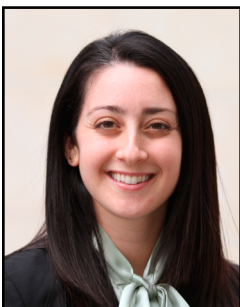


News Curation vs. Aggregation: Emergence of Editor's Choices Features

Darrell West and Beth Stone



Darrell M. West is vice president and director of Governance Studies and founding director of the Center for Technology Innovation at Brookings. His studies include technology policy, electronic government, and mass media.



Beth Stone is Communications Manager of Governance Studies at Brookings.

Recently, there has been a marked rise in the amount of online news websites providing editor's picks and editor's choices features. As American politics become increasingly polarized, and readers become more self-selecting in their news source choices, this type of editorial direction can help break the vicious cycle of the contemporary echo chamber.

Earlier this year, we [recommended that news consumers diversify their news sources](#)¹. In this article, we will examine the potential of editor's choice recommendations on news websites, as opposed to the most popular stories feature, to direct the attention of readers to more insightful, well-reported, and diverse news stories. We discuss challenges with this approach as well as cite recent examples of the "editor's choice" or "curated editor's picks" phenomenon on many news websites and in e-newsletters today.

Gabriel Snyder, former editor of [TheWire.com](#) writes, "We have seen the news landscape shift so much in the last couple of years, but a trend that has been going on for decades is this radical splintering of who gathers news, who distributes news, who chooses news."² And many have tied the trend of increased editorial curation as a way to burst nefarious filter bubbles online.

Jonathan Stray sums up this approach in a Nieman Journalism Lab article when he suggests [bringing curation into journalism](#):

"Editors still command attention. Every time someone subscribes in any medium, whether that's in print or on Twitter, they are giving an editor license to direct their attention in some

1 West, Darrell and Beth Stone. "Nudging News Producers and Consumers Toward More Thoughtful, Less Polarized Discourse." (2014). Brookings. Retrieved from <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2014/02/05-news-media-polarization-democracy-west-stone>

2 Smith, Steve. "When did the news get so 'social,' anyway?" (continued from page 1). (2013). Media Industry Newsletter, 66(45) Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1473882233?accountid=26493>

small way. Every time an article page includes a list of suggested stories, someone is directing attention. Editors can use this donated attention to puncture filter bubbles in ways people will appreciate....

Editors could become curators, cultivating the best work from both inside and outside the newsroom. A good curator rewards us for delegating our attentional choices to them. We still like to give this job to people instead of machines, because people are smart, creative, idiosyncratic, and above all personal. We can form a relationship with a good curator, sometimes even a two-way relationship when we can use social networks to start a conversation with them at any moment."

As Stray mentions above, it is important to include the audience in the editorial process so as to avoid editor's choices from becoming elitist. Social media can allow for these two-way conversations. These channels can work to include the audience's perspective in a more thoughtful way than simply measuring or aggregating the most popular pieces of content on a given website.

Challenges that still need to be overcome in this model include addressing fragmentation, information overload, and ensuring quality control. One way to address these problems is through e-newsletters from organizations and journalists. Also, personalities and trust can come back into news curation through the vehicle of the e-newsletter. Authors can be direct and establish their voices through writing directly to subscribers in a more personal style while sharing their tastes and their "must read" curated content. E-newsletters are a large driver of audiences to content on the web and news outlets, as well as individual journalists and editors, are increasingly taking advantage of this mode of electronic communication.

These email subscriptions can also come from different political ideologies and slants. Carl Cannon of *Real Clear Politics* (RCP) publishes the RCP [Morning Note](#). This e-newsletter always links to the front page of RCP which "aggregates stories and columns from across the political spectrum," as well as to RCP's proprietary news analysis Cannon deems noteworthy. Other notable e-newsletters include *Politico's* [Playbook](#), "Mike Allen's must-read briefing on what's driving the day in Washington." *Politico* also publishes numerous other daily morning tipsheets corresponding to their different subject areas as well. For technology, culture and other news, Fusion's Alexis Madrigal publishes "[5 Intriguing Things](#)," where he has previously asked advice of his readers for their own ideas, other features to include, or tweaks to make to the e-newsletter. These are just a few examples of personalities humanizing the news cycle and creating opportunities for direct user participation through feedback, tips, and personal news.


