



PARSE.LY

THE DIGITAL SHIFT

# Why Being Reader-First Matters



THIS IS THE

# Editor's Guide to Online Media

For years, journalists, writers, editors, and creative storytellers of all kinds have lived by certain rules. Rules that made sense when all of your work was published in print form in a newspaper, magazine, guide or book.

The rules you were taught focused on how to write: how to inform your audience, how to gauge the trustworthiness (or lack thereof) of certain sources, and how to structure your work to highlight the most important information. Those rules still apply, but now there's a new set of rules at play that no one taught you: the rules of writing in a way that will help you ensnare and hold on to the attention of an online audience.

No transformation comes without pain. The shift from print to digital has been underway for years, and new information is still coming to light about how this brave new world works. This applies at the level of the individual reader, where never-before-available insight into audience preferences and behaviors is now accessible, all the way up to corporate offices, where new revenue models, business strategies and

organizational policies and practices must be developed and implemented in order to achieve success in the domain of digital media.

How can you ensure that you will weather the transition and emerge to thrive in this evolving competitive landscape? Everyone involved in the editorial process – from writers to editors, from section desks to product managers in media companies – needs to understand the new rules. Read on to learn how to leverage the right resources and tools to find, develop and nurture the right audience for your work.

---

*For someone with a print background, you're accustomed to the fact that if it makes the editor's cut [and] gets into the paper, you're going to find an audience. It's entirely the other way around as a digital journalist. The realization that you have to go find your audiences — that they're not going to just come and read it — has been transformative.*

---

JANINE GIBSON  
EDITOR, GUARDIAN US



**CLARE CARR**  
Director of Marketing

**AUTHOR: CLARE CARR** joined Parse.ly to help digital publishers understand how to use analytics and data more effectively. Prior to that, she spent five years working with the editorial team at Greentech Media as Director of Audience Development, Marketing and Online Operations. Originally from Ohio, she graduated from the University of Virginia and lives in New York City.

 @clareondrey  /clareondrey

THE SHIFT

# Stories Don't Stop at Publish

Writers or journalists' jobs used to stop when they hit "Publish" in the CMS. Writers spent all of their time and resources focused on what went into their stories, and all that mattered was the finished story they created. Once they submitted that story, the work began again, with another assignment, a new topic.

These days, that cycle has expanded. Mobile devices, social networks and search engines have changed how readers interact with news, content and video. Nothing remains static after it goes to the Web; through readers, it continues to evolve. If you are not active in that process, at best you're not taking advantage of information you can use to inform your own work, and at worst, you're ignoring the needs and desires of the people who consume your stories, leaving them to go read someone else's work.

How did the shift from a story being published in print to being distributed via the Internet result in such a



*The new reporting cycle.*

drastic change? The difference between readers reading on their smartphones versus in a print magazine isn't just a difference of medium; it's a different experience from start to finish, including finding the story, choosing whether to read it, and deciding what to do after they're done.

OFFLINE READING	
1.	Walk through the airport
2.	Buy a magazine
3.	Flip through it
4.	Read a few articles
5.	Leave it in the seat pocket

*Two different experiences:  
Following a print versus an online  
readers' path to your story*

ONLINE READING	
1.	Log on to Facebook to look at photos from a friend's wedding
2.	See a link about a story from another friend
3.	Click on the link and read the story
4.	Comment on the story online
5.	Follow the author on Twitter

Take the example of two people who read a particular article. One reads it in a magazine and the other reads it on his computer. What's different about these two experiences?

