The Imagined Audience in Kansas

Journalists Describe Readers of Education Beat Reporting

With Additional Descriptions from Sports Beat Reporters

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Without the help of the reporters and editors who volunteered to their time to answer my questions, this report would not have happened. I hope that they and their colleagues find it useful.

Thanks to Emily Bradbury, the executive director of the Kansas Press Association, for putting me in touch with some of the journalists whose opinions and insights make the report meaningful.

And thanks in particular to the author of the study that mine is based on, James G. Robinson of *The New York Times*, who shared his ideas and methods with me.

—S.W.
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New introduction to the sports results

Additional interviews, published in 2024, show similar attitudes to data

After sharing the results of the 2022 study of journalists who cover K–12 education in Kansas, I realized that more work needed to be done. Even though the Plains reporters and editors in 2022 had attitudes similar to New York City education reporters three years earlier, would reporters on another beat have a different take? And would advancements in data tools, including artificial intelligence — ChatGPT was unknown when the education studies were undertaken — influence journalists' points of view?

Talking one day with my colleague, Dr. Teri Finneman, who studies news deserts and how to combat them, I mentioned wanting to expand my initial study, and she suggested looking at sports reporting. It made sense immediately. Like the education beat, the sports beat is easily defined and every local newsroom covers it. What's more, both education and sports are hyper-local topics. And both, as it happens, tend to overlap with education because teams are usually organized by high schools and colleges.

The topics are different in important ways, too. Sports has largely avoided the political flash points that infected school board meetings during Covid. And while some fans may think the coach made the wrong decision, costing the team a win, that feeling is unlikely to cause anyone to say that sports needs an overhaul or a cut to the team's budget.

So I set out to ask how sports reporters and editors figure out who is in their audience. What's the balance between using analytics tools and the shoe leather method of talking to people in town? Helping me answer that question was Jack Denebeim, a journalism student at the University of Kansas in 2023, who was also the sports reporter for *The Eudora Times*, the online news source overseen by Dr. Finneman. He conducted most of the interviews. After graduating in December 2023, Jack became the sports editor at the *Sedalia* (Mo.) *Democrat.*

What we found out, in short, is that the journalists who cover Kansas sports prefer to talk to their readers when assessing the audience. Like their colleagues who cover Kansas education, sports reporters and editors look at online comments, follow-up on emails, and occasionally look at user analytics. But their go-to method of imagining who makes up their audience relies on getting out of the office and having conversations.

The results of the sports study start on page 17. The original study of education reporters, first published in 2023, begins on page 3.

1. Introduction to the 2023 study

Page views, unique visitors, eye tracking — but useful data remains elusive

Who reads our articles? It's a question that journalists have long tried to answer. Before online publishing and analytics, I worked with many reporters and editors who seemed to believe that if the newspaper's circulation was 50,000, then 50,000 people read the front-page articles, 50,000 people read the metro articles, 50,000 people read the feature and sports articles, and the same 50,000 read pretty much everything else in the paper.

That was never the case, of course. And while we knew that design techniques, such as including with an article a photograph or chart or other visual data, would increase the likelihood that a reader would read even long-form journalism, we could only hope that other components of what newsrooms considered to be high-quality journalism were true.[1] Clever headlines and tight leads won awards, and still do. The degree to which they draw more readers past the opening paragraphs was an expectation in the pre-digital world, one encouraged by contests that are judged by fellow journalists. The expectation seemed to be that journalism that won awards was also the journalism that drove readership.

For most of the history of journalism the answers to those questions were largely unknown to reporters and editors. In the online age, we can find the answers with digital metrics. By showing us how long people spent on a web page, metrics show us how many readers ("unique visitors") read an article ("page views"), and software such as Chartbeat and Parsely show how deep into an article the average reader went before stopping.

Today we know with certainty that most subscribers do not read every article, and that the actual number is considerably smaller. In most cases, just a fraction of subscribers read nearly any article. Since the number of an article's readers is a subset of those who come to a news organization's site, figuring out which people read which articles could help journalists focus their reporting on the topics that meet their readers' needs. That could make existing readers more satisfied, attract new readers, and increase revenue though growth in subscriptions. Whether journalists use that data is one question, but a bigger question is whether journalists have access to it.

The newsroom of any city's news organization covers a range of topics. City government, police and courts, features on residents, high school sports, and local businesses are the stock in every traditional newsroom's trade. For this study I looked at a beat that is a subset of government: public education, from kindergarten through high school.

The examination of the education beat follows on the work of James G. Robinson, who interviewed seven reporters and six editors on the beat in New York, and one journalist "involved in audience work." They were of the staff of eight publications; one publication he invited to participate turned him down.[2] Ten of the fourteen participants were female. To "control the scope of the study," Robinson "decided to exclude broadcast (radio and TV) journalists from the study and focus on print journalism," which included five legacy newspapers and three digital-first startups. Because one journalist requested anonymity, he gave all of his sources anonymity; I did the same and found it helpful in allowing the participants to be more open in discussing their digital tools and how they use them. Robinson writes that "In any case, the specific identities of journalists and their publications are not particularly relevant to our findings." I found the same to be true.

Robinson concluded that despite the digital tools available to newsrooms, "personal prox-

1 Jacqueline Marino, "Reading Screens: What Eye Tracking Tells Us about the Writing in Digital Longform Journalism," *Literary Journalism Studies*, 8.2 (Fall 2016), pp. 146–47. "Long-form" was defined as 2,000 words or longer.

2 James G. Robinson, "The Audience in the Mind's Eye: How Journalists Imagine their Readers," Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University (n.d. [2019]), p. 56; all data in this paragraph are from the same page.
doi/10.7916/d8-drvj-wj06

imity—actual human contact—influences audience perceptions" for journalists at both legacy and digital publications. He suggested that the nature of beat reporting, in which the reporter works away from the newsroom, may account for reporters' "indifferent attitude towards analytics and metrics" and greater reliance on sources they meet in person.[3]

He also suggested that the information that comes from analytics, its charts, graphs and numbers, can intimidate journalists. Yet even people who are comfortable with data recognize that digital metrics "do not yet provide deeply resonant audience insights." Robinson points out that analytics tools in 2019, as they do now, "focus almost exclusively on user behavior, rather than intent[,] revealing little about the emotional underpinning of engagement that inform the imagined response."[4]

3 Ibid., p. 73. For more information on how beat reporters' distance from newsroom pressures affects their decisions, see Mel Bunce, "Africa in the Click Stream: Audience Metrics and Foreign Correspondents," *African Journalism Studies*, 36.4 (Winter 2015), pp. 12–29. doi: 10.1080/23743670.2015.1119487

4 Robinson., pp. 73, 74.

2. Background

Children and taxes: The education beat encapsulates local news

Education in the U.S. has grown into an issue that everyone seems concerned about, if not frustrated by, in the last few years. Looking only at K-12 schools, politicians and some parents decry lesson topics, instruction methods, and gender awareness. Probably the biggest reason awareness of school issues has grown is the role they played during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. The fatal disease caused many school districts to shut down classes briefly as teachers prepared to move instruction online. Then, when children were learning from home—where entire families were often spending their days too—parents could observe their children's learning. What they saw was often surprising, in part because pupils in primary school found it difficult to pay attention to the laptop computers that were the new medium for their lessons.

