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FROM COMMUNITY TO COMMERCE?

Analytics, audience 'engagement' and how local newspapers are renegotiating news values in the age of pageview-driven journalism in the United Kingdom

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Introduction

Industrialized newspaper journalism has long been propelled by more 'market-driven' motives (McManus, 1994) than any high-minded Burkean commitment to the ideals of a pluralist, truth-seeking "Fourth Estate" (Grande, 2014). From the sensational 'yellow journalism' patented by Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst in the 1890s to the launch of picture-heavy tabloids like Rupert Murdoch's (reinvented) *Sun* and Gannett's *USA Today* three-quarters of a century later, to today's ongoing absorption of swaths of local papers into regional conglomerates, the pursuit of profit as an engine of news production has consistently manifested itself as both a symptom and enabler of the "gradual shift away from financial dependence on political parties to dependence on circulation and advertising revenues" (Hampton, 2010, 6).

Indeed, commercialization of the press arguably predates all these developments and is, in some respects, native to journalism itself – with the noble exception of the earnest outpourings of early DIY pamphleteers. The "supposedly trivial or emotion-laden stories of celebrities" and "everyday heroes" have, as Bird observes, "always been a part of news", even performing "an important cultural role" that only becomes a "problem" when it "swamps the other important dimensions of what journalism can and should be" (2009, 49). Moreover, as Serazio argues (2009, 15), the pointed re-framing of such ingredients as 'popularization', by no less than Herbert Gans, reimagines them as offering "the possibility of strengthening news and bolstering democracy rather than despoiling it" – precisely the aim of lofty Fourth Estate idealists.

It is, then, this part-pragmatic, part-ideological debate – one preoccupied with the perennial tension between revenue-driven commercialism and the pursuit of conscientious public-interest journalism – that underpins this chapter, as it considers the ways in which new drivers and measures of market success are being adopted by local papers in the digital age. In doing so, it considers two sub-questions. The first concerns the issue of how such new forms of commercialization, principally the use of audience analytics to drive news agendas, might be transforming the underlying cultures/identities of local newspapers (and journalists). The second concerns the implications of any such changes for the preservation of the distinctive (if oft-romanticized) role of the provincial paper as "faithful chronicler of the parish pump" (Pilling, 1998, 187) and/or reflector of the interests of the "community structure" of which it is notionally part (McCombs and Funk, 2011, 906). After a brief review of the existing literature, we explore these concerns empirically, by analyzing a series of interviews with five senior local news personnel whose jobs involve incorporating analytics into their day-to-day online editorial decisions.

Clicks, pageviews and the rise of analytics in the online press

Today's digital news environment is, in one sense, a world away from that inhabited by "newsmakers" (Tuchman, 1978) of the mass-circulation analogue era. In others, however, it is all-too-relatable to the musings of post-war wire editor 'Mr Gates', who once justified his news selections by regaling an academic with the commercially astute observation that his readers were "entitled to news that pleases them" – principally "stories involving their thinking and activity" – as well as coverage that "informs them of what is going on in the world" (Manning White, 1950, 390). Latter-day debates about the perceived subservience of public-interest news to that which is *of interest to* the public are, then, echoes of that stolid wire editor's formula for selecting a "variety" of stories – and favouring "human interest" items, "in a big way", over "economic news" and other stories that went "over the heads" of readers (*ibid*., 389–390). While editors of Mr Gates's and later eras based their judgements about stories' likely appeal on clipboard-based consumer surveys, occasional focus groups and the snail-mail feedback published on letter pages (some of which they ignored – see Gans, 1980), today's have access to popularity measures that are instant, 24/7 and much more precise: live data analytics. Widely defined as the "systematic analysis of quantitative data on various aspects of audience behaviour", with the aim of "growing audiences, increasing engagement, and improving newsroom workflows", editorial analytics are increasingly integral to the routinized journalistic practices (and wider business models) of "organisations all over the world", with major news operations increasingly developing "tailored" packages designed to mine the maximum amount of granular information about the demographics (and associated likes and dislikes) of their audiences (Cherubini and Nielsen, 2016, 7).

