

MOBILE METHODOLOGY

**AS MORE PUBLISHERS JOIN MOBILE,
WHAT SHOULD BE THEIR NEXT STEP?**

BY GRETCHEN A. PECK





Mobile's growing popularity shouldn't take anyone by surprise. As stated in comScore's 2015 Mobile App Report, mobile users spend an average of 68.2 hours a month engaged by mobile apps. In fact, those apps get the lion's share of our mobile attention. Smartphone users spend as much as 87 percent of their

time in mobile apps, as opposed to just 13 percent on the mobile Web, according to the same report.

The popularity of mobile apps is projected to rise. Statista.com estimated that by the end of 2016, 82.3 million mobile users will have purchased at least one mobile app, and that is expected to jump to 85 million by 2018.

Publishers continue to experiment with how to present content in a special way, and how to offer an attractive value proposition for both audiences and advertising brands. Still, mobile news publishing is so young that hardly anything about it is certain. But one thing seems true: Mobile is different and distinctive, and that's how publishers should think when maneuvering on this platform.

The evolution of AP Mobile

According to Michael Boord, Associated Press' global director of AP Mobile, the organization was "an early mover in mobile news."

"(We were) the first news app on the app store and other (digital) stores. (We have) focused on giving users a simple, respectful experience that gets them to the news as quickly as possible," he said. "This has allowed us to keep our 4.5 star rating on iTunes for many years, which is a huge feat."

Though the Associated Press will not publicly disclose the size of its AP Mobile user base, Boord did say that the app has been installed 14 million times across various platforms.

"As an ad-supported, consumer-facing app, AP Mobile has a fundamentally different business model than our other services.

We are looking for ways to leverage the booming mobile advertising market, but more importantly to find ways to be relevant in the new digital paradigm, provide a great user experience, and create value for our members," he said. "It is also critical that we stay in touch with new consumption patterns and to better understand the digital consumer, so that we can better serve the AP membership. Mobile gives us a sandbox with which to do this."

The "sandbox" has already produced some insight that's guiding its continued development. "We are working on ways to leverage the shift toward more video consumption," Boord revealed.

The interest in AP Mobile has been affirming for the Associated Press. "There is a perception that users no longer value news brands, but that is untrue," Boord

said. "When big news events happen, we see big spikes not only in usage, as you would expect, but also in new downloads of the app. This leads me to conclude that people actively seek out AP for information when they are most in need of a news source that they trust."

Mobile DNA

Mobile is still a wild world of smartphones, phablets, and tablets.

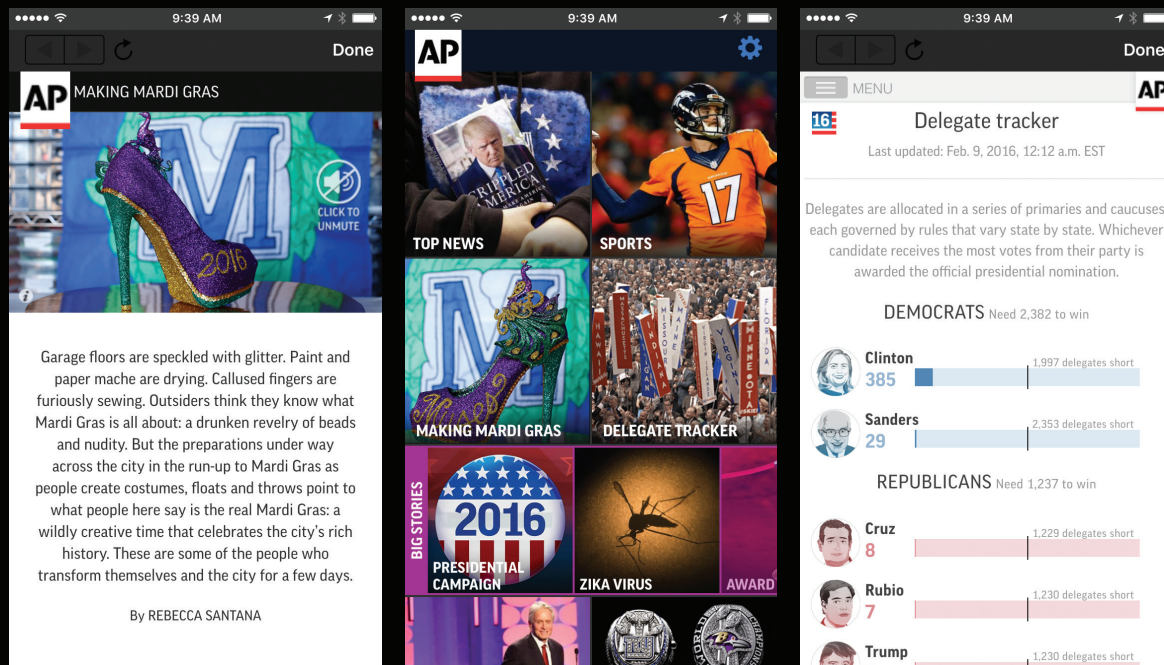
According to Rich Jaroslovsky, vice president of content and chief journalist from SmartNews, "When tablets arrived, a lot of publishers thought, 'This is great! We'll be able to replicate our print business model and how we do things in print but in this new platform.' So they began investing in mobile, but they aimed at tablets. As we've gone on, we've seen that the tablet market hasn't really taken off the way people thought it would...Instead, all the mobile growth has been on the phone."

