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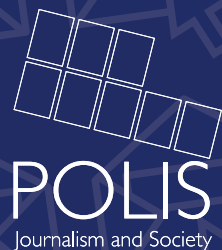
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# Back to the Future- Email Newsletters as a Digital Channel for Journalism



THE LONDON SCHOOL  
OF ECONOMICS AND  
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

journalistfonden  
FÖR VIDAREUTBILDNING



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# Preface

Journalists today have a multitude of ways to get their work to an audience. At the same time there has never been more choice for the consumer and competition for their attention has never been more intense. The new platforms and channels that give news media greater reach can also present problems such as who controls which content reaches which people. This report goes back to the future for one unglamorous but highly effective way to get straight to the reader: the email newsletter.

As Charlotte Fagerlund's report shows, "snailmail" has not disappeared. Conversely, it represents an increasingly effective way of reaching the audience that has some significant advantages of its own. How you design and distribute your newsletter is vital and Charlotte has some excellent strategic and detailed insights. Even if you are not considering using newsletters, this paper is a fascinating example of how we need to keep thinking with open minds about

the tools of the networked journalist's trade. As the digital ecology evolves, it sometimes pays to go back to basics and adapt relatively old ideas for new times.

We are very grateful for the continuing support of the Swedish [Journalistfonden](#) who made this journalism research fellowship possible.

You can read last year's Journalistfonden/Polis Research Fellowship report on source protection [here](#).

**Charlie Beckett**  
Director, Polis

# Introduction

As a newspaper journalist for 16 years I have worked through the digital revolution both on the paper and online. That shift towards digital news is now a major part of the everyday life in the newsroom. But as news media work more and more with social media, especially Facebook, to reach a bigger audience, they also start to realise that there are problems with relying too heavily on those networks to reach your audience. To a significant degree it is now Facebook that decides who sees your articles. Even if you have a large number of followers, there is no guarantee that a majority of them will ever see your articles in their newsfeed.

So how do you reach your readers digitally? The answer is that there is no single magic channel/platform that you can

focus on alone. Instead, you have to use many different ways to get your material to your readers: website, apps, search engine optimising and social media.

The latest big digital shift is the shift from desktop to smartphones, something all news organisations now have to adapt to.

A year ago my newspaper, *Sydsvenskan*, (based in the south of Sweden) had a workshop to find out what our readers do on their smartphones. The result was rather surprising. Everybody we asked said they used it mostly for email – more than they used the smartphone to log on to social media. It turned out those readers we spoke to were representative of society as a whole.

In this report, I will show that email is, in fact, used more than social media on smart phones by a majority of people. I will also describe a trend that has been brewing for the last two years: that email newsletters are coming in from the cold. The old email technology works very well on smartphones, albeit it with some updates. So there is definitely potential for a lot of news organisations to work more with newsletters. This report is based on interviews with a range of journalists who produce email newsletters and shows how and why they are effective tool for journalists to improve reach to their readers.

**Charlotte Fagerlund**  
Journalist at *Sydsvenskan* and  
Journalistfonden fellow

# 1. Is email is an outdated technology?

"I thought newsletters were an outdated technology, something for old people. *The Washington Post* was quite popular on Facebook, but suddenly they changed their algorithms and we lost a lot of readers. I realised that I needed to find something where I can control the means of production. Newsletters were one way of doing it<sup>1</sup>."

**David Beard**, director of digital content *The Washington Post* when *The Washington Post* decided to start working seriously with newsletters in 2014.

A few years ago most experts seemed to agree that the death of email was nigh.

"Email – I can't imagine life without it – is probably going away," said Sheryl Sandberg on the Nielsen's Consumer 360 conference in June 2010<sup>2</sup>, predicting that SMS and social media would take over.

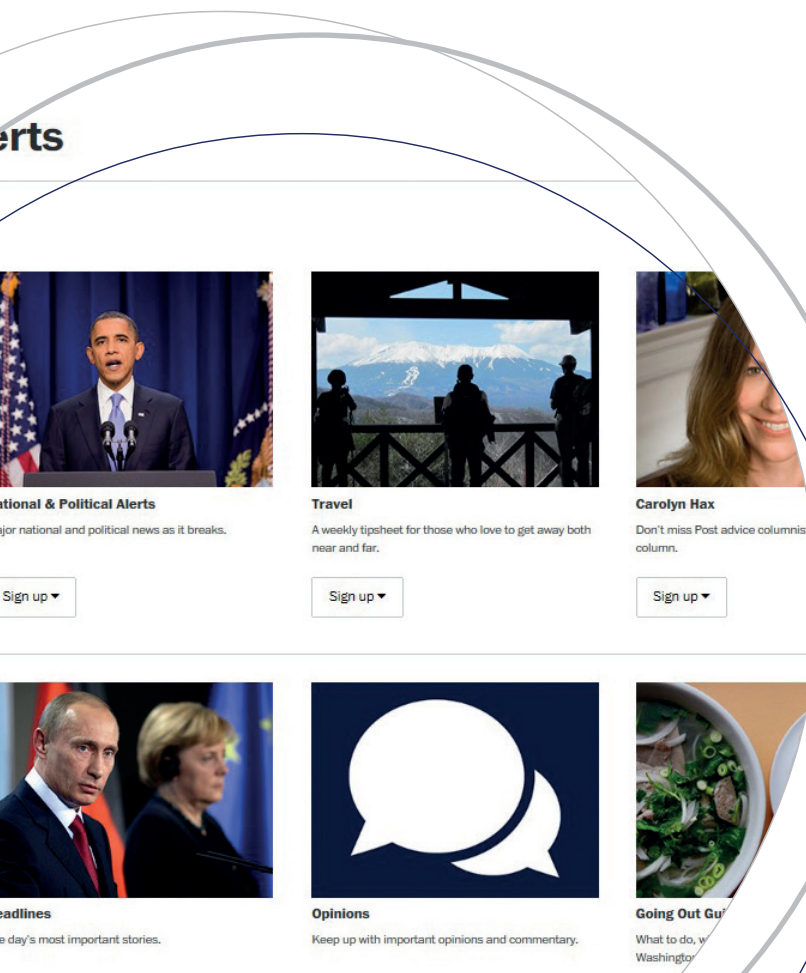
"Is social networking killing email?" asked the *New Statesman* in an article in March 2011<sup>3</sup>. In the article Thierry Breton, the CEO of one of the largest IT services firms in the world, Atos Origin, explained that he wanted his company to get rid of email completely.

