Mitt Romney Won’t Run in 2016 Presidential Election

By JONATHAN MARTIN and MICHAEL BARBARO 11:13 AM ET

By not pursuing a third White House bid, Mitt Romney frees up scores of donors and operatives who had been awaiting his decision, and creates space for center-right hopefuls such as Jeb Bush.

Sometimes Heartbreak Takes a Hostage

By JON PARELES

Björk prepares for the release her new album, “Vulnicura,” and a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art.

Most Americans Support Government Action on Climate Change, Poll Finds

By CORAL DAVENPORT and MARJORIE CONNELLY

An overwhelming majority, including nearly half of Republicans, back government steps to curb global warming, according to a poll conducted by The Times and others.
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter you should be able to:

• Understand what makes today’s readers different from news consumers in prior generations and how best to serve them based on those differences.
• Identify the tools you can use to define your audience and how each tool will provide specific value for you as a reporter.
• Know and apply the interest elements that attract readers: fame, oddity, conflict, immediacy and impact.
• Understand what we owe our audiences above all else, including accuracy, value, fairness and objectivity as well as why these matter to both us and them.

THINKING AHEAD: UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE

Why do you want to be a journalist?

If your answer was “Because I’m good at writing” or “I enjoy talking to people and hearing their stories” or even “I’m nosy,” those are all valid answers. People who have these skills often find long and prosperous careers in various media fields. Good writing, good reporting and good nosiness are all crucial elements of being great in this field.

The main thing you need to understand about all of those skills is how to use them to benefit other people. If you just rely on those skills for your own interests, what you are saying is akin to stating that you want to be a famous chef at a top-flight restaurant because you enjoy eating.

No matter what area of this field you enter or on what platform you work, you won’t be writing for yourself, speaking for yourself or even being nosy for yourself. You will be doing your work for an audience, a large group of specific individuals who seek information from you on a daily basis. Just as the famous chef should enjoy cooking great food for other people, you should receive joy when you find important things that matter to specific readers and viewers. You should also want to convey that information to them in a way they can use and in a form they understand.
Audience centricity is the core of everything journalists do today, whether it’s when they use Twitter to send out important breaking news or cameras to capture gripping video to help viewers see a situation as it unfolded. However, journalists these days also understand that not every reader or viewer uses the same platforms for the same reasons or wants the same information in the same ways. This is why understanding your audience is crucial to everything you do.

In this chapter, we will explore who uses the media today, how they use it and what they expect from their media sources. In addition, we will outline the ways in which you can use the tools outlined in the rest of this book to give your audience members what they crave in the way they want.

MEDIA AND MEDIA USERS TODAY

For decades, newspapers were the standard source of information. Reporters used a series of news values to define what was and was not news. Then, they wrote the content in a way they felt best met the needs of the sources, the readers and the newspaper. As radio and television became important news outlets, audience members sought information from trusted professionals like Walter Winchell, Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite. In each of these cases, the journalists drove the content and presented it to a mass audience in whichever way they saw best.

Today, social media has become a dominant force in the field of news, with new platforms and new sources supplanting traditional journalists. According to a 2015 study from the Pew Research Center and the Knight Foundation, 63 percent of Facebook and Twitter users said they use those sites to get their news. Of those users, nearly 60 percent said they use Twitter to follow breaking news, while 32 percent of the Facebook users said they engaged with political content on the site.

Journalists no longer have the luxury of providing “all the news that’s fit to print” and assuming people will gratefully consume every last word. The idea of a mass medium has gone away and has been replaced with fractured audiences, niche publications and a glut of information. News consumers today have so many choices that they can afford to be picky, and they can decide which sources best serve their interests. Here are some things that make this generation of audience members different from those readers and viewers of previous era:

INFORMATION WHENEVER AND WHEREVER

Generations of journalists were taught in “silos” based on the fields they saw themselves entering. Students with an interest in newspapers went down one path, while those interested in broadcast went down another. When they became professional journalists, they became biased toward their own areas of the field and disparaged their competition. Even as digital media became a force within the field, research has shown that both professionals and students in the field of news see themselves based on their platform choices.
In today’s day and age, this approach to journalism makes no sense, as the audiences we serve aren’t as tied to platform-based biases as we can be. A study by the Media Insight Project found that audience members of all generations are essentially platform neutral when it comes to how they get their news.¹ The once-held beliefs that older generations rely on print, while middle-aged media users rely on TV and young people gravitate to digital devices don’t hold water. The survey found that most Americans have more of a buffet approach to their media use, relying on upward of six devices, including television, newspapers and radio, to get their news. In addition, it is the content that drives their choices, with users turning to print publications for news about education and their local government while using mobile devices to keep up with breaking news.

