffic over two years — nearly three times the decline experienced by the largest outlets. These are often the newsrooms covering underserved communities, the ones whose work is most needed and least resourced.

But this crisis obscures a crucial distinction. News — commoditized information — is indeed being disrupted by AI. Journalism — trusted context, accountability, and relationships — is not. AI can summarize a city council meeting. It cannot build the trust that makes a community believe a reporter who tells them something they don't want to hear.

Trust is relational. It follows that the infrastructure that enables relationships is strategic infrastructure for journalism. Reliance on traditional social platforms creates a dependence on commercial entities whose business models lead them to change direction, suppress links, or advocate for a particular point of view. Open social protocols — a growing fabric of decentralized technologies for social networking and content distribution — make it possible to build communities and social spaces that offer journalism something no commercial platform ever has: direct, disintermediated relationships with readers that no corporation can take away.

This paper presents the case for open protocols as trust infrastructure for journalism, examines early experiments from newsrooms and protocol builders working together, and offers practical recommendations for newsrooms, technologists, and funders who want to act on this opportunity.

Distribution and Trust

The channels that were once reliable connectors of newsrooms to their audiences are disappearing.

Google search referrals to publisher websites dropped 33% globally and 38% in the United States [2] between November 2024 and November 2025, according to Chartbeat data reported by Press Gazette. Google Discover referrals fell 21% year on year. The culprit is not mysterious: Google's AI Overviews now appear at the top of roughly 10% of US search results, and when they do, only 1% of users click the cited links [3]. The search engine that built its business by sending people to websites is learning to keep them from ever leaving.

Social media is no better. Facebook referrals to news sites have declined approximately 80% since September 2020 [4], a consequence of deliberate platform decisions to deprioritize publisher content. X referrals have shrunk by around 60% [5] over the same period. Small publishers have been especially devastated: Chartbeat data shows social referrals for smaller outlets dropped as much as 98% [6] over five years, particularly on X, from 10.1 million page views to under 187,000.

Many newsrooms retreated to email newsletters, treating them as the last channel where they could own the relationship with their readers. But that refuge is temporary: email services are building AI-assisted features that summarize, prioritize, and filter email on the reader's behalf. As these become more prominent, relationships between newsletters and their subscribers will become more intermediated.

This is a structural pattern that has repeated since the early days of Web 2.0: every intermediated channel eventually changes its rules in ways that harm publishers. Each time, the publishers who built their audiences on third party services lose.

The consequences extend beyond business models. The Reuters Institute's 2025 Digital News Report [7] found that global trust in news remains stuck at 40%, unchanged for three years. Four in ten people now say they sometimes or often avoid the news entirely — up from 29% in 2017 and the highest figure ever recorded. And 83% of Americans have not paid for news in the past year [8], with just 8% saying Americans have a responsibility to do so.

When readers say they can get the same thing for free, they're saying information is a commodity. Trusted analysis, accountability reporting, and the sense that someone is looking out for their community all remain valuable.

The asymmetry between large and small publishers makes this crisis particularly dangerous for democracy. All publishers face the same hostile distribution environment, but as Mia Biberović, Editor-in-Chief of Balkan tech outlets Netokracija and ShiftMag, has argued [9], the effects are not distributed evenly: for smaller publishers, the erosion of intermediated channels means "losing what little direct relationship with their audience they still have." The Philadelphia Inquirer can run

citywide marketing campaigns. The Kensington Voice, a much-needed startup newsroom covering an underserved part of the same city, cannot. Established titles like The New Yorker and people like Seymour Hersh and Ronan Farrow have had time, space, and money to build the social proof that earns subscriptions. Newcomers have not.

This asymmetry has consequences that go well beyond the commercial. If the newsrooms most likely to lose their audiences are the ones covering underserved communities — and they often are — then the distribution crisis is also one of democratic access. When journalism is locked behind paywalls that most people won't pay for, in a moment when democratic institutions are under direct attack, the result is that most citizens lack access to the facts they need to make informed decisions. The distribution crisis, the trust crisis, and the democratic crisis are the same problem, and solving it requires infrastructure that does not yet exist at scale.

Distinguishing News and Journalism

News and journalism are often conflated, but understanding the problem requires drawing a line between them.

News is information: a fact, an event, an update. It is, increasingly, a commodity that can be aggregated, summarized, and delivered by automated systems. When AI tools summarize today's headlines or answer a factual question about what happened in Congress yesterday, they are delivering news. And they are doing it at a scale and speed that no newsroom can match.

