

From New Visitor to Subscriber

How DIE WELT Cultivates a Paying Readership

Since the publication of its first edition in 1946, the German national daily DIE WELT has built a solid platform across print and digital media, with robust circulation in hard copy and a highly-trafficked website, diewelt.de.

In 2012, DIE WELT introduced a metered payment model for digital content, leading the industry as the first large German news site to launch online subscriptions. In 2014, WELT's online editorial team brought Chartbeat to the organization to help understand and build their audience on the web. Today, diewelt.de receives 18 million unique users per month, and over 100 million visits over the same timeframe.

For many publishers, media's shift to digital from print has yielded revenue pressure that sets the editorial and business sides of publishers at odds. At DIE WELT, however, a different scenario emerges as a way forward. Using audience data to create common ground and understanding across silos, WELT leadership has found a way to inspire the entire organization to work together in service of the audience, drawing readers to pay for content — and strengthening its subscription model.

DIE WELT AT A GLANCE

1946

First edition published

1995

diewelt.de launches

18M

Unique monthly users

111M

Unique monthly visits

760K

Total print circulation

Data is not a threat, it's a tool.

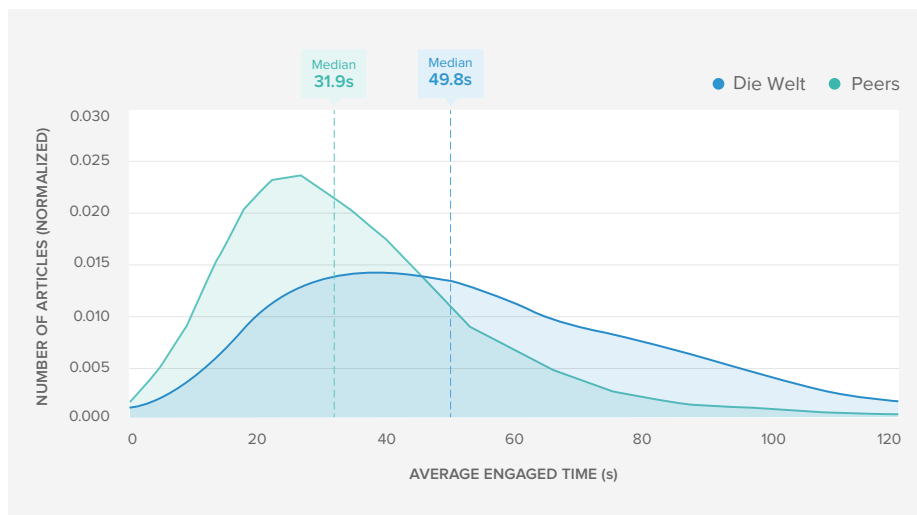
—KRITSANARAT KHUNKHAM

Using Chartbeat analytics and data to create shared metrics, prioritize user experience, and explore new connections, DIE WELT has built a solid subscriber base and outperformed competitor publications across a number of engagement metrics—including a 49.8-second median engagement time per article, 50% higher than its peers. Connecting these successful tactics is a simple mantra that governs each choice that the team's editorial and business development teams make: remembering that every subscriber was, at one time, just a new visitor—and that at every point in a reader's journey, their experience can be adapted to guide them further down a loyalty-driven subscription funnel.

Engagement as a Shared Language

The strategy starts high-level: cross-functionally rethinking and aligning upon what it means to be successful. Many newsrooms already work well with data, but DIE WELT's managing editor, Kritsanarat Khunkham, makes a point of coaching his team on what the numbers really stand for. Not all clicks are good clicks, and not every visit is a quality visit, but each holds the potential to connect and engage a reader. This critical change of mindset means that the entire company has a common understanding of what it means to publish successfully—and that this success includes achieving a large proportion of articles with high engaged time.

Khunkham's team uses Chartbeat to proactively combine a variety of metrics, including visits, engaged time, social media traffic, video views, and bounce rate, into a single "article score," so that a top-level view of their articles offers a more complete and better-balanced view of visitor experience. As he puts it, the question to pose is not just "Did they click?"—but "What else happened besides the click?"



