

Newsletters as News Products: A Guide for Local Newsrooms

By Josh Stearns

INTRODUCTION

This guide was created based on a workshop I gave to graduate students at the Tow-Knight Center for Entrepreneurial Journalism at the City University of New York. It is the culmination of a lot of research and my own experience with email outreach, online advocacy, and fundraising, as well as my work on the *Local Fix*, a weekly newsletter on tips and tools for local journalists.

Many of the ideas here are not original and are drawn from best practices researched and documented by others. A reading list is included at the end of this guide, but I'm particularly grateful for the work of Charlotte Fagerlund, whose report "[Back to the Future — Email Newsletters as a Digital Channel for Journalism](#)" is an absolute must read.¹

1) EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN — THE STATE OF NEWSLETTERS

Newsletters, like podcasts, are an old technology that is going through a renaissance. This renewed interest in email newsletters has its roots in big shifts happening in technology, consumer habits, and economics. The facts and statistics below highlight how quickly email newsletters are growing and provide a glimpse of how they are being used.

The Solo Newsletter

In her "[Back to the Future](#)" report on newsletters, Charlotte Fagerlund discusses Rusty Forster's *Today in Tabs*, which started as a personal project and was eventually bought by *Newsweek*.² He's not alone. Many journalists are using personal newsletters as on-ramps into other news organizations or as stand-alone projects. Philip Balboni, the founder *GlobalPost* (which he sold to WGBH), [is launching a new newsletter on international reporting](#).³ Nick Quah left his job at *Slate* to turn his [newsletter](#) about podcasting into a business.

Meeting Millennials Where They Are

Email is proving to be a hugely popular medium for reaching younger audiences. Started by two former NBC journalists, *theSkimm* was launched as a curated newsletter of headlines for millennials. As of August 2015, it had [1.5 million subscribers](#).⁴ Lena Dunham's *Lenny Letter* [currently reaches more than 400,000 subscribers](#).⁵ According to Fagerlund, Mic's newsletter *Mic Check*, started in May 2015, boasts over 80,000 subscribers. When *Clover* launched, it had [1,000 sign ups on day one](#).⁶

How Are Newsletters Being Used?

Quartz launched its newsletter alongside its website, and the newsletter informed the eventual design of the homepage. The Quartz newsletter now has about 150,000 subscribers (see the Quartz case studies in the reading list at the end of this guide). The *BuzzFeed News* email newsletter served as a prototype for their eventual news app, and the two still share a similar look and feel. Leonard Bogdonoff [notes](#) that in 2015 *BuzzFeed* reported a 23 percent month-over-month rate of growth on traffic-to-site generated from newsletters. “Visitors from newsletters are some of the most engaged readers spending 3 minutes longer on the site than other channels,” Dan Oshinsky, Director of Newsletters at BuzzFeed, told Bogdonoff. ⁷ *The New York Times*, which used email to send updates to readers during the Paris terror attacks in 2015, has experimented with other short-term email strategies alongside ongoing newsletters.

How Many Newsletters Are There?

As of last year, *TinyLetter* — one of many newsletter services — had more than [“161,000 users creating newsletters and more than 14 million subscribers to those newsletters.”](#)⁸ Fagerlund [writes in her report](#) that in November 2015 *The Washington Post* boasted 61 different newsletters. *The Wall Street Journal* had 43 and a number of email breaking-news alerts. *The Financial Times* had 40 different newsletters. *The New York Times* had 33, *Forbes* had 30, *The Daily Telegraph* had 29, and *The Guardian* had 26.⁹

2) WHY EMAIL NEWSLETTERS?

Email Is a New Way to Deliver the News

The inbox may be the new doorstep and the new homepage. [A Quartz study](#) of 940 executives from around the world found that email newsletters were their preferred source of news, eclipsing the Internet and mobile apps.¹⁰

It Is Digestible

In an age of information overload, people increasingly appreciate something they can start and finish. Fagerlund writes, “Newsletters have a beginning and an end, you can finish it. You can never finish the Internet.”

