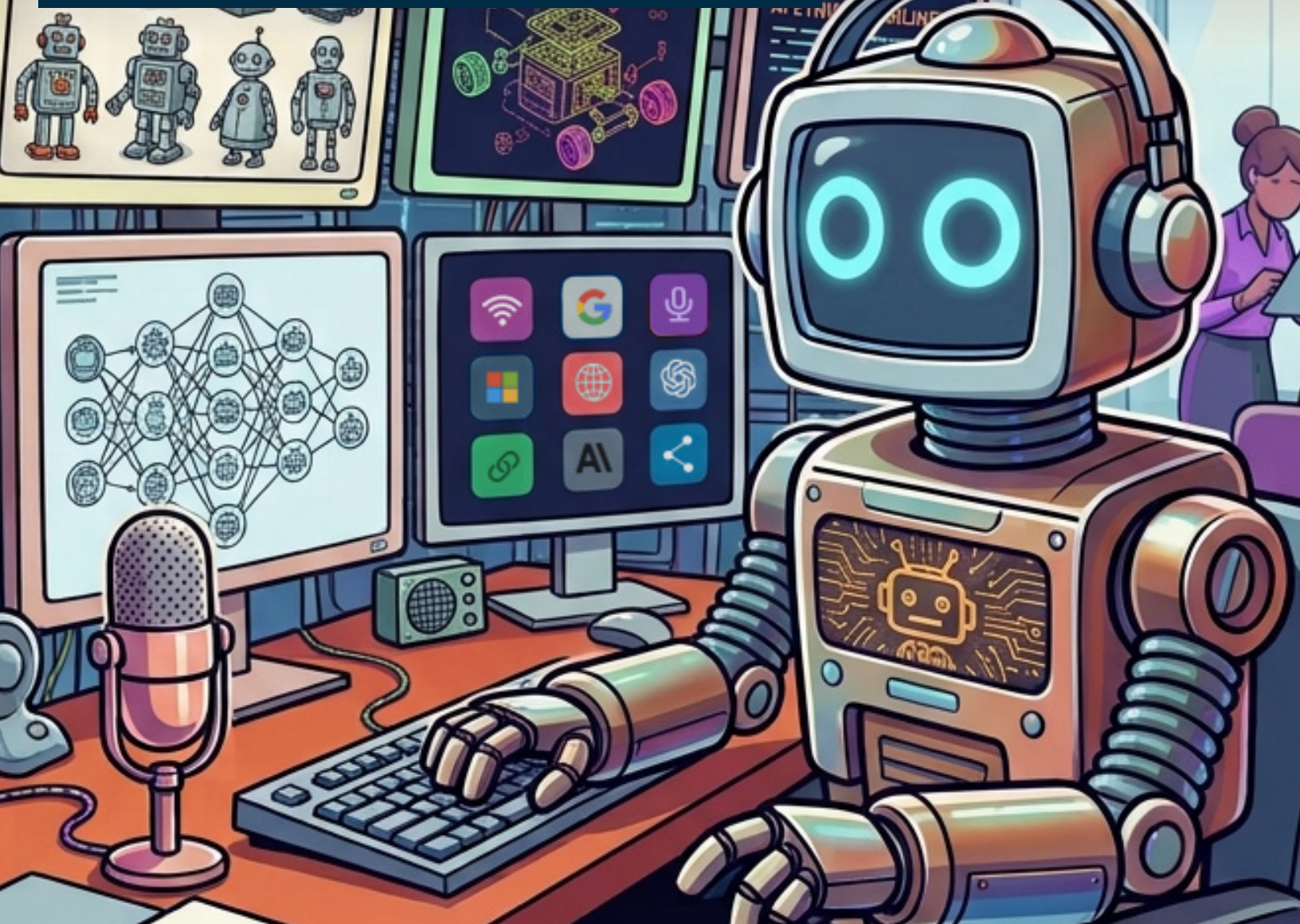


PLATFORMS, PUBLISHERS & THE FUTURE OF NEWS

AUGUST 2026



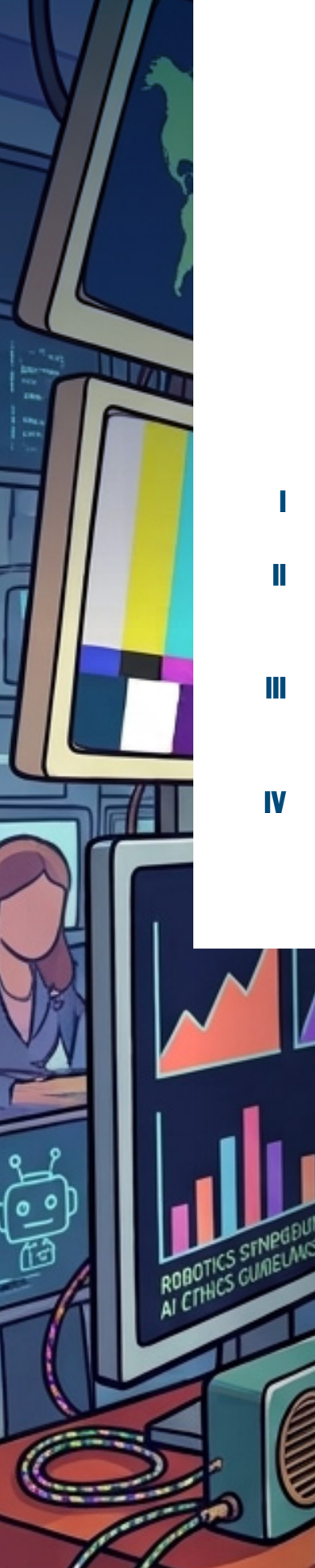
A vertical illustration on the left side of the page. It shows a stack of computer monitors. The top monitor displays a map of the world. The middle monitor shows a color calibration chart. The bottom monitor displays a line graph with an upward trend and a bar chart below it. To the left of the bottom monitor, a person with brown hair is shown from the chest up, wearing a blue blazer and looking at the screen. The bottom monitor also shows a small robot icon and the text 'ROBOTICS SYMPOSIUM' and 'AI ETHICS GUIDELINES'. A coiled cable is visible in the foreground.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Artificial intelligence is reshaping how journalism is produced, distributed and consumed, exacerbating already difficult economic conditions for publishers. As audiences increasingly turn to AI tools for information, publishers face further pressure on traffic and direct audience relationships even as those systems draw on reporting and verified information produced by news organizations. The result is a growing tension at the center of the news and information ecosystem: the technology creating new ways to access information may also be weakening the institutions whose reporting these systems depend on.

In that context, Aspen Digital convened senior leaders from major news publishers, technology companies and philanthropy in July at the David & Lucile Packard Foundation in Los Altos, California. The gathering explored what a healthier information ecosystem might require and where publishers and platforms could begin working on new economic models, product experiences and data-sharing arrangements. Over the course of the day, a clear picture emerged: the AI era's early years have been turbulent, but the two industries have reached a point where collaboration is both necessary and possible.

