

Ok Google, tell me the news: The future of voice and news media

Voice for news media is one of the trends [predicted to skyrocket](#) in usage, showing up again and again in expert forecasts for 2019.

‘Voice’ refers to voice-activated technologies, where the user’s spoken command controls the process. Think asking Google to order more paper towels online, or asking your iPhone’s Siri assistant to tell you what time it is.

Users interact with voice-activated technologies through smartphones and smart speakers, such as the Google Home and the Amazon Echo. Using programmed and recognised commands, users can direct the voice assistant to control other devices such as smart lights in your home, your TV, or even your [kitchen sink](#).

While smart speakers are a novelty for some, they bring about mixed feelings for publishers of news media content.

“Voice has the potential to be a powerful vehicle for news media as long as it is properly curated, professionally created, news content that can be monetised by publishers,” said CEO of NewsMediaWorks Peter Miller.

“The alternative is an amplification of all the problems that we are already seeing with unsourced news delivered in filter bubbles.”



Voice is a two-way street, with the user issuing voice commands (“Ok Google, what are the headlines?”) and the software responding (“The latest stories in

Australian politics are...”).

In this two-way interaction, the latter is the one that presents both opportunities and concerns for news media.

Several news media brands have already jumped on board the audio train, from [The New York Times](#) to [Al Jazeera](#), [Bloomberg Media](#) to [The Washington Post](#), but others in the industry remain skeptical of the risk posed to existing media structures.

As NewsCorp’s Michael Miller argues, the huge growth of voice is leading to increased pressure on publishers to bend to the whims of digital giants such as Google.

“The way the tech giant is pursuing its intentions demonstrates how it exploits its market power so selfishly”, wrote NewsMediaWorks Chairman and Executive Chairman of NewsCorp Australasia Michael Miller for *The Australian*.

Miller says these actions “highlight why regulators in the United States, Europe, and Australia are now focused on creating a fairer, more equitable digital landscape.”

“It’s a way for Google to drive consumers from publishers’ Web sites and radio stations — and keep them in the Google ecosystem. In other words, Google intends to profit off the creativity and industry of journalists and media businesses without paying for the privilege.”

“Google wants publishers and broadcasters to help them build this new business by giving away audio content for free without any commercial agreement to share in the benefits of it.”

In Australia, these concerns are already being discussed through the [ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry](#), which will play out through 2019.



Impacts on consumers

Publishers aren't the only ones concerned about the impact of voice technologies: advocates of consumer privacy are just as worried.

Voice-activated software is basically always listening for a "[wake word](#)"; the command that tells the software that the user wishes to issue a command. Do you feel comfortable with the idea that your smart speaker is listening in to your every conversation? This will be a debate that we will continue to have, and we are already having in the context of smartphones and other devices.

One development aimed at tackling this has been the introduction of [low-power wake words](#), but it is still very much a work in progress to make sure that privacy remains intact.

And for anyone with a [strong accent](#), speech impediment or even just a sore throat, using a smart speaker can be incredibly frustrating, and there are real concerns around accessibility.

Approach with caution

Smart speakers and voice are unlikely to be trends that publishers and marketers can afford to ignore, and several are already preparing to ride the wave and learn to use these new technologies to their advantage.

Voice-optimised content from [trusted news media brands](#) will present new opportunities for advertisers to place audio advertising in premium environments. In addition, news media is something that users are interested in consuming via

smart speaker. According to the [Smart Audio Report](#) from NPR & Edison Research, news and current affairs ranks second only to music as a category of audio that users want to hear.

But be prepared for the pushback, too, especially from news media organisations and publishers, that are growing tired of their content being used and abused by the digital giants.

