

Building a Digital Audience for News

If journalists produce great stories but no one reads them, how can news survive?

The traditional business model for journalism is in disarray. The distribution monopolies that publishers and broadcasters enjoyed for decades are crumbling. The newspaper industry, where I spent the first 15 years of my career, has been hit especially hard. An informed discussion of journalism today must therefore include an awareness of new distribution models, efficiency and marketability.

Can marketing and analytics save journalism? Not on their own, of course. But we live in a world where the amount of content produced has increased exponentially, yet we still each have just two eyes, two ears and one mouth. Thus, journalism needs to find new benefits from new marketing strategies and measurement tactics.

This type of marketing is not advertising, or slogans, or logos. And this type of measurement is not counting bylines for a performance review. Digital publishers need to establish effective publishing goals and be consistent in their pursuit of those goals. Quality content published in some significant quantity, and designed to be found easily in search engines and shared in social media, is a recipe for a successful digital publishing business.

An internal report from The New York Times simply titled "Innovation" provided an exhaustive look at the state of the news media and where the Times stood in comparison to the new and existing players based on dozens of interviews with Times executives, staffers and industry experts outside the Times. Among its most important conclusions was that the organization was in dire need of finding new audiences.

"The New York Times is winning at journalism. Of all the challenges facing a media company in the digital age, producing great journalism is the hardest. Our daily report is deep, broad, smart and engaging—and we've got a huge lead over the competition. At the same time, we are falling behind in a second critical area: the art and science of getting our journalism to readers."¹

To build your audience online, you need to analyze what you publish, what your readers like and do not like, and then do more of what they like. You also need to make sure that your content, especially content your current readers have shown interest in, can be found by new audiences through search engines and shared through social media.

Data and analytics, whether counting page views and unique visits or total shares on social media, help drive decisions on where best to apply the news-gathering resources at most news organizations today.

"As a digital journalist you not only need to be able to kick the ball—you also have to know where the goalposts are," says Marissa Nelson, senior managing director at the CBC in Toronto. "The only way to measure how well you're kicking and where the ever-changing digital goalposts are is by watching metrics—all the time."

Editors might love multimedia and have staffs that are able to produce great video, but when they look at the audience numbers, they are forced to consider what they get back for that investment of time. In the business world, that is called ROI, or return on investment. It is a relatively new application in journalism, but it is one that comes with practicing journalism in the digital age.

The lifecycle of publishing news has also changed dramatically. The competition for attention among the digital audience has forced journalists and news companies to adopt optimization techniques, which means changing headlines for better search engine optimization if stories are not doing well online and trying new angles and new platforms for promotion in social media.

"One of the things that makes digital journalism exciting is not only do you need to create the content, you also have to figure out where the audience is, how you'll get your content in front of them and how you'll make it catch their eye," Nelson said. "The goalposts in digital media are always moving, so you have to adapt and change in order to keep scoring."

Making smart business decisions based on data is critical to digital journalism today. This final chapter will get you started with the fundamentals of building an audience online:

- Content tracking
- Digital analytics
- Search engine optimization
- Effective headline writing for the Web and social media
- Distribution and engagement through social media

The bottom line: For journalism to grow and be healthy, it needs a growing and healthy audience. And that job is no longer relegated to the circulation, research or marketing department.

The Times' "Innovation" report summed it up accurately: "More than ever, the hard work of growing our audience falls squarely on the newsroom."

What Is It?

2 MEASURING JOURNALISM

As newsrooms have taken on publishing new forms of content—social media posts, blogs, video, breaking news updates, push notifications—to new platforms—email, mobile apps, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Snapchat—new structures have been put in place. One famous axiom in business is "what gets measured gets managed." More importantly, "what gets measured gets done."

"Smart digital journalists will spend time defining their audience and setting goals before picking up the tools," said Cory Haik, a veteran of the Washington Post and former publisher of the digital news startup Mic. "In some ways these are concepts that traditionally the publisher or business side of a media company considered before developing products. The editorial branch was created to meet that publisher framework. However, the success of everything in the current newsroom or digital publishing landscape—from a simple social media production on an investigative series to building a tablet app to creating an entirely new coverage area—should be thought of from a holistic perspective and tied to an audience strategy, which the newsroom is now helping to define."

Newsrooms now track and measure everything they do. Editorial meetings frequently begin with a digital report trying to answer some essential, ongoing questions: What is resonating with our audience? How did they find our stories? What is working well and what is not?