*Consider journalism as a service. Content is that which fills something. Service is that which accomplishes something. To be a service, news must be concerned with outcomes rather than products. What should journalism's result be?*

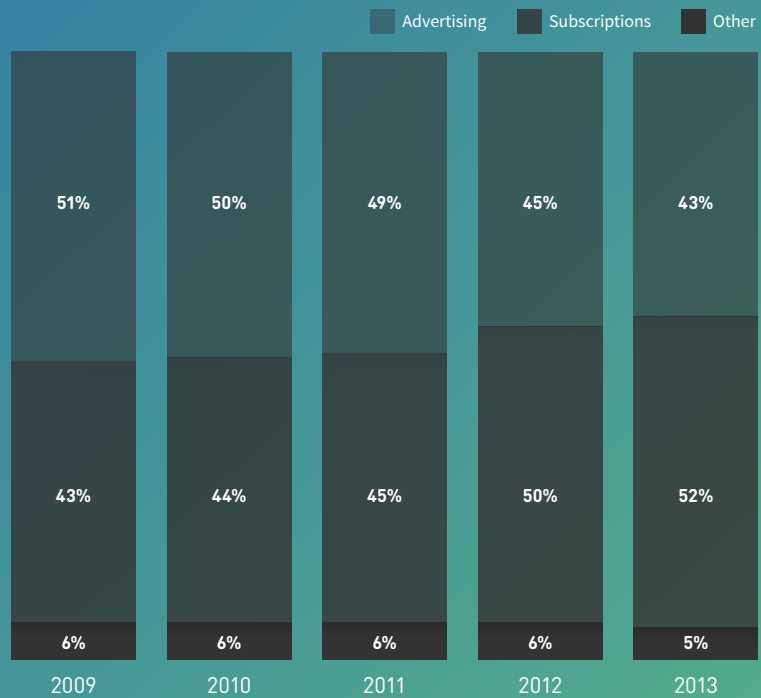
JEFF JARVIS  
BUZZMACHINE.COM

Factors that differ significantly between these two scenarios include the readers' intentions before they found the story, their ability to interact directly with other readers in real time, and finally, their ability to create a personal connection with the author.

This means that understanding these motivations and actions is now a critical part of the journalist's job. Knowing more about your readers, their preferences, their needs and their actions can give you insight into the actions they are likely to take. Using this information to help you select stories, choose the medium or form of the story, and even decide which sources to consult makes it more likely that the audience will connect with the content.

Beyond the satisfaction of having your work read and enjoyed, there's also a crucial financial incentive for knowing more about your readers, as the following chart shows:

**READERS ARE DRIVING REVENUE GROWTH AT THE NEW YORK TIMES**



*New York Times Innovation Report*

This chart from the *New York Times*' leaked Innovation report indicates that audiences are more closely tied with revenue and organizational success than ever before, and the journalists and writers who create the content for these organizations are the gateway to garnering a dedicated and loyal readership.

This doesn't mean that you, the storyteller or reporter, are beholden to the whims of an audience that thinks it has no need for foreign policy news or which only wants to watch cat videos. But you do need to have your stories read by people. In Alain de Botton's *The News: A User's Manual*, he posits that most writers don't successfully connect the reader with the story. "Readers are interested in themselves," he writes, "and finding out how you can insert them into a story in a way that will resonate makes all the difference."

UNDERSTANDING YOUR AUDIENCE

# How do you do it?

So how can you find out all about your readers without surveying each and every user who happens to land on your website? How can you tell if they are reading your stories or sharing them with their friends (or better yet, both)? And how do you figure out which hooks, angles and other story elements will help you establish a connection with your readers? In a word: Analytics.

*Wikipedia* defines **Analytics** as “the discovery and communication of meaningful patterns in data.” Though analytics are supported by software, computation, algorithms and data visualizations, they ultimately aim to assist us in making better decisions by seeing patterns that we otherwise would never have realized.

Like the number of websites that make use of them, the options for analytics applications are vast. The rest of this guide will be focused on the specific uses of



*Analytics aren't just numbers; they're your digital audience: translated.*

analytics and data for understanding your audience better, as well as identifying applications to use that information in your work.

## 01

**GET RID OF  
MISCONCEPTIONS  
ABOUT ANALYTICS**

Before we dive into the nuts and bolts of using analytics, let's talk a little bit about what they are not. Here are a few of the most widespread misconceptions about analytics that are commonplace among staff at online publishing outlets.

## Misconception

Learning how to use analytics will be too hard and will take up too much time for journalists, writers and content creators.

You're probably already more comfortable with analytics than you realize.

