

Study finds K-12 education journalists prefer gut instinct to analytics to determine who's reading their work

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A new study from the University of Kansas shows that while journalists do use new technologies to better understand their audiences and what

they would like to read, K-12 education reporters and editors still largely rely on gut feelings as opposed to analytics software, suggesting limitations to the practice.

Education [news](#) has always been a topic of strong reader interest in community journalism, whether it is coverage of a local school bond issue or an increase in lunch prices. In recent years, there has been heightened interest with news of school closures during the pandemic and controversies about subject matter covered in the classroom. Stephen Wolgast, professor and Knight Chair in Audience and Community Engagement for News in the William Allen White School of Journalism & Mass Communications, interviewed [journalists](#) and editors from seven news organizations that cover education in Kansas to find out how they determine who is reading their work.

For most of their profession's history, journalists had limited means to assess how many people read their articles or whether they finished the stories. Reader demographic information was largely unavailable. Technology and the migration to online publishing have changed that, but Wolgast's study found analytics don't yet have all the answers journalists need.

Programs like Google Analytics, Chartbeat and Parse.ly are now widely available, the researcher noted. Google Analytics is good at giving demographic and geographical information about who visits a site, which is largely useful for selling ads. Chartbeat and Parse.ly are designed more specifically for news sites. Wolgast interviewed journalists and editors who cover K-12 education across Kansas to find out which they use, how effective they are and how they compare to the old-fashioned method of pursuing a story: the gut feeling. The study, published by the Kansas Press Association, was a replication of one conducted by James Robinson, who interviewed education reporters and editors in New York. While New York and Kansas are very different, findings were not.

"The results were essentially the same. It's the gut. My sense is that's because digital analytics don't provide the details they are looking for," Wolgast said.

Respondents said sources and people they met in person most inform their reporters' instincts. In their job, they talk to [school administrators](#), policymakers, teachers, parents and others involved in their local schools.

"What education reporters want to know is, 'Who's reading my story today?' That is hard for analytics to know," Wolgast said.

Reporters said their readership fell into three categories: parents, residents who don't have children in school but pay taxes, and school staff and the [school](#) board. Journalists reported all three groups were invested in schools in at least one way and some on multiple levels. While respondents said they did consider newsroom analytics, they relied more on what people told them in person to determine whether they were providing the news their audience wanted.

One exception to reliance on [gut feelings](#) and in-person interactions was when a story went viral or generated significant engagement on social media. Several respondents said they would check when their story was posted on the publication's Facebook account, and if it generated a large number of comments, they knew the topic was of interest and likely worthy of a follow-up article. The same was the case when a story drew a larger-than-average number of unique visitors or was widely shared online.

While analytics software offers insights into which articles people clicked on and how long they stayed on the page, education journalists said they were not concerned with just numbers.

"Several journalists said, 'My boss doesn't just want me to get clicks, they want me to cover the news well,'" Wolgast said. "If they don't have to focus on that, it suggests that there should be more attention paid by [news organizations](#) than to just stats."

The study is part of a larger body of work. Wolgast said he hopes to continue to work with journalists to better understand how analytics can inform their work and whether they are reaching their intended audiences. The technology will continue to improve, but it is yet to be seen if the information it yields can be used effectively, especially when covering [education](#), a topic of general interest to communities of all sizes, and increasingly at state and national levels.

"Can we use analytics to reach audiences consistently or figure out how to reach people more effectively?" Wolgast said of the topics he hopes to explore. "The next question is if the data is there or if journalists know how to use it. Or is it that the analytics tools don't know how to provide the information journalists need?"

More information: The Imagined Audience in Kansas: Journalists Describe Readers of Education Beat Reporting.

[kspress.com/sites/default/file ... audience_wolgast.pdf](#)

Provided by University of Kansas

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