

ISOJ 2023: Day 2

Panel: *Newsletters, podcasts, text messages, push alerts: Are news orgs moving out of social-media dependency?*

Chair: [Sara Fischer](#), media reporter and author of Media Trends newsletter, **Axios**

- [David Cohn](#), chief strategy officer and co-founder, **Subtext at Advance Publications**
 - [Coleen O’Lear](#), head of curation and platforms, **The Washington Post**
 - [Zainab Shah](#), director of engagement and audience, **THE CITY**
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Sara Fischer Thank you, everyone. Thank you to ISOJ for having us for this great discussion. I'm here with some of the foremost experts in news product to talk about everything from push alerts, text messages, newsletters, podcast, you name it. So before we get into the questions, let me do a brief introduction of everyone to the far right. We have David Chon, who's the chief strategy Officer and co-founder of Subtext. David's going to walk us through a short presentation on what Subtext is, which will be exciting. Next to David, we have Coleen O’Lear, who is the head of curation platforms at *The Washington Post*. Then to my right we have Zainab Shah, who's a director of engagement and audience at *THE CITY*. Welcome, everyone. Thank you so much for joining.

So let's get started. I think everyone knows generally how podcasts work, how newsletters work, but you might not know how text message alerts work for news companies. That's what David specializes in. So, David, let's have you walk through a brief presentation on that and then we can get some started with some questions.

David Cohn Sure. Thank you very much. I'm very excited to be here again. My name is David Cohn. The slides will hopefully come up very soon. Here we go. So I'm going to go back and forth a little bit between just two slides just to give a quick demo of what Subtext is. So again, it's a platform that lets news organizations and reporters text with their audience. So one person can send a text to 10,000 people, they can reply. It's not a reply all fest; the replies only come back to the host. It's not through their personal phone, it's through a platform.

I actually have something called “This Week in Digital Media”, which you can subscribe to. So if you have a U.S. phone, the best way to subscribe is just to text hello to that phone number that you see down there with the 1707 number. If you have a Canadian or Puerto Rican, UK or Australian phone number, then I would actually recommend going to joinsubtext.com/digitalchatter and you can sign up there. So I'm going to give everybody a little bit of time to kind of do that and you'll get a welcome message that will kind of tell you the idea of it. Again, the idea of this week in digital media, every other week-ish, I find a different digital media thought leader who will take over that channel. So we've got about 500 people subscribed. You would probably know some of the people, in fact, some of the people who are subscribed are actually in the audience, I see them. We've had hosts like Nikita Patel, Rodney Gibbs, and Sara, you were actually a host one week. So basically it's passing the mic and they take over; they send you texts about their thoughts for that week and then they hand the mic over to someone else that next week.

So again, just to show you. I'll go back real quick just again so you can see the phone number one last time, if you want to send a text to that phone number, say hello and that will sign you up automatically. If you text something else, you'll get texted back a link and you can still subscribe, or again go to joinsubtext.com/digitalchatter. The next thing I would suggest you do, you don't have to... By the way, you can always text stop and you'll never get another text from me again. Next week there is somebody hosting, so if you text, if you subscribe, you'll start hearing from other digital media thought leaders next week. Once you text and you've gotten the welcome message, you can text ISOJ — I created that earlier today — and if you text ISOJ you'll get just a quick auto reply from me and you'll also be tagged so that I can then message just the ISOJ people in the future. In addition, you'll receive text messages to the larger audience. So we just wanted to do this to let you kind of experience it. I'll just bring this up one last time. Again, that's the phone number and I'm happy to talk about more about what this looks and feels like for news organizations, but you can also experience it firsthand right now.

Sara Fischer Thank you so much, David. That's very helpful. I did have a wonderful experience hosting a Subtext. I thought it was a unique opportunity to reach people who I don't normally get to reach. Before we get started with Q&A, I wanted to remind everyone that we'll be taking audience Q&A, so if you have any questions, submit them and we'll be taking them for the last 15 minutes. But let's get started with the news of the day. So we had Joe Kahn up here, the executive editor at *The New York Times*, saying that he will not be leading the boycott of news organizations from Twitter. Now, that comes after a very chaotic week between the news industry and Twitter. *NPR* and *PBS* both saying that they would be leaving the platform in response to Twitter adding government funded labels to their accounts. Coleen, let's start with you. It feels like the era of relying on social media distribution is over. Meta is no longer investing in news. Clearly, there's a lot of challenges at Twitter, to Joe's interview. What is the replacement if we can't rely fully on social media anymore?

