Digital content platform upgrades for small media outlets

Reviewing the process, outcomes, lessons and key next steps for four small, Black-owned media organizations that migrated CMS and redesigned websites

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About the author

Michael Grant is a journalist who specializes in editorial experience design. In 2021, he founded Get Current Studio — a design, web development and storytelling creative agency reimagining the brands of diverse publishers and how they serve their audiences. Grant is an alum of the John S. Knight Journalism Fellowships at Stanford University, and has held roles at Reveal, from the Center for Investigative Reporting, San Francisco Business Times, Star Tribune, and the San Francisco Chronicle. He also leads the HBCU Digital Media Fellowship at the annual Online News Association conference.

Local Media Association/Local Media Foundation staff contributed to and edited this report.

Introduction and summary

When Local Media Association and Local Media Foundation launched the Digital Transformation Lab for Publishers of Color in 2019, it created opportunities for a small group of Black-owned local media outlets to devise new sets of goals and metrics for success.

The organizations selected to participate in the original lab were The Atlanta Voice, The Dallas Weekly, New York Amsterdam News, Houston Defender Network and The Washington Informer.

With assistance from Emilie Lutostanski, director of LMA's Local News Resource Center, the Lab publishers created short-and-long term social media and audience development strategies.

Two of the five publishers — The Atlanta Voice and the New York Amsterdam News — received $20,000 grants in mid-2020 from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to start enhancements to their digital publishing systems. Those grants were part of a three-year, $2 million Knight Foundation initiative to implement sustainable publishing solutions at local media organizations that serve underrepresented communities.

Then, just over a year after the Digital Transformation Lab launched, the Knight Foundation granted $60,000 to LMF to lead a project that expanded on the work of those two publishers. In that project, the Voice and the Amsterdam News, along with other publishers in the Lab, would upgrade their digital content management systems, and all Lab participants and the industry at large would share in the learnings from those upgrades.

This phase of the Digital Transformation Lab took a comprehensive approach to improving the websites and, as a result, the digital businesses of the participating publishers.

The Houston Defender Network and The Washington Informer later signed on to upgrade their digital publishing systems, and by mid-2021, the Defender had also received a $20,000 grant from Knight in its second round of funding for sustainable publishing solutions.

Knight and LMF agreed to bring in Michael Grant, CEO of Get Current Studio, to lead the organizations through migrating to a chosen CMS. Get Current Studio offers design and technical expertise to publishers of color.

Sustainability for Black publishers is critically important and the promise of a state-of-the-art digital platform was deemed to be a key step in their transformation process.

But the fight to remain a viable source of information became a steeper uphill battle as their plans were met with turmoil.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a major threat to African American communities and the Black-owned local news organizations that serve them.

On the backdrop of a raging pandemic, the cohort of four Black newsrooms prepared to make a groundbreaking shift that would allow them to rely less on print newspapers as a core revenue source and truly focus on growing a digital business.

Newsrooms that find online success today wield digital capabilities to ensure steady growth. They do this by making their news easily discoverable while providing fast, seamless reading experiences. Their colleagues on the business side sell direct and indirect digital ads, collect donations, and create membership and subscription programs that lead to new revenue. And they use performance metrics and data to make key decisions.

Being a member of this cohort meant these publishers would confront aging technology as a business challenge and prepare for a much needed website upgrade.

An organization-wide transition to a new CMS was full of ups and downs for all four news organizations. The good news is, they all made it to the finish line. Throughout the journey, we logged observations about the experience and key findings that may be useful to similar news industry publishers.

This report highlights our greatest insights.

Audience and revenue tactics require a performant CMS

Underperforming website infrastructure remains a barrier to growth for many publishers of color. But what causes websites to underperform? What impact can poor performance have on business? And what can be done to put these newsrooms in a better position to meet the needs of today's audience?

UX, or *user experience*, is a critical factor in whether a user's experience on a website is positive or negative. So when visitors find their way to a news publisher's website, the goal is to offer a good experience. For publishers with out-of-date or poorly maintained websites, a good user experience is unlikely.

Several factors lead to a poor user experience. Common issues include too many advertisements on a web page, web pages that take far too long to load, and web pages that are not well formatted for mobile. **Mobile responsive websites**, or websites that are optimized for small-format (such as mobile phones) or large-format (such as desktop or laptop) display, are critical to presenting news and information especially to a growing audience of readers who primarily use their mobile devices for browsing websites. And frameworks for improving the speed of mobile website rendering are intended to make mobile UX much easier on site visitors — but can often lead to new, complex implementation challenges, especially with display advertising.

Despite the importance of a good user experience, UX is only part of the equation.

Being an easy-to-find resource of news and information is also a critical component of website performance. Weak search rankings and a poor user experience result in what website metrics will show is an underperforming website.

Plenty of methods exist to improve a website's performance and create a better user experience for site visitors, but access to technology alone is not a "fix."

Digital transformation requires media organization stakeholders to assess their current enabling technologies — across operational, business, customer and content functions — and develop a plan for improvement. It often involves improving the existing CMS, or considering moving to a new one, given the

CMS' foundational role in consumer-facing and advertiser-facing digital products and services. During a transition, media organizations may implement the use of new digital tools and, in turn, must develop their staffs' capabilities to ensure those new tools are successfully adopted.

One key result of this rigorous process of transformation that the project team hoped to deliver was a feeling among this cohort of news organizations and their stakeholders of true empowerment as they navigate the digital media frontier. A feeling that with these new tools, they can have a better everyday experience producing news and information for their communities, and in turn, deliver better news, information, advertising and overall user experiences on their websites.

The **key learnings** portion of this report details the pitfalls and challenges these publishers faced and gives tips for navigating the terrain.

Profile of newsroom participants

Houston Defender Network

The Defender Network news website dubs itself "Houston's leading Black news source" and offers breaking news, lifestyle, politics, commentary and community newsletters. The Defender newspaper, also known as the Houston Defender, was founded in 1930 by C. F. Richardson Sr. In 1981, Sonceria "Sonny" Messiah-Jiles purchased the newspaper; she still serves as publisher. The print newspaper publishes weekly in Houston, Texas. For the past two years, Jiles focused her organization on a three-phase plan to monetize print, digital and social media with recent updates intended to strengthen digital revenue.

The Atlanta Voice

For more than 50 years, The Atlanta Voice has been "a voice for the voiceless." It is the largest audited African American community newspaper in Georgia with more than 600 print newspaper distribution locations throughout the Atlanta metropolitan area. Founded in 1966 by the late Ed Clayton and the late J. Lowell Ware, The Atlanta Voice has evolved and redefined its efforts to better connect with the community it serves. It is owned and operated by Janis Ware, who serves as publisher.

The Washington Informer

The Washington Informer Newspaper Co., Inc., is a multimedia news organization that serves the information needs of the African American community in the metropolitan Washington D.C. area. The organization has reached its 55th year, with over 50,000 readers of its

weekly print edition, and an audience of more than 87,000 washingtoninformer.com readers, including weekly email newsletters and social media platforms.

New York Amsterdam News

The New York Amsterdam News is one of the country's oldest (105 years), continuously published African American newspapers, and the leading voice of the black community in the New York region. As a weekly (Thursday) legacy newspaper, the Amsterdam News enjoys a loyal following of more than 98,000 readers weekly with its print product. Its current digital offering, amsterdamnews.com, sees over 100,000 unique visitors per week, more than 444,000 page views per month, and growing.

Choosing a new CMS

A **CMS**, or content management system, is the platform that warehouses the content that news organizations produce and serves the content to website visitors.

Legacy media publishers who have not upgraded their CMS in a while and are experiencing the pains and frustrations of aging website infrastructure may have a lot of questions about migrating — particularly if their newsroom lacks an in-house technologist.

Some questions publishers often ask are:

- Is now the right time to transition to a new website or CMS?
- What CMS should I choose?
- How long will it take to migrate and launch?
- How much does it cost?

These are the very same questions members of the Digital Transformation Lab had along the way. The good news is, transitioning to a new CMS is entirely possible, and all four publishers in this cohort successfully made the migration. Though many excellent options exist for robust, database-backed CMS solutions that can work for large and small media organizations, the cohort's platform of choice was Newspack.

