What are the key trends when analysing the data around user needs?

Right now, Smartocto is working on the User Needs Labs project with 10 media titles, where we're helping refine their content strategy based on data research.

These are the most important findings.

user needs labs

smartocto

Overproduction of 'Update me' articles

Overall, it's evident that every newsroom produces an excessive number of 'Update me' articles. This is your everyday, straightforward news article.
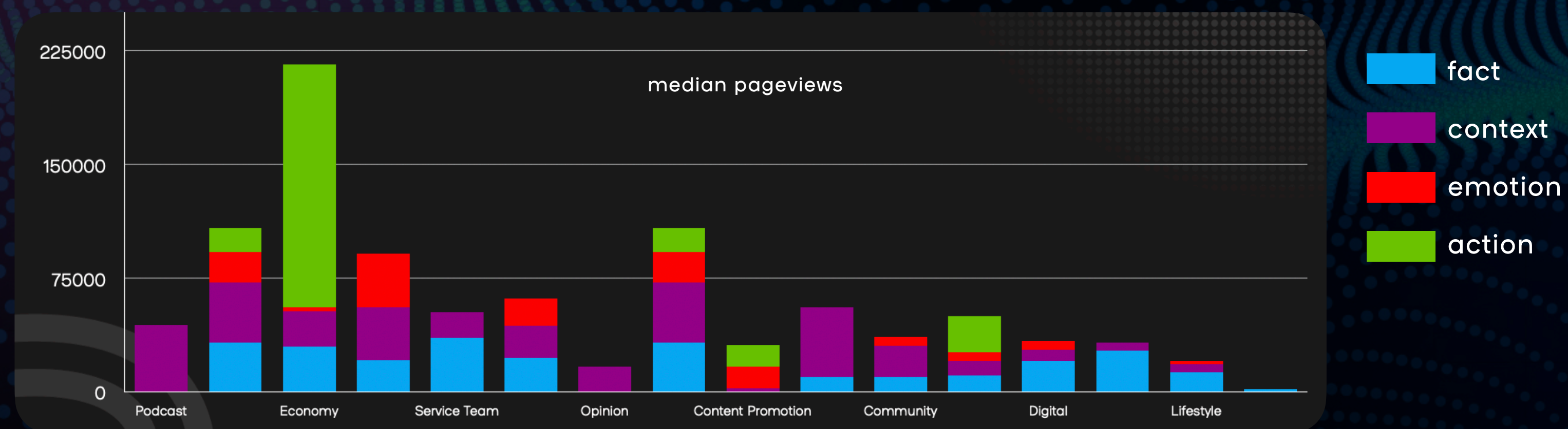
This does not imply that all these articles are without merit for the audience, but it is apparent that articles addressing other user needs have a greater impact (irrespective of their impact, engagement, conversion, attention time, reading depth, etc.).

Therefore, it's reasonable to say that creating an alternative article instead of an 'Update me' article will invariably benefit the overarching strategy .

update me
update me
update me
update me
update me
update me
update me
update me
update me
update me
update me
update me
update me
update me
update me

smartocto

Specific sections require their own mix of user needs

We see it with all the websites we analyse: every section serves their audience differently - and thus requires a specific and custom approach. A deep dive will give insights on the differences and opportunities for each website.

median pageviews

Legend:
- fact
- context
- emotion
- action

X-axis: Podcast, Economy, Service Team, Opinion, Content Promotion, Community, Digital, Lifestyle

Y-axis: 0, 75000, 150000, 225000

For example, the economic section might benefit from **'Give me perspective'** pieces, whereas the sports section grows the audience base with **'Inspire me'** articles.

It's important to understand the dynamics of different sections and determine the strategy based on that.