Email was considered an old-fashioned technology from the early days of the Internet, and with the rise of social media and apps, it seemed to have played out its role. But as is common in the digital world, things change fast.

In June 2014 *The New York Times'* media editor David Carr wrote that the death of email newsletters was "greatly exaggerated"<sup>4</sup>. And in September 2015 Klint Finley of *Wired* wrote an article with the headline "Sorry Ello, the real anti-Facebook is good old email"<sup>5</sup>. In 2015 three different surveys showed that email and email newsletters are far from dead-these will be explored later in more detail.

Two signs of the times: in August 2015 the American journalist, actor, author, screenwriter, producer, and director Lena Dunham started her highly publicised journalistic project "Lenny" with lengthy feminist articles and interviews – not as an app or blog, but as an email newsletter. When the Paris terror attack in November 2015 was still unfolding, *The New York Times* decided for the first time to offer their readers email updates during a major news event.

So email is clearly not an outdated technology and email newsletters are having a renaissance.



## The Washington Post newsletter

<sup>1</sup> Interview with David Beard, former director of digital content *The Washington Post*, October 2015

<sup>2</sup> **Video** from Nielsen's Consumer 360 Conference, June 2010

<sup>3</sup> Article in the *New Statesman*: "Is social networking killing email?", by Jason Stamper, March 2011

<sup>4</sup> Carr, D., News article in *The New York Times*: "For Email Newsletters, a Death Greatly Exaggerated", June 29 2014

<sup>5</sup> Finley, K. News article in *Wired* "Sorry Ello, the real anti-Facebook is good old email", 25 September 2015.

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## 2. What do the statistics say?

According to a Pew research centre<sup>6</sup> study, 88 per cent of American smartphone owners used email at least once during the week of the study compared to 75 per cent who used social media. It concludes that email continues to play a prominent role in the mobile era. A Swedish study, "The Swedes and Internet"<sup>7</sup>, found a similar pattern. 94 per cent of people use email, compared to around 70 per cent using Facebook. Of course the fact that

people use email doesn't automatically mean that they read newsletters, but it indicates the potential. The Digital News Report 2015 from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford<sup>8</sup>, states that: "A key finding this year is the enduring effectiveness of email as a distribution and retention mechanism for news."

25 per cent of people in the US choose email as a starting point to read news. Close to the American numbers are Denmark with 24 per cent, and France with 21 per cent. The lowest numbers are found in the UK with 10 per cent and in Finland with 9 per cent.

According to Nic Newman, the RISJ report author, on an aggregate level, email is one of the three most important channels for news, together with social media and search.

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## 3. The start of a trend

The change in attitudes towards email newsletters started about 3 years ago in the US with individual journalists deciding to reach their audience through their inboxes.

In December 2013, Alexis Madrigal, then senior editor at *The Atlantic*, wrote<sup>9</sup> about how he, and many with him, were getting tired of the never ending stream of information on the Internet. He wanted to go back to the feeling that you could read something from start to finish. His solution was to start a newsletter.

American journalist Ann Friedman started a newsletter to promote her articles, the programmer and writer Rusty Forster started the newsletter *Today in tabs*, which was snapped up by *Newsweek*. Other examples are Dan Lewis' newsletter *Now I know* and Dave Pells *Next Draft*, which both count their subscribers in hundreds of thousands<sup>10, 11</sup>.

One factor in the growth of small independent newsletters is Tinyletter a company owned by Mailchimp that lets people send out newsletters for free and is simple to operate. Where 10 years ago people would have started a blog to reach an audience, today the choice is a newsletter.

Following the trend of individual newsletters were new digitally native media companies, who saw the potential of newsletters. *The Skimm* was started in 2014 by two former NBC News journalists. It is news for the "millennials" in newsletter form. In August 2015 they had 1.5 million subscribers<sup>12</sup>.

Another digital-only news organisation that decided to put resources into a newsletter was the business news company Quartz. At the same time as they launched the website in 2012, they also launched the newsletter *Quartz Daily Brief*, sent out in the morning with a briefing on global business news. The newsletter today has about 150,000 subscribers<sup>13</sup>.

