A CASE STUDY ON THE DAILY WILDCAT:

INSTAGRAM STRATEGIES FOR STUDENT NEWS ORGANIZATIONS

TO INCREASE ENGAGEMENT

BY

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A PROJECT

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Introduction

News is now primarily digital and people get their news online, particularly on social media and especially among younger audiences.

According to a Pew Research Center study, around 55 million newspapers (Figure 1) were circulated in 2000 (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). In 2020, this number decreased to 24 million. In contrast, from 2014 to 2020, the number of unique visitors to newspaper websites increased from 8 million to 13 million users. With the Millennial and Gen Z age groups specifically, 91% of these groups get their news at least weekly on social media, according to the New Media Insight Project (AP-NORC Center, 2022). Finding news on social media can be a pathway to users actively seeking these stories on news organizations' websites. Thus, for news organizations such as student media outlets to stay relevant for a younger audience, social platforms are an integral outlet to effectively utilize to inform their targeted audiences.

Figure 1

Total estimated circulation of U.S. daily newspapers

Total circulation of U.S. daily newspapers
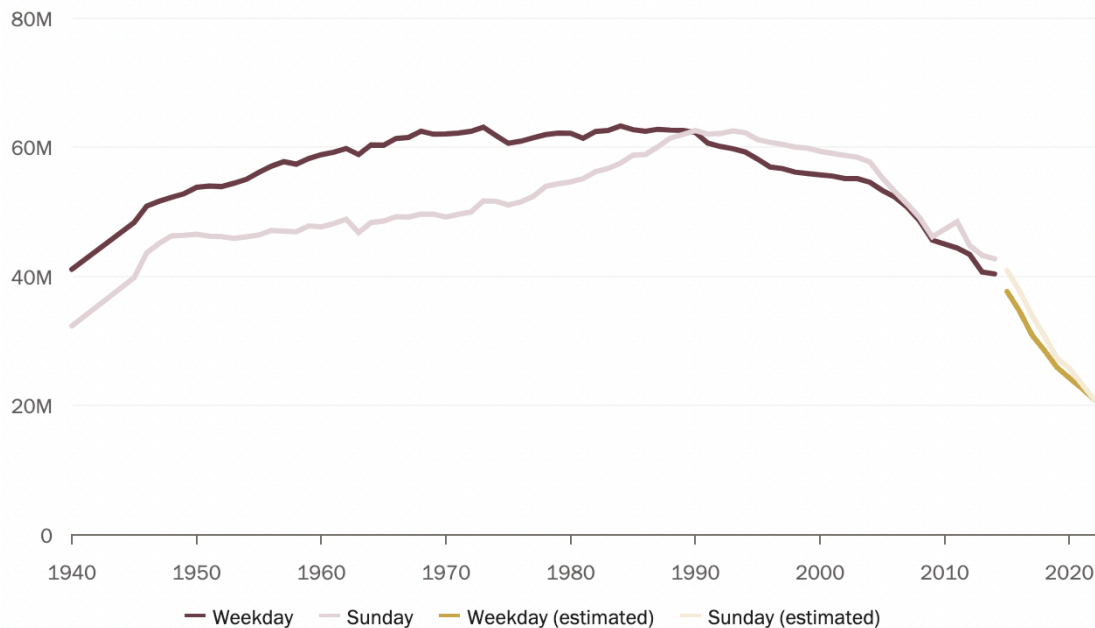
However, there is a lack of literature on social media strategies for news produced by student media organizations primarily targeted at 18 to 24-year-olds. Most research on students and news on social media mainly focuses on misinformation effects, media literacy and activism. The research available also is outdated, with much of it being done in the 2010s. Since 2020, social media platforms have transformed dramatically with the introduction of short video content on

most platforms, like YouTube Shorts or Instagram reels. Still, looking at the research available, it was found that student journalists did not follow best practices.

The few studies done on the efficacy of student media organization's practices used for sharing news on social media primarily focused on Twitter, now known as X. Within these studies, researchers found that college television stations' content "gained hardly any traction among followers," with results suggesting that they could "do more to engage their Twitter followers" such as using hashtags or links (Cozma and Hallaq, 2019). Cozma and Hallaq (2019) reasoned these results were due to regular turnover within student newsrooms. Similarly, another study on Twitter[1] found students seem to lack knowledge on how to use social media in a journalistic manner, such as having a mix of retweets and original tweets to promote articles based on news industry leaders' recommendations, though they use social media frequently (Saks et al., 2018). Saks et al. (2018) reasoned the students seemed to lack knowledge on social media use because journalism faculty may not spend much time "focusing on informing students of best practices for the platform" despite encouraging them to share their work on social media (Saks et al., 2018).

To address this lack of literature, I decided to focus on Instagram to determine the best practices for student media to engage their audience on this platform for my graduate project. Instagram is one of the most highly used social platforms among college-aged students. Instagram has the second highest social media usage among the ages 18-29 at 71% (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). The younger end of this group – ages 18 to 24 – was even higher in their Instagram usage with a rate of 76% (Figure 2). This demographic was chosen as it represents the typical age group for college students.

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[1] Twitter is now known as X. Within this paper, I will refer to X as Twitter in line with the research paper's wording, which took place before the name change.