The benefits of real-time profiling are obvious. Not only does it help editors focus increasingly strained editorial budgets on prioritizing content likely to attract audiences, but both the profile data itself and the evidence of bigger, more engaged, user-communities they generate can be used to sell advertising (Zeng, Dennstedt and Koller, 2016, 549). In the words of one of few substantive studies to date to examine the impact of editorial analytics internationally, including on (national) UK providers:

> Journalists today not only *need analytics*, to navigate an ever-more competitive battle for attention. Many journalists also *want analytics*, as an earlier period of scepticism seems to have given way to interest in how data and metrics can help newsrooms reach their target audiences and do better journalism.
> *(Cherubini and Nielsen, 2016, 7)*

Rolling analytics-monitoring has not only revolutionized the speed with which audience data can be generated; it has prompted a shift in the *types* of metric that are of most interest to news organizations. An earlier preoccupation with the simplest measures of market penetration – 'clicks', 'visits' and the one-time holy grail, 'unique visitors' – has been supplanted by a focus on *how long* individuals stay on websites and *what they do* while there. In other words, the emphasis has switched from quantity to quality. By calculating pageviews, likes, shares and other measures of engagement with their content (*ibid*.) – including comments posted beneath stories and on their social media pages – organizations can build up clearer and fuller pictures of how many times visitors click onto more than one page or item; how long they linger on their site(s); how much they participate while there; and how best to encourage them to spread the word about their brands to others – and keep returning themselves for more.

Yet, for all their commercial virtues – principally, user-friendliness, speed and granular precision – analytics present problems for journalists. Chief among these is the prescriptive, formulaic and instrumentalist newsgathering practices they have the potential to promote over normative professional ideas about newsworthiness, let alone any higher ideals about the public's "right to know" (Meyers, 1993). As Canter demonstrated in a (so far) rare study examining the impact of analytics on editorial practices of local (rather than national) papers, an "increase in the use of web metrics or analytics to measure most-read stories, most-commented stories and most-shared stories is beginning to shape journalistic decisions" (2014, 110). Defying earlier predictions that online audiences' primary contribution to post-Web 2.0 news would take the form of original stories, videos and other content they uploaded themselves to news sites, today's "secondary gatekeepers" (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009, 7), Canter argues, are "impacting on the gatekeeping process" not through "user-generated content" but indirectly: by shaping *editors'* decisions about *their* news selection, via web metrics (Canter, 2014, 110). This, she says (citing Örnebring, 2010), can change news values "to soft over hard news, quirky over substantial, visual over non-visual", promoting "an overall preference for sensationalism" (Canter, 2014, 110).

Pursued to its logical commercial extreme, such analytics-driven journalism could arguably damage trust in news providers by distorting the images of reality they present in far more misleading ways than was ever the case in the oft-maligned mass media age of 'constructed' (e.g., Tuchman, 1978) or 'manufactured' news (Fishman, 1980). Indeed, such unscrupulous approaches would rocket-boost the "audience as product perspective" that, to quote Lee et al., has long been central to the critique of political economy scholars that "above all, capitalist media 'manufacture' audiences to be sold as commodities to advertisers" (2014, 509). In the process, as Nguyen (2013) argues, journalists risk facing ever more tortuous ethical dilemmas, as their employers' relentless pursuit of the bottom line undermines

core news values, dictates new ones and militates against investing in content that (based on past analytics) is unlikely to "sell". Why spend valuable time investigating a complex policy story that (however important) will have little popular appeal, when reproducing a funny video clip lifted from YouTube, at no cost, is more likely to draw punters – and earn you Brownie points?

As we near the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, then, how far have pageview-driven editorial norms come to influence the day-to-day newsgathering and publishing practices of Britain's local press? Four years after Canter's informative interviews with practitioners at various levels in the newsroom hierarchies of two English locals – the *Leicester Mercury* and *Bournemouth Echo* – how representative are her snapshots of the incipient 'metricization' of UK newsrooms today? Has the tail-wags-dog process of Web 2.0-style secondary gatekeeping identified by Canter, Örnebring and others accelerated or stalled − and, if the former, how deeply is it embedded? The following sections aim to make a start on answering these questions based on the findings of empirical fieldwork carried out between June and September 2018. The research involved qualitative, semi-structured interviews with editors responsible for taking daily decisions about what stories (and content) to publish, how prominently and in what form on five local news sites based in different UK regions. These were the digital editors of a daily newspaper covering a major north-east English city, a city-based evening paper in eastern Scotland and an evening title serving a large catchment area in south- west England; the executive editor of a website encompassing the catchments of two south Wales-based daily papers; and the content editor of a county-wide website serving the joint catchment areas of five weekly newspapers in south-east England.

