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## How The Times of London increased digital subscribers 19% in a year

AUGUST 15, 2019 by [Lucinda Southern](#)

Over the last year, The Times of London has undertaken a detailed content audit to understand what makes its readers tick. The outcome has given the newsroom more understanding on what it should commission, boosting more regular reading, in turn, driving retention and subscriptions.

The News UK publisher said, in the past year, paying digital-only subscribers for The Times and The Sunday Times rose 19% to hit 300,000. Registered-access users, who can read two articles a week, have grown to 5 million, up from 3 million last April. A large part of that growth is due to smarter content commissioning following extensive [work reviewing what content resonates best with readers](#).

<https://medium.com/digital-times/conscious-commissioning-and-what-exactly-makes-our-readers-tick-802cd4f5c868>

Last June, The Times used eight freelancers and tagging tech over three months to segment 1,000 articles from the previous 17 months. Each article was tagged with 16 different pieces of metadata, included criteria like the content tone, the headline type, the article format and geography. These tags were plotted against 10 metrics that show engagement, such as pageviews, time on page, whether someone has commented, saving, sharing, whether the reader is registered or a subscriber. That information has then been used to dictate content strategy.

For example, over the last few months, The Times has published 15% fewer stories on the online Home News section after learning that news with no additional or exclusive content underperforms. As a result of publishing less content, dwell time in the section has increased: Readers of The Times smartphone app spent an average 28 minutes daily on the Home News section, up 25% year over year, according to the publisher. Back in

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[news-metabolism/](#)>, updating three times a day.

“The industry is grappling with the right metrics to use online,” said Taneth Evans, head of audience at the publisher, who led the project. “There are broad-brush strokes — like ‘features do well’ — that don’t do anything for the newsroom. This was our attempt to get actual data and findings for people who are doing the job and the wider company.”

A key retention lever for The Times is commenting, particularly having journalists interact with readers. But this takes resource. Thanks to the content review, the five-person comment curation team can more easily prioritize which types of articles they should focus on to generate more discussions in the comments. Often these are exclusive pieces, case studies, columns and opinion pieces. The comment curation team keep the discussions alive, alert journalists when their articles have people talking and use polls to encourage the shier readers to interact. The number of average comments depends on the type of piece, Evans said.

The Times found that subscribers who comment read three times as many articles as those who don’t. The percentage of people who actively comment plus those who get value from reading the comments makes up 65% of its subscriber base, so it’s a decent chunk. But it’s not a case of more comments equals higher interaction. The first five comments on a piece make a big impact on dwell time, and this continues to increase up until the 50-comment mark, anything over that number and the dwell time starts to taper off, added Evans.

“We have started to focus on the quality rather than quantity,” she said. “Once you get in the hundreds and thousands, it starts having a negligible effect on dwell time.”

Evans was unable to share churn rate, but in June The Times said its artificial-intelligence content recommendation tool, dubbed James, [cut its retention rate in half](https://digiday.com/media/news-uk-cut-subscriber-churn-half-using-self-learning-algorithm/).

The social team has since gotten more strategic with promoting stories on Facebook based on the tone or headlines that would do well at driving referral traffic. Evans wrongly assumed that headlines typically drawing people in would drive more referral traffic.

“This tells us how our Facebook readers are different from other Facebook readers. It can be tempting to apply industry research to yourself, but clickbait wasn’t baiting well for us,” she said, adding that headlines with quotes included drive higher referral traffic from Facebook. It’s worth noting, however, that Facebook has pledged to crack down on

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To give value to its digital audience, which it believes to be separate from its print audience, exclusive stories, [like The Times' exposé on a list of people moving to tax havens <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/tax-haven-rich-list-elite-swap-britain-for-sunshine-and-superyachts-sw2xkqg23>](#), are increasingly being published online first at 5 p.m. to target commuters before going out in print.

For now, Evans and the team will continue monitoring how readers interact with its content, especially as new audiences come into the fold.

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