A third example is Mic, which does also target its news at "millennials" with an app and a newsletter *Mic Check*. Since it started in May 2015 the newsletter rapidly hit 80,000 subscribers and continues to grow<sup>14</sup>.

"There is a kind of renaissance for email as a platform for people who want to keep updated. People realised that all this info on the internet is difficult to find and its all about finding a person who you trust to do that for you."

**Joel Paveleski**, director of programming at Mic

Better known for its presence on social media, BuzzFeed also has a number of newsletters ranging from *Buzzfeed books* to *Buzzfeed animals*. The editor for the daily news-focused newsletter, Millie Tran, thinks you need to do both social media and a newsletter to reach your audience:

"Everyone has an email address, not everyone has Facebook."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Study: "U.S. Smartphone Use in 2015" by Pew Research centre

<sup>7</sup> Study: "The Swedes and Internet" by Stiftelsen för internetinfrastruktur.

<sup>8</sup> Study: "The Digital News Report 2015" from Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford

<sup>9</sup> Article, *The Atlantic*: "2013: The Year the 'Stream' Crested", by Alexis Madrigal, December 2013

<sup>10</sup> Article, "TechCrunch: The Man Who Scans The Interwebs So You Don't Have To", by Sarah Bur, October 2014

<sup>11</sup> Article, *Forward*: "Dan Lewis is obsessed with knowing it all", by Ana Goldenberg, November 2013

<sup>12</sup> Article, *Nieman Lab*: "How *The Skimm*'s passionate readership helped its newsletter grow to 1.5 million subscribers" by Justin Ellis

<sup>13</sup> Email interview with Gideon Lichfield, Quartz, November 2015

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Joel Paveleski, Director of Programming, Mic, November 2015

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Millie Tran, editor of the BuzzFeed News newsletter, October 2015



## 4. “Old media” rediscovers the newsletter

Newsletters are also in vogue with “legacy” news media. In November 2015 *The Washington Post* had 61 different newsletters. *The Wall Street Journal* had 43 and a number of email breaking news alerts, *The Financial Times* had 40 different newsletters and plan to launch more. *The New York Times* had 33 and will also soon launch new ones. *Forbes* had 30, *The Daily Telegraph* 29 and *The Guardian* 26<sup>16</sup>.

*The New York Times*’ Nicole Breskin describes it as the product in the building with the most potential. Since starting to focus more on newsletters in the last year it has seen a huge growth both in the numbers of subscribers and in engagement. Readers who sign up for *The New York Times*’ newsletters are twice as likely to become subscribers.

“We’ve always known that email is good for engagement, retention – a loyalty tool, but with all the social media channels popping up it’s easy just to focus on the new shiny toy.”<sup>17</sup>”

Nicole Breskin, Digital Product Director, *New York Times*

David Beard<sup>18</sup> at *The Washington Post* decided to overcome his prejudice against email and steer the newspaper towards working seriously with newsletters. After a few trial runs *The Post* quickly expanded the number of newsletters. In November 2015 it had 61 ranging from automated summaries from the web site, to more edited ones.

The UK is still behind America when it comes to the amount of people finding news through newsletters.

Nic Newman<sup>19</sup>, head of the RISJ report, thinks one reason is that the BBC has chosen not to work with newsletters on any bigger scale:

“I think it’s down to supply and demand. In the UK the BBC is such a huge provider, and they decided to get out of newsletters.”

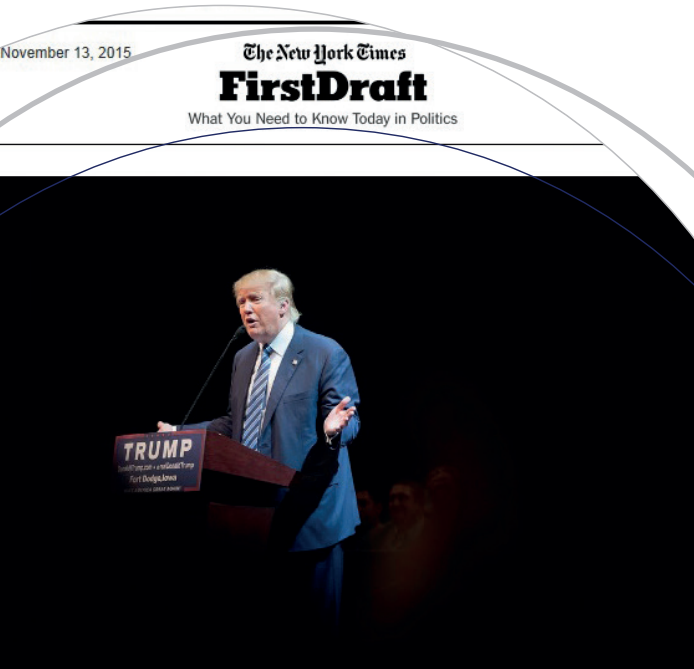
If reading news through newsletters is down to supply as well as demand, then the numbers will probably soon go up in the UK as well, as several British news organisations are starting to put out more newsletters and more resources into developing them. *The Guardian* is likely to start new newsletters within the next year according to Mary Hamilton<sup>20</sup>, Executive Editor for Audience. She thinks the resources they put into newsletters are definitely worthwhile because they draw audiences towards the brand and give direct access to the readers.