A CMS for small to mid-size publishers

Newspack is a **WordPress** CMS with a specific focus on news. It was designed to help small and medium-sized digital news organizations drive audience and revenue in a platform that considers the best practices of the news business.

The Newspack website touts the platform as an "opinionated" CMS that "combines the best of what the industry has learned about publishing and revenue generation, while giving you the flexibility to focus on journalism and express your brand as you see fit."

The Newspack service includes WordPress core and Newspack plugins, provided as software-as-a-service along with managed hosting and support.

Also among a strong list of benefits are live recorded and transcribed weekly calls with customers, a Slack community where publishers share knowledge, and easy access to technical account managers.

Perhaps most compelling to the four publishers were the cost of entry (current pricing tiers are listed under the Newspack Frequently Asked Questions) and the premium migration service which removed many technical barriers to entry for newsrooms looking to leave their platform on a budget. Newspack aimed its price tiers to be economical enough to accommodate the budgets of small publishers.

Migrating to Newspack

Website migration is the process of moving the contents and processes of a website to another environment or platform. Migrations of content often require a level of technical expertise. Difficulty levels of transitioning from one CMS to another may vary.

Because of that, migrations tend to be a high-ticket item depending on the complexity of the job. For the four publishers in this cohort, the Newspack team provided migration resources and support.

Newspack migrations are performed by a technical team as part of the onboarding process for new accounts. Depending on the platform and environment from which a news organization is migrating, the Newspack team may use various approaches.

If a publisher's current platform is based on WordPress, migration can occur in just a few steps. A common method relies on the use of **Jetpack**, a plugin by Automattic (provider of WordPress) that adds features including security, performance, and growth tools.

Migrations using Jetpack assume a publisher's current WordPress service/hosting provider will install and configure Jetpack, and in some cases, grant access to elements of its **technology stack**.

The cohort publishers, in some cases, encountered resistance — some hosting providers refused to install Jetpack for media outlets migrating from their environments, citing the proprietary nature of their operations or inability to install the plugin without negative implications on their own business operations.

Interestingly, each of the four publishers started with a different CMS hosting/support provider, so the Newspack team took a different route of migration for each website.

Website performance

Digitally mature news organizations understand the importance of performant websites, which quickly load on browsers across device types including desktop, tablet and mobile phones.

Slow page load speeds certainly have a negative impact on the experience of website visitors with a ripple effect. Visitors are more likely to abandon slow-loading web pages, causing what analytics platforms will call a *bounce*, and that in turn adversely affects digital ad impressions. Such a loss of ad impressions is likely to have a corresponding negative effect on digital ad revenue and client satisfaction.

Website performance was not always a cornerstone to running a successful online news operation among newsrooms in our cohort. For varying reasons, control of page performance is a technical capability these publishers had little or no control of.

Optimizing the page speed of a website presents a technical challenge that, for many newsrooms, often requires the expertise of a web developer they do not have. In some cases, newsrooms in our cohort solely relied on their service provider to implement website improvements. Most times, they report, performance gains were never realized under the control of their hosting and CMS website providers.

Newspack performance *

Newspack touts itself as "an opinionated CMS" for a reason. From the project's inception, it was built to leverage the power of **Accelerated Mobile Pages**, or AMP, as a cornerstone to optimized website performance. AMP is an open source framework put forth by Google that allows for web pages to load quickly on mobile devices.

Although many content-focused websites use AMP to render mobile web pages, the project and its relationship with Google have long been scrutinized. At one time, Google rewarded sites that used AMP with better rankings in search — but was also accused of hampering other efforts by publishers who didn't opt in. In response, Google stopped elevating AMP sites and started favoring sites with good web performance in general.

In March 2023, Newspack announced it would drop AMP and use a new plugin, [Perfmatters](#), to provide good baseline performance for sites, citing that "development on [AMP] has virtually stopped."

"Without AMP, many more plugins will be potentially compatible with Newspack — but those can drag your site speed down," the message read. "With each new plugin, you'll need to balance the need for that particular feature with any resulting loss of speed."

[Web Vitals](#), an initiative by Google, provides "unified guidance for quality signals that are essential to delivering a great user experience on the web," [according to a post written by Philip Walon](#), an engineer at Google, that appeared on the web.dev website. Core Web Vitals hopes to make it easy to understand various factors that could be impacting page load speeds of their websites.

In November of 2021, Steve Beatty, communications director for Newspack, [compared the average of all Newspack websites' Core Web Vitals performance to other CMS systems](#). Newspack came out on top.

Historically, understanding and managing page performance was uncommon or entirely out of reach among publishers in this cohort. Today, these publishers — all using Newspack — possess a significant level of control over page performance.

Overall, the move to Newspack saw several improvements, including a clean database of imported content, better control of story display, and a multitude of other improvements that are standard nowadays for a well performing website.

For the months that publishers enabled the AMP WordPress plugin, [we did see a performance boost](#). That improvement, we have found, has positive implications for revenue. Perhaps New York Amsterdam News Publisher Elinor Tatum said it best: "Bottom line is the realization that an optimized website for all digital and revenue growth in today's marketplace is a necessity."

In the next section, we detail snapshots of how Newspack homepages performed per newsroom. We also captured page performance speeds of the top visited story of a week pre-Newspack migration, and compared it to the top visited story of a similar week after post-Newspack migration. In the *Key learnings* section of this report, we also detail performance considerations and how they impact the scores we collected.

* Updated March 2023
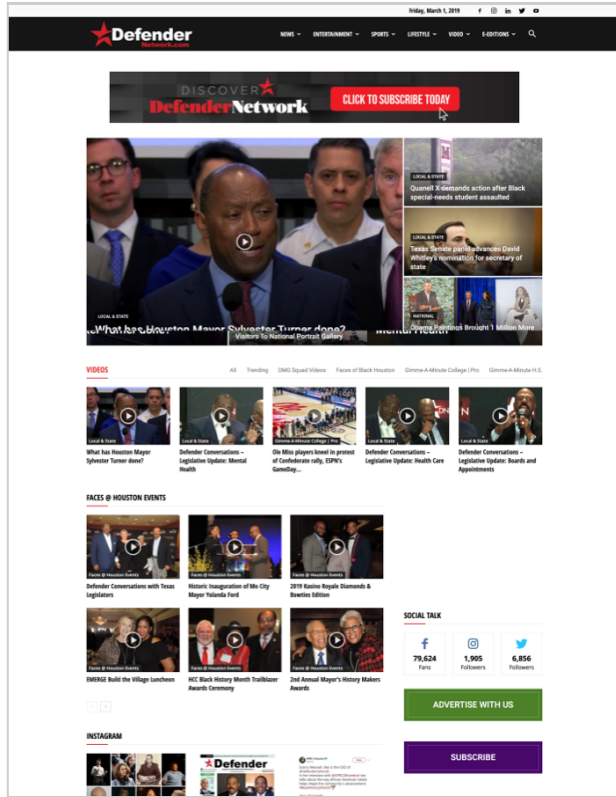
Before
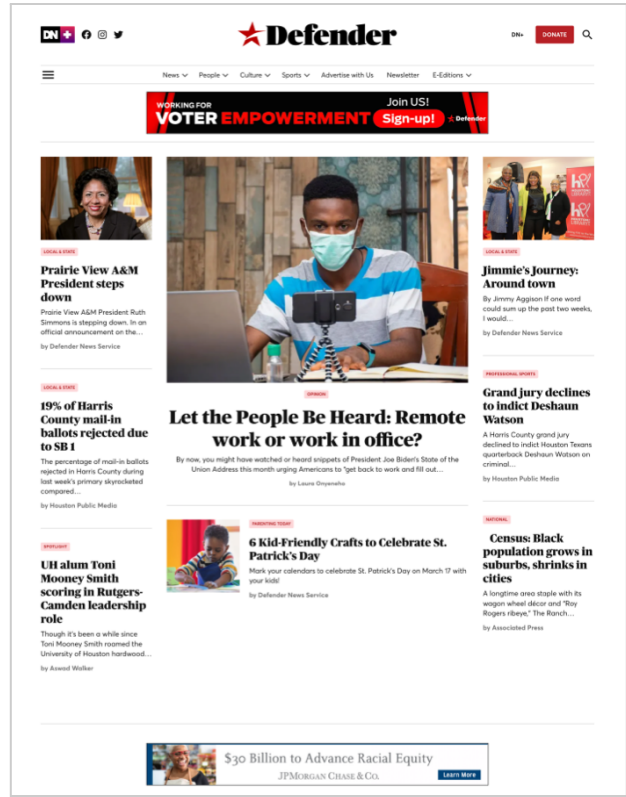
After

