



The ability to get content wherever and whenever has made audiences engage more frequently with various apps that provide news content. The goal of all content providers is to reach their audience in a way readers and viewers prefer.

CHAPTER

1

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AUDIENCE-CENTRIC JOURNALISM

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter you should be able to:

- Understand what makes today's readers different from news consumers in prior generations and how best to serve them based on those differences.
- Identify the tools you can use to define your audience and how each tool will provide specific value for you as a reporter.
- Examine the various aspects of "fake news" as it is discussed in the public as well as why audience members are often misled.
- Know and apply the interest elements that attract readers: fame, oddity, conflict, immediacy and impact.
- Understand what we owe our audiences above all else, including accuracy, value, fairness and objectivity as well as why these matter to both us and them.

Thinking Ahead: Understand Your Audience

Why do you want to be a journalist?

If your answer was "Because I'm good at writing" or "I enjoy talking to people and hearing their stories" or even "I'm nosy," that makes sense. People who have these skills often find long and prosperous careers in various media fields. Good writing, good reporting and good nosiness are all crucial elements of being great in this field.

The main thing you need to understand about all of those skills is how to use them to benefit other people. If you just rely on those skills for your own interests, that is akin to stating that you want to be a famous chef at a top-flight restaurant because you enjoy eating.

No matter what area of this field you enter or on what platform you work, you won't be writing for yourself, speaking for yourself or even being nosy for yourself. You will be doing your work for an audience, a large group of specific individuals who seek information from you on a daily basis. Just as the famous chef should enjoy cooking great food for other people, you should receive joy when you find important things that matter to specific readers and viewers. You should also want to convey that information to them in a way they can use and in a form they understand.

Audience centrality is the core of everything journalists do today, whether it's when they use Twitter to send out important breaking news or cameras to capture gripping video. However, journalists these days must also understand that not every reader or viewer uses the same platforms for the same reasons or wants the same information in the same ways. This is why understanding your audience is crucial to your job.

In this chapter, we will explore who uses the media today, how they use it and what they expect from their media sources. In addition, we will outline the ways in which you can use the tools outlined in the rest of this book to give your audience members what they crave in the way they want.

MEDIA AND MEDIA USERS TODAY

Unlike media users of the past, today's readers and viewers can access vast volumes of content anywhere and at any time thanks to their mobile devices. How we serve them and what platforms we use to serve them require us to know who is in our audience and what they want from us.

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For decades, newspapers were the standard source of information. Reporters used a series of news values to define what was and was not news. Then, they wrote the content in a way they felt best met the needs of the sources, the readers and the newspaper. As radio and television became important news outlets, audience members sought information

from trusted professionals like Walter Winchell, Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite. In each of these cases, the journalists chose the content and presented it to a mass audience in whichever way they saw best.

Today, social media has become a dominant force in the field of news, with new platforms and new sources supplanting traditional journalists. According to a 2017 study from the Pew Research Center and the Knight Foundation, two out of 10 people rely on social media frequently for their news. The study revealed that two-thirds of Facebook and Twitter users said they use those sites to get their news, making social media a major player in the news arena.¹ The study also found that YouTube recently became the second-most used social media tool for news among the individuals surveyed, while more than 60% of Twitter users said they relied on the platform for news content. Another Pew study, conducted in 2019, also supported the notion that people rely heavily on social media for information that matters to them.²

Journalists no longer have the luxury of providing “all the news that’s fit to print” and assuming people will gratefully consume every last word. The idea of a mass medium has gone away and been replaced with fractured audiences, **niche** publications and a glut of information. News consumers today have so many choices that they can afford to be picky, and they can decide which sources best serve their interests. Here are some things that make this generation of audience members different from those readers and viewers of previous era:

Information However, Whenever and Wherever

Generations of journalists were taught in “**silos**” based on the fields they saw themselves entering. Students with an interest in newspapers went down one path, while those interested in broadcast went down another. When they became professional journalists, they became biased toward their own areas of the field and saw their competition as inferior. Even as digital media has become a force within the field, research has shown that both professionals and students in the field of news see themselves in terms of their **platform** choices.³

These days, this approach to journalism makes no sense, as the audiences we serve aren’t as tied to platform-based biases as we can be. A study by the Media Insight Project found that audience members of all generations are essentially platform neutral when it comes to how they get their news.⁴ The once-held beliefs that

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older generations rely solely on print, while middle-aged media users prefer TV and young people gravitate to digital devices, don't hold water. The survey found that most Americans take more of a buffet approach to their media use, relying on upward of six devices, including television, newspapers and radio, to get their news. In addition, it is the content that drives their choices, with users turning to print publications for news about education and their local government while using mobile devices to keep up with breaking news.

These and other research findings drive home an important and yet uncomfortable point for up-and-coming journalists: It's not about you or what you like. The audience members are driving the bus now, and you have the choice to either present your information in a way they want in an engaging format or accept that they will go elsewhere. Journalists have to adjust their own perceptions when it comes to their platform-based biases and focus more on what audience members want.

The "Infotainment" Phenomenon

The idea of "infotainment" has gained traction in the past half decade and continues to be an issue for journalists. On one hand, **listicles** like those on BuzzFeed and humorous news accounts like those on "The Daily Show" and "Last Week Tonight" draw people into the news. On the other hand, the line between serious news and sarcastic commentary has continued to blur, much to the detriment of news providers. In a 2009 speech at the Poynter Institute, veteran broadcaster Ted Koppel noted that the media dedicates too much time to stories that are heavy on hype but light on facts and information.⁵

Just because news journalists must now think more about an audience than they once did, it doesn't necessarily follow that they have to pander to the audience's basest desires. The wide array of platforms has made it possible for people to post almost any kind of information they want, ranging from fan fiction to videos of cats falling off of TV sets. Although these bits of information show up on the same platforms as coverage of tensions in the Middle East or the president's State of the Union address, it doesn't follow that these items are news.

A clear example of news-meets-entertainment exists in the "Florida man" phenomenon. The concept began in 2013 with a Twitter account, @_FloridaMan, that catalogued various odd news stories that involved someone from Florida. The headlines referred to various Florida men, but the use of "Florida man" as an opening in headline parlance led the account's creator to refer to this person as "the world's worst superhero."⁶

Over the next five years, the "Florida man" concept grew virally, with everything from a day-by-day calendar that outlined whatever crazy thing a Florida man did on that day to a "Florida Man Night" promotion at a baseball game, in which a law would be broken every inning.⁷ The "Florida man challenge" also emerged,



Former Vice President Joe Biden engages in some witty banter with late-night host Stephen Colbert. The line between news and entertainment has continued to blur over the years, making it more difficult for journalists to help readers separate fact from fun.