Then, when school doors began reopening, the question of requiring masks and, later, vaccinations attracted even greater attention from parents. School board meetings, which had generally been sparsely attended and of interest only to the dedicated and to gadflies, turned into acrimonious debate sessions with overflowing crowds monitored by armed police. Disagreements over how to re-open schools safely or whether to keep them closed led to threats of violence against school board members and, sometimes, to the schools themselves.

One result: Education has moved into the spotlight. Or maybe the spotlight swung to education. Either way, what was once a sleepy beat had become a topic nearly everyone was aware of, and local news sources ranked highly as trusted sources of information during the Covid-19 pandemic. One study in 2020 showed that 71% of Americans said they "strongly trusted" or "somewhat trusted" their local newspaper. (It was beat only by local TV news, with 85% expressing the same levels of trust, and tied with national TV news. Facebook, by contrast, had the same degrees of trust of 41% of Americans, and Twitter, only 33%.)[5]

Robinson published his work in the summer before the pandemic began. The results here come from interviews in the summer and autumn of 2022, when most Americans were living their lives in as close to pre-pandemic ways as they could. The emotional toll of Covid-19, however, remains.

Even so, Americans' overall confidence in public schools is high. In fact, according to the Phi Delta Kappa Poll conducted June 17–25, 2022, in English and Spanish, "54% of all adults give an A or B grade to the public schools in their community, the highest percentage numerically in PDK polls since 1974," when the poll was first conducted, and "up 10 points since the question was last asked in 2019." Asked how they rated teachers in their communities' schools, 63% expressed "trust and confidence" in their public schools' teachers, but only 16% of adults said they have "a great deal of trust and confidence" in them.[6]

Not only did Americans believe their local papers, in at least one case they turned to local papers more often during the pandemic. A study of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, a daily newspaper in Little Rock, saw its online readership increase fourfold during the pandemic. It had been that the users of its online site read the publication online around five days per month in the six months before the pandemic; after the pandemic

5 M. Ballew, P. Bergquist, M. Goldberg, A. Gustafson, J. Kotcher, J. Marlon, A. Roess, S. Rosenthal, E. [Edward] Maibach, & A. [Anthony] Leiserowitz, *American Public Responses to COVID-19*, April 2020, Yale Program on Climate Change Communication (2020), p. 10. Online at <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/american-public-responses-to-covid-19-april-2020/> [retrieved 18 September 2022]. The results are based on a poll of 3,933 individuals.

6 PDK Poll, "54th Annual PDK [Phi Delta Kappa] Poll" (2022). Online at <pdkpoll.org/2022-pdk-poll-results/> [retrieved 28 September 2022].

Table 1. Participants: Reporters

Media	City population	Time in current job	Full-time education reporter?	Hours/ week	Articles/ week
Web	> 100,000	1.5 years	Y	Full time	1.5–2[1]
Web	> 100,000	0.4 years	N	15–20[2]	5
Print, web	> 100,000	3 years	Y	Full time	3–6
Print, web	> 100,000	1.5 years	Y	Full time	8–10
Mean		*1.6 years*		*34.75*[3]	*5.06*
Median		*1.5 years*		*28.75*[3]	*4.75*

[1] Includes one article per week covering higher education.
[2] 20 hours are typical on weeks with a school board meeting.
[3] Assumes a full-time reporter works 40 hours per week.

Table 2. Participants: Editors

Media	City population	Full-time ed reporter on staff?	Reporters' hours/wk on educ	Articles/ week
Print, web	< 50,000	N	3–5	3
Print, web	< 50,000	N	8–10	2–3
Print, web	50–100,000	N	16	6–8
Print, web	> 100,000	Y	Full time	8–10
Mean			*17.25*[1]	*5.38*
Median			*12.5*[1]	*4.75*

[1] Assumes a full-time reporter works 40 hours per week.

started, the average jumped to about twenty days per month.[7]

With the increased attention to news during in the last few years, and Americans' trust in local news, and with reporting on schools growing more visible, the education beat would seem to have become more relevant than in 2019, when Robinson completed his study.

The main purpose of this study was to find out how they use the data that's available to them about their readers, those numbers and charts and tables provided by systems that measure online visitors to a website. And the big question was finding the degree to which journalists inform their reporting and writing with the results of digital metrics.

Method

Following Robinson, I sought reporters in print newsrooms. Print, however, is a poor term because startup news organizations rarely print anything; here it refers to journalists who publish reporting to be read, whether primarily in print or in pixels. In this study I will refer to legacy newsrooms and digital newsrooms, with the former referring to publications that print newspapers. All of the journalists who participated publish online, but "digital newsrooms" refers here to those newsrooms that do not publish a printed version.

For participants, I contacted eight newsrooms in cities of different sizes that cover school districts across Kansas, asking for volunteers. All eight agreed but in the end only seven of them participated. Each newsroom is in a different city, ranging east to west across just under 250 miles. To give some idea of the size of their newsrooms, I have identified them very roughly by their city populations, in three categories: below 50,000, between 50,000 and 100,000, and more than 100,000.

A difference from Robinson's study is that, unlike in New York and its larger editorial staffs, in Kansas only a handful of newsrooms have full-time education reporters, and in this study only three reporters are in that group. Moreover, some

7 Su Jung Kim, Xiaohan Wang & Edward C. Malthouse, "Digital News Readership and Subscription in the United States during COVID-19: A Longitudinal Analysis of Clickstream and Subscription Data from a Local News Site," *Digital Journalism* (2021), p. 10. doi: 10.1080/21670811.2021.1984972

Table 3. Participants' gender, compared to Robinson study.

Study	Female	Male	% Female
Wolgast	3	5	41.25
Robinson	10	4	71.43
National avg. 2016	71%	29%	71

Kansas newsrooms cover two or more districts in two or more counties, a geographic expanse that benefits from dividing the education beat among a handful of staff.

In some cases the editors themselves are among the education reporters, while at other publications the editors don't cover education. In total, four reporters and four editors from seven newsrooms participated. Their newsroom roles are described in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 3 shows how the proportion of female journalists in this study was considerably lower than in Robinson's. As Robinson pointed out, the gender ratio in his study nearly matched the national average of reporters from a 2016 report.[8]

The interviews were conducted from July 13 to September 20, 2022, on Zoom in all cases except one interview of a reporter and editor, which was in person. Each interview last about 40 minutes, sometimes running nearly an hour. The participants knew before agreeing to the interview that their answers would be anonymous, and that their publications would not be identified. I also told them that after asking questions with anonymous answers I would ask questions for full attribution, which they could choose to answer or not. All eight of them did, but I decided to exclude those answers from these results because they did not relate directly to the questions about using data; I intend to write a separate report that would include their answer along with those of other journalists.

When the participants discussed social media, Twitter of course came up. At the time of the interviews the question of whether Elon Musk would complete his purchase of the company had no reliable answer. The references to Twitter in this report should be understood in the context of Twitter before Musk's purchase and subsequent changes to the service.