Analytics have made an impact in more parts of our lives as data becomes more available and accessible. We track our steps and calories on our iPhones to stay healthy, and we use services that recommend movies we might like based on what we've already enjoyed. These services are all based on analytics.

Using analytics to better understand your audience entails accessing the information in formats that make sense to you and which are applicable to the questions you're trying to answer. As analytics have evolved as an industry, more specific options are available, from receiving social analytics information directly from services like Twitter to publisher-specific analytics built for editorial teams from services like Parse.ly.

## Misconception

Knowing the number of page views a story gets isn't very helpful to me, and I don't think it reflects the true value of my work.

Many in the publishing industry regard analytics as a simple matter of measurement. How many hits did a story get? How many readers clicked on this link? Having these kinds of measurement available is helpful for certain business needs, but analytics are capable of providing much richer detail than that.

---

*The thing that the New York Times is interested in learning is: what makes for a good long-term relationship with a reader?*

---

CHRIS WIGGINS  
CHIEF DATA SCIENTIST NYT

The real power of analytics lies in tapping into previously unrealized insights. At their core, analytics and data visualizations extend and expand upon humans' inherent ability to recognize patterns. When editorial teams use analytics in truly powerful ways, somewhat counterintuitively, they're not concerned with the numbers. They're interested in what the trends and patterns underlying the numbers allow them to learn about their readers.

## Misconception

I'm the writer. I know what to write about – not the audience!

---

*Listening to your readers is as old as publishing letters to the editor. What's new is that Web analytics create an implicit conversation that is as interesting as the explicit one we've long been able to have.*

---

OWEN THOMAS  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF READWRITE

Like any input to the writing process, feedback from the audience isn't a directive; it's a source of information. Ignoring any source of information takes away from your ability to do your very best work. Incorporating reader feedback into your workflow allows you to choose whether to include it, the degree to which you heed it, or even the option to totally ignore it when necessary.

Being fully aware of how best to harness the capabilities of analytics allows you to make better editorial decisions.



# 02

LEARN THE NEW  
WHO WHAT WHEN  
WHERE HOW WHY

Most publishing outlets are deeply aware of their brand voice – who they are as an organization, who they’re trying to reach, and what they stand for. Beyond survey questions, marketing data and corporate messaging, how do you really find out more about your audience?

By taking the classic journalistic tools of “who, what, when, where, how, and why” and applying them to your readers.

## WHO is reading your work?

Do you write for a particular section? Do you create only video content? Even within different channel segments of the same organization, readerships may vary widely.

Take a look at your content over the past week or month. Which stories did well? Which stories didn’t do well? Put yourself in your readers’ shoes to try to imagine the person that would be attracted to these types of stories.

When you can access granular data about your readership, you can get deeper information about the people you’re writing for. Take for example, a women’s fashion magazine. The most popular stories can tell you a lot about the readers, without ever having to survey them. In a popular lifestyle and home site, top stories in the “Design” section looked at DIY furniture hacks, apartment updates and rug decorating inspiration.

			CONTEXT	PAGE VIEWS
1		10 of the Best IKEA Hacks EVER — Get Inspired <a href="#">↗</a> Nov 01, 2015 Ashley Anderson Design		9.1k visitors 0.2 minutes/visitor 30,000
2		The World's Most Beautiful (and Terrifying) Stairs <a href="#">↗</a> Nov 27, 2015 Nancy Mitchell Design		10k visitors 0.8 minutes/visitor 15,000
3		The Designer Trick That's Going To Take Your Dining Room to the Next Level <a href="#">↗</a> Nov 30, 2015 Adrienne Breaux Design		10k visitors 0.6 minutes/visitor 10,000
4		9 Smart Design Ideas For Your Studio Apartment <a href="#">↗</a> Nov 30, 2015 Adrienne Breaux Design		5.2k visitors 0.9 minutes/visitor 6,000
5		Rug Decorating Ideas <a href="#">↗</a> Nov 30, 2015 Dabney Frake Design		3.4k visitors 0.6 minutes/visitor 3,000

Popular stories in a home and lifestyle site’s “Design” section.