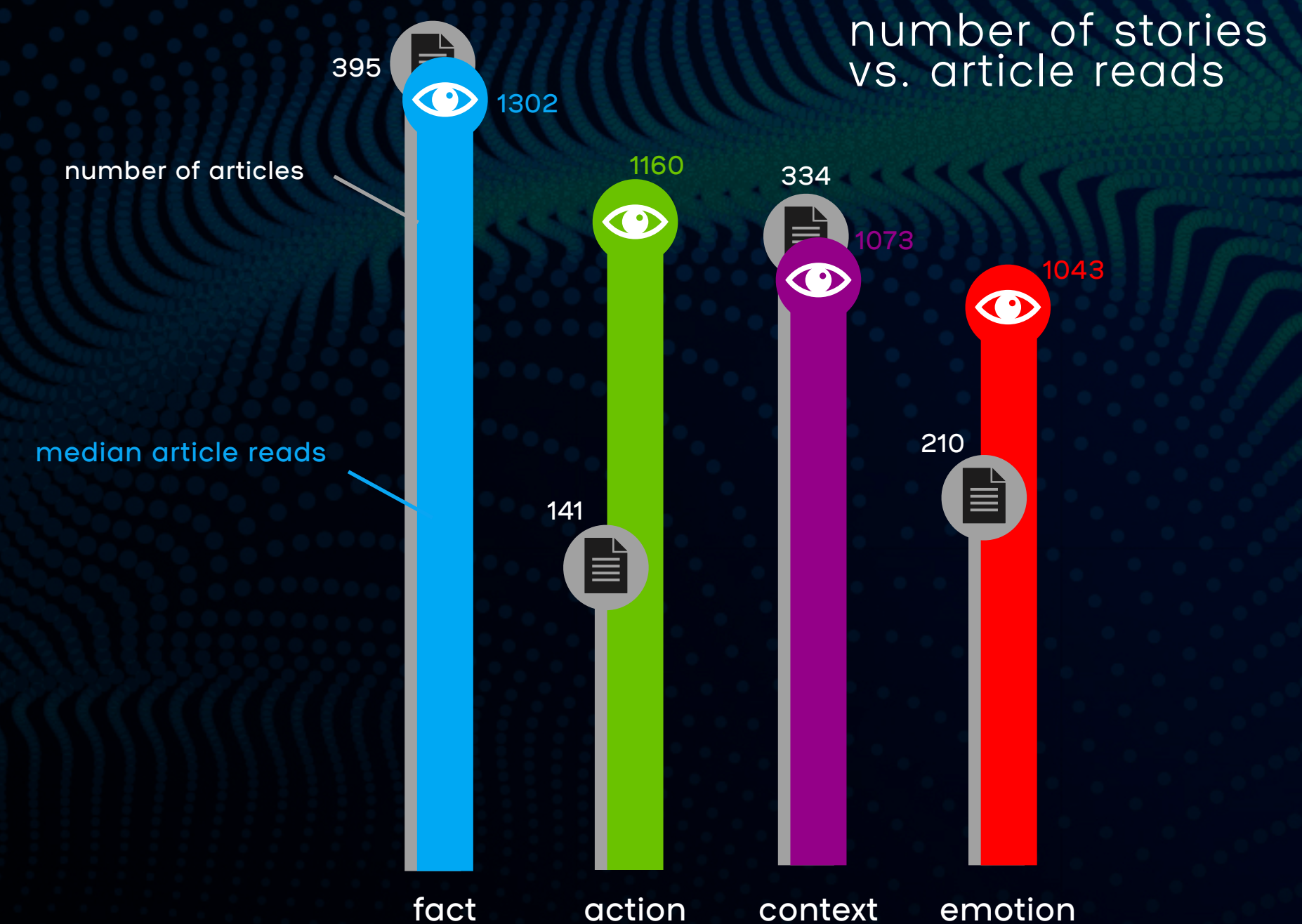give me perspective

inspire me

smartocto

Actionable content seems promising for all outlets

After analysing 10.000 articles for all the participants in **the User Needs Labs 1.0** , we see that all participants have a unique balance in their sets of user needs.

But those on the 'action' axis are the ones most under-executed.

- It has the biggest impact and appears to be the most interesting content for the audience.

- The actionable angle is both 'Help me' and 'Connect me' user needs.

- It fits in the trend of 'news you can use'.