CBS Photo Archive/Contributor/Getty Images

in which people were encouraged to do an internet search with the term “Florida man” and their birthday to see what odd thing a Floridian did on that day.

Although each of the individual stories had merit for people who were geographically tied to the area in which they happened, as was the case with the “Florida Man Steals \$300 Worth of Sex Toys While Dressed as Ninja” report,⁸ the stories became more of a form of amusement for people outside that region. Journalists also questioned to what degree this phenomenon denigrated the homeless or those with mental illness as a way of amusing readers and driving web traffic.⁹

In serving an audience, journalists can walk a fine line between stories that stress oddity as an interest element and those that contain actual impact. (See a full outline of audience-based interest elements later in the chapter.) If a story is boring, readers won’t spend enough time on it to understand how it affects them. However, if a story is nothing but hot air and buzzwords, the readers find themselves consuming nothing but empty calories of news content. As you develop your skills as a journalist, you will need to know how to make a story engaging to the reader without resorting to infotainment.

Info Glut: Choices, Choices and More Choices

American entrepreneur and computer developer Mitchell Kapor once noted, “Getting information off the internet is like taking a drink from a fire hydrant.” Media users today can understand that concept fairly well, as they deal with a glut of information flowing rapidly at them from thousands of sources.

For generations, people who wanted to get the news were stuck with one or two newspapers, three TV channels, a few radio stations and a handful of news magazines. The lack of choices made for a homogenous understanding of what was going on in the world and a limited view as to how we define news. Although the number of dead-tree newspapers that can land on your doorstep today hasn’t increased, the web has opened up a vast expanse of text-based news options for you. Cable TV provides you with hundreds upon hundreds of channels, many of them serving small-interest niches, including home repair and history. Satellite radio gives audiences access to not only a vast expanse of musical choices but also a number of talk radio stations and news outlets. Websites and social media outlets that aren’t affiliated with traditional media also offer readers and viewers a wide array of perspectives on everything from “Star Wars” to knitting.

The sheer volume of choices can make it difficult for today’s media users to make sense of the world around them. A 2018 Gallup survey revealed that almost 60 percent of the people surveyed found that today’s media landscape makes it harder for them to be well informed.¹⁰ Participants reported that they felt the deluge of media choices made it harder for people to discern fact from fiction and to feel as though they were caught up on valuable information of the day.

Shorter Attention Spans

If you have ever seen a bird chasing a foil gum wrapper across the yard, you know how “**shiny-object syndrome**” works: Something bright and shiny grabs the bird’s

attention, and the bird goes after it. When something else shinier comes along, the bird becomes distracted by that thing, forsaking the original target. According to a 2015 study by Microsoft, people aren't much better than that bird when it comes to staying focused.

The research found that the human attention span now sits at eight seconds, or one second shorter than that of a goldfish.¹¹ The study goes on to say that we lose concentration in that tiny bit of time due in large part to the way our digital lifestyles have affected our brain. What's more, a 2019 study revealed that the global attention span continues to shrink, meaning that people focus on more things in the same amount of time and that trends are likely to have shorter durations than those of the past.¹²

This means that readers no longer will spend several minutes reading the overly long narrative lead you put on the city council meeting story. They also aren't going to sit still for a two-minute video of a person standing at a podium, droning on about parking regulations. The stimulus must be strong and steady over time, as you use concise writing or valuable video to grab the audience members' attention and keep it until you are finished. In addition, you must continue to find new and novel ways to grab the attention of your readers, for fear of losing them to other trends that will spike up quickly.

Audience Participation and Spiraling Viral Coverage

It all started with a quest for more Busch Light.

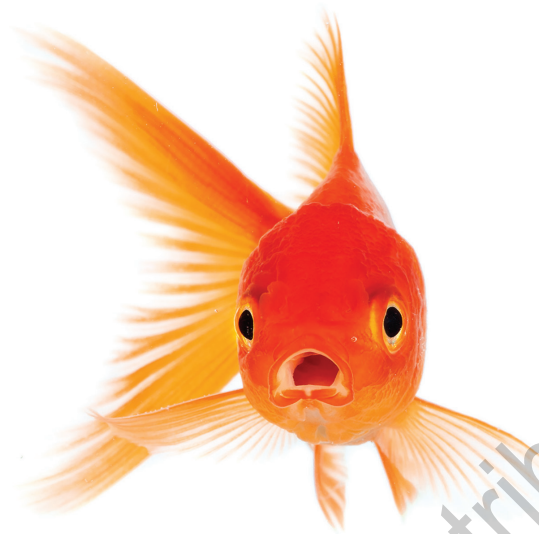
In September 2019, ESPN's "College GameDay" show came to the Iowa State University campus to cover the Iowa/Iowa State football game. During the live shots that featured people cheering behind the television personalities, a 24-year-old fan named Carson King displayed a handmade sign that noted, "Busch Light Supply Needs Replenished." Along with his request for additional liquid sustenance, he included his Venmo account handle, which would allow anyone to send him money.

King told journalists he thought it was a joke and that no one would take him seriously. The internet thought otherwise.

King's sign went viral, and strangers poured in hundreds and thousands of dollars to his account. Journalists dug into his life in an attempt to figure out who the "beer sign guy" was. A reporter from the Des Moines Register interviewed him and later found out that King had posted racist tweets back when he was in high school. This information became part of the story on King, who apologized for his earlier behavior.

This is a goldfish, and it has a longer attention span than your readers do. That means you have to work a lot harder and a lot smarter to get their attention and keep it.

iStock.com/cookelma



Twitter users slammed the paper for its inclusion of this information in King's profile, going so far as to find racist tweets the reporter, Aaron Calvin, had posted in his past.¹³ Calvin lost his job, and the Register issued an apology and explanation for its actions.¹⁴

Meanwhile, King announced he would donate all of the money he received for beer to the University of Iowa Stead Family Children's Hospital, keeping only enough cash to cover the cost of one case of Busch Light. Venmo and Busch Beer caught wind of his efforts and agreed to match the amount he raised.

In less than a month, the collective donations hit the \$3 million mark.¹⁵

As a journalist entering the field at this time of viral content and heavy audience interest, life can come at you pretty fast. The ways in which you approach stories that go viral, how you cover these kinds of pieces and what the overall impact of this work can be rest within your ability to give the readers content they value and enjoy.

You can no longer dictate to the readers what matters, as writers and editors could many years ago when the printing press ruled the news. However, you can use those news values to help you ascertain when an audience's interest has reached a critical mass that demands coverage. You can also use those values to your advantage as you repackage information and disseminate it to your readers.



