

Engagement Metrics That Matter

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Mashable, in 2013, declared that engagement is a “big word that means very little” (Hockenson, 2013). That attitude has changed dramatically in the past six years. For many newsrooms, publishers and content creators, engagement plays a key role in publishing, strategy and business decisions. It is now common to see positions like engagement editor, audience development editor and director of audience in journalist biographies.

For decades, the thought process behind engagement, even if it was not called that at the time, was to count page views as the main source of information regarding what the audience was doing with content. Thankfully, newsrooms, brands and publishers now have myriad ways to measure, track and use data about audience behavior - and not all of it is based on social media.

With that said, what is engagement? Which metrics truly matter? What skills do journalists need to work in this dynamic field? The answers to those questions depend on who is asked.

What is Engagement?

Since the arrival of social media sites like Facebook and Twitter in the 2000s, brands and newsrooms alike have clamored for engagement data. “What’s the ROI?” (return on investment) was, and still is, a common question asked before making any investment in an engagement strategy (Blasingame, 2011). For years, engagement on social media was fairly simple to define and measure. AdWeek, for instance, in 2015 called it the number of interactions people have with your content (Morrison, 2015).

One Word, Many Definitions

For most newsrooms, likes, comments and shares are still among the primary way to measure engagement - but engagement now potentially consists of many more metrics to measure.

“Engagement is getting people to interact with content, whether through a social mechanism, like commenting or liking, or it's ideally clicking on and reading an article or watching a video,” said John Colucci, the senior director of social media for Sinclair Broadcast Group and its 191 television stations in 89 markets.

For Amelia McGuinness, the engagement editor at Eater, a food and dining site that is part of the Vox Media family, engagement is about getting into the mind of the reader.

“Engagement is, to me, measuring people's attention, people's willingness to share and traffic sources,” McGuinness said. “That's basically my entire job. It’s all about obviously whether or not people are reading things, whether or not people are commenting and sharing things - and basically measuring the different ways people get to our content and trying to spread it.”

Some print newsrooms, especially those looking to build digital subscription rates, frame engagement in terms of community and relationships.

“Engagement is finding, facilitating and being a part of conversations within our communities,” said Kim Bui, the director of audience innovation at the Arizona Republic, which is the daily newspaper in Phoenix. “We're starting to use the word engagement less and participation more, which is really the same thing. I would like to think about it as involved journalism because it's a little bit of collaboration but a little bit of engagement. There's more partnerships with the audience.”

Hannah Wise, the audience development editor at Dallas Morning News, said it is not enough for newsrooms to build an audience. Engagement is taking the next step.

“Engagement is relationship building and continuing those relationships and investing in them,” Wise said. “It's really time consuming and difficult, but people are getting more on board and it pays off in the long run, especially for subscription-based businesses.”

Social Platforms and Engagement

The platforms, particularly Facebook, have a different view of relationships and engagement. Facebook has made “meaningful social interactions” its primary focus in recent changes to its algorithm, which determines what content a user sees, who they see it from and when they see it. In his announcement of the changes in January 2018, Facebook co-founder Mark Zuckerberg said:

“We built Facebook to help people stay connected and bring us closer together with the people that matter to us. That’s why we’ve always put friends and family at the core of the experience. Research shows that strengthening our relationships improves our well-being and happiness.

But recently we've gotten feedback from our community that public content - posts from businesses, brands and media - is crowding out the personal moments that lead us to connect more with each other" (Zuckerberg, 2018).

While that may have sounded like a death knell for publishers, Facebook quickly reversed course - at least around local news organizations. A few weeks after its algorithm change, Facebook made another tweak to prioritize local news in users' News Feeds.

"People tell us they come to Facebook to connect with friends. They also say they want to see news about what's happening in the world and their local community. This month, we've announced changes to prioritize posts from friends and high-quality news sources. Today, we're updating News Feed to also prioritize local news so that you can see topics that have a direct impact on you and your community and discover what's happening in your local area" (Hardiman, A. & Brown, C., 2018).