- Younger audiences in particular have the desire to understand and learn what they can do about certain topics.

number of stories vs. article reads

number of articles

median article reads

395
1302
1160
334
1073
1043
141
210

fact   action   context   emotion

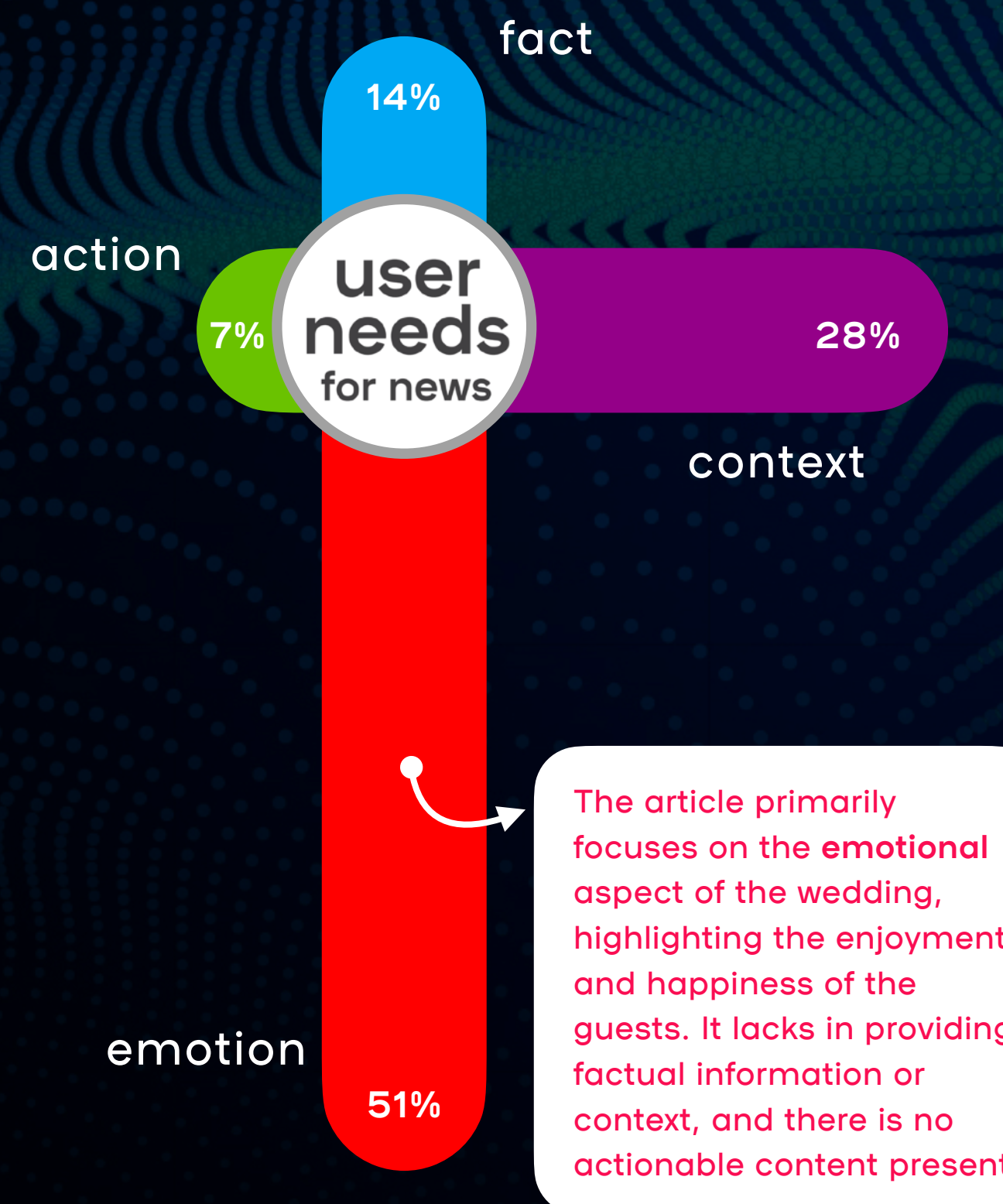smartocto

Execution of stories can be more precise

When we analyse specific articles for all the clients we see in general that stories aren't very well orientated towards one specific user need. This might be confusing for your audience and affects the impact the story makes.