A healthy information ecosystem means the public has access to reliable, fact-based, evidence-based information they need to be thriving citizens wherever they are in the world. It's no secret that this matters both for our businesses and for democracy.

VIVIAN SCHILLER, ASPEN DIGITAL





WELCOME AND FRAMING

Vivian Schiller, VP and Executive Director of Aspen Digital, opened the day with an observation: the current state of news and AI is unsustainable. While many of the publishers and platforms in the room are already engaged in bilateral conversations, there has yet to be a cross-industry effort focused on a mission critical to publishers, frontier AI companies, and the public: sustaining a healthy news and information ecosystem. The point of the gathering was to advance that shared goal, not through another series of separate deals, but by opening a broader conversation and identifying actionable steps publishers and platforms can take together. "A healthy information ecosystem means the public has access to reliable, fact-based, evidence-based information they need to be thriving citizens wherever they are in the world," Schiller said. "It's no secret that this matters both for our businesses and for democracy."

SCENE-SETTER: THE REUTERS INSTITUTE DIGITAL NEWS REPORT 2026

Mitali Mukherjee, director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, presented findings from the Digital News Report 2026, which draws on nearly 100,000 respondents across 48 countries. The findings showed that after several years of relative stability, 2026 marks a clear shift toward social platforms first, then video, now AI. In short, a news environment defined less by publishers and more by intermediaries.