According to Colucci, this prioritization of local news has stabilized the engagement metrics they measure on Facebook at Sinclair stations, at least. For them, there has been no noticeable drop-off since the original 2018 algorithm change.

"I think on that front, we've been able to do well by trying to keep the focus on local content or localizing national stories when we can," Colucci said. "Facebook has been pretty good about local news, and we've been doing fine year over year, so that keeps us going. We just have to keep the focus on that and, obviously, be cautious of any other changes Facebook has, which we never know when those will come. They tend to happen when we least expect them."

Engagement Metrics

Which metrics should a brand, newsroom or publisher concern themselves with? What follows is a detailed, non-exhaustive list of the different metrics available to be tracked on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, along with engagement metrics not found on social media. Each social platform has what are known as vanity metrics - numbers that are easy for the layperson or beginner to understand, which are more impressive the higher they go. The most basic vanity metric - the amount of likes a Facebook page has or number of followers a user has on Twitter and Instagram - is quickly becoming useless with the lack of organic reach as part of Facebook's algorithm changes. In fact, research shows pages with smaller audiences typically get higher engagement than pages with massive audiences (Ahmed, 2015).

Facebook Engagement Metrics

The most basic engagement metrics on Facebook are like/reactions, comments and shares.

Likes/reactions - Despite becoming one of the signature features of its platform, the Facebook Like button did not come along until 2009 (Musil, 2009) - five years after the platform launched. By 2015, it was estimated users liked more than four million posts every 60 seconds (Carey-Simos, 2015). In response to users wanting more options to describe their reaction to a piece of content, Facebook rolled out Reactions across the globe in 2016 (Newton, 2016). By holding down their thumb, a user could now select between the following options: like (thumbs up), love (heart), haha (laughing emoji), wow (surprised emoji), sad (crying emoji) and angry (angry emoji). Just two years later, Reactions had already been used more than 300 billion times (Donnelly, 2018). It is important to note that not all Reactions are created equally. A haha reaction could mean a piece of content was funny - or the user is laughing at the publisher for a mistake. An angry reaction on a piece of content could mean the story, itself, made the user upset - or it could mean the user is upset with the newsroom or publisher of the content for some reason. On Facebook Live, the platform's live broadcast feature, a stream of angry emojis floating across the screen during the broadcast is not a good sign for the person or company going live.

Comments - With its most recent algorithm change aiming for more meaningful interactions, Facebook has prioritized comments as "active interactions," meaning the user had to put in more effort than simply liking a post or clicking a link (Tien, 2018). Even if Facebook's algorithm considers comments a positive form of engagement, it is also important to note here that not all comments are positive. Flame wars, harassment, trolling and arguments may all be interpreted as "active interactions" in the algorithm. For a newsroom or publisher to have a healthy Facebook page, it requires resources to monitor the comments on posts, highlighting the good comments and discouraging comments that are not adding to any sort of meaningful engagement.

Shares - When a user shares a piece of content to his or her account, Facebook also sees this as an active interaction. It is a statement that, "I want all of my friends and family to see this." For many brands, a share is the king of the engagement metrics. It is utilizing the audience to circumvent the algorithm, but it requires a high quality of content that entices the audience to share it in the first place.

Determining which of these most common metrics - likes/reactions, comments and shares - is most valuable depends on the social strategy of the brand or publisher. For more video-focused companies, for example, shares will likely be valued most because they will organically increase

video views. For Colucci and his newsrooms, comments are the strongest measure of engagement of the three, since it may lead to a station's Facebook page being the home of a potentially fruitful conversation happening amongst users.

"It isn't just like someone read the headline and is commenting based on the headline without reading the story," Colucci said. "Ideally, and this is really how I prefer to frame engagement, are they actually consuming the content? I think it drives conversation and drives people actually thinking a bit differently."

While Colucci appreciates and values shares, as well, there are challenges that come along with content leaving a branded Facebook page and now living on a user's Facebook page.

"We don't often see what happens once it gets shared off the page," Colucci said. "We don't often see where it goes. So if they're commenting or engaging on the post itself, we have a little bit more vision as to what people are actually thinking. Sometimes that leads to other story ideas."