Journalism is something different. Journalism is context, analysis, accountability, and — fundamentally — a relationship. It is the process by which a community comes to understand not just what happened, but what it means, who is responsible, and what might happen next. It requires trust, and trust requires human connection.

This distinction matters enormously for how we think about the future. If journalism were just information delivery then AI would indeed be an existential threat to the profession. The machines can deliver commoditized information faster and cheaper than any human operation.

But journalism's value doesn't come from being the fastest way to learn that something happened. At its core, it is a trusted source of meaning. And trust is fundamentally interpersonal. Research consistently shows that social proof — the accumulated evidence that someone is reliable and honest — drives trust formation. We care where we get our context from. We want it from people we think won't manipulate or mislead us, who have accumulated enough social proof for us to trust them. It's why people trust people, not brands: you can't have a real relationship with a brand.

Social proof can be built through one-way exposure: following a journalist's work, learning to rely on their judgment. But there is good reason to believe that interactive engagement deepens trust further: when audiences can respond to, question, and build reciprocal relationships with the people behind a newsroom, they are not just consuming a product but participating in a community. A reader who has interacted with a journalist directly, and seen them interact with others in their community, has a meaningfully different relationship with that newsroom than one who simply reads their output.

Titles like The New Yorker have had decades to build social proof through sheer output and reputation. Newer outlets, particularly those covering underserved communities, have not. And the traditional ways of building it — through name recognition, marketing spend, and longevity — are not available to them.

The way newcomers can fight their lack of social proof is by building tight communities that nurture and support their audiences. You might not trust a newspaper you haven't encountered before, but you might trust the humans behind it if you can be in conversation with them.

This reframes the strategic question for journalism. The challenge is not "how do we distribute content more effectively?" It is "how do we build the trust relationships that make journalism valuable?" And if the answer is community, then the infrastructure that enables community is strategic infrastructure for journalism's survival.

Why Open Protocols?

If community is the answer, why not build it on the platforms that already exist? Facebook has Groups. X has communities. Reddit has subreddits. Why does journalism need something different?

Because centralized platforms have proven, over and over again, that they are unreliable partners.

The pattern is familiar to anyone who has worked in digital media: a platform courts publishers, offering reach and tools. Publishers invest in building audiences there, often redirecting significant resources. Then the platform changes its algorithm, its priorities, or its business model, and the audience publishers thought they had built evaporates overnight. Ændra Rininsland, a journalist and developer, documented at the Protocols for Publishers Showcase event in London what she called "a brief history of algorithmic fuckery" — a timeline of every time centralized social platforms pulled the rug out from under the communities they were theoretically supporting. The details vary, but the pattern never does.

Consider one example. In 2015, Facebook launched Instant Articles, inviting publishers to host content directly on the platform in exchange for faster load times and better distribution. The New York Times, The Washington Post, BuzzFeed, and dozens of other publishers invested heavily in the format, redesigning workflows and redirecting editorial resources. By January 2018, Facebook had announced a major algorithm change [10] deprioritizing news content in the News Feed. By April 2023, Instant Articles was shut down entirely [11]. Publishers who had restructured their operations around the product were left with nothing: no audience, no archive, and no recourse. The pattern repeats because it is a structural feature of advertising-driven platforms whose incentives are fundamentally misaligned with those of publishers. The platform's customer is the advertiser. The publisher's content is the bait. When the platform decides it no longer needs that particular kind of bait, the publisher is left stranded.

Open social protocols offer a structural alternative. They are shared standards that anyone can build on, like email or the web itself — and the communities and social spaces built on top of them inherit their properties. No single entity owns them, and no single entity can change the rules.

There are several key open social protocol projects that are relevant to journalism. ActivityPub, the protocol that powers the fediverse — including Mastodon, and the community infrastructure that the Newsmast Foundation builds on — enables decentralized social communities where anyone can run their own server while remaining connected to the broader network. The AT Protocol, which powers Bluesky, takes a different architectural approach but shares the principle of user sovereignty and open access. And the indieweb movement encourages publishers to own their own web presence and syndicate to social platforms on their own terms.

What these share, despite their different architectures, is a set of properties that matter deeply for journalism. No single entity controls them, so no one can pull the rug. Publishers can own their relationships with their communities directly. Those communities can be portable and interoperable: a member of one newsroom's community can participate in another's without creating a new account, because the underlying protocol connects them. And discovery algorithms can be created by and for publishers, rather than imposed on them by a platform optimizing for engagement.