These and other research findings drive home an important and yet uncomfortable point for up-and-coming journalists: It’s not about you or what you like. The readers are driving the bus now, and you have the choice to either present your information in a way they want in an engaging format or to accept when they go elsewhere. Journalists have to adjust their own perceptions when it comes to their platform-based biases and focus more on what audience members want.

**THE “INFOTAINMENT” PHENOMENON**

The idea of “infotainment” has gained traction in the past half decade and continues to be an issue for journalists. On one hand, demolisticles like those on BuzzFeed⁴ and humorous news accounts like those on “The Daily Show” and “Last Week Tonight” draw people into the news. On the other hand, the line between serious news and sarcastic commentary has continued to blur, much to the detriment of news providers. In a 2009 speech at the Poynter Institute, veteran broadcaster Ted Koppel noted that the media dedicates too much time to stories that are heavy on hype but light on facts and information.⁵

Just because news journalists must now think more about an audience than they once did, it doesn’t necessarily follow that they have to pander to the audience’s basest desires. The wide array of platforms has made it possible for people to post almost any kind of information they want, ranging from fan fiction to videos of cats falling off of TV sets. Although these bits of information show up on the same platforms as coverage of Russia’s attacks on Syria or the president’s State of the Union address, it doesn’t follow that these items are news.

In serving an audience, journalists can walk a fine line between stories that stress oddity as an interest element and those that contain actual impact. (See below for a full outline of audience-based interest elements.) If the story is boring, readers won’t spend enough time on it to understand how it affects them. However, if the story is nothing but hot air and buzzwords, the readers find themselves consuming nothing but empty calories of news content. As you develop your skills as a journalist, you will need to know how to make a story engaging to the reader without resorting to infotainment.
FAKE NEWS

Con men, shysters and other peddlers of hoaxes are nothing new in this world. People swore they had seen the Loch Ness monster and Bigfoot. Others claimed they could sell you a medicine to cure your ills or a controlling stake in the Brooklyn Bridge. What makes today’s cons more problematic for us is the volume of lies purporting to be truths and the speed at which they spread throughout society. Partisan bickering and digital aids have helped create a lucrative field of fake news that can give real journalists incredibly painful headaches.

Not every story that readers disagree with should fall into the category of fake news. Just because you don’t like a political figure or a societal movement, it doesn’t follow that positive stories about these things are fake. However, people are taking advantage of people who enjoy having their worldviews confirmed as they rake in cash based on click-driven advertising.

In 2017, Scott Pelley investigated the fake news phenomenon for “60 Minutes” and found a frightening world of news scams bent on pitting people against each other for sport and profit. One website garnered an audience of more than 150 million viewers publishing headlines like “Hillary Clinton Has Parkinson’s Disease, Physician Confirms.” (The story was based on the claims of a doctor who never met Clinton and was later denied by Clinton’s own doctor and officials from the National Parkinson Foundation.) Some websites rely on computer “bots” at fake social media accounts to hyperinflate the number of retweets and likes a story gets in an attempt to make it seem legitimate or important.

As a journalist, you need to find a way to break through this wall of fake news and illegitimate content if you want to reach your readers. Even more, you will need to find ways to convince these people that you aren’t just one more carnival barker, crying out for attention with exaggerated claims and false promises.

INFO GLUT: CHOICES, CHOICES AND MORE CHOICES

Famed baseball slugger Reggie Jackson was once discussing Nolan Ryan, a man known for throwing fastballs that topped out at about 100 miles per hour, when he made this comment: “Every hitter likes fastballs just like everybody likes ice cream. But you don’t like it when someone’s stuffing it into you by the gallon.” Media users today can understand that concept fairly well, as they deal with a glut of information from thousands of sources.

For generations, people who wanted to get the news were stuck with one or two newspapers, three TV channels, a few radio stations and a handful of news magazines. The lack of choices made for a homogenous understanding of what was going on in the world and a limited view as to how we define news. Although the number of dead-tree newspapers that can land on your doorstep today hasn’t increased, the web has opened up a vast expanse of text-based news options for you. Cable TV provides you with hundreds upon hundreds of channels, many of them serving small-interest niches, including home repair and history. Satellite radio gives audiences access to not only a vast expanse of musical choices but also a number of talk radio stations and news outlets. Websites and social media outlets that aren’t affiliated with traditional media also offer readers and viewers a wide array of perspectives on everything from “Star Wars” to knitting.