*The Financial Times*’ daily newsletter *First FT* was launched in 2014 and now has three daily editions. Andrew Jack<sup>21</sup>, Editor of curated content and head of aggregation wants the newsletters to provide a way through the information overload that readers complain about by pushing the FT’s content to their readers in a convenient way. He says it is also a good way to get existing readers to read more.

In Sweden the business daily *Dagens Industri* has one free daily newsletter with the free material from their web site, and several newsletters for the premium subscribers. But Jonas Jonsson<sup>22</sup>, *Dagens Industri*’s editor, says that as a newspaper in a small market like Sweden they face different challenges and that limits how many specialised newsletters they can put out:

“Papers like *The New York Times* have such a big market that they can do a newsletter about the Federal reserve, and still reach 10,000 subscribers. The volumes are different in smaller countries.”

First Draft, *The New York Times* newsletter



J. Trump spoke during a campaign event in Fort Dodge, Iowa, on Thursday. Scott Olson/Getty Images

### ump Asks Iowa a Question About Support of Carson

OGIE HABERMAN

morning. The lead newsletter item on this Friday was going to be about theocrats, and how they will gather on Saturday for their second official debate. ere to tell you the results of a new New York Times/CBS poll showing voters

<sup>16</sup> Numbers from interviews and from web sites

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Nicole Breskin Digital Product Director, *The New York Times*, November 2015

<sup>18</sup> Interview with David Beard, former director of digital content *The Washington Post*, October 2015

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Nic Newman, Visiting Fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and a consultant on digital media, November 2015

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Mary Hamilton, executive editor, audience, *The Guardian*, November 2015

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Andrew Jack, *The Financial Times*, September 2015

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Jonas Jonasson, editor, *Dagens Industri*, November 2015

## 5. Move to mobile devices

One major factor in why email newsletters are coming back according to Nic Newman<sup>23</sup> is the growth of mobile. The email app is the number one app for the majority of people on mobile phones. In an era where it is harder and harder to get people's attention – there are just too many things to do on the mobile phone

– media companies should move their content towards the apps that people use, which are email and social media apps.

According to the RISJ report<sup>24</sup> the move to mobile devices has also meant that only the most loyal users go directly to news brands or download news apps. To reach the rest you have to use other channels.



## 6. The advantages of email newsletters

### Less spam

Another reason email is getting back in favour is the more efficient way Google and other big email providers have managed to filter out spam. But the caveat of this is that it's important to make sure that your newsletter is not perceived as spam.

**“Email was very discredited because of spam, email itself just got overwhelmed by spam. People feel that they have more control over email now.”**

**Nic Newman**

### People read more of your content

A lot of the people who sign up for newsletters from news organisations are already loyal readers of that news brand. Newsletters are a good way to make them read more of your content by reminding them to read more widely. Sending out

a newsletter means that readers don't have to remember, or take the time, to actively check a website for new articles – the news arrives in their mailboxes.

### Short and digestible

With a never ending stream of information through web sites and apps people have started to feel overwhelmed. They want help with choosing what to read. So it is only natural that a number of media organisations are now offering newsletters with the most important stories of the day. Newsletters have a beginning and an end, you can finish it. You can never finish the Internet.

### A way to get around Facebook

Facebook is going to continue to be an important and growing channel for news. But publishers have discovered that they can't rely on the stories they publish on Facebook actually reaching their readers, even if the readers have “liked” their Facebook page. Email newsletters offer a direct channel to the readers and allow the media companies to keep control over their material.

Not everyone uses Facebook and if you aim to reach a male audience it

might not be the best channel, since it is more used by women, while email newsletters are more used by men.<sup>25</sup>

### Easy

**“Email is a technology everyone has and understands, you don't have to download an app or allow push notifications<sup>26</sup>”.**

**Pontus Jeppsson**, business developer, *Sydsvenskan*

Another factor in favour of email newsletters is that email is an easy, familiar technology. People working with digital news are usually more used to new technologies than the average reader and don't always remember that a lot of people are less technically apt.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Nic Newman, Interview with Nic Newman, Visiting Fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and a consultant on digital media, November 2015

<sup>24</sup> The Digital News Report 2015 from Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford

<sup>25</sup> Digital News report 2015 by The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Pontus Jeppsson, business developer, *Sydsvenskan*, November 2015

## Personal

Email has always been a way of communicating directly with people. That is why many people check their email before they check social media in the morning: is there a message just for me, personally? After that you check what your friends and the rest of the world have been talking about on Facebook or Twitter. There is however a drawback with the inbox being more personal as some people can be cautious about who they give their email address to.

## It's mobile

"A lot of people forget this when they think of mobile – they think of apps. But email is inherently mobile. Everyone has email on their smart phones, and email looks great on your phone because you're so limited. You basically only have words, links and images, beyond that there's not much else."<sup>27</sup>

Millie Tran, BuzzFeed

When people have been talking about the development towards mobile news, the focus has been on apps and on making web sites work on mobile devices. But as the surveys presented earlier show, reading email is one of the things people do most on their smart phones, and it is an easy way to reach people when they are on the go. So far people read newsletters more on desktops than on mobile devices according to the RISJ Study<sup>28</sup>. That is mainly because many people still use a desktop to read their emails and Facebook. But as even the older population moves towards reading their email on mobile devices, this will change.