What is it readers should know/understand/ feel/do with the information in the article?

No article can address all four needs sufficiently, so is it clear what the main purpose of the article is?

If it is, it helps readers understand why they should read the article. Engagement and all other important metrics will increase.

emotional story

"Images from wedding attracted all eyes"

fact

14%

action

user needs for news

7%

28%

context

emotion

51%

The article primarily focuses on the **emotional** aspect of the wedding, highlighting the enjoyment and happiness of the guests. It lacks in providing factual information or context, and there is no actionable content present.

smartocto

ama

ask me anything webinar

all the questions and answers

a m a

strategy

1

question

What are the key effects publishers gain from working with 'user needs' in regard of editorial insights, workflows, changes in content production and last but not least user behaviour?

answer

"You enter an editorial meeting with more knowledge about what does and doesn't work well, making it easier to come up with ideas for the approach of upcoming articles.

You are able to go a step further than just analysing topics and formats, in a way that brings you closer to the needs of your audience.

If you understand better what your visitors are looking for, you can serve them better."

smartocto

a m a

strategy

2

question

Which user needs are most common for popular brands looking for massive audience?

answer

"The most important are the four axes: know, understand, feel, and do. If you have a good grasp of these, you'll go a long way. Big popular brands focus on all the user needs that can be categorised around these axes. The exception is niche websites that make a clear choice.

Vox.com, for instance, clearly opts for a website that sits solely on the context axis. But generally speaking, you can say that with a large reach, you want to be as diverse as you can."

3

question

How do you craft the product for different moods of the user?

answer

"As we said earlier in the webinar, every section has its own user need because you are competing with the same section on other websites, not with other sections on your own site. In a sense, you could also say that timing plays a role. Maybe visitors are more inclined to read in-depth backgrounds when they are sitting at home on the sofa in the evening. There is less time for that during the day. And there is a difference between weekdays and weekends or even the channel: a newsletter caters to different needs than the website or social media channels.

Start small, keep following the data, and you'll figure it out."

smartocto

a m a

strategy

4

question

Do users seek sources outside of mainstream media that offer diverse perspectives from subject matter experts?

answer

Absolutely. Only a small percentage of the time people spend on media consumption is on news sites. Netflix, social media...

Dmitry says it in the webinar like this: "I love cooking and I find all the new recipe inspiration on TikTok. I think food-related sites can learn from the way TikTok accounts present recipes, but it's clear that people always look over the fence.

Taking user needs seriously helps. If you write a great educational article, but the headline still radiates 'Update me', then people will pick up that knowledge somewhere else."

smartocto

a m a

strategy

5

question

How do we stay relevant with a model that crystallises the needs of a specific time?

answer

Working with user needs requires a constant time investment from the editorial team, and the model can evolve over time.

To stay relevant, you must continue to follow the changing needs of the audience and adapt your content strategy accordingly.

Over time, brand-specific user needs may form. If we're talking about timing, then it's certainly true that some articles need to address something different on weekends than on weekdays. But that too is a matter of trying out, reading the data, analysing it, and adjusting your strategy accordingly.

smartocto

a m a

strategy

6

question

How do I find out I bridge the gap between my online readers and those still in print?

answer

The sooner you adapt your content strategy to your digital strategy, the better.

"Let's be honest: nowhere do you get such good data as with online journalism", says Dmitry. 'What works online, works in print too. Drive the print with your digital insights."

smartocto

a m a

7

question

How applicable might the model be for NGOs?

answer

You may have to play around with the model a bit, but you will undoubtedly find it useful if you opt for a content strategy based on the needs of the people you want to reach.

A rule of thumb is to first determine what you want to cover and what kind of coverage you want. Start working with the User Needs Model 2.0. There's a good chance that the 8 formulated user needs will also apply to an NGO's content strategy. 'Connect me' and 'Inspire me' are intuitively important user needs, but providing context can also be important.

smartocto

a m a

strategy

8

question

Can you recommend resources that help leaders build content strategies based around user needs?

answer

Dmitry hesitates when answering the question, but then says, "I don't want to advertise too much here.