While likes/reactions, comments and shares are, by far, the most common metrics discussed with Facebook performance, they are far from the only metrics available. Through its Insights tab for brands and publishers, Facebook also details several other data to understand or measure engagement with the audience. The relevance of these metrics is based purely on the engagement objectives and strategy of the brand, newsroom or publisher.

Reach - This metric measures how many people saw a piece of content. This is different from, but often confused with, impressions, which is the number of times a piece of content was placed in someone's News Feed. Reach will likely be less than impressions, since it is possible a piece of content could be placed in someone's feed multiple times. Reach does not necessarily mean someone clicked on a story or even read the words in the post, itself. There are two types of reach: organic and paid. Organic reach is the number of times someone saw a piece of content from visiting a page or because the algorithm placed it in their News Feed. Paid reach is accumulated with a promoted post (paying to have more people see a post) or an ad on Facebook.

Page views - The number of times a user viewed a Facebook brand page.

Link clicks - The number of times a user clicks on a link in a post or ad. This could be a link that keeps them in Facebook or takes the user to a website outside of Facebook.

Media clicks - The number of times a user clicks on a post to view an image or video contained within.

Other clicks - These are any clicks not made on the content in the post. The most common examples of this metric would be a user clicking the page title or “See more” to continue reading the text in a post. The latter would likely be an effective metric to gauge the strength of captions on Facebook. If content is long enough to generate the “See more” break and users are clicking that option, that is a win for the publisher.

Minutes viewed - The total amount of minutes a video was viewed. This metric combines views on the publisher page and any views coming from user shares of the video.

Three-second views - The number of times a user viewed a video for at least three seconds. This metric was long the default count of a video view on Facebook and defended by Facebook managers as a strong enough signal that someone intended to watch a video (Pakes, 2015). In 2016, Facebook apologized to advertisers for artificially inflating video view counts (Vranica & Marshall, 2016).

10-second views - The number of times a user viewed a video for at least 10 seconds.

Audience watch time - The average time a user played a video during the viewing session. This metric includes any amount of time that user spent replaying a video during that session.

Video retention - This metric allows publishers to see when an audience, down to the second, stopped watching a video.

In addition to the metrics listed above, which all measure engagement on a particular piece of content, Facebook brand pages have certain measurable tools that also help show a level of engagement with the user.

Responsiveness - How quickly does a brand, newsroom or publisher respond to messages in Facebook Messenger? Response rate is measured against the fastest 90 percent of response times of other pages on the platform.

Action button clicks - Facebook introduced the action button for brands in 2014, giving them a specific spot on the page for a consistent call to action (Facebook, 2014). Options for the Action Button include Book Now, Contact Us, Send Message, Call Now, Sign Up, Send Email, Watch

Video, Learn More, Shop Now, See Offers, Use App or Play Game. Therefore, an action button click would be any time a logged-in user clicked the call-to-action button on the page.

Get directions - If a Facebook page falls under the Local Business category, that business can insert their address, which populates a map on the About section of the page. Logged-in users can then click “Get Directions” to get navigation services from the HERE WeGo app.

Phone number clicks - This tool keeps track of how many times logged-in users click the phone number on a Facebook page in order to call that business, brand, etc. Users primarily would use this tool on mobile, but users on a computer can also activate the click-to-call button.

While some of the tools above may not be relevant to newsrooms, they can be incredibly impactful metrics to follow for many businesses, including movie theaters, restaurants, doctor offices and shops, to name a few.

Finally, there is a subset of negative engagement metrics that all pages should pay close attention to. These metrics measure instances of the audiences being put off with content - to the point of doing something about it.

Hide post - This means a user has hidden the particular post. There could be any number of reasons to hide a post - the user does not like the topic or does not like the type of post being the most common. Hiding a post does not mean they have unfollowed the page or unliked the page. It just pertains to that one post.

Hide all posts - Selecting hide all posts is a step up in terms of the user’s frustration with a page. This means a user has essentially unfollowed all content from this publisher. While they still technically like the page, they will no longer have its content placed in News Feed.