Developing a culture and processes to track and measure your work product is essential to competing in this data-driven world. Traditional journalists may cringe at the idea that their artful storytelling or their dogged investigations can be “reduced” to a “work product,” but nearly all digital publishers are building their businesses on the inventory of content produced, either by journalists or by other writers, bloggers or photographers. Producing that content on a regular schedule is vital to a functioning news business.

And without the business, there are no paychecks. This reality applies to mainstream news companies and independent journalism startups.

Create. Measure. Adapt. It is the way the digital world works.

What Is It?

What's Next?

Summary

↓ TRACK ALL THAT YOU PUBLISH

Eric Ries published a book called “The Lean Startup” in 2011, and its basic principles have been applied to companies of all sizes in all industries, including news. The essential tenet is to build as little as you can, as fast as you can, as cheap as you can, then put it in front of “customers” (or in the case of news, an audience) and measure what works and what missed the mark. Then adapt your product (or content) and do it all again.

Or put simply: Build, measure, learn.

It is not just for startup companies, however. “The Lean Startup” concept has been introduced and implemented in the largest corporate entities as well, including General Electric, Alaska Airlines, Telefonica, 3M and Philips.²

Welcome to the new world. How many video stories did you publish last week? Which one had the highest completion rate? By percentage, how much did your online audience grow (or shrink) last month? Which stories helped drive the growth?

These questions, and dozens more, can be answered easily by sophisticated news operations and solo bloggers alike. Productivity, efficiency and effectiveness, of course, are key measurements for managers. But going

beyond the basics of tracking content published, adding qualitative insights to quantitative measurement, is a smart business strategy.

Since this can be a time-consuming endeavor, start with only those areas you are focusing on as top priorities. And have a goal in mind: Do you want to increase the number of email subscribers? Or unique visitors to your site? Or monthly active users to your app? The only way to know if you are making progress toward your goal is to track your production.

► What to track

Learn from your audience: Here is a starter list of content types that journalists and newsrooms could be tracking regularly:

- Top stories by day, week and month

- Total audience and variance, compared to daily and monthly benchmarks

- Top video stories per day, week and month

- Top video stories by completion rate

- Referrals from search, social media and other sources

- Podcast downloads

- Open rates and total subscribers to email subscribers and mobile app push notifications

- Social media engagement and followers (to chart growth)

The easiest way to track this information is with a Web-based programs such as Google Analytics, Adobe Analytics (formerly known as Omniture), Chartbeat and Crowdtangle. While there is a firehose of data available to most news publishers these days, there is a difference between data and insights and for that, some human intervention is required.

► How to set benchmarks

Compiling data on performance without setting goals for either maintaining or improving the efficacy is relatively pointless. The objective of tracking content is to create benchmarks that become the goals for a newsroom, or even a solo journalist, to aim for.

After you start tracking your audience, you will begin to get a more accurate sense of where to set your goals. Start with averages for total audience, top stories, videos or blog posts published per day or per week. These goals should evolve to include other measurements, including revenue and audience satisfaction metrics such as subscriptions, user registrations or email newsletter sign-ups.

Establishing benchmarks and goals can be done only on a case-by-case basis. What works in one market may not make sense in another. And even within a particular website, some sections will have goals different from those of other sections. If you track pageviews to the local news section of a local newspaper website, for example, you can look backward to see what an average month produces and what the best and worst numbers are. Use this history to develop your estimates, and then determine where to set your goals for increasing the audience to that section.

By contrast, the progress of a relatively new section of a website, or a new blog, that does not have years of past performance will be more difficult to forecast. But you can use the performance of other sections or projects that are similar in scope as the basis for your estimates.

At companies such as Google and Intel, they call this process OKR, which stands for objectives and key results. "It's a simple goal setting system that works for companies and teams and even individuals," says John Doerr, chairman of Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers, an early investor in Google and author of "Measure What Matters."

"You write down and share with everybody, transparently, your objectives. These are the goals, what you want to have accomplished. Then you do the same with your key results, which is how you're going to get it done."³

If you still think revenue should not be a factor in the content decisions journalists make, you should start looking for a time machine and go back a few decades. The reality of today's competitive landscape, what media expert Christopher Vollmer calls "digital Darwinism," demands that business needs and journalistic tactics work in concert.⁴

Do not set goals arbitrarily. Picking a number because it sounds good is not the same as making judgments based on historical data. If you expect your website to increase its traffic by 30 percent in the next six months, what specific initiatives are you launching that will propel that growth? Your audience, after all, is unlikely to grow just because you want it to.

