

Chapter 1

Growing Our Audience

Innovation March 24, 2014

Introduction

Long ago, we decided to go to extraordinary lengths to get our journalism into the hands of as many readers as possible.

Each night, we printed our best work. Then we loaded it onto trucks to drive it to cities and towns. Then we enlisted kids to bike from house to house to deliver our papers to readers' doorsteps. For non-subscribers, we dropped off bundles of papers at corner stores and newspaper racks, and painstakingly tracked sales to see where more copies were needed.

We take this work for granted now, but our home delivery and single-sales efforts represented one of the most sophisticated consumer-outreach operations in history. But when the time came to put our journalism on the web, we adopted a much more passive approach. We published stories on our home page and assumed that most people would come to us.

The realities of a cluttered Internet and distracted mobile world now require us to make even more of an effort to get our journalism to readers. Perhaps because the path forward is not clear and requires very different skills, we are putting less effort into reaching readers' digital doorsteps than we ever did in reaching their physical doorsteps.

This effort to reach more readers — known as Audience Development — is where our competitors are pushing ahead of us.

Audience Development is the work of expanding our loyal and engaged audience. It is about getting more people to read more of our journalism. The work can be broken down into steps like discovery (how we package and distribute our journalism), promotion (how we call attention to our journalism) and connection (how we create a two-way relationship with readers that deepens their loyalty).

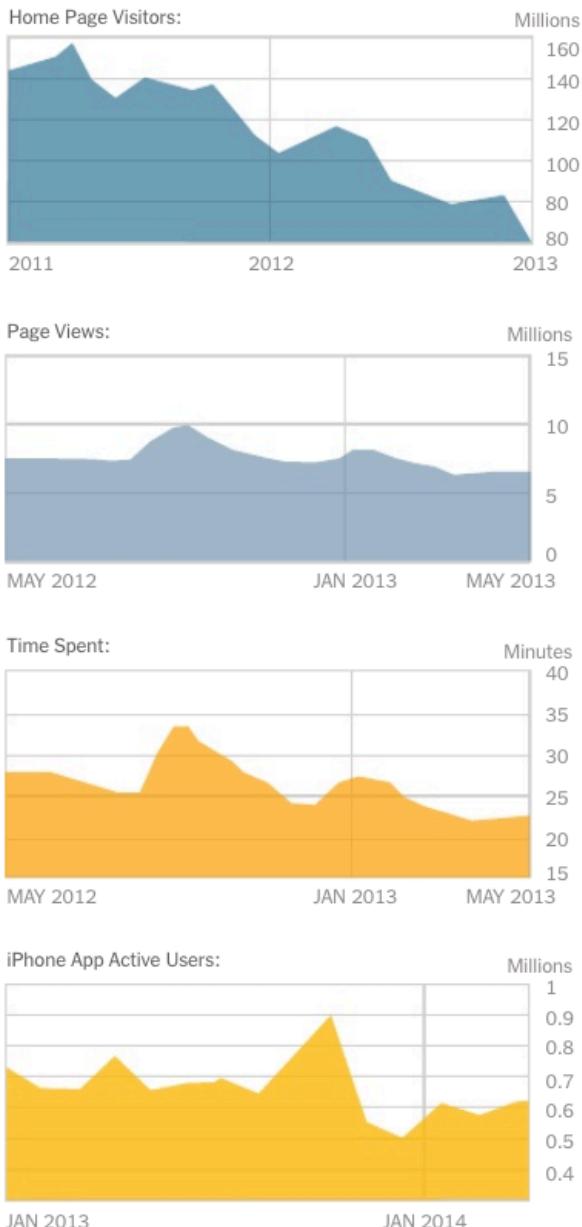
Audience Development needs to be a goal for the whole company. But the newsroom, in particular, must seize a leadership position.

At our new and traditional competitors, Audience Development is seen not just as the responsibility

of the newsroom but as the responsibility of every editor and reporter. They adopt this approach because the work happens story by story and platform by platform, requiring creativity and editorial judgment. These efforts can be compared to using an engaging lede, compelling headline, or gripping photo

TOUGH TRENDS

Some key measures of traffic and engagement point to an inescapable truth: The Times needs to work harder to reach and hold onto readers.



to draw readers into a story.

"The hardest part for me has been the realization that you don't automatically get an audience," said Janine Gibson, editor-in-chief of The Guardian's website. "For someone with a print background, you're accustomed to the fact that if it makes the editor's cut — 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 audience — they're not going to just come and read it — has been transformative."

The need is urgent. Our home page has been our main tool for getting our journalism to readers, but its impact is waning. Only a third of our readers ever visit it. And those who do visit are spending less time: page views and minutes spent per reader dropped by double-digit percentages last year.

Readers are finding and engaging with our journalism in vastly different ways. More readers expect us to find them on Twitter and Facebook, and through email and phone alerts. But the newsroom pays less attention to these platforms, even though they offer our main, and sometimes only, channels

to tens of millions of readers. Here, too, we are lagging our competitors.

Because we are journalists, we tend to look at our competitors through the lens of content rather than strategy. But BuzzFeed, Huffington Post and USA Today are not succeeding simply because of lists, quizzes, celebrity photos and sports coverage. They are succeeding because of their sophisticated social, search and community-building tools and strategies, and often in spite of their content.

"At The New York Times, far too often for writers and editors the story is done when you hit publish," said Paul Berry, who helped found The Huffington Post. "At Huffington Post, the article begins its life when you hit publish."

The Guardian is just one example of a traditional competitor that has adopted digital best practices in Audience Development to drive rapid growth, allowing it to close in on our position as the world's best-read quality newspaper. USA Today has put such practices at the heart of its reorganization. And The Wall Street Journal recently created a new "audience-engagement team," bringing social editors and

REACHING READERS

The Times has worked hard since its earliest days to turn occasional readers into loyal subscribers.

Advertisements for THE WEEKLY TIMES must be handed in before 6 o'clock this evening.

THE TIMES FOR THE SUMMER.

Persons leaving the City for the Summer can have THE TIMES mailed to their address for \$1 per month.

To Times Readers

Difficulty in obtaining The New York Times should be immediately communicated to the Times Office, where such information is welcomed. To prevent delay and disappointment order The Times to be delivered to your home or office every morning.

BIG HELP

Having The New York Times delivered to your home in time for breakfast every morning ... as you can enjoy all day being informed the way only The New York Times keeps you well informed. If you live in New York City or suburbs ... we'll be glad to arrange home delivery for you. Just drop a postcard to our Circulation Department ... or telephone *L*afayette 4-1000.



TODAY—order convenient home delivery
by dropping a postcard to Circulation Department,
The New York Times, New York 18.

data scientists together in the newsroom.