Figure 2

Age gaps in Snapchat, Instagram use are particularly wide, less so for Facebook

% of U.S. adults in each age group who say they ever use ...
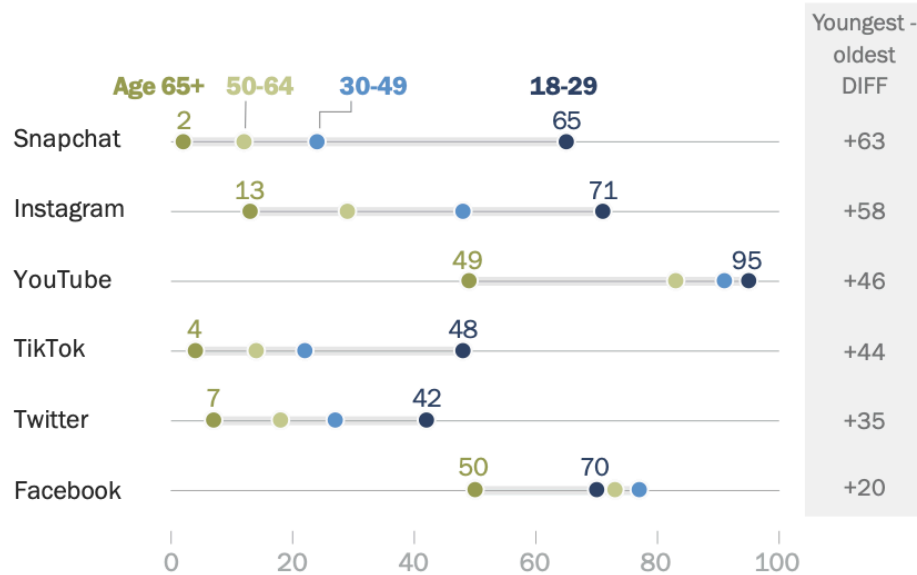
Note: All differences shown in DIFF column are statistically significant. The DIFF values shown are based on subtracting the rounded values in the chart. Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 25-Feb. 8, 2021.
"Social Media Use in 2021"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Despite YouTube being used by 95% of the target age group, I decided not to focus on YouTube for my best practices because it focuses primarily on long-form video content and could also be considered more of a streaming platform. On the other hand, Instagram is known for presenting short and engaging content ideal for promoting written news articles.

My project outlines the best practices on Instagram for student news organizations to disseminate news to their target audience, college students. As one of the social media editors at the student newspaper for the University of Arizona, the *Daily Wildcat,* I applied the best practices I found through my research and data analysis to the paper's Instagram page. I created Instagram posts that follow these best practices and posted them on the paper's Instagram account to examine if these posts resulted in higher audience engagement. The findings may be used as a resource for not just the *Daily Wildcat* but for other student media organizations. By studying strategies to create more engaging news posts suited for Instagram and analyzing the *Daily Wildcat'*s current

weaknesses, student news organizations may use this information to increase their online presence and inform a larger audience about current events in and around campus. Social media engagement shows the strength of the relationship between the user and the follower. According to Buffer, an online social media marketing tool, engagement is a term used to define audience interaction with content which can be reflected in factors such as follows, likes, comments and shares (Eckstein, 2021). According to another popular online social media marketing tool Hootsuite, a higher engagement number is desirable for student media, as they can reflect the user's "level of involvement and interest" (Christison, 2023) and ensures these news stories are being shown to as many people as possible. Posts with higher rates of engagement are more likely to appear on people's social media algorithms.

As of fall 2023 when this project officially began, the *Daily Wildcat's* Instagram account has around 5,300 followers with a like average for each post of around 37 likes. The engagement rate was calculated as 0.69% which was defined as average, using HypeAuditor. Compared with the Instagram accounts of other similar student news organizations I surveyed[2], this was on the lower end, where engagement rates typically ranged from 0.61% to 4.90%. It should be noted that engagement rates tend to be lower for accounts with higher follower counts and the student news organizations had varying follower counts. Those with 1,000 to 5,000 followers have an average engagement rate of 4.8% and with 20,000 to 100,000 followers, this rate dropped to 1.2% (HypeAuditor, n.d.). HypeAuditor did not state an average engagement rate for accounts between 5,000 to 20,000 followers. On another note, the Instagram account for the *Daily Wildcat* has around 2,500 people in the age range of 18-34, which is far below the University of Arizona's total enrollment of around 44,000 people.

On Instagram, social media marketing platform Hootsuite recommends looking into factors such as posting at the right time for when followers are most active, engaging with followers by responding to comments and posting reels (Newberry, 2022). Hootsuite is an established voice in marketing, winning a Shorty Award in 2022, which is an annual, international award competition honoring social media ("We Don't Just Get Social, n.d.).

Another factor in the dissemination of news on social media is accessibility and making content readily available to others. A 2013 article found in the peer-reviewed journal *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* evaluated the concepts of reception and friending in social media (Weeks & Holbert, 2013). Reception is the "consumption of news content, akin to traditional exposure, while friending is the act of establishing a formal link between oneself and another entity within a social media environment" (Weeks & Holbert, 2013, p. 213). The study found that with more exposure to an article or news topic, the more likely it was social media users would share this news online.

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[2] Surveyed organizations were in the Pac-12 or the Western Association of University Publication Managers, which the *Wildcat* is housed under. A full list of surveyed organizations is in the "Journalistic Methods" section.

Though many student media outlets are on social media, they may not know how to best leverage these platforms to engage their audience. One suggested reason for this was that though students are frequently on social media, they lack the knowledge to create and apply audience engagement practices in a journalistic manner (Saks et al., 2018).

