

*The New York Times*

# Innovation

March 24, 2014



# Executive Summary



## Introduction

The New York Times is winning at journalism. Of all the challenges facing a media company in the digital age, producing great journalism is the hardest. Our daily report is deep, broad, smart and engaging — and we've got a huge lead over the competition.

At the same time, we are falling behind in a second critical area: the art and science of getting our journalism to readers. We have always cared about the reach and impact of our work, but we haven't done enough to crack that code in the digital era.

This is where our competitors are pushing ahead of us. The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal have announced aggressive moves in recent months to remake themselves for this age. First Look Media and Vox Media are creating newsrooms custom-built for digital. The Guardian and USA Today have embraced emerging best practices that have helped grow readership. And Huffington Post

and Flipboard often get more traffic from Times journalism than we do.

In contrast, over the last year The Times has watched readership fall significantly. Not only is the audience on our website shrinking but our audience on our smartphone apps has dipped, an extremely worrying sign on a growing platform.

Our core mission remains producing the world's best journalism. But with the endless upheaval in technology, reader habits and the entire business model, The Times needs to pursue smart new strategies for growing our audience. The urgency is only growing because digital media is getting more crowded, better funded and far more innovative.

The first section of this report explores in detail the need for the newsroom to take the lead in getting more readers to spend more time reading more of our journalism. It offers specific strategies and tactics to accomplish this goal, often called audience development.

Pulitzer Day, April 2013



Simply offering recommendations for improving our efforts to get our journalism to readers is not enough, however. The difficulties we face in audience development are symptomatic of our need to become a more nimble, digitally focused newsroom that can thrive in a landscape of constant change.

The second part of this report examines specific recommendations that we believe will help strengthen our newsroom for the digital era. That means taking more time to assess the landscape and chart the road ahead, rethink print-centric traditions, use experiments and data to inform decisions, hire and empower the right digital talent and work hand in hand with reader-focused departments on the business side. These needs are all deeply intertwined — getting better at one will help all the others.

This is a moment we are well positioned to seize.

The anxiety that filled the newsroom only a few years ago has mostly dissipated. The success of the paywall has provided financial stability as we become more digitally focused. The sale of other properties like The Boston Globe has allowed the leadership to focus squarely on The New York Times. Both Mark Thompson and Jill Abramson have established themselves as willing and eager to push the company in new, sometimes uncomfortable directions.

Indeed, all of us have been struck by the news-

room’s momentum in many critical areas that we discuss throughout the report — key digital promotions, promising product initiatives, the mobile imperative, and productive collaborations with the business side. The masthead recently embraced analytics and is in the process of building up a team that will help the newsroom use data to inform decisions, which would have been one of our main recommendations.

That momentum has contributed to a new sense of openness and opportunity across the organization. Our company goals speak volumes: Strategy for Growth, Speed and Agility, Unlocking the Power of Data, and One NYT. The newsroom, once resistant to change, is energized by these recent successes and eager to tackle difficult questions and try new things. And the business side, with a growing bench of talent and an increasingly shared mission of serving readers, is eager for the newsroom lead the way.

Our overarching goal is to help the masthead build on that momentum and take advantage of that openness.

For this report, we have pulled together information and insights to help you do that, based on hundreds of interviews, a deep dive into our operations, a close look at the competitive landscape and, with that rarest of journalistic privileges, the time to step

## The Times Reaches A Vast Print And Digital Audience....

<b>30M</b> Web readers in U.S. per month	<b>20M</b> Mobile readers in U.S. per month	<b>13.5M</b> News Alerts audience	<b>11.3M</b> Twitter followers
<b>6.5M</b> E-Mail Newsletters Subscribers	<b>5.7M</b> Facebook followers	<b>1.25M</b> Print Subscribers	<b>760K</b> Digital Subscribers

back and think.

Some of these recommendations will seem obvious; others may seem more controversial at first glance. All were developed with full commitment to the values of The Times and with the understanding that we have few extra resources lying around.

The few new roles we have proposed are not focused on creating new journalism; their goal is to get more out of the journalism we are already creating. We want to help tune the newsroom engine to get all the cylinders firing more efficiently.

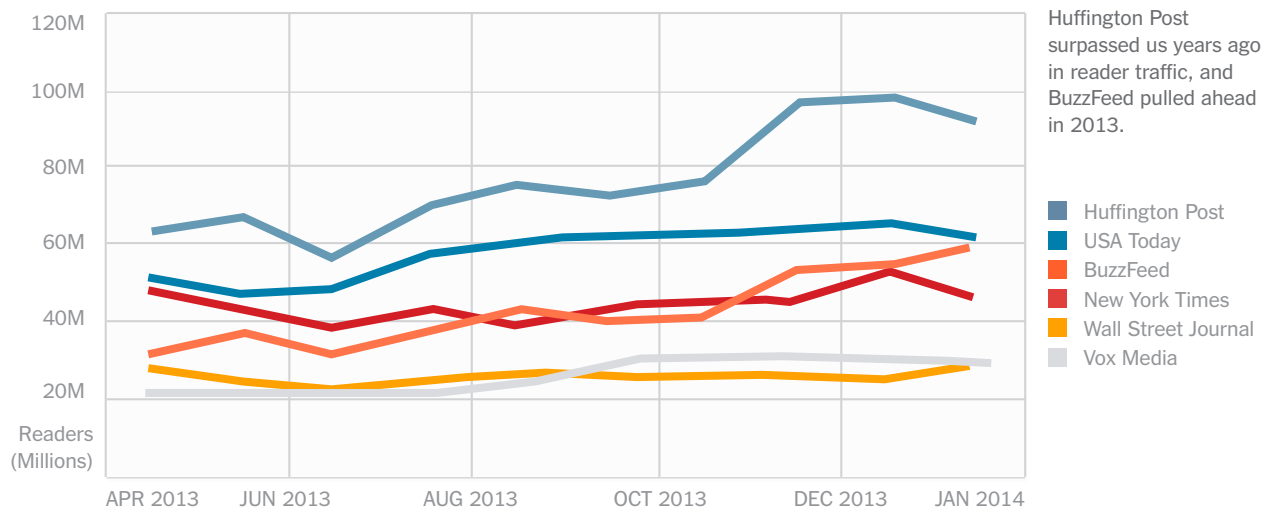
It should be stated explicitly that there is no single transformational idea in this report. Transformation can be a dangerous word in our current environment because it suggests a shift from one solid state to another; it implies there is an end point. Instead, we have watched the dizzying growth of smart phones and tablets, even as we are still figuring out the web. We have watched the massive migration of readers to social media even as we were redesigning our home page.

Difficult new questions will arrive with each new shift. In all likelihood, we will spend the rest of our careers wrestling with them. The leader of another organization called this era, “A period of muddling through.”

Not a single person among the hundreds we inter-

viewed ever suggested tinkering with the journalistic values and integrity that make the Times the greatest journalistic institution in the world. But we must evolve, and quickly, to maintain that status over the coming decades. ■

## ...But Many Competitors Are Growing Faster



# Our Proposals, In Brief

## CHAPTER 1: GROWING OUR AUDIENCE

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### **MAKE DEVELOPING OUR AUDIENCE A CORE AND URGENT PART OF OUR MISSION**

More than ever, the hard work of growing our audience falls squarely on the newsroom. The realities of a cluttered Internet and distracted mobile world require extra effort to get our journalism to readers. This work requires creativity, editorial judgment and offers us the chance to ensure that our journalism lands with even greater impact.

There should be a senior newsroom leader in charge of Audience Development, but this effort

should be everyone's job. We explore several areas that we believe can position us for continued growth: discovery (how we package and distribute our journalism), promotion (how we call attention to our journalism) and connection (how we create a two-way relationship with readers that deepens their loyalty). At both digital and traditional competitors, these functions are now considered part of the newsroom's responsibilities.

## CHAPTER 2: STRENGTHENING OUR NEWSROOM

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### **COLLABORATE WITH BUSINESS-SIDE UNITS FOCUSED ON READER EXPERIENCE**

This shift would provide the newsroom, virtually overnight, with many of the necessary skills and insights to take our digital report to the next level. There are a number of departments and units, most of which are considered part of the business side, that are explicitly focused on the reader experience, including Design, Technology, Consumer Insight Group, R&D and Product.

These functions represent a clear opportunity

for better integration. Recent initiatives, including NYT Now, have shown the benefits of collaboration across these departments. We are not proposing a wholesale reorganization. But we do believe simply issuing a new policy — collaborating with our colleagues focused on reader experience is encouraged and expected — would send a powerful signal and unlock a huge store of creative energy and insights.

### **CREATE A NEWSROOM STRATEGY TEAM**

Many newsroom leaders are so consumed with the demands of the daily report that they have little time to step back and think about long-term questions. When we were simply a newspaper, this singular focus made sense. But we must now juggle print, the web, apps, newsletters, news alerts, social media, video, an international edition and a range of stand-alone products.

Our suggestion is to create a small strategy team with the central role of advising the masthead. The

team would keep newsroom leaders apprised of competitors' strategies, changing technology and shifting reader behavior. It would help track projects around the company that affect our digital report, help the masthead set and evaluate priorities and conduct occasional deep dives to answer specific questions. And it would facilitate desk-level experiments and communicate the results back to the newsroom to ensure we're exploring new areas and learning from our efforts.

## MAP A STRATEGY TO MAKE THE NEWSROOM A TRULY DIGITAL-FIRST ORGANIZATION

Stories are typically filed late in the day. Our mobile apps are organized by print sections. Desks meticulously lay out their sections but spend little time thinking about social strategies. Traditional reporting skills are the top priority in hiring and promotion. The habits and traditions built over a century and a half of putting out the paper are a powerful, conservative force as we transition to digital — none more so than the gravitational pull of Page One.

Some of our traditional competitors have aggres-

sively reorganized around a digital-first rather than a print-first schedule. The health and profitability of our print paper means we don't yet need to follow them down this path. But it is essential to begin the work of questioning our print-centric traditions, conducting a comprehensive assessment of our digital needs, and imagining the newsroom of the future. This means reassessing everything from our roster of talent to our organizational structure to what we do and how we do it.





## Our Mission (And How It Evolved)

Six months ago, you asked A.G. Sulzberger to pull together some of the most forward-thinking minds from around the newsroom to develop smart, sound ways to lift our fortunes through our journalism. The eight-person team – with the help of two colleagues from the strategy group – included digital, design and business skills anchored to a rock-solid journalistic foundation.

We spent the first few months reporting. We went on a listening tour of the business side, we met with hundreds of employees from around the newsroom, we interviewed leaders at dozens of other news organizations and spent time with readers. We pored over internal analytics, studied competing web sites, and read more reports, presentations and articles about changes in digital media than we can count.

In effect, we did a deep-dive reporting project on our own paper and industry. By the end, we had a strong sense of both the opportunities and internal roadblocks that need to be addressed to thrive in a rapidly changing digital media landscape.

This report reflects a critical shift from the original mission. Though the initial assumption was that we would emerge with ideas for a stand-alone product – such as NYT Now – our reporting showed us that the more urgent need was to focus on the core of The New York Times.

Helping The Times adjust to this moment of promise and peril, we concluded, would have greater journalistic and financial impact than virtually any product idea we might have suggested. That insight was supported almost unanimously by the digital newsroom, our leadership and our business colleagues.

Focusing on the core is harder than starting something new because every proposal threatens tradition and turf. But the need is more urgent because of the accelerating pace of change and the over-stretched newsroom resources.

Since that pivot from the original mission, we

have focused our work around new challenges: Let's find ways to leverage The Times' journalism and talents in even smarter and more effective ways. Let's think through the most persistent and difficult questions that have nagged at The Times. Let's identify and share emerging opportunities and best practices. Let's identify the roadblocks and suggest ways to remove them.

This report represents our best attempt to provide answers. Our hope is that helping the masthead identify some of the most pressing problems and most promising opportunities will smooth the way for innovators inside the building.

Finally, we are well aware that this newsroom has invested a lot of talent and time in this group. The report is just one return on that investment. Another is that you have produced eight committed evangelists to help push the newsroom to embrace its digital future. We will do our part to spread the lessons and insights captured here across the organization.



## The Team



**Adam B. Ellick**  
Senior Video Journalist

Studied Disruptive Innovation, Design Thinking, and Social Television at the Harvard Business School/MIT Media Lab. Bahrain and Pakistan coverage won consecutive Overseas Press Club awards.



**Adam Bryant**  
Business Columnist

Interviewed more than 300 C.E.O.s for Corner Office, and wrote two books on leadership, management and culture. Edited Pulitzer-winning series on the dangers of distracted driving.



**A.G. Sulzberger**  
Metro Assistant Editor

Worked on Continuous News, Times Topics, and Video before joining the City Room blog. Opened the Kansas City bureau to expand coverage of the Midwest.



**Amy O'Leary**  
Technology Reporter

Worked as an editor, producer, reporter and manager in her seven years at The Times. Her work has been nominated for three Emmy awards, and won both a Loeb and Knight-Batten award.



**Andrew Phelps**  
Mobile Assistant Editor

Worked in radio, television and print, and covered media for a digital startup. Spearheaded the launch of Today's Paper, and led a project to enhance the breaking news experience on mobile devices.



**Elena Gianni**  
User Experience Designer

Design innovation consultant with a background in engineering and media studies. Worked on the NYT5 redesign, conducting research and prototyping interactions.



**Louise Story**  
Investigations Reporter

Yale M.B.A. Former media reporter. Covered Wall Street during the financial crisis, anchored Times video show, and business correspondent on "The Takeaway"



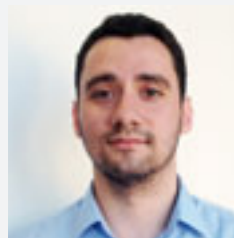
**Charles Duhigg**  
Business Reporter

Harvard M.B.A., former founder and C.E.O. of SWPA Education Management. Part of the team that wrote the Pulitzer-winning "The iEconomy" series.



**Jon Galinsky**  
Strategy Manager

Managing Editor of Williams College newspaper. Interned at a newspaper in Ethiopia. Led the strategy team's planning for selling our digital subscriptions in 2014.



**Ben Peskoe**  
Strategy Manager

Wrote presentation to NYT Board of Directors that recommended building NYT Now, Opinion and Cooking products.

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## Advisers



**Larry Ingrassia**  
Deputy Managing Editor



**Ian Fisher**  
Assistant Managing Editor

## We Interviewed:

**The New York Times:** AJ Chavar, Al Ming, Alex Hardiman, Alex MacCallum, Alex Minkow, Alexis Lloyd, Allen Tan, Amanda Cox, Amy Harmon, Andrew Keh, Andrew Kueneman, Andrew Rosenthal, Andrew Ross Sorkin, Andy Wright, Anh Dang, Ann Derry, Annie Lowrey, Ariane Bernard, Aron Pilhofer, Arthur Sulzberger, Ashley Southall, Ashwin Seshagiri, Barbara De Wilde, Ben French, Ben Koski, Ben Monnie, Bill Brink, Bill Carter, Bill Schmidt, Blake Wilson, Boris Chen, Brad Kagawa, Brian Hamman, Brian Murphy, Bruce Headlam, C.J. Chivers, Carl Hulse, Carolyn Ryan, Catrin Einhorn, Chad Ghastin, Cheryl Yau, Chris Wiggins, Christine Haughney, Christine Hung, Christine Kay, Chrys Wu, Cliff Levy, Coral Davenport, Craig Hunter, Cynthia Collins, Damien Cave, Damon Darlin, Dan Watkin, Dana Canedy, Danielle Mattoon, Danielle Rhodes Ha, David Carr, David Gelles, David Leonhardt, David Perpich, David Scull, Dean Baquet, Dean Chang, Dean Murphy, Deborah Acosta, Deborah Needleman, Deborah Sontag, Denise Warren, Desiree Shoe, Eileen Murphy, Elizabeth Rosenthal, Elliot Malkin, Emily Rueb, Eric Lipton, Erik Hinton, Erik Piepenburg, Ethan Bronner, Evan Sandhaus, Gabe Johnson, Geoff Isenman, Gerry Marzorati, Gina Kolata, Ginger Thompson, Glenn Kramon, Hamilton Boardman, Hannah Fairfield, Heather Murphy, Hugh Mandeville, Hugo Lindgren, Ian Adelman, Ian Fisher, Jacky Myint, James Estrin, James Robinson, Jamie Abir, Jan Hoffman, Janet Elder, Jason Spingarn-Koff, Jason Stallman, Jeff Marcus, Jenna Wortham, Jennifer Parrucci, Jennifer Steinhauer, Jeremy Peters, Jill Abramson, Jim Boehmer, Jim Dao, Jim Dryfoos, Jim Glanz, Jim Rutenberg, Joan Huang, Jodi Kantor, Joe Kahn, John Geddes, John Geraci, John Niedermeyer, John Schwartz, Jon Huang, Jon Kelly, Jonathan Ellis, Jonathan Martin, Jonathan Weisman, Joseph Burgess, Josh Haner, Josh Williams, Julie Bloom, Julie Bosman, Justin Stile, Kim Severson, KJ Dell’Antonia, Kristi Reilly, Laura Chang, Laura Holson, Lauren Kern, Lawrence Ingrassia, Leslie Kaufman, Lexi Mainland, Libby Gery, Libby Rosenthal, Marc Frons, Marc Lavalley, Margaret Sullivan, Mark Bittman, Mark Mazetti, Mark Silver, Mark Thompson, Martin Nisenholtz, Mary Suh, Matt Apuzzo, Matt Boggie, Matt Erikson, Matt Purdy, Matthew Boggie, Meaghan Loomer, Meghan Louttit, Meredith Levien, Michael Corkery, Michael Dewar, Michael Golden, Michael Greenspon, Michael Luo, Michael Schmidt, Michael Shear, Michael Slackman, Michele McNally, Mike McIntire, Mike Zimablist, Monica Davey, Monica Drake, Nancy Donaldson, Nathan Ashby-Kuhlman, Nick Bilton, Nick Kristof, Nicole Breskin, Noam Cohen, Pamela Paul, Patrick La-Forge, Paul Smurl, Paul Werdel, Paul Yorke, Peter Baker, Peter Lattman, Peter Renz, Rachel Golden, Rajiv Pant, Rajiv Pant, Rebecca Corbett, Rebecca Howard, Rebecca Ruiz, Renda Morton, Rich Meislin, Rob Mackey, Roland Caputo, Sam Dolnick, Sam Manchester, Sam Sifton, Samantha Henig, Santiago Alfonso-Lord, Sarah Cohen, Sewell Chan, Shane Murray, Shayla Harris, Sheryle Stolberg, Shreeya Sinha, Stephanie Saul, Steve Duenes, Steven Rocker, Susan Chira, Susan Edgerly, Susan Wessling, Tahir Khan, Tara Parker Pope, Tom Bodkin, Tom Carley, Tom Jolly, Tony Brancato, Tony Scott, Torben Brooks, Tyson Evans, Victoria Shannon, Walt Bogdanich, Wendell Jamieson, Will Bardeen, William Goss, Willie Rashbaum, Yasmin Namini, Zander Baron, Zena Bakarar. **External:** Brian Mcandrews, Adam Davidson, Adam Moss, Adam Orme, Al Anstey, Alex Howard, Alexis Madrigal, Ali Gharib, Ali Velshi, Amanda Michel, Amanda Zamora, Anders Fink, Andrea Shiah, Andrew Fitzgerald, Andrew Ginsburg, Andrew Jaspan, Ann Mack, Anna Bryant, Annie Wamke, Anthea Watson-Strong, Ben Leher, Bob Pittman, Braxton Mckee, Brianna Cotter, Chris Anderson, Chris Cunningham, Chris Mckee, Christina Cacioppo, Dan Collaruso, Danielle Gould, Dave Kliman, Dave Morgan, David Callaway, David Gehring, David Kenny, Dayna Grayson, Don Graham, Doreen Lorenzo, Eddie Kim, Eilidh Dickson, Elisabeth Job, Ellen Rubeefalls, Ellena Lee, Emily Brill, Enrique Acevdeo, Esther Dyson, Ethan Zuckerman, Fabio, Farhan Zafar, Gabe Dance, Gary Portuesi, Gideon Lichfield, Henry Abbott, Henry Blodget, Herb Kim, Jacek Barcikowski, Jacob Weisberg, Jake Levine, James Bennett, Jane Fritsch, Janet Camp, Jed Alpert, Jeremy Tarling, Jesse Shapsins, Jigar Mehta, John Lee, Josh Cohen, Josh Miller, Josh Quittner, Joshua Noble, Judy Winitzer, Julia Thompkins, Justin Smith, Kate Lee, Ken Lerer, Ken Loveless, Kevin Delaney, Laura Evans, Libby Brittain, Lina Srivastava, Ludwig Siegele, Magid Abraham, Mahira Chishty, Marcus Mckee, Mark Allen, Matt Mullin, Matt Singer, Mayo Nissen, Megan White, Meghan Peters, Michael Lebowitz, Michael Wertheim, Miriam Elder, Nick Beim, Norman Pollack, Paul Berry, Peter Goodman, Philippe Browning, Prascilla, Randi Zuckerberg, Ray Day, Richard Ii Hornos, Richard Luettgen, Rick Berke, Rishad Tobaccowala, Rob Grimshaw, Robert Krulwich, Robin Pembroke, Robin Sloan, Ryan Jacoby, Siena Giraldi, Soraya Dorabi, Sravanthi Agrawal, Steve Brill, Stine Hoeck Forsberg, Susan Taing, Tim Carmody, Tom Conrad, Tony Haile, Vadim Lauruskik, Valerie Streit, Vanessa Arantes Nuzzo, Vivian Schiller, Wesley Morris, Zach Seward, Zach Wise.



## A User's Guide to This Report

In the pages that follow, you will find a brief discussion of our competitors and the disruptive forces that have taken hold of our industry.

The rest of the report is in two chapters — Growing Our Audience and Strengthening Our Newsroom — that flesh out the themes in this executive summary, with more detail, context and specific recommendations, based on our reporting inside and outside the building. We offer long-term goals and some possible short-term steps to get there.

In nearly every case, the questions we explore are more important than the solutions we offer. And there can be legitimate debate around the best solutions to many of them.

We have done our best not to overwhelm readers with our reporting. We've attached appendices that list all the people we've interviewed. The quotes

we've used are each representative of a dozen or more conversations; they're not outliers. Many are anonymous — not ideal, but essential to encouraging frank conversation.

As much as possible we've distilled information into charts and graphs. We have also included sidebars to explore topics and share key insights from our reporting.



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# Disruption: A Quick Overview Of The Competitive Landscape

Vox Media's Chicago office. Vox surpassed The Wall Street Journal in total digital readership in 2013.



## **News in the News:** **A Busy Six Months**

As a reminder of just how rapidly new players are disrupting our business, consider what has happened in the six months since our group's work began. Not long ago, it would have been hard to imagine The Washington Post controlled by anyone but the Graham family. Now we are waiting to see what Jeff Bezos does to remake this storied institution. "Even if the Post lost \$100 million a year," wrote Farhad Manjoo, "Bezos' personal fortune could fund it for 252 years."

Soon after Bezos bought the Post for \$250 million, Pierre Omidyar, the eBay co-founder, pledged \$250 million to create First Look Media, a hybrid operation with a nonprofit newsroom and for-profit technology company. It hired well-known journalists like Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras to launch several digital magazines with top-notch data analysts, visual designers and technologists. "Our goal is to experiment, innovate and overcome existing obstacles — to make it easier for journalists to deliver the transformative stories we all need," Omidyar said in his announcement.

Other digital media companies poured more money into the news business, luring talent from established players. Vox Media — which raised another \$40 million in October — wooed Ezra Klein from The Post. Yahoo hired David Pogue to create a consumer tech vertical and signed up Katie Couric to become a "global anchor." Kara Swisher and Walt Mossberg left the Journal to launch Re/code.

BuzzFeed and Upworthy continued their relentless growth while making new investments in quality journalism. And Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn waded deeper into the journalism business by hiring editors and announcing new products, like Facebook's Paper, aimed at news consumers.

Traditional media outlets were just as active. The Washington Post started the Upworthy-inspired

Know More, which took just three weeks to become the company's biggest blog. In March, the company opened an outpost in Manhattan, called WPNYC, to attract top digital talent. "The thing about the site is that it's a very classic legacy media site — a representation of the print medium in digital," said The Post's Greg Franczyk. "We're shifting the paradigm to designing a website that works for our users and building the technology that meets the need."

Digital-first is the new mantra from the old guard. The Financial Times and USA Today have made the switch, and The Journal has pledged to join those ranks, staffing a new "real-time news desk" with 60 people and an "audience-engagement desk" with social-media editors and analytics specialists.

One of the largest chains of local newspapers in the United States, which tellingly renamed itself Digital First Media, announced Project Unbolt, explaining that its goal is "to take a massive wrench to the culture and workflow of our newsrooms and unbolt them," since "newsrooms are still largely print newsrooms with digital operations bolted on."

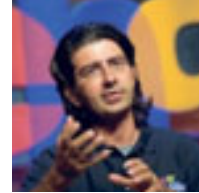
And The San Francisco Chronicle launched "an off-site startup-style incubator." As Audrey Cooper, the managing editor, explained, "We hope to eventually get to the point where instead of being a newspaper company that produces websites, we think of ourselves as a digital company that also produces a newspaper. Unless you flip that switch, I don't think any newspaper will be truly successful at negotiating the digital switchover."

The Times has hardly been idle, of course. Over the last six months, the company unveiled a major redesign of NYTimes.com, the first in seven years. We launched The International New York Times. We pushed into the new world of native advertising (as did Hearst, The Post, BBC, The Guardian and The Wall Street Journal). And we completed the sale of The Boston Globe to John Henry, ushering in an era in which The New York Times is the Times Company's only business.

### **A relentless run of headlines from new and old media companies.**

## OCTOBER

- [Washington Post closes sale to Jeff Bezos for \\$250 million.](#)
- [Pierre Omidyar pledges \\$250 million to a new digital-first venture, First Look Media.](#)
- Times Co. closes sale of The Boston Globe to John Henry for \$70 million.
- Vox Media raises \$40 million in venture capital.
- The Post launches Upworthy-inspired Know More, which takes only three weeks to become the company's biggest blog.



## NOVEMBER

- Yahoo hires a series of high-profile journalists, including David Pogue and Katie Couric.
- Digital First Media rolls out metered paywalls for all 75 of its Media News and Journal Register sites.

## DECEMBER

- The Journal launches an “audience engagement team,” combining social-media and analytics experts.
- An interactive news app — not an article — becomes The Times's most popular story of all time.
- BuzzFeed expands its foreign and investigative reporting staff.

## JANUARY

- Kara Swisher and Walt Mossberg leave the Journal to launch Re/code.
- [Ezra Klein leaves The Post to join Vox Media.](#)
- Marty Baron announces major new digital initiatives at The Post, including a breaking-news desk.
- The Wall Street Journal creates a digital-first “real-time news desk.”
- Digital First Media announces Project Unbolt.
- Facebook introduces Paper, a Flipboard-like mobile news-reading app.
- San Francisco Chronicle launches “an off-site startup-style incubator.”
- [Business Insider surpasses The Journal in combined digital audience.](#)
- The Huffington Post announced a global partnership with a think tank at Davos.



## FEBRUARY

- Upworthy announces “attention minutes” as its new algorithm for measuring reader engagement.
- ProPublica begins selling data gathered from its reporting projects in the ProPublica Data Store.

## MARCH

- The Post launches WPNYC, a Manhattan outpost for design and development.
- Vice News launched with a staff of roughly 100 journalists.
- [The new FiveThirtyEight is unveiled.](#)
- NYT Now, Cooking and The Upshot are prepared for launch.





# What Is Disruption?

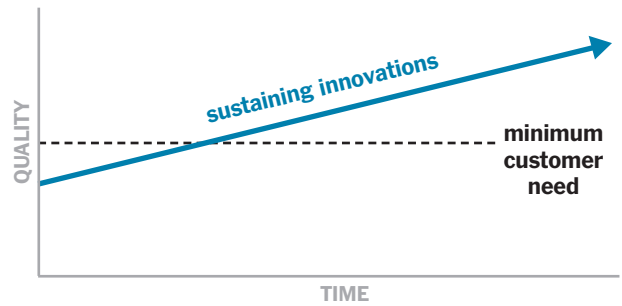
Disruption is a predictable pattern across many industries in which fledgling companies use new technology to offer cheaper and inferior alternatives to products sold by established players (think Toyota taking on Detroit decades ago). Today, a pack of news startups are hoping to “disrupt” our industry

by attacking the strongest incumbent — The New York Times. How does disruption work? Should we be defending our position, or disrupting ourselves? And can’t we just dismiss the BuzzFeeds of the world, with their listicles and cat videos?