But the whitepaper (smartocto.com/research.userneeds) is the most complete document you can find.

All jokes aside, it's a simple truth. It's a combination and summary of a lot of other research into user needs."

smartocto

a m a

strategy

9

How do you best apply the user needs model to regional and local news?

answer

All four axes are important, but you should definitely look at the actionable user needs.

'Help me' can be important if you want to explain where to park cheaply or explain a traffic diversion, but 'Connect me' can work very well to establish a serious trust relationship with your visitors.

smartocto

ama

cultural change

1

What is the most common reason why journalists don't want to start using user needs?

answer

The beauty of the model is: we never leave the editorial conversation. This is very important to realize and communicate.

User needs is a language that can be used to interpret data and determine the approach to stories. This is something that happens every day already. But usually, editors talk in formats and topics.

We add one final aspect, namely the needs of the visitor. This might have been addressed before, but nobody was tracking it and nobody told you that actionable would be better than contextual."

smartocto

a m a

cultural change

2

How to get newsroom colleagues on board with the user needs model?

answer

Don't immediately pour the model over the entire editorial team. Look for friendly, enthusiastic employees who want to get started with it. Then others will see the success and watch what happens.

Always keep it strictly editorial and make it about storytelling. It's data in words. Help the artists create something meaningful.

smartocto

a m a

cultural change

3

question

How can I convince my peers to start applying the user needs?

answer

"To add a bit more to the previous point: it should be something fun. Something with which you can finally achieve your goals without being bothered by all sorts of issues that have nothing to do with creating good stories.

If you don't see that this is what it is, you better not start. But we are convinced that it can be fun and valuable in the long term."

smartocto

ama

cultural change

4

Given limited resources, how do we convince colleagues to spend less time doing straight news articles - which we know our readers like and win us praise - to address other user needs?

What we constantly say is: you probably make too many of these 'Update me' stories. But that doesn't mean you should stop completely. It can often be the case that you immediately start with a follow-up and thus leave the first story alone. You're not ignoring the topic, because we want to say again: write about the topics you want to write about and also use the information you want to share with the audience.

But... think carefully about whether people come to your website to be informed of that information. We see that they usually want something else: content, feeling, service. These are the other axes than the factual axis, and there lies your unique value probably more than in the most common."

smartocto

a m a

cultural change

5

question

What is the biggest challenge in persuading a print-led newsroom to adopt a user needs approach.

How can user needs help print in addition to digital publishing?

answer

We have already addressed this under Strategy, but when it comes to cultural change, we can still say that it of course must be driven by your digital development.

The information you can get from online behavior is so valuable that you can also apply it sustainably to print.

But of course, we see across the breadth of the sector that the focus is on digital development, so you have to involve all your editors in that development.

a m a

cultural change

6

question

I work in content marketing. How do I explain to non-marketing professionals in my company that it is worth placing a bet on meeting user needs, working in concert with our SEO strategy, to improve conversion rates?

answer

The effectiveness of your organisation will increase. It should not be difficult to convince your colleagues since you are coming with a plan to increase engagement or conversion.

This is something that you can and should measure. If it doesn't work, you're probably not doing it right. But it's certainly worth trying anyway.

smartocto

ama

implementation

1

smartocto

a m a

implementation

2

question

What variables would you suggest to track to create the classification model? Other than metadata and topical analysis of the article?

answer

It's important to give the editorial team a recognisable profile. Think of formats that are recognisable for both the editorial team and the audience.

So, if you find 'Educate me' important, use a fixed section '5 questions about' and explain in it what is the most important thing visitors need to know.

smartocto

a m a

implementation

3

question

Do you have any advice on how you would keep track of articles and which user needs you are meeting?

answer

Use smartocto to track how certain user needs are performing. With notifications, we can give the right tips to the editorial team.

