

RESEARCH MEMO · GULF STATES NEWSROOM · NATIONAL SURVEY EXPERIMENT

Reporter-centered Social Media

What drives follows and engagement with news on social media?

FROM Joshua P. Darr, Local NExT Lab · Syracuse University

FIELDWORK Cohort 1 · 2026

The question

Gulf States Newsroom (GSN) often puts reporters at the center of its social media content. As it considered how reporters and branding should appear across its accounts, GSN wanted to better understand what drives different kinds of audience behavior: What makes someone follow a news account, and what makes them engage with individual content?

- What features make people more likely to follow a news account?
- What makes people more likely to engage with social media content?
- Does emphasizing individual reporters rather than the outlet brand affect audience response?

What we did

391

New Orleans-area adults surveyed

2

Survey experiments

798

U.S. adults surveyed (national sample)

HOW WE DID THIS

We conducted two survey experiments: one with 391 adults in the New Orleans area and another with a national sample of 798 U.S. adults. The first experiment tested which profile and content features made people more likely to follow a news account. The second tested responses to individual pieces of content using mock Instagram Reels that varied who appeared on screen — a reporter on the scene or a statehouse interior — and how the source was identified — a reporter's name or a generic outlet name.

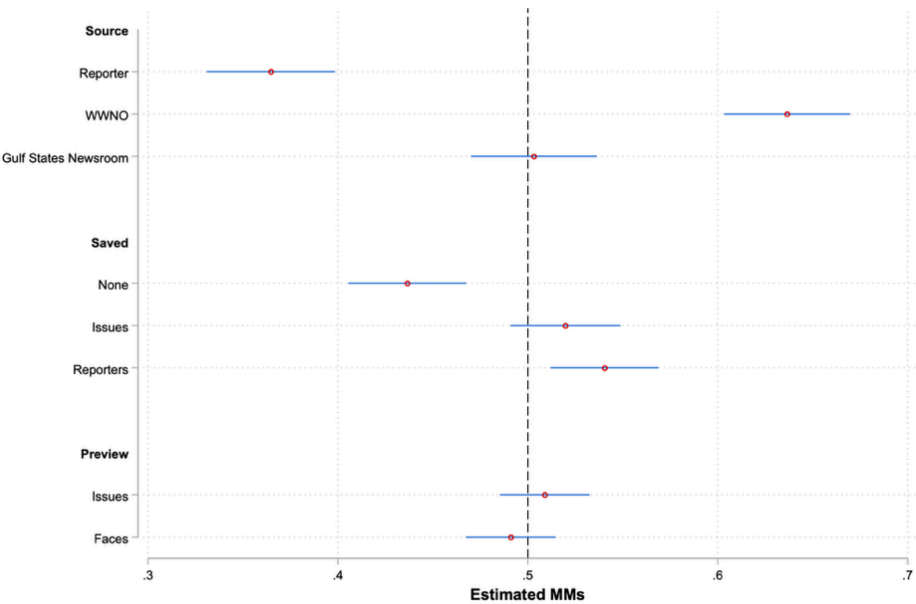
What we found

KEY FINDINGS

- What makes people follow a news account may differ from what makes them engage with individual content. The experiment suggest that follows and engagement are distinct behaviors that can respond to different features.
- Making reporters more visible in Reels produced more positive impressions of the outlet in some comparisons than emphasizing the outlet's name. The findings suggest that reporter visibility and institutional branding may play different roles for audience engagement and growth.
- Reporter-centered content showed promising signs of increasing engagement and improving perceptions of the story being covered. In several comparisons, content featuring a reporter's face and name performed better than alternatives, though not all differences reached conventional levels of significance (where noted).

Experiment 1: What drives follows

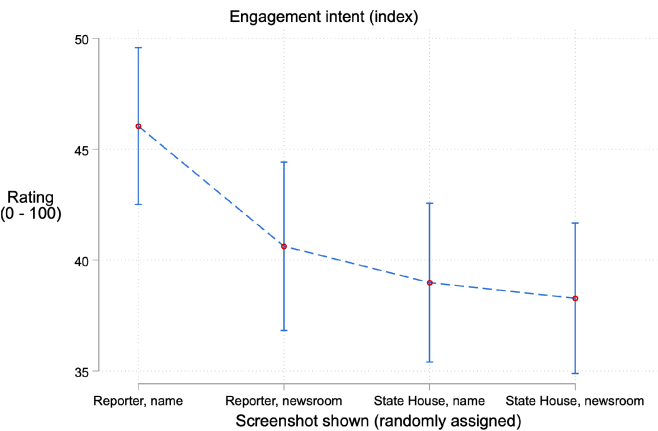
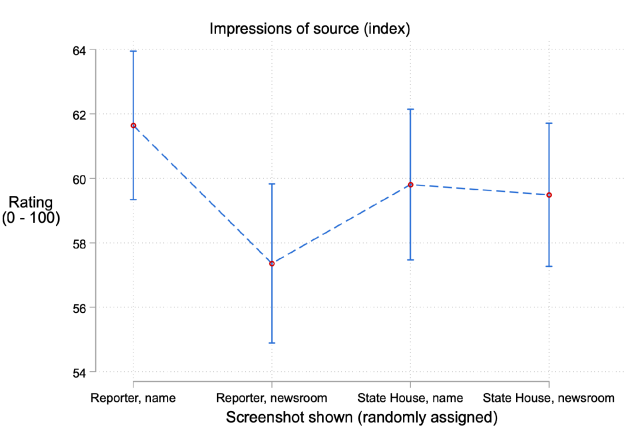
- Source and brand appeared to play a larger role in follow decisions than other profile features.
- Respondents preferred either type of saved stories to none.

