

## Periodic News

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Notwithstanding today's 24/7 news cycle, newspapers and television news programs with the largest audiences still appear just once a day. Even so, most members of those audiences do not show up daily. However, neither the legacy nor the digital news media—other than the now nearly extinct news weeklies have ever sought to target the audience which keeps up with the news only periodically.

Perhaps news organizations and journalists should consider supplementing the daily news with periodic news: fortnightly and monthly formats that summarize and analyze running and other stories that remain newsworthy for more than a few days.

## Only the Latest News

From antiquity on, when news was hard to gather and took long to deliver, journalists and their messenger predecessors have emphasized supplying the latest news.

In the 19th century, and earlier in some places, the news began to appear daily, and over time, branched out to include what would today be called features. Still, journalism's primary mandate has continued to be gathering and delivering the latest news, ideally before the competition. In the competition for breaking stories, running ones and other news are often pushed to the end of the line.

Indeed, even today, scooping peers even if only by minutes remains a primary source of individual and organizational pride. Not coincidentally, the scoop is also a quantifiable way of judging journalistic performance in a profession, in which, like most others, qualitative measures are hard to agree on.

A related temporal criterion of newsworthiness, the peg, is equally important, for it helps journalists to choose between the large number of routine news stories available to them. Like the scoop, the peg is an easily applied and politically neutral standard that permits quick decisions in a profession for which time is always scarce.

Neither the profession nor news firms seem to care whether the news audience, or a significant

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*Editor's Note:* This article expands a point made in a previous article "The American News Media in an Increasingly Unequal Society" by this author at <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3236/1266>.

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part of it, pays attention to scoops or pegs. Only a small proportion of the total news audience views, reads or listens to the news on a regular daily basis.

Worse yet, the declining audience of legacy news media, the uncertain growth patterns of digital news media and the limited time many people spend with them all suggest that the future market for the very latest daily news may not be promising.

Admittedly, the news media that seek the popular or *mass* audience already provide some weekly news, particularly through Sunday newspapers. Almost all report larger circulations than their daily editions and with much more to read on Sundays other than news. Still, some of the people who have stopped reading even the Sunday papers and those who never started might be ready for a fortnightly or monthly periodic news medium.

A few such platforms already exist, including some journals of opinion, and general magazines such as *The Atlantic* and *Harper's*, but they, and a few of the regularly updated news websites are produced mainly for the better educated or *class* audience. Many are "news buffs" who are also loyal consumers of daily news.

So far, at least, there seem to be no news media which are looking to reach, or to assemble a popular news audience that seeks to keep up with the news but wants to do so only periodically.

### **Inventing Periodic News**

Consequently, the time may be ripe to try a periodic news format and in several news media, supplying its audience with the mix of important and interesting news that enables it to keep up with the news. In addition, this format may enable journalists to supply national, international and local news that appears to be of more than momentary importance.

Since periodic news can afford to take a longer view and will be able to report the beginnings, middles and ends of important stories, it might even produce a better-informed audience than daily news. Indeed, periodic news should therefore also attract members of the daily news audience

Further, periodic news would make it possible for journalists to add some analysis to the legislative, political, economic and other stories covered as events by the daily news media. As a result, they might be able to spot some longer term trends and processes, and provide information about some of the forces driving society that daily news, with its emphasis on individual newsmakers, cannot supply.

Periodic news could take many forms. It could be a monthly, fortnightly or weekly television news program, or a streamed one. It could also be a website with the normal mix of text, video and sidebar links; a news magazine; or a section of the Sunday newspaper for people seeking a longer range view of current events.

Periodic news should be regional and local as well as national and international, and include

softer and lighter news features. Health and other service news, human interest stories, and entertainment news would make the format more attractive. Periodic news would even lend itself to documentaries and other kinds of long form journalism—anything that would enable journalists to offer a more extended and thorough look at the world.

### **Making it Real**

Needless to say, the overriding question is whether periodic news would work; whether people who have given up the news as a daily, hourly or constantly changing package could be persuaded to accept and use it as a periodic news audience.

Since periodic news is intended to reach the occasional news viewers and readers among the so-called mass audience, the periodic news audience would have to be built. Attracting it, and then reminding and persuading to be accessible and available regularly will take time and money as well as trial and error to find the right format.

One audience-building device might be to associate a well-known anchor person with the television version who then becomes identified with the periodic news format. Even the digital version could be introduced by a video featuring such an anchor person.

Actually, a number of legacy and digital news media are in some ways already heading in the direction of periodic news, since individual stories are sometimes updated over several days, for example by Ezra Klein's "Vox" and its peers. Others, like *The New York Times'* data driven "Upshot" and its peers frequently analyze trends and processes. However, most of these newly-invented formats never quite lose their connection to an earlier pegged story and so far, at least, they target the class rather than the mass news audience.

Although existing fortnightly and monthly news media could supply some clues about building the periodic news audience, no one now knows what format and content will attract it. Consequently, the invention of periodic news should begin with small scale experiments, trying out various formats and context mixes.

These experiments should also test some innovations in the language of news. They should "talk English not Washington," as Alessandra Stanley's put it in her September 8 2014 *New York Times'* column. The experimenters might also benefit from studying how typical members of the news audience report their news, or stories from the news media to family members, friends and others by word of mouth and through social media.

However, the design of periodic news should be preceded by comprehension research to learn what differently educated members of the news audience understand and fail to understand in present news media, legacy and digital. In an ideal world, there would be several periodic news formats, each intended for audiences of different levels of news interest and education. The Web could easily accommodate a number of variations.

### **Conclusion**

Repackaging (and rethinking) the news in a periodic format could eventually add more audience than the other kinds of repackaging now going on in legacy and digital news media. Even if periodic news does not create new jobs for journalists, it would free some from the endless updating of news websites and enable them to do a more effective job of covering the news needed to inform the citizenry.