Scarce literature exists specifically on best practices for U.S. college student media to engage audiences on social media platforms. Even less literature exists that specifically studies Instagram and what college student media editors can do to increase their followers and engagement on the platform. While the research that does exist was mostly outdated, with much of it being done in the 2010s, some recent literature stated there were three main components to a post that would make it more likely for college students to share a news story on Instagram: when the post allowed them to express their opinions, raise awareness of their friends and spark conversations (Wang, 2021). Another study in 2022 evaluated the reasons why users continuously engaged with specific brands on social media. Three factors that positively drove engagement were "compatibility with lifestyle, perceived information quality and escapism" (Osei-Frimpong et al., 2022, p.1). The more the brands exhibited these factors, the more likely it was the user would engage in the post. Interestingly, one factor that did not affect continuous engagement was the users' perceived level of enjoyment. From this, a proposed next step may be to evaluate what topics related to news would match best with these factors listed. I would apply these practices to examine engaging content related to brands in news. For example, perhaps political pieces do better than other general pieces as it can allow students to comment and express their opinions. Also, in line with the compatibility with lifestyle factors that positively drove engagement, perhaps for news, this could translate to more pieces on student life a college student could resonate with, such as dorm living.

Analyzing the Daily Wildcat as a case study

Within the University of Arizona specifically, there is a lack of courses and material on social media for news. When searching the keyword "social media" on the University of Arizona's fall 2023 course catalog, there were no courses that taught social media at the journalism school. Only one course at the university as a whole, "Social Media Strategies Across Professions" offered by the Information Science and eSociety Major seemed relevant for social media practices across professions per catalog description. Other related courses were more about the research, history and literature regarding the digitizing world. Through my search queries, there may be courses in other colleges I may have missed, but it is certain that for the journalism school, there are no current offerings for how to disseminate news articles through social media. To verify this, I have read the complete list of offered courses for the semester within the UA's School of Journalism and found no related courses. My project aims to fill this gap by being a

resource for faculty and students engaged with student media at the University of Arizona to disseminate campus news efficiently.

Through a small sample survey (n=27) I conducted in spring 2023 on Qualtrics which surveyed UA students on their use of social media, around half of the respondents said they do not follow the *Daily Wildcat*. It should be noted that five of these respondents were seniors and may have graduated. When asked why, many of the 27 respondents said they were unaware of the student news organization or did not know the publication was active on those platforms (Figure 3).

Figure 3
Survey respondent feedback

Q20 - Briefly explain why you do not follow the Daily Wildcat on social media.   Page Options ⌄

Briefly explain why you do not follow the Daily Wildcat on social media.

Because the news is not interesting to me

I didn't know they had social media!

I haven't really heard of the Daily Wildcat before.

I only follow individuals and some non-profit organizations on social media

I didn't even know they had any.

Page: 1 Of 3

Note. Many of the respondents said they did not know the *Daily Wildcat* was active on social media.

The news outlet is relatively underdeveloped on social media as the newsroom position varied depending on the Editor-in-Chief at the time. When I started in 2020, there was no social media coordinator yet appointed. Instead, it was a free-for-all, with editors having access to promote and post any recently published stories. Because everyone was responsible for posting stories, no one did, which often led to content rarely being posted across our social media pages. The paper began to employ a social media coordinator as late as the fall of 2022. Currently, the *Wildcat* has two students on the social media team this semester. In the previous two semesters, this number was one. Thi*s* lack of resources and manpower to fulfill the necessary duties of the job was also identified as issues by the American Press Institute (2017) in a survey of 59 people representing newsrooms "of all types and sizes." In the article, they argued that newsrooms were still using outdated practices for social media. They found that "budget cuts and time constraints" hampered training on current best audience engagement practices on social media. There were

also qualification gaps in hiring social media professionals, with many newsrooms hiring people on an entry-level basis for social media positions. With this, the American Press Institute reasoned the lack of "high-quality social media instruction in many college journalism programs" further exacerbated this problem when people were hired directly from graduation. For student-led papers, many of the social media teams are going in with little to no professional experience in social media, much less social media for journalism. Further, if a social media team is comprised of a small number of members only and they get busy with personal matters and school, the rate and quality of news being shared on social media can decrease as the social team tries to keep up with the pace of news being published.

Review and analysis of current research

Shareability
[One study involved a focus group of 56 people](#) and analyzed how consumers navigated news on social media (Fletcher & Nielson, 2018). The authors found that many do not see social media as a place to get news but rather as two distinct entities (Fletcher & Nielson, 2018, p. 1765). When audiences did see news, they usually saw it shared by people from their social circles and on topics they felt were relevant to them. They did not actively seek news on social media and viewed it as biased.

Emotional value and shareability
A peer-reviewed article from [Digital Journalism](#) found that the presence of emotions except sadness resulted in more shares on Facebook, but not on Twitter (Brown et al., 2017, p. 281). Building upon this study in 2020, another research article was published regarding the ["engagement in emotional news on social media"](#) (Choi et al., 2020). Conversely to the previous article, they found that people on Facebook were less likely to share articles with positive emotions and more likely to engage with articles that were associated with sadness. To examine this, they analyzed how the emotions were delivered visually. They found that though positive news usually had a high reaction rate, it was not shared as frequently as articles that were associated with sadness. The researchers also found the element of sadness was not the only major factor in engagement. Cultural and international news with an element of sadness were shared more frequently than other news subjects; sadness was not found to have a noticeable relationship with other topics. This article did not evaluate the presence of emotions on Instagram, again showing the lack of published research on this social media platform.