Or think of another way in which you constantly check whether the strategy you are following is still being executed.

smartocto

ama

implementation

4

question

We don't have unlimited resources for making big surveys or focus groups.

How can we get users' needs with a low budget?

answer

Go to smartocto.com/research/userneeds

Type in the search bar what you want to know about the different user needs.

Don't spend money on anything. Use the model we have created and you will go a long way.

It's important in implementation that you make articles that focus on 1 user need, otherwise you get a very diffuse picture of performance and it's actually of no use to you.

smartocto

a m a

implementation

5

Which user needs must be any newsroom's first priority?

answer

That depends a lot on your position in the market.

But let's put it this way: if you have an economics section where only one new article appears per day, then no visitor is going to expect you to make an 'Update me' story.

Then you really need to add value to the content that already exists and it's better to provide background (context) or cover one of the other axes.

We see the biggest gap in the data at the actionable axis, or service and solutions journalism.

smartocto

6

question

What's the best approach to involve users and to create a good communication state in media?

answer

Ask them why they consume news. Show examples of articles that do well and ask what they think of them.

There can always be a difference between what you think why people come to you and why that is really the case.

smartocto

ama

user needs recognition

1

There's confusion between 'Keep me engaged' and 'Update me' and Update me' and 'Give me Perspective' articles.

How to differentiate them?

answer

As mentioned, there is a lot of information available on smartocto.com. We have created a 'How to write' article for each user need, and all the specific characteristics are listed there. These are the main differences:

Update me: provides purely factual information answering questions like who-what-where-when and how. Keeps you informed about what has happened.

Keep me engaged: ensures you can join in the conversation about a topic that is circulating in other media. It could be a piece about the latest hit on Netflix, a roundup of social media updates from Golden Globes winners, or an important article written by another journalistic website that is causing a stir.

Give me perspective: usually shows an opinion or at least a perspective from an expert. Opinionated articles that provide context usually fall under this category.

smartocto

ama

user needs recognition

2

question

What are the main differences between headlines when writing for different user needs?

answer

When creating headlines for different user needs, it's vital to establish a sense of familiarity for your visitors.

You might even consider labelling articles. However, the headline remains a key attraction, especially since it represents your article on social media or Google (Discover).

For an 'Educate me' article, you often start with 'Why' or 'How'. For 'Give me perspective', it could be something like 'Expert X reacts to'. Working with user needs over time helps in recognising them.

Unfortunately, explanatory pieces often still carry headlines indicative of an 'Update me' article, potentially causing you to miss many readers.

smartocto

ama

user needs recognition

3

question

Do we trust audiences to know what they need and want?

Or should we be led by the data, or a more nuanced approach that uncovers, anticipates or even has gut instincts about needs and wants?

answer

Yes, trust your audience. After all, you are there for them.

If there's a mismatch between need and offer, you will eventually lose them.

Why would a visitor return if they're not taken seriously?

But let's pose a counter-question: make a list of the best to the worst-read articles of the day. We guarantee that at the bottom of that list, you'll find 'Update me' articles.

That should say enough.

smartocto

ama

artificial intelligence

1

question

Is there a way to connect user needs to a predicted sentiment of the user (too much bad news), and how can it inform curation?

answer

Artificial intelligence is particularly well-suited for this. Smartocto.ai, for instance, should be capable of identifying correlations that editors might miss.

For example, if many readers drop off at a certain paragraph, we can already notify on that. However, with the aid of Large Language Models, you can also analyse the paragraph for content and quality.

Perhaps a certain negative tone creates a negative feeling in the reader. Smartocto.ai can suggest ways to rewrite such a paragraph. If an article simultaneously satisfies two different user needs and becomes messy as a result, there are obvious suggestions for correction.

smartocto

a m a

artificial intelligence

2

question

How can AI help to elevate the user needs model?

answer

It is not for nothing that we started userneeds.smartocto.com, as we aim to train smartocto.ai in recognising the dominant user need.

This is already working quite well, but we think it can be improved, and that our system might be able in the future to at least recognise whether an article is driven by facts, context, emotion, or action.

