

**The Digital Destination:
A case study of the Winnipeg Free Press, changing
reader habits, and the media's development
in digital spaces**

by
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Abstract

The goal of this report is to underscore how one local, legacy publication, the *Winnipeg Free Press*, has withstood the changes of an evolving mediascape, reader demographics, and changing technologies. This report summarizes the challenges facing the news publishing industry, compares strategies of national and international news publications, and outlines the path forward for the *Winnipeg Free Press*.

Keywords: Media concentration; Newspaper publishing; Social media; Digital readership; Publishing verticals; COVID-19 pandemic

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Introduction

Evolving reading habits and developing technologies have changed the way consumers respond to, interact with, and obtain information. The publishing industry — specifically the newspaper-publishing industry — has felt the impact of this change and been forced to look at itself and ask whether and how it is possible to adapt to an ever-changing digital approach in an era of misinformation. By contextualizing the crisis of relevancy and adaptations, while dissecting the successes of local, national, and international publications, this project will analyze the obstacles and opportunities ahead for one local legacy publication, the *Winnipeg Free Press*.¹ This research will assess how social media platforms can be used as tools to capture a new generation and audience of readers.

Part I of this report presents Canada’s mediascape which has been influenced by its relationship with advertising revenue, media concentration, and government programs and legislation. Part II looks to the *Winnipeg Free Press* — from its humble beginnings as a daily newspaper to its development in digital spaces — as a legacy media outlet that has withstood and adapted to the challenges posed by the industry. However, there is always room for growth. Part III features case studies covering the digital strategies of North American media outlets: the *Winnipeg Free Press*, *Toronto Star*, the *New York Times* and BuzzFeed News. Elements of these strategies are applied in Part IV of this report, which outlines the path ahead for the *Winnipeg Free Press*. From investing further in current digital initiatives to developing social media presence on a new platform and building a new generation of readers through intentional products, the *Winnipeg Free Press* will have a framework in place to expand its product offering and establish connections with new readers. This report concludes by acknowledging how important it is for newspapers to reflect the communities they report on and how meeting readers where they are, in digital spaces, is imperative to a publication’s survival.

¹ *Winnipeg Free Press* changed its front-page nameplate to the *Free Press* in February 2022. The publication remains a division of FP Canadian Newspapers Limited Partnership.

Part I: A Glance at Canada's Mediascape

Over the last decade Canada's mediascape has been influenced by several major factors: decline in advertising revenue, media concentration, the ubiquity of social media platforms, the rise of misinformation and disinformation, and the COVID-19 pandemic. While the impact of these factors significantly varies geographically and in terms of media (radio, television, and newspapers), it has not only affected how Canadians access media at large, but how journalists and media outlets connect with readers.

This section outlines the relationship between media and advertising, the role that relationship has in media concentration, and governments' attempts to rectify that concentration through legislation targeting companies that dominate the digital advertising market.

Advertising

Advertising has historically served as the backbone of the news-publishing industry, providing its primary source of revenue. At its core, a newspaper is compiled with the news of the day alongside advertisements in the form of commercial advertisements, classifieds, obituaries, and other family announcements. Surplus revenue from advertising has allowed media outlets to pay the salaries of journalists, cover expenses for broader geographic coverage and allow for investments in in-depth reporting. In other words, advertising revenues have helped keep outlets afloat.

In 2017, a report published by the House of Commons entitled *Disruption: Change and Churning in Canada's Media Landscape* found a decline in advertising revenue had a negative impact on access to local news in communities. This impact was seen in layoffs or complete closures of news outlets, ultimately reducing the availability of local news to a region.² The interdependent relationship in news publishing between editorial and advertising has been recognized within the industry for decades. Marshall McLuhan, philosopher of media theory, wrote in 1964, "the classified ads (and stock

² Report of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, "Disruption: Change and Churning in Canada's Media Landscape," p.74.

market quotations) are the bedrock of the press. Should an alternative source of easy access to such diverse daily information be found, the press will fold.”³ This understanding of the delicate and dependent relationship between advertising and news publishing was predicted decades ago — the reality and McLuhan’s predictions have unfolded over the last 50 years.

The Public Policy Forum’s 2017 report, *The Shattered Mirror*, analyzes news, democracy, and trust in the digital age. The report shows there wasn’t suddenly a creation of platforms that served as “alternative sources” for diverse information; rather, the economic model of viable news publishing collapsed. Prior to the 2008 recession, “classified advertising earned Canada’s daily newspaper industry more than \$800 million a year, reaching a historic high of \$875 million in 2005 — the year Kijiji started in Canada. A decade later, by 2015, that figure had dropped to \$119 million, and the inevitable trend is toward zero.”⁴ Despite newspapers’ attempts to launch digital classified sites of their own — such as Workopolis, which launched in 2000 and was created by *The Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Star* and *La Presse*⁵ — the damage had been done: revenues from classified advertising were no longer as reliable. As some outlets disappeared along with their ad dollars, others, including larger media corporations, opted to sell various local outlets, which created regional clusters of newspapers owned by the same company.⁶ These clusters effectively created local monopolies for media outlets.

Media Concentration

During this period of stark decline in advertising revenue, a notable media deal would set the precedent for media’s profitability for decades to come. In an effort to become Canada’s largest newspaper publisher, television broadcaster Canwest Global Communications Corp. acquired control of Hollinger Inc.’s English-language newspapers in 2000. The deal, which cost about \$3.5 billion, was considered the largest in Canadian

³ “The Shattered Mirror” (Public Policy Forum, January 2017), <https://shatteredmirror.ca/wp-content/uploads/theShatteredMirror.pdf>, p.16.

⁴ “The Shattered Mirror,” p.17.

⁵ “The Shattered Mirror,” p.17.

⁶ Dwayne Winseck. “Media and Internet Concentration in Canada, 1984-2018,” Canadian Media Concentration Research Project. (December 2019) p.70.

media history.⁷ Canwest acquired “136 daily and weekly newspapers, including half of the *National Post*, 13 large big-city dailies, 85 trade publications and directories in the Southam Magazine and Information Group.”⁸ This was in addition to all the Hollinger and Southam Internet properties; however, none of Hollinger’s international papers were included in the deal.⁹

Although the deal appeared promising financially for investors, it alarmed Canada’s largest media union, the Communications, Energy and Paper workers union, which represented around 20,000 workers. Gail Lem, vice-president of CEP, said at the time, it was a “horrifying development” that would lead to unprecedented levels of concentration and ownership.¹⁰ The union was right to be worried, as the company inevitably made operational decisions that appeared to be contrary to the needs of news consumers. Canwest withdrew from The Canadian Press news service, initiated its own national editorial policy printing the “owner’s views across the chain’s newspapers with the exception of the *National Post*,” and directed newspapers to not publish editorial views contradictory to those in the national editorials.¹¹ Canwest also “cut the number of its foreign news bureaus from eleven in 2000 to just two a few years later.”¹²

Within years of the acquisition, Canwest was struggling, despite consistently being a profitable company in terms of operating profits and return on revenue.¹³ The \$3.5 billion in debt it took on with the deal loomed over every operational strategy it put forward.¹⁴ Before the end of 2001, as advertising revenues faced a downturn amid a

⁷ “What’s in It for Hollinger and Canwest?,” CBC News (CBC/Radio Canada, November 11, 2000), <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/what-s-in-it-for-hollinger-and-canwest-1.210338>.

⁸ “What’s in It for Hollinger and Canwest?,” CBC News.

⁹ “What’s in It for Hollinger and Canwest?,” CBC News.

¹⁰ “\$3.5 billion CanWest-Hollinger deal ‘horrifies’ union,” CBC News (CBC/Radio Canada, August 1, 2000), <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/3-5-billion-canwest-hollinger-deal-horrifies-union-1.214924>

¹¹ W. C. Soderlund, and Kai Hildebrandt. *Canadian Newspaper Ownership in the Era of Convergence: Rediscovering Social Responsibility* (University of Alberta Press, 2005) p.114

¹² Dwayne Winseck, “Financialization and the ‘Crisis of the Media’: The Rise and Fall of (Some) Media Conglomerates in Canada,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 35, no. 3 (2010) p. 386.

¹³ Winseck, “Financialization and the ‘Crisis of the Media’: The Rise and Fall of (Some) Media Conglomerates in Canada,” p. 383.

¹⁴ Marc Edge. “Convergence after the collapse: The ‘catastrophic’ case of Canada,” *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no. 8 (2011) p.1269.

recession, it posted a quarterly loss of \$37 million.¹⁵ In 2000, its shares reached a high of \$22, but “in October 2002, the price of Canwest shares fell to CAD\$3.32.”¹⁶ In tandem with Canada’s economic recovery, Canwest began acquiring more assets by the mid-2000s, varying in media format, such as cable television channels and radio stations.¹⁷ When the recession hit in 2007, advertising revenues once again plummeted.

By 2009, Canwest struggled to pay its bills, confidence from its advertisers faltered, and the company filed for bankruptcy protection.¹⁸ Following the announcement, the senior lenders of Canwest’s newspaper unit acquired the operation in a debt for equity swap.¹⁹ At the time of the swap, Canwest had \$1.5 billion in debt, \$950 million of which was owed to those senior lenders.²⁰ In the spring of 2010, a handful of bids emerged to acquire the chain, and operations were sold to what is now known as Postmedia for \$1.1 billion.²¹ Postmedia’s network now consists of over 130 brands that publish news across Canada.²² Four years after the acquisition, Postmedia purchased Quebecor’s 175 English-language newspapers owned under Sun Media for \$316 million.²³

Through this acquisition came an extensive amount of operational consolidation. Canwest Editorial Services, later known as Postmedia Editorial Services, based out of Hamilton, Ont., sought to streamline the editorial process by “co-ordinating, sharing, and

¹⁵ Edge, “Convergence after the collapse: The ‘catastrophic’ case of Canada,” p. 1269.

¹⁶ Edge, “Convergence after the collapse: The ‘catastrophic’ case of Canada,” p. 1269.

¹⁷ Edge, “Convergence after the collapse: The ‘catastrophic’ case of Canada,” p. 1270.

¹⁸ Andrew Clark, “Conrad Black’s Shadow Hangs over the Collapse of a Media Empire,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, October 24, 2009), <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2009/oct/25/canwest-canada-conrad-black-bankruptcy>.

¹⁹ Ian Austen, “CanWest Newspaper Unit Files for Bankruptcy,” *The New York Times*, January 8, 2010, [nytimes.com/2010/01/09/business/media/09paper.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/09/business/media/09paper.html).

²⁰ Austen, “CanWest Newspaper Unit Files for Bankruptcy.”

²¹ “Postmedia Network Canada Corp. Completes Acquisition of Canwest Publishing Print and Online Assets,” Postmedia (Postmedia Network Inc., July 13, 2010), <https://www.postmedia.com/2010/07/13/postmedia-network-canada-corp-completes-acquisition-of-canwest-publishing-print-and-online-assets/>.

²² “Our Brands,” Postmedia (Postmedia Network Inc.), accessed June 7, 2022, <https://www.postmedia.com/brands/>.