It is worth being honest about the caveats. Open protocols are not mature consumer products. Adoption is still early: the ActivityPub fediverse has around 2-3 million monthly active users [12], and Bluesky, while growing to over 40 million accounts [13], is still far smaller than the incumbent platforms. The developer communities building on these protocols are motivated and talented, but under-resourced. The tooling, documentation, and onboarding experiences are improving but are not yet where they need to be. For open protocols to fulfill this promise, publishers need better tools for setting up and managing communities, better moderation infrastructure, and user experiences that don't require technical expertise to navigate. These are solvable problems, and this paper's recommendations address them directly.

But even with these limitations, the structural advantage is clear, and the alternatives are worse. Continuing to build on platforms that have repeatedly demonstrated they will prioritize their own interests over publishers' is not a strategy. It is a recurring mistake. The communities and social spaces built on open protocols belong to the people who build them — something no commercial platform has ever offered.

Community as Discovery Engine

Open protocols don't just protect existing community relationships. They also help establish new models for how audiences find journalism in the first place.

The traditional acquisition model for journalism is push-based: a newsroom produces content, distributes it through available channels, and hopes that some fraction of the people who encounter it will subscribe or return. This model depends on search engines sending traffic, social platforms surfacing links, and email reaching inboxes. As those channels degrade, the model breaks down.

Community-driven discovery inverts this. Instead of pushing content out and hoping for clicks, a newsroom builds a community that becomes a magnet in its own right. The community itself becomes the thing that attracts new members, and the journalism is what holds them.

Here is how this works on open protocols. Imagine a resident of Bristol scrolling through Mastodon. They see a lively conversation about a proposed development in their neighborhood — a thread hosted by the Bristol Cable's community (built by the Newsmast Foundation on top of ActivityPub). They follow the thread, discover the Cable, download the app, and join the community. Over the next few months, they participate in discussions, meet other local residents, and develop a relationship with

the journalists covering their area. When the Cable asks for membership support, they already trust the people behind it.

That scenario illustrates a four-step model.

First, someone discovers a conversation about their local area or a topic they care about on the social platforms they already use. Because open protocols federate — conversations flow across servers and applications — this discovery can happen on any compatible platform. A conversation happening on a newsroom's community space is visible to people using Mastodon, Bluesky (through bridging), or any other compatible application.

Second, they follow the conversation thread and discover the publication hosting it. Unlike a commercial social platform, where conversations stay on the platform, open protocol conversations lead back to the publisher. The newsroom is the host, not the platform.

Third, they make the jump to the publication's own surfaces (its app, website, and community space) and sign up, becoming a member. They start to experience the community firsthand: the discussions, the relationships with journalists, the sense of participation.

Fourth, as they engage, they gain access to deeper features and content. The relationship deepens and trust begins to build. What started as stumbling across a conversation becomes a meaningful connection with a newsroom and the community it serves.

This model works because it treats trust as something that is built before the subscription ask, not after. You don't ask someone to pay for journalism they haven't learned to trust. You invite them into a community where trust can develop through direct human interaction, and the journalism is woven into that experience.

The crucial point is that this requires open protocols. On a closed platform, the conversation stays on the platform, and the platform captures the value. On the open social web, the conversation leads back to the publisher. The community belongs to the newsroom.

Case Studies

These ideas are not hypothetical. Newsrooms and protocol builders are already experimenting with them, and the early results are instructive.

The Bristol Cable and the Newsmast Foundation
The Bristol Cable is a reader-owned local newspaper in Bristol, England. In partnership with the Newsmast Foundation, it has built a new app that combines traditional news delivery with a full, Mastodon-powered community layer for its members.

The app has three core components: integrated news (stories and podcasts), a social following section where members connect directly with Cable staff and each other, and curated channels that aggregate high-quality posts on critical themes like climate change. It represents a transformation of the traditional publisher-reader relationship from passive consumption into active participation.

What makes this particularly significant is that the community is interoperable. Because it's built on ActivityPub, members from other local newsrooms or fediverse users from anywhere can participate through their own apps. A Bristol Cable member and a member of another local newsroom can engage in the same conversation, discuss the same local issues, and build relationships across organizational boundaries. Over time, this creates a social substrate of engaged local members — something that no platform-dependent community strategy can deliver, because the substrate belongs to the publishers and their members, not to a third party.

The Bristol Cable aims to double its membership to 5,000 by 2030 [14], and the community app is central to that strategy: community as infrastructure.