Here’s a quick primer on the disruption cycle:

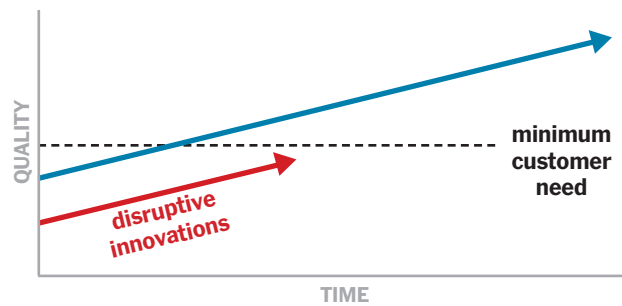
**1. Incumbents** treat innovation as a series of incremental improvements. They focus on improving the quality of their premium products to sustain their current business model.

For [The Times](#), a sustaining innovation might be “[Snowfall](#).”



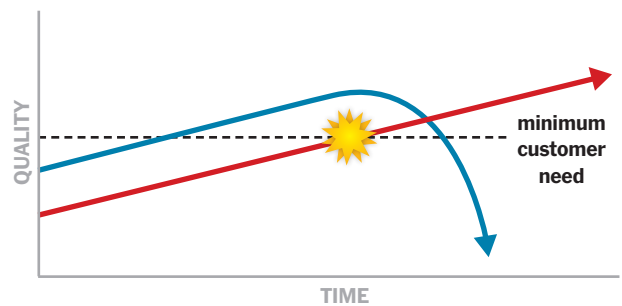
**2. Disruptors** introduce new products that, at first, do not seem like a threat. Their products are cheaper, with poor quality — to begin with.

For [BuzzFeed](#), a disruptive innovation might be [social media distribution](#).



**3.** Over time, **disruptors** improve their product, usually by adapting a new technology. The **flash-point** comes when their products become “good enough” for most customers.

They are now poised to grow by taking market share from **incumbents**.



## HALLMARKS OF DISRUPTIVE INNOVATORS

- Introduced by an “outsider”
- Less expensive than existing products
- Targeting underserved or new markets
- Initially inferior to existing products
- Advanced by an enabling technology



## A CASE STUDY IN DISRUPTION: KODAK

Kodak and its film-based cameras were the classic incumbents: a traditional, respected company offering a high-quality product to a mass market.

Then came digital cameras. Film companies laughed at the poor shutter speed and fuzzy images of early digital cameras.

The photos weren't great, but digital cameras better addressed the user's primary need: to capture and share moments. It was easier and cheaper to take a digital picture, download it onto your computer and email it to many people than it was to buy film, print dozens of high quality photos at a shop

and mail copies to friends.

When the inferior and cheaper digital product became "good enough" for customers, it disrupted the incumbent.

Digital cameras seemed poised to own the market. Then came flip-phone cameras. They offered even lower quality photos. And digital camera companies mocked their grainy images. But again, users opted for a lesser product that was more convenient. They'd rather have a "good enough" camera in their phone than lug a better but bulky digital camera. When the flip-phone camera became "good enough," it disrupted the incumbent.

The first digital cameras were mocked for poor shutter speed and fuzzy images.



Now, "Kodak memories" are a distant memory. What did you take your last picture with?



“Culturally, I think we have operated as if we had the formula figured out, and it was all about optimizing, in its various constituent parts, the formula. Now it is about discovering the new formula.” — *Satya Nadella, Microsoft’s new CEO*

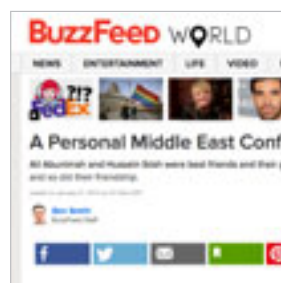


“The world of business really separates into two groups. Entrepreneurs who are disrupting the status quo are attackers. Large organizations are defenders.” — *Steve Case, CEO of Revolution, and a founder of AOL*

# A Competitor Cheat Sheet

## **BUZZFEED**

Founded by Jonah Peretti in 2006, BuzzFeed built a huge audience by using data to help stories go viral. The company is known for rapidly experimenting with story formats and is now hiring journalists to move into traditional news coverage.



### **KNOWN FOR**

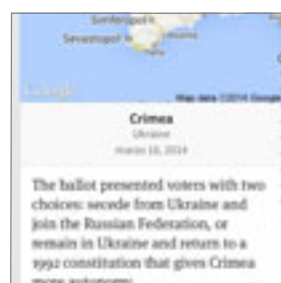
Aggressive social distribution  
Highly shareable content  
Experimental story forms

### **KEY STATS**

130M unique visitors  
\$40M in 2013 revenue

## **CIRCA**

Circa is a mobile news app that aggregates reporting from a variety of sources and repackages each story into running story threads for smartphones. The app allows users to follow ongoing stories and subscribe to alerts for updates.



### **KNOWN FOR**

Bullet-point summaries  
Mobile push alerts  
Allowing users to follow stories

### **KEY STATS**

\$3.4M in funding

## **ESPN**

ESPN is expanding its digital offerings, with video and audio (live and on-demand), sports-related tools (fantasy football, score alerts) and sub-brands based on star journalists (Grantland with Bill Simmons, FiveThirtyEight with Nate Silver).



### **KNOWN FOR**

Mobile push alerts  
User tools/service journalism  
“Pulling back the curtain” on big stories

### **KEY STATS**

56M unique visitors

## **FIRST LOOK MEDIA**

First Look Media is a new digital journalism venture backed with \$250 million from eBay co-founder Pierre Omidyar. It has recruited brand-name journalists like Glenn Greenwald, Laura Poitras and Matt Taibbi to aggressively cover hard news.



### **KNOWN FOR**

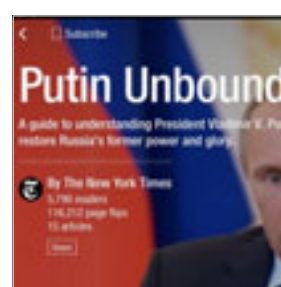
Brand-name journalists  
Developers on every desk  
Single-topic digital magazines

### **KEY STATS**

\$250M in funding guarantees;  
\$50M already invested  
About 20 veteran journalists

## **FLIPBOARD**

Flipboard is a highly visual news aggregator designed for phones and tablets. Content is aggregated from a variety of publishers and grouped into themed collections. Readers can follow collections, topics or publications.



### **KNOWN FOR**

Beautiful user interface  
Built on users' social networks

### **KEY STATS**

90M users  
Raised \$50M round; valued at \$800M  
Third-largest driver of mobile traffic to NYT

## THE GUARDIAN

The Guardian is expanding its digital-only U.S. newsroom, which now has approximately 60 journalists. It led early coverage of the Snowden leaks, largely through the work of columnist Glenn Greenwald.



### KNOWN FOR

Promotion and outreach  
“Comment Is Free” platform  
Data visualizations

### KEY STATS

Avg. 2013 non-U.S. audience:  
27M (vs. 17M for NYT)  
Avg. 2013 U.S. audience:  
12M (vs. 33M for NYT)

## THE HUFFINGTON POST

The Huffington Post, sold to AOL in 2011 for \$315 million, surged in popularity during the 2008 presidential campaign. In addition to original reporting, the site publishes the work of outside contributors and aggregates content from The Times and other sources.



### KNOWN FOR

Open commenting platform  
Aggressive use of SEO and social media

### KEY STATS

Avg. 2013 U.S. audience:  
32M, reaching high of 40M in November (vs. 33M for NYT)

## LINKEDIN

LinkedIn is a social network for professionals. It entered publishing in earnest through its acquisition of Pulse in 2013 and is building out its “Influencer” network of contributors who post original content.



### KNOWN FOR

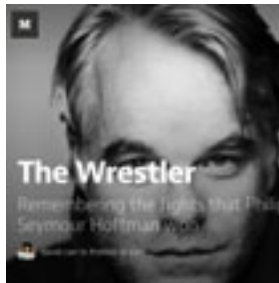
“Influencer” publishing platform  
Allowing users to follow topics

### KEY STATS

65M unique U.S. visitors,  
180M globally  
\$1.5B in total revenue,  
\$360M in advertising

## MEDIUM

Founded by former Twitter CEO Evan Williams, Medium is an open publishing platform that allows anyone to write and distribute content. Medium’s editorial team curates the best content into “collections.” Readers can follow collections and individual writers.



### KNOWN FOR

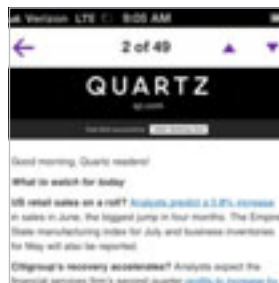
Simple publishing platform  
Smart writers and editors  
Rich visual design

### KEY STATS

Average 250K monthly users

## QUARTZ

Quartz is a business-news site owned by Atlantic Media and edited by Kevin Delaney, a former managing editor at The Wall Street Journal. It operates a mobile-optimized website, rather than native apps, and drives audience growth through daily email newsletters.



### KNOWN FOR

Chartbuilder tool for journalists  
Responsive design  
“Obsessions” in lieu of traditional beats or sections

### KEY STATS

5M unique visitors  
50K daily email subscribers

## VOX

Vox Media operates a collection of vertical publications, including SB Nation (sports), The Verge (tech), Curbed (real estate), Polygon (gaming), Racked (fashion) and Eater (food). The company recently hired Ezra Klein to create Vox, a general-interest news site.



### KNOWN FOR

Live blogging  
Visual story treatments  
Highly engaged community

### KEY STATS

Raised \$40M round in 2013  
\$200M valuation  
SB Nation has 40M unique visitors

## YAHOO NEWS

Yahoo is expanding its journalistic capacity by making big hires. It released a smartphone app called Yahoo News Digest that updates twice daily with the top eight news stories from around the web.



### KNOWN FOR

High-profile journalism hires  
Huge traffic to news content  
Newly released Digest app

### KEY STATS

65M unique U.S. visitors,  
180M globally  
\$1.5B in total revenue,  
\$360M in advertising

Chapter 1

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# Growing Our Audience



# Introduction

Long ago, we decided to go to extraordinary lengths to get our journalism into the hands of as many readers as possible.

Each night, we printed our best work. Then we loaded it onto trucks to drive it to cities and towns. Then we enlisted kids to bike from house to house to deliver our papers to readers' doorsteps. For non-subscribers, we dropped off bundles of papers at corner stores and newspaper racks, and painstakingly tracked sales to see where more copies were needed.

We take this work for granted now, but our home delivery and single-sales efforts represented one of the most sophisticated consumer-outreach operations in history. But when the time came to put our journalism on the web, we adopted a much more passive approach. We published stories on our home page and assumed that most people would come to us.

The realities of a cluttered Internet and distracted mobile world now require us to make even more of an effort to get our journalism to readers. Perhaps because the path forward is not clear and requires very different skills, we are putting less effort into reaching readers' digital doorsteps than we ever did in reaching their physical doorsteps.

This effort to reach more readers — known as Audience Development — is where our competitors are pushing ahead of us.

Audience Development is the work of expanding our loyal and engaged audience. It is about getting more people to read more of our journalism. The work can be broken down into steps like discovery (how we package and distribute our journalism), promotion (how we call attention to our journalism) and connection (how we create a two-way relationship with readers that deepens their loyalty).

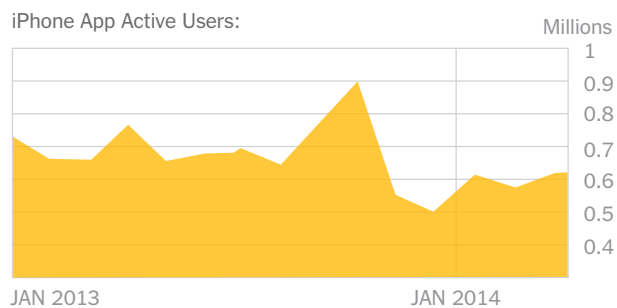
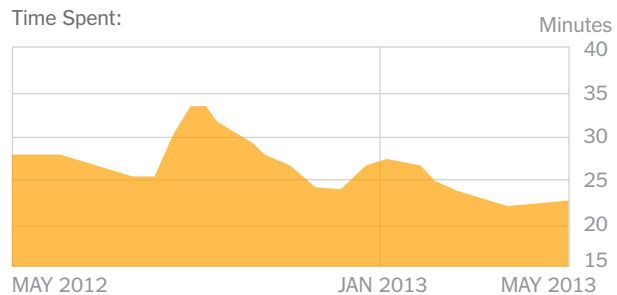
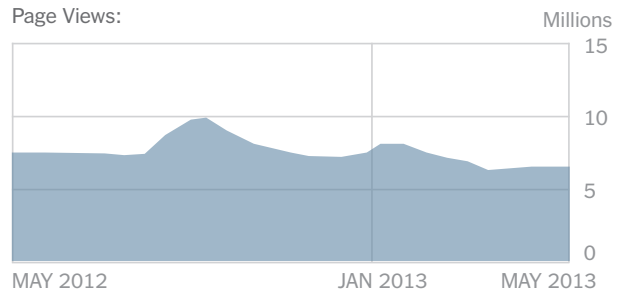
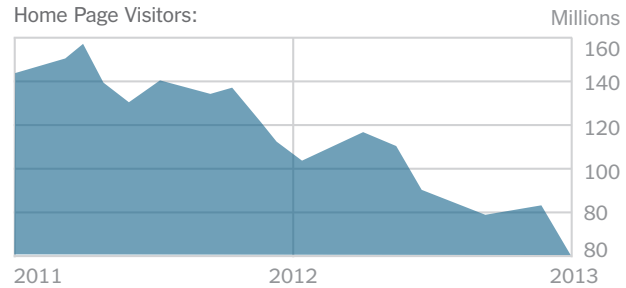
Audience Development needs to be a goal for the whole company. But the newsroom, in particular, must seize a leadership position.

At our new and traditional competitors, Audience Development is seen not just as the responsibility

of the newsroom but as the responsibility of every editor and reporter. They adopt this approach because the work happens story by story and platform by platform, requiring creativity and editorial judgment. These efforts can be compared to using an engaging lede, compelling headline, or gripping photo

## TOUGH TRENDS

Some key measures of traffic and engagement point to an inescapable truth: The Times needs to work harder to reach and hold onto readers.





to draw readers into a story.

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

The need is urgent. Our home page has been our main tool for getting our journalism to readers, but its impact is waning. Only a third of our readers ever visit it. And those who do visit are spending less time: page views and minutes spent per reader dropped by double-digit percentages last year.

Readers are finding and engaging with our journalism in vastly different ways. More readers expect us to find them on Twitter and Facebook, and through email and phone alerts. But the newsroom pays less attention to these platforms, even though they offer our main, and sometimes only, channels

to tens of millions of readers. Here, too, we are lagging our competitors.

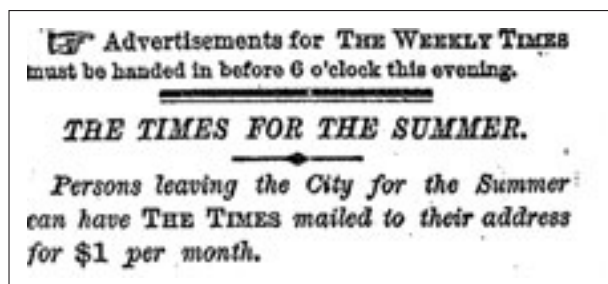
Because we are journalists, we tend to look at our competitors through the lens of content rather than strategy. But BuzzFeed, Huffington Post and USA Today are not succeeding simply because of lists, quizzes, celebrity photos and sports coverage. They are succeeding because of their sophisticated social, search and community-building tools and strategies, and often in spite of their content.

“At The New York Times, far too often for writers and editors the story is done when you hit publish,” said Paul Berry, who helped found The Huffington Post. “At Huffington Post, the article begins its life when you hit publish.”

The Guardian is just one example of a traditional competitor that has adopted digital best practices in Audience Development to drive rapid growth, allowing it to close in on our position as the world’s best-read quality newspaper. USA Today has put such practices at the heart of its reorganization. And The Wall Street Journal recently created a new “audience-engagement team,” bringing social editors and

### REACHING READERS

The Times has worked hard since its earliest days to turn occasional readers into loyal subscribers.

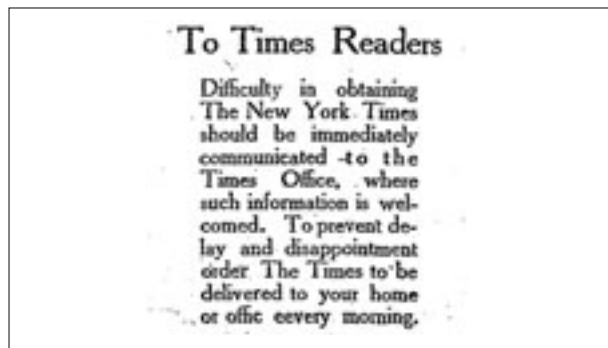


**Advertisements for THE WEEKLY TIMES**  
must be handed in before 6 o'clock this evening.

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**THE TIMES FOR THE SUMMER.**

Persons leaving the City for the Summer  
can have THE TIMES mailed to their address  
for \$1 per month.



**To Times Readers**

Difficulty in obtaining  
The New York Times  
should be immediately  
communicated to the  
Times Office, where  
such information is wel-  
comed. To prevent de-  
lay and disappointment  
order The Times to be  
delivered to your home  
or office every morning.



**BIG HELP**

having The New York Times delivered  
to your home in time for breakfast every morning ...  
so you can enjoy all day being informed  
the way only The New York Times keeps you  
well informed. If you live in New York City or  
suburbs ... we'll be glad to arrange home delivery  
for you. Just drop a postcard to our Circulation  
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**The New York Times**

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The New York Times, New York 18.

data scientists together in the newsroom.

“I tell most reporters, ‘Three percent of the people who want to see your work are seeing it,’” said a top editor at The Washington Post. “So if we can get that to even 4.5 percent, it’s worth the effort, it’s worth the struggle.”

But at The Times, discovery, promotion and engagement have been pushed to the margins, typically left to our business-side colleagues or handed to small teams in the newsroom. The business side still has a major role to play, but the newsroom needs to claim its seat at the table because packaging, promoting and sharing our journalism requires editorial oversight.

This effort needs to be unified under a single leader. We recommend hiring a head of Audience Development who works in the newsroom and collaborates with a counterpart on the business side.

Indeed, in recent months, the most qualified candidate for such a position on the business side, Michael Wertheim, the former head of promotion for Upworthy, turned down the job. He explained that for anyone in that role to succeed, the newsroom

needed to be fully committed to working with the business side to grow our audience.

Audience Development is not a task we should view as a chore – the opportunities are truly exciting. Imagine coming back from an unplugged vacation and having the best pieces you missed waiting for you. Or strolling through Rome and having an article on the best museums pop up on your phone. Or watching a year-old story go viral on social. Or having Science Times become a lively platform for expert debate.

There is no single solution like home delivery that will solve the challenges of digital distribution. But our competitors have been experimenting aggressively, and some best practices have emerged that we will share in the following pages. We should track them closely, and adopt those that meet our standards. And we should unleash the creativity of our staff by experimenting quickly and constantly to discover next-generation solutions.

“If The New York Times could get this right – could reach the right audiences for all its content – it would change the world,” said Wertheim.

## What Are We Trying to Do?

### OUR GOAL

There are many good ideas for innovation in the newsroom, but we focused on those that will help us find more readers for more of our journalism.



### THE CURRENT NEWSROOM APPROACH

The main newsroom strategy for attracting more readers is to produce excellent journalism.



### OUR FOCUS

In this report, we explored additional ideas to attract new readers and deepen our connection with loyal subscribers.



# Our Proposals, In Brief

We recognize that “audience development” can easily be dismissed as one of those “sounds-good-in-theory” notions. So we’ve packed a lot into the following pages to show how it works in practice. We’ll provide the context for why these strategies deserve our attention, explain our current approach, assess the competitive landscape and address concerns. We’ll also offer a few key recommendations and a proposed experiment for each area. However, the details of any specific suggestion matter less than the underlying questions. Our goal is to start a discussion.

Our readers’ habits are changing faster than ever. How can we make sure our news is reaching them in the digital age?



## 1. DISCOVERY

Improving technology provides us with more and better tools to ensure that we get our work in front of the right readers at the right place and at the right time. But we still ask too much of readers — they must navigate a website and apps that are modeled on our print structure. We need to think more about resurfacing evergreen content, organizing and packaging our work in more useful ways and pushing relevant content to readers. And to power these efforts, we should invest more in the unglamorous but essential work of tagging and structuring data.

## 2. PROMOTION

We need to be better advocates of our own work. This means creating newsroom structures to make sure our most important work has maximum readership and impact. And it means identifying and sharing best practices at the ground level, and encouraging reporters and editors to promote their stories. In addition, we must take the process of optimization, for search and social, more seriously and ensure we are updating our tools and workflow along with our changing needs.

## 3. CONNECTION

Our readers are perhaps our greatest untapped resource. Deepening our connection with them both online and offline is critical in a world where content so often reaches its broadest audience on the backs of other readers. And many readers have come to expect a two-way relationship with us, so they can engage with our journalism and our journalists. This means the newsroom as a whole must take the reins in pursuing user-generated content, events and other forms of engagement in a way that reflects our standards and values.

# 1 Discovery

The Times produces more than 300 URLs every day. Because of this bounty, readers easily miss stories and features. This has long been true for readers who come to our home page, because of limited real estate and constantly shifting presentation. This is also true on our mobile apps, where a tiny screen makes it even harder to sift through our offerings. The readers who don't come to us at all — and instead expect us to reach them through social media and our alerts — have even less of an appreciation of the richness of our work.

A more reader-centric approach to packaging and surfacing our journalism offers us a huge opportunity to extend our reach. Exploiting better web and mobile tools will also help us get each story to every reader who might want to see it.

We need to make better use of these tools and tactics because the current structures for organizing our digital journalism, many of which are based on the traditions and limitations of print, are losing potency. Traffic to the home page has been declining, month after month, for years. Traffic to section fronts is negligible. Traffic on our mobile apps, which are mostly downstream replicas of our home page and section fronts, has declined as well.

One great example of the power of a new tool for

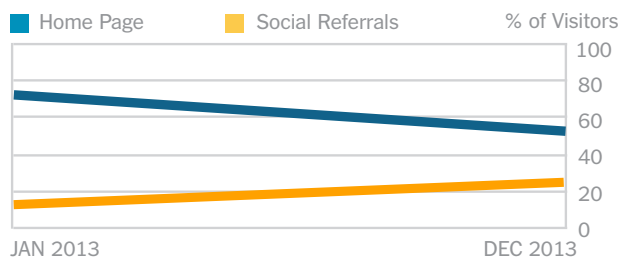
connecting with readers is our news alert system, which now reaches as many as 13.5 million people, about a dozen times our print subscriber base.

Here are four opportunities for getting more readers for the work we're already producing, with a proposed experiment for each idea to make it more concrete.

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## SOCIAL POWER

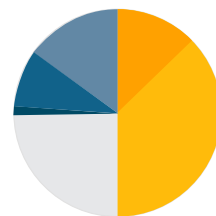
It's not just The Times. The entire digital media industry is seeing a big shift in behavior. Reader visits to home pages are declining while traffic from social media is rising. (Source: BuzzFeed)



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Total Internet traffic by type of site.

Portals  
Search  
News Sites (1.5%)  
Social  
Facebook  
Other



# Opportunity: Evergreen

On Oscar night, The Times tweeted a 161-year-old story about Solomon Northrup, whose memoir was the basis for “12 Years a Slave.” After it started going viral on social media, Gawker pounced, and quickly fashioned a story based on excerpts from our piece. It ended up being one of their best-read items of the year. But little of that traffic came to us.

In a digital world, our rich archive offers one of our clearest advantages over new competitors. As of the printing of this report, we have 14,723,933 articles, dating back to 1851, that can be resurfaced in useful or timely ways. But we rarely think to mine our archive, largely because we are so focused on news and new features.

“You have a huge advantage,” said Henry Blodget, the founder of Business Insider. “You have a tremendous amount of high-quality content that you have a perpetual license to.”

The Cooking team is providing a fresh reminder of our treasure trove of evergreen content. For decades, we published and promoted a handful of new

recipes each week. The new Cooking product better reflects the fact that recipes are timeless and best organized in other ways: by meal, ingredients, season and our critics’ favorites.

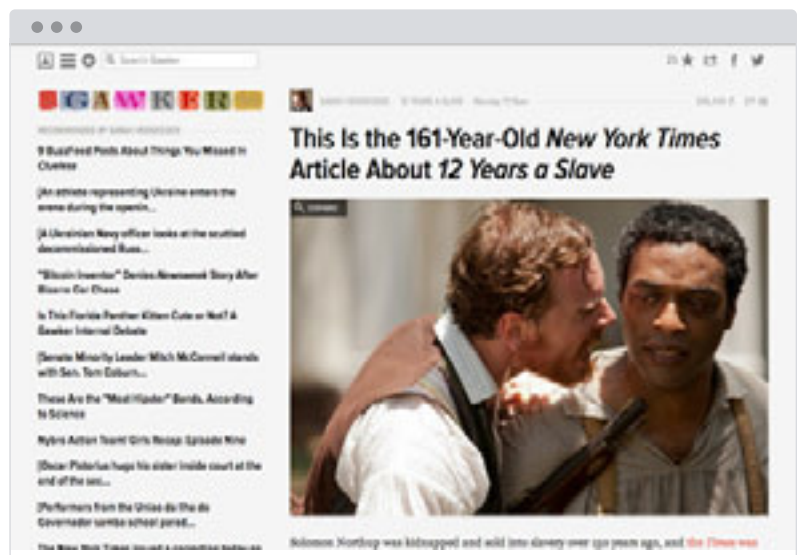
The opportunities are not limited to service journalism. We can be both a daily newsletter and a library — offering news every day, as well as providing context, relevance and timeless works of journalism.

In breaking news and long-running stories, readers can struggle to quickly get up to speed or to understand why something matters. Many of our competitors are tackling this challenge, just as we did with Times Topics.

“Journalists are better than ever at telling people what’s happening, but not nearly good enough at giving them the crucial contextual information necessary to understand what’s happened,” said Ezra Klein, in announcing his new venture at Vox Media. “We treat the emphasis on the newness of information as an important virtue rather than a painful compromise.”

## GAWKERED

When this 161-year-old Times story started going viral on Oscar night, Gawker did what Gawker does —it repackaged our content and won huge traffic gains.



## Experiment: Culture Guides

Our committee ran a study of article readership during the last six months of 2013. Arts and culture stories were among those that were consistently read long after their publication dates, even though they can be difficult to find once they are more than a few days old.

A new approach would be to take cultural and lifestyle content — about books, museums, food, theater — and organize it more by relevance than by publication date.

Erik Piepenburg, the web producer for theater, noted that visitors coming to us for the “Wicked” theater review can’t easily find it because we reviewed it a long time ago. But that review is still relevant to the many readers who are considering buying tickets this week.

One possible solution, envisioned by Ben Koski and Erik Hinton of our Interactive News team, is to add landing pages for our cultural content that are more like guides.

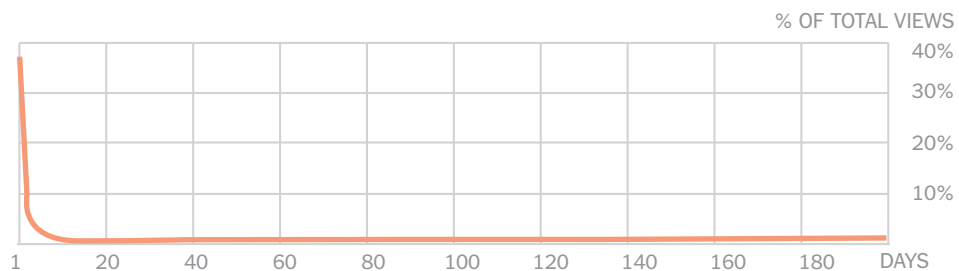
These pages would supplement, not replace, our existing arts pages. Optimized for search and social, these guides would serve the reader who wants to use us as a more timeless resource.