Consider This → How Does Knowing Your Audience Shape Your Work?

Quality reporters see themselves as helpful conduits of content from sources that have important information to readers and viewers who need to know and understand it. In doing this on a daily basis, reporters often become keenly aware of what matters to their readers and why it should matter to them.

Newer reporters can struggle at this initially, as audiences are more than data points on a survey or web analytics on a screen. To fully reach the readers, they need to develop a deeper understanding of what matters most to the audience and why it does. That said, even the best of reporters need to take time out to really evaluate who is in their audience, what those consumers need and how they want to be reached.

How often you think about your audience and its needs can determine the level of success you have in reaching the people in it, but it needs to be more than driving traffic or gaining followers. If you put some deep thought

into who reads your content and what they gain from doing so, you can best shape your approach to what you report and how you tell your stories.

Some audiences, for example, might want the horse-race coverage of elections and the minutiae of governmental meetings. Others, however, might find a need to see the long view of projects and proposals presented to these governmental bodies to better understand their area more holistically. Some readers prefer school coverage that highlights the successes and shortcomings of sports teams and educational endeavors, while others want a deeper look at budgets and testing.

Thinking about those readers as you ply your trade can better help you shape your approach to coverage, the amount of coverage you provide on given topics and the ways in which you provide it. It will take a little more effort at the front end of your journalism journey, but it will pay off handsomely in the long run.

DEFINING YOUR AUDIENCE

Far too often, journalists make incorrect assumptions about readers based on ill-conceived notions or outdated data. To make sure they don't fail their audience members, media organizations often solicit reader feedback to help them refocus their coverage. Here are a few ways you can get information about your audience:

Readership Surveys

A readership survey allows a media organization to examine who is paying attention to its content, what content is most appealing to the readers and to what degree readers' wants and needs have changed over time. Association Media and Publishing lists several reasons for doing these surveys¹⁶:

- **It's been a while:** Media users' preferences change over time, based on various life factors and interest levels. Industry experts say that conducting a survey once every other year is considered a "best practice" within the field of media.
- **You're not sure where you stand:** The desire to "take the temperature" of your readers is natural if you want to know how best to keep readers happy. A survey can help you determine if the information you are providing is relevant and engaging to your readers.
- **You aren't sure if your approach is working:** News reporters occasionally assume that new ideas will be interesting to their readers because those ideas worked in other markets. These ideas could be anything from covering different types of stories to using various platforms to present information. A survey of readers will help a media outlet to confirm or reject those assumptions.

Most organizations have conducted surveys like these at some point, and it is important for reporters to look at them and see what the audiences really want.

Website Analytics

It's not always who is reading the news that is the most interesting aspect of **analytics**, but instead what those people are reading. Either as part of website surveys or through the use of third-party web analytics, journalists can determine what brings people to a site. These analyses can examine specific **key performance indicators (KPIs)** that allow you to measure the performance of your site against your objectives. Cameron Conaway, the director of marketing communication at Solace, outlined a number of key metrics journalists and marketers should see as valuable when rating their work on their websites.¹⁷ These include:

- **Unique visitors:** These are measured based on the time frame under analysis. For example, if a reader visits a website at 9 a.m., noon, 7 p.m., and 11 p.m. during a single day, that reader would be counted as one unique viewer if the unit of measurement is "daily unique visitors." However, if the unit of measurement is "hourly unique visitors," that one person would count four times. Some analytics can now track whether individuals have made multiple trips to your site and what they viewed.

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Helpful Hints → Demographic, Psychographic and Geographic Information on Your Readers



The various ways you can measure an audience can help you determine who is in your readership and what they want from you.
iStock.com/Lightcome

Identifying trends or interests within a large group of readers can seem daunting. The tools listed in this section will help you better understand who your readers are and if they enjoy what you created for them. Here are some ways to break your audience into some simple, useful chunks:

Demographic Information

Demographics usually include things like age, gender, race, education and relationship status. These categories can then be broken into more useful segments, such as age brackets and specific educational levels. When coupled with those other “check-box items,” demographics can help determine the types of people who use the content you create. Even more, you can refine your coverage approach based on what those demographics tell you. For example, if your readership is predominantly men and women ages 25 to 36 who have one or more children under the age of 10, you can tailor your coverage toward the interests most normally associated with that type of individual. This could be early marriage, young parenthood and early education.

Psychographic Information

Demographic information alone isn’t enough to determine common ground among readers. **Psychographic information** allows you to examine an audience based on personality traits, values, interests and attitudes. This type of data includes things like strength of opinion on political issues and social ideologies.

For example, sporting traditions might dominate the social identities of some universities, while other universities have half-filled stadiums for every home game. Certain towns may profess a conservative sense of local politics, even though the people there treat the town like a “bedroom community” and rarely vote. Other towns may have a wide range of political views, but have a serious dedication to the local high school’s events and to shops run by local merchants and vote in every town election.

Geographic Information

People care greatly about things happening near them, making **geographic information** a crucial element in understanding an audience. When someone robs a gas station in a small town, people want to know what happened and who is responsible. When a reader’s school district considers a bond referendum, that person wants to know how much taxes will go up if the effort is successful.

Traditional newspapers know the circulation of their publications, including where distributors deliver the print copies. Webmasters can use analytics to determine where people are when they log in and engage with content. This is helpful for journalists who want to know if an event is too far outside of the audience’s geographic interests or if readers in certain areas might have an interest in the publication’s reaching out farther into their territory.

- **Total pageviews:** This measures the loading of a single page as well as any reloading of that page. A single viewer could visit 10 pages on a single website for a total of 10 pageviews, or that viewer could continually refresh a single page 10 times for the same total. One area Conaway notes as important in terms of pageviews is the bounce rate on the site. This is the number of single-page visits users make to your site divided by all the visits you receive. This should help you figure out how much you are building an engaged and loyal audience as opposed to the one-hit wonders who look at a single story and then leave.
- **Visits:** This is the single time a viewer enters the website and navigates it until the viewer leaves. This information can be further parsed to determine where the person is coming from, what parts of the site accounted for the majority of the reader's visit and other similar bits of information.
- **Source:** Every visitor to a website has to come from somewhere. Source data can include things like the name of a search engine, a specific referring URL or whether the visitor came directly to the site using a bookmark. Source data will help you determine what got your readers to show up, which can help you with marketing or promoting your information to them. Conaway notes that it is important to distinguish between organic visitors, who arrive at your site via search engines or social media, and those who show up based on paid opportunities so you can see what really motivated the visitors' actions. Understanding page referrals will also help you ascertain what platforms are driving the most traffic to your site.
- **Overall engagement:** This takes into account multiple measurements, such as **session duration** (how long readers spent on a given site as well as how long they spent on any particular page), recirculation (how many people read one piece and then another on your site) and reader feedback (comments, shares and similar activities). These individual metrics can work in tandem to help you better assess what draws your readers' attention, keeps their attention and drives them to participate with your content.

