Currencies Cannot Change

Jacob L. Nelson

Abstract
Something I no longer believe is that size will always be the currency of the news media environment. Traditionally, the goal of most publications has been to reach as large an audience as possible. I assumed this was a fixed state of affairs, which resulted in other, smaller assumptions implicit within my research. When I first started studying the news industry, for example, I assumed the advent of sophisticated measures of online audience behavior would finally provide news publishers the answer to the question, “How do we reach as many people as possible?” I was similarly sure that the implications of this development would be profound: journalism would become more democratic, since editors would now know with certainty what subjects were of interest to their readers. On the other hand, journalism would become more focused on cat videos and celebrity gossip as audience analytic data made it plain that these types of content were most likely to attract the largest number of readers. Even as journalism stakeholders have begun talking more about “engagement” metrics, I have tended to assume these would complement, rather than replace, measures of audience size. Recently, however, the news industry has moved further away from the traditional, advertising-supported revenue model that privileges measures of audience size toward audience-supported models that privilege traits like loyalty. Though I remain unsure where these developments will ultimately lead, I am increasingly open-minded to the notion that currencies—like everything else in the news media environment—can change.

Keywords
currencies, engagement, journalism, news audiences

My advisor kept two stacks of books on his desk. The titles within each changed over the 5 years I was his advisee, but their organizing principle remained constant: each focused on how the Internet would dramatically reshape our world. One pile took an idealistic approach, with books suggesting the Internet would bring about a more utopian, egalitarian society. The other pile was more alarmed. Its books contended the Internet would exacerbate inequality, heighten political polarization, and diminish attention spans. As the years passed, I began to see these books as cautionary tales: although their arguments were compelling, they often grew dated in the span of a single dissertation.

The stacks of books, along with my advisor’s generally steady demeanor, made a lasting impression. Though this may not have been his intention, I finished graduate school, thinking it was better to focus my energies identifying aspects of the media environment that have not changed. I figured that doing so would help make my work less susceptible to fads sweeping the field, thus bolstering the likelihood that its accuracy would remain intact over time.

Of course, no guiding principle is perfect, and I have recently begun to think about the limitations of this one. What I have realized is that exercising restraint about the likelihood or degree of change is not the same as arguing that things will not change in the first place. Indeed, when a claim that things will not change coincides with an environment where that very change continues to be avidly and enthusiastically pursued, eventually a point arrives where it is worth revisiting the claim. In other words, sometimes fads fade, but sometimes they do not.

A Claim Reconsidered
The reason I have been thinking about this so much lately is because of a claim I made in an article my advisor and I published 3 years ago. Our study compared the metrics that media stakeholders—specifically news publishers and advertisers within the United States—used to understand online audience behavior (Nelson & Webster, 2016). This was at the Arizona State University, USA

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very beginning of a still ongoing discussion among journalism researchers and professionals surrounding the concept of “engagement,” or the idea that journalists should devote more of their woefully diminished resources to listening to and communicating with their readers (Lawrence, Radcliffe, & Schmidt, 2017). The term has grown increasingly appealing to news media professionals who see it as a potential solution to the industry’s most distressing issues, namely, its lack of sustainable revenue and public trust (Green-Barber & McKinley, 2019).

In those early days, there was a great deal of enthusiasm behind the notion that measuring the amount of time people spend on a site—something fairly straightforward for audience metrics providers to collect and for news publishers to understand—might work as a stand-in for engagement, which is understood to be more amorphous. So we decided to investigate how—or if—privileging an “engagement” metric like time spent would affect the winners and losers within the news media environment. Did the news sites that attracted the largest audiences attract the most loyal ones as well? Or would valuing a different sort of metric mean news publishers would face a greater incentive to publish in-depth, investigative reporting as opposed to less substantive clickbait?

We analyzed online news audience data, and found no significant relationship between the news sites that attracted the largest audiences and those that attracted the most devoted audiences. In light of these results, we concluded that a news industry shift in the way it evaluates success from measures of exposure to time spent would likely have “a transformative effect on the online news publishing industry” (Nelson & Webster, 2016, p. 11). News organizations might find themselves with newfound motivation to produce longer, more substantive pieces. Alternatively, they might simply seek out new sorts of gimmicks to keep people on their pages for longer periods of time.

Most importantly, however, we suggested that a shift this dramatic was unlikely to ever actually happen. We ended our article by writing,

> Measures of audience size and composition (i.e., ratings) will probably remain the predominant currency, because they capture information of central importance to advertisers. Metrics on engagement, derived from creative uses of time spent and visitation data, may well serve as a supplementary currency, but not much more. (Nelson & Webster, 2016, p. 13)

This is the claim that I now find myself reassessing.

