

**Is data
collection,
analysis
and use in
decision—
making the
single most
important
thing you
can do?**

Almost all the decisions you and your team make — advertising, editorial, social media, events, ecommerce, and new product decisions — can and should be influenced, perhaps heavily, by your data



here is no God.

Well, in the world of Big Data, there is no “God metric” for predicting and proving magazine success.

For the past 20 years, magazine media executives have been wandering in the desert looking for the best, most reliable, most revealing, most instructive metric for predicting and proving digital editorial and advertising success.

Disciples and detractors have fought over a series of false Gods: page views, ad click-throughs, unique visitors, followers, retweets, likes, social media shares, engagement, and, most recently, time spent and total attention.

“I feel like what you see in the industry now is people jumping around and trying to find the God metric for content,” BuzzFeed founder Jonah Peretti told Medium.

The inscrutable nature of magazine media data has publishers, editors, and ad directors pulling out their hair (what little they have left after decades of angst and agony).

POLL: Do you have an analytics staff?
WATCH: The audience analytics of the future



performance in each case and what the data suggests in terms of improvement. Develop an action plan including various tests of your hypotheses that can be proven or disproven by subsequent data.

And then do something with it, dammit, because most publishing companies don't.

Almost every publishing company collects and reports data, but too few outside of the mega-publishers have teams (or individuals) tasked with the responsibility to analyse, interpret, and make strategic recommendations based on data.

Data is too often relegated to being the stuff of annual reports or daily emails that merely applaud or bemoan the previous year's or day's "performance".

In fact, data analysis and interpretation should be the top action item on the agendas of every editorial and advertising meeting. The first order of business should be to examine progress against short-, medium- and long-range goals as indicated by the data, and discuss what the data suggests in terms of strategic and tactical pivots.

What's the fuss about data?

In the dark ages (pre-internet), there was precious little data at publishers' disposal outside of newsstand sales and subscription starts and stops. Today we can measure just about anything you can think of in terms of our readers' and visitors' interactions with our products and our advertisers' ads.

But too many publishers are not putting the data to work.

"Right now, many newsrooms are stupid about the way they publish," *Guardian* executive editor for digital Aron Pilhofer told *Fast Company*. "They're tied to a legacy model, which means, for example, that some of the most impactful journalism will be published online on Saturday afternoon, to go into print on Sunday. You could not pick a time when your audience is less engaged."

The thing is, we don't have to be stupid anymore. We have the data to help drive editorial and advertising decisions. But it must be used analytically, not just in reports.

'Media companies can no longer look at data only for reporting purposes or dig no deeper than a look at page views or unique

Media companies "must examine long-form patterns in the data and ask whether they could be used to create predictive models."

Paul Cheesbrough, chief technology officer

News Corp, speaking to the International News Media Association (INMA)

users," Paul Cheesbrough, News Corp's chief technology officer, told the International News Media Association (INMA). "Now they must examine long-form patterns in the data and ask whether they could be used to create predictive models."

Data can deliver predictive information

Publishers can, for example, discover how far down a page an individual reader scrolled, how long they watched a video, which social network they came from, whether they shared a story with their friends, and hundreds of other actions. Editors and ad sales people can look at all those behaviours over time and begin to create predictive models that can help drive editorial and advertising decisions.

Today, for example, publishers can use data to:

- Find and report stories
- Learn about audience behaviour
- Personalise content
- Build audience
- Build reader loyalty and engagement
- Run extremely (individually) targeted, high-CPM advertising
- Launch new data-based B2C and B2B products to create new and sustainable revenue streams

"What we're aiming to do is try to inform product decisions and marketing decisions, as well as potentially newsroom decisions," *New York Times* chief data scientist Chris Wiggins told *Fast Company*.

Who's doing data right?

Hearst

Correctly predicting launch and gift-giving success

Mega-publisher Hearst employs a team of eight Ph.D.s running a data analytics shop executive vice president John McLaughlin describes as "research on steroids".

One result: After crunching data which showed that, much like Hearst's wildly successful launch of HGTV magazine (a 450,000 rate base at launch), the Dr Oz Show, a five-time Daytime Emmy award winning daytime TV show, would be a hit magazine. Sure

enough, it attracted 145,000 subscribers within a month of launching.

Those same data geniuses have also used analytics to identify consumers whom they've determined are predisposed to give magazine subscriptions as gifts. And, once again, they were correct: In the face of newsstand sales declines, subscription marketing at Hearst is more profitable.

The improved targeting resulted in a 25 per cent increase in response rates within two

years and 200 per cent return on the investment in the data programme in just three years.

MEREDITH

Following customers through life cycle with stage-targeted subscriptions

Meredith has 23 analysts who preside over a database of 800 data points for 115 million worldwide subscribers. Among other things,

they follow subscribers through their life cycles and move them from magazine to magazine depending on where they are in their lives.