"I tell most reporters, 'Three percent of the people who want to see your work are seeing it,'" said a top editor at The Washington Post. "So if we can get that to even 4.5 percent, it's worth the effort, it's worth the struggle."

But at The Times, discovery, promotion and engagement have been pushed to the margins, typically left to our business-side colleagues or handed to small teams in the newsroom. The business side still has a major role to play, but the newsroom needs to claim its seat at the table because packaging, promoting and sharing our journalism requires editorial oversight.

This effort needs to be unified under a single leader. We recommend hiring a head of Audience Development who works in the newsroom and collaborates with a counterpart on the business side.

Indeed, in recent months, the most qualified candidate for such a position on the business side, Michael Wertheim, the former head of promotion for Upworthy, turned down the job. He explained that for anyone in that role to succeed, the newsroom

needed to be fully committed to working with the business side to grow our audience.

Audience Development is not a task we should view as a chore – the opportunities are truly exciting. Imagine coming back from an unplugged vacation and having the best pieces you missed waiting for you. Or strolling through Rome and having an article on the best museums pop up on your phone. Or watching a year-old story go viral on social. Or having Science Times become a lively platform for expert debate.

There is no single solution like home delivery that will solve the challenges of digital distribution. But our competitors have been experimenting aggressively, and some best practices have emerged that we will share in the following pages. We should track them closely, and adopt those that meet our standards. And we should unleash the creativity of our staff by experimenting quickly and constantly to discover next-generation solutions.

"If The New York Times could get this right – could reach the right audiences for all its content – it would change the world," said Wertheim.

What Are We Trying to Do?

OUR GOAL

There are many good ideas for innovation in the newsroom, but we focused on those that will help us find more readers for more of our journalism.



THE CURRENT NEWSROOM APPROACH

The main newsroom strategy for attracting more readers is to produce excellent journalism.

OUR FOCUS

In this report, we explored additional ideas to attract new readers and deepen our connection with loyal subscribers.

QUALITY JOURNALISM

PROMOTION, DISTRIBUTION

TAGGING, SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION

BREAKING NEWS, VIRAL HITS, PACKAGES

DISCOVERY, PERSONALIZATION, EMAIL

CONNECTION, EVENTS

READER CONTRIBUTIONS

Our Proposals, In Brief

We recognize that “audience development” can easily be dismissed as one of those “sounds-good-in-theory” notions. So we’ve packed a lot into the following pages to show how it works in practice. We’ll provide the context for why these strategies deserve our attention, explain our current approach, assess the competitive landscape and address concerns. We’ll also offer a few key recommendations and a proposed experiment for each area. However, the details of any specific suggestion matter less than the underlying questions. Our goal is to start a discussion.

Our readers' habits are changing faster than ever. How can we make sure our news is reaching them in the digital age?



1. DISCOVERY

Improving technology provides us with more and better tools to ensure that we get our work in front of the right readers at the right place and at the right time. But we still ask too much of readers — they must navigate a website and apps that are modeled on our print structure. We need to think more about resurfacing evergreen content, organizing and packaging our work in more useful ways and pushing relevant content to readers. And to power these efforts, we should invest more in the unglamorous but essential work of tagging and structuring data.

2. PROMOTION

We need to be better advocates of our own work. This means creating newsroom structures to make sure our most important work has maximum readership and impact. And it means identifying and sharing best practices at the ground level, and encouraging reporters and editors to promote their stories. In addition, we must take the process of optimization, for search and social, more seriously and ensure we are updating our tools and workflow along with our changing needs.

3. CONNECTION

Our readers are perhaps our greatest untapped resource. Deepening our connection with them both online and offline is critical in a world where content so often reaches its broadest audience on the backs of other readers. And many readers have come to expect a two-way relationship with us, so they can engage with our journalism and our journalists. This means the newsroom as a whole must take the reins in pursuing user-generated content, events and other forms of engagement in a way that reflects our standards and values.

1 Discovery

The Times produces more than 300 URLs every day. Because of this bounty, readers easily miss stories and features. This has long been true for readers who come to our home page, because of limited real estate and constantly shifting presentation. This is also true on our mobile apps, where a tiny screen makes it even harder to sift through our offerings. The readers who don't come to us at all — and instead expect us to reach them through social media and our alerts — have even less of an appreciation of the richness of our work.

A more reader-centric approach to packaging and surfacing our journalism offers us a huge opportunity to extend our reach. Exploiting better web and mobile tools will also help us get each story to every reader who might want to see it.

We need to make better use of these tools and tactics because the current structures for organizing our digital journalism, many of which are based on the traditions and limitations of print, are losing potency. Traffic to the home page has been declining, month after month, for years. Traffic to section fronts is negligible. Traffic on our mobile apps, which are mostly downstream replicas of our home page and section fronts, has declined as well.

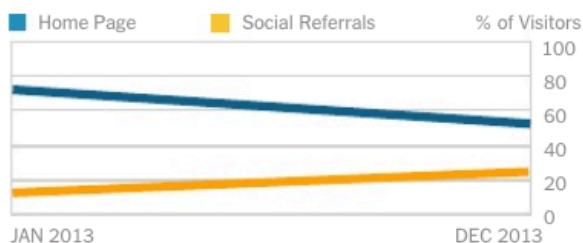
One great example of the power of a new tool for

connecting with readers is our news alert system, which now reaches as many as 13.5 million people, about a dozen times our print subscriber base.

Here are four opportunities for getting more readers for the work we're already producing, with a proposed experiment for each idea to make it more concrete.

SOCIAL POWER

It's not just The Times. The entire digital media industry is seeing a big shift in behavior. Reader visits to home pages are declining while traffic from social media is rising. (Source: BuzzFeed)



Total Internet traffic by type of site.



Opportunity: Evergreen

On Oscar night, The Times tweeted a 161-year-old story about Solomon Northup, whose memoir was the basis for “12 Years a Slave.” After it started going viral on social media, Gawker pounced, and quickly fashioned a story based on excerpts from our piece. It ended up being one of their best-read items of the year. But little of that traffic came to us.

In a digital world, our rich archive offers one of our clearest advantages over new competitors. As of the printing of this report, we have 14,723,933 articles, dating back to 1851, that can be resurfaced in useful or timely ways. But we rarely think to mine our archive, largely because we are so focused on news and new features.

“You have a huge advantage,” said Henry Blodget, the founder of Business Insider. “You have a tremendous amount of high-quality content that you have a perpetual license to.”

The Cooking team is providing a fresh reminder of our treasure trove of evergreen content. For decades, we published and promoted a handful of new

recipes each week. The new Cooking product better reflects the fact that recipes are timeless and best organized in other ways: by meal, ingredients, season and our critics’ favorites.