Defender Network

Page timings: Newspack Homepage

Jan. 15, 2021	Jan. 15, 2022	Change
Avg. Page Load Time (sec):	Avg. Page Load Time (sec):	**155.29%**
20.55 (pre-Newspack)	**8.05** (post-Newspack)	

PageSpeed Insights: Newspack Homepage

Mobile

80

Desktop

75

About PageSpeed Insights

PageSpeed Insights (PSI) reports on the performance of a page on both mobile and desktop devices, and provides suggestions on how that page may be improved.
SOURCE: PageSpeed Insights

Page timings: Top performing article

Wk. of Jan. 15, 2021	Wk. of Jan 15, 2022	Change
Avg. Page Load Time (sec):	Avg. Page Load Time (sec):	**3,086.5%**
54.17 (pre-Newspack)	**1.70** (post-Newspack)	

Before

After

The Atlanta Voice

Page timings: Newspack Homepage

Jan. 15, 2021
Avg. Page Load Time (sec):
11.72 (pre-Newspack)

Jan. 15, 2022
Avg. Page Load Time (sec):
1.78 (post-Newspack)

Change
558.43%

PageSpeed Insights: Newspack Homepage

Mobile

28

Desktop

90

About PageSpeed Insights
PageSpeed Insights (PSI) reports on the performance of a page on both mobile and desktop devices, and provides suggestions on how that page may be improved.
SOURCE: PageSpeed Insights

Page timings: Top performing article

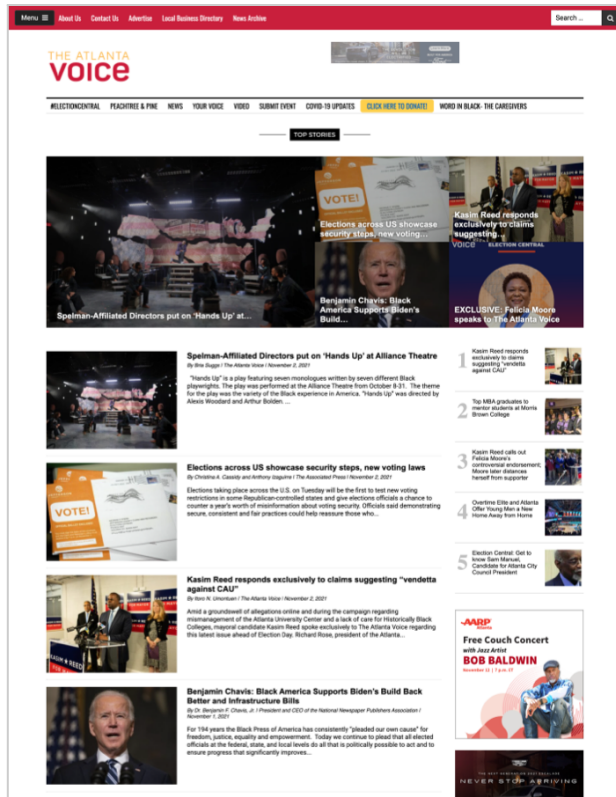**Wk. of Jan. 15, 2021**
Avg. Page Load Time (sec):
8.81 (pre-Newspack)

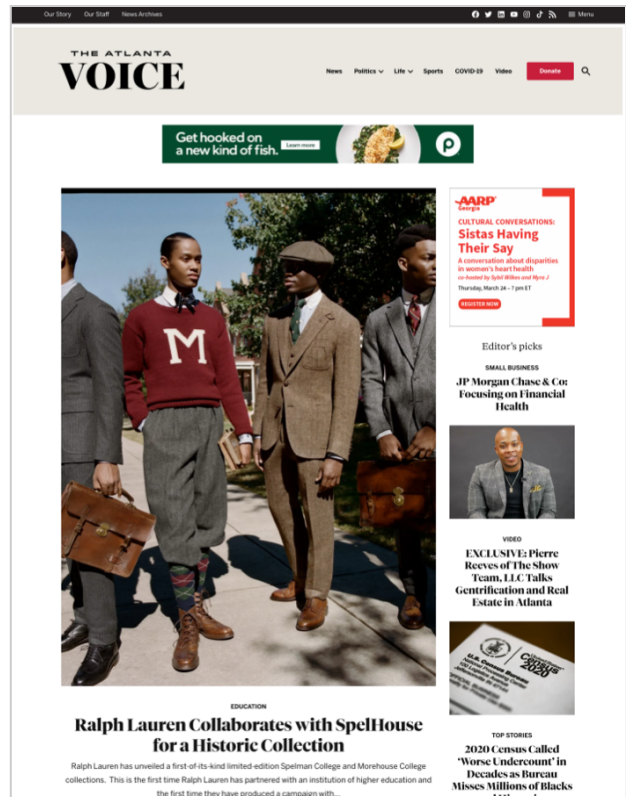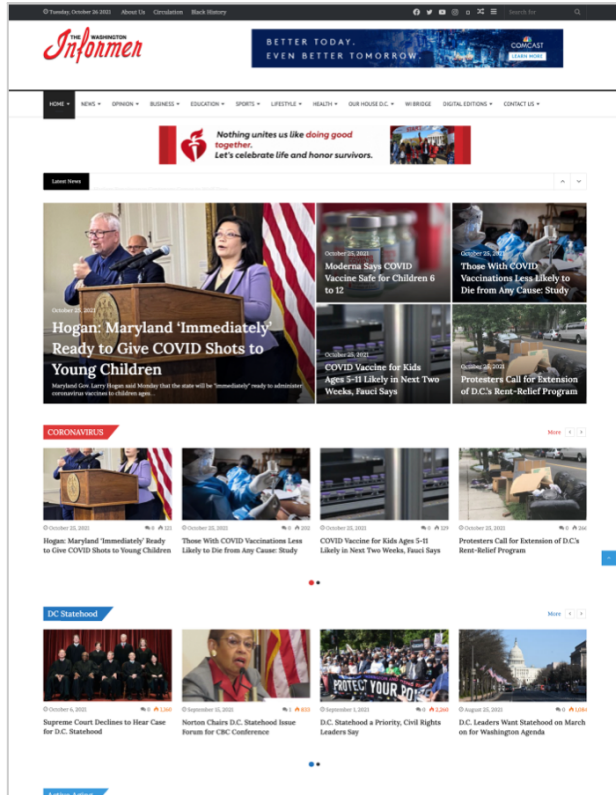**Wk. of Jan 15, 2022**
Avg. Page Load Time (sec):
4.83 (post-Newspack)

Change
82.4%

Before

After

The Washington Informer

Page timings: Newspack Homepage

Jan. 15, 2021	**Jan. 15, 2022**	**Change**
Avg. Page Load Time (sec):	Avg. Page Load Time (sec):	**164.89%**
9.65 (pre-Newspack)	**3.64** (post-Newspack)	

PageSpeed Insights: Newspack Homepage

Mobile

19

Desktop

91

About PageSpeed Insights
PageSpeed Insights (PSI) reports on the performance of a page on both mobile and desktop devices, and provides suggestions on how that page may be improved.
SOURCE: PageSpeed Insights

Page timings: Top performing article

Wk. of Jan. 15, 2021	**Wk. of Jan 15, 2022**	**Change**
Avg. Page Load Time (sec):	Avg. Page Load Time (sec):	**192.88%**
9.05 (pre-Newspack)	**3.09** (post-Newspack)	

Before

After

NY Amsterdam News

Page timings: Newspack Homepage

Jan. 15, 2021
Avg. Page Load Time (sec):
15.23 (pre-Newspack)

Jan. 15, 2022
Avg. Page Load Time (sec):
4.76 (post-Newspack)