Unlike page - When a user selects unlike page, it dissolves the association with that page. It will no longer be listed under pages that user likes, and the page content will no longer appear in that user’s News Feed. While it is disheartening for a brand to have someone unlike their page, there may be other factors at play. Users sometime do a sweep of pages they are no longer interested in or did not remember liking in the first place. An unlike does not necessarily mean a particular post was offensive, demeaning or otherwise failed.

Report as spam - When a user reports a post as spam, it is a definite sign that something has gone wrong. The content creator would want to examine the text itself, tone, word choice and

visuals, among other things. If there is an uptick in spam reports on a page, it is time to reexamine content strategy.

Via Facebook Insights, you can track negative feedback for a selected time period or view which individual posts prompted the negative feedback. It is safe to assume most brands or publishers would like to keep negative feedback to a minimum, but they can be useful opportunities to learn about your audiences likes and dislikes. While they are unpleasant, reflecting on negative feedback should also be a part of the overall social strategy.

Instagram Engagement Metrics

Instagram introduced Insights in 2016, four years after its acquisition by Facebook (Mathies, 2016). To access analytics, an account must be switched to a Business Account. Any profile can do this, however. The account just needs an associated Facebook business page, which anyone can create, and contact information, a phone number or email, to list on the Instagram profile. Once that is in place, Instagram makes detailed Insights available for the user. Like with Facebook, there are many different metrics on Instagram that could be considered part of an engagement strategy.

Likes - The amount of likes a post received is one of the few metrics available to all users, not just business accounts. The amount of likes is shown to anyone on the post itself. To like a post on Instagram, a user has two options - they can click the heart under the post or double tap the photo or video.

Shares - Unlike Facebook and Twitter, Instagram does not have a way to natively share content on its main feed. There is no share button or RT functionality on Instagram. It does feature private sharing, though. There is an arrow underneath the photo or video in an Instagram post that allows a user to send that piece of content to another user via private message. A user can also natively share someone else's content to their Instagram Stories feed, but only if they have been tagged by the publisher in that particular piece of content.

Comments - The comments section of a post on Instagram shares two main functions. First, it is a place for users to comment on the piece of content, just like Facebook. The other function is a result of the lack of a share button on the platforms. Users regularly tag friends and families in the comments of a post to alert them of the post. In that way, the comments section of Instagram posts has become a de-facto way for a user to share content with those he or she feels would want to see it.

Impressions - Instagram defines impressions as the number of times a post was seen. This is the total number of views, which may include multiple views from one user.

Reach - Like Facebook, reach on Instagram measures the number of unique views on a post. If one user saw a photo or video three times, that would be three impressions but only one reach.

Video views - The amount of video views can be seen on the video post itself by anyone who can see the post. A video view is counted once a user has watched the video for at least three seconds. Videos loop and replay again automatically on Instagram, but loops are not counted as multiple views.

Profile visits - Within Insights, a user can see which posts led users to view the profile on the account. This is often a good sign of engagement with the content, sometimes resulting in a follow or visit to a website.

Calls - As mentioned earlier, switching to a business account on Instagram requires some sort of contact information, be it a phone number or email address. Instagram will measure how many people clicked to call the number listed in the profile, if that is the contact method the user selected.

Emails - Likewise, Instagram will measure the amount of emails sent via the contact portion of the profile, if that is the method a user selected to use.

Saved - This is a way to measure how many people bookmarked a post. A user can privately save content from other users and put that content together into collections, which are not made available to anyone else. While Instagram will provide the number of times a piece of content has been saved, it will not provide details of which particular users saved the content.

Instagram Stories launched in 2016 as a feature very similar to Snapchat - primarily vertical photo or video content that is visible for 24 hours (Constine, 2016). Instagram Stories has since exploded in popularity - with more than 500 million active users every day. Photos will be shown for seven seconds on Instagram Stories. Videos have a maximum length of 15 seconds. Users can also broadcast live within Stories. There are many different ways to entice engagement on Instagram Stories, but not all of them are as measurable as others. Here are a few of the metrics a user can track within Stories.