Positive stories that were unexpected/odd/surprising or had social significance overwhelmingly went viral on social media compared to other posts, according to a study that analyzed the [characteristics of viral news stories](#) on Twitter and YouTube through content analysis (Al-Rawi, 2017). There were slight differences between the two platforms, where YouTube users preferred more positive news at a higher rate than Twitter, 77% compared to 58% (Al-Rawi, 2017, p.72).

When sharing news to create more audience engagement, it seems that an element of surprise and positivity should be considered along with balancing this with news that is pertinent to the general population, such as stories that may have a slightly more negative undertone like topics on gun control, politics, or administrative failures. Even before media organizations share news, one type of reporting that might be explored is solutions journalism, which explains social problems and the response to them. A research study in 2022 based in the United Kingdom found this method as a "way to improve audiences' mental wellbeing and engagement with the news" by empowering audiences (Zhao et al., 2022, p. 356). They found that audiences would avoid the news if it negatively affected their mood. Solutions journalism can be defined as a type of investigative reporting that focuses on the response to social issues. In my project, I would identify posts as this type of reporting if they have the "four pillars of solutions journalism" according to the Solutions Journalism Network, which offers insight, evidence and limitations to the introduced problems in addition to the response to the social issue (Solutions Journalism Network, n.d.).

Another 2023 article examined the post features of local television news on Instagram relating to emotion (Guo & Sun, 2023). In studying over 12 local television stations and 2,100 of their combined Instagram posts, the researchers found that "hard" news that covers topics such as politics was equally well-received to "soft" news that usually provides entertainment (Guo & Sun, 2023, p. 16). However, they found that personal, positive stories such as recoveries or celebrations tended to have higher engagement numbers, whereas news topics that intensified political polarization resulted in a decreased level of engagement. Though it is important to cover both topics, a healthy balance of the two should be considered. When posting these news stories, the researchers noted social media users prefer posts that take a shorter time to read and most Gen Z and Millennials prefer to receive this content through video. In video, the research said, the form requires a higher time commitment and effort to process so that must be considered when conveying these posts and around 85-90% of videos are viewed in silence with captions. Thus, the presentation of social media videos requires a different style than traditional television broadcasts.

Communication style
In terms of the communication style on social media, one 2018 research study found there was a rise in a more subjective style on these platforms, specifically on Facebook (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2018). A common format was to add a status message, rather than the traditional picture, headline and lede (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2018, p. 45). The researchers concluded this was done to add interpersonal elements to the posts, which may draw in more readers. There was a limitation in this study as they did not investigate the effectiveness of this method and called for more research into how this style affects the audience.

Journalistic method
Semester 1 and 2 (Fall 2022 and Spring 2023)

In the first two semesters of the project, I worked on gathering information from a previous social media coordinator at the *Daily Wildcat* and organized a focus group discussion and survey. This was done to understand the current operations of the student newspaper and what seemed to work well and to gain student insights, which was my primary audience on Instagram.

In-depth interview:
I conducted several qualitative studies to further examine this topic. The first was an in-depth interview with Kate Ewing, the former social media coordinator of the *Daily Wildcat,* about her experience, practices and time working in the position in fall 2022.

We went through the Daily Wildcat's Instagram account where Ewing showed me the top three performing posts. All three posts she showed me had strong political undertones, which she said could spur people to feel like they need to actively comment or engage with the post. As research previously cited showed, social media posts do well if they elicit strong emotions (Al-Rawi, 2017; Brown et al., 2017; Choi et al., 2020). Ewing further speculated the reason for the posts' success, saying it was due to relating to a topic that resonated with a large population and had good photo composition.

Additionally, posting to the Instagram stories section, which is a way to post content only available for 24 hours on the platform, seems to offer more engagement than posting on the main feed in some ways, such as link clicks. This is because posting to the main feed does not allow for hyperlinks, whereas the story feature does. Another interesting note was that Ewing noted the position required more "manpower" (sic) than was currently available, as she primarily worked alone.

Focus group:
In spring 2023, I also organized a focus group discussion that revealed how UArizona students consume news through social media. We had eight participants and it should be noted our results were somewhat skewed, with around half of the participants having an affiliation with the *Daily Wildcat.* Though these participants may have different consumption habits than the general student population due to this, there were some insightful takeaways from this conversation, as most of these participants still did not keep up with student news despite the skew. Takeaways included the importance of accessibility in having the news delivered to them rather than searching for it and the prevalence of national over local news in social media channels in general. When asked about how or why they would consume news, everyone described the way they consumed their news differently. In addition to the variation of social media platforms they preferred to consume news from, they also differed in their preference for audio, video or text.

Throughout this nuance, however, there was a common theme on the ease of access. The reason why the students chose to access their news through their preferred platforms was the same: the method presented itself as the easiest option for them. They chose to receive news from places that were the most convenient for them, whether that be through push notifications or being able to listen to a podcast at the start of the morning. Though newsletters are not part of social media, it seemed to be a common point for all participants, as they were familiar with receiving the *Daily Wildcat* newsletter each week. However, when prodded about their consumption of the *Daily Wildcat*'s social media specifically, they seemed to stray away from this topic as the group lacked experience in this. It seemed the group was more engaged in national news rather than local. The last subject that resonated with me was a brief discourse on the effect of COVID-19. A participant had made the point that after COVID-19, they felt isolated from the world and sought human emotions. This part of the conversation was where I noticed the most nonverbal reactions, where almost all the participants were nodding along to this statement. It seems there is a need to create news that reflects the human condition and emotion, and through my research, I would like to explore how to best do this.