SOCIAL AND VIDEO PLATFORMS HAVE OVERTAKEN TELEVISION AND NEWS WEBSITES AS THE PRIMARY SOURCE OF NEWS GLOBALLY.

In the United States, social media is now the only news source used by a majority of adults.

THE SHIFT SPANS EVERY AGE GROUP.

Between 2021 and 2026, nearly all growth in online news consumption moved to social, video and, more recently, AI—across every demographic. No age group now prefers news websites and apps.

AI CHATBOT USE AS A NEWS SOURCE, WHILE LIMITED, IS BEGINNING TO RISE.

Weekly use of standalone chatbots grew from 7% to 10% globally, led by younger and more engaged news users. Nearly one in five 18- to 24-year-olds now uses AI chatbots for news each week.

THE LEADING APPEAL OF AI CHATBOTS IS THE ABILITY TO ASK FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS.

Users also cited depth, speed and summarization, but the follow-up question emerged as the most consistent reason people returned.

TRUST IN NEWS FELL SIGNIFICANTLY IN 29 OF 48 MARKETS AND NOW AVERAGES 37% GLOBALLY.

The lowest point the report has recorded. Trust is lower still for news found through social media and AI chatbots.



DISCUSSION I: WHAT'S HOLDING US BACK?

The group began by examining a basic dependency: publishers need access to audiences, distribution, and new technology capabilities, while AI companies need a continuing supply of reliable, original reporting to support the quality and usefulness of their products. Platform executives acknowledged that a healthy information ecosystem is not only a civic concern, but also important to their long-term business interests because unreliable information can undermine both product value and trust. Schiller framed the first discussion as a diagnosis: if both industries benefit from the continued production of trustworthy information, why has that shared interest not resulted in a more workable arrangement? Against the backdrop of the audience shifts presented earlier in the day, she asked the room to look beneath the surface: "What are the core blockers to finding a healthier equilibrium among the news industry, the tech industry and the public?"

THE ECONOMIC MODEL FOR ORIGINAL REPORTING IS THREATENED.

Several publishers named a lack of business and legal intellectual property frameworks to protect the value of their original journalism as an immediate issue. Kevin Delaney, the editor in chief of The San Francisco Standard, argued that tech companies' AI-synthesized products are undermining the sustainable revenue path for the original reporting those products draw on, given the capture of virtually all of the consumer and economic value. "Original reporting is essential for society and for democracy, and it is also essential to the functioning of these AI systems," he said. "These systems improve when they have access to high-quality human-created content. So, if we don't solve the economic issue, we undermine the very inputs the systems depend on." Many agreed that while bilateral licensing agreements exist, they do not amount to a durable industry-wide bargain. A technology-sector participant pointed to a less visible obstacle: internal priorities. When technology companies allocate scarce engineering resources across competing efforts, the participant

argued, “taking on this challenge [of ensuring quality information] is not emerging as important enough” to their business interests. The problem is less a lack of concern than a mismatch of incentives.

THE CURRENT SYSTEM MAY LACK A ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL SOLUTION.

Justin Hendrix, CEO and editor of Tech Policy Press, argued that the internet is increasingly being redesigned for machines and AI agents, changing how information is accessed and who holds power in the ecosystem. Large publishers may have the resources to build new infrastructure, negotiate licensing terms and adapt their products, while smaller, local and independent news organizations may not. “We need a Plan A, a Plan B, a Plan C, and a Plan D for how accountability, free expression and journalism are going to work in the future,” he said.

INTERMEDIATED INFORMATION MAY UNDERMINE TRUST, BUT THAT’S NOT THE WHOLE STORY.

Sarah Adler Hartman, the CEO of The Texas Tribune, noted that “people are acknowledging that their lack of trust in social media news is not changing their reliance on it,” complicating a common assumption that trust is the central problem to solve. Vilas Dhar, president of the Patrick J. McGovern Foundation, challenged the assumption that publishers’ primary goal is to preserve the current system. Instead, he asked, “What is possible now that wasn’t possible before?” The opportunity, he argued, is to imagine new ways of meeting public information needs and then build the economic structures around them.

AI DID NOT CREATE THE CRISIS IN TRUSTED INFORMATION, BUT IT IS ACCELERATING THE NEED FOR NEW APPROACHES.

