

Google is not a publisher and should not be regulated as such, says UK Managing Editor



Google is not a publisher and should not be regulated in the same way as traditional news publishers, its Managing Editor in the UK and Ireland has said today.

Delivering the prestigious Society of Editors' Lecture at The Tamburlaine Hotel in Cambridge this evening, Ronan Harris said that while the company recognised that it has many responsibilities, it did not believe that it should be regulated in the same way the news industry is.

He said: "We undertake to give you an answer to an infinite number of questions – 15% of which we've never seen before – in a fraction of a second. On Youtube we provide a platform on which more than 400 hours of video are uploaded every minute.

"Now think about what a newspaper or a news programme does every day. Whether it's 100 pages or a 30 minute programme, your products are polished and curated. They have rigorous editorial processes and an editor who is ultimately responsible. They have a beginning and an end... almost the opposite of the open web. If every piece of material on the open web had to be checked and lawyered before we surfaced an answer or showed a video that would – quite simply – break the internet.

"We agree that we have many responsibilities. But, as the FT wrote the other day, we're clearly not publishers in the same way that newspapers are. "

Speaking as part of the first day of the Society of Editors' sell-out 'Fighting for Real News' conference, Harris said that Google took its responsibility seriously in relation to the content that it showed online and measures were in place to tackle extremist material on its services.

He said: "I often hear Google referred to as an 'unregulated wild west' but that's just not right – it's based on misunderstandings of who we are and what we do.

"First, that we avoid our responsibilities with regard to controversial content because we can't be bothered, or because it would hurt our bottom line. On the contrary, a relatively easy and economical thing for us to do would be to take down any content that anyone complained about. The reality is that we've employed thousands of people and invested millions of dollars on systems that evaluate every removal request thoughtfully – because we believe that is the right thing to do."

Harris added that while Google was fundamentally in favour of free speech, it did not support extremist content and, as such, mechanisms were in place to identify and remove vast swathes of such material before it reached the consumer.

He added: "We are fundamentally on the side of free speech but we agree, of course, there are limits. Violent extremism and hate speech should have no place on our services. We are doing more every day to tackle these complex issues – through technology, human review and in partnership with governments and NGOs. Last month 83% of the terrorist content we removed was identified by machine learning, without needing the viewer to flag this to us as problematic."

Harris went on to say that Google considered itself a partner to the news industry and did recognise that it had made mistakes in the past in its relationship with publishers.

He said: “Google and publishers share a common cause. We both believe in enabling access to information. At Google, we strongly believe in the power of news to record the truth, hold institutions and businesses to account, and make for a better-informed, freer, more open society.

“We have always seen ourselves as a partner to the news industry. But we accept that we haven’t always got it right.

“In the past we introduced – or cancelled – products in the news space with little warning. We were not as receptive as we might have been to calls to help solve some of the problems that were holding newspapers back online. And we were not well organised in our conversations with publishers – so you didn’t always feel you could rely on us as a partner. We learned our lesson, and today our approach is to engage early and engage often.”

While Google had set up projects such as the Digital News Initiative to support and boost paid content by news publishers, Harris objected to the idea that the company was monopolising advertising revenue away from traditional publishers and that, as well as driving traffic to news websites, it continued to share revenue with publishers.

He said: “The majority of Google’s revenue comes from showing highly relevant ads when you search for a particular term. This form of online advertising has allowed hundreds of thousands of UK businesses, of all sizes, to reach customers around the world at the very moment they’re looking for something. Search advertising is not a market that news publishers have ever been in.

“Also - and this is important because we haven’t explained it clearly enough in the past - there is no advertising on Google News. Zero. Indeed you will rarely see advertising around news cycles in Google Search either.

“In display advertising, Google is a supplier of ad inventory to newspaper websites. In every deal we do, without exception, the publisher keeps the majority of ad revenue — typically more than two thirds but often more. In short, we only make money if you’re making money.

“Every year we share billions of pounds in revenue with publishers globally. We also drove more than 10 billion clicks a month to publisher websites — for free — from Google Search and Google News. Both services are designed to get people off our site and onto the publisher’s so that you can make money from that audience.”

On the subject of tackling fake news, Harris said that Google was working to reduce its prominence online and reiterated the importance of working with the journalism community on fact checking.

He said: “While we can’t prevent fake news being uploaded to the Web, there are certain things we can do – and are doing – to reduce its prominence online, such as cutting off revenue to misrepresentative sites, improving the visibility of high quality content and ensuring our reporting and feedback tools are as effective as they can be.

“We haven’t always got this right but we’re continually working on concrete actions to tackle this complex issue.”

The ‘Fighting for Real News’ conference will continue with the main day of conference sessions at the University of Cambridge’s Clare College tomorrow (Monday 13 November). Speakers include the Metropolitan Police Commissioner Cressida Dick, Chris Evans, Editor of the Telegraph and Lionel Barber, Editor of the Financial Times.

The Society of Editors conference is supported by Camelot, which has sponsored the Society of Editors since 2001, United Utilities, Google, BBC News, JTI, Foot Anstey, PCS, NLA Media Access, Waitrose, Cambridge News, Visit Cambridge and Beyond, Lidl and HoldTheFrontPage.

Read the full text of Ronan's speech [here](#).