The best opportunities are in areas where The Times has comprehensive coverage, where information doesn’t need to be updated regularly, and where competitors haven’t saturated the market. For now, museums, books and theater fit that description. Travel and music would present significantly more hurdles.

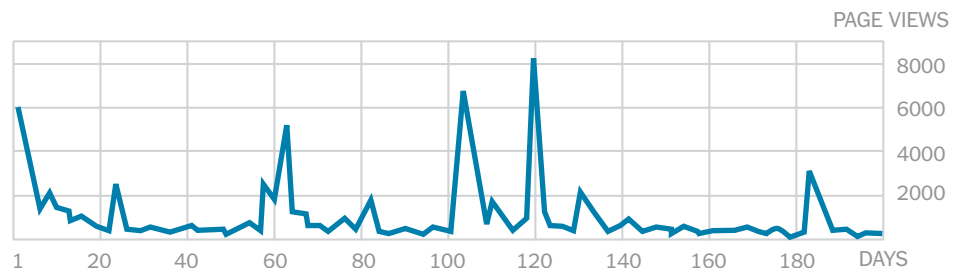
“So far, there’s been much enthusiasm from the desks,” said Koski. “But getting these on the official agenda to be built and made real is an ongoing challenge. It’s hard for ideas like these to compete with enterprise, major events and story work.”

### GIFTS THAT KEEP ON GIVING

Traffic on most of our stories falls dramatically after the first day they’re published.



But enterprise and feature stories can have long lives. For example, Libby Rosenthal’s colonoscopy story from last year, below, attracted new readers months after it was published.



PAYING TILL IT HURTS A Case Study in High Costs

Part 1: Colonoscopy

## The \$2.7 Trillion Medical Bill


Colonoscopies Explain Why U.S. Leads the World in Health Expenditures

By ELISABETH ROSENTHAL | Published: June 1, 2013

ART  
The Met  
MOMA  
Guggenheim  
The Whitney  
Morgan Library  
Brooklyn Museum  
More...

ARTS & CULTURE  
Natural History  
Discovery Times  
Square


## The Metropolitan Museum of Art



**Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China**

For its "Ink Art" show, the Metropolitan Museum has installed works by 23 contemporary artists in its Chinese gallery, inviting comparisons of past and present.

**Review: A Magical Well That Never Runs Dry**  
[Exhibit website](#)




### THE ART OF CURATION

The Times dominates coverage of books, museums and theater. And the evergreen nature of those subjects makes them a natural for being repackaged as culture guides. Here are two proposals from the Interactive News department.


# Book Review Complete Archive

Books reviewed by the New York Times Book Review going back to the year 1871 up until present day.

**EDITORS' PICKS**




Book Award Winners



Authors from the Midwest

Alice Moore Wins Nobel Prize 2013




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**This week from Last Year**









"Embroidering on everything he sees, he undercuts our belief with every stitch. The grammar of silence is unfamiliar to him."  
 —Mark Stouck, on Paul Harding's *Tense*




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**This week from 1987**



















Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?  
 a novel by  
 Lorrie Moore


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**2000s**






















[See all](#)









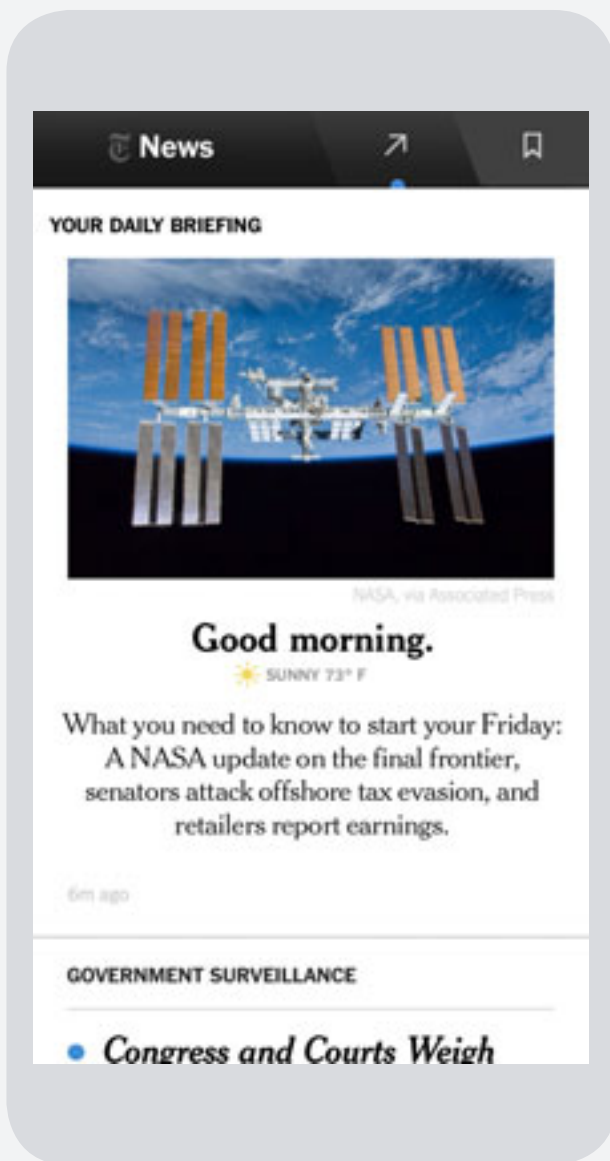


## Best Practices In Experimenting

If you were to ask most people in the newsroom about how The New York Times experiments, they might talk about a new story format like “Snowfall” or a recent crowdsourcing effort like “Paying Till It Hurts.” But “experimentation” is about much more than simply trying something new.

Real experimentation is about adopting a rigorous, scientific method for proving new concepts and constantly tweaking them to be as successful as possible. This is how every major digital innovator — including Google and Amazon — works today.

Unlike a printed newspaper (which is polished to near-perfection and “launched” once a day), a digital experiment should be released quickly and refined through a cycle of continuous improvement — measuring performance, studying results, shuttering losers and building on winners. The Verge, for example, redesigned its home page 53 times in two years. We must push back against our perfectionist impulses. Though our journalism always needs to be polished, our other efforts can have some rough edges as we look for new ways to reach our readers.



### KEY EXPERIMENTS IN PROGRESS:

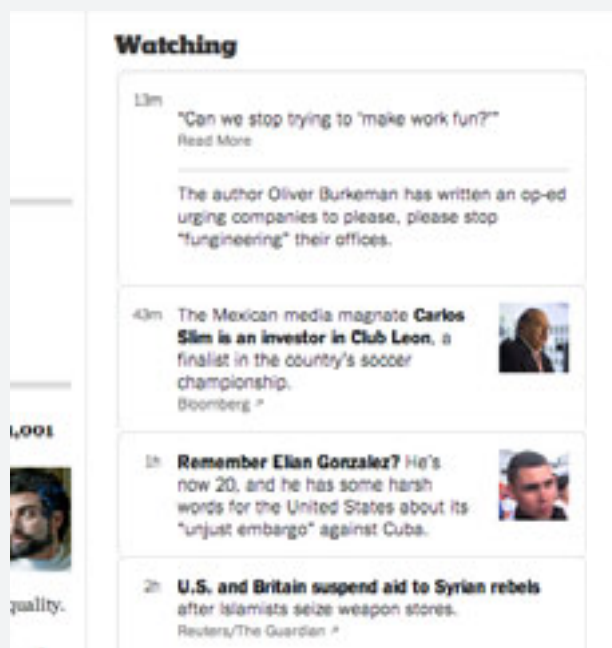
NYT Now: Our first experiment in packaging news specifically for a mobile audience.

NY Today: An ongoing experiment to assess readers’ appetite for tip sheets.

Cooking: An experiment to build a world-class service-journalism app, leveraging the archive.

Watching: An experiment in curating a news feed on our homepage.

NYT Now & Watching.





## A LIST OF BEST PRACTICES FOR EXPERIMENTATION:

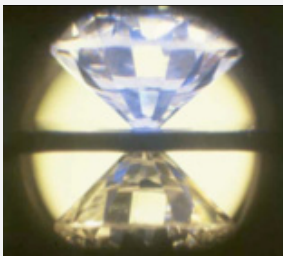
- Launch efforts quickly, then iterate. We often hold back stories for publication, as we should, because they're "not quite there yet." Outside our journalism, though, we can adopt the "minimal viable product" model, which calls for launching something in a more basic form so that we can start getting feedback from users and improve it over time.
- Set goals and track progress. Every new project should be launched with a specific goal and metric for success. In many cases, our main goal is high-quality journalism. But readership and engagement are usually important, too. All managers should be clear on what a new initiative is aiming to accomplish. Editors in charge of experiments should track their progress in real time.
- Reward experimentation. Currently, the risk of failing greatly outweighs the reward of succeeding at The Times. We must reward people who show initiative, even when their experiments fail. Share lessons from both successes and failures.
- We need to do a better job of communicating our digital goals, and sharing what we know about best practices to achieve them. No project should be declared a success, or shuttered, without a debrief on what we've learned, so that we can apply those insights more broadly.
- Kill off mediocre efforts. To free up resources for new initiatives, we need to be quicker and smarter about pulling resources from efforts that aren't working. And we must do it in a way that is transparent so that people understand the reasons behind the decision, so that they will be willing to experiment again.
- Plan for "version 2.0" and beyond. Often, the resource plan for new projects stops at launch. As we learn from readers about what is working and not working, we have to continue our efforts to refine and develop our new initiatives.
- Make it easier to launch an experiment than to block one. At many companies, people are able to test ideas on a small percentage of users with mid-level approval. Elsewhere, you must write a memo about why an experiment should not happen in order to block it. Our journalistic standards always need to be protected, but tradition alone shouldn't be a justification for blocking experiments.

### TESTING, TESTING

Earlier this year, the newsroom analytics team conducted an "A/B Test" on a science article, showing different headlines and photos to readers. Of the options below, number three performed best. More important, it showed that this kind of test is possible — and that The Times should use it as another tool to drive traffic to our journalism.

1

The Color Of Pressure



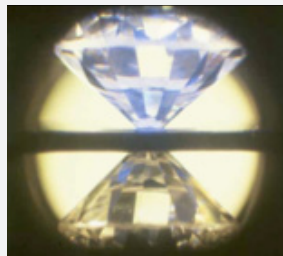
2

The Color Of Pressure



3

The Big Squeeze



4

The Big Squeeze



# Opportunity: Packaging

Readers who visit our site for the first time naturally might assume that if they click on “New York,” they’re likely to find restaurant reviews, theater reviews, local sports coverage, museum coverage or real estate coverage. That assumption would be wrong, of course.

This is but one example of the many opportunities we have for repackaging our content so that it’s more useful, relevant and shareable for readers.

We can point to successes already. On a whim,

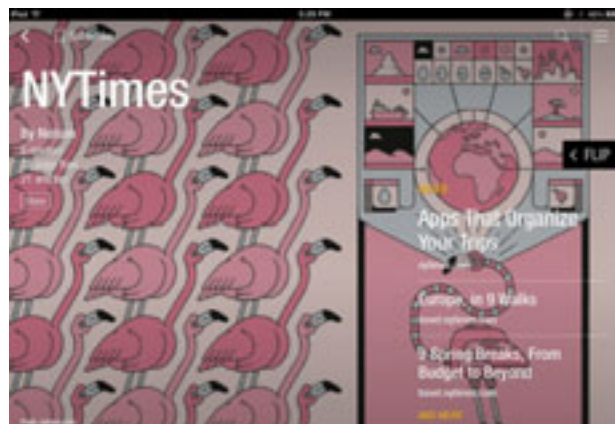
Andrew Phelps created a Flipboard magazine of our most important obits of the year and it became the best-read collection in the history of the platform. Other colleagues have tackled similar projects to repackage our work. But because our systems are difficult for them experiment on, they usually turn to Flipboard, Pinterest and other sites.

“It’s crazy that we’re doing this on a third-party platform and letting them reap many of the benefits,” said a senior digital editor.

## NOTABLE EXPERIMENTS

Millions of people flipped through this collection of New York Times obits, developed on a whim by Andrew Phelps.

Flipboard has created a tool that lets readers make collections with content on their app, including stories from The Times.



## **Experiment:** **Collections**

Our committee ran a couple of experiments with repackaging and found that even old content can generate significant traffic without ever appearing on the home page.

The first was a page featuring a collection of nine videos related to love, chosen from our archives by the weddings editor, for Valentine's Day. The second was a collection of Nick Kristof articles and columns from the archives about sex trafficking. We created no new articles, only new packaging. We explicitly requested that they be kept off the home page and then we launched a strategic campaign to promote the pages elsewhere. The result? Both were huge hits, exclusively because our readers shared them on social. The video unit, eager to repeat those wins, is already pushing to create a template.

Sasha Koren, our social and community editor, said these collections forced a change in thinking about what's new. "Maybe it's, 'what's new to someone now,'" Koren said. "It's still timely, it's still relevant to this moment, it's not dated."

Collections would allow us to curate or automatically group our content in many different ways: by section, topic, byline, etc. They can be used to put a new frame around old content and connect the dots between pieces written over time in a way that day-to-day coverage typically does not.

A Collections format is being developed by Product and Design to improve our ability to organize content in ways that are more intuitive and useful. The newsroom should support that work and consider creating a tool for reporters, web producers, video journalists and editors — and eventually readers — to create collections and repackage our content in ways beyond the usual news format.

For example, we could package stories about Putin's tightening grip on Russia, or the best round-up of climate-science explainers, or service pieces about the science of sleep, or all the four-star restaurant reviews from the last year. Currently, these

types of collections are created almost exclusively off-site, on Flipboard.

The key to making Collections scalable is for the newsroom to introduce a widget-like tool that any reporter or editor could use to drag and drop stories and photos. (The R&D department and, more recently, New Products have already built such tools.)

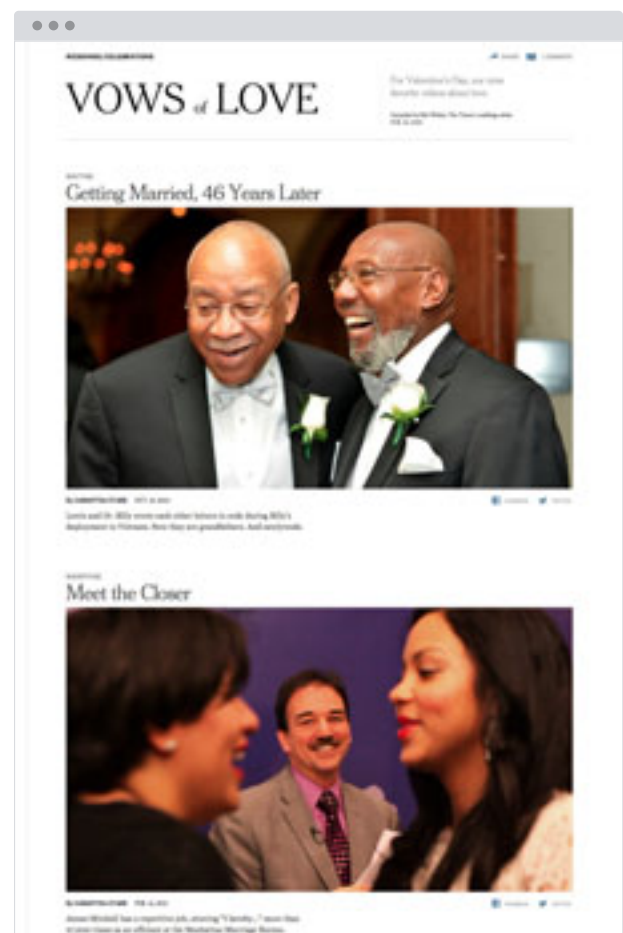
Because Collections are created with content that has already been vetted and published, they require few resources and limited oversight.

If our Collection tool were intuitive and easy to use, we could encourage readers to drag and drop a group of stories into their own collections, which they could then share. This is an opportunity to empower readers to make something on our site with less risk to our brand.

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### **TIMELY AND TIMELESS**

For Valentine's Day, we worked with our weddings editor and other colleagues around the building to repackage nine videos from our archives. The result: a big hit with readers.



# New Again (And Popular)



The “Inside the Brothels” collection that we developed with Nick Kristof’s help provides a case study in how, without too much effort, we can repackage material in our archives and make it relevant again.

Until we published “Inside the Brothels,” the seven stories in the collection had not drawn any traffic in years. But, as the chart at bottom left shows, all the stories saw a spike in visits after being repackaged, with several getting more traffic than a typical new story on the day it’s published.

### NEW TRAFFIC

“Inside the Brothels” rose to the No. 8 most-viewed article on launch day, and it sustained its traffic several days longer than typical daily stories. Over six days, the traffic to the collection page and the associated articles totaled 468,106 page views. Very few articles from a typical day’s paper will garner this much traffic in a month.

### ENGAGED READERS

Articles in the “Inside the Brothels” collection were among those that readers spent the most time with that day. The 1996 Kristof article in our collection was third on this list, with the average user spending 2 minutes, 35 seconds.

### THE RECIRCULATION EFFECT

“Recirculation” refers to a story’s effectiveness in driving readers to other stories, as opposed to their leaving the site. On launch day, “Inside the Brothels” ranked No. 1 on the recirculation list.

### LESSONS LEARNED

- Evergreen content is appealing to readers if resurfaced in a way that is smart.
- Such work can find a large audience without home page attention.
- The newsroom can fall into old habits about experiments like this one, raising concerns about turf, quality control and precedents.
- One-offs are laborious, so we should focus on making such efforts replicable and scalable.

Pub Date	Article	Page Views
APR 14, 1996	Children For Sale	<b>37,803</b>
JAN 21, 2004	Bargaining For Freedom	<b>29,238</b>
MAR 26, 2006	A Woman Without [...]	<b>21,962</b>
APR 22, 2007	The 21st Century Slave [...]	<b>14,075</b>
NOV 18, 2010	A Woman. A Prostitute. [...]	<b>33,240</b>
MAR 31, 2012	Sex Trafficking Comes [...]	<b>24,255</b>
OCT 12, 2013	From the Brothels [...]	<b>25,230</b>
	<b>Collection Page</b>	<b>282,303</b>
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>468,106</b>

## **Balancing Act: One-offs vs. Replicability**

The surprising popularity of The Times dialect quiz — the most popular piece of content in the paper’s history, with more than 21 million page views — prompted weeks of internal discussions about ways to build on that remarkable success.

But over at BuzzFeed, they were busy perfecting a template so they could pump out quiz after quiz after quiz. “We wanted to have interactive games,” explained one BuzzFeed editor, “but not have the developers build them every time, so that we could experiment freely.”

This contrast helps illustrate one of the biggest obstacles to our digital success. We have a tendency to pour resources into big one-time projects and work through the one-time fixes needed to create them, and overlook the less glamorous work of creating tools, templates and permanent fixes that cumulatively can have a bigger impact by saving our digital journalists time and elevating the whole report. We greatly undervalue replicability.

Driven in part by the success of Snowfall, we have gone to extraordinary lengths in recent years to support huge single-story efforts. The ambitions of such projects are central to our brand. But Graphics, Interactive, Design and Social are spending a disproportionate amount of time on these labor-intensive one-offs. Meanwhile, we have repeatedly put off making the necessary improvements to allow our graphics to appear on mobile.

That runs counter to the approach at so many of our digital competitors. “We are focused on building tools to create Snowfalls everyday, and getting them as close to reporters as possible,” said Kevin Delaney, editor of Quartz, which is known for innovative storytelling formats. “I’d rather have a Snowfall builder than a Snowfall.”

When we have created tools, the benefits are

clear. For example, the slideshow tool has become one of our most popular features, the dashboard system has elevated our ability to respond to breaking news, and our blog platforms helped train an entire generation of Times reporters and editors to write for the web. “It’s actually been a long time since we had platform innovation on that scale,” said Nathan Ashby-Kuhlman.

Several digital leaders in the newsroom said they believe we need to reprioritize the kind of incremental improvements that can elevate the whole report and allow our journalists to, for example, build their

own collections from our archives. “We’ve reached a point now where platform innovation is a requirement,” said one editor.

We also need to prioritize sustainable solutions over time-consuming hacks, short-term fixes and workarounds to problems that emerge repeatedly, sometimes daily. For

example, platform editors spend hours on Sunday mornings trying to fix stories that don’t work on mobile devices. They know the problems that will emerge but are unable to get the Technology resources to fix them. Since the newsroom does not control those resources, it is very difficult to prioritize even small changes that cause trouble day after day.

Our competitors, particularly digital-native ones, treat platform innovation as a core function. Vox and First Look Media have lured talent with the pitch that they have built the tools and templates to elevate journalists. That was the advantage that BuzzFeed C.E.O. Jonah Peretti cited in a recent company memo, saying that the company had spent years investing in formats, analytics, optimization and testing frameworks. “This is a massive investment that is very difficult to replicate,” he said.

**Tools, templates  
and permanent  
fixes can elevate  
the whole report.**

# Opportunity: Personalization

We already personalize our content for individual readers in subtle ways: a front-page story about New York may be substituted for a National story, the global home page curates our news report with an international sensibility, and the iPad app grays out the stories you've already read.

Embracing personalization does not mean flipping a switch that gives different stories to every person. Nor should it. Research shows that readers come to us in part to find out what we consider the top stories of the day.

But personalization offers countless opportunities to surface content in smarter ways. It means using technology to ensure that the right stories are finding the right readers in the right places at the right times.

For example, letting you know when you're walking by a restaurant we just reviewed; knowing that you prefer to get stories by email; and making sure you never miss a story about your alma mater.

Even with the home page there is an opportunity for a measured approach — in effect, serve everyone the same dinner but at least give them their favorite desserts. For basketball fans who never read about baseball, that means showing them the story about the Knicks game rather than the Yankees game (unless the baseball story has been flagged as important, such as a story on a perfect game).

Readers have come to expect this personalization. Facebook's new Paper app, for example, is built on news feeds tailored to each user. Yahoo has recently used personalization technology to drive growth in news readership.

Other media sites, like BuzzFeed and The Wash-

ington Post, alter what readers see based on how they arrive on their sites. For example, they will look at data in real time to track which stories are drawing readers from Twitter, and then they show those same stories to other people who visit from Twitter. This practice tends to keep them reading more stories.

In the absence of newsroom input, the business side has been leading our approach to personalization.

Currently, our main tool for personalizing content is our "Recommended For You" tab, which is not up to our standards and has provoked many reader complaints. The list occupies a prominent spot on our homepage but the newsroom has not been very involved in discussions. As a result, the formula we use offers content that would otherwise be hidden on the site — but it often shows smaller-bore items. "It's possible we're using the entirely wrong algorithm," said Boris Chen, a data scientist on The Times's personalization team. But editors, he said, must help him understand what is wrong so he can create a better alternative.

Another significant tool for personalization — a section of the home page for content that readers missed but would likely want to see, based on their reading patterns — is being planned by Design for NYT5 and the iPhone app.

The newsroom should consider devoting more attention to these new initiatives. And the newsroom should clarify how much personalization we want on our home page and on our apps. Until then, the uncertainty about what is acceptable will limit our creativity and initiative on this front.

## A BETTER ENGINE

Readers have come to expect smart personalization online. But our current recommendation engine, right, uses an algorithm to serve up content that leaves many readers puzzled about our judgment. “Based on what The New York Times thinks I’m interested in, I am not a fun person,” wrote Margaret Sullivan, our public editor. The Times is planning to add other features that help personalize the reading experience in more subtle ways. One example, below, which we’ve illustrated with the help of a gray box, would show individual readers the stories they missed on the home page since their last visit. Though all readers would see the same top news stories, the other articles we show them would be customized to reflect what they haven’t seen.

This screenshot shows a news interface with several sections:

- Editorial:** The C.I.A. Torture Cover-Up
- Op-Ed Columnist:** The Leaderless Doctrine
- Arts »**
  - Critic's Notebook:** The Salesman in Chief, Gately Under Fire
  - Obama's New Approach Takes a Humorous Turn
  - Music Review: Organist Introduces New Partner in Concert
- Movies »**
  - Just Another Great Role for What's-Her-Name**
  - Video: Tilda Swinton at SXSW
- Most Emailed:** 372 articles viewed recently
- Recommended for you:** elena.gianni, All Recommendations
- Top 5 Recommendations:**
  1. Family Wants Say in New King Memorial
  2. SCENE CITY: All the Glamour, With No Acceptance Speeches
  3. MAUREEN DOWD: Frozen in a Niche?
  4. Patenholder on Breast Cancer Tests Denied Injunction in Lawsuit
  5. FUTURE TENSE: Celebrities Behaving Well

This screenshot shows a news interface with a mix of content:

- Top News:**
  - Patients Appear to Be Free of Virus** (By DONALD G. NOBEL)
  - In Cairo, Effort to Broaden Support for Charter** (By DAVID D. ENFPATRICE and KAREEM FAYOU, 9:04 PM ET)
  - Law is Tight for Certain Tax Exemptions** (Mortgage debt forgiven by a lender in a short sale, loan modification or foreclosure is exempt from federal taxation. But that exemption expires Jan. 1.)
- Well:**
  - How Exercise Can Calm Anxiety** (By GRECCHEEN REYNOLDS)
- Economic:**
  - The New Economics of Part-Time Employment** (By CASEY B. HULLIGAN)
- Real Estate:**
  - The Rushmore, NYC** (Riverside & 64th 3BR Half Floor Condos with River and Skyline Views)
- More News:**
  - 3 Dead in Oregon Mall Shooting (45 minutes ago)
  - Rabbi Who Aided Abuse Victims Hurt (5:02 PM ET)
  - Kid's 3-Pointer Wins It for Knicks (6:43 PM ET)
- Advertisements:**
  - Place a Classified Ad
  - AD 375 x 96
- Footer:**
  - INSIDE NYTIMES.COM
  - NY / REGION, OPINION, SCIENCE, HEALTH, OPINION, BUSINESS
  - Editorial: The Breath of Autumn (In October, the wind in New York is still buoyant, even mocking. It doesn't numb)

# Experiment: Following

We've heard time and again that younger readers are moving away from browsing and that they increasingly expect news to come to them, on social, through alerts and through personalization. There is a sense that "if something is important, it will find me." We are far behind in adjusting to these trends.

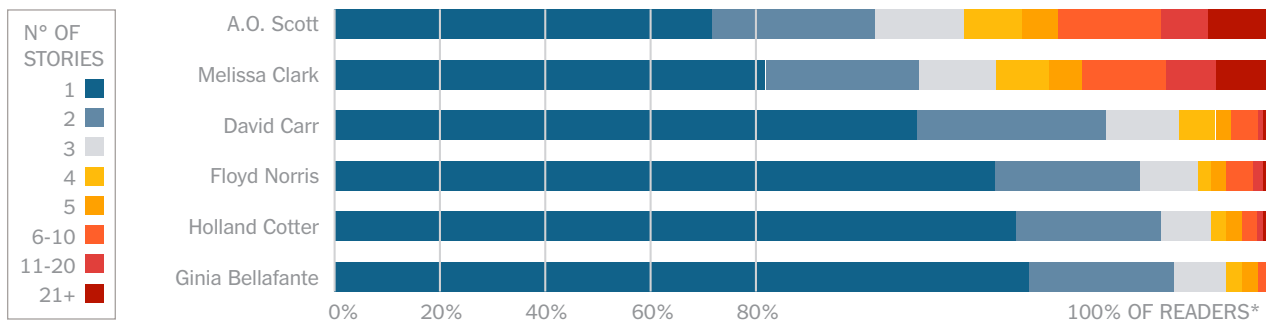
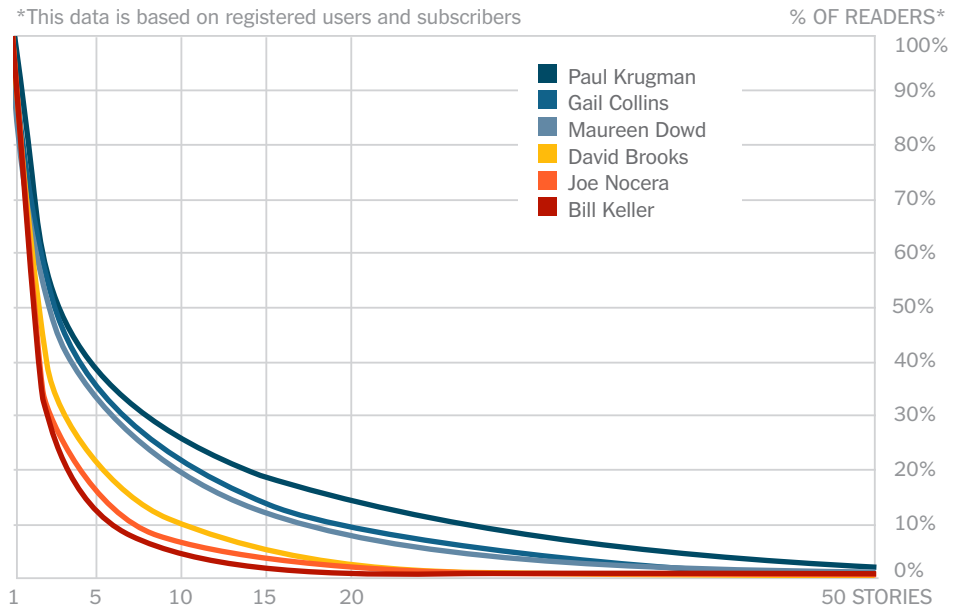
We could create a "follow" button that offers readers a variety of ways to curate and receive their own news feeds, ensuring they never miss a Modern Love or Maureen Dowd column. With a single click, their favorite topics, features and writers could automatically be collected in a Following Inbox. We could also offer readers the opportunity to have alerts about new stories sent to their phone or email.