DIE WELT's engagement time per article significantly outperforms its peers.

This measure of engagement holds the tie to revenue. At Chartbeat, we've long emphasized that visitors who engage for longer periods of time with a site's content, and who read multiple articles in a single visit, are far more likely to come back. Besides the simple fact that returning visitors increase ad impressions, they also represent a crucial point in a publisher's subscription funnel: every new visitor is a potential subscriber, but — to put it bluntly — no one will pay for content that doesn't engage them.

Our whole subscription model is based on returning visitors — they're essential. You can only turn users to subscribers when they're returning. I'd rather have 500 returning visitors than 5,000 one-time users. They're [the ones] who appreciate my work, who trust my brand.

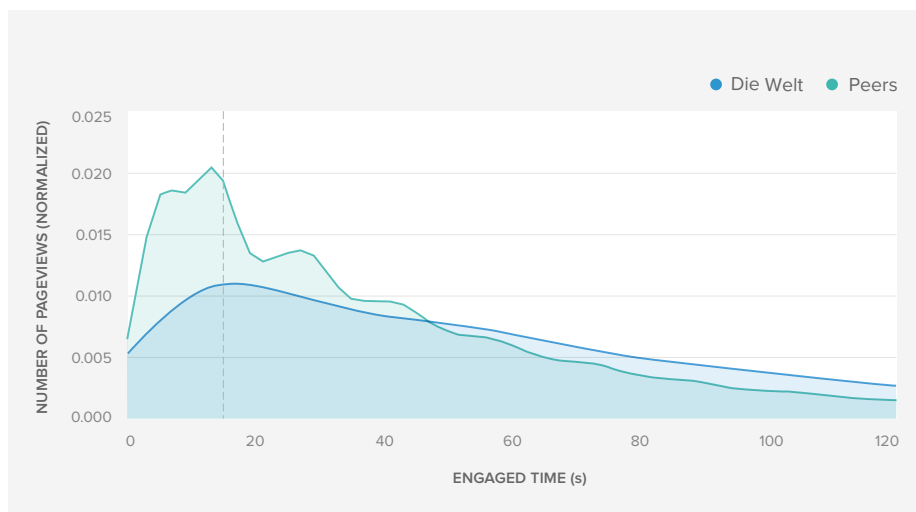
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Data-driven Opportunities to Improve

Given the size and scale of DIE WELT’s operation, a successful strategy didn’t emerge out of nowhere, or overnight. The masthead’s efforts to think more critically about user experience on an article level plays into how long their readers actually engage with the content—and how likely those readers are to return. Khunkham and his team use Chartbeat tools like Engaged Headline Testing and the Heads Up Display to improve engagement on a per-visit basis. Markedly, 69% of DIE WELT’s page visits result in more than 15 seconds of engagement, outstripping peers by 10%.

In the context of a composite system of metrics used to evaluate every article published, Khunkham encourages his team to think critically about what went wrong or right. “Data is not a threat, it’s a tool,” he coaches his journalists. Indeed, data is a tool that the paper’s editors and reporters rely upon, knowing that every piece pushed out to an audience represents a new chance to prove and/or test editors’ instincts about what will pique and hold their readers’ attention.

In practice, here’s what that looks like. For a given article, a high number of clicks but low engaged time might mean that potential readers were pulled in by a compelling headline but the article content itself didn’t match up—in which case they would run A/B tests to increase engagement time. On the other hand, that combination of results might also mean that people started reading, but something happened in the middle to interrupt, so editors analyze scroll depth in real time to see if something’s wrong. Did the reader encounter an image, video, or advertisement that somehow disrupted the reading experience? Another scenario: perhaps an article getting low click-through on the homepage isn’t right to showcase there, but holds high potential to be repackaged for a social-media audience.