And remember, goals should include more than just numbers of pageviews. Think broadly when setting goals, but use the traffic data and audience patterns to manage and measure the pursuit of those goals. Numbers should drive goals that help the organization achieve journalistic, and business, success.

What Is It?

What's Next?

Summary

↓ TRACK YOUR AUDIENCE

"Less guessing, more knowing." The opportunity to learn what is truly resonating with your audience is one that must be embraced by journalists and news organizations in the digital age.

At one time, newsroom meetings were conducted in blissful ignorance of what, exactly, the audience was consuming. Editors theorized about what the audience wanted, based on anecdotal feedback, phone calls, eventually emails and maybe letters to the editor. This echo chamber created assumptions that persisted through generations of journalists. It was common to hear editors assert at editorial meetings, "Readers don't like *those* stories. They like *these* stories."

But when it came right down to it, those editors had little idea of what they were talking about.

It is now standard practice for newsrooms to have large screens adorning the walls and hanging from the ceilings displaying current audience performance across Web, mobile and social media. New-media startups such as Gawker, BuzzFeed and Vox Media were built from the ground up to include minute-by-minute analysis of audience data to help guide decisions and editorial activity.

Newspapers and TV news stations have transformed to adapt to this new competitive landscape. "Content strategist" and "audience development manager" are job titles in news organizations that did not exist just a few years ago.

► Digital tools measure digital audience

Digital analytics—the software and mechanisms to track website traffic—have changed all that. But it took years for many newsrooms to embrace the numbers coming from their websites and begin to use them in their editorial decision making.

DRILLING DOWN

Options for Analytics: You can choose among three possible sources of traffic-measuring tools for your digital audience:

Commercial systems that charge monthly fees but allow real-time traffic reporting. Adobe Analytics (formerly known as Omniture) is the industry standard and offers a powerful suite of tools and automated reporting. Chartbeat is also used widely for its real-time analysis of current audiences.

Free programs, most notably Google Analytics, are the standard here and have improved their real-time results. (Clicky is another solid free tool.) CrowdTangle, which was acquired by Facebook, is a powerful tool that is free for professional news organizations and tracks social media activity and engagement.

There are also built-in tools offered by the content-management software or hosting service you are using.

Now, Web services such as Omniture, Chartbeat and Google Analytics make it easy to track your website's performance with a Web-based dashboard panel. These services work by using bits of code you place on your Web pages, which feed traffic information to the tracking services on other servers.

You simply copy and paste a small piece of JavaScript code provided by the service into the HTML of every page on your site. The code keeps track of everyone who visits the page and sends the data it records over the Web to another website, where those results are tallied and displayed.

Google Analytics is a free Web-based tracking service that is practically as powerful as any commercial traffic service. It is quick and easy to set up and comes with an intuitive dashboard. Just sign up for an account, paste the code on your pages and visit the Google Analytics website anytime you want to check on your traffic (see www.google.com/analytics).

Thousands of websites use this free Google tool to track their visitors. It is easy to get started, and the administration screen is fairly intuitive and powerful—although it is tailored to Google AdWords customers, with emphasis on conversion rates and other customer metrics.

This is why Google offers the service for free. By using the data, website publishers can track which AdWords are driving the most traffic to their sites and will spend more money with Google to buy more AdWords. Thus, it is good business for Google to give away its Analytics product.

Google is not the only free option for Web analytics, and new players are coming onto the scene all the time. Other options to explore include Chartbeat and Clicky, which both offer low-cost services that will give you real-time tracking better than even what Google offers.

Some content-management systems and blog platforms offer traffic-tracking tools as part of their administrative interfaces. Most of these services are limited and will probably only whet your appetite for more detailed information.

► Identify key data points

A robust traffic-reporting system will offer you a dizzying array of statistics and metrics to consider. It would be inefficient to try to keep track of all of them, so you need to decide which measurements are most important and will give you the best gauge of how your site is performing.

Generally, the best Web traffic measurements are pageviews, visits compared with unique visitors and engagement and referrers.