Algorithmic Feeds for News on Bluesky
Ændra Rininsland, a journalist and developer, has built custom algorithmic feeds within the Bluesky ecosystem that highlight journalism and ensure real reporting makes its way to social readers. Her work addresses one of the most persistent complaints publishers have about social platforms: that the algorithms are opaque, unaccountable, and optimized for engagement rather than for quality or truth.

On Bluesky, feeds are open infrastructure. Anyone can build an algorithmic feed using tools like Surf and Graze, and users can choose which feeds they subscribe to. Rininsland's news feeds demonstrate that publishers and their allies can construct their own discovery mechanisms: algorithms that serve the public interest rather than an advertising business model.

The key insight here is that journalism doesn't have to be passive in the face of algorithmic distribution. It can build. News organizations and the technologists who support them can create the technological infrastructure they need, rather than waiting for platforms to serve their interests. This is a fundamental shift in posture: from journalism as a thing that technology happens to, to journalism as a participant in building the technology it depends on.

Flipboard's Federation with Publishers
Not all experiments in open protocols and journalism originate from the same community. Flipboard [15], the news aggregation platform, has been steadily federating via ActivityPub since late 2023. By 2024, over 100 publisher partners [16] — including Axios, The Verge, Semafor, Smithsonian Magazine, Fast Company, and The Conversation — had federated their content through Flipboard, making it discoverable across the fediverse. A Flipboard user can follow accounts on Mastodon; a Mastodon user can follow a federated publisher through Flipboard.

What's notable is the direction of movement. Flipboard is not a protocol project or a mission-driven foundation. It is a commercial company that looked at the trajectory of centralized social media and decided that federation was a better bet. CEO Mike McCue has been explicit that the fediverse represents an opportunity to build a news ecosystem beyond the control of any single platform. The fact that a commercial actor is making this bet, and that over 100 publishers have joined, suggests the open protocol thesis is becoming a mainstream strategy.

Recommendations

Understanding the opportunity is the first step. Acting on it requires concrete plans. What follows are practical recommendations for the three groups who need to work together to make this happen: newsrooms, protocol builders, and funders.

For Newsrooms
The first step is an honest audit of your current dependencies. How much of your audience comes through channels you don't control? What would happen if Google search referrals dropped another 30%? If Facebook stopped sending traffic entirely? If your email open rates halved? If the answers are alarming, and for most newsrooms they will be, that is the case for diversifying toward owned infrastructure.

Start with a minimum viable experiment. You don't need to rebuild your technology stack. You can begin hosting conversations on the fediverse through Mastodon, cultivate a community on Bluesky, or explore a partnership with an organization like

the Newsmast Foundation to build a social community layer into your existing app. The goal at this stage is to begin building a direct community relationship alongside your existing channels.

Be realistic about what this requires. Community management is not free. Building a thriving community space takes dedicated staff time, editorial judgment about what conversations to foster, and a willingness to engage with readers as participants rather than consumers. This is an investment, and it should be budgeted and staffed accordingly.

Think about what success looks like in year one. It probably isn't massive audience numbers. It is depth of engagement: how active are your community members? Are they talking to each other, not just to you? Are new members arriving through community conversations rather than through traditional channels? Are your most engaged community members also your most loyal supporters? These are the leading indicators that the strategy is working.

For Protocol Builders
The single most important thing protocol builders can do is close the gap between what open protocols can theoretically do and what a non-technical publisher can actually use today. The technology is powerful. The user experience is not yet where it needs to be. Publishers need consumer-grade experiences.

Specifically, the gaps that most urgently need filling are onboarding (it is still too hard for a newsroom to set up and run a fediverse community), moderation tools (community management at scale requires sophisticated tooling that doesn't yet exist in the open protocol ecosystem), and analytics (publishers need to understand what's happening in their communities, and the metrics that matter for community health are different from traditional web analytics).

Most importantly, build with publishers rather than for them. There is enormous mutual interest between the publishing and open software communities, but also significant gaps in understanding. Publishers don't always know what's technically possible. Technologists don't always know what publishers actually need. The solution is co-design: sustained collaboration where both sides shape the product together.

For Funders and Foundations
This is democratic infrastructure. The case for investing in open protocol adoption by newsrooms is the same case for investing in public media, press freedom, or civic education: informed citizens are the foundation of democratic life, and the infrastructure that connects citizens to trustworthy information is a public good.