The opportunities are not limited to service journalism. We can be both a daily newsletter and a library — offering news every day, as well as providing context, relevance and timeless works of journalism.

In breaking news and long-running stories, readers can struggle to quickly get up to speed or to understand why something matters. Many of our competitors are tackling this challenge, just as we did with Times Topics.

“Journalists are better than ever at telling people what’s happening, but not nearly good enough at giving them the crucial contextual information necessary to understand what’s happened,” said Ezra Klein, in announcing his new venture at Vox Media. “We treat the emphasis on the newness of information as an important virtue rather than a painful compromise.”

GAWKERED

When this 161-year-old Times story started going viral on Oscar night, Gawker did what Gawker does —it repackaged our content and won huge traffic gains.

Here's the full story:

The screenshot shows a Gawker article titled "THE KIDNAPPING CASE: Narrative of the Seizure and Recovery of Solomon Northup." Below the title is a section titled "INTERESTING DISCLOSURES" with a note: "We have obtained from Washington the abridged statement of the circumstances attending the seizure and recovery of the negro." To the right of the main text is a sidebar with a list of links related to the story, such as "The Kidnapping Case," "Narrative of the Seizure and Recovery of Solomon Northup," and "INTERESTING DISCLOSURES."

The screenshot shows a New York Times article titled "This Is the 161-Year-Old New York Times Article About 12 Years a Slave". The article includes a photograph of two men, one white and one black, and a quote from the original article: "Solomon Northup was kidnapped and sold into slavery over 150 years ago, and the Times was". The page also features a sidebar with other news items.

Experiment: Culture Guides

Our committee ran a study of article readership during the last six months of 2013. Arts and culture stories were among those that were consistently read long after their publication dates, even though they can be difficult to find once they are more than a few days old.

A new approach would be to take cultural and life-style content — about books, museums, food, theater — and organize it more by relevance than by publication date.

Erik Piepenburg, the web producer for theater, noted that visitors coming to us for the “Wicked” theater review can’t easily find it because we re-reviewed it a long time ago. But that review is still relevant to the many readers who are considering buying tickets this week.

One possible solution, envisioned by Ben Koski and Erik Hinton of our Interactive News team, is to add landing pages for our cultural content that are more like guides.

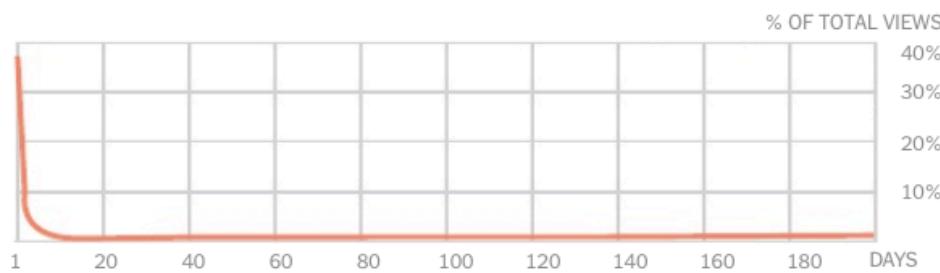
These pages would supplement, not replace, our existing arts pages. Optimized for search and social, these guides would serve the reader who wants to use us as a more timeless resource.

The best opportunities are in areas where The Times has comprehensive coverage, where information doesn’t need to be updated regularly, and where competitors haven’t saturated the market. For now, museums, books and theater fit that description. Travel and music would present significantly more hurdles.

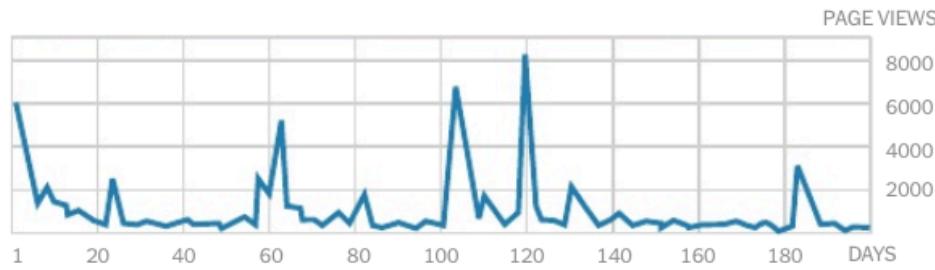
“So far, there’s been much enthusiasm from the desks,” said Koski. “But getting these on the official agenda to be built and made real is an ongoing challenge. It’s hard for ideas like these to compete with enterprise, major events and story work.”

GIFTS THAT KEEP ON GIVING

Traffic on most of our stories falls dramatically after the first day they’re published.



But enterprise and feature stories can have long lives. For example, Libby Rosenthal's colonoscopy story from last year, below, attracted new readers months after it was published.



PAYING TILL IT HURTS: A Case Study in High Costs

Part 1: Colonoscopy ↗

The \$2.7 Trillion Medical Bill

Colonoscopies Explain Why U.S. Leads the World in Health Expenditures

By LIBBY ROSENTHAL | Published: June 1, 2013

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China.

For its "Ink Art" show, the Metropolitan Museum has installed works by 23 contemporary artists in its Chinese galleries, inviting comparisons of past and present.

[Review: A Magnificent Show That Never Runs \[2\]](#) [\[+\] See more reviews](#)

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THE ART OF CURATION

The Times dominates coverage of books, museums and theater. And the evergreen nature of those subjects makes them a natural for being repackaged as culture guides. Here are two proposals from the Interactive News department.

Book Review Complete Archive

Books reviewed by the New York Times Book Review going back to the year 1851 up until present day.

EDITORS' PICKS

Book Award Winners

Authors from the Midwest

Alice Munro Wins Nobel Prize 2013

This week from **Last Year**

"Embroiling on everything he sees, he undercuts our belief with every stitch. The grammar of silence is unfamiliar to him."

—Mark Shand, on Paul Auster's "Towd"

This week from **1987**

2000s

[See all](#)

Best Practices In Experimenting

If you were to ask most people in the newsroom about how The New York Times experiments, they might talk about a new story format like “Snowfall” or a recent crowdsourcing effort like “Paying Till It Hurts.” 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. This is how every major digital innovator — including Google and Amazon — works today.

Unlike a printed newspaper (which is polished to near-perfection and “launched” once a day), a digital experiment should be released quickly and refined through a cycle of continuous improvement — measuring performance, studying results, shuttering losers and building on winners. The Verge, for example, redesigned its home page 53 times in two years. We must push back against our perfectionist impulses. Though our journalism always needs to be polished, our other efforts can have some rough edges as we look for new ways to reach our readers.

