

Breaking bad news: Making journalism accessible

Part 2: The formula for better news

Lower readership. Declining viewership. A younger generation that journalists are told consumes news content through their social media feeds. And a population with ever diversifying needs.

The current media landscape isn't equipped inside or out to meet the realistic demands of between 28 and 50 percent of the population, who are disabled or chronically ill and may need additional support such as closed captioning, sign language, or other features for news to reach them.

Furthermore, the industry must change to keep up with Americans' shifting tastes, especially if it plans to convince 70 million Gen Z Americans – and beyond them, Gen Alpha – to become news consumers. These generations are the most diverse generations in America to date. (i)

Likewise, the disability, chronic illness, and caregiver community – one that touches every race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and geographic corner of the United States – is growing in numbers, but not in economic power.

If the audience is more diverse in how they want and need the news, we must mirror the audience we think about most when we design, plan, and distribute news.

Dateline: America, a wasteland of inaccessible news options

Several problems exist in the current news media landscape.

First, most news outlets are built for readers or listeners or viewers – but not all three.

These typical new outlets lack entry for people who use alternative modes of communication such as American Sign Language, plain language, Easy English, or close captioning. For blind and low vision users, video lacks secondary tracks which describe the visuals. For people with

learning differences, sensory issues, or other accessibility needs, simple solutions are not implemented.

Second, as more and more news outlets try to reach their audiences online, they aren't ready to meet basic web accessibility standards.

In 2024, a survey by WebAIM found 96% of online home pages failed to meet Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. (ii)

A WCAG survey of one million webpages found the average page has 56 accessibility errors. Accessibility errors can be as simple as poor color contrast making text difficult to read or misuse of color making it difficult for people with dyslexia; failure to use plain language; lack of audio descriptions on video; lack of closed captioning for audio; inconsistent use of alternative text and image descriptions; or lack of ASL translation for primary ASL users. (iii)

Broken or missing hyperlinks are a problem for those who read screen readers. News outlets often use nondescriptive words in body text for hyperlinks making them nonsensical for those who use screen readers. But news outlets place hyperlinks within large bodies of text making the text hard to read for those with sensory issues. For more than 72 million disabled adults, lack of accessibility is a barrier to news.

A 2020 study by the National Disability Institute and Stony Brook University found that a household with a disabled person needs an extra \$17,690 per year to achieve the same standard of living as a peer household without a disabled member. (iv) In 2020, 78% of news sources had a paywall restricting access to content for those with financial barriers. (v) With almost a quarter of the disabled community living below the poverty line, paywalls prevent access to news and impact their ability to stay informed. (vi)

Accessible journalism is the solution

Equal Access Public Media seeks to enrich the lives of the diverse disabled and chronically ill community, allies, and caregivers through accessible news, and to create accessible jobs in the news media industry.

Four core beliefs inform the first part of our mission.



First, being an informed news consumer leads to stronger civic engagement and more democratic participation. (vii)

Second, all news is news for disabled people. Whether a story is about the new congressional bill, climate change, a major Supreme Court ruling, or a new scientific breakthrough, for example, all news affects everyone.

Third, everyone should have access to high-quality factual and informative news.

Fourth, the news industry should be more diverse, more accessible, and more inclusive.

EAPM began with the idea that news media should be accessible for more people. To reach that goal, the organization intends to produce a variety of accessible media products, especially in the news space.

The first of those products is a daily online multimedia news product covering national news of interest, called the National Tab. It uses universal design, basic digital accessibility plus specific accessible modes (sign language interpretation, closed captioning, audio description) to create additional accessibility.

This product will be multimedia – covering the same news item in text, audio and video – so primary news consumers have a choice in how to access the news story. But it will also be what EAPM terms “multimodal.” It will include a variety of enhanced modes of accessibility, such as a type of plain language intended for individuals with significant developmental or intellectual disabilities, language learning differences, or reading differences called “Easy English,” in which the most important items of the article are noted in simple single sentences with key words in a bullet pointed format. (viii) It will include ASL interpretation for both text and video as about 1 million Americans are primary sign language users. (ix) It will also include a secondary track in video called audio description that describes background action. Finally, it will have other features as technology develops or as EAPM identifies need.