Pageviews: This is the total of Web pages viewed in a given time period. If the website is supported with advertising, this is also directly related to the inventory the site has to offer prospective advertisers. It is also how content is ranked in terms of popularity. When websites provide lists of their most popular content, those lists are usually based on numbers of pageviews.

DRILLING DOWN

Just Add JavaScript:

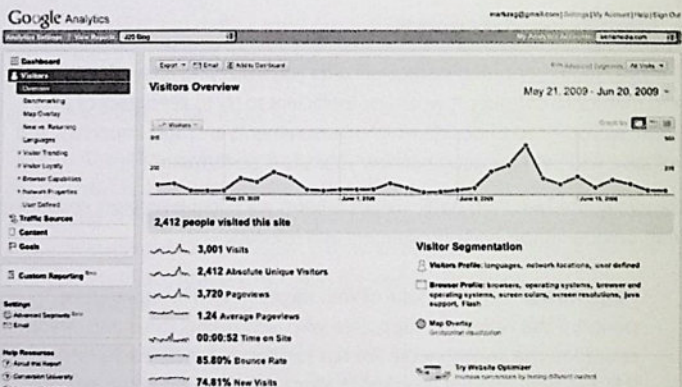
Many Web services (such as Google Analytics) rely on JavaScript, which alongside HTML and CSS, is one of the three core technologies of the World Wide Web. JavaScript is a simple programming language that adds interactive features to Web pages. The vast majority of websites use it, and all major Web browsers have a dedicated JavaScript engine to execute it. It is used for everything from pop-up windows to navigation menus that appear when you scroll over them with your cursor.

Visits and unique visitors compared: "Visits" refers to the number of times all visitors access a website. If you visit the site twice and I visit it three times, that is a total of five visits. But we would represent only two unique visitors. You can also use visits in conjunction with pageviews to determine the average number of pages viewed per visit (pageviews divided by visits). Or use unique visitors instead of pageviews to gauge audience interest in specific stories or pages.

Engagement and referrers: The amount of time spent on the site by each user will help you gauge the level of engagement for your website. Tracking referrers will help you learn where your traffic is coming from. Google generally makes up as much as one-third of this figure. Facebook has continually frustrated the news industry by changing its algorithm, sometimes sending more traffic to news sites and sometimes less.

The search continues for the "killer metric" that will accurately and comprehensively reveal audience engagement. Pageviews and unique users can tell only part of the story. Some Web experts, for example, attribute significant pageview numbers to bad design, meaning visitors have to click on many pages just to find what they are looking for.

Most-viewed and most-emailed stories have influence on editorial planning meetings, as they should. But context and perspective are important when you use Web metrics to make journalistic decisions. Sensational stories involving crimes or celebrities will usually draw more pageviews. Professional



Google Analytics makes it easy to track your audience.

and college sports coverage also does well on newspaper websites. The context is that the audience for coverage of sports and celebrities is larger than the audience for more local stories. If I am a Chicago Cubs fan, for example, but I do not live in Chicago, I am still potential audience for the Chicago Tribune website. But I am probably not going to read about the Chicago city council.

Click-driven metrics have been employed since the consumer Web hit the mainstream in the 1990s. Nowadays, there is a push toward something more meaningful, what former Chartbeat CEO Tony Haile called the "Attention Web."

"The click had some unfortunate side effects. It flooded the Web with spam, linkbait, painful design and tricks that treated users like lab rats. Where TV asked for your undivided attention, the Web didn't care as long as you went click, click, click," Haile wrote on Time.com in 2014.

"Sites like *The New York Times* are redesigning themselves in ways that place less emphasis on the all-powerful click. New upstarts like Medium and Upworthy are eschewing pageviews and clicks in favor of developing their own attention-focused metrics. Native advertising, advertising designed to hold your attention rather than simply gain an impression, is growing at an incredible pace."⁵

Haile left Chartbeat to help launch a new company called Scroll, which raised more than \$7 million in 2017 to develop a platform service to provide an ad-free Web that "rewards great user experience and funds essential journalism." Its motto is "Journalism shouldn't be driven by clicks," which is an important reminder that attention, engagement and impact are also important measurements for digital journalism, just more difficult to track.⁶

One of the best ways to use traffic data is to determine which experiments and new projects are working. For example, analytics can help you to manage a new video series or a new section of a website. But if the traffic numbers are anemic, that does not necessarily mean you should pull the plug, especially if people are still excited about the idea behind the project. Compare new projects with other new projects, not established successes.