The most impactful investments are specific bets on the infrastructure layer. The Bristol Cable's community app exists because a funder saw the value of building reusable community infrastructure that could serve many newsrooms. The highest-leverage investments right now are in shared tools and platforms that multiple newsrooms can use: community management software built on open protocols,

moderation toolkits designed for journalism contexts, and onboarding flows that let a newsroom launch a federated community in days rather than months. These are the building blocks that have the potential to turn individual experiments into a movement.

Beyond tooling, funders can accelerate the feedback loop between publishers and protocol builders. Sustained programs that pair newsrooms with developers in ongoing co-design relationships produce better tools and better adoption. Investment in measuring what works, so that the Bristol Cable's experience and others like it can inform the next hundred newsrooms, is how early experiments become common practice.

The window of opportunity is real but not infinite. As AI-mediated discovery continues to erode traditional distribution channels, newsrooms that have not built direct community relationships will find themselves increasingly dependent on systems they cannot influence. The time to invest in this infrastructure is before the crisis becomes irreversible.

Conclusion

Community is journalism's trust infrastructure; open protocols allow you to build it without intermediation.

Relationships are a core prerequisite to trust. People trust people, not brands or platforms. They trust the journalist who shows up at their community meetings, who answers their questions, who acknowledges when they get something wrong. They trust the newsroom that treats them as participants in a shared project, not as eyeballs to be monetized. That trust, once built, is what makes journalism valuable and distinguishes it from the commodity information that AI can deliver faster and cheaper.

But trust needs infrastructure: social spaces where journalists and communities can meet, converse, and build relationships over time. Those spaces should not be controlled by companies whose business model depends on keeping people on their platform rather than deepening their relationship with a publisher. They should be communities built on protocols that are as open and unownable as the web itself.

The pieces are coming together. The Bristol Cable is building a community app on the fediverse. Journalists like Ændra Rininsland are creating algorithmic feeds that serve journalism rather than attention markets. Flipboard is federating with over a hundred publishers via ActivityPub.

None of these experiments can succeed in isolation. Publishers need protocol builders to create tools they can actually use. Protocol builders need publishers to help them understand what tools to build. And both need funders who understand that this work is an investment in the conditions for informed democratic life.

The journalism industry tends to treat technology as something that happens to it, like an asteroid. But it doesn't need to. It can build its own technology, in collaboration and co-ownership with open source communities. The open social web doesn't belong to any corporation. No one can pull the rug. And the relationships you build on it are genuinely yours.

The trajectory if nothing changes is not abstract. Google search referrals to publishers dropped 33% in a single year; at that rate, they will halve by 2028. Social referrals for small publishers have already fallen 98%. AI-mediated inboxes will erode the newsletter refuge next. Newsrooms without direct community relationships are running out of channels — and running out of time.

The question is not whether journalism needs to invest in owned community infrastructure: the collapse of every intermediated channel makes that case emphatically. The question is whether newsrooms, protocol builders, and funders will recognize the opportunity and act on it while there is still time to build.

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Further Reading

- **Protocols for Publishers:** An initiative bringing together newsrooms and open protocol builders to explore how open social protocols can serve journalism. https://protocolsforpublishers.com
- **The Newsmast Foundation:** Building community infrastructure for publishers on open protocols. https://newsmast.org
- **The Bristol Cable:** A reader-owned local newspaper pioneering fediverse-powered community. https://thebristolcable.org
- **ActivityPub:** The W3C protocol powering the fediverse. https://www.w3.org/TR/activitypub/
- **AT Protocol:** The open protocol behind Bluesky. https://atproto.com

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Ben Werdmuller is a writer and technology leader who has been building at the intersection of the open web, journalism, and communities since the early web. In addition to technology leadership roles at The 19th and ProPublica, he created Elgg, an open source social networking platform that was translated into 80 languages and used by governments, NGOs, and Fortune 500 companies. At Matter Ventures, he invested in early-stage media startups working to transform the industry. He is a board member of A New Social, an organization promoting technology alternatives to extractive business models. His writing on technology, journalism, and the open web can be found at **werd.io**.

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About the Newsmast Foundation

The Newsmast Foundation helps mission-driven organisations create independent, ethical digital spaces through simple, affordable community apps. A UK charity, they believe communities deserve online spaces where they are free to share information and learn from trusted sources, as well as one another. Digital spaces without ads, algorithms or data exploitation, that reflect the values of their users and support genuine connection.

The Foundation's goal is to make the open social web accessible to everyone, providing powerful tools without technical complexity through their Apps for Change programme which has already seen mobile app infrastructure delivered to publishers across the globe.

Learn more about how the Newsmast Foundation helps Independent Newsrooms here.