The sheer volume of choices can make it difficult for today’s media users to make sense of the world around them. A 2013 study revealed that about half of the social media users surveyed reported that they had a constant fear that they were “missing out” on some important bit of information.” The global media agency Carat noted in a 2015 study that people feel overwhelmed by the number of information outlets and the volume of content they receive online. Thus, the study finds, about 44 percent of people rely on content their friends provide or recommend.
SHORFTER ATTENTION SPANS

If you have ever seen a bird chasing a foil gum wrapper across the yard, you know how “shiny-object syndrome” works: Something bright and shiny grabs the bird’s attention, and the bird goes after it. When something else shinier comes along, the bird becomes distracted by that thing, forsaking the original target. According to a 2015 study by Microsoft, people aren’t much better than that bird when it comes to staying focused.

The research found that the human attention span now sits at eight seconds, or one second shorter than that of a goldfish. The study goes on to say that we lose concentration in that tiny bit of time due in large part to the way our digital lifestyles have affected our brain.

This means that readers no longer will spend several minutes reading the overly long narrative lead you put on the city council meeting story. They also aren’t going to sit still for a two-minute video of a person standing at a podium, droning on about parking regulations. The stimulus must be strong and steady over time, as you use concise writing or valuable video to grab the audience members’ attention and keep it until you are finished.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION AND SPIRALING VIRAL COVERAGE

In January 2016, actor Alan Rickman died of cancer at the age of 69. He played a wide array of characters, from the Sheriff of Nottingham in “Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves” to stern Hogwarts professor Severus Snape. In a more traditional media era, Rickman’s death would likely lead to a small bit of information in a television newscast and an in-depth obituary in many newspapers. In today’s media world, however, not only were journalists writing about Rickman’s death, but so were fans, colleagues and others, as their thoughts ping-ponged off of one another at a rapid pace.

James and Oliver Phelps, who played the Weasley twins in the “Harry Potter” franchise, tweeted their immediate reactions to the news about Rickman. Others, including Daniel Radcliffe and Emma Thompson, also offered their thoughts and emotions through various information outlets, which fans then shared repeatedly via social media. However, Emma Watson, who played Hermione Granger, created the largest viral spiral with her tribute to Rickman. She quoted Rickman, an unabashed feminist, who noted, “There is nothing wrong with a man being a feminist, I think it is to our mutual advantage.” Twitter users immediately accused Watson of...
attempting to advance an agenda through Rickman’s death. (Watson herself has often spoken
freely about feminist issues and is a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations.)

Meanwhile, author J.K. Rowling tweeted back and forth with fans, who asked whether
Rickman ever knew of a deep secret that Snape held back throughout the series. As Rowling
answered these questions, other fans offered their thoughts on the issues associated with the
character, the secret and what Rickman’s work meant to them.

CONSIDER THIS ➤ A MEDIA DIET: AUDIENCE
WANTS VERSUS AUDIENCE NEEDS

What we want from a media diet isn’t always what’s best for us. It is the job of good journalists to prepare a healthy blend of engaging content that will serve the readers and make them want to come back for more.

Just because you want something, it doesn’t necessarily follow that the thing is good for you. Think about how a little kid comes home after trick-or-treating and rips into every chocolate bar and piece of taffy she gathered. It seems like a great idea at first, but then the stomach ache follows, and the kid eventually gulps down 6 pounds of sugar in a single sitting wasn’t a smart move.

Conversely, the things we know are good for us aren’t always awe inspiring. Vegetables, like broccoli and cauliflower, often get left on a child’s plate until the last minute of dinner. After a few lame attempts to spread them out on the plate or bargain with a parent regarding how much has to be eaten, the kid eventually gulps down a piece or two.

Just like this regular “diet” issue, a media diet often strikes a balance between what people want and what they need. The stories about a toddler who stole an ice cream truck in Australia or a water-skiing squirrel named Flippy are great fun, but they lack substance for most readers. Stories about legislatures passing bills or city councils trimming budgets hold the appeal of a Brussels sprout, but these stories can alert readers to life-changing outcomes.

Audience-centric journalism isn’t about handing your readers a bucket of Halloween candy every day, but rather finding ways to provide information they need in an appealing way. As a journalist, you need to find ways to make readers pay attention to stories that should matter to them. You can do this through stronger reporting and clearer writing as you constantly find a way to answer the question, “Why should a reader care about this?”

An occasional story about a bear in a swimming pool or someone setting a world record for most eggs eaten in five minutes doesn’t hurt, but it can’t be the main course for a media diet. The overall goal of this book is to find ways to make those “vegetable stories” worth a second look as we give the readers something they need in a way in which they want. Consider this balance between wants and needs as you continue throughout the remaining chapters, and you will have a much easier time reaching your readers.