The findings suggest the *degree* to which web analytics are dictating news agendas across the provincial press is subject to some variation from one area and/or provider to another, with local factors (e.g., population characteristics and socio-economic profiles) combining with slight deviations in newsroom structures to affect the extent to which metrics are pre-eminent. However, the overarching picture suggests that pageview-driven journalism is certainly on the rise – and predictions about the likely audience appeal of this story or that, based on the tracking of today's clicks, likes and shares, are as likely to determine tomorrow's content and headlines as any normative and/or ideological judgements about an event's or incident's intrinsic news- worthiness. Indeed, some findings even signalled the emergence of a potentially more problematic crossover between the roles of journalists and advertising/salespeople – sets of practitioners customarily separated by such clearly defined professional boundaries that studies consistently conceive of them as "walls" between mutually antipathetic camps (Gans, 1980; DeLorme and Fedler, 2005; Artemas, Vos and Duffy, 2018).

Reading the runes and promoting the popular: analytics-driven news lists

The primacy of analytics-based audience profiling and data measuring the popularity of past content in shaping today's editorial decisions was emphasized by all five interviewees. "With analytics you know exactly what people are interested in", remarked the Scottish-based editor, adding that real-time metrics "totally" drove his paper's online news decisions. The south-east editor said data were "the key driver" of her site's coverage, with her daily news lists "shaped by" analytics, while the north-east editor described such measures as "absolutely crucial" to "informing" his online coverage, as they helped it "remain relevant, produce better digital content and reach a larger audience". Though there was remarkable agreement about the most popular genres of content – breaking news, crime, traffic, human-interest stories and (depending on time of day) more leisure-orientated articles, like restaurant reviews – some examples cited demonstrated a more nakedly commercial approach to capitalizing on "trends" with little respect for old-style, community-focused news values. An extreme illustration came from the Scottish editor, who described how a tweeted video of a teenager tripping his friend over at a party "went massive" by gaining 50,000 views – forcing him to explain to fellow editors in a news conference why the day's "best story" had been "someone kicking someone at a party". Analytics-driven routines adopted by all five news organizations included the following.

•   Segmentation − targeting certain types of content at sub-audiences and/or peak times.
•   Follow-ups and added value – milking popular items by publishing extra related content.
•   Using social media as a shop window – posting links and headlines to their content on Facebook and other external sites to drive traffic towards their own websites.

Sub-audience targeting and segmentation

The most normalized use of analytics was to construct round-the-clock schedules to determine when specific items/types of content should be published, in order to maximize audiences. "We have a constant schedule – 7am, 8am etc. – so we know what we are going to publish … right up to 11am the next day", explained the south-west editor. Aside from breaking news stories – which could occur at any time and "almost exist in a parallel space" – his reporters had to pitch three self-generated stories each morning. Depending on their subject matter, these would

be ration-released to target specific sub-audiences who were active online at different times. Like others, the south-west site generally held back "hard stuff" for its lunchtime peak, whereas evenings were "a bit different", as audiences "switch to Facebook and Twitter" – encouraging editors to post shareable, feature-style content, to drive users towards their site. Each interviewee described rush-hour peaks, with the south-east editor relaying a diet of "stuff we save and schedule" on weekday mornings and evenings as "things aimed at commuters", such as traffic news and information. Items held back for daytime release tended to be light-hearted or "aimed at mums".

"Commuters" and "mums" were key segments identified by all interviewees, though other sub-audiences were highly specific to the characteristics of individual catchments. The Scottish editor likened the process of targeting different sub-audiences at different times to "a press office, communications" scheduling grid – though you've got the content there, deciding when to release it was driven by the question, "when's it going to have the most effect?" A peak-point for one sub-audience specific to his catchment was tied to the shift patterns of its biggest local employer. "Health stories are more popular around 5pm", he said, because hospital shifts "begin and end at 5, so you've got people going into work and people who've just finished".

Follow-ups and added value

Another way of drip-feeding content to maximize audience engagement is to deliberately string out the release of details relating to *unfolding* news events. "So a fire takes place and you get the initial … breaking news", which gains a "massive readership", explained the Scottish editor, and you then "do an update". Updates might be published "four or five times" for one story, starting with "first story: something's happened", then "second story: maybe reports of shouting", followed by a third story from a police statement – and "each time you're linking it to the original", to encourage newcomers to the story to click back to earlier versions and spend longer on the site. "If we have a video we link that to the story, and then all our stories [about this incident] have a video", he added, allowing the site to "monetize" it directly by posting a paid-for advert at the start, in the style of YouTube's "video comes after ad" banners.

