Engaging Audiences

MEASURING INTERACTIONS, ENGAGEMENT AND CONVERSIONS
A SURVEY OF "DIGITAL-FIRST" NEWS SITES

BY JAN SCHAFFER AND ERIN POLGREEN

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> *"We feel these numbers only give us part of the information we need. We're interested not just in breadth of engagement but more in depth of engagement."*
> *— Survey Respondent*

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Measuring Interactions, Engagement and Conversion

Overview

The rise of social media tools has empowered online news startups to distribute content, market their sites and track users. However, most small news sites say they cannot lasso data to track whether they are turning users into supporters who will help their sites survive.

According to a national survey on audience engagement, nearly eight in 10 online survey respondents said they could not measure whether their engagement strategies were also converting readers into advertisers, donors, content contributors or volunteers.

"Such an effort is beyond our capacity," said one respondent. "We need help," said another.

These are among key findings of a new survey, funded by the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, focusing on how "digital-first" news sites are engaging their audiences and measuring that engagement.

"These small sites can measure interaction with their content, but they don't have good tools to measure meaningful engagement," said Jan Schaffer, director of J-Lab: The Institute for Interactive Journalism, which spearheaded the research. "This affects both the future of their operations and the impact they can have in their communities."

Social media connectors such as Facebook and Twitter were highly valued, but they were primarily used to alert users to new stories or information.

Describe the community you serve.
Check all that apply:

Category	Percentage
Focuses on a specific community or region.	81.9%
Reports on a specific topic or cluster of issues.	37.4%
Seeks to serve a niche demographic.	19.2%

* 265 Respondents

New analytical tools gave these news startups some useful data, but survey respondents said their top metric for measuring engagement was still website usage – unique visitors and page views. Many expressed dissatisfaction with the information they get.
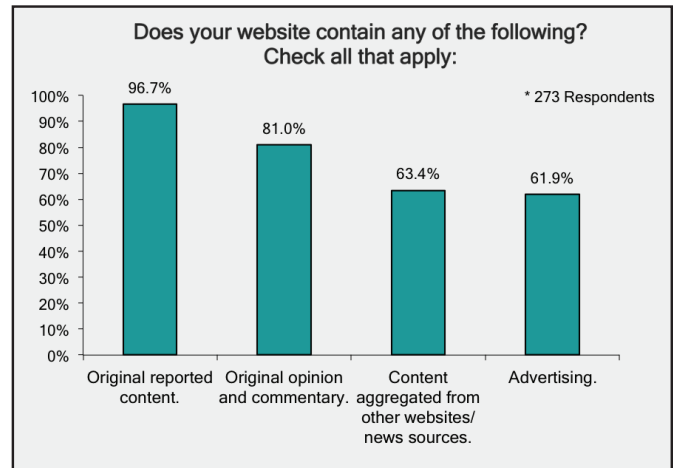
"We feel these numbers only give us part of the information we need," said one respondent. "We're interested not just in breadth of engagement but more in depth of engagement."
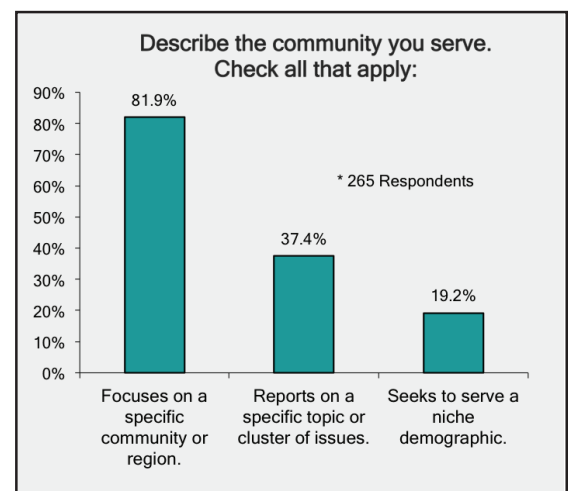
Even though data on depth and stickiness of audience engagement were missing, creative ideas were not. In more than 1,300 open-ended comments, respondents described many resourceful strategies they are using to involve their audiences in community issues and information.

Many of these ideas extend beyond conventional definitions of engagement as audience interactions with content. At least four types of engagement surfaced in the survey responses, but how well the respondents optimized these engagement strategies varied by organization. They include:

- **Engagement as outreach**, driving users to consume content.

- **Engagement as reaction**, inviting users to comment, share, like and chat.

- **Engagement as stakeholder participation**, getting users to contribute stories, time, funding.

- **Engagement as civic participation**, activating audience members to address community issues.

Does your website contain any of the following? Check all that apply:
* 273 Respondents
- Original reported content. 96.7%
- Original opinion and commentary. 81.0%
- Content aggregated from other websites/news sources. 63.4%
- Advertising. 61.9%

> *At least four types of engagement surfaced in the survey responses.*

"As these small startups build new toolboxes to connect with their audiences, they need new ways to identify and measure the different strata of engagement," Schaffer said.

About the Survey

The online survey reached out to 783 "digital-first" news startups to explore what strategies they are using to engage audiences and measure that engagement. Of the 278 who responded, 239 (86%) completed the full survey; 39 respondents answered a portion of the questions, including offering many open-ended responses.

Sites were identified primarily from J-Lab's Community News Sites directory, lists of other online news startups, selected members of The Media Consortium and the Association of Alternative Newsmedia, and a local list from the Chicago Community Media Workshop. J-Lab fielded the survey between Feb. 7 and March 2, 2012.

> *"These small startups... need new ways to identify and measure the different strata of engagement."*

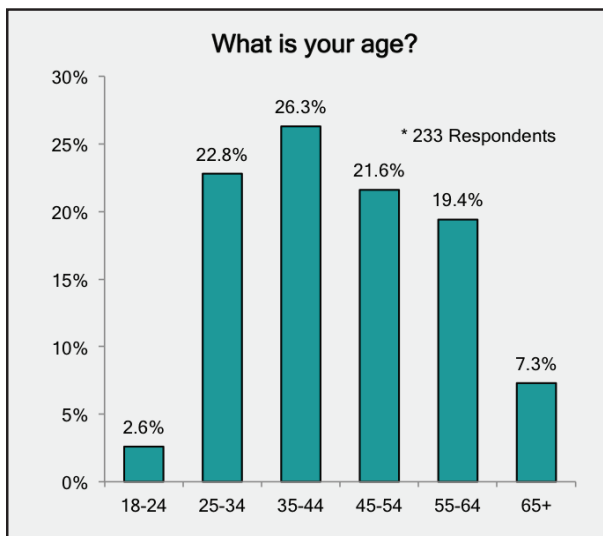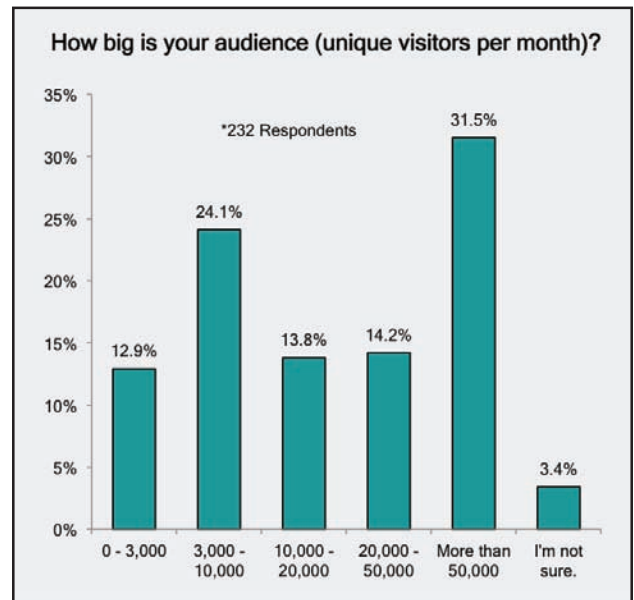Media strategist Erin Polgreen took an in-depth look at respondents from Chicago, where the McCormick Foundation is based. "Chicago's media ecosystem is very distinct and reaches many different geographic and cultural niches," Polgreen said.

"Respondents tended to be more mission-driven and distribute content across multiple platforms, including radio, in-person events and syndicated blogs to increase reach and engagement. However, like national organizations, issues of staffing, strategy and measuring quality of interactions – not just the number of people reached – are of critical concern."
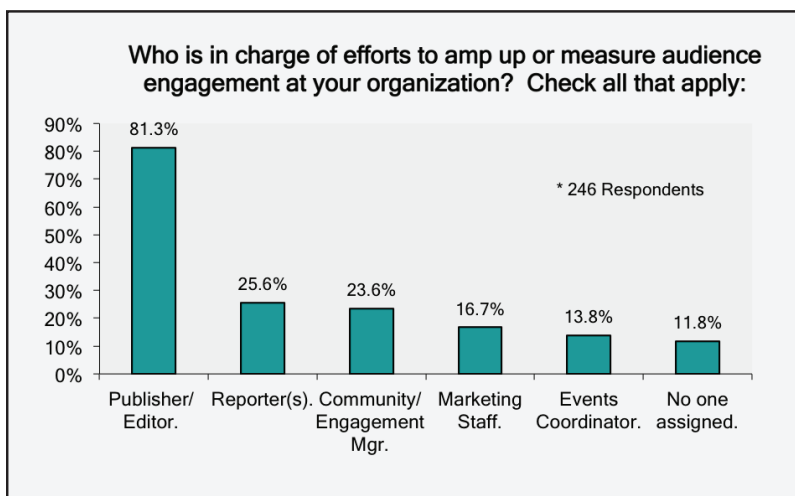
Characteristics of the Respondents

The vast majority (82%) of the news sites focused on a specific community or geographic region, which is where most of the growth in entrepreneurial news startups has been. Just over 37% addressed a specific topic or cluster of issues, such as health or the environment. This is a growing area for news sites that seeks to connect with specific demographic or interest-based communities.

Nearly 97% reported having original reported content and 63% aggregated content from other sources. Only 62% have advertising. About 65% of the respondents had 50,000 or fewer unique visitors per month. Many sites were very small: 37% have fewer than 10,000 unique visitors per month, however, 32% had more than 50,000 visitors per month.

How big is your audience (unique visitors per month)?

*232 Respondents

0 - 3,000	3,000 - 10,000	10,000 - 20,000	20,000 - 50,000	More than 50,000	I'm not sure.
12.9%	24.1%	13.8%	14.2%	31.5%	3.4%

Agewise, nearly 52% of the respondents were between 18 and 44; 25% were digital natives between 18 and 34. However, just over 48% were 45 and older. The range in ages fits the profiles of entrepreneurs launching news startups. These initiatives tend to be launched by young journalists just entering the business, mid-career journalists who have been downsized from newsrooms, or empty nesters who see media as a new way to volunteer in their communities.

What is your age?

* 233 Respondents

18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
2.6%	22.8%	26.3%	21.6%	19.4%	7.3%

About 65% of the respondents had 50,000 or fewer unique visitors per month.

Who is in charge of efforts to amp up or measure audience engagement at your organization? Check all that apply:

* 246 Respondents

Publisher/ Editor.	Reporter(s).	Community/ Engagement Mgr.	Marketing Staff.	Events Coordinator.	No one assigned.
81.3%	25.6%	23.6%	16.7%	13.8%	11.8%

Many of the respondents have only a small staff, and the publisher or editor was identified most frequently (81% of respondents) as the person responsible for both bolstering engagement and trying to measure it. However, nearly 24% of the respondents, usually the sites with larger audiences, reported having a community or engagement manager. Of those responding, 65% said they devoted as much as 10 hours a week to engagement activities.

Engagement via Visualizations

Comparing What Is
with What Could Be

When "urbanists" and web developers Dave Reid and Jeramey Jannene founded Urban Milwaukee in 2008, they aimed to use the site to advocate for the city's built environment.

In the process, they've employed some novel ways to engage their readers and bring about 11,000 unique visitors per month to the site. One strategy led to a notable before and after.

In April 2009, the site zeroed in on re-imagining South 2nd Street, a pitted roadway lined with a hodgepodge of architecturally interesting buildings in the city's Walker's Point section. "It seemed ripe for improvement," Reid said. "It seems like a logical place to start with a complete-street type of idea," he said, referring to the movement to design streets that provide safe access for all users.

The local community actively weighed in with comments and graphic artist Kieran Sweeney jumped in and offered to sketch a total redesign. With colored bike lanes, street trees and curb bump-outs, the plan foreshadowed possibilities for a strip that met the needs of motorists, plus bikers and walkers.

At the time, GOOD magazine was running a livable-streets competition. The 2nd Street design was entered – and took second-place. Milwaukee news outlets soon picked up on the idea and published the street images. A local alderman jumped on board, and the idea of a redesign got on the local public works agenda.

> *"It seems like a logical place to start with a complete-street type of idea."*

Two years later, in May 2011, the community celebrated a ribbon cutting of the newly redesigned street that had almost everything in the initial sketch – plus street lighting.

The 2nd Street project was not the only time the site urged its audience to visualize possibilities. In March 2009, the city was moving forward on

plans to launch a streetcar route in the city. Urban Milwaukee invited its audience to use Google maps to design their ideas for the best three-mile inaugural route. Users were then invited to vote for their favorite from 11 routes put forth. "One of the designs submitted closely reflected the ultimate route," Jannene said.

