Expert Insight

How the News Industry Must Evolve to Fit into Daily Life

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Audiences have developed new behaviors and habits as a result of the global pandemic. At the same time, we are on the cusp of a revolutionary opportunity to transform news experiences with faster internet speeds through the eventual mass adoption of 5G, which is still in its early days. These changes—behavioral, societal, and technical—mean we are better positioned to create news that fits more seamlessly into daily life. It also means we have to solve problems for users and help them verify the accuracy of the information they consume.

News + e-commerce
More people are on their devices—like computers and smartphones—and not just for information consumption, work, and entertainment. A growing number of people—more than 200 million in the United States—are shopping and living online. We need to integrate news into the experiences and activities that people are already doing. We should consider doing this on our owned and operated platforms. This will also involve reassessing the actions we allow audiences to take on news platforms.

Some innovators and academics, including me, had proposed that smart homes offered new plat-
forms for journalism. But we’ve found the masses still consume digital news mainly on computers and smartphones. While offering products for purchase on news sites isn’t a new concept, we now have a larger base of people who, as a result of the pandemic, may be open to buying or even expecting it. We know that allowing people to take actions on our platforms can create a stickier experience and help reduce audience churn, and we must find ways to continue to leverage this trend.

Empowering audiences
News literacy initiatives need to offer more two-way interaction with audiences and empower them to determine if information is trustworthy, accurate, and from a reliable source. This is an essential public service. Clear plans and strategies are needed to show audiences how to use technology to trace the provenance of news and information. Some news companies define words and link to previous coverage to offer more transparency, but not enough initiatives show audiences what to question, how to verify information, or how to track story developments on their own. Is it worthwhile to experiment with blockchain technology or use traditional docs to help audiences track news stories? Will citizens who can track changes in news begin to trust journalists more? We need to focus on how to empower audiences as we create news literacy projects.

More immersive experiences
As 5G gains adoption and creates faster and more stable connections (even if it takes a decade to fully take hold because users need to upgrade devices), we are already asking how to build more immersive news experiences. This is a unique opportunity to bring audiences into actual news events. How would it have felt to experience, in almost real time, all of the marches for equality and social justice across the world during the summer of 2020? How will the masses react when they can regularly experience news, not just read, listen, or view it? And how will that impact our real-time conversations, opinions, and lived experiences when we can all experience—not just watch—certain events in near real time together?

Service journalism
Offering audiences services and utility is another way we can connect with and help them. People want to know how to write a standout cover letter, write a resume, and grow their money. Others may want to know how to lose pandemic pounds. We need to create content answering audiences’ immediate questions and help them solve challenges they are facing. We can already see what audiences want to know based on what they search for online and by asking them to tell us. As we think about growing the community around journalism, how we help people should remain a core focus. This is also a unique strength that positions news organizations to have a lasting impact with audiences. After all, don’t you recall the last time someone helped you?

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Cancel Culture and Accountability Politics

Key Insight

Powerful people frequently dismiss justified protest and credible accusations as “cancel culture” to evade consequences for their actions. On the other hand, certain “cancellation” campaigns, waged via social platforms but with real-world repercussions, are misguided or vindictive attempts to discredit or exploit those in the spotlight.

Examples

“Canceling” can come in many forms: calling out, deplatforming, censoring, boycotting. It can happen to celebrities, but private figures can get caught up, too. New York resident Amy Cooper, for example, faced criminal charges after being filmed calling 911 to falsely accuse and harass a Black man, and she was also fired from her investment firm after public outcry and viral bad press. Online vigilantism is sometimes the only way to hold people accountable in a world that doesn’t always achieve justice through traditional means, but not every call for sanctions is equal in scope or stakes. YouTube personalities have attempted to cancel each other over personal slights. Former President Barack Obama is one of many voices pushing back against the culture of calling people out online. “The world is messy; there are ambiguities,” he said last year. “People who do really good stuff have flaws.”

Disruptive Impact

Every day we create a robust, lasting record of our lives thanks to the proliferation of connected devices and cheap data storage. As social norms evolve, those records will memorialize choices, messages, and actions that don’t necessarily sync with our future selves, or our future culture, providing ample fodder for character assassination. As a society, the question is whether we will let those who transgress learn from their mistakes: What can someone do to repent when they do harm? What past acts are irredeemable? And who gets to decide when atonement is complete? The person or community who was violated? The transgressor? Their allies online?

Emerging Players

- Electronic Frontier Foundation
- Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.)
- Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.)
- Facebook
- YouTube
- Twitter
KEY INSIGHT

Wearable devices will change everything we know about user interaction. Glasses, headphones, and other wearables will integrate directly with a user’s sense of sight, hearing, and touch. Instead of developing media for a particular screen size, storytellers are going to need to optimize for individual users’ senses.

EXAMPLES

The OrCam MyEye, a small camera that clips onto any pair of glasses, is a simple wearable device that recognizes what it “sees” and describes it to the wearer. It’s ideal for helping visually impaired people interact with the world around them, such as hearing a menu read aloud. But OrCam’s aspirations are much bigger: Patent filings describe methods for “lifelogging”—storing details about what an individual has done, where they’ve been, and who they’ve met for recall later. Facebook’s Project Aria is building wearable devices and testing them in the real world with hopes of defining what is useful, meaningful, and relevant when a device integrates with a user’s senses. This is a seismic shift for storytellers: Experiences won’t be constrained by the size of a screen or the shape of a device, but will be bespoke to each user.

DISRUPTIVE IMPACT

Storytelling that integrates with a user’s perception could foster empathy and unlock new ways to understand the world—but it could also be manipulated to create sensory clickbait. Journalists will need to find new ways to deliver the news, but they must hold tech companies accountable as this technology develops. There is essential reporting to be done on how wearable devices will be compatible with different types of bodies. Will sensory integration work equally well for people of all genders? People of color? People with disabilities?

EMERGING PLAYERS

• OrCam
• Facebook Project Aria

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KEY INSIGHT

In the internet’s first two decades, information crossed borders freely. Now local, state, and national governments are creating a complex patchwork of regulation that assigns internet users (and their data) different rights in different places.

EXAMPLES

The California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) gives Californians the power to stop businesses from selling their personal information and a GDPR-style right to have information deleted. Businesses that serve Californians—even if they’re not based in the state—are required to be compliant as of January. Washington passed a law strengthening the definition of personally identifiable information in the state and shortening the window companies have to notify consumers and the state attorney general after a data breach. In New York, legislators passed the Stop Hacks and Improve Electronic Data Security Act to increase the types of personal information covered by the state’s data breach reporting law. New laws will give real meaning to the physical geography of where a user accesses the internet, and of where the companies involved are located.

DISRUPTIVE IMPACT

CCPA and the other state laws on the horizon will impact ad targeting, but watch for major changes in any business that depends on knowing its consumers, like subscription marketing. Without coordinated effort, geographic differences in rights and expectations will continue to proliferate. This could change the economics and operating model for companies that serve customers across international borders (or even across state lines in the U.S.). Established tech platforms and multinational organizations will have the scale to account for that kind of regulatory complexity, but new entrants may find it hard to serve—and monetize—audiences in multiple jurisdictions.

EMERGING PLAYERS

- European Union
- U.S. Federal Communications Commission