The screenshot shows the NYTimes mobile application interface. At the top, there's a black header bar with the word "News" and a menu icon. Below it is a white header section titled "YOUR DAILY BRIEFING". A large image of the International Space Station (ISS) is centered in the middle of the screen. Below the image, the text "NASA, via Associated Press" is visible. Underneath the image, the heading "Good morning." is displayed, followed by a weather forecast: "SUNNY 73° F". The main content area starts with a headline: "What you need to know to start your Friday: A NASA update on the final frontier, senators attack offshore tax evasion, and retailers report earnings." Below this, there's a section titled "GOVERNMENT SURVEILLANCE" with a sub-headline: "• Congress and Courts Weigh".

KEY EXPERIMENTS IN PROGRESS:

NYT Now: Our first experiment in packaging news specifically for a mobile audience.

NY Today: An ongoing experiment to assess readers' appetite for tip sheets.

Cooking: An experiment to build a world-class service-journalism app, leveraging the archive.

Watching: An experiment in curating a news feed on our homepage.

NYT Now & Watching.

The screenshot shows the "Watching" section of the NYTimes mobile application. The title "Watching" is at the top. Below it, there are several news items listed in a grid format. Each item includes a timestamp, a thumbnail image, and a brief description. The items are:

- 12m "Can we stop trying to 'make work fun?'"
Read More
- 10m The author Oliver Burkeman has written an op-ed urging companies to please, please stop "fudging their offices."
- 40m The Mexican media magnate Carlos Slim is an investor in Club Leon, a finalist in the country's soccer championship. Bloomberg
- 1h Remember Elian Gonzalez? He's now 20, and he has some harsh words for the United States about its "unjust embargo" against Cuba.
- 1h U.S. and Britain suspend aid to Syrian rebels after Islamists seize weapon stores. Reuters/The Guardian

A LIST OF BEST PRACTICES FOR EXPERIMENTATION:

- Launch efforts quickly, then iterate. We often hold back stories for publication, as we should, because they're "not quite there yet." Outside our journalism, though, we can adopt the "minimal viable product" model, which calls for launching something in a more basic form so that we can start getting feedback from users and improve it over time.
- Set goals and track progress. Every new project should be launched with a specific goal and metric for success. In many cases, our main goal is high-quality journalism. But readership and engagement are usually important, too. All managers should be clear on what a new initiative is aiming to accomplish. Editors in charge of experiments should track their progress in real time.
- Reward experimentation. Currently, the risk of failing greatly outweighs the reward of succeeding at The Times. We must reward people who show initiative, even when their experiments fail. Share lessons from both successes and failures.
- We need to do a better job of communicating our digital goals, and sharing what we know about best practices to achieve them. No project should be declared a success, or shuttered, without a debrief on what we've learned, so that we can apply those insights more broadly.
- Kill off mediocre efforts. To free up resources for new initiatives, we need to be quicker and smarter about pulling resources from efforts that aren't working. And we must do it in a way that is transparent so that people understand the reasons behind the decision, so that they will be willing to experiment again.
- Plan for "version 2.0" and beyond. Often, the resource plan for new projects stops at launch. As we learn from readers about what is working and not working, we have to continue our efforts to refine and develop our new initiatives.
- Make it easier to launch an experiment than to block one. At many companies, people are able to test ideas on a small percentage of users with mid-level approval. Elsewhere, you must write a memo about why an experiment should not happen in order to block it. Our journalistic standards always need to be protected, but tradition alone shouldn't be a justification for blocking experiments.

TESTING, TESTING

Earlier this year, the newsroom analytics team conducted an "A/B Test" on a science article, showing different headlines and photos to readers. Of the options below, number three performed best. More important, it showed that this kind of test is possible — and that The Times should use it as another tool to drive traffic to our journalism.

1

The Color Of Pressure



2

The Color Of Pressure



3

The Big Squeeze



4

The Big Squeeze



Opportunity: Packaging

Readers who visit our site for the first time naturally might assume that if they click on “New York,” they’re likely to find restaurant reviews, theater reviews, local sports coverage, museum coverage or real estate coverage. That assumption would be wrong, of course.

This is but one example of the many opportunities we have for repackaging our content so that it’s more useful, relevant and shareable for readers.

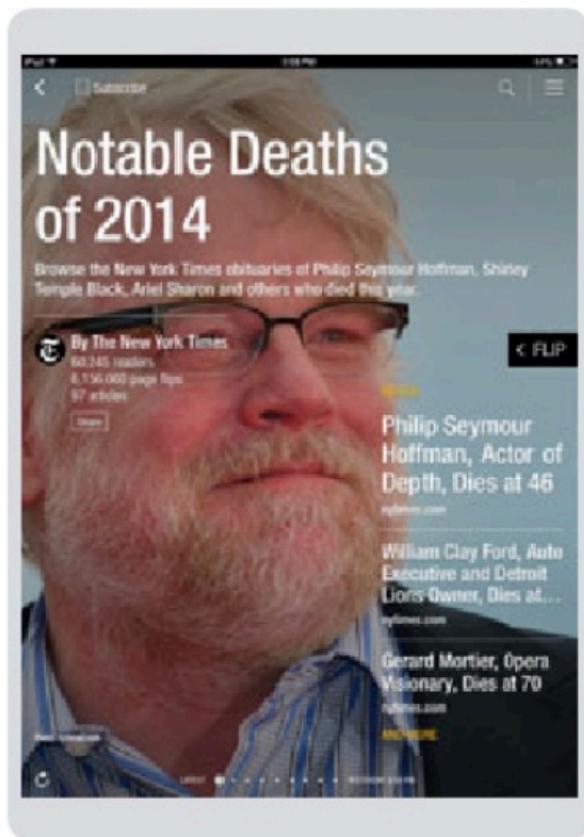
We can point to successes already. On a whim,

Andrew Phelps created a Flipboard magazine of our most important obits of the year and it became the best-read collection in the history of the platform. Other colleagues have tackled similar projects to repackage our work. But because our systems are difficult for them experiment on, they usually turn to Flipboard, Pinterest and other sites.

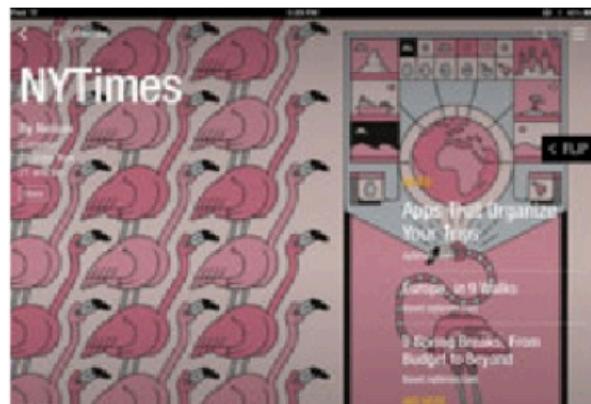
“It’s crazy that we’re doing this on a third-party platform and letting them reap many of the benefits,” said a senior digital editor.