Story reach - A user can see, within Stories, how many people viewed each post in a story. This metric is available to a user for up to 14 days after the content was created. A user can also see

which other users viewed the post and how many times users clicked back to watch a post again.

Story retention - Because a user can post multiple posts to an Instagram Story, it is possible to measure story retention by looking at story views over the course of the entire story. If a user posted a 10-part story, he or she could track how many viewers watched until the end. Post one may have 100 views, but post 10 may have 15, which would signal poor engagement from the audience. Brands, newsrooms and publishers should create Stories content that encourages and promotes active story retention. Insights also tracks which specific posts in a story caused users to exit or click to the next story, which allows content creators the opportunity to see where things went wrong with story retention. While sounding like a negative metric, exits are not always a bad thing. It may mean a user swiped up on a link within a story (Darma, 2018).

Swipe up links - Once a business account hits 10,000 followers, Instagram enables the “swipe up” functionality within Stories. This is an incredibly valuable function, since it is the only place beyond the profile bio where a user can insert a link. Instagram will track how many times users swiped up to follow the link included in a story via the “link clicks” metric on the post in Insights.

Replies - The default settings allow users to reply to a post within Stories. If a user replies to a story here, it will go to the content creator’s private messages. For many brands, newsrooms and publishers, replies will be an important metric to show how many conversations with the audience were started because of a particular piece of content. It is possible to turn off the replies functionality on Instagram Stories.

Instagram Stories also provides several interactive features called stickers for publishers to encourage engagement with the audience, including questions, polls, quizzes and countdown clocks, among others (Instagram, n.d.).

Questions - The questions sticker allows publishers to hold a Q&A session with the audience. The creator will publish the sticker with a question, and the audience can click the sticker to provide an answer. Publishers can then swipe up to see all responses to the question sticker and can click on answers to then share them with the rest of the audience within Stories.

Polls - The poll sticker allows a publisher to ask a question and gives two options for users to tap and select one as an answer. Creators can swipe up on the post to see how many votes each option received and which users selected either option.

Emoji slider - Instagram Stories also features a similar emoji slider sticker, which allows a publisher to ask a question and select an emoji to be included as the answer. Users can then tap and slide the emoji to describe their response. For instance, a publisher may post a picture of a sunny day and ask the audience, “How gorgeous is it today?” The emoji selected may be the heart eyes emoji, which would prompt users to slide their answer. The further to the right a user slides the emoji, the more agreement with the question.

Quizzes - The quiz sticker allows a publisher to ask a question and provide multiple choice answers for a user to select. Once they select an answer in a story, Instagram will show them whether they selected correctly or incorrectly. Publishers can swipe up on the post to see how many users selected each option and how each user answered.

Countdown clock - The countdown sticker allows a publisher to encourage excitement about an upcoming moment or event. Once the countdown has ended, users who clicked the sticker will be reminded of the event or moment via a notification.

Twitter Engagement Metrics

Twitter, meanwhile, has five key metrics to measure engagement. Three of them (likes, retweets and replies) are numbers any user can see on a particular tweet. The final two metrics (impressions and engagement rate) are accessed via Twitter Analytics, which is available to any user of the platform.

Likes - A like on Twitter can denote several things. It can mean a user genuinely liked that tweet. It can mean a user wanted to bookmark that tweet to find it later, since Twitter keeps a list of tweets a user has liked on his or her profile. This particular functionality became an issue when Twitter changed the icon of the like from a star to a heart (Ingram, 2015). Twitter has since added a bookmarking function to its platform to address this controversy (Perez, 2018). Finally, liking a tweet is often used as a conversation ender - the Twitter equivalent of an okay sign.

Retweets - The retweet is Twitter’s version of the share button. There are two types of retweets - the retweet (sharing a tweet with no additional commentary) or the retweet with comment, which affords the user the opportunity to add his or her own perspective on top of the tweet as it is shared in their feed.

Replies - A reply on Twitter is someone responding to a particular tweet.