²³ “Postmedia Purchase of Quebecor’s Sun Media OK’d by Competition Bureau,” CBC News, March 25, 2015, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/postmedia-purchase-of-quebecor-s-sun-media-ok-d-by-competition-bureau-1.3008709>.

outsourcing production” and proofing to save “newsroom budgets for ‘content producers’ like reporters and photographers, otherwise known as the stuff readers do notice.”²⁴ In 2012, the company committed \$25 million into redesigning its print brands to create a “cookie-cutter template.”²⁵ Simpler pages and section fronts ultimately made the jobs of page designers and copy editors in Hamilton less complicated. In a piece written for *The Walrus*, former editor-in-chief of Postmedia’s *Edmonton Journal*, Margo Goodhand,²⁶ observed, “when a local paper doesn’t seem local anymore — when it loses its ability to be a community partner — it loses credibility with the business community, which further impacts sales.”²⁷ In 2017, Postmedia further streamlined operations and merged newsrooms across the country, including the *Calgary Herald*, the *Calgary Sun*, the *Ottawa Citizen*, the *Ottawa Sun*, the *Vancouver Sun* and *Province*. A national desk would manage the sports sections for the publications, eliminating the need for local sports desks.²⁸

Postmedia had a chokehold on the news-media industry, but it wasn’t enough for the company. Postmedia sought out a major deal with TorStar to “swap forty-one newspapers, most of them community papers, thirty-seven of which were immediately shut down and 290 workers laid off. The companies’ newspaper swap also effectively divided the province of Ontario into two zones of mutual exclusivity, or local monopolies.”²⁹ Despite an investigation into this consolidation conducted by the Competition Bureau, Canada’s antitrust law enforcement branch, the bureau announced on January 7, 2021 that it would not bring its case to court,³⁰ meaning there would be no penalty for this depletion of the mediascape for communities.³¹ The closures of these

²⁴ Margo Goodhand, “Above the Fold,” *The Walrus*, February 4, 2016, <https://thewalrus.ca/above-the-fold/>.

²⁵ Goodhand, “Above the Fold.”

²⁶ Margo Goodhand was editor of the *Winnipeg Free Press* from 2007 to 2012.

²⁷ Goodhand, “Above the Fold.”

²⁸ Goodhand, “Above the Fold.”

²⁹ Dwayne Winseck. “Media and Internet Concentration in Canada, 1984-2018,” p. 70.

³⁰ Competition Bureau, “Competition Bureau Closes Investigation of Postmedia and Torstar,” Canada.ca (Government of Canada, January 7, 2021), <https://www.canada.ca/en/competition-bureau/news/2021/01/competition-bureau-closes-investigation-of-postmedia-and-torstar.html>.

³¹ Bryan Carney, “Emails Confirm Torstar and Postmedia Knew Both Planned Cuts after Big Swap,” *The Tyee*, March 1, 2021, <https://thetyee.ca/News/2021/03/01/Emails-Confirm-Torstar-Postmedia-Knew-Both-Planned-Cuts/>.

outlets could not prepare other media organizations for what was to come. In March 2020 the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic; at a time when delivering information was more crucial than ever, advertising revenues once again plummeted, forcing news publishers to pivot their operations.

The Local News Research Project, J-Source, and the Canadian Association of Journalists have tracked the impact of COVID-19 on media since the onslaught of the pandemic. Since March 2020, 288 companies, including newspapers, radio and television stations, magazines and online outlets have been affected.³² In that time, 53 media outlets in Canada permanently closed, 41 of which were community newspapers.³³ The companies that didn't fold were still faced with decreases in production as a result of impacted advertising revenues and layoffs: 51 news outlets, 31 of which were community papers, cancelled some or all print editions.³⁴ These cancellations and closures inevitably contributed to the growing crisis of misinformation (inaccurate or false information) and disinformation (intentionally deceptive or misleading information).

Misinformation, Disinformation and the Government's Role in Protecting News Media

An absence of credible media creates opportunities for news to be sourced from social media platforms. Without the recognized and trusted practice of information gathering, fact-checking, and credibility, these platforms are perfect hosts for misleading articles, biased posts, and spreading of false claims. Traditionally, the media has played the role of gatekeeping information by determining what is true and what is not. However, individuals on social media have no accountability to industry standards and don't face any restrictions before sharing incorrect or misleading content.

³² "Covid-19 Media Impact Map for Canada: Update Nov. 17," JSource: The Canadian Journalism Project, November 23, 2021, <https://j-source.ca/covid-19-media-impact-map-for-canada-update-nov-17/>.

³³ "Covid-19 Media Impact Map for Canada: Update Nov. 17."

³⁴ "Covid-19 Media Impact Map for Canada: Update Nov. 17."

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need for verified and accurate news.³⁵ This prompted outlets to leverage media products, such as removing paywalls for COVID-19-related coverage, and engage a new reader base. This, for many outlets, resulted in a pandemic-driven subscription surge.³⁶ The pandemic provided an avenue for readers to engage with traditional media outlets that they may have turned away from before. It also shed light on the federal government's perception of and commitment to journalism in Canada.

The federal government created and continued various relief programs to assist news media during the COVID-19 pandemic. The emergence of the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy program helped outlets pay their employees as advertising revenues declined. The continuation of the Local Journalism Initiative, which launched in 2019 to fund journalism positions that cover underserved communities, helped fund positions that could have been lost due to lack of revenue. To further encourage the consumption of local news, the government also launched the Digital News Subscription Tax Credit, allowing digital news subscribers to claim their subscriptions on their personal income tax and benefit return from 2020 to 2024.

The latest and perhaps most ambitious initiative taken by the Canadian government to assist news organizations is the introduction of Bill C-18, otherwise known as the *Act respecting online communications platforms that make news content available to persons in Canada* or, the short title, the *Online News Act*. The goal of the act is to “establish a new legislative and regulatory framework to ensure fairness in the Canadian digital news marketplace and for independent local news businesses, including rural and remote news organizations, by ensuring that news media and journalists receive fair compensation for their work.”³⁷ This “fairness” relates to the

³⁵ Karine Garneau and Clémence Zossou, “Misinformation during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, February 2, 2021), <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2021001/article/00003-eng.htm>.

³⁶ Josh Rubin, “Torstar Grows Digital Subscriptions as Pandemic Impacts Ad Revenue,” *Toronto Star*, May 6, 2020, <https://www.thestar.com/business/2020/05/06/torstar-grows-digital-subscriptions-as-pandemic-impacts-ad-revenue.html>.

³⁷ Canadian Heritage, “Government Introduces a Bill to Ensure Fair Compensation for News Media and the Sustainability of Local News,” Canada.ca (Government of Canada, April 6, 2022), <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/news/2022/04/government-introduces-a-bill-to-ensure-fair-compensation-for-news-media-and-the-sustainability-of-local-news.html>.

relationship between the news media that create the content and the digital platforms such as Facebook and Google that share that news content on their websites for profit.

The proposed law would set up a framework requiring digital platforms to negotiate deals with news media including newspapers, magazines, digital news groups, and broadcasters that publish news online. Organizations, big and small, could team up and bargain collectively with digital giants. If an agreement is not made within six months, news outlets and digital platforms would enter a mediation period, and if that proved fruitless, they would enter binding arbitration.³⁸ Failure to comply with the law could leave tech platforms facing “penalties of up to \$15 million per day for repeated non-compliance.”³⁹

On Facebook and Google, sharing news articles contributes to an environment for user engagement, data collection, and targeted advertising. News media benefit from sharing content on these platforms to reach readers; however, they don’t benefit from the advertising revenues. The *Online News Act* attempts to rectify the disparity in collecting advertising revenues between news publishers, Facebook, and Google.

Facebook and Google profit from having content on their websites — but not because they are the creators of the content. In providing forums to share content, such as news articles, and promote engagement from that content through comments, likes, and shares, the companies are increasing the time spent by users on their platforms. Advertisers aim to meet the users where they are, and thus spend their ad dollars through those channels. The drive for engagement is never-ending. Articles produced by journalists run alongside memes and clickbait and keep users online, diverting ad dollars from the pockets of news publishers. In 2020, Facebook and Google raked in over half of all advertising spending in Canada.⁴⁰ This revenue would typically return to newsrooms to invest in producing quality journalism. Instead, revenues go straight to the

³⁸ Canadian Heritage, “Government Introduces a Bill to Ensure Fair Compensation for News Media and the Sustainability of Local News.”

³⁹ Marie Woolf, “New Bill Will Force Tech Giants to Negotiate Deals to Pay Media to Use Their Content,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/canada/law-to-help-news-industry-combat-fake-news-to-be-tabled-today-576363862.html>.

⁴⁰ Dwayne Winseck. “Media and Internet Concentration in Canada, 1984-2020,” Global Media and Internet Concentration Project. (2021) p.81.

platforms and newsrooms remain strapped for resources to provide the kind of coverage that readers deserve.

In Australia, after nearly three years of development, the government passed legislation in an attempt to rectify the power imbalance between news publishers and Facebook and Google. The News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code, passed in February 2021, establishes “a mandatory code under which registered Australian news-business corporations and designated digital-platform corporations must comply with requirements including provision of information and non-differentiation and may bargain about the amount to be paid for making available certain news content on designated platform services.”⁴¹ The bill’s key requirements of provision of information, providing transparency on data related to user interactions and referral traffic, and non-differentiation — placing responsibility on a digital platform to distribute content from publishers equitably in terms of ranking and indexing — are key to levelling the playing field for all publishers, and tackling misinformation.⁴²

Facebook immediately responded to the legislation by restricting news publishers and people in Australia from sharing and viewing news content on its platform.⁴³ Facebook argued the law misunderstood the relationship between its platform and the publishers who use it voluntarily. According to Facebook, less than four percent of content in the news feed in Australia was actual news content, and it estimated that referral traffic to Australian news publishers was around 5.1 billion users, valued at AU\$407 million.⁴⁴ Days later, Facebook reversed its course after striking a deal with the government on the bill, including a period for digital platforms to broker agreements with

⁴¹ “Treasury Laws Amendment (News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code) Bill 2020,” Parliament of Australia, February 17, 2021, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/bd/bd2021a/21bd048#_Toc64377246.

⁴² “Treasury Laws Amendment (News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code) Bill 2020.”

⁴³ William Easton, “Changes to Sharing and Viewing News on Facebook in Australia,” Meta, February 23, 2021, <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/02/changes-to-sharing-and-viewing-news-on-facebook-in-australia/>.

⁴⁴ Easton, “Changes to Sharing and Viewing News on Facebook in Australia.”

publishers.⁴⁵ While Facebook struck deals with Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp.,⁴⁶ the Guardian,⁴⁷ and ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation),⁴⁸ it failed to reach deals with smaller publishers such as the Special Broadcasting Service, one of the country’s five national broadcasters, and *The Conversation*, a not-for-profit outlet. The code was under review as of February 2022 and the companies left out of the deal have little room for action unless the government forces Facebook to negotiate or risk fines.⁴⁹

Google in Australia initially disapproved of the legislation, arguing the code would “dismantle a free and open service that’s been built to serve everyone, and replace it with one where links come at a price, and where the government would give a handful of news businesses an advantage over everybody else.”⁵⁰ Rather than pay publishers per click through Google’s search-engine function, Google proposed an alternative feature for publishers to display and promote their journalism on Google. The feature, Google News Showcase, allows newsrooms to curate stories featured on Google News and receive regular payments from Google.⁵¹ After launching in February 2021, over 70 Australian news publishers signed up.⁵² When news emerged from Australia that

⁴⁵ The Associated Press, “Facebook to Restore Australian News Pages after Deal Reached to Amend Proposed Law,” CBC News, February 23, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/facebook-ban-australia-1.5924076>.

⁴⁶ Scott Neuman, “Facebook Reaches Deal with News Corp.. Australia to Pay for News Content,” NPR (NPR, March 16, 2021), <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/16/977776254/facebook-reaches-deal-with-news-corp-australia-to-pay-for-news-content>.

⁴⁷ Josh Taylor, “Guardian Australia Strikes Deal with Facebook to Licence News to the Platform,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, July 2, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/jul/02/guardian-australia-strikes-deal-with-facebook-to-licence-news-to-the-platform>.

⁴⁸ ABC News, “‘A Great Way to Start 2022’: ABC to Employ over 50 Regional Journalists after Facebook, Google Deal,” ABC News (ABC News, December 3, 2021), <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-12-03/abc-to-add-more-than-50-journalists-in-regional-australia/100673862>.

⁴⁹ Amanda Meade, “Rod Sims Says Facebook Should Be Forced to Negotiate with SBS under News Media Bargaining Code,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, May 22, 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2022/may/23/rod-sims-says-facebook-should-be-forced-to-negotiate-with-sbs-under-news-media-bargaining-code>.

⁵⁰ Mel Silva, “Open Letter - Update on the News Media Bargaining Code in Australia,” Google, accessed June 6, 2022, <https://about.google/google-in-australia/jan-6-letter/>.