It Is Ubiquitous

Nearly everyone has an email address. The “2015 Digital News Report” from Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that there was an [“enduring effectiveness of email as a distribution and retention mechanism for news.”](#)¹¹

It Is Accessible

Most people not only have an email address but also know how to use email programs. It is low tech — no downloading apps, no tweaking settings.

It Is Mobile

Email is built into most smartphones and is one of the most used apps on smartphones. For many people, email is mobile-first already.

It Is a Platform You Control

In a time of anxiety around how platforms shape and control the delivery of news, newsletters are a delivery route you control. While there may be nuances in the ways companies sort and filter people's inboxes, email generally lets publishers take back control of how and when people see their content.

It Is Messaging

Newsletters are part of the emerging interest in messaging platforms — for example, Facebook Messenger, WeChat, Snapchat, and Kik. Moreover, newsletters can (and often should) be a two-way medium as well.

3) CHOOSING THE RIGHT EMAIL PLATFORM

There are many choices when selecting an email platform. I won't suggest any one option, but I will provide some overarching questions to ask when considering any email service.

- Do you control your data? Can you move your subscribers, for example, and download a list?
- What sort of CRM does it have on the back end for managing relationships with your community?
- Is it going to stick around? Will it be bought by someone else?
- How is its customer support?
- What analytics and testing support does it have? (How can it help you learn and improve your strategy?)
- How will you be writing for it (automatic/RSS/social feed or handwritten/edited)?
- Does it play well with your current tech stack (CMS, Ad server, CRM, etc.)?
- Who is it primarily trying to serve (marketers, activists, media)?

4) MONETIZING YOUR EMAIL NEWSLETTER

A lot of newsletters are about community building and brand outreach, creating an on-ramp to other revenue streams. This is a kind of lead-generation or indirect revenue. But there are also a number of direct ways to monetize a newsletter as part of an overall revenue strategy for your organization. I have sorted these strategies into three categories:

- **Ads — Banners/Boxes, Text Ads, or Native Ads:** These tend to be images like banner ads on a website but are embedded in the newsletter.
- **Sponsors — “This Newsletter Brought to You by”:** Often text in the body or header/footer of the email newsletter includes a short sponsor message, usually limited to 1–2 per newsletter.
- **Subscribers:** People pay for exclusive content or advance content delivered to them.

Digiday profiled how four publishers are monetizing their newsletter.¹² [Read the entire article here.](#)

- **TIME:** *TIME* uses its newsletter both to run ads and push readers to subscribe to the magazine.
- **Financial Times:** Similarly, *FastFT* includes ad spots but is designed to drive subscriptions. “By building a relationship with non-paying readers, the *Financial Times* can make a stronger case for why those readers should pay up” wrote Ricardo Bilton in *Digiday*.
- **Vox:** Vox monetizes its newsletter with standard banner placements.
- **Quartz:** *Quartz’s* newsletters are sponsored and include native ad placements.

Other examples:

- **POLITICO:** Many emails are part of *POLITICO’s* “Pro” subscription service and also feature short sponsor messages.
- **Hot Pod:** *Hot Pod* includes ads in the weekly free version, but subscribers also get another newsletter later in the week with exclusive additional content.

5) BASICS OF BUILDING AND USING YOUR EMAIL LIST

Rule number one: No matter what, make sure you are getting permission to add people to your email list, and make sure it is easy to unsubscribe. Otherwise, frustrated people will mark your email as spam, and your newsletter (or even your entire domain) could get blacklisted by email providers.

Make a great sign-up page that gives people a sense of what to expect from your newsletter and a clear reason why they should join your list. (Note: MailChimp offers a “Translate” option to automatically translate your forms and response emails into more than 40 languages.)