8 At p. 56, referring to EWA, *State of the Education Beat 2016: A Field With a Future*, Education Writers Association (2016), p. 10. Online at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED577101.pdf> [retrieved 4 October 2022]. The association had not published more recent results as of October 2022.

3. Results

The imagined audience

Before getting into data, however, I asked the participants who they imagine their audience is. The answers fell into three categories: parents, residents who don't have children in school but pay taxes (which is their interest in schools reporting), and school staff and the school board. We can think of these groups as directly invested, secondarily invested, and professionally invested. All of the groups are taxpayers who support public schools; we will assume that most of the teachers and other staff live in the district where they work.

Parents can be said to have a direct investment in schools since their children are the reason each school exists. The strength of a school, in its intangible outcome (education) and in its tangible resources (buildings, learning material, teachers), have the greatest impact on parents and their children.

Residents who do not have children attending schools have an indirect investment in schools. While they may have a community booster's interest in schools' outcomes, their interest is likely to be measured by how they feel about how their tax dollars are spent. In these times of heightened awareness of what happens in the classroom, from masks to the way some lessons are taught, they may also feel they have a stake in the answers and may choose to participate in a school board meeting or become active in some other way. But without their own children in schools, they cannot be said to have a direct interest.

School administrators and staff have a professional investment in the outcome of schools. The teachers, principals, and the school board seek to the best outcomes in their schools based on revenue to cover expenses, learning outcomes measured by state and federal testing, and the professional accolades that come with a successful school (and the diminished reputations of schools and districts that cannot meet state and national standards).

Of the three groups, who should a news publication write for? Reporters from two publications, both of them legacy publications, named all three groups. One reporter explained it this way: "For the most part, parents. Teachers; to an extent, policymakers." The reporter defined policymakers as school board members and those with an interest in education beyond having children in school, but even so, policymakers were a third-level audience. "Depending on the issue, I'd say parents and teachers."

The other reporter who mentioned all three groups placed an emphasis on parents (direct investment) and school boards (professional investment). "Parents are interested in issues in their own districts, and want to know what's going on in neighboring districts. School board members want to know what parents are upset about or interested in."

Three other journalists identified only parents and non-parents, excluding those with a professional interest. A legacy publication's editor, who is one of three who covers education in the newsroom, said, "I try to think, if I had a kid in school, what would I want to know about? Also, people are interested in taxes, in government, so I hit on financial questions."

The topic of reporting was important to a digital publication's reporter. "I generally try to think about what parents and families will care about. Sometimes, taxpayers in general."

A summary of their answers appears in Table 4.

Whichever group they think of when reporting, the reporters I interviewed were dedicated to informing their audiences. "My goal is to try to reach the kind of parents that probably aren't already on top of things, people that don't understand, like, here's the ramifications of the school bond issue," a legacy reporter said. To find story ideas from those with a direct investment, one legacy reporter seeks out parent groups on social media and asks permission to join them.

Some of the journalists volunteered demographic data. Referring to colleagues, a digital reporter said, "We've talked about the demographics of who reads our work. They skew younger than other publications. Part of our mission is to reach people who haven't been served by the

Table 4. Who do you imagine your audience is? Answers were volunteered.

		Audience		
		Non-parents[1]	*Parents*	*School board & staff*
Publication	*Role*	*Indirect*	*Direct*	*Professional*
Legacy 1	Editor	√		
Legacy 2	Editor	√	√	
Legacy 3	Editor	√	√	
Legacy 4	Reporter	√	√	√
Legacy 5	Reporter	√	√	√
Digital 1	Reporter	√	√	
Digital 2	Reporter	√	√	

[1] Those without school-age children, who may be parents too

media." By contrast, one editor of a legacy publication acknowledged that its readers tend to be older and that fewer of them are likely to have school-age children. These differences in these two answers reflect an awareness of the journalists' audiences that can help them make better decisions about reporting for their readers.

A reporter at a legacy newsroom brought up the tension between journalism and managers' financial goals. "The managers are always willing to let me try new stuff, but they get pressure from [the owners] to get page views. So I'll do a story on [a well-to-do area] that gets hits so I can do a story on [a less affluent area] too."[9]

Covering various neighborhoods is one way to report on a variety of residents even if some are less likely to read the article than others. How, I asked, does the audience change based on the topic? Features on students and clubs and how to apply for reduced-fee lunches may appeal to readers who are less interested in bond proposals and weekly school board meetings. Two legacy editors had different answers. One said the audience for all education articles is similar: "I don't think it changes." The other saw a distinction between feature articles written primarily for parents, and the newsier, nuts and bolts articles about the school board being read by a different audience.

In the online age, anything on the web can be accessed and read nearly anywhere, so I wanted to know how much journalists consider readers in another county or even outside Kansas. Their answer: not much. "Our business model is local news," an editor said, adding that the newsroom does not "anticipate or look for" readers outside its coverage area. A reporter in a legacy newsroom writes for a local readership, but would like a broader audience. "I sometimes wish we took things a little broader. I think we're sometimes a little too hyper-focused." This reporter suggested that an adjustment as simple as changing the name of the city in the headline to "Kansas" would help expand readership on articles that cover issues that hit home in many districts.

There's another way to look at the question, one that occurred, unprompted, to an online reporter. "I've noticed that some stories will always do a lot better in a certain [ethnic] community versus another one," based on the schools topic that mattered most to them. For example, which neighborhoods are included in redistricting for representation on the school board, or a feature on a particular teacher.

Readers in real life

One of the best parts of a beat reporter's life is getting out of the office to talk to people about the beat—education, in our case. Those sources may typically be administrators at a school and board members outside a meeting, but they are also parents, students and teachers, as well as elected officials such as city counselors, county commissioners, and legislators who may have a say in where a new school is erected and how much teachers are paid.

Aside from specialized sources, I wanted to know the last time the journalists met someone who struck them as a typical reader.

"Yesterday," an editor replied, and went a step further. "Every single day. Everybody reads education articles." Even if that's more aspirational the factual, it could also mean that every reader will read one type of education article or another. Some people read the features, other never miss reading about a bond. Another editor said meet-

9 Specific names were removed to retain anonymity.

ing a typical reader of education news was rare because this editor doesn't cover the beat.

Among the reporters, a digital reporter referred to meeting readers at the publication's community advisory board, which meets quarterly. Those readers are likely to be highly engaged in local issues and, as volunteers, are people who have spare time to visit with reporters, making them atypical news consumers. A reporter in a legacy newsroom said he meets a typical reader "maybe a few times a month," and a third, also in a legacy newsroom, responded, "It's hard to answer because it's a variety of people" who make up readers of the education beat.

Meeting readers may not happen frequently after changes from the pandemic. Board meetings are reliably streamed online, making it easier for the curious to watch remotely and harder for reporters to find and interview them. Newsrooms themselves are more likely to allow working from home, which means the public can't simply walk into a newsroom to visit with a reporter.

The same technology that enables remote work also enables virtual connections. How frequently do the journalists hear from a reader via email, a phone call, or directly through social media (as opposed to being addressed publicly in a comment)? One digital reporter hears a few times a month, mostly by email. The other digital reporter hears directly from readers once or twice a week.