In other newsrooms, follow-ups and "added value" content were routinely generated to capitalize on the appeal of popular items. "If it's doing well, we will search for any follow-up or new line we can get", said the south-east editor, adding that her team would "embellish the story" with every possible hyperlink and "read more" tab; "look at variations of that story we could sell differently" to "different areas" of their catchment; and use all "other means possible to keep them [readers] on our site". Should an item's popularity exceed expectations, the Wales-based editor would "examine any trends" around the subject (using Google Trends) and, if persuaded there was a genuine market among his core audience, try to amplify his coverage. A simple way of generating ready-made follow-ups to stories that generate lots of social media activity favoured by both Welsh and north-east England-based sites was to run a "reaction piece" quoting a mix of representative and/or provocative posts. Conversely, "if a particular theme, issue or topic is being heavily debated [on social media]", said the north-east editor, "we will look at whether further journalistic investigation is needed". When stories were "spiking", his journalists would be told to write not only "regular updates" but additional related content, including "explainers, reactions, image galleries" and, "if appropriate", live blogs.

These depictions of newsroom cultures primed for all-hands-on-deck investments in high- performing stories reflected the primacy placed on audience-driven news values by all five publications. As the south-east editor put it, the pursuit of rapid follow-ups to popular items had "an incredibly big impact on our editorial decisions", to the extent that it almost "dictates it".

Social media as shop window

The ways in which social media analytics were used by editors differed to those used to exploit *their own* metrics in two important respects. First, rather than focusing on profiling their existing audiences and using the popularity of their past/present content to inform future editorial decisions, their main reason for tracking social media metrics was to identify where audience- members *came from*, i.e., from which external sites/platforms they were being redirected, via links and likes shared by "opinion leaders" in their social networks (Turcotte et al., 2015). Second, their use of social media was, in many ways, more sophisticated than the quantitative data-mining used to harness their own websites' internal analytics. With up to six out of ten of their online audience-members initially stumbling on their content via Facebook (according to metrics), and further traffic coming via Twitter, all the interviewees had routinized the process of posting their main stories on these platforms daily. However, rather than run the risk of losing track of potential return visitors, they had also developed their own social media channels (north-east editor), including branded Facebook pages – giving them access to vital sources of secondary analytics they could harness to profile/target *potential* audiences and build brand loyalty by constructing external communities of interest linked to their sites.

"Without social media, our online audience would be significantly smaller", explained the north-east editor, adding that Facebook was "by far the biggest referrer" of traffic. Moreover, his south-east counterpart described this platform as the source of "successful

innovations" for her company, including a dedicated "traffic and travel" website, which "has 30,000 members who share information" and is both "a key place for us to share our traffic-based stories [and] get tips on stories" and "the authority on traffic and travel" throughout the county. So integral had social media become to her news operation that her morning editorial meetings were now used to agree not just the site's own schedule but also a *Facebook* schedule for the day" (author's italics), determining "what time we will post certain stories … for the best benefit of traffic". The south-west editor was more cautious about automatically using big Facebook hits as a guide to shaping future news decisions, unless he could establish an audience was "core", rather than passing trade, i.e., "internal" to his site or based on "our own Facebook page". However, he conceded its importance in boosting audiences – adding that, "if they [new visitors] choose to read another article, we know they like the brand".

Another virtue of Facebook was that it could be used to engage *directly* with newcomers who showed an interest in a site's content. People who lingered, clicked on more than one item and/or expressed "some kind of emotion on Facebook" faced being directly contacted by the Scottish editor, who would invite "anyone [who] likes or comments on" an article to "like the [news or Facebook] page". The act of 'liking' a page would flag up future content that might interest them – increasing the likelihood of their returning to the site. "Say you were on a story with 100-odd likes, I'd get a list of all those people with likes", and "with all of those we can go in and 'invite', 'invite', 'invite'". When "you've got the likes", he added, "the next time you've got a big story, you're hitting them", because "it appears on their news feed".