Tom Rubin, the chief of intellectual property and content at OpenAI, noted that the disruption and disintermediation of news began years ago with the rise of the internet, search and social media, long before AI. Rubin underscored the importance of news organizations and put the stakes plainly: “The lack of adequate reporting would be existential for society.” He urged participants to be more precise about the specific harms, opportunities and product arrangements that might support journalism in a new environment.

THE DEEPER QUESTION WAS NOT JUST HOW TO PRICE JOURNALISM, BUT WHAT EXACTLY IS BEING VALUED.

Rebecca Grossman-Cohen, head of strategic partnerships and chief of staff to the CEO at The New York Times, stressed that journalism is not interchangeable with generic “content.” Behind a verified fact is a costly process of reporting, expertise, editing and judgment. Francesca Barber, executive vice president of Product, AI and Audience at Politico, identified the legal mismatch: journalism produces facts, but copyright generally protects only their expression, not the facts themselves. Sam Feist, the CEO of C-SPAN, distilled the problem: “[Journalism’s] value is in discovering the fact, not the fact [itself].” Reporting is a costly endeavor, and current frameworks often fail to return value to the publisher.

By the end of the discussion, the group had identified a set of overlapping barriers:

- **No scalable economic model** for sustaining original reporting in an AI-mediated environment.
- **Misaligned incentives inside technology companies**, where journalism struggles to compete for engineering time and executive attention.
- **Declining trust does not necessarily change audience behavior**, since audiences continue to rely on social and AI platforms they say they trust less.
- **Legal and commercial frameworks** that fail to capture the value of discovering and verifying facts.
- **Distribution systems built for an earlier internet**, now giving way to machines, agents and synthesized answers.
- **No shared Plan B for the wider ecosystem**, particularly for smaller, local and independent publishers that lack the resources to negotiate or build their own path forward.

The conversation did not yield any singular diagnosis, and that was part of the point. What is holding the system back is a set of economic, technical, legal and behavioral shifts happening at once.

DISCUSSION II: WHAT DO WE NEED— AND WHAT CAN WE OFFER?

The second discussion shifted from diagnosis to action: what would it take for publishers and platforms to build something new while still managing the pressures of the present? Schiller asked the room to move from what is broken to what each side needs from the other. Dhar described one obstacle: institutions under pressure to protect revenue, preserve jobs, and cut costs rarely have much room for structural reinvention. “Where is the space where we can do experimentation?” he asked. In his view, the constraint was not a lack of ideas but the capacity to pursue them.

PUBLISHERS REMARKED THAT MANY OF THEM ARE IN FACT ALREADY EXPERIMENTING.

Delaney described creating a “Mode 2” track alongside the core business—work focused not on today’s operating needs, but on what might matter several years from now. In the case of The Standard, that’s taken the form of an app with an AI-native news interface. Julie Pace, executive editor at the Associated Press, was more direct: “I think news organizations are doing an enormous amount of experimentation.” The constraint, she said, is that experimentation has to happen while the underlying business is under pressure and every new effort still has to justify itself financially.

THE CLEAREST REQUEST FROM PUBLISHERS WAS BETTER DATA.

Tyson Evans, who leads product and brand at ProPublica, said publishers lack the insight platforms have into how people are actually seeking information. “Better data exchange would help us innovate with more confidence,” he argued. Kristin Heitmann, the chief revenue officer at the Associated Press, made the same point more bluntly: “We are operating in the dark here.”

Publishers wanted to know what kinds of queries their reporting informs, how their work is surfaced or synthesized, and whether users engage further. Joanna Geary, head of content and audience at Bloomberg, described the need as inventing a new “content funnel” for the AI era—one that shows where journalism is consumed, where it adds value and what happens next.

PLATFORMS, IN TURN, ASKED PUBLISHERS TO BE MORE SPECIFIC ABOUT WHAT THEY WANT TO BUILD.

Rubin said the conversation too often focuses on what has been lost—traffic, control, monetization and direct relationships—without a clear picture of what they’d like to see come next. He said publishers need to consider how they can “seize back the audience and the experience.” The more useful question for platforms, he suggested, is not simply how to preserve the old arrangement, but what product experiences, subscriber relationships and information services publishers want AI systems to enable.