NOTABLE EXPERIMENTS

Millions of people flipped through this collection of New York Times obits, developed on a whim by Andrew Phelps.



Flipboard has created a tool that lets readers make collections with content on their app, including stories from The Times.



Experiment: Collections

Our committee ran a couple of experiments with repackaging and found that even old content can generate significant traffic without ever appearing on the home page.

The first was a page featuring a collection of nine videos related to love, chosen from our archives by the weddings editor, for Valentine's Day. The second was a collection of Nick Kristof articles and columns from the archives about sex trafficking. We created no new articles, only new packaging. We explicitly requested that they be kept off the home page and then we launched a strategic campaign to promote the pages elsewhere. The result? Both were huge hits, exclusively because our readers shared them on social. The video unit, eager to repeat those wins, is already pushing to create a template.

Sasha Koren, our social and community editor, said these collections forced a change in thinking about what's new. "Maybe it's, 'what's new to someone now,'" Koren said. "It's still timely, it's still relevant to this moment, it's not dated."

Collections would allow us to curate or automatically group our content in many different ways: by section, topic, byline, etc. They can be used to put a new frame around old content and connect the dots between pieces written over time in a way that day-to-day coverage typically does not.

A Collections format is being developed by Product and Design to improve our ability to organize content in ways that are more intuitive and useful. The newsroom should support that work and consider creating a tool for reporters, web producers, video journalists and editors — and eventually readers — to create collections and repackage our content in ways beyond the usual news format.

For example, we could package stories about Putin's tightening grip on Russia, or the best round-up of climate-science explainers, or service pieces about the science of sleep, or all the four-star restaurant reviews from the last year. Currently, these

types of collections are created almost exclusively off-site, on Flipboard.

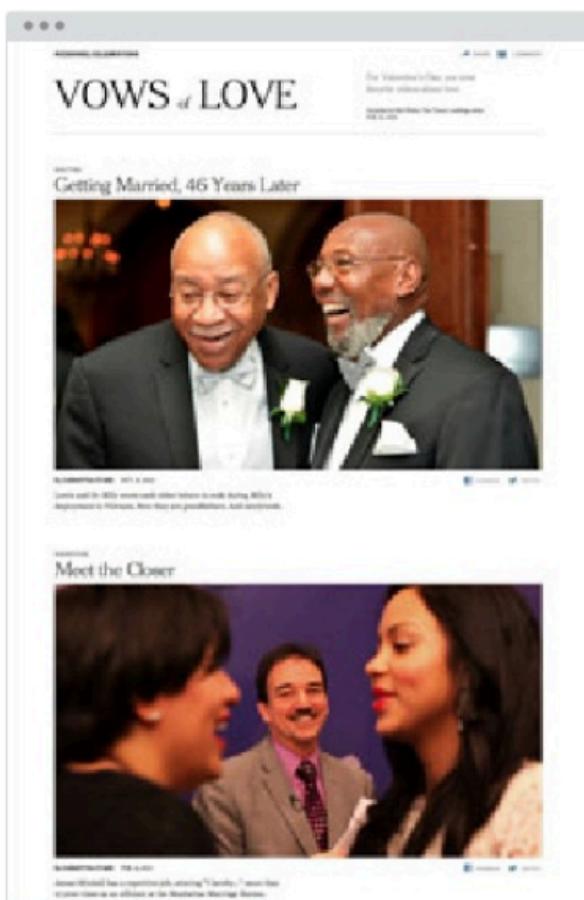
The key to making Collections scalable is for the newsroom to introduce a widget-like tool that any reporter or editor could use to drag and drop stories and photos. (The R&D department and, more recently, New Products have already built such tools.)

Because Collections are created with content that has already been vetted and published, they require few resources and limited oversight.

If our Collection tool were intuitive and easy to use, we could encourage readers to drag and drop a group of stories into their own collections, which they could then share. This is an opportunity to empower readers to make something on our site with less risk to our brand.

TIMELY AND TIMELESS

For Valentine's Day, we worked with our weddings editor and other colleagues around the building to repackaging nine videos from our archives. The result: a big hit with readers.



New Again (And Popular)

The screenshot shows a news website layout with three main article cards:

- Inside the Brothels** (April 14, 1996)
Seven unforgettable stories in the battle against sex trafficking, collected over two decades of my reporting. —Nicholas Kristof
- Children For Sale** (Apr 14, 1996)
I first reported on sex trafficking in 1996, during kids locked up in Thai brothels. This article helped make me the idea that this can be a modern form of slavery.
- Bargaining For Freedom** (Jan 21, 2004)
The day I purchased the freedom of two Cambodian girls for \$1,200.

Pub Date	Article	Page Views
APR 14, 1996	Children For Sale	37,803
JAN 21, 2004	Bargaining For Freedom	29,238
MAR 26, 2006	A Woman Without [...]	21,962
APR 22, 2007	The 21st Century Slave [...]	14,075
NOV 18, 2010	A Woman. A Prostitute. [...]	33,240
MAR 31, 2012	Sex Trafficking Comes [...]	24,255
OCT 12, 2013	From the Brothels [...]	25,230
	Collection Page	282,303
	TOTAL	468,106

The “Inside the Brothels” collection that we developed with Nick Kristof’s help provides a case study in how, without too much effort, we can repackage material in our archives and make it relevant again.

Until we published “Inside the Brothels,” the seven stories in the collection had not drawn any traffic in years. But, as the chart at bottom left shows, all the stories saw a spike in visits after being repackaged, with several getting more traffic than a typical new story on the day it’s published.

NEW TRAFFIC

“Inside the Brothels” rose to the No. 8 most-viewed article on launch day, and it sustained its traffic several days longer than typical daily stories. Over six days, the traffic to the collection page and the associated articles totaled 468,106 page views. Very few articles from a typical day’s paper will garner this much traffic in a month.

ENGAGED READERS

Articles in the “Inside the Brothels” collection were among those that readers spent the most time with that day. The 1996 Kristof article in our collection was third on this list, with the average user spending 2 minutes, 35 seconds.

THE RECIRCULATION EFFECT

“Recirculation” refers to a story’s effectiveness in driving readers to other stories, as opposed to their leaving the site. On launch day, “Inside the Brothels” ranked No. 1 on the recirculation list.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Evergreen content is appealing to readers if resurfaced in a way that is smart.
- Such work can find a large audience without home page attention.
- The newsroom can fall into old habits about experiments like this one, raising concerns about turf, quality control and precedents.
- One-offs are laborious, so we should focus on making such efforts replicable and scalable.