Ways to get people to sign up:

- **Add a Call to Action** on your Twitter account and Facebook pages. Use the built in tools like Twitter cards, pinned tweets, and Facebook’s action buttons to make it easy for people to click and join.
- **Interstitial Pop-Ups on Your Website:** Many people worry about putting a pop-up on their homepage, but they work really well and may not be as hated as people assume. (Or try a popup when someone is about to leave your site. See <http://www.exitintel.com/> for an example.)
- **One-to-One Outreach on Social Media:** Don’t hesitate to talk regularly about your newsletter and remind people why they should subscribe. When you highlight someone or another organization in your newsletter, tag them on social media and let them know. *Clover* built their audience by messaging influencers on Instagram and featuring them in the newsletter.
- **Contests and Promotions:** Create evergreen content — for example, reports and guides — aligned with your mission and ask people to subscribe to your newsletter to download a free copy. But watch out for high unsubscribe rates from people who may think this is a bait-and-switch promotion.
- **In-Person Events:** In-person events (yours and other people’s) are a great place to sign people up for your email list. Don’t miss a chance to ask people to join and make it easy (but

make sure they know they are being added to your email list). MailChimp has a dedicated “subscribe app” for iPads and Android tablets.

Once you have someone signed up, you may want to consider an automated “welcome series” or other carefully tested ways of solidifying your relationships with new subscribers. Your welcome messages can help them learn more about you, point out recent projects they might find useful, and remind them to add you to their address book or move your email to a better tab in Gmail.

Sending welcome messages is also a good way to practice segmenting your list — i.e., sending different messages to different people based on the data you have about them. For example, everyone on your email list who hasn’t opened an email from you in two weeks could get a different message or a different subject line than those who have been reading every week. Or anyone with a .edu email address could get a message tailored to university staff and students. Segmenting can be important because it allows you to test different messages and personalize your content. This helps you ensure your newsletters are as relevant as possible to your audience. Smart [segmentation of lists can result in much better open rates and clicks](#).¹³

6) TIPS FOR WRITING AND DESIGNING YOUR NEWSLETTER

Never Stop Testing

It takes time to find the right form and tone for your email. Ask for feedback, test, and prototype. Don’t assume you know what’s best. ([Read about how BuzzFeed tested its email and app in public](#).¹⁴) Also be sure to test how your templates and designs look across different platforms. Email programs, like Outlook or Apple Mail, all handle mail differently. Just as you have to test websites in different browsers, you need to test emails in different inboxes. Try <http://litmus.com/> to test how your newsletter will look.

Some Key Early Choices

Is the newsletter the product, or is it a bridge to another product? Is it a standalone, or do you want people to click through to your website? Will your newsletter be edited or automated (or a hybrid: edited with a bit of RSS content)? These choices will shape how you write and design your newsletter.

Before Hitting Send

Proofread. You can’t edit it after you hit send. Check all your links and make sure they work and go to the correct url. Make sure images have metadata and alt text. Check your subject line and “From” field — newsletters tend to do better with a person’s name in the From field.

Learn from MailChimp’s Experience: [Don’t End Up in the Spam Folder](#)¹⁵

Following is a list of things to avoid in each area.

- **Subject Line:** Overuse of punctuation, special characters, and phrases like “free,” “act now,” or “open immediately.”
- **Formatting:** ALL CAPS, crazy colors, and extra exclamation points!!!!
- **Content:** Anything about getting money, paying less money, or money-back guarantees.
- **Code:** Sloppy code, extra tags, code pulled in from Microsoft Word.

- **Images:** Too many images or one single image and no text to balance it.

There is no one right length for newsletters. There are successful short and long newsletters. What matters is whether the form of your newsletter works for your goals and audience. This list of “[15 Email Newsletter Examples We Love Getting in Our Inboxes](#)” from *HubSpot* gives a great overview and at-a-glance look at how very different newsletters can be successful.¹⁶

7) METRICS: MEASURING YOUR NEWSLETTER

Below are the most common analytics and data used to measure the success of an email newsletter. Not all of these metrics make sense for every newsletter. For example, if you don’t need your audience to click back through to your website, then “clickthrough rate” isn’t a meaningful metric.

