

Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life  
at The University of Texas at Austin  
Engaging News Project

## 2016 ANNUAL REPORT

We envision a vibrant American news media that more effectively empowers the public to understand, appreciate, and participate in the democratic exchange of ideas.

We work to accomplish this goal by testing digital strategies for informing audiences, promoting substantive discourse, and helping citizens to understand diverse views.



The University of Texas at Austin

ENGAGING

NEWS

PROJECT

## 2016 HIGHLIGHTS

Redesigned our website to make it easier to search our research

Met with more than **100 working journalists** to discuss how they could use our research

Hosted our first **Social Media Summit** with the UT School of Journalism

Hosted our third News Engagement Workshop with **12 digital news leaders**

Received **more than 75 mentions in the media**, leading to increased awareness of our project

Released **10 research reports** on issues facing the news industry

Released the “**Engaging Buttons**” plugin for news organizations so that they can add a “Respect” button to their websites

Received the **Bill Eadie Distinguished Award for a Scholarly Article** from the Applied Communication Division of the National Communication Association

Presented at the **2016 SXSW Interactive Festival**





## FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear friends and supporters,

There's no doubt that 2016 will be remembered as a very tumultuous year. With the unprecedented presidential election and the seemingly never-ending cycle of tragic events, the news media were more needed than ever before. Yet the media also faced a tough year, with criticism of their coverage and the need to make business-oriented cuts.

I started the Engaging News Project as a way to address some of these issues. For us, 2016 was our most successful year to date. We released a record number of research reports, all of which help newsrooms meet their business and democratic goals. We've seen more news organizations adopt our work and reach out to us about research partnerships.

Our research in-progress delves even more into how to help the news media. In the coming year, we will release reports on how news organizations cover local elections, how to share election news via Facebook to maximize engagement, and what commenters on various news sites think about the space.

I want to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to our supporters and funders for helping us reach these new heights. Thank you to the Democracy Fund, Hewlett Foundation, Rita Allen Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Solutions Journalism Network, the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life, and the Moody College of Communication. We would also like to thank Google and Facebook for their generous gifts.

And thank you to the friends who have supported us by sharing our work, using our tools, or partnering with us on research. We would not be where we are today without you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Natalie Stroud".

Dr. Natalie (Talia) Stroud  
DIRECTOR, ENGAGING NEWS PROJECT  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

The background of the entire page is a stack of New York Times newspapers, slightly out of focus. A white rectangular box with a thin black border is positioned in the upper left quadrant, containing the word 'RESEARCH' in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

## RESEARCH

THIS YEAR WE RELEASED  
10 REPORTS ON ISSUES FACING  
THE NEWS INDUSTRY.

