

UNFINISHED



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Welcome back to the Unfinished newsletter, where we explore the intersection of tech, ethics, and social impact.

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First, some exciting news

We're thrilled to announce [the full agenda for Unfinished Live](#)—two days of inspiring events featuring an unbelievable lineup of talent exploring the collision of technology, art, ideas, and impact.

Unfinished Live is all about shaping our digital future in pursuit of a stronger democracy, a fairer economy, and a more just society. This isn't a conference: It's a movement.

You'll be able to hear from Shoshanna Zuboff on the death match between surveillance capitalism and democracy; join Jesse Damiani and Leah Zaidi for an interactive workshop on imagining the metaverse as a public good; engage Cory Doctorow in a live session about disassembling Big Tech; and much, much more.

Create your schedule now by visiting the [agenda page](#)—and [register for the event now](#) if you haven't already. It's a jam-packed program on September 22 and 23. We can't wait to see you there.

What we're thinking about

The unexpected side effects of an overreliance on convenient technologies like Google Search.

[In a new article in *Wired*](#), the tech researcher Francesca Tripodi argues that the design changes Google has made over time—evolving from providing users with a series of links to explore, to giving direct, definitive answers to

complex questions as it does today—have led Google Search to play a major role in misleading the public and reinforcing false beliefs.

“Independently conducting a search on a given topic makes audiences feel like they are engaging in an act of self-discovery when they are actually participating in a scavenger-hunt engineered by those spreading the lies,” writes Tripodi, a UNC-Chapel Hill professor who specializes in social media, political partisanship, and democratic participation and the author of the new book [*The Propagandists' Playbook: How Conservative Elites Manipulate Search and Threaten Democracy*](#).

To learn more about Tripodi’s perspective, we gave her a quick call to talk about her article, Google’s search problem, and her book.

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.



In your article, you talk about the changes Google has made over time to how the engine responds to queries, leading "to incorrect returns that often disrupt democratic participation." What major effects has your research identified that resulted from these shifts?

It has become very easy for propaganda and conspiracy theorists to manipulate Google search engine returns. People have come to rely on Google as a fact-checking service where they can very quickly find an answer because Google has the knowledge graph, in which people are no longer clicking on links in a search result but finding the answer quickly and then can walk away with their unsubstantiated claims verified.

These changes allow users to rely on technology to very quickly answer their questions on extremely complicated topics that require a more extended search process.

Your *Wired* piece identifies our inclination to treat all Google search results as definitive and true as a major problem. Do you think this will continue to be an issue as the midterm elections approach?

Something that I noticed in the research that I conducted for my book is that when people were exiting the polls after voting, they overwhelmingly said that

they found out about their political candidate through Google. Voters were using the knowledge graph to determine their voting platform, learn about the candidates and what they stood for. The problem is that people do these quick searches, maybe even when they're standing in line [to vote]. But those first Google returns are not necessarily the most reliable. People put a lot of weight in those top returns thinking that they are somehow more accurate.

In your view, what corrective actions could Google take to fix its search problems now?

One thing that Google could do is create a flagging mechanism for when their knowledge graph recaps are wrong. When their very first search returns contain incorrect information, there seems to be no mechanism by which people can notify them that these are inaccurate results.

However, I think it's really important for us to think less about Google as the fix, because if Google is creating the problem, then we don't necessarily want to rely on the problem creating the solution. By showing people how important keywords are to the information that they receive, my goal is that we as voters take a little bit more of that responsibility in terms of how we look up information and find out about candidates' platforms. It's important for us to recognize that information exists outside of Google.

What advice do you have for people who use Google to confirm facts or find information who also want to be healthy participants in the democratic process?

My tagline is: Google is not a helpful librarian. But switching to a different search engine is not the solution either. If someone takes their exact same search practices and puts it into Bing or DuckDuckGo or Yahoo, they might have more control over their data, but the returns that they're getting are still programmed in terms of relevance. What people need to recognize is that words matter. The phrases that you start searching with are a key element in terms of driving the information that's going to be returned to you.




Other notable headlines

☰ The same things that made tech so successful in the first place also account for the industry's slowly-improving-but-still-dismal gender diversity statistics. [***In MIT Technology Review***](#), Margaret O'Mara reports that a new generation of activists, whistleblowers and organizers is trying to change the status quo: *"The tech industry loves to talk about how it is changing the world. Yet retrograde, gendered patterns and habits have long fueled tech's extraordinary moneymaking machine. Breaking out of them might ultimately be the most innovative move of all."*

🚗 Most drivers have no idea what data is being transmitted from their cars—not to mention who is collecting, analyzing, and sharing that data, and with

whom they're sharing it. [In *The Markup*](#), Jon Keegan and Alfred Ng identify 37 companies — including car companies, insurance companies, music system providers, navigation providers, and telecom operators — that make up the largely unregulated connected vehicle data ecosystem.

 As usage of OpenAI's text-to-image generator DALL-E continues to proliferate, it poses a new question. Who owns DALL-E images? [In *VentureBeat*](#), Sharon Goldman speaks to legal AI experts to determine if it's "the owner of the AI that trains the model? Or the human that prompts the AI with words like 'red panda wearing a black leather jacket and riding a motorcycle, in watercolor-style?'"

Announcing our Unfinished Live podcast hosts

We're excited to introduce our featured podcast hosts who will be joining us and hosting live podcasts during Unfinished Live this September. You can [register here](#), if you haven't already.

- **Cory Doctorow** is a Special Advisor to the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a science fiction author, activist, and journalist. Check out the Craphound podcast [here](#).
- **Kevin Owocki** is the founder of Gitcoin, a platform where developers can get paid to work on open-source software in a variety of programming languages. Listen to the GreenPill podcast [here](#).
- **Baratunde Thurston** is an Emmy-nominated futurist comedian, writer, cultural critic, a founding partner of the new media startup Puck, and the host of Unfinished Live 2022, where he'll also be recording a live podcast. Hear the How to Citizen podcast [here](#).
- **Camila Russo** is the founder of The Defiant, a media company focused on decentralized finance and the author of *The Infinite Machine*, a foundational book on the history of Ethereum. Check out The Defiant podcast [here](#).
- **Alex Kantrowitz** is a tech journalist and the founder of Big Technology, a newsletter and podcast about Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google, and Microsoft. Listen to Big Technology [here](#).

A message from our partners at The Markup

*We're excited to showcase *The Markup* as part of our community catalyst program, which promotes work at the intersection of tech, art, and impact. If you're interested in learning more, [contact us here](#).*

[The Markup](#) is a nonprofit newsroom investigating how powerful institutions are using technology to change our society. Test out one of their public tools, [Blacklight](#), to see how some of your favorite websites might be tracking you. Then get ready to see this organization at [Unfinished Live](#) next month.

Thank you for reading.

Follow Unfinished ([@byUnfinished](#)) on Twitter for ongoing chitchat on the changing web.

Have a great, restful weekend.

The Unfinished team

Project Liberty, 888 Seventh Avenue, 16th Floor, New York, New York 10106

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