Readers ask questions about real estate transactions or street closings via Twitter, but the site's founders say they often interact with their audience through their individual accounts.

In addition, they host a book club where a group of 10 to 15 people meet to talk about books on urbanism. Every June they celebrate their anniversary with a get-together and they hold parties after key votes on urban projects.

Their latest engagement strategy is also a revenue strategy for their enterprise. They have opened a store next to their workspace where they are selling pro-Milwaukee T-shirts, books and photographs. ■
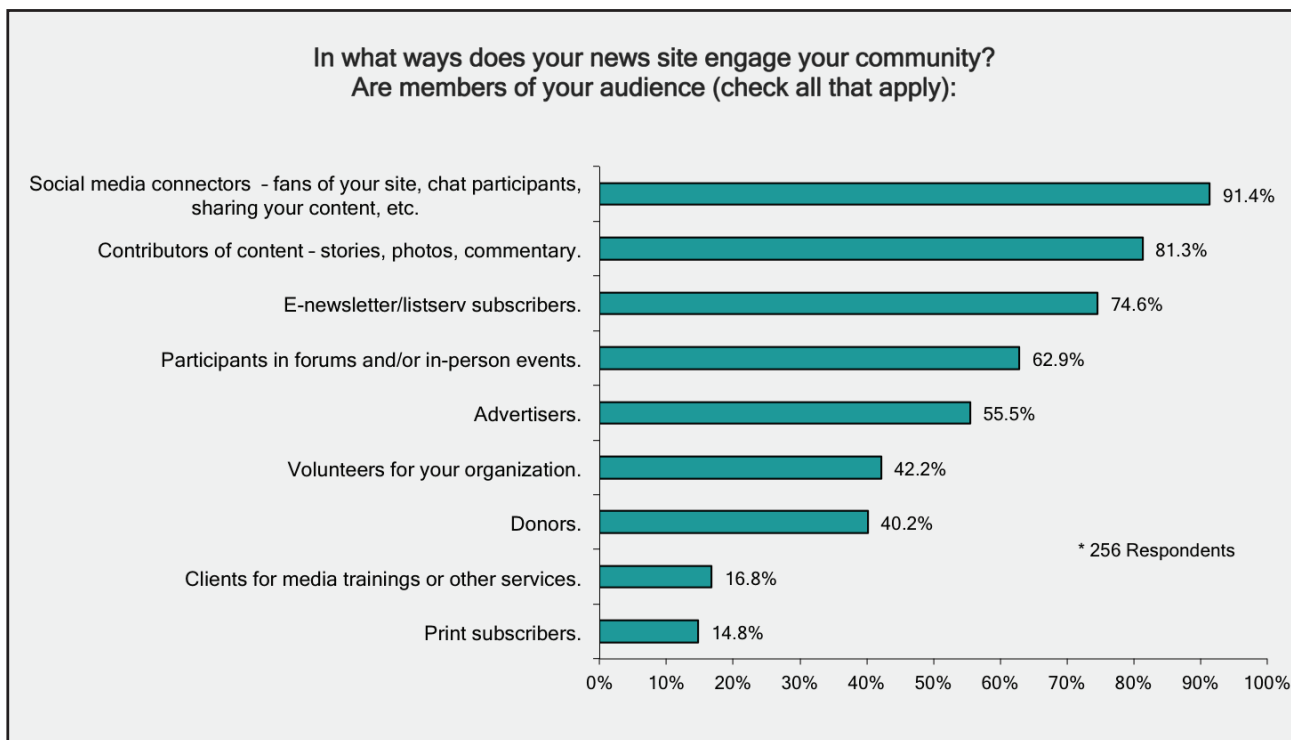
Avenues for Engagement

In asking respondents to identify the ways their particular news sites engaged their community, the survey provided insights on primary engagement strategies and revealed considerable resourcefulness on secondary strategies.

As expected, outreach that tried to get users to consume, create or react to site content prevailed. Respondents frequently mentioned users commenting on their websites or Facebook pages, subscribing to newsletters, tweeting or re-tweeting information, becoming site fans, sharing on Facebook and other outreach to grow audiences who will read their stories.

When asked to offer their "most successful" engagement efforts, however, the sites discussed an arsenal of different tools they employed. Some of these are captured in short case studies that accompany this report.

In what ways does your news site engage your community? Are members of your audience (check all that apply):

Category	Percentage
Social media connectors - fans of your site, chat participants, sharing your content, etc.	91.4%
Contributors of content - stories, photos, commentary.	81.3%
E-newsletter/listserv subscribers.	74.6%
Participants in forums and/or in-person events.	62.9%
Advertisers.	55.5%
Volunteers for your organization.	42.2%
Donors.	40.2%
Clients for media trainings or other services.	16.8%
Print subscribers.	14.8%

* 256 Respondents

The top engagement approach employed by nine out of 10 (91%) of the respondents was through such social media connectors as Facebook chat participants or shared content. Eight out of 10 (81%) sought to get audience members to contribute stories, photos or other content.

Three-fourths (75%) of the respondents used e-newsletters or listservs to alert readers to available content. Nearly 63% used in-person events. (In another question 81% said they considered face-to-face gatherings an important part of building relationships.)

A much lower emphasis was placed on engaging the audiences in roles – such as advertisers, donors or volunteers – that could help sustain the news sites as ongoing community resources. A little over half (56%) said they engaged their audiences as advertisers; about two in five engaged them as donors (40%) or volunteers (42%). About 17% offered media training for the community.

Participatory Engagement

Empowering an Army of Eyes, Ears

When East County Magazine launched in 2008, one way it immediately engaged residents was by providing free alerts about wildfires and emergencies in the eastern outback of San Diego County.

Home to rattlesnakes and mountain lions, a growing wine industry and casinos operated by some of its 18 Native American tribes, East County is a region of about 480,000 people.

There is much to focus on: With San Diego now a growing green energy hub, East County has sprouted wind and solar energy farms and an algae bio-fuels industry. Land-use issues involving the use of parkland are a key topic.

"We tell our readers that if you see some wrong-doing, get it on photo and video," said editor Miriam Raftery.

And so she put out a call when a tip arrived that the local gas and electric company was violating no-fly zones near protected eagles' nests. The video got the company's helicopters grounded, Raftery said.

> ### "We tell our readers if you see wrong-doing, get it on photo and video."

"Another video proved a water district was violating orders not to dig up sacred grounds with Native American remains. We showed it at a water board meeting, and the next day the attorney general sued the district and issued an injunction," she said.

"It's like we have this army of eyes and ears out there. We really empower our people a lot."

Empowering its audience is a key engagement strategy for the site. It recruits "spotters" for wildfire outbreaks. It barters ads for access to a police-scanner site to add to its community alerts.

Raftery said the site has been recognized by local, state and federal agencies for its commu-

nity information and engagement around wildfire reporting. "We now collaborate with radio and TV stations in providing ... real-time information for wildfires in California. Our informal 'spotter' network has transformed to include firefighters, and the model is now being replicated in several other communities," she said.
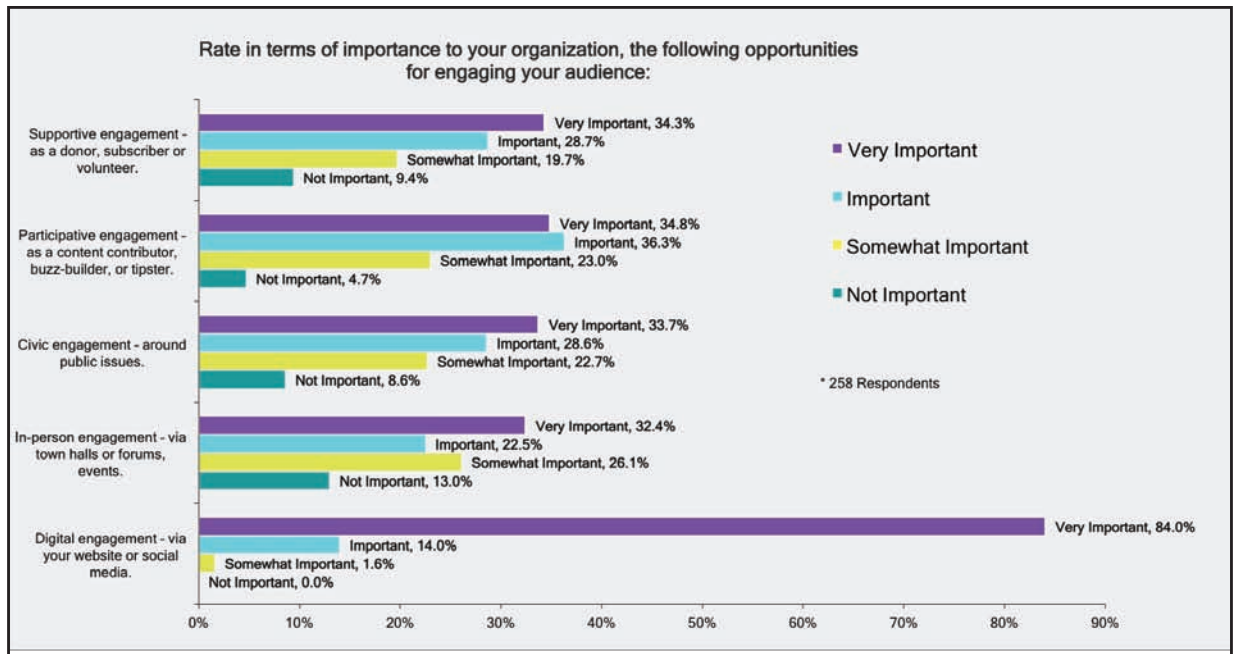
East County Magazine employs some of the typical strategies for reaching out to its readers. It signs up subscribers and volunteers at public events, solicits sponsors for its own events and makes targeted donation pitches when it needs something in particular, such as an upgrade to a private server.

"When we started, we thought it was going to be monthly," she said. "In the first week, we had enough content to go weekly." Now, she posts daily. The award-winning site reports monthly unique visitors as high as 50,000.

She values social media. Story tips often come from Facebook. And the site uses two Twitter handles: one for fire alerts and one for news. People who follow an alert link to the website often subscribe to the weekly email newsletter.

Raftery, however, says she uses Twitter cautiously. 'We might do a couple of tweets a day. Some days none. If we get too many in a day, people will opt off."

"When we send it, we want it to be worth it." ■

Rate in terms of importance to your organization, the following opportunities for engaging your audience:

Supportive engagement - as a donor, subscriber or volunteer.
- Very Important, 34.3%
- Important, 28.7%
- Somewhat Important, 19.7%
- Not Important, 9.4%

Participative engagement - as a content contributor, buzz-builder, or tipster.
- Very Important, 34.8%
- Important, 36.3%
- Somewhat Important, 23.0%
- Not Important, 4.7%

Civic engagement - around public issues.
- Very Important, 33.7%
- Important, 28.6%
- Somewhat Important, 22.7%
- Not Important, 8.6%

In-person engagement - via town halls or forums, events.
- Very Important, 32.4%
- Important, 22.5%
- Somewhat Important, 26.1%
- Not Important, 13.0%

Digital engagement - via your website or social media.
- Very Important, 84.0%
- Important, 14.0%
- Somewhat Important, 1.6%
- Not Important, 0.0%

Legend: Very Important, Important, Somewhat Important, Not Important

* 258 Respondents

Importance of Engagement Opportunities

When asked to rank the degree of importance of different engagement opportunities, the responses affirmed that the participating news sites aspired to be highly involved in many strata of engagement.

Respondents were asked to rate five kinds of engagement, scoring them as "very important," "important," "somewhat important" or "not important." Digital avenues of engagement through their websites and social media were paramount for 100% of those responding, with 85% declaring it "very important."