Reporters can use these and other analytics to assess what stories drew the most people, held people's attention the longest and led to additional reading on the site. Just like any other tool, web analytics can be misused or overinterpreted, but for the most part, reporters should look at them to determine what mattered the most to the readers.

Real People

Surveys can give you a broad array of information from a large group of people, while web analytics can help you ascertain where people spend their time while on your site. However, neither of these can replace actually interacting with your audience members.

For years, reporters have relied on **official sources** to drive story selection and story angles. A number of logical reasons existed for this approach: Officials are easy to find, they carry a certain level of authority and their comments are "safer" for reporters than those that come from average citizens. (See Chapter 12 for more on the issues associated with absolute privilege and qualified privilege.) In addition,

journalists often developed patterns with regard to what merited coverage and how best to cover it. As scholar Warren Breed noted while reflecting on his own time in a newsroom, older reporters passed down expectations and values to younger reporters, thus leading to a self-perpetuating cycle of repetitive content.¹⁸



Thoughts From a Pro → Erik Petersen, Editor, Fort Lauderdale Magazine



© Erik Petersen

As a journalist with experience on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, Erik Petersen understands a lot about how an audience can shape content for a publication and how digital media has made that even more important.

Petersen serves as the editor of Fort Lauderdale Magazine, the monthly publication for the city. Prior to returning stateside, Petersen spent 11 years at the Nottingham (U.K.) Post, where he worked primarily as a features writer and columnist. He has also served as a bureau reporter for The Kansas City Star.

Throughout that time, Petersen said he learned how audiences shaped the various publications at which he worked.

“In the U.S. we’ve got a de facto national media thanks to papers like the Times and the Post,” he said. “In the UK, it’s much more explicit. You’ve got London-based national papers like the Guardian, Daily Mail and Telegraph, and then you’ve got local papers. Because of the split, national newspapers cover all the national and international news, while local papers are what Americans would think of as one giant metro section.”

These differences lead to different approaches to what made for content and what the audiences tended to expect in certain publications, he said.

“Local British papers tend to run stuff that U.S. city dailies wouldn’t—real cat-up-a-tree stuff,” Petersen said. “There are entire websites devoted to people in British local papers frowning and pointing at things—potholes, closed public restrooms and so forth. This habit of local papers running these stories in print has always been a sort of endearing running joke, and in the early days of online, papers took notice of how much it could drive traffic. Nonsense stories would go viral.”

Even though the papers enjoyed the traffic spikes on the web, Petersen said he often worried about how the audience viewed the publication.

“People who are tweeting your story with ‘LOL, it’s all kicking off in Bath’ are helping give you a massive spike on that story, but they’re not building a community of readers who are committed to your publication,” he said. “They’re not from your area, and they’re only reading your story because they’re mocking it. It was a lesson that in my view took a while to learn because stories that create huge spikes are hard to peel away from, but British local papers now focus more on the more long-term process of building a community of local readers.”

When he returned to the States, Petersen said he took that understanding of audience building as he approached his new challenge of reaching the Fort Lauderdale community, especially through the interactivity available on the web.

“Unlike daily papers, where the challenge has been how to compete in a world where daily news is now a much more open game, city monthlies now get to interact more regularly with our readers,” he said. “In newspapers, it often felt like ‘this is a threat we have to understand.’ Here it feels more like an opportunity. Our

readers are professionals who live in the city and have discretionary income. If a few times a week we can give them a product they find useful—say, something quick about a gallery opening or a new restaurant—it’s a level of interaction we didn’t have before.”

In terms of moving forward in a digital world with an ever-evolving audience, Petersen said he worries less about the newest apps or devices and more about how best to reach his readers with quality content.

“I try not to get caught up in ‘what works’ as much as how we present it, because in most ways I think good journalism is still what works,” he said. “For a while we heard a lot about how only shorter, quick-hit stuff would work in the new world. Well, I went to the University of Missouri with a guy named Wright Thompson who is one of the people proving that false. Just do good work, and then let the analytics side of things guide you in the particulars of how you present it.”

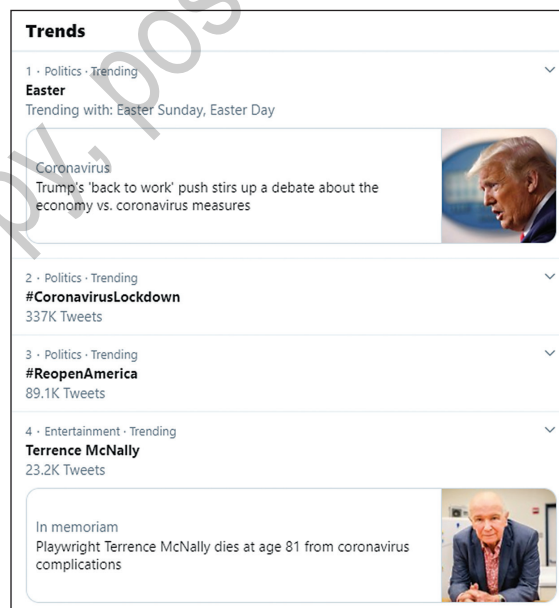
One Last Thing

Q: If you could tell the students reading this book anything you think is important, what would it be?

A: “I think it’s so important right now to be less top-down about building readerships and everything that comes with that, particularly in a big organization. Don’t have one person with all the secret knowledge. Make sure every journalist—particularly the younger, junior ones—have ownership in what’s happening. Likewise, journalists need to think like one-person media organizations. That’s even down to the small things. It might not seem like the biggest thing in the world, but if I meet a journalist without a Twitter account, I wonder what they’re doing. It’s a simple tool for getting your work out there more—don’t you want that?”

What no one really spent a lot of time thinking about in the newsroom, however, was the degree to which stories about robberies, city council meetings or formal speeches mattered to the audience members. In the days of limited media outlets, reporters didn’t have to worry that they would lose readers to other publications. Even if there was competition, most journalists ascribed to a standard set of news values that would essentially guarantee that if a robbery occurred or a city council met, every media outlet would be there, dutifully covering it. Now, with a wider array of media options, understanding your readers becomes more important than ever.