⁵¹ Mel Silva, “An Update on the News Media Bargaining Code,” Google, accessed June 6, 2022, <https://about.google/google-in-australia/an-open-letter/>.

⁵² Silva, “An Update on the News Media Bargaining Code.”

legislation would be passed, Canada vowed it would be the next country to follow suit.⁵³ Despite tabling Bill C-18, industry experts remain conflicted on whether the legislation will have much impact on lost revenues. While some say it's a step in the right direction, others suggest the bill fails to address how digital advertising is regulated in Canada, which is a major factor in newspapers' bottom lines.

Shortly after its inception in 2016, News Media Canada, the national association of the Canadian news media industry, began lobbying for legislation that would make digital companies support journalism. Paul Deegan, president and CEO of News Media Canada, described the Canadian government's proposed legislation as "vital" in a story by London-based *Press Gazette* in May 2022.⁵⁴ Deegan supported the bill by saying it would allow "Canadian publishers to negotiate collectively with platforms backed up by the teeth of baseball-style arbitration."⁵⁵

Bob Cox, former publisher of the *Winnipeg Free Press* and past chair of News Media Canada explained in an April 2022 opinion piece how the delay in legislation boiled down to several factors: little awareness that Canadian journalism was facing a crisis of closures, the role government could play in helping journalism survive, and the lobbying done by Google and Facebook to demonstrate their support for journalism and news outlets, attempting to prove government intervention was not necessary. Following the Australian legislation, Cox said the new deal "legislated what already operates informally," as Google and Facebook have signed deals with publishers, including the *Winnipeg Free Press*. Cox called the bill a "key step" in addressing the Canadian news crisis, as "it will enshrine in law the principle that the journalism organizations that originate news content deserve to be compensated for it as it is searched and shared on digital platforms."⁵⁶

⁵³ David Ljunggren, "Canada Vows to be next Country to Make Facebook Pay for News," CBC News, February 19, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-next-country-facebook-news-1.5919665>.

⁵⁴ William Turvill, "Online News Act: Google and Meta Fight with Publishers Moves to Canada," *Press Gazette*, May 9, 2022, <https://pressgazette.co.uk/online-news-act-google-meta-canada/>.

⁵⁵ Turvill, "Online News Act: Google and Meta Fight with Publishers Moves to Canada."

⁵⁶ Bob Cox, "New Bill a Key Step in Addressing News Crisis," *Winnipeg Free Press*, April 6, 2022, <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/opinion/analysis/new-bill-a-key-step-in-addressing-news-crisis-576367482.html>.

Back to the Drawing Board

Not everyone is as optimistic as Deegan and Cox. Dwayne Winseck, director of the Canadian Media Concentration Research Project and professor in Carleton University's School of Journalism and Communications has conducted extensive research studying media in Canada and says policy-makers should go "back to the drawing board" on this bill.⁵⁷ Winseck's blog notes the bill has positive elements, such as measures that would prohibit Google and Facebook from giving preference to news providers, allowing platforms to strike deals with news providers individually and collectively with a review process, and that it has Canada Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) involvement. However, Winseck argues that "rather than trying to counteract the source of Google and Facebook's market dominance and gatekeeping power, the *Online News Act* tries to leverage their market dominance for public policy ends: saving journalism."⁵⁸ The crisis that journalism is facing, says Winseck, has been unravelling across decades and didn't just begin with the digital giants. Winseck's research found the crisis has primarily been influenced by declining newspaper circulation, consolidation, and advertising revenues.⁵⁹ While it may be convenient to put the blame on the companies affecting advertising revenues, the bill doesn't address the root of the problem, which is the companies' chokehold on digital advertising and their data-driven business models harvesting personal information.

Saving journalism through this bill means incorporating a key element of journalism itself: competition. The state of news media will not be saved by the funnelling of ad dollars from Google and Facebook alone, but by creating intentional spaces at the bargaining table for "rivals, advertisers, experts, academics or anybody else to articulate the 'public's interests' in these matters."⁶⁰ In focusing on the public's interests, the CRTC would act as a "super-regulator" under this bill.⁶¹ This role places an exceptional amount

⁵⁷ Dwayne Winseck, "Mediamorphis," Mediamorphis (blog), April 13, 2022, <https://dwmw.wordpress.com/2022/04/13/bad-news-proposed-online-news-act-trades-on-myths-and-misconceptions/>.

⁵⁸ Winseck, "Mediamorphis."

⁵⁹ Winseck, "Mediamorphis."

⁶⁰ Winseck, "Mediamorphis."

⁶¹ Winseck, "Mediamorphis."

of trust in the CRTC that Winseck says is misplaced, considering the commission's "timid" approach to tackling issues in telecoms and broadcasting.⁶²

Without addressing these root issues of market dominance, gaps in public policy and lack of regulation, it's not clear whether the bill will have the intended effect of saving the existing business model of journalism.

The challenges facing the industry of news publishing can't be solved overnight or with a single piece of legislation. Policy-makers and industry advocates must continue to critique, analyze, challenge, and champion forthcoming efforts in maintaining a diverse mediascape while embracing change. If the business model of journalism is collapsing, rather than go down with it, publishers need to re-strategize operations. The *Winnipeg Free Press* serves as an example of a local legacy media outlet that has felt the impact of the issues facing the mediascape, yet it remains determined to adapt alongside changing reader habits and technologies.

⁶² Winseck, "Mediamorphis."

Part II: Let's get Local: *Winnipeg Free Press*

Amidst the evolving mediascape and myriad digital developments, this case study focuses on a local 150-year-old publication that has managed to keep the presses hot, and the population informed. But the COVID-19 pandemic, an aging readership, and limited financial resources are active barriers to growing the next generation of its audience.

This section looks at the history of the *Winnipeg Free Press*, its current digital reader demographics and social media follower demographics, and how these audiences are missing a key group, readers aged 18 to 24. Reaching the 18-to-24 audience is imperative to the publication's long-term viability.

The History of the *Winnipeg Free Press*

In 1872, two years after the province of Manitoba joined Confederation in 1870, William Fisher Luxton and John A. Kenny created the *Manitoba Free Press*. Within years of its inception, the *Manitoba Free Press* “became a leading daily.”⁶³ Between 1859 and 1890, 20 newspapers had emerged on the local publishing scene, yet only the *Manitoba Free Press* survived.⁶⁴ The survival of the paper is linked to the historical events that took place during the late 1880s as the recently incorporated City of Winnipeg found itself competing with nearby communities to be the site of a new national railroad.⁶⁵ While the railroad brought settlers to the prairies, it also brought many new readers, eager to be informed about their community. Another factor contributing to its success was the acquisition of the newspaper around 1892 by Sir Clifford Sifton, a federal cabinet minister in the government of Sir Wilfrid Laurier. In 1901, John Wesley Dafoe became the editor of the paper, alongside E.H. Macklin as its chief business manager — together, the three men worked to maintain the paper's position as the largest-selling

⁶³ Gordon Goldsborough, “Manitoba Free Press / Winnipeg Free Press,” Manitoba Historical Society, April 25, 2022, <http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/business/freepress.shtml>.

⁶⁴ Goldsborough, “Manitoba Free Press / Winnipeg Free Press.”

⁶⁵ “History,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, May 10, 2015, <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/history/>.

newspaper in the province.⁶⁶ In 1931, the paper changed its name to the *Winnipeg Free Press*.⁶⁷

Following the dictum “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,”⁶⁸ the publication’s roots remained strong as it passed through different hands of ownership, various editors, and served a growing population. In the publication’s earliest days, it committed itself to being a paper for the people, and, in its centennial edition, once again pledged “to never forget the individual, to not let size dominate passion. Winnipeg is, after all, a city of people. That’s the way it has been. That’s the way it should be.”⁶⁹

Expanding with the city and evolving technology, by the late 1980s the newspaper had outgrown its once-grand headquarters in the heart of downtown Winnipeg at 300 Carlton Street. It began developing plans for the construction of a \$150-million plant on Mountain Avenue, in the city’s northwestern corner.⁷⁰ The new *Winnipeg Free Press* headquarters was completed in 1991 and equipped with three state-of-the-art computerized presses with a printing capacity of 75,000 newspapers per hour.⁷¹ A decade later, in December 2001, the newspaper, along with sister paper the *Brandon Sun*, was purchased from Thomson Newspapers by FP Canadian Newspapers Limited Partnership. The founders of the company, Ronald Stern and Bob Silver, were both born and raised in Winnipeg, and with the purchase, the pair became the owners of the largest independent newspaper in Canada.⁷²

The *Winnipeg Free Press* has an ongoing commitment to being a voice of authority in the community and its current mission is to “strengthen society by ensuring there is a trusted, independent news source of information the public can rely upon to understand the world they live in, to connect with their community and to make decisions

⁶⁶ “History,” *Winnipeg Free Press*.

⁶⁷ “History,” *Winnipeg Free Press*.

⁶⁸ “Main Street 100 Years Ago: A Thoroughfare into the Future,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, November 30, 1972, Centennial edition.

⁶⁹ “Main Street 100 Years Ago: A Thoroughfare into the Future,” *Winnipeg Free Press*.

⁷⁰ “History,” *Winnipeg Free Press*.

⁷¹ “History,” *Winnipeg Free Press*.

⁷² “History,” *Winnipeg Free Press*.

about what matters most to their lives.”⁷³ The paper is committed to accuracy and accountability and is a member of the National News Media Council, follows Canadian Press style and standards, and is one of only two Canadian media outlets to join The Journalism Trust Initiative, which has set a standard of indicators for the trustworthiness of journalism.⁷⁴

While the *Winnipeg Free Press* continues to produce a successful print product, it also operates a website, winnipegfreepress.com, as well as two apps: the NewsBreak app, and the E-Edition, which is a replica digital version of the newspaper. The *Winnipeg Free Press* provides robust coverage of local affairs, business, sports, and arts and entertainment news, in addition to its dedicated political coverage from Ottawa, and international coverage supplied by wire media services. It continues to look to the needs of its readership and explore potential avenues for growth, partnerships, and community engagement.

Reader Demographics of the *Winnipeg Free Press*

Data from Vividata Spring 2022 provides insight on *Winnipeg Free Press* reader demographics as well as details on their news consumption.⁷⁵

Of Winnipeg adults aged 18 and older, the data finds the average weekly digital readership at 261,000 readers, which is 38 percent of Winnipeg’s adult population. Of those, the gender demographics are relatively balanced with 49 percent being male and 51 percent being female. Most readers have pursued post-secondary education: 26 percent have a trade certificate or diploma, and 54 percent have a bachelor’s degree or post-graduate degree. The average household income of these readers is just shy of \$85,000 and most (79 percent) own their homes. While the average age of an adult in Winnipeg is 47, the average age of weekly digital readers is 51.

⁷³ “About Us,” *Winnipeg Free Press* (FP Canadian Newspapers Limited Partnership, May 10, 2015), <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/about-us/>.

⁷⁴ “About Us,” *Winnipeg Free Press*.

⁷⁵ Datasets can be viewed in Appendix A: Supplemental data for Part II

Most notably, 22 percent of readers or 147,000 Winnipeg adults usually access *Winnipeg Free Press* digital content by using a search engine (organic search),⁷⁶ and 19 percent or 128,000 by accessing links on social media (social media referral traffic).⁷⁷ While a significant portion of readers are seeking out *Winnipeg Free Press* content directly, this data shows social media presence and sharing links to articles can and does drive traffic back to the *Winnipeg Free Press* site.

Social Media Demographics of *Winnipeg Free Press* Followers

As of May 2022, the *Winnipeg Free Press* had over 81,000 followers on Facebook and over 22,000 followers on Instagram.

The audiences for both pages skew female: the Facebook audience is 59 percent female and on Instagram the audience is 61 percent female. The largest audience of followers is between the ages of 35 to 44. The followers are primarily based in Winnipeg.