However, it was also clear that four other engagement goals were competitively important with one another:

Of the following tracking tools and strategies, please select the three that are most important for your organization:

- Unique visitors. — 66.3%
- Page Views. — 55.0%
- Number of comments/commenters on your site. — 35.3%
- Average time on your website. — 31.7%
- Number of Facebook fans. — 30.5%
- Number of interactions (likes, shares, comments) on Facebook. — 24.5%
- Number of Twitter followers. — 18.1%
- Number of Retweets, Tweets, etc. — 13.3%
- Click-throughs to advertisers. — 6.8%

* 249 Respondents

- **Participative engagement** – as a contributor, buzz builder or tipster – was key for 94%, with 71% saying it was "very important" or "important."
- **Civic engagement** – prompting involvement in public issues – was key for 85%, with 63% saying it was "very important" or "important."
- **Supportive engagement** – as a donor, subscriber or volunteer – was key for 83%, also with 63% saying it was "very important" or "important."
- **In-person engagement** – via events or town halls – ranked highly for 81%, with 56% saying it was "very important" or "important."
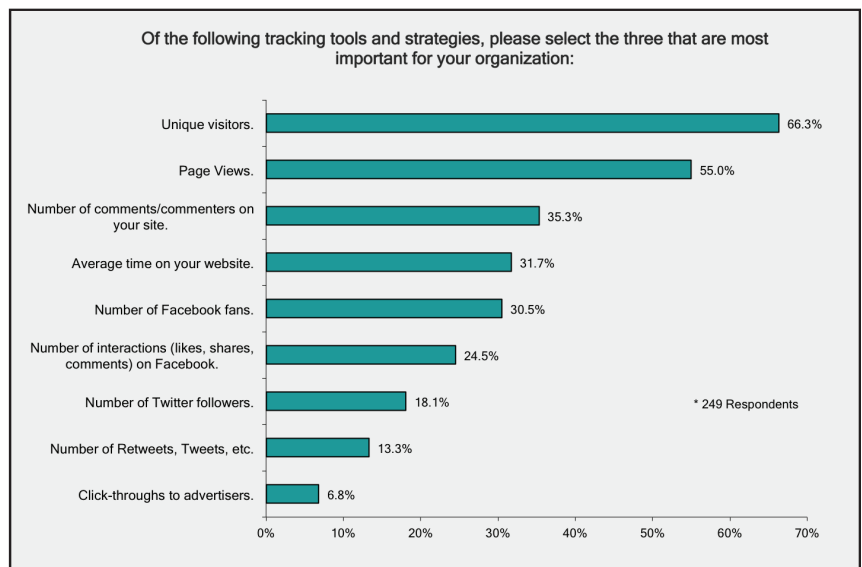
The sites had few efficient ways to measure engagement in three of the strata. For tracking different kinds of support, they need to manually count donors or volunteers. For in-person events they might use an online registration tool but need to independently count actual attendees or revenue raised. Digital analytics tools can measure comments or social media activity, but more substantial contributions, such as stories or columns, require independent tracking. Meanwhile, the sites generally resort to anecdotes to track civic engagement.

Engaging with Humor

Offbeat Ways to Engage and Entertain Your Audience

What if the subjects of your news stories are leaking septic tanks, overflowing sewers and invasive species that can devour entire ecosystems?

In such matters, connecting with your community can involve teaching as well as telling through serious journalism. Add an ounce of ingenuity and some good guffaws, and you devise some engagement opportunities that range from the absurd to the awe-inspiring.

The five-year-old Great Lakes Echo, has devised a menu of offbeat opportunities to involve its community of readers who care about the Great Lakes watershed.

The site is a project of the Knight Center for Environmental Journalism at Michigan State. Most recently, a student reporter wrote about the state's plan to kill 13,500 swans, and she included a poll asking reader opinions.

"We wondered if it made much difference just to get a click of the poll, but it was an interactive element that we hadn't used in a while," said site editor Dave Poulson, the center's associate director. "Then we noticed tweets that said something like: 'Should Michigan kill swans? Vote!'"

Five days later, 419 votes had been cast, 43 comments were posted and the story had been liked, shared and tweeted more than 311 times. "I realize those numbers may not sound high in relation to other sites, but for us it's a huge spike from the norm," Poulson said.

"When I saw the poll ... on Twitter, I wondered if telling our readers to 'go to the story and vote' got us more readers than if we just said 'go to the story.'"

The site has gotten a lot of mile-

age out of such wacky interactions as:

- **Carp Bombs**, a gallery of reader photos that contain photoshopped images of the invasive Asian carp.

- **Great Lakes SmackDowns**. The site's 2010 competition pitted eight of the region's invasive aquatic species against one another. In 2011's "Terrestrial Terror," readers were asked which species was the most destructive to the region.

- **Facebook quizzes** that ask readers:
  - *Which Great Lakes invasive species is your former significant other?*
  - *Which Great Lakes are you? Shallow like Lake Erie? Or stormy like Lake Michigan?*
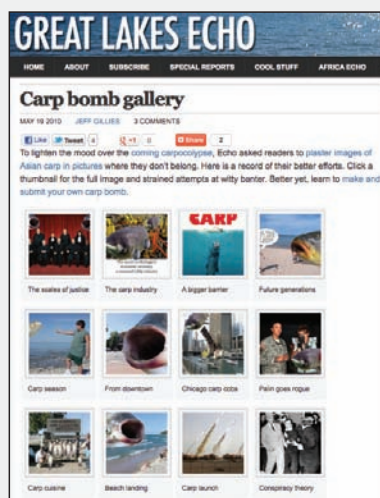
Then in March 2012, the site launched Flash Point. Echo, mimicking an idea from Outside Magazine, invited regional photographers to send their favorite and trickiest-to-shoot photos, along with their tales of how they got them. Photographers sent in stirring, light-infused images, shots of amazing Northern lights and cool star trails captured digitally by shooting 350 30-second exposures. Amateur photographers began asking questions.
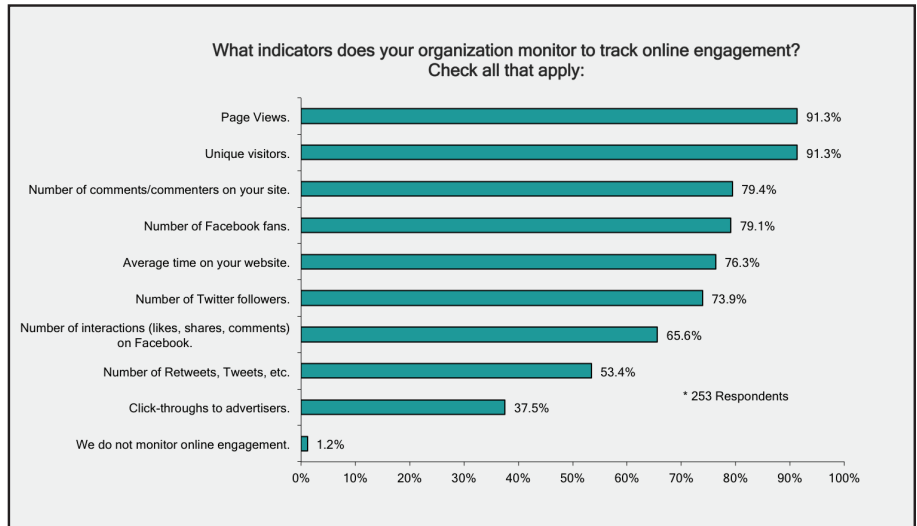
Measuring Engagement

To know whether their strategies are working, online news sites need to track their online engagement. But while social media activity was identified as their top engagement tool, social media monitors are a secondary indicator for measuring engagement.

Instead, most respondents said they focus on monitoring website activity. More than nine in 10 (91%) focused on unique visitors and the same percentage focused on page views. Eight in 10 (79%) monitor commenting activity. That was closely followed by tracking average time on the website (76%).

As for social media measurements, about eight in 10 of the sites (79%) monitor the number of the Facebook fans and 65% track such Facebook interactions as likes, shares or comments. Nearly 74% monitor the number of Twitter followers; only 53% tracked Twitter activity.

However, when asked to select the three most important tracking tools for their organization, respondents overwhelmingly focused on two: unique visitors (66%) and website page views (55%). Fewer than one-third said social media interactions were among their most important trackers. Only 37% of those responding said they measured click-throughs to advertisers. (See chart on page 11.)

What indicators does your organization monitor to track online engagement? Check all that apply:

Indicator	Percentage
Page Views.	91.3%
Unique visitors.	91.3%
Number of comments/commenters on your site.	79.4%
Number of Facebook fans.	79.1%
Average time on your website.	76.3%
Number of Twitter followers.	73.9%
Number of interactions (likes, shares, comments) on Facebook.	65.6%
Number of Retweets, Tweets, etc.	53.4%
Click-throughs to advertisers.	37.5%
We do not monitor online engagement.	1.2%

* 253 Respondents

(Continued from previous page.)

"Some asked if we'd pay them for the image. We said the best we could do was a link back to their commercial site," Poulson said. "To my surprise, that was enough for several to submit." *Echo* found more photographers by tracking who was re-tweeting the stories.

Launching soon is a weekly video feature called *WadayaKnow*? It's modeled after Jay Leno's *Jaywalking* feature on the *Tonight Show.* Students ask simple environmental questions of people on the street and video the responses.
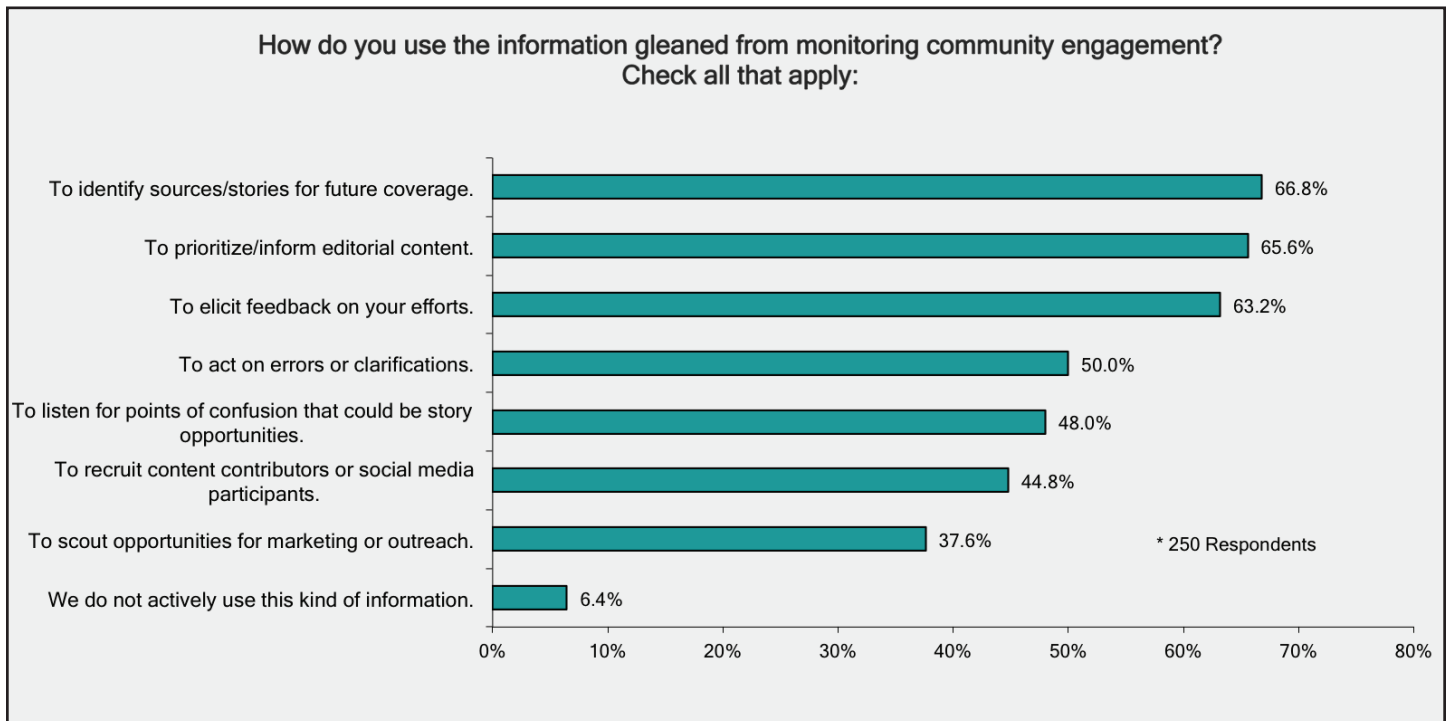
Examples: *Where does your water come from? Name the Great Lakes. What is the greatest threat facing the Great Lakes? What is the difference between climate and weather?*

"Some of the answers are hilarious. Some serious. Some really, really wrong. And some are right."

"Some of the answers are hilarious. Some serious. Some really, really wrong. And some are right," Poulson said. Each feature ends with an expert such as the state climatologist, a water microbiologist or an ecologist explaining the correct answer. "They're just coming in now but they look pretty good."

Poulson's strategy on engagement: "I still think you've got to invite the audience in. You've got to challenge them," he said. "It's like pushing a rope sometimes. But if you have to push too much, something is not working." ∎

How are Engagement Metrics Used?

How do you use the information gleaned from monitoring community engagement?
Check all that apply:

To identify sources/stories for future coverage.	66.8%
To prioritize/inform editorial content.	65.6%
To elicit feedback on your efforts.	63.2%
To act on errors or clarifications.	50.0%
To listen for points of confusion that could be story opportunities.	48.0%
To recruit content contributors or social media participants.	44.8%
To scout opportunities for marketing or outreach.	37.6%
We do not actively use this kind of information.	6.4%

* 250 Respondents

If sites are spending time measuring engagement efforts, how do they use this information? A majority of the respondents, between 65% and 67%, said they use this input to inform or develop their editorial content. About 63% used the information to get feedback on their efforts.

Yet while overwhelming majorities said they engaged audience members with social media connectors (91%) or as content contributors (81%), only 45% said they used engagement metrics to actually recruit more content contributors or social media participants.

Consistent with other responses, only 37% said they use their tracking results to scout opportunities for marketing or outreach.

Tracking Audience Conversion

About 79% of those responding said they did not track or measure whether they converted site visitors to take on other roles.

Engaging site visitors in various content-creation roles was identified as most important to the success of the respondents' sites. Ranked as "very important," "important" or "somewhat important" were:

Does your organization track or measure audience conversion?

