

INNOVATION
IN MEDIA
2022/23
WORLD
REPORT

Editors

Juan Señor
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A handbook on media
innovation for FIPP
by Innovation Media
Consulting Group

Table of Contents

4

Introduction

James Hewes, FIPP President & CEO

6

Editors' Note

Juan Señor, Jayant Sriram and Inês Bravo, Innovation Media Consulting

8

Beyond the Third-Party Data Play – How to Build Your Own First-Party Data Operation

20

The Reinvention of a Medium – The Newsletter Economy

36

What's Next? – The Evolution of Audio

52

How to Run a Product Team & Build a Data-Driven Newsroom

66

New Media Tech – Artificial Intelligence, Robo Journalism and NFTs in Publishing

84

Best Retention Strategies - After the Covid subscription bump, how do you stop churn and retain reader revenue?

98

Best Digital Magazine Narratives – a showcase of best multimedia storytelling formats and products in the past year

118

Print & Offbeat: Our Annual Showcase of Creativity and Imagination



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A New Age of Innovation



The past two years have reaffirmed the need for flexibility, creativity, and diversification in our industry, not to mention the value of real-world experiences, be they in-person or in print. For FIPP's part, we are delighted that our World Media Congress has returned to a real-world setting in 2022, as has our wider programme of annual events.

But today, innovation is no longer just about re-emergence from Covid. Other key trends too, have been significantly accelerated in recent years. The shift towards reader revenues has been a timely one, particularly with the 'Cookiepocalypse' now well and truly upon us. Publishers are finding new and innovative ways to leverage first-party data, and stand to be at the forefront of a new wave of contextual advertising environments.

We've seen podcasts finally realise their potential, and a resurgence in the popularity of the humble newsletter, as consumers search for more personalised and engaging experiences. NFTs have gone mainstream, while a whole host of what were once thought of as periphery plays like AI, gamification, and visual storytelling are now finding more pragmatic applications.

More broadly, we've witnessed a world coming to terms with the awesome power – both positive and negative – of its media, and the need for greater tech regulation. At the time of writing, we find Elon Musk preparing to complete his proposed takeover of Twitter, and await the next chapter in that particular saga...

This year's incarnation of Innovation is more relevant to the global media industry than ever before. At a time when longstanding trends have been accelerated – through necessity – into the mainstream, media owners are beginning to truly recognise the importance of agility, and investing the profits from their legacy businesses into the products of tomorrow.

This year's book offers a great starting point, and reflects an industry entering a new age not only in the wake of Covid, but as the content of media begins to re-emerge from the dominance of digital tech.

James Hewes FIPP PRESIDENT & CEO

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We're back!

After two years of uncertainty through which we published digital-only editions, we are back in print this year and back with a live in-person event to launch this book. And you, our dear readers, are back at work, and back navigating the real world. The world of media has changed though, irrevocably in some respects, and there are new technological paradigms to contend with. We have identified six such areas for publishers to consider as we begin the process of building for a better and brighter future.

1 There is a seismic shift coming in the world of digital advertising. 2023 will be the year of the much-vaunted 'cookiepocalypse', when third-party cookies on Google's chrome browser will be phased out, thus ending programmatic advertising as we know it. Should we fret, or see this as an opportunity? Digital advertising has long proven to be a fickle friend for publishers, stacked as it is in favour of Big Tech. With global privacy concerns putting an end to third-party data tracking there is an opportunity for publishers to focus instead on leveraging their own first-party data as a proposition to sell to advertisers. And that's what makes this story so compelling - a real live example of how good journalism can be good business. "If you're thoughtful about it, the subscriptions business powers your advertising business. You have a direct reader relationship, great data comes from that relationship and can drive a much more effective, analytical, targeted advertising business," Jon Slade, chief commercial officer at Financial Times recently said in an interview. We couldn't agree more.

2 Ignore the old mediums at your peril. In this case, the humble email, widely referenced through the years as being "the cockroach of the internet." The email newsletter was having a moment even before the pandemic but it has emerged now as the single most versatile and valuable tool in a publisher's arsenal. Use it as a 'pop-up' tool to capitalise on big news stories, as a medium to promote personalities within your newsroom, as a direct conduit to your readers or as a publishing business model in itself. In the newsletter economy, there are only possibilities.

Juan Señor
Jayant Sriram
Inês Bravo

3 Audio isn't far behind in the old gold stakes, proving to have multiple uses for publishers. We know, of course, about the boom in podcasts and their potential for bringing in advertising revenue. Added to that reliable revenue tool now are new possibilities and technology for text-to-voice features for articles, which are proving to be particularly effective at engaging audiences and building habit, and now a boom in live audio with Clubhouse and its antecedents like Twitter Spaces. Could it be that years of digital innovation are taking us back to a place where the spoken word goes back to being our primary medium? That's not an outlandish theory at all.

4 The past two years have seen breathless innovation as news organisations have raced to launch new podcasts, newsletters, live blogs, instant analysis and more. What stays and what doesn't beyond the pandemic and how can this process of change be made more sustainable? There has never been a more important time for news organisations to think of product teams and product thinking, to break silos and to place the audience experience first in any strategy. The definition and roles of product thinkers are rapidly evolving however, and we try to bring some clarity to this space through outstanding case studies. A related, but equally important question here - how do we introduce more data and analytics to newsrooms without causing too much anxiety?

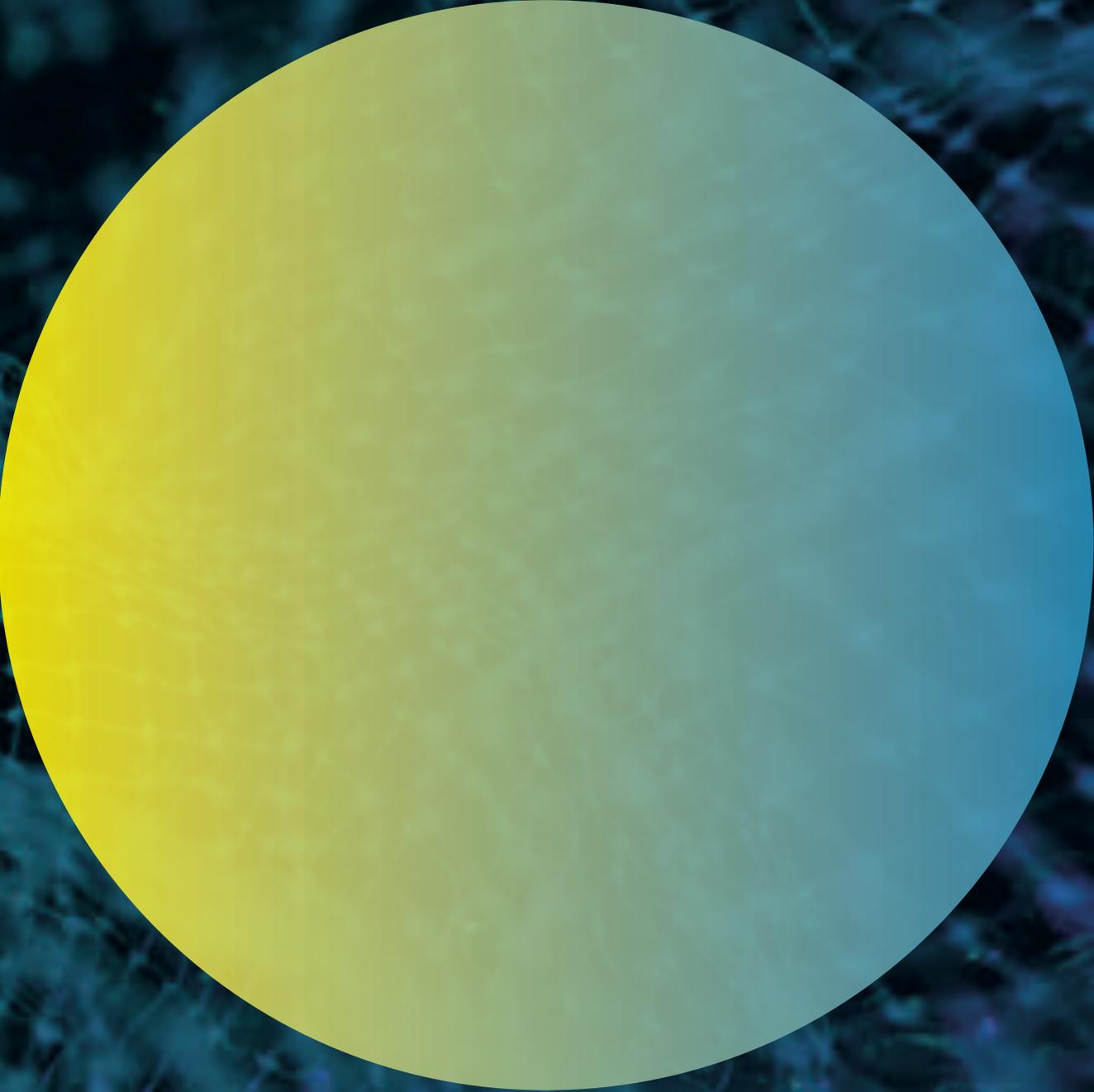
5 Keep an eye on what's next with the new technologies that help newsrooms function better. We are talking Artificial Intelligence and we go through an array of machine learning functions that publishers are relying on to predict audi-

ence behavior, improve the presentation of content and optimise customer service. And though there is still a healthy degree of skepticism we are seeing more examples of actual articles being written by robots for some subject areas. Could this be a cause for concern or a reason for optimism that journalists might be freed up from mundane work? We'll let you make up your minds as we also give you the latest on the NFT craze currently sweeping through media as a possible revenue stream of the future.

6 The last two years have come with significant business challenges but they have proven to be a golden age of sorts for subscriptions as audiences around the world looked to get news from trusted sources and finally realised that quality journalism is worth paying for. But as the big news stories that brought this subscription bump fade into the rear view, how do we keep a hold of these new subscribers and ensure that the momentum toward reader revenue stays? There are a variety of fascinating strategies on offer, all centred on different understandings of audiences, particularly on the 'light readers' who now represent the biggest opportunities for growth in all news organisations.

We end this year's book with a visual treat and a study in contrasts - a round-up of the best visual storytelling formats in digital over the past year, followed by our annual roundup of the best offbeat print and physical campaigns. Print is, after all, where we started and where we will continue to venture, even as we enjoy and marvel at the innovation and change taking place around us. We are happy to be in your hands once again along with your screens, and long may it be so.

Happy reading, and here's to a great recovery from a fragile world.



Beyond the Third Party Play: How to Build a First- Party Data Operation for Your Media Business

A great realignment is coming in the world of digital advertising, and publishers could be in the driving seat if they prepare themselves now

Brace yourselves for the cookie- pocalypse!

And then breathe... and start to look beyond, for there is life after the cookie (and other types of third-party data). In fact, it could be a far better world for publishers, one they may even have a key role in shaping as a part of the digital advertising system finally hives off from Big-Tech and the hellish world of scale, clicks and eyeballs that they have imposed on us for decades.

THE AD COMEBACK

This is an exciting story and a potentially pivotal moment for media but before we dive full on into Google Chrome and the proposed phase-out of third party cookies in 2023 (itself an event that has had many twists and turns), let's go back a bit and take a look at digital advertising from two perspectives. The first is the story of the news business and publishers over the last two years when the media business as we knew it seemed to be turning on its head. As advertising spends cratered across the globe and other businesses looked doomed, a surge in demand for news and online subscriptions provided media businesses with a ray of hope. Editors, CEOs and digital leaders invested in reader-focused business models and moved to launch paywalls. The big stories of 2020, particularly interest in Covid, carried some momentum into early 2021, but of course it couldn't last. By January this year, outlets like Axios were reporting that news engagement had fallen off a cliff over the past year as compared to the extraordinary news cycle that the Trump era and the onset of Covid provided.

By the middle of 2021, another seismic shift was underway. Advertising was rebounding from the Covid-slump, and rebounding big. "Welcome to the roaring '20s," was how the global media investment company GroupM described the scene in their mid-year forecast for 2021, noting that they expected digital advertising to grow by 33% for the year. Those gains would continue into 2022 with ad spending poised to grow 9.7 percent to \$836.9 billion, GroupM said, by the end of the year. And so in a topsy-turvy way, completely emblematic of the times we live in, the message was once again reinforced to publishers: when thinking of business models, don't put all your eggs in one basket. Aim for flexibility and for a mixed-business model, because the loss of ad money overnight may have precipitated a round of useful and productive soul-searching, but ad money is definitely key to the recovery.

THE COOKIE CRUMBLES

When the internet first came into being, the browsing experience was the same for everyone, and data privacy concerns were non-existent. In 1994, the Netscape browser for Web communications developed a tool called a cookie to verify whether a user had visited the site, enabling the site to remember preferences. While meant to primarily help e-commerce companies, the technology changed digital advertising forever.

The Rise of Third-Party Cookies

IN THE MID 90s, the pioneers of the internet faced a serious challenge. Entrepreneurs had already recognised the potential of the new medium for e-commerce, but the industry's key players were not keen on having to store information relating to each user.

The solution was created by Lou Montulli, a 23-year-old engineer working for Netscape, which at the time was the most advanced and popular web browser. Montulli came up with the concept of the cookie – a small amount of data that could be stored on an individual's computer to archive information such as login details and passwords. It also kept a roll call of the pages the person had visited.

— extract from FIPP's report on the Death of Third-Party Cookies

According to an Adobe report, more than 77 percent of websites use tracking cookies, as do 82 percent of all digital ads. As extensive profiles were built on users, the internet thus became ultra-personal, recognizing users' locations, browsing history, preferences, and crucially, gaining the ability to target ads at them. Third-party cookies were identified as a considerable privacy threat as far back as 1996 but the system continued until users' privacy concerns resulted in major changes over the last few years.

Firefox began blocking third-party cookies in 2019 and Apple followed suit in 2020. Apart from disabling third-party cookies in Safari, iOS14 prompted iPhone and iPad users to opt out of tracking in apps that monitor their behaviour and share that data with third parties. The enactment of laws like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union in 2016-2018, and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA), placed further legal pressures on Big Tech companies. The final nail in the coffin was when Google announced it would block all-third party cookies in Chrome - initially planned for the end of 2022 and then extended to the end of 2023 as the company tries to work out an alternative for advertisers (more on that later). Given that Chrome holds an estimated 64 percent of the web browser market share, and third-party cookies are the glue that holds the whole system of targeted advertising together, you can see why marketers and advertisers alike generally view this as an extinction-level event.

The Cost of the Cookiepocalypse

In a paper published in April 2012, consulting firm Mckinsey tried to assess how the shift away from third-party cookies would threaten the US digital advertising industry—and compel its transformation. Some insights from the analysis:

The publishing industry will have to replace up to \$10 billion in ad revenue with a combination of first-party data gathered through a combination of paywalls and required registrations, and updated contextual targeting and probabilistic audience modeling (analytics that incorporate an array of unknown elements).

Many major US publishers currently use first-party data in their ad targeting, and executives interviewed said that they believe the data changes will not have a significant impact on their businesses. Other publishers, mostly non-premium players, depend on third-party targeted ads for more than 80 percent of their ad revenue.

Third-party data's exact effect on ad revenue is unclear: one study found that publishers only increased ad revenue by 4 percent from use of third-party data; another estimated that turning off third-party data decreased ad revenue by 50 to 60 percent. However, the Mckinsey analysis suggests that up to \$10 billion in US publisher revenue is at risk.

BEYOND THE COOKIEPOCALYPSE

Let's be clear here. Big Tech companies have everything to gain from the phase-out of third-party cookies. "We have to be aware that the international tech platforms already do have excellent first-party data," said Patrick Rademacher, senior manager/strategy at Ringier in Switzerland who was quoted in an INMA report on The Third-Party Cookie Trigger in 2020. "Google, Facebook, Instagram, etc., have 60% to 100% logged-in users. So moving away from third-party is something that will strengthen their competitive advantage even more – if the media industry doesn't act."

And therein lies the rub. Digital ad spending is back around the world but the way in which publishers interfaced with the system – through machine-based ad sales fueled by third-party cookies – is on the way out. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Programmatic advertising was initially embraced by publishers as they looked for ways to monetise their web-based content but with largely machine-based advertising

sales that prioritised reach and eyeballs, things soured over the years. “CPMs have fallen, revenues dropped and in many ways the cookie has created a wall between the publishers and their audiences. For some, their ad inventory has become just a cheaply acquired afterthought for brands looking to cement their relationship with consumers across numerous sites and platforms,” a FIPP report on The Death of Third-Party Cookies notes. Moreover, as Greg Piechota, INMA’s researcher in residence points out, the programmatic market is dominated by tech companies that take nearly half of the advertising purchase because they organised the basic bidding platforms.

Both media companies and brands want to target and build relationships with actual people. What third-party data held by others offered was aggregations layered upon each other to create customer attributes rather than people. It worked for Big Tech, but not for everybody else. What if brands got together with publishers to provide smaller groups of customers with higher-calibre, increasingly personalised experiences? “To replace indiscriminate targeting with real value at every step of the customer journey,” as the Adobe report puts it, with first party data acquired by publishers would be the foundation for strategic partnerships.

Like it or not, publishers are now part of the ad tech ecosystem. “Looking across the global news media landscape, the irony appears to be that publishers more advanced in subscriptions are best prepared to integrate advertising as

a new “client” of their first-party data. That is because the key difference between advanced subscription publishers and non-advanced subscription publishers is first-party data,” INMA Executive Director and CEO Earl J. Wilkinson write. There is perhaps no better way to sum up just why this story should be the primary focus for all publishers from here on. If 2020 and 2021 gave publishers the perfect opportunity to focus on subscriptions, experiment with products, gather audience data and know their readers, now is the time to mobilise the learnings and of course, the data.

“Instead of a “subscription model” and an “advertising model” being at opposite ends of the publisher strategy continuum, the embrace of first-party data and on-site content consumption better merges the two models,” Wilkinson concluded.

SCALING UP FIRST PARTY DATA OPERATION

Direct-to-consumer (DTC) brands have a huge advantage in terms of collecting first-party data by virtue of having a business model built on direct relationships with their customers. Over the last few years, successful media companies have transitioned away from the transactional print-advertising model to one built on reader-relationships. The Covid years accelerated this process, as it did for many trends already evident in the world, leading to experimentation and innovation in digital subscription businesses, membership and partnership models, e-commerce, e-learning and virtual or hybrid events. While all of these are excellent building blocks, scale and strategy are the two most important factors to consider when it comes to building out a first-party data play.

Over 2020, as companies first grappled with the news of Chrome’s impending third-party cookie phaseout, Boston Consulting Group and Google interviewed marketing executives at 23 companies and seven advertising agencies across the U.S. Their key findings show that top brands take the following three actions:

- Develop a comprehensive data strategy to

“If we assume that the use of third-party data by publishers is going away, or at least shrinking in value (which I do), then it’s still important to participate in the discussion. Otherwise the risk is we end up with a solution which claims to be privacy-preserving but will conveniently provide more market dominance to the big platforms.”

— Tom Betts, chief data officer of the Financial Times, speaking to INMA.

A Primer on Types of Data

First-party data is the data you collect on your audience based on their behaviors directly on your website and/or app. This data is the most valuable and has the least challenges with regard to privacy. The challenge is that it can be hard to scale since it’s only coming from your efforts. Second-party data is basically someone else’s first-party data that you have to pay or partner up for. The seller collects data straight from their audience, and it all comes from one source. You can feel confident in its accuracy and privacy since it’s coming from one source.

Third-party data is a collection of multiple first-party data sources aggregated across websites and applications by independent researchers and companies, and is also purchased. The provider doesn’t explicitly have a connection or direct relationship with the customers it collects information from. There are many data providers selling many different types of data around the world.

Some basic examples of first-party data include:

- Number of unique visitors
- Location of users
- Audience demographics (e.g. age, gender, income, education)
- Data from your subscription-based emails or products
- Data from your social media profiles

prioritize investment and garner buy-in

- Test, learn, and measure to determine the best activation methods
- Build robust in-house tech capabilities while relying on strategic partners for other kinds of expertise

DATA STRATEGY

Let’s flesh each of these principles out further. The BCG report points out that many brands simply collect as much of that data as possible in the belief that collection itself would somehow translate to value. But attempting to collect unneeded data burdens customers, increases the cost of technology and personnel and raises the risk of data breaches and other privacy violations. The best brands create organisation-wide strategic goals for collection and investment in such data and also identify what data is essential.w

How do we apply this crucial learning to

What Comes After Third-Party Cookies

Google is the last of the Big Tech companies to be holding out on phasing out third party cookies. In fact, the company pushed its end-2022 deadline by a year because it said it needed time to work out alternatives for advertisers. In January 2022, Google announced plans to rollout a new system called Topics, in which advertisers will place ads via a limited number of topics determined by users’ browser activity.

Google said Topics would be ‘easier to understand’ for users and it replaces the earlier plan called FLoC (Federated Learning of Cohorts), which was certainly more of a mouthful. FLoC came under heavy criticism by privacy advocates who worried the new ad-targeting solution would inadvertently make it easier for advertisers to gather user information.

Interestingly, the move came days after a group of German publishers, led by Axel Springer, submitted a report to the European Union claiming that Google’s plan to remove access to third-party cookies from Chrome was anti-competitive. Should publishers just accept the reality and move on with alternatives? We can certainly make a case for that.

HOW IT WORKS:

According to reporting by FIPP, Topics learns about a person’s interest by logging their moves around the web. The company categorises the sites that the user has visited and segments them into one of 300 topics. Advertisers will then be invited to display ads on one of the three topics that it has allocated based on a user’s browsing history.

The system resets every three weeks and for sites that it hasn’t categorised before it will use machine learning to provide an estimated topic.

publishers? For starters, your organisation needs business executives who understand data and a person designated as manager for these strategies, especially if you are looking to mobilise new revenue streams. Historically, publishers and brands have kept data around ad revenue, subscriptions, content engagement and customer profiles stored separately. This thinking should change. As the INMA Third-Party Cookie report puts it, “If the sale of on-site advertising revenue becomes newly reliant on the same first-party data used for a media company’s subscription business, then data

strategies will require a re-thinking. What data does an advertiser need to visualize digestible segments for purchase, and might those user segments simultaneously inform the art and science behind subscription sales and engagement?”

TEST AND LEARN

First party data can be great for delivering personalised experiences. BCG recommends that companies should use a test-and-learn approach to determine what should be personalised and what level of personalisation is needed. “This could mean, for example, focusing on only one customer segment and investing only in the data and technology required to test that particular use case,” the report notes. Once value is proven, brands can deploy additional technology such as artificial intelligence and machine learning and expand personalisation efforts to new customer segments and journeys.

“Collect more data over time by thinking through the right moment in the customer journey to ask for it. At each stage, aim to understand how to move users deeper into the funnel with the right offers that will net you more data to round out your customer profile. Don’t try to collect too much data at one time,” Micheal Silberman, SVP Strategy of the business analytics platform Piano, wrote in What’s New in Publishing.

BUILD IN-HOUSE TECH CAPABILITIES

Brands need to think more strategically about working with agencies rather than outsourcing all aspects of marketing to them, BCG notes, adding that it is more efficient and effective to consider which capabilities are best kept in-house and which ones an agency can provide. They recommend a hybrid approach where the technology stack and capabilities related to data analysis are kept in house while agencies can provide strategic advice.

A number of leading publishers have already made significant strides in building up their own first party-data platforms over the last 12 months and beyond. Apart from the collection of scaleable and authentic data, these efforts include creating easily accessible audience segments for advertisers to use that data. Let’s run through a few prominent examples:

THE NEW YORK TIMES

The New York Times announced in 2020 that it would stop using third-party data to target ads in 2021 and work on creating a proprietary first-party data platform. Axios reported that

What publishers should think about when collecting first party data

Mark Challinor, INMA’s Advertising Initiative Lead, has some tips to think about.

- Begin to be more creative to get first-party data in every customer touch point where possible (still allowing, of course, for customer consent).
- Make sure you are open with customers to make them give you that data, i.e. be transparent as to why you want it.
- As part of being transparent, allow your customers to change their mind easily about what they want to give you.

year that the publisher would start offering companies proprietary first-party audience segments to target ads which would be broken into five broad categories: age, income, business, demographic, and interest. “This can only work because we have 6 million subscribers and millions more registered users that we can identify and because we have a breadth of content,” Allison Murphy, Senior Vice President of Ad Innovation, told Axios.

At an INMA conference in October 2021, The Times said there were three key areas in which they were focused on building products.

1. **Contextual products:** Targets users based on page context.
2. **Behavioural products:** Groups users into segments like demos, age, interest.
3. **Insights products:** Match what is known about the user, content, products, and ads to back up targeting recommendations.

“Any company with a meaningful direct digital relationship with customers could stand to benefit from the cookie-less world,”

– Julia Clyne, Head of Media & The Trust, APAC at Dow Jones.

Prepare your news organisation to be truly data-ready

The INMA report on the The Third-Party Cookie Trigger lists out the different ways in which the role of data within media companies has changed over the years. Before you move toward thinking about harnessing your first party data it is useful to look through the list and actually consider it as a step-by-step guide to ensuring that you have the preconditions in place to achieve success.

What has changed at (successful) media companies:

1. The emergence of real-time data analytics from Web browsing behaviours.
2. CEOs and fiduciary boards understand “data is the new oil” and are investing in data infrastructure.
3. Newsrooms have become moderately accepting of data to guide content decisions, notably behaviours between subscribers and non-subscribers.
4. Media companies are creating teams to strategise data and collect data using standards that continue to evolve.
4. Media companies are hiring business executives who understand the data ecosystem and know how to put the data to good use: subscriber acquisition, subscriber retention and engagement, advertising sales, personalisation, business efficiencies.
5. The acceptance by leaders and the emergence of data best practices are beginning to change media corporate cultures toward being more data-informed.
6. Data records on people have become more unified as hardware, software, and data sets have improved.

The ad team also developed motivation targeting, which looks at how an article motivates the reader, and topic targeting, where they scanned a few years of NYT content and spotted themes or clusters of content the newspaper consistently wrote about. “Today we have about 20 emotions, seven motivations and 100 or more topic clusters,” the publisher told WAN-IFRA in September 2021.

VOX MEDIA - FORTE

Vox announced the launch of its first-party data

platform at the end of 2019. Digiday reported that even with the shock of the pandemic that struck a few months following Vox’s launch, Forte wound up having a very good year. More than 100 brands tried using the platform and by the end of 2020, Forte data was used to drive “nearly half” of Vox Media’s display ad revenue, chief revenue officer Ryan Pauley told the publication. That share grew to about 66% in 2021 and is expected to grow further. Vox is still trying to figure out the way in which clients can use it and how widely it wants to make Forte segments available outside of its own ecosystem.

The bulk of the data Forte uses to infer audience interests and intent comes from the content Vox Media’s audience consumes across both Vox Media and New York Media, which Vox acquired in 2019. But it draws from other sources too, including offline data about people who have attended in-person events, such as Eater’s dinner series Young Guns, as well as subscriber data gathered from New York Media and commerce data gathered from New York Media’s commerce brand, The Strategist.

INSIDER - SAGA

Insider launched its first-party data platform in early 2020 and spent much of that year getting advertisers comfortable with their product. In 2021, over 140 advertisers ran ad campaigns on Insider using Saga data, up from 48 the previous year, the publisher told Digiday. While many of those were first-time customers, a significant percentage were not. What’s more, the advertisers that bought ads from Insider using Saga had a renewal rate of 48%, and the amount of money those advertisers spent on average tripled, according to a company spokesperson. On the whole, the amount of revenue Insider generated on campaigns using Saga rose 175%, from a not-insignificant base. “We went from millions to tens of millions [in revenue],” said Jana Meron, Insider’s SVP of programmatic and data strategy.

Above and beyond these very impressive numbers, Meron said that Saga is now being used by different parts of the Insider’s organization for a number of different initiatives, including audience extension projects designed to drive subscription growth.

JP/POLITIKENS HUS

The Danish publisher also developed its own proprietary first-party data platform in 2020. Describing the platform for an INMA report, the company said it organises data into segments, creating buckets of interest, then does audience

profiling. How much do they interact, and what are they interacting with? The publisher then tries to get as much descriptive data as possible, asking them questions as they log in about gender, age, and more. JP/Politiken offers 600 audiences/segments for direct and programmatic buying and saw a 70% increase in audience segment sizes by utilising first-party data.

SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST - LIGHTHOUSE

The Hong-Kong-based publisher launched its first-party data platform Lighthouse in 2019 to better understand its users and provide advertisers with the tools necessary to target audiences with greater precision. Speaking at an INMA conference in July 2021, Ian Hocking, vice president of digital at South China Morning Post in Hong Kong, shared the amazing range and types of data that Lighthouse could offer as audience segments. These were:

Preference: A long-term attribute unlikely to change.

Opinion: Current way of thinking, which might change based on circumstances.

Sentiment: The positive, neutral, or negative feeling about an article.

Intent: Declared action to do something.

Behavioural: A predictable, usual way of being.

Interest: Declared passion for something.

“When we put all of that together in a profile, we start to build what we think looks much more like a person,” Hocking said. “I think pub-

lishers that have a great, ongoing relationship with audiences to really benefit and present something interesting [comes from] building out not just an ID with an attribute attached to it, but a broad profile that really talks to them as individuals.”

WASHINGTON POST – ZEUS INSIGHTS

The Washington Post developed a first-party data ad targeting tool called Zeus Insights in 2019 which is licensed out to publishers and allows them to utilise first-party reader data to sell highly-targeted adverts. The platform monitors contextual data such as what article a person is reading or watching, what position they have scrolled to on a page, what URL they have used to arrive there and what they're clicking on. It currently has over 200 publishers who are at various stages of using the Zeus platform.

Speaking at an event organised by Insider on “how advertisers can navigate the death of third-party cookies, The Post’s VP of Commercial Technology Jarrod Dicker said that the publisher is seeing it as an opportunity “both in terms of the investments we’re making on the Post and also how we represent all of our Zeus partners, which is now at 200+ publishers.”

“We’ve seen trends over the past few years where [the client-publisher] relationship has been growing: more focussed on direct, more focus on unique products even beyond branded content, but how we target, how we understand consumption. Publishers have a unique advantage in this next phase because consumption data is something that we’ve always deeply understood – we know what type of content users prefer, how they navigate through sites, and all of this can be worked out without ever having to know a user’s identity,” Dicker added.

According to the INMA report, the Post’s Research Experimentation and Development (RED) group has data to support the prioritisation of first-party data based on content consumption over third-party crosssite shopping data:

Higher click-through rate: Ads that ran without any behavioural context from a third-party cookie had an

overall 25% higher click-through rate. This is based on machine-learned contextual adjacency when applied to high-quality content.

Better ad performance and recall: Ads performed better and reduced the amount of recall when they were content-based rather than cookie-based. Readers of brand-aligned journalism can yield better results than third-party cookies, especially for net-new customers.

Lowest cost-per-click: Content had twice the click-through rate and the lowest cost-per-click. High-quality journalism can, by itself, be used as a performance driver – especially on platforms omitting contextual adjacency.

As Earl J. Wilkinson summarised in the report, The Post’s research suggests the emerging game is convincing advertisers that a person’s content consumption and brand engagement are better signals to serve up relevant advertising than a person’s cross-site shopping.

FUTURE PLC - APERTURE

Future PLC, the U.K. company which published over 50 magazines, was another early mover, launching its first-party data platform in December 2020. The publisher spent months building out a tech stack to collect, streamline and scale the first-party data that it gets from its more than 350 million monthly visitors to its portfolio of 130 special interest sites and enthusiast publications.

“The specialist piece is a key differentiator,” Future’s global chief revenue officer Mike Peralta told Digiday in December 2020. “That’s because enthusiast audiences naturally have higher purchase intent for products that are endemic to their passions.”. Future has run over 200 campaigns through the platform to date and has seen a range of 50-70% better performance on campaigns that use its first-party audience segment data than campaigns that rely on third-party data, Peralta added.

In one sense, from an advertising perspective, first-party data actually represents something of a throwback to a system of contextual advertising where ads are placed next to relevant content. What the publisher is doing essentially is to divide those audiences into segments based on interests and sell ad space to advertisers who want to target those segments. The ways in which this is being done, however, is already becoming incredibly sophisticated. Each of the examples we highlight are perfect illustrations of the breadth and complexity of audience data that a publisher is able to collect because of their unique one-to-one relationship with audiences. While we focused on the early movers who have had some time to develop their strate-

Choose your platform

Publishers often differentiate between data management platforms (DMPs) and customer data platforms (CDPs). Here’s a quick breakdown of the differences from Oracle that you need to keep in mind when you’re looking at a first-party data play.

Both platforms handle first-party data, second-party data (data provided from other companies, such as partners, resellers, etc.), and third-party data (data from multiple sources).

However, what they target differs. DMPs primarily pursue third-party data (cookies and segmented customer IDs) and then store that data for a short time. CDPs focus on structured, semistructured, and unstructured PII first-party data.

A CDP stores this data over long periods of time so marketers can build in-depth, accurate customer profiles and nurture customer relationships.

Deciding on whether to use a CDP, DMP or both comes down to:

- Understanding the differences between the two platforms
- Determining how each platform can help you achieve your marketing objectives
- Knowing how you want to use your data
- Establishing if you can dedicate enough resources to using these platforms to optimize their potential

Examples of CDPs - Piano, Blue Conic, Blue Venn, Deep.BI, Lytics, Mather

Examples of DMPs - Lotame Audience Management, Permutive, Oracle Data Cloud, Salesforce Audience Studio, Adobe Audience Manager

Examples of software developed by peer media companies to manage data and ad targeting: The Washington Post’s Arc, Vox Media’s Chorus, or Ringier Axel Springer’s Ring

gies, there are a number of recent publisher entries to the first-party platform space, including News UK’s Nucleus, Penske Media’s Atlas Data Studio, Livingly’s IRIS, Forbes’ ForbesOne and BuzzFeed’s Lighthouse. With Google pushing back the time limit on the cookie phaseout to the end of 2023, the good news for publishers around the world is that there is ample time to learn and experiment.

“For users to provide that login information, they need to see value in what they get in return for their personal data, and publishers will need to grow the value of their offerings and use the information to drive a better consumer experience. When we look at this from the consumer point of view, we have to look at why they want to give us that information.”

– Jarrod Dicker, VP of Commercial Technology, The Washington Post

There are already strong indications that publishers' first-party data has begun to significantly alter the landscape in some markets. Publishers' conversations about 2022 with advertisers and agencies are underway, and publishers' first-party data is a newly prominent topic for an unusually wide range of publishers, Digiday reported in December 2021. Where last year many publishers were either readying or launching their first-party data offerings, this year, most have something in the market. And conversely, advertisers have gotten their own data in order, and are increasingly willing to share it with publishers.

The deals and partnerships being forged now are more complicated – and in some cases, more expensive – than some are used to, but it will make the industry more comfortable with the change, while also moving ad buyers and sellers closer to understanding how much value publishers' audience data really has when third-party cookies are phased out, Max Willens writes in the article.

So is a strong first-party data play the right move for your organisation? There is overwhelming evidence to support the case, but scaling up will be the biggest challenge. Small publishers in particular will feel that they cannot compete in this world. Half of small publishers plan to rely more on non-advertising sources of revenue when third-party cookies are phased out at the end of 2021, according to a survey Digiday conducted in the first quarter of 2021.

"Without third-party cookies and targeting, they don't have the scale to compete," said Fran Wills, the CEO of the Local Media Consortium, a trade group that negotiates preferred rates with vendors and platforms for over 5,000 local news publisher sites, told Digiday.

"I fully understand not all publishers can afford such a thing," Thomas Lue Lytzen of JP Politik-

The Importance of Logins

Logging in to a news website should provide subscribers and users access to content and other experiences. Yet it also should create pools of known users from which audience segments can be optimised for advertisers, according to INMA's report. With content consumption patterns as the currency behind digital advertising, publishers will have to be much more forceful in requiring user logins. Some shining examples:

In the United Kingdom, The Guardian has experimented with a registration wall to serve up more relevant ads. Yet it is the incentives to log in that are of particular interest: signed-in users can leave comments, gain access to newsletters, and opt in for special discounted offers. Gannett's USA Today has offered visitors sweepstakes entries in exchange for registration, while its local news sites unlock content when a reader hits a paywall.

The Amedia Group in Norway, which publishes 75 small community newspapers has about 80% of its users logged-in. For a publisher, that is an extraordinary figure that rivals the 60%-100% range of Big Tech platforms and major entertainment brands like Netflix.

ens Hus told INMA. "But I would at least recommend they start thinking about what they can do on first-party data. If they can't build something themselves, then they could probably talk to some of the companies out there trying to help media companies organise first-party data. Start first with evaluating or finding what you actually have on the first-party side and then try to look for some other media companies and work with them," he added.

Could these collaborations between media companies be the way of the future? Take for instance, the "Drive" effort by a collective of German regional publishers. In 2020, the German news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur and the publishing consultancy Schickler created a cooperation between publishers with a simple idea: share resources, share data and share insights. The reasoning was that for smaller publishers, collection of data can be costly and tedious – each publisher has to recruit its own data science teams, build the data infrastructure and go through all the experiments only to realize that the critical amount of data is lacking. The data experts from Schickler

set up a joint data warehouse which collects in real time first-party customer data from all the news sites.

