WORLD MEDIA GROUP

BBC NEWS

BUSINESS INSIDER

CNBC

CNN

The Economist

Forbes

FORTUNE

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

The New York Times

Reuters
THE SOURCE

TIME

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

The Washington Post

ASSOCIATE MEMBER

The Atlantic

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BUILDING TRUST TOGETHER

Working towards a shared framework for media evaluation in the age of AI

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Introduction

Trusted media matters. It matters for all kinds of reasons, societal, democratic, and economic. But it particularly matters to advertisers. It has been shown time and again that advertisements placed in trusted news environments perform better for marketers — in terms of the positive associations for the brand, in terms of sales, and in terms of long-term brand recognition.

+25%

Brand lift on advertising in trusted news environments

This has been proven across multiple industry studies, such as the 2024 study by Cossette Media, Vox Pop Labs and the Google News Initiative, which found that advertising in trusted news environments produced a 25% lift in brand rating, with news publishers rated around 35% above baseline trust — ads effectively inherit the publisher's credibility.

News publishers rate around

35%

above baseline trust

And despite changing media habits, the value of trusted news environments is not changing any time soon. In fact, the IPA Data Bank in the UK suggests advertising in news brands is now twice as effective as it was in 2018.

Which is why, for many years, media agencies have evaluated their partners not just on quantifiable metrics such as reach and impressions, but also around the quality of the content, the fame of the masthead, and the respectability of the news brand.

The age of AI brings a new challenge to this dynamic. Increasingly, media buying decisions are made directly by AI agents, evaluating thousands of media choices in seconds. Their evaluation models are primarily based on things like cost, reach and average click-through rates, combined with demographic audience data.

Within that framework, the risk is that trust and prestige no longer feature in the buying decision. That would mean that advertisers could miss out on all the benefits that these premium, high-quality news environments provide.

So how can media planners and buyers respond to this? How can we train the AI agents to take the value of quality journalism seriously, and factor it into their buying decisions?

To answer this, we spoke directly to the editorial leaders at some of the world's most trusted media organisations, to understand how they think about the work they produce. What is it about this work that makes it stand out from other, more easily produced content? What is the mark of 'quality' in the world of journalism? When they are evaluating news sources, what criteria do they themselves use? And where do they think journalists can do a better job of communicating the ways in which they are building value into their editorial product?

Alongside these editors, we spoke to the commercial leaders turning their work into a profit-making business. Where did they see the value of the journalism, and the impact it created for their clients? And how did they differentiate between higher and lower quality content across the internet?

Author
Jamie Credland
CEO
World Media Group



Contributors

We spoke to participants from across the industry, from WMG membership and a wider network. The views in this document represent an amalgamation of many of those views. Specific attributed quotes come from:



Kamal Ahmed
Executive Editorial Director, Europe & Middle East
Fortune



Kenn Cukier
Deputy Executive Editor,
The Economist



Cathy Ibal
Senior Vice President, Ad Sales,
CNN International Commercial



Ryan Struyk
Director, AI Innovation,
CNN Worldwide

The Context

Media buying is changing. And while no one can predict the future, it seems clear that agentic buying will feature heavily in tomorrow's advertising landscape. A September 2026 report from IAB Europe found that 58% of professionals across the digital advertising industry are expecting agentic ad buying to reach operational use or scale within the next year. And McKinsey & Company found that more than 90% of advertisers say they already use AI to plan media, set budgets, optimise targeting, and generate creative.[i]

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This automated buying is part of the shift towards goal-based automation, using tools such as Google PMax and Meta Advantage+. But the broader capabilities of agentic buying increase the risk that buying decisions will be made purely on media metrics such as clicks rather than broader strategic goals and revenue conversion.

Indeed, there is already a gap here, between those that are using AI to implement buying, and those that are using it during the planning and strategy process. eMarketer found that in 2024, 57% of ad buyers in the US were already using AI platform tools as part of the buying process, while only 19% were using AI during media planning.[ii]

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i. McKinsey AI in Advertising Survey, February 2026
ii. https://www.emarketer.com/content/5-charts--agency-changes--privacy-laws--ai-define-media-planning-2025

The speed of adoption also creates risks, with tools that have not been fully tested and clients unaware of how their campaigns have been bought. Very few companies or agencies have been operating in this space in a considered, strategic manner, with those AI capabilities baked-in from the beginning. As Dimitris Beis of IAB Europe highlights, “the practical questions are familiar: where is the value, have we established the conditions to capture it, and who is accountable when something goes wrong?”

A badly implemented agentic tool could lead to models which do not deliver the best value for advertisers. And one way in which they are likely to fall short is that they will under-represent the value of trusted news sources, quality mastheads and well-researched journalism. These are precisely the elements that drive the most considered engagement with premium audiences, and the elements that are hardest to measure. To avoid that, we need to think about how we recognise quality journalism when we see it.