- **Open Rate:** What percentage of your list opened the email?
- **Clickthrough Rate:** How many people clicked on a link from your newsletter?
- **Conversions:** What did they do once they clicked? (Did they take action, for example, buy something, or bounce away?)
- **List Growth:** Is your list growing? What is the rate of growth? Has there been a drop off?
- **Forwards:** Are people sharing your newsletter with other people?
- **Delivery Rate:** How many of your emails are going to dead addresses? (Clean your list for better performance.)

To compare your newsletter with others like it, see [MailChimp’s Average Email Campaign Stats by Industry](#).¹⁷

Appendix One:

Email Newsletters Reading List

REPORTS AND GUIDES

- “Back the Future — Email Newsletters as a Digital Channel for Journalism” — *Polis/London School of Economics and Political Science*. Available at: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2016/01/25/are-email-newsletters-the-future-for-digital-journalism/>.
- “Guides” — *MailChimp*. Available at: <http://mailchimp.com/resources/>.
- “How to Create Email Newsletters That Don’t Suck” — *HubSpot*. Available at: <http://offers.hubspot.com/email-newsletters-that-dont-suck/>.
- “Final Findings from My Independent Study on Email Newsletters” — *Research by a UNC undergrad*. Available at: <http://kelseyweekman.web.unc.edu/2016/05/05/101/>.

BLOG POSTS AND ARTICLES

- “What We Learned from a Week of Prototyping a Newsletter in Public” — *BuzzFeed*. Available at: https://www.buzzfeed.com/millietran/what-we-learned-from-a-week-of-prototyping-a-newsletter-in-p?utm_term=.buZREmGLv#.cIEON14Zb.
- “How Journalist Ann Friedman Built a Newsletter Empire” — *NewsCred*. Available at: <https://insights.newscred.com/how-journalist-ann-friedman-built-a-newsletter-empire/>.
- “15 Email Newsletter Examples We Love Getting in Our Inboxes” — *HubSpot*. Available at: <http://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/email-newsletter-examples-list#sm.00014agq2cwybfff611nufhv14ra>.
- “You’ve Got Mail — Again: Rethinking the Role of Email Newsletters” — *MediaShift*. Available at: <http://mediashift.org/2016/02/youve-got-mail-again-rethinking-the-role-of-email-newsletters/>.
- “Sorry Ello, The Real Anti-Facebook Is Good Old Email” — *Wired*. Available at: <https://www.wired.com/2015/09/sorry-ello-real-anti-facebook-good-old-email/>.
- “For Email Newsletters, a Death Greatly Exaggerated” — *The New York Times*. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/30/business/media/for-email-a-death-greatly-exaggerated.html?_r=0.
- “How The Skimm’s Passionate Readership Helped Its Newsletter Grow to 1.5 million Subscribers” — *NiemanLab*. Available at: <http://www.niemanlab.org/2015/08/how-the-skimms-passionate-readership-helped-its-newsletter-grow-to-1-5-million-subscribers/?relatedstory>.
- “On Email Newsletters for Big Media” — *Medium*. Available at: <https://medium.com/email-newsletter-stand/on-email-as-big-media-s-missed-opportunity-10645046b265#.8ps0pihf>.