This data is similarly reflected on the *Winnipeg Free Press*'s Google Analytics page. The majority of users accessed the *Winnipeg Free Press*'s website on desktop and mobile devices through organic search (40 percent), by arriving directly (27 percent),⁷⁸ and through social-media referral channels (15 percent). The gender of readers accessing content digitally is skewed slightly, with males accounting for 55 percent of users, and 23 percent of users were between the ages of 25 and 34. At opposite ends of the spectrum, the readers in the oldest demographics — users aged 65 or older — made up 11 percent of users, while those in the youngest segment — users aged 18 to 24 — accounted for 12 percent. While the users aged 65 and older may have a higher propensity to read a physical, printed product, the users within the 18-to-24 age

⁷⁶ Results from search engines that are not advertisements. Example: typing “Winnipeg Free Press” into Google

⁷⁷ Users reach <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com> by clicking on an article link shared on a social media platform

⁷⁸ Traffic that arrives directly to Winnipeg Free Press. Example: typing <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com> into a web browser.

range are more likely to seek out news on digital devices, and through social media.⁷⁹ Users aged 18 to 24 also make up the smallest demographic following on both Facebook (4 percent) and Instagram (5 percent) and are thus less likely to view *Winnipeg Free Press* content that will refer them to the publication's website as its not appearing within their social media feeds.

Data from Google Analytics shows Facebook as the leading social network driving user traffic to the site on mobile and desktop devices — 87 percent being referral traffic from article links posted on the *Winnipeg Free Press*'s Facebook page, and 13 percent from paid advertising. In 2021, traffic from Facebook accounted for 49 percent of sessions from social networks, traffic from Twitter accounted for 44 percent of sessions and traffic from Instagram accounted for 0.3 percent of sessions.

This information shows how useful and effective social networks are in driving traffic to the *Winnipeg Free Press*'s site and in building its overall readership. Although social-referral traffic is slightly concentrated between users aged 25 to 54, the younger audience is not being reached. The *Winnipeg Free Press* must find ways to reach those aged 18 to 24 to build its next generation of readers. Its lack of presence on these users' feeds means they are more likely to source news from other media outlets and less likely to subscribe to, or interact with, *Winnipeg Free Press* content.

Reaching the 18-to-24 Audience: Social Media Use and Habits

The *Winnipeg Free Press* must understand how the 18-to-24 audience uses social media, before it can successfully reach them on those platforms. Pew Research Center found 84 percent of adults ages 18 to 29 use social media.⁸⁰ The majority of this group uses Instagram and Snapchat, and nearly half use TikTok. Adults aged 18 to 24 were more likely to report using Instagram (76 percent), Snapchat (75 percent), or

⁷⁹ Antonis Kalogeropoulos, "How Younger Generations Consume News Differently," Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, May 24, 2020), <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2019/how-younger-generations-consume-news-differently/>.

⁸⁰ Brooke Auxier and Monica Anderson, "Social Media Use in 2021," Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, May 11, 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/>.

TikTok (55 percent).⁸¹ This demographic also reported checking some of these social platforms every day, multiple times a day,⁸² showing that the habit of checking social media has been integrated into their daily lives. In terms of how this group accesses news digitally, 42 percent of adults aged 18 to 29 say they get their news on social media.⁸³ This data affirms the generation’s presence on social platforms, and their interaction with the news.

In identifying the types and frequency of social media platforms used by the targeted 18-to-24 demographic, the *Winnipeg Free Press* can refine its focus on developing strategic ways to build engagement with that audience digitally. Determining how users’ access winnipegfreepress.com content can guide which resources should be applied to drive growth. More broadly, analyzing the demographics of the *Winnipeg Free Press* allow for the publication at large to develop intentional products and content for its readers.

⁸¹ Auxier and Anderson, “Social Media Use in 2021.”

⁸² Auxier and Anderson, “Social Media Use in 2021.”

⁸³ Elisa Shearer, “More than Eight-in-Ten Americans Get News from Digital Devices,” Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, January 12, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/>.

Part III: Unearthing the Digital Strategy

The *Winnipeg Free Press's* strategy to attract and retain digital readers has ebbed and flowed with the popularization of different technologies, reader habits and most importantly, the cultural shift in paying for news online.

This section will spotlight the *Winnipeg Free Press's* past and present digital strategy. Digital strategy case studies on the *Toronto Star*, *New York Times* and BuzzFeed News will compare attempts to secure digital readers and supersede falling advertising revenues.

The *Winnipeg Free Press's* website, winnipegfreepress.com, launched November 1, 1999. Initially, readers could only access the website's content if they had a print subscription — there was no model in place for a digital-only subscription. In 2009 content on the website could be accessed without a subscription and in December 2011 a paywall was added to the site for users, primarily snowbirds (readers who travel south for the winter), accessing content outside of Canada.⁸⁴

In 2015 the *Winnipeg Free Press* was the first major newspaper in North America to implement a micro-accounting and post-pay digital strategy. In the pay-as-you-go model, users who created online accounts would be able to pay 27 cents per article read, and even receive a refund if the user didn't believe the article was worth the money. Three years into the pay-as-you-go model, nearly 30 percent of digital access subscribers started as micropay readers.⁸⁵ This model was ultimately phased out in 2021 as conversion rates between users committing to full-rate subscriptions tapered off. However, users who prefer less commitment can still purchase a day pass, which gives unlimited access for 24 hours at a cost of \$2.

New *Winnipeg Free Press* users can access three digital articles or one premium article for free before they are asked to supply an email address to continue reading.

⁸⁴ Kevin Rollason, "Free Press to Add Pay Wall to Website," *Winnipeg Free Press*, December 8, 2011, <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/135232773.html>.

⁸⁵ Christian Panson, "What Are Some of the Challenges of Implementing Micropayments, and What Are Some Lessons You've Learned in the Process?" *Editor & Publisher* (September 2018) p. 12.

Following that, a prompt appears notifying them to subscribe at the latest promotional rate. Users can also subscribe for digital access only, digital access combined with the delivery of the Saturday paper, and six-day paper delivery from Monday to Saturday.

In focusing further on its efforts to attract new digital readers while generating revenue, the company has developed a funnel by which users travel through the subscription process. The digital funnel strategy is broken into four tiers of action: Come, Stay, Pay, and Keep Paying. Each tier of the funnel demonstrates the various tactics employed to attract, build trust, and create loyalty with potential subscribers.

COME: Users visit *Winnipeg Free Press's* digital infrastructure through engagement tactics such as content marketing (including organic and paid social-media marketing), external advertising, and partnerships with local organizations. Other channels such as Apple News, Apple News+, Google News and Google News Showcase direct readers to the site. Tactics are employed to provide a seamless experience for anonymous users including reduced page load time, ad-free options, and behavioural-based article recommendations.

STAY: *Winnipeg Free Press* readers are encouraged to stay with the product through a simplified registration page, cross-platform device integration and seamless reading across the NewsBreak and E-Edition apps, through onsite messaging, print advertisements, and email marketing. By promoting current subscription options and information on connecting with customer service representatives, readers have the details they need to commit to a paid subscription.

PAY: The most difficult part of the funnel is the same question plaguing the media industry: what tactics will prompt people to pay for their news? The *Winnipeg Free Press* is currently juggling nearly a dozen, including promoting top-read stories, sending promotional email offers, featuring subscription offers as house advertisements online, and implementing a touch point for customer-service support through Intercom business messaging — a type of on-site chat function that connects users to live customer-service representatives.

KEEP PAYING: The backbone of the Keep Paying tactics revolve around the customer, the person who builds the community the paper reports on. The reader is recognized as a fundamental component behind the journalism that happens. Through

reader feedback surveys, gift subscriptions, and on-site thank-you messaging, readers are more likely to stay if they are acknowledged and made to feel as if they are part of the bigger picture.

As of 2022, these tactics have allowed the *Winnipeg Free Press's* digital growth to expand to 20,000 subscribers and counting. To further promote engagement with the *Winnipeg Free Press* brand and develop customer loyalty, various initiatives have been launched: the Reader Bridge, connecting underserved communities to reporting; *Free Press* Book Club; Summer Reading Challenge for Kids; Homemade Community Cookbook; Brew Box; and *WFP* Movie Night. Each of these initiatives has taken on its own brand while aligning with the values of the paper to build community through its enterprises. By connecting with diverse audiences including book lovers, recipe-swappers and foodies, and movie-lovers, the *Winnipeg Free Press* better reflects its community.

Engagement initiatives and editorial decisions to invest in various beats have been informed through data analysis. The *Winnipeg Free Press* uses a variety of data-collection tools such as in-house subscription reports, Google Analytics, Piano Insight, and Metrics for News. These tools find patterns within user habits, tracking the popularity of stories and emerging trends within beats. By using these tools, newsrooms can deliver stronger, targeted reporting for their readers and dedicate resources to stories that will gain traction in the community.

In Canada, audiences increasingly want convenient and immediate access to news and information about their communities. Various news platforms have been assessing their approaches in attracting readers and converting them into subscribers. However, the approaches haven't always worked out.

Digital Strategy Case Study: the *Toronto Star*

The *Toronto Star*, dubbed the "Paper for the People," is a primary example of a local newspaper attempting to adjust its product strategy in the digital market.⁸⁶ The *Star's* business strategy as the digital era pressed on resembled its early beginnings:

⁸⁶ "History of the Toronto Star," *Toronto Star*, September 23, 2016, <https://www.thestar.com/about/history-of-the-toronto-star.html>.

pack the pages and website with the news of the day, collect advertising revenue from traditional print and online banner ads, and the publication would pay for itself. But the crucial flaw in the plan, which newspapers including the *Winnipeg Free Press* would learn, is that it would take many more impressions on online banner ads to generate revenue akin to a printed advertisement. The *Star* launched a digital subscription option in 2013 providing unlimited access to articles online as well as a digital replica of the paper.⁸⁷ Its newly designed website was unveiled in January 2013, providing for better positioning of multimedia components such as videos, live blogs and chats, and a paywall was implemented in August 2013.⁸⁸ Feeling the advertising revenue pinch from Facebook and Google, “the paper has lost the capacity to generate the advertising revenue required to fund its journalistic output.”⁸⁹

The *Star* tried several digital initiatives, such as launching the Star Touch app in 2015, a tablet-only product that was available paywall-free and backed by advertisers. The app was modelled off Montreal newspaper *La Presse*’s digital product, LaPresse+ that emerged in 2013. Although the *Star*’s online content was paywalled, the app remained paywall-free in an attempt to recreate the mass market while selling higher-priced digital advertising.⁹⁰ The app was never intended to be a breaking-news product; however, the newsroom made shifts to focus on “screen-based storytelling,” investing heavily in video production, further differentiating it from the online and print edition of the paper. By 2017, owing to low reader numbers and lack of advertising volume, the app was shut down.⁹¹

⁸⁷ John Cruickshank, “Toronto Star Launches Digital Subscriptions: Publisher,” *Toronto Star*, August 13, 2013, https://www.thestar.com/news/2013/08/13/toronto_star_launches_digital_subscriptions.html.

⁸⁸ Cruickshank, “Toronto Star Launches Digital Subscriptions: Publisher.”

⁸⁹ Brett Popplewell, “Inside the Toronto Star’s Bold Plan to Save Itself,” *The Walrus*, May 18, 2018, <https://thewalrus.ca/inside-the-toronto-stars-bold-plan-to-save-itself/>.

⁹⁰ Ken Doctor, “Newsonomics: In Toronto, the Star Is Making Its Own Big Bet on Tablets,” Nieman Lab, June 11, 2015, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2015/06/newsonomics-in-toronto-the-star-is-making-its-own-big-bet-on-tablets/>.

⁹¹ Laura Hazard Owen, “The Toronto Star, ‘Surprised by Low Numbers,’ Is Shutting down Star Touch, Its Expensive Tablet App,” Nieman Lab, June 27, 2017, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2017/06/the-toronto-star-surprised-by-low-numbers-is-shutting-down-star-touch-its-expensive-tablet-app>.