How to Recognise Quality Journalism

Defining quality in journalism is a notoriously difficult challenge. Not least because journalists themselves thrive on being outsiders, mavericks, and generally enjoy challenging orthodoxies where they find them. As Kenn Cukier at The Economist describes it, “I don't think you can be a good journalist without being a bit devious and wanting to do battle with the world and all that it is”. No wonder many journalists balk at the idea of any form of gatekeeper evaluating what counts as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ journalism.

> “I don't think you can be a good journalist without being a bit devious and wanting to do battle with the world and all that it is.”
> ***– Kenn Cukier, The Economist***

And while an easy default would be to differentiate 'human created' journalism from 'AI slop', this is an increasingly challenging distinction to make. The quality of AI-generated materials continues to improve at exponential speed, making them harder to identify. And while hallucinations and mistakes remain an issue, over time they should decrease almost to zero. 'Accuracy' as a standalone differentiator of human-created content is unlikely to last. Kamal Ahmed also took issue with the term 'AI slop' itself, highlighting that most AI-generated content is "genuinely much better than that — but that's what makes it more dangerous."

To get around this challenge, we asked a different question. When the journalists themselves are researching a story and come across a news source they are unfamiliar with, how do they evaluate it? What do they look for to ensure they are quoting a reputable source, and not disinformation, commercial PR, or worse?

Reassuringly, the answers across the group were fairly consistent, and a number of themes came up multiple times. Together, these formed the basis of a workable model for media evaluation.

The key with all of these indicators is that they are actually quite hard to fake, especially quickly. As Ryan Struyk at CNN described: "Citations from other credible news sources or individuals are hard to fake, as are strong audience signals like a prominent search index position built on real web traffic. The text of a story itself, though, is not hard to fake."

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– Ryan Struyk, CNN

1. Verifiable Identity & Provenance

Issues around the verifiability of individuals and provenance were perhaps the most important factor overall. Several journalists spoke about the importance of evidence that the content was created by a verified, real-life human being: “The presence of a named individual in the byline who is a real reporter matters, along with independent evidence that individual is employed by a legitimate news organisation.” (Struyk, CNN). Alongside individual articles, “An ‘About’ page with a masthead naming the senior individuals responsible for the content” (Struyk, CNN) is vital.

The respondents were clear that a recognisable brand, cited by other outlets across the industry, is vital to establish legitimacy. “The first thing I'm going to look at is the brand and the logo…. [and then] If you're cited in the New York Times, that means you have some form of legitimacy — you’ve had to pass muster with someone else first.” (Cukier, The Economist).

While this makes it harder for newer entrants to establish that credibility, there was broad agreement across publishers, clients and agencies that heritage and an established brand deliver business value for the advertisers in those environments.

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> - Ryan Struyk, CNN

2. Editorial Process & Judegment

Transparency on the processes involved in the reporting is also vital to establishing the trust credentials of an outlet. News reporting is a group endeavour, with many people involved. Beyond an individual journalist, “Standards, legal, photo desk, and rights and clearances are involved in the reporting process.” (Struyk, CNN). “At The Economist, all articles are touched by at least seven individuals” (Cukier, The Economist).

These standards are increasingly important in a world where fake sources are multiplying. Work from the Press Gazette in the UK has highlighted the growth of fake spokespeople and news sources, and everyone we spoke to confirmed that all individuals quoted should be verifiably real. Defining this, alongside when to use named vs. anonymous sources, has actually proven harder than expected for AI to accurately respond to, and is a good example of an area where human understanding of nuance, and journalistic judgement, remains essential.

These processes are all designed to ensure accuracy of the reporting, but inevitably mistakes can still happen. In those situations, offering the opportunity for individuals to respond to allegations, or requests for comment, is essential. Likewise, if there was a mistake, “you take it seriously. You disclose to readers what the mistake was — sometimes even how the mistake happened.” (Cukier, The Economist)

> “At The Economist, all articles are touched by at least seven individuals.”
> - Kenn Cukier, The Economist.

3. AI Governance & Accountability

During this moment of flux for the industry, every news organisation is approaching AI governance differently and using it in a different way.

In that context, the key to building trust with audiences remains transparency. Both in terms of what the overall guidelines across the organisation are, as well as the specifics of how it has been used on an individual article, image or piece of footage.

The guidelines may well vary depending on the formats and channels of the content — use of AI in an article summary may require different levels of disclosure than use of AI in a deep piece of data analysis. But worthy of particular caution is any usage of AI in imagery or video. Multiple respondents highlighted the challenges here, both in terms of verifying third-party sources, and in terms of managing how a piece of content that had been edited by AI is then shared beyond the publication. For this reason, generative AI techniques in the imagery and video space should be approached with caution.