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Through it all, media outlets ranging from fan blogs to news sites covered each aspect of Rickman’s death and its reverberations. Rather than defining for the audience what is news, the media outlets tended to use what the audience felt mattered to help select content and convey it to other interested users. Most media outlets retained their sense of how best to structure and present the coverage, but audience participation and the sense that a story was “gaining ground” helped influence the amount and the focus of the coverage.

As a journalist entering the field at this time of viral content and heavy audience interest, you will find yourself pulled between traditional news values, such as conflict and impact, and audience interests that feel more like “junk food” information. You can no longer dictate to the readers what matters, as writers and editors could many years ago when the printing press ruled the news. However, you can use those news values to help you ascertain when an audience’s interest has reached a critical mass that demands coverage. You can also use those values to your advantage as you repackage information and disseminate it to your readers.

**DEFINING YOUR AUDIENCE**

Far too often, journalists make incorrect assumptions about readers based on ill-conceived notions or outdated data. To make sure they don’t fail their audience members, media organizations often solicit reader feedback to help them refocus their coverage. Here are a few ways you can get information about your audience:

**READERSHIP SURVEYS**

A readership survey allows a media organization to examine who is paying attention to its content, what content is most appealing to the readers and to what degree readers’ wants and needs have changed over time. Association Media and Publishing lists several reasons for doing these surveys:

- **It’s been a while**: Media users’ preferences change over time, based on various life factors and interest levels. Industry experts say that conducting a survey once every other year is considered a “best practice” within the field of media.

- **You’re not sure where you stand**: The desire to “take the temperature” of your readers is natural if you want to know how best to keep readers happy. A survey can help you determine if the information you are providing is relevant and engaging to your readers.

- **You aren’t sure if your approach is working**: News reporters occasionally assume that new ideas will be interesting to their readers because those ideas worked in other markets. These ideas could be anything from covering different types of stories to using various platforms to present information. A survey of readers will either confirm or reject those assumptions.

Most organizations have conducted surveys like these at some point, and it is important for reporters to look at them and see what the audiences really want.
CHAPTER 1: AUDIENCE-CENTRIC JOURNALISM

HELPFUL HINTS → DEMOGRAPHIC, PSYCHOGRAPHIC AND GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ON YOUR READERS

The various ways you can measure an audience can help you determine who is in your readership and what they want from you.

Identifying trends or interests within a large group of readers can seem daunting. The tools listed in this section will help you better understand who your readers are and if they enjoy what you created for them. Here are some ways to break your audience into some simple, useful chunks:

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Demographics usually include things like age, gender, race, education and relationship status. These categories can then be broken into more useful segments, such as age brackets and specific educational levels. When coupled with those other “check-box items,” demographics can help determine the types of people who use the content you create. Even more, you can refine your coverage approach based on what those demographics tell you. For example, if your readership is predominantly men and women ages 25 to 36 who have one or more children under the age of 10, you can tailor your coverage toward the interests most normally associated with that type of individual. This could be early marriage, young parenthood and early education.

PSYCHOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Demographic information alone isn’t enough to determine common ground among readers. Psychographic information allows you to examine an audience based on personality traits, values, interests and attitudes. This type of data includes things like strength of opinion on political issues and social ideologies.

For example, sporting traditions might dominate the social identities of some universities, while other universities have half-filled stadiums for every home game. Certain towns may profess a conservative sense of local politics, even though the people there treat the town like a “bedroom community” and rarely vote. Other towns may have a wide range of political views, but have a serious dedication to the local high school’s events and to shops run by local merchants and vote in every town election.

GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

People care greatly about things happening near them, making geographic information a crucial element in understanding your audience. When someone robs a gas station in a small town, people want to know what happened and who is responsible. When a reader’s school district considers a bond referendum, that person wants to know how much taxes will go up if the effort is successful.

Traditional newspapers know the circulation of their publications, including where distributors deliver the print copies. Webmasters can use analytics to determine where people are when they log in and engage with content. This is helpful for journalists who want to know if an event is too far outside of the audience’s geographic interests or if readers in certain areas might have an interest in the publication reaching out farther into their territory.
WEBSITE ANALYTICS

It's not always who is reading the news that is the most interesting aspect of analytics, but instead what those people are reading. Either as part of website surveys or through the use of third-party web analytics, journalists can determine what brings people to a site. These analyses can examine which stories get the most clicks, the most screen time or the most comments. A survey of American Society of News Editors members found that nearly 97 percent of newsrooms monitor web metrics.10 The five key metrics they said every journalist should know and value are:

- **Unique visitors:** These are measured based on the time frame under analysis. For example, if a reader visits a website at 9 a.m., noon, 7 p.m., and 11 p.m. during a single day, that reader would be counted as one unique viewer if the unit of measurement is “daily unique visitors.” However, if the unit of measurement is “hourly unique visitors,” that one person would count four times.