Impressions - Twitter uses impressions, instead of reach, to gauge the scope of a tweet. Impressions on Twitter measure how many times the tweet was placed into a user's feed or in search, but it does not mean the user necessarily saw that tweet.

Engagement rate - Engagement rate is a formula measuring the number of engagements (likes, retweets and replies, among other engagements such as follows, link clicks and hashtag clicks, for instance) divided by impressions. In other words, engagement rate is the percentage of a user's audience that engaged with their content (Newman, n.d.).

Using engagement metrics to monetize accounts.

Any of these metrics - but especially Impressions - are measures of strength, particularly for content creators or influencers, social media users who have amassed large followings and influence on their audiences, trying to partner with brands on Twitter. Matt Nelson, the creator of two wildly popular Twitter accounts - We Rate Dogs (@dog_rates) and Thoughts of Dog (@dog_feelings), said impressions have become more important for him, personally, in the past six months as he started to add more sponsored or promoted content in coordination with large brands.

"That's an analytic that they pay attention to because that's where you can get your CPM (cost per thousand impressions) rates and how they value the ad placement," Nelson said.

Nelson, along with other super-users of Twitter, have found tweets that include a username, hashtag or links, all of which appear as blue in the tweet, receive less impressions than content that is just text and a photo or video. He uses that information when working out the parameters of the partnership with a company or brand.

"Twitter specifically, anything that shows up blue is off-putting," Nelson said. "The regular posts that don't have any of that, which is our typical content, average 3.5 million impressions. When a brand works with us, I say, 'Hey, if I have to include a hashtag or I have to @ you guys or you have a specific hashtag you want linked,' I try to estimate the impressions for them."

Nelson partnered with Budweiser for a piece of promoted content during the 2019 Super Bowl. When the Budweiser ad, featuring a dalmatian riding alongside the famous Clydesdales, aired on television, the We Rate Dogs account rated April, the dog in the commercial, and featured behind-the-scenes photos.

“I think we told them it might get 1.5 million impressions, and it ended up getting 3.4, so it did just as well as our normal posts,” Nelson said. “I could go back to them, using impressions as the benchmark, and be like, ‘This did well, and one of the reasons why is because it was in line with our regular posts impressions-wise - or how many eyeballs were on it.’ So that's what impressions mean to me. It's changed, obviously, as we've worked with brands, but it's become, ‘What percentage of my audience is frequently seeing my tweets?’ If it's above 50 percent, then we're doing good. It's fun when a few tweets get above 7.7 million impressions (the amount of followers of We Rate Dogs) because it's pretty much like my entire following saw that tweet, even though it's obviously not those followers. It's kind of like that, though.”

Beyond impressions, Nelson has also determined a real-time formula to measure whether a tweet is doing well, by his accounts' standards.

“Early on, I would do hundreds of likes per minute,” Nelson said. “That was a good benchmark. And now, on @dog_feelings, it's thousands of likes per minute. So if I can hold a thousand likes a minute for 15 minutes, that's an average post for @dog_feelings. On @dog_rates, if I could hold it for six minutes, we're going pretty well. On @dog_feelings, a lot of people have notifications on, so they're very active in the beginning. If you were to look at the activity over time, @dog_feelings has a spike in the beginning and obviously decreases from there, but it decreases sharper than @dog_rates. Retweets let me peer into it a bit more. If I can hold 2,000 in 20 minutes - so a hundred retweets a minute for 20 minutes - that's going to be a good post.”

Membership as Engagement

Engagement is not confined to the different social platforms. Perhaps the most impactful metric for engagement is membership - a consumer of content donating to a newsroom or publisher to help fund operations. For The Texas Tribune, a non-profit newsroom in Austin, Texas, covering statewide public policy and politics, engagement is core to its mission statement, and membership is one of four growth areas named in its 2018 strategic vision (The Texas Tribune, 2018):

“For years, the Tribune has measured its performance and its audience engagement through broad, conventional, site-wide metrics — everything from unique readers and pageviews to social followers and comments. While this approach helped chart our growth over time, it never told the full story of our reach and never felt like the right fit for our public service mission.