Additionally, AI can assist in better formulating headlines, based on the desired user need, or even rewriting paragraphs if they cause readers to disengage.

The ideal combination of content analysis and data analysis.

ama

artificial intelligence

3

question

What actions could news publishers take right now to integrate generative AI tools and prepare for the continuous improvement of these systems?

answer

First of all: book a demo with smartocto. Define where you want AI to assist editorial teams and which tasks it might eventually take over. This also means freeing up people to focus on this, giving them a mandate and a budget. Ensure every department is represented. Journalism is too valuable to be left solely to technicians. This means setting up a meaningful innovation agenda.

That means of course to experiment, trying out different systems and tools, but there has to be internal communication and focus on the outcome. If there is something that the early days of the internet has taught us, it is that you need to take these groundbreaking innovations very seriously, but you shouldn't go overboard while the tech is still developing. It is a means, not a goal.

smartocto

ama

artificial intelligence

4

question

I'd love to hear more about 'actionable content' and your thoughts on the possibility of using ChatGPT to generate personalised messages/reports/emails/social posts.

answer

Smartocto should dedicate a separate webinar to this in the new year.

We are not yet at a point where we can provide a comprehensive answer, but it underscores that we are living in exciting times in which journalism is rapidly evolving online.

smartocto

1

question

How do you determine whether an article has actually been read (number of clicks on the title? time spent on the article page)?

answer

We can only speak for how smartocto has organised this. Smartocto measures whether a click is actually a loyalty click. This means that a visitor is active on a page for at least 10 seconds, and for some customers, this is set to 15 seconds.

The loyalty rate indicates whether the article meets expectations. With a loyalty rate of 80 percent, 8 out of 10 visitors remain active on the page for more than 10 seconds.

extra questions during the webinar

2

question

We are a b2b publisher. When analysing our industry-specific articles, I often get that they lack emotional elements.

Is that a problem? If so, how to integrate emotions into, say, a piece about a new report?

answer

In some topics, it's impractical to add emotion, but creativity can take you far. With emotion, you need to look for the personal story. This can be as simple as asking how certain insights change people's work.

Information is only important if it impacts human lives. Even in the professional sector, where it's often about work, there's always someone who can speak passionately about a topic.

smartocto

3

question

What analysis of user needs has smartocto done in more authoritarian contexts with polarised media environments - is their a shift in importance of different axis points with the audiences?

answer

The simple answer might be that context is especially important in such places: explaining what's happening. Much depends on the environment and competition.

BBC Russia, years ago, moved away from frequent updates about the country, but after the war in Ukraine, there was suddenly a great need for 'Update me' because state media couldn't write about the war.

Changing circumstances call for a different approach.

smartocto

ama

4

question

Which media outlet its using the model as it best? Why?

answer

The Conversation. We did a client case with them.

Read it right here.

smartocto

extra questions during the webinar

5

question

What are your experiences with Balkan online media?

answer

We have lots of media from the Balkan that use smartocto. So yes, lots of experience.

Especially because we are a partly Serbian company.

smartocto

6

question

We write many film reviews, often tied to embargoes.

Would all fall under the same user need and if so which one? (update/ engage/help?)

answer

In principle, you can apply all user needs to every topic and section.

However, it stands to reason that with reviews, you want to help people make a choice about where they go or which films they want to watch. 'Help me' is a suitable user need for this.

But sometimes, you might want to explain something from a documentary or find a film inspiring. In those cases, those user needs would also be good to address prominently.

smartocto

ama

extra questions during the webinar

7

question

One challenge I have is how to get journalists to actually change the way they write for educate or perspective, rather than just tag it.

Do you have experience of this?

answer

Hopefully the answers in the chapter 'implementation' will help you with this.

Other wise please read the whitepaper because we have a chapter about implementation there as well.

smartocto

ama

extra questions during the webinar

8

question

Sorry if I missed this at the beginning - will you share this recording?

I would love to be able to share it with some of my colleagues.

answer

Yes, the recording is freely accessible right here.

We only ask you to leave your email. Enjoy!

smartocto