Coleen O'Lear I think it's important that we build sticky products ourselves, right? I mean, at the end of the day, social is just supposed to be a bridge to your owned and operated. so I think it's really important that we think about the things that we've learned from social media and we actually integrate them into our core products, as a lot of what we've tried to do on our app of *The Washington Post*. we redesigned our site in many ways to be more responsive for a mobile audience. I think *The Post*, like many of you probably in the room, are getting the majority of your users coming in on their phones. We have these very traditional experiences in most cases that don't necessarily always work with the way that mobile storytelling has evolved. So I think it's really important that we build up different mechanisms for connecting with those users. So, yeah.

Sara Fischer What are the main products that *The Washington Post* is focused on building in mobile?

Coleen O'Lear Yeah, I mean, like I said, we had two apps for a very long time. They had really distinct experiences. They were built for completely different audiences. Over time, we found that the user needs became closer and closer, and so last year, we actually unified those two apps into one flagship app and then started really heavily investing in the one app, the black app; there was a blue one before.

Sara Fischer What were the two apps?

Coleen O’Lear Yeah, there was an app that was originally called the Select App, and it was really our first app that focused at a national audience many years ago. The classic app, which is what we called it at that time, really focused on what we knew about our subscribers already. It was very locally focused. It was very print focused. With the national app, we really tried to tell a story in a different kind of way that was very visual. It was more limited that you would really get a bundle, we wanted it to feel sort of like the old newspaper experience in a digital world — more breakfast in bed than sort of like endless scrolling. So we took a lot of learnings from that experience and the interactions that we had with users on that app and sort of built that into our experience now. So now when you come to *The Washington Post* app, hopefully you see new exciting things all the time as we evolve it from a product perspective. We’re really listening to our readers and trying to be responsive to their needs and their concerns and the things that they’ve flagged that they really want. But looking at the app two years ago versus today, you’ll see different story forms. It’s not just text. There’s a vertical video in the app. We curate audio carousels. At *The Washington Post*, you can listen to every article on our site or on our app. Some of that is AI generated and some of that is actually the reporters themselves reading their stories. But we’re curating selections of those articles for users around themes or topics, sort of bundles of things off of the news for the day. So it’s a much different experience.

Sara Fischer I’m glad you mentioned that I generated audio because we are going to come back to AI in this conversation. Zainab, let me pivot to you for a second. If you’re a newsroom and you don’t have the same level of technological capabilities or resources as *The Washington Post*, you might still need to rely on other platforms for distribution, but not necessarily social media platforms. How is *THE CITY* thinking about elevating its journalism in places like Apple News or maybe Smart News, some of the news aggregation apps?

Zainab Shah That’s a great question. Thank you for that. So I think that you’re right. Social media is just — I agree with Coleen when she says this, too — a means to an end. It’s a means to meet people where they’re consuming information. I think as an industry, we have a bit of a bias toward online spaces. We’ve been doing a lot of promotion of our work in online spaces and also a little bit of a dependency on aggregation, as you say, on Apple News and other platforms like that. So I think on the one hand it’s really fantastic that, these platforms have already built audiences and have users that you can reach that are interested in news, but I would say that it’s really also important to consider and get creative, really, when you talk about being strapped for resources, as you know we’re a nonprofit. So get really, really creative about what other places you can meet audiences and how you can continue to develop, build and maintain direct relationships with them that don’t depend on necessarily the algorithm of an aggregation app or the algorithm of another social media platform.

How we do it? We built a really engaged and loyal audience through our newsletter, “The Daily Scoop.” If you haven’t subscribed to it, subscribe now. This is a good time. There’s that, and we just have Subtext now as well. I think what I’m really focused on thinking about is where can we reach people that may not be extremely online. Our audience is extremely well-defined: It’s New York City, the five boroughs. So where are New Yorkers getting their information, whether that’s offline, online through organizations, or through the public library, for example — partnerships with the public library are a big thing for us as well. How we can how can we reach people? Address kind of this bias that we have for going viral on platforms, and this is where everyone is extremely online, so this is where we must be and this is what we must prioritize.

Sara Fischer In avoiding just focusing on going viral, I think that's why a lot of publishers are flocking towards text because you're not competing in a very crowded inbox, it's a very personalized space. But David, my question to you is when do we get to a point that the text inbox starts to feel as bloated as the email inbox? Is that a risk for Subtext in newsrooms?