No.	78.8%
Yes.	21.2%
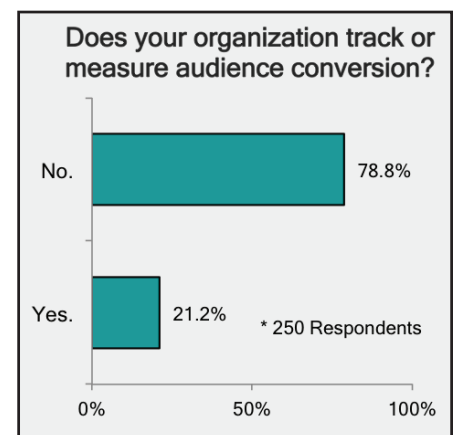
* 250 Respondents

- Converting audience members into sources for future stories or tipsters and crowdsourcing participants (both 88%).

- Converting site visitors to be actual contributors of stories or photos was cited by 77% of the respondents.
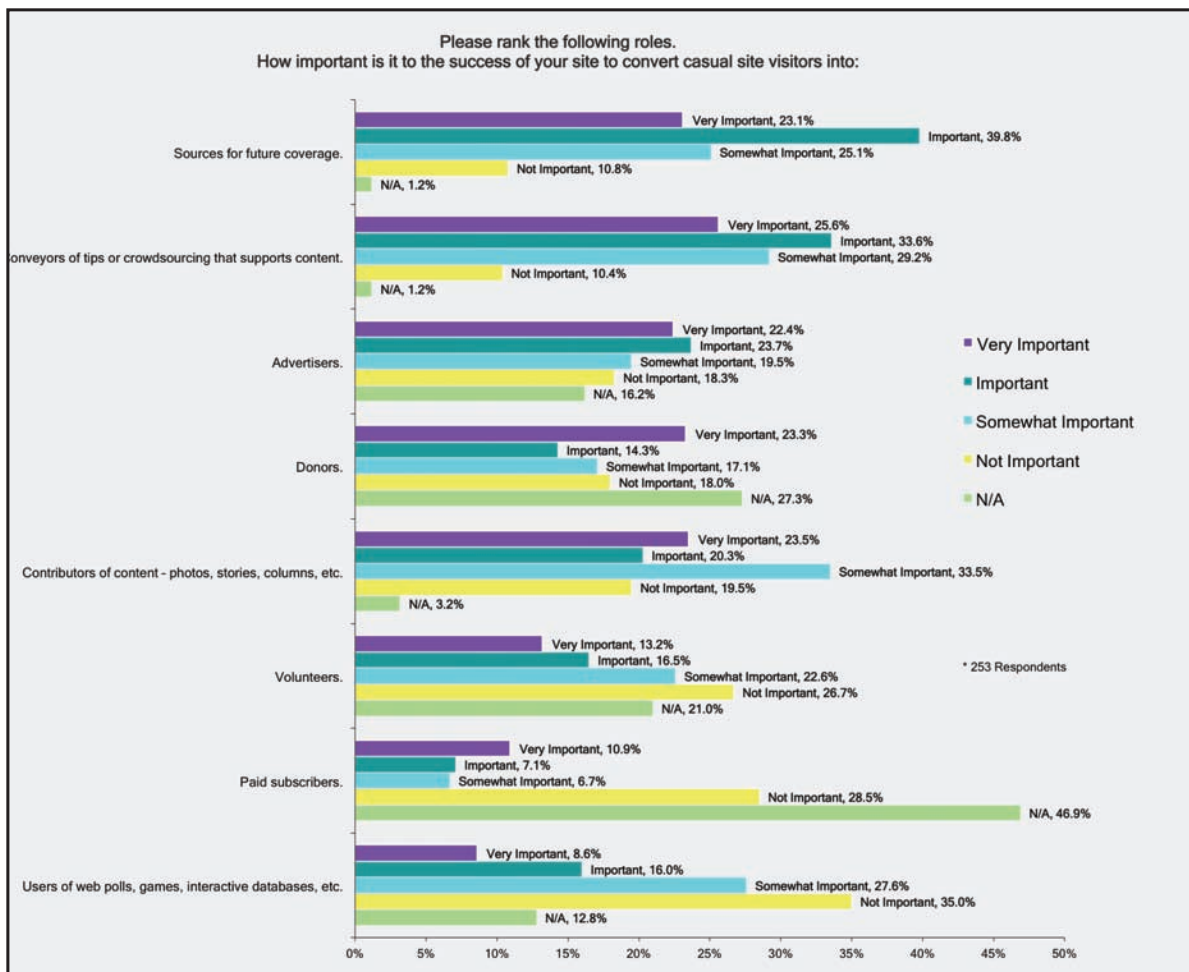
Ranking lower in importance was converting casual site visitors into advertisers (66%) although advertising was not applicable to 16% of the respondents. About 55% said converting site visitors into donors was important, but donations did not apply to 27% of the sites. Of some importance to 25% was converting visitors to paid subscribers, but paid subscriptions did not apply to nearly 47% of respondents.

Please rank the following roles.
How important is it to the success of your site to convert casual site visitors into:

Content Strategies for Engagement

The survey queried whether the news sites employed three specific content strategies for engaging their audience. They were asked whether their news site:
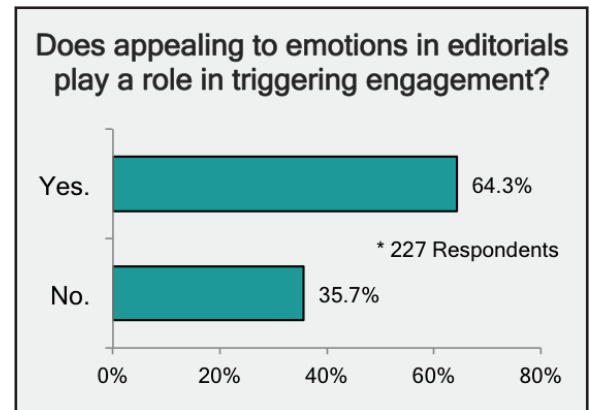
- Appealed to emotions in their content or outreach.

- Focused on helping the community understand or address its master narrative – the story it tells itself.

- Engaged in mapping the assets of their communities.

Appealing to Emotions

Just over 64% of 227 responding said they found that appealing to emotions in their coverage – frustration, anger, outrage or happiness – played a role in triggering engagement, and 95 respondents elaborated more in open-ended responses.

"People can get frustrated on community issues," said one. "And we can give them a platform to voice their concerns."

"Readers are more likely to engage when emotional," said another. Numerous respondents said emotions particularly stirred engagement on social media.

Does appealing to emotions in editorials play a role in triggering engagement?

Yes. 64.3%

* 227 Respondents

No. 35.7%

0% 20% 40% 60% 80%

> *"Our lurker readers provide a lot of hits to our unemotional coverage, but our commenting community is more active in emotionally appealing pieces."*

"Our lurker readers provide a lot of hits to our unemotional coverage, but our commenting community is more active in emotionally appealing pieces," said one respondent. "Frustration, anger and outrage frequently prompt sharing, commenting and discussion," said another.

While many respondents embraced an appeal to emotion, others steered clear out of a concern for "journalistic integrity," they said.

"We absolutely do not do this in our content because we purposefully have no editorial voice or positions," said one respondent. "However, our social media is a different story. And I've found that digging out the nugget in a story that hits people on an emotional level has been extremely successful in engaging readers in our content."

Master Narratives

Asked whether their news site made it a priority to help the community understand, or change, its master narrative, more than 68% of 239 responding said they did – although they don't necessarily anchor their coverage in that ongoing narrative.

What is a Master Narrative?

Master narratives are the overarching or meta-stories that are built from a lot of other "little stories" about a person, place or an issue. When the sum of these stories embody longstanding beliefs about how things work, they become conventional wisdom.

Examples of master narratives include the Rust Belt saga of deindustrialization in the Northeast and Midwest United States, or voter characteristics in Red States and Blue States. The depiction of Silicon Valley as a tech entrepreneurs' paradise is a local master narrative.

When a master narrative rings true, it engages community members who find it to be authentic. However, when a new narrative is emerging – for instance, a downtrodden community that is starting to gentrify – audiences often experience it before journalists report it.

Grassroots news sites with close community connections have a unique opportunity to engage new audiences by being the first to understand and articulate any new narratives that are taking hold in their communities.

Do you help the community understand its own master narrative?

Yes.	68.2%
No.	31.8%
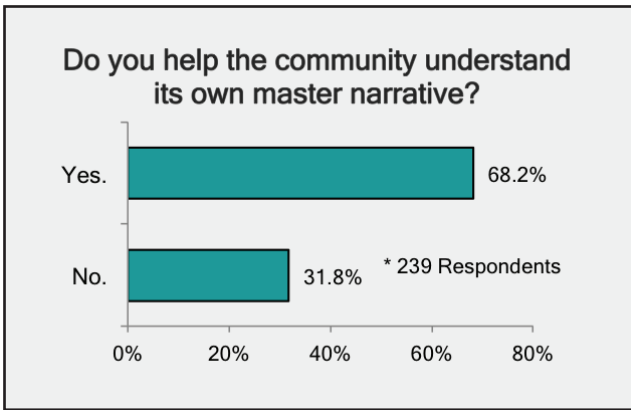
* 239 Respondents

For instance, several respondents work to counter stereotypes about their community. Some focus on protecting a valued natural resource such as a river basin or lake. Others see a narrative of empowerment, helping people participate in community issues.

"We don't have an 'ongoing master narrative,' but we do try to speak out against incorrect narratives, both within and outside our community," said one respondent. "A city of immigrants that is constantly shedding its skins has to stay true to the 'master narrative,'" said another.

"We share the … irritation that the external narrative is that [our city] is a backwater, that it's been passed over, that its residents are criminals," said one.

"People are beginning to see the need for an alternative narrative beyond the cops reports in the local paper," one said. "We identify the master narrative as a quest for better health-care access, affordability and care," said one health news site. "By informing readers of efforts to achieve this, it sparks debate on all sides."

"Our master narrative is that we live in a good community, no matter what you read in the newspaper," said one. "A master narrative works when it rings true."

What is Asset Mapping?

Many of the survey's respondents are as interested in *building* community as they are in *covering* it. By cataloging or actually mapping community "assets," or community strengths, some social scientists assert that communities can be empowered to address their problems with local talent and capacity.

A community asset or resource is anything that improves the quality of life in that particular community. Assets can include such things as local experts; artistic or cultural resources; businesses that support the local economy; public, private and nonprofit institutions; associations of citizens; important buildings; sources of funding or natural resources. They will vary from place to place.

When people in a community know who to go to for what, for instance, they are operating with a mental "asset map," although they might not use that term. News organizations that chart these assets have a more direct path to audience engagement, as they are creating internal structures to support smarter community involvement.

One way many news sites can engage their community in solving problems is by making hidden assets, or strengths, more public.

Asset Mapping

One approach holds that digital news sites can engage their communities by validating or cataloguing various community resources, attributes or "assets." The Knight Foundation has even encouraged people in communities to engage in scavenger hunts to find such information online.

However, only 29% of the survey's respondents said they engaged in mapping their community's assets. "We should," said one respondent. "People take things for granted," said another. This is an "admirable goal," said one respondent. "We need help with this."

Bringing on a Full-Time Engagement Editor

Scarcely a year ago, The Lens in New Orleans brought a new staff member on board. Maggie Calmes' task was not only to monitor metrics on the investigative news site but also to develop its event activities.

Her title was a new position for the organization: Engagement Editor.

In mid-March 2012, the nonprofit site held its third "salon." About 120 people came to hear a panel of five experts discuss juvenile justice policy and a controversial 8 p.m. curfew for teens in the French Quarter. The curfew prevented kids under 18 from working in the Quarter's restaurant kitchens or performing with the local music groups.

"This was more of an educational event rather than a Lens-based event," Calmes said. Other events tended to involve more social mingling or source development, and participants paid a small donation if they wanted. But educational events are "something we wanted to do."

The Lens is developing its salons and other events with two aims: One is making them an extension of its journalism. In addition, The Lens is seeking to develop new relationships and secure some new streams of financial support from future event fees or sponsorships.

It is also launching a membership drive and a new website design that will add another column that can accommodate advertisements or announcements as a way of engaging with corporate sponsors.

"Educational events are 'something we wanted to do.'"

Calmes figures the site gets about 35 percent of its traffic through Facebook. And reporters regularly Tweet from meetings they cover. "It's a way to publicize [the meeting] and a way to take notes," she said.

"It's easy to 'like' someone on Facebook and post a comment, but it's way harder to go to PayPal and get someone to make a donation," Calmes said. The site has more than 1,750 Facebook fans and 2,800 Twitter followers.

"We want to engage people in ways that are very natural and good and positive, and it's hard to do that while asking people for money," she said. The site now operates on just under $500,000 a year.

Appealing to Calmes was The Lens' commitment to covering the master narrative of a hurricane-ravaged city. "The Lens highlights the need for a more engaged New Orleans and a more transparent government."

"The 'narrative' is one of a recovering city taking the reins of a historically corrupt and inefficient government," Calmes said.

"It's what sets us apart and what attracted me to The Lens," she said. With the events, "we are trying to get those people who are super civically engaged and get them to come out and get to know us."