What the Tribune wants most is loyalty: to produce journalism so compelling and useful to Texans that they're inspired to support us financially. More than 4,000 people do today. We believe this is the ultimate measure of an engaged audience, so we must focus our efforts on moving more readers from their initial contact with our work into channels and experiences that bring them closer to Texas Tribune membership.

Over time, membership has accounted for a modest but growing share of our revenue. But that growth hasn't kept pace with our overall audience growth. We aim to double the size of our membership program — and its associated revenue — by 2025.”

Since the growth strategy initiative launched in 2018, the Tribune's membership base is at nearly 6,600 member households.

Engagement via Email

Another area publishers are targeting for engagement is email. The rebirth of newsletters in the past few years has opened doors for newsrooms to push content to a specific audience at a specific time or attempt to convert non-paying consumers to subscribers. The Wall Street Journal has, in the past year, streamlined its newsletter content with a strong focus on the audience (Schmidt, 2018). What was once a roster of more than 120 newsletters of varying quality is now a list of about 55 newsletters - some centered around a specific topic or reporter - with a goal of getting the audience to open the email, read the content and, hopefully, subscribe (i.e. pay) to receive more content from The Wall Street Journal.

Email, of course, does not have an algorithm, which is one of the biggest advantages of a newsletter strategy. Its audience is also quite predictable. Eater, for example, uses that predictability to time its newsletters for maximum engagement.

“I am attached to my emails because I have a full-time job,” McGuiness said. “That's a reason why we send some of our newsletters at 11 a.m. on a Monday, because we know that people are looking for something to do and distract themselves from work.”

A 2016 study found 68 percent of teens and 73 percent of millennials prefer to receive communication from a brand via email (Roesler, 2016). However, McGuiness said it is a daily struggle to reach a younger audience through email.

“At the moment, our audience is a lot older,” McGuiness said. “We've done audience analysis of our newsletter audience, and they're in their forties. If you're trying to get people under the

age of 20, it's kind of impossible. Newsletters - it's like these are the people who might potentially pay. They are more loyal subscribers, and they are a completely different audience. They aren't young people.”

On-Site Engagement

Beyond social media, membership, subscriptions and newsletters, newsrooms continue to need information about how the audience is engaging with content on their websites. Page views are still measured, but there are more in-depth methods of determining engagement with content on a site. Tools like chartbeat, which measures real-time analytics, help newsrooms with a deeper understanding of what a user is doing on their site. Some of the best metrics to currently measure in terms of on-site engagement are engaged time and audience retention.

Engaged time - chartbeat can measure the time users are interacting with a newsroom’s content - down to the second. This includes actions like clicks, mouse movements, keystrokes and scrolls (chartbeat, n.d.).

“With chartbeat, one user sends repeated pings, as frequently as every 15 seconds, to say ‘I’m still here, and this is what I’m doing.’ Are they actively reading your site, or do they have it open in a browser tab for later? Are they writing something, maybe a comment or search? Are they scrolling down and engaging with the content or not getting much further than the headline?

The chartbeat method of counting provides a richer sense of how many qualified and retained views you’re getting, rather just raw visits to your web site. Our data gives a more accurate accounting of time on page and a better sense of how much of that time was actually spent looking at and interacting with your page. This is information that that can be valuable in optimizing your website, improving your marketing, or selling more advertising” (Haile, n.d.).

Audience retention - chartbeat can measure how frequently a user comes to a website and breaks it down into three categories: new, returning and loyal. New visitors are on a site for the first time in 30 days. Returning visitors have been to a site more than once in 30 days - but not every day. Loyal visitors have visited a site eight of the past 16 days (chartbeat, n.d.).