Balancing Act: One-offs vs. Replicability

The surprising popularity of The Times dialect quiz — the most popular piece of content in the paper's history, with more than 21 million page views — prompted weeks of internal discussions about ways to build on that remarkable success.

But over at BuzzFeed, they were busy perfecting a template so they could pump out quiz after quiz after quiz. "We wanted to have interactive games," explained one BuzzFeed editor, "but not have the developers build them every time, so that we could experiment freely."

This contrast helps illustrate one of the biggest obstacles to our digital success. We have a tendency to pour resources into big one-time projects and work through the one-time fixes needed to create them, and overlook the less glamorous work of creating tools, templates and permanent fixes that cumulatively can have a bigger impact by saving our digital journalists time and elevating the whole report. We greatly undervalue replicability.

Driven in part by the success of Snowfall, we have gone to extraordinary lengths in recent years to support huge single-story efforts. The ambitions of such projects are central to our brand. But Graphics, Interactive, Design and Social are spending a disproportionate amount of time on these labor-intensive one-offs. Meanwhile, we have repeatedly put off making the necessary improvements to allow our graphics to appear on mobile.

That runs counter to the approach at so many of our digital competitors. "We are focused on building tools to create Snowfalls everyday, and getting them as close to reporters as possible," said Kevin Delaney, editor of Quartz, which is known for innovative storytelling formats. "I'd rather have a Snowfall builder than a Snowfall."

When we have created tools, the benefits are

clear. For example, the slideshow tool has become one of our most popular features, the dashboard system has elevated our ability to respond to breaking news, and our blog platforms helped train an entire generation of Times reporters and editors to write for the web. "It's actually been a long time since we had platform innovation on that scale," said Nathan Ashby-Kuhlman.

Several digital leaders in the newsroom said they believe we need to reprioritize the kind of incremental improvements that can elevate the whole report and allow our journalists to, for example, build their own collections from our archives.

"We've reached a point now where platform innovation is a requirement," said one editor.

We also need to prioritize sustainable solutions over time-consuming hacks, short-term fixes and workarounds to problems that emerge repeatedly, sometimes daily. For example, platform editors spend hours on Sunday mornings trying to fix stories that don't work on mobile devices. They know the problems that will emerge but are unable to get the Technology resources to fix them. Since the newsroom does not control those resources, it is very difficult to prioritize even small changes that cause trouble day after day.

Our competitors, particularly digital-native ones, treat platform innovation as a core function. Vox and First Look Media have lured talent with the pitch that they have built the tools and templates to elevate journalists. That was the advantage that BuzzFeed C.E.O. Jonah Peretti cited in a recent company memo, saying that the company had spent years investing in formats, analytics, optimization and testing frameworks. "This is a massive investment that is very difficult to replicate," he said.

Tools, templates and permanent fixes can elevate the whole report.

Opportunity: Personalization

We already personalize our content for individual readers in subtle ways: a front-page story about New York may be substituted for a National story, the global home page curates our news report with an international sensibility, and the iPad app grays out the stories you've already read.

Embracing personalization does not mean flipping a switch that gives different stories to every person. Nor should it. Research shows that readers come to us in part to find out what we consider the top stories of the day.

But personalization offers countless opportunities to surface content in smarter ways. It means using technology to ensure that the right stories are finding the right readers in the right places at the right times.

For example, letting you know when you're walking by a restaurant we just reviewed; knowing that you prefer to get stories by email; and making sure you never miss a story about your alma mater.

Even with the home page there is an opportunity for a measured approach — in effect, serve everyone the same dinner but at least give them their favorite desserts. For basketball fans who never read about baseball, that means showing them the story about the Knicks game rather than the Yankees game (unless the baseball story has been flagged as important, such as a story on a perfect game).

Readers have come to expect this personalization. Facebook's new Paper app, for example, is built on news feeds tailored to each user. Yahoo has recently used personalization technology to drive growth in news readership.

Other media sites, like BuzzFeed and The Wash-

ington Post, alter what readers see based on how they arrive on their sites. For example, they will look at data in real time to track which stories are drawing readers from Twitter, and then they show those same stories to other people who visit from Twitter. This practice tends to keep them reading more stories.

In the absence of newsroom input, the business side has been leading our approach to personalization.

Currently, our main tool for personalizing content is our "Recommended For You" tab, which is not up to our standards and has provoked many reader complaints. The list occupies a prominent spot on our homepage but the newsroom has not been very involved in discussions. As a result, the formula we use offers content that would otherwise be hidden on the site — but it often shows smaller-bore items. "It's possible we're using the entirely wrong algorithm," said Boris Chen, a data scientist on The Times's personalization team. But editors, he said, must help him understand what is wrong so he can create a better alternative.

Another significant tool for personalization — a section of the home page for content that readers missed but would likely want to see, based on their reading patterns — is being planned by Design for NYT5 and the iPhone app.

The newsroom should consider devoting more attention to these new initiatives. And the newsroom should clarify how much personalization we want on our home page and on our apps. Until then, the uncertainty about what is acceptable will limit our creativity and initiative on this front.

A BETTER ENGINE

Readers have come to expect smart personalization online. But our current recommendation engine, right, uses an algorithm to serve up content that leaves many readers puzzled about our judgment. "Based on what The New York Times thinks I'm interested in, I am not a fun person," wrote Margaret Sullivan, our public editor. The Times is planning to add other features that help personalize the reading experience in more subtle ways. One example, below, which we've illustrated with the help of a gray box, would show individual readers the stories they missed on the home page since their last visit. Though all readers would see the same top news stories, the other articles we show them would be customized to reflect what they haven't seen.

Editorial: The CIA Torture Cover-Up
Op-Ed Columnist: The Leaderless Doctrine

10 minutes ago Seeking an Identity, the New Big East Takes a Familiar Stage

24 minutes ago Will the Real Satoshi Nakamoto Please Stand Up?

MOST EMAILED RECOMMENDED FOR YOU

372 articles viewed recently elena.gianni All Recommendations

- Family Wants Say in New King Memorial
- SCENE CITY All the Glamour, With No Acceptance Speeches
- MAUREEN DOWD Frozen in a Niche?
- Patentholder on Breast Cancer Tests Denied Injunction in Lawsuit
- FUTURE TENSE Celebrities Behaving Well

Patients Appear to Be Free of Virus

By DONALD G. MCNEIL, JR.

The R.I.V. patients who had bone marrow transplants for blood cancers have apparently been virus-free since they stopped taking antiretroviral drugs.