David Cohn Sure. That's a good question. Just to piggyback, I would say, I think when we're on social media, it's often performative versus there are spaces like text which feels... Where the reporter is just, "Oh, I'm here to inform. I'm just being informative", and it kind of removes a lot of the performative nature of social media. In terms of the risk of text feeling too much, the beauty of text specifically, which I can speak to the most, is a pure communication medium. I mean, even email is used as a to-do list and it's often both work and personal and calendars and some people use it almost as a word processing document to like leave notes to themselves; Whereas text is really pure communication, and it has a 95% open rate because it's just so simple and pure. As a result of that, I think people will be discerning about which brands... They're not going to invite every brand and every organization into their text inbox. I think it will be selective, but that's exactly why you would want it to be there because you're now on the same communication playing field as their best friends and their parents and their kids, or whatever their relationships are. For the brands and the organizations that can get into that, you're now almost like a trusted friend. And so could it be bloated? There is potential, but I think people will be discerning and find their natural limit. For some, it might be higher than others. But I do think that right now it's not the same as email. Email I think is very saturated; text does not feel at all like it's reached that saturation for a while.

Coleen O'Lear The SMS experiences or experiments that we've tried at *The Post* have always been things that have been really focused on how to help you improve your life in a way. So it maintains that personal relationship that I'm going to get something that I really need and I really, really want, and that's why I'm inviting it into our text space. So I think that's a really good point about how that is distinct from a lot of the other places that we feel like are getting really crowded.

Zainab Shah Yeah, we also use text to source reader questions. Say, for example, the election is coming up, so you can text us your questions again. There's ways to see what people are interested in online, whether you're checking trends or you're checking what people are asking about on Twitter or emailing it to you, but text is a different channel where people can send us their questions and we can answer them directly.

Sara Fischer Coleen, let me come back to you on finding those places that are not overly saturated. I think almost every publisher is experimenting with some form of an email newsletter. My company was built on them. But I think there's a lot of newsletter fatigue amongst readers. How do news companies navigate that? Does that mean they shouldn't be investing in the medium? Should they be cutting down the number of emails they send? What should they do?

Coleen O'Lear I think that we all have to take a really hard look at our newsletter portfolios. I think that we tend to think of newsletters as this sort of one-and-done-right like we created, there was a need for it, people have subscribed to it, let's let it linger; we can't do that. I feel like you constantly have to be re-exploring whether it still meets the need of the audience, whether you have to do something different. We obviously have a huge newsletter portfolio at *The Post*. It's something that we are actively looking at and sort of

taking constant assessments of. One thing that we hear a lot from our readers and I think that all of us have seen and just general research, particularly about millennials and younger, is that people really want something that feels briefer. They want something that fits into their lives. A lot of our newsletters sort of didn't always meet that kind of a need. It wasn't the need necessarily. When they were created, they wanted something more in depth. They wanted an inbox experience that was a bit longer, instead of having to go to a site and read an article. So that was one of the reasons that when we launched our briefings in the fall of 2021, we use newsletter as an avenue because we felt like it was something that was brief and it was meeting a need. That newsletter, The 7 Morning Briefing, has really grown a lot. It's the fastest-growing newsletter we've ever had, and it has a really high completion rate. There are more than a million and a half subscribers to it now. That's pretty tremendous growth, but it's because it met a different kind of need. It followed a different kind of format. It offered something different even for the people who were already subscribing to newsletters. It had that loyalty — that retention value — but it also attracted new people who sort of just wanted to be able to catch up very quickly with like a low-barrier entry and felt like they could get it in the newsletter without necessarily having to read seven articles every morning.

Sara Fischer Can I follow up with you on The 7? Because there's also The 7 podcast which is meant to be very short and concise as well. Do you think we need to be revisiting our podcast slate in the same way that we have to be revisiting our newsletter slate? Or do you think podcasts are less saturated right now?

Coleen O'Lear I think that all of our products should be living and breathing. I think that we can't sort of think that we have always hit it out of the park with everything. Even things that are working, we should inspect and reassess. We've had our flagship podcast for quite some years now, The Post Reports, that comes out in the evening, but the format was completely different when we started it, and now we're really digging deep into one storyline — often it's from the news or something that's exclusive to *The Post*. That has provided a different kind of value. So that was something that we had a loyal audience with The Post Report. There was always an extraordinarily high completion rate, but it was shot up even more when we sort of reassessed how we were engaging with that audience and when we made it more personal with Martine's voice. You sort of became friends with Martine in that way.