But the smartphone is unique.

"When you're sitting in front of a



► **Michael Boord**, Associated Press' global director of AP Mobile



► A look at AP mobile

“IF I WERE A PUBLISHER, THE FIRST THING THAT I’D INVEST IN IS MAKING SURE MY MOBILE WEBSITE IS ADEQUATE AND RESPONSIVE.”

computer, it is very easy to jump from news site to another news site. It’s as simple as clicking on a bookmark or clicking a link and you’re there,” Jaroslovsky said. “I think a lot of publishers that developed their own apps learned that it’s much more cumbersome on a phone to go from app to app, to have to launch a new app every time you’re going to another source. It’s much easier to do that on a desktop computer.”

That’s why aggregation is so compelling in mobile. SmartNews works by bringing news from multiple sources into one platform.

“You’re getting news from all over, brought to you in a convenient and attractive package,” Jaroslovsky said. “On a desktop, you can go to the news, but in the mobile environment, you want the news to come to you.”

He continued, “If I were a publisher, the first thing that I’d invest in is making sure my mobile website is adequate and responsive. That should even take



precedent over creating branding mobile apps, which can certainly come in time. But immediately, the mobile Web is too good of an opportunity to pass up.”

Mobile as an experimental phase

When *The New York Times* launched the NYT Now app, it wasn’t new territory for them. It was already publishing in the mobile space with its main mobile app, according to the paper’s vice president of product Ben French. He leads the data group and oversees NYT Now, as well as digital apps for cooking, real estate, crossword puzzles, and more apps to debut this year.

The goal for NYT Now was to offer readers a free and more selective mobile app experience, with curated content. It also allowed the publisher some mobile space in which to experiment with what compels readers.

“People are consuming news all across the day in these little small moments,” French said. “Speed becomes a really important factor and a lot of what we’ve designed tried to address that. We wanted to be fast. From the technology perspective, we wanted the app to load quickly, perform quickly, and load article pages quickly. We also wanted it to be fast from a journalistic perspective, so we bulleted summaries, and made it so that you could scan the content quickly if you didn’t have much time. We also curated a daily briefing, a

morning summary.”

Because younger readers tend to get their news from a variety of sources—and yet still trust the judgment of the *Times*’ brand—NYT Now embraced that.

“Journalists hand-select the most interesting, fun, provocative, cool reads from elsewhere,” French said.

Marketing NYT Now was about connecting with people on a personal level—and not just acknowledging digital habits, but celebrating them.

“We produced a video that did a creative job of capturing moments throughout our day when we want information,” French said. “There’s the moment in bed before you get up, a moment in the elevator when you look at your phone...People look at news at times different than what we’ve historically dealt with.”

“I think it’s also worth saying that mobile defines how you tell a story. (Mobile devices) have also changed people’s expectations of what it does. These are not phones. These are mini-me devices,” French continued “It’s all about me...So we built an app that is relentlessly helpful and friendly. The medium, to a large extent, defines the journalism.”

Since the app’s launch, video has proven its populari-

FROM THE TECHNOLOGY PERSPECTIVE, WE WANTED THE APP TO LOAD QUICKLY, PERFORM QUICKLY, AND LOAD ARTICLE PAGES QUICKLY.

ty, but that doesn’t mean that publishers should produce video just for the sake of having it. It has to tell the story in the best possible way, specific to mobile viewing.