Change
220.25%

PageSpeed Insights: Newspack Homepage

Mobile

23

Desktop

58

About PageSpeed Insights
PageSpeed Insights (PSI) reports on the performance of a page on both mobile and desktop devices, and provides suggestions on how that page may be improved.
SOURCE: PageSpeed Insights

Page timings: Top performing article

Wk. of Jan. 15, 2021
Avg. Page Load Time (sec):
11.65 (pre-Newspack)

Wk. of Jan 15, 2022
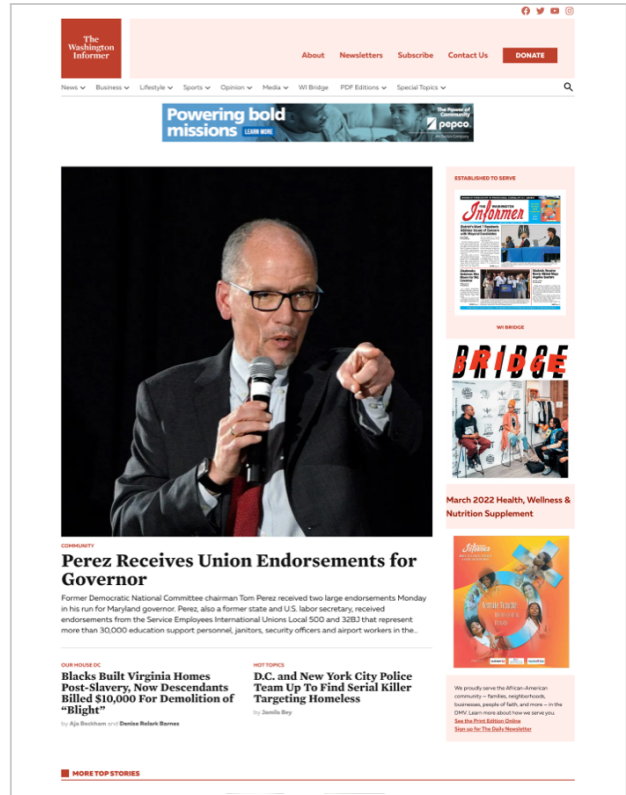Avg. Page Load Time (sec):
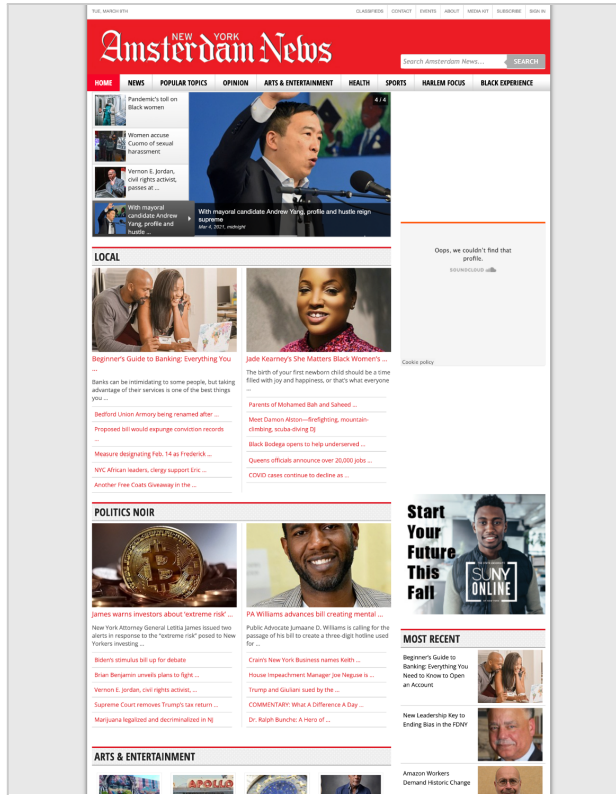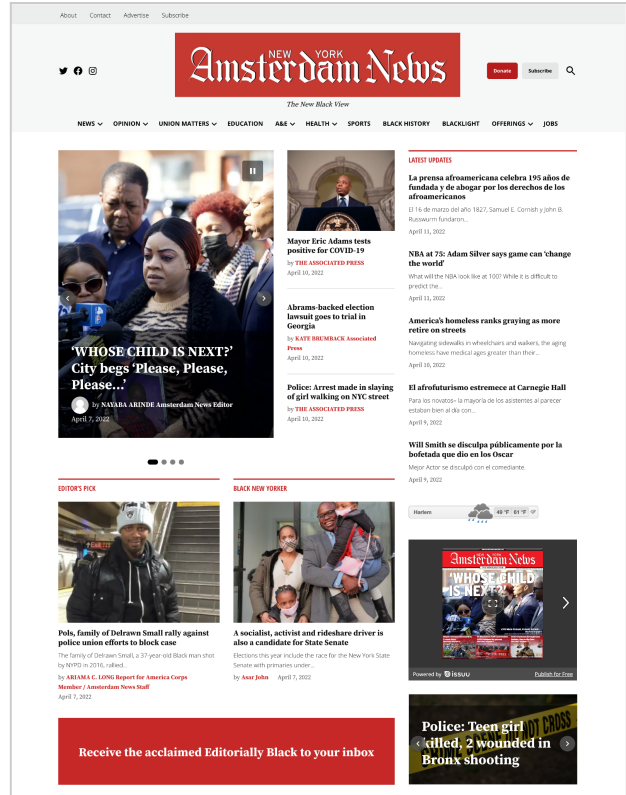**3.52** (post-Newspack)

Change
230.97%

Key learnings

As the four Black media outlets made their way to the finish line, we observed and logged issues and challenges they faced along the way. Our findings have been synthesized to give the industry at large, and organizations of similar size in particular, things to consider for a smoother transition to a new CMS.

An awakening is under way

Access to specialized knowledge and training is growing. The organizations in our cohort participated in a number of other extracurricular newsroom development programs.

Those programs included Table Stakes, Google News Initiative (GNI) programs, Meta (Facebook) Journalism Project's accelerator programs, Poynter programs, the API Listening & Sustainability Lab, News Revenue Hub courses and training, LION Publishers, Lenfest Institute, Borealis Philanthropy, Solutions Journalism Network, Report for America, and of course the LMA Digital Transformation Lab. All four of the organizations also participate in the first cohort of the just-launched Knight x LMA BloomLab, a three-year, $3.2 million immersive experience with 26 Black-owned local media outlets intended to apply technologies and business strategies to promote long-term sustainability and independence.

Some of these programs made rounds of funds available to the teams specifically earmarked for digital tools, technologies and human capital that support their digital operations.

Programs also tackled the latest proven methods in subjects like product development, revenue and audience metrics, memberships and subscriptions, email newsletters and conversions, and even user experience.

These in-depth programs are offered in a variety of formats with varying program lengths, from single sessions to week-long, month-long and multimonth programs and webinars.

Programming like this has successfully introduced our cohort members to new industry insights and thus created a foundation for understanding modern

approaches to audience growth, engagement and digital revenue practices which all lead to digital maturity and sustainability.

Group learning accelerates understanding

When one Black-owned organization benefits, other Black outlets are apt to make gains as well. Or at least that's the way Sonceria (Sonny) Messiah Jiles, publisher of The Houston Defender, sees it.

"I think that is what's unique about the Black press," she said. "There's a certain group of us who have been sharing for the last 20 years as each one of us has learned different skills."

This was certainly a characteristic of the Digital Transformation Lab.

It is critical for media outlets to realize that although print revenue models may continue to calcify, new engagement and revenue opportunities have emerged for local legacy news organizations, including ethnic-owned media.

When they see one publisher make gains, and when their peers help connect the dots on how they got there, teams understand new successes are within reach — even when it involves learning new processes, workflows or technologies.

Digital transformation begins at the top

The fate of legacy news organizations lies in the hands of organizational leaders and their ability to get stakeholders on the same page about what they intend to accomplish together. But transforming an entire news organization is a huge undertaking that requires careful planning. Success isn't realized overnight.

For most organizations in our cohort, realizing things need to change was the first step in charting a new path. With the website as the centerpiece to a digital transformation, the publishers called on stakeholders from around the organization to contribute to the effort.