Beyond disclosure, several respondents raised the issue around what happens when AI systems make mistakes. Specifically, that a publisher can't "blame the AI": the ultimate responsibility has to rest with the human journalist involved in the story. This is essential from a journalistic perspective, and also important from a commercial perspective to minimise the risk of associating your brand with any inaccurate content.

4. Commercial Trust & Brand Safety

While not a new concept, the final pillar of the trust framework is as simple as disclosure of any commercial relationships. This has long been a signifier of quality and builds trust with the audience. The growth of AI-driven businesses significantly increases the importance of this disclosure.

Cathy Ibal at CNN highlighted that “We have very clear guidelines in place at CNN [for] how sponsored and branded content and advertising placements are labelled and positioned. The guiding principle is that it needs to be clear to our audiences when they are reading, watching or listening to sponsored or branded content.” (Ibal, CNN)

In a world where provenance gets harder to trace, this kind of disclosure is going to be more important than ever in building trust with your audience.

The other key pillar of the commercial relationship revolves around brand safety. While there is little evidence that any advertising in news environments results in brand damage, agencies continue to impose limiting brand safety requirements on publishers. In that context, ensuring that brands have visibility over where their advertising is appearing, especially on real-time, fast-moving stories, remains a priority.

Ibal spoke for many of the publishers when she outlined the steps CNN are taking: “Across our owned and operated platforms we also provide brand-suitable environments, use proprietary tech, deliver round-the-clock campaign monitoring and create premium ad formats to ensure effectiveness and peace of mind for marketers” (Ibal, CNN). The key is to ensure the publisher has tools available to control where the message appears across more sensitive content, and is transparent with advertisers about placement.

“We have very clear guidelines in place at CNN [for] how sponsored and branded content and advertising placements are labelled and positioned.”
- Cathy Ibal, CNN

Does this mean that AI has no place in the creation of journalism?

Not at all. All the respondents were quick to point out that they and their teams use AI technologies in a variety of ways across their workflow, from translation and transcription through to more complex data analysis. The role of AI in journalism is definitely not a yes or no question: "Are you for or against artificial intelligence? That's like asking me if I'm for or against fire — it depends what you do with it." (Ahmed, Fortune)

> "Are you for or against artificial intelligence? That's like asking me if I'm for or against fire — it depends what you do with it."
> ***- Kamal Ahmed, Fortune***

Cukier said that AI was already being used at The Economist in a range of non-writing capabilities: "For translation and transcription, or for reviewing our work internally — all the back-office processes of being a journalist — we use AI."

Others went further, highlighting the strengths of an AI tool versus a human contributor: "I can't scour the digital content in the way that they can and bring together groupings of information, which it would take me years to do." (Ahmed, Fortune)

Struyk at CNN echoed this, highlighting that "Investigative reporters are using AI to analyse documents and data... AI helps us find sources and conduct research as well as code automated data pipelines more easily."

There was some disagreement over the extent to which AI should be used to actually write stories themselves. The Economist takes a strong position: “The Economist journalists do not use AI for their writing. It's all produced by a human, and we have no plans to change that approach. We do not use AI for writing whatsoever. Full stop.” (Cukier, The Economist), whereas others were taking a more experimental approach, with various teams or individual journalists using AI either on first drafts or in some cases final versions of reporting. However, in all cases humans were kept in the loop for fact-checking and final approval.

At this stage, how AI is used within the production of stories is very much an evolving situation, and all the publications we spoke to agreed that the priority is full disclosure to the reader — transparency on when and how AI has been used is much more important in maintaining trust than a blanket rule over how it can be used.

Indeed, Ahmed at Fortune saw this as an evolving technology, where acceptable norms would surely evolve over time. In 2026, he does not specify in an article if he has used search or the internet to research it, and likewise “we don't say this was produced using electricity”. Eventually common standards may make disclosure less important, but that is still some way off for now.

Towards a buying framework

In the meantime, agencies need to build frameworks for their agentic buying that deliver the best value and impact for their campaigns. This challenge is what drove WMG to create our new trust framework for media selection.

The intention is not to define exactly how clients or media planners and buyers should evaluate media channels, but rather to highlight some key attributes shared by the most trusted and influential news organisations. Taken together, they form a solid basis for evaluating a media partner.

Individual buyers can vary the relative weight of consideration given to different factors, and of course will need to adapt these models to their own existing evaluation systems.

To aid with that, we have included example questions that buyers should be asking of news organisations, to gauge their credibility. These questions are based on feedback from the journalists themselves, and are exactly the questions those journalists felt would define quality in their eyes, so any news organisation should be able to answer them in relation to their own business confidently.