In terms of web portals and search engines experimenting with editor's picks, Google rolled out an interesting search feature in August 2014: "In-depth Articles." This new search engine function might direct users to in-depth content when they search for topics, adding an element of quality control and countering fragmentation in some ways. [Google describes these results as](#): "high-quality content to help you learn about or explore a subject." SEO consulting company Moz did [a study](#) into this feature, which demonstrates that newsworthy content is more likely to appear in the "in-depth articles" results.

A Google search for the phrase "midterm elections" now returns the usual search results (eight results), with some Google news results interspersed, then the new in-depth articles feature at the bottom of the page, which is typically in a set of three with an option to expand and view more. The three suggestions that currently populate

from the “midterm elections” search query are from different outlets such as [The New Republic](#), [The Washington Post](#) and [The New York Times](#). See the results below:


In-depth articles

How the Democrats Can Avoid Going Down in the ...




The New Republic - Apr 2014
In fact, the very phenomenon that sustained Obama's own victories is the one that may doom his party in **midterm elections** for the rest of his life. The dynamic so cripples Democrats' ...
Explore: [2014 election](#)

There is no wave coming in the 2014 election



The Washington Post - Dec 2013
Prognostications about the upcoming **midterm election** are coming fast and furious. The bullishness about the Democrats' prospects, so frequently expressed (and exaggerated) during ...
Explore: [election predictions](#)

Why Democrats Can't Win the House - NYTimes.com



The New York Times - Sep 2014
WASHINGTON — Republicans and Democrats are struggling for control of the Senate in this November's **midterm elections**. But there is no real fight for control of the House of ...
Explore: [republican house](#)

[+ More in-depth articles](#)

Source: <https://www.google.com/#q=midterm+elections>

How does Google account for a balance of viewpoints when selecting which in-depth articles to feature in this very visible way? It will be interesting to monitor the variety of views represented in these results, whether the content is blocked to some users because of a paywall, and how audiences respond to this new type of search result. Will this feature drive traffic to more in-depth think pieces from across the political spectrum?

Yet some have even predicted that the future of finding content on the web will be through editorial curation, not search engine optimization. In 2013, Brittany Botti, co-founder and social lead of the digital marketing agency Outsperspective wrote, “In the future, people will look to other people instead of algorithms to find what they are looking for.”³ The overflow of information available from increasingly fragmented sources goes hand in hand with the growth in editor’s choices columns on the web.

3 Thompson, M. (2013). “Are Content Curators the New Editors?” *EContent*, 36(5), 12-17. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1412264940?accountid=26493>

The overwhelming sentiment on why human editors are better than algorithms boils down to trust (this is the crux of the aggregation vs. curation debate). "Curation's the hot buzz word now for human-powered story collecting, and aggregator is mostly how we describe Google News and its robotic peers."⁴ However, there needs to be a way to involve trust in technology (which shapes the future of journalism) as well in the judgment of human beings. While editor's choices have long been a feature in newspapers and magazines, the ethics of the web, or a lack thereof, change everything.

[Emily Bell writes in the Guardian:](#)

"The decline of the newspaper, and the subsequent closure or shrinking of newsrooms, not only leaves news unbound, it also removes the culture of editorial filtering. Centuries of human debate over cultural values, expressed in everything from intrusive splashes to grandiose editorials, are disappearing to be replaced by a black box.

Accountability is not part of Silicon Valley's culture. But surely as news moves beyond paper and publisher, it must become so. For a decade or more, news organisations have been obeisant to the power of corporate technology, nodding and genuflecting at the latest improbably impressive magic. But their editorial processes have something to offer technologists too."

In the digital age, readers must trust that news websites will give them information they need to know from as an objective a standpoint as is possible. News organizations can increase their credibility by providing links from all around the web, increasing their profile as a real resource for analyzing and reporting on truthful and useful content. As news business models change, news organizations must adapt to the fact that both diminishing staffs and reporters being assigned less and less frequently to specific beats means potentially relying on other news organizations for quality reporting as well.