One of the biggest things that we've heard about with the briefing, but we've heard even more with the podcast that launched in the fall is that people feel like they're talking to their friend with Jeff Pierre. He'll make little jokes. He'll bring things from his life into the stories that he's talking about in the morning. People have really resonated with that. They want personality in those sorts of spaces because they feel more intimate. So I think it's important that if you're not serving that need... Someone mentioned yesterday about personality in their research papers really being important in the podcast space. I think it absolutely is. That's something that I think we've tweaked. We have those two... While we've done sort of serial podcasts that tell one story over many episodes, we've really thoughtfully gone into the podcast space, and really have those two cornerstone products without sort of flooding the space ourselves. We're just trying to meet the need.

Sara Fischer Zainab, one of the criticisms of podcasts is that the ad market for them is still so nascent that unless you have scale, it can be hard to make meaningful revenue and as such, it can be hard to make initial investments. This is particularly true at the local level because local is not meant to scale. It's meant to be for a particularly small geographic population. *THE CITY* is reaching a particularly small geographic population; It's just

Manhattan or really it's just New York City. So, how do you think about products like audio potentially that require a lot of upfront investment and you might not get enough financial return, even though they're great for audience development?

Zainab Shah That's a great question. I should caveat this by saying, of course, your strategy, your audience strategy, what product you're going to launch are really heavily going to depend on your revenue model. Some of them are more skewed toward on one extreme dependent on ads. So you have to really ask yourself the question before you launch it: whose needs are you centering here? Right. Are there readers who are going to benefit from this, who want this information in this format and really be in touch with those folks? Do considerable research, I would say, before going into any kind of product launch. Being in touch with your readers, being in touch with the audience that you're trying to reach, understanding what formats they prefer, how they prefer to consume, the information that you're presenting to them, I think is really, really important. Once you figure that out and define that, OK, there is a need for this and there are people for that... In the nonprofit model, there's sometimes funding that's tied to particular avenues of information distribution and dissemination. So that's going to be one thing to consider. But then also, I would say try to find ways to get started with it that are really economical. I think because we have made leaps and bounds in technology and the way that we publish things and the way that we do things, you can get started with a podcast — sure, the quality might not be amazing or where you want it to be, but again, I think that if the goal is to serve readers with a certain level of information, that's first and foremost. Then the production value of it — what it sounds like and what it's going to be — that comes much, much later than that, especially once you've started building an audience for it and testing it and trying it.

Sara Fischer David, for text, there's not a lot of upfront investment in making a text message. It's not like you need a ton of heavy equipment or you need a studio. So what is the barrier to entry for most publishers? Is it awareness? They just don't know the opportunity exists?

David Cohn I think it's awareness, but also just the technical infrastructure. Because it is its own application, essentially, that can then send that text messages in mass. So it's an application that can text out to 10,000 people, similar to email. You have an email service provider; Subtext is essentially a text service provider. That's the main investment. There are data costs with text, but to the point of revenue, there are lots of ways that you can turn that into revenue, either through retaining existing subscribers, making it a perk, making it a standalone subscription product, or finding sponsors. But it's certainly not the same kind of capital expenses, as even a podcast studio in some respects — maybe I'm speaking out of my lane. But text is a relatively lightweight way to get, a high editorial lift where the main cost is just that that text service provider.

Sara Fischer Do you find the texts are helpful for actually pushing people to websites or apps like driving traffic? Is the text message helpful for awareness of the brand? You mentioned it's a subscriber perk. Like what are most people using text messages to actually do?

David Cohn Sure. So actually there's two extremes and most people are somewhere in the middle. On one extreme, we do have people that use it really just for distribution, similar to an email newsletter, but just through a medium that has a 95% open rate. They're actually not using the sort of back-and-forth that you can have with text. On the other extreme, we have folks that use it... Where there's a reporter in Los Angeles and he

texts to unhoused people in Los Angeles. It's a smaller audience, unhoused homeless people. But he's texting them resources and they're texting back what they're seeing about whether or not those resources are actually there and how to hold the city accountable. Again, those are the extremes. Most people are somewhere in the middle. I'll use podcasting as an example in the middle. If you have episodic content, if you have a podcast that comes out on Wednesdays once a week, sending a text on Friday to both remind people about the episode that came out, but also tee up the episode that may be coming up next Wednesday. On Monday, kind of teasing up maybe what to expect or ask what questions can I ask. That creates a nice virtuous circle for that kind of content. That's kind of in that middle space.