The pilot phase of the project included three regional publishers: Mittelbayerische Zeitung (Regensburg), Badische Zeitung (Freiburg) and Aachener Zeitung (Aachen). In the second half of 2020, five new publishers joined up: Lensing Media (Dortmund), Aschendorff (Münster), Südwest Presse (Ulm), Zeitungsgruppe Ostfriesland (Emden), and Rheinpfalz (Ludwigshafen). Up to 15 publishers are now part of the initiative.

In October 2021, Nieman Lab reported on the Swiss Digital Alliance launched in 2018 and includes the major private media companies in Switzerland: CH Media, NZZ Media Group, Ringier, and Tamedia as well as the Swiss public broadcasting corporation SRG. (There are similar alliances throughout Europe: Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom) Some of their news sites are free, others require a paid subscription, but they came together to launch OneLog, a plan that brings all the companies together to a single sign-on solution.

The initiative originated with a conversation between leading publishers who were worried about the looming battles over third-party cookies and their losing ground in the advertising market. They wanted to find ways to work together to regain a direct relationship with their readers and news consumers online. They all agreed that having more first-party data and increasing the share of registered visitors would allow them to build better relationships with readers and more relevant news products, Nieman Lab reported.

The Swiss Digital Alliance hopes the lack of friction will prompt readers to log in even if a news site has no paywall. And there are signs that the idea is already catching on. In April this year, The Fix reported that some publishers in the Czech Republic were preparing to adopt Czech Ad ID, a unified login system across the majority of big news websites to be able to track users. The plan was similarly a response to Google Chrome's impending replacement of the third-party cookie system.

Whether you find strength in the collective or work on your data teams and capabilities to make a strong individual play, the good news is that you have time, and plenty of examples to learn from. And remember, it's your chance to place the odds in your favour rather than waiting around for Big Tech to come up with another system to exploit you. ●

"Collect more data over time by thinking through the right moment in the customer journey to ask for it. Don't try to collect too much data at one time."

– Micheal Silberman, SVP, Strategy at Piano

The Newsletter Economy

In these heady times of product innovation, subscriber battles and the pivot to reader revenue, the media world is awash with shiny new technologies and avenues that promise to be the next big thing. You might have heard of NFTs, AI driven paywalls, synthetic text-to-audio features and personalised apps (don't fret: we write about all of those in this book as well!). Oh, and you may also have heard that the world's most famous publisher simply acquired the internet's hottest word game. Because engagement.

And yet, amidst all of the competition, one tool in the publisher's arsenal stands tall, boasting not one but many superpowers. It can:

Build direct, intimate relationships with readers

Build habits, drive traffic and monetise relationships

Be a key driver for collecting first-party data insights

Be adaptable in content and format, such that A/B testing is a dream

Be tailored to deliver specific content to niche audience segments

Give your star writers a new lease of life, or a shiny new project

Pair well as a companion to your podcasts and other new storytelling ventures

Be the foundation for an entire business model (if done right)

Welcome to the new newsletter economy. It's the old medium that never quite went away, the publisher's swiss army knife that keeps adding blades. "The great survivors" is how Sarah Ebner, head of newsletters at Financial Times, describes them, pointing out that they keep working because the reader has specifically signed up to read what you're offering.

All the way back in 2014, the renowned media columnist David Carr mused that despite many predictions to the contrary, the death of the email newsletter was greatly exaggerated. "How can that be?" he asks. "With social media, mobile apps and dynamic websites that practically stalk the reader, how can something that sometimes gets caught in a spam filter really be taking off?"

Newsletters, Carr theorised, are clicking because readers have grown tired of the endless stream of information on the Internet, and having something finite and recognisable show up in your inbox can impose order on all that chaos. Subscribe if you want it, unsubscribe if you don't. It's a neat analysis that still holds good in 2022, though not even Carr, we suspect, could have foreseen what commentators described as "peak newsletter" – a time just before the pandemic hit in 2020.

"In the age of ceaseless content, everyone seems to have a TinyLetter or a Substack, and the personal-newsletter backlash is predictably here," Claire Landsbaum wrote in Vanity Fair in July 2019. It might be a misguided backlash, she added, and so it proved during the pandemic when people were stuck at home and hungry for any and all kinds of information.

STACK UPON SUBSTACK

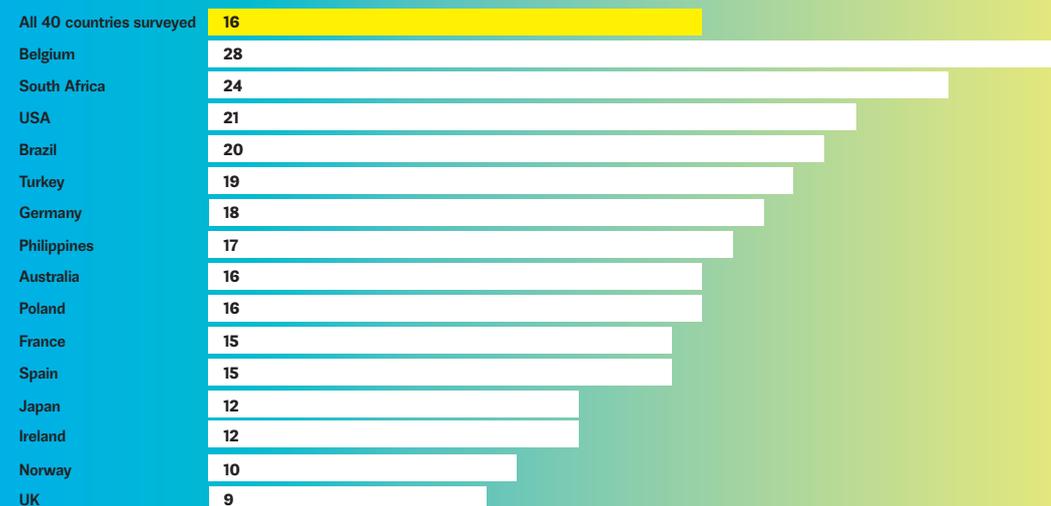
It turned out that there was enough space for everyone to co-exist and newsletters actually became a huge driver of paid subscriptions, a trend propelled by Substack. Now five years old, the company that lets creators create, send, and charge for newsletter content came along at the perfect moment, the newsletter writer Dave Pell wrote in The Atlantic in November 2021. "The Trump years created a unique obsession with the media and raised the profile of countless journalists. Many of these journalists took their raised profile and left established publications to go direct-to-consumer with their writing. What we're seeing is an indie news-delivery revolution," Pell writes. "What we're not seeing is a technological revolution. This movement is not about hiring 10,000 engineers to build a

Newsletter Data

The Reuters Institute Digital News Report of 2020 was one of the first comprehensive attempts to compile newsletter consumption data for newsletters. Here are two key charts.

One in six people access news through newsletters each week

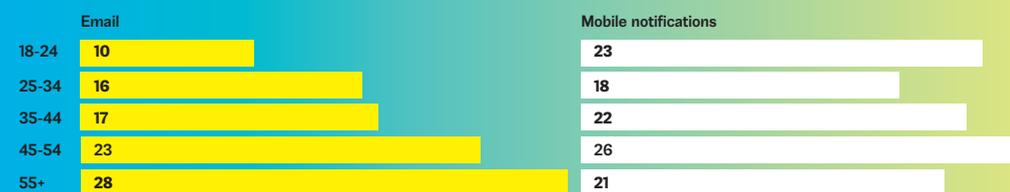
% of survey respondents who access news via email weekly



Selected countries shown Source : Reuters Digital News Report 2020

Newsletters are popular with older readers

% of each age group that accessed news by email and mobile notifications in the last week



Source : Reuters Digital News Report 2020

new version of human interaction."

The combination of efficient business model and evergreen medium, allied to the pandemic-inspired thirst for content, brought Substack to a major milestone: 1 million paid subscribers in November 2021. It underscored people's willingness to pay for quality content and despite the fact that they may have lost some of their star writers to Substack and other newsletter platforms, publishers were optimistic that the portends were good for their own subscription efforts.

"I would regard anything that is about helping make the market for paid digital journalism as good," New York Times CEO Meredith Kopit Levien told investors in the same month. "This is still a forming market. And I would regard all

efforts to get more people to think about paying for high quality journalism is a positive thing."

Sure enough, the American news site Axios was soon reporting that the Substack threat to newsrooms was overblown and the bigger publishers were hitting back, embracing the idea of the independent-operator model. "Pressure from new publishing platforms has finally pushed newsrooms to create programs that give writers more pay, autonomy and flexibility, Axios' media reporter Sarah Fischer noted. And those changes were bringing some prominent independent writers back to traditional news companies.

More superb reporting from Fischer followed on the creator economy as a whole, which was supposed to democratise media, but it turned

out that a small portion of creators still reap the most revenue for their work across multiple platforms. One figure that stood out in particular for newsletters - Fischer reported that the top ten publications on Substack collectively make more than \$20 million a year in subscription revenue, while less popular newsletters typically make tens of thousands annually.

THE NEW FRONTIER

Not that long ago, being relegated to a newsletter was considered a journalistic demotion, Jack Shafer writes in Politico. It was Substack that arguably changed this irrevocably, to a time when writing a newsletter has become something of a prestige beat for writers. For publishers of course, as Shafer notes, the business imperative is huge. "The newsletter form offers publishers something advertisers crave: a targeted audience. When you subscribe to a newsletter, you reveal that part of your identity defined by your interests and that has value. Advertisers would rather reach the right 50,000 readers than 5,000,000 randos, and they especially covet audiences to whom they can repeatedly serve targeted content", Shafer notes. "Instead of letting all those precious eyeballs disappear into the Substack writers' room, publishers have found that they can provide plenty of room for newsletter writers to roam."

For the star writer or the lesser light, for the legacy newsroom or the digital upstart, this is now the new golden age of newsletters, and the numbers show it. "There are so many ways technology has helped email newsletters become a replacement for the newspaper and magazine as people's view into the world and how they get news and information," Kerel Cooper, CMO of email service provider LiveIntent, told Digital Content Next. LiveIntent's Industry Pulse Survey of 200 senior marketing and publish-

ing executives showed 87% of publishers and marketers actively investing in email and 94% scaling their email programs in 2021, a trend that is set only to grow this year.

Now that we've surveyed the frontier, let's set out the new rules of engagement. What strategy should you follow, who is getting things right and which are the companies making the big moves? Here's our comprehensive rundown:

METRICS - BEYOND OPENS

Here's Dan Oshinsky, former Newsletters Director of both The New Yorker and BuzzFeed, talking about newsletter metrics in an interview with The Fix in 2020.

"First of all, no organisation sees 100% of readers open their emails. If you can get 30% of your readers to open your newsletter, that is very good. A 25% click to open - meaning 25% of readers who open a newsletter click on something - that's really, really good." The other number Oshinsky shared is that the best newsrooms convert about 10% of unique visitors to newsletter subscribers.

The open rate was formerly the standard by which to measure the success of a newsletter. But by 2021, Oshinsky and others were warning that publishers needed to start looking at other measures and do more to engage with readers of their newsletters. Central to this is data privacy policies being instituted across the board by Big Tech companies and in this case, Oshinsky is referring in particular to Apple releasing mail privacy protection in the fall of 2021, a new feature that "helps users prevent senders from knowing when they open an email, and masks their IP address so it can't be linked to other online activity or used to determine their location."

The result, Oshinsky told an International News Media Association (INMA) conference in July 2021, would be that media companies may start to see differences in their metrics since Apple was essentially opening up people's emails behind the scenes before it hit a user's inbox. Remember that Apple Mail is the dominant email platform in the U.S. and elsewhere. As a result of this change, Oshinsky says companies may start to see inflated open rates and find that location data isn't accurate.

To battle back, he recommends that newsrooms focus on progressive profiling and ask questions to gather information on readers: "What are they interested in? Where do they live? What do they do? What do they want more of? We can start to personalise the user journey and the specific newsletters to serve these audiences."

"One-to-one replies to subscribers is more valuable now than it's ever been. Clicks are better than opens to drive habits."

- Dan Oshinsky, former Newsletters Director of both The New Yorker and BuzzFeed

Journalist David Tvrdon at The Fix has been maintaining a list of all the ways publishers are making money from newsletters. Here, we summarise his last update:

1 PAID NEWSLETTERS

Paid newsletters with access only for paying subscribers are the most straightforward way news publishers can grow their paying members or subscribers. It's not a simple task by any means. There are different strategies you can choose from. But having a paid newsletter connected with your membership/subscription offering is easy to communicate. Of course, this goes without saying, if you want people to pay for your content, it has to be good.

2 EXTRA CONTENT FOR PAYING SUBSCRIBERS (I.E. SUNDAY EDITION, SPECIAL Q&A)

Recently, Bloomberg launched new personality driven newsletters and one of them, "Power On" written by Mark Gurman about Apple and consumer technology, has two versions. One version is for any free subscribers with all the weekly Apple news. Another version goes out to Bloomberg paying subscribers sooner and includes an exclusive Q&A section.

3 EXTRA FEATURES FOR PAYING SUBSCRIBERS (i.e. access to online community).

One of the best practices for building a loyal following is creating exclusive and "safe spaces" for members and subscribers to interact with the newsroom and each other. Taking this into account, some independent and also small news publishers are experimenting with creating online communities on Discord or in closed Facebook groups. Entry is only for paying supporters.

4 FREE NEWSLETTERS WITH LINKS TO PAYWALLED ARTICLES

If you have a big base of readers, going the indirect way of converting them to paying customers might be more successful even if it is a longer term project. One of the big news publishers going down this route is The New York Times. "Newsletters are a great way to grow a subscription business. Subscribing to a newsletter is a healthy habit that can bear fruits down the line," Adam Pasick, editorial director of newsletters at The Times told Digiday. The strategy of free newsletters linking to

paywalled articles was successfully used by Funke Mediengruppe who managed to convert 5 to 10% of their newsletter subscribers to pay for their online subscription.

5 FREE NEWSLETTERS WITH MEMBERSHIP/SUBSCRIPTION PROMOTION (support us)

This is a similar approach as in the previous point with the exception that you are actively promoting your digital subscription in the newsletter. NYT is doing this, Funke Mediengruppe tried this but had more success with sending readers to paywalled articles. You can do this also to promote memberships for a news site that does not have paywalled content.

6 EAAS - EMAIL AS A SERVICE (full articles straight into inbox)

What if your subscriber's inbox was the main touch point with your content? The resurgence of independent writers using platforms like Substack, Ghost and Revue shows the power of the inbox. Readers subscribe to the newsletter and get the full experience of each content within the email sent by the writer. No need to click and visit the website to read the whole article.

7 NEWSLETTER AS A RETENTION TOOL (losing less subscribers)

Sometimes growing your members or subscribers means you are not losing the existing ones. As Adam Pasick of the NYT quoted above says, newsletters are a great habit forming tool.

8 REFERRAL PROGRAMS

Referral programs are primarily used to build up the newsletter list. You create incentives for your newsletter subscribers to share the sign up link to get their friends or followers to join your newsletter.

9 CREATE A NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIPTION PLATFORM

The last and hardest one to pull off. If you have the resources, the market power and the incentives for independent writers to join your platforms, you can have your own newsletter subscription platform.

Things to consider when vetting your newsletter idea

What are the questions publishers should ask themselves to hone in on the right newsletter ideas? Here are some suggestions from Kim Bode, Product manager, newsletters and messaging, Los Angeles Times/San Diego Union-Tribune and Jacqueline Boltik, CEO, yellowbrim.com.

COMMUNITY FIRST

Who is this newsletter for? Why do they need it?

How are you engaging with them – or not? How do you plan to reach them?

How can you provide opportunities for the community to connect with you and with one another.

GOALS

What do you want to achieve with this newsletter? And does it line up with your overarching mission/strategy?

How do you plan to measure success?

Could this newsletter generate revenue directly or indirectly?

PROCESSES

Who will write/edit/produce the newsletter? And who will take over if this person is unavailable?

Who will check and monitor responses from subscribers? Do you plan to answer them, and if so, how?

News media companies, he says, should measure success by engagement. “One-to-one replies to subscribers is more valuable now than it’s ever been. Clicks are better than opens to drive habits and use user-submitted data more to personalise the experience as best we can.”

“What percentage of our audience has actually filled out this info, given us this info? What percentage has given us location data? Do we know their job? Do we know what they’re interested in?”

As an example, Oshinsky mentioned the female-focused Canadian sports site The Gist, which asks its readers where they are located when they sign up for its newsletters. “Based on that information, they personalise certain sections of the newsletter,” Oshinsky said. So readers in New York may get more basketball and baseball news and readers in Toronto may see more about hockey.

One company that’s ahead of the curve on this development – no surprises here – is the Financial Times. The FT’s Sarah Ebner, who was quoted earlier, says the company uses several different metrics to measure success, realising that even numbers like click-through rates, though more informative than open rates, are not enough.

“Even to the extent of someone’s opened a newsletter, are they really reading it all the way through? You don’t know that,” Ebner, who was also a speaker at the INMA conference, said. The FT likes to engage its readers intimately, asking them to fill out newsletters with specific questions, polls, and user surveys. “People like that one-to-one relationship,” Ebner says. The company then looks at time spent on their site from a newsletter click to gauge its success.

One piece of advice Ebner has is not to be afraid to A/B test. The FT saw a 5% increase in openings when it changed the sender from the name of the publication to the first and last name of the writer.

This interactive feature in newsletters was also highlighted by Funke Mediengruppe, one of the largest German multimedia companies with 13 regional daily titles, whose digital growth was spurred by an extraordinary five-fold increase in newsletter subscribers over 2020. The German publisher is often cited as a case study for rapid digital transformation.

Nadine Lange, who has managed the Digital Transformation Project at the company since 2019, pointed out audiences respond well to tests and surveys. “These elements also serve as additional measuring tools for audience engagement research,” she said in an interview with The Fix.

More broadly, what we are arriving at is an increasing sophistication with which successful publishers approach the unique data that can be generated by newsletter readers, honing in on the granular specifics.

“Look at the content consumed most by loyal users as that is a guide to what your newsletters should be based around,” advises Martin Little, audience transformation director of the UK publisher Reach. Newsletters are now a key way to get users to come back to one of the publisher’s more than 80 online brands.

Little continues: “Build up your mailing list. Focus really hard on your mailing list and make sure it’s quality as well. It’s not a case of buying users or a mailing list because their engagement levels will be low, you need to use your website’s inventory well. Again target loyal users - where are they visiting on your site? What sections? What pages? Optimise the inventory on your pages to get those people to sign up.”

Oshinsky refers to this practice at the INMA conference, wanting to see companies to personalise the experience for readers and then lead them toward more content as they move along. “You become a subscriber. Great. After you register and subscribe, we’re going to encourage you to sign up for different types of newsletters,” he says. The one key learning here is this” at this current moment newsletters are almost unparalleled both in generating audience insights and the potential they harbour to make inroads into niche segments and interests.

EXPERIMENT, AND THEN REFINE

In October 2021, Digiday reported that British publisher The Telegraph was betting that offering fewer, more focused newsletters would actually help grow the number of subscribers to them. The publisher used engagement rates, among other factors, to inform sunseting about a half dozen newsletters and consolidating others due to “underperformance,” Dan Silver, The Telegraph’s director of email and newsroom innovation, was quoted as saying.

Here again is one of the key questions that publishers have to address in this age of ever-continuing peak newsletter. Do you forge ahead with more variety, targeting the various niches that present themselves from sophisticated audience research, or hone in on the most successful? The Telegraph’s experiment represents a fluid approach that would work well for the future.

“Newsletters can have a shelf life. It’s fine to unsubscribe to one newsletter and sign up for another newsletter. We have a very fluid at-

Five tips from The Economist on building a successful newsletters team

Newsletters have long since been instrumental in The Economist's subscription strategy. Its core offerings are a weekly round-up, an evening digest and a subscriber-exclusive Espresso morning briefing, the most popular newsletter on offer. The publisher has also launched the subscriber-only Cover Story newsletter that shows the process behind the selection of the print cover story; the Checks and Balances newsletter for US political coverage; and the Climate Issue newsletter which is a collection of cross-section climate stories.

Speaking at the FIPP World Media Congress 2020, Sunnie Huang, newsletters editor of The Economist offered some lessons her team has learned over the years. Here is a summary from journalism.co.uk.

MAKE NEWSLETTERS INTO A STAND-ALONE PRODUCT

"The best newsletters should be first and foremost designed with readers in mind," she says.

It is tempting to see newsletters as another way to drive traffic to, and to diffuse content from, the website. But neither of these are reader goals. The best user experience will not require readers to be redirected to make sense of it all.

She revealed that "unread copy guilt" is one of the biggest reasons why people unsubscribe, so her team is focused on not adding to the burden. Huang advised to not ask too much of the reader and stick to a tight knit number of newsletters with distinct offerings.

HONE IN ON A POWERFUL USER JOURNEY

People need to have a good reason to read. Newsletters are only as strong as the user journey and user experience. Here, the value proposition is what matters most.

Huang said that her team agonised over the email sign-up page, "obsessing over every pixel", so that readers know what they are signing up for. It is key to manage goals and expectations.

If you also have a print product, make sure the digital offering is distinct and not just replicating the same experience.

DEVISE CROSS-FUNCTIONAL EMAIL TEAMS

Internally, we all know the difference between marketing emails, transactional confirmations and editorial newsletters. But to others, it can all look the same.

"To readers, an email from The Economist is an email from The Economist," says Huang, adding that in addition to expanding its portfolio of newsletters, the publisher has doubled-down on the "inbox experience" across the company.

An "email squad" was assembled from many different departments - editorial, marketing, products, data, user experience, legal - to think about the email approach through workshops.

"We all think the email should be a welcoming, consistent, customer-sensitive and business-driven experience," she explains on the common ground she found within departments.

"When everyone is clear where you want to go, everything becomes easier and that's why a cross-functional team is key to success."

NEVER STOP IMPROVING THE TOOLS AND PRODUCT

It is tough to produce daily newsletters bridging many themes, languages and regions.

Always seek new technological solutions, like new templates or plug-ins. But do not stop there, train more staff from different teams to get to grips with the tools and access the email platforms. "Don't underestimate the power of internal training, the power of knowledge-sharing and how that improves processes."

UNDERSTAND YOUR READER'S PAIN POINTS

"Take a step back from the product and reconnect with your audience and their needs," says Huang. "Once you know who your audience is, what needs they have and what pain points they have, it will become a lot easier to find the right products which fit those needs."

The pain point which came out of Huang's user research was how time-poor her audience was. Not only that, they would be interrupted by other emails and app notifications at any point of reading newsletters.

The key, she concluded, is to create a product which is worth their time and not overly taxing to use, as to not add to the friction.

itude to these editorial properties," Silver said. This is because, Little explains, "Newsletters are easy to get out, on the ground, and test new concepts."

The Telegraph tracked newsletter readers' habits and found overlaps among audiences and topics, such as Letter from the USA and Letter from the Middle East – foreign dispatch newsletters – that were combined into one global newsletter called The Dispatches. Elsewhere, three rugby newsletters were condensed into one. The Telegraph still has a significant number of newsletters sent out by editorial teams – more than 40 according to Digiday, eight of which are exclusive to paid subscribers. That number should give you an idea of the scale at which bigger publishers are allocating resources to newsletter strategy, with the British media trade magazine Press Gazette reporting, by way of comparison, that the The New York Times, Washington Post and The Guardian all send out over 50 newsletters on a range of subjects.

Peak newsletter right? Well, it's also a perfect illustration of just how agile the medium can be, with publishers identifying niche areas for coverage as well as adapting content and storytelling to major news events. Not surprisingly, 2020 was the heyday of the pop-up newsletter. The Washington Post for example, in the span of just two months, saw its coronavirus newsletter become by far the most popular of the more than 70 newsletters it offers. The New York Times similarly reported that its newsletters around big news events, including the "Coronavirus Briefing," "Coronavirus Schools Briefing," and "At Home" had over 180 million opens.

Experimenting with pop-up newsletters was also central to the strategy of Funke Mediengruppe whose success with dramatically increasing its number of newsletter subscribers we referred to earlier. Funke created pop-up newsletters, which are used for trending topics. Then they'd kill that newsletter when the event was over. However, in some cases they would adapt the product depending on the response and the purpose it might serve in the future. They would not kill the pop-up before they had something else to offer them. "We did pop-up newsletters for the U.S. election last year," Funke's Lange told INMA. "We moved them to permanent ones so there's a U.S. politics newsletter now for general readers."

Funke also saw great retention with its once-a-week newsletter that only talks about good news, a strategy that several publishers adopted in tandem with focus coverage about Covid and

"Look at the content consumed most by loyal users as that is a guide to what your newsletters should be based around."

– Martin Little, audience transformation director of Reach, U.K.

other news stories. The Telegraph experimented with a newsletter promising a pandemic-free reading experience called In Other News, while the Guardian took a more data-driven approach with The Antidote, a daily listing of the most popular non-coronavirus stories.

IDENTIFY NICHES, THEN DEPLOY

Here's the thing about Funke Mediengruppe's newsletter transformation that we haven't told you so far. The publisher's strategy centred around 12 main daily newsletters and 75 others covering a specific topic. That sounds like an enormous project right? Well, it was launched by a group of five people! And they were responsible for the following: editorial, marketing, tech, product and project management, and digital transformation management.

And here's the lesson here: with the right organisation you can launch your big flagship newsletters, devote resources to understanding your audience, and aggressively going after specific target segments. We've spoken so far about some of the bigger names, skewing somewhat toward the U.S., but a new report published by the World Association of News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) in January 2022 looks into how 10 European newspapers adopted an audience-centric mindset during the Table Stakes Europe programme, conceived primarily (but not only) for local and regional news organisations to help drive digital growth by refocusing on audiences. Needless to say, newsletters were key to helping these publishers serve their audiences with targeted content, and helping to transform casual readers into loyal subscribers. Here are some examples, summarised by journalist Faizal Kalim for What's New in Publishing.

The German publisher General-Anzeiger

launched a weekly newsletter called Bonn Appetit aimed at foodies that had more than 600 people signed up even before the first issue was published in late May 2021. The decision to launch a food-related newsletter was driven by editorial instinct which was backed by data, according to Sylvia Binner, Head of Editorial Development for General-Anzeiger. “At first, we trusted our gut feeling,” she says. “Then we analysed the data. We saw that – depending on the method used [Personas and Google Interest categories] – we have between 560,000 and 750,000 foodies in the region. That’s when the decision was made.” The publisher now plans to build upon the success of Bonn Appetit with a podcast, video show, and live events like wine tastings and cooking classes.

Similarly, the Spanish publisher Diario de Navarra decided to launch a range of products in the family segment. The paper launched a dedicated newsletter in 2019 and also organised live events like the Expo Family Fair, round tables and book presentations. Recently, Diario de Navarra narrowed its audience focus from families in general to parents who have children enrolled in compulsory education.

The publisher also has a newsletter that caters specifically to professionals, defined as the segment of people who hold middle and upper management positions, as well as self-employed workers like lawyers and doctors. This group makes up 18,000 people in Navarra and the newsletter had 3,600 subscribers in late 2021, having increased its unique readers by over 24% in recent months.

“We’re definitely seeing a flight to niche and to verticals. I think newsletters and podcasts are interesting because they’re examples of a larger shift going on in general, from institutions to individuals. There’s been a lot of trust loss over the last decade plus, really, and I think it’s normal for this phase of media to go more towards individuals.”

– Brian Morrissey, former Digiday editor and host of The Rebooting newsletter

Nordwest-Zeitung is another German publisher with a family-focused newsletter called “Familienzeit” (Family Time) that has 3,000 subscribers and also drives digital subscriptions. The newsletter which focuses on service, excursions, and cooking tips was developed after surveying readers on what they would like to see in the product.

Circling back now across the pond, in May 2021 Adweek reported on the newsletter portfolio expansion of the technology website The Information. Take a look at the topics they were planning:

“Four times a week, reporter Matthew Olson will write Reality Check, which covers the worlds of augmented and virtual reality. Reporter Yunan Zhang will publish the Mandarin and English-language China newsletter every other week, covering the latest developments in the Chinese tech industry,” Mark Stenber reported for Adweek.

Another newsletter, still a work-in-progress at the time, would build upon The Information’s proprietary organisational charts, tracking the comings and goings of key executives to map the taxonomies of power within influential tech companies. Further newsletters were planned to cover the creator economy, the cloud enterprise space and the world of cryptocurrency.

Does this sound niche in the extreme? “My hope is that people say, ‘Oh man, no one’s gonna read that.’ And then a couple of months later, we’ve got hundreds of thousands of people reading it,” the site’s founder Jessica Lessin told Adweek. “That’s what we’re going for.” Adding in-depth, niche resources to its subscribers helps The Information reduce churn. By giving them more for their money, the publication hopes to keep readers subscribed for longer, an effort Lessin calls “super-serving” its readers.

“What we are seeing across the board is that consumption is shifting from generic to specific, Reuters Institute Professor and digital transformation expert Lucy Kueng said in an episode of the Media Voices podcast. “There’s various prime real estate in terms of very interesting areas that really have traction with audiences,

that advertisers are interested in, that are being plucked off by players who are doing either newsletters or podcasts, or both, who are very dangerous to mass media players because they offer both speed and depth.”

A great example to highlight here is the business-centric newsletter publisher Industry Dive. In February 2022 Adweek again reported that the publisher is on pace to generate between \$105 and \$110 million in revenue for the year, and it is testament “to the value of stitching together pockets of niche readership into a sustainable audience.”

Industry Dive has a network of 53 business-centric newsletters serving 22 different industries. It reaches 2.5 million free subscribers through a mix of 25 daily and 28 weekly email products, and caters to business professionals across fields including construction, waste management, retail and biopharmaceuticals, but the branding and design of the newsletters are uniform. Industry Dive launches new email products in at least two industries per year. Launched in 2012, the publisher is just 10 years old, and has been profitable since 2014.

LEAN INTO PERSONALITY

Here’s an announcement from The New York Times in April 2020:

“Quietly, our flagship email newsletter, The Morning Briefing, has become one of our biggest and most important news products. The newsletter now has more than 17 million subscribers, one of the largest daily audiences of any kind in journalism, across television, radio, print and digital.

“That’s why we are turning to one of our most authoritative and nimble journalists to take the helm. We are thrilled to announce that David Leonhardt will return to the newsroom to become the new writer, host and anchor of our flagship newsletter, which will be rebranded as The Morning.”

A host and anchor for a newsletter? That’s the kind of star power talk most obviously associated with television. And it’s the clear example of how the success of the Substack ecosystem has affected and filtered into traditional newsrooms.

“We’re definitely seeing a flight to niche and to verticals. I think newsletters and podcasts are interesting because they’re examples of a larger shift going on in general, from institutions to individuals. There’s been a lot of trust loss over the last decade plus, really, and I think it’s normal for this phase of media to go more towards individuals,” Brian Morrissey, former Digiday

The Importance of Logins Product Spotlight - Axios HQ

If you’re halfway familiar with the sending of email newsletters, you’ll know that ‘skimmability’ is always a big plus. Axios launched a product that helps companies achieve just that.

According to The New York Times, The software uses artificial intelligence to suggest editing and formatting to distil blocks of texts into shorter bullet points. Axios HQ also has analytics that show the clients whether employees opened the messages. Companies pay about \$10,000 for an annual contract and use the software to write team updates and sales notes, according to senior Axios executives and Axios HQ now has 210 clients, from major companies like Delta Air Lines to state school systems to small start-ups. The company has about 60 people working exclusively on Axios HQ.

editor and host of The Rebooting newsletter told the Media Voices podcast.

Let’s look at two recent examples. In September last year, Axios reported that The Washington Post was relaunching its 202 newsletter suite with new emails, new authors and an expanded product suite. Key to the rebranding was that the new products were meant to be more personality driven, according to Rachel Van Dongen, editor of The Post’s 202 newsletters. “We’re leaning into personalities. In these newsletters specifically and around town, people want to connect with the authors and have two-way communication,” she says.

Then, in March 2022, Digiday reported that The New Yorker has switched up the presentation of its daily newsletter, rolling out a “voicier and more editorialized approach for readers’ inboxes.” The idea was to infuse a bit more personality and original content.

TAKE THE MOMENTUM AND BUILD YOUR OWN NEWSLETTER NETWORKS

If a rebrand sounds too low-key, why not go all the way and launch your own personality-driven content network? In November last year, U.S. publisher The Atlantic came up with a plan to basically import independent writers already in the paid newsletter business. While letting

them stay independent the publication planned to get these writers behind The Atlantic's pay-wall and convert their subscribers to Atlantic subscribers.

One notable recruit for this programme was Charlie Warzel, who left The New York Times to set up shop on Substack with the technology newsletter Galaxy Brain. In a post candidly explaining why he was leaving Substack to go back to the traditional media fold, Warzel explained that in his reckoning, he was worth more to a publication as part of a package of writers/reporters/thinkers than he was on his own. "This makes sense to me. I don't break tons of news these days and my work lately has been either explanatory or analytical. That may be a harder thing for somebody to pay for individually, but as a larger stable of people, I might fit more nicely into a bundle."

Vox reported more details on The Atlantic's plan. The publication isn't hiring the writers as full-time employees, but will offer them some sort of base payment with the ability to make additional money if they hit certain subscriber goals. Newsletter writers who join the Atlantic's program get to keep their existing list of subscribers so they can start up their businesses again if they decide to leave. Plus, in addition to their newsletter, their subscribers get access to any other newsletters the Atlantic publishes and a year's subscription to The Atlantic itself, which currently sells for \$50 a year. They will remain largely editorial independent but may get some "light editing" from The Atlantic's editors.

Late last year, Axios reported that The Information was in the early stages of launching "The Information Newsletter Network," a platform to power independent newsletter writers on The Information's tech stack. The company's first member, per Axios, is the newsletter Parqor from Andrew Rosen. Rosen's newsletter was previously on Substack. CEO Jessica Lessin says the first batch of newsletters are business-related, "but our lens for inviting writers to participate is really just whether we love their content." The platform, she added, is "designed for subscription newsletters and the vast majority will be paid, but one of the next to launch is currently free and exploring paid related products."

Earlier in the year, Forbes also announced that it was launching a newsletter platform that would allow journalists to launch their own paid newsletters and split the revenue with the publisher. To set the new "Journalist Entrepreneurs" program up for success, Forbes planned

to hire 20 to 30 writers with large audiences, according to Subscription Insider. These writers and journalists will get the benefits of being part of the Forbes ecosystem, 103-year-old publisher, including marketing, editorial and financial benefits. At the same time, the writers would enjoy editorial freedom to keep their readers interested.

Sounding familiar by now? In terms of financial benefits, Subscription Insider reports that writers will share subscription newsletter revenue in a 50/50 split with Forbes. The publisher will also share a portion of advertising revenue with writers, based on page views and a bonus for returning visitors.

USE NEWSLETTERS TO CONVERT MORE PAID SUBSCRIPTIONS

We've been flirting for a while now with the serious business end of things when it comes to newsletters. We come now to the meat of it – how effective can newsletters be at driving subscriptions at scale? And looking ahead even, can entire business models be built around email offerings?

In August 2021, The New York Times said that it would make a slate of newsletters available only to subscribers, including new offerings from John McWhorter, Kara Swisher and other writers. The publication had lost a few writers to Substack over the years and its response had been months in the planning.

"The Times, which has produced free newsletters for 20 years, now has about 50 newsletters, which are read by 15 million people each week, the paper reported. Eleven of those will become subscriber-only, along with seven new newsletters, Alex Hardiman, The Times's chief product officer said.

Speaking to Nieman Lab, Hardiman described introducing subscriber-only newsletters as "both a retention play and a conversion play."

"When we look at the intersection between our subscription model and newsletters, newsletters are already really important," she said. "We see that almost half of subscribers open a newsletter in a given week, and people who do receive newsletters are far more likely to pay and to stay."

You can see the appeal of a model like this for The Times, which in February this year surpassed 10 million subscriptions. However, that number is still a fraction of the 100 million people who have registered with their email at nytimes.com. The move to double down on subscriptions, according to Nieman Lab, is a bid to boost the value of a Times subscription,

"We, clearly along with everybody else in the industry, recognised that newsletters are going to be a huge phenomenon.. And so we spent a lot of time thinking about how we respond to this. We eventually settled on the strategy of building our own newsletter distribution system that would, we hope, take the best of individual newsletters and the best of the benefits of continuing to work for the Atlantic."

– Atlantic CEO Nicholas Thompson, *interviewed by Press Gazette*

and maybe nudge some of those free newsletter readers into paying for a subscription. "This is only the start," Opinion editor Kingsbury told Axios of the move at the time. "We are still talking to writers across a bunch of different topics."

How did the Times choose which newsletters to put behind a paywall? Hardiman outlined three broad categories of emails to Niemen lab – briefings, personalised alerts, and (now) subscriber-only newsletters – and said that each type plays a different role in subscriber strategy.

Briefings like The Morning from David Leonhardt, he said, will stay free because they are so effective at promoting discovery – at pointing readers to news articles as well as podcasts, puzzles, and other content. The second functions as personalised alerts to help readers follow their favourite writer or stay on top of issues they already care about. The ones behind a paywall then fill a distinct user need.