- **Pageviews:** This measures the loading of a single page as well as any reloading of that page. A single viewer could visit 10 pages on a single website for a total of 10 pageviews, or that viewer could continually refresh a single page 10 times for the same total.

- **Visits:** This is the single time that a viewer enters the website and navigates it until the viewer leaves. This information can be further parsed to determine where the person is coming from, what parts of the site accounted for the majority of the reader's visit and other similar bits of information.

- **Source:** Every visitor to a website has to come from somewhere. Source data can include things like the name of a search engine, a specific referring URL or if the visitor came directly to the site using a bookmark. Source data will help you determine what got your readers to show up, which can help you with marketing or promoting your information to them.

- **Session duration:** This measurement will allow you to see how long readers spent on a given site as well as how long they spent on any particular page. This will help you determine what content people used the most and what content saw minimal screen time.

Reporters can use these and other analytics to assess what stories drew the most people, held people’s attention the longest and led to additional reading on the site. Just like any other tool, this can be misused or overanalyzed, but for the most part, reporters should look at these analytics to determine what mattered the most to the readers.

REAL PEOPLE

Surveys can give you a broad array of information from a large group of people, while web analytics can help you ascertain where people spend their time while on your site. However, neither of these can replace actually interacting with your audience members.

For years, reporters have relied on official sources to drive story selection and story angles. A number of logical reasons existed for this approach: Officials are easy to find, they carry a certain level of authority and their comments are “safer” for reporters than those that come from average citizens. (See Chapter 12 for more on the issues associated with absolute privilege and qualified privilege.) In addition, journalists often developed patterns with regard to what merited coverage and how best to cover it. As scholar Warren Breed noted while reflecting on his own time in a newsroom, older reporters passed down expectations and values to younger reporters, thus leading to a self-perpetuating cycle of repetitive content.11
As a journalist with experience on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, Erik Petersen understands a lot about how an audience can shape content for a publication and how digital media has made that even more important.

Petersen serves as the editor of Fort Lauderdale Magazine, the monthly publication for the city. Prior to returning stateside, Petersen spent 11 years at the Nottingham (U.K.) Post, where he worked primarily as a features writer and columnist. He has also served as a bureau reporter for The Kansas City Star.

Throughout that time, Petersen said he learned how audiences shaped the various publications at which he worked.

“In the U.S. we’ve got a de facto national media thanks to papers like the Times and the Post,” he said. “In the UK, it’s much more explicit. You’ve got London-based national papers like the Guardian, Daily Mail and Telegraph, and then you’ve got local papers. Because of the split, national newspapers cover all the national and international news, while local papers are what Americans would think of as one giant metro section.”

These differences lead to different approaches to what made for content and what the audiences tended to expect in certain publications, he said.

“Local British papers tend to run stuff that U.S. city dailies wouldn’t—real cat-up-a-tree stuff,” Petersen said. “There are entire websites devoted to people in British local papers frowning and pointing at things—potholes, closed public restrooms and so forth. This habit of local papers running these stories in print has always been a sort of endearing running joke, and in the early days of online, papers took notice of how much it could drive traffic. Nonsense stories would go viral.”

Even though the papers enjoyed the traffic spikes on the web, Petersen said he often worried about how the audience viewed the publication.

“People who are tweeting your story with ‘LOL, it’s all kicking off in Bath’ are helping give you a massive spike on that story, but they’re not building a community of readers who are committed to your publication,” he said. “They’re not from your area, and they’re only reading your story because they’re mocking it. It was a lesson that in my view took a while to learn because stories that create huge spikes are hard to peel away from, but British local papers now focus more on the more long-term process of building a community of local readers.”

When he returned to the States, Petersen said he took that understanding of audience building as he approached his new challenge of reaching the Fort Lauderdale community, especially through the interactivity available on the web.

“Unlike daily papers, where the challenge has been how to compete in a world where daily news is now a much more open game, city monthlies now get to interact more regularly with our readers,” he said. “In newspapers, it often felt like ‘this is a threat we have to understand.’ Here it feels more like an opportunity. Our readers are professionals who live in the city and have discretionary income. If a few times a week we can give them a product they find useful—say, something quick about a gallery opening or a new restaurant—it’s a level of interaction we didn’t have before.”