“We’ve tried to use video in a way that reflects the need,” French said. “For example, we might pull out ‘the five seconds from last night’s speech’ that you need to see.” He acknowledged there’s still much more to learn about video.

So much of the success of an app depends on the creative force behind it, French said: “For us, it was about getting a team together who were cross-disciplinary—not just an editor, but also a designer, a technologist, a product specialist. Together, let’s figure out at a high level what our goal is, what we’re trying to accomplish, and then test and learn our way. For our group and all

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across the *Times*, we believe that experimentation is the only way forward.”

Mobile news: Morning, noon and night

The Dallas Morning News has done its fair share of mobile experimentation too, said Christopher Williams, senior director, digital portfolio.

“We are seeing users move from desktop to mobile. I think that’s a pretty generic trend that everyone is aware of and talking about now,” he said.

This has meant the continual rethinking of how best to present content on mobile platforms. “It used to be that we wanted to serve people bite-sized chunks, but now the screens are bigger, so they’re absolutely spending more time. We’re seeing an uptick in video,” he said. “Tablets, however, are a question mark.

“If you look at our e-paper, the tablet is king for that. People who are on (tablets) are trying to have an exact replica of the newspaper, in terms of feel and function. They like it when the page flips rather than scrolling. They like to zoom in and see things. It’s really about getting the newspaper on their own terms, and they use tablets for that.”

Producing video for mobile seems like a no-brainer, but experimentation with video has gleaned some interesting insight, according to Williams, who says that there’s a discrepancy with what people think they want, and what they actually need and use.

AS DEMAND FOR MOBILE CONTENT INCREASES, NEWS PUBLISHERS ARE RESTRUCTURING AND REBUILDING THEIR ORGANIZATIONS.

Take the newspaper’s coverage of sports, for example. While readers may vocalize that they’d like to watch an entire high school football game on their mobile devices, they don’t actually do that. Instead, data shows that they prefer videos that just show the highlights. “The ‘ask’ is different than the ‘need,’” Williams explained.

Today, the *Morning News* produces two mobile apps, in addition to its e-reader digital edition. Both of the apps are free.

“We’ve experimented with different forms of paywalls on our website in the past, but haven’t created any paid apps yet,” Williams said. “If it seems that content is going to move to a more metered or paid model, we may revisit that.”

As demand for mobile content increases, news

publishers are restructuring and rebuilding their organizations. That’s been the case in Dallas, where even the newsroom is undergoing a transformation to be decidedly “digital first.” They’re creating cross-functional teams to work on these mobile equations. Training, brainstorming, and networking are becoming even more critical, along with mining, parsing, and leveraging data.

Williams noted that there’s a glut of data that publishers can amass from digital and mobile, but that doesn’t mean that they inherently know what to do with it. He recommended some outside help, looking to other industries like healthcare, for example, to learn how they’re using data to better reach and serve their customers.

Running the ad block

When it comes to mobile and ad blocking, newspaper publishers should keep close tabs on what’s happening.

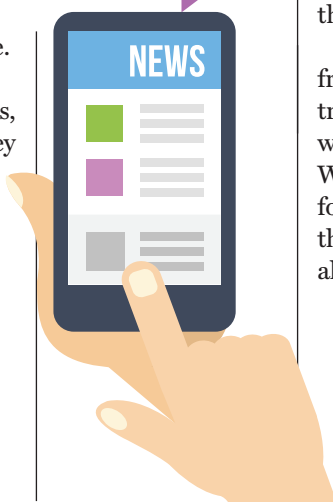
“Ad blocking is not yet a big issue in native apps,” said AP’s Boord. “However, as we think about our new app under development, we are taking a critical look at app performance and the overall advertising experience for users. We are trying to be respectful of users and create a best-in-breed user experience that engages them without creating clutter and intrusive experiences.