"The subscriber-only newsletters offer exclusive journalism from experts who go deep on the topics that our subscribers are most passionate about, and do it within the convenience of the inbox," Hardiman said.

In a similar vein, online business news publisher Quartz shook up its membership offering last year by creating four premium emails. Digiday reports that according to a March 2021 survey, 75% of Quartz's members said they were primarily accessing Quartz's content through email, according to Quartz editor-in-chief Katherine Bell, explaining in large part why the publisher chose to expand in this area.

Since it launched in 2018, Quartz's paid subscription programme – or membership – included two emails: How To, which brings practical tips around being more effective at work, investing, or general life advice; and The Weekend Brief, which is a wider lens on the most important news story of the week. Journalism.co.uk reported that two new emails were added to the list: The Forecast, which provides a short, sharp look forward at an emerging industry, technology, or trend; and The Company, spotlighting companies that are changing (or are about to change) the way their businesses work.

BUILD AN ENTIRE BUSINESS MODEL AROUND NEWSLETTERS

Around 1,800 US newspapers closed between 2004 and 2019, according to research published by Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism. As with all things in media, the Covid-19 years acted as an accelerator, with more than 10 local newsrooms closing according to an estimate by Poynter. These newsrooms, they

write, are often more than 100 years old, and often the only news source in those places.

Over the past year, an idea for a new business model has swept through the local news landscape in the U.S and it is powered by two companies who believe they have found the formula to reverse this decline. You'll be unsurprised to hear that the idea is newsletters. But it might still be a stretch to wrap your head around the idea that for an ambitious digital news company, email is not a supporting revenue or engagement stream. It is the main product.

Between them, the two companies, Axios Local and 6AM City have launched 42 local newsletters, covering cities across more than 20 states. By the summer, according to reporting by Press Gazette, that number will have grown to at least 49.

And both companies believe that their business models can be successfully rolled out to 100 cities or more. Both say they generated around \$5m in revenue in 2021. Axios predicts that it will triple that number in 2022, while this March, 6AM reached 1 million newsletter subscribers and also say they are on track to cross \$10 million dollars in revenue.

Axios and 6AM are perhaps the biggest but they are by no means the only players in the local news newsletter scene. Other companies like WhereBy.Us in the U.S. and Overstory in Canada have rushed to build local newsletter networks and have similarly ambitious expansion plans. Platforms like Substack and Tiny News Collective meanwhile, have given out grants to support local news writers create newsletters. These are not just cash handouts but programmes with a strong focus on acquiring subscribers and building sustainable revenue.

"Fueling this local news gold rush is a shared hypothesis," Mark Stenberg writes for Adweek. "By treating email as the primary product, a small team of locally based journalists can grow a financially stable news operation with little overhead."

Let's take a look at how they work. Stenberg reports that in each outpost, Axios Local hires two reporters who work in tandem to produce a daily newsletter. Most newsletters feature six content sections, called "cards," and at least one piece of original reporting. The journalists curate reporting from other local news affiliates, striving for a mix of long- and short-form material.

The bulk of revenue is generated through newsletter sponsorships, which keeps its email product free. Unlike Axios proper though, the Local program places a greater emphasis on featuring regional advertisers and hopes to split its advertising 50-50 between local and national

"We're designed to be kind of like a marketing engine for the cities, curating the best of what's going on there about how you can become a better, more engaged and involved citizen, whether that means telling you quickly how you can join, boards, nonprofits, participate in charity events, or where to go have a cocktail on a patio in downtown."

– 6AM City founder Ryan Heafy, speaking to the Media Voices Podcast

partners. In October last year Axios launched a membership programme for the Local programme. Suggested contributions, listed on new city-specific sites, range from \$50 to \$500 per year.

6AM operates with a very different content strategy, actively choosing to avoid covering crime and politics to create a "safer place for both the reader and the advertiser", according to Press Gazette. The business model is currently driven by advertising, with the breakdown about 70% local and 30% regional according to Adweek.

"The publishing industry has seen its grip on the digital ad market weaken over the last decade, but as newsletter appetite has grown, newsletter advertising has remained a bright spot," Stenberg notes.

It's not just local news that can place email at the heart of a business model. Former Vanity Fair editor Graydon Carter launched Air Mail in 2019 as a weekly subscription newsletter for high brow individuals. It covered topics.

Air Mail launched with a focus on covering stories that cater to an influential news consumer across topics like arts, politics, culture, literature, film and television and fashion, its content accompanied by glossy, print-like magazine ads from premier brands. The sort that you might expect to find in Carter's old publication Vanity Fair, a reflection of Carter's days at Vanity Fair. The company has several other newsletters and has recently expanded out into podcasts and

e-commerce. Its premier Sunday email though, costing about \$80 per year, is the major breadwinner.

BE WARY OF WHAT COMES NEXT

Where there's a successful business model to eat into and potentially co-opt, you can bet that Big Tech would have caught the scent. Google, Twitter and Face-, sorry, Meta have all announced their intentions to get into the newsletter game last year and those plans should pick up pace in 2022.

Meta plans to "support independent writers" by creating a free, self-publishing tool to create individual websites and an email newsletter. In addition,

the company said it planned to help writers find audiences and sell subscriptions. Google meanwhile, has a project in the works called Museletter which allows anyone to publish a Google Drive file as a blog or newsletter to their Museletter public profile or to an email list.

The effort, TechCrunch reported, would essentially repurpose Google's existing document-creation tools as a means of competing with other newsletter platforms like Substack, Ghost or Revue.

The last of those was acquired by Twitter. In August last year the company started testing a feature that brings Revue newsletters more prominently into the Twitter experience, according to another TechCrunch report. Users will be able to see writers' Revue newsletters appear on their profile beneath their follower counts. If you click subscribe, you'll be prompted to read a sample issue or subscribe using the email address connected to your Twitter account. This is a strategy that may prove to be the most successful yet among the Big Tech plays.

There is reason then, to keep a watchful eye, but not to fear. Remember that it is writers and publishers who powered the success of this new medium, finding a way to connect directly with readers and bypassing any algorithm that Big Tech could throw into the mix. That connection with audiences will drive the future business of newsletters, and perhaps of media as a whole. Long may it continue! ●

What's Next:

Like the email newsletter, audio is another time-honored medium that is seeing a renaissance as it applies to strategies for publishers. In fact, given the more primordial nature of audio, you might find several theories floating around right now that decades of digital expansion and innovation are actually taking us back to a time when communication primarily happened through the spoken word. That may sound like a stretch at first, but it's hard to argue with the timeless quality of audio even as we marvel at its staying power and evolution.



The Evolution of Audio

Along with the incredible expansion in podcasting all over the world, new innovations in format are proving that audio can address many aspects of the engagement funnell. In this chapter we cover some of the most important trends in audio that publishers need to keep track of. These are:

The continued boom in podcast advertising, significantly enhancing its potential as a driver of revenue

The removal of technical roadblocks to offer paid podcast subscriptions, thanks to new initiatives by platforms like Apple Podcasts and Spotify

Publishers going in heavy on converting text articles to audio either through human voice or AI solutions. Often in response to readers demanding more audio over text

The combining of audio articles and podcasts into appealing subscription packages. Either linked to existing digital subscription plans or fashioned, in some cases, into standalone audio apps put out by publishers

The boom in live or social audio, inspired by Clubhouse but now led by new tools like twitter Spaces

More developments in short form audio that increasingly looks like the future: finding a sweet spot somewhere between a podcast, text article and a video.

THE PODCAST ADVERTISING BOOM

The initial fear with Covid-19 and lockdowns around the world was that they would change audio listening patterns drastically, dealing a serious blow to the burgeoning podcast industry. We now have several indicators to suggest this is not how things played out, and two years on from the start of the pandemic, the business and revenue potential of podcasting for publishers looks healthier than at any time.

Firstly, though commuting time, often considered key to podcast listening habits, went down all over the world, the 2021 Digital News Report from The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism notes that it did not really move the needle on consumption. With many publishers racing to create new products to explain different facets of the pandemic and how it had changed life around us, podcasts and newsletters were key, and the report notes that "podcasts have become a key part of many lockdown routines with more consumption at home."

Second, as Oregon University professor Damian Radcliffe says, it is worth noting that in the U.S, research has historically suggested that the bulk of podcast listening – even pre-Covid – was done at home. What we can conclude then, is that while there was a loss in terms of commute time, the overall numbers for podcast reach remained fairly neutral. On the other hand, what did grow fairly dramatically, was advertising for podcasting.

A study of U.S. podcast advertising done for the Internet Advertising Bureau (IAB) showed revenue of \$842 million in 2020, a nearly 20% increase over the previous year. At that rate, podcasting revenue was predicted to exceed \$1 billion in 2021. Writing for The Fix in March 2022, James Breiner gave significant indicators as to why advertisers were increasingly choosing podcasting as an option – in particular, a new advertising technology called "dynamic insertion". It allows advertisers more flexibility to quickly switch out messages as needed at the point where the listener downloads the podcast. Dynamically inserted ads increased their share of podcast revenue from 48% to 67% year over year.

In March this year, a new study commissioned by The Guardian found that podcast advertising raises positive perceptions of brands and encourages listeners to take buying action. The nationwide U.K. study, conducted by independent research company Tapestry, looked at the effectiveness of podcast advertising and found that it commands the highest levels of attention of any media channel. The study

Are podcasts the future of news consumption?

A Pew Research Center survey conducted in July 2021 had the headline figure that about a quarter of U.S. adults (23%) say they get news at least sometimes from podcasts.

According to the survey, the share of Americans who say they often get news from a podcast is quite small – at just 7% – compared with about twice as many adults (16%) who say they sometimes get news from podcasts.

At the same time, more than half of Americans (56%) say they never get news from podcasts, suggesting there is still quite a lot of growth potential for this industry, the survey suggests

Some groups are more likely than others to get news from podcasts. Younger adults, in particular, are more likely than older adults to at least sometimes get news from podcasts.

One-in-three adults ages 18 to 29 say they at least sometimes get news from podcasts, compared with 12% of adults 65 and older. About three-in-ten adults ages 30 to 49 (29%) get news from podcasts at least sometimes; nearly one-in-five adults ages 50 to 64 (18%) say they do the same.

Men and women get news from podcasts at similar rates (25% and 21%, respectively)

found 65% of listeners paid attention to podcast adverts – more than adverts on TV at 39% and adverts on the radio at 38%.

These high levels of attention, the study found, translate into greater likelihood to buy the product or service being advertised. For example, 51% of weekly users of each channel said podcast adverts made them want to buy something from the brand versus 38% for radio.

Speaking to Digital Content Next, Radcliffe also points out that the podcast audience is typically more affluent, more educated and has a higher disposable income, making it a very attractive segment for advertisers. "The other big factor here is that podcast advertising tends to be pretty limited & there's a value in that exclusivity for podcasters which is quite appealing," he adds.

These are trends confirmed by other research – The Super Listeners 2020 study from Edison Research, for instance, found that 48% of respondents reported paying greater attention

to podcast ads than any other form of media advertising. A big reason for this was due to presenter reads.

In his piece for The Fix, Breiner points to the example of National Public Radio (NPR) in the U.S. to illustrate the dynamic between a drop-off in listenership but a corresponding rise in ad revenue. NPR lost a fourth of its audience for live shows over 2020. By the end of that year however, it was on track to make more money advertising on podcasts than on its conventional radio shows. NPR now has four of the top podcasts as measured by weekly listeners, according to Edison Research.

Other companies with a heavy focus on podcasting also saw the money coming in after years of investment. The online magazine Slate, for instance, which has a roster of news analysis shows combined with longer form interview and narrative podcasts, reported in 2021 that half of its ad revenue was coming from podcast advertising.

THE PODCAST SUBSCRIPTION WARS HAVE ARRIVED

For some time then, advertising will continue to be the main revenue stream for podcasts, potentially as one of the biggest winners from the global bounceback in digital ad spending. There's a movement building up in parallel though, and it's the rapidly evolving landscape of successful paid-for models being used by publishers for podcasts.

Not all of this is new, of course. Over the last few years, publishers have experimented with early-access offers (such as The New York Times did for the Caliphate podcast) or member-only podcasts which publishers like The Guardian and more recently, Slate have attempted. Slate Plus, Slate's membership programme, for example, offers both bonus podcasts and an ad-free listening experience for its members.

Over in the UK, Bauer launched a subscriber-only podcast in 2021, which is a spin-off from their main podcast Empire. The new podcast is published twice a month, and also gives subscribers access to the podcast archive which was previously free.

These are models that should, by now, be familiar to most regular podcast listeners around the world. What happened over the course of 2021 however, is that the subscription business model was turbo-charged by announcements from the two biggest platforms for podcast listening - Apple and Spotify.

In April 2021, Apple unveiled its plans for a podcasts subscription service that would

Other Platforms to Watch

Though Apple and Spotify are the big movers, Substack also joined the party last year, announcing that it was funding the launch of a new podcast network called Booksmart Studios, with the option of subscriber-only podcasts. Axios had reported at the time that a number of individuals had been given six-figure advances. Similar to its cut on newsletters, Substack will take 10 percent of podcast subscription revenues.

"We're in the very early days of podcasting on Substack, but some podcasts are already making hundreds of thousands of dollars a year through the platform," Substack co-founder Hamish McKenzie told Axios in July 2021

"The Substack model provides a new and exciting avenue for podcasters and writers who want to break out of old constraints - including to build a business or portfolio of media offerings, like Booksmart is doing," he added.

Facebook/Meta also rolled out a podcast product in June 2021, allowing hosts to link their show's RSS feed up to a Page, which then automatically generates posts for new episodes. However, though the company expressed much excitement about the future of audio in the wake of the Clubhouse craze, Bloomberg reported in April 2022 that Facebook was already looking to get out of the podcast game less than a year later. The report said the company was leaning more toward other ideas including metaverse events.

allow listeners to unlock "additional benefits," like ad-free listening, early access to episodes and the ability to support favourite creators. For publishers, this was a huge deal. As David Tvrton reports in The Fix, creating a subscriber-exclusive or an ad-free podcast was, up till that point, a complicated, multi-step process involving the creation of unique RSS feeds for each user that had opted to pay. The new Apple Podcasts subscription programme reduces the process to just one click - Apple has the payment information of its customers and can easily charge them.

The Fix also reported that Apple managed to convince some top podcast producers to jump onboard for the launch. Big names include Pushkin Industries, Radiotopia from PRX, NPR, the Los Angeles Times, The Athletic and Sony Music Entertainment.



Great news all around but some caveats that publishers needed to keep in mind about Apple's plan:

- Apple will not give podcasters the emails of subscribers, and podcasters can only communicate with their followers and subscribers through the Apple app.
- Apple will also take a 30% cut of each first year subscription and 15% for following years, just as it does for other subscriptions services. To access the new premium tools, podcasters will be charged \$19.99 per year.
- Pricing starts at around \$0.49 per month in the U.S., but creators can set their own pricing. There is no provision to buy individual episodes.

Given that it was a major move by a Big Tech company, you won't be surprised to hear that the plan wasn't entirely driven by a need to support struggling podcast creators. "The announcement of the new service follows shortly after an industry report suggested that Spotify's podcast listeners would top Apple's for the first time in 2021," TechCrunch reported.

Sure enough, just weeks after the Apple announcement, Spotify introduced a subscription counter-offer to podcasters, and announced that, unlike Apple, it would not charge them a revenue sharing fee for the first two years. Following this period, podcast producers would be charged a 5% fee for access to the subscription tools.

Though very inexpensive compared to Apple (again, no surprise) the one catch with Spotify's programme is that if a podcaster wants to use Spotify's subscription tools, they need to use its podcast hosting platform, Anchor, through which some episodes can be marked as subscriber-only. Still pretty significant news, as Anchor is also the biggest host where podcasters migrate from other platforms, according to the industry newsletter Podnews.

Like Apple, Spotify said the cost to subscribe is determined by the creator, but will be one of three tiers: \$2.99, \$4.99 or \$7.99 per month. In July 2021 Spotify announced 13 pilot partners to test the programme spanning publishers, audiobooks and other creator platforms. The list included Vox Media and Slate from the U.S., Der Spiegel from Germany and France's Mediapart.

PUBLISHERS CASH IN

With the technical ability to offer subscription podcasts now significantly enhanced by Apple and Spotify's plans, publishers have a significant opportunity to capitalise. We can expect to see paid podcasts go mainstream across the board as 2022 progresses, either as new initiatives by publishers or integrated into existing plans. We already have a handful of examples from Europe, detailed by The Fix.

With the arrival of paid subscriptions on Apple Podcasts the German weekly newspaper

9 ways newsrooms can incorporate more audio in their work

Damian Radcliffe, Carolyn S. Chambers Professor in Journalism at University of Oregon, outlines three areas, and nine different examples, to show how journalists and news outlets can more effectively embrace audio. We summarise and adapt his excellent list here:

1 TELL THE “STORY BEHIND THE STORY”

Sharing your reporting processes can help newsrooms be more transparent about what they do and how they do it. Audio is a perfect means to support this goal by giving a voice to the journalist behind the byline to explain his/her thinking and process.

2 OFFER PREVIEWS

Talk about what's in the paper this week or this day. Explain why a story is important or made it to the front page or talk about an interview or an investigation that your paper has conducted. Radcliffe picks out an example from the U.S. - the Klamath Falls (OR) based Herald and News has experimented with something similar, a short 2-3 minute podcast called Tomorrow's Headlines Today that offers a sneak preview of stories in the next day's paper.

3 USE LONG-FORM STORYTELLING

The Guardian's long reads for example, perform very well as an audio product that audiences can listen to on the go. The U.K. based 'slow news' start-up Tortoise Media has also been very successful in publishing its longer investigations and stories as multi-part podcasts.

4 OFFER EXCLUSIVE CONTENT

Podcasts can be a great means to promote engagement and brand awareness, operating as a gateway to a more sustained monetary relationship with your content, Radcliffe writes. Subscriber-only audio content is one of the most popular strategies that publishers like Slate and The Washington Post have adopted.

5 HIGHLIGHT ARCHIVED AND EVERGREEN CONTENT

Archive content is always valuable and audio can be one platform to showcase it. One example is Audm, a company recently acquired by The New York Times that turns long text articles into audio. The Audm app has more than 3,000 stories in its archive such as those from national outlets - Rolling Stone and The New Yorker - to

more regional sites - The Texas Observer and The Bitter Southerner.

6 USE TEXT TO SPEECH SERVICES

Audm uses award winning narrators. Not every publisher can afford that so an AI solution that can convert text to audio with a human sounding voice is a good option. The Washington Post uses a software called Amazon Polly. But not everyone is the Washington Post! The Irish Times used a startup called Speechkit for their text-to-audio conversion. Find your own!

7 SHARE AUDIO SNIPPETS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Tools like Headliner have helped make audio go more viral on social media, creating visually appealing audio snippets for platforms like Twitter and Instagram which can act as a preview for wider interviews and (non-audio) features. Another provider, Audiogram, notes, more than 85% of social video is consumed without audio, so its platform also includes automatically transcribed captions.

8 MONITOR THE SMART SPEAKERS TREND

Smart speakers have been around for a while now and were at one time touted as the fastest-growing consumer technology since the smartphone. For all the excitement however, news consumption on smart speakers is consistently low on the list of uses for most consumers, behind listening to music, functional information and podcasts. This is still a space to watch though and the breakthrough for publishers may be around the corner.

9 GET READY FOR SOCIAL AUDIO SERVICES

The rise and fall of Clubhouse has been well documented but the social audio trend it started has inspired other products. Both Facebook/Meta and Twitter launched competitors and it seems like the latter is beginning to figure out a place for itself in newsrooms and publishers' audio strategies. There's a lot more in the offing. The tech industry analyst Jeremiah Owyang has identified more than 30 companies working on social audio calling it a “Goldilocks' medium for the 2020s: Text is not enough, and video is too much; social audio is just right.” Tech industry analyst Jeremiah Owyang has identified more than 30 companies working on social audio.

Die Zeit set up a paywall around its podcasts on the platform and added audio articles accessible for 5.99 € a month. The publisher has about 19 shows.

Der Spiegel, which offers four paid podcasts as part of a larger audio package, also put those podcasts behind a paywall on Apple podcasts.

In France, while no big publisher adopted the plan, a handful of independent creators, podcast studios and one radio station decided to experiment. The names include Louie Media, Paradiso, Europe 1, Nouvelles Écoutes, Bababam, Binge Audio and Pénélope Boeuf. As we mentioned earlier, the online investigative journal Mediapart was one of the publications chosen by Spotify to pilot its paid podcast programme. The publication was already considered one of France's most successful digital media outlets in terms of getting people to pay for content.

Over in the U.S. NPR, in partnership with PRX, announced that they would offer an ad-free version of their podcasts to paying subscribers via Apple. Listeners have the option to support a single show and buy ad-free access for a monthly fee, or they could become a member of their local NPR station and get access to all NPR podcasts ad-free.

“We continue to feel very strongly that the content we produced should be freely available,” NPR's Joel Sucherman the Hot Pod newsletter. “We continue to believe in the RSS standard and the open podcast economy. But we feel this is an opportunity for the super fans who really love particular shows to support them at the show level.”

AUDIO ARTICLES – THE POWER OF HABIT

Audio articles - the simple exercise of a text article being read out by a human or AI generated voice - have most commonly been seen as an accessibility feature by publishers. In the last two years however, as we have gone through cycles of peak podcast, peak newsletter and audience and product teams trying to work out how and when audiences consume news and in what formats, this seemingly simple feature has had a renaissance and reinvention.

What can we attribute it to? Well, we've heard multiple accounts about the increasing uptake of audiobooks during the pandemic but it turns out that it's a larger trend with spoken word content. In its third edition, released in November 2021, the Spoken Word Audio Report from NPR and Edison Research, documented how news, podcasts, audiobooks

and talk radio's share of audio listening is at an all-time high. The figures recorded for the U.S. market were stunning: Spoken word audio listening is up 40% in the past seven years, and up 8% year-over-year.

Still, experiments with audio articles are not new and over the years, some publishers have realised that they can play an important role in retaining audiences. As long ago as 2007, The Economist started an audio edition of its weekly magazine, with a voice professional recording every story in the magazine. While only 10% of The Economist's app users listen to audio, the publisher found that these were the consumers who remained the most loyal. During the pandemic, The Economist saw a record number of streams/downloads and unique listeners, leading them to invest in their audio editions because of the strong, positive impact it has on retention.

“Audio versions of articles allow subscribers to complete issues when they don't have enough time to sit down and read them,” Deputy Editor Tom Standage told the Nieman Reports. “Our evidence suggests that the audio edition is a very effective retention tool; once you come to rely on it, you won't unsubscribe.”

Another forerunner in this field is the Danish media company Zetland. Struggling to retain members and subscribers in 2016, the publisher was seeking solutions and the team decided that one possible fix might be to fulfill multiple requests from readers for audio versions of their stories. The pilot was enormously successful - news consumption shifted quickly towards listening to articles rather than reading. The digital analytics firm Twipe reported in 2020 that 80% of Zetland's consumption is in audio form rather than written text, with numbers accelerating during the lockdown time in Denmark. Zetland found not only that members were more likely to finish the full article in audio form (90% listen-through rate), the format also helped to improve member satisfaction and loyalty.

Were these two publishers on to something big then? In May last year, Press Gazette had an excellent interview with Kat Downs Mulder, Chief Product Officer and Managing Editor at The Washington Post, about the evolution in their audio articles project. In that month, The Post had announced that all of its technology articles would be available to listen to through Polly, a service that aims to transform written text into lifelike speech, on desktop and mobile devices. The Post's plan was to make more

sections available through Polly in the months ahead.

So what's special about Polly? In July 2020, The Post had made all of its articles available in audio form on Android and Apple mobile devices, using built-in text-to-speech technology on those platforms. Polly, Mulder says, "is a better voice – it's a smoother, more human-sounding voice. It still sounds like a mechanised voice, an automated voice. But I think it's a bit smoother and more natural."

What The Post has hit on there is a solution to the big question around audio articles – human voice or AI? It should come as no surprise that audiences would be more engaged if the article is read out by a more relatable, human sounding voice. The Economist, as we mentioned, had a voice professional read out the articles. Zetland, meanwhile, had the reporters on each story do a voice version. That is of course, infinitely more time consuming than an AI solution and The Post – which has of course been a pioneer in publishing tech in all its years under Jeff Bezos' ownership – seems to have come up with a winning solution.

Downs Mulder said that Post 'readers' have "reacted really well" to its audio offering so far. Subscribers listening to audio articles on its apps "engaged more than three times longer with our content," she said.

"A big focus of ours is going to be to extend the convenience of the features," she told Press Gazette. "So not just being able to listen to an individual article, but being able to create playlists of articles, or listen to your saved articles,

or listen to all the articles from the front page of the newspaper or from our magazine..."

Like other large publishers, The Post produces a large slate of podcasts. Press Gazette asked if audio articles would be competing against podcasts.

"I think they serve different needs," Downs Mulder said. "I think it's a little bit up for debate, how that will end up in the long term. But our podcasts are much more narrative – interviews with reporters, conversations between people, much more highly produced than what you would get through the reading of an article itself. A lot more context." For audio articles she says, there is "a different use case."

Other publishers, spotting the opportunity in audio articles, have also looked to AI solutions. The Irish Times, which has had a paywall since 2015, launched "Listen", a package bringing together all its podcasts and audio articles in one place in 2019. "Initially we did this as an experiment to see how it might work, what was the readers' feedback and to build out some of the workflows," Paddy Logue, digital editor at The Irish Times told WAN-IFRA.

A lot of the content on 'Listen' was author-narrated which Logue said helped to add cadence and emotion to the narration. But there was a flipside to it. Getting the authors to narrate the article came with a large overhead cost. The stories had to be read out, recorded, edited, processed and so on, altogether creating a big manual process.

With the help of a startup, Speechkit, the publisher started producing AI-narrated articles "of such good quality that it's kind of hard to distinguish from human voices," according to Logue. Partnering with Speechkit, The Irish Times currently produces about 15-20 AI-read audio articles per day.

AI can also help generate specific voices, as the Norwegian publisher Aftenposten attempted in 2021. "We've got eight hours or something of speech data and fed it into an AI algorithm that will then generate the voice that sounds like our main podcast anchor," Karl Oskar Teien, Director of Product at Aftenposten, told The Fix. "She thought it was an

"It's really interesting when you look at the early data coming out from podcasting, that 21% of people who are regular podcast listeners are prepared to pay for shows and content that is particularly in their area. Already you've got three times more people who enjoy listening to podcasts saying they'd be prepared to pay for it than for news. So I think that is exciting."

– Katie Vanneck-Smith, Co-founder and Publisher, Tortoise Media

Drivers of Habit

Habit-building is a term we have referred to, in this chapter and our round-up of The Newsletter Economy. In February 2020, Twipe brought out an important report on understanding habit formation for news consumption on digital platforms. Through interviews with editorial leaders at The New York Times, Schibsted, The Telegraph, News UK, The Wall Street Journal, The Guardian, and more, the report sought to understand best practices for publishers interested in increasing reader frequency.

The key findings were as follows:

- Understanding habits and adapting product offerings accordingly is now a key priority at all of the leading news organisations that were interviewed.
- Habit formation takes time: on average 66 days before an automatic behaviour is ingrained in our brain.
- Habits can be formed through carefully designed Habit Loops: an iterative process requiring triggers, cues, actions, investment, craving and variable reward.
- Studies across the industry show that three reading activities per week is the tipping point where occasional engagement turns into predictable, habitual behaviour.
- Successful news organisations focus on understanding patterns and adapting content to fit readers' daily lives.

honor that she would be the voice of Aftenposten given that we use it for the right purposes. I think it unlocks some other opportunities later on. I think there's an opportunity to extend the reach of our text content."

In South Africa, a country with multiple languages and unique accents, publisher News24 worked with BeyondWords to create a series of native voices that could pronounce local names in Zulu, Xhosa and Afrikaans. Since adopting these voices for reading out articles the publisher observed a staggering 407% increase in audio engagement compared with publishers using conventional text-to-speech voices.

AUDIO FOR LONG READS

In 2020, The New York Times made headlines when it acquired Audm. TechCrunch reported that while there are other services that turn news articles into audio, including read-it-later apps like Instapaper and Pocket, Audm differentiates itself by using professional voice actors to narrate the content, not automated voice technology. That makes the content more enjoyable to listen to – more like listening to a podcast, for example.

In Europe, Twipe reported that we have seen similar platforms such as Curio and NOA that have partnered with leading titles including The Telegraph and The Guardian. The Guardian began their own audio edition in 2012 and since then have vastly expanded their audio offerings with their long-read articles proving very popular in audio form. In Germany, Twipe continues, Audible has partnered with German-language publishers such as Handelsblatt and Die Gazette to offer quality audio articles.

We end this section with the example of Tortoise Media, launched in the UK in 2019. As the name suggests the company is looking to pioneer 'slow journalism', focusing on a few stories and hoping to cut through the clutter. It has already amassed over 110,000 paying subscribers.

Speaking at a WAN-IFRA event in May 2021, Liz Moseley, CMO and Partner at Tortoise Media explained how the company moved to pursuing an 'audio-first' strategy.

"What we found is that our journalism, our slow, narrative-led stories, is a formula that lives better in audio than on a small screen as a long-read. It's kind of obvious now I say it, but it took us a long time to realise that was going to be the case."

Tortoise mainly uses three audio formats: The Slow Newscast, a weekly investigation of

"the stories that really matter." Members can listen to the Slow Newscast on Mondays, with a free version (with adverts) being disseminated on podcast platforms on Thursdays.

The Sensemaker Daily, which looks at one story every day "to make sense of the world."

Special investigations, which are published as multi-part series. The most popular recent one is Sweet Bobby, which topped the U.S. podcast charts at the end of 2021.

AUDIO BUNDLES AND STANDALONE APPS

With the increasing importance of audio articles added to the mix, it follows that publishers may want to switch focus from individual podcasts and instead take more ownership of the distribution of their audio products by offering bundles. We referred earlier to the 'Listen' package offered by the Irish Times as one example of this.

Get on the Youtube

In the United States, according to the 2021 Reuters Institute Digital Report, the most popular platform for podcasts (based on a sample of 2,001 digital news consumers) is YouTube.

One reason for this, the report contends, is that "the growth of video podcasting, accentuated by the use of tools like Zoom during the pandemic, is opening an even wider range of options for distribution."

With podcast conversations recorded over Zoom, or other video calling apps, it is easier than ever to record – and distribute – these discussions on video platforms. Zoom allows you

to share live calls on YouTube and Facebook, while the audio can also be downloaded separately and uploaded to SoundCloud, iTunes and similar platforms.

The YouTube podcasting trend is not a unique byproduct of the pandemic, writes Damian Radcliffe. Podcasters like David Axelrod, Joe Rogan and others, have long distributed their shows on the video platform, using a simple studio setup. The implication, he says, is that if YouTube is not already part of your audio distribution strategy, then data from the Digital News Report suggests that it really should be.



In June 2021, the German publisher Der Spiegel introduced Audio+, its exclusive audio bundle. The package includes an audio version of the weekly edition of the magazine, a daily news podcast (similar to The Daily by the New York Times), a podcast with work-life balance tips and topics on nutrition and mindfulness called CoachingM and "Dein Spiegel Podcast" for children and their parents. The audio package was combined with existing digital offers. All existing SPIEGEL+ subscribers were given a 12-month free access to Audio+. Without the digital access subscription (SPIEGEL+), Audio+ costs 14.99 euros per month, a joint subscription is €19.99. Subscribers can access the paid audio on the outlet's website or use its mobile app and Der Spiegel also puts the four paid podcasts behind a paywall on Apple Podcasts.

In the same month, Schibsted (the publisher of the Swedish tabloid Aftonbladet and other media) obtained control over the Swedish premium podcast company PodMe which was created in 2017 with an ad-free subscription model and access to exclusive podcasts. The publisher says that audio, which includes podcasts, books, and short-form content, is now a core part of its overall strategy.

Taking the idea of an audio bundle, what if a publication came up with a standalone audio app that could house all of its audio products? It would certainly be one way of eliminating the middleman, or platform, like Spotify or Apple Podcasts. This intriguing prospect came closer to realisation in October last year when The New York Times announced that it would be

beta-testing a standalone audio app called New York Times Audio.

Products under The Times' banner, including its podcasts, read-aloud journalism, Audm-produced pieces and more would feature on the app, Mark Stenberg reported for Adweek. He added that the app would also feature audio journalism from a curated set of publishers, including BuzzFeed News, New York Magazine and Rolling Stone. No financial details of these partnerships were shared, though each of the listed publishing partners produces content on Audm, which, as we noted earlier, The Times acquired in 2020. Another significant purchase made by The Times was that of Serial Productions, arguably the company that kicked off the entire podcast revolution. How's that for signaling your intentions toward audio?

When The Times decided to beta test the app, Norman Lab reported that it would invite users to give feedback through a survey which had a number of questions about paid subscriptions, and asks users to indicate how much they agree or disagree with statements like, "If one of my favorite podcasts started charging a fee for access, I would stop listening."

Stenberg, one of the sharpest media analysts out there, has a succinct take: "If The Times builds a standalone audio product that succeeds in attracting repeat listeners, it could mark a new era in the audio industry. The last decade has bred a reticence amongst media companies to rest their content strategy on algorithmically driven third-party platforms, but publishers have largely ceded control of

their audio distribution to companies like Spotify, Apple Podcasts and Amazon. In testing the willingness of its audience to seek out its content on a standalone app, The Times is gauging the viability of an owned-and-operated audio product, which could reduce its reliance on intermediaries, as well as offer a host of data and advertising advantages."

Everything that The New York Times does ends up being pioneering of course, but we should note here that when it comes to a standalone audio product, they were not the first to experiment. The Dutch

"Some of the most important and clarifying and ambitious journalism that The New York Times produces these days happens in audio, but audio is not a part of our digital experience almost at all. You could spend hours a day on our home page and read seemingly everything that our newsroom produces and not come across much of our audio. That has increasingly felt odd to us."

– Sam Dolnick, assistant managing editor at The New York Times, speaking to Digiday

publisher NRC, for example, launched their own audio app in March 2021. Twipe reported that unlike most publishers and public service podcast providers, NRC's app features external as well as NRC podcasts. The podcasts on the app are editorially curated and feature a range of languages.

Earlier, in 2020, De Correspondent, another Dutch News website launched its own audio platform. Unlike NRC, the content strategy for the publication was on bringing their quality audio journalism to listeners in a controlled manner. While De Correspondent's podcasts remain available via third-party platforms such as Spotify and iTunes, the new audio platform was created so members could be the masters of their "audio destiny".

"With more audio stories, we don't want to become dependent on major listening platforms like Spotify. We've noticed they're trying to make audio more and more exclusive by buying up big shows and putting them behind a paywall. We want our journalism to remain as inclusive as possible, so we've chosen to take our audio directly to you, the members who make it financially possible," the publication said while announcing the launch of the app.

"Audio journalism and an app are two of the most asked-for features by you, our members, and we're really excited to now offer both," the publication added.

LIVE AUDIO - TWITTER SPACES FINDS A SPACE

The meteoric rise and even faster fall of Clubhouse, the invite-only app that drove the social media world into a live-audio frenzy in the early months of the pandemic, is now well documented. "More than any other startup, Clubhouse epitomizes the venture-capital-backed euphoria that swept the tech industry since lockdowns shut millions of people inside and pushed them online for connection, entertainment, and information," Business Insider wrote in a searing article in November 2021. As vaccinations rose and people slowly started to get to grips with life and return to work, interest in the app faded. "Daily downloads of the app have plunged more than 90% since a peak in June, while daily average users are down almost 80% since February," the piece added.

So did any publishers see opportunities with the platform in its short-lived time as the next big thing? "Currently, few news brands are active on Clubhouse, and the app is facing stiff competition from established social media giants Facebook and Twitter, which are planning

Advantages of Twitter Spaces for publishers

Unlike Clubhouse, Spaces are generally free and easy to access without having to join a group or get an exclusive invite beforehand. Anyone can host a space, or co-host with other Twitter users.

Twitter Spaces also gives publishers the ability to schedule and set reminders for followers to join a Space on time and even pin certain tweets so that listeners can easily access and read any articles or information being discussed.

Twitter has also previewed ticketed Twitter Spaces, where those with more than 1,000 followers that had used Spaces three times in the last 30 days could charge a fee for attending certain Spaces. This is a feature that will roll out more prominently in the coming months.

their own audio rivals," William Turville wrote in Press Gazette's Platform Profile series in April 2021. Various executives Turville spoke to pointed to the fact that the platform didn't have a large enough audience and there were no clear opportunities for monetisation.

Mike Butcher, the UK-based editor-at-large of TechCrunch who was one of the early adopters, hosting a weekly show on the platform, pointed out that the audio features Clubhouse 'pioneered' would eventually find their way to other tools. "So I think our show will eventually work very well on something like Twitter Spaces because it is designed to be very public, for public consumption," he said.

That prediction did turn out to be rather prescient, because fast forward to March 2022, and a new article in the Platform Profile series was asking if Twitter Spaces could be the future of audio for newsrooms. "Some news outlets using Twitter Spaces see it as a middle ground between a podcast and a conventional social media post," it said.