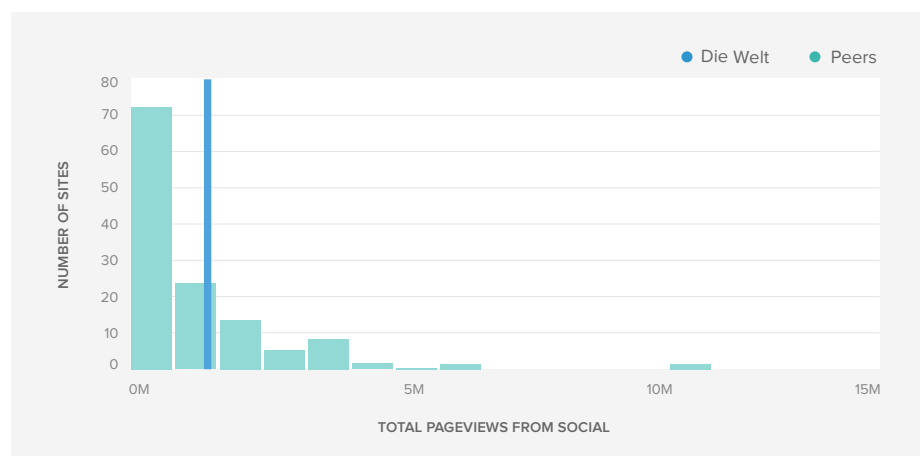


With mindful changes to visitor experience as they’re reading, DIE WELT’s goal is to inspire loyalty in newer visitors. Unsurprisingly, they see more engagement on a per-visit basis. For peers, 41% of all page visits result in less than 15 seconds of engaged time; for DIE WELT, it’s just 31%.

The whole team uses Chartbeat tools in the moment to make these live tweaks to UX, because they know that the person who has clicked on — and is currently reading — their story is either already a subscriber whose loyalty needs retention, or a reader who could become that engaged subscriber. With so many competitors for online attention, having readers' attention in the moment represents their first and best chance to deliver a compelling experience that draws someone to return repeatedly.

Discovering New Audience Connections

Even as Khunkham's team uses shared metrics and in-the-moment UX tweaks to deepen visitor engagement, they're simultaneously expanding their reach through new connections on social media to broaden the audience at the top. And with their already engaging content, they see a relatively high total number of page views from social referrers compared to peers, as well as longer content lifespans than those peers, regardless of referrer.



While everyone looks to social media as an outlet for audience promotion, DIE WELT's engagement-first strategy yields a relatively high total number of page views from social referrers, as compared to peers.

Khunkham notes that often, their consistent eye on data uncovers what topics their audience is truly interested in — and justifies expanding coverage in those areas, often areas they might not have expected. “Sometimes [our audience is] more interested in political news than we expected, and we have such potential for [an audience] who reads seriously,” he says. “When we can prove to [journalists] that readers engage with their meaningful work, it motivates them.”

So often we assume that with a lot of the industry chasing empty clicks and promoting sensationalism over quality, that that's the only way to keep up your numbers. But Khunkham and the DIE WELT team not only prove that those aren't the numbers worth considering in the first place, but that they can invest in meaningful, complex stories, engage with their audience, and push those readers further to convert to subscribers — all because of data.

Looking Toward the Future

Of course no strategy is foolproof, and particularly with technology constantly changing, the DIE WELT newsroom needs to stay flexible. As such, they're always looking at new strategies to use. Khunkham is already thinking about adjusting their article score to pay attention to further parse the difference between social shares and social traffic. He feels it could add a contextual layer around the various platforms that host their content. Also being explored: the role that paid content could play in their revenue model.

The key for their team though, will always be their united focus on the quality of each and every one of their visitors' content experiences. On both sides of the house they know that enticing someone to pay for content they only click, skim, and share on social media is an uphill battle; instead, engagement has to come first.

Chartbeat, the content intelligence platform for publishers, believes that today's content creators and audience developers need mission-critical insights — in real time and across devices and social platforms — to turn visitors into a loyal audience. With our mobile and social pivots, as well as Offsite Social, our real-time social article performance tracker powered by Facebook's CrowdTangle, we're building the tools to help you understand your content performance wherever your readers live.

For more about Chartbeat and how we're helping you understand your social audiences, get in touch at insights@chartbeat.com.