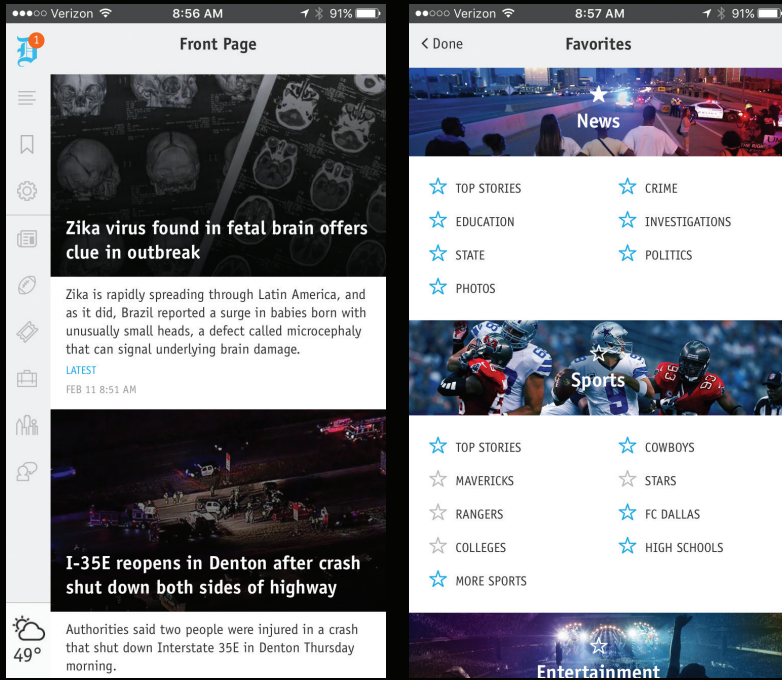
“I don’t think all users have an issue with the concept of ads,” he added, “but many have an issue with their implementation, performance, and transparency—and publishers certainly bear much of the blame. We have a responsibility to do it better, hold ad providers to higher standards, be more transparent, and take the responsibility very seriously.”

“It’s a really important issue, one that we’re talking a lot about internally (with NYT Now),” French said. “Our advertising strategy right now is to aggressively come up with premium ways for advertisers to tell their stories.

“Display advertising on mobile has been challenging from day one. With NYT Now and other products, we’re trying to think of ways that can integrate sponsors in a way that is not confusing. We are *The New York Times*. We don’t want to confuse readers about what’s paid for and what is the journalism of our newsroom. But at the same time, we want to address readers’ needs and allow sponsors to tell their stories in ways that are more woven in and feel more native... We have a laser-like focus on that right now.”

Williams said he sees three types of users at *The Dallas Morning News*: people who don’t mind ads, or even appreciate them; ad-blind readers, who simply tune them out; and readers who shun ads completely. He thinks newspaper audiences tend to



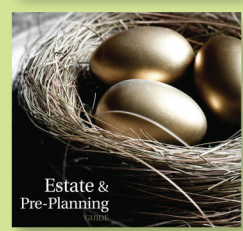


▶ The Dallas Morning News on mobile



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“I think ad blocking is here to stay,” he said. “For months, the top three apps on Apple Store were ad blockers. At last check, two of the top five still are.”

Jaroslovsky suggested ad blocking, on a macro level, is one of the big battlegrounds in the hand-to-hand struggle between Apple and Google. How Apple decides to treat ad blocking in the future could be a “huge game changer,” he said.

What’s the next step?

The term “experiment” comes up a lot in conversations about mobile. Williams, for example, suggested that as much as 20 percent of a mobile teams’ effort (resources permitting) should be spent regularly challenging the norm, and trying to figure out new opportunities for audience and revenue growth, though he knows it isn’t a comfortable concept.

“The way news happens is non-cyclical,” he said. “We’ll have one month with a great story, and our page views will absolutely explode, and then it falls again. Advertising, however, is largely built around retail

and revenue generation; it’s more cyclical around holidays, for example.”

That works against a publisher, especially in the mobile space. Plus, publishers have grown accustomed to what he affectionately referred to as “the hockey stick”: If you think of an exponential graph, you have a slow incline, and then all of the sudden, it shoots straight up. That’s what publishers are trying to constantly capitalize on.

“The reality is, that’s lightning in a bottle. Twitter started in small offices in San Francisco, and then exploded. There’s only one Twitter, and though others have tried to compete with Twitter, there’s still only one,” Williams said. “We need to go back to a linear growth strategy.”

And that requires patience. Williams offered some justification—beat reporters, for example. Every day and week, that journalist is focused on one topic, and one topic only. Over time, that beat reporter becomes the authority on the topic—the go-to, must-read source. It takes time, but it happens.

“You’ll have the network effect. You’ll own the market over time,” he said. “Slow growth is worth it.” ■

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