Survey:

I conducted a small sample survey (n=27) in spring 2023 on Qualtrics to survey UA students on their use of social media. The results confirmed the Auxier & Anderson (2021) study, where Instagram proved itself to be the most relevant and used platform for the overall student population. This is because it has the highest daily use rate among this age group. When asked where they got their news within these platforms and where they would most prefer their news amongst several platforms, Instagram was the clear winner in both aspects (Figure 4). Because of this, I focused on developing a set of practices for Instagram for my project.

Figure 4

Social media sites visited vs. preferred for news
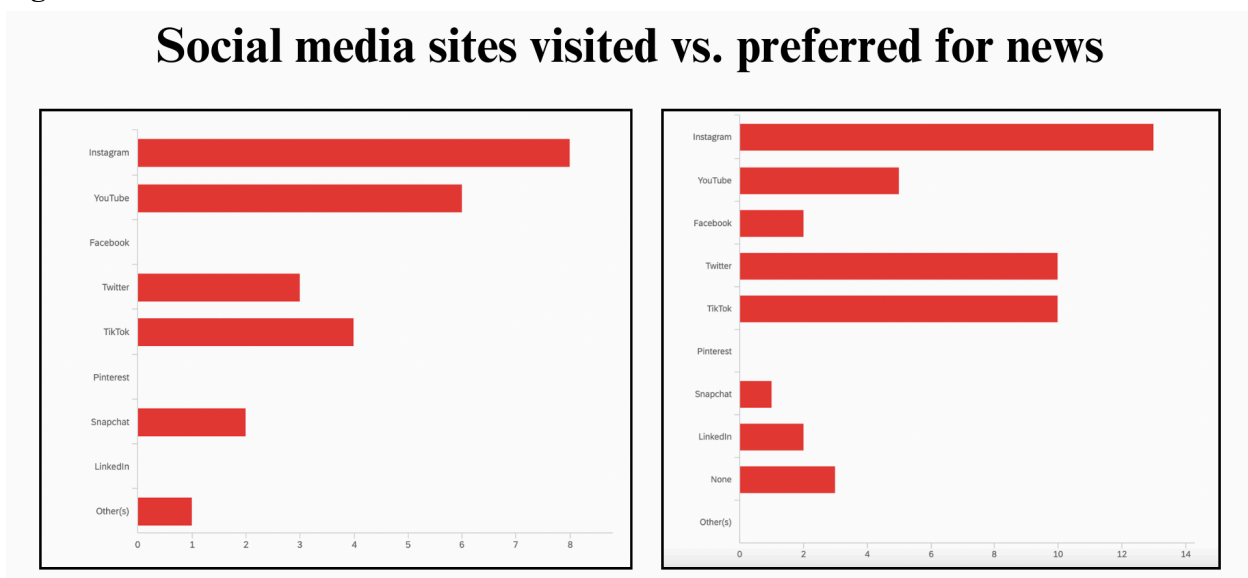
Note. In both charts, Instagram is the top-chosen platform for where people get their news (left) and where they prefer to receive it (right).

Semester 3 and 4 (Fall 2023 and Spring 2024)
In the fall semester, I joined the social media team at the *Daily Wildcat*, a small team of two. I took this opportunity to learn about the current posting procedures before I made any changes.

My primary goal for fall was to get an overview of what we are doing now and what is working. This semester was spent learning and performing what the organization has always done, not trying to attempt anything new to serve as a baseline for engagement metrics for the spring.

I also reached out to the editor-in-chief or social media editors of various student news organizations comparable to the Daily Wildcat for interviews on their current practices during this time. I contacted 17 total organizations following the recommendation of Brett Fera, who was a former student adviser and alumni of the *Daily Wildcat*. This includes fellow Pac-12 schools and media outlets part of the Western Association of University Publication Managers, of which the Wildcat is a part. These schools are composed of the following: The Daily (Washington), Daily Emerald (Oregon), Daily Barometer/Orange Media Network (Oregon State), Daily Trojan (USC), Daily Bruin (UCLA), The Chronicle (Utah), State Press (ASU), Daily Evergreen (Washington State), Minnesota Daily (Minnesota), Daily Texan (Texas), Rocky Mountain Collegian (Colorado State), Crimson White (Alabama), State News (Michigan State), Mustang News (Cal Poly SLO), Daily Kansan (Kansas), OU Daily (Oklahoma) and Daily Tar Heel (North Carolina). My primary goal in these interviews was to serve as a framework to create recommendations for the *Daily Wildcat*'s Instagram for the next semester.

The table below (Figure 5) is a listing of various Pac-12 and WAUPM organizations and their engagement rates along with their follower counts from fall 2023. The average engagement ratio came out to 1.996%.

Figure 5
Pac-12 and WAUPM organizations' engagement rates

Organization name	Engagement rate	Follower count
Daily Wildcat (UArizona)	0.69%	5.3k
State Press (ASU)	2.54%	4.8k
The Daily (UW) (Washington)	2.49%	4.5k
Daily Emerald (Oregon)	1.39%	4.2k

Daily Barometer/Orange Media Network (Oregon State)	4.90%	1.8k
Daily Trojan (USC)	1.10%	19.7k
Daily Bruin (UCLA)	1.38%	36.2k
The Daily Utah Chronicle (Utah)	3.06%	1.8k
Daily Evergreen (Washington State)	2.87%	2.1k
Minnesota Daily (Minnesota)	0.61%	6.2k
Crimson White (Alabama)	0.96%*	8k
Daily Kansan (Kansas)	2.55%	13.1k
Mustang News (Cal Poly)	2.37%	13.3k

*Crimson White had a lot of ads with a low like rate that likely lowered its engagement rate compared to their actual news posts

Interview findings:
Of the organizations above, I interviewed the following six student media outlets: Daily Emerald (Oregon), Mustang News (Cal Poly), Minnesota Daily (Minnesota), Crimson White (Alabama), State Press (ASU) and Daily Kansan (Kansas). I reached out to all these organizations via email. To find this contact information, I would go to their website, locate their masthead, see if there was a social media editor and locate their email from there. If the social media editor position was not displayed, I would reach out to the editor-in-chief. These six student media outlets were chosen as they were the organizations that responded to me.