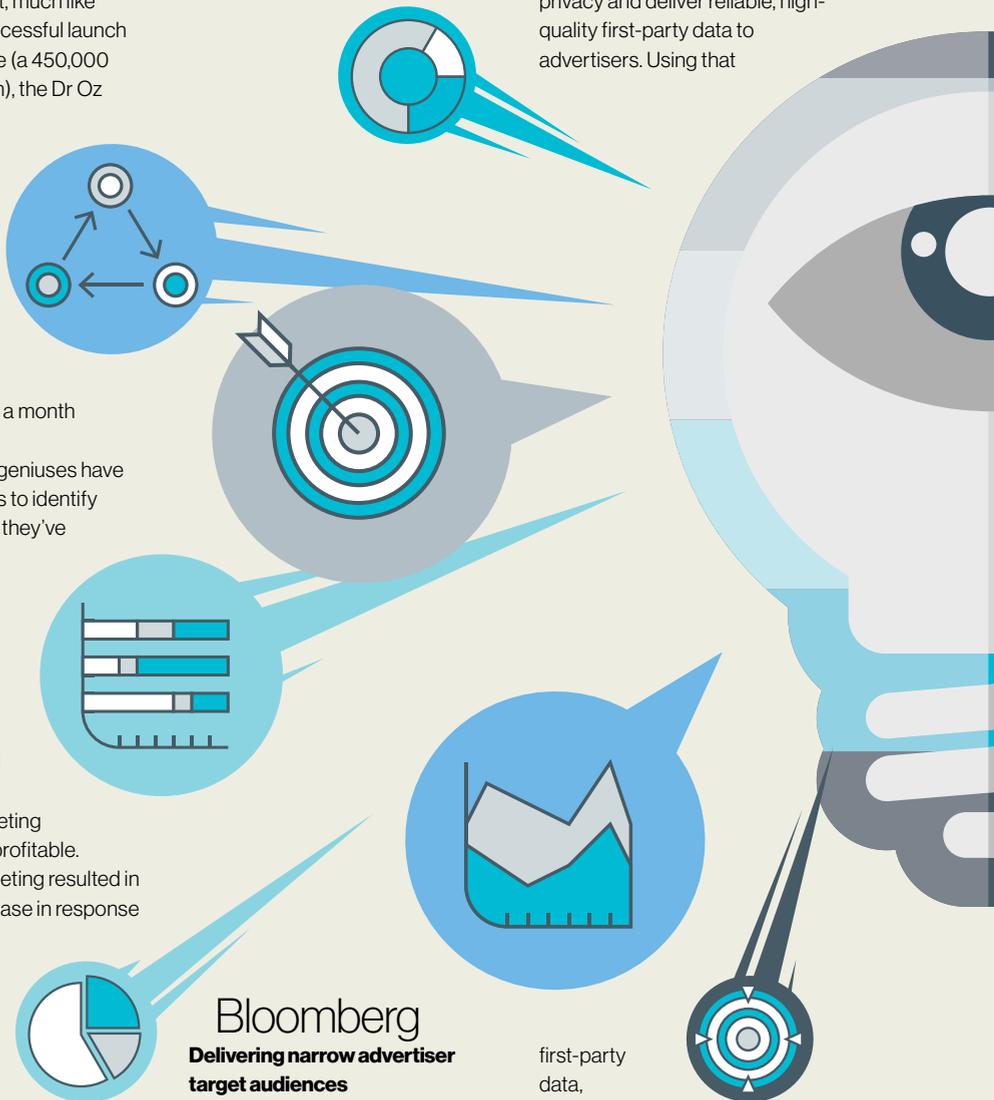
The data enables subscription marketing team to suggest *American Baby* to new mothers and *Family Circle* to those same mothers as their children get older.

the advertiser and then track their online behaviour to tell the advertiser which subjects interested them and even list them in priority order.

News Corp

First-party data powers profitable global ad exchange channel

Two years ago, News Corp got rid of all third-party data to protect privacy and deliver reliable, high-quality first-party data to advertisers. Using that



Bloomberg

Delivering narrow advertiser target audiences

Using its voluminous customer data, Bloomberg was able to create a new product called "BMatch". The programme finds advertisers' target audiences and incorporates data about those audiences into the advertising campaign. For example, an advertiser wanted information about its customers' interests. Using BMatch, Bloomberg was able to identify its visitors who were also customers of

first-party data, News Corp created its own global ad exchange, offering advertisers secure, highly targeted, highly reliable consumers. The result: New revenue. "We've easily covered the costs of what we've been doing on the data front for the past few years," Paul Cheesbrough, News Corp chief technology officer, told INMA.

Penton

Data directs email and retargeting campaigns

Multi-market B2B company Penton runs 125 websites and has built a database of 16 million records and 1,000 datapoints. With that kind of data and insights, Penton is able to identify which of its B2B readers is engaged

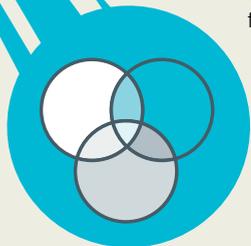
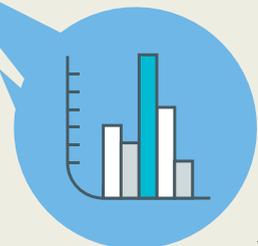


in one of the stages of researching a purchasing decision. Penton used its data to create two products to offer to its advertisers: Web Target which zeroes in on key data points to trigger email marketing campaigns; Audience Extension which identifies visitors who've already engaged and indicated an interest for a re-targeting email campaign.