Following the app's demise, the company decided to invest further in data collection and understand what stories readers were looking for.⁹² This included the use of Parse.ly, a web analytics and content-optimization software company.⁹³ Pursuing a journalism-first approach to sustain the company financially is a stark contrast from the paper's earlier reliance on advertising revenue. While the notion of a journalism-first approach isn't novel, it may be the best way to show readers that thoughtfully-produced news content is worth the investment of a subscription.

To attract more readers to its content, the *Star*, like other publishers in Canada including the *Winnipeg Free Press*, partnered with Google News Showcase in October 2021 to help drive traffic back to its website.⁹⁴ Beyond the audience that is actively seeking out news, the *Star* went after another demographic when it launched a sports betting section within its site with content created by NorthStar Bets.⁹⁵ The betting platform officially launched in May 2022, but data on its ability to expand its readership through this specific initiative is not yet available.

The *Star's* printed product still exists, and likely will continue to exist as long as it remains profitable. However, on its subscription page, digital options are presented in various formats, well ahead of any print offer.⁹⁶ The push for digital indicates this is where the company's future lies, and it will continue to promote a digital-first option as the pendulum of reader habits swing in that direction. The publication's digital future is further reinforced by Torstar's overall bump at the end of its fourth quarter in digital subscriptions to 32,000 digital-only subscribers from 28,000.⁹⁷

⁹² Popplewell, "Inside the Toronto Star's Bold Plan to Save Itself."

⁹³ Popplewell, "Inside the Toronto Star's Bold Plan to Save Itself."

⁹⁴ Josh Rubin, "Torstar Announces Partnership with Google News Showcase, Launching in Canada Today," *Toronto Star*, (Toronto Star, October 27, 2021), <https://www.thestar.com/business/2021/10/27/torstar-announces-partnership-with-google-news-showcase-which-launches-in-canada-today.html>.

⁹⁵ "Northstar Gaming Unveils Northstar Bets Brand and Launches Integrated Content Arrangement with Torstar Corporation," Cision, February 25, 2022, <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/northstar-gaming-unveils-northstar-bets-brand-and-launches-integrated-content-arrangement-with-torstar-corporation-839937317.html>.

⁹⁶ "Subscribe to the Star Digital Access: The Star," *Toronto Star*, accessed June 6, 2022, <https://www.thestar.com/subscribe>.

⁹⁷ Josh Rubin, "Torstar Grows Digital Subscriptions as Pandemic Impacts Ad Revenue."

Being a “Paper for the People” doesn’t mean that a publication has to be all things to all people, all the time, but that it reflects the needs of its audience. By curating and creating content that readers seek, hawking it across platforms like a paperboy would on a street corner, and developing alternative products such as the sports betting section to develop brand awareness and loyalty with users, the *Star* has shown initiative in pivoting its offerings.

Digital Strategy Case Study: the *New York Times*

The *New York Times* is another key example of a newspaper company that weathered the storm of tanking ad revenues. The publishing company has worked diligently to redefine its business model and has been ambitious in seeking out a scalable target market for its news and news-adjacent products. The *New York Times*’ current strategy is to market itself as “the essential subscription for every curious, English-speaking person seeking to understand and engage with the world.”⁹⁸ This lofty goal not only describes people who are genuinely curious, but targets those who aspire to become that person, and see the *New York Times* as a means to that goal. Within its strategy, the *New York Times* expands the business of news consumption, pushing past the notion that news and engagement with news products is exclusive to interaction with articles; it can be in the form of newsletters, podcasts, and news-adjacent products.

As the company navigated shifting its focus from its print to digital products, its strategy states that the mission of “helping people understand the world” propelled it to be “a digital-first, subscription-first business, centered on journalism worth paying for.”⁹⁹ And many people have found the products worth the price: by the end of 2021, about 7.6 million subscribers purchased approximately 8.8 million paid subscriptions across its products, and the non-news products Games and Cooking both had over one million subscriptions.¹⁰⁰ Following the acquisition of The Athletic, a subscription-based sports website, the company surpassed its 2019 goal of reaching 10 million subscriptions. The

⁹⁸ “Our Strategy,” The New York Times Company, March 24, 2022, <https://www.nytco.com/press/our-strategy/>.

⁹⁹ “Our Strategy,” The New York Times Company.

¹⁰⁰ “The New York Times Company 2021 Annual Report.” The New York Times Company, March 11, 2022. <https://nytco-assets.nytimes.com/2022/03/The-New-York-Times-Company-2021-Annual-Report.pdf>

latest target for the company is obtaining 15 million total subscribers by the end of 2027.¹⁰¹ And with the January 2022 acquisition of Wordle, a daily game in which users have six chances to guess a five-letter word, that goal may not be so far-fetched. The game quickly skyrocketed in popularity after it launched in October 2021, as users shared records of their attempts to guess the word of the day on social media platforms. On November 1, 2021, Wordle had 90 users; when the *New York Times* purchased it, “millions play[ed] the game daily.”¹⁰² Through this acquisition the *New York Times* has once again tapped into a committed audience and created another opportunity to expose its brand to potential subscribers. By diversifying its offerings through verticals such as Games and Wordle, the *New York Times* provides more opportunities for reader-generated revenue, and less reliance on advertising revenues.

Despite its digital-first approach, over 40 percent of the company’s revenue is sourced from its printed product. While the company doesn’t intend to stop print production, it recognizes several challenges it may encounter while carving out digital success. Those barriers include the extensive amount of “low-quality news,” the inherent complexities of the digital ecosystem and its sources of untrustworthy information, the polarization of society and attacks on media and journalists, and the evolution of how people interact with the news and digital media. But these factors aren’t deterrents for the company’s digital success; audience research produced by the *New York Times* suggests around 135 million adults worldwide are willing to pay or are already paying for subscriptions to news products written in English.¹⁰³ These news products include “news and opinion, sports journalism, puzzles, recipes, expert shopping advice, or podcasting.”¹⁰⁴ The unifying theme between these products is the readers themselves, who fall into the audience demographic of curious readers and lifelong learners. This group is characterized by their capacity for independent thinking, their interest in civic engagement, and appreciation for other cultures and experiences.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ “The New York Times Company 2021 Annual Report.” The New York Times Company.

¹⁰² Marc Tracy, “The New York Times Buys Wordle,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, January 31, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/31/business/media/new-york-times-wordle.html>.

¹⁰³ “Our Strategy,” The New York Times Company.

¹⁰⁴ “Our Strategy,” The New York Times Company.

¹⁰⁵ “Our Strategy,” The New York Times Company.

To further reach this audience, the approach for the *New York Times* is threefold. First and foremost, the *New York Times* aims to be the best in its news offering. This means investing in and developing robust coverage about the most important and interesting stories of the day and enhancing those stories using multimedia tools. These tools include complementary “articles, newsletters, photography, interactive graphics, data visualizations, audio, video and events.”¹⁰⁶ The *New York Times* is committed to investing in its journalism through specific beat reporting, breaking news coverage, investigative pieces, and diverse opinion pages.¹⁰⁷ Secondly, the company has committed to providing lifestyle and culture coverage to balance the negative news stories. Mixing hard news with the levity of lifestyle coverage reinforces a different kind of authority the news has typically offered: providing guidance for everyday decisions, whether that be at the polls or in a bookstore. In this sense, the *New York Times* aims to act as an auxiliary resource for readers. To reach and retain those readers, the third portion of the strategy is the development of an expansive and connected product experience. As a digital-first company, the *New York Times* recognizes its primary product as its *New York Times* app, rather than its website. This move is indicative of user habits and reflects how readers are consuming news on their digital devices such as tablets and smartphones. As the *New York Times* focuses on user experience within the app by providing seamless navigation across its products, it aims to increase the time readers spend on the app to reinforce its essential role in their lives. In this model, paying subscribers would be rewarded for their investment in the *New York Times* through “enhanced experiences” within the app. What these “enhanced experiences” are has not yet been explained in its publicly available strategy.

The *New York Times*’ strategy states its ongoing commitment to its non-paying audience. By introducing its non-paying audience to its coverage through its website, nytimes.com, connecting with the audience through newsletters, and letting them hear the voice of the brand through its podcasting efforts such as *The Daily*, the *New York Times* demonstrates its authority in providing news coverage. These efforts demonstrate that the *New York Times* understands the value in creating content for this audience despite the uncertainty of converting them to paying subscribers.

¹⁰⁶ “Our Strategy,” The New York Times Company.

¹⁰⁷ “Our Strategy,” The New York Times Company.

The *New York Times* has set an international standard for its coverage and will continue to do so as, according to its strategy, it “is not an institution that succeeds by standing still.”¹⁰⁸ Its ability to remain flexible has driven its success, and other news outlets should take note if they aim to endure and overcome the challenges presented by today’s mediascape.

Digital Strategy Case Study: BuzzFeed News

Buzzfeed took a similar approach to the *New York Times* when, in 2012, it began diversifying its offerings and digital development. BuzzFeed News is a vertical of BuzzFeed, an internet media company created in 2006 and known for its viral content and quizzes. In its early days, like many other companies looking to find space in the expanding virtual world, BuzzFeed latched on to internet culture through various pillars of its brand including food brand Tasty, do-it-yourself brand Nifty, and self-care brand Goodful. The breadth of its digital-first and -only content enabled the company to expand its content reach and introduce the brand to audiences across social platforms.

Buzzfeed News describes itself as a global news organization that provides “original online reporting and video programming across the internet’s biggest platforms.”¹⁰⁹ It reaches its target audience in the digital realm and leverages the power of existing social media platforms to share content. The news brand averages over 50 million unique monthly readers, not subscribers. The site does not paywall its content, but it does have a “membership” program offered to readers to support its journalistic efforts. Memberships start at one-time contributions as low as US\$5, followed by US\$5 per month, and US\$100 per year. BuzzFeed News used this financial model in “an effort to explore a deeper relationship with our most active supporters.”¹¹⁰ Seemingly, the only visible perks of being a member are accessing member-only emails, and if a user purchases a membership equal to or exceeding US\$100, they receive a tote bag.¹¹¹ News content is available free of charge, making the addition of a tote bag and an

¹⁰⁸ “Our Strategy,” The New York Times Company.

¹⁰⁹ BuzzFeed News, “About BuzzFeed News,” BuzzFeed News (BuzzFeed News, May 20, 2022), <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/buzzfeednews/about-buzzfeed-news>.

¹¹⁰ “Become a BuzzFeed News Member,” BuzzFeed News Membership, accessed June 6, 2022, <https://support.buzzfeednews.com/?about>.

¹¹¹ “Become a BuzzFeed News Member,” BuzzFeed News Membership.

exclusive newsletter imperative to enticing paid members. These “perks” are necessary because there isn’t an option to access BuzzFeed’s news product in a physical format such as a newspaper, so it helps users feel as if they are getting something physical in return for their contribution.

In the race for revenue, BuzzFeed had acquired HuffPost News in 2020 and Complex Networks, a New York City-based youth entertainment company targeting millennials and Gen Z through multimedia lifestyle content in June 2021. BuzzFeed News aimed to punch above its weight, and it did, earning the 2021 Pulitzer Prize in International Reporting, among many other awards for its in-depth investigative pieces. In December 2021 BuzzFeed became a publicly traded company. Since that decision, shares in the company have tanked, hovering around US\$4 to US\$5.¹¹² Despite its disruptive and thought-provoking reporting, shareholders of the company urged management to shut down the news arm, however BuzzFeed founder and CEO Jonah Peretti chose to restructure operations.¹¹³ In 2022, the news division of the company continued to lose money.¹¹⁴

Buzzfeed has multiple ventures under the company’s umbrella that may be appealing to advertisers, but it’s not clear whether that revenue will be enough to protect the news segment of the company. In BuzzFeed’s case, creating a digital media company with diverse offerings means each offering will perform differently in terms of revenue, not unlike the *New York Times*’ approach of offering something for everyone. A viral quiz or listicle will be shared differently than a news article that is timelier than it is relevant to pop culture. Revenues dictated by clicks and shares on other internet platforms indicates cross-posting content is a viable way to drive traffic to buzzfeed.com. But viewing BuzzFeed News alongside viral content, the bread-and-butter of BuzzFeed,

¹¹² “Buzzfeed Inc (BZFD) Stock Price and News,” Google Finance (Google), accessed June 6, 2022, <https://www.google.com/finance/quote/BZFD:NASDAQ?sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjroJXskZr4AhUktoQIHXFACBkQ3ecFegQILRAY>.