Working in Engagement

The Pew Research Center, in 2014, made note of the growth in hiring at digitally focused newsrooms (Jurkowitz, 2014). While the term “engagement” is not used in the piece or the study behind it, Jurkowitz (2014) does describe what eventually became known as key job duties of the typical engagement editor or audience development manager:

“Other digital news producers, especially those that have emerged most recently at the national level, are aimed at cultivating new forms of storytelling - from video to crowdsourcing to new documentary styles - and new ways to connect with audiences, often younger ones. A number of legacy outlets are also experimenting with new storytelling and data visualization techniques. But much of the innovation is coming from the digital native sector, with many outlets focused on hiring people with skills and voices ‘being nurtured online,’ as one editor put it.”

Think-pieces on engagement and workflow in newsrooms began appearing soon thereafter, first in MediaShift (Powers, 2015), Columbia Journalism Review (Murtha, 2015) and Huffington Post (Kamdar, 2015). Powers (2015) described the new role of an engagement editor as:

“To help navigate their relationship with digital audiences, news outlets across the country are hiring engagement editors – jobs that are critical as the number of publishing platforms expands, the ability for users to interact with journalists and media outlets increases, and the metrics used to measure content popularity become more sophisticated.”

NPR, in December 2018, listed a job for an engagement editor to “better focus on our audience and drive deeper engagement” (National Public Radio, 2018). In January 2019, The Center for Public Integrity posted an opening for an audience engagement editor position with the following duties and responsibilities (Investigative Reporters & Editors, 2019):

- “Work with editors and reporters to create engagement plans and strategies to increase reach and impact for major projects
- Manage the strategy and day-to-day social media presence of all the Center’s platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and Reddit
- Be an advocate in the newsroom for audience engagement and continuing research into who our audience is, who we’re reaching and who we’re missing
- Monitor website, social media, email analytics and reader feedback to provide regular reports to editors and the development team

- Work directly with editorial leadership to inform our editorial strategy, based on website performance, social, third-party platforms, reader feedback and other audience insights
- Develop and maintain communities related to and affected by the Center's reporting to cultivate a more engaged audience for the Center's work, and help bring in new sources and story ideas
- Consider ways to repurpose previously published stories on our website and social media or through partnerships to increase engagement
- Support engagement initiatives and maintain projects that involve reader-driven or responsive content, including comments, Facebook groups and crowdsourcing
- Work with the Development team to create content for our membership program, including live video chats with reporters, impact reports and other elements
- Support and coach staff on social media usage, headlines and SEO strategies in conjunction with the digital editor
- Adhere to Code of Ethics and Editorial Standards and Practices of the Personnel Policy Manual and Employee Handbook."

A search of indeed.com listings for audience engagement editor shows 704 positions available as of April 2019, including positions in newsrooms and other industries. While the duties differ from newsroom to newsroom and industry to industry, engagement editors and audience development editors have advice for skills students can learn right now to succeed in jobs like these.

"Above anything else, you need to be able to spot a good story and write, as much as it's about data analysis and spotting trends and all those different things," McGuinness said. "You also need to know how to sell a story, and you need to understand good content. I've found that my interest in data and analytics is taking me further because I've just taught myself all these different things. I'm now learning SQL and a bunch of other different things so that I could take it to the next level. It's one of those crazy hybrid roles where you have to be a journalist and also put a math brain on, which for me, I never thought I would do."

McGuinness and Colucci both encouraged anyone interested in working in engagement to continually improve your skills and knowledge.

"It's really learning the difference between posting for yourself, your own personal social media and posting as a business," Colucci said. "One of the challenges as I've met younger students out of college is there might have been an assumption in school that they knew social media, so they didn't need to learn too much about it. But they need to learn it - really paying attention to how some other publishers are posting, studying them. Wherever possible, interface or go to

conferences, even if they're the free kind of conferences that you're attending via webinar. Learn from other engagement people."

With so many ways to measure engagement beyond the stand likes, comments and shares, the role of the engagement editor will likely only continue to grow in importance in newsrooms in the immediate future. Not all engagement is created equally, and having a trained eye on audience development, data analysis, strategy, relationship building and good storytelling will likely be key to the health of newsrooms from this point forward.

"It can be really exciting and invigorating because it's giving people something they have felt like they haven't had the words to say - that this is what they want to do," Wise said. "They're like, 'Oh, I get this. This feels like the core of journalism.'"

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