

Data as the key to growth:

How Omroep Brabant uses smartocto

Omroep Brabant has been the biggest regional broadcaster in The Netherlands for years. But despite their success, they don't lack ambition and always strive for maximum impact. They're continuously and actively searching for possibilities to serve their audience better - pretty cool if you ask us! After making the conscious decision to start focusing on online, they started using data analytics to keep an eye on their performance.

Now, 10 years later, they couldn't imagine how any media company could do without these insights. We spoke to their editor in chief, head of development and editorial coordinator about how they use smartocto, its benefits for the newsroom and the future of journalism.

A livestream of story performance

"There was actually no need at all to start using these tools because we already were the largest regional broadcaster in The Netherlands," says editor in chief, Renzo Veenstra. "However, we didn't really know why. And if you want to continue to grow, you need to determine what works and what doesn't. That requires a more data-driven approach. And the raw data from Google Analytics is not enough, because it only shows you which story performed well afterwards. We were looking for a platform that could give us a livestream of how a story develops right after publication, that shows what impact it has and how we can act upon the way the audience is engaging with it."

The need for real-time information convinced them to start using an editorial analytics tool. Head of development Tim Zunneberg was the driving force behind this. "This is not a sprint: as a media company we run marathons. The goal is to grow each year - in exposure, impact and appreciation. So we started using Chartbeat to follow in real time what was happening with our news content in this competitive market. Unfortunately that system did not live up to our expectations, especially for social media."

The company started looking for alternatives. Here's Tim again: "I remembered a memo from 2015 about keeping an eye on smartocto. So I got in touch and in 2016 we became the first regional broadcaster to start using this kind of editorial analytics software." Smartocto now shows them when a story is shared through social media and the impact it has in terms of reach, interaction, link clicks, comments and more.



Data as validation of journalistic relevance

The first six months were all about becoming acquainted with and warming others up to the tool. "It was on a big screen in my office, where it caught the eye of everyone who walked in. Eventually they started asking for it themselves; a big difference from 10 years ago when people said that as journalists, they wanted nothing to do with all those numbers! They shifted from fearing that data would take away their right to decide what to write about, towards regarding data as validation."

The company has seen a major increase in the request for data since then. Whereas before they lacked control and insights on what happened to content after publication, that is now no longer a point of discussion.

Chief editor Renzo always wants to be ahead of the crowd when it comes to technology and his enthusiasm for smartocto springs forth from that. He firmly believes that whatever you direct your attention to grows, a theory that was confirmed when they noticed tremendous growth in the online department after that became the focus for the editorial team.

It stands to reason that directing more attention towards headlines and homepage orchestration could logically lead to more growth in that area. That led him to contribute to the development of Tentacles, the tool that allows for A/B testing of headings and placement of articles at the front end of a website.

"I thought it would be so cool if you could have this sort of filter over your content that shows you what's going on. On the website itself, so without going into the CMS. And it just so happened that another smartocto client had requested the same thing and they were in the early stages of developing it. So we got on board."

To him it was a no-brainer. "To have that situation where an editor does not need to log into complicated systems, but can actually see what's happening to a story right there in the live environment - that's paramount."

So how was that? At this point, Tim chimes in: "Working with your supplier on a product and to get that commitment from both sides was amazing. It was a lovely process." With Tentacles, the editors can test different headings to see which one scores the most clicks. Determining this right after publication ensures the most exposure for an article, and as if that wasn't enough, it could - as Tim states - increase the performance of a story by 10 to 20%. All without putting a whole lot more effort into it.

**Working with the tool
on a daily basis**

It's like a puzzle

impact puzzle



High clicks but low performance means the people were attracted but left quickly, so the story didn't live up to their expectations - that's something you can work on. When it's the other way around (a small number of people clicked but they were deeply engaged) it's probably a niche subject, but still important. And when both clicks and performance are high you've struck gold: these are the stories you learn from and expand on.

We almost want to whisper this next question, but we won't because we're fully transparent about this kind of thing: won't this make smartocto redundant in the future, when you know what the audience wants and learn to predict their interests?