In terms of moving forward in a digital world with an ever-evolving audience, Petersen said he worries less about the newest apps or devices and more about how best to reach his readers with quality content.
What no one really spent a lot of time thinking about in the newsroom, however, was the degree to which stories about robberies, city council meetings or formal speeches mattered to the audience members. In the days of limited media outlets, reporters didn’t have to worry that they would lose readers to other publications. Even if there was competition, most journalists ascribed to a standard set of news values that would essentially guarantee that if a robbery occurred or a city council met, every media outlet would be there, dutifully covering it. Now, with a wider array of media options, understanding your readers becomes more important than ever.

To help you reach your readers and understand what “real people” want to see, consider both traditional and digital options. As you work on standard stories, such as meetings, speeches and news conferences, you might take time out to ask audience members what they like to read or what things they think matter. When you cover lite-brite stories, such as Fourth of July parades or the opening of a local library, you could spend more time talking to people about what they would like to know and why they read (or don’t read) what your media outlet produces.

In a digital realm, you should read through reader comments at the end of your stories and other stories. Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, often have ways for you to keep track of a topic as well as the people most directly interested in it. This will allow you to strike up a conversation with these interested parties via email or Twitter and find out more about what matters to them. Always look for ways to find out from “real people” what they think matters and see if it merits additional attention from you and your media outlet.

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**ONE LAST THING**

**Q:** If you could tell the students reading this book anything you think is important, what would it be?

**A:** “I think it’s so important right now to be less top-down about building readerships and everything that comes with that, particularly in a big organization. Don’t have one person with all the secret knowledge. Make sure every journalist—particularly the younger, junior ones—have ownership in what’s happening. Likewise, journalists need to think like one-person media organizations. That’s even down to the small things. It might not seem like the biggest thing in the world, but if I meet a journalist without a Twitter account, I wonder what they’re doing. It’s a simple tool for getting your work out there more—don’t you want that?”

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This list of trending topics shows you how varied the overall levels of interest in a wide array of topics can be on any given day.
WHAT DO WE OWE OUR AUDIENCE?

With all of this in mind, the job of the journalist can seem a lot less fun and a lot more overwhelming than you might have originally thought. Although the discipline may seem more complicated than you originally thought, some basic elements of journalism remain crucial. As we noted earlier in the chapter, you don’t have to pander to an audience to drive readership. Here are a few basic things news consumers need from you:

ACCURACY ABOVE ALL ELSE

No matter how fast you get information to someone or how incredible your mind-blowing visuals are, if your work lacks accuracy, nothing else matters. The first and foremost expectation audiences have of journalists is that we have put forth information that is factually correct.

This means you should go back through everything you write and make sure your facts are solid, your writing can’t be misconstrued and your quotes are accurate. This might require one edit or it might take several, but spend whatever time you need to make sure you have everything correct. We will spend much more time on this throughout the book, but always remember this should be your prime directive.

CLARIFICATION OF VALUE

One of the bigger mistakes journalists make is to get into a rut when they report and write. This often emerges when city government reporters cover too many meetings or sports reporters rely on the “who beat whom” coverage to fill their story quotas. The idea of “we’ve always covered X” rears its ugly head when journalists forget that they’re not covering meetings or games for the sake of covering meetings or games. They need to go back to the basic premise of this chapter: Write for the audience.

Journalists have often relied on who, what, when, where, why and how—the 5W’s and 1H—when they write. When writing a story, it becomes imperative that we look at the idea of not only what happened but also why it matters to our readers. The lead will capture the core elements of who did what to whom, but the “why” element of the 5W’s and 1H will drive home the value of the piece. Here’s an example:

Brown County firefighters responded to a fire at 123 E. Smith Drive late Wednesday night.

The core of this sentence picks up on four of the W’s, but it lacks value because this essentially tells the readers that firefighters fought a fire. That’s what they are supposed to do, and thus there’s not a lot of value in that. The lack of an answer to “Why should I care?” leaves the readers without a sense of importance. A stronger lead can create improved value:
A fire at 123 E. Smith Drive killed three people Wednesday and caused $280,000 in damage to Brown County’s oldest historic home.

That shows value in terms of a sizable impact (death and damage) as well as an additional bit of insight regarding the importance of the house (oldest historic home in the county).

When you write for your readers, be sure you can clearly answer the question “Why should I care?” for them.

**FAIRNESS AND OBJECTIVITY**

Accuracy goes a long way to improving trust, but fairness and objectivity also contribute greatly to trustworthiness.