New information helped set the agenda for where these organizations would spend their time and resources. As teams learned new insights, they repositioned their news organizations by developing new value propositions for new digital products.

Each team presented to the full group and led important discussions along the way. What mattered was that the teams were learning, relaying important information, and calling a huddle when needed. It didn't matter that the

organizations were small. The ones that saw the greatest progress were those that embraced a refreshed mission.

Staff development is critical to success

Like any other organization, the day-to-day can feel like business as usual. But for the four media outlets moving to a new CMS, one goal was to break old habits and create new ones.

With a new CMS, they would have stable technology in place to try the things they learned in the Digital Transformation Lab and other development programs.

Prior to launching a new website, the Newspack team pulls from a long menu of training programs, and may tailor training per the requests of each organization.

Post-launch, having access to specialists who can spend time with team members working routinely in the CMS is invaluable. Particular attention should be given to make sure staff members have a complete understanding of the key activities they perform and the impact those activities have on the presentation of news, information and commercial content (advertising) to their audiences.

This attention to detail enables team members to truly understand the gains to be had in their new CMS, and leads to both empowerment and newfound successes.

The time has come to evolve old roles or create new roles

Loss of personnel is one of the most difficult challenges facing ethnic media outlets. When a key person leaves the organization, skills, expertise and production capability leaves, too.

This is especially true at smaller establishments where losing a person in a critical role may even result in the loss of platform account access (too often, individual employees in small organizations become, or are made into, [single points of failure]) , erosion of once-maintained business relationships, and loss of institutional knowledge.

Having well-defined roles and responsibilities was critical to the four organizations in our cohort.

But people who know and understand key functions, capabilities and limitations of a website are hard to come by.

These news organizations were given access to reliable digital specialists who could identify and understand gaps in knowledge and bring helpful information to their attention.

The most basic day-to-day functions of a digital news organization are often carried out by web producers. In the general sense, the news industry defines this role as someone with the ability to edit and post content prepared by colleagues, or produce original digital-first content.

For this group, web producer and technologist roles were the biggest missing pieces.

In most digitally mature news organizations, these roles may be better defined but are no less critical nor any easier to fill. To address this need with our cohort, project leaders facilitated a session that defined the roles and responsibilities of a web producer, and provided a job description template for reference.

The quality of provider support varies

Service providers have power, particularly website platform providers or organizations that supply publishing clients with core digital services like a CMS, website hosting infrastructure and technical support.

When providers don't evolve, it is nearly impossible for their clients to evolve while using their platforms. As a result, several members of this cohort had not evolved.

Leaders in the four organizations cited frustration with the quality of service they were offered by some providers — noting product limitations, pushback on feature requests, and red tape when technical experts sought to gain deeper access into their platforms.

Some providers will gladly accept a client's money in exchange for bundles of service — whether or not the client stands to benefit. We couldn't quantify the monetary value of poor service, but we believe some members of our cohort were potentially overpaying for low-quality website infrastructure.

In cases where a publisher paid for additional website features, we found some news organizations were not trained to use what they bought. A digital technologist might have been helpful to vet the quality of services and to measure if they were worth the price.

Another common circumstance among these teams was to fill the void of full-time or part-time staff with outside services and contractors. These providers can fill roles large and small, including webmaster, CMS provider,

domain and hosting support, analytics and metrics reporting, web producer and a multitude of other functions. They, too, should be evaluated carefully for the value of what they can provide.

For organizations who have a long-standing relationship with these providers, business relationships are hard to break. Trust plays a huge role, and most times, seemingly, the providers mean well but may not always deliver.

For ethnic media outlets that wish to improve the quality of their online news operations quickly, it is important to assess the quality of provider relationships. Great service providers should be allies who truly want the best for your business and will work hard to help you move the needle.

It's also a good idea to solicit advice from expert digital consultants before making key decisions about enabling technologies. A good digital consultant may help you see the field more clearly, point out biases and signal blind spots which should help in making the best possible decisions.

Website and article performance matters

As mentioned earlier, more media organizations are becoming aware of the importance of page performance on their websites. Low bounce rates, high recirculation (multiple page visits in a single session) and viewable impressions on digital ads are all key considerations to running a successful news website.

Slow page speeds degrade the user experience. When visitors have to wait for pages to load, they are more likely to abandon the website, which reduces a publisher's opportunity to convert a visitor into a loyal audience member and benefit from the visitor's time spent on the website.

At times, these teams can and should consider the impact of adding additional features, functionality, or even ad positions to their website, as these additions can impact page speed.

Most outlets in this group have AMP turned off on their home pages. This decision stems from technical conflicts with digital advertising, in particular a branded content module that all four publications deployed as a new source of digital revenue.

Because the branded content module requires the use of a script that will not run when AMP is enabled, the tradeoff is slower home page speed scores for the sake of a new revenue opportunity.

In our home page benchmarking, we noted mostly adequate page speeds across the board despite AMP being turned off, but home page performance on mobile could be better.

In cases like this, it is important for teams to determine if revenues generated from certain ad units, plugin features, or other scripted embeds are significant enough to justify despite possible negative impact on the user experience.

Though our page speed reporting spotlights home page performance, home pages are only part of the bigger picture. While home pages account for consistent numbers of direct visits, a single individual article can easily account for larger numbers of visits than the home page. Alongside home page performance on a single day, we noted page performance on the top performing story for that week as a better indication of how well a highly visited story actually performed in Newspack.

Learning the true cost of transformation is a journey

Time, money and human capital are real considerations for media organization leaders as they evaluate what it takes to chart the path to a sustainable future. Each consideration carries its own share of importance in the big picture.

Digital transformation does not happen overnight. While some issues may be easily remedied by moving to a better platform, it takes time for leaders to move all their stakeholders in the right direction. Digital transformation often requires leaders at the top to learn and embrace new methods and approaches to doing business. It also requires training staff (and sometimes trusted service providers) to adopt new practices. Digital product offerings that are worth their salt are in some way rooted in the value expectations of digital audiences. Discovering the special ingredients that bring value to local audiences is an investment of time. Coming up with the right words to describe the new products and services that media outlets hope will attract and create loyal readers — well, that takes time, too.

On the journey through digital transformation, local media organizations should get comfortable assessing, tinkering, experimenting and iterating their way to a refined product experience that delights, or at least satisfies expectations.

The journey may also require monetary investments. Suitable digital products and services for local news organizations are rarely free. A CMS,

specifically, could be one of the most expensive investments in digital transformation. Fortunately, the migration of internet technologies to cloud-based, software-as-a-service models has brought about more palatable cost structures — and reduced needs for big capital investments in fast-depreciating hardware, such as on-premises web or database servers. And programs such as the aforementioned Knight Foundation sustainable publishing initiative and the Knight x LMA BloomLab help alleviate costs for their participants. Even media organizations that cannot avail themselves of programs like those should see reduced total costs of ownership for enabling technologies going forward. The benefits of software-as-a-service, as well as cost engineering on everything from digital cameras, laptops and tablets to video production gear, should stretch far beyond just foundational CMS to reduce the cost of digital transformation across the board.

Finally, human capital is critical. New initiatives require people on the team to be aligned with and capable of achieving business objectives. Not only do team leaders need to establish buy-in among their staffs and providers, those who carry out the daily work of writing, editing, and posting content should understand what is needed of them (and the technology they use) in this evolved media landscape. As a contrast to the benefits of cost engineering in technology, unfortunately, it is not as easy or even possible to cost-engineer most aspects of hiring, retaining, training and motivating high-quality people for these organizations. In fact, many of these talent costs have jumped rapidly since the onset of the pandemic.

Performing a successful migration for these four organizations involved aligning internal teams and service providers and getting them to work together. Communications with providers sometimes stalled, proving how easily critical actions can be delayed in the transformation process.

Some ethnic media outlets may feel a real sense of urgency to make the move to a new CMS. It's important to take stock of the time, money and human capital necessary to make the leap. Slowing the pace of routine, run-of-the-mill work to create space for this commitment is wise. Teams should safeguard lessons and learnings that lead to a more productive future. The demands of the day can easily distract from a broader transformation effort.