News organizations have a tendency to plant lots of seeds but spend little time on the care and feeding of new sprouts. By analyzing traffic data and establishing benchmarks, you can more closely manage projects and improve them over time.

7 SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION (SEO)

How do you drive more audience to those good ideas everyone is excited about? Traditional marketing can take you only so far, so SEO and viral distribution through social media remain increasingly important.

To understand how to optimize your Web content so that it can be found by search engines, you must first gain an understanding of how search engines work.

► Understand search engines

Essentially, search engines perform three main functions:

Spiders and robots: These terms refer to small computer programs that are sent out by search engines such as Google and Bing to crawl the internet and track and record the information found on Web pages. They are programmed to look for new pages or new information on existing pages and send back reports to their respective search engines for indexing.

Indexing: Larger, more powerful computer programs on the search engines' servers take the information sent from the spiders and robots and build large database files with references to all the content connected to the right links. This is the catalog of the Web that a search engine refers to when you perform a search.

Queries: When you type a keyword search into the home page of Google or Bing, you are making a query of that search engine's database. Additional computer programming takes your keywords and looks in the index for the most relevant results; then it returns and presents those results on Web pages for you to explore.

► SEO for journalists

Search engines rank the results of searches and present them on a series of Web pages, usually displaying 10 results per page. Google has become the dominant search engine during the past decade because of the algorithms it uses to establish relevance. Based on the peer-reviewed journal method found throughout academia, the Google algorithms give more importance to websites that other sites are linking to. Links from other sites are similar

to endorsements. And the more credible (endorsed) a site is, the more credibility or authority it can give to another site by linking to it.

This phenomenon of credibility based on links has been referred to as "Google juice."

The vast majority of Web searchers do not venture past the first page of results, so having your website or news story show up among the first 10 is a huge advantage if you are hoping to grow your audience. Some news sites receive as much as two-thirds of their Web traffic from search engines, so improving the ranking of your pages in search engines is a smart strategy. And that is the goal behind SEO.

Of course, SEO is an entire industry with companies helping businesses of all sizes acquire more traffic through search. The industry is constantly changing as Google continues to modify its algorithm to improve the results and protect its users from being tricked into clicking on links that appear to be one thing but in the end or something else entirely.

"Much of the advice given to copywriters, journalists, editors, and other content creators for SEO writing is dangerously out of date, leaning on practices that were once tried and true but that could now get your site penalized," said Rand Fishkin, cofounder and former CEO of Moz, one of the leading SEO firms in the U.S.⁷

Those words that people enter into a search engine are called "keywords," which is just a fancy way to describe the words that people use when searching for information online. The idea is, if you publish the most credible story on organic broccoli farming and someone enters the keywords "organic broccoli farming" into Google, the search engine will display a link to your story at the top of the first results page, driving more traffic to your site than to any other.

This concept raises some warnings for journalists. Some fear stepping out onto that slippery slope that can lead to journalism cheapened by the blatant insertion of popular keywords to get some added Google juice. Or worse, editors and writers could start picking stories based on keywords in hopes of generating increased Web traffic.

"This Boring Headline Is Written for Google" was the headline of a story by Steve Lohr in The New York Times about SEO and journalism.

"There are no algorithms for wit, irony, humor or stylish writing," Lohr wrote. "The software is a logical, sequential, left-brain reader, while humans are often right brain."⁸

It is really just the latest balancing act in efforts to make journalism interesting without allowing it to cross the line into the sensational. If journalists understand the basics of writing search engine-friendly headlines, they can drive more audience to their news and information without compromising any of their values.

What Is It?

What's Next?

Summary

↓ USE SEO TO GROW YOUR AUDIENCE

The importance of SEO, and its more commercial cousin SEM (search engine marketing), has led to the creation of a multimillion-dollar industry. Companies are available for hire to help you engineer your Web pages, and some even “guarantee” top placement in the big search engines for your site. But the reality is that plenty of information is available on the Web, and most Web publishers can do their own SEO—at least on a basic level.

At its core, the practice of SEO is simply a matter of putting the words on your Web pages that you think a prospective reader would type into a search engine while looking for an article on that subject. Some keywords are static, such as the title of your website and the description you create for your site. Other keywords are new to your site every time you publish a new piece of content.

