

Script: Audience Engagement
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Welcome to our presentation on audience engagement and social media plans.

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Audience engagement is a catch-all term to describe the many ways journalists can connect with their community of readers or viewers.

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Think of it as a looping process, in which you and your audience can interact with each other in numerous ways.

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Audience members help spread content you create – by liking, sharing, retweeting or favoriting.

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They comment on stories or share their own– having conversations with you and with other people through you.

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They may even create what's called user-generated content: photos or videos they share with you to use in stories.

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Journalism is no longer about creating a story – your product, publishing it and then moving on. It's a process that the audience can take part in from start to finish.

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Audience members may give story ideas or content to get you started. You may have a conversation while you're working on the story, and then they will share your story once it's done and talk with you and others about it some more.

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To effectively engage your audience, you first have to determine who that audience is. Do you want to reach students at your school? Students AND teachers and parents? Or, perhaps you're hoping to engage your neighborhood community as a whole?

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Next you have to decide who does what and that can really depend on the size of your organization. If you have a lot of students, then having an engagement team

is effective. Or any reporter could be responsible for the engagement on their own stories.

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These students would create posts for social media, respond to comments on social media and the web, ask the audience for user-generated content and then distribute that content.

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Map out an engagement plan - Decide which platforms you'll be using. Don't spread yourself too thin. Just be really good at one or two things.

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If you have a website, you can do some of your engagement there – getting and responding to comments – sharing user generated content or doing online polls to gauge opinions. Audience engagement doesn't have to be digital though – letters to the newspaper, callers for radio and television – connecting with your audience in any form.

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But a lot of what you'll do will be on social media. Ask: where is your audience? – Twitter? Snapchat? Instagram? Facebook? Maybe something new. Maybe it's a combination.

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If you aren't sure – ask. Do a poll – online or in the hallways. Go to where the audience already is, rather than relying on it to come to you.

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You can grow your audience by engaging with readers and viewers... but how you do that depends on the platform.

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For Twitter, you'll get more followers if more people see your tweets. You can make sure that happens by using hashtags.

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Find hashtags that people are already using on big stories. Or start your own – then be sure to promote them – in the newspaper, on the radio, over the PA system, at club meetings, wherever you can.

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Also use what are called @mentions – the twitter handles of the names of people or of organizations you talk about in your tweet.

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Here's a tip though: don't start a tweet with an @mention. That tells Twitter to limit who can see the tweet. Put a period before the @mention or better yet, start your tweet another way.

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Hashtags are a great way to get your content in front of people with Instagram too. Find the popular, relevant ones being used or create your own. Once again, promote your custom hashtags every chance you get.

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If you're using Snapchat, put your account's yellow ghost barcode where people can see it, snap it and add you. Publish it in the paper, post it to other social networks, put it on your website. Put color printouts at school events and tell your staff to talk it up. Word of mouth works great.

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To gain traction on Facebook, you'll want to encourage shares, comments and clicks. The more people who interact with your content, the more people Facebook shows that content to.

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To get comments – ask questions.

To get shares – tell people why their friends and family would want to know.

To get clicks – tease something in the story to make people want to read.

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Here's a trick though – don't mention the words "like" "share" or "comment." – Facebook considers posts that do so "spammy" and won't put them out to as many people.

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Here's possibly the most important advice for any platform: images make a huge difference. People are much more likely to interact with posts that have an interesting photo or video.

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If you don't have an image – consider making a graphic using a free online tool. I used Canva for these examples.

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Ask a question, pull a quote, give a list of story highlights. Anything to grab attention.

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When you want to see if your audience is growing, you want to use the metrics – or analytics - specific to your platform.

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Facebook's Insights shows you how many people like your page and how many have added you in the last week. It also shows you how many people are seeing your posts – that's called "reach."

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Twitter's own analytics offer a lot of information as well. You can see how many tweets you sent and how many people had a chance to see those tweets – that's called impressions. You can also see how many people visited your profile, have mentioned you, and how many followers you picked up.

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Snapchat and Instagram give you numbers within the apps – how many times someone has viewed your story, or liked your post.

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If you want to know how many people are looking at your website, Google Analytics is your best bet. All you need is a gmail account and a website address to track.

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Right from the main page you can see how many people are on your site, which stories they are on and where the traffic is coming from.

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You can look at page views - how many people have seen your story – or see how much time was spent on your story.

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One thing you'll want to pay attention to on your website is search engine optimization – also known as SEO. This is how you make sure your content comes up whenever people are looking for a story on sites like Google, Yahoo and Bing.

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Computer programs called spiders crawl the web looking for content that includes the same terms people are searching for. Those terms are known as key words.

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You want to make sure your headlines include key words. If you're doing a story on your school's football team, you may want to include the name of the mascot

and the word football in the headline. If you're doing a story about your principal eating a worm after a reading challenge, include the principal's first and last name, worm and reading.

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You'll also want to use keywords as tags. WordPress and other content management systems have areas for you to type in tags, which then inserts those keywords into the story's HTML so the spiders can find you.

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Of course, it's not enough to get the audience to your website or social media post. You must engage them once they are there. Respond to comments, offer thanks when someone gives you content – and let them know when you share that content.

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Talk with your audience. If you have more than one person assigned to that task, decide on a common voice so that your communication has consistency.

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Think of yourself as the “helpful friend” who has information to share and wants information back from your readers and viewers. It's definitely a two-way relationship.

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This concludes our module on audience engagement – how to build connections with your community, nurture them and measure them.