The Financial Times for instance, has been using Twitter Spaces since December 2021. "As always with social media platforms, it's about building awareness of our journalists, content and brand," FT's head of social media and development Rachel Banning-Lover said.

"It's another step on the ladder toward converting them into subscribers. In many cases,

The Boom in Kids Podcasting

Podcasts in the kids and family category have seen a 20 percent increase in listenership since 2019, according to NPR and Edison Research's 2021 Spoken Word Audio Report.

The Hollywood Reporter notes that during the early days of the pandemic, kids' screen time nearly doubled as classes moved to Zoom and parents struggled to manage caretaking duties in addition to their jobs. Many parents turned to children's podcasts as a screen-free form of edutainment to keep kids stimulated, engaged and out of their hair.

Even as pandemic restrictions abate, the trend doesn't look to be slowing. Podcast adaptations of hit children's shows are proliferating, while, conversely, film and TV studios are becoming involved earlier than ever to snap up podcast IP catered toward kids.

Over the past two months, Spotify has released a slate of exclusive children's programming, while major streaming networks are getting involved as well. Amazon's podcast network Wonderly has inked exclusive advertising and licensing deals with Gen-Z Media and Tinkercast in addition to rolling out a subscription tier just for children's podcasts.

the listeners aren't yet following the relevant FT Twitter account, so we suspect the Spaces are sometimes the first time some people are interacting with the FT." Similarly, Press Gazette reported that U.K. publication The New Statesman had spent the last few months experimenting with Twitter Spaces, hosting live conversations between a member of its social media team and a journalist where they do a deep dive into a popular article.

"We know we've got excellent content, it's about making sure that we are reaching new audiences. And at the moment, Twitter Spaces is one of the languages on Twitter that can convey our stories," said Elise Johnson, head of audience at The New Statesman.

Since first starting in December, The FT reports that its average 'Space' gets around 300-400 live listeners, with 3,000 to 5,000 tuning in afterwards to watch recordings. Big topics, like discussions around new Covid variants, can reportedly pull in almost five times as many live



listeners.

"We want to retain it as a powerful, yet resource-light tool that journalists can jump on without too much training to dissect an engaging item in the news agenda. A quick way to connect our journalists directly with listeners" Banning-Lover told Press Gazette.

Eric Zuckerman, head of U.S. news partnerships for Twitter, told Nieman Lab in January this year, that he and his team have been talking to newsrooms about using Spaces for the past year. His pitch? Social audio like Twitter Spaces presents "an opportunity for newsrooms and journalists to have open and authentic conversations with their audiences about what's happening in the world and about the stories that they're covering," he said.

Nieman Lab's far-ranging piece, written by Sarah Scire, goes on to describe some of the most interesting experiments being done on Twitter Spaces and how the platform is slowly finding its purpose.

"Some of the best Spaces I've heard have been where reporters share what they know and what they're still trying to figure out. When the news broke that Facebook planned to change its name, tech journalists Kara Swisher and Casey Newton held a rollicking discussion with a lot of blue-checked names speculating about what the new name might be, and why Facebook might be interested in making the change," Scire writes. "The freedom the reporters felt to make some educated guesses — the kind of conjecture that might not make it into print — made it all the more fun."

The article also points to the example of NPR — which has hosted more than 60 Spaces so far — and has also been able to use and reuse conversations hosted on Twitter Spaces. "The reporters open the conversation, talk through recent reporting, and update our audience on what they should know. But I think the real special feature to social audio is the social part, opening the mic to the audience to ask questions that can help us figure out topics we haven't covered yet or get their reactions to how NPR is covering the news," Matt Adams, engagement editor at NPR, told Scire.

"I've worked in online communities for a long

time and before you used to send out a survey to get feedback or ask members how we can better provide a service ... To me, social audio is an in-real-time survey where we can gain feedback and hopefully reach new audience members.”

WHAT'S NEXT IN AUDIO?

Many variations in short-form audio or social audio by the looks of it. As mentioned, Twitter Spaces was not the only prominent competitor launched in the wake of the Clubhouse craze though it currently seems to be the live audio tool that's finding the most cache with journalists and publishers. Along with its foray into podcasts last year, Facebook launched a feature called Live Audio Rooms in June last year to allow users to connect to friends or public figures via real-time audio chats. The company also launched 'soundbites', a new creative, short-form audio format that will appear across all their products – an audio version of its Tik-Tok like video product Reels. The latest however, according to reporting from Bloomberg, is that the company is pivoting away from its bets on audio and is focusing on metaverse related products instead.

Another entrant also to watch in this space is Spotify's Greenroom, which is currently a separate app but is reportedly soon going to be renamed as Spotify Live and become part of the main app. LinkedIn too is getting in on the act. In March 2022, TechCrunch reported that the business and employment-oriented social network was testing a social audio experience in its app which would allow creators on its network to connect with their community. LinkedIn believes its audio networking feature will be differentiated because it will be connected with users' professional identity, not just a social profile. As yet, there are no prominent examples of newsrooms making use of either of these tools, but given that both platforms have large user bases we are bound to see some experimentation over the coming years.

A host of other companies are also hoping to jump in on the act. “Voice notes and short-form audio have an intriguing opportunity to play a role in the audio future. Or that's certainly what start-ups such as Beams, Pludo, Quest and Racket are betting on,” Twipe reports. If you haven't heard of any of those companies yet, we're with you. But who's to say we won't do an entire chapter on them next year. The tech industry analyst Jeremiah Owyang has in fact, identified more than 30 companies working on social audio efforts, calling it a “Goldilocks' medium for the 2020s: Text is not enough, and video is too much; social audio is just right.”

The Growing Market for Non-English Podcasts

Companies like Vice Media Group, iHeartMedia and Tinkercast are ramping up podcast production in languages other than English, as they catch on to the opportunity to grow their global listener bases, Digiday reported in February 2022.

While the U.S. provides the largest market for podcast audiences, non-English-language companies offer large and growing listener bases. China and Brazil, for example, provide the second and third biggest audiences, and podcast listening growth in Latin American countries was slated to surpass that of North America and Europe in 2021, according to eMarketer.

In order to capitalize, publishers and audio platforms are trying to adapt their podcasts into languages beyond English – and they are taking a variety of different approaches, from translation to duo-language production.

Of the 600,000-plus podcasts that launched in 2021 and tagged a language, a majority – 53% – tagged a non-English language, Dave Zohrob, co-founder and CEO of podcast analytics service Chartable, told Digiday. By contrast, in 2020 less than half of the 900,000 new podcasts debuted in 2020 were in non-English languages. After English, the top five most popular podcast languages were Spanish (18%), Portuguese (11%), Indonesian (7%) and German (3%). Those top languages did not change from 2020 to 2021, Zohrob said.

The Washington Post for instance, launched a Spanish-language news podcast called “El Washington Post” in 2019, and in September 2020, it increased production from two episodes per week to four. Downloads increased 67% from 2020 to 2021, and unique listeners were up by 48% from December 2020 to December 2021, a company spokesperson told Digiday, adding that the top countries for the show's downloads outside of the U.S. are Mexico, Colombia, Spain and Peru, the spokesperson added.

We firmly believe however, that this particular moment in audio still belongs to podcasts and we're excited to see what comes next on subscription models and standalone audio platforms in particular. ●



How to Run a Product Team & Build a Data-Driven Newsroom

Your newsroom needs to manage sustainable innovation. The Covid years sent publishers racing to create new podcasts and newsletters, graphics and data visualisations, live blogs and dashboards.

During this time many also introduced paywalls, experimented with existing paywalls, lowered paywalls for a time, modified subscriptions offers, introduced discounted offers and deployed teams to understand audience behaviours and preferences. And then they needed to decide which of these new products and innovations to keep while their peers all around seemed to be jumping aboard shiny new bandwagons like NFTs.

Sound exhausting? But also familiar? To manage these changes your newsroom needs product managers and product thinking. But what exactly is that? The Journalism, media, and technology trends and predictions report for 2021, brought out by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, found that more than nine in ten (93%) news executives surveyed recognised the importance of product roles. But many felt that those doing the job often lack the right skills (54%) and less than half think it is well understood (43%).

We'll repeat that. Less than half when just about every news executive out there wants to bring in product thinking!

So let's reframe the question. How do you build a product team by hiring the right people or more importantly, finding the right people within your organisation? How do you get your news operation to break away from the traditional cliches of journalism (we need more hard-hitting stories, we need more exclusives, we need to cover the stories not being told) to a culture where your team realises that it's not just about delivering news, it's also about how the audience experiences it. Perhaps you may need to embrace some outsiders, some people who think differently from you hard-nosed journalists, to take you to that place. Perhaps the answers all lie within.

We can't give you all the solutions of course, but what we can do is give you a little history, and as always, show you some great examples of how this is happening around the world.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PRODUCT IN NEWSROOMS

The first part of this story, you all know. In the beginning, there was just one product - the newspaper. And that product hovered up a whole lot of money from local advertisers who needed a way to reach potential local customers. The newspaper was king, and while this situation existed there was a hard wall between journalists and the business side of a news operation. It made sense - one side produced great stories and the other dealt mostly with ad sales.

This wall lasted a long time, even through the initial years when news started moving to the web. When this migration first happened, text articles were simply recreated on the web and publishers expected that the advertising market would also follow. The ad money never came though, and as the web evolved it turned out that legacy publishers were not the only ones who could put out a lot of text on the web. Somehow, in order to cut through the competi-

tion and stand out, they needed to build more engaging websites. To drive audience growth through search and social media and keep them there. Most crucially, they understood that content needed to be adapted into different formats. And it was really important to experiment because as the web evolved, as did the technical ability to get data on exactly what audiences were consuming and reacting to.

Product thinking in newsrooms dates back to this fundamental tension - the need for publishing to adapt from one medium to another and find more sophisticated storytelling forms. In an excellent academic paper published in the journal of The International Symposium for Online Journalism, Cindy Royal, professor and director of the Media Innovation Lab at Texas State University, tracks some of the first instances of product teams and product management in a newsroom context.

"Studies of The New York Times (Royal, 2012) and Chicago Tribune (Parasie & Dagiral, 2013) observed the emerging role of the programmer-journalist, those newsroom developers who were the earliest creators of interactive, digital stories. This role can be perceived as the precursor to understanding the evolving state of digital development in newsrooms," the article notes.

"In February 2016, a panel discussion on product management was held at New York's The New School, co-sponsored by that university's Journalism + Design program and the Tow-Knight Center for Entrepreneurial Journalism at the City University of New York. During that discussion, Aron Pilhofer, who previously led the NYT Inter-

active News Technology team, said, "It was a few years in that it dawned on me that I was actually running a product development team"

By that year however, product was already beginning to be seen as something more than just the folks creating fancy interactive graphics. In the Harvard-based think tank Nieman Lab's annual series on predicting the future of media for 2016, two articles dealt with the emerging role of product management.

Product managers "will be the interdisciplinary heart of media organisations where editorial and business come together to create better products, drawing a page from Silicon Valley's playbook," Storify cofounder Burt Herman wrote. Royal herself had an article in the series, predicting that "media organisations and journalism schools will begin to comprehend and define product management and embrace it as a relevant and critical career path."

In February 2016, The American Press Institute (API) came out with a white paper, authored by Jeff Sonderman, outlining tips and best practices for product development. API had convened a group of 45 product managers and executives from a number of outlets - both local and national, and digital-native and legacy - to discuss their strategies. The white paper gives us one of the first concrete definitions of the role of product manager.

"...In the era of the "personal news cycle" - where abundant information and constant connectivity gives each individual control of her news consumption - our news products must be good and targeted to succeed. They must know who their users are, what they need, how they need it, and deliver a satisfying experience. That is what a product manager does. And increasingly this role, which has long been a staple of the tech world, is emerging in news organisations."

You will have noticed of course, that there has been more than one reference to the tech world, and we must acknowledge this. In the first article of a series run by Northwestern University's Knight Lab on the Rise of Product Thinking in Media over 2020 and 2021, Meredith Gallo writes of this connection.

"Product will drive the industry because we need to have the customer at the centre of everything. We need to be obsessive about every piece of the site and the app. We need to remove the friction during all interactions. Product is changing everything. I once heard content is king, but product is queen, and I really agree with that."

- Luciana Cardoso, Chief Product Owner at Estadão newspaper in Brazil

“In technology companies, product management developed as a way to ensure that products served customers’ needs while also accomplishing their companies’ business and revenue goals. Product managers in tech have sometimes been called “mini-CEOs”, because they are charged with coordinating the work of software engineers while keeping product development aligned with customer needs and business strategy.”

“The tech industry,” Gallo writes, “tended to hire product managers with degrees in computer science or business, but they also needed an unusual combination of skills, including the ability to motivate teams and individuals, and the capacity to communicate across different disciplines.”

In a news organization, however, product work is different than in other kinds of companies.

“News product thinkers have to understand journalism—its culture, values and ethics,” writes Rich Gordon, Professor and director of digital innovation at the Medill School of Journalism, in another piece for the series run by Knight Lab.

“That’s a key reason why so many news product people started their careers as journalists—and why it can be challenging for product specialists from other industries to move into our field,” he adds.

Let’s hear about how this dynamic plays out from an experienced product person in media who came from tech. Luciana Cardoso is the Chief Product Owner at Estadão Newspaper in São Paulo, where she oversees teams responsible for building, maintaining and testing the website, the mobile app as well as ramping up future products. Cardoso started her career at IBM before moving to Estadão in 2011 to create small and medium business projects.

“When we underwent digital transformation, we started to figure out what roles would be necessary. We knew business intelligence would be important and we needed to figure out the product part,” Cardoso says in an interview with the News Product Alliance.

“It was the first time we figured out what we are doing is product, not projects. We started looking to the users and metrics to enhance the products. It was very difficult to undergo this cultural change because the newsroom was like “No no no. The product is newspaper. This is not a product. This is the website.”

“I think we still have this confusion. When they announced my position a lot of people asked how, since I was not a journalist in a sense. How would I be managing this product? So, I think we still have some confusion about that,” Cardoso says.

A toolkit for building and launching new products

Rich Gordon, Professor and director of digital innovation at the Medill School of Journalism, identifies three bundles of strategies and tactics that his team evolved when he was appointed online director for The Miami Herald in 1995:

- Human-centred design, or design thinking: Techniques for interviewing and observing users, developing insights into their needs, and testing product concepts and prototypes with them.
- Agile software development: Approaches for building software in small chunks and testing them with users during the development process.
- “Lean” product development: Investing resources incrementally as you test and learn, and prioritising revenue generation in the process.

Cardoso says however, that the interaction with the newsroom brought in new dimensions to her work and vice-versa. “Working in tech, the people are very mathematically minded. Engineering is very focused on numbers. When we talk with newsrooms it’s a completely different scenario. They are interested in the numbers, but they need to understand the mission and why I’m talking about a topic. It’s a challenge because I need to explain things more, but the conversation is very rich because we have a lot of exchanges and different ideas. The impact of the job is completely different.”

Do most product people in media come from tech, or do most start their career as journalists, as Gordon says? Both routes are now common and as you will read on to discover, the discipline of product thinking is a broad tent that takes in many. “Product management is a weird discipline full of oddballs and rejects that never quite fit in anywhere else,” Ken Norton, a tech executive who is now a coach to product leaders around the world, wrote in a 2005 essay.

CAN PRODUCT THINKING SAVE NEWS?

A December 2018 article by Max Willens at Digiday, notes that product managers have

What to look for when you’re hiring a product manager

In the white paper he wrote for the American Press Institute, Jeff Sondheim has this interesting segment on what media companies need to look for when hiring for product roles.

You need someone who thinks of news as a product:

Most people at legacy media organisations tend to think of news as just the articles or video packages they produce day-to-day. Product managers have to think about the whole experience of the user – what they should get from that news and how they want to consume it.

Someone who takes on a product role also needs to be an advocate for the user, someone who values readers as an important part of the news ecosystem. The ideal product person is also someone who is able to develop relationships throughout an organisation and can also deal with managing conflicts.

To ensure diversity, Sondheim adds, managers should look for someone who is a “culture add,” not necessarily a “culture fit.”

One culprit is that managers enter the recruiting process looking for “culture fit” – someone who will think like and act like the rest of the team. This naturally leads to hiring people who tend to also look like and come from the same socioeconomic backgrounds as your existing team. Instead, look for “culture add” in your candidates – the traits, experiences and skills that are exciting because they’re not present in your current team.

become the must-have new hire for publishers. The article notes how several publishers like Bloomberg Media, Vox Media and the Washington Post have significantly increased the number of product managers they employ.

“They, and other publishers have been stocking up on product managers because, as digital media grows faster-moving and more complex, publishers are being compelled to add people who can evaluate new opportunities, balance sales and editorial’s competing priorities, helping to develop new, unfamiliar lines of revenue.”

However, Willens writes that product managers also pose thorny problems for publishers. “They create organisational headaches and up-

set power dynamics; they can be difficult to find and keep; and they force publishers to reckon fully with just how committed they are to acting like the owners of digital products, rather than the producers of content.”

Two years later, in January 2021, the International News Media Association launched a Product Initiative to study and understand what news organisations needed to do to create, deliver, and innovate the best possible products for their audience. The initiative has produced some great studies but has also brought us some of the most updated definitions and understandings of where product teams fit into newsrooms.

“Product directly touches many parts of an organisation but mainly works across editorial, technology, design and user experience, data, marketing, and revenue. Despite being relatively new, product has quickly become an instrumental part of news organisations, akin to that of any consumer tech organisation,” INMA Product Initiative Lead Jodie Hopeprton writes in a report the team brought out in July 2021.

Despite being the youngest department at most news media organisations, Hopeprton writes that product has become an organisational rallying point for innovation, so important that it is often a stand-alone function sitting directly under the CEO – as is the case for more than one-third of respondents to a survey that INMA conducted in late 2020. In short, good product managers are also akin to strategic advisors.

“Before product teams existed, it’s not that we forgot customers; it was everyone’s job to think about their experience,” Hopperton continues in a subsequent report published in February 2022. “Newsrooms knew their readers, marketing knew their audiences, advertisers knew their customers. Yes, we all had different names for the same group of people. Now, the product team is the customer advocate. And there is a process we can follow to ensure what we are building – products and features, large and small – is focused on the people we are building it for.”

THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE PRODUCT

In September 2021, Becca Aaronson, a former director of product at Chalkbeat and product manager at The Texas Tribune, wrote a Medium post about the News Product Alliance (NPA), an organisation she had co-founded a year ago. The NPA is a much-needed initiative aimed at raising the role’s profile across the industry.

I wanted to create a community for “Product thinkers – those with the abilities to align editorial, audience, technology and business goals” because I believe they have “become the missing link to creating sustainable journalism in the digital age,” Aaronson wrote.

The idea for the NPA, she explained, came about during a meeting of product thinkers Aaronson attended in 2019 when it became clear the group would benefit from having a community of support and practice. While there are a variety of organisations working to support the digital transformation of news organisations, none directly support the individuals and teams doing this challenging work within, and that was the void the NPA hoped to fill. They also recognised that there is no single path into the discipline of product thinking or product management and so it hoped to diversify the field, and break down barriers to entry for people from a variety of backgrounds and experiences.

The NPA’s inaugural summit in March 2021, brought together a diverse group of more than 400 journalists, technologists, news executives and educators to discuss best practices for news product management, find career support and learn from each other. It was also a diverse group of participants that included 108 people of colour, 110 people from outside North America, and people from all experience levels, from those early in their careers (180) to news executives (71).

In another Medium post, Anita Zielina from the Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at CUNY, summarised what they had learnt about this nascent community. While it informs strategy at the NPA, these learnings are crucial for any publisher that is looking to build or expand product teams:

1. Product Thinkers are interdisciplinary collaborators

You are editors and designers, developers and managers, business strategists and audience experts – and everything in between. You showed us you don’t need to have a product title to be a product thinker. (Really, only 22% of you do!) You thrive at the intersections, and you experience joy when expanding the boundaries of your roles.

2. You strive for connection and community

Many of you feel lonely. If you’re in a small organisation, you might be the only “product person” there – and in large organisations, you might feel detached from the legacy power centres in editorial, business and tech. You deeply

value the feeling of belonging that you experienced at the Summit.

3. You want to mentor and be mentored

Very few of you had formal “product mentors” at the start of their careers, and you pledged to do better on the ones who come after you. You want to mentor and coach, but also feel a need to be mentored and coached.

4. Career paths and trajectories are a core question

Product in media is messy, and your career paths often are, too. Rather than a straight line, they are wild and wonderful circles and patterns with Ups, Downs and plenty of cross-movements. So many of you ask yourself: What’s next for me? How can I move fully into product? What’s the path to CPO (Chief Product Officer)?

5. There is a big need for training and professional development

You teach yourself how to “do product”, because no one else does. But at some point, you feel the need to solidify that knowledge, learn how other organisations or industries are using product frameworks or workflows and want to learn how to get better at pushing product forward in your organisation.

6. You value and push for diversity and equity

Many of you know what it’s like to be the outsider in an organisation as the “new product person”. You don’t want that for others, and you are eager to make journalism more equitable and inclusive.

7. You want to learn about international product practices

Maybe it’s because of the interdisciplinary growth mindset many of you have, but you really don’t feel geographic borders should impact how we learn from each other. You are curious about how other countries and regions of the world tackle product and eager to build those connections.

8. Changing culture in your organisation is a big impediment

Fighting resistance is something most of you are deeply familiar with. You are the translators and connectors between editorial, business and tech, and that does not come without conflict. Driving sustainable culture change in your organisations is on top of many of your minds. “News product” is almost synonymous

7 Steps to a Successful Media Product Process

In a report published in February 2022, INMA Product Initiative Lead Jodie Hopperton identifies a seven-step process that will make it easier for product teams at any size news media company in any region of the world to meet their goals while prioritising customers and stakeholders.

Step 1

THE MISSION

Nothing will come together without clearly articulated, easily understood, transparent goals and objectives. A publisher example - Lucy Butler, chief analytics officer at the Financial Times, explains how. As the company’s business has grown, it has moved from a focus on simple, volume-based metrics to more sophisticated value-based metrics. Instead of focusing on traffic, as it did from 2005 to 2014, FT moved to a blended metric known as RFV (recency, frequency, volume).

Step 2

ARTICULATE THE PROBLEM

Know what issue your media organisation is trying to solve and why. The what, who, why, where, when, and how questions aren’t just for reporters. Creating a hypothesis statement, problem solving, and focusing on the outcome are key.

Step 3

DEFINE CUSTOMER NEEDS

Growth occurs when customer needs are addressed consistently, creatively, and strategically. The user needs model is simple because it is external and comes from users.

Step 4

VALIDATE THE IDEA

This is the point where product teams test the hypothesis, as well as the steps before product design. Schibsted for example, involve the newsroom in user interviews and follow-up brainstorming, while Dagens Næringsliv of Norway created a lean innovation framework, called “the DN way,” which it used to attract younger readers.

Step 5

CREATE A PROTOTYPE/MVP

This is the time to ask about functionality, desirability, usability, and engagement – and get input from all teams.

Step 6

TEST AND ITERATE

The team has experimented, is confident in the product, and now it’s time to test. After the prototype/MVP has been tested with a subsection of readers, it is time to scale up, making your tests more and more broad. This is also where creating a monetisation strategy comes in, which also involves determining the value to the consumer.

Step 7

SHARE RESULTS

Product team jargon doesn’t always translate to other departments within the media company. Too much data can be a dangerous thing, so narrow it down to three to five things to share. Also, explain why teams in other departments should care.

with ‘culture change’ within news organisations, and driving this in a small organisation can be a lonely and disheartening task. I came away from the summit ready to dust off a bunch of old ideas I’d almost given up on and really start trying again in some areas, with almost immediate results.”

9. You are interested in product outside of journalism

While (or maybe because) very few of you have started their careers outside of the media industry, a large part of the journalistic product community is eager to be inspired by best practices, processes and cases from other industries.

As of today, there are more than 1,000 people who’ve signed up to be part of the New Product Alliance. “Some are product managers; others are doing the work of product managers at organisations that haven’t created that formal job role yet. And some are journalists who now see themselves as product thinkers, whatever their title is,” Gordon writes in his piece for Knight Lab.

That may be why many news product professionals believe journalism schools need to teach product management and product thinking. In the “State of the News Product Community Survey by Texas State University in 2020, 87 per cent of news product thinkers agreed with the statement, “Journalism schools should include product management topics in curriculum.”

HOW PRODUCT IS CHANGING THE STRUCTURE OF NEWS ORGANISATIONS

Before we move on to highlight some interesting case studies in product development from publishers, Hopperton’s 2021 report lays out some categories and caveats – for lack of a better word – that we should keep in mind in order to understand the role of product and

“‘News product’ is almost synonymous with ‘culture change’ within news organisations, and driving this in a small organisation can be a lonely and disheartening task.”

– Participant at the first NPA summit in March 2021

what it can do for a newsroom.

It may have occurred to you that the definitions we have been dealing with thus far are only growing broader in scope in terms of departments that product can encompass. This is not always a good thing, and though can pervade the entire organisation, Hopperton writes that it can practically be broken down into four categories:

1. **Consumer facing/platform, which can include Web, apps, newsletter, e-paper, podcasts.**

2. **Enabling products (cross-platform), which can include checkout, paywall experiences, personalisation, OVP (open virtual platform), notifications.**

3. **Internal tools, which can include CRM (Customer Relationship Management), CMS (Content Management System) and advertising tools that gather first and third-party data.**

4. **B2B tools, which are usually internal tools that have been developed in-house and sold separately to publishers and other businesses. Examples are The Washington Post’s Arc, a popular content management platform, or Canadian publisher The Globe and Mail’s Sophi, a suite of AI products that can manage a range of functions from paywalls to web-page design.**

One other thing Hopperton flags is that product development is not necessarily novel, or about creating shiny new things. The reality is that optimisation could sometimes be the key to better performance and for most product teams, 90% or more of the time is spent optimising the current product rather than developing brand new ones. Some examples of just how effective this optimisation process can be:

1) **The New York Times** found that allowing users to login via clicking a link in an email (“magic linking”) had a 2% lift in successful logins.

2) **The Wall Street Journal** was able to increase app downloads by 450% through using link texting for app downloads.

3) **The Telegraph** saw when it optimised its homepage speed (going from 9 seconds to load to 5.5 seconds), it had a 12% increase in pageviews from subscribers.

Keeping the caveats in mind, we can look at some different types of case studies that

the INMA report highlights on how focus on product is changing the organisational structure of newsrooms.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

For The New York Times, product grew out of its digital first strategy, which the company pursued aggressively beginning around 2006. Cultivating digital led to new journalistic efforts, new product features, and new revenue capabilities.

“What this did was really help spur a pretty fundamental culture change within the newsroom, where we now have reporters who understand that the audience reach and distribution that they get from a single push notification on their smartphone far outweighs what they get through ... placement on the front page of the newspaper,” said Alex Hardiman, chief product officer at the Times.

“What we’re really seeing is that the newsroom has become much more product-minded and our product teams, in turn, have become much more editorially minded.”

We should stop at this point to ask if this is a problem that sounds familiar for your newsroom or a gap that you’re hoping to bridge. We’re willing to wager that it hits home and the NYT is a perfect example of how the discipline of product management and its resultant ethos is fundamentally changing the way the organisation is structured.

The company recognises that success depends on the way people work together to address common audience needs, and its structure reflects that at every level, Hardiman says.

“First we have functions [which] are skill-based groups familiar to a lot of news organisations,” Hardiman said. “So it could be journalists in the newsroom, designers, product managers, engineers, data scientists – and they’re responsible for standards and excellence within their craft, career development and growth and community.”

From there, teams are created around specific missions.

“Missions are groups of cross-functional teams that are all pursuing the same high-level goal or objective,” she said. The New York Times has two types of missions:

Programme missions, which are focused largely on consumer-facing products and experiences.

Platform missions, which focus on underlying technologies and infrastructure.

With product and software at the heart of its growth, the company has looked at new ways to

Where do product people come from?

In December 2020, INMA ran a survey with more than 60 companies from 25 countries and confirmed there is not a traditional path to working in product at news organisations. In the survey, they asked: “Have you previously worked in another department within a news organisation? Please select all that apply.”

Almost 50% come from the newsroom, 30% from marketing, and 26% from technology or revenue/advertising and a small percentage from design.

Here are some other key takeaways from the survey that reveal where members of news companies are with their journey toward inculcating a culture of product thinking:

1. PRODUCT PEOPLE HAVE DIVERSE JOB TITLES

Roles vary from Vice President, CEO, Editor, Product Manager, Marketing Head etc.

Job titles had keywords such as growth, subscriptions, digital strategy, experience, business and development. There is a joke that product managers want to be vice presidents, vice presidents want to be CEOs, and CEOs want to be product managers.

2. PRODUCT TEAMS ARE RELATIVELY NEW

Nearly 40% of respondents to the survey have formed their product teams within the last four years and 23% within the past year.

3. THERE IS NO CONSISTENCY IN WHERE A PRODUCT TEAM SITS WITHIN A NEWS ORGANISATION.

Just over one-third of respondents had a product team reporting directly to the CEO or publisher. Some other product teams sat under technology (25%), a digital unit (8%), editorial (9%), marketing/had product people spread across different departments (12%).

4. PRODUCT TEAMS VARY WILDLY IN SIZE.

Whilst 42% of organisations have 11 or more people in their product team, 17% of respondents said there wasn’t a specific product team.

5. PRODUCT PEOPLE LOVE INSPIRATION

A word cloud exercise of some of the brands and terms loved by survey participants include Netflix, Spotify, Apple, Disney, Amazon, newsletters, podcasts, subscriptions and the Times.

creatively engage readers and rethink the ways in which journalism is presented, Hardiman goes on to explain. That gave them the ability for instance, to adapt and present different types of content during the pandemic. That uncertain year of 2020 saw The New York Times site attracting readers from 232 countries and one out of two Americans visiting.

“What I also like about it is that it really reflects the reimagining of our products, not only on the consumer side, but also on the journalist side, in terms of really pushing us to give our journalists and our editors much better tooling to create much more immersive and useful storytelling,” Hardiman said. “It’s this type of adaptive product strategy and progressive change that’s really driving growth at the New York Times.”

At the end of 2019, the Times announced the creation of the Newsroom Product Desk, describing it as “a crucial step in our ongoing effort to expand the newsroom’s partnership with colleagues on the Product, Design and Technology teams.”

“Those teams are focused on a broad range of work that is closely tied to how we plan and present our journalism to readers around the world, an effort critical to deepening our readers’ engagement with our journalism, and the creation of this desk brings the newsroom into the heart of these projects.”

SINGAPORE PRESS HOLDINGS

Changing geographies now, we move to Singapore Press Holdings which publishes The Straits Times and Business Times amongst several others. SPH Chief Product Officer Gaurav Sachdeva tells INMA the company looks to build business-viable products or experiences that customers love.

Singapore Press Holdings looks for cross-functionality, so product teams are made up of a department member from product design, engineering, data and analytics, editors and circulation, and sales and marketing.

Accountability plays a key role in success, so SPH has a system where the product is governed by “a trinity of business owners (made up of members of the editorial team and circulation, sales and marketing), product owners, and tech owners.”

SPH has also instituted a system of having a monthly steering committee where senior management can weigh in on product and tech-related topics. He called these meetings a “safe place to fight” as long as everyone is focused on specific outcomes: steering the direction, get-



ting everyone on the same page, and overseeing progress and learning.

YAHOO NEWS

Being product-led can help an organisation promote collaboration and jettison a traditional siloed approach to departments in media houses. INMA highlights the example of Yahoo News where product has always been a critical department but has become more so recently with a change in structure from being vertically led to being product-led. Lippe Oosterhof, head of product at Yahoo News, Lifestyle and Entertainment, said the product team at Yahoo is responsible for creating great consumer experiences: “This starts with coming up with ideas for new features and products, and it ends with scaling experiences to drive our key results, such as retention, NPS, revenue, engagement, etc.”

In between those two phases, he said, they validate hypotheses through user research and testing, collaborate with editorial to fine-tune their approach, and lead their engineers and designers to build interfaces, personalisation, and publisher tools, etc.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ARRIVING AT SHARED GOALS

No matter how it is incorporated into organisational structure, a critical component to product management is creating clear, specific goals. Jackie Bavaro, head of product management at the mobile work management platform Asana and author of “Cracking the PM Career”, views a company’s goals and strategies as a pyramid:

“At the top of the pyramid is the company

mission and high-level company strategy. Below that, each department might have a strategy that connects to the higher-level strategy. And below that, each team might have a strategy that connects to the departmental strategy,” Bavaro told INMA.

When the goals are clear and well-connected, she said, each member of the product team understands how their work supports the team goal, which affects the departmental goal, which in turn supports the company goal. When that understanding takes place, each person will feel confident that their work is valuable and valued. Such communication begins with senior leadership and then trickles down to the departmental level.

For any of this to succeed of course, Bavaro says companies must develop a product mindset. “Product mindset is the habitual approach of connecting all work to those goals and needs,” Bavaro said. “It’s remembering to always ask, ‘What problem are we trying to solve?’ and ‘What problem should we solve?’”

One way of approaching this is to constantly evaluate the quality and type of audience data that a company looks for in formulating strategy - a prime example being the Financial Times.

In a March 2021 INMA Webinar, Lucy Butler, chief analytics officer at the Financial Times, explained the metrics her organisation uses for product success.

She emphasised that product is an ever-evolving journey – one that is leading the FT toward a more comprehensive North Star. As the company’s business has grown, it has moved from a focus on simple, volume-based metrics to more sophisticated value-based met-

rics. Instead of focusing on traffic, as it did from 2005 to 2014, FT moved to a blended metric known as RFV (recency, frequency, volume). This was a leading indicator of acquisition and retention, looking at engagement, cancellation, and conversion rates, as well as revenue versus usage. Now the FT looks at quality visits and engagement to the current North Star metric of lifetime value (LTV), of which RFV is an important predictor.

Cait O’Riordan, chief product and information officer for the FT, admits that the formula is a bit of a guess: “What it thinks about is how much money each customer will spend with us during their time as a subscriber. And it is a prediction. It’s a very educated guess.”

Deploying a mission to reach this new North Star meant creating a new framework to evaluate the opportunities at hand, see what the team needed to work on, and allow them to pursue multi-million-dollar opportunities.

“Things like engagement are still very much at the heart of lifetime value,” she said. “If you can get more engaged users, you will drive more lifetime value because they will stick with you. But you can also think about conversion, you can think about different types of monetisation; it allows us to think more clearly about our monetisation methods and how we monetise those customers.”

THE ATLANTIC

A hard focus on data can also be complemented by more subjective audience surveys. An excellent example to highlight here is The Atlantic. In a January 2022 post, Emily Goligoski, the publication’s executive director of audience research explained how they had spent two years studying readers’ and listeners’ needs.

The team gathered five research-backed, time-proven reasons that individual readers and listeners look to The Atlantic’s journalism:

Give me deeper clarity and context

Help me discover new idea

Challenge my assumptions

Let me take a meaningful break

Introduce me to writers at the top of their craft

“Our team at The Atlantic conducts survey and interview-based research with current, prospective, and former subscribers, as well as with people in the U.S. and in other countries

who listen to Atlantic podcasts and narrated articles,” Goligosky explains. “Among other topics, we ask research participants what makes our coverage unique, whether that means worth sharing, paying for, or vehemently disagreeing with.”

“The people we speak to and survey aren’t all fans of our work, nor do they all spend time with our journalism regularly. But the experiences of people who interact with us infrequently also expand our understanding of answers to the questions: why do people seek out The Atlantic? What do they get out of the time they spend with us? We complement this intel, gathered over thousands of self-reports, with information that our data science, audience, and customer care teams gather.”

To illustrate the value of these insights, Goligosky speaks to one of The Atlantic’s associate editors, Isabel Fattal, who said having the five needs on hand is generative for her work with Atlantic newsletters and our apps: “The reader needs help me stay intentional in how we’re using our readers’ time. On a practical level, the needs prompt variety in story selection – I use them, along with other editorial priorities and programming methods, to make sure we’re giving our audiences a balanced reading list.”

VOX

Extending this line of thought, shared goals in product thinking is also something that editorial teams can achieve by refining the concept of what their stories should be and do. In November 2021, Nieman lab had an interview with editor-in-chief Swati Sharma on how Vox is revamping its editorial strategy to redefine what ‘Voxy’ means. It was an exercise that involved eliminating some sections of the site and reorganising others.

Sharma said she found that oftentimes the term “Voxy” would be used without a clear definition of what that meant. In talking with editors, they came up with the six types of stories that Vox writers do well. Going forward, she said, a Vox story is one that either brings clarity to chaos; dissects complicated policies or ideas; connects something to the larger stakes; explores solutions or emerging ideas to solve problems; helps readers make decisions or surfaces something hidden in plain sight.

Vox’s mission, as Sharma and her team redefined it, is to still explain the news, but in a way that empowers people with the information and insight they need to understand the world around them. That isn’t to say Vox wasn’t doing those things before, Sharma told Nieman

Lab, but part of redoing the editorial strategy is to have that guideline clearly laid out for staff to refer back to, and to make sure every story fits that bill.