Entire books have been written about the practice of SEO. But because you may not have the time or the inclination to take a deep dive into the topic, here is a quick guide to get you started.

▶ Grow audience with content and links

Content is king: Fortunately, the content factor is a big advantage for journalists in the SEO game. E-commerce and marketing websites struggle to publish quality content regularly to impress the search engines. But journalists? Hey, this is what we do.

Linking is queen: Tap into Web karma by linking out to as many sites as makes sense. This will increase your authority in many search engines and could lead to more Google juice if the sites you are linking to recognize it and return the favor.

Make sure you link between your pages, too. This is an easy way to increase the number of links to your pages and will also increase the usability of your site for your audience.

Make anything that is important a link off the home page, because search engines give greater value to those links.

Make sure your links make sense: Links help your visitors and search engines understand what your page or article is about. Therefore, they should not be generic, such as “click here” or “yesterday’s article.”

Title tags: The title tag appears at the top of a user’s Web browser.

Many content-management systems and blog platforms have the ability to display the headline from the story or blog post in the title tag. This is helpful, as search engines give a lot of credence to title tags. Search engines attach greater weight to the headline and the title tag on a Web page. That means headline writing is especially important for good SEO. It will be covered in a separate section.

HTML meta tags: If you select **View—Source** on a Web page, you will see the computer code that is behind the Web page. Near the top are some meta tags that provide information about the Web page even though this information does not actually display for the user. Web designers used to stuff this area with as many keywords as they could dream up in the hope that a search engine would give their pages credit for those words as content. Google and other search engines have changed their algorithms to account for this scheme but putting a few relevant keywords in the meta description is still a good idea.

► Write effective Web headlines

Almost everyone writes headlines today. Even if you work for a newsroom that has a copyediting and headline-writing team, you will likely have a blog or publish other multimedia content that will need headlines, too. Even a post on Twitter requires concise, compelling language, just like a good headline.

“I see it as being essential to the modern journalist or writer online,” Graham Charlton wrote in an article on searchenginewatch.com, the leading news site for all things search and SEO. “These skills will help you write for the web effectively and ensure that your content finds its audience.”

DRILLING DOWN

Search Engine Marketing:

The SEM industry has exploded in the past 10 years and is filled with companies that will help other businesses buy text ads on search engines. Strategy is involved, since the ranking of the paid ads is determined by pay-per-click rates. Thus, the goal is to pay the lowest rate possible to get the highest ranking.

DRILLING DOWN

Use Internal Linking: Linking to outside sources within an article can help increase the SEO of a page, but internal linking is also important. A link to related articles within the same site can bring beneficial effects for both reader and site. Readers who are interested in the topic will appreciate a related article conveniently linked within the current article, and search algorithms will index the links and include them in their ranking algorithms.

"Let's be clear though: the quality of content is the first consideration: if the article sucks then no amount of SEO knowledge is going to help. The ability to write is the thing."⁹

It is even more important for independent journalists who do not have the power of a big news brand and all that Google juice behind their stories.

On average, eight out of 10 people will read a headline, but only two out of 10 will read the rest of the piece. This is the secret to the power of the headline and why it so highly determines the effectiveness of the entire piece.¹⁰

Combine that with how important headlines are for search engines, and you can see how critical it is for a news site to put considerable thought and strategy into its headline writing.

▶▶ *Write for readers and robots*

Remember, you have two audiences online: readers and robots.

For readers: "Web headlines have no friends."¹¹ The headline sits alone, without deck heads, photos or graphics, so it has to carry the entire load. Web headlines should be simple, literal and direct. They must motivate readers to move the mouse and click (or touch, if using a smartphone or tablet).

For robots: SEO means that if a headline contains search keywords that are also repeated in the text of the story (and elsewhere on the page), the story will acquire more Google juice and be returned higher on search pages.

▶▶ *Make good headlines better*

1. **Keywords, keywords, keywords.** Think about Journalism 101: who, what, where. This attracts both readers and robots. A sports headline must have the team name. A headline on a local story must have the city name. Write for readers with Google in mind.

When the Atlas foundry exploded in Tacoma in 2008, the headline in The News Tribune in Tacoma, Wash., the next day said, "Everything Shook, Then

Went Black." It worked well ... because it had friends, namely, a huge picture of black smoke and flames pouring from the building. Online, though, this headline does not tell the reader or the robot anything. The headline published on the newspaper's website, *thenewstribune.com*, was "Explosions Rock Tacoma's Nalley Valley."