## Good target group for ads

One factor that might be interesting to news organisations that sell advertising, is that people who read news through email generally have a higher household income and higher level of education than the general population. Social media is slightly more popular within the lower or medium household income group.<sup>29</sup>

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# 7. Is email just for old people?

According to the Pew research centre's 2015 survey of smartphone use in the US<sup>30</sup>, 91 per cent of 18-29-year-olds, 87 per cent of 30-49 and 87 per cent of 50+ had used email on their smartphone at least once in a week. For social media the numbers were 91 per cent, 77 per cent and 55 per cent. In Sweden 16-19-year olds use email as much as social media and slightly more than chat.<sup>31</sup> So while email in itself is not just for older people, when it comes to reading news on email, there is a clear divide between the younger and older readers.

The RISJ report<sup>32</sup> compared the use of email and social media when it comes to finding news in four countries: US, UK, Ireland, and France, and found that email is used more by older age groups while social media is used more frequently by younger age groups.

This doesn't mean that you can't reach young readers through email. *The Skimm* has successfully targeted "Millennials" with their newsletter, so has *Emerald Street*, *Lennyletter* and *Mic Check*.

*The Skimm's* target audience is women ages 22-34. One of the founders, Danielle Weisberg, said they faced a lot of criticism from potential investors for the decision to go for an email newsletter and not an app.<sup>33</sup> But they felt they knew their audience and decided to go for a newsletter anyway. In August 2015 *The Skimm* had 1.5 million subscribers. *The Skimm* has also successfully built a community around their newsletter with ambassadors who promote *The Skimm*, called "Skimbassadors".

In the UK *Emerald Street* publishes a daily magazine-like newsletter with a summary of the most interesting stories at the bottom. It targets urban professional women in their late 20s and 30s and according to editor Anna Fielding<sup>34</sup> an email newsletter is a good way to reach that group.

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with Millie Tran, editor of the BuzzFeed News newsletter, October 2015

<sup>28</sup> "Digital News Report 2015" by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

<sup>29</sup> "Digital News Report 2015" by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Smartphone Use in 2015 by Pew Research centre

<sup>31</sup> "The Swedes and Internet" by Stiftelsen för Internetinfrastruktur

<sup>32</sup> "Digital News Report 2015" by The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

<sup>33</sup> Article, Nieman Lab: "How *The Skimm's* passionate leadership helped its newsletter grow to 1.5 million" by Justin Ellis, 18 August 2015

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Anna Fielding, editor, *Emerald Street*, October 2015



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## 8. Do people open newsletters?

The most important number is open rates: how many of the subscribers actually open the newsletter. The email marketing company MailChimp, that sends billions of emails a month for more than 9 million users, did a survey in early November 2015<sup>35</sup> of open rates among different industries. Media and publishing had an average open rate of 22.48 per cent. The general consensus is that anything above 20 per cent is good.

There is no survey of open rates within the media industry as a whole, but here are some examples from the interviews made for this report.

After focusing on newsletters for a year, *The New York Times* has increased open rates to 70 per cent<sup>36</sup> for some of their newsletters. *The Guardian* has open rates

ranging from 15 to 75 per cent<sup>37</sup> for their different newsletters. *Quartz* has an open rate of about 40-50 per cent<sup>38</sup>, which has declined slightly since the start. *The Washington Post* columnist Carolyn Hax's newsletter has open rates of about 40 per cent<sup>39</sup>, and so has *Emerald Street*<sup>40</sup>.

Both *Emerald Street* and *The Guardian* remove subscribers that don't open their newsletters regularly and *The New York Times* is planning to do the same next year. It is, of course, one way of increasing the open rates. But Dork Alahydoian<sup>41</sup>, Executive Director, Product at *The New York Times*, points out that they won't throw out inactive readers straight away but will first make an effort to try to get them back into reading the newsletters regularly.

Going through the lists and removing inactive readers can also be a way of making sure that your newsletters don't get filtered as spam, which could harm your brand rather than helping it.

Another way of increasing open rates is to reduce the number of newsletters, as both *The Guardian* and *Time* magazine have done. In 2013 *Time* magazine had 10 different newsletters with an open rate of 17 per cent.<sup>42</sup> They decided to reduce that to just one newsletter, *The Brief*, with a short intro and links to the 12 best stories every morning. They managed to get an open rate of 40 per cent.

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## 9. How do you get people to sign up?

With inboxes filling up with both work emails, private emails and commercial emails, you have to persuade your readers that they really want your newsletter in their over-crowded inbox.

On Facebook you can choose any target group from their millions of users – say people under 25 who live in your town – and buy exposure for your page from Facebook as a way to boost the number of followers. With email newsletters you need to have a long list of email addresses if you want to do a targeted campaign to gain followers.

*The Washington Post* used the email addresses they gained from a campaign where people could sign up to read the digital paper for free for a certain period.

David Beard<sup>43</sup>, who has now left *The Washington Post*, explains how they started sending out an email or two a week:

“We had very few people telling us to stop sending these emails. Less than one percent told us they did not want it.”

*Emerald Street* did a lot of marketing through their mother magazine *Stylist* when they launched their newsletter. They also did partnerships with other companies to send out an offer to their email database in exchange for discounted ad rates and in November 2015 they had 115,000 subscribers. An important factor to getting that many subscribers according to editor Anna Fielding<sup>44</sup> was that they know their demographic target group.