Legacy journalists heard more frequently. One of them hears from readers every week or so but more frequently after publishing an enterprise article. Referring to reporting on teacher shortages and districts that ease teacher licensing to make up for lost staff, this reporter hears from readers "not just here in [the city], but from all around the state." Another legacy reporter hears regularly. "Almost every day, especially on days when a story is published. Every story I get a couple of emails on," which the reporter uses "to get a sense of how people are taking a story," which the reporter said means determining if readers understand the article's point, or are they argumentative or angry.

The editors, perhaps because of their status in the newsroom or their stature in their cities, receive plenty of feedback. "Usually with the school features, we hear back almost all the time because it's a mom coming in to buy papers," said one, who then noted that school board articles elicit a response once a week. This editor, the one who considers every reader an education reader, clearly has a dedicated readership: "Sometimes they reach out and ask for reporting on bond issues, for example."

Another editor hears from readers daily but on education topics only a couple of times a month. Yet when the local school board was discussing whether to close schools, the editor received four or five comments a week.

The third editor reaps the benefit of a vibrant letters-to-the-editor section, which drives readers to comment daily. "But we've always had a very open editorial page policy where letters to the editor go, and so we have a comfort level in our community, with people communicating with us, interacting with us as a newspaper." Not all of the letters are about education, but the comments are plentiful. Referring to readers, this editor said they use the phone, email, and even approach his staff "out in the public" to talk about issues. "I think it's crucial for a small newspaper to have that kind of interaction."

Social: Looking for reader responses

The journalists' methods of figuring out who their audiences are have so far relied on their guts and on their shoe leather. Talking to sources and listening to readers are both ways that reporters and editors develop what we can refer to as a gut sense, for lack of a better term, of who's reading their work. There's undoubtedly some accuracy to it but one person's gut sense may be no more accurate than the next person's. How to better divine what readers are thinking?

Social media is one answer. Readers post their responses, reactions, and thoughts to news online where everyone can see them, and share articles they have an interest in. No longer does a reporter need to ask the guys having their morning coffee at the diner to get a pulse on locals' attitudes. All of those points of view are on digital display. How important a role is checking online comments to a journalist's job?

"It's part of everyone's job," said an editor who illustrated the importance of keeping an eye on social media by recounting how the newsroom found out about a fire: The city's fire department announced the blaze only on its Facebook page, so if the news staff had not been following the department on Facebook the staff would not have known until someone happened to contact them.

Yet when a task is part of everyone's job, it's no one's specific job. That seems to be more typical. By contrast, both online publications have a social media editor who monitors it. "I check them spe-

cifically because I enjoyed it," said one online reporter. The other said that checking social media is not required, "but reporters know that if people are commenting on articles, they are newsworthy.

And even though checking social media is not a requirement for one legacy reporter, this person spends a fair amount of time peeking at comments. "It's not something I've ever had an editor tell me to do," the reporter said. "I don't know if it's anxiety that drives me to read them, but I'm always curious how people are taking stories, the different opinions, different sides." Occasionally, checking in online causes more anxiety than it provides enlightenment. Referring to comments and other reactions following reporting on the legislator who kicked a student while working as a substitute teacher, the reporter said, "Some stories just get out of hand—they go national or international—and you just have to close your laptop."

The legacy reporters and editors were the most committed to checking for online comments. "If a story [of mine] posts, I'm checking it every hour or couple of hours, depending how busy I am. At least throughout the day," said one reporter. For an editor, it's equally frequent. "All the time, yeah, I mean we're checking all the time," the editor said before pointing out that the way Facebook handles comments make it "more awkward to get to now." Another editor has a dedicated approach: "I read every comment posted" on the newsroom's social media.

The other two editors say they check Facebook a few times a day, one to check a post's reach, and the other to make sure people aren't copying and pasting articles—thieves!—to share with non-subscribers.

So we know that journalists are looking at social media, but they aren't convinced of its usefulness. An editor whose articles are behind a paywall is frustrated by the number of commenters who post without having bothered to read (and pay for) the article they are commenting on. Referring to followers on the newsroom's Facebook page, the editor lamented, "A lot of times they post rumors out there [and] don't take time to really read the entire story." Instead, the editor said, many social media users see only the headline. "And oh, my God, I'd give an arm to stop the ranting and raving when they really don't know all the details."

Another editor notices the difference between readers' posts and their reading. "There have been stories where there was a ton of engagement on Facebook. And yet, it didn't drive that that many clicks."

The usefulness of social media to reach readers seems to be changing, at least to the journalists interviewed for this report. "Links from Facebook are decreasing, and from Google are increasing," an editor said. "Search engines are becoming more and more prevalent. There was a time that we saw Facebook pushing one-third of all traffic, a few years ago." That's decreasing, according to the editor, who suggests the change may come from alterations to Facebook's algorithms and the growing popularity of the staff's email newsletters.

A reporter in a legacy newsroom who actively posts on social media is turning away from Twitter because this person seeks an audience different from those who typically scroll through tweets. "I don't want to give up on Twitter. But I sure haven't been doing it as much lately." The reporter likes the statewide engagement he sees around education issues on Twitter, "but it doesn't really reach down into the kinds of audience that I think we might be targeting with our stories that go into the local parents [who] are not going to be on Twitter, or even teacher." Instead, the reporter said Twitter is used mostly by policymakers who are already engaged. (Note that these comments were made months before Elon Musk completed his purchase of Twitter.)

As uninformed as some readers' online engagement may be, other followers on social media read the articles and contribute their own perspectives. Collecting information from them, such as through crowd-sourcing, could increase perspectives in reporting and lengthen a reporter's list of story ideas. Yet when it comes to the comments that appear on articles, the value that reporters and editors place on them turns out to be very low. While most of the journalists said that they take into account the comments they encounter on their articles, none of them say that those comments direct their reporting.

One editor explained that the newsroom may follow up on some comments, "but then again, it goes back to, are we are we tilting our coverage toward what you see on Facebook?" The editor pointed out that the staff does not dismiss social media; it has a role, for both education and news in general.

Reporters in legacy newsrooms similarly see social media as a tool for reporting, though perhaps just one of many tools. Two of them separately pointed out that when social media

Table 5. Which analytics do you use? Answers from the seven newsrooms

	Google	Parsely	Social	Other services
Legacy (both)	5	2	5	Synchronex, Wordpress
Online only		2	2	
Total	**5**	**4**	**7**	

Note: These are the analytics tools volunteered by the reporters and editors interviewed; others in their newsrooms may use additional analytics tools.

comments come from school insiders, they can serve as a way to get around tight-lipped school districts and their dearth of on-the-record comments. These reporters peruse the comments on their districts' social media feeds to find new angles and potential sources.

It's another way that reporters use social media comments to supplement their reporting rather than direct it. One of these reporters explained how to improve reporting. "Is a parent reacting to what I wrote about, is there something I don't understand? If a person is tearing something apart, I like to reach out to those people. It's a good way to build outreach to the community, and sometimes it's a way to get a good source for the next story."

Analytics: Plenty of data, but what of value?

Perhaps the most promising means of finding out who's reading the news arrived with website analytics, and indeed, it's very satisfying to watch a live dashboard as users arrive on your site, move around it, and settle on something to read. Finally, we could evaluate readers' interests based on something more useful than counting clicks.