### The Ad Industry’s Waning Influence

Historically, the goal of most media producers has been to reach as large an audience as possible. This has been especially true for news publishers in the United States, which have long depended in large part on advertising revenue to sustain themselves. Audience size metrics have thus served as the currency by which news media producers have compared their performance to that of their competitors (Nelson & Webster, 2016). This privileging of measures of exposure means that U.S. news organizations have generally faced “a strong incentive to publish content that will appeal to as wide an audience as possible, and less incentive to publish anything else” (Nelson, 2018, p. 3).

This situation has held true even with the advent of digital technology and the sophisticated audience measures that came with it. Despite the fact that news publishers can now determine how much time people spend with a story, how often they share that story on social media, and how much of that story they actually read, the metric that continues to be the most important to advertisers is the number of people who click on the story to begin with. This is because, even in a digital environment, the ad industry continues to privilege an ad’s reach more than any other trait. “For the past decade or so, the currency for publishers on the Internet has been, first and foremost, volume” (Skibinski, 2018).

When my advisor and I wrote our article in 2016, I assumed that as news publishers grappled with their pressing problems, they would do so while also struggling against the demands of a change-averse ad industry. In other words, I believed that journalism’s attempts to transform itself to overcome its challenges would be limited by the fact that its overriding form of evaluation would be unlikely to transform with it. What I did not consider, however, was that news publishers would begin to seriously question the utility of their bond with advertising revenue altogether.

Yet that exact conversation appears to be unfolding throughout the profession, for a number of reasons. First, news publishers have grown bolder in asking audiences to pay for news (Kiesow, 2018). And second, it is becoming frustratingly clear to journalism stakeholders that digital advertising revenue will never be enough to keep the lights on. While describing the recent layoffs of more than a thousand journalists from seemingly successful digital news outfits such as HuffPost, BuzzFeed, Vice, and TechCrunch, Josh Braun (2019) noted “the inability of the digital advertising business to make much meaningful room for anyone but monopolistic tech giants.” The Atlantic’s Derek Thompson (2016) was even more succinct: “There are too many publishers, and not enough ad money.”

If journalism were to move away from its dependence on advertising revenue, then it would no longer be beholden to the ad industry’s preferences for what its currency ought to be. Furthermore, if this shift was not only away from advertising, but also toward audience-supported revenue, then measures of engagement like time spent with online content could potentially move to the forefront of how news organizations evaluate success.
or failure within the field. News publishers would be less motivated to pursue a mass audience, and more motivated to cultivate a loyal one.

**When One Assumption Leads to Another**

Until this past year, I assumed the ad industry’s hold on journalism in the United States (where my research has been primarily focused) was a fixed state of affairs, which resulted in a variety of smaller assumptions implicit within my research. When I first started studying news publishers, I assumed the arrival of online audience behavior metrics would finally provide them the answer to the question, “How do we reach as many people as possible?” I was similarly sure of the questions that this development would raise for those interested in understanding journalism and its role in society: Would editors now be able to confidently identify the topics of interest to the largest number of readers? If so, how would that affect the kinds of news that journalists publish, the way they understand their responsibilities to their audiences, and the way they perceived “the audience” in general?

Even when journalism stakeholders began talking more about “engagement” metrics, I assumed these would complement, rather than replace, measures of audience size. However, now the news industry has begun to openly consider pursuing a transition away from the traditional, advertising-supported revenue model that privileges measures of audience size toward audience-supported models that privilege traits like loyalty. Acknowledging the possibility that this transition might succeed raises an entirely new set of questions that I hope to investigate. For starters, what are the implications for society if news publishers grow less interested in reaching everyone and more interested in winning over the loyalty of small groups of people, particularly those with disposable income?

Such a state of affairs could improve the quality of news reporting while also making it more exclusive, thus exacerbating gaps in political knowledge (Prior, 2005). Alternatively, it could improve the quality of local news, especially for communities of people who currently feel under- or misrepresented by large, daily newspapers targeting a nonexistent, homogeneous audience. On the other hand, at a moment when political polarization within the United States has become so extreme that good faith discussions between people with opposing views are remarkably difficult to come by, journalism’s decision to pursue targeted, niche audiences could further diminish the likelihood that people will ever meet in what Elihu Katz (1996) calls a “shared public space” (p. 1).

To be sure, even in the face of these recent attempts to change the news industry’s currency from one trait to another, one important aspect remains constant: the fact that these distinct measures (e.g., audience size, time spent) continue to reflect the interests of specific news media stakeholders. Audience size metrics reflect the interests of advertisers, for example, while time spent or other more loyalty-focused measures increasingly reflect the interests of news publishers. This suggests that the shape an industry’s currencies inevitably take will always likely reflect the interests of its primary players. In this case, the potential shift from one currency to another indicates not that news publishers’ and advertisers’ interests have grown less important over time, but simply more conflicted.

In short, the thing I no longer believe is not that everything can or will change, but that researchers need to constantly be willing to re-evaluate their knowledge in light of evolving conditions.

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