I interviewed four social media editors and three editor-in-chiefs, when the social editors were not available. One interview was done jointly with both the editor-in-chief and the social media editor. I did not always ask, but from those I did, their chosen majors varied, ranging from journalism, business and computer science.

To gather information on the student organization's current practices, I asked questions about their background, current practices, insight and challenges they have on Instagram. Questions about background included the responsibilities of the position and the process of posting. When speaking about current practices, I would ask about any rules or guidelines the organization had as well as how often they posted. For insights, I would ask them about any engagement or best practices. To close, I would usually ask about any challenges they had in the position and any improvements they thought they may have to make in the future.

From my interviews, I learned that each social media team's size differed, but was usually around 1-3 people. The biggest social media team I encountered was seven people at Mustang News for Cal Poly. The social media editor said that the team rotates positions biweekly, focusing on one platform at a time. This may have a positive effect on their engagement. This news organization also was on the higher end of the average for engagement with a rate of 2.37% in fall 2023 compared to the average rate of 1.99%. As of spring 2024, they currently sit at a rate of 5.75%. Some organizations chose to schedule their posts out in advance while some did not. Their method of choosing stories differed, ranging from the choice of the editor, correlation with the newsletter and website analytics. To confirm my hypothesis that Instagram is a suitable platform for students, I would start with questions about social media in general. Then, I would ask what their best-performing platform was for students. The most common answer was Twitter or Instagram.

Some common themes I found regarding the best engagement practices for Instagram were to post content that was related to the student body, post breaking news and use external traffic drivers as indicators for posting. To begin, when I asked what practices were best for Instagram, all of the editors said posts related to the culture of student life would do well. This included any presence of Greek life, prominent sports, administrative changes, what students think or how they're taking action regarding any national political movements, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Breaking university news was a subset of this that would result in more follows, shares and likes. Breaking a news story would often result in an increased number of followers and shares due to the pressing manner of the situation compared to more evergreen posts. In other words, students seem to care more about the coverage of topics that would have a direct impact on themselves. It seemed that the primary focus on what made a good post was on the content of the piece, rather than how the content was posted. When I asked further questions about how the content was posted, the editors said considering a good quality photo along with composition was important as well as trying methods that increased the interactiveness of a post. An example of this was a bleeding photo, which splits up one photo into two so Instagram users have to swipe multiple photos in a post.

On another note, I found that not all student organizations would post every story that was published within their organization. Instead, they would choose to feature stories that were chosen for their newsletter, were predicted to do well looking at website analytics or from the best judgment and prediction of the social media editor or editorial board. Some reasons for this would be because of a lack of staff to post all of the content published or because the editorial board felt that the posts were best-suited for only certain types of platforms.

Applying the interview findings:

I applied this information to the *Daily Wildcat* by first gathering website and newsletter analytics and comparing them to the analytics of the *Wildcat*'s Instagram posts. I wanted to determine if there is a correlation between the performance of the same story on the website and the newsletter on Instagram. Since the website and newsletter are usually published before an Instagram post, it could serve as an indicator of the performance of the post.

To evaluate the correlation, I created a spreadsheet making note of the engagements in an Instagram post and its corresponding newsletter link clicks (Figure 6). It should be noted that data points were limited as an Instagram post was not always made for every story. The correlation coefficient was 0.6, which is considered to be a strong association (The BMJ, n.d.). The findings indicate stories that generate high click-through rates from the Daily Wildcat Newsletter will also correspond to higher engagement on Instagram.

I collected page view numbers within this spreadsheet as well. The correlation coefficient between page views and engagement was 0.4, which is considered to be a moderate association (Figure 7).

Figure 6

Newsletter link clicks vs. Engagements (likes, shares, saves, comments)