The reality has not matched the promise, however. Editors, reporters, and even social media staffs seem to struggle to make useful sense of the data. Perhaps there's just too much of it to try to understand, or maybe the data we learn—which phone readers use, what their shopping interests are, how they came to the site and so on—simply cannot help us understand what the reader wants in an article about the school board.

Analytics are here to stay, however, and will inevitably become more useful. In the meantime, journalists' views of their digital analytics service calls to mind Nixon's description of *The New York Times*: "Some read it and like it. Some read it and don't like it. But *everybody* reads it."[10] All of the journalists I interviewed read their analytics reports, and all of them say they do so despite having no requirement to read them.

How useful are analytics? The answer seems to be decided by the role any mass news medium plays for its audience: to inform and to entertain. "I think it helps us kind of realize what the community is really paying attention to," an editor said. "But you know it's this double-edged sword, because by the same token, if the public wants more stories about things that are kind of off-the-wall things, we have still have to cover city council, county commission, because we're the watchdog."

Another editor explained how analytics can be useful for macro information. "We're looking at page-view numbers and subscriber page-view numbers, and digital subscription numbers," the editor said. Others use analytics for similarly specific information, such as time spent on an article and the number of shares. A legacy editor said that organic hits—people coming to the site directly—are greater than hits from social media, and knows that readers of their education articles are younger than the others and that they are more likely to read on a mobile device. The deeper dive is not so surprising: "Hard news, teacher staffing, planning, budgeting needs, construction, bond issues, all of that doesn't do great. What gets hits are cultural touchstones: Masks, [Critical Race Theory], stuff I don't feel matters but it matters to some people." The editor said that "controversial issues" generate the most visits, along with bright features on a student or teacher.

The editor went on to make a critical point about trying to learn from analytics results. While the data records a visit to a page, "I don't even know if they read the articles." More important to this editor is how many subscriptions and renewals came in during the week.

Two reporters, one for a digital newsroom and the other for a legacy newsroom, both volunteered that they follow up on their articles to see if they are popular, using analytics to find out

10 Emphasis in original. David W. Dunlap. "A Presidential Place of Honor, Unfilled for Now." *The New York Times*, Jan. 26. 2017, online at <www.nytimes.com/2017/01/26/insider/a-presidential-place-of-honor-unfilled-for-now.html> [accessed Nov. 3, 2022].

if they outperformed their expectations. "Sometimes I write one and I think, that's boring, and no one's going to want to read it," the online reporter said. "And it turned out it did fairly well initially, and then people continue to search for it on Google." It's interesting information, even if it is not particularly useful.

Another editor seemed to sum up the respondents' feelings. "If you allow the analytics to drive the story, you under-deliver to the readers because there's not a lot to the story."

Measuring success

Using analytics to measure the success of an article or a topic has its drawbacks. Reporters dread being evaluated based on the number of clicks their articles produce, and most editors have moved beyond that simplistic metric. One editor uses analytics to help answer three questions: Did we do a good job posting on social media? Are we putting out enough news? Are we posting news that interests people? To answer those questions this editor still counts clicks but also considers shares (calling them "commentary that's good discussion"), engagement, reach, and likes on Facebook—which he knows has its drawbacks. "I hate Facebook, but everybody uses Facebook."

All of the reporters who participated are younger than the editors by at least a decade (in my estimation: I didn't ask anyone's age), so the reporters may feel more drawn to applying analytics to their own definitions of success. "I kind of do, maybe to a fault," a legacy reporter said. "I think all newsrooms are trying to figure out how seriously to take these." Another legacy reporter explained how looking at an article's popularity, in analytical terms, can show which education topics the readers have the most interest in, such as teacher licensing and teacher shortages, which can influence the newsroom's decision on what to cover.

An online-only newsroom approaches digital data warily. "Our founder doesn't want us to get stressed out if our stories aren't getting read," the reporter said before bringing up a conundrum of seeking readers for articles published online only. "But we aim to reach readers who haven't been served by the media," which would seem to acknowledge that at some point, clicks matter. That point was made by the other reporter for an online-only publication: "Bigger numbers of views are best."

Among the other editors, one explained how the news staff reviews the reasons some articles floundered online. The editor was referring to one of those once-in-a-while articles that the reporter and editor expect to perform well—and then does not. At a follow-up meeting with the staff whose job it is to optimize digital performance, they ask why the article failed to resonate. "Do we need to rewrite the headlines? Do we need to think about social in this in a different way?"

Another editor reflected on using analytics reports as something of a wake-up call. If a topic that the newsroom regularly and frequently reports on and the data show few click-throughs, little Facebook engagement and a small number of re-tweets, "it's gonna give you pause," the editor said, before pointing out that analytics would not be the sole reason to change coverage. "You don't want to rely on [an analytics report] from a journalism standpoint, because it doesn't neatly fit with the mission." Informing the public comes first. "Sometimes part of our mission is to report what they ought to know but they don't know yet that they ought to know."

A story done well

How do journalists know when the article was done well? They discussed a variety of methods here for getting an answer. There are digital metrics and gut feelings, there are talking to parents and reading online comments. One newsroom even hosts meetings with readers to hear their thoughts. Successful reporting, however, remains an elusive concept to measure.

It's important because a reporter's article is the method print (or pixel) journalists use to disseminate their work. An article needs to be easy to understand, interesting in the topics it covers, relevant to its audience, and an accurate reflection of the issues the reporter is covering. Yet even when each of those criteria is met, readers may still decide to spend their time doing something besides reading the article, no matter how important a reporter and editor believe it is.

Like the other qualitative goals addressed in this study, measuring success varies among the newsrooms. Yet a few themes emerge: page views, positive audience response (or an absence of a negative response), and revenue through subscriptions.

Page views

Among the participants, it was two reporters who mentioned page views as the definition of success. One of the reporters works in a legacy newsroom that gives "each reporter a benchmark

of how many page views you get a month, and how many subscriptions we get after reading your story," which may explain the reporter's interest in "religiously watching page views all the time." The reporter then listed elements that have an impact on an article's online success: Was the headline written in the right way? Did the article reach our intended audience? "I obsess over it a little bit." Even looking to see if people subscribed after reading the article is part of the reporter's evaluation, a metric that otherwise is mentioned only by some of the editors. Numbers go only so far, though. The reporter also looks for online comments and email from readers,

A reporter for a digital newsroom follows the numbers too, but only to a point. The reporter tracks page views, "but success to me is actually hearing from someone who was, like, You know, I read this story, and it made me really think." There are no page view minimums for reporters in this newsroom, which probably helps make page views just a part of the definition of success.

Positive responses

In a different legacy newsroom, one reporter acknowledges the availability of digital metrics but as one of the longer-serving education reporters in the study, the reporter listens for reader reaction, often during in-person encounters. "People have started to recognize me and say, Oh, you're [the reporter], you wrote this story."