Sara Fischer Coleen, What about push alerts? I'm seeing so many more push alerts, whether it's on my phone, on that home screen or even across my like Chrome browser on desktop. There's a million alerts every day. Are those actually effective in pushing traffic? What's the benefit to a publisher that's engaging in that?

Coleen O'Lear That's a space that I think has gotten a lot more saturated. I think that everyone in this room isn't like the normal user for push alerts, like we probably all get a lot more than the average person does. But I think that there are different value propositions for push alerts. There is a value even when people don't click through when it's breaking news. Right. To be on someone's screen and to tell them that something is happening that is important is really valuable. That builds trust, that builds relationships. They understand that you understand their needs in a way.

I think that the things that sort of get the biggest click-through, the most engagement are the things that are the most unique that they either really serve to help a person — they're going to teach them something about their lives that they really fit into something in your everyday life — or it's something that's really sort of like exclusive and distinct. We do all sorts of different push alerts. We really have tried to experiment with going beyond the breaking news push alert, which I think everybody sends. That's an expectation when you have any sort of news app where you've enabled push alerts, or you have an aggregation app. So what we've tried to focus a lot on, in addition to making sure that the biggest breaking news is getting to you, is that you can kind of curate your experience better. We recently redid our segmentation in our app to really be able to emphasize just some topics and some subject areas that we were seeing really high engagement with and that we knew that users had asked for more of or that we've invested in and we have a really good slate of offerings, like the wellness lane. We'd always had sort of a tech segment, but it was also business news, and business news and tech news are quite different sometimes. We've had a huge investment in climate and we offered a segment for that. So I think it's important that if you have things are that habitat formers to the point that David was making to you about text message, that you have a push segment for those types of things. We launched a push segment for The 7 because you want to get it every morning, so why wouldn't we tell people, and give them the opportunity to be reminded about it in the morning. But I think surprisingly, some of the things that have the biggest click-through engagement, if that's your measurement for success, are sort of like the everyday things, like the push alert that we sent sort of about does milk really help the body, does it do the body good. We had a whole article about that and people... How many glasses of water you should drink in a day? That had an extraordinarily high click-through rate. I think everyone's like, oh, I haven't drank enough water today.

Sara Fischer Okay, so a follow-up to that, and I'm curious both Zainab and David's thoughts on this as well. I always thought that it was like big breaking news scoops that

drove a ton of traffic and that was the type of thing that you really wanted to focus your push alerts... Or big investigations, original content. So what is it that you think drives most of the engagement? Is it the sort of everyday life updates that help a lot of people broadly? Or do you think it's like the very scoopy investigative original stuff that you can't get anywhere else?

Zainab Shah So for us, it's definitely stuff people can use. We do a range of different kinds of stories. We do some pretty excellent explanatory journalism. Our associate editor, Rachel, she heads that up, and it's really, really important things that help New Yorkers be more civically engaged. So how do I join a community board, for example? Five people wrote in to us and said, "After your explainer, we joined a community board." If five people wrote in telling us that there was a lot more there were a lot more people who actually use it and did it. So we see the most engagement on things that are useful and explain how the how institutions across New York City work, things that might help someone in their daily lives, for example. Now, more so, we're doing big investigations as well. But I think you also have to consider in terms of the makeup of your audience — how many folks are interested in knowing about that versus how many folks are interested in knowing about things that, again, will affect a broader population or more people. I'm not saying investigations don't affect people. Of course, when you're holding people accountable and explaining how power works, for example, that does affect people. But the long-form investigation, naturally, it won't always feel urgent unless you're an avid news consumer. Our goal is to not just be for the avid, extremely online news consumer, but to be useful to news consumers and people who also like... To help people understand their daily life and create an onramp really to our other deeper, longer form work.