Organizations that have invested but sense they are still behind the industry curve should not let sunk costs get in the way of making financial decisions that may change the trajectory of their news organization. The right investment today may save them from pitfalls of past unsuccessful efforts.

Digital revenue and performance metrics

Digital revenue

Although publications in our cohort moved into Newspack without digital reader revenue programs in place, nearly all of them have a program in development. Specifically, educational opportunities such as Table Stakes, the GNI Ad Transformation Lab (a GNI Digital Growth Program), Meta (Facebook) Accelerator programs, and the API Listening & Sustainability Lab allowed members of our cohort to explore pathways to reader revenue models. Not only were these programs underway while the outlets were implementing their new websites, different programs often overlapped.

This exposure to best practices in audience growth and revenue led to a number of specific strategies and outcomes for members of the cohort.

Newspack enables media outlets to display and manage advertisements, and incorporate reader revenue programs, within a performant website. But moving to Newspack alone does not guarantee a website will achieve profitability via either digital advertising or reader revenue.

This reality is what makes programs like the GNI Ad Transformation Lab such an invaluable resource. The Ad Lab exists to strengthen the digital ad revenue opportunities among media organizations of color.

At the time of this writing, The Atlanta Voice and The Washington Informer are participants in the GNI Ad Transformation Lab. As members of the program, they are provided with the technical resources of 10up, a digital agency that was tasked with removing technical barriers and ensuring that digital advertising technology is properly configured and websites are optimized to display direct and indirect ads for the highest possible dollar amounts. Both organizations received a Google Data Studio dashboard custom-built to enable digital revenue performance metrics. They have also been given access to digital advertising sales expertise from Blue Engine Collaborative, an agency that assists local media organizations through

development of strong direct sales strategies. While the two outlets still await reporting on results, both already see the impact of hands-on interventions.

The Lab aims to leave newsrooms like The Atlanta Voice and The Washington Informer with a strengthened sales pipeline and empowered sales teams. It supports organizations to successfully sell ads directly to prospect clients, properly handle and serve client ad campaigns, and manage ad inventory across their websites.

Direct and indirect (programmatic) digital advertising, sponsorship packages, and branded content are all potential revenue sources, yet all of these now common objectives require technical infrastructure.

Infrastructure for supporting a digital ad business varied widely across the cohort. For example, before moving to Newspack, one organization was totally reliant on its previous website provider to traffic both direct and indirect advertising with little or no input on how to price ad inventory. Also, the actual value of programmatic ads that ran on its site was unclear. Other organizations hired either in-house staff or outside providers with varying abilities to manage digital ad inventory.

Moving to Newspack meant those organizations that had a complete reliance on their web host for digital advertising would need to learn to manage their entire advertising process — sales, creative, ad insertions, performance metrics — on their own. If the role did not already exist in the organization, they would need to enlist staff or contractors with the specialized skills. Today, each of the four organizations is actively pursuing (and driving some level of digital advertising revenue through) branded content campaigns, some

By having a very persistent "Donate" button, and creating messaging where Publisher Sonny Jiles literally asked her audience to support her newsroom, she brought in revenue to the tune of six figures over the course of 90 days, which was far more than she anticipated even as the world moved deeper into the pandemic.

Jiles

stemming from participation in the [Meta Branded Content Project](). The Defender Network has had major financial successes through the use of branded content, and the New York Amsterdam News leadership has major plans to continue the use of branded content as part of its business model.

"Over the next two years the New York Amsterdam News will be working to maximize its digital advertising revenue including that obtained through branded content programs," said Elinor Tatum, publisher.

Reader revenue — digital subscriptions or membership programs, for example — was largely uncharted territory for most members of our cohort. However, The Defender Network quickly learned the real opportunity behind reader revenue, just before its move to Newspack. By having a very persistent "Donate" button, and creating messaging where Publisher Sonny Jiles literally asked her audience to support her newsroom, she brought in revenue to the tune of six figures over the course of 90 days, which was far more than she anticipated even as the world moved deeper into the pandemic.

Outcomes

Comfort and control

In the past, if a local media organization asked its website provider to enable a relatively common technical function, the request might be met with resistance. In fact, our entire cohort expressed high levels of dissatisfaction with previous website providers, citing lackluster maintenance and support, and little progress in keeping up with the ever-evolving pace of the web.

Kinsey Wilson, founder and head of Newspack at Automattic, has found success in combating this dynamic. "At the core is a simple principle: no local news organization should have to pay full freight to develop, assemble and configure systems that are nearly identical to those being used by others in the same business."

According to Wilson, "70 percent of Newspack publishers report that they have no technical resources on staff or on contract."

"We shoulder that burden by employing a staff of nine developers and more than a half-dozen support staff," Wilson said.

So just how comfortable are these organizations now that they have moved to Newspack? And how much control do they feel they have over their digital platforms?

Responses vary by organization. James Washington, president and general manager of The Atlanta Voice, says his staff is gaining "a greater appreciation for the work they do," while growing to understand how that work affects the organization's bottom line. "In the beginning, not only did most [staff] not understand what the term 'digital transformation' meant, but they felt it only belonged to those who were working on the web, and not them. Today is different, and most of my writers, especially, don't want to be left out."

Denise Barnes, publisher and owner of The Washington Informer, feels empowered by new digital revenue opportunities that are at her fingertips. "We are now able to readily participate in the revenue space for digital ad buys," she said.

"The Newspack transformation has allowed us time to focus on the reader's experience and make the content presentation more

appealing/engaging," said Sonny Jiles of The Defender Network. "Success looks like significant increases in newsletter sign-ups and reader donations."

The four organizations launched at various points throughout 2021. In many respects, they are already realizing the benefits of their transformation.

'We are now able to readily participate in the revenue space for digital ad buys'

Denise Barnes, publisher and owner
The Washington Informer

This realization is due in part to the capability of Newspack as a publishing platform. It is clear the Newspack team is moving with the pace of the news industry to provide a growing feature set — many of which would have been out of reach, or not commonly known, to many media outlets.

Now that this cohort of news organizations is on a more capable technology platform, how they perform within the platform going forward will be the true test of success. Each publisher and news organization has demonstrated how having the wherewithal to keep pushing ahead pays dividends.

"Digital transformation is a necessary goal that requires training, experimentation and investment of time and resources," said Denise Barnes of The Washington Informer. "The more you commit and engage with the process, the more you will learn that the benefits are measurable and achievable."

Conclusion

Transitioning to a new CMS has largely been a successful endeavor for each local media organization in our cohort. As a result of migrating to Newspack, they all enjoy a faster, more performant website that has the ability to perform just about every task they expect from it.

Although the organizations realized immediate gains, much remains to be done in training their teams to realize the full potential.

The daily handling and care of a well-maintained website is quietly handled behind the scenes by Newspack's very competent and well functioning development team.

Although some issues arise, they are sometimes the product of a team's limited knowledge of the platform. Those issues can be addressed pretty quickly by a Newspack technical account manager with a video, a link to documentation, or a two-minute support session.

When the technology fails to work as intended, fixes are swiftly pushed out to individual sites, or the entire Newspack ecosystem. Herein lies the value of a baseline tech stack and a community of newsrooms operating on a common platform. When the technology works, these organizations can focus on what matters most: serving their audiences and clients.

The Digital Transformation Lab cohort participants all believe they are in a better position to leverage new learnings, tactics, and strategies for garnering higher audience engagement and generating more advertising and reader revenue. Until now, this has been a tough nut to crack.

2023 update: Audience and revenue outcomes

By Emilie Lutostanski • March 2023

Progress ushered in after a new CMS launch takes time to show.

When this report was first published, data from the four news companies — New York Amsterdam News, Houston Defender Network, The Atlanta Voice and Washington Informer — was insufficient to demonstrate the breadth and depth of business improvements that a functioning, fast and user-friendly CMS can enable. Now, many months since their sites were launched, the publishers shared more about value added, changes made, and challenges they faced.

Amplified impact

Since launching on Newspack, the four publishers also participated in the inaugural cohort of the Knight x LMA BloomLab, a three-year, immersive experience with Black-owned local media outlets intended to apply technologies and business strategies to promote long-term sustainability and independence. The knowledge and support from the BloomLab empowered the publishers to amplify the positive impact of their new CMS while growing their acumen for profitable digital publishing.