Charter School Project

Part of that is reflected in the site's charter-school reporting initiative that targets communities with kids in schools. (New Orleans is a center of the

charter-school reform movement.) The Lens has recruited a corps of paid freelancers who cover each charter school and work to ensure that the schools release a meeting agenda, that the meetings are held and minutes are posted. "Educational reform pulls in people from every possible background," Calmes said.

The Lens also invests in publicizing and supporting community workshops that teach citizens how to attend city meetings and efficiently engage local officials.

Another of the site's get-to-know-us activities are "Offline with The Lens" days when staffers park themselves in a remote location within the community to work instead of working out of the space it shares with the Fox8 TV newsroom.

The Lens publicizes the locations and people come to offer story ideas.

"The 'narrative' is one of a recovering city taking the reins of a historically corrupt and inefficient government. "
-- Maggie Calmes

The site has held three "Offline" days so far – a concept borrowed from California Watch. Calmes says they have produced some 40 story ideas. Some of the ideas pan out and others don't, but Calmes gets back to the person to tell them what The Lens found out. "We're very attentive to those kinds of things," she said.

Calmes is engaged in setting some quantifiable engagement goals for the coming year. One goal is to increase the site's average weekly unique visits beyond 1,600. And she is doing deeper training in Google Analytics to help her connect the dots.

"I'd like to see what are the stories that people read that prompt them to click on 'Donate.'" ■

"This is an admirable goal. We need help with this."

Some were puzzled by the question. "I have no idea what you mean by *asset mapping*. Would love to learn more," one said. Another pushed back: "Actually, no. We're not the Chamber of Commerce."

The news sites that engaged in asset-mapping used such things as directories, resource listings, Google maps, tag clouds or top-picks lists.

Examples ranged from a list of all youth groups that deal in violence prevention to a chart of the connections among members of the school governing board as well as maps of local farmer's markets, best art shows of the month, searchable databases of health information, a map of one library's system of capital projects.

"We launched a reader survey in the fourth quarter of 2011 asking what makes this area special to our readers," said one.

"Last year, we gave our community art calendar its own website, along with a directory of artists/ arts, a blog and searchability, and we publicize the calendar as a big resource," said another.

One arts site rued the fact that it had the "best mapped and curated arts lists ever but 'we had to let it go.' In a sense, though, nearly everything we write is in some sense asset mapping of what's good in [our city's] contemporary art."

Others map information to help foster conversations. "Our project to map the residential location of every person elected mayor or council member from 1971 through 2011 showed a gross disparity in geographic representation," said one.

"This was a major project that's being used extensively now as the city works toward changing the election system from all at-large elections to council districts."
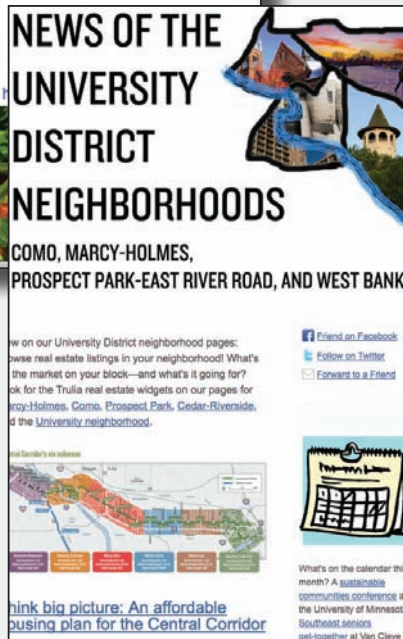
Twin Cities Daily Planet Connects with Niche Newsletters

In January 2012, the Twin Cities Daily Planet, a gritty seven-year old start-up in Minneapolis-St. Paul, added even more tasks to its already daunting workload.

The bootstrapped daily news site launched three specialized newsletters:

- Education News offers a weekly roundup of local education stories plus some links to national coverage.

- TCFoodies is a weekly collection of TCDP's coverage of food issues, from restaurant stories, to blogs, to urban gardening and the farm bill.

- Southeast Minneapolis is a bi-weekly newsletter covering news in neighborhoods around the University of Minnesota. It's a collaboration with nearby community organizations that wanted more coverage after their neighborhood print newspaper folded.

"I absolutely think of these as engagement strategies," said the site's editor Mary Turck.

"We know there's a lot of interest in specialized areas," Turck said. "One of the amazing things is seeing the responses."

The newsletters are published using MailChimp's email marketing service; a 12 percent open rate is the norm. TCDP's daily e-newsletter gets around a 10 percent open rate, Turck said.

"With TCFoodies, we started getting upwards of a 50% open rate, which is not what you get. That was phenomenal."

Meanwhile, Southeast Minneapolis has had open rates of between 60 and 90 percent with a fast-growing subscriber list, she said. Plans are afoot to soon add a four-page print newsletter that can be distributed in coffeehouses. "It's clear that these niche publications are what people want," Turck said.

The verticals follow the launch two years ago of another newsletter ArtsOrbit. TCDP doesn't derive much revenue from ArtsOrbit, and it even gives arts organizations some of its surplus ad inventory to try to help them stay afloat.

TCDP has a small staff and relies for much of its content on recruiting and training contributors. But the newsletters give the site a certain "synergy" with the audience: TCDP gives them better news and readers keep the Planet up to date.

"We do a lot with a little," Turck said. "But it's exciting. We're connecting people more and more."

TCDailyPlanet launched in 2006 with one of the original New Voices grants from J-Lab. Since then, it had been an innovative leader in finding ways to engage with its audience. It partners with some 40 ethnic and community news organizations. It has launched a corps of correspondents for its Neighborhood Newswire. It does media training workshops for the community.

For readers who want to rant, TCDP offers a Free Speech Zone for unedited contributions.

Favorite Engagement Tools

An interesting picture emerges when respondents were asked to talk about their "favorite" engagement tools. In more than 1,300 comments throughout the survey, these small online news sites revealed that they actually worked with two kinds of engagement toolkits: One reaches for social engagement and tries to draw traffic to their websites. The other employs a wide menu of strategies, including a lot of in-person events, to trigger deeper public engagement around community issues.

What surfaces is a difference between engagement around a product, their website, and public engagement that seeks to involve people in community conversations – although one can clearly drive the other.

Social media connectors were cited as many times as quality content and comments as the favorite tools for encouraging their audiences to engage in their websites.

Respondents again and again favored "stories that spark comments" and engaging readers with their comments, either on their websites Facebook or Twittter.

Facebook was cited as the most valuable online tool by several. "Facebook – nothing else comes close," said one respondent. "We receive a large portion of our traffic, comments and online interaction from posting our stories on Facebook," said another. "Facebook has been most effective, as measured by click-through traffic," said another. "It's not necessarily my favorite."

However, when asked to name their favorite tool(s) for engaging their readers in *community issues*, good journalism, quality content and good commenting activity were king – outpacing mentions of social media tools by nearly three to one.

"Good journalism," "in-depth reporting," "producing meaningful stories" were valued as were in-person events, personal interactions and community involvement. Many of these tools were accompanied by the use of social media. E-newsletters and events were also valued.

"We pay a lot of attention to social media," said one, "but in the end it's all about the journalism."

"We pay a lot of attention to social media," said one espondent, "but in the end it is all about the journalism."

(Continued from previous page.)

To recruit more serious writers, it posts a list of stories it wants. For the elections, TCDP wants to identify issues that matter and is paying $10 to contributors who will write up one-on-one conversations about what individuals think is important in the local, state or national races.

Meanwhile TCDP is working on the second year of its "New Normal" project, an examination of the economic challenges and demographic changes in the Twin Cities that involves community conversations and interactive Q & As.

"With TCFoodies, we started getting upwards of a 50% open rate... that was phenomenal."

Turck said the best way to get people engaged is to personally "meet them face-to-face" or work individually with writers.

"Once you get a relationship going, that's when social media becomes highly important," she says. "But social media is a tool; it's not a solution. It's a really good tool, but it's only a tool." ■

Engagement by LiveStream

Juicing Participation via Webcasts

When NowcastSA aired a webcast of a town hall exercise on San Antonio's future, it snared 2,000 comments in one hour on its website.

An "integrated chat" scrolled alongside the livestream of the September 2010 "SA2020" event, which was the start of a conversation about what residents wanted the city to be in 2020. Twitter was employed as well.

The first SA2020 was staged in a room that held only 750 people, but 1,000 showed up. So Nowcast's livestream of the four-hour event was piped into overflow space. For the event's leaders, it had "profound impact," said managing editor Charlotte-Anne Lucas. They saw that people participated from all over the world. Five more conversations were held over the next year.

As Nowcast webcast more community meetings, both in-person attendance and online viewing grew. Community leaders began attributing Nowcast's livestreaming and outreach "as the key to why they got in-person attendance," Lucas observed.

"People very quickly said, 'How much do you charge?' So Nowcast came up with a fee schedule," she said.

By early 2012, a growing number of San Antonio community groups – from the United Way to the Department of Energy to the San Antonio Housing Authority – were commissioning NowcastSA to videotape their meetings and events, often writing the site into their grant proposals as their on-ramp to stir civic engagement.

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan came to town "and the mayor's office called us in to livestream it," Lucas said.

Last year Nowcast brought in $51,000 in revenue from its videotaping services. Lucas projects such revenue will grow to $75,000 this year.

"People very quickly said, 'How much do you charge?'"

NowcastSA launched in 2009 with funding from the Knight and San Antonio Community Foundations to create community conversations and civic engagement through its website and by webcasting public meetings and events.

The site now uses a number of video platforms, including Livestream, YouTube, Blip and Vimeo. A new service will be soon enable videostreaming to mobile phones.

Conventional thinking is that if the news is important enough it will find me," said Lucas. "For me, it's important to be where the content will be found." (Continued on page 23.)

"Young people, instead of Googling things, are YouTubing things, so if you are not on YouTube, you won't be found," Lucas said.

Nowcast also edits long livestreams into small segments. It has a video database where one can search for a video by the place it happened, by the person in it or by the topic. But storage becomes an issue. "We just moved 350 pieces of video to the cloud," Lucas said.

Videotaping events allows people to participate who might not be able to attend in person. Lucas has seen the impact.

At one high school event in November 2010, "the online audience was so engaged the chairperson ended up using our computers to interact with people online," she said.

At the September 2010 SA2020 event, a former intern from the mayor's office ended up actively participating online from Stanford University. "It was totally magic," Lucas said. "It was very much a vertical expansion of the room."

Lucas helps others in the community engage their constituencies. Nowcast worked with one San Antonio media teacher to livestream all eight high school graduation ceremonies. "When a kid from Edison High School got up to sing the national anthem, his mother, who was deployed

> *"Young people, instead of Googling things, are YouTubing things, so if you are not on YouTube, you won't be found."*

in Iraq, could watch him," she said.

For the city's 2011 Luminaria night, Nowcast did simultaneous livestreams from both ends of a city park. "We got the best video and audio ever produced of the San Antonio Orchestra," Lucas said.

Every piece of video has text wrapped around it, which helps search engines like Google to find it. And it helps Nowcast with analytics.

Lucas is moving forward with plans to recruit journalism students to do a story on each of the 140 projects contained in a forthcoming municipal bond issue. Currently the site features an interactive Google map that reveals photographs, budgets, and other details for each of the projects, as well as webcasts from the San Antonio Bond Committee meetings.

Nowcast is also working with other San Antonio media outlets. Recently the public radio station asked Nowcast to participate in a town hall. "The biggest problem with town halls is getting people to show up," Lucas said. "They felt more people would show up if we we're there."

