

The continuing digital transformation of the New York Times by Arthur Sulzberger

The chairman of the New York Times Arthur Sulzberger gave a talk at Polis LSE on the continuing digital transformation of the New York Times on November 1st.

Here is the text.

Good afternoon everyone. I appreciate the opportunity to be with you here at the London School of Economics to talk about The New York Times and the role we are playing in helping to shape the future of digital and social media. There is a transformation currently underway at The Times – and by that I mean the one in New York – which involves the evolution of a great NEWSPAPER to what is now a great MULTI-PLATFORM global news organization.

We've transformed the manner in which we deliver the news without ever veering from the high journalistic standards that are firmly in place at both The Times and at our global newspaper, The International Herald Tribune.

In a world where information and opinion are ubiquitous, our promise of quality is more important than ever.

But in our new world, quality carries many elements. Reporting honestly and accurately is a critical part, of course. But so too is engaging communities in a variety of new ways. So, how are we doing there?

This past July, a research company called Netprospex issued a comprehensive report on the use of social media by businesses across the United States. The study looked at the numbers of employees in a company who were on various social networks and the numbers of followers those accounts had.

[link to [Twitter post about the Netprospex report](#)]

The New York Times was ranked Number One as the MOST social company in the United States, based on our social presence. The Times scored ahead of powerhouses like Google, Apple, and the Walt Disney Company.

We've put a priority on the utilization of social media, which I will talk more about later. We've had great success building upon our readership that way. We have far more followers on social networks than most other news organizations. The main Facebook page of The New York Times has more than 1.7 million fans. And, our main Twitter page has more than 3.8 million followers. That's extraordinary and it doesn't even begin to define our reach since so many of our terrific reporters have their own significant followings on social media. In fact, we have more than 15.8 million followers on Twitter for all New York Times accounts. And here is an astounding fact – a New York Times story is tweeted every 4 seconds.

I'd like to give shout-outs to three of our reporters in particular for their extraordinary efforts in social media:

Nick Kristof — has huge, real time communities on Facebook and Twitter and he uses them to great effect in his reporting, often from some of the world's most troubled places.



Chris Chivers — uses Tumblr and Twitter to draw back the veil on his reporting, often posting story snippets on his Tumblr blog before they appear on nytimes.com. He also asks his audience to help crowd-source a question for him, for example about ammunition he's found in the field in war torn Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iraq.

and...

Lydia Polgreen – She has used her Facebook page to build a community of readers interested in India, where she has been a Delhi-based correspondent. Now that she's moving to South Africa, I can only assume she will do the same there.

There is a reason why we are so committed to social media at The Times and that reason rests with our audience. We have an incredibly enlightened, intelligent and sophisticated group of users who are highly engaged with our products. Our efforts in social media are meant to tap in to the knowledge from that readership. We value what they can share with us and with other users.

For this specific reason, we are currently in the midst of an expansion of our online discussion and community features at NYTimes.com and we are redesigning our comments section later this year.

We're also in the process of creating a Trusted Commenter program, which will be available to a select group of readers with a history of high-quality comments. Their submissions will be published on our Opinion pages and across NYTimes.com without prior modification.

The business result of all of these efforts is increasing levels of engagement with our site. This includes more time spent, more stories read, more videos viewed...and more ads viewed.

So, back to how we're altering the culture at The New York Times.

Innovation is not some new-fangled management concept for us, we've been at it for about 160 years. We launched the first book review and best-sellers list. We created the modern Op-Ed format by publishing opinions from the public. We undertook a national and international expansion that cemented our standing as a global news brand. And we were early to the Internet with "The Times on the Web" in January 1996.

Our success online was not a foregone conclusion. In 2000, we were #3 in terms of uniques behind The Washington Post and USA Today. Today we're proudly the #1 newspaper website, with a worldwide audience of over 45 million uniques (that's comScore, not our own internal numbers). And that's after we started asking readers to pay for unlimited access to our content.

Our mission is inspirational and it guides us in everything we do. We create, collect, and distribute the highest quality news and opinion, while upholding what we believe is the gold standard of journalism, and we do it across all platforms where our readers want to find us.

A healthy democracy is built on an informed and engaged population. News organizations are a critical part of that.

We want people to be well and reliably informed. We want to lift the global conversation. And we want to transform our industry – the content experience and underlying business model – to make all of that possible for a very long time to come.

Our content distinguishes us. Now, we are also challenged to deliver it in ways that draws in readers who are one click away from a dizzying array of other options.

Not so long ago, at The Times, the Web was an afterthought. But we integrated our print and online news operations and can now leverage the talent of many hundreds across all platforms.

Our approach to stories now almost always includes the notion that we'll post a story when it's ready to go. And, we've tweaked our story telling to include the use of video, interactive graphics and other multimedia tools.

Most recently, we have introduced a new storytelling enhancement that allows us to embed a video right within the text of a story, not in some separate video player elsewhere on the page.

We used this recently as part of an outstanding enterprise piece on Autism, where the story's subject, an aspiring animator, told his story in his own words.

Let's return to social media for a moment.

As I mentioned, at The Times we see great value in social media. We believe it is critical in keeping us as a part of the open web and of the global conversation, particularly after the launch of our digital subscription model. In fact, we value it so greatly that all social media links to nytimes.com are free... from everywhere in the world on all social networks.

And, as I noted earlier, we're using social media to engage our audience and we're using it in our reporting.

Twitter and Facebook are vast, so we have approached them by applying Times journalism as a layer on top of them. We come up with clever hashtags, ask provocative questions, find ways to curate only the best material for our site, provide Times quality live reporting on Twitter and our staff, aggressively and skeptically reports on developments in the social media world.