INTRODUCING METRICS TO NEWSROOMS (WITHOUT ANXIETY)

We’ll end this chapter by considering one procedural aspect of integrating product teams and product thinking into newsrooms - it often involves looking at a lot of audience data, and that can often not go down well with reporters and editors if not introduced in a considered manner.

This is a question that was addressed in an excellent Journalist Fellowship Paper written by Elisabeth Gamperl and published by The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in September 2021. Gamperl’s research, spanning conversations with newsroom managers, data analysts and industry experts, was sponsored by the German publication *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

“While numbers are considered rational, the discussion about metrics is often very emotional,” Gamperl notes. “Caitlin Petre found in her ethnographic study of the role of metrics in contemporary news that metrics exert a “powerful influence over journalists’ emotions and morale”. She wrote that metrics evoke a range of strong feelings in journalists, like excitement, anxiety, self-doubt, triumph, and demoralisation.”

Journalists, whose stock in trade is words and stories, may not necessarily be excited about metrics, Gamperl notes. “There is a balancing act between keeping a newsroom informed and not overwhelming them. Jörn Rose, Head of International Audience at Huffington Post said: “I think if you provide too much, it [...] has a counterintuitive effect of making people less engaged with it because people don’t know where to focus. It becomes a little bit overwhelming and disengaging to just see reams and reams of data.”

“Every interviewee told me it is important to be transparent about metrics but you also have to understand the preferences and needs of editors and journalists. For some it will be enough to receive reports and emails from time to time, others need access to real-time dashboards, still others just want to know the performance of their own articles.”

As part of her research, Gamperl spoke to Chris Moran, head of editorial innovation at the Guardian, who said his team developed a list of questions they work through before submitting data to the newsroom. These include: “Who is

How to build a forward-looking relationship with data

For newsrooms wanting an active, forward-looking relationship with data, Elisabeth Gamperl, Journalist Fellow at The Reuters Institute, proposes six guidelines that will yield both short-term benefits and improve longer-term strategic decision-making.

WORK WITH A HYPOTHESIS Metrics won’t tell your newsroom what it should write or which format works best. What they will do is provide a sounding board for your hypothesis.

METRICS MEAN BETTER PLANNING At its core, data allow you to approach the news-gathering process in a more structured way. All my interviewees confirmed that working with metrics led to a change in the editorial planning processes.

IT’S A DAILY EXPERIMENTATION JOB

Analytics-informed decision-making will involve the day-to-day tweaking of headlines, pictures, placement, and promotion across social media.

NORMALISE TALKING ABOUT FAILURES

As a general rule in newsrooms, every story has involved an investment of time and resource and care. Journalists are told from day one to never make mistakes – a factual mistake in an article can have devastating consequences. This makes newsrooms a challenging environment in which to discuss things that didn’t work out as planned. Every journalist carries a tension about failures. In contrast, working with metrics is all about trial and error, adjustment and retrial. Every failure is a step closer to success.

IDENTIFY THE UNNECESSARY For a long time, the narrative around online publishing was to publish as much and as often as possible. This makes sense in a world where page views are monetized. But now, as many newsrooms shift towards subscriptions, the conversation about quantity is changing. It was a viewpoint repeated by many of my interviewees: a number of them had lowered their daily article counts.

PROMOTE TRUST IN YOUR ANALYSTS Many newsrooms now have a data person or a team dedicated to analysing and growing their audience. As I said before, not every journalist is a data analyst and it is advisable to employ specialists and involve them in the editorial decision-making process. Journalists should see their analysts as consultants they can call on before, during, and after the creation process.

the audience of the data and who will act on it?”, “What is the mechanism for delivery?” or the very important question: “What is the potential damage and how can it be gamed?”

GET DATA TO HELP OUT JOURNALISTS

At an INMA Product and Data for Media Summit held in October 2021, Caroline Carruthers, co-author of “The Chief Data Officer’s Playbook” was asked about how to help form a data-positive culture in the newsroom. She had one crucial piece of advice:

“When it comes to creative people, you’d better ask how to use data to free yourself from doing things that you don’t want to do rather than trying to make data do the job for you,” she said. “The best way is to use data to free these people from the mundane and boring, so they can actually use their talent and skill in the best way possible,” she added.

The INMA summit highlighted case studies from news publishers that ran initiatives that increased efficiency and effectiveness of the work of journalists, while preserving their autonomy. Greg Piechota, INMA’s researcher-in-residence summarised them.

Content reviews helped spot what’s not worth doing: Funke Media Group in Germany analysed supply and demand of articles to help identify topics for which “we generate a lot of content which are not well received by our readers.”

Algorithmic text generation expanded coverage saving reporters’ time: NDC Media Group in Sweden automated generation of reports from 60,000 local football matches, using data on results, pictures, and quotes crowdsourced from coaches.

Automated curation boosted effectiveness saving editors’ time: The Globe and Mail in Canada handed over curation of its home page and social channels to an AI system so its editors could focus on finding and telling stories.

We started this chapter with product managers and ended this chapter with AI? How did that happen?

We realise we may have taken a bit of a segue from the craft of product thinking and its incorporation into newsrooms. But these insights are important to start creating a data-positive environment. And that’s where it all begins. ●

A primer on what works and what's to come

Artificial Intelligence, Robot Journalism and NFTs

New Media Tech

There are years in which the media industry is abuzz with talk of new tech and new solutions, and others in which older mediums have suddenly been imbued with new possibilities.

We'd say that this moment is a mix of the two, with product development and innovation moving so fast that it encompasses both the old and new. So as newsrooms around the world continue to innovate with podcasts and newsletters, and possibly gear up for a new pivot to video on platforms like Tik Tok, we take this chapter to look at the tech that might define the future. In order of importance these are:

Artificial Intelligence: How is it being used in newsrooms today and what for? Can AI predict user and subscriber behaviours and help automate mundane tasks so that journalists have more time to generate quality content?

Robot Journalism: An offset of AI that is both cheered and feared in newsrooms. Can creating some types of articles and content be done by machines? And what does that mean for newsroom workflows?

Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs): We'll be honest in saying we have no idea how long this is going to last. But while the bandwagon is still gaining steam it's worth looking at how publishers can capitalise on the demand for NFTs to generate some revenue.

Let's get started:

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE FOR THE SMART NEWSROOM

The data we have right now from multiple surveys is that publishers across the world are betting big on AI. There's an interesting dynamic here - a recent McKinsey report found that across industries 50% of companies use AI in one way or another. However, compared to other digital media outlets like video and audio platforms, news publishers are still at a very early stage of AI adoption.

Why is this the case? Anecdotally, we've found that despite there being many different use cases for AI in newsroom operation and other aspects of media management, there is still some level of stigma or fear... about the big elephant in the room proposition - can AI get so good that it will make journalists redundant? Can we get to a stage where machines will churn out news articles? These propositions are still very far-fetched, though there have been significant advances in 'robot journalism' which we'll cover later. For now, let's pan out and look at the bigger picture.

The Journalism, media and technology trends and predictions 2022, a report written by Nic Newman for the Reuters Institute for the study of journalism surveyed 246 news leaders in 52 countries to explore the latest developments in the field and the priorities for the year ahead. Newman writes that AI technologies are fast being seen as core to publishers' businesses.

"Artificial intelligence technologies such as Machine Learning (ML), Deep Learning (DL), Natural Language Processing (NLP), and Natural Language Generation (NLG) have become more embedded in every aspect of publishers' businesses over the last few years. Indeed, these can no longer be regarded as 'next genera-

tion' technologies but are fast becoming a core part of a modern news operation at every level - from newsgathering and production right through to distribution," Newman writes.

A quick breakdown of priorities:

- More than eight in ten (85%) say that AI will be very or somewhat important this year in delivering better personalisation and content recommendations for consumers.
- A similar proportion (81%) see AI as important for automating and speeding up newsroom workflows, such as the tagging of content, assisted subbing, and interview transcription.
- About 70% see AI as playing a key part in helping find or investigate stories using data.
- 69% see it as being helpful in identifying and targeting prospective customers most likely to pay for a subscription.
- Lastly, using AI to automatically write stories - robot-journalism - is less of a priority at this stage (40%) but is where many of the most future-focused publishers are spending their time.

Newman also lists out some excellent examples from 2021 on how AI has had an impact on both story production and distribution.

1 In June 2021, The Boston Globe won an investigative journalism Pulitzer Prize for Blind Spot, a story about preventable road accidents in the US. Reporters used Pinpoint, an AI tool developed by Google, to support investigative journalists to identify patterns in their data.

Despite nearly 50 years of warnings by federal safety officials, the United States has no effective national system to keep tabs on drivers who commit serious offenses in another state, Brendan McCarthy Deputy Projects Editor at The Globe writes in a Google blog. "When we launched the investigation, we hadn't fully gotten acquainted with Pinpoint, a new Google tool where you can upload documents to easily search for names, places and more for patterns. But midway through our reporting process, we were dumping troves of files - court documents, photos, handwritten files, spreadsheets and more

- into the tool, he writes.

"A couple of helpful aspects of Pinpoint are its ability to recognize text in images and organizational capabilities, like the opportunity to quickly see, and search documents for, the most mentioned names or places and connections between people. So often in journalism - especially when you are dealing with mass troves of data - you are looking for outliers. Pinpoint let us figure out what was NOT there as much as what was there."

2 Sky News used AI to extract and clean public health data from pdfs and other previously inaccessible formats, which they then used to constantly update web pages and TV graphics across its output.

3 The Washington Post has extended its synthetic voice audio versions across all of its output, using a software called Amazon Polly, following a successful trial period within its apps.

The Post was previously using standard text-to-voice conversion iOS and Android technology, but. Polly "is a better voice - it's a smoother, more human-sounding voice," Kat Downs Mulder, the publication's managing editor for digital said in an interview with Press Gazette. "It still sounds like a mechanised voice, an automated voice. But I think it's a bit smoother and more natural."

In the 2021 edition of the Journalism, media and technology trends and predictions report, Newman refers to the Journalism AI project

"Using AI to automatically write (40%) stories - so-called robo-journalism - is less of a priority at this stage but is where many of the most future-focused publishers are spending their time."

- Nic Newman, author of "Journalism, media, and technology trends and predictions 2022", published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

from the POLIS think tank at the London School of Economics which has been documenting best practice case studies in this field since the beginning of 2020. These include:

- The Peruvian news outlet Ojo Público has created a tool to spot potential patterns of corruption in government procurement contracts.
- The BBC has been testing an AI powered chatbot tool to answer questions about coronavirus using its own trusted reporting and information summarised from official sources.
- The South China Morning Post is using AI to identify look-alike audiences to help it better target new subscribers.
- The Reuters news agency used speech-to-text technology to add time-coded transcripts to its entire archive of historic videos dating back to 1896 – making key moments easier to find in 11 different languages.
- The Globe and Mail in Canada has delegated many of the editorial choices on its homepage and other landing pages to an AI-based tool called Sophi.
- A number of publications are using AI tools to monitor issues of gender and racial bias in output and flag results to editors. New ideas have been surfaced by AIJO, the AI in Journalism project, which is a collaboration across eight publishers and has proposed ways to understand and mitigate newsroom biases.

THE CURRENT STATE OF AI ADOPTION

Narrowing in further from Newman's examples, many of which one could see as more advanced uses of AI, a survey published in February 2022 by the World Association of News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) in collaboration with the Germany-based consulting firm Schickler, decided to look at the current state of AI adoption in newsrooms by narrowing use cases to reader revenue and editing.

In general, the survey, conducted across 2021, found that more than 75 percent of publishers say AI will play a crucial role in the success of their business within the next three years. A more striking insight was that the use of AI was not just restricted to larger newsrooms with deeper pockets, or the oft-cited publisher examples in Europe or the U.S. who pop up in discussion about innovation.

"In fact, as we saw in this year's World Press Trends survey the gulf in the importance (and planned investment) attributed to Automation, AI and Machine Learning is more striking, and perhaps, surprising, i.e. developing countries place a huge importance compared to devel-

AI use cases ranked by relevance

(according to global survey of news media by WAN-IFRA and Schickler)

Reader Revenue

1. Prediction of conversion likelihood
2. Prediction of churn-likelihood
3. Market-Based-pricing
4. Individualised Paywall
5. Chatbots in Customer Service

Content Creation

1. Automatic content planning
2. Automatic content adaptation
3. Automatic content creation

Content Distribution

1. Automatic link placement in articles
2. Personalising web pages
3. Personalised newsletters
4. Automatic content moderation
5. Automatic content extension
6. Automatic creation of topic pages
7. Automatic resurfacing of archive content

The growing case for AI

The key takeaways from global survey of news media by WAN-IFRA and Schickler provide an excellent overview and guide to how publishers are thinking about AI, now and for the future.

Publishers banking on AI for its business: Despite a slow rate of adoption, nearly 77 percent of publishing executives responding to our global survey said AI will be important for the success of their business in 2024. Of that, 35 percent said it would be very important.

Algorithm allergies clearing up for editors: Indeed, the near taboo that was once associated with AI as it pertains to journalism is clearly fading, or even a moot point, as newsrooms and their editors lean into the benefits of automation. It doesn't mean they are giving up on Einstein's "The only real valuable thing is intuition" when it comes to having the final say

Reader revenue use cases abound

Some of those benefits are clearly the role AI can play in reader revenue strategies: Helping to surface content, placement on home pages, predicting churn, propensity to subscribe, automated content creation like sports results that has a long tail play in retention and even triggers for subscriptions, dynamic paywalls, eliminating some of tedious, mundane tasks so journalists can focus on creating deeper, quality content.

The power of positive results

And when newsrooms start to see these actions turn into positive results, it can have a knock-on effect of buying into automation as a true benefit vs. a threat. Not to mention getting more buy-in for more investment, whether that is in tools or resources.

It can be expensive, but...: AI innovation and investment is not just for the marquee publishers around the world as small publishers (across the globe) have already adopted AI in many facets of their activities. Whether it is through in-house development or partnering with startups, universities / labs or other publishers, there are ways to get on board.

Now the reality on the ground...

Actual adoption and implementation appears to tell a different story, at least when we conducted our survey nearly a year ago. That indicates that while there is enthusiasm to invest in AI in the near future, nearly 50% of respondents said they have not adopted AI usage thus far; 19 percent have implemented multiple cases and only 11 percent fully implementing one case.

Internal struggles

Any adoption of a new technology brings its own set of obstacles and challenges, and AI is certainly not an exception. While there are several cases globally of small publishers implementing AI, publishers told us (in our survey) their biggest challenge is a lack of funding in the budget and time compared with other projects. Not far behind this is the difficulty in developing actual production-ready AI use cases.

Core use cases identified

Most publishers have indicated that many of the key use cases associated with reader revenue and other editorial practices are planned to be in practice by 2024, so it is clearly in their road map.

Data resource shortcoming: For most publishers to reach that goal of having AI playing a critical role in the success of their business by 2024, there also needs to be a bigger commitment to their overall data strategies and infrastructure. That means investment in expertise (staff), finding champions within the organisation, but generally getting their data blueprint in order.

Providers plentiful

To help, there is no shortage of technology providers (and consultants) to assist news publishers on their journey. Just check out our member suppliers on page 28 to connect with that precious part of the industry.

oped countries,” the report states.

This is a trend confirmed by other research as well. In July 2021, a report jointly prepared by International Media Support, The Fix and El Clip, aimed to specifically address this gap in our understanding of AI application in newsrooms around the world. It focuses on media houses using varying degrees of AI, ML and Data Processing as part of their core business operations in 20 countries in Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe. The data was collected via deep dive case studies of 44 media outlets and over 33 hours of interviews with experts.

The report management of paywalls and subscriptions are the most widely used AI applications in both regions but while the use of AI/ML is not limited to large, corporate media, budgets and market realities can make stark differences. The report finds that attracting specialist talent and skills is a barrier to further adoption and growth and more collaborative approaches between media, research institutions, and third-party solutions need to be encouraged.

Still, as the WAN-IFRA report finds, the exciting news is that the near taboo that was once associated with AI as it pertains to journalism is clearly fading.

“It sounds like a cliché, but it is true: the advantage of automating mundane processes allows journalists to focus more on their core principles of creating quality content. But increasingly as the surveys showed, the intelligence side of AI is also winning over editors and journalists as it pertains to reader revenue strategies,” the report states.

“A lot of analytics tools inform the newsroom about what stories are trending and when, but many of the AI tools already on the market and in practice today help to predict more accurately which stories will be read, and more importantly, which stories will convert and retain based on historical data around subscriptions and engagement.

WAN-IFRA also highlights some recent case studies, giving more insight into the specific use cases for AI that publishers are.

AN ALGORITHM TO DEFINE READER ENGAGEMENT

The Norwegian publisher, Amedia, the country’s largest publisher of local media titles which reaches 2.4 million readers daily across all platforms, wanted to understand the kind of user behaviour that characterises a happy and satisfied customer. Getting an answer to this question is easier said than done, of course, but

it can be key to designing new products and act as a guide to what kinds of content to focus on.

Amedia handed over this decision to a machine learning algorithm, letting it select the best combination of metrics. The algorithm takes up to 70 reader behaviour statistics as an input and distills them into a single number that best predicts how likely a reader is to stay loyal to the product. At Amedia they call this number the “Engagement Index.”

A particular benefit of the Engagement Index, according to the WAN-IFRA report, is that it separates the product’s and content’s influence on reader loyalty from other external factors such as personal preferences or subscriber tenure. In other words, it captures those factors that are currently affecting reader loyalty – and that are under the publisher’s control.

A PAYWALL THAT PREDICTS USER BEHAVIOUR

We’ve made mention of this innovation before from Canada’s The Globe and Mail. In recent years the publisher has committed itself to AI, developing a range of tools and products under the name Sophi.

Perhaps the most cutting edge is a fully dynamic, personalised real time system that decides when, or even if, to show a paywall. The unique thing about this paywall is that it knows when to give up rather than alienate visitors. Here’s how Sonali Verma, senior project manager at The Globe and Mail, described it at the Online News Association conference last year: A reader who reads mostly general news and recipes might be less likely to subscribe than one reading a lot of business-related content. Still, Sophi might present this general news reader with a paywall.

If they don’t reach for their wallet, the model won’t hit them with the same message again. Instead, Sophi might pivot, and try asking the reader to register with an email instead. Sophi uses analytics to make decisions that balance the potential for ad revenue against the potential for subscriber revenue. Some readers might never encounter a paywall (Verma mentioned a hypothetical visitor who primarily reads car reviews – a strong source of ad revenue) while others might see one every time they visit the site.

The Globe and Mail has credited Sophi with helping it achieve a 51% increase in subscriptions as against its old paywall which was a hybrid approach. In April 2021, the company reported that it had 170,000 digital-only subscribers.

Use cases for AI/ML in Latin America and eastern Europe, as described in a report prepared jointly by International Media Support, The Fix and El Clip

- In both LatAm and CEE the most widely used AI applications included the management of paywalls and subscriptions. Major legacy media are taking the lead with AI related either to subscription services, personalisation and automation to engage readers and drive them to become subscribers.
- In both LatAm and CEE media managers reported use for A/B headline testing and bots for user feedback. It was also used for churn prediction analysis.
- The most common AI/ML use in CEE was for the automated generation of texts.
- The data showed little use of AI for intelligent invoice management, customer or post-sale services or automatic content generation for social media.
- More than half of publishers use AI/ML powered solutions for editorial reasons (especially data analysis and automating content creation). But it is the mid to large sized media that make a full use of the AI/ML solution spectrum, particularly when it comes to managing subscriptions or automating internal processes.
- The most common AI/ML use in LatAm was for predictive patterns to generate new content and understanding visitor patterns.

The paper also uses AI in many other ways that indirectly drive subscriptions and registrations. For instance, natural language processing is used to select stories to put outside the paywall. In fact, a Sophi tool decides where to place 99% of all digital content across The Globe and Mail’s properties, Gordon Edall, Vice President, Sophi, told WAN-IFRA. “Our work on Sophi Site Automation... is probably where we have had the biggest impact, as we have been able to let the newsroom continue to do its work but use the machine to more effectively drive performance of that content without putting the brand at risk.

Sophi is also helping publishers around the world who can purchase the AI tools from The Globe and Mail. The South African news website News24, which launched a freemium paywall in August of 2020, decided to use the tech to get directly involved in ranking news stories, prioritising times to publish, and conversion predictions. With its help, News24 reached 45,000 subscriptions in just over one year’s time, Adrian Basson, Editor-in-Chief of News 24 told WAN-IFRA.

A PREDICTIVE SCORE TO HELP RESURFACE AND REPUBLISH ARCHIVE CONTENT

A collaborative research project between Ouest-France, the country’s largest newspaper, and the companies Twipe and Syllabs resulted in the creation of an internal search engine based on a predictive score that helps the newspaper surface, republish, and monetise archival content.

The collaboration resulted in the creation of a “content monetisation predictive score,” assigned to each of the more than 30 million articles in the Ouest-France content archive and designed to assess an article’s potential to generate page views.

“Initially, we had three goals in mind,” Jean-Pierre Besnard, Project and Incubation Manager at Ouest-France, told WAN-IFRA. “The first was to consider it from a page views angle, the next was engagement, and the last was subscriptions. We could imagine three algorithms on three of these points of view, but we only had time for the first one.”

The partners also built an internal search engine tool based on the predictive score, which

surfaces articles from the archive, allowing journalists to select and re-publish them with just a few clicks.

A DATA-DRIVEN PLAN TO PREDICT CHURN

Mediahuis, headquartered in Belgium, set itself the goal of implementing a fully automated data-driven customer journey with the aim of increasing revenue and reducing churn. The company wanted to target its potential and existing customers with the best registration offer, the best sales offer, and the best retention journey in an automated, efficient, and personalised manner.

In order to achieve this, they adopted a data-driven approach, using a churn propensity prediction model developed in-house. Incorporating this machine learning, Mediahuis is targeting a selection of existing customers who seem likely to churn but worthwhile to keep, and who could potentially be persuaded to stay on with the right offers.

In addition to its churn prediction model, the WAN-IFRA report notes that Mediahuis started working on a propensity to buy model a few months ago to be able to predict whether someone will buy a subscription and what type of subscription they will buy in the next month.

In terms of initial results, Jessica Bulthé, Data Science Business Partner at Mediahuis, told WAN-IFRA they looked promising for both logged-in and anonymous users, with the model correctly predicting in eight out of 10 cases whether somebody will buy a subscription in the next month.

“That’s a good first step towards adding propensity to buy and the next best action modeling for propensity to buy,” Bulthé said.

DO ROBOTS DREAM OF DIGITAL TEXT?

We’ll cover this last case study from WAN-IFRA before moving on to a larger discussion about robot journalism or automated content generation.

The case study itself is of the Dutch regional media group NDC, which publishes three daily titles and more than 40 weeklies, ramping up coverage plans for the first post-COVID football season with a reader promise to cover every single local match. This extended sports coverage is part of the publisher’s strategy to build out the value of its local journalism, thereby driving reader revenues. It’s all about providing coverage that’s not available anywhere else, to drive engagement in local communities.

How many matches does that amount to? 60,000! That is far beyond the capacity of the newsroom. But NDC’s solution is to have robots write the match reports, while photos and comments from coaches are collected through a crowd-sourcing platform. For a regional publisher like us, being able to cover all matches of all divisions is engagement gold.” Ard Boer, Sports Project Manager at NDC told What’s New in Publishing.

We mentioned earlier in this chapter that publishers are interested in automated content generation, but it is not a priority area for most right now. This is largely due to the fact that at present AI can only produce texts for certain niche topics where structured data is available. Sports is one, what could the others be?

Schibsted’s Norwegian regional site Bergens Tidende is another publisher using automated content to drive revenue, writing stories about real estate. Local stories about the housing market are relatable for most readers but churning them out is incredibly time-consuming, involving mapping neighbourhoods, properties and sales.

Bergens Tidende experimented in 2019 with the ‘Bologrobot’, a piece of tech created by a company called United Robots that finds information about the real estate, like current prices, addresses, areas, changes in prices over time, the price of a square meter, and so on. This data comes from agencies and is gathered by the Norwegian authorities. Then, it finds great aerial and panorama photos from a supplier, supplemented by images from Google Street view.

One of the main reasons to work with a robot was to engage more readers and sell more subscriptions. “Since launching in mid-July 2020, we have sold 500 subscriptions from nearly 6,000 automated articles. We anticipate roughly 1,000 new subscriptions per year. That’s five percent of all the article conversions in BT, overnight establishing the robot as the most popular service to our readers,” the publication reported in 2021. WNIP reported that these automated articles generate about 3,000–4,000 pageviews a day.

Other publishers are catching on to this idea. Swedish national tabloid site Nyheter24 publishes automated real estate top lists and celebrity real estate articles. The articles generate tens of thousands of page views per week. The publisher is looking at growing ad revenues with cost-effective robot-generated pageviews.

In March this year, What’s New in Publishing reported that US local media group McClatchy

Other examples of how AI can help publishers use archives to engage audiences

In March 2022, Journalim.co.uk’s editor Marcele Kunova reported on two fascinating projects that were part of Collab Challenges, a series of experiments organised by LSE’s JournalismAI project and supported by the Google News Initiative. Both involved the use of AI to surface archive content.

Sveriges Radio

The Swedish radio station Sveriges Radio, decided to use AI for two objectives: making audio more searchable and shareable, and making it more accessible to diverse audiences.

One of the most obvious applications of such technology, Kunova writes, is to be able to search through archived material. For example, Sveriges Radio’s global news podcast recently talked about new developments in the murder of the Swedish prime minister in the 1980s. However, the producers soon realised some of their listeners were not even born yet and knew little about the case.

To help them out, the team used soundbites from archived shows that featured important information. This helped younger audiences understand the story and refreshed the memory for others.

There are many more ways journalists could

work with audio snippets, like using them in another audio show or collating them into a curated playlist. “Taken further, the AI system could recommend more soundbites to listen to according to users’ preferences, instead of suggesting entire shows, making audio content more engaging and relevant,” Kunova writes.

The Guardian and Agence France-Presse (AFP)

When it comes to written text, it is not that easy to accurately identify quotes and match them with the right sources. So data scientists at The Guardian joined forces with Agence France-Presse (AFP) to find a better way to identify and attribute quotes, using machine learning. The objective was to enable journalists to better search and understand quotes and who they are quoting.

Although no tool has yet to be built for journalists with this concept, Kunova writes it has the potential to help search and analyse quotes within articles. “This could help create new beats focused on accountability reporting like tracking how public personalities’ opinion changes over time by searching and comparing their quotes from archives,” she notes.

has signed an agreement with United Robots for a pilot partnership to deliver home sales news in Sacramento County, CA, and nine other locations.

“The agreement includes automatically generated stories about individual sales as well as aggregated articles on aspects such as median or average price, and top lists of most expensive homes sold during given periods for given areas or neighborhoods,” WNIP reported.

The articles are based on real estate data from industry data providers, and also include images of properties as well as satellite maps, through a global agreement United Robots holds with Google.

Swedish publisher Gota Media is another that publishes automated stories about sports, real estate, company registrations, and traffic in

order to provide regular updates in all its local communities. Its automated real estate content has a conversion rate of 2% which is the best across the group’s ten news sites.

“For a small newsroom, automation is necessary,” Helena Tell, Editor-in-Chief, Bärgslagsbladet (Bonnier News) in Sweden, told What’s New In Publishing. “We know where to deploy our resources in order to make our readers happy. And if we can use technology and automation to perform tasks as well as we reporters would, there’s no doubt that’s what we should do.”

Another example is Crosstown, a non-profit community project that uses machines to cover hyperlocal news in neighbourhoods of Los Angeles. The title is published by Gabriel Kahn

who is also a journalism professor at USC Annenberg School for Journalism.

Speaking at Journalism.co.uk's Newsrewired conference in 2021, Kahn said he uses AI-powered tools to scrape public datasets and store content in the cloud. Humans can then turn that data into narratives that address people's concerns around topics as varied as crime, traffic, air pollution or coronavirus.

The idea is that by having a location tag on each piece of data, every story can be turned into neighbourhood news. For example, Kahn said a large database on crime in LA can be dissected into stories about crime on each street which gives residents information that is relevant to their lives.

By outsourcing the most labour-intensive tasks to the machines, Crosstown is trying to address one of the biggest pain points of local news: sustainability. It is simply not possible to have a reporter in every neighbourhood to monitor everything from traffic to pollution to public spending, then produce personalised news relevant to the residents. By using machines to source and analyse data, Kahn said the editorial team can extend its reach and serve LA inhabitants on a hyperlocal level.

AI IS GROWING INCREASINGLY FLUENT

What are the other types of stories for which AI can be applied, and can machines do it alone? Take the example of the Wall Street Journal, which has begun to generate AI narratives on the biggest markets in the U.S. and Europe. For this they partner with a company called Narrativa which has an AI system called Gabriele.

"We couldn't be more satisfied with the result; news articles generated by Narrativa are featured on the front page of the American website," a post from the company said.

Narrativa generates two types of news articles for The Wall Street Journal:

1 Information on the state of financial markets in the United States, Europe and Asia.

2 Consumer price index and producer price index (CPI and PPI).

"Our artificial intelligence system serves up the information quickly and then WSJ professionals then analyze it in terms of the impacts that a particular fall or rise in the stock market will have for the financial world."

"But this isn't a tool to replace editors," the post adds. On the contrary, artificial intelligence

is the perfect ally to support their work, using a combination of technology and research."

More and more companies, Narrativa says, are waking up to the potential artificial intelligence and natural language generation (NLG) as superior support tools that improve results.

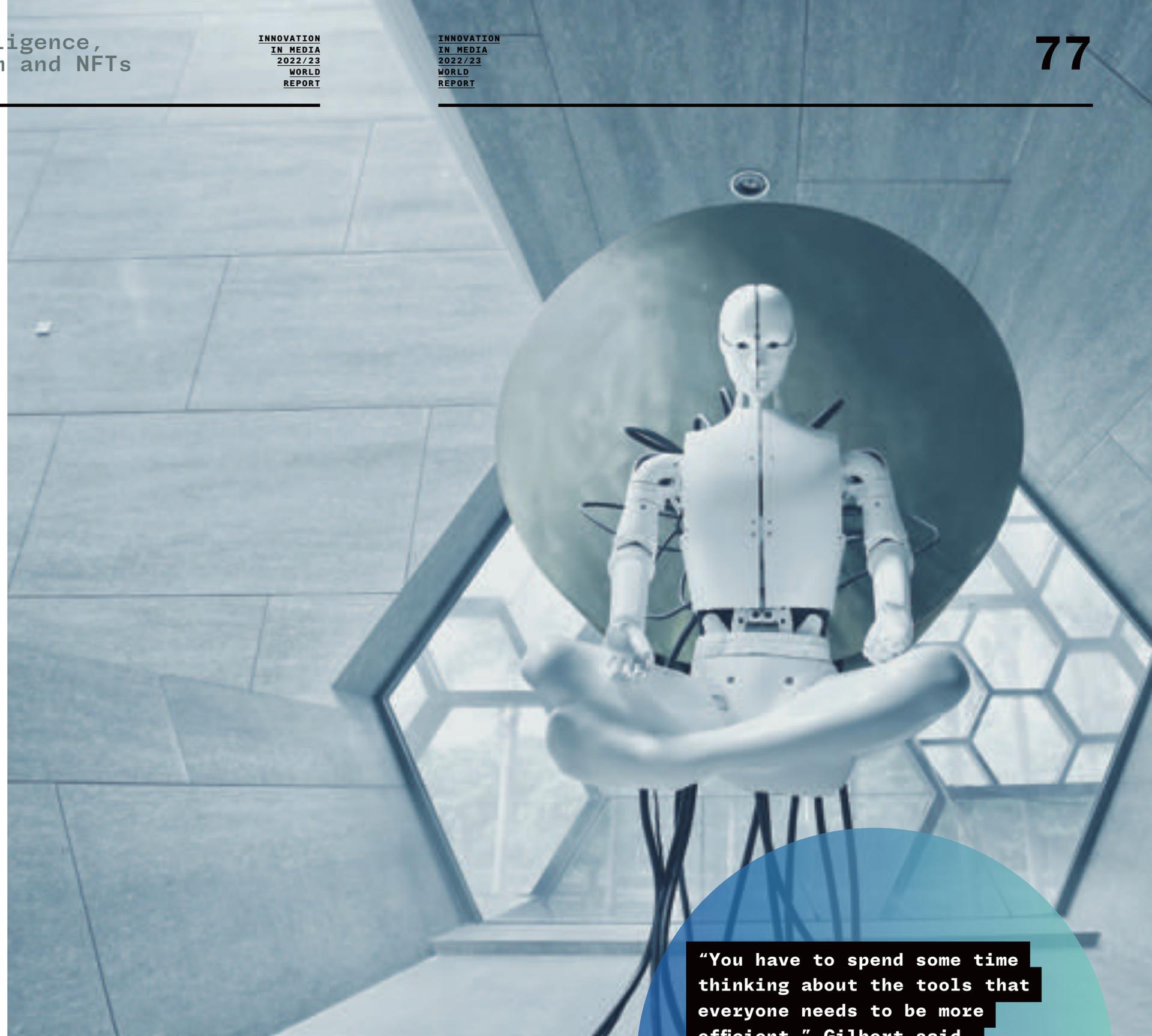
The company claims that the number of readers of news generated by NLG has risen from zero to 7% in the last two or three years. "With

this in mind, it is more than likely that we have read an article generated by artificial intelligence at some point without even realizing it."

There are more examples of AI growing increasingly fluent and proficient

"You have to spend some time thinking about the tools that everyone needs to be more efficient," Gilbert said. "It really is incumbent on journalism leaders and funders to do this in a way that is practical.."

– Professor Jeremy Gilbert, Knight Chair in Digital Media Strategy at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism



at generating text. In the Journalism, media and technology trends and predictions report for 2022, Newman writes that the BBC is planning to extend its 2019 experiment with election results, which allows hundreds of constituency pages to be automatically written and rewritten by computer as the numbers change – all in a BBC style. “Local elections in May 2022 will provide the next test of what will become a permanent system that could be adapted to work with many other types of publicly available data from health to sports and business,” he notes.

SHOULD WE BE WORRIED ABOUT ROBOTS STEALING JOURNALISTS' JOBS?

“I think saying that robots steal journalists' jobs is the wrong way to look at it. Because it's not about stealing jobs,” Cecilia Campbell, Chief Marketing Officer of United Robots tells The Media Voices Podcast. “It's actually about news publishers improving their offer, and actually securing the business. If you can offer better journalism, obviously you have a better chance at a future.”

“I'm not going to say that there has never been a single freelancer who hasn't lost a gig because of a robot... But for the majority of publishers that we work with, the robots are part of the strategy to grow the business and improve the business,” she adds.

We'll leave it to you to ascertain if that sounds reassuring or not but there's no doubting that robot journalism is a space that we will be continually watching, and as technology and possibilities improve it will be fascinating to see how far the possibilities extend.

Speaking about what the newsroom workflow is like when robot journalism is incorporated, NDC's Arb Boer, who joined Campbell on the podcast, said the most energy involved is in just checking the messages and the articles, and seeing if they need improvement.

“Because it's used with AI technology, if there's an error, if there's a sentence not written really well or you want some word not used or used differently, you can put it in a feedback loop. And then the robot knows, ‘Oh, I need to do this differently the next time.’”

“That will never happen with a human – they will probably do it 10 more times! But actually, training the robots to write the articles the way you really want, that's where the effort goes in.”

“You have to make sure that the connections are still working, but that's a relatively small

MINI CASE STUDY 1

AI for content moderation

Journalists at Kronen Zeitung, one of Austria's largest news publishers, see that the audience is very much part of the newsroom. Readers post some 500k comments on the website each month - on top of the discussions on social media - and reporters are pushed toward stories that matter to the community. However, half a million comments a month is way too much for a team of human moderators to sift through especially with spam, abuse and other kinds of online hatred thrown in.

And so began the experiment with artificial intelligence- powered tools that were brought into the newsroom to help clean up the comment section to make readers feel safe and moderators' jobs less stressful. The team at Kronen Zeitung experimented with a couple of softwares before settling on a Finnish company called Utopia Analytics. Today, it filters about three quarters of all comments, flagging up words or expressions that may go against community guidelines. This is a huge time-saver for human moderators who can work on publishing the comments in real time. To the publisher's surprise, this increased engagement by around 25%.

amount of time and effort, and is more of an effort from the digital department than it is from the newsroom,” Boer says.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR AI?

The next frontier, Newman writes, is using AI for images and video. In particular there is much excitement about DALL-E, a new AI model from Open AI, revealed in January 2021, that automates original image creation from instructions you provide in text.

“This could open up a range of new possibilities, from simple story illustration to entirely new forms of semi-automated visual journalism,” Newman writes.

“The big challenge for many large media companies is serving audiences with very different needs using a monolithic website or app. AI offers the possibility of personalising the experience without diluting the integrity of the newsroom agenda by offering different versions of a story – long articles, short articles, summa-

MINI CASE STUDY 2

Automation for newspaper layout

Agderposten is a Norwegian newspaper that publishes 30 to 60 pages daily depending on the day. They were using two different CMS platforms, one for print and one to convert their print content to digital. Reporters had to work on the same story in 2 different places and its editors spent a great deal of effort to lay down the newspaper each evening. The company wanted to look for a solution – was there a way to produce pages that looked and felt like they had been created by experienced designers and editors – but were actually built by automation?