The journalist-adperson hybrid: tagging, video and other monetizing newsroom practices

Beyond routinizing the use of analytics themselves to maximize audiences, interviewees described various other ways in which commercial thinking (and practice) was becoming hardwired into newsroom cultures. The south-east editor said comments and shares on her site's Facebook page enabled it to offer sponsored posts and content to advertisers, while both her Scottish and south-west counterparts said almost every story was now accompanied by a video, as they could easily be monetized. The former described video views as an especially attractive "currency" to advertisers, as they required users to sit through commercials before they could watch. "The sellers say to the market, 'we get 500,000 video views a week'", he said, adding, "the higher the number, the more they can charge".

Perhaps the starkest illustration of how the increasingly commercialized nature of online news production was pushing some journalists towards crossing the line into the business side of their organizations was the same editor's description of "tagging": the use of thematic labels to signpost and/or link items of related content. He outlined two different reasons for why you tag: the first being for "easy reference", as it "helps the readers, it helps us", and the second to attract advertising, as there might be someone who wants to advertise "just for people who read" content relating to a specific area. Expressing enthusiasm for doing "the sales schtick" himself, he said there were "great opportunities" to exploit – adding that,

as an advertising team we can say, 'we'll give you … 50,000 page-impressions', so they [advertisers] know that everyone who reads a story has some interest in that area.

Reinforcing the 'wall'? Resisting role mergers and putting pageviews in their place

The above testimony suggests that market-driven priorities are increasingly breaching the symbolic 'wall' that has traditionally been held to separate journalists from salespeople – replacing it with a more permeable barrier, like a 'curtain' (Coddington, 2015). Nonetheless, in considering questions about their websites' news values, most interviewees betrayed signs of enduring tensions between what might normatively be regarded as "important stories" (Welsh and south- east editors) and content most likely to attract audiences – and advertisers.

A strident assertion of the need to uphold traditional news judgement came from the south- east editor, albeit couched in pragmatic terms. Casting public-interest values less as a hard-to-sell luxury (or economically costly burden) than a unique selling-point that could be exploited for commercial gain, she said her website's push to improve its "engagement times" had "brought back the need for core journalistic values, quality reports, exclusive material" and "trusted con- tent" that distinguished the press from other outlets. "A loyal readership", she added, is "what will keep local digital journalism alive and we will earn that through respect". She also emphasized her team's efforts to balance more obviously commercial "trending topics", in which audiences were already showing interest, with "important" stories that they "didn't know they wanted to read" – adding that, if "an important story hasn't done very well", they would "discuss ways to make it more relevant" to audiences and "sell it in a way that will make them click on it". An example might include dressing up "a story about cuts the council is making" to "link with our trending topics". Others described similar efforts to boost stories they considered newsworthy/ important – from adopting "a slight change to how it's delivered and at what time/day" or targeting "specific interest groups" (Welsh editor) to "re-nosing

the headline or social media posts" (north-east editor) or putting "a human face on it" (south-west editor).

Significantly, though, there was general agreement that commercial considerations were ultimately prioritized over 'instinctive' news values when it came to finalizing decisions about what to run with and/or how hard to push important stories that analytics suggested were unpopular. The Scottish editor described how he sometimes took advantage of the "three peaks" in his site's daily audience to "put on a new headline, and maybe write it slightly differently for the evening peak" if it "doesn't do anything" initially, but added that this often "doesn't work" − leaving him feeling that, "for the effort I've gone [to], I've thought, 'well, that's not really done it'". Similarly, despite being strongly resistant to getting "involved with" his website's business side, the south-west editor lamented that, "ultimately, if you are writing about an issue and no one's reading it, you are kind of writing into a vacuum".

Conclusion

Tensions between newspapers' *commercial* interests and their duty to serve the *public* interest are as old as the press itself. However, while even local paper editors have always tailored much of their output to the tastes and demands of their publics, this chapter shows that, as the sector formerly known as the press becomes progressively more digitally native, new competitive pressures combined with technological advances have encouraged it to adopt ever-more market-driven mindsets − embracing everything from granular profiling of segmented sub-audiences to direct-messaging of people who stumble on its content accidentally via Facebook. While more empirical research is needed to determine precisely how far today's local news agendas can be described as pageview-driven – including analysis of their published content – our interviews suggest journalists are increasingly resigned to prioritizing profit over public service. Nonetheless, while some editors are enthusiastic about the prospect of working more collaboratively with advertising staff, others seem determined to avoid breaching this 'wall' − by preserving some semblance of the historical distinctions between what Gans once described as the "church" of editorial and the "state" of business (1980, 24).

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