Buzzfeed

Algorithm delivers 200 per cent traffic growth

Recognising the editorial challenge of populating the BuzzFeed website on weekends with a small staff, now publisher Dao Nguyen, wrote some code that surfaced the top 20 posts to promote throughout the weekend. The results have been nothing short of



spectacular: Year-on-year weekend traffic grew 224 per cent.

Nguyen also saw data indicating that Pinterest could be a big hit for BuzzFeed. So she created an editorial data group called "Pin Ops" to work exclusively on creating content for Pinterest, including creating new verticals that lent themselves to the visual approach and unique audiences of Pinterest (parenting, health, food, DIY). Pinterest soared from virtually

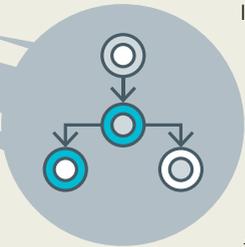
non-existent as a traffic referrer to BuzzFeed's second-largest social traffic driver.

Glamour

Data-directed posting changes drive double-digit growth

Data analysts at the Condé Nast fashion magazine noticed visitors coming to the site on different platforms at different times of the day for different reasons. And yet, content was being posted without any regard to those behaviours (everyone filed stories at night to be published in toto in the morning).

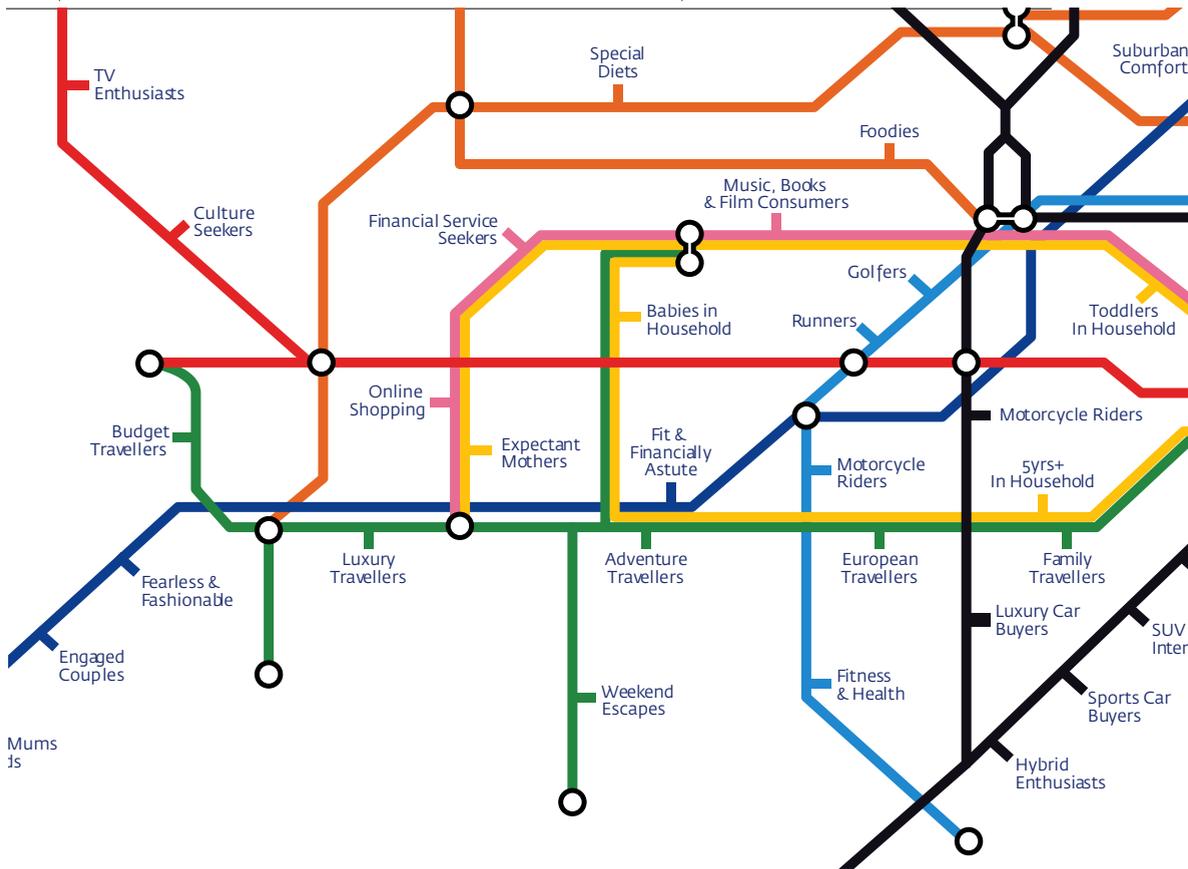
Data indicated that more than half of *Glamour's* 7.5 million monthly unique visitors came to the site on mobile devices and primarily for beauty content. The result: Creation of a mobile-first beauty site called "Lipstick".