Figure 7

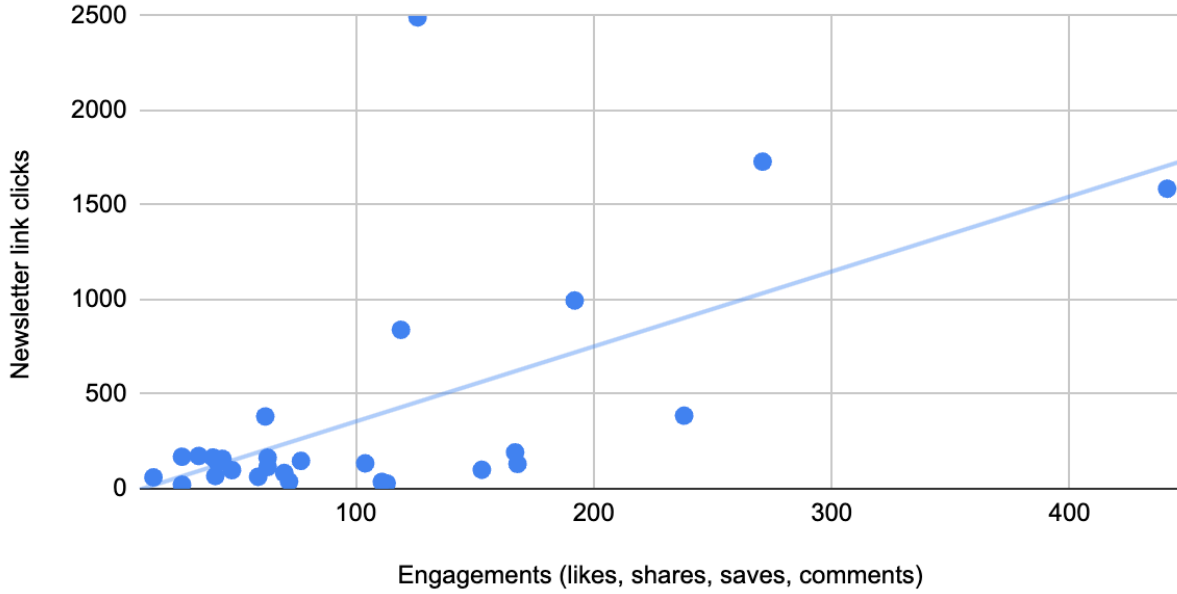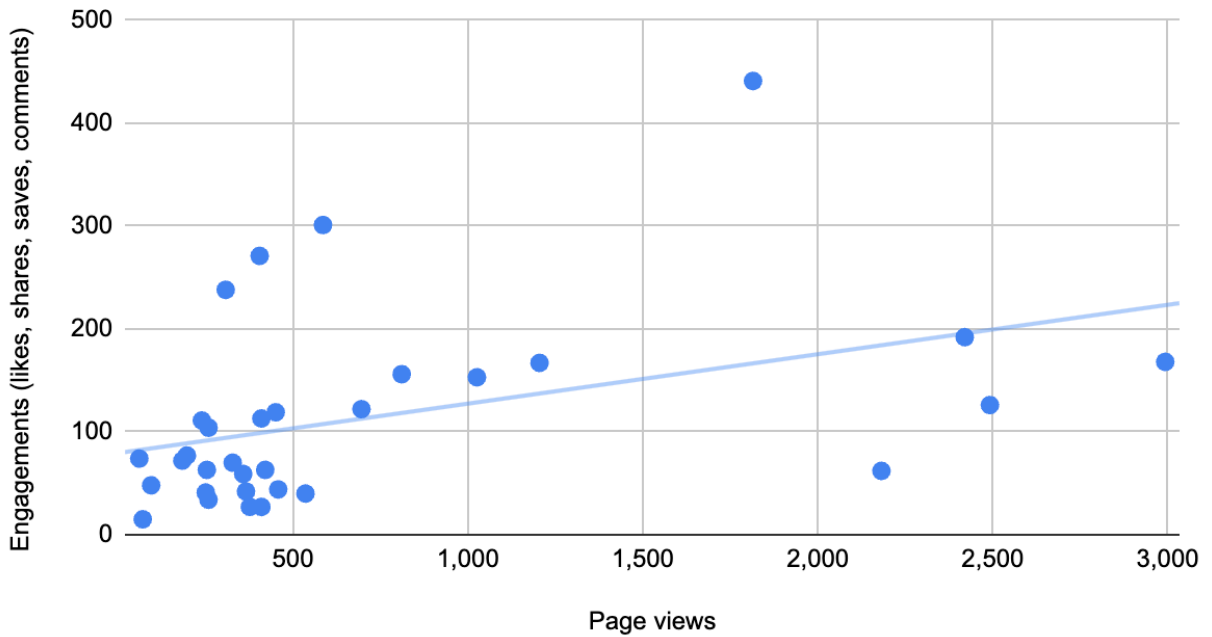### Engagements (likes, shares, saves, comments) vs. Page views

The findings indicate student media organizations may consider using external traffic drivers as indicators for what will perform well on Instagram, although newsletters may serve as a stronger indicator. Alternatively, if a student news organization's goal is to drive more website traffic through newsletter clicks, Instagram could be used to gauge what stories are more interesting to the student body to include in the newsletter.

I further gave thought to the previous research done on emotional value and shareability, as well as what the editors mentioned about posting content that related to the student body and university culture and posting breaking news stories. These factors led to a consideration of news values for data analysis, as this is related to the qualitative reasons given for what seems to do well on social media. Previous research did not include the study of news values and audience engagement on Instagram. Because social media is a visual medium and reflecting on the comments about photo composition, I also considered whether or not a post had a real photo rather than a graphical one along with whether or not that photo included a face.

With this in mind, I evaluated 100 Instagram posts across 10 different news values and factors: real photo (or no graphic design), human element, proximity, timeliness, conflict, impact, emotion, prominence, oddity and human interest. A score of "1" was given if a post had the element and "0" if the post lacked it. I added up all of these factors to get a score ranging from 0-10, which I called my news value sum. When comparing the news value sum to the engagement they received, post engagement was strongly correlated with a correlation coefficient of 0.75. I compared the individual news values and factors to engagement as well, but it was found that these values were correlated with weak to moderate associations. The values (Figure 8) found are shown below ranging from the highest correlation to the weakest:

Figure 8
Correlation coefficient of news values to engagement

News value sum	.75
Conflict	.55
Emotion	.52
Prominence	.44
Human element (face or no face)	.41
Impact	.40
Timeliness	.35

Proximity	.34
Real photo (no graphic)	.25
Oddity	.17
Human interest	.074

For oddity and human interest stories, the data points available were very few, which may have caused some data discrepancies. Still, looking at the table above, it can be concluded that the news value sum had the strongest correlation with engagement, making it the biggest predictor of success on Instagram. In other words, it seems that the more news values a post had, the more likely it was to have greater engagement. Evaluating articles based on their news values before posting can help social media editors decide what to prioritize and have a sense of what will do well. Additionally, the data indicates highlighting a story's conflict, emotion and prominence will help increase engagement.