REAL NUMBERS HAVE BEEN REMOVED FROM ACCOUNTS

Looking at information beyond the individual posts, like sections, article tags or authors allows you to create a more contextual picture of your reader. These article tags from the same magazine didn't resonate with readers:

90	Garden Supply		500
91	Devices		450
92	Office		400
93	Chairs		350
94	Outdoor Space		300
95	Cleaning Tools		250

Story topics that did not resonate with readers that day.  
REAL NUMBERS HAVE BEEN REMOVED FROM ACCOUNTS

Lower on the list was garden supply, office, and at the very bottom of the list? Cleaning tools. What does knowing this say about readers, who they are and what they care about?

## WHAT makes them act?

So now you know some basics about the audience you're writing for. What do you want them to do? You want them to take some action: watch a video, share a link with their networks, or simply come back to read your site again.

In order to do that, you have to understand what makes them more or less likely to

take that action. Take a look at the articles getting the most traffic from social networks, the most-shared articles and the articles that have the most returning visitors. Do they differ from other posts, and if so, in what ways?

## Try it!

Gather your ten most popular stories and your ten least popular stories for the last month. Describe the people that would read them: what else do they like to do, what else to they read, what do they care about?

FILTER BY:		AUTHOR	SECTION	TAG	PAGE TYPE	PUBLISH DATE	SHOW POSTS BY:	Social Referrers
							EXPORT: <a href="#">SPREADSHEET</a> , <a href="#">CSV</a> , <a href="#">SCHEDULE</a>	
							LAST 30 DAYS	SOC. REFS
1		The World's Most Beautiful (and Terrifying) Stairs	Nov 27, 2015	Nancy Mitchell	Design		13k views 10k visitors	12,000
2		10 Simple Christmas Decorating Ideas for Small Spaces — From the Archives: Greatest Hits	Dec 01, 2015	Nancy Mitchell	Style		19k views 17k visitors	8,000
3		The Designer Trick That's Going To Take Your Dining Room to the Next Level	Nov 30, 2015	Adrienne Breaux	Design		11k views 10k visitors	6,000

REAL NUMBERS HAVE BEEN REMOVED FROM ACCOUNTS

## Try it!

Gather your top five most-shared posts, and use them as the basis for answering the following questions.

- What format are the articles in? Standard text, lists, quizzes?
- Are certain words commonly used in these headlines or do they follow a similar format?
- What's the tone of these articles? Does it differ from other areas or stories? Aspirational versus humor? Business versus casual?
- Does the article have a video, a gallery, or any other multimedia element?

Now, as a point of comparison, take a look at some articles that didn't do as well. What are the differences between the top performers and the underdogs? Try to identify specific details, looking both at content (what did the stories cover?) and format (how did the article cover the topic?).

Once you have some answers, see what you can do to incorporate the elements of the successful articles into other work. However, it's important to be cautious of "over-optimizing" by going overboard with a particular technique. The point of these exercises is not to force you to create rote copies, but to use the success as a launching point for additional experimentation. As Jonah Peretti of BuzzFeed puts it:

---

*When we have something that's a hit, usually our response is not, 'Let's do more of those'. Our response is, 'Let's figure out why this is a hit and make variations of this'. This was successful because it was tied to someone's identity, it was successful because it had cats in it, or it was successful because it had humor, or it was successful because it tapped into nostalgia.*