Until the feature was recently discontinued as part of the NYT5 redesign, the only way for Times readers to be notified of new favorites was by email. This feature was hard to find, hidden at the bottom of stories below the comment section, and required readers to plow through multiple sign-up pages. Even so, it had 338,000 users and unusually high engagement rates. Some technically savvy readers are so eager not to miss stories that they have even written code so that certain stories are sent to them automatically.

Such "following" features have been critical to the success of YouTube, Spotify and Twitter. But increasingly Circa, Breaking News, The Verge and other digital outlets are doing this with news. The Design and Product teams have been exploring such a feature for columnists, and should have the newsroom's support.

## TOUGH AUDIENCE

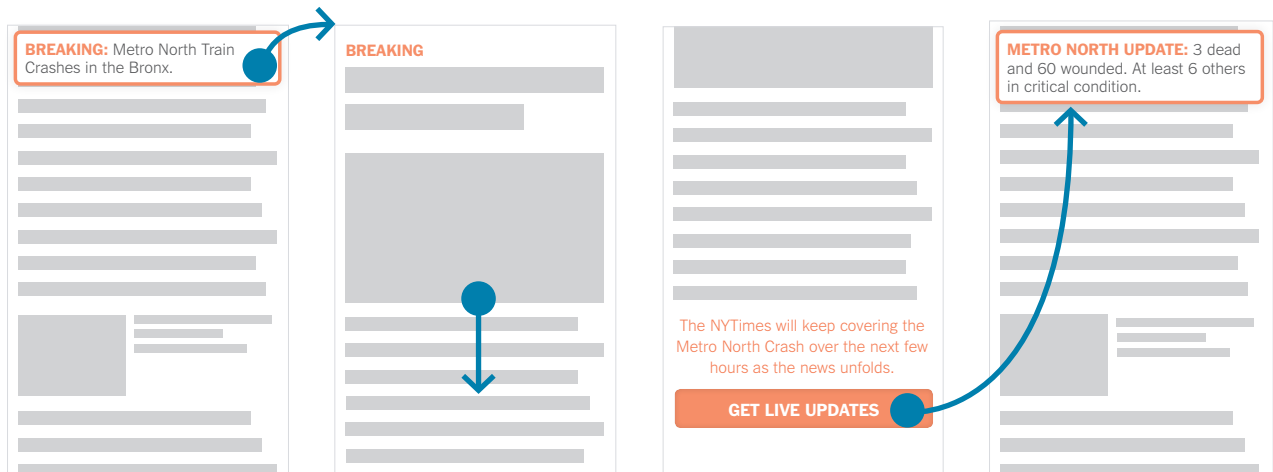
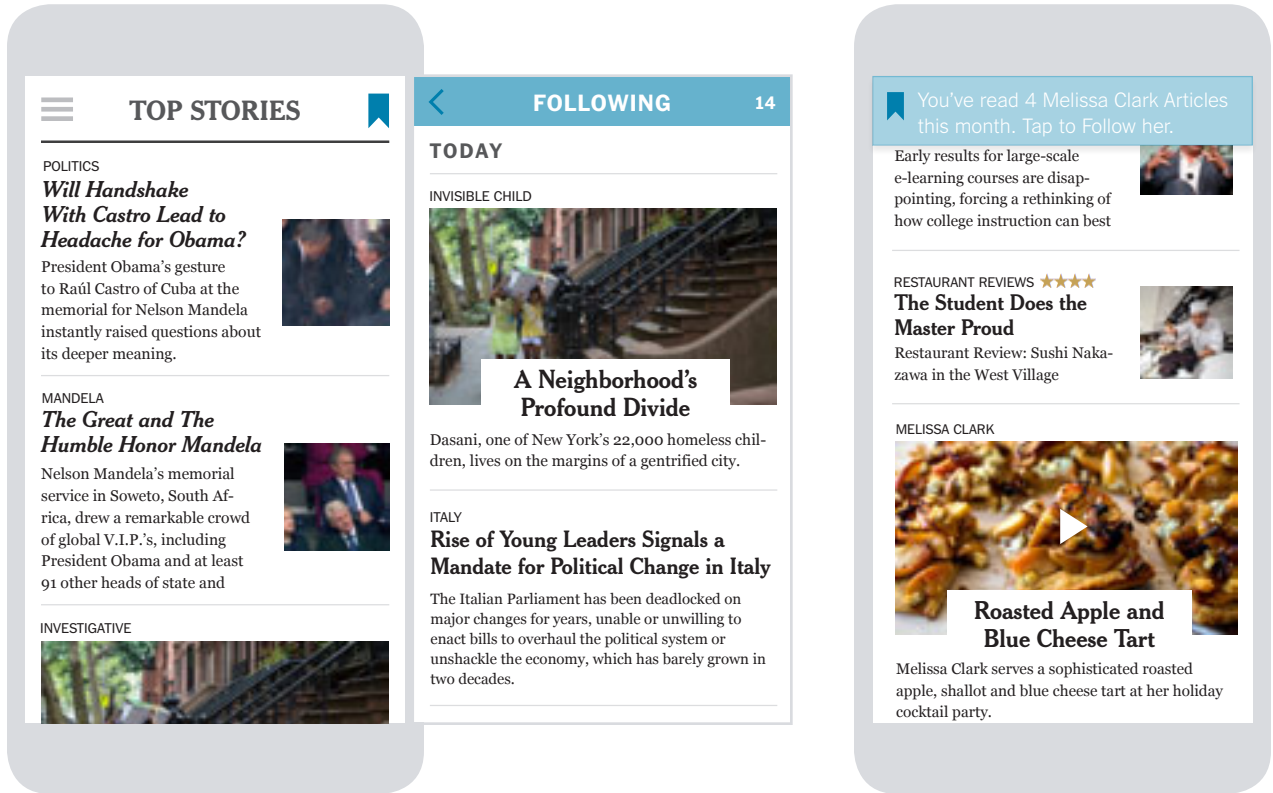
We've always had a sense that readers were loyal followers of their favorite columnists. And the paper makes it easy to catch certain bylines (Monday morning? Time for David Carr). On the Internet, however, readers are far more fickle. The accompanying charts show that readers don't come back often to the same columnist. The quality of their work isn't the issue. Making it easier for readers to discover what they already like – by creating a "follow" feature for each columnist, for example – could make these charts look very different.





## BUILDING A FOLLOWING

These are some examples of features we could add to our mobile app to help readers follow their favorite topics, bylines and stories.



A news alert arrives for breaking news.

Tapping on the alert brings the reader to a developing story.

At the end of the article, the reader is prompted with the option of following the story.

The reader is notified of new updates.

## “The Paper of Record,” Version 2.0

A century ago, The Times began the laborious process of identifying and tagging the major and minor topics and characters of every story it produced. Each year, it compiled these listings in the massive “New York Times Index,” the only complete index of a U.S. newspaper. This effort made us indispensable to librarians, historians and academics. And it earned us a nickname: “The Paper of Record.”

The many opportunities described in this report — and others that will only become clear over time — require us to focus on this humble art we helped pioneer, which we still call “tagging.”

In the digital world, tagging is a type of structured data — the information that allows things to be searched and sorted and made useful for analysis and innovation. Some of the most successful Internet companies, including Netflix, Facebook and Pandora, have so much structured data — by tagging dozens or even hundreds of different elements of every movie, song and article — that they have turned the science of surfacing the right piece of content at the right time into the core of thriving businesses.

The Times, however, hasn’t updated its structured data to meet the changing demands of our digital age and is falling far behind as a result. Without better tagging, we are hamstrung in our ability to allow readers to follow developing stories, discover nearby restaurants that we have reviewed or even have our photos show up on search engines.

“Everyone forgets about metadata,” said John O’Donovan, the chief technology officer for The Financial Times. “They think they can just make stuff and then forget about how it is organized in terms of how you describe your content. But all your assets are useless to you unless you have metadata — your archive is full of stuff that is of no value because you can’t find it and don’t know what it’s

about.”

And here is an ugly truth about structured data: there are substantial costs to waiting.

For example, because our recipes were never properly tagged by ingredients and cooking time, we floundered about for 15 years trying to figure out how to create a useful recipe database. We can do it now, but only after spending a huge sum to retroactively structure the data. The lack of structured data also helps explain why we are unable to automate the sale of our photos and why we continually struggle to attain higher rankings on search engines.

We need to reclaim our industry-leading position, but right now our needs are far more basic. We must expand the structured data we create, which is still defined by the needs of the Times Index rather than our modern digital capabilities.

For example, at a time when nearly 60 percent of our readers access us via mobile devices, we are missing an opportunity to serve up content that’s relevant to their locations because we are not tagging stories with geographic coordinates. The Boston Globe is among the many publications doing this.

Similarly, to enable readers to follow updates on running news stories, we need to be using tags that tie together articles, photos, and videos about a news event, like “Boston Marathon Bombing.” It took seven years for us to start tagging stories “September 11.”

“We never made a tag for Benghazi, and I wish we had because the story just won’t die,” said Kristi Reilly of our Archive, Metadata and Search team. Her boss, Evan Sandhaus, framed the opportunity more strongly: “We don’t tag the one thing” — news events — “that people use to navigate the news.”

Our competitors are a full step ahead of us in using structured data. The Washington Post and The

The structured data we create is still defined by the Times Index.

Wall Street Journal use it for insight into how readers are using their websites. At Circa, each article is broken into “atoms of news,” such as facts, quotes, and statistics. That allows editors to quickly surface relevant content and context during breaking news.

Expanding our structured data capabilities would require us to address some technology and workflow issues. Notably, it would put greater demands on our copy editors, web producers and librarians.

That means we may need to build out those teams, and we will certainly need to go to great lengths to explain how crucial this effort is to our long-term success.

Every day we wait, we fall further behind our competitors. The Times considered increasing its tagging efforts in 2010 and passed. The cost of catching up has only grown.

## BIGGER DATA

Here are some examples of structured data that would allow us to make better use of our content:

NEW TAG	SAMPLE TAGS	POTENTIAL BENEFIT
<b>Geographic location of story content</b>	Gramercy Restaurant 40.7386° N, 73.9885° W	Surface new and old content relevant to readers' locations, particularly for mobile usage.
<b>Timeliness</b>	Timely forever Timely for a year Timely for a month Timely for a day	Surface old content in a smart way, including adding sophistication to our recommendation engines and easier ways for editors to feature relevant older stories.
<b>Story type</b>	Breaking news Profile News analysis	Make better use of evergreen content well after publication. Conduct more granular analysis of users' reading behavior.
<b>Story threads</b>	Crisis in Ukraine	Enable readers to follow ongoing stories and news events. Better organize our archives.
<b>Story tone</b>	Uplifting Serious	Improve content discovery by letting users surface stories based on their mood.
<b>Photos: topics</b>	Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich	Display photos in search results on our site and our apps. Tagging photos by topic would improve the ranking of our content in search results.
<b>Photos: articles where photo appeared</b>	“A Kiev Question: What Became of the Missing?”	Create a ‘news in photos’ experience that lets users start with a photo and click through to a related article.
<b>Photos: usage rights</b>	Rights cleared No resale rights	Sell prints of all rights-cleared photos on our site.

# 2 Promotion

At The Times, we generally like to let our work speak for itself. We're not ones to brag.

Our competitors have no such qualms, and many are doing a better job of getting their journalism in front of new readers through aggressive story promotion. They regard this as a core function of reporters and editors, and they react with amazement that the same is not true here.

"A lot of the institutions that are doing well are marketing themselves well," said Amanda Michel, head of social media for The Guardian. "People may think that's dirty, but it's reality."

The Guardian has a promotion team inside the newsroom and an ambitious social strategy that has helped rapidly expand its readership in the United States. The Huffington Post expects all reporters and editors to be fully fluent in social media, including the kinds of headlines and photos that tend to perform best on different platforms. The Atlantic and its digital properties expect reporters to promote their own work and mine traffic numbers to look for best practices.

Even ProPublica, that bastion of old-school journalism values, goes to extraordinary lengths to give stories a boost. An editor meets with search, social and public relations specialists to develop a promotion strategy for every story. And reporters must submit five tweets along with each story they file.

By contrast, our approach is muted. After we spent more than a year producing a signature piece of journalism — the "Invisible Child" series — we alerted our marketing and PR colleagues too late for them to do any promotion ahead of time. The

reporter didn't tweet about it for two days. (Though the pieces still had massive reach and impact, we don't know how many more readers we could have attracted with additional effort.)

"I don't feel like we sit down when we have a big project, a big story, and say, 'How do we roll this out?'" said one top editor. "It would require an entirely different way of thinking. It would be about saying, '*This* is what is running on Sunday.'"

A key tool is social media. Our institutional accounts reach tens of millions of people and the accounts of individual reporters and editors reach millions more. The size of our social team reflects our eagerness to succeed in this arena. But with less than 10 percent of our digital traffic coming to us through social media we are still figuring out how to best engage readers.

The percentage of readers who visit BuzzFeed through social, for example, is more than six times greater than at The Times. They have learned, among other things, that a great Facebook post has become a better promotional device than a headline and that the impact of social is even greater on mobile.

Many outlets place a team in the newsroom to track the most popular stories in real time. As those stories spike, the team helps desks take steps to draw more traffic and to keep visitors on the site longer. Other sites also look for unexpectedly poor performers and repackage them to give them a lift. Reuters, for instance, recently hired two employees to scour the site to find up to seven hidden gems per day, which they then repackage and republish

to give them a second chance.

We need to create structures inside the newsroom that broaden the reach and impact of our most important work. In addition, we need to identify and share best practices at the ground level so that reporters and editors feel encouraged and empowered to promote their own work.

And we need to focus more attention on the behind-the-scenes process of optimization. Just adding structured data, for example, immediately increased traffic to our recipes from search engines by 52 percent.

Companies like Huffington Post and BuzzFeed have, in just a few years, eclipsed our traffic by building best practices for search and social into their workflow. For example, at The Huffington Post, a story cannot be published unless it has a photo, a search headline, a tweet and a Facebook

post.

Now The Huffington Post regularly outperforms us in these areas — sometimes even with our own content. An executive there described watching their aggregation outperform our original content after Nelson Mandela’s death. “You guys got crushed,” he said. “I was queasy watching the numbers. I’m not proud of this. But this is your competition. You should defend the digital pick-pockets from stealing your stuff with better headlines, better social.”

Other competitors, like The Atlantic and Politico, are also using emails as direct channels to readers. This basic tool has become one of the most popular and efficient ways to cut through all the noise of the social web and reach readers directly. The Times is reaching 6.5 million readers by email, even though this tool has largely been treated as an afterthought.

The screenshot shows a New York Times article titled "How Y'all, Youse and You Guys Talk" from the Sunday Review. The article is a dialect quiz. Annotations include:

- Top Left:** "The New York Times" logo with a callout: "Add a link to NYT home page."
- Below Logo:** "Add a related article." pointing to a sidebar article titled "Local Accents Give You a Sense of Place" by Barbara Johnson.
- Below Article:** "Add a form where readers can sign up to receive notices about future quizzes." pointing to a "Sign Up" button.
- Below Sign Up:** "Sign up for emails to future New York Times quizzes." pointing to the sign-up form.
- Right Side:** "NEW TOOLS" section with text: "Promotion doesn't just mean using social media sites like Twitter and Facebook. Email and search are also powerful drivers of traffic. Another is optimization, the use of specialized tools and tactics to draw readers and keep them reading. At competitors, this is done story by story and platform by platform, before and after publication. The dialect quiz had 21 million visits and still gets around 10,000 per day. But the simply designed page did little to keep visitors on our site. Here are some features that we could have added to help the quiz drive more traffic to other parts of the site."
- Bottom Right:** "Q&A" callout: "Ask a question of the professors behind the quiz, Bert Vaux and Scott Golder." pointing to a "Q&A" button.
- Bottom Right:** "REDDIT" callout: "Add a link to a social site that is driving heavy traffic to this feature." pointing to a "REDDIT" button.

# Opportunity: Institutional Promotion

Our Twitter account is run by the newsroom. Our Facebook account is run by the business side.

This unwieldy structure highlights a problem that has bedeviled our promotion efforts. Even though audience development is the kind of work that should be shared across the company, it instead falls into silos, with marketing, public relations, search, and social all answering to different bosses and rarely collaborating.

These departments should work together on promotion strategies, such as publicizing big stories before and after they are published. We also need to change our tools and workflows to optimize our content for search and social, and exploit other direct channels to readers, such as email.

There is a widely held assumption in the newsroom that promotion is mostly done by the social team. But the team has framed its mission mostly around using social media as a reporting tool,

rather than as a tool for audience development. This approach was an important first step to help the newsroom start exploring social media. But today it means that we are mostly leaving the larger promotion question unaddressed.

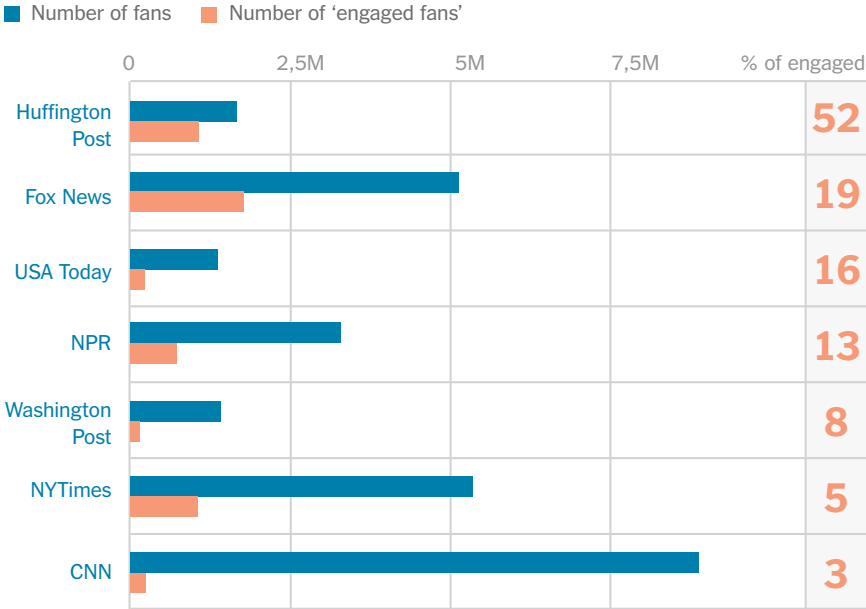
Though many of our competitors also use social for reporting, they mainly view it as an audience development tool. They told us they also use it as a hotbed of experimentation because platforms and user behavior change so quickly.

At The Times, the social team collects less data and is less integrated with the rest of the newsroom than at our competitors, hampering our efforts to identify and spread best practices. Others have paired social editors with data experts and then aggressively spread lessons through their newsrooms.

“When we figured out the Facebook algorithm and that Facebook mattered more than Twitter, traffic exploded,” said Jacob Weisberg of Slate.

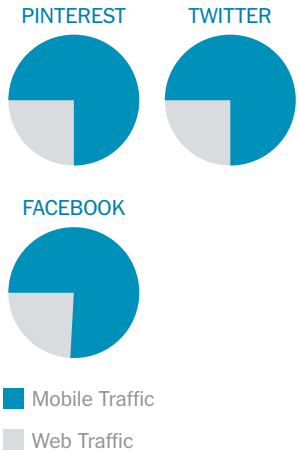
### FAN BASE

The number of Facebook followers counts for a lot. But a more telling indicator of reader engagement is how many of them interact with content, by posting comments and “liking” stories. By this measure, many of our competitors are doing better than us.



### GOING MOBILE

Most of the social networks' traffic comes from smartphones. That's why our competitors say the key to winning mobile is to win on social.



Source: BuzzFeed

## Experiment: Promotion Squad

We could form a promotional team of experts in the newsroom to focus on building and executing strategies for extending the reach of our most important work.

The model used by ProPublica is instructive, with a team that creates a specific strategy for each story in advance of its publication. The team includes an expert to focus on ways to boost a story on search through headlines, links and other tactics; a social editor who decides which platforms are best for the story and then finds influential people to help spread

the word; a marketer who reaches out through phone calls or emails to other media outlets, as well as organizations that are interested in the topic. The story editor also participates to ensure the journalism is being promoted appropriately. And a data analyst evaluates the impact of the promotion.

Our committee pulled together such a team from across departments for an experiment with The New York Times Magazine for the February “Voyages” issue. We let them run the experiment while we participated as observers. The traffic figures were underwhelming — actually decreasing from the previous year — and the process had numerous stumbles. These results should be instructive for any future efforts.



### LESSONS LEARNED

The Magazine promotion experiment was not a success. Here are three lessons we learned.

1. There were disagreements about strategy and no clear leader to resolve them.
2. The promotion specialists seemed unclear about the tools at their disposal, so they gravitated to conservative approaches they knew best.
3. Decisions were made without data, which affected both setting goals and measuring outcomes.



# Opportunity: Front-Line Promotion

The Times made a smart decision when it decided not to establish rules for using social media, preferring instead to trust reporters and editors to exercise their judgment. We gave people the room to experiment and adapt to developing mediums. There are no rules, but no real guidance, either.

We need to explicitly urge reporters and editors to promote their work and we need to thank those who make the extra effort. Interest in and aptitude for social media should not be required — just as we don't expect every reporter to be a great writer — but it should be a factor. And we need to help journalists raise their profiles on social by sharing best practices. Our journalists want maximum readership and impact but many don't know how to use social media effectively. Content promotion needs to become more integrated into each desk's daily workflow.

The notion that journalists should be their own promoters has become a bedrock principle at our competitors. For example, Dan Colarusso, executive editor of Reuters Digital, said, "All web editors engage on social and are also tasked with identifying related communities and seeding their content."

Other places test approaches to social engagement and then actively disseminate the results. That taps into reporters' competitive instincts, and raises everyone's game.

Reporters and editors are eager to do what is asked of them, as long as they have clarity on both how and why — as well as some assurance that the extra effort will be rewarded. Right now, they are unsure of whether spending time on social represents doing work or avoiding it.

For example, A.O. Scott said that his film reviews occasionally get an outsize reaction on social. He is torn between engaging with readers and moving on to the next story. "It raises the question, when is pushing it forward the better substitute for doing more work?"

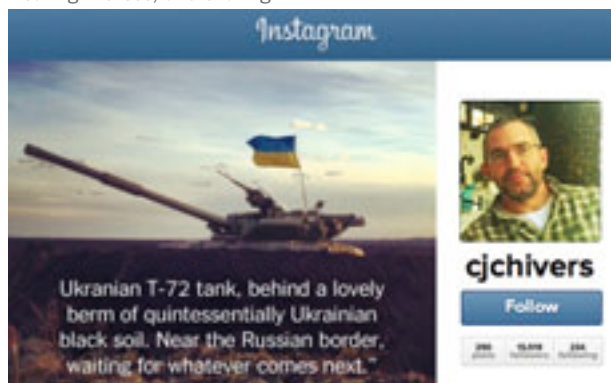
There are countless examples of smart social and community efforts around the building. KJ Dell'Antonia, our Motherlode blogger, spends about an hour every day replying to commenters. Gina Kolata writes back to all readers who email her. Chris Chivers makes time, even in war zones, to manage social accounts on eight different platforms.

All of these reporters complained that the tactics they use to reach readers are one-offs. They all expressed hope that the broader newsroom could be given tools and support to help journalists connect with their audiences.

One approach would be to create an "impact toolbox" and train an editor on each desk to use it. The toolbox would provide strategy, tactics and templates for increasing the reach of an article before and after it's published. Over time, the editor could teach others.

There is compelling evidence that these best practices can be taught. Many of the reporters who are best at social promotion — such as Nick Kristof, Nick Bilton, C.J. Chivers, David Carr and Charles DuHigg — learned these skills from their publishers as part of their book-promotion efforts. Andrea Elliott said she also received this training after signing her book deal at Random House.

Bearing witness, and sharing





# Experiment: Influencers Map

To help promote the Kristof collection, we pulled together a list of relevant, influential people who could spread the word about it on social media. This work could be automated and turned into an internal tool, which we could use to help promote our best journalism on social media. We've mocked

up below what an influencer map for “Inside the Brothels” might look like.

The work paid off. Someone we had contacted about the collection shared it on Twitter and was retweeted by Ashton Kutcher, who has 15.9 million followers.

## INFLUENCERS

TOPICS: KRISTOF x SEX TRAFFICKING x INDIA x PAKISTAN x CAMBODIA x 🔍

NYTIMES
EXTERNAL
FILTER BY

<p><b>Nick Kristof</b> opinion columnist @NickKristof 1.46 million followers</p>	<p><b>Sheryl WuDunn</b> co-author of “Half the Sky” @WuDunn 11,200 followers</p>	<p><b>Becca Stevens</b> priest in Tennessee who has fought sex trafficking @RevBeccaStevens 1,354 followers</p>	<p><b>Minky Worden</b> director of Global Initiatives at Human Rights Watch, NGO @minkyshighjinks 5,736 followers</p>
<p><b>Lydia Polgreen</b> deputy foreign editor and former foreign correspondent in India, South Africa, etc @lpolgreen 38,700 followers</p>	<p><b>@Half</b> account for “Half the Sky” book on the treatment of women around the world 50,500 followers</p>	<p><b>Liriel Higa</b> social media coordinator for “Half the Sky” @idiplomacy 3,161 followers</p>	<p><b>Tom Dart</b> Sheriff in Cook County, Illinois active in fighting sex trafficking @TomDart 2,688 Followers</p>
<p><b>Declan Walsh</b> Pakistan bureau chief @declanwalsh 45,300 followers</p>	<p><b>Restore NYC</b> an NGO @restorenyc 5,963 followers</p>	<p><b>Andrea Powell</b> Executive Director &amp; Co-Founder, FAIR Girls, non-profit that fights sex trafficking @Fair_Girls 12,200 followers</p>	<p><b>Lisa Goldblatt Grace</b> head of My Life My Choice, Boston-based group fighting sex trafficking @mlmcgirls 238 followers</p>
<p><b>Salman Masood</b> Pakistan correspondent @salmanmasood 18,300 followers</p>	<p><b>Change.Org</b> an activist platform @change.org 777,000 followers</p>	<p><b>Bradley Myles</b> Executive director of Polaris Project, which fights human trafficking @Polaris_Project 28,600 followers</p>	<p><b>Gary Haugen</b> CEO of International Justice Mission @garyhaugen 21,300 followers</p>
<p><b>Thomas Fuller</b> southeast Asia correspondent @ThomasFullerNYT 4,763 followers</p>	<p><b>Apne App</b> an India-based NGO fighting sex-trafficking @apneaap 2,114 followers</p>	<p><b>Ken Roth</b> executive director of Human Rights Watch, NGO @KenRoth 50,800 followers</p>	<p><b>Somaly Mam</b> Cambodian human rights activist @somalymam 405,000 followers</p>
<p><b>Ellen Barry</b> South Asia bureau chief, formerly Russia correspondent @EllenBarryNYT 10,200 followers</p>	<p><b>Ashley Judd</b> actress who has spoken out against sex trafficking @ashleyjudd 202,000 followers</p>		

# 3

# Connection

The Times commands respect, conveys authority and inspires devotion. All of that is captured in the pride with which people identify themselves as devoted Times readers.

This is our huge advantage as we think more about connecting with our audience.