¹¹³ Luke Winkie, “More Digital Media Companies Want to Go Public. Can Their Newsrooms Survive?,” Nieman Lab, April 21, 2022, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2022/04/more-digital-media-companies-want-to-go-public-can-their-newsrooms-survive/>.

¹¹⁴ Alex Sherman, “BuzzFeed Investors Have Pushed CEO Jonah Peretti to Shut down Entire Newsroom, Sources Say,” CNBC (CNBC, March 22, 2022), <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/03/22/buzzfeed-investors-have-pushed-ceo-jonah-peretti-to-shut-down-newsroom.html>.

on other internet platforms gives pause to users who may question the credibility or quality of the news product.

Buzzfeed News was a pioneer in digital news, breaking rules on tradition and poaching talented journalists to create an impact in the mediascape. Current revenue struggles are being seen across the media industry, but whether BuzzFeed's commitment to news will impact its financial viability remains to be seen.

Content produced by media companies should reflect the communities they report on. Through this reflection, publishers should follow the trends and habits of current and potential readers to maximize their target audience. However, looking to the successes and trials of media companies near and far can provide insight into other markets and product offerings. Expanding reach should no longer be limited to the production of in-house content such as articles or newsletters, but publishers must look to alternative digital approaches and verticals to maximize the reach of their brands, missions, and content. The journey ahead for the *Winnipeg Free Press* must be built upon these foundations to enhance its digital strategy and commitment to readers.

Part IV: The *Free Press*'s Path Ahead

As reader habits evolve, this section outlines how the *Winnipeg Free Press* has taken strides to expand the reach of its journalism through content-sharing agreements and investments in social media platforms. In addition to these efforts, digital development and reader engagement opportunities lie in expanding its social media presence while leveraging platforms to work for its publication, and in creating spaces for young readers to interact with the local news.

In February 2022 the *Winnipeg Free Press* redesigned its front-page nameplate to the *Free Press*.¹¹⁵ This change has threefold implications. While the paper itself has existed for 150 years with slightly different names, it has always remained a free press. The change is also a nod to how local readers often reference the publication, demonstrating an effort to reflect its relationship with the community, and the removal of “Winnipeg” challenges the notion that it is a hyper-local publication. Taking the focus away from “Winnipeg” in the nameplate positions the paper as a broader Manitoba publication, expanding the opportunity to reach readers beyond Winnipeg’s Perimeter Highway. The *Free Press* also changed its tagline to: “For Manitoba. For 150 Years. Forever With Your Support,” further implying its permanency and commitment to provincial coverage.

That commitment has been reflected in attempts to reach readers where they are: in the digital space. The *Free Press* has invested heavily in content-sharing agreements, signing with Facebook News, Apple News and Apple News+, Google on the Google News Initiative, CBC, Canada’s National Observer, *The Narwhal* and even the *Toronto Star*¹¹⁶ to broaden its reach across Canada. Although the sharing agreement with the *Toronto Star* ended in May 2022, and with CBC in August 2022, agreements with all other companies are ongoing as of August 2022.

The *Free Press* also made further efforts to enhance its social media presence on Instagram and Facebook while it maintained its presence on Twitter. Most notably in

¹¹⁵ *The Free Press*, February 4, 2022.

¹¹⁶ Paul Samyn, “Free Press Teams up with Toronto Star,” *The Free Press* (Winnipeg Free Press, March 22, 2021), <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/free-press-teams-up-with-toronto-star-574033122.html>.

April 2020, the *Free Press* implemented an Instagram strategy focused on posting daily to the grid and Instagram Stories. The pillars of the strategy were rooted in applying an editorial and design style guide for social media, as well as using a social media scheduling tool.¹¹⁷ Posts were curated intentionally based on arts, life, food, and social justice stories in an attempt to target a younger demographic. Over a one-year period the strategy was extremely successful in growing its overall audience: the page's follower count grew 40 percent, from 13,100 to 18,300. However, in analyzing recent data from the *Free Press*'s social media scheduling platform, Later.com, growth in the last year has slowed. From July 2021 to July 2022, the account only grew 15 percent, acquiring 2,900 followers, leaving the total follower count at 22,400. While growth remains steady, this data demonstrates the need to update existing social media strategies and tactics regularly to integrate current trends, new in-app tools, and optimal posting times to increase reach.

The Next Generation of Readers

On social media, authenticity and originality are the main currency. The *Free Press* is a respected, well-established media company that has existed for 150 years, yet an institution with that reputation can appear to social media followers as cold, rigid, and out of touch. As a news destination, local reporting has served as its lifeline. The *Free Press* is dedicated to community coverage, holding itself and public figures accountable and remaining steadfast in its commitment to quality journalism. However, to maintain its mission, the *Free Press* faces some steep challenges as it attempts to reach its younger, desired demographic where it lives online, on social platforms.¹¹⁸

The *Free Press*'s future lies in building and connecting with its next generation of readers. As noted in the demographic section of this project, readers within the 18-to-24 age range — the paper's youngest demographic and among its smallest group of readers — would provide security for the publication's future. As per the Vividata Spring

¹¹⁷ See Appendix B: Social Media Plan, Strategies and Tactics

¹¹⁸ Dara Fontein, "Everything Social Marketers Need to Know About Generation Z," Hootsuite (blog) (Hootsuite Inc., November 13, 2019), <https://blog.hootsuite.com/generation-z-statistics-social-marketers/>.

2022 data set, 30 percent of Winnipeggers, 204,000 people, fall into the 18-to-34 age demographic.

To reach this audience, the *Free Press* must understand its motivations for connecting with the communities it covers and determine what prompts users to read past a headline. Research released in the *Reuters Institute 2022 Digital News Report* aims to understand the younger demographic's news habits, attitudes towards news distrust and avoidance and how social media plays a role in those behaviours.¹¹⁹ The report found readers aged 18 to 24 reported using social media as their main source of news (39 percent). For these users, social media allows for more entertaining, personalized, and diverse news sources. However, the report notes, there has been a steady trend in news avoidance among young people (aged 35 or younger), which has come as a result of the increase of coverage on topics involving politics and COVID-19, and the negative emotional effect that news can cause. When readers under 35 do access the news, they are "more likely to be interested in 'softer' news topics: entertainment and celebrity news (33 percent), culture and arts news (37 percent), and education news (34 percent)."¹²⁰

This research demonstrates how drastically the reading habits of younger audiences are changing, and it underscores the crucial need to dedicate specific resources to reaching this demographic. A conscious social media effort is imperative to the *Free Press's* success in creating connections with this audience. Social media is no longer an auxiliary business strategy; it is a necessity to engage the 18-to-24 age demographic of readers.

Present resources for social media are limited at the *Free Press*. Social media is primarily monitored by an eight-person team assigned to the paper's web products. To implement a consistent and clear social media strategy, a dedicated social media manager should be hired to oversee the platforms and make operational decisions about the accounts. Responsibilities of the social media manager would include managing social media correspondence; developing, optimizing and implementing social media

¹¹⁹ Kirsten Eddy, "The Changing News Habits and Attitudes of Younger Audiences," Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, June 15, 2022), <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022/young-audiences-news-media>.

¹²⁰ Eddy, "The Changing News Habits and Attitudes of Younger Audiences."

strategies; scheduling posts across platforms as needed; and collecting and analyzing data on post performance and engagement metrics. The social media manager would also work closely with the editorial department to plan featured content and the digital department for social media advertising campaigns. Compensation for similar roles in Manitoba average \$50,000 annually.¹²¹

Although dedicating an entire team solely to social media would be ideal, the social media manager would place a strong emphasis on using platform-integrated tools, leveraging each platform to work for the *Free Press*. For example, Instagram's position as a photo-sharing app makes it a natural place to share carousel posts of photographs, and Facebook's tendency to attract shares and commentors makes it ideal for sharing everyday local news, whereas Twitter is most suitable for breaking news coverage. The largest undertaking of this role should be consistent investment in a new social media platform: TikTok.

TikTok: @winnipegnews

TikTok, a video-sharing app, is extremely popular among Gen Z. The app has 386.6 million users aged 18 to 24, which is 44 percent of the platform's total users.¹²² Various news media have invested in this platform, including the *Washington Post*. The *Washington Post's* TikTok, primarily operated by video journalist Dave Jorgenson, packages the news of the day into informative, engaging and often humorous video content.¹²³ In an interview with *The Atlantic*, Jorgenson explained the *Washington Post* is using the app as a tool to expose youths to the *Washington Post* brand and gain trust in the brand, and to reinforce the paper's mission.¹²⁴ So far, the *Washington Post* has expanded its reach among social media users as its TikTok account has 1.4 million

¹²¹ "Social Media Manager Salary in Manitoba," Indeed, April 5, 2022, <https://ca.indeed.com/career/social-media-manager/salaries/Manitoba>.

¹²² Ying Lin, "15 TikTok Statistics Marketers Need to Know," Shopify, May 2, 2022, <https://www.shopify.ca/blog/tiktok-statistics#2>.

¹²³ Christine Schmidt, "Meet Tiktok: How the Washington Post, NBC News, and the Dallas Morning News Are Using the of-the-Moment Platform," Nieman Lab. (Nieman Lab, June 18, 2019), <https://www.niemanlab.org/2019/06/meet-tiktok-how-the-washington-post-nbc-news-and-the-dallas-morning-news-are-using-the-of-the-moment-platform/>.

¹²⁴ Scott Nover, "How Do You Do, Fellow Kids?," *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, December 4, 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/12/washington-post-all-tiktok/602794/>.

followers.¹²⁵ In considering how content creators dominate the app, and the path paved by the *Washington Post* and other news media by leveraging it for news sharing, the *Free Press*'s limited resources in video editing and content creation may be better suited tapping into another realm of TikTok altogether: #BookTok. This trending hashtag has amassed 64.2 billion views and features videos based on plotlines in books, short reviews, or reaction videos.

The *Free Press* publishes its book reviews online and in print on Saturdays. In print it dedicates four full pages to reviews, which run alongside monthly featured columns on specific book genres. The variety, number of reviews, and inherent popularity of #BookTok sets a framework for a successful TikTok strategy for the *Free Press*. As all reviews are published once a week, the social media manager should work closely with the literary editor to plan content creation for the most-anticipated reviews. The *Free Press*'s approach to TikTok would likely reflect elements of the *Washington Post*'s strategy and the *New York Times*' digital strategy to its non-paying audience. The crux of this being the return on this investment likely won't be as quantifiable as subscription revenue. Rather, it supplements reader revenue by this type of digital outreach that focuses on building relationships with potential readers first.

Following the *Free Press* account's growth on the platform and its ability to keep up with trends, there is potential to expand its content creation focusing on news of the day, like the *Washington Post*. Expanding content creation means expending more resources on the platform, and additional video editing resources, storyboarding and human resources would likely be required to follow through on this growth.

Further Digital Development

The *Free Press* also has an opportunity to go back to its core mission of serving every individual in Manitoba by sharing and tailoring its product to young readers. Although the time frame to eventually convert children into full paying subscribers is extensive, presenting the *Free Press* as a trusted and reliable part of their day is integral to the longevity of the publication. Providing an opportunity to instill news-reading habits

¹²⁵ "Washington Post TikTok Profile," TikTok, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@washingtonpost?lang=en>.

within the format of a children's product would increase likeliness of subscriptions down the line; such a product could also be bundled as an additional subscription to the *Free Press*' digital or printed products. Following focus-group testing, the *Free Press* could experiment with the sustainability of pursuing a printed monthly product for kids, focusing on a theme of the month, or develop an app with a variety of offerings including news written in child-friendly language, contests, and the Summer Reading Challenge for Kids.