### 10 Things We Learned by Analyzing 9 Million Comments from *The New York Times*

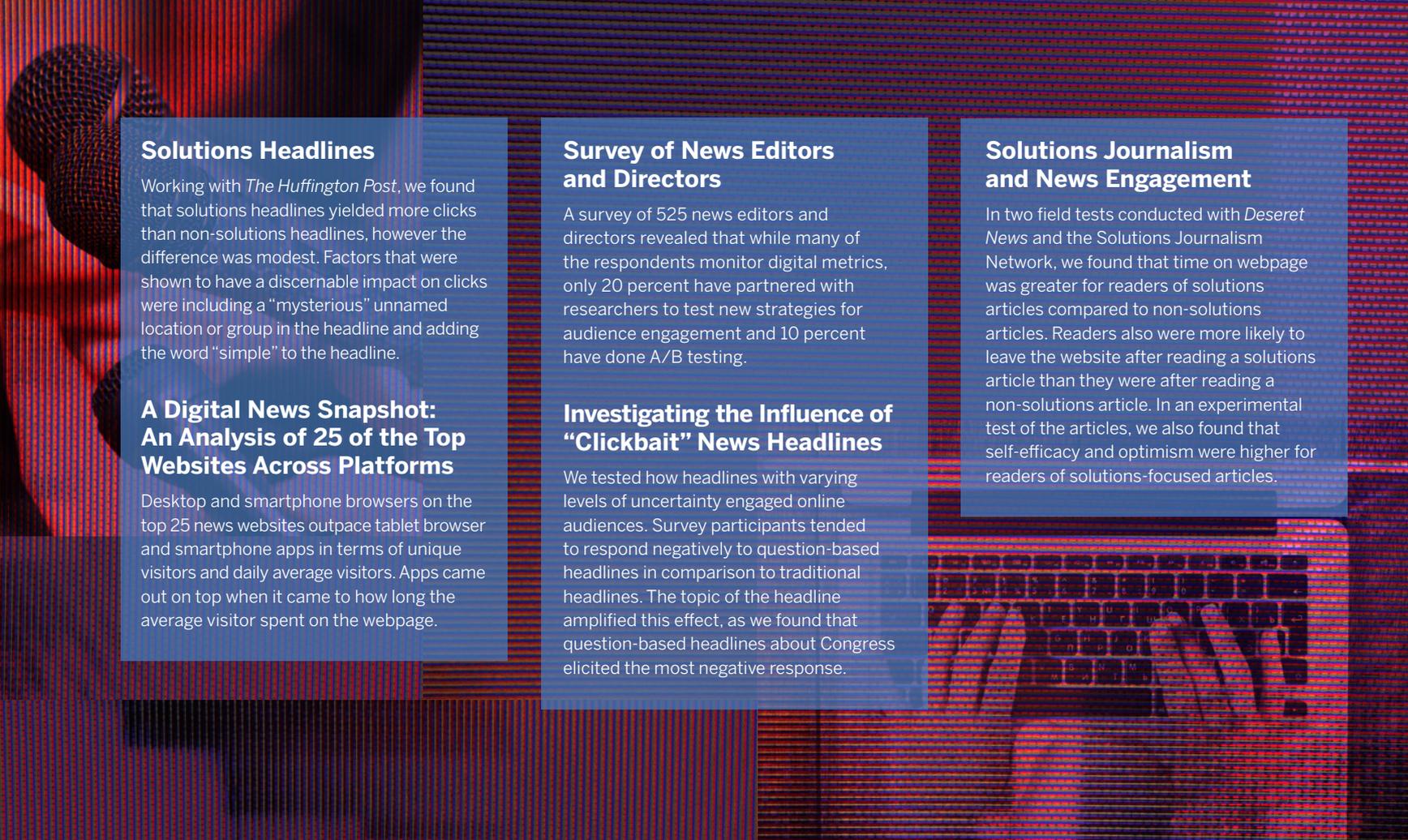
A redesign of *The New York Times* comment section increased the number of comments, and decreased the use of abuse flags and uncivil terms. When the comment was posted affected discourse as well. The *Times* receives more comments on weekdays than weekends, but has a higher use of uncivil terms on weekends. The content of the comments influenced how others interacted; comments with profanity and fewer words were less likely to be NYT Picks, while partisan and uncivil terms actually corresponded with a greater number of user recommendations.

### Survey of Commenters and Comment Readers

Our study of a nationally representative sample of commenters and comment readers indicates that 55 percent of Americans have left an online comment and 78 percent have read the comments at some point. Commenters on news websites are more likely to be male, have lower levels of education, and have lower incomes compared to those who read news comments.

### Journalists and Online Comments

We interviewed working journalists to see how they've adapted to the ubiquity of online commenting on news websites. All the journalists said they read comments at least occasionally, though few set aside time to do so. Two-thirds of journalists indicated that they respond to comments, though most noted that they avoided uncivil comments.



## Solutions Headlines

Working with *The Huffington Post*, we found that solutions headlines yielded more clicks than non-solutions headlines, however the difference was modest. Factors that were shown to have a discernable impact on clicks were including a “mysterious” unnamed location or group in the headline and adding the word “simple” to the headline.

## A Digital News Snapshot: An Analysis of 25 of the Top Websites Across Platforms

Desktop and smartphone browsers on the top 25 news websites outpace tablet browser and smartphone apps in terms of unique visitors and daily average visitors. Apps came out on top when it came to how long the average visitor spent on the webpage.

## Survey of News Editors and Directors

A survey of 525 news editors and directors revealed that while many of the respondents monitor digital metrics, only 20 percent have partnered with researchers to test new strategies for audience engagement and 10 percent have done A/B testing.

## Investigating the Influence of “Clickbait” News Headlines

We tested how headlines with varying levels of uncertainty engaged online audiences. Survey participants tended to respond negatively to question-based headlines in comparison to traditional headlines. The topic of the headline amplified this effect, as we found that question-based headlines about Congress elicited the most negative response.