This audience is often described as our single most underutilized resource. We can count the world's best-informed and most influential people among our readers. And we have a platform to which many of them would be willing and honored to contribute.

Yet we haven't cracked the code for engaging with them in a way that makes our report richer.

Of all the tasks we discuss in this report, the challenge of connecting with and engaging readers — which extends from online comments to conferences — has been the most difficult. But best practices have emerged on these fronts, as well, and many of our competitors are experimenting aggressively and pulling ahead of us.

Aside from social, our main platform for engaging with readers is moderated comments, a forum that is respected for its quality but does not have wide appeal. Only a fraction of stories are opened for comments, only one percent of readers write comments and only three percent of readers read comments. Our trusted-commenter system, which we hoped would increase engagement, includes just a few hundred readers. That has prompted business-side leaders to question their value and newsroom leaders to wonder whether those resources could be

better used elsewhere.

Our other efforts for engaging with readers — many of which have been well-received — mostly have been one-offs. Impressive projects rarely lead to replicable tools that could be used to elevate our whole report.

And our offline efforts to connect with readers, like conferences and cruises, are largely outdated replicas of competitors' work, and we have pursued them without much newsroom input. Meanwhile, The Atlantic and The New Yorker have created signature events that deepen loyalty and make money while staying true to their brands.

The newsroom needs to take on these questions of connection and engagement. We are in a subscriber-driven business, our digital content needs to travel on the backs of readers to find new readers, and there is an appetite to know the people behind our report. We can come up with a Timesian way for connecting with our readers online and offline that deepens their loyalty.

The first step is getting more comfortable with the idea of pulling back the curtain and providing readers a bit more insight into how we do our work, which will only deepen their connection to it.

Outlets like NPR and The Guardian, which reach similar audiences, have used this approach to good effect. "Few places have that brand, but The New York Times does," said Vivian Schiller, formerly of The Times and NPR, and now head of news at Twitter.

Our reporters and columnists are eager to connect with readers in this way but many are going to other platforms to talk about the process behind their work. A recent case in point: Jon Eligon wrote a gripping first-person account on Facebook about his experience as a black reporter approaching a white supremacist in North Dakota.

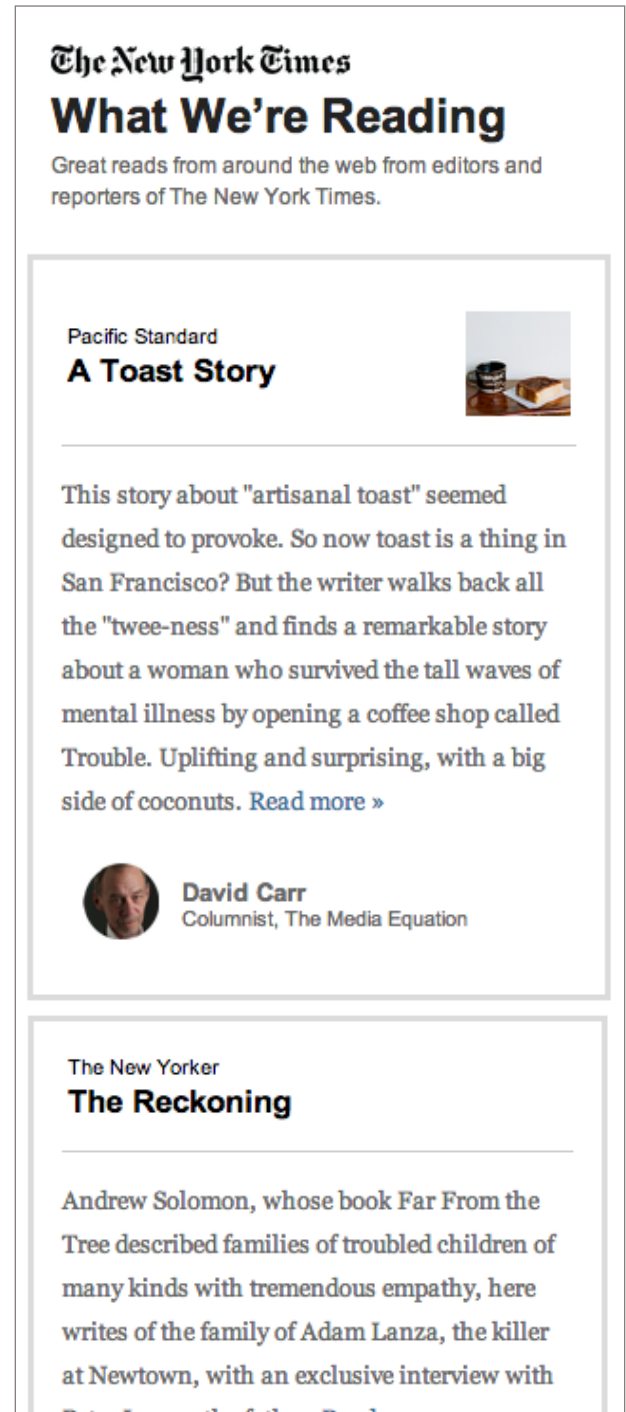
The good news is we are moving to capture some

#### OPENING UP

Readers want to connect with Times journalists — to get the back story, learn what we are reading, and join the conversation.



of this conversation. We recently launched the “What We’re Reading” email, which curates recommendations of good journalism from around the web from Times editors and writers. We are offering a new “story behind the story” feature for premium subscribers. Similarly, the new Opinion product is focused on fostering reader-columnist discussions.



# Opportunity: User-Generated Content

User-generated content, which has provided our competitors with a low-cost way to expand their sites and deepen loyalty, has proved to be a difficult challenge at The Times.

But we already are home to one of the most celebrated forums of user-generated content in publishing: Op-Eds.

In the digital world, though, we are trailing badly behind our competitors. Many publishers have decided to become platforms, as well. Huffington Post and Medium have experienced huge growth in part because they have become a platform for opinion pieces and guest essays. Others, including CNN and

The Journal, are moving in the same direction.

They have serious quality lapses as a result, but also big wins and a growing and engaged audience. The Times has considerations our competitors don't — namely, our brand promises readers that everything they has been carefully vetted. We are one of the few outlets where even comments meet this standard.

But a new generation of startups is training the next generation of readers to expect participation.

“Our readers do want to show off and what we could offer them is the imprimatur of greatness,” said Leslie Kaufman, who covers media.



## SANDBOXES

The Huffington Post's platform allows anyone to publish content on its site. Medium enhanced that model with design and curation. Storify lets users assemble Tweets and videos into storylines.



## Experiment: Expand Op-Eds

One digital strategist compared the world of online engagement to a cocktail party. Most people, she noted, don't want to talk to strangers. They want to talk to their friends or important people.

Facebook is handling the friend part of that equation. The Times is well-positioned to play host to important people.

We receive dozens of Op-Ed submissions every day from top thinkers and leaders, and we publish only a fraction of them. Some of this is quality control. But in many cases, we are simply following the constraints of print.

The Times has already expanded our footprint in this area through our new video feature, Op-Docs. The quality of submissions and audience interest both have been extremely high, making Op-Docs one of our most popular and praised verticals.

We should experiment with expanding our Op-Ed offerings to include specific sections and verticals, opening up our report to leaders in fields such as politics, business and culture.

These guest essays, to use the more conventional

term, would help The Times solidify its position as the destination for sophisticated conversation. The world's smartest and most influential people have long been eager to write for us for the modest payday of \$150 a piece. These are often some of our best-read works — and often provide us with world-beating scoops.

Imagine if the Arts section had daily Op-Eds from leading figures in dance, theater, movies and architecture. Or if David Leonhardt's new venture included daily Op-Eds from smart minds in politics and academia. Or if the Science section became the leading arena for ideas from scientists and philosophers.

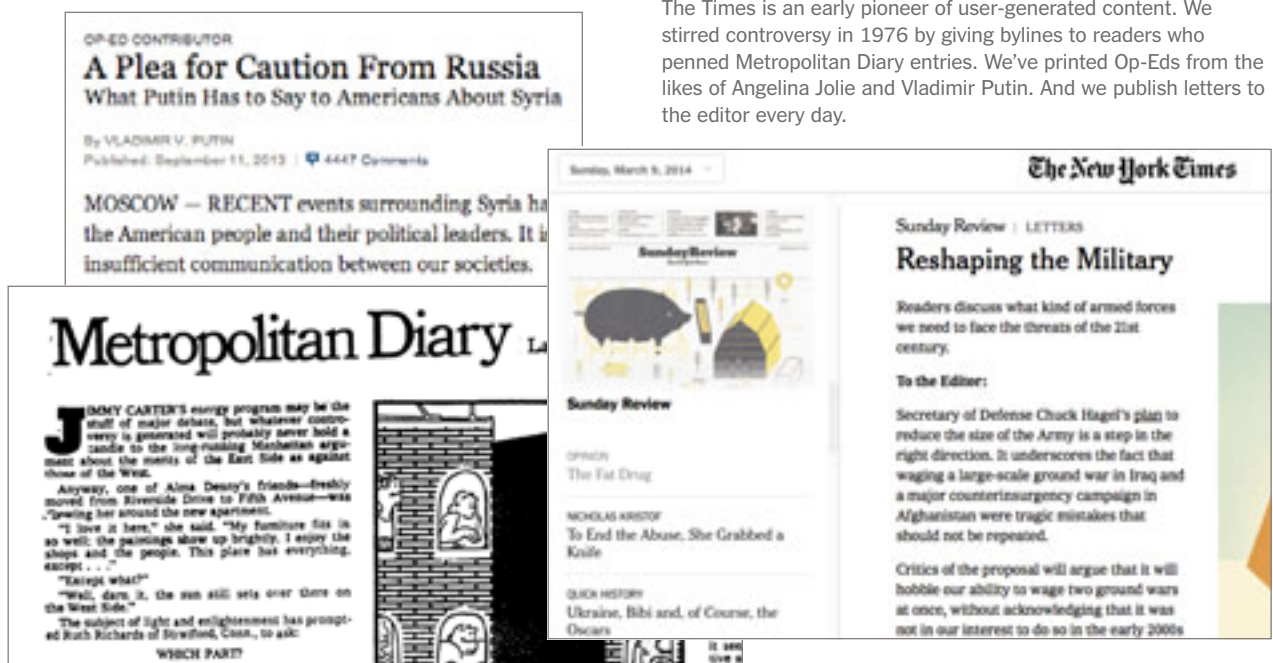
Controversial? Metro does this with Metropolitan Diary. Business, Sports, Styles and Book Review do this, as well, with guest essays and other user-submitted features.

Gina Kolata said she frequently receives well-written submissions that are too narrowly focused for the newspaper but perfect for Science. "Often I'm getting people saying, 'Can I write an Op-ed?' Most of their stuff goes nowhere, but if it did, there'd be an audience for it."

We would recommend starting with one or two desks and establishing best practices.

### READERS WHO WRITE

The Times is an early pioneer of user-generated content. We stirred controversy in 1976 by giving bylines to readers who penned Metropolitan Diary entries. We've printed Op-Eds from the likes of Angelina Jolie and Vladimir Putin. And we publish letters to the editor every day.



# Opportunity: Events

Our events operation is improving but still has a long way to go to meet the standards of The New York Times.

Our events are typically built around industry issues that are of interest to both sponsors and corporate audiences.

Events can be about connecting with readers as much as they are about making money.

NPR has made its journalists the centerpiece of shows that travel to large concert spaces in cities and college towns. The Atlantic hosts the well-regarded and lucrative Aspen Ideas Festival. The New Yorker reportedly makes a huge amount of its annual revenue from its fun and engaging annual festival.

There is no reason that the space filled by TED Talks, with tickets costing \$7,500, could not have been created by The Times. “One of our biggest concerns is that someone like The Times will start a real conference program,” said a TED executive.

Univision recently hosted town halls by reporters about topics that consistently ranked as the most popular on its website and channels. “We got around 8,000 people to discuss better ways to manage personal finances,” said Enrique Acevedo, who hosted the event.

But before we pursue any of these options, the newsroom needs to be more involved in thinking through our events strategy.

This is more urgent because in recent years the events industry has shifted in ways that mirror changes in the newspaper industry: away from a total dependence on advertising and toward readers willing to pay.

Rob Grimshaw, the head of digital strategy at FT.com who has made events an extension of his job, said his newsroom now views conference attendees much as it does digital subscribers – they are all simply members of its broader audience.

Our best effort on this front is Times Talks, but

we’ve made little effort to scale them. Those who have studied the industry say that the most successful approach is to take such events on tour, with multiple stops for the same line up, or to hold a single large annual event. Instead, we’re building each of ours as a one-off.

Many executives and editors at competing outlets said that The Times is in a unique position to increase and retain subscribers by shedding its modesty and putting forward its best asset: its talent.

## Experiment: New Events

The Times should create reader-focused events that elevate our brand while meeting our standards. Imagine a New York Times Readers Festival:

An annual event in NYC that anyone registered on our site could pay to attend, with a few segments open only to subscribers and premium subscribers. Possible sessions include: panels on the top stories of the year, Q&A’s with reporters and editors on certain topics, training sessions on writing, photography and video, talks by a handful of outsiders who wrote the most-read Op-Eds of the year, a multimedia showcase of our best videos, photos and interactives. We should not underestimate interest in Times reporters and journalism.



## Getting to Know Our Readers

To provide more relevant and meaningful user experiences, we need to first better understand our readers — who they are and how they use our site.

Currently, our capabilities for collecting reader data are limited. The information is dispersed haphazardly across the organization and rarely put to use for purposes other than marketing. And the newsroom, which is perhaps best positioned to champion this effort because of its close connection to readers, has not played a leading role.

The smart use of reader data has been essential to the success of companies like Google, Facebook and Amazon. But traditional media companies are also figuring out this game. The Guardian, for example, recently launched its “Known Strategy,” with the newsroom leading the effort to improve how it collects, archives and uses reader data.

“I don’t think we really understood the power of the data and the audience understanding that came with the subscription model,” said The Financial Times’s C.E.O., John Ridding. “We’ve been able to build a system of understanding our readers.”

LinkedIn offers a good example of how to use reader data in smart ways. Last year, it sent out an email to hundreds of thousands of users: “Congratulations, you have one of the top 5 percent most viewed LinkedIn profiles.” Other sites, like TripAdvisor, tell unpaid contributors when their work is being widely read and commented on. These feedback mechanisms increase loyalty.

Because the Times has a paywall and has recently taken new steps to encourage readers to register, we’re even better positioned to collect such data. But we don’t do things that our competitors do, like ask readers whether they would be willing to be contacted by reporters or if they are willing to share some basic information about their hometown, alma mater and industry so we can send them articles about those topics.

When the newsroom does seek reader data, too often we build one-off systems and then we don’t

store the information in ways that can be shared or retrieved later. For example, when Libby Rosenthal tried to email all the people who had commented on her first medical-cost story to let them know about a follow-up, someone had to manually pull every commenter’s email address from registration data. KJ Dell’Antonia paid an assistant out of her own pocket to go through years of her old emails to pull reader addresses to let them know about her newsletter.

Readers, though, are eager to share information if they think it will help us or them. In stories where readers are encouraged to leave their email addresses to signal that they would be willing to speak with Times reporters, almost 90 percent agree. Our competitors have pursued this strategy to build up reader databases that can be used for both reporting and promotion. We should pursue this in a scalable, organized fashion in consultation with the business side.

### MANUAL LABOR

When Libby Rosenthal wanted to alert readers about a new story in her series, someone had to pull the email addresses by hand from comments posted on her previous articles. The exercise pointed to an obvious need to create a tool to collect those addresses automatically and help cement our relationships with readers.



Throughout this article, readers have shared their experiences by responding to questions about their perspective on pregnancy care.  
**Elisabeth Rosenthal, reporter**

#### 728 READER RESPONSES

All Recent Pregnancy Pregnancy Not Covered Medical Profes

**nicole** New York · Pregnancy Covered · 9 months ago

We chose to use a midwife and pursue natural childbirth at a birthing center in New York. Although our midwife had advanced training and 35 years experience, her prenatal care and delivery was not covered under our comprehensive medical insurance. I used a medical doctor, medications and had a c-section with a 1 stay of one week, my coverage would have been 100%.

**lahke** Boston · Pregnancy Covered · 9 months ago

That newborn care in first 6 months was included. Also, are yo outlier cases? A couple of \$4 million dollar premiums will make t

# Strengthening Our Newsroom





## Introduction

It is hard to believe that only seven years ago, The New York Times housed its digital and print operations in separate buildings.

Since that time, the newsroom has undergone a slow, steady evolution. Each year, our traditional and digital journalists become more integrated and more aligned. Each year, our leaders invest more resources into our digital operations. Each year, we produce more groundbreaking digital journalism.

Despite these concerted efforts, we have not moved far enough or fast enough. There is a split in our digital readiness that is making it harder for us to thrive in this shifting landscape.

The digital journalism that readers see each day is exceptional: Graphics, Design and Interactive News have become industry-leading operations and home to some of our most talented journalists. But we've made far less progress in the areas that readers can't see. These are the eat-your-spinach process and structure questions we often perceive as getting in the way of our daily jobs: publishing systems, work-

flow, organizational structures, recruitment efforts and strategy.

As one digital leader at The Times noted, the newspaper sets the gold standard not just because we employ world-class journalists but because we also empower them with a world-class support system. But we have not yet modernized that support system for our digital journalism. "Aspirations have outpaced our technology, templates and workflow," said another digital leader.

We must move quickly. Our competitors, which not long ago were mostly newspapers that lagged far behind us in digital, are growing in number, sophistication and gaining ground.

The challenge for us is that the new battleground is not where we are strongest — the journalism itself — but in this second arena that is largely out of sight. Because our digital competitors adapt faster to changing technology and trends, their lesser journalism often gets more traction than our superior journalism. They are ahead of us in building impressive support systems for digital journalists, and that gap will grow unless we quickly improve our

The Past...



capabilities. Meanwhile, our journalism advantage is shrinking as more of these upstarts expand their newsrooms.

The previous chapter, which explored the urgent need to grow our audience, discussed the importance of experimenting, failing, replicability and investing time in the rote work of structured data and reader data. This chapter focuses more squarely on process and structure questions and lays out three steps — immediate, short-term and long-term — we can pursue to position ourselves to succeed in this changing landscape.

To become more of a digital-first newsroom, we have to look hard at our traditions and push ourselves in ways that make us uncomfortable. Too often we've made changes and then breathed sighs of relief, as if the challenge had been solved. But the pace of change is so fast that the solutions can quickly seem out of date, and the next challenge is just around the corner. For example, Times Topics, once our smartest bet to win search, seems archaic now, and social has emerged as the next critical front for promoting our work. This era demands that even be-

fore we finish something, we need to start planning for version 2.0 and 3.0.

The good news is that our journalism remains rock solid and our financial position is stable. Inside The Times there is widespread enthusiasm — both from the digitally inclined and more traditional journalists — to do what it takes to make this transition. And on the business side, new talent and a shared mission of serving readers has created the opportunity and enthusiasm to work together and find solutions.

“This will be a historic year for the media industry. Technology is disrupting every distribution platform. Consumers are redefining decades-old consumption habits,” wrote Justin Smith, C.E.O. of Bloomberg News, in a recent all-staff memo that echoed similar missives from leaders of media companies over the last several months. “Seizing this opportunity will require long-term investment and a large appetite for transformation, risk, as well as a tolerance for intermittent failure.”

...The Present



# Our Proposals, In Brief

(This page also appeared in the executive summary.)

## **COLLABORATE WITH BUSINESS-SIDE UNITS FOCUSED ON READER EXPERIENCE**

This shift would provide the newsroom, virtually overnight, with many of the necessary skills and insights to take our digital report to the next level. There are a number of departments and units, most of which are considered part of the business side, that are explicitly focused on the reader experience, including Design, Technology, Consumer Insight Group, R&D and Product.

These functions represent a clear opportunity

for better integration. Recent initiatives, including NYT Now, have shown the benefits of collaboration across these departments. We are not proposing a wholesale reorganization. But we do believe simply issuing a new policy — collaborating with our colleagues focused on reader experience is encouraged and expected — would send a powerful signal and unlock a huge store of creative energy and insights.

## **CREATE A NEWSROOM STRATEGY TEAM**

Many newsroom leaders are so consumed with the demands of the daily report that they have little time to step back and think about long-term questions. When we were simply a newspaper, this singular focus made sense. But we must now juggle print, the web, apps, newsletters, news alerts, social media, video, an international edition and a range of stand-alone products.

Our suggestion is to create a small strategy team with the central role of advising the masthead. The

team would keep newsroom leaders apprised of competitors' strategies, changing technology and shifting reader behavior. It would help track projects around the company that affect our digital report, help the masthead set and evaluate priorities and conduct occasional deep dives to answer specific questions. And it would facilitate desk-level experiments and communicate the results back to the newsroom to ensure we're exploring new areas and learning from our efforts.

## **MAP A STRATEGY TO MAKE THE NEWSROOM A TRULY DIGITAL-FIRST ORGANIZATION**

Stories are typically filed late in the day. Our mobile apps are organized by print sections. Desks meticulously lay out their sections but spend little time thinking about social strategies. Traditional reporting skills are the top priority in hiring and promotion. The habits and traditions built over a century and a half of putting out the paper are a powerful, conservative force as we transition to digital — none more so than the gravitational pull of Page One.

Some of our traditional competitors have aggres-

sively reorganized around a digital-first rather than a print-first schedule. The health and profitability of our print paper means we don't yet need to follow them down this path. But it is essential to begin the work of questioning our print-centric traditions, conducting a comprehensive assessment of our digital needs, and imagining the newsroom of the future. This means reassessing everything from our roster of talent to our organizational structure to what we do and how we do it.

# 1 Reader Experience

The wall dividing the newsroom and business side has served The Times well for decades, allowing one side to focus on readers and the other to focus on advertisers. But the growth in our subscription revenue and the steady decline in advertising — as well as the changing nature of our digital operation — now require us to work together.

For the first time, both the newsroom and business side are focused primarily on readers. Exciting new collaborations are already underway. But our historical divide has not fully adjusted to reflect this shift.

We still have a large and vital advertising arm that should remain walled off. But the many business-side departments and roles that are focused on readers — which we refer to as “Reader Experience” throughout this report — need to work more closely with the newsroom, instead of being kept at arm’s length, so that we can benefit from their expertise.

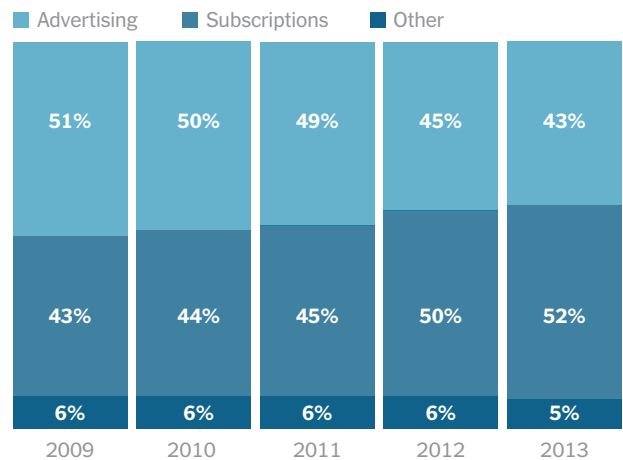
These departments and roles, which include large segments of Design, Technology, Consumer Insight Group, R&D and Product, are now critical to the newsroom’s efforts, possessing the skills and insights we need to grow our audience and take our

digital report to the next level.

Working closely with Reader Experience is vital to making sure the experience of finding and engaging

## READERS ARE DRIVING OUR GROWTH

NYT revenue by source.



## WHY “READER EXPERIENCE”?

The departments that need to interact with both the news and business sides are sometimes called “operational departments,” “neutral departments” or “green-light departments.” But we believe “Reader Experience” better describes the work of these departments. It also underscores why we need to work with them to fulfill the newsroom’s mission of serving its readers.

with our journalism is as impressive as the journalism itself. And greater cooperation will advance our goals of ensuring that our journalism is adjusting to technological and behavioral shifts, reaching a growing audience and landing with maximum impact.

We want to emphasize that we are not advocating a huge new bureaucracy, disruptive reorganization, or a newsroom takeover of these departments. We are simply recommending a policy shift that explicitly declares that Reader Experience roles should be treated as an extension of our digital newsroom — allowing for more communication, close collaboration and cross-departmental career paths.

Such a move would build on the significant improvement in relations between news and business under the leadership of Jill, Mark and Arthur as The New York Times newspaper and company have become one and the same. Embracing Reader Experience as an extension of the newsroom is also the next logical step in Jill’s longstanding goal of creating a newsroom with fully integrated print and digi-

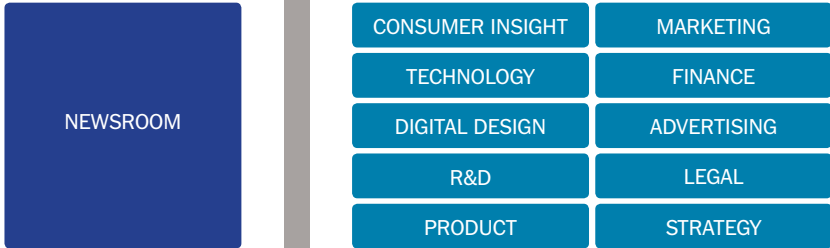
tal operations, since these departments have skills to build on our digital successes.

In the following pages, we will explain the need for a closer relationship between the newsroom and Reader Experience. In the discussion section, we will explore the lack of clear lines in our current process, the hidden costs of our reluctance to work together, and the recent initiatives that have demonstrated the value of collaboration. And in the “how to get there” section, we will offer some suggested guidelines.

The very first step, however, should be a deliberate push to abandon our current metaphors of choice — “The Wall” and “Church and State” — which project an enduring need for division. Increased collaboration, done right, does not present any threat to our values of journalistic independence.

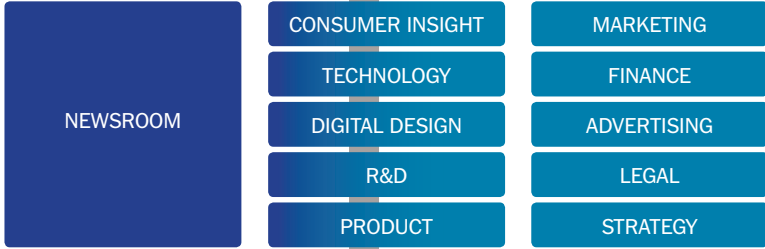
**1. A DIVIDED COMPANY**

If you were to ask many Times journalists to draw an org chart of the company, it might look something like this: the newsroom and “business-side” functions on opposite sides of a wall. Even some groups that are technically part of the newsroom, like Digital Design, often are thought to be on the business side. The two sides are generally discouraged from working together to protect the newsroom from financial pressures.



**2. A SHARED MISSION**

But in reality, many of these “business side” groups perform vital functions that have nothing to do with advertisers. They focus mainly on improving the reader experience. These groups are building new products and the infrastructure to support our journalism. NYT Now, Cooking, and the NYT5 redesign have shown the benefit of working with these colleagues.



# Discussion

Outside the newsroom, there are many departments that are explicitly focused on reader experience. These include Design (crafting the reader experience), Technology (bringing the reader experience to life), Analytics\* (understanding the reader experience), R&D (imagining how the reader experience may change) and Product (crafting a strategy for combining many of these elements into a single, reader-centric experience).

There are many examples of how these departments have helped the newsroom achieve its goals. For example, the newsroom tried and failed for more than a decade to clear the logistical hurdles involved in creating a searchable recipe database. But a product manager helped make it happen in a matter of months.

The newsroom had also struggled to find ways to signal to readers when we had updates to stories that didn't quite merit a new headline or news alert. Design, working with developers, came up with several solutions, including the new Watching feature for the home page and the update bullets on NYT Now.

These colleagues have specialized skills that most editors simply do not possess and they are trained in the processes of turning ideas into successes.

Everyone we interviewed in these groups — at all levels — told us that they could do their jobs better if they were tied in more with the newsroom and our core report. Indeed, the perception that their roles were “on a different side” was a source of confusion and complaint.

“News and business’ doesn’t even capture it any-

more,” said the leader of one of these departments. “These are neutral functions that technically live on the business side, but they are not business functions; they are operational functions. Developers, designers, product managers — you could make the argument that not one of those people belong on the business side.”

At many of our competitors, these units report to the newsroom or to both sides, just as design and technology do at the Times. Indeed, a central reason that digital-first organizations like Huffington Post and BuzzFeed have succeeded with lackluster content is because of their excellent product and technology operations, which are critical parts of their newsrooms.