In just one month, Lipstick outperformed *Glamour's* former beauty channel. Data also indicated that fashion readers come at lunchtime

and in the evening, and they tend to come via desktops whose larger screens are better suited for looking at outfits. So *Glamour* started to program its home page to feature fashion stories at lunchtime and in the evening. *Glamour's* celebrity content was most popular in the afternoon so editors started posting celeb updates after lunch and saw an 11 per cent increase in unique visitors and 23 per cent increase in page views.

Finally, late night brings out readers for the sex and dating stories. Editors started tweeting and posting those stories after 8pm and reaped an almost immediate 50 per cent increase in visits and referrals.



Sine qua non: Commitment from the top

But all the best data, the best analytical tools, and the best data scientists will be ineffective without a corporate commitment from the top to make the collection, analysis and translation of data into action plans a top company priority.

The New York City based Council for Research Excellence issued a primer for advertising and media research in October 2014, stating right up front that the success of big data implementation requires “top management support to get all functional areas on board and invested [and] education to secure engagement across the organisation.”

Without executive support, the right people won't be hired, they won't get the necessary resources, and their work will be wasted on staff uneducated about how to put it to work to inform their editorial and advertising strategies.

The biggest decision: What to measure?

“Not everything that can be counted counts; not everything that counts can be counted.”

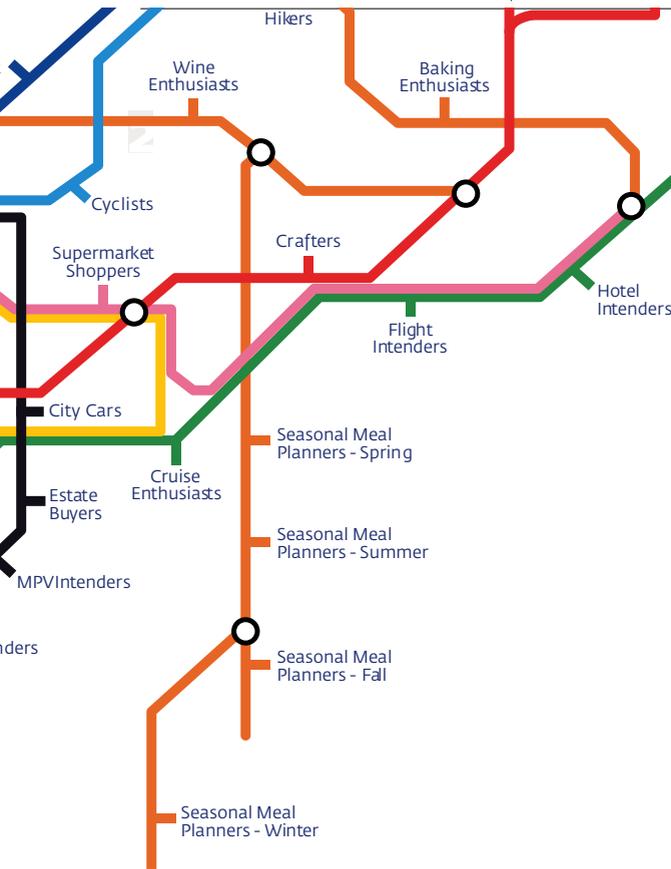
That quote from Butler University professor of sociology William Bruce Cameron sums up the conundrum publishers find themselves

in when it comes to big data.

The earliest digital data revolved around page views, unique visitors, and click-throughs. But none of those statistics measured whether a visitor liked or hated the story or video or even whether they actually read the story or looked at the ad. And with the increasing ubiquity of digital ad fraud, there's the very legitimate question of whether a page or ad was even served to a human being.

Large numbers of page view, uniques, and click-throughs do indicate “reach”, giving publishers and advertisers the same (false) comfort that the old print circulation numbers used to provide. If a magazine sold 100,000 copies and had a pass-along multiplier of five, then advertisers assumed that their ad was seen by almost half a million consumers. And publishers could charge accordingly, as they then translated into the digital publishing model with page views, uniques and click-throughs. The old model in new clothes.

That focus on delivering large numbers of page views and monthly uniques encourages publishers to “game” the system, creating click-bait headlines (e.g., “You Won't Believe What This Cat Is About To Do!”) and high-click



Targeting known (but anonymous) individuals across various interest and behaviour segments allows a publishing company to tailor marketing around interest areas, purchasing behaviours, demographics and other variables. This Immediate Media Metro-like map of intersecting interests is a playful illustration of how data sets can work together.

content such as slideshows and multiple-page stories to build up the traffic numbers.

To bulk their traffic numbers up even further, publishers go so far as to buy outside traffic from so-called “click farms”. As *Salon*’s Alex Halperin has said: “Sites that sell advertising have a strong incentive to crank out the editorial equivalent of empty calories.”

“What was written and whether the visitor likes it or loathes it, reads it or does not, has no impact on the page view tally.” wrote Chartbeat CEO Tony Haile for the *American Journalism Review* (AJR).