Currently, several news organizations provide a wide range of editorial content not solely their own, a "best of" or "must read" selection from around the web. It is refreshing to see that represented in this sampling of websites are news organizations from all political walks of life. On the conservative side, there is the National Review Online's [The Agenda](#), their domestic policy blog, and [The Feed](#), which shares "what's news right now." Both include content from different political vantage points and The Feed even features global news stories as well as domestic. And on the left, there is the example of [Breaking News](#), "a standalone startup...part of NBC's acquisition of Msnbc Interactive in 2012." Some additional examples are listed below:

- The Daily Beast Cheat Sheet (from external websites including some DailyBeast content) <http://www.thedailybeast.com/>
 - Daily Beast Longreads as well, "The Week's Best Longreads" <http://www.thedailybeast.com/features/longreads.html>
- Longreads <http://longreads.com/> (some Longreads original content, mostly hand-picked from other websites)

⁴ Kirkland, Sam (2014) "Has 'curate' replaced 'aggregate' as the default term for summarizing other people's news?" Poynter. Retrieved from <http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/media-lab/mobile-media/237444/has-curate-replaced-aggregate-as-the-default-term-for-summarizing-other-peoples-news/>

- Propublica's Muckreads (ProPublica's ongoing collection of watchdog reporting elsewhere) <http://projects.propublica.org/muckreads/>
- The Newspaper Guild, Communications Workers of America- Today's Top Stories <http://www.newsguild.org/>
- The Week: 10 things you need to know today <http://theweek.com/article/index/270292/10-things-you-need-to-know-today-october-21-2014>
- ShortFormBlog (a Tumblr, known for "short blurbs, quick wit, and crazy styles" and mentioned in Time and Newsweek) <http://shortformblog.com/>
- The Browser, "Writing worth Reading" <http://thebrowser.com/>
- The New Inquiry Sunday Reading <http://thenewinquiry.com/features/sunday-reading-76/>

Yet the vast majority of news websites, discounting personally curated e-newsletters from journalists and editors working at the following news organizations, include editor's picks from solely their own content. Many major news outlets are included in this category, such as *USA Today*, *Associated Press*, *Salon*, *The New Yorker*, *Politico*, Fox News, NPR, BBC, Bloomberg, *Forbes*, *The Washington Post*. These are only a few examples of the wide variety of major news organizations that share only their own content. In an era where pageviews drive business, it is no wonder that there is an anxiety over authorship and many news outlets hesitate to drive readers to competitors.

The New York Times has just launched a new homepage "Watching" feature driving readers to other content, as well as their own, in a Twitter newsfeed-like layout. "Watching offers a tailored feed of the news of the moment, such as early outlines of developing stories on [NYTimes.com](http://nytimes.com) and curation of the most newsworthy and trusted reporting from around the web. It also features tweets from Times reporters and others, as well as photos and YouTube videos."⁵ Many have debated the usefulness of the homepage, and the *The New York Times* has seen only about a third of its readers are still visiting theirs.⁶ With Watching, the *Times* makes a "front-page bet on real-time aggregation"⁷ and this feature might spark homepage innovation amongst competitors as well. Some local and national media organizations, ranging from *Newsweek* to the *Village Voice* to the *Paris Review*, are embracing social media [and becoming active on Tumblr](#), sharing their own and others' content along the way.

Of course, many of these major news sites discussed in this article still include the most popular, shared, or e-mailed features as well. Strict aggregation, a catalogue of the day's news, still has its place. Both sides of the coin, editorial direction and popular sentiment, are necessary for a healthy democracy. And both ways of bringing content to readers are necessary, particularly when they must fight through information overload, web fragmentation and poor quality reporting. News organizations and editors will need to address the issue of balancing aggregated and popular content with thoughtfully selected pieces as they continue to improve upon both their machine-and human- picked features for audiences.

5 "The New York Times Launches New Homepage 'Watching' Feature. (2014). Retrieved from: <http://investors.nytc.com/press/press-releases/press-release-details/2014/The-New-York-Times-Launches-New-Homepage-Watching-Feature/default.aspx>

6 Ellis, J. (2014) "Watching what happens: The New York Times is making a front-page bet on real-time aggregation." Retrieved from: Nieman Journalism Lab. <http://www.niemanlab.org/2014/09/watching-what-happens-the-new-york-times-is-making-a-front-page-bet-on-real-time-aggregation/>

7 Ibid.

We would like to thank Emily Feldmesser for her valuable research assistance.

GOVERNANCE STUDIES

The Brookings Institution
1775 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20036
Tel: 202.797.6090
Fax: 202.797.6144
brookings.edu/governance.aspx

EDITING

Christine Jacobs
Emily Feldmesser

PRODUCTION & LAYOUT

Beth Stone

EMAIL YOUR COMMENTS TO GSCOMMENTS@BROOKINGS.EDU

This paper is distributed in the expectation that it may elicit useful comments and is subject to subsequent revision. The views expressed in this piece are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the staff, officers or trustees of the Brookings Institution.