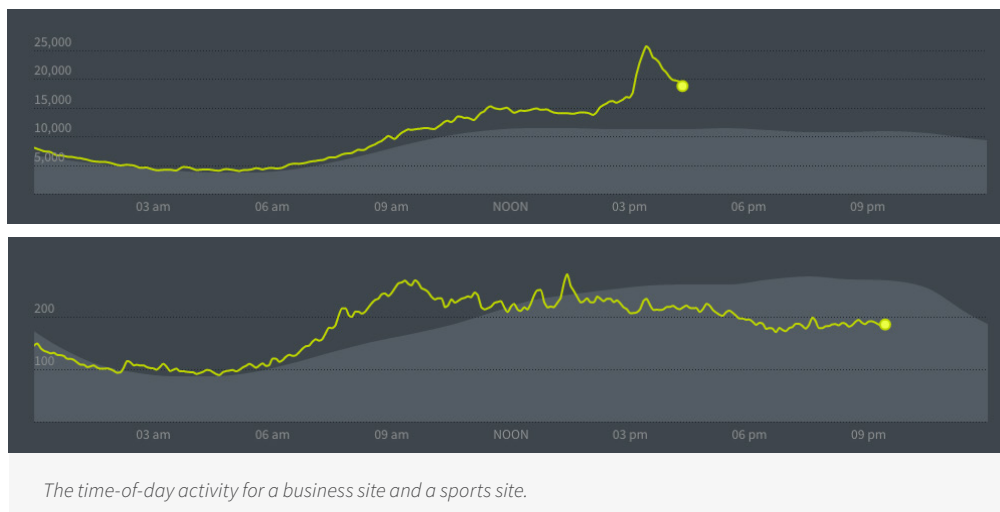
---

JONAH PERETTI  
FOUNDER, CEO BUZZFEED

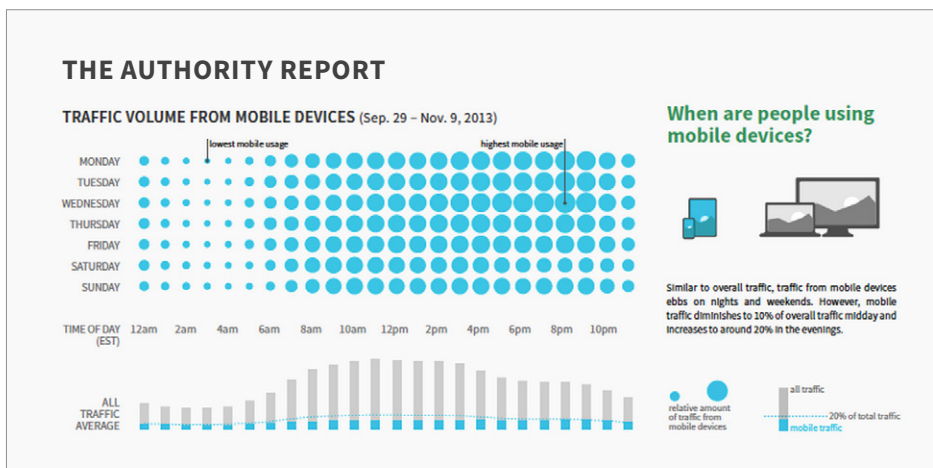
## WHEN are they reading?

Readers are more than users or analytics data; they have habits and lives. Your work fits into their habits and lives - they may always read the world news with their coffee when they get up in the morning, or browse social media to find interesting stories during their lunch breaks. Understanding your readers' habits allows you to make it as easy as possible for them to access your work at the times that are most convenient for them.

This means that you no longer have one deadline a day, it makes all day into a possible deadline. Find out when your readers are most likely to be online and interested; it may vary from topic to topic or author to author.



The time-of-day activity for a business site and a sports site.



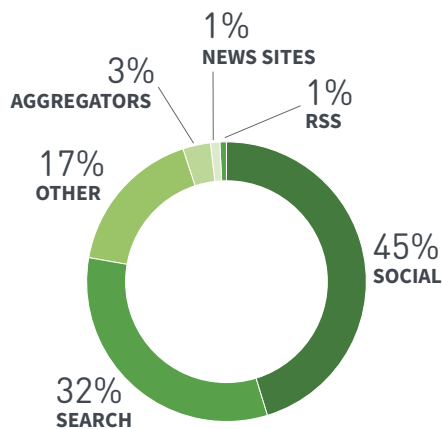
Other information about a reader's habits include how they're reading at different times. Are they on a desktop or a phone? According to research from Parse.ly, readers are mostly likely to be reading news on a mobile device or tablet on Wednesday evenings.

## WHERE ELSE do your readers live online?

You know who these people are, and you know a little bit more about what excites and interests them. Now how do you get them to come to your site consistently?