Going beyond the page view

So, as News Corp’s Cheesbrough says, we have to go beyond those blunt-instrument measurements to find data that provides predictive power.

The latest attempt to find more meaning in data comes in the form of what is being called either “attention minutes” (Upworthy) or “engaged time” (Chartbeat) or “total time reading” (Medium).

Switching to an attention- or time-based set of metrics redirects the focus of data to the quality of the interactions rather than just the volume.

“The one interesting thing to bear in mind

that gets lost is that you’re looking at the total amount of attention over a month,” Haile wrote. “If you give them a three-minute video and they watch it and don’t come back, your total engaged time is three minutes. But if you give them a short article and they love it and come back, it is far, far greater. It doesn’t have to be in one big lump. You can do it by writing one great piece or a whole bunch of great pieces that bring people back to your site.”

Chartbeat, Upworthy, and Medium lead the charge

Chartbeat claims its engaged time system tracks “people” rather than “events,” according to Lauryn Bennett, head of brand at Chartbeat.

“We silently ping users on the site and can anonymously say, ‘Someone is reading right now, scrolling this far down the page, spending a minute and a half actually engaged on the page;’” Bennett told the *AJR*. “Are you scrolling? Are you commenting? Are you navigating? Are you actually engaged or have you just left that tab open and gone to get coffee?”

This granular data gives editors and advertisers precise insights into exactly the type of content that attracts individual readers. These clues can be translated over time into predic-

tive models for what content works and what doesn't as well as how to get certain readers to come back again and again. They also enable publishers to target individual readers with alerts letting them know that their favourite type of content is being published.

Upworthy, announced its attention minutes metric a year ago, saying in the company blog that it would track attention minutes in two forms:

- **Total attention on site** (per hour, day, week, month, whatever): This tells us (like total uniques or total page views) how good a job Upworthy is doing overall at drawing attention to important topics.
- **Total attention per piece:** A combination of how many people watch something on Upworthy and how much of it they actually watch. Pieces with higher total attention should be promoted more.

"We love thinking this way because it rewards us for sharing content that people really enjoy and find valuable – not just stuff

interaction with every post."

"We pay more attention to time spent reading than the number of visitors at Medium because, in a world of infinite content – where there are a million shiny attention-grabbing objects a touch away and notifications coming in constantly – it's meaningful when someone is actually spending time," wrote Medium CEO Ev Williams in the company blog. "After all, for a currency to be valuable, it has to be scarce. And while the amount of attention people are willing to give to media and the Internet in general has skyrocketed – largely due to having a screen and connection with them everywhere – it eventually is finite."

Not everyone is convinced.

"I remain a big fan of page views per visit (a sign of engagement) and repeat visits (a sign of loyalty) as variations on relatively conventional – and important – metrics that are still critical to both our journalism and the business model that supports our journalism," wrote News Corp's senior vice president for strategy Raju Narisetti for journalism think tank Poynter Institute.

"While it is critical that our industry evolves and adapts – and new ideas around better metrics are a key part of that journey – wishful thinking on new-fangled metrics don't necessarily mean we can simply abandon what works – and, I dare say, works OK," wrote Narisetti. "I am wary of 'time spent' metrics simply because of the complexity of measuring that and the resulting assumptions and inaccuracies that usually creep in."

Another "Doubting Thomas" is Media Kitchen's president, Barry Lowenthal, who points out that the attention minutes system assumes all content is created equal. He says that using length of time on a story as a metric punishes publishers whose stock in trade is short, quick-hit, convenient stories.

"There is certainly content that is designed for a quick scan, and that content is not any less valuable because of that," Lowenthal said. "A lot of people don't want to spend 20 minutes reading a 10,000-word article when they can get it in a thousand words or less ... To say that it's going to be the new currency is silly."

Lowenthal and other critics also worry that, just as publishers learned how to game

TTR

According to Medium, the "Only Metric That Matters" (OMTM) is "Total Time Reading" (TTR), not page views, uniques, or click-throughs.

they click on a lot," the company explained. "It may mean that we don't do quite as well on uniques or page views, but that's a trade-off we're happy to make because this is a metric focused on real audience satisfaction."

Medium declared at the end of 2013 that its "Only Metric That Matters" (OMTM) is "Total Time Reading" (TTR).

"You want people to read. And then come back, to read more – at Medium, we optimise for the time that people spend reading," wrote then product scientist Pete Davies on the Medium Data Lab blog. "We measure every user

How NPR created its own dashboard

How's this for a steep challenge: Research, design, and build an editorial analytics dashboard for a national media outlet in six weeks.

National Public Radio (NPR) in the US wanted an analytics dashboard for its editors and writers. They turned to their social media "team" (two people) and said, "Come back in six weeks!"

Melody Kramer and Wright Bryan got right to work.