- “Want to Start an Amazing Local Newsletter? Better Call Sol.,” *Poynter*, April 21, 2015. Available at: <http://www.poynter.org/2015/want-to-start-an-amazing-local-newsletter-better-call-sol/337083/>
- “GlobalPost’s Founder Hopes to Find Freedom from Platforms and Ads with a New Email Newsletter” — *NiemanLab*. Available at: <http://www.niemanlab.org/2016/03/globalposts-founder-hopes-to-find-freedom-from-platforms-and-ads-with-a-new-email-newsletter/>.
- “How to Build a Successful Newsletter: Advice from Quartz” — *The Media Briefing*. Available at: <https://www.themediabriefing.com/article/quartz-newsletters-advice-simon-davies-daily-brief>.
- “Quartz’s Email-Centric News Coverage” — *MailChimp*. Available at: <https://blog.mailchimp.com/quartzs-email-centric-news-coverage/>.
- “Quartz Increases Newsletter Readers by Going Simple” — *NiemanLab*. Available at: <http://www.niemanlab.org/2014/04/quartz-increases-newsletter-readers-by-going-simple/>.
- “4 Publisher Approaches to the Daily Newsletter” — *Digiday*. Available at: <http://digiday.com/publishers/four-publisher-attempts-daily-newsletter/>.
- “6 Crucial Email Newsletter Metrics You Should Be Monitoring” — *HubSpot*. Available at: <http://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/email-newsletter-metrics-list#sm.00014agq2cwybfff611nufhv14ra>.
- “Email Newsletter Success Metrics: What You Need to Know” — *MediaShift*. Available at: <http://mediashift.org/2015/01/email-newsletter-success-metrics-what-you-need-to-know/>.
- “Email Marketing Benchmarks” — *MailChimp*. Available at: <http://mailchimp.com/resources/research/email-marketing-benchmarks/>.
- “Really Good Emails” — Available at: <http://reallygoodemails.com/>.
- “Emailing Teenagers the News: 8 Good Questions with Clover’s Liza Darwin and Casey Lewis” — *American Press Institute*. Available at: <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/good-questions/email-newsletters-clover-liza-darwin-casey-lewis/>.
- “New Video — ‘Hooked: Building Habit-Forming Products’” — *Nir & Far*. Available at: <http://www.nirandfar.com/2013/02/new-video-hooked-the-psychology-of-how-products-engage-us.html>.
- “How BuzzFeed Uses Email Marketing to Drive Their Phenomenal Growth” — *Campaign Monitor*. Available at: <https://www.campaignmonitor.com/blog/customers/2015/04/buzzfeed-email-marketing/>.
- “Newsletters, Briefings: Curating Content While Creating a Habit” — *García Media*. Available at: http://garciamedia.com/blog/newsletters_briefings_curating_content_while_creating_a_habit.
- “There Are at Least Eight Promising Business Models for Email Newsletters” — *NiemanLab*. Available at: <http://www.niemanlab.org/2016/11/there-are-at-least-eight-promising-business-models-for-email-newsletters/>.

ENDNOTES

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- ² Ibid.
- ³ Laura Hazard Owen, "GlobalPost's Founder Hopes to Find Freedom from Platforms and Ads with a New Email Newsletter," *NiemanLab*, March 14, 2016, Accessed October 5, 2016. Available at: <http://www.niemanlab.org/2016/03/globalposts-founder-hopes-to-find-freedom-from-platforms-and-ads-with-a-new-email-newsletter/>.
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- ⁵ Laura Hazard Owen, "Lena Dunham's Lenny Letter Has Grown to 400,000 Subscribers with a 65 Percent Open Rate," *NiemanLab*, March 2, 2016, Accessed October 4, 2016. Available at: <http://www.niemanlab.org/2016/03/lena-dunhams-lenny-letter-has-grown-to-400000-subscribers-with-a-65-percent-open-rate/>.
- ⁶ Laurie Beth Harris, "Emailing Teenagers the News: 8 Good Questions with Clover's Liza Darwin and Casey Lewis," American Press Institute, March 1, 2016, Accessed October 4, 2016. Available at: <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/good-questions/email-newsletters-clover-liza-darwin-casey-lewis/>.
- ⁷ Leonard Bogdonoff, "On Email as Big Media's Missed Opportunity," Blog, *LinkedIn*, November 15, 2015, Accessed October 4, 2016. Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/email-big-medias-missed-opportunity-leonard-bogdonoff>.
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