This product could act as a hub for the next generation of news consumers to see themselves within their community, contribute to it thoughtfully, and develop an understanding of and appreciation for independent journalism. As news leaders within the community, the *Free Press* can also reach this audience by building relationships in educational settings, participating in time-specific reading events such as I Love to Read Month in February and Media Literacy week in October.

The needs of digital audiences will continue to evolve with the emerging tools and technologies of social media. To succeed in this sphere, the *Free Press* must become comfortable with breaking from tradition, dedicate financial and human resources to experimenting with digital tactics and strategies, and most importantly, continue to listen the needs of its readers.

Conclusion

The obstacles media have faced in the last two decades have placed a seemingly insurmountable challenge in front of each outlet: how can newsrooms survive without the support of community, financial resources, and a commitment to the news that is produced every single day? Advertising revenue will not offer the financial backing it once did, and consolidation within the news industry will harm communities large and small. Government programs targeted at maintaining independent journalism in Canada are needed — the programs show the vitality of news in communities and democracies, but complete reliance on these programs may reduce faith among readers and limit newsrooms in reporting efforts. Partnerships with media giants such as Facebook, Google, and Apple allow outlets to put their reporting in front of wider audiences, although the return varies from newsroom to newsroom. Finding a harmony between each of these avenues will support independent journalism, yet newsrooms must also continue to reinvent their own models to secure longevity.

By combatting attitudes of apathy and disregard for news, newsrooms have pushed themselves to be more than places that write about everyday occurrences. From products centred around betting, to others focused on lifestyle such as books, cooking, and culture, there has been a clear shift in the media's investment in vertical products especially as readers grapple with news fatigue. In exploring the paths readers take to consume news, it is important to invest in efforts beyond subscriptions. Alternate routes for creating brand awareness and brand loyalty such as through newsletters, podcasts, and social media accounts will be the way forward for many news outlets. Alternate news-sharing formats can captivate attention and readers may find themselves further exploring the outlets products. In cultivating engagement beyond its traditional products, further investment in the *Free Press's* social media will be a way for readers to have trusted news better integrated into their everyday lives.

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Appendix A. Supplemental data for Part II

Vividata Spring 2022 Study

Winnipeg Free Press Digital Readership
Vividata Spring 2022

	Winnipeg Population		Average Weekday Readership DIGITAL		Average Weekly Readership DIGITAL	
	# of Winnipeg Adults	% of Winnipeg Adults	# of Readers	% of Readers	# of Readers	% of Readers
Winnipeg Adults 18+	679,000	100%	128,000	100%	261,000	100%
GENDER						
Male	330,000	49%	72,000	56%	128,000	49%
Female	349,000	51%	56,000	44%	133,000	51%
HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION						
Secondary/High School Graduate	160,000	24%	29,000	23%	50,000	19%
Trade Certificate/Diploma or Other Certification	196,000	29%	34,000	27%	69,000	26%
Bachelor's Degree or Post Graduate+ Degree	282,000	42%	65,000	51%	141,000	54%
HOUSEHOLD TENURE						
Own	515,000	76%	87,000	68%	205,000	79%
Rent	163,000	24%	41,000	32%	56,000	21%
HOUSEHOLD INCOME						
Under \$50,000	204,000	30%	33,000	26%	72,000	28%
\$50,000-\$99,999	234,000	34%	62,000	48%	109,000	42%
\$100,000+	241,000	35%	33,000	26%	80,000	31%
Average HH Income	\$87,247		\$82,830		\$84,681	
AGE						
18-34	204,000	30%	16,000*	13%*	50,000	19%
35-49	185,000	27%	26,000	20%	73,000	28%
50-64	147,000	22%	43,000	34%	68,000	26%
65+	142,000	21%	44,000	34%	70,000	27%
Average Age of Adult	47		55		51	
OCCUPATION						
Managers/Owners/Professionals	189,000	28%	33,000	26%	81,000	31%
Employed Full Time	305,000	45%	51,000	40%	138,000	53%
Retired	156,000	23%	52,000	41%	72,000	28%

	Winnipeg Population	
	# of Winnipeg Adults	% of Winnipeg Adults
WAYS USUALLY ACCESS FREE PRESS DIGITAL CONTENT		
My print subscription includes the digital edition	89,000	13%
Through search engines like Google or Bing	147,000	22%
By typing the publications website address	38,000	6%
Through links on social media like Facebook or Twitter	128,000	19%
Through links on other websites	56,000	8%
Through an app	41,000	6%
Through my bookmarks, favourites or my homepage	46,000	7%

* Too small for reliability-shown for consistency only.
Source: Vividata Spring 2022

Facebook and Instagram: Audience demographics

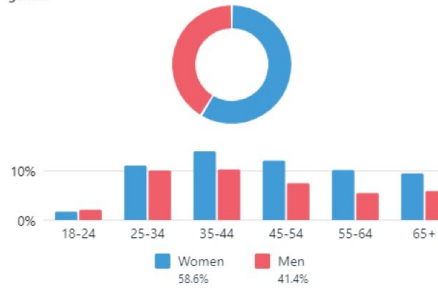
Audience

Current audience... Potential audience

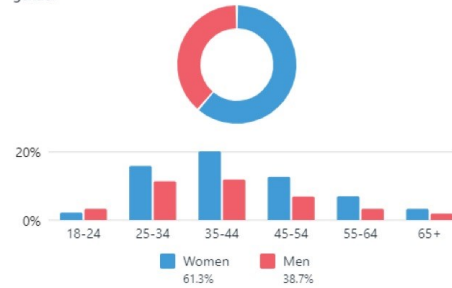
Facebook Page followers
81,477

Instagram followers
22,132

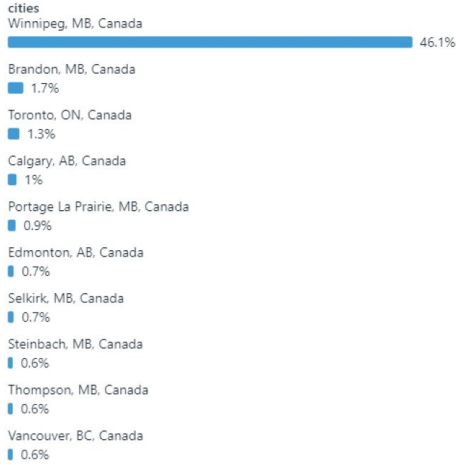
Age & gender



Age & gender



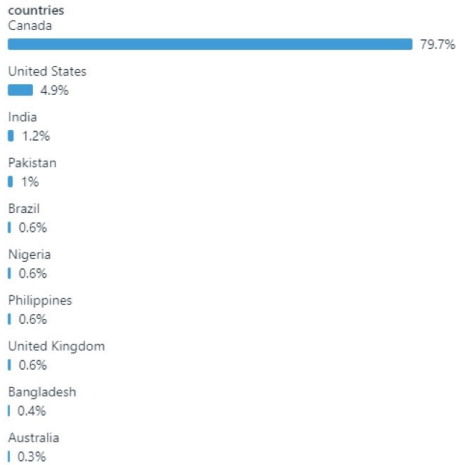
Top cities



Top cities



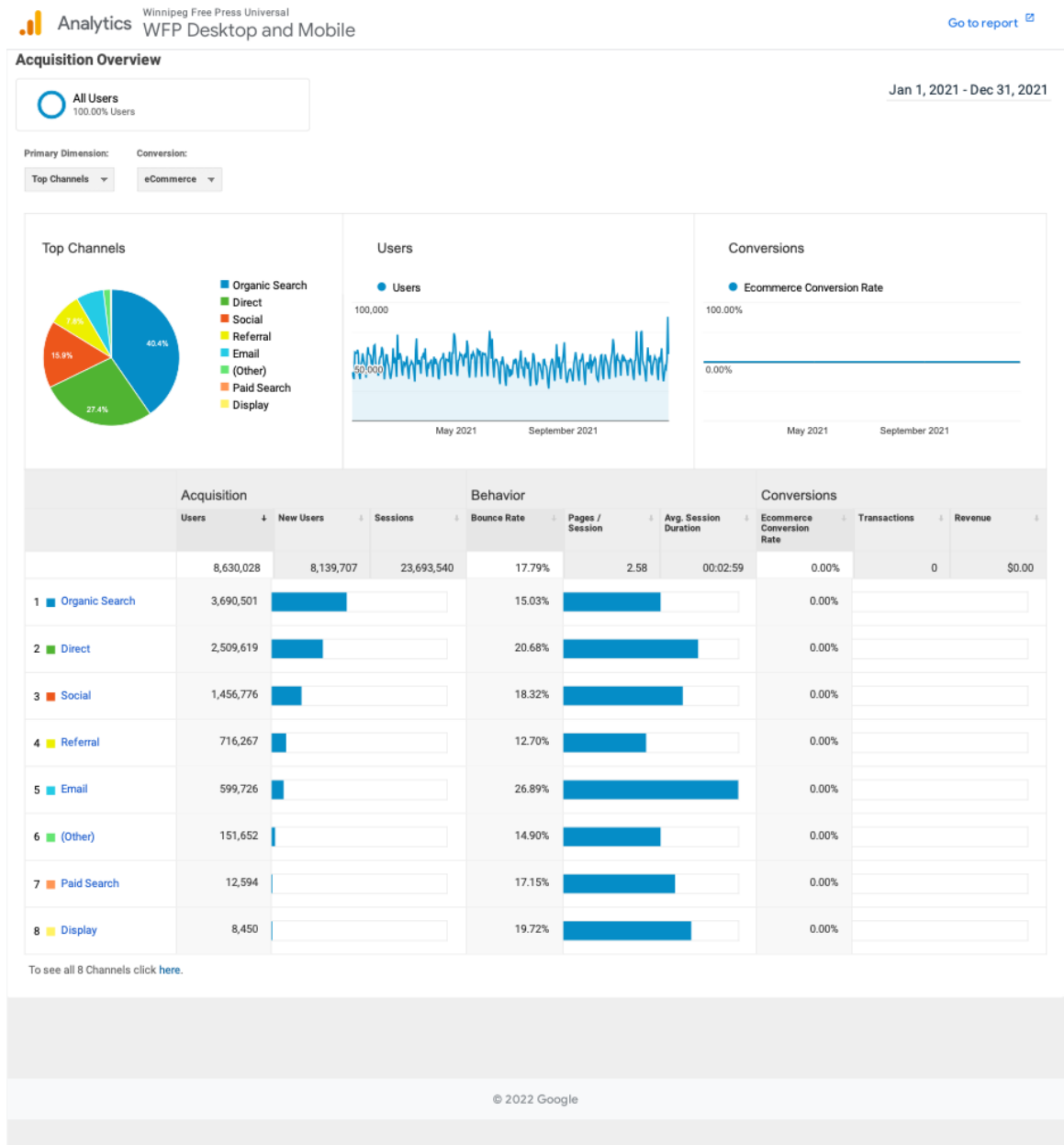
Top countries



Top countries



Google Analytics: Digital acquisition traffic for 2021



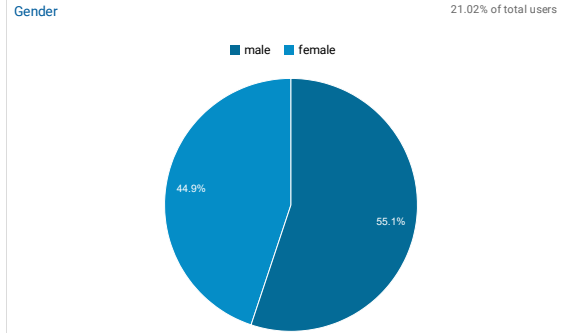
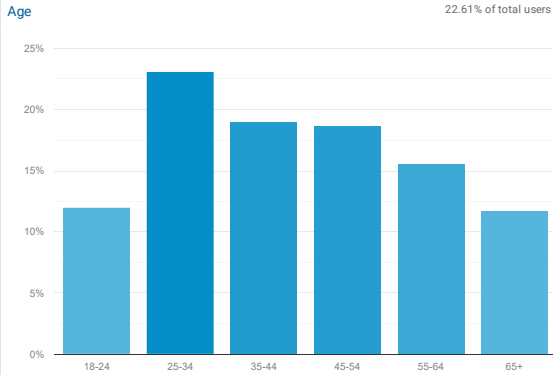
Google Analytics: Digital user demographics for 2021:

Demographics: Overview

All Users
100.00% Users

Jan 1, 2021 - Dec 31, 2021

Key Metric:



Google Analytics: Network referrals through social media in 2021

Network Referrals

Jan 1, 2021 - Dec 31, 2021

Discover where your social traffic originates

Identify the networks and communities where people engage with your content. Learn about each community, and identify your best performing content on each network.