Now, if Nowcast doesn't know about something, Lucas said people ask her, "Why wasn't Nowcast here?" ◼

NEXT: The McCormick Foundation, in funding this research, sought a special report pulling out responses for news sites in Chicago, where the foundation is based. What follows is the Chicago report. Final takeaways and recommendations start on page 33.
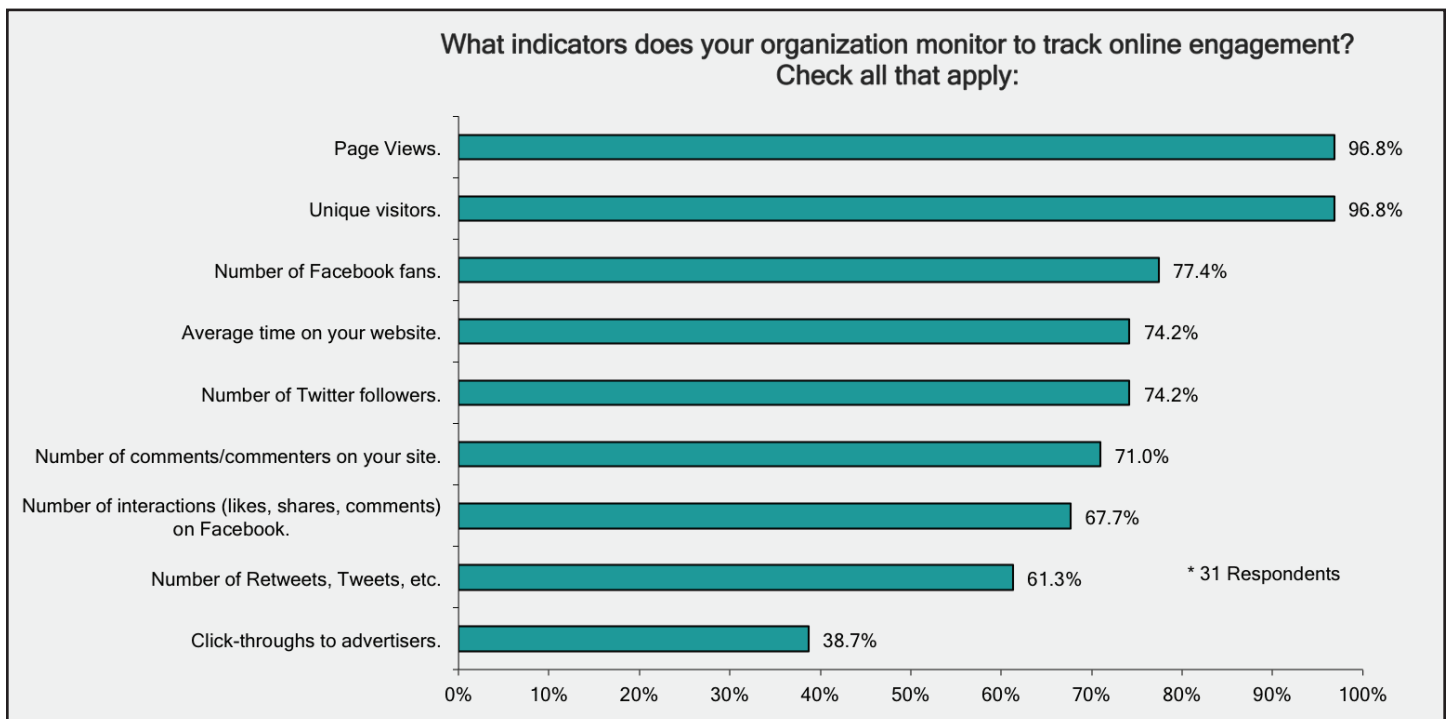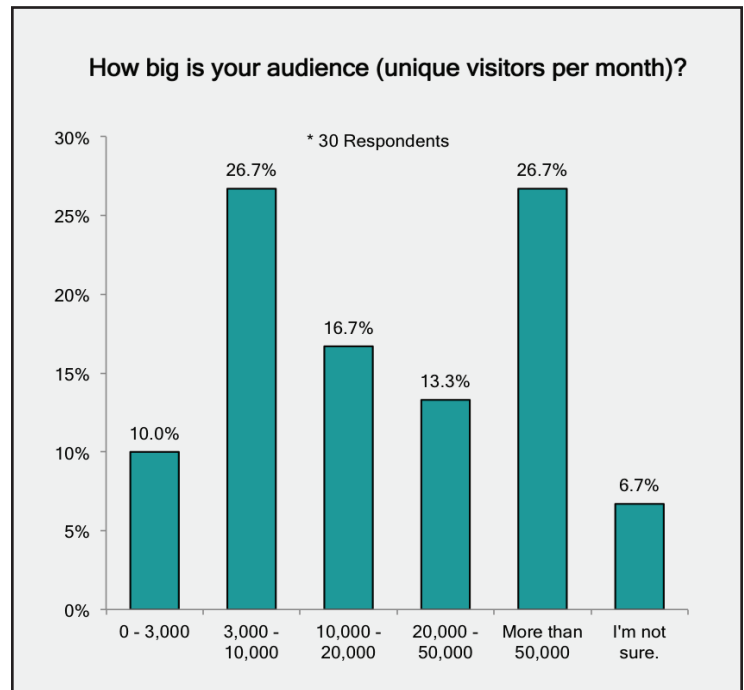
Chicago Media's Emerging Engagement Strategies

Thirty-one news organizations based in Chicago responded to the engagement survey. Their input suggests that local news organizations, despite cultivating communities via in-person events and on social networks, still tend towards a "broadcast" mentality when it comes to engagement.

This means that many respondents conflate audience reach or size with audience engagement. It's an important distinction between quantitative and qualitative: The difference between measuring an audience's overall size, but not the quality of users' interactions with the publication. Cultivating audience participation is still a nut that needs to be cracked.

Chicago respondents ranged from broad-reaching legacy media to neighborhood-based newspapers, from political blogs to outlets dedicated to preserving the city's cultural heritage.

Because the Chicago market is so distinct, the recruitment pool was broadened to include some legacy print and radio media outlets that had a strong online presence. Approximately 115 regional media outlets were asked to take the survey. Including these organizations also gives the McCormick Foundation some targeted information about Chicago news media's needs pertaining to engagement and outreach strategies.

How big is your audience (unique visitors per month)?

* 30 Respondents

Range	Percentage
0 - 3,000	10.0%
3,000 - 10,000	26.7%
10,000 - 20,000	16.7%
20,000 - 50,000	13.3%
More than 50,000	26.7%
I'm not sure.	6.7%

Overall, the city's respondents mirrored national survey responses on topics such as engagement-tracking tools, asset mapping and conversion. Likewise, many Chicago respondents cited "good journalism" and quality content as the primary tool for engagement in self-submitted comments.

What indicators does your organization monitor to track online engagement?
Check all that apply:

* 31 Respondents

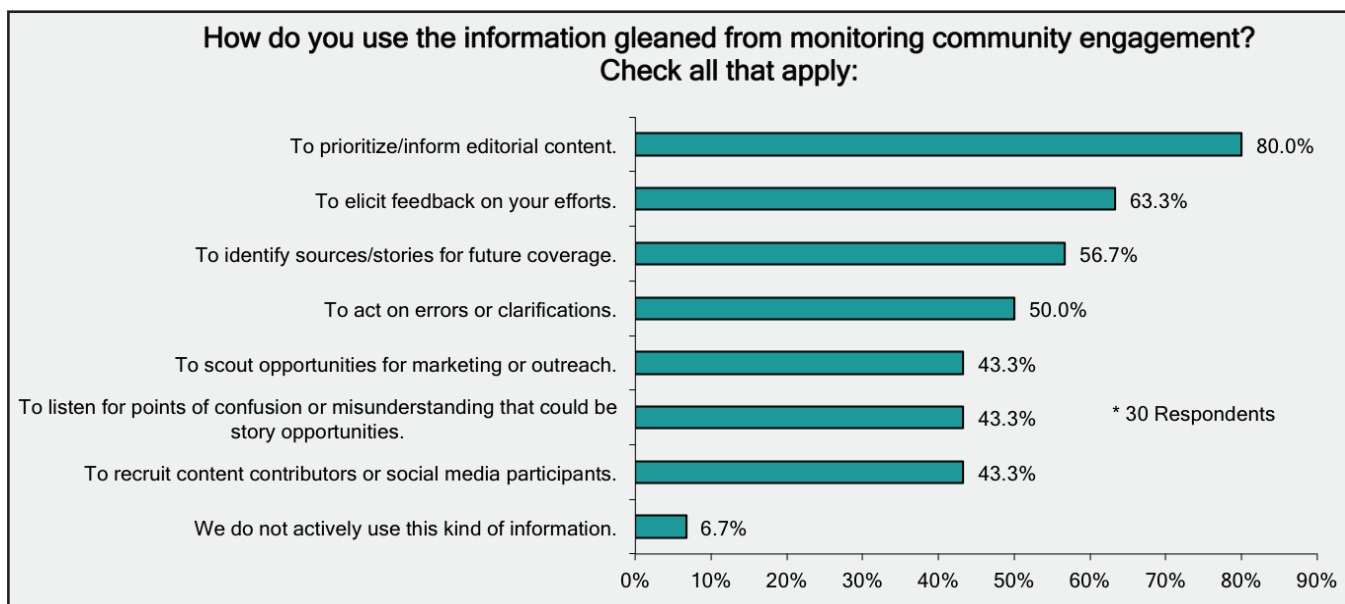| Indicator	Percentage
Page Views.	96.8%
Unique visitors.	96.8%
Number of Facebook fans.	77.4%
Average time on your website.	74.2%
Number of Twitter followers.	74.2%
Number of comments/commenters on your site.	71.0%
Number of interactions (likes, shares, comments) on Facebook.	67.7%
Number of Retweets, Tweets, etc.	61.3%
Click-throughs to advertisers.	38.7%

As in the national survey, Chicago respondents were broadly distributed in age. Almost 36% of survey takers were between the ages of 25-34, with an even distribution across age brackets 35-44 and 45-54. Nearly 11% were 65 or older.

Chicago respondents also looked to website metrics more than social media metrics as evidence of engagement. Almost 97% of Chicago respondents said that page views were a primary indicator of engagement, while only 61% said that tweets and retweets were important indicators, and 68% cited interactions on Facebook.

> *"Cultivating audience participation is still a nut that needs to be cracked."*

However, Chicago respondents also overwhelmingly noted that information gleaned from monitoring community engagement helped prioritize or inform editorial content and/or identify sources and stories for future coverage.

How do you use the information gleaned from monitoring community engagement? Check all that apply:

Response	Percentage
To prioritize/inform editorial content.	80.0%
To elicit feedback on your efforts.	63.3%
To identify sources/stories for future coverage.	56.7%
To act on errors or clarifications.	50.0%
To scout opportunities for marketing or outreach.	43.3%
To listen for points of confusion or misunderstanding that could be story opportunities.	43.3%
To recruit content contributors or social media participants.	43.3%
We do not actively use this kind of information.	6.7%

* 30 Respondents

One respondent, whose organization was "just getting started" using information from monitoring community engagement, said it was "using data mainly to see how social media is driving involvement." Another organization used this information to "adapt and position the organization and its products and services in a dynamic communications landscape."

Engagement Staffing

Like respondents from around the country, Chicago media members also struggle with staffing, bandwidth and crafting measurable engagement strategies that can refine their organizational goals. Nearly 97% of respondents said that the publisher/editor was the primary point person for engagement strategy. "We are small — just two people so we do everything," said one. "This is one of the many hats I wear," said another. Over 38% spend between one and five hours a week on engaging community.

Yet, some outlets have created roles that were specifically focused on fostering engagement, with such titles as "Director of Strategic Partnerships," "New Media Manager" and "Community Editor." These positions were typical for respondents who were more legacy and multi-platform in nature or had larger overall operations.

Engaging on Multiple Platforms

Chicago respondents differed from national participants in their use of many different platforms to distribute their content. Several outlets described broad distribution strategies that mix print, web-only text stories, podcasting, video reports or mixed media projects in order to reach more people in a meaningful way.

One organization even cultivates engagement by offering guided tours of the city. "On any given tour, audience members function as 'study guides,'" the respondent wrote. Those study guides often inform others "about topics that they might not have known about otherwise."

Chicago's media organizations also tended to be more mission-driven than national respondents, and they focus on cultivating real impact in the community. Many responding outlets do vital work that supports nonprofit and advocacy organizations. "We write about non-profit missions and raise aware-

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Engagement through Advocacy

Improving Education in Chicago with Authoritative Journalism

In 2007, Catalyst, a newsmagazine focused on Chicago education issues, reported that many pre-school children were staying at home and leaving empty seats available at nearby schools.

Catalyst did what more traditional news outlets would not: It tried to solve the problem.

"In Englewood and West Englewood, there are nearly enough slots (1,323) to serve the estimated 1,500 3- and 4-year-olds who live there," the story said. "Yet filling those slots has proven difficult, and outreach workers are now canvassing homes to determine why, as well as to get an accurate count of how many children are now in pre-school."

"This is something that's close to the line. We have to be careful about our role in advocacy issues because we're journalists."

Catalyst staff connected with local community organizations and pitched a series of forums on early childhood education that Catalyst would moderate.

The community organizations mobilized their communities and even got representatives from the City of Chicago involved. The forums were incredibly successful. One year later, nearly every Chicago Public Schools pre-school slot in that community was filled, and private institutions saw an uptick as well, Catalyst reported.

Catalyst's efforts were part of a cohesive community effort that encouraged change. Still, it was controversial for a news organization to become so involved in the community it serves.

"This is something that's close to the line. We have to be careful about our role in advocacy issues because we're journalists," says Catalyst Publisher Linda Lenz of the pre-school forums. "It was a judgment call. We're journalists, but we exist to make school system better."

The Catalyst is one of a number of emerging news sites – covering everything from schools, to health, to development – that blend good journalism with working for the good of the community. Engaging their communities through informational forums and community events is just one of the tools in its toolbox.

Tailoring Products to Reach Four Core Audiences

Over the years, the Catalyst, founded in 1990 by Lenz and published by the Community Renewal Society, has developed an intriguing cocktail of engagement strategies that align with its mission of improving "the education of all children through authoritative journalism and leadership of a constructive dialogue."

ness for their causes," said one. "For example, [we] wrote one story about … a non-profit that supports middle-school music programs in a low-income neighboring town. [The organization] got a $10,000 check the next day."

"Informing our audience of pressing issues faced by this region continues to be our goal; inspiring them to action is also significant to us and figuring out better ways to track and measure the impact of our work is an important next step," said another.

However, it's key to note that inspiring community members to act is only a goal for some respondents. In an interview, one individual said her organization's mission was not to inspire communities to act, but to "equip them" so that they could make an informed choice about how to act on an issue that impacts them.

