

NEW REPUBLIC

News Formats Change, But the Content Stays the Same

Things people want to read haven't changed much since the dawn of mass media.

By Elspeth Reeve

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A [recent report](#) from Pew Research Center has pointed up a huge generational difference in the way people get their news: "Baby Boomers and Millennials demonstrate nearly inverse habits when it comes to local TV and Facebook." (Sixty percent of boomers get political news from local TV and 39 percent get it from Facebook; those sources are basically inverted for Millennials.) While this has serious implications for media companies, it's probably best to resist the claim that this shows a massive change in the way people think about the world, and what they actually want from news. Because while their formats are very different, the content of local TV and Facebook is the same: some real news, some political outrage, but mostly the same old stories about rich women misbehaving, brave pets, and horror stories from the police desk. The primary innovation of Facebook is that you no longer have to wait until 6:30p.m. for a heartwarming tale of an adorable child overcoming a terrible disease.

In *The New York Review of Books*, [Michael Massing writes](#), "That digital technology is disrupting the business of journalism is beyond dispute. What's striking is how little attention has been paid to the impact that technology has had on the actual practice of journalism." That might feel true but it's not actually true. Every new communications technology has been the basis for claims that we're approaching the end times for civil society. As Adrienne LaFrance and Robinson Meyer [explained](#) in *The Atlantic* in April, anxieties about BuzzFeed mirror what media people have thought about every new media innovation, from *Time* magazine almost 100 years ago to radio to cable television to *USA Today* to MTV. The secret to *Time's* success, they wrote, should sound familiar:

Time turned boring newspaper reporting into fun blurbs. In other words, [it aggregated](#). Its founders bet that its readers wanted to learn about the world but do it quickly, so it distilled local and world events into readable summaries shorter than 400 words. These story bursts were true stories, with a beginning, middle, and end, and their tone was relaxed but arch.

There has always been too much news. While researching another article, I came across an election dispatch in *The Washington Post* that concluded, "But one thing is finally, perfectly clear. The longest, most media-saturated presidential campaign in anyone's memory has, believe it or not, irrevocably come to an end." The date is November 4, 1980 and CNN was only a few months old.

You can find the ancestors of social media-optimized BuzzFeed headlines deep in the archives of *The New York Times*. The lost dog comes home. (April 24, 1921: "[LOST DOG WAR HERO FOUND](#). Irish, Blind and Shellshocked, Restored Through a Times Clipping.") The annoying rich woman trend piece. (December 27, 1880: "FRENCH SOCIETY. THE INTOLERABLE DULLNESS OF FORMAL EVENING GATHERINGS—[THE VAPID TALK OF THE WOMEN](#).") Finding such examples is so easy that it kind of kills the fun. Search almost any term, and sort by oldest, and you can find an article that, with some edits to the language, could be at home on Elite Daily or Upworthy or whatever. Here's [a story from July 7, 1884](#) that has all the Facebook-ready hyperbole and anthropomorphism of "[15 Llamas Who Just Do Not Give A Damn](#)": "THE PARROT'S LITTLE JOKE.; HE HIDES HIMSELF FROM HIS MISTRESS AND THROWS HER INTO A FIT OF ANGUISH." (A parrot who said obscenities briefly went missing. "With premeditated malice unequalled in natural history, the mottled pet had climbed up the lace curtains, crawled through the open window, and secreted himself on the cornice of the house. When tired of the joke he came in again and made the household happy.")

LOST DOG WAR HERO FOUND.

Irish, Blind and Shellshocked, Restored Through a Times Clipping.

The Bide-a-Wee Home for Animals, in East Thirty-eighth Street, has found Irish, the missing dog war veteran, the story of whose disappearance on Saint Patrick's Day was told in THE NEW YORK TIMES of April 3. Tied to the railing in front of her home at 28 Beekman Place, Miss Catherine Foster found one morning the blind terrier, who was shellshocked at the front.

Beekman Place, over by the East River, runs from Forty-ninth to Fifty-first Street, and is a quaint little section, something like Sutton Place. A neighbor of Miss Foster brought to her a clipping from THE TIMES describing the missing Irish, and the dog was compared with the description.

The Bide-a-Wee Home was communicated with and joyfully identified Irish. Miss Foster, meanwhile, has become so fond of the dog that she has begged permission to keep him for a little while and hopes to persuade the Bide-a-Wee managers to let her have him permanently.

"We are grateful to THE TIMES for being instrumental in finding Irish," said Mrs. Harry Ulysses Kibbe of the



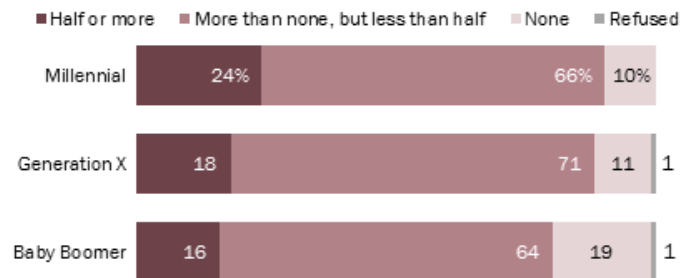
The New York Times, July 13, 1902

It turns out we've known that long headlines get more attention since way before Google Analytics. This [Times headline from October 13, 1895](#), is about a popular [listicle topic](#): "Our Colonial Ancestors Were Governed by a Stern Code. SMOKING WAS A HEINOUS CRIME History of Connecticut's Curious Laws — The Stocks, Whipping and Fines for Apparently Trivial Offenses."

I recently attended an Intelligence Squared debate over whether “[smart technology is making us dumb](#).” Those who argued that it was said we’re too distracted by our phones to think long and hard about serious issues, and also because something something selfies. But the Pew study finds that between the selfies, Millennials are actually reading more serious news that challenges their point of view. Millennials report seeing more political news posts on Facebook than older generations, and they're more likely to report seeing posts that do not support their views. Only 18 percent of Millennials say they always or most of the time see posts that support their politics.

Millennial Facebook Users Most Likely to See Political Content on the Site

% of Facebook users who say ____ of the posts they see are related to politics



American Trends Panel (wave 1). Survey conducted March 19-April 29, 2014. Q33a. Numbers may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The internet is not making us dumb. We were always dumb. Just like we make fun of old people watching Fox News now, in 30 years young people will make fun of old Millennials yelling at Facebook. The technology in this *Simpsons* joke will change, but the idea will be the same.



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