Agderposten opted for a content management system called Naviga Publisher, powered by the Sophi.io AI technology developed by Canada's The Globe and Mail. Using the new CMS, Agderposten's editors selected the content they wanted to print, prioritised it, and could also specify how much of the page they'd like to devote to a particular article. Sophi then ran all the AI work behind the scenes to create the print-ready newspaper. This was done without the use of templates, maintaining the look and feel of the newspaper. “Agderposten's editors could hit the print button and be done, or alter the paper as news broke, then rerun the automated process within a minute,” writes Sonali Verma, Senior Product Manager for The Globe and Mail, in a post for INMA

ries, image or video-led treatments – with much greater efficiency.”

Summarisation and smart brevity are trends that Newman expects to see more of in 2022, with news organisations experimenting with content formats for under-served audiences. Research shows that these audiences prefer:

- Increased use of bullet-points in news articles,
- Visual stories over text,
- Mixed media story formats popularised by social media.

As an example already in operation, Newman writes of the BBC's latest Modus prototype which uses two different NLP approaches to generate bullet point-led stories and automated captions for images in picture galleries.

MINI CASE STUDY 3

Automation for personalised emails

A “digital butler” known as James (Journey Automated Messaging for Higher Engagement) creates individualised emails for Time and Sunday Times subscribers by predicting content they are likely to be interested in, and then sending it in their preferred format at the time they are most likely to read it.

The company carried out a nine-month trial of the new AI technology in 2018 after receiving funding from Google's Digital News Initiative and collaborating software company Twipe. According to Press Gazette, the trial revealed that 70% of 117,000 randomly chosen subscribers interacted with James by either opening or clicking on the newsletter. The technology was most effective with the least-engaged Times subscribers, with highly loyal readers more likely to already be happy with how they receive their content.

“James created habits among the lowest engaged groups which are the hardest groups for us to retain,” Mike Migliore, head of customer value at News UK, was quoted as saying. James had been used for emails, but the publisher plans to expand the service to channels like text messaging and push notifications in future and could also be used to

“Enabling this,” he adds, “will be a new generation of modular content management systems, such as Arc from the Washington Post and Optimo from the BBC that do not base authoring around a ‘story’ but instead around ‘nested blocks’ that allow better connections across stories, making it easier to reassemble content in potentially limitless ways.”

Up until now the best models for Natural Language Processing and Generation have been focused on English. While this has been a challenge for languages like Arabic and Spanish where extra training is often needed to get the required quality, Newman expects to see faster progress over the year with publications like La Nación in Argentina and Inkyfada in Tunisia refining their own models in collaboration with academics. Programmes to share best practice such as the Journalism AI collaboration programme from LSE's Polis and INMA's AI webinars and showcases are also helping spread knowledge. ●

The NFT craze/phase

NFTs (Non-Fungible Tokens) are the media world's current enfant terrible, embraced in some quarters as a possible revolution in monetisation of content, and in others as very much a passing fad. Much of it depends, we suppose, on how you feel about the potential of cryptocurrencies and blockchain.



“While NFTs have been around since at least 2017, the buzz surrounding them has escalated in recent weeks, for a number of reasons,” Mark Stenberg writes in his Medialyte blog.

“The technology presents a new, and potentially very lucrative, revenue stream for anyone in the business of creating digital media, a classification that includes everything from songs to tweets to essays to memes. NFTs also represent the beginning of a new way of thinking about how ownership works on the open internet.”

Stenberg expands on this idea in an article about publishers adopting NFTs for Adweek - “In an industry determined to diversify its revenue stream, NFTs offer publishers a way to monetize their digital content in a novel fashion. Whether articles, covers, collaborations or as a form of membership, the tokens allow media companies to translate reader affinity into revenue in a new manner.”

Publishers experimenting with NFTs is no longer a new thing, but it's worth running through the examples. In October 2021, Stenberg wrote that Playboy had unveiled its latest round of NFT, a drop of 11,953 3D rabbit characters known as Rabbitars. The Economist, he said, had followed suit, announcing that it had minted its first non-fungible token, the cover of its Sep 21 issue exploring the world of decentralized finance.

“By creating this NFT, The Economist is engaging with one of the earliest ways developers have created for the distribution of content on a decentralized web,” Alice Fulwood, Wall Street correspondent for The Economist, told Adweek.

Jamal Dauda, the vp of blockchain innovation at Playboy (yes that position exists now) said the publication was drawn into NFTs “because it seemed like an interesting way to reimagine our 68 years of IP and to leverage our immense archive.”

These examples can be added to a flurry of others over the last year or so, when NFTs basically seemed to give a new twist to a business model we have always advocated for at INNOVATION - monetising archive content.

TIME MAGAZINE

TIME was one of the first to jump in with its “Is God Dead?” cover auction in March 2021. The magazine auctioned three covers as NFTs - The first was its iconic 1966 cover asking, “Is God Dead?” The second was a more recent spin on that cover from 2017, during the Trump years, when the magazine asked: “Is Truth Dead?” A brand-new “cover” that's not actually appearing in the magazine: “Is Fiat Dead?” was designed

for the NFT sale and is basically meant to appeal to crypto enthusiasts.

“Fiat money is government-issued currency that is not backed by a physical commodity, such as gold or silver, but rather by the government that issued it. Crypto currencies, like Bitcoin and Dogecoin, are challenging that model,” a release from Time said. The three covers were auctioned on digital artworks marketplace SuperRare for \$435,000. Time President Keith Grossman told Adweek this is an extension of Time's existing cover story business, which is a seven-figure business line. “This is not just about the collectibles and big drops,” Grossman said. “The more interesting part is what does this mean about the future of subscriptions, the future of community, the future of membership.

CNN

In June 2021, CNN announced that it would sell “moments” from its television archives as non-fungible tokens. “For 41 years, CNN has gone to extraordinary lengths to document and broadcast the global stories of our time. Now, the network and digital news powerhouse is opening its archives for the first time to offer collectors the opportunity to own a piece of history,” a release from the company said.

Vault by CNN will house a select set of digital collectibles, or ‘Moments’, from CNN's television archives, mint them as NFTs using blockchain technology, and sell them at vault.cnn.com. “Until now, there has been no way to ‘collect’ these moments. Users can often find old footage online, or packaged up in documentaries, but they cannot ‘own’ them or display them in the way they can with a print newspaper or magazine,” CNN said in an FAQ about the service.

SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST

In August 2021, journalism.co.uk reported that The South China Morning Post wanted to turn its historic articles, pictures and other items into digital assets that cannot be tampered with and can also be owned by anyone. The project launched by the publication is called ARTIFACT and it will see items like important historic images or front pages re-created digitally using blockchain technology. These NFTs can then be collected or traded by the members of the public or institutions.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

More recently, in January this year, The Associated Press announced that it's starting a marketplace to sell NFTs of its photojournalists' work in collaboration with a company

called Xooa. According to The Verge, it's billing its foray into NFTs as a way for collectors to "purchase the news agency's award-winning contemporary and historic photojournalism" and says that the virtual tokens will be released at "broad and inclusive price points."

The AP actually has history with this, being the first news organisation to sell an NFT, for a work of art titled "The Associated Press calls the 2020 Presidential Election on Blockchain—A View from Outer Space."

NEWS UK

In February 2021, The Guardian reported that News UK may soon join the NFT boom.

"Rupert Murdoch's publishing arm is considering making a move into the frothy market of non-fungible tokens, or NFTs, by turning the Times and the Sun's extensive archive of photos, cartoons and classic front pages into unique digital versions," the paper reported.

Experiments with NFTs can also be.. well, more experimental. In March last year, Quartz listed one of its articles for sale in NFT form, claiming that it was the first column to be sold as such. That same month The New York Times minted an NFT of one of its own columns, subtly headlined 'Buy This Column on the Blockchain'. These were experiments not tied to archive content, more attempts to ride what was at the time a nascent NFT bubble for publishers.

THE CASE FOR NFTS

Can we make a broader philosophical case for NFTs? Jarrod Dicker, who is vice president commercial for The Washington Post, was involved in a cryptocurrency venture called Poet before he joined the company. Speaking at a discussion on NFTs and the media moderated by Columbia Journalism Review, he said that his primary interest in NFTs is as a way of bringing "an ownership element back to media" and putting more value on individuals and the work they create."

"We are in the early days of seeing how NFTs impact and evolve existing businesses, most popular today in digital art," Dicker says. "But I encourage people to think about NFTs beyond the product itself and actually as a process; if we as content creators are able to manage control of assets at the inception of the idea (pre-publish), what dynamics come about that give us more creative control, monetization and agency?"

"Let's think of NFTs as a point of entry for publishing, each piece of content created becomes an NFT," he continues at another point in the discussion. "The value here is that there is an inception of the content that's immutable and

4 ways publishers can use NFTs

From his excellent Medialyte blog, Mark Stenberg muses about some creative ways in which publishers might make this latest craze work for them. As long as it lasts that is..

Integrating NFTs with events: An event like The Texas Tribune Fest or New Yorker Fest, which are filled with celebrities and fans of the publications, could sell NFTs exclusive to the event or treat NFTs like the price of admission. Unlike standard tickets, these NFT tickets would continue to appreciate in value over time, potentially generating future returns for the publishers.

Minting NFTs for high-profile stories: Imagine a cover story, especially one with a strong emotional resonance or significance, being sold as an NFT. A publication like Pitchfork, for instance, which sells posters of its magazine covers, could also sell NFTs of its covers. TIME, of course, has already done this.

NFT subscriptions: Imagine you buy a subscription to a publication you love at a fixed price – say, \$100 – and you can sell it in the future, when prices have risen. Stenberg says this is a practice common with season tickets. The publisher sells a subscription for a high price, but the customer never has to pay again, and they can sell that discounted subscription to someone else in the future.

Photography, video, and infographic NFTs. A self-explanatory concept according to Stenberg (and also the most common use of NFTs by publishers today). Nevertheless, he says, it introduces a thorny dilemma: Who owns the picture, the publication or photographer, but either way, there could be money to be made for both parties.

managed by the media company or creator. This gives both control as to how that content is used, licensed and distributed as well as a means to be able to collect revenue on that asset."

So will NFTs as a viable part of the media business last? Or are they just the latest example of the "nonsensical tactical futuristic toys that distract marketers?" – a colourful description by brand consultant and former marketing professor Mark Ritson,

Like it or not, so long as demand for NFTs is there, publishers will likely continue to explore how they might experiment with it and hopefully translate some of those ventures into revenue. ●

How to
Stop Churn
and Retain
Reader
Revenue
after
the Covid
Subscription
Bump

Now is
the time to
consolidate
the gains.

It was the worst of times, and then, in one regard at least, the best of times.

As difficult as the last two years have been with office work being disrupted, print sales declining and ad sales being unstable, it was also a golden age of sorts for publishers when it came to the promise of building a sustainable digital business model around revenue. Traffic and interest in news surged as people turned to trusted sources for information in uncertain times, and they proved they were willing to pay for quality journalism. It was a moment, a perfect storm, that seemed to accelerate years of steady growth in digital businesses. People were used to paying for subscription services like Netflix and Spotify and had the time and money to take on more.

Consider the numbers: In 2020, subscription revenue for publishers grew 16%, according to a study by subscription management platform Zuora, while another report by Piano, another subscriptions management platform, indicated that their largest clients saw an increase of almost 58% in subscribers over the first year of the pandemic. Encouragingly, they were also a bit stickier. One year into the pandemic, 43.6%

of post-pandemic subscriptions were retained vs. the pre-Covid average of 40%.

For the bigger names in publishing, record subscription levels were recorded. The New York Times grew by 52%, while The Washington Post managed more than 66%. In the UK, both The Telegraph and The Economist saw record growth. These are the usual suspects of course, but there is also evidence from outside of Western newsrooms. The International News Media Association reported, for example, that after 19 years in the market, the online news portal Malaysiakini in Malaysia saw its subscriber base grow by 64%, with total reader revenue up by 70%.

HOW LONG CAN IT LAST?

You've got the subscribers to come on board, but how do you keep them? Toward the end of 2021 we already started seeing signs of pandemic fatigue and people logging off from digital consumption habits. Writing for The Fix in March 2022, Jakub Parusinski noted that "the past few weeks have seen huge drops from such companies as Netflix, Meta (a.k.a. Facebook) and the home fitness equipment maker Peloton." The latter in particular seemed to tell a larger cautionary tale about how business models built on pandemic-era digital consumption habits were perhaps set for a worrying decline. The competition for people's time and money is just becoming much more intense.

For publishers and news organisation, as the roller coaster news cycle of 2020 recedes further into the rear view, there are worrying questions to contend with: how many subscriptions can a reader keep and pay for, especially if they are returning to the real world and not spending all that time at home to consume content. More importantly, which category of news organisation might be affected by this trend? We know that the bigger newsrooms may have collected more dedicated readers who would probably stay on, and these organisations have resources to invest in audience research and strategy to get subscribers to stay. But what of smaller local and regional news outlets? Could drop-offs in subscriptions upend the foundations on which publishers around the world are hoping to move to a sustainable model of reader-revenue?

Before we dive into the best strategies for subscriber retention, let's first try to get some insight into why people cancel news subscriptions. Over the course of 2021, the Harvard-based Nieman Journalism Lab ran a survey amongst its readers, asking one simple question: What was the last news subscription you

cancelled, and why? Surveys like these are crucial and frankly, we have too few in our industry.

"Public data on cancellations is sparse. It's not something that news organisations like sharing. So we asked our readers for their most recent cancellation stories, and received over 500 responses," Nieman Lab noted.

Of course, the caveat here is that a Nieman Lab reader is probably more into news than the average person. Many of the respondents therefore, indicated they are paying for more than one news subscription, which is not the norm.

Here's what the survey found:

The No. 1 reason people say they cancel a subscription is money: Nearly a third of respondents – 31% – cited money as the primary reason they cancelled a subscription. Some people cancelled when promotional rates expired; others were irritated that subscriptions auto-renewed or that news organisations weren't transparent about price. Respondents cited a lack of funds, often due to the Covid-19 pandemic and related income loss, as another reason for cancelling subscriptions.

This is followed closely by ideology or politics: 30% of respondents said that they cancelled the news subscription due to ideology or politics. The publications that were most often implicated in this line of reasoning were The New York Times and The Washington Post, but other publications weren't exempt.

The content isn't good enough: 13% of respondents said they'd cancelled the subscription for what we categorised as non-ideological content concerns: They thought a publication had become too clickbaity or non-substantive, or found that the content generally wasn't useful to them or just wasn't worth paying for.

Too much to read, too little time: Another 13% of respondents said they'd cancelled because of information overload; in the case of print publications, they saw them piling up unread. (This was a common reason cited for cancelling The New Yorker.)

Customer-service issues: Finally, 12% of respondents to our survey said they had cancelled primarily due to some kind of customer service or UX issues. Print newspapers were getting delivered too late (often, these people switched to online-only), or changing a subscription was so annoying that the subscriber decided it wasn't worth it.

ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGIES

So we've drawn out the contours of the challenge that lies ahead for publishers. Now what are the different ways in which to tackle it?

Firstly, at an organisational level, it is time to invest in staff and strategy focused around keeping and bringing in subscribers. An August 2021 report by Digiday highlighted some examples of larger publishers that have made additions or changes to their leadership ranks to keep their subscriber momentum going.

"On Aug. 16, Michael Ribero took on the role of The Washington Post's first chief subscriptions officer, tasked with overseeing the company's digital subscriptions business," the report notes. "Karl Wells was promoted to a new role at Dow Jones, chief subscriptions officer, in April, and he will have three new VP positions reporting to him starting this fall: VP of WSJ Core Subscriptions, VP of Barron's Group Subscriptions and VP of International and Young Audiences."

Others, the report notes, are investing in large teams to improve specific functions. The L.A. Times for example, is using first-party data "to inform creative messaging and perform content

"It is one thing to get users to subscribe, particularly with discounted introductory offers. It becomes essential to keep those consumers. To continue growing net revenue, publishers need help to evaluate what they are currently doing and where there are opportunities to improve retention and decrease churn"

– Jeff Sonderman and Gwen Vargo,
for American Press Institute

The Top 10: Most-common retention tactics

Percentage of publishers who use each tactic

We encourage new subscribers to sign up for our email newsletters	90%
We use analytics to track what subscribers as a whole are reading	89%
We track data about which digital content online users engage with	86%
We send welcome emails that highlight features of their subscription including apps, e-editions, rewards programs, etc.	78%
We respond to individual concerns and complaints on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.	78%
Customer service tracks reasons for cancellation or lapse	74%
We conduct campaigns to win back recent cancellations	72%
We email subscribers to remind them about the overall benefits of their subscription	69%
Introductory price discounts	69%
We send surveys via email	68%

From a survey of publishers across the U.S. conducted by the American Press Institute

tests with specific user segments. In the last year, the publisher has hired “around 10” people each to its creative services and growth marketing teams to support its subscription strategy, including designers, copywriters, acquisition marketing managers, retention marketing managers, a media director and media planners, among others. It is expecting to grow these teams as the challenge of retaining subscribers grows through the year.

STRATEGIES AROUND CONTENT AND AUDIENCE

You’ve built up your team of crack subscription managers. Now what do you get them to look at?

A survey by The American Press Institute, published in March 2021, provides some

9 subscriber retention strategies

Retention strategy	Value: Percent who said “extremely” or “very” valuable	Proficiency: Percent who said “very” or “fairly” proficient
Onboard new subscribers	86.3%	53%
Study interests and behaviors	86.0%	31%
Actively encourage renewal	85.5%	44%
Identify at-risk subscribers	83.5%	19%
Use metrics to evaluate churn	82.6%	28%
Test initial subscription offers	79.2%	48%
Track what subscribers read	75.7%	30%
Fix credit-card expirations	74.4%	46%
Offer subscriber-only benefits	62.0%	23%

American Press Institute

How publishers study their subscribers

Percentage of publishers who use each tactic

We track data about which digital content online users engage with	86%
Customer service tracks reasons for cancellation or lapse	74%
We send surveys via email	68%
Customer service collects more general feedback about the website, news content, etc.	62%
We ask visitors to answer a survey while they are on our website or app	25%

Data Source: Q. In which of the following ways does your organization collect information about subscribers’ interests and behaviors? For each tell us whether you use this tactic or not. American Press Institute

31 Proven Subscriber Retention Ideas to Steal

Reach out to lapsed members via direct mail	Call new subscribers halfway through their grace period	Send a “reason for non-renewal” survey to non-renewers	Encourage new subscribers to sign up for newsletters	Offer a weekly newsletter or alerts for specific topic	Launch an exclusive monthly, members-only newsletter	Update & increase the # of email renewal notices
Send automated emails to people w/ expired credit cards	Offer reduced rates for people who call to unsubscribe	Use existing engagement data to inform renewal negotiations	Prioritize retention w/ a dedicated team focused on it	Use events, focus groups & surveys to engage readers	Include print subscribers in email renewal notices	Encourage auto-renewals for as many new subscribers as possible
Communicate how you’re helping readers increase awareness	Organize events to meet your journalists	Remove subscribers who haven’t opened in 3 months from distro list	Upgrade your paywall & subscription system	Use a vendor to update credit cards automatically	Send subscribers personalized reading recs from reporters & editors	Produce more content known to be popular with subscribers
Offer an annual subscription option	Test longer introductory rates (months vs weeks)	Transition manual renewals to auto-renew	Eliminate initial deep discounts and step up pricing	Use a paywall to focus on recurring donors & auto-renewals	Introduce an email welcome series for new subs	Create an onboarding program that nurtures new subscribers
Make subscribers feel special and listened to	Use surveys to develop special events that match reader interest	Be sure to calculate an accurate churn rate				

Source: American Press Institute

excellent granular detail about how a range of publishers view retention strategies. Though only based in the U.S., it had 133 respondents representing 526 publications. They included big and small publishers, newspapers and digital-only, non-profit and for-profit. All have readers who pay for content via subscriptions, memberships, or recurring donations. These publishers were asked about the potential value they saw in different retention strategies irrespective of whether they were using them or not.

“It is one thing to get users to subscribe, particularly with discounted introductory offers. It becomes essential to keep those consumers. To continue growing net revenue, publishers need help to evaluate what they are currently doing and where there are opportunities to improve retention and decrease churn,” the report’s authors Jeff Sonderman and Gwen Vargo write.

Among the survey’s key findings were that 90% of publishers use email newsletters as a subscriber retention strategy. A similar percentage employ analytics to track what subscribers

are reading. And 86% find studying subscribers’ interests and behaviours valuable.

COLLECT INFORMATION ABOUT SUBSCRIBERS’ INTERESTS AND BEHAVIOURS

Let’s go into detail on some of these strategies. Studying subscribers’ behaviour and interests is regarded to be one of the most effective retention strategies. No surprises there, of course. Paying attention to what subscribers want, through gathering feedback and tracking user behaviour and interests, both individually and collectively, can help publishers adapt content strategy and other business practices to serve those needs.

The survey found 86% of publishers agree that collecting information about their subscribers’ interests and behaviours is fairly or very valuable. However, they rated their proficiency at doing this as just moderate.

The authors asked about five specific tactics that might be used to learn about subscribers.

“The most commonly used tactic (by 86%

of the respondents) is to track what content is being read online by subscribers. That practice is nearly universally employed by most types of news publishers, with the exception of the smallest newspapers (of whom still a majority, 67%, are employing),” they write.

The least-used tactic is asking readers to complete a survey (only 25% do this). “This low response could be due to technical obstacles real or perceived which is keeping organisations from using this approach to learning,” the report notes.

Online-only, for-profit publishers were more likely to employ most of these tactics, while the smallest circulation papers are less likely to use any of these methods for learning about subscriber behaviour. There’s one exception here: small papers are actually more likely than others to have their customer service departments track the reasons customers didn’t renew (83% vs 74% of all publishers).

Let’s try to broaden out this point now by bringing in further nuance. In attempting to understand their customers should publishers focus on heavy or light users?

UNDERSTANDING THE “LIGHT READER”

An important research paper published by the International News Media Association (INMA) in September 2021 titled “Light Readers: Digital Subscriptions’ Next Growth Path”, identified this latter category as representing the strongest growth path for subscription-mature news media companies and the audiences they really needed to devote resources to understanding.

The report acknowledges at the outset that this might be counterintuitive. More engaged or heavy readers, after all, will account for more a publication’s revenue. However, the report argues that this is a cohort that doesn’t really need to be understood – “They tend to be the people most like us. Heavy news consumers, as the segment name suggests, visit frequently and read many articles. Because of this, they are far less likely to churn than the light readers.”

So who is the light reader and how can we understand their importance in the larger rubric of subscription strategies?

“The longer you’re in the market with your subscription product, the more light-reading subscribers you are going to have, writes Grzegorz Piechota, INMA’s researcher-in-residence and the report’s lead author.

“The latest data from Piano shows that, in real-world situations, the majority of conversions come from light readers. The proportion of conversions that come from this cohort

grows the longer that you are in the market. In the first month of your subscription offering, 33% of your subscribers will be on their first active day of the month. By the end of the first year, that will be 37%, and the proportion of heavily engaged readers converting will be dropping – because more of that cohort have already converted.”

In fact, if we look at subscriptions overall, Piechota says, the majority come from light readers – and many subscribers do not read you at all. That’s the harsh truth of the matter for publishers to deal with. Recent research by Northwestern University’s Medill Spiegel Research Centre in the United States, based on a data analysis of 45 markets, found that nearly half of digital subscribers didn’t go to the websites they had paid for even once a month. In news industry slang, they are known as “zombie subscribers”. The infrequency of web visits was especially common among people with combined print and digital subscriptions, but a fifth of digital-only subscribers also were counted as “zombies.”

“The industry has long been concerned about unengaged subscribers, but the extent of the problem has not been widely known. An article on the Better News website drew gasps by reporting that the Arizona Republic was facing a 42% “zombie” population when it started a subscriber retention campaign a few years ago,” Mark Jacob writes for Medill’s Local News Initiative. Joshua Benton of Harvard’s Nieman Journalism Lab tweeted that it was the “most shocking news-industry datapoint I’ve seen in a while.”

IDENTIFYING AT-RISK SUBSCRIBERS EARLY

How did the Gannett-owned Arizona Republic, the state’s largest news outlet, deal with this prob-

lem? As mentioned, the publication realised that almost half of its paid digital subscribers were not visiting their website at all in a given month. They found that the group also accounted for 50% subscription stops each month.

The Republic thus went on an active mission of “killing” off these zombies, which, in this case, doesn’t mean getting rid of them but bringing them back to life as engaged subscribers. For nearly a year, the outlet tracked how content was performing with the various audience groups – new visitors, prospects, and subscribers. It used those learnings to guide content changes that cut the share of unengaged subscribers from 42% to 26%, increasing retention as a result.

Here’s an example, quoted in the Better News article:

“...we are talking about being strategic about topics, headlines, photos and writing style. We found that the most successful zombie-killer stories in the newsroom were those that had strong news elements combined with a bit of a hook – a unique spin on a viral story, a strong human element, or a format that grabbed readers quickly. And, most importantly, one not written on the print deadline. Don’t wait to hit publish. Verify. Write. Publish.”

The Republic has become an often cited case study, but as Sonderman and Vargo write in the API report, this strategy of identifying at-risk subscribers was one of the biggest areas where publishers could improve their tactics.

Publishers tended to rate their proficiency at identifying at-risk subscribers as “not very” or only “somewhat” proficient. More than half (52%) of publishers are “not very” or “not at all” proficient at identifying at-risk subscribers.

“This suggests that one of the biggest technological needs for publishers is to implement

more sophisticated and integrated CRM software that links all subscribers’ identities to their digital engagement. This would enable publishers to see which subscribers are NOT signing in or visiting their products,” the report notes.

Such technology would also help model systems to study churn propensity. “Which behaviour patterns by a given subscriber should cause a publisher to worry that a customer is likely to cancel a subscription? To learn that requires the technology to trace subscribers’ behaviour backward in time after they cancel subscriptions and find patterns in that behavioural data.” Once again, the API study found that larger news organisations are more proficient at doing this than smaller ones.

OTHER STRATEGIES TO ENGAGE AND RETAIN LIGHT READERS:

Circling back to the INMA report, Piechota notes that the phenomenon of zombie subscribers is not exclusive to the U.S. Across more than 300 news publishers globally, Piano found that 39% of paying subscribers didn’t visit once in the month in question. The INMA report gathered more best practices from publishers around the world in order to establish a set of recommendations for converting and retaining light readers. These are as follows:

HOW TO ENGAGE AND RETAIN LIGHT READERS

1. Get new subscribers up to speed

“Research suggests you have about 100 days to engage new subscribers,” Piechota writes. “The benchmarks show most new monthly subscribers churn in their first three months. This is the key window of opportunity for you to intervene to make them a more committed subscriber. If you can boost their engagement, they are less likely to churn.”

One publisher that deploys this principle is the Wall Street Journal, which in 2019 created a cross-functional team to identify what specific user actions by new subscribers within their first 100 days indicate likelihood to renew their subscription. The effort was nicknamed “Project Habit,” and it identified some intuitive actions like subscribing to a newsletter or downloading an app, but also things like loyal consumption of a particular topic or author, reading recurring features such as a weekly column, and reading features stories beyond finance or politics.

The Journal then turned that knowledge into churn-reducing action, building an onsite boarding experience that Piechota says remains the

longest and the most comprehensive among the top 50 leading news subscription sites. The new subscriber is invited to swipe more than a dozen cards presenting benefits, helping to set up features, or asking to customise the experience. Despite the length, Anne Powell, director of engagement at The Journal, told an INMA Master Class on Digital Subscriber Retention that 60% of readers complete the whole flow. And up to 80% take at least one recommended action. The Journal has also extended its welcome email series to 93 days, which is also one of the longest series observed in the news industry.

100 days is an estimation, but it may not be the most exact window. "Research conducted by University College, London (UCL), suggests people are most likely to adopt new habits after 66 days of repetition," Piechota adds. "So, you need to do something to engage the new subscriber daily for two months to start establishing your product as part of their habitual routine."

2. Study the light reading subscriber

A point similar to The Arizona Republic case study we highlighted. Whatever the strategy used, Piechota writes that it is particularly important to study the user behaviour of your light-reading cohort, as they are the ones you are most likely to lose.

As an example, Karl Oskar Teien, product director for Aftenposten in Norway, tells Piechota that has established a project team focused on how to engage this light reader cohort. It looks at article types, but also at homepage structure. "We often curate homepages on the assumption that people are visiting the site every hour. That's simply not the case for most readers. In fact, most subscribers rarely visit," he says.

"Is there a homepage structure that suits the occasional visitor? Of course. There are a number of approaches you can apply. If your CMS and publishing systems support personalisation by cohort, you could create variations of the front page, dependent on your segments. The light readers could see more evergreen, explainer, and news analysis content, while the heavy readers get the more traditional news-centric page."

3. Adjust your product for light readers

"Once you understand light-reading subscribers, you need to adapt the product to their needs – without undermining its value to the heavy readers," Piechota writes. This is a bit of a balancing act but there's evidence to support the fact that light reader-centric changes are more likely to help with heavy readers than hinder you.

The Wall Street Journal 100-day on-boarding e-mail series

Day	Email Topic
6	App Download
9	WSJ + Activation
14	Puzzles
18	Newsletters
22	Re-on-boarding
26	Live Q&A
30	Authors
37	Re-engagement
42	Portrait generator
46	Daily Dose
49	Business and Finance
52	Opinion Review
55	Life and Arts
62	Building connections
66	Real Estate
72	Video
83	Watchlist
93	Thank you from the Editor-in-Chief

Source: Wall Street Journal

Louise Story, a former chief product and technology officer for The Wall Street Journal in the United States, told INMA: "Topics attractive to light-reading subscribers of The Wall Street Journal succeed with heavy readers, too. It doesn't work the other way."

Almost by definition, light-reading subscribers are more selective in what they read on the Web site than heavy users. An example that Story cited is that light readers might display a preference for practical advice about personal finance. "This is also useful for the heavy reader. Investing in more content in this space, or from better quality journalists, could bring the benefit from increased engagement from both cohorts and reduce your risk of churn." As the Wall Street Journal found, the reverse is not true. Article types or topics that over-index with heavy readers do not often appeal to light readers.

4. Brace for "hop-on, hop-off" riders

A "hop-on, hop-off" behaviour pattern among me-

Doubling down on what reader's want

By contrast, there are also retention strategies that publishers can pursue that focus on a more engaged cohort of readers. This is not to say that they cannot parallelly focus on light readers as well, but if you think you have a winning strategy for your most valuable audiences, it makes sense to double down.

Digiday reports on a couple of examples, citing the business website Quartz, whose strategy is to give its subscribers more of what they want, in the format that they want it in.

The publisher's subscriber base grew 71% year-over-year, according to editor-in-chief Katherine Bell, to 27,000 paying members, each paying either \$14.99 per month or 99 per year. But in August 2021, Quartz announced that it was refocusing its membership programme around its email newsletters, after it found, in a March 2021 survey that 75% of its paying subscribers were driven to most of Quartz's content via their inbox.

In other cases, Digiday reported, it means doubling down on coverage areas. The Atlantic for instance, is another publisher that has hugely benefited from the Covid subscription boom, growing its subscriber base by nearly 50% over the past 12 months, adding 280,000 paid readers from the first half of 2020 to the first half of 2021.

To keep that growth going, Nicholas Thompson, CEO of The Atlantic, told Digiday that editorial is investing in areas of coverage that have "defined and distinguished" its reporting over the past year: on the pandemic, the rise of authoritarianism, the dangers of extremism, the fracturing of the country across political and racial lines, and examinations of culture and society. The Atlantic is also expanding its coverage into topics like climate and technology.

dia subscribers has been noted by Piano, which records that a growing number of purchasers disable auto-renewing right after they subscribe. 68% of auto-renew disablements are in the first 60 days of a new contract. 22% of the disablements now happen on the day of the purchase.

This is comparable with behaviour seen in other subscription-based spaces, like TV streaming. An October 2020 study by Deloitte

showed the average U.S. TV viewer had five streaming video subscriptions. However, 46% of viewers had cancelled at least one streaming subscription in the last six months.

"People are growing accustomed to having many services, but hopping on and off them as they see their value grow and decline. It's a new kind of behaviour for the news subscription market, but we should expect to see more of this as we more actively pursue casual readers," the INMA report notes

5. Price to acquire – but also to retain

During the COVID-19 crisis, Piechota notes in the report that publishers that offered trials outperformed those that did not in terms of acquisition. "It is evident that trials work. But we need to construct them in such a way that they retain well instead of acquiring new subscribers who rapidly churn away. Some of the most successful publishers using trials have discovered a counter-intuitive approach that seems to work: offer much longer-term trials," the report notes.

Some 37% of publishers offer trials of three months or less, and 24% keep them to one month or less. However, The New York Times was offering U.S. readers a discount of 75% for a year (\$1 per week instead of \$4.25). The Washington Post was offering a 60% discount for a year (\$40 instead of \$100)." Since the start of the pandemic, The Boston Globe regularly promotes an offer of \$1 per week for six months – and only then do you go to the standard rate.

These are very long trial periods, and it may be counterintuitive, but they pay off better in the long run. "It's simple: They buy you time to engage subscribers. It's not the long trials themselves that deliver the results; it's what those long trials facilitate. If you use that time to engage the reader and help them build a habit of using your product, they can deliver excellent results," Piechota notes.

THE BIG AND SMALL NEWSROOM DIVIDE

Given the range of newsrooms covered in the API report we are able to get some indication of the kinds of strategies for retention that the majority feel fairly comfortable deploying, and others which they feel are important but lack the technical resources to execute. And despite the survey being restricted to the U.S. it could give us some clues in this regard about disparities between small and big publishers in other markets as well.

87% of publishers for instance, place at least a fairly high value on welcoming, engaging and

onboarding new subscribers. They also rated themselves as fairly and somewhat proficient. This is an important strategy because subscribers are more likely to renew if they are aware of all the benefits of their subscription and feel personally connected to the publisher's brand.

Almost all publishers surveyed (90%) encourage subscribers to sign up for their newsletters and 78% send a welcome email. A smaller percentage send educational information about how to use their products (46%) or send personal notes from a person in the newsroom (43%).

Similarly, with encouraging digital subscribers to renew, most publishers felt moderately confident, with strategies centreing around responding to individual concerns and complaints on social media and conducting marketing campaigns to win back recent cancellations, reminding them of subscriber benefits.

The gaps appear in areas which require more advanced analytics. For instance, while many publishers acknowledge that an introductory discount is one of the best ways to bring in new subscribers, they understand very little about what kinds of initial promotions will lead to subscribers you can actually retain after the trial expires.

"On this subject, as was true with identifying at-risk subscribers, the large newspapers are more proficient than are smaller newspapers or online publishers. In the most extreme case, a majority of online-only for-profit publishers say they are "not at all proficient" at this," the report notes.

When it came to tracking content that subscribers engage with to build personalisation and give each customer unique recommendations or experiences informed by their past behaviour, publishers in the API study ranked themselves overall as mid to low in their proficiency. Only 4% said they were "very" proficient but they did think it was highly valuable to track what content subscribers engage with.

ADVANCED TECH AND METRICS

Depending on your organisation's resources, there are solutions out there that can help with these strategies. The Times and Sunday Times in the UK for instance, invested in an AI technology for personalisation - a "digital butler" called JAMES, developed by the software company Twipe. Through automatically creating and sending individualised newsletters with JAMES, the publisher observed a 49% decrease in churn. During the project, JAMES served over 100,000 subscribers of The Times with individualised newsletters, using several optimisation algorithms including time optimisation, content recommendation, and format optimisation.

"What made the experimentation with JAMES different from other personalisation research is its unique focus on news content. Outside of the news industry, there's been a lot of great work on personalisation, such as the strong recommendation engines from Netflix and Spotify, Mary-Katharine Phillips, Media Innovation Analyst at Twipe told INMA.

Now let's look at the use of metrics to evaluate customer journeys and predict churn. The API report highlights the importance of having such a system in place for publishers - having the right metrics at hand can help to spot problems quickly and monitor improvement. However, just 6% of publishers said they were very proficient at measuring churn. Most (83%) agreed it would be a very or fairly valuable thing to do well.

Interestingly, 60% of respondents wanted to calculate the Lifetime Value for their digital subscribers, meaning the total amount of money a customer is expected to spend not just this year but in their lifetime. This is a metric that balances current prices, future price increases, and the probability of retention.

Lifetime value or LTV is a measure used by other large publishers around the world, most notably the Financial Times, which for years has been a pioneer in building a digital subscriptions business. The FT is thus likely to have far bigger teams and more sophisticated analytics through which it makes its calculations.

In a March 2021 INMA Webinar, Lucy Butler, chief analytics officer at the Financial Times, explained that the publisher has moved from focusing on web traffic, to a blended metric known as RFV (recency, frequency, volume). This was a leading indicator of acquisition and retention, looking at engagement, cancellation, and conversion rates, as well as revenue versus usage. Now the FT looks at quality visits and engagement to the current North Star metric of lifetime value (LTV), of which RFV is an important predictor.

Similarly, In August 2020, Dan Silver, director of newsroom innovation at The Telegraph in London, told an INMA conference how the publication moved away from a focus on subscriber acquisition-related numbers to a system called STARS - the Single Telegraph Acquisition and Retention Score.