A few examples...

Prior to Hurricane Irene, a recent storm that threatened the Northeastern part of the United States, our newsroom was looking for a way to get trusted information to our audience in real time as the story developed. So, we launched a new twitter account that we plan to use as our dedicated Twitter feed for breaking news, @NYTlive. @NYTlive will be used to provide a steady stream of developments and links to stories and multimedia, and retweeted updates from our correspondents as well as other interesting sources.

In a world overflowing with information and opinion of too often questionable value, we intend to provide context and reliability. When you come to @NYTlive, you will get both fast and honest journalism.

Every story in our 9/11 10th anniversary package, The Reckoning, included a suggested hashtag for tweeting, #911plus10. We came up with this hashtag months before the 9/11 anniversary and started using it on Twitter on the @nytimes account to seed discussion. By 9/11 it was a popular tag being used throughout Twitter — and in some cases by our competitors — to talk about the anniversary. On the day of the anniversary, we put out another hashtag, #911plus20 and provoked our readers to tell us what they thought the United States should focus on during the next 10 years.

Here's a sampling of the [thoughtful responses](#):

And here's the [interactive map](#) that was a key social 9/11 project, allowing people to pin themselves, leave a comment and then send a customized tweet or Facebook status update linking directly to their contribution:

Another terrific example of community building happened on the evening of Steve Jobs death.

On that night, we coined a hashtag, #stevejobslegacy, that went viral and we curated a selection of amazing tweets for the homepage of nytimes.com. We also gave readers a chance to send in photos. We asked them to use photography to illustrate the impact that Jobs's life had made on theirs. It was a tribute both fascinating and touching.

The homepage that night ended up being a gathering place for a community of people seeking to learn about Jobs but also looking to share reminiscences about the important part he played in their lives.

Here's [a link to the Steve Jobs tweets](#) on the homepage:

Our live debate dashboard for the U.S. presidential election has many great elements, including its real-time fact-checking feature. On Twitter, readers can tweet requests for Times political reporters and editors to fact check something a candidate just said during the debate using the hashtag #asknyt. Answers appear on the [dashboard](#):

How we report the news is evolving and so is how our readers consume news.

Given the seismic shifts in media consumption, knowing your reader is obviously important. Like most publishers, we have a trove of data on our users. But at The Times we also sit down and talk to our audience, one to one. Our Customer Insight Group is our direct line to our readers and they conduct frequent studies.

Two recent studies looked at iPad behavior among our most loyal Times readers.

In the first round of research, we learned that many are now consuming more news than ever across platforms: Over 80% of iPad users read The Times on at least two platforms and half of them juggle three or more.

It's no secret that we, along with the entire newspaper and magazine industry, were worried that the iPad – more than any other digital device – might cannibalize print, so we were delighted to see that these users are instead reading us more than ever.

We then commissioned a follow-on study on cross-platform behavior. The first set of recent findings are fascinating.

Let me touch on a few highlights:

Mobile. Very utilitarian. Users are really “filling in,” “snacking” when they have free time...at the football field, the doctor's office... They also tell us our content made that downtime more meaningful and valuable to them.

With print and the tablet, it's about the reading experience. Spread the paper out on the kitchen table, bring the iPad to the park, lean back and enjoy.

Print users read throughout the day, with a morning bias. Tablet users express an evening bias.

How many of you take your iPad to bed at night? Uh-huh. This is one of the key reasons that our engagement levels are up. This device has added an entirely new day part for us. You can literally get into bed with the audience.

Desktop and laptop. A week-day/work-day habit, and personal. Print and tablets on the other hand are more often shared, left on the coffee table.

Interesting? Yes. But also useful in our marketing and product development efforts.

Finally, I want to talk about our recent move to a digital subscription model.

We did much research to help shape our digital subscription offerings.

We needed to design a model that allowed us to maintain our influence on the Web, protect and grow our advertising business, all the while building a new subscription business.

So we took a “metered” or “freemium” approach, providing 20 articles a month free and “first-click free” on referrals, but charging for unlimited access beyond that. Not a lot of added bells and whistles because our readers were very clear about what they value: the content. The content they have come to know and love... period.

Our highly valued home delivery subscribers get All Digital Access as part of their subscription.

And for another loyal group: our most engaged online users, we did what might have appeared crazy to some. We gave 100,000 of them free access for a year, sponsored by Lincoln, an advertiser who jumped at the opportunity.

Overall, we're pleased with the success of our digital subscription business. The traffic to our site has exceeded expectations and we continue to meet all of our advertising commitments. And, we're very pleased with the number of paid and sponsored digital relationships we have – approximately 1.2 million.

At The New York Times and the International Herald Tribune, we are committed to creating, collecting and distributing the highest quality news and opinion and we remind ourselves every day to put the consumer at the center of all we do. This allows us to create products that people want and deliver them to the places where people want them.

There was much skepticism prior to the launch of our digital subscription model with many commentators and others saying that it couldn't possibly succeed. But, our readers have proven that they can distinguish news worth paying for.

Before I close, I'd like to give my colleague David Carr a moment here- this clip, from an Intelligence Squared US debate was recently featured in the [documentary Page One](#).

There's a concern that the pace of change and financial pressures will inexorably lead to lower quality. I stand before you tonight to promise that our standards for quality at The New York Times and The International Herald Tribune will not decline; and that applies to all of our platforms, those current and those yet to be dreamed of.

Thank you again for having me here.

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