But at The Times, the current structure dictates that our Reader Experience experts often can only guess at, or simply ignore, the newsroom’s needs.

Consider the Consumer Insight Group and Business Intelligence, which handle analytics, conduct surveys and run focus groups. These groups spend each day thinking about and talking to readers. But they have focused almost exclusively on issues like how to increase subscriptions, largely because the newsroom has rarely called on them for help. There are countless ways this unit could be helpful: Are people more likely to read our new newsletter if it were sent at 6 a.m. or 10 a.m.? Is the newsletter building a loyal audience of return readers? What percentage of those readers make it to the last item?

Design has long been a critical part of our newsroom. Even so, we heard repeatedly from designers who said they were treated as outsiders. They said newsroom editors needed to be more engaged when designers are wrestling with major questions about

The perception that roles were “on a different side” was a source of confusion.

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\*We use “Analytics” as shorthand for Consumer Insight and Business Intelligence.

## Ready, Willing And Able

We have an army of colleagues who are committed to helping deliver cutting-edge journalism and growing our audience. A breakdown of the “Reader Experience” departments:

### **ANALYTICS (Consumer Insight Group and Business Intelligence): ~30 people**

The Analytics groups use data to learn about our readers’ changing habits as well as the effectiveness of our advertising and marketing. They also gather direct feedback from our readers about what they want from our apps and websites. This group translates those needs for Product and Design.

### **DIGITAL DESIGN: ~30 people**

Digital design invents, plans and executes new features for our platforms and articles. They work collaboratively with the newsroom, Product, and Marketing to ensure that every aspect of the reader experience meets our standards for excellence.

### **TECHNOLOGY: ~445 people**

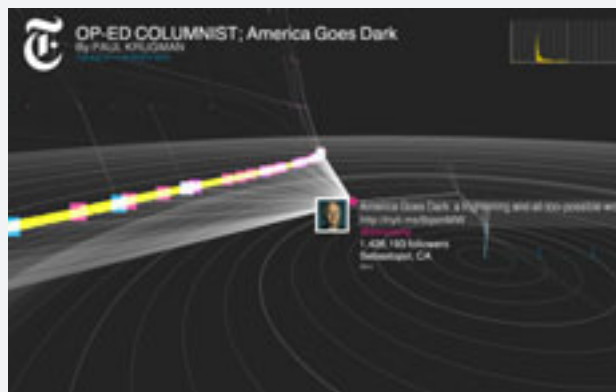
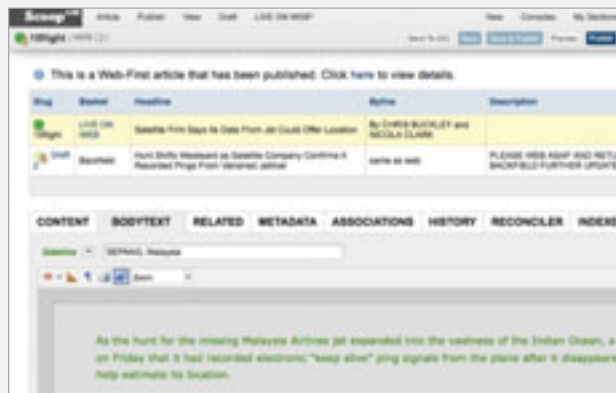
This department includes roughly two dozen teams of engineers who write the code that powers our publishing systems, mobile apps, websites and e-commerce infrastructure. They also build and maintain the digital pipes that keep those applications running smoothly.

### **PRODUCT (Core, New, Video, Ventures): ~120 people**

Product managers serve as the link between the newsroom and the business side, balancing various requirements and interests to ensure the best reader experience in new products like apps or web features. They have come up with ideas like NYT Now and work closely with Design, News, Technology, Marketing, Advertising and Customer Insight.

### **RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT: ~8 people**

The R&D group is a hybrid technology and design group with a long-term focus. They develop tools that aim to revolutionize the way we gather and present news, like using drones to shoot video or delivering morning headlines on a bathroom mirror.





our digital future, like experimenting with personalization, rethinking how we organize our content, and even changing the architecture of stories to meet new needs.

“We can sit around and come up with ideas all day long up here, but they have no legs without editors,” said Ian Adelman, our digital design director.

Collaboration is even more difficult for functions that are part of the business side. Several people in R&D expressed frustration over not being informed of newsroom priorities, leaving them focused mostly on business-side projects for advertising. At times, they have tried to guess what may be helpful to the newsroom, but as a result often end up producing work of limited utility. “I’d like to be able to use real information and not make bad assumptions,” said Matt Boggie, the director of R&D.

Part of the problem is that editors often don’t understand what colleagues who work in these Reader Experience roles can do to help improve our report. More fundamentally, though, there is widespread concern that it is inappropriate to speak with colleagues on the business side’s payroll. “The bottom line is that people don’t know the lines,” explained one masthead editor.

We heard from editors who said the fear of impropriety meant that they actively avoided communicating with business colleagues altogether. Others said they simply waited for approval — even when it slowed down projects — because delays are considered a lesser evil than the appearance of crossing lines without permission.

“People say to me, ‘You can’t let anyone know I’m talking to you about this; it has to be under the radar,’” said a leader in one Reader Experience department. “Everyone is a little paranoid about being seen as too close to the business side.”

This distance means that employees on each side are sometimes unaware that they are duplicating work or taking opposite approaches to the same problem.

The lack of communication can be intentional: We heard from people in these Reader Experience units who felt they had to make sure an idea was complet-

ed and bulletproofed before it could be presented to the newsroom. And vice versa. This runs directly counter to best practices, which call for collaborating as early as possible to solve problems. “Both sides actively don’t communicate stuff from their side,” said one Reader Experience leader. “I’ve been in meetings when people have been very clear about, ‘We don’t want to bring them in yet.’ That’s how it is — there’s the opposite of transparency. There’s not trust.”

A significant amount of distrust and skepticism stems from speaking slightly different languages. People are referring to the same thing when one side says “content” or “brand” and the other side says “journalism” or “The New York Times.” But these word choices foster perceptions that the business side is crassly commercial and uninterested in

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## BUZZFEED’S SECRET WEAPON

Jonah Peretti, the site’s founder, explained how years of close collaboration and investment in the dry stuff — tools, workflow and process — have helped drive the site’s dizzying growth:

“Our tech team, product team, and data science team have built a very powerful publishing platform that allows us to serve our readers better. We have spent years building publishing formats (lists, quizzes, video, longform, short-form, breaking news, photo essays, explainers), stats and analytics, optimization and testing frameworks, integrations with social platforms, native-mobile apps, and a user-friendly, visually pleasing design. This is a massive investment that is very difficult to replicate, it is part of the reason that the best editorial talent wants to join BuzzFeed, and it creates a virtuous cycle where a growing number of talented people use increasingly powerful tools to do their job.”



the very thing that makes The New York Times so special — or that the newsroom is precious about its work and sanctimonious about its values. The fear that a single stray word can derail a conversation is keenly felt, particularly on the business side.

More, better and faster communication is needed. If the masthead were to clearly delineate which groups and employees can communicate and collaborate without first seeking permission, colleagues who reached across the news-business divide could feel more as if they are crossing a state line than navigating a national border.

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## A DEEP BENCH

**Our colleagues in various Reader Experience departments have a vast range of skills to help us grow our audience and improve our journalism.**

The last year in particular has shown the value of collaboration and how quickly productive relationships can be formed when people are working side by side.

The newsroom requested a member of the Consumer Insight Group, James Robinson, to work with Aron Pilhofer on using metrics to help our report. The masthead recently decided to expand the effort.

Similarly, Danielle Rhoades Ha from Public Relations, who is helping promote our journalism, and Kelly Alfieri from Product, who is helping coordinate the many moving parts involved in our coverage of the Oscars, Olympics and other tent-pole events, are now based in the newsroom. And the movement is in both directions — Brian Hamman, previously a key member of Interactive News, is now working on the 9th floor.



[Torben Brooks](#)

Director of User Experience Research

Torben has led more than 1,000 interviews with our readers to glean insights about their news habits. He is an expert at translating the needs of our audience to our designers, editors and product managers.



[Evan Sandhaus](#)

Director of Search, Archives & Semantics

Evan is perhaps the most passionate advocate of structured data at The Times. His team ensures that the journalism we produce is tagged and archived for future use. Evan's work to build TimesMachine has brought life back to millions of old articles.



[Libby Gery](#)

User Experience Strategist

Libby specializes in user experience — the art of understanding reader needs and designing solutions. She has used these skills to redesign NYTimes.com and invent the forthcoming “Watching” home page feature.



[Dan Blumberg](#)

Product Manager

Dan was a producer and host of WNYC's “Morning Edition” before joining The Times to build our “NYT Everywhere” strategy. Dan has formed crucial partnerships with Flipboard, Google and others to help expand our reach.



[Chris Ladd](#)

Senior Software Engineer

Chris is the lead developer for our Cooking app and previously was our lead iPad developer. He is also a former reporter. How many mobile developers can boast an A1 byline in The Boston Globe?



[Reed Emmons](#)

Director of Web Development

Reed is the lead developer of NYT5 and a newcomer to The Times. His team built a flexible workflow system that has sharply improved the speed with which we create, test and deploy new features on the web.

The newsroom mobile team worked closely with their business counterparts to create a proposal for overhauling the company’s mobile strategy. That collaboration gave much more power to recommendations like, “We should take this opportunity to challenge ourselves about our audience strategy, namely that our current approach is focused primarily on monetizing an existing reader base.”

The most promising example has been the collaborative efforts, led by New Products under David Perpich, that are developing innovative experiments in mobile-first journalism (NYT Now) and digital service journalism (Cooking).

Cliff Levy has paired with Ben French on NYT Now and Sam Sifton has joined forces with Alex MacCallum on Cooking, and each group is supported by a multidisciplinary team that includes Design and Technology. Working side by side has increased trust and created a sense of shared mission, captured in their mantra, “Product first, department second.” In the process they have created tools, like drag-and-drop and location recognition, that will elevate our whole report.

“It’s the old world where the publisher and the editor work together,” said Sifton. “They each play their position and support one another. It’s not lions lying down with lambs. It’s a mutually beneficial, symbiotic relationship.”

This stands in sharp contrast to the old models we sometimes default to, in which one side leads a project and then simply hands it to the other — the business side saying, “go make this,” or the newsroom saying, “go sell this.”

The original effort for what was then called Need To Know offers a case study in this unbalanced approach. Initially, the project did not have an editor to help shape the vision, which led to a weaker product at the outset that did not meet our editorial standards. (The late addition of Cliff Levy helped to create a product that is poised to be a journalistic success, regardless of whether it meets the business goals.)

On the other side, the projects being led by David Leonhardt and Carl Hulse were both newsroom-led

initiatives, conceived of and started without input from Reader Experience colleagues. Months into the development of these efforts, Leonhardt and Hulse both worried they were neglecting questions surrounding competitive analysis, audience development, platform-specific strategies, promotion, and user testing. But they felt ill-equipped to answer them.

“I had no idea who to reach out to and it never would have occurred to me to do it,” Leonhardt said. “It would have felt vaguely inappropriate.” (The addition of Kelly Alfieri, a product manager, to the project has helped.)

There is another compelling reason for the newsroom to engage more with Reader Experience: recruiting and retaining talent. We heard many examples of employees who had turned down more money elsewhere to work at The Times — developers, designers and product managers are in particularly high demand in this digital world — because of a belief in the value of our journalism.

However, we risk losing those employees when we wall them off from our journalism. The divide has been jarring for product managers coming from other organizations where they were considered part of the newsroom. One new product manager who relocated to the newsroom said she was shocked when a newsroom colleague told her that her presence was unwelcome because she belonged on “the business side.”

This sense of division has prompted the departure of some of our best developers, exacerbating a tal-

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## SIMILAR GOALS

Paul Smurl, The Times’s general manager of core digital products, recently sent an email to his team defining their mission. It bears some resemblance to the newsroom’s:

“Core Products continuously invents and evolves our core web and app experiences to:

1. Fullfill our journalistic mission,
2. Increase reach among like-minded readers,
3. Build deeper loyal relationships with readers,
4. Grow revenue through paid content, advertising and other services.”

## In Their Own Words: Reader Experience

We asked eight leaders of Reader Experience teams about their relationships with the newsroom and how they'd like to see them improve. Some clear themes emerged — everyone said that collaboration was critically important but said we were currently falling short. And when asked their main points of contact in the newsroom, we heard the same four names: Ian Fisher, Aron Pilhofer, Nathan Ashby-Kuhlman and Jonathan Ellis (who just left). Here are some of their thoughts about the current state of the relationship:

### **How important is working with the newsroom to your group and its ability to contribute fully to The Times success?**

- “We’re ultimately providing all these vessels to get our world-class journalism in the hands of our readers, and the newsroom is crucial for that.”
- “There’s only so much we can do at arm’s length from the newsroom by working through product and technology as proxies.”
- “If we didn’t serve the newsroom, we wouldn’t be serving one of the most important parts of the company. It wouldn’t be doing our job. The fact that we can help the newsroom is a really great reason for people to come work for us.”

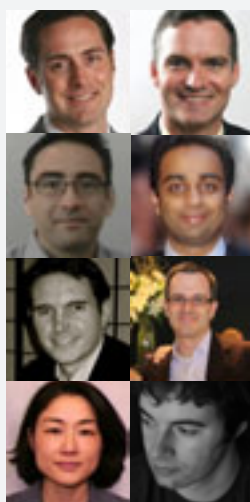
### **How effective is the current collaboration between your group and the newsroom?**

- “There’s a long way to go.”
- “Right now there is room for a more holistic view of what the newsroom thinks is important for our product direction — there isn’t someone I could talk to about that now who has sway.”
- “Our single biggest challenge is we don’t know what our goals are at any given time. If we don’t know what we’re trying to get our users to do, it becomes hard to prioritize effort and evaluate internally.”
- “I don’t yet know, if I had an idea, who I would go to in the newsroom with it.”
- “On NYT Now and Cooking, the editors and product managers have worked really well together. It’s really been the ideal partnership.”

### **How can we improve collaboration?**

- “Nathan and Jonathan are the perfect partners: they know what is wrong and what needs to happen. They are the perfect partners in terms of what you’d want as a thought partner, but it breaks down beyond that.”
- “Ideally we need people in the newsroom who are obsessed with social and mobile and digital.”
- “The newsroom is really easy to work with right now, but I don’t think they’re particularly ambitious. There’s not a lot of oomph in terms of articulating where our products should be going. You get into fiefdoms where there’s a little bit of thinking about it but no bold aspirations.”
- “My biggest concern within the newsroom is I feel a lot of people like Jonathan and Nathan and Andrew understand how digital works, but you go above that and it becomes really murky in terms of understanding.”
- “There’s no corollary within the newsroom to the digital general managers on the business side.”

### **We interviewed:**



**Ian Adelman (left)**

Digital Design

**Paul Smurl (right)**

Core Digital Products

**Brad Kagawa**

Content Management Systems

**Rajiv Pant**

Technology Management

**David Perpich**

New Digital Products

**Matthew Boggie**

Research & Development

**Sonia Yamada**

Consumer Insight Group

**Brian Murphy**

Web and Mobile Engineering

ent deficit in Technology that slows down projects. The vast majority of developers on the eighth floor we spoke with believed they were not allowed to set foot in the newsroom, creating a sense of distance and even alienation from a product they are instrumental in creating. Virtually all meetings among our digital teams occur in the tower of the building.

One developer who started a “developer/newsroom relations committee,” asked to be added to the AHOT distribution list so developers could occasionally attend brown-bag lunches. The request was declined with an explanation of the “church-state divide.” Not long afterward, he left the company.

It is in the newsroom’s interest to help attract the best talent for such roles. “Where we can compete is getting people closer to the mission,” said one high-ranking developer.

Our Reader Experience colleagues are thinking strategically about the very questions at the heart of the newsroom’s digital future. Again and again, we

found that the most forward-thinking approaches to some of our pressing problems were coming from Design and Product.

Tapping into their expertise will only become more critical in coming years, as we wrestle with big questions about transitioning from a print-first to a digital-first organization.

But we cannot simply hand off these problems to Reader Experience. Our role in this partnership is critical to ensuring our efforts reflect our creativity, meet our standards, minimize our conflicts and serve the long-term mission of advancing our journalism and growing our audience.

A brainstorming session for the new cooking app.



# How to Get There

## **CLARIFY WHICH READER EXPERIENCE UNITS SHOULD BE INTERACTING WITH THE NEWSROOM**

- Generally we believe the group should include Product, Design, Technology, Analytics, and R&D. However, not every part of these departments falls into this category – for example, E-Commerce in Technology.
- Create and distribute a clear organizational chart of the Reader Experience departments that includes a contact person and their newsroom counterpart.
- Masthead, desk heads, platform editors, producers and people in charge of verticals, including columnists, should be encouraged to work with Reader Experience without prior permission. For example, someone starting a new product should consult Product to learn the best practices for a successful launch or talk to Consumer Insight to better understand the target audience.
- Masthead editors, desk heads, and platform editors should have blanket authorization to speak to anyone on the business side. Our most senior leaders should be encouraged to learn as much as possible about our strategy for the rapidly changing digital landscape, to ensure that we help shape it from the beginning.

## **ENSURE THE NEWSROOM IS WORKING COLLABORATIVELY WITH READER EXPERIENCE**

- New ventures should be developed with collaborative multi-disciplinary teams whenever possible. A product manager should be assigned to our most important efforts, like The Upshot. A designer and developer should also be assigned to key projects as early as possible in the planning phase. Teams should sit together to foster communication and collaboration.
- Newsroom leaders should work closely with Reader Experience departments to shape digital priorities. People like David Perpich and Paul Smurl should be invited to newsroom strategy meetings on topics like mobile, social and new products.
- Prospective leaders should be encouraged to work on interdisciplinary projects as part of the grooming process. Leaders like Levy, Sifton, Fisher and Ingrassia have said that such exposure has significantly improved their understanding of opportunities and challenges.
- The newsroom should assign a point person for each major product area. Because current responsibilities are not always clear, we often react to discussions rather than help shape them. These point people should engage with the Product leads and inform the masthead of priorities and ongoing work in their areas. This is similar to the role that Jonathan Ellis played with Alex Hardiman on mobile, or that Nathan Ashby-Kuhlman plays with Brad Kagawa on Scoop.

## **HIRE COLLABORATIVELY AND ENCOURAGE EMPLOYEES TO MOVE FREELY BETWEEN THE NEWSROOM AND READER EXPERIENCE**

- Start pilot programs to embed more Reader Experience staff in the newsroom — for example, embed a developer on a particularly innovative desk, place a member of the R&D team on the News Desk, or have a Product manager work with a columnist for two months.
- Digital employees in the newsroom should be allowed to take positions in these departments and vice versa. For example, Brian Hamman recently made the jump from the newsroom to the new product team, and has been an invaluable asset, in part because of the breadth of his experience and his ability to translate the needs of each side. Others have turned down such jobs out of fear that they won't be able to return to the newsroom.
- The newsroom should be engaged in the hiring process for key Reader Experience positions, such as product leads who directly touch our report. Similarly, Reader Experience should lend its expertise when the newsroom is hiring for key digital positions like platforms editors.
- To help recruit digital talent, hiring managers should emphasize that shaping the presentation of our content is a vital and valued journalistic contribution.
- Orientation for new employees in the newsroom and Reader Experience should be integrated, exposing everyone to the full range of our reader-focused efforts and the values of our journalism.

## **COMMUNICATE THE NEW MESSAGE FOR COLLABORATION BROADLY**

- Reader Experience employees should be added to both newsroom and business-side communications and considered welcome at all events.
- The newsroom should regularly send emails to all our Reader Experience colleagues about recent accomplishments and ongoing priorities, and vice versa.
- The executive editor, C.E.O. and publisher should communicate reader-focused goals and priorities broadly to foster a sense of shared mission among the newsroom and Reader Experience groups.

## 2

# Newsroom Strategy Team

Not so long ago, the masthead could focus almost entirely on the newspaper.

Today, running The New York Times newsroom means not just creating a daily print report, but also running a huge web operation, overseeing a growing array of mobile apps, newsletters, news alerts and social media, as well as guiding an international edition, a video operation and a range of new stand-alone products. As Jill said recently: “If you even stop to catch your breath, you’re falling behind.”

The masthead, in particular, is being asked to fill two roles: to oversee the day-to-day needs of the news report and newsroom operations and, simultaneously, to assess the future and chart a new course.

In recent months, the masthead has made the time to focus on the long-term needs of the newsroom — holding an off-site retreat to address pressing big-picture needs, reassessing the mission of the magazine, crafting a plan for improving our mobile report and creating initiatives such as this group, focused on innovation.

But strategy is such a pressing need at this juncture that it should become a permanent newsroom function, with dedicated staff.

Our recommendation is to create a newsroom strategy team that serves as an adviser to the masthead. We envision a small newsroom team that

would seek to support the masthead in its goals, serving to better arm The Times’s leaders with insights and analysis that will make their growing jobs easier.

The core function would be ensuring the masthead is apprised of competitors’ strategies, changing technology and shifting reader behavior. The team would track projects around the company that affect our digital report, ensuring the newsroom is at the table when we need to be.

This team would include people with strong backgrounds in journalism, technology, user experience, product and analytics. That expertise would help the masthead evaluate and set priorities in critical but less familiar areas like our content-management system, platform functionality and audience development.

The team would serve as a catalyst for launching desk-level experiments in these areas and be charged with communicating those results to the newsroom. It would also provide valuable training ground for future leaders by offering a deeper look at the challenges and opportunities facing The Times.

This team would be distinct from the business-side strategy team. But like that team, it would not have an operational role. It would be a neutral internal adviser dedicated to improving everyone’s game.



# Discussion

The demands of a daily newspaper create a powerful gravitational pull on editors' attention, drawing their focus to the short-term — tomorrow's front page, the tick-tock for Sunday's paper, a project launching next month.

Across the board, newsroom leaders told us that they are so consumed with the demands of the daily report that they have trouble finding the time to step back. In addition to the daily news demands, there are the daily crises and a packed schedule of standing meetings.

Perhaps the most telling example is Ian Fisher, the masthead editor in charge of both web and mobile reports. An average workday for Ian involves writing headlines, scanning the wires, tracking breaking news and making sure that stories are appearing correctly on mobile. That leaves him with less bandwidth for bigger strategic questions about our digital operations.

There are others who are explicitly charged with thinking about the big picture, of course: Tom on design, Aron on digital, Larry on new initiatives, and Janet on newsroom management. But these are some of the busiest people in the newsroom. Perhaps the only ones with more on their plates are Jill and Dean.

All this helps explain why Rich Meislin, who took the buyout several years ago, remains such a critical resource, providing information, insight and counsel about digital issues to a range of people in the newsroom and on the business side. In addition to having a deep well of institutional knowledge, he also has time. "They go to Rich because he's available and because he's not dealing with the daily report," said a masthead editor.

Similarly, desk heads told us they have little time to step back. "I don't even have time to think about these things," one said. Another suggested that the relentless work of assembling the world's best news report can also be "a form of laziness, because it is work that is comfortable and familiar to us, that we

know how to do. And it allows us to avoid the truly hard work and bigger questions about our present and our future: What shall we become? How must we change?"

This focus on the daily report also extends into our digital ranks. The mobile team, which should be one of our most forward-looking groups, spends so much time making fixes to ensure all our journalism appears in our apps that they say they have little left to think about how the mobile report should be distinctive or how to harness new technologies. That helps explain why it took a group removed from the daily flow of the newsroom — NYT Now — to fundamentally rethink our mobile presentation.

The people who have spent the most time thinking about the challenges of our digital future — thorny topics like personalization, and glaring needs like better data collection — can be found upstairs, most often in Product, Design and Strategy. They are also spending countless hours studying and interviewing our competitors and our readers, and capturing and sharing their insights in detailed reports. But their initiative means the newsroom is often reacting to, rather than driving, the work on big questions that are critical to our future.

"We've abdicated completely the role of strategy," said one masthead editor. "We just don't do strategy. The newsroom is really being dragged behind the galloping horse of the business side."

The business side doesn't want this imbalance. They want to work alongside the newsroom to improve the core of what we do. And they know that if the newsroom were to become a glorified service desk — simply providing the content that fills the packages that other groups are creating — that would not be good for the institution.

"I want a partner who has vision," said the head of one Reader Experience department. "We wind up focused a lot on how to get things out the door and make them successful but not spending enough time on the one- to three-year horizon."

We believe a strategy group can help reset the balance in the following ways:

### TRACKING THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

This work is critical but time-consuming. Over the last six months, we have spent countless hours reading about the latest industry shifts in digital media. Understanding some developments often required technical knowledge, and at times, we have relied on experts to explain the implications.

Staying on top of these trends, particularly in today's faster-moving media world, requires finding sources, often in leadership roles at other companies, and cultivating ongoing conversations. Alexis Madrigal, the tech writer and digital strategist at The Atlantic, told us how the company was succeeding on mobile through a focus on Facebook and direct emails. Kevin Delaney, the head of Quartz, provided his insights on how to integrate and use developers

in the newsroom, and Laura Evans, the former head of analytics at The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal, helped us understand how those publications are changing — which shifts we should mirror and which we should ignore. These relationships also helped us identify promising digital talent.

“I talk to [Nick] Denton all the time. We both talk to Jacob [Weisberg]. We're constantly telling each other what's working, what we've experimented with,” said Adam Moss, the editor of New York magazine, referring to the heads of Gawker and Slate. “About half the choices I make come about because someone from another site tells me something worked, and so we adopt it.”

It's important to capture these conversations as well, so insights can be widely shared. The business-side strategy group shared with us an 80-page tran-

**At Circa, it's not about 'chunkifying' news but adding structure**  
by David Cole  
Published Feb. 7, 2014 9:00 am  
Updated Feb. 8, 2014 12:47 pm

You sometimes hear what we do at Circa described as "chunkifying the news and presenting it in mobile-friendly chunks. And while on the surface this observation is correct, it misses the bigger picture.

Yes, each "point" of Circa is a single unit of news — something like a fact, quote, statistic, event or image. We thread these po

**NEWS FEED**  
A strategy team could keep the masthead apprised of important industry developments.

**WSJ completes real-time news desk aimed at "raising" digital game**  
by Chris Roush  
January 21, 2014

**CAPITAL**  
**Washington Post open outpost in New York**

**digitalfirst MEDIA**  
Home | Pro

Digital First Media's more than 800 multi-platform products reach

**Press Releases**

**Digital First Media Announces Project Unbolt**  
Wednesday, January 29, 2014

*Focuses On Reimagining Newsgathering And Publishing Process*

New York, NY (January 29, 2014) — [Digital First Media](#) today announced Project Unbolt, a new newsroom culture that will result in a truly Digital First newsroom.

The Washington Post is expanding its New York footprint with the creation of a

script of interviews about social strategy that they conducted with the leaders at various competitors. They provided us with detailed assessments of the mobile functions offered by our competitors, which quickly clarified where we need to catch up.

A newsroom strategy group should capture, distill and explain the most important developments and insights to emerge from articles and interviews, perhaps in weekly emails to the masthead. Such information could also be shared with desk heads and deputies to ensure that we're arming the next generation of leaders with the knowledge they need.

The strategy group could also be responsible for tracking and sharing the most important work being done inside the building.