## Solutions Journalism and News Engagement

In two field tests conducted with *Deseret News* and the Solutions Journalism Network, we found that time on webpage was greater for readers of solutions articles compared to non-solutions articles. Readers also were more likely to leave the website after reading a solutions article than they were after reading a non-solutions article. In an experimental test of the articles, we also found that self-efficacy and optimism were higher for readers of solutions-focused articles.

## OUTREACH

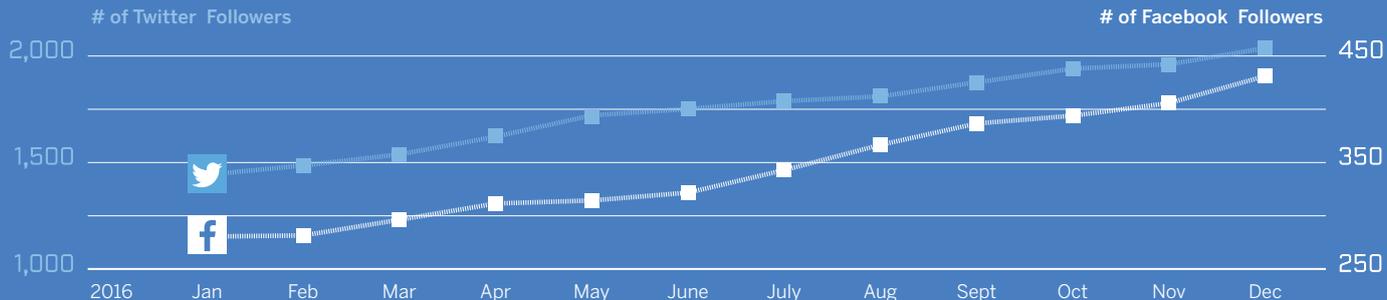
SINCE WE STARTED, ONE OF OUR GOALS HAS BEEN MAKING SURE THAT THE ENGAGING NEWS PROJECT IS WIDELY KNOWN AND ITS RESEARCH WELL USED. THIS YEAR WE MADE GREAT STRIDES IN GETTING THE WORD OUT ABOUT THE PROJECT, AND WE LOOK FORWARD TO CONTINUING THIS TREND NEXT YEAR.

Engaging News Project team members presented at several major events this year including:

- SXSW Interactive Festival
- International Symposium on Online Journalism
- Online News Association Annual Conference
- People-Powered Publishing Conference

The Engaging News Project received more than 75 media mentions this past year from a variety of outlets including:

- Nieman Lab
- Quartz
- FiveThirtyEight
- Forbes
- Jezebel
- Columbia Journalism Review
- American Press Institute
- MediaShift
- Journalism.co.uk



## TOOLS

**Engaging Buttons** – Through our research on social media buttons, we found several instances where people were significantly more likely to click “Respect” than “Like” when the views expressed in a comment differed from their own.

To encourage news organizations to adopt “Respect,” we created the Engaging Buttons plugin. The plugin allows users to easily set up and configure alternative buttons to “Like” on their website. The plugin has been downloaded more than 400 times and has been used on a variety of websites.



**Quiz Tool** – We redesigned our quiz tool to make it easier for users to create a quiz for their websites. We also made improvements to make quizzes more enjoyable for audiences, and to provide more analytics for creators.

We created our quiz tool after our research found that news audiences enjoyed and learned from quizzes. Since we first developed our quiz tool, it has been adopted by more than 25 news organizations and viewed by more than 100,000 news consumers.



## News Tools Workshop

In February, we hosted 12 digital news leaders from various news outlets to discuss their ideas and experiences using audience engagement news tools. Workshop participants agreed that news tools need four qualities: they should be reusable, meet the need of news organizations, be interactive, and target a news audience. Additionally, participants collaborated on ways news tools can address political polarization and engage millennial audiences.

*“The workshop in Austin was so great. I had such a good time and learned so much. Really can’t thank you enough!”*

**Priya Krishnakumar**  
LOS ANGELES TIMES

*“I really enjoyed myself! Thanks again for having me. I was impressed by how smoothly you ran your event. It was focused and productive.”*

**Marine Boudeau**  
WNYC/NEW YORK PUBLIC RADIO





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*The* ANNETTE STRAUSS INSTITUTE  
FOR CIVIC LIFE



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