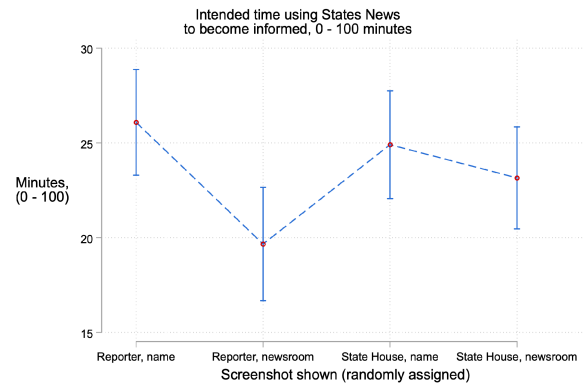
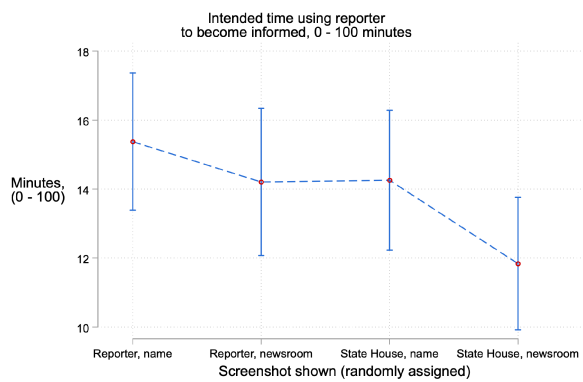


Experiment 2: What drives engagement



- Respondents were randomly shown one of four conditions and then asked about the content and news outlet.
- Intent to engage was higher when the content featured a reporter alongside the reporter's name than when the same reporter appeared alongside the newsroom name.





- Respondents shown the reporter-and-reporter-name condition also reported the greatest intention to spend time with similar content in the future.
- When measuring intent to use the outlet in the future, the reporter + name condition significantly increased intention compared to reporter + newsroom; for intent to use the reporter to become informed, the reporter + name condition was significantly higher only when compared to the state house + newsroom condition. The lesson? Let reporters speak for themselves on social media.

Applying the findings

These experiments suggest that the features that encourage someone to follow a news account may not be the same ones that encourage engagement with individual content. They also provide directional evidence that making individual journalists visible can influence how audiences respond to social media content and the news organizations behind it. Because several comparisons did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance, these findings are best treated as promising directions for further testing rather than a universal formula.

- **Consider the distinct goals of an account and its content.** Building recognition or followers for a news organization may require different strategies than encouraging audiences to engage with individual stories. Being clear about the desired outcome can help determine what to emphasize and measure.
- **Test reporter visibility as an audience strategy.** Reporter-centered content showed promising results in this experiment. Newsrooms and other trusted-information organizations could test when showing the people behind the information strengthens engagement or perceptions of the organization.
- **Explore how individual and institutional identities work together.** Rather than treating reporter and newsroom branding as an either-or choice, future tests could examine when audiences respond to an individual messenger, an institutional source or a combination of the two.
- **Test these approaches in real-world environments.** Randomized tests on social platforms could vary elements such as imagery and attribution while holding the underlying story constant, helping separate the effects of presentation from differences in subject matter.
- **Connect analytics to specific hypotheses.** Metrics such as engagement, time spent and follower growth become more informative when tied to intentional tests of what changed and why, rather than interpreted on their own.

- **Support learning alongside production.** Small experiments can help newsrooms and their partners understand not only what information audiences engage with, but how the messenger, branding and presentation shape that response. Building testing into journalism investments can generate learning that travels beyond a single newsroom.

Questions about this study or the Local NExT Lab? Reach out at jpdarr@syr.edu.

About the Local NExT Lab

The Local NExT Lab, part of the Institute for Democracy, Journalism & Citizenship (IDJC) at Syracuse University, brings together local newsrooms, funders and academic researchers to test approaches to how news is collected, framed and delivered. Through real-world experiments, the lab generates practical insights that participating newsrooms and the broader local news field can use to inform their work.

A NOTE ON SCOPE

This was a small national online sample that excluded anyone who participated in the first survey experiment, in which the conjoint experiment could not be analyzed due to data collection issues from the survey provider. Results here are suggestive and internally consistent rather than definitive; several comparisons described above did not reach conventional statistical significance. Treat these findings as a starting point for a randomized, on-platform test, not as confirmed causal estimates.