To help you reach your readers and understand what “**real people**” want to see, consider both traditional and digital options. As you work on standard stories, such as meetings, speeches and news conferences, you might take time out to ask audience members what they like to read or what things they think matter. When



This list of trending topics shows how varied the overall levels of interest in a wide array of topics can be on any given day. Twitter

you cover **lite-brite** stories, such as Fourth of July parades or the opening of a local library, you could spend more time talking to people about what they would like to know and why they read (or don't read) what your media outlet produces.

In a digital realm, you should read through reader comments at the end of your stories and other outlets' stories. Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, often have ways for you to keep track of a topic as well as the people most directly interested in it. This will allow you to strike up conversations with these interested parties via email or Twitter and find out more about what matters to them. Always look for ways to find out from "real people" what they think matters and see if it merits additional attention from you and your media outlet.

THE RISE AND IMPACT OF THE "FAKE NEWS" PHENOMENON

A major concern for journalists and their readers is the rise of "fake news" and its impact on how people perceive the things they see in the media. The term gets thrown around the way the word "internet" used to be thrown around: Everyone is using it, dealing with it and thinking it's something it's actually not.

For the sake of this discussion, we'll define "fake news" as content whose authors know it to be false, posted with the intent of fooling readers into believing it to be real. To understand your audience, you need to know what drives people to fake your readers out and why your readers tend to fall for fake news.

Who Writes These Stories and Why They Do It

To better understand the fake-news phenomenon, it helps to determine who is driving the movement and why these people feel compelled to lie to the public. The people who post this kind of content include those with strong ideological positions they hope to propagandize and others who have no stake in what their readers believe or learn. Let's look at who posts this stuff and why they do:

Ideologues Who Want to Advance an Ideology

People often have a strong interest in a given topic and want to feel secure in that position. To make that happen, a lot of ideologically driven individuals will post content whose aim is to get more people to support a specific way of thinking about a given topic. We tend to think of this as a political issue, mainly because of how the term "fake news" rattles around in the world of politics.

The truth, however, is that ideologies can be anything: a position on faith, science, health or anything else. When people want to have "their side" seen as right, they will often push the envelope to get other people to see things "their way." That includes creating or sharing fake content.

The most famous argument currently under discussion (and likely to remain under discussion for decades to follow) is the degree to which Russian hackers (and other folks) spread misinformation to tilt the outcome of the 2016 presidential election in favor of Donald Trump. Researchers found that people who were hyperpartisans on both ends of the political spectrum tended to hit these fake stories more frequently than less engaged people.¹⁹

When unscrupulous people really believe in something and they want other people to believe it, there is little they won't do to force the issue. Thus, we get some false stories that emphasize what people perceive to be larger truths.

People Like Money

Many people who create fake news, especially the highly partisan content, do so with no real interest in our political system. A number of journalists and scholars investigated the people responsible for many of the fake news stories and found that they write them because those stories drive traffic to their sites, and all those clicks add up to serious cash. CNN found that a town in Macedonia builds websites with the intent of inflaming U.S. partisans for cash.²⁰ The ethical and ideological standards for their content producers start and stop with the almighty dollar.

A Washington Post writer tracked down two guys closer to home who were basically doing the same thing for the same reason. The owners of Liberty Writers News essentially use hyperbolic, partisan headlines to fan the flames of divisiveness because it makes them rich.²¹ Whether it is the snake-oil salesmen of the Old West or the Ponzi scheme hustlers of the financial world, scammers often see dupes around every corner and an opportunity to profit from those people. As the line erroneously attributed to P.T. Barnum states, "There's a sucker born every minute." And there is always someone looking to make money from them.

Some People Are Jerks

Not to put too fine a point on it, but some people just like being idiotic. If they can be idiots and get a lot of attention for it, all the better.

After the attack in Las Vegas in which a gunman killed more than 50 people and injured several hundred others, a social media post appeared in which a young man said he was desperately seeking information on his missing father. It turned out that this was a fraud. The profile photo on the young man's Twitter account was the same one used elsewhere to pull the same stunt during an attack in Manchester. In addition, it's an internet meme.

The "lost dad" in the photo? He's porn star Johnny Sins.

When a reporter from Mashable reached the troll and asked why he used a national tragedy for his own amusement, he replied, "I think you know why. For the retweets."²²

He also said he'd probably do it again.

Why Do People Fall for Fake News?

It's hard to think of many things that can make you feel dumber than falling for a news hoax, especially if you shared the content and then got called out for it. As journalists, we know that we should evaluate sources and research content before buying into a story. However, in many ways, we often get tricked into thinking fake news stories are true, just like our readers do. Here are a few reasons why:

More Weirdness, More Chances for Errors

It's not clear if society is weirder now than it was at previous points in time, or if we just know more about the weirdness because we have access to a wider array of news sources. It used to be, we had a few local weirdos and that was it. Now, we

have access to a world of weird, and there are some real hot pockets of weird out there. Thus, when we think about all these strange stories, we start to think, “Yep, that sounds like something I’ve heard before.”

People who wish to mislead us will take advantage of our willingness to suspend our disbelief as they write things that sound similar to other wild stories we’ve heard.

Consider the following headlines:

- Florida man turns himself in for murdering imaginary friend
- Florida man arrested after recording himself having sex with dog
- Florida man arrested for hanging on traffic light and s—ting on cars passing underneath
- Tennessee man accused of dipping testicles in customer’s salsa before online delivery

Two of these are actual headlines for real stories that ran in local media outlets, while the other two are hoaxes that went viral on the internet. Here’s the question: Can you figure out easily which two are which?

These stories all seem completely ridiculous and appear fake on one hand, and yet they also seem totally plausible, thanks in large part to the “Florida man” phenomenon, as we discussed earlier in the chapter. People will often simply pass along these stories rather than checking to see to what degree each is factually accurate and which ones are con jobs.

Confirmation Bias

Another reason people fall for fake news comes down to the idea of stereotyping and the concept of confirmation bias. With so many of us finding ways to sit in our news bubbles and not look elsewhere for content that might not align with our points of view, it becomes easy to create stereotypes and look for things that confirm them.