Renzo is convinced the opposite is true: "Now we often think that we're able to predict what our stories will do. But we're still surprised when something that we were convinced would be successful doesn't perform at all."

It's that combination of real-time information today and advanced statistics tomorrow that provides control over their content.

From
"what **can** we write
about"
to
"what do we **want**
to write about"

What's key to Omroep Brabant's is making the transition away from breaking news towards stories they want to make because it fits their identity and target audience. This shift could help set them apart from other broadcasters and newspapers - and ensure they maintain their position as the biggest regional media company in The Netherlands.

"We know that emergency news scores well, but we want to allow ourselves more time to create our own stories that matter to us and match our identity," says Lody. "Do we show enough pride for all that's happening in our province? In a perfect world, the data will help journalists to develop a feeling for this and make informed decisions about what the story should look like. We know these aren't going to be the highest scoring pieces, but they are important to stay connected with our community."

"If you aim for big impact, big reach will follow."

At Omroep Brabant, the focus is definitely on engagement and impact. With smartocto, they can finally measure how they're doing - and measure it comprehensively.

Renzo: "Our radio and tv statistics are a mystery to us. But for online, we can see even on a story level how many people are reading and interacting with our content. So that excites me. As a journalist you want to create impact and now we can finally see if we are. That makes a big difference and I believe that if you aim for the most impact, the biggest reach will follow as well."

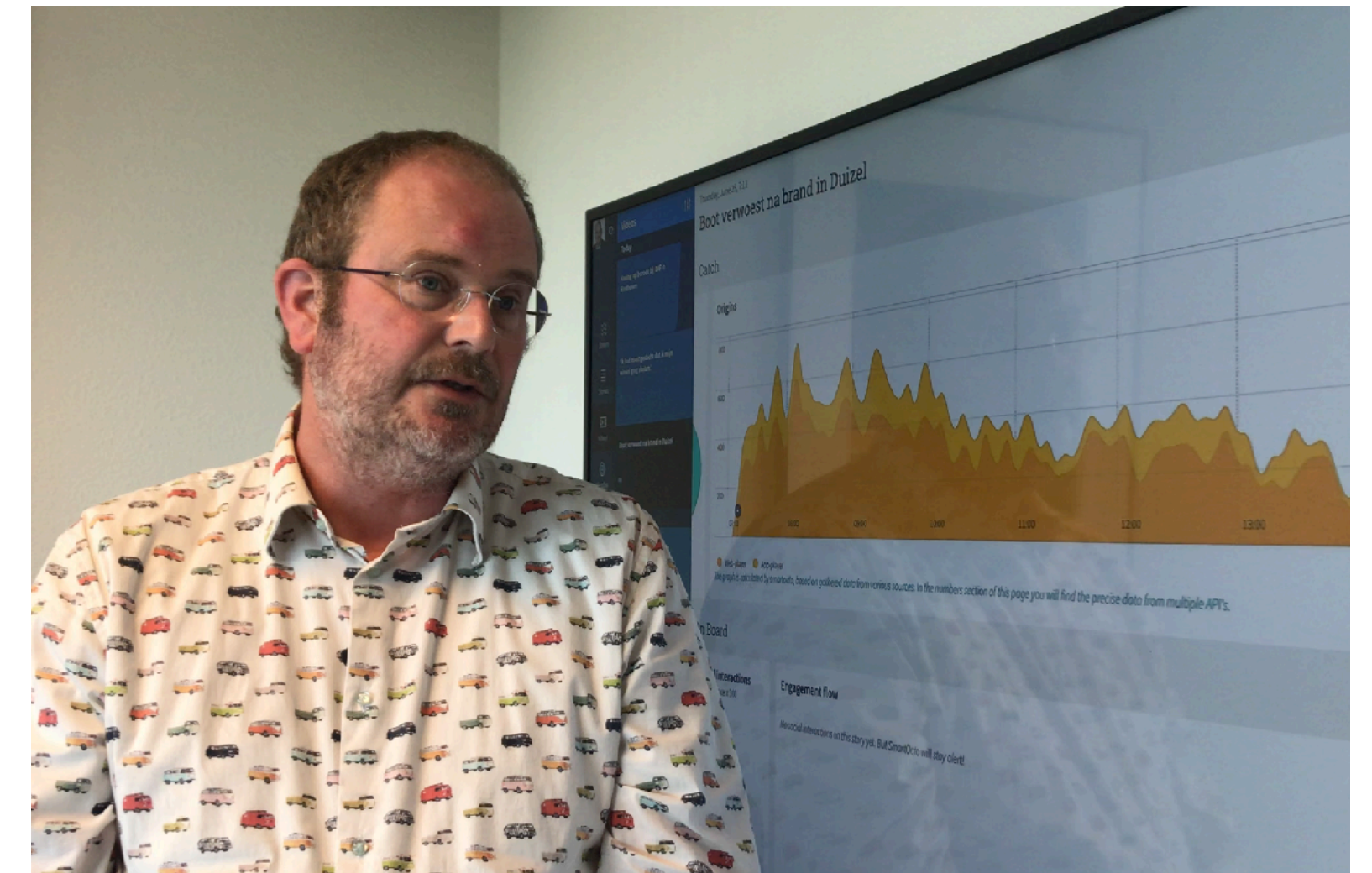
Of course, journalism is about more than data. Having a well-honed gut-feeling and the right contacts is just as important, and a certain amount of creative freedom is essential. But when it comes to impact and relevance, you have to be able to measure it. That's where the data from smartocto Insights comes in.

