COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

06:50 AM - December 12, 2014

News roundups can be part of a smart media diet

What you should know about 'everything you need to know'

By Jihii Jolly

Each morning around 3:30am, Adeel Hassan and Victoria Shannon start reading and summarizing the day's top news. By 5am, they have a completed draft of major world events, upcoming NYC happenings, what's happening with the markets, what's noteworthy, and a short backstory on an interesting topic (the softer news was planned ahead of time). Shannon edits it, sends it to the copydesk, and by 6am it's published on the NYT Now app. By 6:30am, it's in subscriber inboxes as "Your Morning Briefing" by *The New York Times*.

They're not the only team working in the wee hours to create a morning news roundup.
The Economist publishes its version at 6am on its Espresso app. And Mic news director Jared Keller wakes up to write and send his site's morning letter, Mic Check, to subscribers by early morning, as do the folks behind The Skimm, Bit of News, and the Quartz Daily Brief.

"Doing a roundup of links is another way to say, 'These are the stories we value, and this is what we stand for,'" says Keller. There are also evening news roundups, the likes of Vox Sentences, Vox.com's 8pm wrap-up, and the *Times*' evening briefing. Not to mention countless other daily news round-up services: Circa for bite-sized news, Yahoo's News Digest app, Dave Pell's NextDraft newsletter, and Today in Tabs, to name some popular ones.

Each one is slightly different, but part of a growing trend: to tell readers "everything" they need to know, and to do it with bite-sized, voicey analysis.

Because increasingly distracted (or simply busy) readers are being presented with more news briefings to choose from as a way to stay abreast of current events, it's worth looking at them through a news literacy lens, considering what subscribers need to be aware of to best construct their own news diets.

Implicit in the design of each product are assumptions they are making about readers: who they are, how educated they are, what they want to know, and when and why they want to know it. In addition to being subjective as a result of who it's targeting, it's subjective because of who is writing it.

"A lot of the decisions about what to include and exclude are gut, based on decades of news judgment and experience," says Shannon, news editor of NYT Now. "And that's not something that can be replicated easily. No matter how many homepages you look at, there has to be some experience to go along with that."

Dylan Matthews, who writes Vox.com's evening briefing, Sentences, agrees. "One of the advantages of our staff is that we have people who know what it's like to be a news consumer," he says, noting that employees don't all come from journalism backgrounds. "It's stressful to follow things thoroughly. I think sometimes we in the news business tend to assume that people are as riveted by as stuff as we are and as on top of it. But it takes a lot of time to read a lot of outlets, or even develop a repertoire of sites to read."

Learning what goes into a news roundup is reminiscent of a lesson called the Page One Meeting created by the News Literacy Project, where students get a chance to play the role of editor and weigh the decisions that go into selecting which stories go on page one of a print newspaper, or the homepage of a news website. What are the skills necessary to make these decisions? Who should we trust to exercise them? Can we, as news consumers, develop them for ourselves?

"The lesson is really about having students understand the balance, and sometimes tension, between providing a news audience with the information that they want to know, as well as the information that they need to know," explains Darragh Worland, New York program manager and vice president of digital media at NLP.

Curating a news roundup is a similar process, and as the lesson evolves to keep up with the digital strategies of newsrooms, Worland says that news roundups "are probably something we should start incorporating into the teaching of this lesson because they are

becoming the norm."

And unlike what a reader might find in the paper or on news site, the micro-focus of these roundups means that much is deliberately excluded, something to be aware of when making roundups a main news source.

"The goal isn't just to give someone the news, but to give someone a sense of the conversation around the news," adds Keller about the goal of Mic Check. So each day he focuses on the big news stories but provides a few links to context and analysis for each one. This is followed by a section called "marvels," which he describes as a roundup of "entertaining morsels." "So we are giving people the meat and potatoes, but we are also giving people dessert," he says.

Stories on Espresso don't include links because that would make it harder to finish reading the whole thing in just a few minutes. "The promise [Espresso] makes to the reader is, 'You don't have time to read everything, so just read this,'" says digital editor Tom Standage. The emphasis is on analysis, rather than facts, and each 150-word story is written by the reporters who cover the relevant beat.

Meanwhile, Jess Coleman and Xiao Xu, undergraduate students at Cornell who are studying computer science and industrial labor relations (respectively), recently started the morning newsletter Bit of News with their friend, Curtis Wang. Their target audience is their peers. So far, they have 20,000 subscribers on three campuses. They aren't providing analysis, just short summaries of the news, followed by softer items that might be of interest to college students.

Their target competition is The Skimm, by Carley Zakin and Danielle Weisberg, former journalists whose millennial, women focused newsletter has over half a million subscribers. The Skimm seeks to provide a conversational tone and social cues relevant to young women (though it's grown popular with their moms too); story headers read: "What to say when [insert social situation relevant to news story here]."

Though aiming at different audiences, all these roundups capitalize on the fact that reading the news is a social and emotional experience. Accordingly, in designing the morning briefing, NYT Now editor Cliff Levy and his team thought about how one *feels* at 6am. How much information and what tone of voice does someone want pre-coffee? Certainly one more casual than what's in the rest of *The New York Times*. "We try to be a little… not orthodox-Timesian," says Levy. It took them two years to perfect the style, he says. "We want to be your friend in the morning."

The Economist's Espresso is trying to give the feeling of being one step ahead of the news, explains Standage. As reward for finishing all five 150-word stories in the briefing, readers are rewarded with a thought-provoking quotation at the end.

Each of these considerations comes from keeping the perspective of the news consumer in mind above all else—a departure from traditional, formulaic styles of news presentation where the news says the same thing no matter who is reading it, and when.

"Everyone is dealing with this huge firehose of information and content," says Levy. "It's really important for people to find someone they can rely on who can tell them, 'These are the things you should pay attention to.'"

Funding for this coverage is provided by the Robert R. McCormick Foundation.

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