Several masthead editors told us there are so many initiatives that it can be hard to know when we need to claim our seat at the table. In recent months,

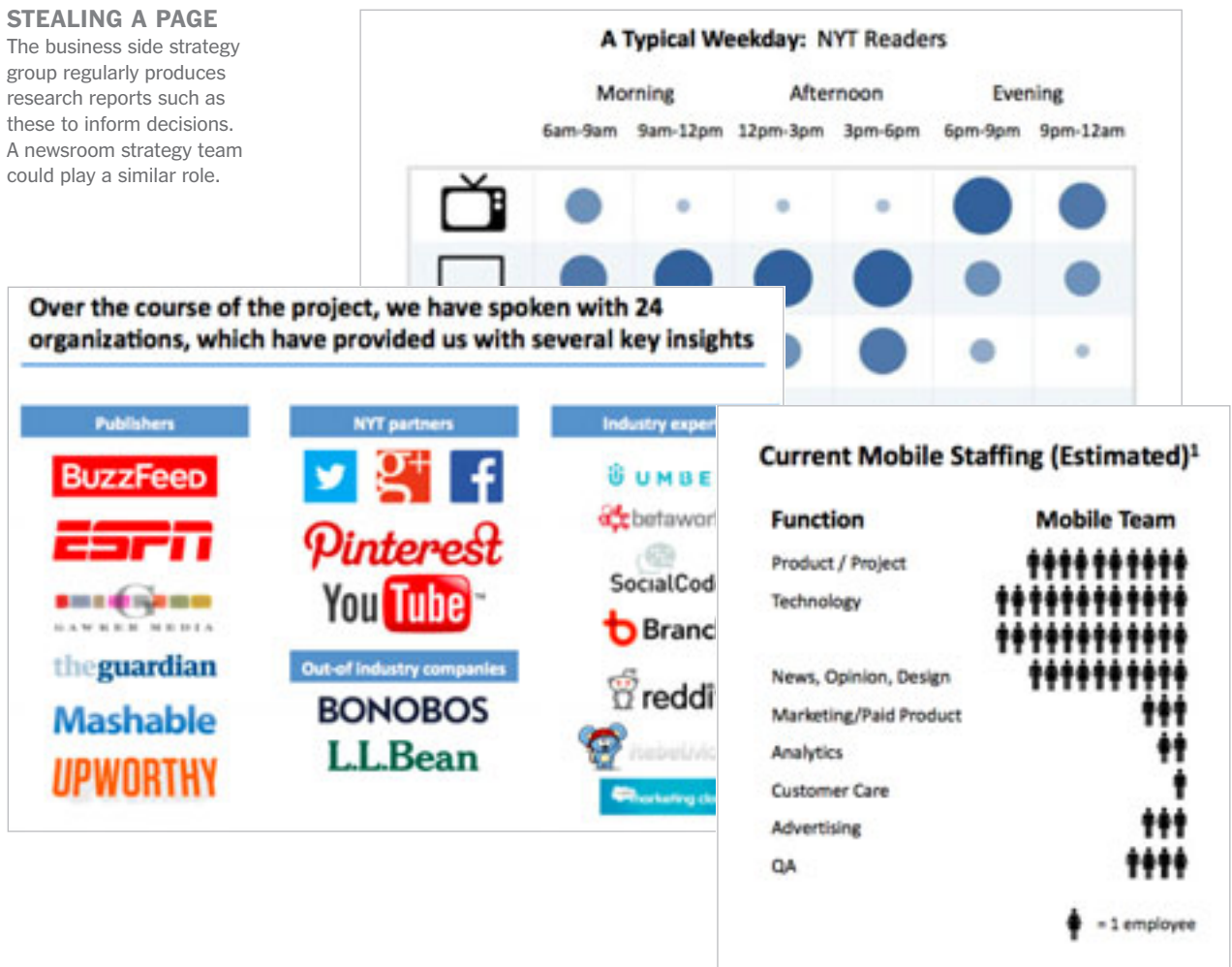
the masthead has been left out of several important studies that will affect the newsroom, including a marketing-led exploration of our audience-development efforts and a detailed assessment of our data capabilities and needs. In both cases, our senior leaders were unaware that these conversations were happening, despite the newsroom's growing interest in both subjects.

In other cases, we knew about meetings but failed to send a senior newsroom leader to represent our interests. In one instance, several of our business-side colleagues had to speak up on our behalf to keep the Leonhardt project from being pushed down the priority list.

A newsroom strategy group could ask for regular updates on the projects and priorities from various business units. And it could help our masthead leaders determine when we need to get involved.

### STEALING A PAGE

The business side strategy group regularly produces research reports such as these to inform decisions. A newsroom strategy team could play a similar role.



## The Right Way To Fail

Failure is not something we're comfortable with in the newsroom. And for good reason: getting our journalism right is the foundation of our success. But that mindset can limit our appetite for and tolerance of risk. Our aversion to failure can also lead to wasted resources and prevent us from learning valuable lessons.

For example, our mobile app, "The Scoop," and our international home page have failed to gain traction with readers, yet we still devote resources to them. We ended the Booming blog but kept its newsletter going. These ghost operations distract time, energy and resources that could be used for new projects. At the same time, we haven't tried to wring insights from these efforts. "There were no metrics, no targets, no goals to hit and no period of re-evaluation after the launch," said a digital platforms editor, about our international home page.

When we do shut down projects, the decisions are made quietly and rarely discussed, to protect the reputations of the people who ran them. As a result, lessons are forgotten and the staffers involved become more risk-averse.

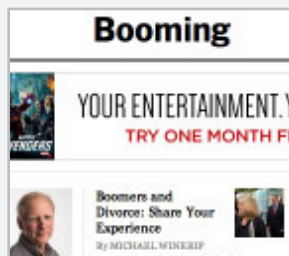
By contrast, the business side conducts reviews of big projects to assess what worked and what didn't and then builds those insights into future efforts.

Failures should be recast as important learning opportunities — that's the approach at most tech firms. We should publicly acknowledge when new projects are discontinued and have an open conversation about what we learned from that investment of time and resources.

And we should take heart. Perhaps the best example of learning from a failure in the industry can be found inside our own building. Times Select was a stunning failure, and was mocked and derided in all corners of the Internet. In 2007, Gawker called it "the world's stupidest pay-for-content barrier to a good user experience."

But the knowledge gleaned from that effort helped us score the single biggest journalistic win in

a decade: the metered subscription model. Our early "failure" was critical to our later success, providing many of the critical lessons about how to structure and roll out our digital subscriptions.



### 'WEEDING THE GARDEN'

One of the sharpest insights we heard about failure came from Bob Pittman, the C.E.O. of Clear Channel. He described the importance of continually "weeding the garden" in organizations, to ensure that marginal ideas are not kept alive simply because of inertia:

"If I try 10 new things and let's say two are clear winners and two are clear losers. That means I've got six in between. What do I do with those? Most organizations let everything live except the clear losers. And what happens over time is that stuff in between doesn't really help you. It takes up a lot of resources. It's confusing. It's muddy.

"And if you let that stuff build up, then pretty soon my whole organization is basically mediocrity and gunk. So if you can bring yourself to say, 'I'm only going to let clear winners live. I'm going to take the resources I put for the other eight things and try again,' you can keep a crisp organization. And so we always talk about weeding the garden. Part of it is being honest with yourself. What really is a winner?

"It sort of goes back to the idea of don't be afraid of mistakes. You'll make a lot of them. I think a lot of people only want to keep it at two mistakes out of 10, instead of eight out of 10, because they want to keep their batting average better. But nobody's counting how many mistakes you make."

## ASSESSING NEEDS AND SETTING PRIORITIES

Our top editors have razor-sharp instincts for making tough choices about priorities in news coverage. When big news breaks, we know how many reporters to put on the story, and we can quickly work up five-day coverage plans.

But the newsroom leadership doesn't always have the expertise needed to identify, prioritize and set plans for meeting our top digital needs. Sometimes this means we are less ambitious in our efforts, sometimes this means we have less of a sense of how to use our limited resources, and this almost always means we are too reliant on front-line colleagues with deep expertise.

The newsroom strategy team, with a range of backgrounds in the group, could help. Having traditional journalists working alongside people versed in user experience, technology and product management would allow for holistic and nuanced examinations of problems and solutions needed to push our digital efforts to the next level.

For example, our content-management system may be our single most important platform, since it structures our work in print, on the web and on mobile. But desks and producers spend countless hours on one-time fixes to the platform, rather than permanent solutions, even when it is clear the problems will emerge again and again. One senior member of

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## A CANDID, NEUTRAL VOICE

In recent months, we've watched the newsroom move inexorably to launch a new product, the Washington morning tipsheet, even though almost every person involved questioned the approach, from those working on it to the top of the masthead. However, few wanted to publicly question the idea. It may turn out to be a success but we believe a more candid discussion would only help accomplish that goal. This is one of several occasions when we found widespread concern about a strategy but a reluctance to air it openly. We believe a strategy group could help give voice to such concerns.

the news desk said that leaders would be "horrified" if they understood the situation, but he felt he lacked the ability to translate the problems for colleagues without a deep background in content-management systems. We heard essentially the same complaint from those in mobile, Social, Design and Interactive News.

The strategy group could help in these cases by assessing the problems, explaining the need and then offering a range of solutions to the masthead.

A strategy group could also help provide a clear point of contact for leaders looking to innovate, supplying them with the assistance, contacts and best practices to ensure they are launching new efforts in a way that makes them more likely to succeed. "I don't even know who to ask," said another department head.

Several desk heads and masthead editors mentioned that "mobile" and "social" and "video" were all considered priorities at various points. But without tactical recommendations for acting on them, everyone re-focused on the print report, where their strengths lie and where the rewards are easily identified. "We'll do it," said one department head, about implementing the digital priorities. "But we have to be led."

The strategy group could help the masthead both create and communicate a clear newsroom digital priority list. And it could help define what questions should be answered before new initiatives are launched. What are we trying to achieve? How many people will be required? How will we measure success? What can we learn from competitors? And how do we get better over time?

"We need a vetting process for ideas," said a masthead editor. "What are the ground rules for deciding what's worth doing? What are our goals?"

## RUNNING EXPERIMENTS AND SHARING RESULTS

There has been a longstanding tension between dispersing and centralizing our digital talent. The choices that result affect the ebb and flow of experimentation in the newsroom.

Right now, we have consolidated digital innovation in desks like Graphics, Interactive News, Social and Design. This approach has its advantages, ensuring excellent quality control and the highest-caliber work. But one disadvantage is that news desks, particularly web producers, lack the opportunity to experiment digitally on their own.

This approach makes scaling up our digital efforts far more difficult. To succeed in the coming years, news desks need to be building digital skills. Indeed, a major reason producers have seen their access to tools and templates curtailed is because of the concerns that the editors on these desks are unable to recognize substandard work.

### SPEED WINS

When we have good ideas, we should treat them with the urgency of a news scoop. Otherwise, we risk letting our competitors get there first. A year and a half ago, Andrew Phelps presented his bosses with a tool he developed: an automated, visual homepage of the day's report. Editors were enthusiastic, but there was no structure to support the initiative and after several months he gave up. More than a year later, an identical featured appeared on The Washington Post website. Immediately, the NYT business side put out a request for a designer or developer interested in building a visual homepage.

This tension between quality control and expanded digital capabilities has been difficult to resolve. While we have skewed towards centralization, our competitors are doing the opposite: aggressively dispersing digital talent throughout their newsrooms with the understanding that people will make mistakes as they build new skills.

A strategy group could help provide conceptual help, structure and guidance to experiments launched at the desk level, allowing more producers, editors and reporters to innovate and learn. They would be familiar with the tools and talents in the newsroom, Technology, Product and Analytics that could help bring such ideas into reality.

This would allow us to use desks as laboratories to answer pressing questions and to develop best practices. Examples include experimenting with different newsletter designs, testing how to best resurface evergreen content, and trying new approaches to promoting a story. One priority for the strategy group would be replicability – encouraging experiments and creating tools and templates that can then be easily shared with the rest of the newsroom.



## Truth Be Told...

During more than 200 interviews, we heard a lot of unvarnished opinions from our colleagues about how the newsroom and business side could work together more effectively.

One popular theme: There are times when each side needs to think a bit more like the other.

### **BUSINESS** **A GREATER FOCUS ON THE LONG-TERM**

Long-term growth must be a higher priority for the business side. This point came up often, not just from newsroom leaders but from business-side leaders, too. A stubborn perception remains — even though it may not be accurate in some cases — that too many incentives on the business side reward short-term goals.

One indicator is the troubling decline in our readership. This is even true on mobile, where our focus on turning casual readers into subscribers led us to tinker with the article meter to meet immediate revenue goals.

Some of this short-term focus is understandable, given the strain on our finances in recent years. But our more solid financial footing allows us to re-emphasize long-term thinking.

It should be noted that Mark has explicitly championed such a shift. But a focus on immediate revenue — “line of sight ROI” — remains a concern. We were repeatedly told by members of strategy, marketing, product, technology and other key divisions that business leaders sometimes struggle to value things that can’t be easily quantified and plugged into a financial model, starting with our readers. For example, several people told us that this approach led us to under-invest in social media, which offers ambiguous returns even though it is an increasingly critical method of distributing our journalism and building audience loyalty.

“Not every proposal should have to fit neatly into a financial model,” said one member of the strategy team. “We need a mindset shift that allows us to invest in things we think are important simply because we think they’re important.”

### **NEWSROOM** **TIME TO TACKLE HARD PROBLEMS**

Both business-side and newsroom leaders said that the newsroom could do a better job of tackling the trickiest questions head-on. The rapidly changing landscape demands innovation but too often we put off setting strategy around controversial issues.

The newsroom’s role as steward of our institutional integrity ensures that it retains veto power over anything that could be journalistically fraught. But that also means we must take a more active role in leading strategy in areas that offer the most promise — and yes, peril — for our digital future.

One reason for our caution is that the newsroom tends to view questions through the lens of worst-case scenarios. Even carefully phrased suggestions about metrics or personalization have prompted responses like, “I don’t want to turn our home page into a collection of stories about cats and celebrities.” Four years ago, just floating the idea of using bullet points in mobile article summaries led to someone being accused of “dumbing down our report.”

Because we set these questions aside, our business colleagues or Reader Experience departments have often stepped in to fill the void. And the newsroom has historically reacted defensively by watering down or blocking changes, prompting a phrase that echoes almost daily around the business side: “The newsroom would never allow that.”

An example of the risk of this hands-off approach became apparent in recent months. The business side conducted a wholesale rethinking of our audience-development strategies, and the marketing department planned to turn to the newsroom to implement many of the final recommendations. The newsroom was not consulted in advance.

# How to Get There

## **BUILD A STRONG TEAM**

- We believe the team should have, collectively, strong backgrounds in journalism, technology, user experience, product and analytics.
- The team should have a clear leader. To ensure it is cohesive and nimble, the team should be no larger than six people. Members should be collaborative problem-solvers, gifted at persuasion and eager to work with experts and novices.
- The team could include permanent and rotating positions, which would allow for continuity while also bringing in new ideas.
- The group offers a unique opportunity to groom future leaders. It also offers an opportunity to tap into different desks and create new evangelists for collaboration.
- The leader of the strategy group should report to a single person on the masthead who is senior enough to provide the necessary carrots and sticks to implement recommendations. But the group should serve the whole masthead.

## **TRACK AND ADVISE**

- The group's central mission should be to ensure that newsroom leaders are apprised of changing technology and shifting reader behavior.
- The group could track digital competitors' websites, apps and strategies and conduct regular interviews with other companies to assess thinking and best practices. These could be compiled into weekly reports for the masthead and other senior leaders.
- The group could provide regular training sessions for newsroom leaders about the changing digital landscape. One example is assembling speakers from other digital publications. Another is arranging a "reader insights boot camp" to help desk heads understand how readers engage with their sections.
- The group could serve as another contact point for departments on the business side to ensure that the newsroom is aware of all projects and priorities throughout the company. They could communicate developments to the masthead with recommendations of when and how the newsroom should participate.



## HELP IDENTIFY AND COMMUNICATE PRIORITIES

- The team could use its expertise and knowledge of the competitive landscape to help the masthead evaluate and set priorities in areas like audience development and publishing systems.
- It could help communicate digital and innovation goals in the newsroom and on the business side. It could help assess the resources needed to achieve each goal and make sure they have specific metrics for success. The team could track initiatives and keep the masthead informed of wins and where we are underperforming.
- The team could also be a contact point for reporters and editors with innovative ideas who need guidance on execution. This could also include explaining why some ideas aren't being pursued, so that people can let go of pet projects that are going nowhere.

## WORK WITH DESKS TO FOSTER INNOVATION

- The team could arrange “embeds” in the newsroom for business-side units focused on reader experience.
- The team could help facilitate efforts with Audience Development to design and launch desk-level experiments, and then communicate results back to the newsroom.

# 3 Digital First

We must begin an ongoing assessment of our print traditions and digital needs.

In the coming years, The New York Times needs to accelerate its transition from a newspaper that also produces a rich and impressive digital report to a digital publication that also produces a rich and

impressive newspaper. This is not a matter of semantics. It is a critical, difficult and, at times, painful transformation that will require us to rethink much of what we do every day.

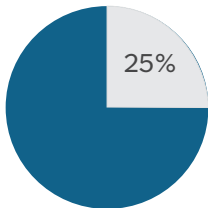
Our leaders know this and we have taken steps in these directions. But it has become increasingly clear that we are not moving with enough urgency. This may be the single most important long-term challenge facing the newsroom and its leaders.

There are factors that, understandably, slow this tricky transition. More than three quarters of our advertising and subscription revenue still comes from the newspaper, and most of our employees have spent their careers building skills to succeed in print. But the huge majority of our readers are digital, and this represents our single biggest opportunity for growth.

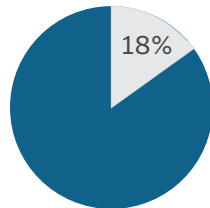
As a business, this is an extremely difficult bal-

## MOST REVENUE STILL COMES FROM PRINT...

■ digital ■ print

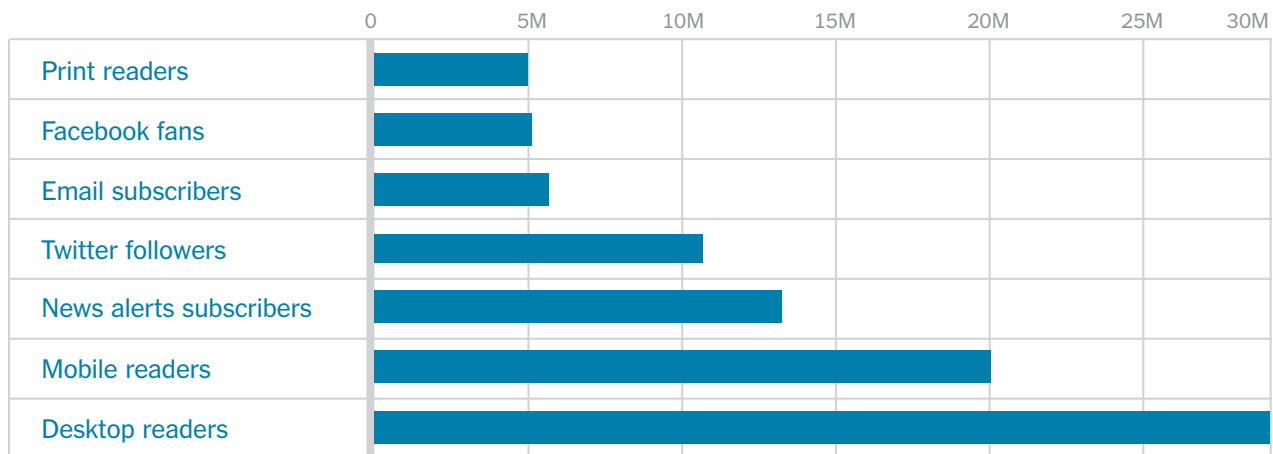


**Advertising** accounts for \$667M, of which \$170M is digital and \$497M is print.



**Circulation** accounts for \$824M, of which \$150M is digital and \$674M print.

## ...BUT PRINT ACCOUNTS FOR A SMALL PERCENTAGE OF OUR READERS



ancing act. It is just as tricky for the newsroom. The experience of putting out the newspaper informs almost every element of how we do our jobs, from the people we hire to how they work to what they produce. These assumptions — based on the newspaper’s fixed dimensions and hard deadlines — are so baked into our days that it is easy to overlook their artificial limitations or the new possibilities we could embrace.

“The question of what is Timesian has been both the saving grace and artificial limiter of the newsroom,” said one masthead editor.

The continued profitability of the newspaper has bought us time. But that head start is eroding. Several billionaires have pledged parts of their fortunes to creating digital newsrooms. Start-ups, backed by venture capital, are redefining digital media. And traditional competitors have moved aggressively to remake themselves as “digital first.”

“The newsroom of the future is not the current one dragged into it,” said John Paton, the CEO of the local newspaper chain that renamed itself Digital First Media. “It is going to be re-built from the ground up.”

We all wish there were a ready-made playbook for

this shift. But the only real solutions will come from critical questioning, experimentation and a devotion to iterative change. The first step is an open-ended recommendation: The newsroom should begin an intensive review of its print traditions and digital needs — and create a road map for the difficult transition ahead. We need to know where we are, where we’re headed and where we want to go.

That means aggressively questioning many of our print-based traditions and their demands on our time, and determining which can be abandoned to free up resources for digital work .

That also means assessing our digital needs, creating new digital leadership posts and upgrading digital talent across the newsroom, especially with people from other innovative organizations and non-traditional competitors.

Even more important than policy or structural changes is that the rank and file of the newsroom take ownership of this transformation. This means sending clear signals about goals, changing reward structures and basing promotions on behavior that moves us toward our digital future.

“If you wait around for a generation of reporters to do this naturally,” the editor of one competing news organization said, “You are going to be left behind.”



#### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE ‘DIGITAL FIRST?’

Around the newsroom, this phrase often is used to refer to publishing articles on the web before putting them in print. But outside our walls, digital-first is an all-encompassing strategy.

Digital-first means the top priority is producing the best possible digital report, free from the constraints of the newspaper. The last step is repackaging the best of that digital report for the next day’s paper.

This transition requires rethinking staffing, structure and work processes from top to bottom.

Companies with no legacy platform have the advantage of being able to focus entirely on creating the best digital reports. For newspaper companies, making this transition can be so challenging that several of our competitors have handed responsibility for the daily paper to small, stand-alone teams so that everyone else can focus on digital.

# Discussion

Nathan Ashby-Kuhlman, our senior editor for digital operations, recently sent a provocative email to the leaders of our digital newsroom. Calling the print paper “a powerfully conservative force” in the newsroom, he warned we were not doing enough to prepare for our digital future.

The newsroom, he noted, is still governed by the traditions and limitations of print, and he made a table-pounding case that we should create content for a digital report and then use the best work from that effort to put out a print edition.

“We don’t need to get there by the end of 2014,” he wrote. “But because this will be one of the most difficult transitions The New York Times’s newsroom has ever made, it is urgent to start mapping out a strategy.”

Years of private complaints around the building suddenly had a very public forum. Others quickly weighed in.

A top member of our technology team complained that our changes so far have been “incremental and reactive,” and he called for a “holistic look at the way we work — job descriptions, tasks, workflows and organization — to make us the flexible, adaptable organization we will need to be in order to survive.”

A top platform editor warned that print revenue was more likely to fall off a cliff than continue its steady decline. “We have already made great strides in becoming one integrated, print-and-digital newsroom,” he wrote. “But we actually haven’t gotten far enough. It’s not enough to be an ‘integrated’ newsroom. We have to become a digital newsroom, a small subset of which produces a print product.”

And the new executive director for core digital products called for spending “at least an hour every week for, I suppose, ever,” discussing this transition. “We start by painting a picture of where we

want to be 1, 5, 10, 20 years from now — a best guess is fine and we can adjust as we go — and then map out the steps towards realizing that vision.”

It’s not as if the newsroom has been standing still. Digital is now part of the newsroom ecosystem. In some departments, like Graphics, Digital Design and Interactive News, we have industry-leading operations, and the department heads have been elevated to the masthead. And just this month, the afternoon Page One meetings were recast to be more of “a look ahead to coverage for digital delivery.”

But to those charged with worrying about the newsroom’s future, it’s clear we’re just a fraction of the way there. And compared to many of our competitors, we’re falling behind.

## **‘DIGITAL FIRST’ AS A MANTRA FOR CHANGE**

It may sound like a buzz-phrase, but “digital first” — as a strategy, a process and a mindset — is taking hold across the industry. New companies are using it to lure our best journalists, promising them the technology and talent to succeed without old constraints.

“It’s so rare to get an opportunity not only to build something from the ground up, but to build it without the pressure of producing content on a daily basis,” said Eric Bates, who left his role as executive editor of Rolling Stone to join First Look Media.

Some of our competitors have ruthlessly reorganized in the last two years around digital and grown significantly. “Once everyone at the senior level really understood this, it prompted a huge intervention, big editorial changes,” said the head of The Financial Times’s digital operations.

Over the last year, USA Today has been integrating digital staff — like developers and social editors — into each desk. Now, a small team organizes and designs the print paper. “The best online journalism

## Owning The Story

When Michael Sam, the college football player, decided to announce to the world that he is gay, he brought the story first to The Times and ESPN. Our package was well-executed and memorable, but some of our more digitally focused competitors got more traffic from the story than we did.

If we had more of a digital-first approach, we would have developed in advance an hour-by-hour plan to expand our package of related content in order to keep readers on our site longer, and attract new ones. We would have been thinking as hard about “second hour” stories as we do about “second day” stories.

Here is what a digital roll-out might look like:



Chris Lee/Associated Press

### College Football Standout Says He Is Gay

By JOHN BRANCH 55 minutes ago

Michael Sam, who played for the University of Missouri and is expected to be chosen early in the N.F.L. draft, could become the league's first openly gay player.

- 62 Comments
- **Macur: It's Time for the N.F.L. to Welcome a Gay Player**

**1.** Alert the Opinion section in advance to line up a reaction. Instead, we published a column a day later.

The Opinion Pages | OP-ED COLUMNIST

### Panic in the Locker Room!

FEB. 10, 2014



Frank Bruni

A news flash for every straight man out there: You've been naked in front of a gay man.

In fact you've been naked, over the course of your life, in front of many gay men, at least if you have more than a few years on you. And here you are — uninjured, uncorrupted, intact. The earth still spins. The sun rises and sets.

Maybe it was in gym class, long ago. Maybe at the health club more recently. Or maybe when you played sports at

EMAIL

FACEBOOK

**2.** Resurface our 2011 “Coming Out” series. Since the series tapped into gay communities, ask the editor for those contacts. We didn’t find a link to this series in our Michael Sam coverage.

The New York Times U.S.

### Coming Out

Helping and supporting gay and lesbian athletes and their families. The military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy has been repealed, and the debate over same-sex marriage continues to divide the country. Against this backdrop, many U.S.A.T. athletes wonder how accepting society will be, as they come out.

- About Coming Out
- A Guide With Questions
- Coming Out: A Personal Story
- "I Feel There's No Transgender"
- Finding Out Is Different
- Recent Reader Submissions (18)

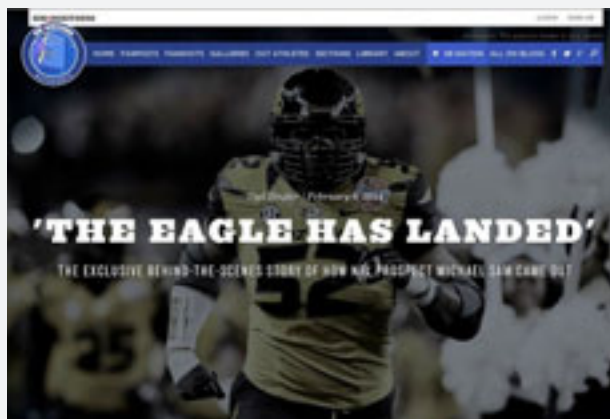
**3.** Organize a Google+ hangout with another openly gay athlete. We later found numerous online video and television appearances with Jason Collins, an openly gay NBA player, talking about his friendship with Michael Sam.



**4.** Assign a reporter to live-blog Twitter reactions. We found several sites that beat us at assembling the reaction. Despite not having an exclusive, Sports Illustrated was the first to report on a backlash among NFL executives.



**5.** Post a short backstory on how we got the interview. SB Nation reported the backstory of our exclusive, and branded it "exclusive." Its story dominated Twitter and Google News.



#### OTHER SUGGESTIONS:

- Implement a social promotion strategy the minute The Times posts the story, including reaching out to gay communities and influencers, via LinkedIn, Facebook and others.
- Reach out to Times reporters with large Twitter followings, especially those with prominence in gay and sports communities, to tweet the story to their followers.
- Pre-produce video highlights to put clips on sites like Instagram and Twitter.
- Create tools to become a platform for the reaction after the news breaks. For example, we could create an interactive quiz or survey related to the draft, or start a moderated discussion thread with prominent figures.

goes into print at the end of the day,” said David Calaway, the editor-in-chief. “But nothing is native for print.”

The Financial Times was spurred to take similar steps after its leaders studied changing readership trends and spent several weeks in Silicon Valley. They cut the number of editions from three to one. They moved 200 night production staffers to normal daytime hours. They built up engagement, data and breaking news teams. And they put print in the hands of a small group of editors.

“You have to shift the balance of power and work backwards,” said Lionel Barber, the editor.