500 Comments

MORE STORIES

- 3 Dead in Oregon Mall Shooting 40 minutes ago
- Rabbi Who Abused Victims Hires 5002 PM ET
- Kid's 3-D-Printed Wine Box Knick 6:43 PM ET

In Cairo, Effort to Broaden Support for Charter

By DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK and KAREN FOSH 8:04 PM ET

Presidential advisers and a panel of politicians and intellectuals worked on changes to a draft constitution.

WELL

How Exercise Can Calm Anxiety

By GRETCHEN REYNOLDS

Exercise leads to the creation of excitatory brain cells, but it also creates neurons that can quiet parts of the brain and counter everyday stress, new research in mice shows.

ECONOMICS

The New Economics of Part-Time Employment

By CATHERINE HILLMAN

The Affordable Care Act will make part-time employment more attractive to many workers, an economist writes.

WELL

How Exercise Can Calm Anxiety

By GRETCHEN REYNOLDS

Exercise leads to the creation of excitatory brain cells, but it also creates neurons that can quiet parts of the brain and counter everyday stress, new research in mice shows.

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Editorial: The Breath of Autumn

In October, the wind in New York is still buoyant, even moist. It doesn't snuff

SEARCH FOR PROPERTIES

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Experiment: Following

We've heard time and again that younger readers are moving away from browsing and that they increasingly expect news to come to them, on social, through alerts and through personalization. There is a sense that "if something is important, it will find me." We are far behind in adjusting to these trends.

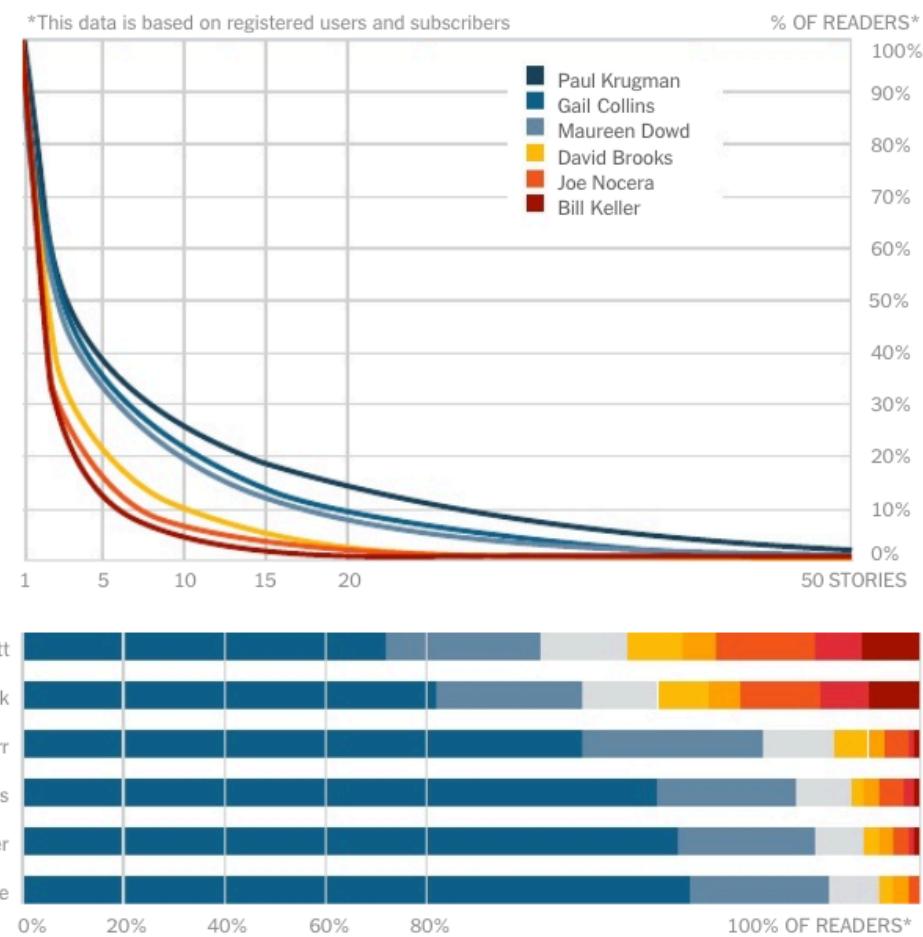
We could create a "follow" button that offers readers a variety of ways to curate and receive their own news feeds, ensuring they never miss a Modern Love or Maureen Dowd column. With a single click, their favorite topics, features and writers could automatically be collected in a Following Inbox. We could also offer readers the opportunity to have alerts about new stories sent to their phone or email.

Until the feature was recently discontinued as part of the NYT5 redesign, the only way for Times readers to be notified of new favorites was by email. This feature was hard to find, hidden at the bottom of stories below the comment section, and required readers to plow through multiple sign-up pages. Even so, it had 338,000 users and unusually high engagement rates. Some technically savvy readers are so eager not to miss stories that they have even written code so that certain stories are sent to them automatically.

Such "following" features have been critical to the success of YouTube, Spotify and Twitter. But increasingly Circa, Breaking News, The Verge and other digital outlets are doing this with news. The Design and Product teams have been exploring such a feature for columnists, and should have the newsroom's support.

TOUGH AUDIENCE

We've always had a sense that readers were loyal followers of their favorite columnists. And the paper makes it easy to catch certain bylines (Monday morning? Time for David Carr). On the Internet, however, readers are far more fickle. The accompanying charts show that readers don't come back often to the same columnist. The quality of their work isn't the issue. Making it easier for readers to discover what they already like – by creating a "follow" feature for each columnist, for example – could make these charts look very different.



BUILDING A FOLLOWING

These are some examples of features we could add to our mobile app to help readers follow their favorite topics, bylines and stories.

TOP STORIES

POLITICS
Will Handshake With Castro Lead to Headache for Obama?
President Obama's gesture to Raúl Castro of Cuba at the memorial for Nelson Mandela instantly raised questions about its deeper meaning.