THAT OPENED THE DOOR TO A MORE CONCRETE SET OF PRODUCT IDEAS.

Barber pointed to pricing and packaging, niche information products and lessons from entertainment and streaming. Evans raised the possibility of deeper publisher experiences inside AI systems—not just citations, but authenticated subscriber access, deeper interactions and clearer pathways into publisher products. Grossman-Cohen described the principles of a workable arrangement: publisher identity remains visible, users can move into richer experiences, publishers retain some understanding of the relationship, and the system helps sustain the reporting itself.

PARTICIPANTS ALSO SAW AN OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN MORE ABOUT INFORMATION NEEDS USERS MAY NOT THINK OF AS “NEWS.”

Sarah Pollack, who serves as policy communications lead for societal impacts research at Anthropic, offered to help publishers learn more about Anthropic’s research tools for understanding how people use Claude for gaining information, including how they work to understand how people use AI with a research tool surveying Claude users who choose to participate inside the product itself. Hartman and Sisi Wei, chief impact officer at CalMatters and The Markup, suggested that this research examine questions about schools, public services and local civic issues—needs that may be grounded in journalism even when users do not traditionally think of them as news.

As Wei put it, the key question for publishers is not just whether they are cited, but whether their reporting can “actually solve a problem in a person’s life.”

By the end of the discussion, the group had identified several practical needs and offers:

- **Publishers need room to experiment** without abandoning the work that sustains their current businesses.
- **Platforms need more specific product asks** rather than a general demand to restore the previous distribution model.
- **Publishers want clearer data on how their journalism is used**, surfaced and valued in AI environments.
- **Both sides see potential in richer publisher experiences**, including authentication, subscriber access, attribution and pathways back to publisher products.
- **User research could reveal unmet information needs** that journalism is well positioned to serve, even when users do not describe those needs as news.
- **New pricing, packaging and licensing models may emerge** around specialized products and workflows, not only around the article itself.

By the end of the session, the requests on both sides were more concrete. Publishers wanted usable data, clearer pathways to audiences, and room to experiment. Platform representatives wanted publishers to identify specific products and user experiences they hope to build. The gap between those positions remained significant, but it was more specific—and more actionable—than the debate over principle alone.

DISCUSSION III: WHAT DOES A BETTER SYSTEM LOOK LIKE?

The final discussion shifted to what a better information system might actually look like. Schiller asked the room to move beyond the needs of publishers and platforms and return to the public they both exist to serve. “What does good look like?” she asked. “Even if we don’t know how to get there, what is the better future arrangement we should be aiming for?” The challenge was to imagine a system that could expand access to reliable information without stripping away the identity, economics and accountability of the organizations producing it.

ANY NEW MODEL HAS TO WORK FOR MORE THAN JUST THE LARGEST INSTITUTIONS.

Sam Gregory, the executive director of WITNESS, cautioned that many of the proposed solutions were being designed around major publishers, even though the wider ecosystem includes community media, civic organizations, citizen journalists and smaller outlets in the Global South. A better system, he argued, must preserve distinctive voices, protect smaller organizations from disappearing inside generic AI outputs and help people determine what is real.

THE IDEAL USER EXPERIENCE MAY BE RICHER THAN EITHER A LINK OR A SUMMARY.

Feist described the aspiration as reaching more people with relevant, personalized information that still carries the publisher’s brand. Kristina Anderson, the managing director of global news programs at Google, asked what a more immersive experience could look like—one built around depth and context rather than simple summarization. Schiller acknowledged the tension from the user’s perspective: a robust, accurate answer drawing on many sources is inherently appealing, even if it creates serious economic and institutional challenges for the news providers behind it.

ONE PROMISING MODEL WAS A LAYERED EXPERIENCE THAT COMBINES CHATBOT-GENERATED NEWS SYNTHESIS WITH PUBLISHER RELATIONSHIPS.

Barber proposed subscription portability: users could authenticate the news subscriptions they already pay for inside the AI system they use. Grossman-Cohen expanded on the idea, arguing that users should be able to move between a broad synthesized answer from a chatbot and deeper, publisher-specific experiences shaped by their subscriptions. That could create a richer product than a bare citation while preserving pathways into the publisher's own reporting and services.