David Cohn Yeah, just to piggyback off that. One, I would say again, it is, obviously, always great to have that big scoop and *Block Club Chicago* uses us for... They just do breaking news text alerts. But to step back and address like kind of what the topic of the panel is... I think social media, and I'll use Facebook as the big elephant in the room, gave news organizations access to the largest audience in human history. That's not an exaggeration; it's the largest audience in human history. It is great and it sounds great to have a bazillion eyeballs, but I think what the news industry has learned is that it's actually maybe better to have 10,000 brains instead of a billion eyeballs. As you go down, maybe it's better to have a thousand whole humans instead of a billion eyeballs. I'm obviously being silly here with this analogy, but hopefully, it comes across as what are the ways that you can get real interactions or real engagement? Because I think even if they are smaller in number, they actually might be more valuable. I often use like *BuzzFeed* and that era as one side of the spectrum, and on the other you have the information. The information doesn't have the same traffic as *BuzzFeed*, but if they get 10,000 people paying \$400 a year, that's a real business, right? And those are real people as opposed to eyeballs.

Sara Fischer Well, that kind of segues into another topic of subscriptions. How does your product strategy need to differ if you're an ad-based, scale-based publisher versus more of a niche subscription-based publisher? David, do you want to take it.

David Cohn Sure, again, I think that part of it is just acknowledging like eyeballs come and go. That's very top of the funnel, and, again, social media is great for that, but ultimately 90% of them are going to leave. To pick on Twitter a little bit, even in 2019, only 20% of U.S. adults were actually on Twitter. I mean, it's a great place to meet other journalists, but it's not a great place to meet your audience. So you work down the funnel and eventually, you get to a place where you're actually having a real value exchange. Now, that exchange might look different for different types of organizations. The *AP* is going to be

breaking versus *The New Yorker* is going to be more thinking. But so once you find out what that value proposition is, that's when you can address them as a whole human with different products. I think different products will address different types of humans, so to speak, or different interests. So you need to know your audience but know them deeply. This is where — putting on my bias hat here... Text, even if it's not getting a large audience and just gets 5% or 10% of your audience, you will learn more about the 5% or 10% of your audience that are hard core for you and that will help you identify future hard core audience members who will be future subscribers.

Sara Fischer Coleen, one thing we haven't talked too much about is video. I think there is a mad rush towards video because there was a mad rush towards pre-roll advertising, and that seems to have taken a step back. Then we saw a bunch of newsrooms, including *The Washington Post*, shift their video strategies towards these big licensing plays. *The Washington Post* has a deal with Imagine, a big Hollywood studio, to license its content for films and series. What does video mean for publishers like yourself that are trying to accrue subscribers? Does it help actually get people to subscribe to *The Washington Post* to have your content license for a Hollywood movie, or is it just a brand awareness thing?

Coleen O'Lear Video is one of the things that isn't in my purview, so I don't want to speak too much for Micah. I think it's brand awareness in many ways. It's sort of the top of funnel. You can introduce the brand and show some of what the brand's values are, or the proposition value even, through video. I mean, a lot of people are consuming video. We see our social feeds are full of video now. I think that there's just different ways to bring people through on that. We've done a lot of really short-form video lately. We've done a lot of explanatory video in that kind of way — really short clips that are made for your mobile phone that teach you something, are useful, contextualize the news in a way, or introduce you to our personalities. Fenit talking about coronavirus consistently does well. Putting Gabriela out there to explain what student loan debt forgiveness was going to mean for people was so important. It's a different way to sort of connect with that audience. It feels really personal.

Sara Fischer Your TikTok is explosive that *The Washington Post*. Does the TikTok strategy... Is that different and separate from what you're doing on every other platform? And do you think other news outlets should be investing in it, given the fact that it might get banned?

Coleen O'Lear It is a different strategy than we have on other platforms. Obviously, you see a lot more sort of parody and lightheartedness. I think that the video that Dave and his team create for TikTok feels very distinct to TikTok, and it fits very well into that ecosystem. If you saw something like that in another place that might feel really off-brand but also off-platform. I don't know that rushing to TikTok is something I would be doing with a three-person team immediately, but it's something we didn't rush into in the beginning either. It started with Dave really experimenting with TikTok himself and then experimenting with a branded account. Eventually, we invested in it because it had such great returns and built such great relationships. Dave is sometimes cited in people's subscriptions. They're like, "I saw Dave on TikTok and now I'm subscribing to *The Post*." You like never thought there'd be a direct correlation necessarily between TikTok and a subscription to *The Post*.

Sara Fischer It is such a testament to the fact that you have to be absolutely everywhere any potential audience might. I'm going to take a few audience questions and remember, feel free to keep submitting them or if you want to come up. But I'm going to read one first

from a submission online. I think this is best for Zainab. If the newsletter satisfy the audience need for information as a medium, how do you take advantage of that? How do you monetize it if you don't even need to do a click-through? How could newsletters contribute better to business strategy?