*The New York Times*<sup>45</sup> use social media a lot to make people sign up for their newsletters, and Quartz<sup>46</sup> put ads on their web site and rely on word of mouth. Which strategy works best depends on the audience and the kind of newsletter in question.

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<sup>35</sup> Study: Email Marketing Benchmarks, by Mailchimp, November 2015

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Nicole Breskin Digital Product Director, *The New York Times*, November 2015

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Mary Hamilton, executive editor, audience, *The Guardian*, November 2015

<sup>38</sup> Email interview with Gideon Lichfield, Senior editor Quartz, November 2015

<sup>39</sup> Interview with David Beard, former director of digital content *The Washington Post*, October 2015

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Anna Fielding, editor, *Emerald Street*, October 2015

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Dork Alahydoian, Executive Director of Product, *The New York Times*, November 2015

<sup>42</sup> Article, Poynter: How *Time*'s newsletter achieves a 40 percent open rate by Sam Kirkland, 2 November 2014

<sup>43</sup> Interview with David Beard, former director of digital content *The Washington Post*, October 2015

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Anna Fielding, editor, *Emerald Street*, October 2015

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Nicole Breskin Digital Product Director, *The New York Times*, November 2015

<sup>46</sup> Email interview with Gideon Lichfield, Senior Editor Quartz, November 2015

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## 10. Edited or automated?

Another choice when launching a newsletter is whether it should be edited, automated or somewhere in between. This is both a question of resources and your target audience. Most people seem to agree that a personal voice is best, but you have to weigh the number of subscribers for a particular newsletter against the time it takes to write it. If you have a bigger audience for your newsletter than for your twitter feed, maybe resources should be redistributed towards the newsletter.

Good morning. The lead newsletter item on this Friday was going to be about the Democrats, and how they will gather on Saturday for their second official debate. We were to tell you the results of a new *New York Times*/CBS poll showing voters looking at Hillary Rodham Clinton as a more steady choice over Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, and what effect, if any, that may have had on the candidates' debate strategies. But then Donald J. Trump took a stage in Iowa on Thursday night and, well, you'll see.

This is an example of how *The New York Times'* newsletter for political news and analysis, *First Draft*, can sound. Alan Rappeport<sup>47</sup>, who is anchor for *First Draft* explains that it started out as an automated newsletter, but that they decided to go for a more personal touch when it launched in its present form. He says writing in a more conversational tone has meant that they get more feedback from readers.

*The Times* of London was thinking along those lines when they launched their more recent newsletters: *Red Box*, *The Brief* and *Times Woman*. The new newsletters have one of the newspaper's personalities fronting them:

**"I think the style of journalism practiced in newsletters will increase in importance. That is, maybe the medium will change to another platform, but the idea of getting a digital digest delivered to you about a subject area that you're interested in is one that has currency"**

**Joseph Stashko**, Digital News Development Editor, *The Times*.<sup>48</sup>

The BBC have had a few automated newsletters for some time, but around the British election they decided to try a more bespoke format, according to Steve Herrmann, Executive Editor, Digital, BBC News.<sup>49</sup> One journalist from the politics team was given the full-time job of producing an edition every day around 4pm to target evening commuters.

The newsletter would start with an introduction in a conversational personal style, and then the editor would add both video and analyses with specially tailored text.

But even though the newsletter got a "reasonable amount of subscribers", according to Herrmann, the BBC, like many other news organisations, realised that having a heavily edited newsletter can be very time consuming – in this case the newsletter took up most of one person's working day. In the end the BBC decided not to continue as they couldn't justify the resources involved.

At the other end of the scale is a fully automated newsletter that scrapes content straight from a web site or a blog and put it in a newsletter.

Among *The Washington Post's* 61 newsletters there are many automated newsletters, and sometimes they even do better than the manually put together ones,

according to David Beard<sup>50</sup>. One example is the newsletter they send out in the afternoon with a summary of the five latest stories on the web site, which did better than the heavily edited morning politics newsletter.

### Algorithms for newsletters

There is a lot of talk about algorithms when it comes to Facebook, but not so much when it comes to email and newsletters. There should be, according to Nic Newman<sup>51</sup> at the Reuters Institute. Today the technology for finding out things about the subscribers to your email newsletters is so good that news organisations can easily find out data on when people open the newsletter and so tweak the time when they send out the emails in response.

It is also possible to develop more personalised emails.

The Danish business paper *Børsen* has just bought the technology to start working seriously with algorithms. It will be used both for their website and for their newsletters. One use could be a more insightful approach to what readers are actually interested in, explains *Børsen* editor Karsten Haugaard<sup>52</sup>. An article about the Danish maker of windmills, Vestas can, for example, be interesting to many different kinds of readers for different reasons. You can have stocks in Vestas or you might work in the windmill industry. Or you might be interested in the environmental angle. The challenge, according to Haugaard, is to make algorithms that take those different interests into account.

For newsletters, algorithms could increase the number of articles people read and increase the open rates and the numbers of people signing up for the newsletters.