If you think President Trump is a great guy and you read nothing but news about how great he is, it stands to reason that you might get sucked in by a fake news story that says he was endorsed by the pope. Or one that says he rescued a kitten from a tree. On the other hand, if you think the president is a racist, a liar and a cheat (to quote Michael Cohen’s testimony), you could easily find yourself believing a far-less-than-truthful story that said he plans to bring back the word “Negro” as a descriptor for African Americans.²³

In 2017, Scott Pelley investigated the fake-news phenomenon for “60 Minutes” and found a frightening world of news scams bent on pitting people against each other for sport and profit. One website garnered an audience of more than 150 million viewers publishing headlines like “Hillary Clinton Has Parkinson’s Disease, Physician Confirms.” (The story was based on the claims of a doctor who never met Clinton and was later denied by Clinton’s own doctor and officials from the Parkinson’s Foundation.) The people who published this site tended to lean toward political fakery because they found that more people were willing to click on stories like the Clinton one. A large part of this was because people disliked the politicians who were the subjects of these stories, and thus they were willing to read anything that painted the pols in a negative light.²⁴

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Con men, shysters and other peddlers of hoaxes are nothing new in this world. People swore they had seen the Loch Ness monster and Bigfoot. Others claimed they could sell you a medicine to cure your ills or a controlling stake in the Brooklyn Bridge. What makes today's cons more problematic for us is the volume of lies purporting to be truths and the speed at which they spread throughout society. Partisan bickering and digital aids have helped create a lucrative field of fake news that can give real journalists incredibly painful headaches.

Not every story that readers disagree with should fall into the category of fake news. Just because you don't like a political figure or a societal movement, it doesn't follow that positive stories about these things are fake. However, scammers are taking advantage of media users who enjoy having their worldviews confirmed as they rake in cash based on click-driven advertising.

As a journalist, you need to find a way to break through this wall of fake news and illegitimate content if you want to reach your readers. Even more, you will need to find ways to convince these people that you aren't just one more carnival barker, crying out for attention with exaggerated claims and false promises.

WHAT DO WE OWE OUR AUDIENCE?

With all of this in mind, the job of the journalist can appear a lot harder and a lot more involved than it did at first glance. Although the discipline seems more complicated than you originally thought, some basic elements of journalism remain crucial. As we noted earlier in the chapter, you don't have to pander to an audience to drive readership. Here are a few basic things news consumers need from you:

Accuracy Above All Else

No matter how fast you get information to someone or how incredible your mind-blowing visuals are, if your work lacks **accuracy**, nothing else matters. The first and foremost expectation audiences have of journalists is that we have put forth information that is factually correct.

This means you should go back through everything you write and make sure your facts are solid, your writing can't be misconstrued and your quotes are accurate. This might require one edit or it might take several, but spend whatever time you need to make sure you've verified everything. We will spend much more time on this throughout the book, but always remember that this should be your prime directive.

Clarification of Value

One of the bigger mistakes journalists make is to get into a rut when they report and write. This often emerges when city government reporters cover too many meetings or sports reporters rely on "who beat whom" coverage to fill their story quotas. The idea of "we've



The "copy-taster" (left) selects material, while Editor Arthur Waters (seated, center, right) decides on the treatment of a story with a member of his staff, on a Saturday afternoon in the newsroom at the News of the World, April 1953. Journalists historically have put extra emphasis into the issue of being accurate and fair.

Bert Hardy/Picture Post/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

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always covered X” rears its ugly head when journalists forget that they’re not covering meetings or games for the sake of covering meetings or games. They need to go back to the basic premise of this chapter: Write for the audience.

Journalists have often relied on who, what, when, where, why and how—the 5W’s and 1H—when they write. When writing a story, it becomes imperative that we look at the idea of not only what happened but also why it matters to our readers. The lead will capture the core elements of who did what to whom, but the “why” element of the 5W’s and 1H will drive home the value of the piece. Here’s an example:

Brown County firefighters responded to a fire at 123 E. Smith Drive late Wednesday night.

The core of this sentence picks up on four of the W’s, but it lacks value because this essentially tells the readers that firefighters fought a fire. That’s what they are supposed to do, and thus there’s not a lot of value in that. The lack of an answer to “Why should I care?” leaves the readers without a sense of importance. A stronger lead can create improved value:

A fire at 123 E. Smith Drive killed three people Wednesday and caused \$280,000 in damage to Brown County’s oldest historic home.

That shows value in terms of a sizable impact (death and damage) as well as an additional bit of insight regarding the importance of the house (oldest historic home in the county).

When you write for your readers, be sure you can clearly answer the question “Why should I care?” for them.

Fairness and Objectivity

Accuracy goes a long way to improving trust, but **fairness** and **objectivity** also contribute greatly to trustworthiness.

Journalists often hear that fairness means getting “both sides of the story,” but in many cases, issues have more than two sides. A fair journalist gives stakeholders an opportunity to make their positions known. In some cases, those stakeholders may be less than genuine or may have their own agendas, which is why you need to be prepared with research and information when you speak to them. Fairness does not mean parroting your sources. Fairness means giving people the opportunity to put forth a viewpoint, which journalists have every right to question and challenge.

However, this leads to the idea of objectivity. Being objective is not akin to being blind to reality. The term “fake news” has taken over as a one-size-fits-all term for any news certain people dislike, leading to diminished approval ratings of the press and media credibility. However, objective journalists will examine statements presented as fact and push back against those that fail to pass muster.

For example, in March 2018, Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross testified that he had nothing to do with asking for a citizenship question to be included on the upcoming census, instead noting that it was the “Department of Justice, as you

know.” However, Washington Post reporters had dug into the issue months earlier and found that Ross had actively sought the question almost immediately after joining President Trump’s cabinet. An email from May 2017 from Ross even noted that he wondered why no one in the government had acted “in response to my months old request that we include the citizenship question.”²⁵

What objectivity requires of a journalist is to approach each topic and each source with an open mind. Even journalists who research a topic well might not know everything about it. You have to be able to put aside your personal views and biases when covering stories and give your sources the opportunity to provide you with information on the topic. You also have a duty to your audience to be as informed as possible, so that sources don’t pull the wool over your eyes, and to push back against sources when they present falsehoods.

WHAT ATTRACTS AN AUDIENCE?

Don’t be discouraged when you realize that audiences now determine what matters most to them. Instead, realize that you still have a lot of input when it comes to how you can meet their needs while still maintaining your own set of best practices. To do this, you need to understand what attracts an audience to your content and then use those items as starting points to drive your coverage.

The book “Dynamics of Media Writing” outlines a series of **interest elements** that can help you attract an audience.²⁶ To remember them, you can use the mnemonic **FOCII**, like the plural of focus, but with two I’s. Here is a brief examination of those elements:

Fame

This interest element relies on the idea that important people will draw the attention of readers. As noted in “Dynamics of Media Writing,” it isn’t always what someone does, but who is doing the deed that matters. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the United States sees more than 800,000 marriages end each year with little fanfare. However, when former vice presidential candidate and former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin and her husband, Todd, headed for divorce, it became national news.²⁷

Fame falls into two main categories. The first category includes people who are famous for an extended period of time, like heads of state, actors and singers. The second category includes those people who are living out their “15 minutes” of fame, such as Powerball jackpot winners and internet sensations.