STARS, Silver explained, is actually a super-metric derived from three feeder metrics that identify and reward content that:

- Converts new subscribers
- Helps keep them subscribed
- Resonates with registrants and new users - the potential subscribers of tomorrow

"Research conducted by University College, London (UCL), suggests people are most likely to adopt new habits after 66 days of repetition. So, you need to do something to engage the new subscriber daily for two months to start establishing your product as part of their habitual routine."

- Grzegorz Piechota, Researcher
-in-Residence, INMA

Pre-STARS, Silver articles with high conversion rates dominated discussion and content strategies. "Now there is a new focus on content that encourages existing subscribers to return to our platforms or that drives high engagement with registrants and anonymous users."

Other publishers have attempted to arrive at similar measures for audience engagement by using sophisticated AI tools. The Norwegian publisher Amedia, which wanted to understand what kinds of user behaviour makes for a happily engaged customer on their platforms, handed over this decision to a machine learning algorithm, letting it select the best combination of metrics. The algorithm takes up to 70 reader behaviour statistics as an input and distils them into a single number that best predicts how likely a reader is to stay loyal to the product. At Amedia they call this number the "Engagement Index."

The situation is ever changing of course, but it's worth pointing out that a recent Associated Press report brought attention to the fact that small newsrooms have fallen behind larger ones in adopting AI, and the technology is under-used at the local level mainly because of time and resource constraints. Among the nearly 200 newsrooms surveyed were print, radio, television, and digital-only outlets.

EVOLVING STRATEGIES

1. Take the wire

Did you ever think that using stories from the good old wire service might be a key factor in

retaining subscribers? That sounds crazy when you've been investing in original reporting all this while, right?

Well, a first-of-its-kind analysis using data from Northwestern University's Medill Subscriber Engagement Index, published in March 2022, reveals that wire-service and syndicated content can help to develop reading habits and retain subscribers among light and very light readers. Even for the most ardent, heavier readers, wire content has a neutral - not negative - effect.

"Syndicated content is important to grow engagement," said Edward Malthouse, research director at Northwestern's Medill Spiegel Research Centre

and Erastus Otis Haven Professor of Integrated Marketing Communications. "Any story's a good story if you can get me to read it."

Launched in October 2021, the Medill Subscriber Engagement Index is a tool that allows local news organisations to see what content encourages subscribers to stick around and lets publishers benchmark their performance against outlets in comparable markets. The project started with 44 newsrooms of various sizes across the U.S, while a further 100 outlets were expected to be on board by early 2022.

The insight on wire stories was one of the first significant pieces of research to emerge from the project, and the analysis took into account tens of millions of page views by digital subscribers of two participating newspapers over 23 months, from Jan. 1, 2020, to Nov. 30, 2021.

At first glance, Malthouse writes that the data appeared to show that wire-service content was not associated with retention or regularity, or had negative associations. The initial findings aligned with conventional wisdom that readers put a greater value on original news accounts than on widely available, commoditised stories.

A more detailed look however, showed the surprising benefit of wire-service stories for retaining digital readers who rarely use their subscriptions. News organisations need to reach these under-engaged subscribers before they cancel, and wire content can help, Malthouse said. "It's magic for light readers."

The latest findings were "obviously music to our ears," Jim Kennedy, senior vice president of strategy and enterprise development at the As-

sociated Press was quoted as saying in the article put out by Medill's Local News Initiative. "We've always felt the local news readers are concerned about the whole range of news ... world, national, business, sports, entertainment. You're forcing them to look elsewhere if you don't run any of it."

However, the piece notes there is an art (and science) to learning which wire stories can keep users engaged:

"News organisations should blend sound editorial judgement with automated recommendation systems that direct readers to stories fitting their personal interests. Media houses need to detect the passion points for that reader," it says.

2. Going big on games

The potential for puzzles and games as habit-building tools was thrust firmly into the spotlight earlier this year when The New York Times acquired the viral word game Wordle.

Even before that though, there had already been much talk and experimentation about games for audience and retention. In a way this should make perfect sense. As the digital analytics and AI company Twipe notes, puzzles and crosswords were the original gamification and habit-forming tools for newspapers. That their draw has travelled over to the digital world is no surprise.

One depressing statistic here. Twipe writes that the provision of puzzles is particularly important for publishers in the USA as just 55% are interested in the news, according to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021.

Aside from NYT and Wordle there are several other notable examples of publishers leaning heavily on games. The Wall Street Journal, for instance, discovered that puzzles played a major role in reducing churn. They therefore decided to add Puzzles as part of their onboarding experience, to encourage subscribers to get into the habit of playing daily puzzles.

At The Telegraph in the UK, Twipe reported that puzzles play a vital role in habit formation for their subscriber-first strategy. Not only do their newspaper crosswords have a loyal following, but they drive retention habits with the answers posted in the following day's edition. Telegraph subscribers are also now able to play their daily puzzles directly inside their digital edition app.

The Atlantic is taking a slightly different approach, launching a new newsletter in December last year that seeks to bridge the gap between puzzle player and subscriber. The GoodWord newsletter is written by crossword-puzzles editor Caleb Madison, and it actually serves as a useful entry point into The Atlantic.

A piece in What's New in Publishing noted

this strategy worked well because as well as the written essay from Madison, each issue features that week's top stories and Atlantic events.

"Puzzlers who may have started with an interest in the crossword and how it's built are now exposed on a weekly basis to The Atlantic's full journalism. Their bet is that regular cruciverbalists with an interest in linguistics will also find commonality with the publisher's more analytical, deep-dive approach to current events."

IN CONCLUSION:

The Covid years accelerated every trend that was already evident in the world. What it did for media in particular was move the needle, perhaps irreversibly, toward business models supported by subscriptions and reader revenue. As we write the conclusion to this chapter, news is still trickling through of major staff cuts and the possible closure of BuzzFeed News, one of the last pure digital players that tried to run a free for all news business model supported by advertising.

In their place, as the Financial Times reported at the start of the year, a new cohort of media startups are coming up which are focusing on paying readers and not just clicks.

"This generation of start-ups is distinct from page view-obsessed predecessors of the mid-2010s, which gave readers stories for free in order to reach large audiences. Instead, these companies believe that journalism should be paid for and that, thanks to social media, individual writers can form relationships with their readers, in the same way social media influencers do with followers," FT wrote, citing as prominent examples companies like Insider, Axios, The Athletic and the much awaited new global news operation (latterly, we learnt that is going to be called Semafor) that is being started by ex-Bloomberg CEO Justin Smith and ex-New York Times media columnist Ben Smith who was also once editor of BuzzFeed.

But, the FT article closes, it is too early to say how much space there is for all these subscriptions in consumers' budgets. While the last two years have brought significant upheaval, innovation and transformation, perhaps that is the one sobering thought that publishers must keep in mind as they navigate the times that lie ahead. The first gold rush is likely coming to an end, and consolidation, rather than expansion, will be the name of the game. Therefore, think carefully about all the strategies laid out here for retaining subscribers, think about the investments you can make and remember: keep your heavy readers close, and your light readers closer! . ●

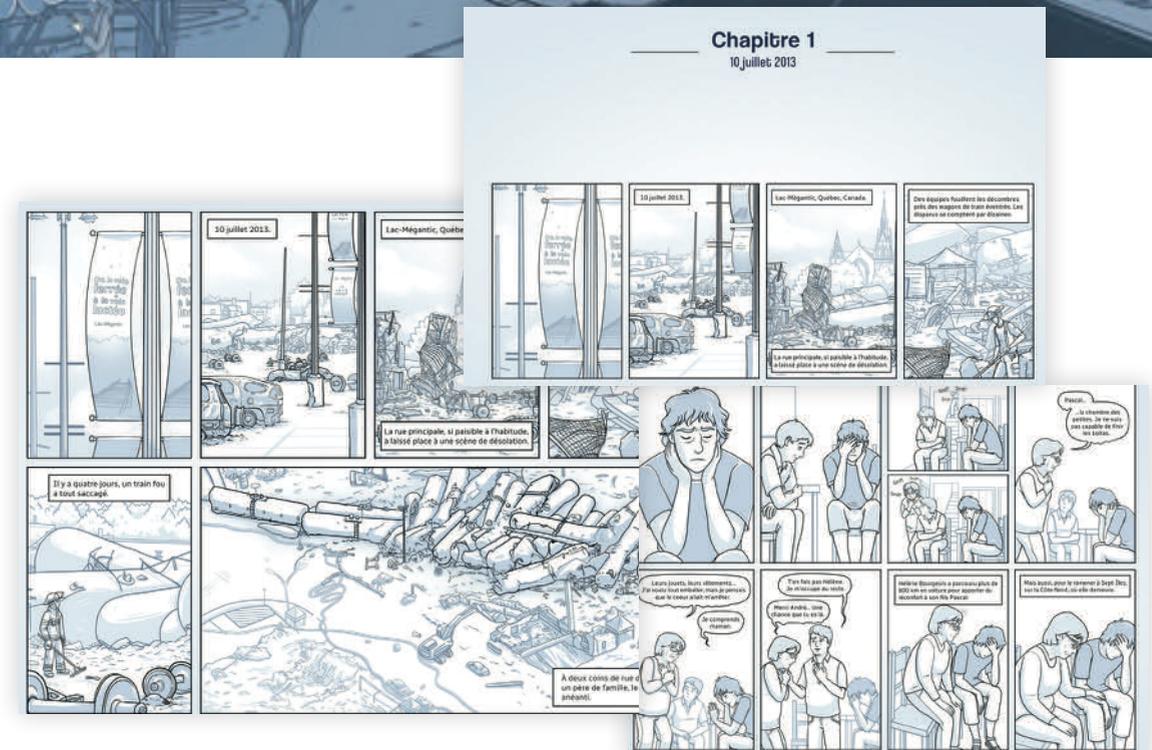
Innovation in Visual



For all the problems that media companies faced during the Coronavirus pandemic, a lack of creativity was not one of them.

Digital Storytelling

In fact, we may well look back on these years as the period in which visual journalism really came of age, as news organisations found bold and ambitious ways of telling a story that involved both unfathomable numbers on a global scale as well as very tangible, personal impacts on individual lives and communities. These stories were not just huge drivers of engagement and subscriptions, they were also stunning to witness across platforms. Over the past year this golden period in multimedia storytelling has expanded beyond the pandemic to cover several other human interest stories while also circling back to cover the ongoing effects of the pandemic on society in interesting ways.

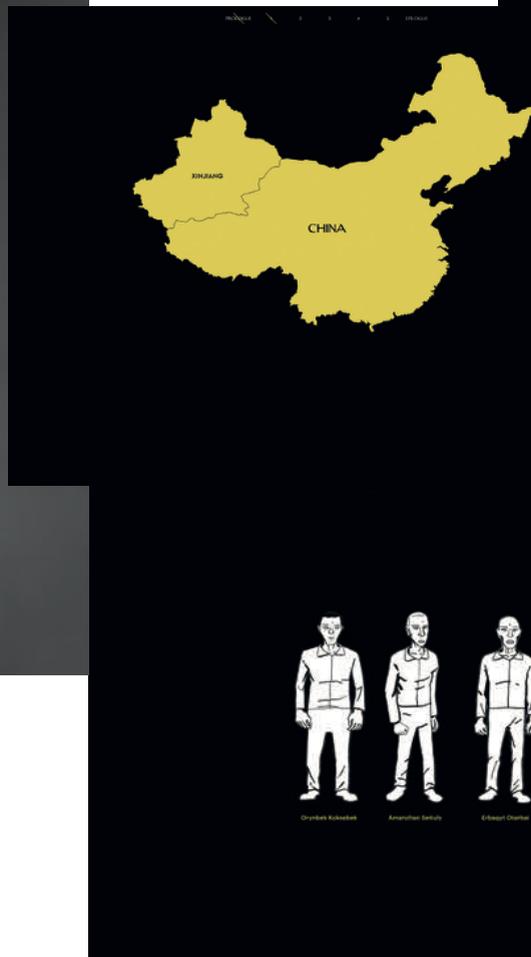
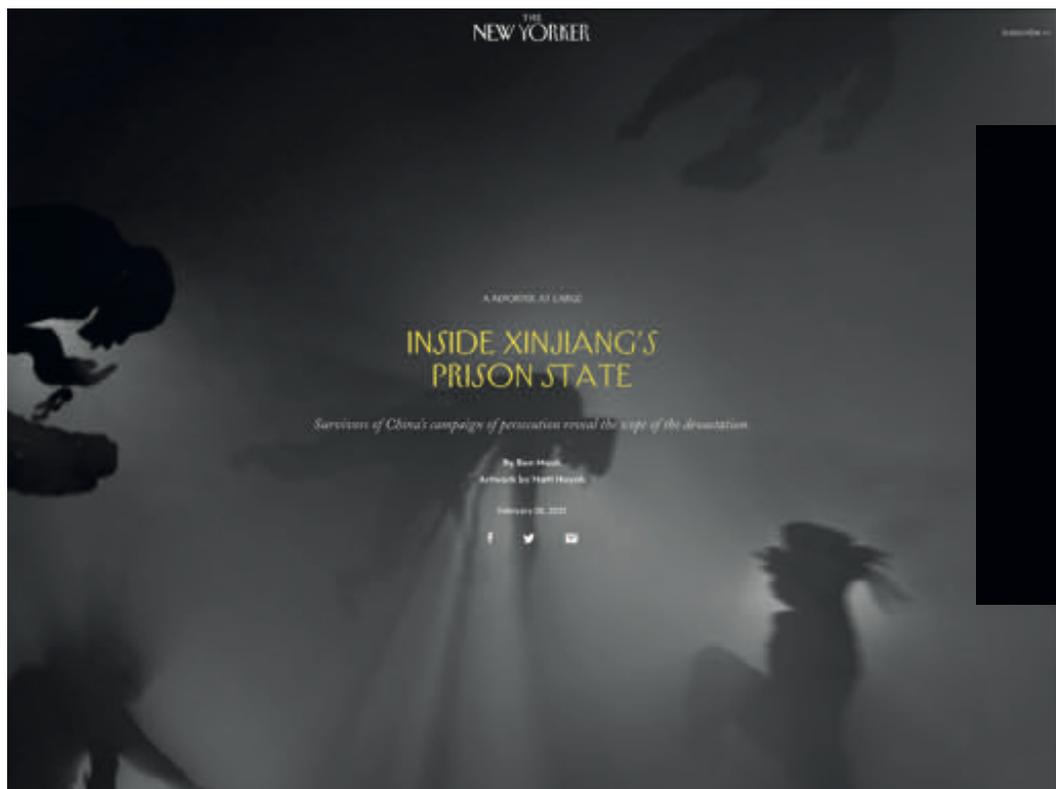


CBC News Radio Canada

Lac-Mégantic: La Dernière Nuit

On the night of July 5 to 6, 2013, a runaway train carrying crude oil derailed in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec, Canada, killing 47 people and decimating its downtown area. As part of a duty to remember, Radio-Canada launched the virtual graphic novel “Lac-Mégantic: The Last Night”.

The report recounts the last hours before the derailment, under the watchful eye of survivors, and former mayor Colette Roy Laroche. It immerses the reader into places that no longer exist, in a captivating and respectful way.



The New Yorker
“Reeducated”

Since 2016, authorities in Xinjiang, China have implemented one of the most advanced police states in the world. By 2018, as many as a million people were held in a vast network of “reeducation” centres. Officials used broad pretexts to justify the detentions, including travelling abroad and owning a prayer rug. It is likely the largest mass-internment drive of ethnic and religious minorities since the Second World War. “Reeducated” is a two-part project by The New Yorker covering this human rights crisis and features the publication’s first virtual-reality documentary of the same name, along with an immersive interactive, “Inside Xinjiang’s Prison State.”

Released in late February 2021, the documentary brings viewers inside a Xinjiang prison camp, reconstructed from the memories of three former detainees. To create the film, Orynbek Koksebek, Erbaqyt Otarbai, and Amanzhan Seituly, all ethnically Kazakh men and ex-prisoners of the camp who are now living outside China, shared testimony about the facility, describing in detail everything from their daily schedules and experiences of torture to the distance between beds. The artist Matt Huynh brought their recollections to life in stark, evocative pen-and-ink drawings, which were then assembled by a team of animators into a three-dimensional space that allows viewers to experience a detention cell, an indoctrination classroom, and other parts of the camp.





À Punt Mèdia, Barret Cooperativa, Lab RTVE

Birth in the 21st Century

An interactive, participatory narrative that uses the pandemic as a turning point in contemporary birth practices. Birth in the 21st Century is an interactive documentary that follows the stories of five women during their pregnancy and childbirth, before and during the coronavirus pandemic. The experience invites the viewer inside the delivery room of the Hospital Universitario de La Plana, in Villarreal, Spain, where a team of midwives specialised in humanising birth support women through childbirth in a way that is designed and developed with a deep respect for their bodies, their babies, and their rights.

Participatory elements, such as an interactive birth plan, render Birth in the 21st Century an educational tool that aims at offering vital insight into contemporary birth practices. This is a highly actionable piece of journalism that allows the audience to make important decisions about their own birth plans.

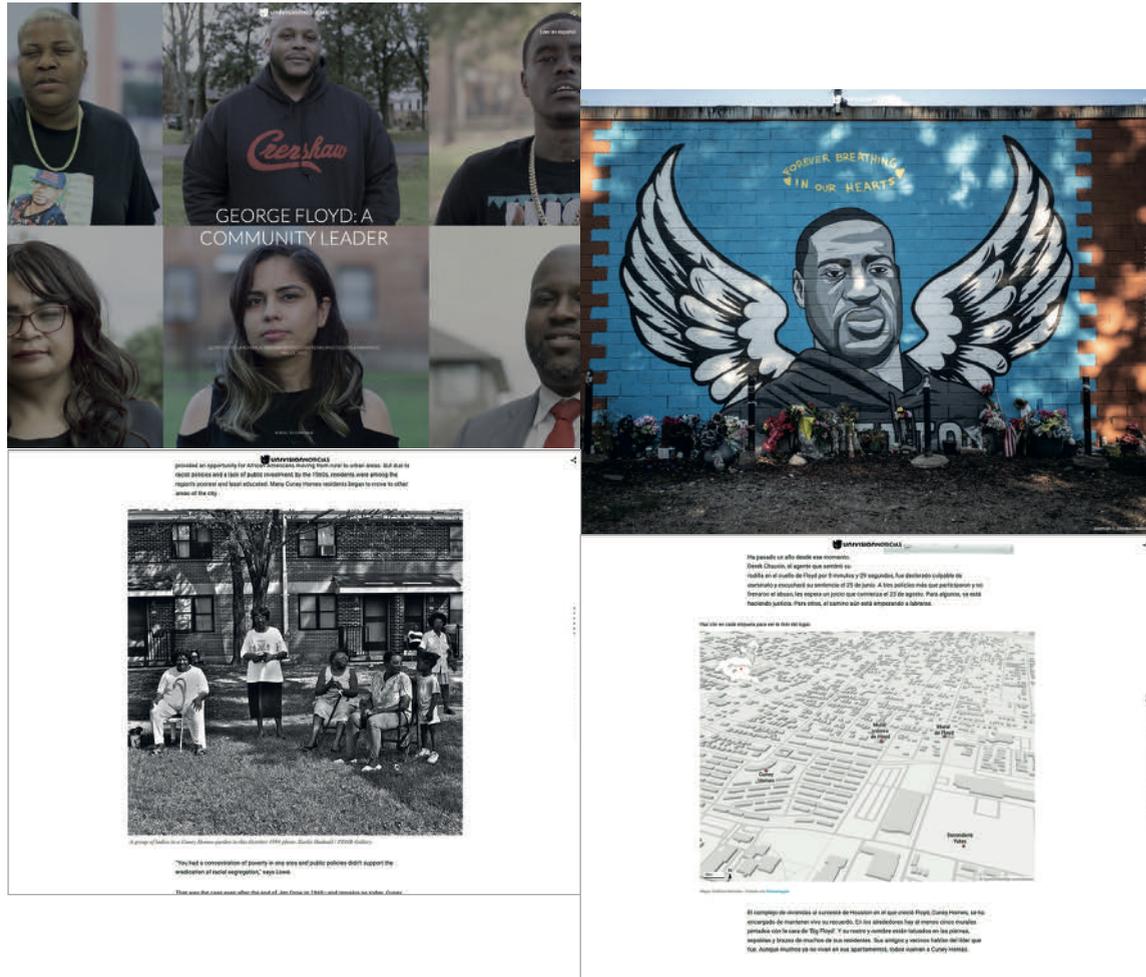


Globe and Mail

Gone

A winner at the Online Journalism Awards (OJA) in the large newsroom category for 2021, this story demonstrates “the power of disappearance as a tool of social control”. At least 66,000 people have disappeared in Mexico since the start of the “war on drugs” in 2006. The scale of this tragedy is enormous, as is the challenge of identifying the killers, since critical details about the victims routinely vanish along with their bodies.

A Globe and Mail team resolved to tell this story of violence and corruption through the lens of a single mass grave that is believed to be the final resting place for victims of narcotraffickers, state violence, human trafficking, and political conflict. Our hope was that it could provide a means of demonstrating the complicity between organised crime and the state, and how this has engendered many of the systemic issues that plague Mexico today, from poverty and social vulnerability to corrupt justice and governance.

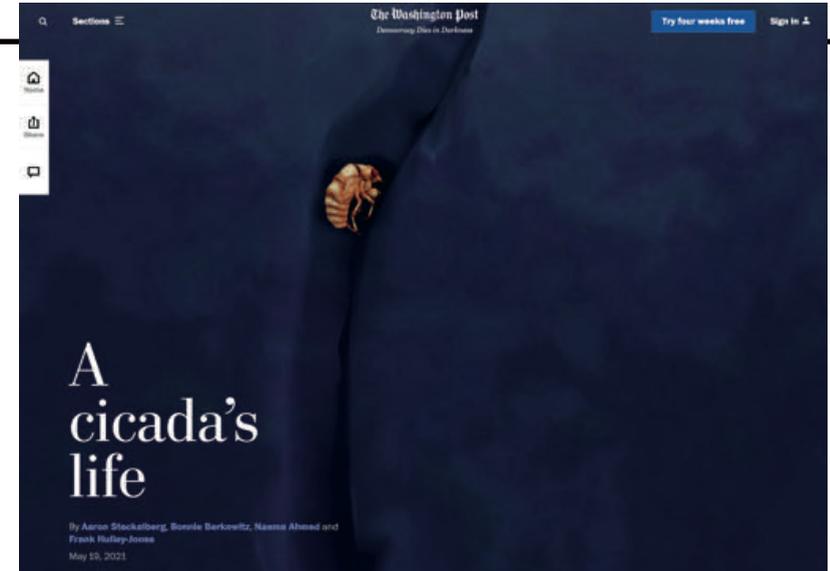


Univision News Digital, Spanish and English

George Floyd, A Leader in His Community

This multimedia project looks at the life of George Floyd from the perspective of six of his friends and relatives, and provides an intimate and sensitive look at his life. Through the eyes of those who knew him, the story also dives deep into the social and institutional issues that still affect his community, including racist urban planning policies and the pervasive lack of opportunities in places such as Cuney Homes. It also describes the strong community ties and bonds that help residents to overcome some of the difficulties they face.

The project includes a narrative and heavily researched text, six short documentary videos profiling six individuals who were close to Floyd at some stage of his life, graphics and photography (including archival photos of the neighbourhood and polaroid photos of the community). "Through this project we wanted to offer our readers a nuanced look at the life of George Floyd, as an opportunity to also examine larger issues of injustice faced by Black communities in the US. This was a particularly important project for us to create, given that our audience is primarily Hispanic and immigrant, and very few projects of this kind have been published in Spanish," Univision submitted at the OJA awards

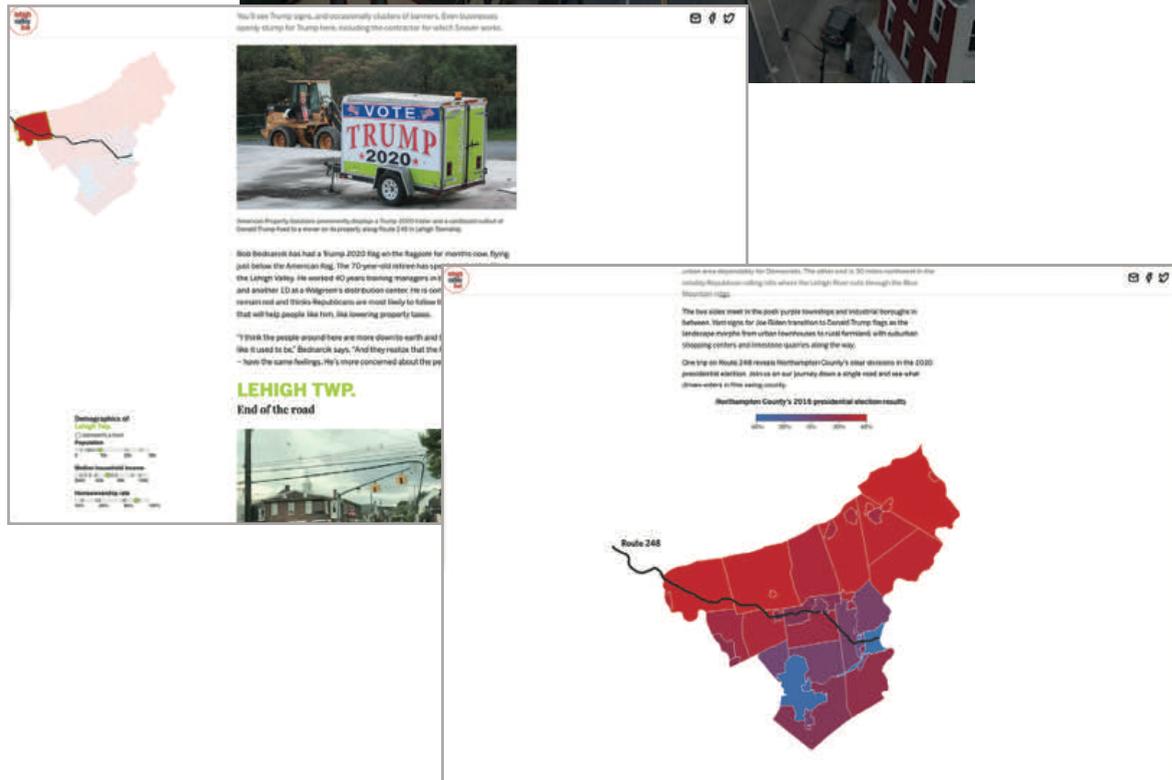
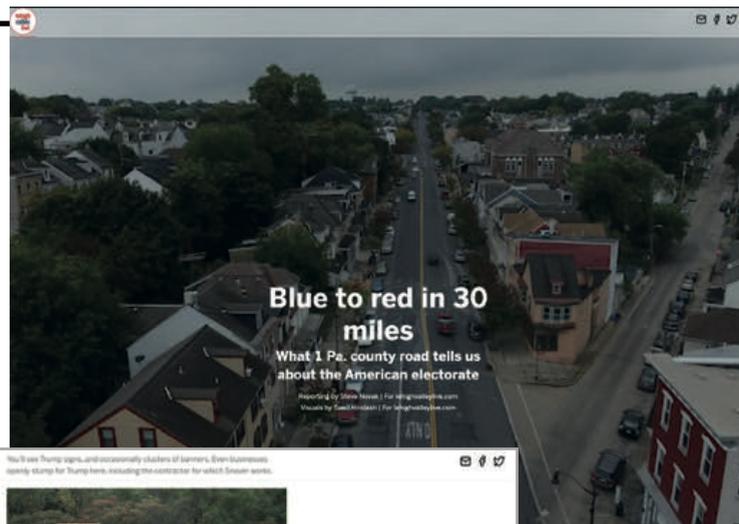


Washington Post

A Cicada's Life

Here's a wonderfully executed wildlife story that draws upon digital visualisation to take the reader into a unique world. Every 17 years in many parts of the eastern United States, hundreds of billions of Brood X cicada nymphs crawl out of the ground and spend the last sliver of their lives in an awkward frenzy of flying, singing and mating.

Washington Post journalists imagined an immersive experience that takes readers close to this event, whether or not they lived in Brood X territory. This is a visual and mobile-first experience – Post graphics reporters created a three-dimensional scene, centred around a tree. They used 3-D software and a display tablet to first sculpt the tree and cicadas as if they were made of clay. Then they chose a variety of digital brushes to paint two-dimensional textures onto the three-dimensional objects, placed them in the scene and animated a virtual camera to bring everything to life. The result is an immersive tale of one cicada's life from the day it emerged to its death and the hatching of its offspring, which will tunnel underground and not appear again until 2038. The result is like a storybook coming to life.

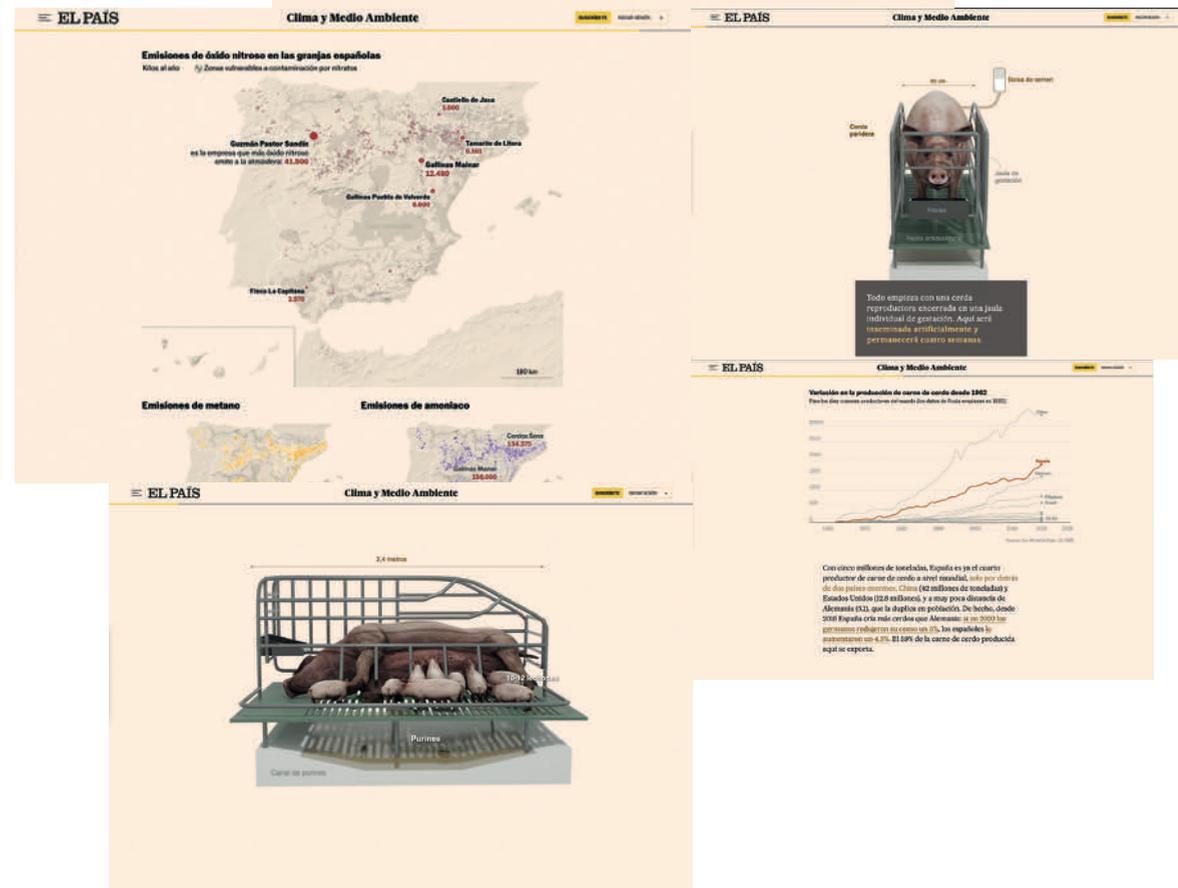


Lehigh Valley Live

Blue to Red in 30 Miles

This is a story that makes a statement: it seeks to respond to parachute journalism by large media outlets by providing a highly localised, personalised version of events. It zooms in on one area – a Pennsylvania county road – to tell a larger story about the American electorate. The story is told using maps, interviews, time-lapse videos and drone photos.

“We knew that we had the story of the 2020 election encapsulated in a single county. But telling our readers wasn’t enough – we had to show them. The premise was to pick a single road that captured the diversity of Northampton County – politically, of course, but also socially, economically. That was found in Pennsylvania State Route 248, with one end in the city of Easton’s blue neighbourhoods and the other in the red, rural rolling hills of the county’s northern tier, and the battleground boroughs and suburbs between,” Lehigh Valley Live submitted at the OJA awards.

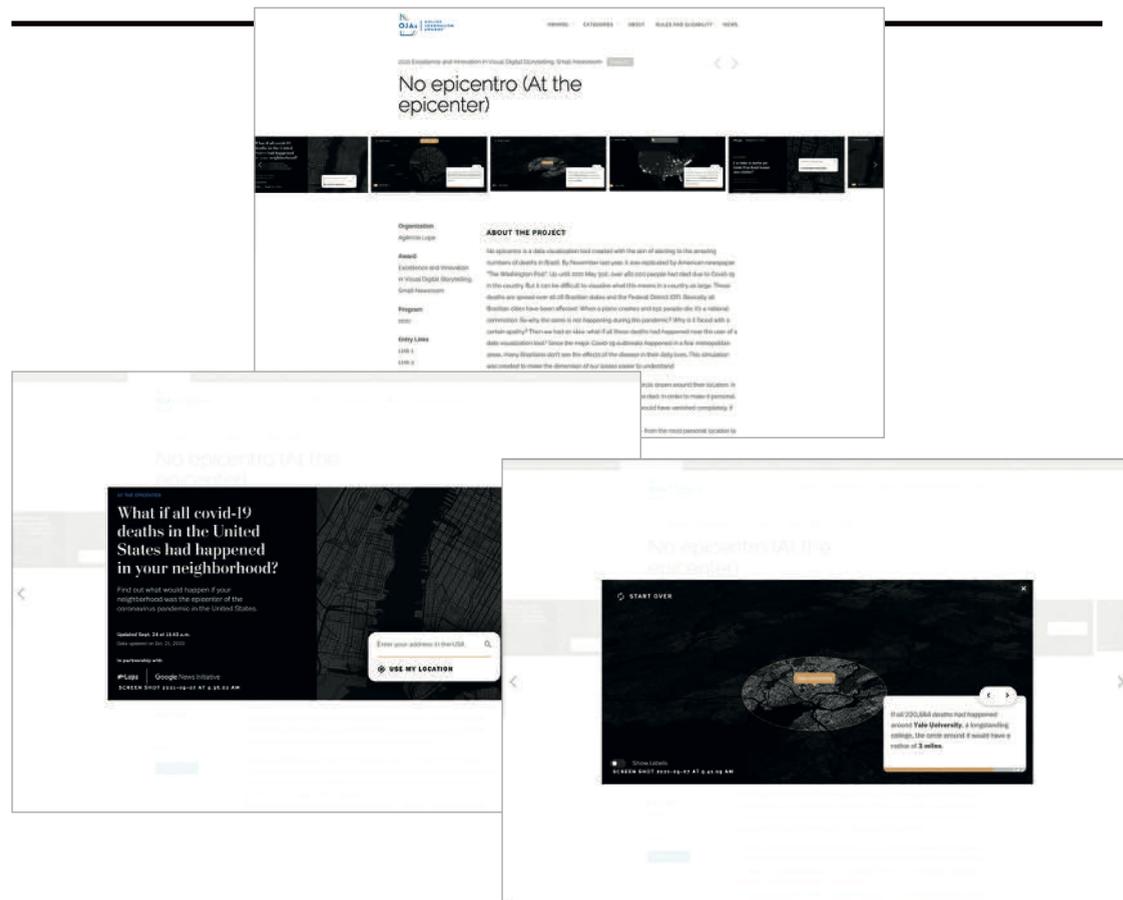


El Pais

Las macrogranjas/ The macro farms

The story takes you step by step through an industrial process to raise 53 million pigs a year. The point is to explain that While the rest Europe reduces its pig production, exploitation in massive facilities increases in Spain. The operation of these macro farms is not sustainable for the environment - Its residues, the slurry, generate important environmental problems in the nearby lands and waters.

Recently, two NGOs, Greenpeace Spain and Association Hacendera, called for stricter legislation around mass pig farming and they received a lot of support from the Spanish public. El Pais’ story used simple visual representations in a scroll-down format to explain how these farms are overcrowded with pigs and the environmental risk they pose.



Agencia Lupa

No epicentro At the epicentre

No epicentro is a data visualisation tool created with the aim of alerting readers to the amazing numbers of deaths in Brazil. By November last year, it was replicated by The Washington Post. Here's how the team describes the project:

Up until May 31st 2021, over 462,000 people had died due to Covid-19 in the country. But it can be difficult to visualise what this means in a country so large. These deaths are spread over all 26 Brazilian states and the Federal District (DF). Basically, all Brazilian cities have been affected. When a plane crashes and 250 people die, there is national outcry. So why did the same not happen during the pandemic? Why is it faced with a certain apathy? Then we had an idea: what if all these deaths had happened near the user of a data visualisation tool? Since the major Covid-19 outbreaks happened in a few metropolitan areas, many Brazilians don't see the effects of the disease in their daily lives. This simulation was created to make the dimension of our losses easier to understand.