A Trust & Quality Framework for Evaluating News Publishers

Four pillars an agency can score, drawn from interviews across WMG members

1

Verifiable Identity & Provenance

- Identities verifiable through bylines or media directories
- Quoted people & entities confirmed real
- No AI-manipulated or generated imagery
- Public masthead naming senior staff
- Recognised brand, cited by other outlets

2

Editorial Process & Judgement

- Defined review chain before publication
- Transparent sourcing & attribution
- Evidence of news judgement, not just facts
- Right of reply for contested claims
- A quality bar held independent of AI use

3

AI Governance & Accountability

- Public position on where AI can / can't be used
- Clear disclosure threshold to readers
- Human review before publishing
- Named accountability for corrections

4

Commercial Trust & Brand Safety

- Consistent sponsored vs. editorial labelling
- Dedicated brand-suitability process
- Real-time monitoring around breaking news
- Independent evidence of commercial impact

Deliberately unweighted — buyers set relative priority per pillar and adapt to their own evaluation systems.

Four Questions to Ask Any Publisher

Example questions to ask publishers to evaluate their work within the framework

1	**Verifiable Identity & Provenance**	*Can you show us your masthead, and disclose who your journalists are?*
2	**Editorial Process & Judegment**	*Walk us through your editorial review process — who is involved, and what's your right-of-reply policy?*
3	**AI Governance & Accountability**	*What's your position on AI use in writing and editing, how do you disclose this to readers, and who's accountable when something needs correcting?*
4	**Commercial Trust & Brand Safety**	*How do you label sponsored content and how do you handle ad placements around breaking news?*

Conclusion

We are at the very beginnings of the journey with AI technology and its use in journalism. There are a huge variety of ways that it may come to be used, many of which will unlock the ability to uncover greater stories than ever before. But the value in a news story lies in the ability of the audience to trust that it is true. The need to preserve that essence of reporting is more important than ever.

Within that context, now is the time to question what, exactly, we mean when we say ‘quality news’, or ‘trusted journalism’. And from a commercial perspective, why these labels matter to us. Positioning your brand alongside great reporting, analysis and debate creates positive brand signals for buyers, drives influence across your industry, and ultimately builds incredible revenue for your business.

Appearing next to misinformation, libellous accusations and faked imagery causes harm to your brand, and can lead to brands unwittingly financing criminal organisations.

To create truly impactful marketing, as well as a better society, it matters that the advertising industry does what it can to prioritise those outlets creating high-quality news and reporting. Our model is a starting point for that debate, and we are looking forward to it evolving over time.

Why R-ai commissioned this research
Izzie Rivers, CEO, R-ai



R-ai is an innovative, intelligent AI platform that plans and operates paid media campaigns. We recommend the best places for brands to place their ads, and to do that we had to take trust and transparency incredibly seriously from the start. That's exactly why we commissioned this research and asked the World Media Group and its network of publishers to lead it.

To our mind: nobody builds trust alone. We are experts in media buying and AI, but the people who understand trusted editorial best are the ones who produce it every day. So rather than define quality journalism from the outside, we went to the source — the editors and commercial leaders who live it. We believe the best AI is collaborative.

The report findings describe a real risk. Media planners, either at agencies or within clients, can spin up simple endpoint AI agents to automate media recommendations that don't have specific knowledge libraries, or that optimise only for what's easy to measure — like cost, reach and click-through. It's tough to build cohesive AI decisioning, true, but for us doing what's easy isn't enough.

Trust rarely fits neatly into a spreadsheet, so in a purely efficiency-driven model it falls out of the decision, and advertisers lose the long-term brand value that trusted environments deliver. We need to remember that immediate efficiency is not the same thing as performance or return on investment.

That's the gap we're building to close. We're integrating WMG's Trust & Quality Framework into R-ai as an evolved decision pillar that complements the many different audience, performance and cost signals we already weigh. In practice, that means turning the framework's markers into machine-checkable inputs, with human-in-the-loop weighting and scoring, so editorial quality and brand safety become part of every relevant recommendation. The human stays in the loop and the reasoning stays visible — no black boxes, just better decisions about where your brand shows up.

How was AI used in the creation of this research?

AI was used extensively during this research project, and we are keen to include full disclosure here, in line with our own trust framework. We used Microsoft's transcription tools to turn video interviews into text-based documents, and then used Claude to identify some of the key quotes within them. We also used Claude to experiment with different structures for the document overall, and to suggest alternatives for the categories within the Trust Framework document. That said, all the content in this report has been written by a human, based on the content of interviews also carried out by a human. As such, any errors remain the responsibility of the human author.

About the World Media Group

The World Media Group is a strategic alliance of leading international media organisations that connects brands with highly engaged, influential audiences in the context of trusted and renowned journalism. Its members include BBC News, Business Insider, CNBC, CNN International, The Economist, Forbes, Fortune, National Geographic, The New York Times Company, Reuters, TIME, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, associate member The Atlantic, and partners Brand Metrics, Bridged and Dianomi. To find out more about the World Media Group, please visit www.world-media-group.com.