Journalists often hear that fairness means getting “both sides of the story,” but in many cases, issues have more than two sides. A fair journalist gives stakeholders an opportunity to make their positions known. In some cases, those stakeholders may be less than genuine or may have their own agendas, which is why you need to be prepared with research and information when you speak to them. Fairness does not mean parroting your sources. Fairness means giving people the opportunity to put forth a viewpoint, which journalists have every right to question and challenge.

However, this leads to the idea of objectivity. Being objective is not akin to being blind to reality. In the wake of the 2016 election, the term “fake news” has taken over as a one-size-fits-all term for any news certain people dislike, leading to diminished approval ratings of the press and media credibility. However, objective journalists will examine statements presented as fact and push back against those that fail to pass muster. In one such incident, presidential adviser Kellyanne Conway defended President Donald Trump’s proposed travel ban by referencing two Iraqis who masterminded “the Bowling Green massacre.” Media outlets quickly researched the incident and found that no such terrorist attack occurred. Instead, they found that two men were arrested in Bowling Green, Kentucky, after attempting to send resources to al-Qaida. Conway eventually recanted, noting that she meant to say “Bowling Green terrorists.”

What objectivity requires of a journalist is to approach each topic and each source with an open mind. Even journalists who research a topic well might not be fully versed in it. You have to be able to put aside your personal views and biases when covering stories and give your sources the opportunity to provide you with information on the topic. You also have a duty to your audience to be as informed as possible so that sources don’t pull the wool over your eyes and to push back against sources when they present falsehoods.

**WHAT ATTRACTS AN AUDIENCE?**

Don’t be discouraged when you realize that audiences now determine what matters most to them. Instead, realize that you still have a lot of input when it comes to how you can meet their needs while still maintaining your own set of best practices. To do this, you need to understand what attracts an audience to your content and then use those items as starting points to drive your coverage.

The book “Dynamics of Media Writing” outlines a series of interest elements that can help you attract an audience. To remember them, you can use the mnemonic FOCII, like the plural of focus, but with two I’s. Here is a brief examination of those elements:
FAME

This interest element relies on the idea that important people will draw the attention of readers. As noted in “Dynamics of Media Writing,” it isn’t always what someone does, but who is doing the deed that matters. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the United States sees more than 800,000 marriages end each year with little fanfare. However, when actors Ben Affleck and Jennifer Garner split in 2015, it became news almost everywhere.

Fame falls into two main categories. The first category includes people who are famous for an extended period of time, like heads of state, actors and singers. The second category includes those people who are living out their “15 minutes” of fame, such as Powerball jackpot winners, internet sensations and news oddities.

ODDITY

People value rare things, which can be anything from the Hope Diamond to the kid in third grade who can belch the alphabet. Journalists often focus on oddities and present them to their readers as being different from the everyday elements of life.

News organizations occasionally highlight oddity with positive superlatives, such as the “largest ball of earwax in North America” or “the longest filibuster in state history.” In other cases, oddity could come from negative outcomes, such as the 45-year-old Muncie, Indiana, woman who was arrested on suspicion of stabbing a fellow partygoer in the eye with a fork. The reason? The stabbing victim took the last barbecued rib. In terms of the criminally weird, some publications, like the Toronto Sun, even have a “weird” news section on their websites.

CONFLICT

If two or more people or groups seek incompatible goals, conflict will emerge. Whether it is two people who want the last barbecued rib at a party or two political parties seeking dominance in the House of Representatives, when mutually exclusive endgames present themselves, you will see conflict.

As we will discuss in Chapter 2, reporting on conflict requires more than getting side A of an issue and then assuming there is a side B that you need to even things up. When it comes to conflict, you can see various facets of conflict if you put in some effort to examining the issue. For example, any building project could have financial, societal and environmental ramifications.
for the area and your readers. You need to understand those various facets and explain how each outcome can be good or bad for your readers. No matter what happens, the outcome will matter to your readers.

**IMMEDIACY**

People don’t like to feel out of the loop, and news journalists understand this. To best serve their readers, journalists do their best to get people the most important information as quickly as possible.

When journalists “break” news or get a “scoop” on the competition, they demonstrate the importance of **immediacy** as an interest element. Digital outlets like websites and social media outlets can provide journalists with 24/7 access to their readers, meaning that immediacy takes on a whole new level of importance. Prior to these ever-present platforms, journalists measured immediacy in increments of days or hours.

Newspapers published multiple editions each day, with the final edition bringing a close to their day of information dissemination. Journalists working for the publication then had to wait to see what competing papers and broadcasters got that they didn’t. Television journalists had three nightly broadcasts, with the final version of the news coming out just before midnight, depending on the time zone. However, once those windows closed, the news went dark until the morning newscast.