Zainab Shah That's a great question, I think about this all the time. I would say that generally the way we like to do things... The way I like to do things is you have to... The value in informing people... If the goal is to inform people, you have to meet them where they are. You have to inform them in formats and ways that they prefer. There's just too much information, too many platforms, too many ways of talking to people out there for you to afford to not be doing that. So ultimately, that's one thing. So I don't know that click-throughs might work, again, if your revenue model is such that you have to prioritize eyeballs on ads, for example, so that makes sense and that would make sense for that revenue model. But like Coleen just very rightly pointed out, sometimes people will see you somewhere else and they will give you money because they like what you're doing, where they saw you. If you always remember that, one, it will be in service to your readers, and two, it will be in service to your news organization. So whatever mechanics you've set up for taking money from people, there is a way to let them know that, "Hey, you could help us fund this and this is how you can help us fund it." I don't necessarily think that it's in service to readers when we try to make them do an action like click through or go somewhere else or leave the platform or that kind of stuff. If, again, the goal is to inform people and reach people where they are, I think your strategy necessarily should address the platform you're on. Your format should address the platform you're on. That includes newsletter as well.

Sara Fischer Quick follow up on that for Coleen: what about just putting ads in the newsletter then you don't have to force anyone to click out?

Coleen O'Lear That's absolutely something that we do. Our newsletters sort of fall into four buckets: those that really have a target for acquiring new audiences; those that are built as loyalty for our existing audiences; there are some newsletters that are sponsored newsletters; then there are some that are subscriber-only, for us right now that's predominantly opinion but that's something that we're going to take into a news space, too. So I think that if you set your newsletters up, some can try to drive revenue, others can try and drive loyalty, which might drive revenue over time. Some can just introduce you to something that you might like. Something like The 7 was not built for click-through; it was built for loyalty, and it was built for retention. Yet we do see some click-throughs for it, but it's also something that can be sponsored. So we can meet the audience with an ad there. Obviously, it's like discerning, it's not filled with ads. There's like a high proposition value for the ads that we would take into something like that newsletter.

Sara Fischer Dmitry, do you have a question over there?

Dmitry Shishkin Yeah, thank you. Dmitry Shishkin It's a delight to be listening to you about... We're so deep into news product conversation. Although I couldn't help but think about the morning session and the fourth pillar of *New York Times*, development, talent and skills. So if you were to hire people to look after all of those things and all of those initiatives... They're not editors necessarily. They can be like all of us editors who have migrated into product one way or another. Data people are the same, all of that kind of transferability of skills. However, my question is, if you were to generalize and talk about maybe five most important competencies that you would be looking at whilst hiring those types of people, because not many of us can afford to have a dedicated product manager

and not many of us have dedicated business intelligence people to look at... The number of metrics you mentioned in this session is incredible, but what kind of people you will be hiring to make it happen for you. Thank you.

David Cohn I'll do a quick shout-out to the News Product Alliance, which is here and actually, I think got formed at the end of an ISOJ. So it's a very big discussion that could take place for a longer time on that Slack channel. I think of product there's sort of three main competencies. I think you asked for five, but I'll give you the three that I think of. One is what I call the MBA-type element, understanding the business and business propositions and those tradeoffs. Another one... You don't have to have all three of these to be a good product person by the way. I think good product people have a focus on one of these at least, maybe two. Another one would be somebody who's technology-minded, understands how to work with development to make those ROI decisions about how the technology should progress and usher that through. Then the third one is actually someone who I'd call like the diplomat; someone who can communicate with all the stakeholders in an organization and manage those relationships so that we all understand what the needs are from that business and then execute from there. So again, you might not find somebody with all three of those, but those are the things that I think you want to look for or cultivate in somebody who is in that position.