From in-person events and forums to customized content, Catalyst has baked engagement into all of its editorial efforts. Part of the effectiveness of its strategies stems from its focus on four target audiences: parents, educators, community leaders and policy makers.

"We put together a package of products and services that we think will touch on the lives of those groups," says Lenz. A quick sampling of Catalyst's products includes:

• An in-depth quarterly publication of investigative reporting on education issues.

• A four-page newsletter for parents that is available in English and Spanish and reaches over 90,000 parents via distribution on report-card pickup day.

• Online news and content verticals that touch on specific topics, such as student achievement and reaching black boys.

"The largest percentage of online readers are teachers," says Lenz. "Page views are really high on stories dealing with teacher contracts, issues and school closings."

• Public forums on a variety of issues, including teacher evaluations and better use of longer school days. According to Lenz, Catalyst has seen online registrations of "close to 300" for these forums.

Catalyst has also hired a Community Editor, who manages a number of tasks at the intersection of development, marketing and community engagement. While this role is still developing, Catalyst's community editor works to boost engagement across all of Catalyst's core audiences and content platforms, including in-person events and social media. ▪

Engagement from the Inside Out

WBEZ Builds an Organizational Strategy to Encourage Engagement

For Chicago Public Media, WBEZ 91.5, audience engagement means more than simply building traffic for its news programs. As important, it's about improving the "civic health of the community."

That means engaging people in helping to increase the quality of the content on air and online and also connecting community members at events – all with a goal of informing citizens.

"I think a lot about healthy communities," says Breeze Richardson, WBEZ's Director of Strategic Partnerships. "Success looks like positive contributions to our community. … It's about cultivating an informed citizenry." By that measure, WBEZ has scored some enormous successes in the past year.

In the past six months alone, the news organization has fielded more than 2,000 audience contributions, be they call-ins to programs, uploaded content or ideas for guests, and coverage topics. To continue to build on this success, WBEZ, which has served the Chicago area since 1943, is building a strong organizational strategy that supports community participation across multiple levels, from content production to marketing.

> **"It's about cultivating an informed citizenry."**

The engagement strategy is designed to increase the quality of content and community connection. Efforts fall into three distinct areas: on air, online and community events.

WBEZ has gone beyond the megaphone model of putting content into the world and instead makes a concerted effort to include community members and stakeholders in conversations around the news. Strategies to foster engagement can be as simple as "baking time in" for a Q+A conversation at an in-person event, according to Richardson.

PRESENTED BY WBEZ 91.5

inside and out

Young people and juvenile justice in Illinois

ABOUT
STORIES
PHOTOS
PLACES
DISCUSSIONS
BLOG
LEARN MORE
SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS
RSS

Carlos Javier Ortiz

Prison Classes Offer Few Job Skills for Real Life
In its mission statement, the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice pledges to help the young people in its prisons become productive citizens. But at the maximum security youth prison in Joliet, 40 miles southwest of Chicago, that pledge has been hard to keep.

WHAT THEY KNOW

Inside and Out, a series focused on juvenile justice in Illinois, has kicked off a significant public conversation. Hundreds of people attended a forum on the issue after the series began, fueling a call for significant reforms at a statewide level. As a result of WBEZ's coverage, the director of

> **"WBEZ draws a line when it comes to calls to action."**

the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice was removed. It's one case where "policy changes have been suggested or implemented" as a result of WBEZ's work, Richardson said.

It's important to note that, unlike some organizations that view engagement as a tool for mobilization, WBEZ draws a line when it comes to calls to action. (Continued on next page.)

Its mission is to inform the community so that citizens are equipped to make their own decisions. As a public media institution, however, it does not build campaigns around issues.

WBEZ also uses strategic partnerships with community organizations to drive programming and content creation. For _Dear Chicago_, WBEZ worked with 21 partners to curate stories from Chicago residents in an attempt to counter political punditry and overused talking points in the

> **"Strategies to foster engagement can be as simple as 'baking time in' for a Q&A conversation at an in-person event."**
> **– Breeze Richardson**

2011 election cycle.

WBEZ's partners nominated more than 70 individuals for the series, which resulted in 15 multimedia profiles of individuals "whose personal stories illustrated an issue or problem that city government can and should address." _Dear Chicago_ was featured by the National Center on Media Engagement's "Stories of Impact" project.

Infrastructure to Support Engagement

Like many of the organizations surveyed for this report, engagement at WBEZ is firmly rooted in the production of "good journalism." However, engagement is also a much more holistic part of WBEZ's organizational strategy.

To effectively work with its community, WBEZ approaches engagement from an "inside-out" perspective. Richardson says, "Internal engagement is crucial. The stronger the internal engagement is, the stronger the external engagement [in the community.] There's no way to take it on otherwise."

That means that WBEZ looks at engagement efforts for each department, from marketing to social media, from on-air content to blogging.

> **"The stronger the internal engagement is, the stronger the external engagement [in the community]."**

For news organizations looking to increase the connection to their communities, Richardson recommends looking beyond the word "engagement." She encourages organizations to think critically about authentic audience participation.

Richardson also has a word of warning: "It's dangerous to make efforts to engage without tools for actually tracking the work."

In other words, if engagement is part of an organizational mission, make sure to articulate clearly what kinds of engagement the organization is looking for. Success cannot be defined without a means of measurement. ■
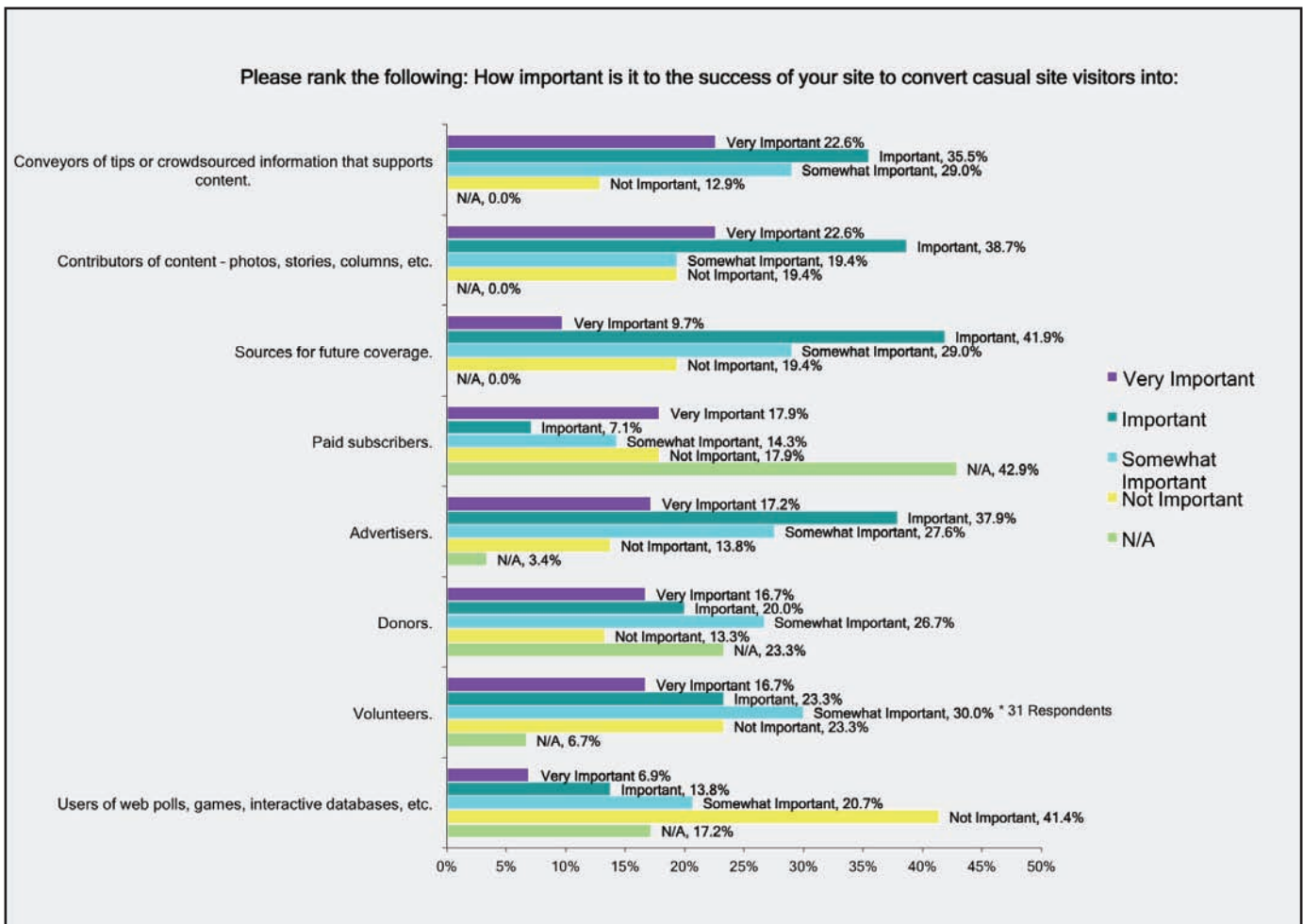
The Audience Conversion Challenge

As with the national respondents, about 81% of Chicago respondents do not track or measure audience conversion. They blame this deficit on a lack of bandwidth, lack of resources and lack of tools that could support this kind of work. "Though we might not be collecting data on this, we do note these conversions," said one organization.

Regarding audience conversion – that's the process by which an audience member becomes increasingly engaged with a media organization – responses from Chicago media were quite mixed. When converting visitors to be content contributors, nearly 39% said it was "important" and nearly 23% said it was "very important." But converting audiences into financial contributors, either as paying subscribers or donors, generated mixed responses: nearly 43% of respondents said that paid subscribers were "non-applicable," while about 23% said donors were "non-applicable." Almost 27% said that converting users to donors was only "somewhat important."

> **There is a clear need for support when it comes to conversion strategies that facilitate revenue.**

Please rank the following: How important is it to the success of your site to convert casual site visitors into:

In an interesting twist, Chicago media's responses to conversion-related survey questions denoted more awareness of revenue-related conversion issues than national numbers. For example, nearly 11% of national respondents said that converting audiences to become paid subscribers was "very important," as compared to Chicago respondents' nearly 18%. National outlets also leaned more heavily towards "non-applicable" when it comes to converting audiences to be advertisers or donors. Based on these responses at the local and national level, there is a clear need for support when it comes to conversion strategies that facilitate revenue.

Off the Asset Map

Asked whether they engage in any kind of "asset mapping" of chief resources or attributes to help their audiences understand the community they live in, 70% of Chicago respondents said they do not. Also, over 83% of respondents do not engage in asset mapping to help staff better understand and report on the Chicago community. These responses were often linked to lack of staff and budget to create formal structures supporting this kind of work. "Staff? I should be so fortunate," wrote one respondent.

"We've been developing these maps internally but implementing them effectively has been a challenge," said one organization. Another said the organization's asset maps consisted of "a ton of interviews, photo trips/essays, developing deep friendships with people in any given community." These assets are what "makes worthwhile, memorable content," the respondent said.

Stories of Engagement

Chicago news sites also offered powerful stories of civic impact, successful audience engagement and recruiting community members as contributors. As one respondent wrote, "Citizens often feel disconnected from their governments. By us suggesting … how they might participate in government, they become more engaged in both their governance and our content."

Strategies to curate engagement varied. See the three accompanying Chicago case studies for more information. In addition, here are a few shorter stories of engagement.

Themed audiences: One organization sought out specific audiences for thematic content: "We shared archived stories about the Robert Taylor Homes development with a Facebook group for former residents of Robert Taylor," the respondent wrote.

Ad-hoc crusade: One site went on an all-out crusade to free information vital to the community, even risking the possibility of police arrests for staging a sit-in at a local school. The site was engaged in publicizing candidates for a Chicago school election called the Local School Council. In Chicago, there is an LSC for each school. "We identified policies that allowed us to examine the files of candidates, knowing that the schools did not want to release those files to the public and had frustrated our attempts two years ago to shed light on the process," the respondent said. The site did research with the National Lawyers Guild, the Chicago Kent Center for Open Government, the Headline Club (SPJ) and its attorneys to craft a strategy that would put the schools in a position where they had to open the records. "We anticipated being arrested for our work. The possibility of arrest was brought up when one school decided not to give the files out. We decided to sit down in the school and wait them out. This could have provoked a charge of trespass and a felony arrest. While in the school we made phone calls to our support group, who made further calls. We called political leaders, who monitored the situation and called the school. We began using FaceBook and Twitter to alert the public, in real time, of what was happening. At the end of the day, after nearly six hours, we were given the records."

Documenting city services: Another organization believes its coverage led to an electoral upset: "We did a very simple story following a heavy snow, comparing how the streets and sidewalks were being cleared in different special tax districts called SSAs," the respondent wrote. "We feel our coverage of the failure of one SSA led to a victory for an opponent of the Chicago machine in the 2011 municipal elections."

Cultivating contributors: One organization specifically uses social media as a means of cultivating contributors. "We publish stories daily and then take the conversation to Twitter, where we ask readers for their take," the organization wrote. "The most engaged Twitter users get invited to submit a 'citizen contributor' column for the next print edition."