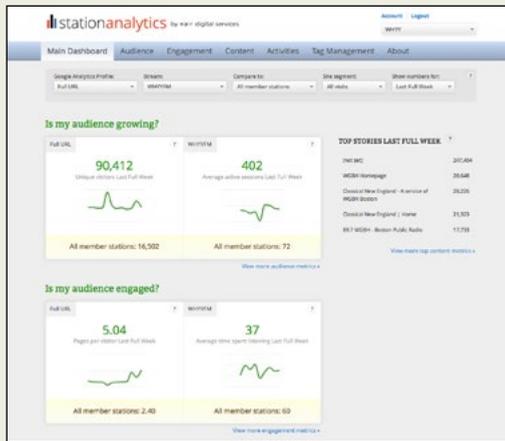
They pretty quickly dismissed the idea of buying a pre-built, off-the-shelf product. Cost and

customisation doomed that option. A little research and it became immediately apparent that it would be cheaper and more customisable (and much more flexible) to build it in-house. All of the bells and whistles they'd pay for in a commercial product would have been wasted given the needs of the NPR editorial department. Besides, what they really wanted was a simple dashboard that could be easily and quickly adopted, used and understood.

NPR already used Chartbeat and Google Analytics for basic audience behaviour data, but each has its limitations. For example, Chartbeat doesn't let them know when an archived piece is trending and Google Analytics is, well, just too difficult to use when you're in a hurry (and what person in a newsroom isn't in a hurry?).

Before doing anything else, Kramer and Bryan wisely decided to first understand their "customers", their needs, mindset, culture, and tolerance for change.

In a nutshell, Kramer and Bryan wanted a tool that would enable editors and writers to see at a glance how individual stories were performing and give those writers and editors "actionable behaviours" choices to influence that story's



performance which could then be instantly analysed by the same dashboard.

With remarkable restraint, the pair did not start by designing the dashboard right away. Instead, they followed the user experience (UX) process, creating personas, listing assumptions, and determining the functions their personas needed. Their personas included a homepage editor, section editor, blogger, reporter, and producer. They listed the needs of each and conducted interviews with people in each group.

Then they listed assumptions, including, first and foremost, enabling a change in the editorial culture. They understood that the best tool in the world would be useless if the writers' and editors' attitudes and behaviours didn't change to enable them to appreciate the value of the tool and actually use it. Culture and habits had to change.

Kramer and Bryan made it clear to the journalists that the tool was designed to empower them to do their jobs better and build their own individual reputations on social media, and to become established leaders in their niches. And they promised the training to ease the transition.

To best assure the staff understood

the process and the tool, the pair held brown bag lunches throughout the six weeks, aiming to be completely transparent every step of the way. They dived deeply into each persona and created as many use cases as they could for each. For example, if a home page editor sees an archived story spiking on the dashboard, what options should the dashboard offer? The

editor could bring the story back to the home page, alert the social media team, update the story with new information, etc. And then the tool should show in real time the results of each action to encourage experimentation and reward it with instant results.

The first iteration of the dashboard tells editors and reporters:

- How much traffic a piece is getting
- Where the traffic is coming from
- Who has linked to that piece
- How the piece is doing on social media

The feedback has been universally positive, according to Kramer.

To make the cultural change easier, Kramer and Bryan simultaneously launched a daily auto-generated analytics email summarising the new dashboard's stats from the day before and linking back to the dashboard.

They also enhanced their daily email (which had been about social media tips and tricks) to include learnings from the dashboard.

Take-away: Start by going back to ground zero, asking your staff about their needs and doing the hand-holding that cultural change requires while delivering a tool that makes their lives easier and richer and their product better.



Gardening & Nature



Weddings



Television



Youth & Children



Cycling



Active



Food



Lifestyle

Niche-interest publications or consumer titles with niche segments like these can use data to tailor relevant, personalised offers for subscriptions, events, ecommerce, promotions, new products, etc. (Graphic courtesy of Immediate Media)

the page view system, they will learn how to game the attention minutes system by creating longer and longer content.

Chartbeat's Tony Haile countered both criticisms, calling them myths:

"Myth: The attention web punishes short-form sites: It's the total amount of attention one can accrue from a user that is more important than any individual visit," Haile wrote on Digiday. "Short content with frequent visitors or long content with less frequent visitors can flourish on the attention web. Those who fail are those who create content that captures neither attention nor loyalty.

"Myth: Publishers will game attention by writing longer content: An average piece of content loses 30 per cent of its visitors before they have even scrolled a pixel, and the drop off after that is significant. Thinking that people will hang around for bad long-form is... optimistic... The best way to game the attention web is to simply create content that is good."

Talent is where the rubber meets the road

Incredibly enough, choosing what to measure is the easy part. So is collecting the data (God knows we have enough data already).

Finding a highly qualified data scientist or analyst to help us understand what the data is saying is the hard part.

While the collection and mashing of data can be left to machines, someone has to tell the machine which data to compare against which other data sets, and then make sense of the results to the point of being able to make strategic and tactical recommendations.

"There's no black-box solution in these areas – that we've found anyway – so you have to have smart engineers and technologists and architects who can help piece together the different bits to really optimise how you do it," News Corp.'s Cheesbrough told INMA.

So, how do you find the right data scientist?