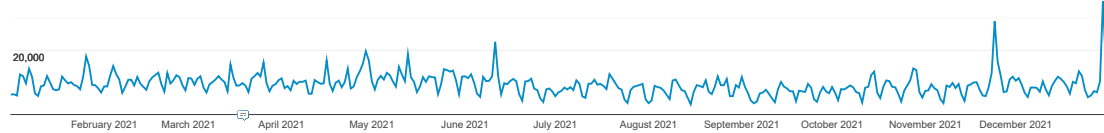
[Don't show education messages.](#)



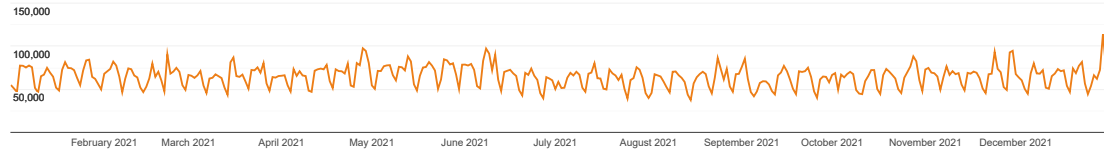
All Users
100.00% Sessions

Social Referral

Sessions via Social Referral
40,000



All Sessions
150,000



Social Network	Sessions ↓	Pageviews	Avg. Session Duration	Pages / Session
1. Facebook	1,670,864 (49.28%)	3,013,177 (47.75%)	00:01:17	1.80
2. Twitter	1,485,139 (43.80%)	2,820,947 (44.70%)	00:02:00	1.90
3. reddit	160,707 (4.74%)	333,454 (5.23%)	00:02:22	2.07
4. LinkedIn	49,671 (1.46%)	95,336 (1.51%)	00:01:39	1.92
5. Instagram	9,407 (0.28%)	17,589 (0.28%)	00:01:04	1.87
6. Instagram Stories	5,758 (0.17%)	10,188 (0.16%)	00:00:32	1.77
7. Pinterest	4,443 (0.13%)	6,502 (0.10%)	00:00:39	1.46
8. Blogger	2,096 (0.06%)	7,531 (0.12%)	00:03:14	3.59
9. YouTube	521 (0.02%)	1,508 (0.02%)	00:02:14	2.89
10. WordPress	484 (0.01%)	941 (0.01%)	00:01:36	1.94

Rows 1 - 10 of 46

Appendix B. Social Media Plan, Strategies and Tactics

This plan serves as a rough guideline for the many hands currently monitoring the *Winnipeg Free Press's* social accounts to ensure consistency.

An editorial style guide underpins the brand's visual identity and voice. The style guide informs social publishers on appropriate fonts, colours, and bonus functions of apps (posting live stories, use of polling tools, and GIPHY). Engagement data should be used to inform future posting plans.

To measure the plan's effectiveness, an editorial calendar and metrics tools will host data from each platform. This data can be accessed easily via Facebook Insights, Twitter Analytics, Instagram insights, and Google Analytics. Data should be input weekly and interpreted monthly to track the best performing posts.

Prospective spreadsheet template

Date & time of post	Platform	Post Type (event, video, article, photo)	Content type: Local, Biz, Arts, Sports, other.	Organic Reach	Paid Reach	Engaged Users

Social Media Style Guide

Instagram: @winnipegfreepress

At its core, Instagram is a photo-sharing app where storytelling is enhanced through captions, and other posting features including stories; Reels, which showcase short video clips of 90 seconds or less; and IGTV, which hosts videos ranging from one minute to an hour.

The *Winnipeg Free Press's* advantage on this app is the sharing of its high-quality images through posts and stories and sharing well-written captions that explain

the context of the images. Another advantage is sharing information crucial to everyday lives. Whether it be information on what's open and closed during long weekends, eligibility information for COVID-19 vaccines, or news about businesses in Winnipeg, people are bound to interact with it by sharing, liking, or commenting on the post.

Instagram Social Media Guidelines

Post frequency: Once daily, ideally at lunch hour or evening.¹²⁶

Post type: Grid post directing people back to bio to read more, and later using the story feature to re-share the post — “swipe up to read our latest.”

Content: Although it will be based on news cycle, the social team should be in regular communication with the photography department to receive guidance on the most visually compelling story of the day.

Copy: Usually taken from the lede¹²⁷ of an article, focusing heavily on the nut graph¹²⁸ and allowing people to understand what is taking place in the photo and why they should care. An ideal word count for the caption is 100 to 200 words.¹²⁹

Emoji: Use when appropriate, feature camera emoji when providing credit to the photographer.¹³⁰

Tone of platform: More casual, human-interest-centred, fresh, young, hip, room to be more playful with our brand and show we can adapt to artistic technology.

¹²⁶ Paige Cooper, “The Best Time to Post on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn,” Hootsuite (Hootsuite Inc., January 27, 2022), <https://blog.hootsuite.com/best-time-to-post-on-facebook-twitter-instagram/>.

¹²⁷ A lede is typically found at the beginning of an article and contains the gist of the story (who, what, when, where).

¹²⁸ A nut graph is found below the lede and tells readers why they should care about the story.

¹²⁹ Eddie Shleyner, “The Ideal Social Media Post Length: A Guide for Every Platform,” Hootsuite. (Hootsuite Inc. , May 24, 2019), <https://blog.hootsuite.com/ideal-social-media-post-length/>.

¹³⁰ Michael Brenner, “The Rise of the Emoji for Brand Marketing,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, January 26, 2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/media-network/2015/jan/26/rise-emoji-brand-marketing>.

Commenting feature: Up to poster's discretion, if commenting would create struggle for moderation. If so, turn off.

Branding: Use templates of panels for Instagram stories that feature the *Free Press* logo, colours, and font.

Wild card: Instagram continues to evolve as a platform and includes many additional design options through the Instagram Stories feature:

- When sharing a concert review, consider sharing a soundbite through the music feature of Instagram Stories.
- Don't shy away from Instagram Lives if reporting on scene
- Use the polling feature to ask what followers want to see on the *Free Press's* page

Facebook: @winnipegfreepress

Facebook serves as a space for followers of the *Winnipeg Free Press* to stay up to date with the latest news coverage, interact with articles through sharing, liking, commenting, and receiving clarification on news stories from the moderator. Followers also connect with WFP via the chat window and can ask questions, receive info for offering news tips, serve as a vehicle for complaints, and offer information for subscription troubles.

While Facebook stands as the social-media channel that accounted for nearly 50 percent of desktop and mobile social media sessions on winnipegfreepress.com in 2021, current practices are working.

The *Winnipeg Free Press* shares a variety of content on its Facebook page, including photos, video, links to news stories, newsletter promotions, and events.

Facebook Social-Media Guidelines:

Post frequency: From Monday to Friday, publish six posts sharing news stories that link back to winnipegfreepress.com. The six content posts should be made at 10 a.m., 12

p.m., 2 p.m., 4 p.m., 6 p.m., and 8 p.m.¹³¹ As video production is inconsistent, video-related posts should be made when available. Facebook banner images should be updated monthly and feature photos of seasonal interests that are Manitoba-focused.

Post type: Normal feed post, including copy and link to news story.

Content: Use metric tools available to gauge what is most popular among readers, however a strong rule of thumb is to share stories related to upcoming events, new or closing businesses, and stories where a source is speaking out about an occurrence in their community.

Copy: Similar to Instagram, the copy of Facebook will be taken from the lede of an article, focusing heavily on the nut graph. Length should be around four sentences or less and indicate the byline of the reporter.¹³²

Emoji: Use when appropriate, perhaps for promoting newsletters, but not necessary for posts on stories.

Tone of platform: In interactions with commentors, the *Winnipeg Free Press* account will carry a neutral, informative, and helpful tone, directing users to accurate answers they seek.

Commenting feature: Up to poster's discretion, if commenting would create struggle for moderation. If so, turn off.

Branding: In relation to all *Winnipeg Free Press* pages shared across Facebook, branding of the *Winnipeg Free Press* name and page design should align with the *Winnipeg Free Press* brand guide to ensure product consistency.

Wild card: Through the amalgamating of Facebook and Instagram through Meta, the *Winnipeg Free Press* may consider cross-posting Instagram Stories to Facebook Stories. Additionally, moderators may consider interacting with users who comment or post positive feedback on stories by thanking them for reading or subscribing.

¹³¹ Paige Cooper, "The Best Time to Post on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn,"

¹³² Eddie Shleyner, "The Ideal Social Media Post Length: A Guide for Every Platform,"

Twitter: @winnipegnews

Twitter's text-first approach as a social media site has allowed it to serve as an optimal outlet for breaking news.¹³³ The *Winnipeg Free Press* has optimized its resources for Twitter in using RSS feeds that automatically share content directly to Twitter, limited to a headline and link, when posted to the breaking news section of its website, the homepage. The web team currently responds to direct messages and engages with tweets regarding article errors. Journalists can have stories automatically shared to the *Winnipeg Free Press's* Twitter by including "#wfp" in their tweets.

Twitter also serves as a way for readers to interact directly with the *Winnipeg Free Press* through tweets and replies, the sharing of published stories, and direct messaging.

While the majority of the posts on the Twitter account are created automatically, the *Winnipeg Free Press* does manually share a preview of the front page of the newspaper that is to be published the next day. As sharing content is primarily accounted for, the *Winnipeg Free Press* may consider investing efforts in sharing and promoting additional products and services on its page. The following guideline will apply to the sharing of additional products and services such as upcoming events and free newsletters.

Twitter Social Media Guidelines

Post frequency: As newsletters are created, the social team should share the subscription page to the newsletter, encourage readers to subscribe, noting its free of charge, and tag the writer. Posts on events can be shared one week and one day prior, and day of.

Post type: Copy including Twitter handle of writer and link to newsletter sign-up page, or copy including event details and link to more information on the event.

¹³³ Amy Mitchell, Elisa Shearer, and Galen Stocking, "News on Twitter: Consumed by Most Users and Trusted by Many," Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, November 15, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2021/11/15/news-on-twitter-consumed-by-most-users-and-trusted-by-many/>.

Content: Newsletter sign-up or event-focused.

Copy: Explanatory, limited to 280 characters or less.

Emoji: Use when appropriate, not necessary when promoting stories.

Tone of platform: The tone of Twitter itself ranges drastically based on user, but the *Free Press* should maintain a tone as informative and approachable.

Branding: Twitter does not present itself as a visual platform, but any posters for events or branding for newsletters should align with the style guide.

Wild card: The *Winnipeg Free Press* actively maintains a list of Twitter handles of its reporters. The social-media manager should obtain a copy of the list to use if promoting more in-depth pieces that require a thread for preamble. Reporters should also be encouraged to share their work on Twitter and use hashtags relevant to their individual beats to maximize engagement. Despite Twitter's propensity for text, the *Winnipeg Free Press* could try sharing photos of the week from its photojournalists. These images wouldn't necessarily be related to specific news stories, they could be stand-up images.

Accessibility Tools

On its website, the *Winnipeg Free Press* has implemented various accessibility features including adding alt-tags for images to comply with screen readers, adding an underline and colour change to links, creating an option for users to adjust text size, and providing the option to translate pages in different languages.

This same consideration should be applied to social media platforms when possible and can include:

- Writing detailed, plain-language alt text for images shared on social media
- Adding captions to video content, and using auto-generated captions if filming content through the social media platform
- If using emojis, consult emojipedia.org to ensure it translates to text accurately