But David Beard<sup>53</sup>, who started the *Washington Post's* newsletters, thinks the human touch is important in email newsletters, no matter how good the algorithms are you might be working with:

**"I think algorithms can help but I think you build your audience through differentiation with human touch. At the end of the day, it's a human speaking to another human, and I think that is important if you're building an audience."**

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with Alan Rappeport, anchor *First Draft* at *The New York Times*, October 2015

<sup>48</sup> Email interview 9 November 2015 with Joseph Stashko, Digital News Development Editor at *The Times*

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Steve Herrmann, Executive Editor, Digital, BBC News, Board member Online News Association, October 2015

<sup>50</sup> Interview with David Beard, former director of digital content *The Washington Post*, October 2015

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Nic Newman, Interview with Nic Newman, Visiting Fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and a consultant on digital media, November 2015

<sup>52</sup> Interview 18 November 2015, Kasper Haugaard, editor *Børsen*

<sup>53</sup> Interview with David Beard, former director of digital content *The Washington Post*, October 2015

## Design is important

*Emerald Street* looks a lot like a glossy magazine when it arrives in your inbox, and that is very deliberate. *Emerald Street*, together with the newsletter *Mr Hyde*, which target a male audience, is owned by the magazine *Stylist*, but the newsletters are completely separate products from the print magazine.



Editor Anna Fielding<sup>54</sup> says they have a designer working specifically with the two newsletters to make them look right. And you can tell, *Emerald Street* stands out in your inbox.

**“I think there are a lot of ugly newsletters and I think it is part of the overall way to get attention. If you just slap together something then you are not taking it seriously.”**

**Anna Fielding**, editor *Emerald Street*

Joel Pavelski<sup>55</sup> at *Mic* agrees that design is very important, but he stresses the technical side of it. The design mustn't make the email too “heavy”, because then there is the risk it might end up in spam filters.

*Mic Check* has also worked a lot with the flow through the newsletter, for instance by putting some good material at the bottom of the email, as a reward to those who read the whole newsletter.

Joseph Stashko<sup>56</sup>, Digital News Development Editor for *The Times* thinks that the key is not to over-design. The newsletter should look interesting but it's important that the content is at the centre. He also thinks that it is important that the design isn't so heavy that it effects load times, especially when people read the newsletter on their mobile phones.

Nic Newman<sup>57</sup> thinks that there will be a lot of product development when it comes to design as companies use customer experience data to understand what kind of format works best. And as data becomes cheaper, we will see a lot more video and visual content in general, which is quick and easy to digest.

## 11. The crucial subject line

Everybody interviewed for this report agrees on the importance of the subject line in a newsletter. It is what determines if people open the email or not. And even if a newsletter is automated, it is worth spending a few minutes on the subject line:

**“Unbelievably important. It's the sell for the entire product.”**

**Joseph Stashko<sup>58</sup>**, Digital News Development Editor, *The Times*

Anna Fielding<sup>59</sup> at *Emerald Street* compares it with the main headline of a newspaper. *Mic Check*<sup>60</sup> are doing continuous tests on what kind of subject lines grab attention, and have settled for as short as possible, something that clearly indicates what you will get when you open the newsletter.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Anna Fielding, editor, *Emerald Street*, October 2015

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Joel Pavelski, Director of Programming, *Mic*, November 2015

<sup>56</sup> Email interview with Joseph Stashko, Digital News Development Editor for *The Times*, November 2015

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Nic Newman, Visiting Fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and a consultant on digital media, November 2015

<sup>58</sup> Email interview with Joseph Stashko, Digital News Development Editor for *The Times*, November 2015

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Anna Fielding, editor, *Emerald Street*, October 2015

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Joel Pavelski, Director of Programming, *Mic*, November 2015

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## 12. When should you send a newsletter?

Like with any other digital publishing, timing is important. A lot of newsletters today offer a summary of what has happened during the night and what you need to know for the day. They try to catch people early in the morning, during the commute to work or when people first open their emails at work.

But when that time slot is getting crowded, media companies are now trying to find other times when the competition is less fierce.

One example is *The Washington Post's* newsletter *The Optimist*, which goes out around 10am on Sunday morning. David Beard<sup>61</sup>, who started it,

describes the newsletter as having the optimism of a good sermon and that gave him the idea to go for Sundays:

"Everyone tries to do the early morning but I think if you go for Friday evening and Saturday and Sunday mornings people reflect more. To pick the right time you have to experiment and see when people react the most."

*Emerald Street* send their main newsletter between 11.30am and 1pm every day in time for people to take a break at work. Focus groups before they launched showed that most women said that they would welcome a break from work.

They also did a focus group with men for *Mr Hyde*, *Emerald Street's* sibling newsletter aimed at men. That focus group said that they would never open a non-work email during working hours.

"But obviously we can see when they open it, and it's a lie, they open in during work hours. The women were just more open about it."<sup>62</sup>

Anna Fielding, editor, *Emerald Street*

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## 13. Difficulties

### Technical:

Email programmes, like Outlook or Apple Mail, are still fairly primitive when it comes to dealing with editorial newsletters. A newsletter can look brilliant in one programme and be almost unreadable in another. Pontus Jeppsson<sup>63</sup>, business developer Sydsvenskan describes email programmes as being a bit like browsers were ten years ago, when you really had to work hard to make your web site look good in both Explorer and Firefox. That is not a problem today:

"With newsletters you still have that challenge, especially Lotus notes, that many companies use, is difficult. No matter what you do the newsletters look awful."