Oddity

People value rare things, which can be anything from the Hope Diamond to the kid in third grade who can belch the



Oddity and conflict will draw readers to your publication. However, if the material fails to deliver more than shock value, they won’t stick around for long.

Images News/Getty Images

alphabet. Journalists often focus on oddities and present them to their readers as being different from the everyday elements of life.

News organizations occasionally highlight **oddity** with positive superlatives, such as the “largest ball of earwax in North America” or “the longest filibuster in state history.” In other cases, oddity could come from negative outcomes, such as the 45-year-old Muncie, Indiana, woman who was arrested on suspicion of stabbing a fellow partygoer in the eye with a fork. The reason? The stabbing victim took the last barbecued rib.²⁸ In terms of the criminally weird, some publications, like the Toronto Sun, even have “weird” news sections on their websites.²⁹

Conflict

If two or more people or groups seek incompatible goals, conflict will emerge. Whether it is two people who want the last barbecued rib at a party or two political parties seeking dominance in the House of Representatives, when mutually exclusive endgames present themselves, you will see conflict.

As we will discuss in Chapter 2, reporting on **conflict** requires more than getting side A of an issue and then assuming there is a side B that you need to even things up. When it comes to a particular conflict, you can see its various facets if you put in some effort to examine the issue. For example, any building project could have financial, societal and environmental ramifications for the area and your readers. You need to understand those various facets and explain how each outcome can be good or bad for your readers.

Immediacy

People don't like to feel out of the loop, and news journalists understand this. To best serve their readers, journalists attempt to provide audience members with valuable information as quickly as possible.

When journalists “break” news or get a “scoop” on the competition, they demonstrate the importance of **immediacy** as an interest element. Digital outlets like websites and social media outlets can provide journalists with 24/7 access to their readers, meaning that immediacy takes on a whole new level of importance. Prior to these ever-present platforms, journalists measured immediacy in increments of days or hours.

Newspapers published multiple editions each day, with the final edition bringing a close to their day of information dissemination. Journalists working for the publication then had to wait to see what competing papers and broadcasters discovered that they didn't. Television journalists had three nightly broadcasts, with the final version of the news airing just before midnight, depending on the time zone. However, once those windows closed, the news went dark until the morning newscast.

Today, immediacy is measured in minutes and seconds, which leads to a hyper-competitive market in which speed dictates a lot of what we do. However, as immediacy becomes a primary issue in the field, we all have to make sure that speed doesn't trump accuracy. Fast is great, but fast and wrong is horrible.

Impact

As noted earlier in the chapter, people want to know “Why should I care?” Good journalists can answer that question when they focus on the **impact** of a story. In some cases, you can demonstrate impact with simple stories, such as pieces on tax-rate increases or business closings. In other cases, you need to go much deeper to show a longer-range impact, such as how the “too big to fail” banking crisis of the mid-2000s came to a head or how changes in environmental laws will affect the quality of water in an area.

You can demonstrate the impact of a story in a quantitative or qualitative sense. Quantitative impact measures the degree of the impact, such as how many people contracted the coronavirus in a city, a state or a nation. Qualitative measurements show the severity of an impact, such as the death of one student at your school.

/// THE BIG THREE

Here are the three key things you should take away from this chapter:

1. **The audience matters most:** You aren't writing for yourself. You are writing for your readers, and they have specific wants and needs that you must address. The better you understand this, the more connected you will become with your audience members, and the better you will be able to serve them.
2. **Journalists owe the audience:** When it comes to your readers, focus on what you owe them each and every time you ply your trade. You have to be accurate. You need to show them value in
3. **Focus on the interest elements:** Fame, oddity, conflict, immediacy and impact serve as crucial interest elements for all media writers, but they are particularly valuable for news reporters. Each time you sit down to write a story, consider each of these elements and see which ones you think apply. This will help you focus your work and build strong and valuable content.

/// KEY TERMS

accuracy	17	impact	21	pageview	11
analytics	9	infotainment	5	platform	4
audience centricity	3	interest elements	19	psychographic information	10
conflict	20	key performance indicator (KPI)	9	real people	13
demographics	10	listicles	5	session duration	11
fairness	18	lite-brite	14	shiny-object syndrome	6
fake news	14	niche	4	silos	4
fame	19	objectivity	18	unique visitor	9
FOCII	19	oddity	20	visit	11
geographic information	10	official source	11		
immediacy	20				

/// DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The first question this chapter asked is “Why do you want to be a journalist?” What is your best answer to that question? What makes this field worthy of study in your mind?
2. What is the source of most of the media you consume? Think about not just the platform (newspaper, magazine, TV, web, apps) but the sources of media on those platforms. What makes that media valuable to you? How did you find the sources, and what made them a part of your consumption habits? What similar media did you reject or decide not to continue using? To what degree do you think the media provides you with audience-centric content?
3. Of the five interest elements listed in the chapter, which one drives you to consume media? Why do you think this is? Which one matters the least to you? Why do you feel that way?
4. Of the information you consume on a daily basis, how much of it do you think would fall into the category of “infotainment”? What draws you to this material, and how much does that bother you now as a reporting student?

/// WORK IT OUT

1. Examine the following sentences and determine which of the following interest elements would most likely apply to them:
 - a. Taylor Swift accuses Selena Gomez of stealing one of Swift’s unpublished songs and recording it as her own.
 - b. A baseball player on a south Florida high school team had his fastball clocked at 123 mph, the fastest ever on record.
 - c. Members of the local city council will vote today on whether to allow a developer to build condominiums on land that is sacred to a local tribe of Native Americans.
 - d. More than 1 million people in the United States have contracted the coronavirus over the past three months, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention stated today.
 - e. Residents of a Pittsville, Wisconsin, neighborhood reported seeing a man wearing clown makeup while hang gliding naked over a city park.
2. Read the following headlines and determine which ones you feel meet the standards of fairness and objectivity as outlined within the chapter:
 - a. Poll shows president’s approval rating at 51 percent; Citizens report slow economic growth, international tensions as main concerns
 - b. President is pointlessly arguing against statistics—and it’s going about as well as you would expect
 - c. Local restaurant revises menu, brings back “Garbage Burger” after customers protest in parking lot
 - d. Why is the city council unable to accomplish anything?
 - e. Senator defends her position on same-sex marriage, argues critics “purposefully misunderstand” her vote on bill
 - f. Citywide poll reveals Chicken Hut’s wings best around
 - g. Environmental Global Conference issues warning that eating Tide Pods can kill you; Soap Eaters Anonymous president disagrees
3. Research the following stories online, based on the summary information provided below, and determine which ones are fake and which ones are based in truth:
 - a. A Pennsylvania man sued a stripper and her employer for severely injuring him during a “special performance.” The man suffered a ruptured bladder and nerve damage.
 - b. A member of the U.S. government wished “Happy Birthday” to the U.S. Navy via social media. To make the message more

powerful, he included an image of a warship. Unfortunately for him, it turned out to be an image of a Russian battle cruiser.