Apryl Pilolli (right), director of technology for the BloomLab, serves as a fractional technologist for BloomLab participants. She assisted in updating this report by providing year-over-year performance data and contextual analysis about the publishers' key performance indicators (KPIs).

The cohort has had a top-to-bottom focus on transformation, and the results show. From 2021 to 2022, the four news outlets saw an average increase in digital reader revenue of 327%.

However, the publishers were not exempt from industry trends: according to Poynter Institute for Media Studies research, local news publishers saw a 20% decline in pageviews in early 2022. This cohort experienced a 22% drop in

pageviews. Not surprisingly, many news organizations suffered huge hits in referral traffic from Facebook, Twitter, and news aggregators like NewsBreak and SmartNews.

Website improvements

Among these four publishers, only one gained pageviews from 2021 to 2022. At the Houston Defender Network, the total number of pageviews grew 20%, largely driven by organic search and newsletters. Users have tended to stay on-site longer, too: In the same time frame, pages per session on defendernetwork.com from all traffic sources also grew 20%.

CEO Sonny Messiah Jiles said that in addition to improving page load time, the Defender's new website has features that help keep readers on-site.

"The right rail we implemented for stories is helping people stay on the website with the recirculation of existing stores," she said. "With Newspack, they're constantly trying to come up with different components … that let you change the face of your website. Those things allow you to be more creative in your presentation, and I think that's the direction we have to go if we're going to make the user experience more engaging."

At New York Amsterdam News, Chief Revenue Officer Siobhan Bennett (right) said until the publication's website was converted to a Newspack site, it was not a competitive product for selling digital advertising.

"Last year [after conversion], we had a pretty aggressive goal of $200,000, and we did $220,000 in digital advertising," Bennett said.

Pilolli notes that even though audience volume has diminished across the industry, on-site reader revenue for these four publishers has grown.

"This is a direct impact of the technology that enables publishers to move more users down the marketing funnel and into more loyal relationships with their audiences," Pilolli said. "Publishers are now using tools that encourage newsletter signups and reduce friction with donations. These problems were more complicated to solve for before migrating to a new CMS, but Newspack has these features built into its tech."

Newsletter growth

On their new sites, the teams at all four news outlets enabled Newspack Campaigns to show interstitial prompts, including in-line with text and overlays. Messages drive visitors to sign up for newsletters, donate or subscribe.

Josh Barker (right), digital editor for the New York Amsterdam News, said the team added a popup feature through Newspack Campaigns to help capture new readers and grow their engagement.

"If you're a first-time user to our website, the first thing you see before you see the story is a pop-up asking you to sign up for our newsletter," Barker said. "We implemented that last year and we saw a huge jump in the number of people wanting the newsletter."

After switching to Newspack, New York Amsterdam News grew newsletter subscribers from less than 1,000 to more than 14,000 in 2022.

They moved their email creation from Constant Contact to Active Campaign, which is integrated with Newspack, and relaunched a news roundup email sent twice daily, five days per week. Barker said he sends the second email of the day to the most engaged 18% or so of email subscribers, resulting in a consistent 85%-90% open rate. Among all 10 emails, the open rate hovers around 40%, he said.

Chief Revenue Officer Siobhan Bennett said after testing a few pricing points, the team realized the New York Amsterdam News email product was prized by advertisers — and underpriced.

"We started making money in 2022 off the newsletter, and our revenue projection was $20,000. We ended up making $72,000 in 2022," she said. "We don't expect to have that kind of crazy growth in 2023. We're anticipating maybe about 20% more."

At the Houston Defender, newsletter subscribers grew 525% from 2021 to 2022, boosting email to be the second-highest source for site traffic. In the same time frame, the users on the Defender's site referred by email grew 1,363%.

Reader revenue gains

Furthering the impact of its newsletters, the Defender team set up an email onboarding cadence that guides new subscribers through the company's brand-, mission- and community-focused content. Within those emails is an ask to donate to support the critical journalism the Defender produces. It also runs year-end and seasonal invitations for financial support.

"Email is still the No. 1 driver of donations and paid subscriptions, so it's about getting users on the website to sign up for the email, then leading them down the funnel with the right messages at the right time," Pilolli said.

In addition to using Newspack Campaigns to solicit donations, publishers used best practices, sample emails and graphics from the BloomLab to make their year-end asks. All four publishers saw on-site reader revenue increases from 2021 to 2022.

- The Atlanta Voice +710%
- Houston Defender +186%
- New York Amsterdam News +283%
- Washington Informer +128%

Digital Reader Revenue
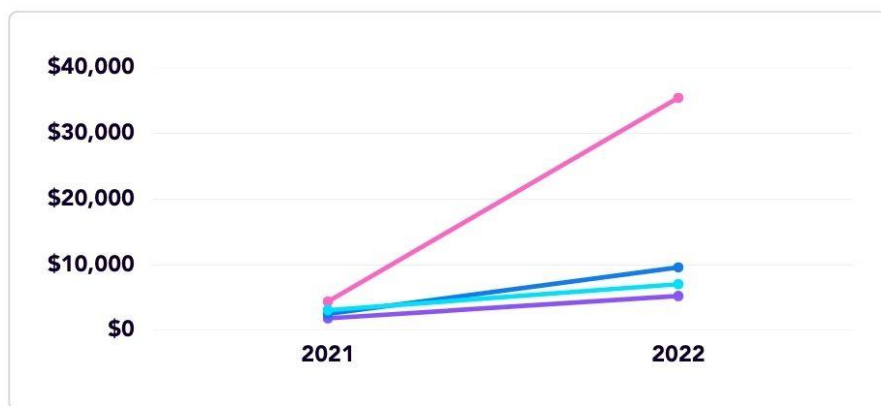
Branded content destinations

One new revenue opportunity for publishers was opting to use the Newspack Sponsors feature to display branded content. It allows users to give sponsored or underwritten content a special visual treatment.

For example, The Washington Informer partnered with JP Morgan Chase and Co. for Money Talk, a financial education series dedicated to closing the racial wealth gap by encouraging healthy conversations about financial wellness.

"This is more than a widget. They took it to the next level and designed landing pages that were specific to the content," Pilolli said. "Technology enabled them to sell better solutions and they took advantage of that."

Similarly, Defender launched its Finances FYI, Parenting Today and Women's Wellness branded content series, adopted from The Meta Branded Content Project.

"Each one of those series was $100,000 in additional new revenue," Jiles said.
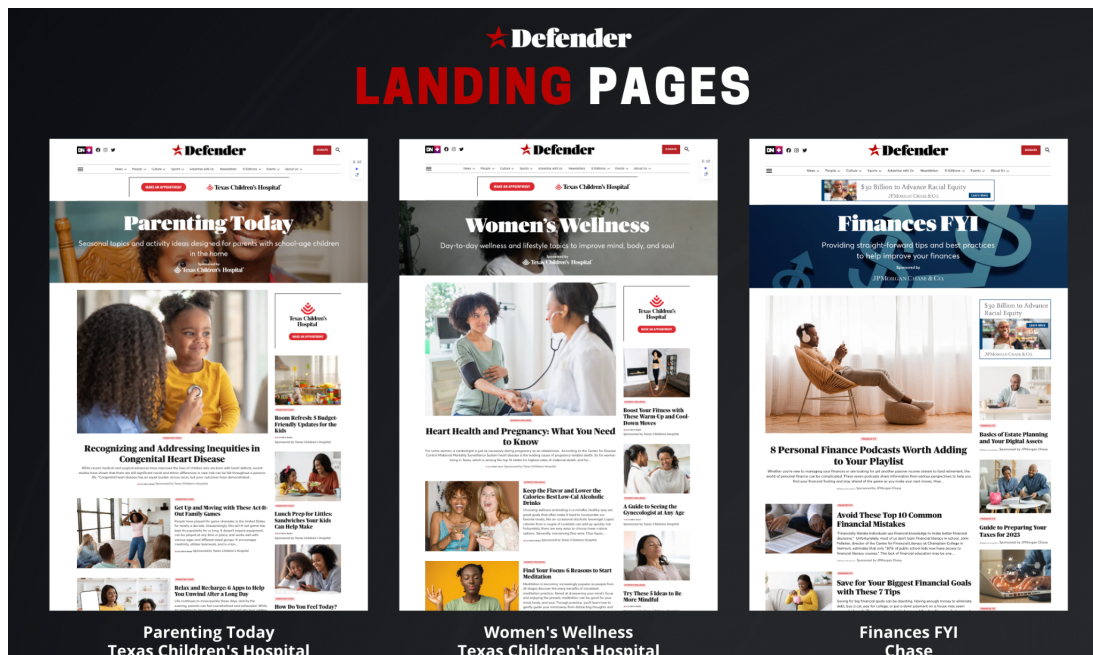
Print, staff and the future

Now months out from their website migrations, many of the news outlets are making continued strides toward revenue diversification and sustainability via digital innovation.