You also have to take into account that some people read their newsletters on a desktop, some on an iPad, and many others on different kinds of smartphones. A newsletter that looks good on desktop, might be difficult to read on a small screen.

Another technical problem can be that the programme used to send out newsletters works badly with the content managing system (CMS) used to publish material on the web site – which is where you would usually get the digital content. And if you publish ads in the newsletter, the newsletter programme also has to work with the separate programme used for digital ads. Some CMS and ad programmes work better than others, but few organisations have taken exporting to an email newsletter into account when choosing CMS products.

Every organisation will have their own technical issues, but the digital-native media organisations where the newsletter is an important channel from the beginning, will have a head start.

### Resources

Producing higher quality, well-designed, format compatible, personalised newsletters takes time. In newsrooms around the world with shrinking numbers of journalists, and increasing numbers of tasks, newsletters can often be seen as a luxury or a temporary product. An example of that was the BBC's 2015 UK election email. The BBC is now looking at less time consuming ways to work with newsletters within the news organisation<sup>64</sup>.

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<sup>61</sup> Interview with David Beard, former director of digital content *The Washington Post*, October 2015

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Anna Fielding, editor, *Emerald Street*, October 2015

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Pontus Jeppsson, business developer, Sydsvenskan, November 2015

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Steve Herrmann, Executive Editor, Digital, BBC News, Board member Online News Association, October 2015



## 14. The future for email newsletters

After the total focus on social media for the past few years there is now a rising awareness that newsletters are also an important digital channel and the numbers of email newsletters will continue to increase at least for the next year or two, as more and more media companies join the trend. A saturation point may be reached eventually, with too many newsletters trying to do the same thing – something American media is already starting to experience.

The increasingly crowded market will probably mean that media companies have to find new strategies to stand out from the crowd.

But whereas the American market might be seeing too many newsletters being sent out already, the UK is not there yet. And as big media companies both in the US and UK focus more on the development of newsletters we should anticipate changes in what newsletters look like and do in the next couple of years.

There is also a continuous move from desktop towards mobile phones when it comes to reading email and it is going to be interesting to see if media organisations manage to tap into that.

With more interest in newsletters there will probably be a development in how you can use algorithms for personalisation in newsletters and a development in email programmes so that newsletters are shown more consistently. This would change what content you could send out in your newsletters and make visual elements like charts and pictures easier to use.

There is also the potential for development of something beyond “apps” that could eventually replace email but such things are impossible to predict, just as it was impossible to predict that email newsletters would suddenly be back in favour in 2015:

“Who knows what comes next, I would never have imagined that I would do this, five years ago. You have to continue to surprise and keep the quality up to keep the audience.”<sup>65</sup>

Anna Fielding, editor, *Emerald Street*

*Emerald Street* newsletter

# Emerald STREET



“@EmeraldStreet on the weekends too? Happy days!” @sofihi



## HAPPY EQUAL PAY DAY

*Today is Equal Pay Day – from this day until the end of the year women are effectively working for free, given the size of the gender pay gap. Angry? Us too. Feed your righteous indignation with the following statistics*



## ENTER TO WIN BROWNIE COMPETITION

The winner will receive a £50 gift card to kMix and their recipe book The Hummingbird Book



<sup>65</sup> Interview with Anna Fielding, editor, *Emerald Street*, October 2015



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## 15. Conclusion

In today's digital world, news media need all the channels available to reach their audience. While the primary focus has been on social media and apps, sending news through email newsletters is becoming more common. This is more the case in the US where the market is increasingly crowded but in the UK and some other European countries there is still a chance to get ahead of the game.

In this report I have focused on examples of news organisations that work effectively with email newsletters, but in my research I have been surprised at how many news organisations don't seem to take this digital channel seriously, especially in the UK and Sweden.

I can see a big untapped potential here – most news organisations have access to big databases of email addresses. Most of them also have access to a fairly large number of digital readers. To make them more faithful, and to make them read more articles, it makes sense to add email newsletters to the digital channels they are already working with.

This will of course mean that the resources in the newsroom will be stretched even further, but for some media organisations the audience that can be reached through email newsletters might be worth more than the audience reached through social media. Though in practice it will be important to continue to work both mediums.

If everybody starts a newsletter, there is of course a risk that people's inboxes will clog up or that people just won't sign up. It will be up to the media organisations to make newsletters that are good enough to keep their audience. Just as most news organisations have worked more and more professionally with their channels in social media, they should learn how to work efficiently with email newsletters.

Email is a technology that is used slightly more by the older age group, but while young people are increasingly turn to apps like Snapchat and Whatsapp for communication, they still use email. As the examples *The Skimm*, *Mic Check*, *Lennyletter* and *Emerald Street* show, it is possible to reach a younger audience through an email newsletter if you manage to deliver something relevant.

What is certain is that email is not dead or even dying, people use it even more since the arrival of smart phones. If that will still be the case in five years from now is impossible to say, but the next year or two we will see many more newsletters appear and it is going to be interesting to see how they evolve.



**About the Author:**

Charlotte Fagerlund has worked as a journalist in Sweden for 15 years within TV, radio and newspapers. She has spent the last ten years at newspaper *Sydsvenskan* in various positions including business editor, foreign editor, web editor and reporter.

**@C\_Fagerlund**

Edited by Charlie Beckett and Julia Ziemer

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[blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis)  
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