- c. As part of an antismuggling sting, officials found a child frozen alive in a small box. He turned out to be one of nearly 300 children frozen alive for the purposes of selling their harvested organs for transplantation on the black market.
- d. A man in Louisiana stole a life jacket from a department store. This crime led him to be sentenced to life in prison. The cost of the lifejacket was less than \$200.
- e. The FBI conducted a raid on a Virginia retirement home in 2018, acting on a tip about illegal activity. The investigators found that the elderly residents were being forced to participate in a “Fight Club” activity. Nurses and other staff members placed wagers on who would win the hand-to-hand combat events. Seven employees were arrested as a result of the raid.

/// WRITE NOW!

1. Explore the demographic details of your school in terms of age, gender, race and the in-state/out-of-state gap. Look for specific details you think define your school. Then, select another institution within your state and examine the same elements. Use these findings to write a two-page essay that outlines the similarities and differences between these schools. Also, include your opinion regarding the degree to which those elements accurately reflect the similarities and differences between your two schools.
2. Select three articles that interest you from the media you consume. Look through them to identify the elements of interest outlined in this chapter. Write up a few paragraphs on each article, explaining why you found that these articles were of interest to you and which elements most and least factored into your interest.
3. Select an issue of your student newspaper (or online publication, depending on your campus) and compare it with the coverage of an issue of your local publication from that same day and time as well as an issue of a national publication from that same day and time. Write a short essay on each one of these publications to outline what audience(s) you think they serve and how well you think they are serving them. Use examples of stories that illustrate the points you are making regarding the quality (or lack thereof) of the coverage.
4. Conduct a short content analysis of one of your social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.). Which of the people you chose to follow shows up most in your feed over the past 24 hours? What topics are “trending” in your feed, and how well do you feel those things represent your overall interests? To what degree would you say these items qualify as “news,” and how do you think this reflects on you as a media consumer? Write a short paper that outlines your thoughts and findings.
5. Reflect on a time when you became an active participant in a social media phenomenon. It might have been your choice to tweet about an election or to post articles about a topic that you thought others should read. What drove you to do so, and how much thought did you put into your approach? Does this differ in any way from how you see yourself as an upcoming journalist, or is this part of a different way you see media usage?
6. Reflect on the issue of accuracy and how you feel it is or isn’t present in the media today. As allegations of media bias, “fake news” and other similar issues come to the forefront, how do you see this overall field, and why do you perceive it this way? Write a short essay that clarifies your outlook.
7. Select a news piece from a local publication and assess it for audience centricity. How does it do in addressing the 5W’s and 1H, and how well does it tell you why it should matter to you? If you feel it has done well, explain what works. If you feel it hasn’t, explain what doesn’t work and how you would go about fixing it.

The author maintains an active digital media presence at the “Dynamics of Writing” website, where he posts reactions to the news, helpful hints on media writing and additional exercises for readers. Here is one post that captures the essence of this chapter, with a few minor edits for context and clarification. For the original version of this post and others like it, visit www.DynamicsOfWriting.com.

Local newspapers and trash-sniffing bears: How audience-centric journalism works (Published Oct. 7, 2017)

Whenever I travel, I tend to grab a copy of the local newspaper to see what matters to the readers of that area. In the larger metro areas, you get a lot of the same types of things: crime, governmental wrangling, national news, international news and big-time sports. Over the years, I also noted a trend of unfortunate similarities among regional papers because most of them are now owned by a single company, Gannett. Thus, you get a lot of “USA TODAY NETWORK—(FILL IN YOUR STATE HERE)” bylines on stories that have a general local feel, but lack a clear connection to the specific town or city in which the paper lives.

Still, a number of true “local” papers exist in various parts of various states, including mine. When my in-laws used to live in a place called Beecher, Wisconsin, we would often visit them and a stop at a gas station along the way gave me a chance to sample the local press. The one vivid memory I had was during a spring trip “up north” at a time of heightened international tensions, some sort of congressional shriek-fest and a lot of worries about an upcoming state election.

The front-page story on the local paper? Six tips on how to keep bears emerging from hibernation from getting into your trash.

I couldn’t find a single story on Obama or Europe or even our state legislature on the front page. It was about the local fishing forecast, a festival at a local church and, of course, the bear thing. The publishers of those papers were local folks, writing about local things that mattered to local citizens.

Sure, things like peace in the Middle East and who was likely to do what in the U.S. Senate mattered to those people in a broader sense, but the local press figured (probably rightly) that people who read their paper would have gotten that stuff from CNN or FOX or some big-news website. They didn’t have a reason to rehash that stuff. On the other hand, it was a pretty safe bet that Anderson Cooper or Sean Hannity wasn’t going to run a series on how deer were in heat and thus leading to more car accidents on Highway 141 (a real concern around these parts).

Use this link to take a look at two local publications that understand how to focus on what matters in the readers in their geographic area: The Omro Herald and The Winneconne News: <https://dynamicsofwriting.com/2017/10/09/local-newspapers-and-trash-sniffing-bears-how-audience-centric-journalism-works/>.

Top story: How local bridge work isn’t going to hurt the fishing in the area. Other stories? The building of a new assisted living community, how the local schools are doing in state tests/budgets, local zoning laws and an upcoming Oktoberfest walk/run.

I’m not going to endorse or admonish the writing quality or design approach on either of these publications, but I will tell you that I’d bet a dollar to a dime that the content matters to the area readers. **(FULL DISCLOSURE:** I live in Omro, a city of about 3,300, and my wife desperately wants to raise chickens in our yard for reasons past my understanding. She’s always keeping an eye on zoning changes that might allow for this. I pray that this never happens.)

The big takeaway here is that you need to know what matters most to your readers and then provide content that meets the needs of those readers. It might seem “unimportant” to cover things like this, especially when other people you know are writing about political unrest in Russia or North Korea’s missile program.

However, if you ever walked out to your trash and saw a 300-pound black bear pawing through your garbage, you’d probably want to know how to keep that from happening again.

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