It should be noted I participated in individual coding, and so evaluating whether or not an article had a news value was to my discretion only. In the future, it would be valuable to have more than one coder and evaluate intercoder reliability through the results. Thus, two or more people could come together to agree on the content and value more accurately.

Applying the findings to the *Daily Wildcat*:
After gathering and analyzing the data, I created a social media guide for the *Daily Wildcat* and other student media organizations to use to increase engagement on Instagram:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kNmf_hCLJvceMATVnQCSh5CAjbgmnh2zpIQ4ELrry4k/edit?usp=sharing

The guide explains the significance of news values in creating Instagram posts as well as how to create a spreadsheet to evaluate these values and know what to prioritize while posting. It also details using newsletter or website analytics as a predictor of success. Additionally, I created another section that details what a typical social media desk looks like and how it functions. When interviewing different student media organizations, the social media team seems to be a fairly new and varied position, with some being more developed than others. Social media editors could use this information as a guide to aid in the evolution of their teams (or in some cases, to begin a team).

In addition to this guide, moving forward, the *Daily Wildcat* should consider producing more stories more closely related to the UA community. As I coded the different elements, it became clear that more general stories, such as pieces on the greater Tucson community and its

organizations or opinion pieces on pop culture, did not perform as well. This might also be due to these stories and narratives being fulfilled in other professional media organizations. However, this does not mean those topics should not be covered at all. In creating stories with a general topic, it would be better to consider the UA community in every aspect and how it will or has directly impacted students, faculty and staff to provide a more unique local angle that other professional media organizations may lack. Moreover, in contrast to previous research studies mentioned in the previous "*Emotional value and shareability*" section, negative stories appeared to do well in terms of engagement on Instagram, perhaps due to often having factors such as conflict, prominence, proximity and impact in the community. Thus, these types of stories should be further explored in the future.

As I coded the different elements for 102 total articles, I noticed two news values were greatly underrepresented: oddity and human interest with a total of seven and 10 having those news values. Though stories containing oddity may be harder to find, the Wildcat might consider producing more human-interest stories focused on the UA community. The few that were published over the past two semesters did fairly well: "UA Graduate, self-taught roller skater rolls out all-level classes" reaching 181 engagements, "Club spotlight: AZ Pole and Aerial dance offers 'no judgment'" reaching 120 engagements and "'People need to know': UA student launches drug awareness clothing line" reaching 114 engagements. According to Hootsuite, entertainment and media companies have an average engagement rate of 1.56%, which results in around a benchmark of 85 engagements for the Wildcat's ~5,500 followers (Mikolajczyk, 2024). The previous posts did well over this number.

With my findings, the Wildcat should also consider their primary goal for Instagram, such as increasing presence among UA students, faculty and staff, driving website traffic or increasing ad revenue. As I worked as the social media coordinator of the *Daily Wildcat*, it seemed that the primary goal was to promote our stories. However, as the Wildcat navigates a current financial crisis and budget cuts, Instagram may be another source of revenue not yet explored. During my time over two semesters, there was only one ad posted to the Instagram account, which may indicate that there is an opportunity here to fund the organization we are not currently doing.

Limitations and further reflection
Some factors that limited the scope of my investigation include a lack of funding, availability, constantly changing social media platforms and time. Because my journalistic methods were conducted on a volunteer basis with no incentives, it limited the number of people surveyed. Though I would have liked my participant pool to represent the most diverse student population and student media organizations, this was not possible within my parameters. On a similar note, I contacted social media editors from different organizations along with a follow-up message, but I did not receive any response from a majority of the people I reached out to. This meant I could only interview the organizations that reached back out to me. This is likely because of a lack of

incentives, busy student schedules and the high turnover in student newsrooms. Some organizations had higher engagement rates but did not get back to me despite several follow-up emails. One organization I was curious about was the Daily Tar Heel (North Carolina), which dealt with the aftermath of a shooting on the UNC campus. I would have liked to know how the organization provided this coverage.

After the interviews, I began to collect data on website and newsletter analytics to compare to the performance of the Instagram posts. However, one limitation that was posed was that the *Daily Wildcat* recently changed its host server for the website, deleting all the website analytics from years prior. This means I only have website analytics starting from December 2023.

There was also a time concern. My research aims to find and test the best practices on Instagram within four semesters, where the first two were spent researching and developing my project proposal. If I had more time, I would have been able to possibly manipulate the different factors tested with more data points. Many factors are in place that result in a social media post's success, and so with the time presented to me, it was difficult to only manipulate one factor comprehensively. I struggled with wanting to test out different factors such as Instagram stories, caption length and post format, but had to limit my testing for the sake of time. I also wanted to gather and analyze the data for what had the most shares, but this was something I had to forgo due to time constraints.

Moreover, social media platforms are constantly evolving, thus a social media strategy may be deemed irrelevant over time. For example, Instagram recently added the "stories" and "reels" features within the last couple of years, which can leave content creators scrambling for how best to utilize and adapt to these new elements to best engage their audience. For the *Daily Wildcat* personally, which is primarily text-based, it has struggled to keep up with the demand for video content which is something I would like to explore further if given the opportunity.

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