That may not be the best way to frame the question. Instead, you have to go to them, and you can only do that if you know where they already are.

**THE AUTHORITY REPORT:  
TOP TRAFFIC SOURCES BY CATEGORY**  
(AUG — OCT, 2015)



There's a pretty good chance that social media is the right place to start your search. In a recent analysis of the billions of page views accumulated by our network of digital publishers, Parse.ly found that social media sites accounted for more traffic referrals than any other source, including search.

But that's still a big net to cast. How can you find out more specific details about where your readers are hanging out?

Checking your posts' referral information is an easy way to identify the networks your readers use the most and the popular or influential groups, blogs or Twitter accounts that are already driving traffic to your work.

### Try it!

The next time you write a story about a certain topic, look up similar posts, topics or tags that your site covered and examine their referrals. Did a certain network share it widely? Reach out to offer your piece as a follow-up story, or offer exclusive early access. Will the coverage affect a certain group of people more than others?

Send it to them directly, or have a PR team reach out.

TOP REFERRERS		
POWERED BY PARSE.LY		
Jul. 1, 2015 - Jan. 25, 2016		
SEARCH	PAGE VIEWS	
google	22,336,282	
bing	443,706	
yahoo!	200,187	
OTHER	PAGE VIEWS	
duckduckgo	hsrd yahoo com	2,370,064
ask	feedly com	2,095,459
	news google com	1,126,706
	news ycon	
SOCIAL	PAGE VIEWS	
	reddit com	5,865,749
	facebook com	5,076,066
	twitter com	2,528,827
	stumbleupon com	526,433

*Each topic team must develop a guiding statement of what they cover based on audience metrics, research and judgment. Instead of a collection of beats, each team will have a coherent theme against which to work. The topic statements should evolve as audience demands and circumstances change. For example, instead of covering a bunch of individual companies, the Economy team might focus around a topic such as ‘Metro Atlanta’s recovery from the Great Recession and how that is reshaping the economy for our audiences.’*

— BERT ROUGHTON JR.  
SENIOR EDITORIAL DIRECTOR  
ATLANTIC JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

## Try it!

Ask these questions for your own organization. Given the information you’ve gathered from other “Try it” sections, are your answers different now that you know more about your audience?

## HOW can you incorporate this into your work?

If you have collected a significant amount of information about your audience but don’t use it as the basis for making any changes, what’s the point? Activities like finding out who your audience is, what compels them to act, and where they live online only matter if you can create stories, content and pieces that incorporate important aspects of their lives and form the basis for a connection.

Publishing companies around the world are incorporating more and more of this information into their work every day. By accessing this data, editorial teams can stop guessing and start acting.

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* has started to expand what they have traditionally considered “beats” to make sure they’re writing about topics that interest the readers in their region. In an [interview published on the Poynter Institute website](#), *AJC* managing editor and senior editorial director, Bert Roughton Jr., explained this strategy:

Each team started with a series of questions, some of which are listed here.

- Define your beat. What do you write about and cover?
- Why is what you write about and cover important to our readers?
- Who reads your stories? Who is your audience?
- What does our audience need from us that they cannot get elsewhere?
- What are the subjects that we ought to be covering that we are not covering?
- What are we covering that we should not pay so much attention to?
- What is the best way to organize our team to write the stories and cover the subjects we ought to be covering? By subject matter/organizing into pods/ what else?
- What can the econ team do that no other business in metro Atlanta can do?

The *AJC*’s main focus is on their audience, and how their team can serve that audience through their reporting.

And the *AJC* isn’t alone. Across the country, media companies are hiring staff that understand how to apply analytics to their editorial work, from staff reporting roles, to more specialized roles like community engagement editors, to audience development specialists.



## WHY do your readers care about certain things?

There's one final question that will always require more information and can't just be answered by numbers and trends.

### Why?

As a reporter, you are the one that can connect the information you're seeing with the real story, the bigger picture.