Another company, Digital First Media, recently announced “Project Unbolt.” This initiative, underway at dozens of newspapers (formerly known as Journal Register and Media News), is meant to transform “every process, every workflow step.” Steve Buttry, the company’s Digital Transformation Editor, said that the effort — named because print newsrooms typically have digital operations “bolted on” — has been surprisingly well-received by traditional journalists. “I don’t hear so many resisting, curmudgeonly, ‘you can’t make me change’ reactions anymore,” he said. “I hear learning-curve types of questions.”

The Wall Street Journal pledged to join the “digital first” ranks, building a new “real-time news desk” with 60 people and a new “audience-engagement desk” with social-media editors and analytics specialists at the center of their newsroom. They are intentionally hiring younger, less experienced employees to speed them up and push for change.

Ezra Klein was one of several prominent journalists who left the security of an established newspaper for a digital-media startup. For Klein, the value of a guaranteed audience — The Washington Post’s historic trump card — was eclipsed by the value of technology and digital talent. Increasingly, the right technology and talent can build up a big audience very quickly.

In his announcement, Klein focused on Vox’s content management system, Chorus, as the key draw. “And behind Chorus is a world-class design and en-

gineering team that is already helping us rethink the way we power newsrooms and present information.”

Our own David Carr crystallized the moment in a recent column. “In digital media, technology is not a wingman, it is The Man,” he wrote. “How something is made and published is often as important as what is made.”

## **DIGITAL FIRST AT THE TIMES**

Over decades, we have perfected our formula for putting out a world-class paper 365 days a year. But many of our traditions, routines and habits — perfect for the fixed deadlines and constraints of print — seem increasingly out of step with the digital world.

For example, the vast majority of our content is still published late in the evening, but our digital traffic is busiest early in the morning. We aim ambitious stories for Sunday because it is our largest print readership, but weekends are slowest online. Each desk labors over section fronts, but pays little attention to promoting its work on social media.

Once you start looking at The Times through this lens, the questions start spilling out: Should our digital report only present what’s new, or should it also showcase content from our archive that has been repackaged in creative and useful ways? Is the 700-1100 word story, the sweet spot for print, the right length for digital readers? If weekly columns are struggling to win repeat readers, how can we build loyal followings?

Our mindset is to perfect, then release. This should always be the case for our journalism. But we must question whether everything needs to meet this standard. Our competitors are launching new products or features as betas, and then using vital feedback from readers — rather than another round of internal feedback — to improve.

“I’m glad we still have the standards of quality that we do,” said one Times platform editor. “That’s what distinguishes us in this era. What bothers me is when standards are used as an excuse to say no to an idea.”

We look at our competitors through a print lens,

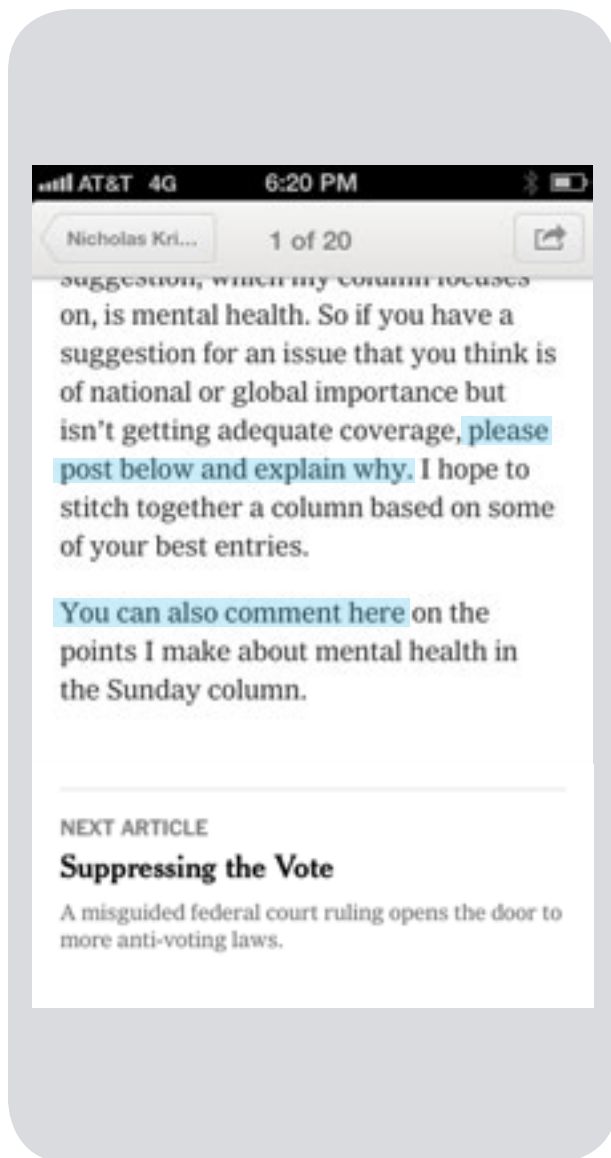
as well. Newsroom leaders spend a lot of time reading other outlets' stories. Few are studying their digital strategies — presentation, social presence, search optimization, navigation and mobile strategy. Fewer still are spending enough time looking at digital media outlets that we don't consider competitors.

And even fewer are looking at competitors on their smartphones. As a result, it is distressingly common to see mistakes on our apps.

For instance, we noticed that our popular Busi-

#### NO COMMENT

At the bottom of this Kristof column on our mobile app, he invited readers to comment. But the app does not have that feature.



ness Day columnists showed up at the very bottom of the business section. That is because our mobile site is automatically loaded from our web section fronts. Similarly, we've spotted numerous stories that invited readers to post comments, even though our iPhone and iPad apps do not allow users to comment. Instead of running mobile on autopilot, we need to view the platform as an experience that demands its own quality control and creativity.

Moreover, beyond simply recognizing and encouraging new behavior, we must be incentivizing that behavior through new reward structures.

Most reporters know exactly how frequently they've appeared on Page One in the previous year — indeed, annual performance reviews often lead off with that figure. Similarly, desk heads are keenly aware when they have a dry spell of Page One stories, and backfielders spend countless hours each week to making sure the pipeline is filled with stories that could be offered for the front page.

To right this imbalance, we need to provide more feedback. Editors should be monitoring things like their reporters' social-media presence and willingness to try new ways of telling stories. And desk heads should be told if they are not keeping up digitally.

This feedback — which a new analytics unit will make far easier to provide, based on data — is essential because New York Times editors and reporters will always be working at capacity. They just need clearer and more consistent signals. "They mostly seem to care about the front page and big, giant stories, and that's great," one desk head told us. "But if 13 million people need a news alert, we ought to know that. It ought to be somebody's job on the masthead to tell us that. We do respond, but it's a matter of shifting our burdens."

#### OUR DIGITAL BENCH OF TALENT

To help change the culture, we need more and better digital talent.

We often hire in bursts for new strategic initiatives, such as video, or offer promotions when someone is considering leaving. But these efforts are



## In Their Own Words: Digital Departures

The Times is strong enough to withstand the loss of any one journalist. But when a talented digital colleague departs, it can feel more disruptive because our bench is not as deep.

We asked five people who left digital jobs at The Times to explain their departures. Some of the reasons are well known, such as the lack of growth opportunities. But they also expressed frustration that their work was not fully understood or appreciated by the leadership. And they complained that their efforts to elevate our digital report were hindered by tradition and bureaucracy.

Everyone we interviewed said they were passionate about The Times but could not turn down more autonomy, creativity and influence elsewhere. Tellingly, none expressed regret that they left.

### **Why did you leave The Times?**

- “I looked around the organization and saw the plum jobs — even ones with explicitly digital mandates — going to people with little experience in digital. Meanwhile, journalists with excellent digital credentials were stuck moving stories around on section fronts.”
- “When it takes 20 months to build one thing, your skill set becomes less about innovation and more about navigating bureaucracy. That means the longer you stay, the more you’re doubling down on staying even longer. But if there’s no leadership role to aspire to, staying too long becomes risky.”
- “I didn’t want to be a straight-up news reporter or even a straight news editor. I always felt a little bit outside of what was most core to The Times, and what The Times was most proud of.”
- “I felt stifled by the hierarchy of the organization; meetings predicated upon meetings that did not lead to resolution or clear next steps.”

### **What was appealing about life outside The Times?**

- “The BuzzFeeds of the world have strong central leadership with clear digital visions not tied down by fiefdoms and legacy products.”
- “I wanted to learn a lot from a purely digital company that didn’t have complicated print legacy requirements. I still feel to some extent that The Times, or large parts of The Times, have a begrudging acceptance of technology.”
- “I could pursue my passion and grow as a leader faster elsewhere, in an environment with less rigid

roles and a deeper understanding of the possibilities of true digital journalism.”

### **What can The Times do to retain digital leaders?**

“Young digital talent is rarely motivated by money. Typically they are motivated by the potential to make impact at an organization that speaks to their values. This is the NYT trump card and should be played as often as possible.”

“Figure out a way to take a big chance on someone. In 1992, the ‘Today’ show was already a 40-year American institution when NBC appointed 26-year-old Jeff Zucker as its executive producer. We all know the success that happened after that. But can you imagine something like that happening at The New York Times?”

“Young people have many opportunities and only the rarest of the bunch will be willing to wait 20 years for the opportunity to truly be a leader. But find a way to give someone some real authority, and you may be onto something.”

#### **We Interviewed:**

**Soraya Darabi:** Launched social media at The Times. Founded a startup that was sold for \$10 million and featured on the cover of Fast Company.

**Alice DuBois:** Former deputy of digital platforms at The Times now director of editorial product at BuzzFeed.

**Jonathan Ellis:** Former senior editor for mobile platforms at The Times. Joined Mashable to become managing editor for the growing newsroom.

**Liz Heron:** Former social media editor at The Times. Joined Facebook after serving as head of audience engagement at The Wall Street Journal.

**Zach Wise:** Former senior multimedia producer for The Times. Now Associate Professor, The Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University.

largely reactive. The newsroom should think about our hiring needs — including jobs we need to create — for the next five to 10 years.

Our current approach overvalues journalistic skills for digital hires and undervalues digital skills for journalism hires — often because that reflects how most editors know how to evaluate talent. Indeed, many people hired into purely digital roles said their clips were the most important factor in landing their jobs. One department head warned that we must change our mindset from hiring people “to continue the legacy we’ve established” to hiring people “to shake things up.”

This is true for our traditional journalism positions, as well. We need more reporters and editors with an intuitive sense of how to write for the web, an interest in experimenting with mobile and social storytelling, a proficiency with data, a desire to engage with readers on and off our site, and a nuanced understanding of the shifting competitive landscape. We have people like Jenna Wortham and Mike Luo but there are far too few of them. This is particularly true in the editing ranks, where many desks lack editors who even know how to evaluate digital work. This is one of our most pressing needs.

We also must find ways to develop and empower our existing digital talent so that they can help shape strategy.

The complaints from digital staffers in our newsroom are, by now, familiar to our leadership: they feel their expertise isn’t put to good use, have few growth opportunities and believe their bosses do not understand their skills.

The reason producers, platform editors and developers feel dissatisfied is that they want to play creative roles, not service roles that involve administering and fixing. It would be like reporters coming here hoping to write features but instead we ask them to spend their days editing wire stories into briefs.

As a result, some of our brightest digital staffers

have either left or asked to transition into reporting or editing because those roles offered a clearer path for career growth. This creates a troubling dynamic — we retain our best digital players by putting them in positions that don’t take advantage of their skill sets. These are clear signs of our newspaper mindset trumping our digital mindset.

A number of people who left The Times recently said they saw only a small number of senior roles to grow into, and when those positions do open up, they are often handed to traditional journalists. This only compounds the problem: Because of the shortage of digital natives in senior leadership, we have trouble knowing who should be promoted.

Collaborative efforts in the newsroom help develop and empower digital talent, and they provide more opportunities for our digital colleagues to distinguish themselves with current leaders. For example, Sam Sifton said the most transformative part of his experience working on the Cooking product has been sitting side-by-side with software developers. If he raises a question, a developer will overhear it and start searching for a solution. Prototypes are created in an afternoon, not a month.

Kevin Delaney, a former top editor at The Wall Street Journal who founded Quartz, said that his technologists and journalists all sit together. “My conviction is that traditional organizations separate this process, which really greatly handicaps innovation,” he said. “The developer understands the process because they are involved. Developers are not order-takers.”

Bringing someone from Product, Design, Technology or one of our other Reader Experience units into the newsroom would make it far easier for them to spot problems and offer solutions — people like Renda Morton and Libby Gery, the user-experience designers who invented the forthcoming “Watching” feature on our home page. Or someone like Paul Yorke, who has played a crucial role in building our news-alert system into one of the most ef-

## Digital staffers want to play creative roles, not service roles.

fective broadcast devices in journalism. There have been some initial efforts along these lines, with Erin Grau, Kelly Alfieri, James Robinson and others, and they are worth building on. In another promising sign, Ian Fisher is bringing developers into the newsroom.

However, our producers provide a case study for how dispersing digital talent is insufficient without a clear plan for using them. Many work in a vague, catch-all position that can be best described as a “digital person on a desk who is not a reporter or editor.” First, their bosses need to better understand

their skills and how they could be put to use.

“You can’t take new talent and put them in old structures where they are second-class citizens,” said the editor of one competing newspaper. “That is not real change. You must change the structure of power.”

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### PAGE ONE

The newsroom is unanimous: We are focusing too much time and energy on Page One. This concern — which we heard in virtually every interview we conducted, including with reporters, desk heads, and masthead editors — has long been a concern for the leadership.

And yet it persists. Page One sets the daily rhythms, consumes our focus, and provides the newsroom’s defining metric for success. The recent announcement from Tom Jolly to focus the Page One meeting more on the web report is a great step in the right direction, but many people have voiced their skepticism that it will truly change our focus.

Here is a typical complaint from a Washington reporter who frequently appears on A1:

“Our internal fixation on it can be unhealthy, disproportionate and ultimately counterproductive. Just think about how many points in our day are still oriented around A1 — from the 10 a.m. meeting to the summaries that reporters file in the early afternoon to the editing time that goes into those summaries to the moment the verdict is rendered at 4:30. In Washington, there’s even an email that goes out to the entire bureau alerting everyone which six stories made it. That doesn’t sound to me like a newsroom that’s thinking enough about the web.”



## Winning The Talent Wars

In the 1990s, the paper of record decided to add more sparkle to its just-the-facts approach to producing the daily report. We started recruiting writers with voice and style from publications we had long overlooked, like New York magazine and The Observer. Color photos soon followed. Then more engaging graphics.

Now we take it for granted that The Times is a magnet for the best writers, photographers and graphics editors in the business.

We've arrived at a similar moment.

The only way to ensure that our report keeps pace is to build a newsroom with a deeper and broader mix of digital talents: technologists, user experience designers, product managers, data analysts and, most of all, digitally inclined reporters and editors.

Or, to set aside those labels and put our needs in more basic terms, we want makers, who build tools to streamline our newsgathering; entrepreneurs, who know what it takes to launch new digital efforts; reader advocates, who ensure that we are designing useful products that meet our subscribers' changing needs; and zeitgeist watchers, who have a sixth sense for the shifting technology and behavior. Most of all, we need those rare — and sought after — talents who can check off many of those boxes.

And we need them now. While we receive accolades for our digital efforts like "Snowfall," we nevertheless are at risk of becoming known as a place that does not fully understand, reward and celebrate digital skills. And many our competitors — including The Wall Street Journal, The Guardian, The Financial Times and The Washington Post — are ahead of us in making such hires a top priority.

Recruiting the right talent is imperative because the success rate of hiring a digital native — the people who have grown up in a digital world, rather

than adjusted to it — is far higher than moving traditional journalists into digital posts. It's not just a matter of possessing a particular skill set. They have an intuitive sense of how to adapt to the changing demands of technology and reader behavior.

"You need to build a whole new culture, a whole new talent base that's completely dedicated to the new," said Justin Smith, the C.E.O. of Bloomberg News, who earned his stripes transforming The Atlantic from a money-losing magazine to a thriving and profitable digital operation. "Don't trust that people are ever going to be able to transition."

Similarly, editors at The Financial Times and USA Today told us that the most important move they have made in recent years was to aggressively bring in digital talent. In both cases, they used buyouts to make room for new hires, with a focus on clearing out reporters and editors who were actively opposing changes.

Digital media startups don't have to worry about retraining their staffs. "Every year our talent pool gets better and better," said Henry Blodget, who founded Business Insider. "A new generation of writers and reporters grew up in digital, and it's second nature to them."

Attracting digital talent will take more work than we might think. We assume, rightly so, that ambitious journalists want to work at The Times. But our storied brand is less of a draw among digital natives. They are drawn to opportunities to create something, experiment and solve problems, and rethink how news is made — without the guardrails and bureaucracy of a legacy organization. It doesn't help that we often can't compete on wages for top digital talent. But we can compete by pitching ourselves as a great Internet success story, selling potential hires on the satisfaction of helping transform a world-class, mission-driven organization.

We need makers,  
entrepreneurs, reader  
advocates and  
zeitgeist watchers.

### Here are potential steps to attract digital talent:

- Identify our skills gaps and aggressively recruit to fill them.
- Make sure our hiring managers understand the demands of the jobs they're trying to fill, and can assess the skills of applicants.
- Put less emphasis on traditional journalism skills in our digital hires, and put more emphasis on digital skills in our journalism hires.
- To bring in new ideas, hire fewer people from traditional competitors, and recruit more from innovative start-ups.
- Use our journalism as a recruiting and retention tool, by letting talented technologists, user-experience designers, product managers and digital strategists work more closely on the report.
- Empower and develop our digital talent by asking them to help shape, rather than simply implement, strategy.
- Consider hiring top digital talent at a senior level to send an important signal about our priorities to potential recruits.

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### Digital Stars

Many our of digital colleagues are famous in their fields, though few in the newsroom are aware of their talents and reputations.



#### Mike Bostock

A graphics editor in the San Francisco bureau, Bostok created a library of graphics code used by publications all over the world. In the tech community, he is a revered figure.



#### Mark Suppes

An Interactive News developer, Suppes is almost certainly the only Times employee who has built a nuclear fusion reactor with about \$35,000 in spare parts. He also built Gucci's website.



#### Chris Wiggins

A top data scientist from Columbia University, Wiggins is working to bring more data scientists to The Times at a time when experts in this field are in short supply and high demand.



#### Jeremy Ashkenas

Ashkenas created CoffeeScript, a programming language. His reputation helps us attract top talent. "He influences how things are built on the web," a colleague said.

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## Grooming Digital Leaders

We need more digital talent over all, but we also need more digitally inclined leaders.

This shortfall stems from several longstanding biases. We rarely hire outsiders directly into leadership positions. We have struggled to groom our digital journalists for leadership, in part because we don't fully know how to use their skills. And we have a tendency to move traditional journalists into top digital roles.

It's critically important to have traditional journalists involved in crafting and implementing our digital strategy. But having so many of these posts filled by traditional journalists deprives us of deep expertise to push our digital efforts to the next level.

We need to understand the demands of such roles and the skills they require, and to be clear-eyed

about the trade-offs when pushing journalists into such jobs without relevant experience. This pattern of promotion risks, among other things, sending the message that the only way to move up in the company is through traditional journalism, even on digital career paths.

When our competitors hire for critical digital positions, they don't seek people with print experience; they seek people with the most impressive resumes.

An important shift happened recently with the promotion of Aron Pilhofer and Steve Duenes to the masthead. The promotions paid off quickly: Both are responsible for hiring much of our best digital talent and for launching ambitious digital initiatives. They watch competitors and notice trends — making the conversation about our mobile efforts or new products richer.

# Assessing The Newsroom's Digital Needs

Before we can embrace many of the opportunities described in this report, we must first have better understanding of our current digital capabilities and where we need to improve.

We have identified five areas that warrant more investment: strategy, analytics, product, platforms and audience development. Our competitors — old and new — have been staffing up in these disciplines, and we must join the battle to better meet our digital needs and to build a deeper bench of digital talent.

What follows is an assessment of these needs, rather than a proposed organizational chart for new hires in these areas. The precise structure matters less than insuring they have a central role in the newsroom.

## STRATEGY

**Need:** Strategy is an implicit part of many jobs but planning is not centralized. Masthead editors and desk heads have little time to focus on long-term strategy. The newsroom does not have a list of priorities to coordinate with the business side. Without a deep understanding of competitors' digital strategies, we lag behind on best practices. Innovators in the newsroom have trouble translating their needs and executing their ideas.

**Opportunity:** Create a newsroom strategy team that would apprise the masthead of changing reader behavior and strategy shifts by new and traditional competitors. It would help prioritize and communicate the newsroom's digital initiatives. The team could conduct studies to answer strategic questions.

## PRODUCTS

**Need:** The Times's digital products, especially mobile, no longer set the standard for digital journalism. People who serve as product editors are focused on short-term fixes rather than long-term editorial vision. Other products, like email, are neglected. Because the team is understaffed and has little guidance from the masthead, their efforts are focused on business-side initiatives to generate revenue, not newsroom needs.

**Opportunity:** Hire and empower more product editors to help develop reader-facing products for the website, mobile apps, email, video and community platforms, as well as the reader-facing features of cross-platform products, such as breaking news and personalization. They would work closely with their product-manager counterparts on the business side and represent the newsroom's interests in new-product initiatives.

**Mobile Product Lead**  
at BuzzFeed ([View all jobs](#))  
New York  
BuzzFeed is looking for a product leader to take our Mobile app to a new kind of media company for the social world. Our technology distributes content, detects what is trending on the web, and reacts in real-time with the hottest content of the moment. Our site is a media that reaches over 100 million monthly unique visitors and an additional 300M uniques. This role will report directly to our Head of Product.  
This job is based in our NYC offices, and we offer competitive compensation and an equity option program.

**PRODUCT Front-End Designer**  
Location: Washington, DC

**Front-End Engineer**  
Location: (Multiple states)

**ATLANTIC MEDIA**  
**Programming Director**  
Location: New York, NY Department: Quartz Type: Full Time

## IN DEMAND

Journalism job postings show that the demand for digital talent far outstrips the supply.

## PLATFORMS

**Need:** There is no single newsroom owner of our content-management system, Scoop, which is where all our digital content is created. As a result, our CMS lags behind systems at The Huffington Post, BuzzFeed and Vox in terms of functionality, ease of use and speed. Our Interactive News department is a big driver of innovation, but their work is often not replicable because it is not built into journalist-facing technology. Because the newsroom leadership has not set clear priorities, the CMS technology team is forced to address minor fixes, often for individual desks, instead of focusing on major editorial innovation. New-product teams, like NYT Now, had to work around our publishing systems because they couldn't get their work prioritized.

**Opportunity:** Create platform editor positions to serve as the newsroom leads on internal products like Scoop, working closely with colleagues in Interactive News and Technology to identify problems with our publishing systems and prioritize and build solutions. Platform editors also could identify successful one-off projects that could be turned into replicable templates. They could also advocate for and develop models for structured data and tagging. Platform editors could work with product editors to identify how reader-facing product innovations — for example, a feature to help readers follow a story — can be absorbed into newsroom workflows and publishing systems.



## AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT

**Need:** We are not aggressive enough about promoting our work so that our content reaches its maximum natural audience. We lack a presence on important social platforms, and our Twitter and Facebook accounts are managed by different departments. Our website editors do not use some strategies for maximizing traffic that are standard practice elsewhere, even though these approaches would not conflict with our editorial values. A number of valuable tools like repackaging, personalization, optimization, and direct outreach are not being used strategically.

**Opportunity:** We need to focus on growing our audience and keeping our existing readers on our site longer. This comes through optimization of our web site and off-site distribution, especially in social media. Our content needs a newsroom-driven promotion strategy ahead of and just after publication. Raising our game in audience development would help us win back the traffic around our own content that other sites like Huffington Post are stealing from us. The need is particularly urgent given the declining number of people reaching us through our home page.

## ANALYTICS

**Need:** We don't regularly use data to inform our decisions in the newsroom, which means we are missing out on an opportunity to better understand reader behavior, adjust to trends and drive traffic to our journalism. This makes it more difficult to set goals and assess progress. A strong analytics operation is essential to every one of these digital needs.

**Opportunity:** Analytics skills are needed in many parts of the newsroom, including for top-level strategy as well as desk-level decision-making. We need to hire analytics experts to work with news, platform, and product editors, newsroom strategists and the people trying to grow our audience. We need to also work closely with data scientists in the Consumer Insight Group.

# How to Get There

## DE-EMPHASIZE PRINT

- Shift the newsroom’s center of gravity away from Page One. Creating additional measures of success, using metrics like traffic, sharing and engagement could help.
- Assess our processes, workflow, staffing and traditions. Changing what we do will be difficult without changing how we do it. This means looking critically at every element of how we work. A first step is listing ways in which we are optimized for print rather than digital.
- Ask our editors to read more like our readers. Each desk should have at least one staff member monitoring its report on the mobile web, and on our mobile and tablet apps. Eventually this will become second nature.
- Rethink the “competition.” Ask every department to develop a list of new competitors for their sections, and encourage their backfield to familiarize themselves with new apps and digital-only sites.
- Make digital a key part of evaluations. Reviews should include sections for digital as well as print performance. This should be the case for the whole newsroom, particularly for leaders. Has their desk developed a smart strategy for social media? Are they open and enthusiastic about experimenting? Are they making smart, digitally focused hires? To do this, we must first clearly communicate digital expectations to our employees.

## ASSESS DIGITAL NEEDS

- Reevaluate our current digital needs and create new positions. These range from the top (head of audience development, head of analytics) to the lower ranks (developers who build tools to streamline our reporting processes, a strategist to manage our undervalued email newsletters).
- Assess the digital capabilities of various desks and fill the holes. We would notice quickly if National lacked a strong investigative reporter or if Metro didn’t have a rewrite ace. Similarly, we should track whether these desks have strong digital talent — not just as producers but reporters and editors. Those with such skills should be encouraged to share best practices within their desks.
- Build the newsroom out of Legos, not bricks. The right structure for today won’t be the right structure for tomorrow. Our needs will change quickly and our skills will become out of date. More than anything we need to make ourselves adaptable. That means constantly assessing needs, recruiting talent and changing structures. And that means sometimes creating jobs with expiration dates to help us in transitional moments.
- Add digital specialists to our staffing committee. Once we have a sense of our needs, we need to fill them, and a digital specialist who participates in vetting new hires and promotions would help us identify gaps and the people best positioned to fill them. Janet has already recommended such a move.
- Maintain a list of the best talents in digital media and begin courting them. Right now other companies are aggressively bringing in digital talent. Because the Times newsroom is behind on many fronts, like analytics and audience development, it is even more important that we identify game-



changing and game-improving talent.

- Accept that digital talent is in high demand. To hire digital talent will take more money, more persuasion and more freedom once they are within The Times — even when candidates might strike us as young or less accomplished. Developers, product managers, user-experience designers and smart digital thinkers are commanding a significant premium.
- Find ways to empower our current digital staff. We want a culture of experimentation in the newsroom. For example, we could give producers responsibility for more testing, and then ask them to share their findings with the organization.
- Let employees transfer easily between newsroom and operational units. In many cases, the best positions for valued digital employees already ex-

## EXPLORE MORE SERIOUS STEPS

- Consider a task force to explore what it will take to become a digital-first newsroom. We've seen a number of other newspapers take this approach and more people are discussing this possibility in our newsroom. Examining what it would take to become digital-first is a major effort and may eventually require stand-alone group to lead it.
- Consider creating a digital fellowship program. One way to bring top digital talent into the news-

ist — on the business side. It is in our interest for Product, R&D, Design, Technology and Consumer Insight to have, and to help retain, top talent. Such moves are often logical extensions of jobs in the digital newsroom. This would create a huge new range of senior positions. It would also open up another pool of future leaders for us.

- Identify the rising digital stars in the newsroom. Show them they are appreciated, and solicit ideas from them on how The Times can be better. Help develop their careers and have them help us identify more talent.
- Make a star hire. Talent attracts talent, and few steps would send a better signal than getting another respected digital leader into a senior position. This would also help generate new ideas and strategies.

room without paying Facebook wages would be to create a fellowship program in partnership with a university like MIT and its Media Lab. Infusing desks with digital trailblazers can lead to fruitful digital collaboration. Once they're in the door, we have a better chance of retaining top performers. We can recruit "visiting professors" from Google, Facebook and other companies. Such efforts also serve as powerful recruiting tools for top talent.