MANDELA
The Great and The Humble Honor Mandela
Nelson Mandela's memorial service in Soweto, South Africa, drew a remarkable crowd of global V.I.P.'s, including President Obama and at least 91 other heads of state and

INVESTIGATIVE

FOLLOWING 14

TODAY

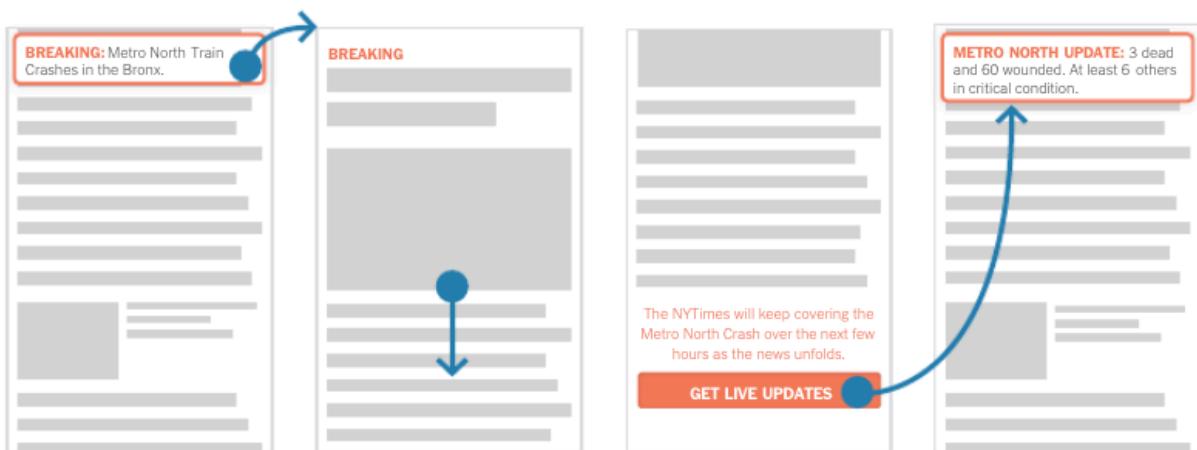
INVISIBLE CHILD

A Neighborhood's Profound Divide
Dasani, one of New York's 22,000 homeless children, lives on the margins of a gentrified city.

ITALY
Rise of Young Leaders Signals a Mandate for Political Change in Italy
The Italian Parliament has been deadlocked on major changes for years, unable or unwilling to enact bills to overhaul the political system or unshackle the economy, which has barely grown in two decades.

MELISSA CLARK

Roasted Apple and Blue Cheese Tart
Melissa Clark serves a sophisticated roasted apple, shallot and blue cheese tart at her holiday cocktail party.



A news alert arrives for breaking news.

Tapping on the alert brings the reader to a developing story.

At the end of the article, the reader is prompted with the option of following the story.

The reader is notified of new updates.

“The Paper of Record,” Version 2.0

A century ago, The Times began the laborious process of identifying and tagging the major and minor topics and characters of every story it produced. Each year, it compiled these listings in the massive “New York Times Index,” the only complete index of a U.S. newspaper. This effort made us indispensable to librarians, historians and academics. And it earned us a nickname: “The Paper of Record.”

The many opportunities described in this report — and others that will only become clear over time — require us to focus on this humble art we helped pioneer, which we still call “tagging.”

In the digital world, tagging is a type of structured data — the information that allows things to be searched and sorted and made useful for analysis and innovation. Some of the most successful Internet companies, including Netflix, Facebook and Pandora, have so much structured data — by

tagging dozens or even hundreds of different elements of every movie, song and article — that they have turned the science of surfacing the right piece of content at the right time into the core of thriving businesses.

The Times, however, hasn’t updated its structured data to meet the changing demands of our digital age and is falling far behind as a result. Without better tagging, we are hamstrung in our ability to allow readers to follow developing stories, discover nearby restaurants that we have reviewed or even have our photos show up on search engines.

“Everyone forgets about metadata,” said John O’Donovan, the chief technology officer for The Financial Times. “They think they can just make stuff and then forget about how it is organized in terms of how you describe your content. But all your assets are useless to you unless you have metadata — your archive is full of stuff that is of no value because you can’t find it and don’t know what it’s

about.”

And here is an ugly truth about structured data: there are substantial costs to waiting.

For example, because our recipes were never properly tagged by ingredients and cooking time, we floundered about for 15 years trying to figure out how to create a useful recipe database. We can do it now, but only after spending a huge sum to retroactively structure the data. The lack of structured data also helps explain why we are unable to automate the sale of our photos and why we continually struggle to attain higher rankings on search engines.

We need to reclaim our industry-leading position, but right now our needs are far more basic. We must expand the structured data we create, which is still defined by the needs of the Times Index rather than our modern digital capabilities.

The structured data we create is still defined by the Times Index.

For example, at a time when nearly 60 percent of our readers access us via mobile devices, we are missing an opportunity to serve up content that’s relevant to their locations because we are not tagging stories with geographic coordinates. The Boston Globe is among the many publications doing this.

Similarly, to enable readers to follow updates on running news stories, we need to be using tags that tie together articles, photos, and videos about a news event, like “Boston Marathon Bombing.” It took seven years for us to start tagging stories “September 11.”

“We never made a tag for Benghazi, and I wish we had because the story just won’t die,” said Kristi Reilly of our Archive, Metadata and Search team. Her boss, Evan Sandhaus, framed the opportunity more strongly: “We don’t tag the one thing” — news events — “that people use to navigate the news.”

Our competitors are a full step ahead of us in using structured data. The Washington Post and The

Wall Street Journal use it for insight into how readers are using their websites. At Circa, each article is broken into “atoms of news,” such as facts, quotes, and statistics. That allows editors to quickly surface relevant content and context during breaking news.

Expanding our structured data capabilities would require us to address some technology and workflow issues. Notably, it would put greater demands on our copy editors, web producers and librarians.

That means we may need to build out those teams, and we will certainly need to go to great lengths to explain how crucial this effort is to our long-term success.

Every day we wait, we fall further behind our competitors. The Times considered increasing its tagging efforts in 2010 and passed. The cost of catching up has only grown.

BIGGER DATA

Here are some examples of structured data that would allow us to make better use of our content:

NEW TAG	SAMPLE TAGS	POTENTIAL BENEFIT
Geographic location of story content	Gramercy Restaurant 40.7386° N, 73.9885° W	Surface new and old content relevant to readers' locations, particularly for mobile usage.
Timeliness	Timely forever Timely for a year Timely for a month Timely for a day	Surface old content in a smart way, including adding sophistication to our recommendation engines and easier ways for editors to feature relevant older stories.
Story type	Breaking news Profile News analysis	Make better use of evergreen content well after publication. Conduct more granular analysis of users' reading behavior.
Story threads	Crisis in Ukraine	Enable readers to follow ongoing stories and news events. Better organize our archives.
Story tone	Uplifting Serious	Improve content discovery by letting users surface stories based on their mood.
Photos: topics	Ukraine Viktor Yanukovych	Display photos in search results on our site and our apps. Tagging photos by topic would improve the ranking of our content in search results.
Photos: articles where photo appeared	"A Kiev Question: What Became of the Missing?"	Create a 'news in photos' experience that lets users start with a photo and click through to a related article.
Photos: usage rights	Rights cleared No resale rights	Sell prints of all rights-cleared photos on our site.