But no one is leaving a print legacy behind. The news outlets, with support from the BloomLab, have actually seen print revenue gains since improving their digital presence and broadening their digital advertising options, said Robert Walker-Smith (right), digital revenue director for the BloomLab.

"When we go after integrated solutions selling, we have a 4% lift on print among all 10 publishers in Cohort 1," Walker-Smith said. "That is far exceeding the reporting that print *declines* should have been between 12-15% between 2021 and 2022."

At New York Amsterdam News, Bennett said the single most important factor in digital transformation and revenue growth has been adding staff members focused on digital.

"We were lucky we had super talented digital passionates that we were able to promote: Josh Barker, a 15-year reporter to digital editor, and Ali Milliner, an eight-year sales rep to digital, branded content and hybrid sales consultant."

Ultimately, Pilolli said the publishers who are seeing the most growth in digital revenue are the ones that have leaned into new technology — especially solutions that drove reader, sponsor and philanthropic revenue — and provided adequate training for their teams.

"Technology can only go as far as its users," Pilolli said. "These four news organizations have invested serious time and resources into their digital transformation, and many of those revenue and audience gains have only started to be realized."

Key terms

UX - An abbreviation for "user experience."Improving UX is the practice of refining the experience users have while browsing digital products. UX considers ease of use, organization of content, performance and other factors that, when executed well, result in pleasant encounters that serve a purpose for users.

mobile responsive - A website display technique that allows web pages to adjust to various screen sizes and orientations including mobile device screens, thus optimizing the ability to easily read content.

CMS - An acronym for "content management system," a CMS is a platform that warehouses the content that news organizations produce and serves the content to website visitors.

WordPress - An open-source software platform for creating websites, blogs, or apps. According to the WordPress website, "WordPress powers more than 43% of the web — a figure that rises every day."

Newspack - An "all-in-one" CMS product of WordPress designed specifically for small- and medium-sized news organizations. The project aims to simplify publishing and help news organizations drive audience and revenue right out of the box.

website migration - A technical process that involves moving the contents of a website including images, text, files and structured data from one platform to another.

Jetpack - A WordPress plugin created by Automattic (the makers of WordPress) that adds additional WordPress features including security, performance, growth tools and a number of other enhancements.

technology stack - A set of website technologies that combine to form the foundation of a website architecture.

AMP - An acronym for Accelerated Mobile Pages. AMP is an open source project created and managed by Google to improve the performance of web pages on mobile devices.

Appendix

Q&A Interview with Kinsey Wilson, Founder & Head of Newspack at Automattic

Kinsey Wilson, founder and head of Newspack at Automattic, made himself available for questions concerning this report. The following is a transcript of the questions asked by Michael Grant, author of this report, and Wilson's written responses. The exchange was captured in a direct message thread in the Newspack Slack workspace.

Q: The Black-owned news organizations that I assisted through launching in Newspack have very small teams and lack technical resources. For similarly sized media organizations of color that are considering upgrading their CMS, what makes Newspack a good choice? What do they stand to gain from migrating to Newspack?

A: In our surveys, more than 70 percent of Newspack publishers report that they have no technical resources on staff or on contract. We shoulder that burden by employing a staff of nine developers and more than a half-dozen support staff.

But you're not simply outsourcing technical and support functions to Newspack.

Instead we operate on a shared services model, where the cost of building, maintaining and adapting the tools required for digital publishing are shared across many organizations.

At the core is a simple principle: no local news organization should have to pay full freight to develop, assemble and configure systems that are nearly identical to those being used by others in the same business.

Newspack is tailored to the needs of small and medium-sized digital news organizations and we vet each publisher to ensure that we're not straying from that central mission.

It's not a one-size-fits-all model. We have to be able to accommodate for-profit and not-for-profit organizations; publications that are principally

ad-driven as well as those that depend heavily on reader revenue; and sites that only publish stories as well as those that have extensive listings.

But it means we're able to provide economies of scale without sacrificing the flexibility that organizations need to give expression to their journalism or adapt their business model.

And it means we shoulder the burden of attracting the kind of talent that can keep pace with market changes, drive product and technology requirements and optimize and maintain complex advertising and reader revenue systems.

Newspack's mission is to offload as much of that as we can, allowing you to redirect those dollars to the critical editorial and local ad-sales work that no one else can do.

Q: I logged a number of common issues and challenges that our publications experienced with their previous CMS service providers. What customer experience can small to midsize outlets expect by signing on with the Newspack team?

A: Newspack is designed to deliver a great user experience both to the publisher and the reader.

Our designs are specifically tailored to the current best practices of the news industry. And our sites are engineered to be fast and mobile-first, recognizing that 70-80 percent of typical local publishers' web traffic is delivered on the phone.

Behind the scenes, we've built customer interfaces that allow publishers to manage everything from home-page and landing-page layouts, to the set-up or advertising, marketing and reader revenue systems.

Customers are introduced to Newspack during an "alignment" call at the outset of engagement. We work closely with your team throughout the migration and staging and launch process. And our support team is available to answer not just technical questions, but the inevitable how-to questions that arise with any complex CMS.

You also benefit by being part of a community of editors, publishers and producers, now nearly 800 strong, that is active in our Slack community. Folks that are devoted first and foremost to serving the local journalism needs of their community and have proven to be generous in supporting their colleagues.

Q: What impact do you hope to have on the sector of local journalism that specifically serves Black and Brown communities? Are there technical or service challenges in the market unique to ethnic media that you wish to address in future iterations of Newspack?

A: We've explicitly sought to address the needs of Black and Brown publishers by working closely with LMA's Word In Black project and a similar initiative in California spearheaded by CalMatters. And by working with the Knight Foundation to subsidize technology costs for eligible grantees.

As a result, about a third of the sites Newspack serves in the U.S. are operated by editors or publishers or color or reach historically underserved communities.

The publications vary widely in their financial resources, their digital sophistication and the communities they serve. And so we try to tailor both the services and support we offer to their needs.

For example, publications serving communities of color may be more ad-dependent and less able to rely on reader revenue. And so we work to configure the platform accordingly.

A number are also publishers of long standing, whose print titles are still a vital source of revenue. So we work to ensure that our digital services are properly integrated with their print publishing needs.

Above all our mission is to reduce the cost of technology and related business services so publishers can maximize the resources devoted to local journalism.

Project partners

About Local Media Association / Local Media Foundation

Local Media Association brings all media together to share, network, collaborate and more. More than 3,000 newspapers, TV stations, radio stations, digital-only publications, and research and development partners engage with LMA as members or constituents of our programs. As a 501(c)(6) trade association, LMA is focused on the business side of local media. Its programs and labs focus on revenue growth and new business models. LMA helps local media companies develop their strategies via cutting-edge programs, conferences, webinars, research and training.

Local Media Foundation serves as the innovation and transformation affiliate of LMA. Incorporating our four [strategic pillars](#) — [business transformation](#), [journalism funded by philanthropy](#), [industry collaboration](#), and [sustainability for publishers of color](#) — LMF helps provide local media companies with the strategies and resources for meaningful innovation and impactful journalism projects.

About the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation is a social investor that supports democracy by funding free expression and journalism, arts and culture in community, research in areas of media and democracy, and in the success of American cities and towns where the Knight brothers once had newspapers. Learn more at [kf.org](#) and follow @knightfdn on social media.