Storytelling: After readers provide an address, they see a circle drawn around their location: in such a scenario, everyone who lives in that area would have died. In order to make it personal, this map-based narrative also presents a nearby city that would have vanished completely, if all deaths were to happen within its boundaries.

Gradually, the story shifts from a near view into a far view – from the most personal location (a simulation around the reader's house) into the broadest overview (the real distribution of deaths in the whole country).



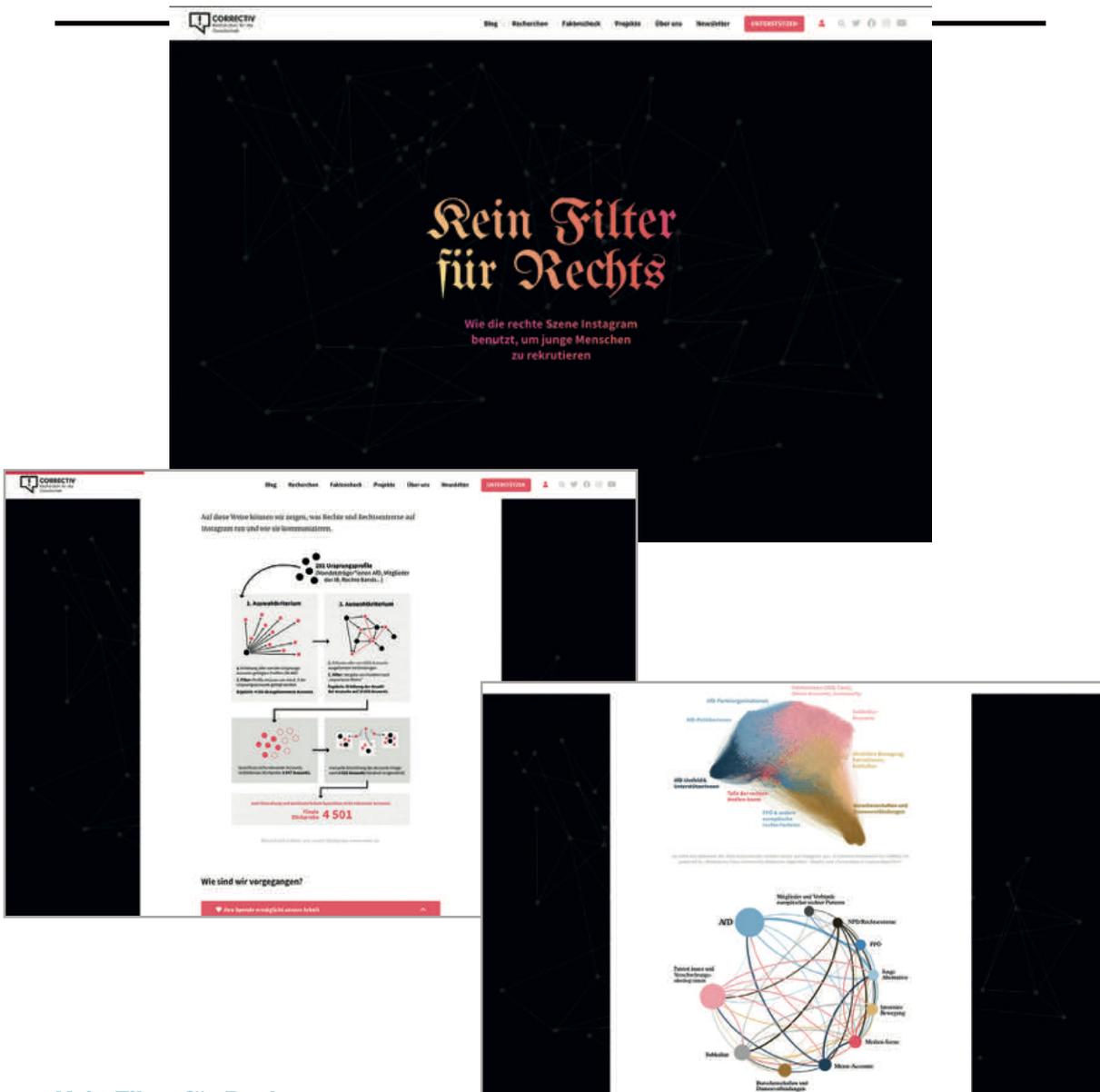
Buzzfeed 5-part story through 2020 and 2021

China's detention camps

BuzzFeed News won a Pulitzer Prize in June 2021 for a series of innovative articles that used satellite images, 3D architectural models, and daring in-person interviews to expose China's vast infrastructure for detaining hundreds of thousands of Muslims in its Xinjiang region.

Reporters on the project calculated the floor areas of 347 compounds bearing the hallmarks of prisons and internment camps in the region and compared them to China's own prison and detention construction standards, which lay out how much space is needed for each person detained or imprisoned.

Earlier estimates, including one extrapolated from three-year-old leaked government data, have suggested that a total of more than a million Muslims have been detained or imprisoned over the last five years, with an unknown number released during that time. The unprecedented analysis goes further, showing that China has built space to lock up at least 1.01 million people in Xinjiang at the same time.



Kein Filter für Rechts
CORRECTIV

The story features the use of technology and data science to detect bias or propaganda on Instagram from the right wing. Even when it seemed like subtle advertisement, this talented team managed to detect how these extremists' network and recruit. Creative storytelling is presented in chapters, each one explaining the findings that otherwise would not be easy to understand. The effort of analysing thousands of accounts, more than 4,500, delivered in this case the expected impact: Many accounts and content were deleted from the platform, and good journalism once again enlightened society on how to be aware of this kind of dangerous manipulation.

The investigative data research #KeinFilterFürRechts, enriched with conversations with insiders from the scene and ex-developers, gave the first comprehensive insight into the right-wing parallel world on Instagram, its most important figures, strategies and codes – and showed with impressive examples how little the company does against it.



KRIK
Prosudi ko sudi

Who are the judges who make decisions in the most important trials in Serbia? Why do many of those cases end up with the release of controversial businessmen, politicians, and criminals? How do judges progress in their careers, when they make illegal decisions, what property do they own? Serbian non-profit KRIK's unique online database "Judge who judges" provides answers to all these questions.

"Our new innovative database is the only place where you can read the complete profiles of 33 Serbian high-ranked judges, who act in the main departments for organised crime and corruption," KRIK says.

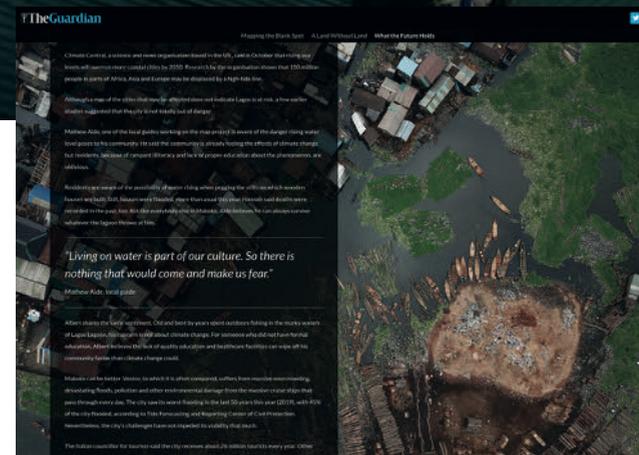
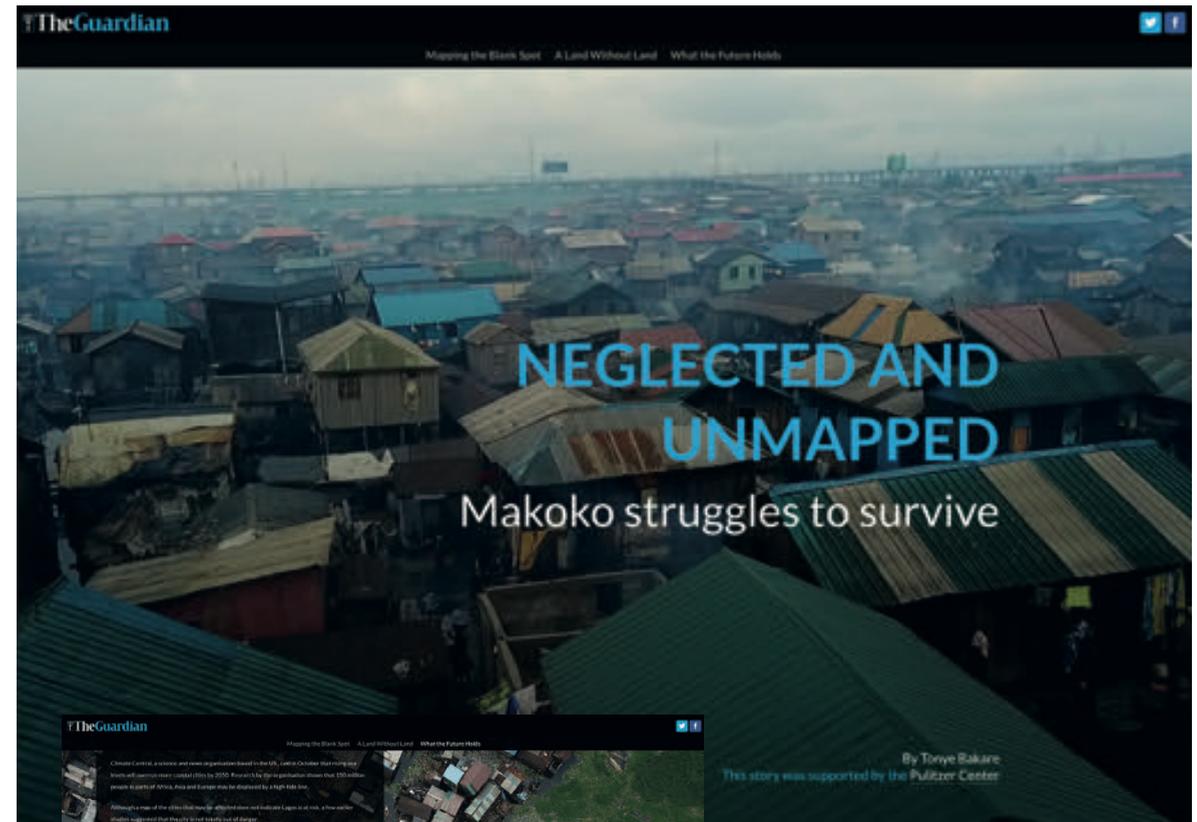


The New York Times

Who Gets to Breathe Clean Air in New Delhi

It's no secret that the air in New Delhi carries dangerous levels of pollution. But just how bad has the situation become? In the New York Times' excellent "Who Gets to Breathe Clean Air in New Delhi" project, the newspaper both quantified and personalised that question in a powerful multimedia story that combined sensor journalism, video, graphics, data analysis and strong reporting to bring us a day in the life of two children – one poor and one middle-class.

By tracking their activities over the day – from waking to commuting to school to coming home for dinner – and measuring the pollution they were exposed to, minute-by-minute, they brought home in a visceral way the inequalities in access to clean air. Published December 2020.

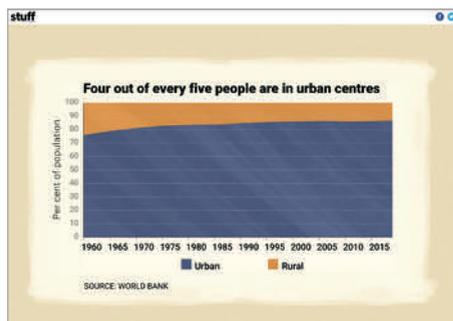
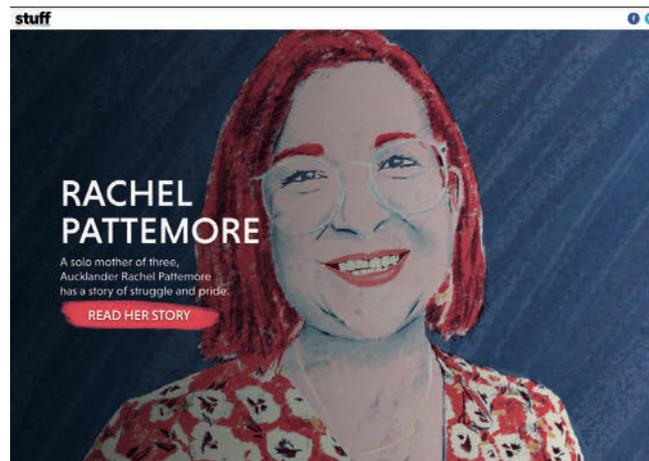


The Guardian

Neglected and Unmapped

"Neglected and Unmapped" tells the story of a fishing community in Nigeria that is literally not on a map. A brilliant collaboration bringing together a news organisation (the Guardian), civil society (Code for Africa), technology enablers (OpenStreetMap and AfricanDRONE), journalism funding support (the Pulitzer Centre on Crisis Reporting), and the local community, especially young women living in the area, this project managed to not only put a community on map with first-hand drone images collected by residents, but also tell stories of its people, history, and current struggles – against local politics, state governments, as well as climate change.

The story is an alarming reminder of many such communities existing yet treated as non-existent, and a lively example of how data and technology could empower those who would otherwise never be seen.



Stuff

Aotearoa in 20

Following the release of the census, Stuff's data journalists produced a series of charts and graphs to visualise the changes in New Zealand's economy and demography over time.

"For better or worse, we're not the same group of people as we were 50 years ago. Or five years ago. Or even, five months ago," Stuff wrote as a blurb to the multimedia story.

"Each one of us has a unique story about what brought us to this moment in our nation's life. Aotearoa in 20 shares the stories of a representative sample of Kiwis. We have analysed population data held by Statistics NZ and come up with the profiles of 20 people who represent the nation as a whole. Stuff reporters have found Kiwis who fit those profiles and who had a story about themselves they were willing to share."

Print & Offbeat

2021 was one of those nearly years, starting with optimism that we might swiftly leave the turmoil and uncertainty of 2020 behind, only to realise that some shadows are more difficult to shake. It was, consequently, a year of ups and downs, twists and turns.

As we danced on the edge of chaos and a return to normality, it was only natural that creativity might suffer or struggle to find direction. Luckily though, the media and ad industry stepped up, finding inventive and creative ways to engage with audiences. In some special cases, they also managed to capture the zeitgeist, a sense of a world on the cusp of turning a corner. In other instances, they were just wonderfully weird! Either way, it is always a delight to put together our annual round-up of the best print and offbeat campaigns and our picks for this year remain, as ever, mightily impressive. Let's get to it:

1. A PERFECT BLEND – LOCAL COFFEE AND LOCAL COPY



'When the Keene Sentinel, a local newspaper that operates out of the southwest corner of New Hampshire pivoted to subscriber revenue as its principal revenue stream, they

faced the pressure of subscriber churn and losses from deeply discounted subscription plans. We're guessing that this sounds like a familiar problem for a lot of publishers, right? Well, the Keene Sentinel wanted a more reliable means of retaining new customers and developed a program that bundled locally produced goods from local businesses with subscription offers.

"Our first was with a coffee roaster through which, at half-price, we purchased 1-pound bags of coffee to combine with an online-only subscription or weekend print delivery and full online access," the publisher told Better News. "The initial offer did well, by our standards and our operation size. We purchased 20 bags of coffee at 50% retail (\$8) and quickly sold out, forcing us to order twice more."

The Sentinel went on to partner with a candy company, a baker, a soap manufacturer, an oil and vinegar producer, a maker of rum and a chocolatier. The thing that didn't work at all? Soap.

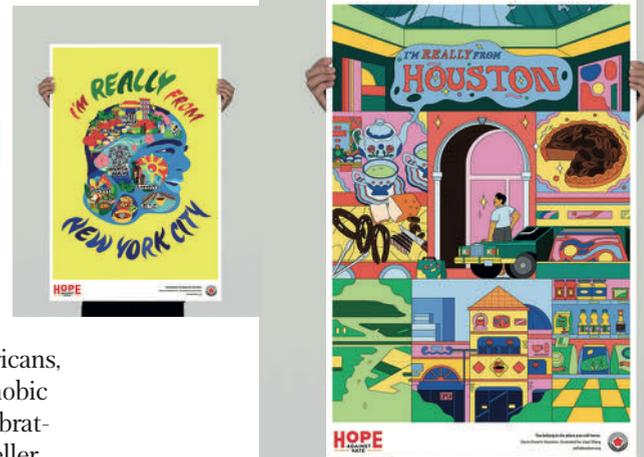
2. AN AD CAMPAIGN THAT CONNECTS YOU TO A LARGER CONVERSATION



Ads24 co-created a campaign with the number one tampon brand, Lil-lets, in partnership with two daily newspapers, City Press and Daily Sun. The Lil-lets Talk campaign enabled

a platform where women could more openly discuss life-challenging topics, such as going through menopause. The campaign leveraged the strengths of print, online and social media platforms, also driving multi-brand reach. Newspapers carried QR codes which could be scanned to join the conversation

3. POSTERS THAT TAKE ON THE COMPLICATED QUESTION OF ASIAN-AMERICAN IDENTITY



Focusing on the stories of ten Asian-Americans, I'm Really From aims to tackle the xenophobic undertones that taint the question by celebrating the complex relationships each storyteller has with the place they call home. The campaign was launched in the US in the midst of an anti-Asian crisis, with hate crimes against Asian people increasing by over 70% during 2021 according to the FBI. Featuring celebrities alongside victims of anti-Asian hate, the campaign takes the form of a series of vintage-inspired travel posters. At first glance, they appear to be posters for far-flung destinations, but a closer look reveals they're actually advertising US destinations from New York City to San Diego.

4. A NEWSPAPER FRONT PAGE THAT SMELLS LIKE A FRESHLY CLEANED TOILET!



Let's take a small detour from the thoughtful to the slightly ridiculous here. Readers of the Times of India woke up one December morning to a befuddling olfactory sensation. The paper seemed to smell flowery, but in a vaguely medicinal way. It smelled a lot like toilet cleaner!

It turns out that was the theme of the ad from Domex, a Hindustan Unilever's (HUL) brand that offers a range of household cleaners.

Domex decided to run a full-page ad on 'World Toilet Day' (19 November) and choose to feature a western toilet as the protagonist. The copy read, "The next time you step into a toilet, stop. Sniff the air. If it smells bad, even slightly, you know that the toilet isn't safe. Because an



unpleasant odour is the surest sign of germs." "Now smell this paper. It's the Domex FreshGuard fragrance. If your toilet smells like this, it's proof it is safe from germs."

5. A MAGAZINE ISSUE THAT CONDENSES AN EXPERIENCE OF A CITY



Produced by the Singapore-based Lim family and inspired by a family trip to Tokyo, Rubbish Famzine has recorded their lives together for the best part of a

decade. The tenth issue of the publication was supposed to involve a return to Tokyo but with the pandemic having other ideas, the family decided to bring the Japanese capital to their home instead.

The family collaborate on the themes, ideas and their execution; each issue sees the children grow up a little as the magazine acts as a

supercharged family photo album sharing their lives together – favourite TV, films, food, music...

That first issue was to be repeated for issue 10, with a group trip to Tokyo; but Coronavirus prevented travel just as they were due to leave.

The solution? Bring Tokyo to Singapore, and use the original pages of the first issue as the basis for the new issue. Stickers and rubber-stamped messages are added, new images tipped in, all in typical Rubbish FAMzine fashion.

The cover of the brilliantly OTT issue came wrapped together with a series of miniature reproductions of items the family brought back from their trip to Japan, including a Rubbish-branded Casio digital watch which is used to seal the magazine closed. Because, why not?

6. KEEP THE LIGHTS ON FOR MCDONALD'S



Here's a poster campaign that plays on the iconic quality of the brand's logo, so much so that it allows for a minimal aesthetic.

It almost seems incredible that until recently, McDonald's did not do home deliveries in the U.K. With the pandemic raging, the fast food giant was forced to close its restaurants, which saw it quickly pivot to introduce delivery partnerships which allowed people to receive Big Macs or Sausage McMuffins straight to their doorsteps—and a new revenue stream was born.

Promoting the service at the start of the year, the ever-present advertiser introduced three posters that show half of its iconic golden-arches "M" looming over an apartment block or house with only one light on as customers await the arrival of their order. Created by Leo Burnett London, and with only the words "We deliver" displayed—no full branding—it was still evident who the campaign was from, demonstrating the familiarity of the McDonald's brand.

7. CARDS THAT CARRY AN OMINOUS INVITATION

Ok, so this is not an example from a magazine or newspaper but it's still very cool for the effective way in which it capitalises on the giant success of the Netflix show. A series of three



simple geometric shapes—a circle, triangle and square—printed on a nondescript business card is an invitation to the ultra-violent Squid Game.

The game inspired Relief, an app that uses AI and collective bargaining to eliminate credit card debt, to drop 10,000 such cards in New York and Miami. Designed by the Canadian agency Wunder, on the back of each was a message that would resonate with anyone who'd watched the show: "There's a better way to get out of debt."

8. LE CHOCOLAT CAPTURES THE BEAUTY ALONGSIDE THE OCCASIONAL FRUSTRATION



For most designers aiming to create a truly visual concept, integrating the product into print



ads can be a straight-up annoyance. But TBWA Paris found a way to make the actual packaging of Le Chocolat des Français bars the centerpiece in a detail-rich campaign that's charming and hilarious. "Keep the Best of France" shows how the lovely scenes on the chocolate bars contrast with everything happening outside the frame.

"In each execution, the candy bar's real packaging from a limited collection of designs is placed into a backdrop showing all the realities of French life that don't make it into the final frame. The artistry is light but beautifully crafted, with the product still managing to play a starring role," David Griner writes for Ad Week.

The ads and packaging feature the work of artists Beatrix de Gevigney, Clément Soulmaignon, Laurène Boglio, Hubert Poirot Bourdain, Leonie Despres, Charlotte Molas and Simon Bournel-Bosson.

9. AN INTERACTIVE SHOPPING EXPERIENCE THROUGH PRINT



It was only a matter of time before augmented reality and AI was effectively deployed for the home shopping experience. The American women's magazine Allure has been teaming up with Perfect Corp. from November 2020 through to the September 2021 issue to recreate a collection of looks and products via digital try-on, and made these

looks available for readers to experience within the YouCam Makeup app. This full circle reader journey allowed readers to visualize the stunning looks and products in real time on their own face, creating a more personalized and engaged reader experience.

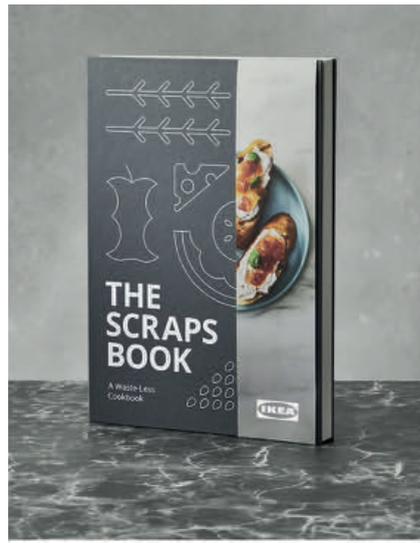
Of course, although these issues were specifically created around the concept of shopping, it also fits in perfectly where try-ons are going digital for the sake of safety and hygiene, and it could be a nod toward the future.

10. THE NFT MAGAZINE COVER (GET USED TO IT!)



Regardless of how you feel about the NFT craze currently sweeping through all aspects of life it would seem, it's very much a trend that looks to have some staying power for publishers. We pick just one example here from ES Magazine, the weekly lifestyle and culture publication from the Evening Standard which recently released its very first NFT magazine cover art. Revealed at a London Fashion Week party, the dynamic digital magazine is an immersive work of art that captures movement in three dimensions.

The cover was designed to amplify BIPOC, non-binary voices across the music, art and fashion, and it the non-fungible token art features the face of LGBTQ+ poet and model Kai-Isaiah Jamal.



11. A COOKBOOK THAT IS QUITE LITERALLY A SCRAPBOOK

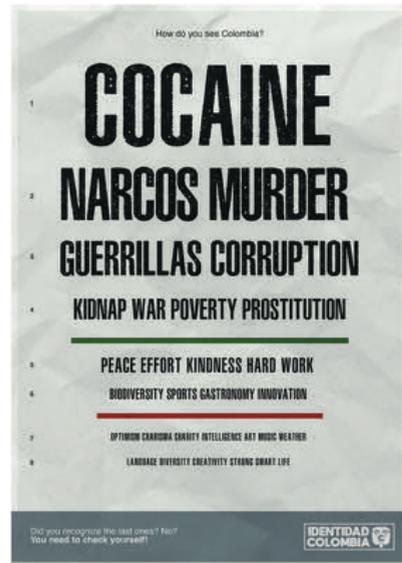
All across 2021 Ikea went big on sustainability and the environment, coming up with a range of innovative campaigns. Their campaign in Norway for instance, featured images of Ikea furniture found in trash piles and landfills that Ikea then retrieved and refurbished. An even more innovative campaign “Little Robot” depicts a droid trying to save the planet but realizing that small sustainable actions – like curbing food waste and opting for reusable grocery bags – can make big differences.

The sustainability push also involved a cookbook with an unusual theme. The ScrapsBook, created in collaboration with chefs from across North America, is dedicated to cooking with the little things we usually throw away.

Scrapcooking, if you could call it that, is about finding the beautiful possibilities in that banana peel, radish top, or even the chicken bones you’re about to toss, and make the most of everything available to you. The book includes recipes for dishes like banana peel bacon & wild rice pancakes, corn cob soup, and bruised apple butter

cake. The cookbook also includes tips for reducing food waste throughout the text, including regrowing scallions, bok choy, and celery from the roots on your windowsill.

12. AN EYE TEST THAT ASKS YOU TO CHECK YOUR PERCEPTIONS

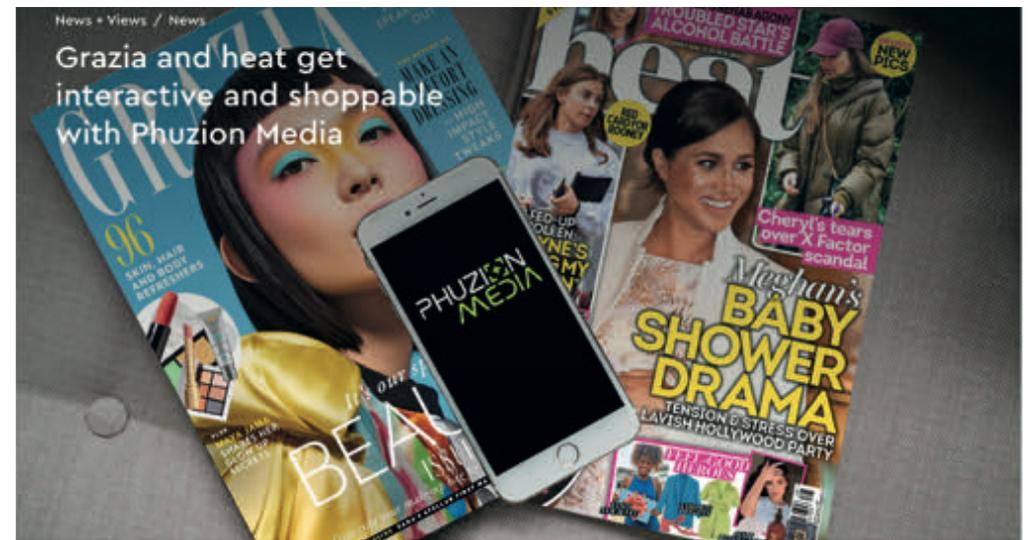


Identidad Colombia’s 2022 campaign uses the ingenious prop of an eye chart test, with a twist. The objective is to invite people to check themselves based on the way they think and see Colombia. The picture speaks for itself.

13. MAKING THE MOST OF SHUTTERS

This is another example of a campaign that’s more out-of-home than print but managed to meet the moment with simple, minimalist innovation. With bars forced to shut across Europe due to pandemic restrictions, there was no way for owners to drive revenue to keep their business afloat for almost a year. Many were having to close their shutters for the last time as a result. But Publicis Italy saw potential for those shutters to become advertising billboards instead, redirecting Heineken’s out-of-home budgets to support bar owners. More than 5,000 bars turned their shutters into ads for the company’s beer brands including slogans such as, “See the ad today, enjoy this bar tomorrow.” The campaign would go on to earn the Outdoor Grand Prix at Cannes Lions in June 2021.

14. MAKE YOUR ENTIRE MAGAZINE SHOPPABLE



Another idea that has long since been developing in the background and has now come to fruition is shoppable magazine content. It’s no secret that e-commerce boomed during the pandemic and publishers across the board are integrating shopping strategies into their commerce mix. So why should it just be restricted to the digital space. In May 2021, Bauer Media partnered with image-recognition platform Phuzion Media to enhance its magazines Grazia and Heat, making products and services within its print pages instantly shoppable and interactive. The technology allows readers to point their phone or tablet camera at the pages of the magazine and immediately find out more about products recommended by editorial or shop the adverts. The new tech by Phuzion makes this possible without the addition of QR codes or so there will be no changes to the design of editorial or creative.

Bauer Media research found that over 1 in 3 people read magazines during this third lockdown and 11% said they were now reading more magazines than they were last year prior to the pandemic. Plus, with 80% of people agreeing that technology has made online shopping easier, the innovative idea aligns with new consumer shopping habits.

15. A PRINT AD THAT CAN HELP YOU FIND YOUR BLOOD GROUP

The Times of India came up with an innovative advertisement on world blood donor day (June

14) across its editions in Kerala. The innovation was used to inform young readers about donating blood to their compatible groups. The DIY advertisement by the publisher asked its young readers to pour water on the advertisement where blood groups are printed to know who all can receive blood from the particular group. For example, AB+ can donate only to AB+. A+ can donate to A+ and AB+ and so on. ●



Good journalism is good business

We help media companies innovate, embrace new digital platforms, develop bold new strategies, and create new revenue streams



INNOVATION

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We are a global consultancy firm with a difference. We focus exclusively on the publishing business – both editorial and management. And our focus is helping our clients innovate and embrace new digital platforms, and find bold new strategies as well as new revenue streams.

We invite you to be part of the digital revolution and benefit from INNOVATION's knowledge and hands-on expertise of more than two decades advising some of the best-known media brands in the world.

HOW WE WORK

We believe that change is not imposed but is negotiated and agreed upon. We take into consideration all scenarios, opinions – and only after thorough analysis, evaluation, and testing we present our final recommendations and action plans.

One way to visualise our process is to think of it as a three-step effort: audit, diagnostic and implementation. We lead in-house teams to be at the heart of innovation in their firms and deliver on a new product, content or strategy. Although all projects are made-to-measure, the phases of any change process are always similar.

EDITORIAL SERVICES

Our clients call us when they face pressing issues ranging from editorial re-organisation to a need for re-invention of their products, or the development and execution of new editorial or commercial strategies. They approach us for objective, honest, analytical, smart and experienced advice.

MANAGEMENT AND STRATEGY SERVICES

We believe that media companies should become new Information Engines™, and transform by shifting from readers to audiences and from audiences to communities. Our clients talk to us when they need to make decisions that will have lasting consequences for their teams, operations, revenues and brands. They approach us when they need fresh global and experienced thinking.

MAGAZINES

We believe, however, the genre must be re-invented to survive and thrive. We have developed ground-breaking new concepts, and formats with demonstrable success. We re-organise news operations to adapt a matrix based on audiences rather than products. ●

1ST PHASE

The Problem

- 1 Audit
- 2 Diagnosis
- 3 Action plan

2ND PHASE

The Solution

- 4 Brainstorming
- 5 Market research
- 6 Content model
- 7 Design model
- 8 Business model
- 9 Multimedia model
- 10 Prototypes
- 11 Editorial & graphic style books
- 12 Newsroom management model
- 13 Working space redesign
- 14 Training & implementation
- 15 New Product launch

3RD PHASE

The Implementation

- 16 Evaluation
- 17 Audience research
- 18 Corrections
- 19 Training
- 20 Results: increased audience, increased advertising

A Sustainable Future for Media

Self-interest and the public good are rarely comfortable bedfellows. But in the case of sustainability, they are. Assessing your company's environmental impact and then creating a plan to reduce it will not only save your company money, attract environmentally conscious consumers, and avoid increasing governmental pollution penalties - it also helps slow climate change, improve water security, slow deforestation, and increase biodiversity.

Good bedfellows, indeed. Better yet, the citizens of the world support you, and are pushing you to become a good environmental citizen.

CONSUMERS WILL CHANGE HABITS TO SUPPORT GREEN COMPANIES

In a June 2020 IBM study involving more than 18,000 consumers worldwide, "nearly six in 10 respondents said they are willing to change their shopping habits to reduce environmental impact," the report found. Eight in 10 indicated sustainability is important for them. And for those who said it is very or extremely

important, more than 70% said they would pay a premium of 35%, on average, for brands that are sustainable and environmentally responsible.

"More than seven in 10 consumers said it's at least moderately important that brands offer 'clean' products (78%), are sustainable and environmentally responsible (77%), support recycling (76%), or use natural ingredients (72%)," the report found.

ENVIRONMENTALISM IS NOT JUST FOR THE YOUNG

"While Millennials may be leading the change in sustainability awareness, every age group indicates that sustainability, environmental, and/or personal wellness attributes are significant considerations in selecting brands," the report found.

"Enlightened self-interest is driving a lot of conversations [about sustainability] right now," said Immediate Media CEO Tom Bureau speaking at the 2020 FIPP World Congress. "The thing is, if you're not supporting green credentials you're an investment risk."

"A lot of it is driven by global warming and climate change, the impact of which is so immediate in many places of the world, especially in Central Europe," said Stefanie Eichiner, Senior Manager Sustainability at UPM. "Now with a few drought years, you actually have visible changes in the landscape, especially in the forests in Central Europe."

CLIMATE CHANGE: IN YOUR FACE

"It's not just like some complicated scientific debate," she said. "It has become tangible - now you can see it in the fields and in the cities." Not only is the impact increasingly visible, but a global youth movement including Fridays for Future (FFF) is giving the scientific debate around climate change a human face. FFF started in 2018, when then 15-year-old Greta Thunberg skipped school to conduct a one-student school strike for climate. Her action

inspired youths around the world who organised to skip Friday's classes to demonstrate and urge political leaders to take action on climate change and transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy.

A global strike in March 2019 gathered more than one million strikers at 2,200 sites organised in 125 countries. That was topped during the 2019 Global Week for Future in September, with four million protesters attending 4,500 strikes across over 150 countries.

Going green is becoming increasingly important to commercial success. "You need certain measures in place to be interesting to your customers and to differentiate yourself," said Eichiner. "You create a value to your customers through sustainability."

MOTIVATION BEYOND SAVING THE PLANET

But if global climate safety isn't enough motivation to launch a sustainability initiative at your company, self-interest is also served. Sustainability can save your company money, attract green-friendly consumers, and avoid pollution penalties. "If you know what resources you are using, and you're monitoring them, then you can find ways to cut down on them," said Eichiner. "If you don't know, how can you cut back on it?" asked Eichiner.

HOW SHOULD A COMPANY GET STARTED?

The favourite phrase in corporate public relations lingo these days is "reducing our carbon footprints", but it turns out that's a misleading and incomplete measure.

The term "carbon footprint" is used as a proxy for sustainability or environmental friendliness, but using any single measure, like a carbon footprint, doesn't give you a full picture of your company's entire impact, from your products and your processes to your physical facility and your supply chain. Issues like biodiversity, chemicals, safety, human rights, etc. aren't covered in your carbon footprint.

COLLECT DATA, ANALYSE IT, CREATE TARGETS, BUILD A PLAN

Sustainability programmes cannot be reduced to a one-size-fits-all solution. No two companies are the same in what they do, how they do it, and how they distribute their products and services. So it is impossible to say that there is one thing every media company should do.

While there is no single solution for every media company, there is a process every company should follow:

1. Find out what you're doing
2. Measure it
3. Create a plan

"What that means in practice is first: You have to assess what are my biggest impacts, and then collect them and assess the status quo," said Eichiner. "Then you will know, is it my energy? Is it my products? My supply chain? What is my impact really?"

"Second, you have to set targets, and validate those targets and the ways to achieve them," she said. "Then you have to regularly measure your success, review it, adjust the plan, and repeat."

RESIST THE TEMPTATION OF A SIMPLE PR STUNT

Sustainability has become an essential part not only of doing business in the 21st century, but also an essential part of surviving on the planet. "In the very long term, the price of not engaging in sustainability is that you will have a degraded planet," Eichiner said. "You will have social unrest because of inequitably distributed resources. It will not be a good life, and not a good operating environment for your business.

"Very selfishly, for a company to create value, it will be incredibly easier if you have a safe, stable, engaging, happy environment rather than people having to worry about water, food and safety," she said. "So you have dual motivations: self-interest and the health of the planet." ●





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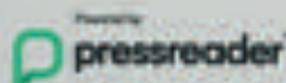
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