Today, immediacy is measured in minutes and seconds, which leads to a hypercompetitive market in which speed dictates a lot of what we do. However, as immediacy becomes a primary issue in the field, we all have to make sure that speed doesn’t trump accuracy. Fast is great, but fast and wrong is horrible.

**IMPACT**

As noted earlier in the chapter, people want to know “Why should I care?” Good journalists can answer that question when they focus on the **impact** of a story. In some cases, you can demonstrate impact with simple stories, such as pieces on tax-rate increases or business closings. In other cases, you need to go much deeper to show a longer range impact, such as how the “too big to fail” banking crisis of the mid-2000s came to a head or how changes in environmental laws will affect the quality of water in an area.

You can demonstrate the impact of a story in a quantitative or qualitative sense. Quantitative impact measures the range of the impact, such as how many people got the flu during a particular winter. Qualitative measurements show the severity of an impact, such as the death of one student at your school.
THE BIG THREE

Here are the three key things you should take away from this chapter:

1. **The audience matters most:** You’re not writing for yourself. You are writing for your readers, and they have specific wants and needs that you must address. The better you understand this, the more connected you will become with your audience members, and the better you will be able to serve them.

2. **Journalists owe the audience:** When it comes to your readers, focus on what you owe them each and every time you ply your trade. You have to be accurate. You need to show them value in what you write for them. You need to be fair and objective. If you do these things, you will grow and retain a strong and loyal audience. If you don’t, the readers can always go somewhere else for their information.

3. **Focus on the interest elements:** Fame, oddity, conflict, immediacy and impact serve as crucial interest elements for all media writers, but they are particularly valuable for news reporters. Each time you sit down to write a story, consider each of these elements and see which ones you think apply. This will help you focus your work and build strong and valuable content.

KEY TERMS

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The first question this chapter asked is “Why do you want to be a journalist?” What is your best answer to that question? What makes this field worthy of study in your mind?

2. What is the source of most of the media you consume? Think about not just the platform (newspaper, magazine, TV, web, apps) but think about the sources
of media on those platforms. What makes that media valuable to you? How did you find the sources, and what made them a part of your consumption habits? What similar media did you reject or decide not to continue using? To what degree do you think the media provides you with audience-centric content?

3. Of the five interest elements listed in the chapter, which one drives you to consume media? Why do you think this is? Which one matters the least to you? Why do you feel that way?

4. Of the information you consume on a daily basis, how much of it do you think would fall into the category of “infotainment”? What draws you to this material, and how much does that bother you now as a reporting student?

**WRITE NOW!**

1. Explore the demographic details of your school in terms of age, gender, race and the in-state/out-of-state gap. Look for specific details you think define your school. Then, select another institution within your state and examine the same elements. Use these findings to write a two-page essay that outlines the similarities and differences between these schools. Also, include your opinion regarding the degree to which those elements accurately reflect the similarities and differences between your two schools.

2. Select three articles that interest you from the media you consume. Look through them to identify the elements of interest outlined in this chapter. Write up a few paragraphs on each article, explaining why you found that these articles were of interest to you and which elements most and least factored into your interest.

3. Select an issue of your student newspaper (or online publication, depending on your campus) and compare it with the coverage of an issue of your local publication from that same day and time as well as an issue of a national publication from that same day and time. Write a short essay on each one of these publications to outline what audience(s) you think they serve and how well you think they are serving them. Use examples of stories that illustrate the points you are making regarding the quality (or lack thereof) of the coverage.

4. Conduct a short content analysis of one of your social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram etc.). Which of the people you chose to follow shows up most in your feed over the past 24 hours? What topics are trending in your feed, and how well do you feel those things represent your overall interests? To what degree would you say these items qualify as “news,” and how do you think this reflects on you as a media consumer? Write a short paper that outlines your thoughts and findings.

5. Reflect on a time when you became an active participant in a social media phenomenon. It might have been your choice to tweet about an election or to post articles about a topic that you thought others should read. What drove you to do so, and how much thought did you put into your approach? Does this differ in any way from how you see yourself as an upcoming journalist, or is this part of a different way you see media usage?

6. Reflect on the issue of accuracy and how you feel it is or isn’t present in the media today. As allegations of media bias, “fake” news and other similar issues come to the forefront, how do you see this overall field, and why do you perceive it this way? Write a short essay that clarifies this.

7. Select a news piece from a local publication and assess it for audience centricity. How does it do in addressing the 5W’s and 1H, and how well does it tell you why it should matter to you? If you feel it has done well, explain what works. If you feel it hasn’t, explain what doesn’t work and how you would go about fixing it.

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