"Because data scientists can be the difference between success and failure in a company's use



Craft



Parenting



Science



History

of its data, finding the right kind is critical,” wrote Adobe vice president of mobile Matt Asay on *ReadWrite*. “It turns out that discovering the right data scientist is similar to analysing one’s data: you need to make sure you’re hiring the right kind, and that you ask them the right questions.”

Unfortunately, the supply of data scientists to meet the sudden demand is not even close to sufficient. Research company Gartner anticipated 4.4 million data jobs will be created by the end of this year, but only a third of them will be successfully filled.

Because of the sudden and urgent demand, big data-related jobs are commanding serious salaries. In its 2014 Salary Guide, Robert Half Technology found the following:

Data architect: US\$111,000-153,000

Database manager: US\$107,000-149,000

Business intelligence analyst: US\$101,000-142,000

Data modeller: US\$97,000-134,000

Data analyst/report writer: US\$68,000-101,000

Serious salaries attract serious – and not-so-serious (unqualified) – candidates.

“There are highly talented geniuses in our population who can change the landscape of an entire organisation, through the development of an algorithm and the implementation of some code,” wrote Chris Pearson, partner and co-founder of UK-based recruitment company Big Cloud on *KDNuggets.com*. “This also unfortunately means that there are lots of people out there who want you to think that they are one of those geniuses, too. The question is, can you tell the difference?”

For most publishers, the answer is an uneasy “no”.

Pearson offered sample questions that can help publishers separate the wheat from the chaff, focusing on a candidate’s understanding of the business outcomes of the data analytics process rather than just the process itself.

You want to ask questions like “Can you give me an example of when you’ve developed an algorithm from a framework/research paper?” to determine if the candidate has the mathematical and statistical modelling and programming skills to collect, compile and mash up the data.

But it’s even more important to determine the candidate’s understanding of your business and how the analysis of data and its conversion into action plans impacts your future. That would lead to questions like: “Tell me about a time when you’ve improved a business process?” and “What were the business outcomes of the projects you worked on?”

Pearson added one more piece of advice:

“Because data scientists can be the difference between success and failure in a company’s use of its data, finding the right kind is critical.”

Matt Asay, vice president of mobile
Adobe, writing on *ReadWrite*

Data can turn into stand-alone or ongoing editorial projects. At the Los Angeles Times, the Data Desk regularly publishes data-based stories in the paper, on the website, and on its own Data Desk page. At The Guardian, the data team has its own blog where it highlights its own work.

“It’s worth pointing out that if you find someone who has nailed all of the above questions and you have that gut feel that they may do wonders for your business, please don’t get too precious about culture, team fit, etc. Don’t get me wrong, these things are important, but people like this can be incredibly hard to find.”

The data scientist can’t be a voice in the wilderness

The data scientist cannot be the only person in the company who understands and is committed to the daily use of data.

This situation is akin to when publishers had to bring in a webmaster to run the internet operations and a community or social media manager to run the social media operation. Where those people worked on organisational islands, the companies remained mired in the old way of doing things. Only when web and social media knowledge and responsibilities became more widespread did publishing companies change and grow.

Publishers must make a commitment to a level of training of staff across departments in the power, use, and interpretation of data.

At the *San Francisco Chronicle*, for example, all reporters must attend a social media bootcamp and are trained to use an individualised analytics dashboard that shows metrics including not only page views and unique

visitors but also social referrals, engagement time, and how well stories are doing in a particular geographic area.

Forbes and *The Guardian* also use individualised dashboards for contributors, writers and editors.

Where to start?

The prospect is overwhelming. There is just too damn much data! Of all the data out there in all of the different categories of measurement, what should you do first?

Focus.

You can’t do everything all at once. So narrow it down. And consider using profit as the filter for your first project.

“I’ve focused the first couple of projects on the areas where we can really see real quantifiable business impact,” Hearst CTO Philip Wiser told *Fast Company Labs*. “And once we’ve built confidence and capabilities – then we could look at longer-term R&D efforts.

“On the audience data side, we look at the rising use of programmatic buy-ins for online advertising and that could buy us an opportunity to apply some of our data analytics to give us a competitive advantage in the programmatic stages,” Wiser said. “Then, if we can improve on engagement with advertisers and the amount of where CTM lies with online exchanges, we have real quantitative mea-

sure to know that the tech we're building is producing a real, viable result."

Data can lead to new profitable products

Publishers who do use data mostly focus on existing editorial and advertising operations, which is all well and good.

But a few publishers have taken the next step: Using data to launch new products with new and sustainable (not one-time) revenue streams.

The poster child for using data to launch profitable new products is a guy named Rafat Ali, who launched Paid Content in 2002 and sold it to The Guardian News & Media for US\$30 million in 2010.

Taking a breather after the sale, Ali toured the world and, in the process, discovered that information about the US\$6.5 trillion global travel industry was fragmentary and largely unavailable to people working in the industry.

So Ali launched the travel industry site skift.com in 2012, and quickly became the industry's leading news source.

That would be a nice launch story in and of itself, but it's what Ali did next that makes the point about the savvy use of data to create new products and revenue streams.