Web layout, while based in the principles of universal design, will be designed to consider users with learning differences such as dyslexia and dyscalculia; sensory issues; low vision; and those who use assistive and augmentative technologies.

Simultaneously, the news offered will uphold high-quality news standards of solutions and watchdog journalism and adhere to the ethical standards of the Society of Professional Journalists, Trusting News, and the ideas set forth by the Solutions Journalism Network. EAPM seeks to help those who are disabled and nondisabled alike, from all backgrounds, stay informed and become educated on current events without the assistance of others, leading to greater empowerment, a sense of equality and inclusion in the community, and better civic engagement.

The news offered in the National Tab will be covered and produced primarily by the internal staff. This news will cover general national news such as government (White House, Congress, courts, government agencies), health, science, education, environment, economy, politics, and other topics of general national interest. It will also include deep investigations and feature news. As staff increases, so will coverage in other areas of national interest, such as entertainment, sports, and other topics. The daily outlet's reporters will be expected to think and cover news with an eye toward accessibility and the diverse audience the outlet reaches but also dig deep and ask tough questions of their sources.

The National Tab will also partner with other local and niche outlets to repackage their news in the accessible model, thereby extending the reach of their news and bringing local news to a national audience.

With the daily model's success, EAPM plans to launch additional news products in the future including, but not limited to an online weekend magazine focused on feature stories, entertainment, arts, and first-person stories; niche publications such as a youth-focused online magazine, a sports-focused online news outlet, a disability news-focused online magazine, etc.

Accessibility is for everyone

While this format was designed for audiences not normally reached by news outlets, EAPM's model of offering multiple formats of the same news story in one setting matches how one of the diverse Gen Z news consumers expressed they want news in the 2024 Next Gen News research project by the Knight Lab at the Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications. (x) Interviews with news consumers ages 18 to 25 were conducted in partnership with FT Strategies and supported by the Google News Initiative. During these

interviews, news consumers expressed a preference for news convenience, language, and format that fits with EAPM's model.

According to the Next Gen News report, Gen Z wants news that is personalized or customized, easy to read, and without barriers to access; with language that is easy to understand, but not “dumbed down”; and stimulating multi-media formats. They want credibility in their news outlets, in the journalists at their news outlets, and in the sources their journalists use. (xi)

They also want to trust who is paying for that news. As one person told the Next Gen News interviewers, “Many private news organizations do not disclose, in real-time or ever, who funds, majority owns or invests in the media company. This is a problem.” (xii)

Current research further shows that while the vast majority of news websites are behind a paywall or require a subscription for continuous news, most news consumers do not want to pay for news. (xiii, xiv)

By using the public media model, we will fund our news products through individual donations, business donations, grants, and endowments. This means that our news is available to all news consumers without a paywall or subscription. This lowers the fiscal barrier to entry for news for those who may not be able to pay for news. Likewise, the public media allows us to tap into the partnership of other nonprofit and public media. This creates a way for news from one corner of the country to reach another and for news for our audience to be exposed to news from niche and local nonprofit publications.

Overall, this model of accessibility is not just fiscally responsible but has a promising revenue outlook.

A study from Harvard Business Review found that workplaces that invest in diversity had higher gross earnings. (xv) A National Business and Disability survey from The Viscardi Center and Cygnal found 73% of consumers will choose services from a company or organization if they know it employs individuals with disabilities. (xvi)

[Accessible news is the future](#)

EAPM doesn't just present accessible information. We are building a fully accessible and inclusive news environment, giving everyone in the news audience autonomy to stay informed. EAPM is accessibility first public media.

EAPM's research shows that presenting news of national interest in a more accessible format online is not only a moral imperative, fiscally responsible, but in line with what the youngest generation of potential news consumers are seeking: a source that is more flexible to their needs.

The future is accessible news, and the future is here.

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