Over to Tim again: "This information actually helps us to manage processes. We see this, what do we want to do about it?" He's able to go through the numbers with the editors to determine if the content that was made matches their mission, vision and values. Does it live up to the expectations of the audience and was it published at the right time? These are points of discussion they wouldn't have considered without the insights from smartocto. "When we look at trends over a six-month period and see that certain topics and sections are structurally underperforming, that warrants a serious discussion. Without the insights, we would be in the dark and just responding intuitively."

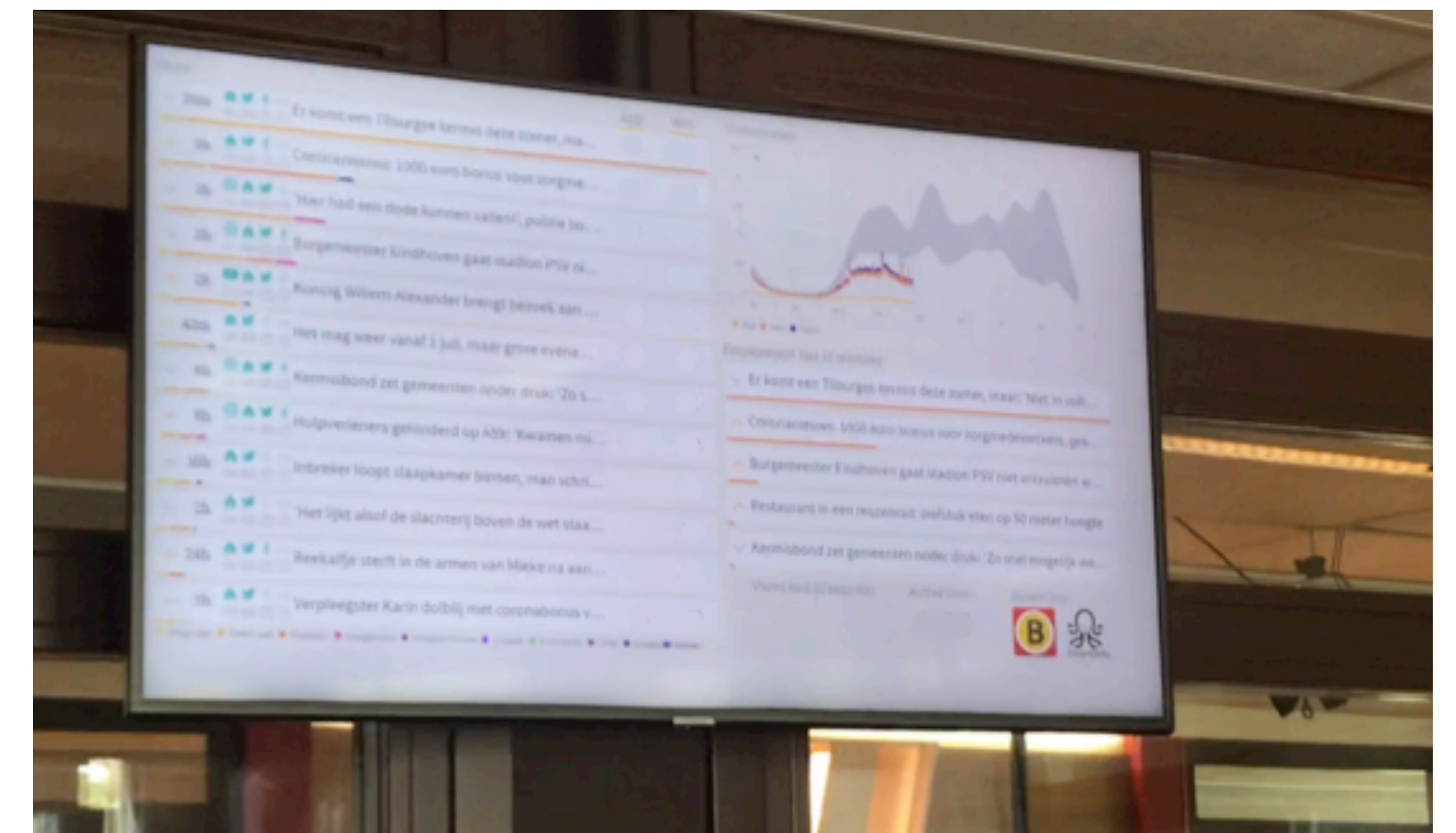
Why smartocto makes a difference

Renzo believes that their projected growth would not be possible without the data from smartocto. "To other journalistic organisations out there that do not use data, I would say: you have to want to know this. I can't imagine people not being interested in this information. Every other journalist or editor that I show smartocto to is immediately drawn to it, and they say they can't believe they didn't know that it was available." *

But even for data enthusiast Tim, it's about more than the numbers: "I enjoy being a client with smartocto because it's a company that I can have a conversation with. I don't feel like I've just purchased an anonymous SaaS tool: I can discuss strategic challenges and how the tool can be of help there. The technique and the advice are complementary - you can only use these tools to their full potential if you know **how** to use them. I'm convinced that better choices will create more profit, but we could never make these choices if we hadn't been able to talk with the people behind the software. Alongside the easy-to-use, simple-to-understand, great-to-read tool, that consultancy is priceless."



Editor in chief Renzo Veenstra: "You should want to know this."



The smartocto big screen in the newsroom

3 ways to transfer **Omroep Brabant's** **success** to **y**our newsroom

- Data tools in the newsroom are often met with reluctance or skepticism. Present it democratically and openly, in a place people can gravitate to in their own time and this can lessen the pushback - and indeed nurture curiosity.
- The Impact Puzzle is the gateway to starting to think critically about what data actually implies. Be wary of oversimplification - high click rates, for example, are only part of the answer to the question of how an article performed. You only have to dig marginally deeper to get your questions the responses they deserve
- Use the humans behind whatever tool you use. As Tim says, you can only use these things to their full potential if you know your way around. It could mean the difference between your articles doing ok as they are, and them going stratospheric because you've understood the notifications and reports and acted accordingly. So, get to know your customer support team, dig deep on tutorials - and if you can't get the information and support where you are, give us a call. We take this stuff pretty damn seriously. We haven't spent years honing this thing for our clients to only use 12% of it.

*** So, yes! A newsroom-centric editorial analytics solution absolutely IS available. The good folk at Omroep Brabant are spot on. If you'd like to find out more about how we (and by 'we', we mean us, smartocto) can help your newsroom, we'd love to chat.**

smartocto.com