2. **Use conversational language.** That makes the reader want to know more. Be direct and focus on the unique.

Instead of "Council Votes to Raise Taxes," try "Get Ready to Pay More Property Taxes."

3. **Do not be afraid to inject a little attitude.** We must be fair and accurate, but that is no reason to be boring.

Look at all headlines as they appear without the context of the story. They should have something to engage potential readers, especially those who come across the headlines while conducting related searches.

Think about readers and robots when you are writing headlines. If you were Googling for information on a certain news story, what words would you use? Think of a handful of keywords; then use sound judgment to see how many of those keywords you can work into the headline without sacrificing its potential interest for readers.

What Is It?

What's Next?

Summary

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT DRIVES DISTRIBUTION

If the top three priorities in real estate are location, location, location, then the top three priorities of digital publishing are distribution, distribution, distribution.

"The hardest part for me has been the realization that you don't automatically get an audience," said Janine Gibson, editor in chief of The Guardian's website. "For someone with a print background, you're accustomed to the fact that if it makes the editor's cut—gets into the paper—you're going to find an audience. It's entirely the other way around as a digital journalist. The realization that you have to go find your audience—they're not going to just come and read it—has been transformative."¹²

Writers, bloggers and even the largest news companies have all learned how to offer their digital content through email newsletters, podcasts and mobile apps. And we just discussed search, which is effectively like distributing

content through Google. All are excellent methods of enabling visitors to find your content without visiting your website again and again.

Unfortunately that is not enough. Reaching new audiences and growing an existing audience is a top priority for news organizations around the world today, which has led to the emergence and prominence of the use of social networking and social media distribution in news and journalism. Social media platforms are great for cultivating a community for source development, transparency and credibility, as discussed in Chapter 3, but they also are powerful distribution networks if produced well.

The New York Times "Innovation" report focused on three areas for growing audience: discovery (how the journalism is packaged and distributed), promotion (calling attention to the journalism) and connection (creating a two-way relationship with readers that deepens their loyalty).

"Audience Development is the work of expanding our loyal and engaged audience. It is about getting more people to read more of our journalism."¹³

Loyalty is critical to audience growth, and social media platforms offer news organizations the unique ability to increase loyalty through engagement. This goes beyond simple distribution of content and attracting a "drive-by audience."

Many people believe that "if the news is important enough, it will find me." What makes this true, more often than not, is engagement. Facebook will show your content to more people the more engaging that content is. It is how the algorithm works. More Twitter users will find your news the more times it is retweeted and favorited. And then there is "dark social," which refers to links shared by email, text message and other apps that are not easily trackable by Web analytics programs.

"Virtually every journalist today is closer to the tools of publishing the news than at any point since the hand-pulled press of colonial times," Derek Willis of The New York Times wrote on his blog. "We can push buttons and our words, images and graphics appear on the web. A story's afterlife—what happens when it has been published—is something that we can revise and extend. These are hugely important changes; they alter what is possible for all of us."¹⁴

► **Publish and engage where the audience lives**

The challenge with social media platforms is that not everyone is on all of them and the audience keeps shifting. A few years ago, it looked like Pinterest and Tumblr would become a player in the distribution and

engagement of news, but then it faded and on came Instagram and Snapchat. That said, there are news sites and journalists who have found an audience on Pinterest and Tumblr and others who still do not participate on Instagram and Snapchat, meaning each approach and strategy should be handled case-by-case.

Finding the right social platforms for you and your organization is important. While they are free to join and participate in, social media takes diligence and persistence to do well. And that takes time and effort.

Who is your target audience? That is an essential first question to ask before starting to think about and plan your social media attack. You need to research and explore different social platforms and look for evidence that your target audience exists there before you start publishing and engaging there and hoping to find an audience.

Here is a starter list of social media marketing channels that most—if not all—news media websites should be participating in.

Twitter: Best source for breaking news, sports, politics, business news, marketing and real-time reactions to live events and live TV shows. If you are involved in breaking news at all with your coverage, Twitter is a required channel for distribution.

Facebook: The best referral source of traffic back to your website. Facebook still drives more audience to news publishers than Google, even after the massive algorithm changes in 2018. Its audience is just that massive. It is also broad-based and likely includes whatever you happen to cover as a news organization or journalist. Most, if not all, topics can find some audience on Facebook.