That personal contact was mentioned by an editor, too. "Anecdotal stuff of people in the supermarket checkout, who say, 'I like that story.'" The editor also mentioned social media, singling out Facebook, as a source of positive comments as well as followers sharing the article on their own feeds. A digital newsroom's reporter relies on social media the same way while acknowledging its limits. "Even then I don't know if they think it's well written or they like the topic or they're just reading the headline." Referring to specific online comments or shares, the reporter said, "If it's someone in the school district, like school board members, or school employees, then I usually think they think it's positive."

Another editor similarly looks offline for responses. "Beyond analytics from Google and Facebook is actually the reaction" from readers, the editor said, particularly when they want more information about the topic of the article. "That's the best guide," the editor said, who then described letters to the editor as a strong measurement of an article's success. "We still have a decent community of letter-writers," so hearing from them on a topic shows the newsroom what interests the readers.

Revenue

Finally, there's the bottom line to consider. Newsrooms don't exist without revenue, which is, in one way or another, the reason all journalists want to connect with their audiences. That only two participants volunteered revenue as a measure of success may show the value that their newsrooms place on journalism. Even still, as journalists, they expressed feelings on both sides of the church-state divide.

"It depends how you define success," an editor said. "From the business model side, clicks are fine, but they don't generate dollars—which are subscriptions." Comments online are important, but not all comments: "I like articles that generate discussion, but I want them to generate informed discussion." It's a sentiment that came up several times in the interviews.

A reporter in a digital newsroom got straight to the point. "Ideally it's when they donate and mention an article I've written is the reason they're donating."

4. Conclusions from education reporters

Reporters' gut feelings outweigh their reliance on digital analytics

Even with data from social media and digital analytics, the audience that Kansas education reporters and their editors rely on matches the one Robinson describes as imagined in his study of education beat reporters in New York in 2019. In both studies, the data from digital analytics form only one tool, and one the journalists do not place much confidence in. The journalists who cover education in Kansas were uniformly more descriptive of the usefulness of their interactions with individuals than they were of metrics, and all of them indicated that they were more likely to adjust the topics they cover based on what they heard in conversations or from a reader who contacted them electronically than from an analytics report. By contrast, the only way digital numbers mattered to them was in page views. They said that with that data they were more likely to report on a topic that generated lots of views, and less likely to continue reporting on a topic that attracted few page views.

High tech, high touch

Given all the depth and breadth of various software programs and online platforms, it's surprising at first to see how little the journalists trust digital data. But unlike non-journalist "content providers" who post their ideas and comments to social media, journalists have for centuries relied on gathering information by going into communities to visit with their sources in person, meeting the people who have connections to education, and attending meetings of decision-makers, and only then reporting what they find. Journalists live and report in the three-dimensional world and publish their results in the two-dimensional world, as print reporters have done since journalism began. The difference today is printing with pixels instead of ink, but they still rely on what Robinson characterized as "personal proximity—actual human contact." The journalists I spoke to described using social media as a way to find sources whom they could interview, a way of using technology to arrive at human contact.

Another reason for journalists' limited use of audience data may be that most of it is sterile. It's the ten-thousand-foot view, which, as Robinson concluded, "focus[es] almost exclusively on user behavior, rather than intent." Analytics show us the time of day users visit, where they are, their flow through a site and the time spent on each page they visit, which devices they use to connect to the site, and their gender, ages, and consumer categories. None of that can tell us definitively if they are more interested in reporting on a proposal for a bond issue, features on teachers, or the price of a school lunch next year. But talking to people at a school board meeting can get answers to each of those.

The ways the journalists evaluate an article's success bear out the divergent methods of collecting audience information. The number of page views was the only figure any of the journalists mentioned as a measure of success; nothing else from digital reports came up. Instead, they were much more interested in the nature of reader response: The number of comments and, more importantly, the nature of the comments (constructive or not); the number of times articles were liked or shared on social media (which can be part of a data report, but the journalists retrieved these details from looking directly at the posts); and the number of readers who chose to subscribe or donate after reading an article.

Future research

The next investigations into how journalists imagine their audiences would be improved, first, by expanding the sample size. A challenge in Kansas is the somewhat small number of news publications with a full-time education reporter, so including editors who oversaw that reporting allowed a larger participant pool. Another way to do that would be geographically enlarging the newsrooms' locations beyond Kansas (and the two Kansas City's).

Broadening the participant pool to include broadcast journalism would add another dimension to the results, though no broadcast news-

rooms in Kansas have a full-time education reporter.

Determining the reasons journalists choose not to rely on digital tools would make for interesting results. Robinson's results suggest that some of the reasons are reporters' access to digital metrics (which may be more limited than their editors see) and the long-standing newsroom notion that journalists simply develop a sense for the topics their audiences are interested in. The journalists I interviewed expressed similar ideas. Many indicated that social media comments are not representative of those who read their articles, and, as an editor put it regarding data, "If you allow the analytics to drive the story, you under-deliver to the readers because there's not a lot to the story."

Queries to introduce to future surveys would seek to understand the ways journalists use digital tools and how, specifically, digital results are put to use. This survey, by contrast, asked only general questions and let the respondents answer as they wished. Future researchers could create a battery of questions that separate analytics tools (such as Parsely and Google) from analytics that come from a social media platform; that ask for specific frequency of checking the data, such as on a Likert scale; determine what journalists are looking for (the nature of comments on social media, the age of online visitors, and any other demographic info they seek); that determine any specific ways the data is evaluated (counting clicks, conversions to subscriptions); and if digital data is actually applied to future reporting as the results here and in 2019 suggest.

5. Sports results

Editors and reporters on sports beat rely on get reactions too

Conducted in summer 2023, this study includes five publications, four of which are legacy newsrooms that also maintain their own websites, and one new publication that appears only on the web. It alone aims to reach people across the region and covers a range of sports from high school to adults' amateur competitions. The legacy newsrooms each cover a city, whose size I separate by population in Table 1A. As in the education study, they are in categories smaller than 50,000 (two publications), then 50,000 to under 100,000 (one publication), and then 100,000 and larger (one publication).

Method

They were selected by following up on the education study and by outreach to publications that were not part of the education study. The interviews asked 14 questions, were conducted by Zoom and lasted about 45 minutes. Four of the interviews were conducted by Jack Denebeim, a journalism student at the University of Kansas who graduated in December 2023. I conducted the other interview.

Following the protocol in the education study, the interviewees were promised anonymity not only by name but by newsroom so that they could discuss internal operations freely. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. From the transcriptions I organized the answers and identified themes.

Results

Sports reporters are often seen as a group distinct from their newsroom colleagues. They cover an aspect of local life that combines entertainment and emotion, budgets and bragging rights. Especially in reporting on high school athletes, sports reporters' work is read and discussed by a range of readers broader than most other content except, perhaps, the weather.

Since they work in the same newsroom as the rest of the staff, it isn't surprising that their attitudes and approaches to social media and analytics are similar to their education colleagues'. It was the education beat that I studied a year earlier, in 2022, finding that reporters and editors who cover K–12 schools in Kansas sought reader comments online but, with a few exceptions, took little time or interest in evaluating analytical data of their readers' online habits around reading their articles.

The same is largely the case for sports reporters. This study is the result of five interviews of Kansas journalists who cover sports. Some of them have "editor" in their job titles, and of them, some area also reporters. Others specifically report on sports rather than serve as an editor. The level of teams they cover varies largely based on their city limits: If a college or university is in town, they cover it in addition to high school teams. Otherwise, just the high school teams. Some mentioned that they do features on amateur competitions for adults, such as a bike race. None of the interviewees in this study covered a professional team.