Why are there so many views on one post but not another? Why did a previously published article recently experience a new surge of popularity? Why did a just-posted piece receive a sudden spike in attention? The answers to these questions lie in the ability to merge analytics with the real world — and reporters know better than anyone else how to uncover hidden details and connect the dots.

## 03

**TAKE ACTION:  
USING A READER-  
FIRST APPROACH  
TO CREATE VALUE**

Let's talk again about **why** you want to understand your audience. Knowing more about them allows you to create stories and content that they are more likely to engage with, share and enjoy. This in turn will prompt them to be more likely to come back to your site, convert into subscribers or even attend an event hosted by your outlet. Ultimately, you don't just want readers; you want to create a connection with a community of people interested in the things you're writing about. With a strong business team working behind the scenes, this community of readers will also help fund your future projects, directly or indirectly.

But there's a lot of competition out there, and seemingly every day, a new outlet, app or platform is introduced. How do you rise the above the fray and maintain a close connection with your readers? One way is experimentation.

Experimenting with new technologies, types of content, formats, packaging and distribution allows you to combine your reader-first analytics knowledge with creative thinking. You can surprise and delight your audience with new endeavors and innovations that are guided by the information you've gathered via analytics. Then you can assess the impact and success of these experiments with subsequent rounds of analysis.

To make the most of this experimentation, it's important to develop and apply a framework that clearly defines your goals. One such model is described in the *New York Times*' Innovation report.

---

*But 'Experimentation' is about much more than simply trying something new. Real experimentation is about adopting a rigorous, scientific method for proving new concepts and constantly tweaking them to be as successful as possible.*

---

NEW YORK TIMES INNOVATION REPORT



## AN EXPERIMENT

# Innovate Based on Findings About Your Readers

Identify an opportunity for a new idea based on your audience

Using the **TRY IT** sections in this guide, identify something your audience might need or want that they aren't currently getting from your site's content.

**EXAMPLE** You found that people weren't reading about proposed local legislation on your website, but were very active on blogs about the topics those bills covered.

Explore ideas that might get your audience more interested or involved

Using the information you know about them, make hypotheses about what outcomes they're interested in, and why the current content doesn't provide it.

**EXAMPLE** Our readers did really like a story that allowed them to donate to a charity we covered. Maybe people aren't interested in our coverage because it doesn't provide them any way to take action.

Decide how you could change your content or provide missing elements

Make a clear statement about what you will be trying to achieve

**EXAMPLE** *"We will give readers a better way to take action on a senate bill we're writing about."*

Implement a change!

You don't have to code to make a change that affects the reader, although cross-departmental efforts could have more functionality and support.

**EXAMPLE** In articles that cover state senators, include a section that highlights that senator, what bills they have voted on, and a button that allows the reader to contact the senator about that topic.

Monitor the results by looking at reader interest through analysis

Use the same kind of assessments about the readers you did before the experiment after it launches. What differences do you see?

**EXAMPLE** Readers on these articles are coming from the different blogs, and sharing the articles more. That likely means they're engaging with the content more, and you've attracted and created active citizens.

Share your findings and make changes

Not all experiments or changes will be a success. But the results still should be shared with team members so that everyone can understand the audience better.

**EXAMPLE** After discussing the results within your organization, you find other changes you can make, either to improve the existing experiment or to create a new one.

# The Future of Reader-First Publishing



This document is by no means a comprehensive guide to all possible means of learning about your audience or to what you can do with the information. As these practices become more standard across newsrooms, editorial teams and journalism courses, we'll begin to see even more innovation as the transitional stage between the print era and the digital era comes to a close and we move into a truly digital-first environment.

That may entail not just understanding what your audience likes and who they are, but even having access to granular data about where they are (literally!). Using mobile data, predictive analytics, and pattern recognition, content could be served based on location, need or habits, without readers even having to ask.

Will you be ready for those kinds of innovations? Taking the first steps in the shift toward being reader-first will help guide you and your organization as these industry changes continue to unfold.

Want to try some of these suggestions on your site? Parse.ly provides analytics specifically designed to help you understand your audience.

Sign up for a trial today: [www.parse.ly/trial](http://www.parse.ly/trial)