CONTROL OF THE USER RELATIONSHIP REMAINED UNRESOLVED.

Grossman-Cohen stressed that even a well-integrated off-platform experience raises hard questions: what does the publisher still control, how does it learn from the audience and how does it build durable value if the entire interaction happens inside someone else's interface? Hartman and Kathleen Hennessey, editor of the Minnesota Star Tribune, pointed to the related top-of-funnel problem: publishers may be able to improve products for loyal users, but discovery becomes much harder if audiences increasingly begin and end their information journeys elsewhere.

THE ECONOMICS MAY EMERGE THROUGH SPECIALIZED PRODUCTS RATHER THAN A SINGLE UNIVERSAL MARKETPLACE.

One publishing executive compared the current moment to the early cable era, when distributors and content producers eventually reached a durable bargain because each needed the other. Lara Cohen, who leads strategic partnerships for Cloudflare, pointed to Model Context Protocol (MCP) as one possible infrastructure layer, allowing AI agents to access publisher information through structured, permissioned services rather than undifferentiated scraping. Ginny Badanes, general manager of Microsoft's Tech for Society team, cautioned that broad demand for paid news content remains limited, but said more specialized grounding—high-value information used in a particular product or workflow—may offer a more credible early market. One technology-sector participant added that the buyer may often be an application company building on top of a model, not the model provider itself.

By the end of the discussion, several features of a better system had emerged:

- **Reliable AI-generated synthesis that does not erase source identity**, including stronger branding, attribution and provenance.
- **Layered user experiences** that allow people to move from broad answers into deeper publisher-specific reporting.
- **Subscription portability** and authentication inside AI products.
- **Meaningful data and pathways back** so publishers can understand and sustain audience relationships.
- **Infrastructure for permissioned, machine-readable access**, including emerging protocols such as Model Context Protocol (MCP).
- **New markets for specialized information products and workflows**, rather than one licensing model for all news.
- **Explicit protections for smaller and community-based publishers**, whose visibility and distinctive voices are especially vulnerable and where the public is particularly underserved.

Although the group did not agree on a single model, participants repeatedly emphasized the same requirements for a more sustainable future: visible sources, richer pathways to publisher products, usable audience data and economic arrangements that help sustain original reporting.

DISCUSSION IV: NEXT STEPS—FROM SHARED CONCERNS TO SPECIFIC WORK

The day ended with several concrete ‘offers’ rather than a single grand bargain. Schiller summarized the commitments from some of the platform representatives which included:

- Working with publishers on specific user-research questions.
- Collaborating with publishers to define more clearly the products, user experiences, and audience relationships they want to build.
- Exploring what data could be shared and which experiments would be most useful.
- Continuing to advance collaborations with local news.

Together, the offers suggested a more practical next phase: moving from broad principles to focused work around users, products, and evidence.

Data sharing emerged as the clearest candidate for immediate collaboration. Steve Sachs, managing director for the U.S. at The Guardian, argued that publishers need “data and more data sharing” to understand what people are doing inside AI platforms and build better products accordingly. One proposal was to convene a smaller working group of publishers and platforms to define what information publishers actually need, what platforms can realistically provide, and in what form. The aim would not be to recreate web analytics, but to develop a useful view of how journalism contributes to AI-driven information journeys.

The group also wanted to make room for more fundamental and more targeted experimentation. One proposed exercise was to ask what the information ecosystem would look like if it were designed from scratch around today's technology, rather than inherited from the web's existing legal and commercial structures. At the same time, several participants urged the group to begin where the system is already visibly failing: local news deserts and under covered public institutions. Hartman of The Texas Tribune asked whether AI could help address places where "there's literally no one watching what's going on"; Eileen O'Reilly, who heads standards and AI practices at Axios, pointed to using AI to help reporters monitor more local hearings; and Liz Johnstone, the director of data, elections and AI at NBC News, said some of the most promising applications were emerging at resource-constrained local stations.

Schiller closed by acknowledging that the room had moved between very large structural questions and highly practical opportunities. The immediate task was not to solve the entire publisher-platform relationship, but to turn the areas of mutual interest into work that could be tested, measured, and shared.

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