Here are their answers, organized by the same topics as the education reporters' answers. The descriptions of publication as small, medium or large comes from their cities' population.

Table 1A. Participants (editors and reporters)

Media	City population	Time in current job	F/T sports reporter?	Hours/ Week	Articles/ week[2]
Web	n/a[1]	>10 years	Y		1[3]
Print, web	50–100,000	0.25 years	Y		12
Print, web	<50,000	>10 years	N	20–30	10–20
Print, web	<50,000	>10 years	N	2–4	7–10
Print, web	>100,000	1.9 years	Y		5

[1] Covers sports state-wide

[2] During school year

[3] Large feature stories

Readers in real life

Like the education reporters, the journalists who covered sports reported recent contact with typical readers of their work, sometimes frequently. "Oh, all the time," one reporter said. "My dentist, my dental hygienist, my barber. I mean, the list just goes on and on. They go from being former athletes and coaches to just the man on the street."

Another reporter said that the first time they went to a track meet at a new venue, they ran into locked gates. When two track fans arrived, they recognized the reporter and, after joking that the reporter was lost, showed them the entrance.

The most common type of typical reader who came up: Parents.

Social: Looking for reader responses

Hearing from consumers of sports news comes mostly through social media, which is no surprise. Four of the five journalists said that checking social is part of their job and that they check social media accounts every day.

A reporter who specializes in sports features was contacted 25 to 50 times a week through social media. A sports editor at a medium-sized publication received 20 to 100 comments a week on Facebook posts, five to ten comments on the publication's web site per week, and a few emails too; the higher end of the ranges came during the local team's biggest sport season.

The reporters kept on top of the comments and a couple of them volunteered that on sports articles, at least, the comments tended to be supportive. "Most people are, even if the team loses and you write that story and they're saying, 'We're still proud of you, boys,'" one reporter said, and added, "I mean, it is so much more positive on the sports side than what you see with some other news coverage and just other social media in general." This overlaps with advertiser support for sports content (see Revenue, below).

The fifth journalist, who doesn't check online comments, takes the contrary approach. "You don't know about those internet comment sections. Are these real people? It could be one person created ten accounts," said the editor, at a mid-size publication. "Maybe this isn't possible, but it just feels like one person could create a ton of different accounts," with the result being a dozen comments that appear to come from only a dozen people. But what if many of the comments are from individuals in town? That wasn't enough to make a difference. "Either there's going to be negative comments I don't want to read or there's going to be positive comments and there aren't going to be enough positive comments that I would like for that story."

Table 3A. Participants' gender, compared to previous studies.

Study	Female	Males	% Female
Wolgast Sports	1	4	20
Wolgast Ed (2022)	3	5	41.25
Robinson (Ed, 2019)	10	4	71.43
Ed: Nat. avg. 2016	71%	29%	71

Analytics: Plenty of data, but what of value?

Moving from reading online comments to pulling back the curtain on the data behind online visits, the journalists described an interest in finding reader data but a challenge in finding the time to make good use of the information. "We need to track better, but the time is just not there," one editor said. "When you're doing a small-town newspaper, you're wearing so many hats and that's a big struggle and it's getting harder."

All of the publications used at least one method to monitor online visitors , with Facebook being the most common. Indeed, for one publication, Facebook was the only digital monitoring tool in use. Two publications used two social media platforms: in one case, Facebook and Instgram, and in the other Facebook and X (Twitter). The other two publications each used one social media platform and one analytics platform. For one it was X and Parsely, and for the other it was Facebook and an advertising analytics service.

The extent to which newsrooms used analytics varies, which is similar to analytics' use in ed-

Table 4A. Who do you imagine your audience is? Answers were volunteered.

		Audience		
Publication	Role	*Parents/fam*	*Community*	*Fans of team/sport*
Web	Reporter			√
Print, web	Editor/reporter		√	√
Print, web	Editor/reporter	√	√	
Print, web	Editor	√	√	
Print, web	Editor/reporter			√

Table 5A. Which analytics do you use?

	Parsely	FB	Instagram	X	Other
Web only		√	√		
Print, web	√	√√√		√√	Infolinks

ucation reporting. One mid-size newsroom posts results of readers' visits in the newsroom weekly, and another mid-size newsroom uses data to praise reporters whose work garners more hits than usual. "And that's good, constructive feedback on a story that they put some work into. Makes up for all those other boring mundane ones you have to do."

Those in editing positions were on the same page about using analytics' results to decide what to cover: They don't do it. As the education interviews showed, unusual news and novel features are more likely to grab readers' attention even though the foundational reporting that is those stories' base, meetings and the like, attract few views. Beat reporting, the feeling was, succeeds only when reporters cover all aspects of the beat, not just the exciting events.

Analytics can play a role in display, however. "It probably drives how we're going to play a story in our print publication and how much time we're going to dedicate" to reporting it, the editor of a mid-size publication said. So there's a role for analytics, though it was a small one.

Measuring success: A story done well

How do these reporters and editors decide if a piece of reporting had been done well? A common thread in the responses was the connection between the strength of an article and how interesting the game was. "A lot of it is based on, in a sense, just how good the particular event is and what it offers. Some of them obviously offer a lot. Some of them don't offer as much." A less interesting game makes the reporter's job more difficult, and none of them expected a reporter to craft an engrossing article out of a ho-hum game.

Still, a few measurable points came up. One was including multiple sources in sports articles, which was a challenge for this editor in a smaller market because the newsroom covered sports in several communities with a limited staff.

Another editor had a simple answer: Winning in the Kansas Press Association contest.

A metro publication's editor pointed to the business side. Converting readers to subscribers was on this journalist's mind.

Page views

Like most journalists, the five in this study resist using page views as the signifier of success. One pointed out that the home team's win or loss plays a big role in determining the article's page views. "You obviously have more people who read the article of a win than read the article of a loss. So is that a failed story or didn't succeed as well as the other story? You put as much work into a loss as you do a win."

When the team wins, the game story can be a winner too. As an editor at a smaller publication said, "it humbles you a little bit when you see 10,000, 15,000 hits," or as many as "25–30,000 on a story when you're in a town of 20,000." But none of the interviewees was still using page views as a measurement of success of game stories. Perhaps for those reasons, an editor at a mid-size publication applied analytics results to breaking news reporting but not to game stories.

Positive responses

At a mid-size newsroom, a sports editor appreciated readers' feedback on an article, but placed a higher premium on the feeling they did good work in reporting and writing it.

A smaller newsroom's reporter wished there were more time to look at reader responses. "Because a goal of trying to be the best newspaper we can be is looking at good feedback. And I don't mean good feedback like always positive. I don't mind negative feedback or questions. That's how you get better." Overall, readers' responses were unlikely to sway an editors' feelings about whether an article hit a home run or was a foul tip.

Revenue

Taking a bottom-line approach to reader data certainly makes sense when financial strains only seem to grow, and here's where journalists recognized the value of analytics.