Instagram: Designated as the “happy place” on social media—at least compared with Facebook and Twitter—it should be leveraged if your brand and content makes sense with its positive approach. Local news organizations excel in Instagram when they focus on “pride of place” posts, showcasing the photos of a local area’s natural beauty.

Pinterest: The lifestyle social network makes sense for journalists and writers if they happen to cover food, fashion, fitness, beauty and other lifestyle topics. It is an effective referral source for audience if the topics fits. (The New York Times had 275,000 followers and 10 million monthly visitors in 2018.)

YouTube: Follow the channels of people and organizations who post content that is related to what you cover. Create playlists of other

YouTube videos as a way to participate in this channel, especially if you have limited ability to create the kind of YouTube videos that will get noticed. (The YouTube algorithm rewards “watch time,” meaning the more time people watch a video is more important than the number of people who start watching a video.)

Blogs: Blogs can still be an important source for finding niche audiences. Contribute to the conversations you find on them, too. Commenting and linking, when appropriate, are effective ways to get others to view, link to and comment on your journalism and become part of your community.

Reddit, Fark, etc.: Social news and bookmarking sites can provide a significant short-term boost in traffic. Converting those new readers into an audience that is loyal is the challenge. The reddit community is notoriously skeptical of new users, though, so it is important to be authentically participating in a reddit community (or subreddit, as it is known) on a consistent basis before you try to promote your own stories.

While it was once customary for a news organization to appoint one person or a small team to manage social media distribution efforts, that task has largely been distributed to everyone in the newsroom. For independent journalists or bloggers, it is also one more task.

One note of caution, however. Investing too much time, energy and resources in building an audience on a platform that you do not control comes with risk. Several digital media companies learned that lesson the hard way in 2018, when Facebook altered its algorithm, which determines how much audience would see a publisher’s post. Mic, a digital publisher that had raised \$7 million and built a huge following by publishing video content onto Facebook’s platform, never recovered. It ended up laying off more than 100 journalists and selling the brand and remaining assets for \$5 million before the end of that year.¹⁵

► Publishing is only the beginning

This does not mean, of course, that journalists should abandon social media platforms altogether. It simply means it is time to refocus.

“You may find this hard to believe, but one time, journalists joined social media to talk to the audience,” says Mandy Jenkins, former editor of Storyful and a Knight Fellow at Stanford. “There was no advertising play, no payouts to produce videos, no thirsty posts to gin up metrics to impress the

shareholders—just people talking to other people in their communities. It was a beautiful time to be alive.

“The problem with that practice—then and now—is that it takes a lot of work to do well. It requires that we ask questions and also answer them, that we keep the peace, think carefully about what we share, update often, and most of all, always be paying attention.”

What Jenkins is describing is “engagement,” which is a buzzword tossed around too frequently these days. But it remains a critical priority in social media.

“We have to get back to the social part of social media or risk being left out of the conversation altogether,” Jenkins says. “The bad guys—the fake-news makers, bots, trolls, and scammers—will gladly take over the community organizer roles we leave vacant. They’re pretty good at this sort of thing.”

Engaging with an audience in social media will increase the distribution of your news stories, video and other content, but it also brings collateral benefits. It goes beyond pageviews and unique users. A journalist or news organization can earn something once called “social capital”—and thus become the “trusted center” for a community—by engaging in multiple channels.

Participating in social media forces you into really having that two-way conversation that journalists have talked about for years. Listening to your audience will bring huge benefits to your news gathering and news judgment, a form of product development that has never existed in journalism before.

“One of the benefits of having a digitally creative team working within the social and distribution landscape is the knowledge the team brings back to the content development cycle,” Cory Haik wrote in a previous edition of *Journalism Next*. “There is no better time to create successful digital products that reach and develop audiences, as we are able to see our competitors in more full view, engage with our users and optimize/refactor on the fly to meet them where they are as platforms emerge.”

Jumping into social media gives a news organization the opportunity to put a human face on the journalism it provides. Readers—even the ones who hate you—will engage with the people in a newsroom, while they might just shake their fists at an institution.

Building social capital is an increasingly important strategy for journalists and news companies. As public opinion regarding journalists and the news media continues to be skeptical, those who can find new ways to build bridges back to the communities they cover stand the best chance of increasing their audience.