Engaging via Arts and Culture

Creating a "River of Content" by and for Chicago's Young Latinos

When a local bakery owner made disparaging remarks about violence in Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood, Gozamos was one of the first media outlets to cover an incident that quickly went viral, igniting protests that led to coverage from local legacy media, including ABC7 Chicago – and a formal apology from the bakery.

Six years ago, Naomi Levine, owner of a high-end pastry shop, had moved into Humboldt Park as part of an influx of people who were gentrifying a largely Puerto Rican community. After several years operating in the area, Levine moved her shop to another part of town.

In early 2012, she commented in a videotaped interview about why she made the move: "I bought a bakery in Humboldt Park in 2006 and there were just too many gunshots in the cakes…."

Her comment may have gone uncovered if one of Gozamos' writers hadn't noticed a reader's post on Facebook. Before long, there was a growing sentiment that Levine had misrepresented Humboldt Park in a disrespectful manner.

The story "made a big splash. We were the first outlet that published, and the owners of Tipsy Cake mentioned us in [an] apology note," says Abraham Velazquez, co-founder of Gozamos, a two-year-old news site that covers cultural events and community issues for young Latinos.

Gozamos' work fed a broad public conversation about safety and public perception of the Humboldt Park neighborhood, which often suffers from a stereotype of being crime-ridden and unsafe. Its coverage also brought together many community groups, which organized protests.

"We have great partnerships with the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and Batey Urbano," a youth and culture center in Humboldt Park, says Velazquez.

Gozamos' content is typically grounded in arts, music and events for Chicago's Latino community. That content, though, provides a bridge for Gozamos to take on more serious issues, such as immigration, gentrification and GLBTQ rights. "We try to hit things that are funny and personal, and we try to spark a conscious awareness of social issues," Velazquez says.

Open-Contribution Model

Velazquez built Gozamos, which means "we enjoy" in Spanish, to be a "curatorial, community-based event finder" in which editors and writers are active members of their neighborhoods. The goal: to "create a river of content flowing from the community."

"We try to hit things that are funny and personal, and we try to spark a conscious awareness of social issues."

While Gozamos pays its contributors a small amount for their work, it also has an "open model in the sense that we ask people to contribute [stories] at the bottom of every page," says Velazquez. "We are passionate about our community and culture. We call our users culturally savvy people, but [content is] not exclusive to Latino culture."

Gozamos engages its audience by backing up a robust, mobile-friendly website with a healthy mixture of social media and in-person conversations. While none of Gozamos' 20 to 30 writers are full time, they are all active in their neighborhoods. Readers are also engaged as sources of tips and content via Facebook and Twitter.

Engagement Needs of Chicago's Ethnic Media

While Chicago's digital and legacy media are developing engagement strategies to move their organizations forward, the needs of regional ethnic media are distinctly different. While news organizations that serve black and Latino communities did respond to the survey, no members of Chicago's immigrant press responded.

Chicago's ethnic media consist primarily of small print newspapers with few staff that serve a variety of immigrant and cultural communities. Furthermore, their news coverage tends to skew members towards stories about developments in that community's native land rather than news in Chicago.

"The only way ethnic news media exists is because they represent [a specific community]. The minute [an ethnic news outlet] loses its link to that community, it dies," said the Community Media Workshop's Steve Franklin, who works with more than 300 members of Chicago's ethnic press.

"I really see a need for community and connection. I see success, but there's so much more to be done. [Ethnic media] needs support from the larger community. It's too isolated and too singular," Franklin said. "The risk is that all of these little organizations will go out of business."

A Master Narrative for the Windy City

Asked whether they anchor their coverage in an ongoing master narrative, nearly 52% of Chicago respondents said they did. Their responses offer a unique opportunity to chart out how media outlets that serve divergent communities in the area perceive and narrate the story of their city.

Open-ended survey responses were multifaceted and touched on narratives of Chicago culture, ethnicity, politics, social responsibility and civic pride. As one respondent put it, "Identifying Chicago as a site of ongoing social justice work (historically and contemporaneously) gives our readers a deeper connection to the work that we do. It's not just reporting. It's storytelling."

Another wrote, "I liken what we do to letting the world know what the community … is doing, letting our light shine. A great deal of what we write is in support of economic development and cultural literacy, to provide news and information of interest that can help and a celebration of individual and local successes."

"Many of our readers come to us for a real assessment of the city, its politicians, its institutions, and its sports teams. [They come] for a narrative called 'Reality.'" Another respondent wrote, "Citizens often feel disconnected from their governments; by us suggesting … how they might participate in government, they become more engaged in both their governance and our content."

(Continued from previous page.)

The open-contribution model and community presence seem to be paying off. Gozamos reaches between 10,000 and 20,000 visitors a month and just launched a site for Milwaukee's young Latinos.

Velazquez says he'd like Gozamos to be smarter about using traffic metrics to be more effective. "I come from an advertising background and coversion is important to me," he says.

However, "It's not something we do well." The expertise of "data analysts" for news is still emerging, he says, and it's hard to find staff to fill this role.

In the meantime, Gozamos tracks what kinds of phrasing is effective with its community and continues to focus on building a conversation across multiple channels. ■

Popular Engagement Trackers

Survey takers try to measure their audience engagement using a number of tools. Here are some of their favorites.

Bit.ly
Shortens URLs into more compressed forms for easier sharing. All links shared via Bit.ly allow users to view complete, real-time traffic and analytics data. Bit.ly also offers a fee-based enterprise analytics service.

Bottlenose
A social media dashboard in private beta that brings together all streams of messages and notifications with a new interface, Sonar, that shows what is important and what is trending in social media streams.

Buffer
A social media application where users can "fill" the buffer with content they seek to have distributed over a period of time. Users can continuously fill and content will stream to social media accounts at the allotted time.

Chartbeat
A web and mobile service that lets users track their traffic in real-time. Features include traffic sources, page views, users reading or writing, minutes on the page and active visits. Priced at $10-$150 a month.

Disqus
A commenting system that integrates with communications and social media platforms to provide real-time commentary and chat-like discussions around content. Features include a notification and reply system, media embedding and mobile commenting.

Facebook Insights
A free service that gives Facebook page administrators and app developers performance metrics on their page or app. It analyzes trends within user growth and demographics, consumption and creation of content.

Goo.gl
Google's URL shortener, like Bit.ly.

GetClicky
A real-time website traffic viewer where users can filter information such as visitor-source sites and demographics and historical account of traffic for any given page (up to one year). The service also provides Twitter analytics.

Google Analytics
A popular, free service offered by Google that generates detailed statistics about visitors to a website. A premium version is also available for a fee. GA can track visitors from all referrers, including search engines, display advertising, email marketing as well as social-networking sites.

Hootsuite
A dashboard for multiple social media accounts. Can allow for simultaneous posting, timed posting, tracking brand mentions. You can choose services to view statistics on site traffic.

Jetpack
A free plug-in that gives Wordpress sites extra features. These include site stats, shortlinks, easier embedding, extra sidebar widgets, user subscriptions and social-media sharing.

Klout
A free service that integrates social media accounts and provides a comprehensive score of the influence accounts have on other users. It gauges the number of people you influence, how much your content influences them to respond or share and then gauges your audience's influence when they share your content.

Quantcast
A free tool that provides worldwide audience and demographic data for websites, videos, widgets, blogs and advertising campaigns. It allows users to manipulate raw data into the targeted populations they wish to reach.

Sitemeter
A software that embeds code onto pages of your website and tracks statistics such as page views, number of pages viewed and other information. One must create a Sitemeter account (there are free and paid options) to have the unique code embedded on all pages of a site.

Social Flow
This API enables developers who build social media applications to integrate SocialFlow AttentionScore, which analyzes real-time conversations on the social graph to help publishers to post the best possible content at the best possible time.

Sparkwi.se
A new dashboard developed by Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC) and Tomorrow Partners that measures engagement by comparing analytics from multiple accounts, including Google Analytics, YouTube and Facebook, in a centralized package. It was funded by cohort of foundations with a goal of helping media makers measure how their work influences larger public conversations via keyword searches and tracking.

ThinkUp
A free, open-source PHP application that can aggregate, sort and export social-media networks integrated into it. Users can create graphs and maps to display data as well as export tweets for archiving and easily review historical information to share.

Tweetstats
A free tool where users can enter their Twitter handle and get statistics such as a tweet timeline, tweet density and aggregate tweets by day or hour and interface used. It also includes information on replies and retweets as well as the option of viewing a hashtag and tweet cloud.

Overall Takeaways

It is clear that small online news outlets, both for-profit and nonprofit, are growing audiences via social networks, their websites and in-person events. Nevertheless, a "broadcast" mentality still reigns when it comes to engagement: They are focusing on winning eyeballs – driving users to consume their content. That prompts them to think of audience size as synonymous with audience engagement.

As a result, many online news sites expend a lot of effort measuring the number of people who visit their pages and react to their stories via comments, shares and likes, but that information doesn't tell them about the quality of their audience's interactions or track the impact those interactions have on their communities or their journalistic enterprises.

Nearly all of the sites surveyed struggle with staffing, bandwidth and crafting measurable engagement strategies that can help set organizational goals. Moreover, they blame their inability to track or measure audience conversion on lack of resources and lack of tools that could support such work.

There is a clear need for support when it comes to audience-conversion strategies that facilitate revenue. There is also interest among the community of startup news sites to learn more about such strategies as asset mapping and anchoring coverage in evolving master narratives.

For organizations that support emerging journalistic endeavors, these gaps present clear opportunities for them to play a role that would advance engagement skills.

There was a wide variation in survey respondents' level of expertise and overall understanding of the kinds of engagement strategies that might be available to them. Larger news organizations have more sophisticated ways to measure audience engagement and conversion, but those tend to be proprietary and closely guarded.

Smaller sites would like to get a better handle on different types of data. They want to know how a story moves through social circles, what the triggers of engagement are, and how they can elicit the kind of stakeholder support that will ensure their survival. Good metrics can help them develop internal engagement goals and increase support for their efforts.

For now, some organizations are trying to make informed deductions about audience engagement using a suite of tools to collect social-media and website metrics. Tools most frequently cited are in the sidebar on page 34. Other news sites said in the survey that they cobble together data on Excel spreadsheets or collect anecdotes.

Better tools can be built, online publishers need to be trained to use them, and site supporters – from funders to advertisers – should require better measures of engagement and impact.

Recommendations

This report serves as a roadmap for identifying opportunities to improve both actual audience engagement and measuring that engagement so that it can help online news sites achieve their goals.

Some of the needs outlined in this report can be addressed via:

- The development of good, open-source tools that can help site editors easily analyze engagement levers and pinpoint audience conversion.

- In-person training on how to employ multiple tools for nurturing engagement and a sharing of innovative ideas that are emerging around the country.

- More research into effective strategies to encourage audience engagement that could become replicable models for others to use.

Recommendations for news sites

News organizations committed to fostering engagement should:

- Share best practices with their cohorts either via an online portal or participation in training events. Survey respondents seemed to feel very siloed in their efforts to measure engagement. Creating community and cross-organizational support is critical to supporting outlets that are sustainable in the long term.

- Articulate their specific needs for data and tools. It is vital for legacy and startup media organizations to keep asking themselves what kind of data is effective and what tools they need to chart their efforts.

Recommendations for funders

As the media ecosystem changes, funders can play a critical role in helping media grantees achieve higher levels of audience engagement and measure the effectiveness of their efforts. We would urge funders to:

- Support innovation in the development of engagement-tracking tools.

- Fund the development of an engagement portal and online learning modules to teach site publishers how to use available tools.

- Require grantees to implement some baseline tools to facilitate better tracking. This could take the form of a standardized reporting mechanism, or even the creation of an Engagement Ombudsman who could work with grantees to refine internal strategies and help with more in-depth measurements. Creating a common standard for affiliated groups of grantees will also make it possible for funders to chart the impact of their work in a significant way.

- Support grantees in hiring community or engagement editors to boost and measure engagement.

- Convene in-person summits to teach news outlets how to enhance audience-engagement efforts. Agendas could involve training on how to better use available tools, such as Google Analytics and Facebook Insights, as well as building connections between organizations that have debuted game-changing engagement strategies.

Recommendations for journalism schools and organizations

Funders and news outlets are not the only organizations that should invest in engagement strategies, standards and methodology. Journalism organizations, journalism schools and affiliated groups also have roles to play. They should:

- Foster research on identifying and effectively measuring the different strata of engagement.

- Engage in open dialogues about engagement pressure points. Encourage collaboration across organizations to amplify audience engagement and share best practices and research.

- Offer services, such as statistical analysis or metrics auditing, to help news organizations better understand their data.

- Teach systems of measuring audience-engagement in the classroom.

Conclusion

Audience engagement has just started to unfurl as an issue for news organizations. A smart mixture of institutional support, community building and investment in metrics infrastructure could have a significant payoff. Such intervention would both increase the effectiveness of news organizations in the long haul and assist in identifying paths to financial sustainability.

News sites that can track their various strategies for engaging audiences are in the best position not only to tell the story of their community, but also to chart the role their own organization plays within that community.

Moreover, a news site that can deliver an authoritative narrative about its own activities is in the best position to make a compelling case to stakeholders for support.

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