Ali saw a gap in actionable industry data available to travel brands and set about to gather, analyse, and sell data about his readers (the travel industry players) to his readers in a product called SkiftIQ for the tidy sum of US\$99 a month.

"Data is great at creating sustainable, scalable business revenues," Ali told *MediaBriefing*. "By building a media company at scale that's not just at the mercy of page

view whoring, if you will, but really has a solid business model behind it, that helps the scale more."

Outside help is available

Many publishing companies outsource some or all of their analytics work. Chartbeat, Omniture, Quantcast, parse.ly, Simply Measured, and comScore are but six of the bigger data service companies.

Chartbeat claims 80 per cent of the top US publishers as clients. But most publishers, including Chartbeat's clients, work with multiple service providers as well. *The LA Times*, for example, uses Chartbeat plus Omniture, Google Analytics, and Simply Measured.

Should data be used in compensation decisions?

Some publishers, including *Forbes*, *Complex Media*, and *The Oregonian*, use data such as repeat traffic, engagement, etc. to financially reward their writers.

To no one's surprise, the money-for-traffic system is a controversial topic.

Incentivising is a double-edged sword in this regard, according to critics. You can get great performance, or you can incentivise the wrong thing:

"What we choose to measure defines what we aspire to," wrote Chartbeat's Haile in his *AJR* piece. "It is thus unsurprising that when a newsroom prioritises a measure of link performance, that newsroom learns how to optimise links, but not content. Instead of metrics teaching the primacy of good content, we get clickbait and slideshows."

Data should be used as a "trusted feedback loop that informs and educates – it can make journalists better," Haile wrote. "If we're writing about something worth writing about, then we should want to know where our message has fallen short and then adapt. That's what good metrics enable. After all, our goal is not simply to write, but to be read."

"However, when used poorly, metrics can lead to low morale in newsrooms and justify fears that the desire to create great or important content will be sacrificed in favour of cat videos and an endless stream of Miley Cyrus stories," Haile wrote for *AJR*.

US\$147k

That's the upper-end of the salary range for a data analyst in the US. With the tremendous demand for data talent, salaries are skyrocketing.

“If you are a slave to the numbers, then... pretty soon you will have a site full of trash and salacious garbage,” BuzzFeed’s Peretti told *Capital New York*.

In January, Gawker (an early adopter of paying for traffic) abandoned the practice. Curbed, acquired by Vox in 2013, also dropped its policy.

But *Forbes* still maintains that pay-for-repeat-visits is a valid data point in compensation decisions. *Forbes* believes rewarding writers for getting repeat visitors encourages quality content over one-hit wonders.

“We use this model because I believe that what the audience thinks and does matters,” *Forbes* Media chief product officer Lewis DVorkin told *Digiday*. “It’s not just about what an editor thinks about a reporter’s work but, it’s also what an audience thinks about it.”

DVorkin said *Forbes* is considering adding time-based measures such as time on a piece and the depth of a reader’s scrolling to the compensation metric.

Intriguingly, *Forbes* does not extend the same pay-for-traffic reward system to its staffers.

Who should see the data?

To us, this debate debases the intelligence of our journalists.

There are some publishers, including MIT’s *Tech Review*, who will not give their writers access to traffic data for fear of poisoning the well, distorting their journalists’ judgement in favour of writing click-bait pieces instead of substantial stories.

“We’re moving ... to where you will be living in your data all the time and you’ll be able to at will explore any part of your business you want to.”

Jacob Ross, chief revenue officer
Analytics company Metamarkets, speaking to *eContent*.

Unless those journalists are being compensated based on traffic or other data (see above), prohibiting them access to data prevents them from learning if their work is reaching their audience and, worse, implies that they would prostitute themselves and their publication for traffic. If your writers are that vain, you have a bigger problem than the question of data access.

Even at Vox-owned *Verge*, which had until recently prohibited its writers from seeing traffic data, staff now gets to see the stats. “I’ve never met a journalist who wasn’t interested in page view stats,” Vox editor-in-chief Nilay Patel told *Digiday*. “There’s no shame in being interested in that information.”

Where to next?

As scary as it may sound today, you will soon be “living in your data,” according to Jacob Ross, chief revenue officer of analytics company Metamarkets, speaking to *eContent*.

“We’re moving from a model where you had to ask your team a question and wait a day, or even an hour to get the answer... to where you will be living in your data all the time and you’ll be able to at will explore any part of your business you want to,” Ross predicted.

“For publishers, that’s the Holy Grail – your site and your marketing analytics may start to converge and you may be able to personalise your content in the same way that you personalise your advertising,” Ross said. “Those two things are connected, but the systems haven’t talked to each other historically.”

You may also soon be able to follow your readers to other places.

“Since you now have that data, you can also follow those people as they go to other sites,” Gordon McLeod, president of data management company Krux, told *eContent*. “You can extend and add to your inventory or your ability to reach them, both from an advertising and brand perspective.”

So, if you’re just collecting but not analysing data, wake up and smell the toast.

If you are collecting and analysing, make sure it’s seen as one of the highest priorities in your company and insist on regular reviews of the analysis and related action plans.

Only your future depends on it.