An editor at a smaller publication noted the obvious, that fans can't get enough information about their favorite teams. While fans can find vast amounts of sports talk, reporting and data about major universities and pro teams, reporting on high schools, where local communities bond, is much thinner. As a result, "they're going to consume everything we have," the editor said, pointing to how this newsroom leverages fans' enthusiasm. "The sponsorship people"—local advertisers—"also are just rabid supporters of sports. If you go to sell them a sports package, they're in, they want to support that. They know

that those fans are going to follow everything about their team."

Another beneficial use of analytics comes from targeting ads to followers of sports. Think that's men? "No, not true," according to a sports reporter at a smaller publication. The ratio of women to men following them on Facebook was two to one, leading the ad staff to sell a presence on its social feeds to advertisers who want to reach women locally. For example, the editor said, women choose home furnishings, so if you want to sell a couch, he has that audience.

A sports editor at a larger publication checked user data daily to find out the proportion of sports readers are subscribers, which revealed how many conversions the newsroom still has to make.

Geography

When it comes to reaching readers beyond the papers' circulation areas, out-of-town teams lose the game. Four of the journalists said that they don't include visiting fans in their marketing plans or their outreach, even though they acknowledged getting positive responses from those fans from time to time. The fifth journalist was an editor at a smaller publication. "Yes, definitely," they consider out-of-town fans. "If we have good writing and good reporting, then the appeal of good sports stories is universal."

Conclusions

The high-tech, high-touch disparity exists among the sports staff as it does among education reporters. We have all sorts of digital tools to monitor and report our readers' habits and interests, but the people out in the community covering the news put more value in the people they visit with than they do the analytics. That's the same for education reporters in Kansas in 2022, and for education reporters in New York, in the original study, conducted just before the pandemic.[1]

This study affirms the results of those previous studies, so instead of repeating the conclusions (found on p. 15), I'll ask the next question: If these journalists, along with their newsrooms, used reader data thoroughly, would it make a difference? It's hard to say that learning more about your readers would hurt. The question is how to make sense of the reports. All of those lists and charts and diagrams take some mastery to understand and then require flexibility to adjust to. Many of the smaller newsrooms in particular are eager to adopt new lessons but lack the budget or the staff or the expertise — or all three — to do so.

Perhaps interpreting analytic results is a place to use artificial intelligence. When the Kansas education journalists were interviewed in 2022, AI was, for most of us, limited to making travel itineraries, asking Siri a question, or watching a science fiction movie. Since then AI has become yet another threat to independent journalism because it scoops up everything that journalists publish and summarizes it to answer questions. (Whether that's theft of intellectual property or fair use of copyrighted material is unlikely to be answered for years.)

Someone with expertise in programming AI could harness it to analyze reader data and suggest how newsrooms can make the most of it. That expert, however, is unlikely to have a newsroom job. If there's a way for a newsroom consortium create the procedure and then share it, even small newsrooms could have the chance to take a stride toward finding out about readers' interests in their hearts and minds — instead of just from where their fingertips and keyboards direct their browsing.

1 James G. Robinson, "The Audience in the Mind's Eye: How Journalists Imagine their Readers," Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University (n.d. [2019]), p. 56. doi/10.7916/d8-drvj-wj06

6. Who's reading us?

Conclusions from sports, education journalists

Journalists covering education and sports in Kansas reported that their local readership made up the largest portion of the audience, which makes sense as most of the publications' reporting is on local schools. (See Table 6.) These are the readers identified by the reporters and editors in these two studies, based on their perceptions of visiting with the public, reader comments (in any form, but typically online), and their use of analytics. Taken together, these are the journalists' imagined audiences.

The largest group of readers was made up of the general public. For sports reporting, that was readers in the circulation area who were not related to the athletes. For education reporting, that was the people in town who did not have children in school and who were not employed by the school district. Of the twelve journalists in the study, ten of them, 83.3 percent, volunteered this answer. That was eight of 9 legacy reporters and editors and two of the three on a digital staff.

The next largest group that the journalists identified as readers were parents of athletes or of pupils. Eight of the twelve journalists volunteered this answer, or two-thirds of both legacy and digital news staffs.

The smallest set of readers was sports readers from out of town and education readers on the staff of the local school district who, together, were volunteered by 41.7 percent of the survey participants. For sports readers, the journalists identified them as affiliated with the visiting high school team or fans of the local college or university team. Four of the nine education journalists, or 44.4 percent, volunteered this answer, and one of the three sports journalists did so.

At first glance it may seem that seeking a bigger out-of-town readership is the way to go. Most of the journalists pointed out, however, that selling ads to distant audiences rarely works.

Table 6. Combined answers: Who do you imagine your audience is?

		Non-parents Indirect		*Parents* Direct		Outside circ. area (sports) or professionals (educ.)	
Publication	Number	Yes	Percent	Yes	Percent	Yes	Percent
Legacy	9	8	88.9%	6	66.7%	4	44.4%
Digital	3	2	66.7%	2	66.7%	1	33.3%
Total	**12**	**10**	**83.3%**	**8**	**66.7%**	**5**	**41.7%**

Sources: Tables 4 and 4A.

Appendix

Participants' data from both studies

Two sets of interviews conducted over two summers with staffs from two sections of newsrooms resulted in the data set below. Seven reporters and editors participated in the education interviews over the summer of 2022. Six of them worked in five legacy newsrooms (a print publication and a web publication), and two worked for newsrooms that published online only. The next year, in summer 2023, the sports study included five publications, four of which were legacy newsrooms. The fifth was a new publication that appeared only on the web and, unlike the others, aimed to reach people across the region and covers a range of sports.

The participants' identities are confidential, but they agreed to share information about their jobs, the populations of the cities where they worked, and how frequently they published their work — either as a reporter or as an editor reviewing the work.

Table 7. Participants (editors and reporters)

Media	Beat	Participant's role	City population	Time in current job	F/T beat reporter?	Hours/ Week	Articles/ week[2]
Web	Sports	Reporter	n/a[1]	>10 years	Y	Full time	1[3]
Print, web	Sports	Editor/reporter	< 50,000	>10 years	N	20–30	10–20
Print, web	Sports	Editor	< 50,000	>10 years	N	2–4	7–10
Print, web	Education	Editor	< 50,000		N	3–5	3
Print, web	Education	Editor	< 50,000		N	8–10	2–3
Print, web	Education	Editor	50–100,000		N	16	6–8
Print, web	Sports	Editor/reporter	50–100,000	0.25 years	Y	Full time	12
Print, web	Sports	Editor/reporter	>100,000	1.9 years	Y	Full time	5
Print, web	Education	Editor	> 100,000		Y	Full time	8–10
Web	Education	Reporter	> 100,000	1.5 years	Y	Full time	1.5–2[4]
Web	Education	Reporter	> 100,000	0.4 years	N	15–20[5]	5
Print, web	Education	Reporter	> 100,000	3 years	Y	Full time	3–6
Print, web	Education	Reporter	> 100,000	1.5 years	Y	Full time	8–10

[1] Covers sports state-wide
[2] During school year
[3] This reporter produces large feature stories
[4] Includes one article per week covering higher education.
[5] 20 hours are typical on weeks with a school board meeting.

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