Coleen O'Lear And I would just add people who are inquisitive. It's really important. People who have strong communication skills and are sort of always thinking of the questions and want to understand what a developer is thinking about when they're creating a new product. Someone who's going to go and sort of seek out that information is going to be able to cultivate that sort of product thinking themselves, even if they're not in that role. My role is in the newsroom, right? Like I am a news editor at the end of the day. But I think that one thing I tried to instill in my teams is that they should always be inquisitive. They should always challenge things. They should always put the user first. That's thinking about the audience, not just that something is meant for, but also themselves as an audience. If something isn't working for you, it's probably not working for anybody else. That ultimately becomes a product problem. I think that we are able to sort of make more hybrid folks in newsrooms by applying that more judiciously than we did before. There used to be such a barrier between products or technology and news. If you were the word person, you were supposed to sort of stay in that lane, and if you were the tech person, you're supposed to stay in that lane. But I think the more that you can kind of blur that and develop that in people, that's really important.

Sara Fischer I was just going to say the final question, and you can answer this as well. When you're thinking about allocating these resources, how much of it falls on the journalist versus the audience development person?

Zainab Shah Allocating resources for?

Sara Fischer For doing external activity on platforms — making an Instagram post, sending a newsletter. Is that your responsibility? Is that the journalist's responsibility?

Zainab Shah So I think it varies across newsrooms, but I'll take a little bit of step back to answer Dmitry's question. I know it was a question about external hiring, but also there are people in all of our newsrooms that are naturally or are inclined or showing the propensity for or interest towards these things and curiosity. There's that person who's either on the product team and always talking to someone from editorial or that person who's on the edit team and always talking to someone from product and asking questions, and like Coleen

said is curious. Mentor them definitely and get them the resources they need; get them the tools they need and guide them into a role like this. I think that's really important to identify and do.

To answer your question, I think it'll vary within newsrooms. There's like so many different kinds of reporters, and I think as someone who leads an audience team or is on the audience team, it's really important to understand what each reporter's capacity, propensity and interest is in running things off platform or starting a newsletter or doing things like that, and working with them on those capacities and that interest. So not every single reporter is going to be having an engagement element to their work, but some of them are going to be like, "Hey, I would love to hear from readers. How can you help me do that?" Sometimes you'll do it with one reporter, and it would be such a fantastic example that other reporters would be like, oh, I want to do that too. So I always try to look for those folks and I always try to partner with those folks and do it in that way.

Sara Fischer At *Axios*, we like to finish all of our newsletters with one fun thing. So I have one fun thing to ask all of you, which is what is the most underrated product for audience development? I know we've talked about a lot today, but there are a bajillion others, whether it's games or live events, etc.. David, let's start with you.

David Cohn Wow. I would say an underrated product that has helped me in my life and I think can help in audience are actually like personal organization tools. I use something called Clover App. I also have used something called Roam. A lot of people are fans of Notion. If you are not using what I would call... I forget what the genre of those are called, but like their personal organizational tools, it's like your own wiki or your own fiefdom. It will declutter your life and allow you to focus on what you need to focus on.

Sara Fischer Love that. Coleen?

Coleen O'Lear That's really a tough question. I feel like a lot of us have acknowledged that games are sort of underutilized in a way, and they're very sticky. They bring delight to your life. It's very important to sort of balance people's news consumption. I always talk to my teams about sort of meeting the needs of the whole person versus just the person with the news hat. Like when they turn off from the news, you still want to be with them. That's why podcasts work so well, like they're taking you to the gym with them. Games feels like such a copout.

Sara Fischer I like games.

Zainab Shah Yeah, I will say the same thing. We have a transit quiz, a New York City Subway quiz. Like, how well do you know the New York City subway? My coworker who developed it is in the audience right now. Hey, Sam! So I highly recommend finding some ways to make it informative, but also fun. I think with information overload, some would call it, or with the constant unrelenting news cycle, sometimes creating a different format, a more fun format and more engaging format can be really, really helpful for the audience.

Sara Fischer So before we leave everyone, just to wrap a few fun things that we learned today. One, David saying that social media is often very performative, I think rings true, which is why we're having a conversation about products outside of social media where you can engage subscribers and audiences. 95% open rate for text messages. Sign up for subtext. There you go. That should be all the information that you need to know. Coleen saying that all of our products need to be living and breathing, meaning that you have to

assess them and audit them at all times to see whether or not they're still relevant to the audience today. I thought that was very helpful. David: "It's better to have 10,000 brains instead of 1 billion eyeballs." Very, very true. Then Zainab saying, at the end there, it's no good for the reader to force them to take action like a click just for your monetization efforts. I thought that was really smart. Then some underrated news products that we should all be checking out: personalized productivity apps from David and then games and quizzes from Coleen and Zainab. Thank you so much, Rosental and to everyone at ISOJ for this. We'll see you next year.