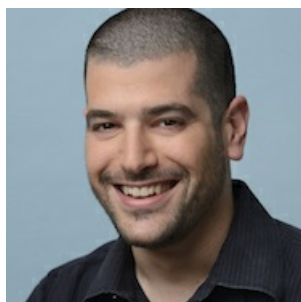


COLUMNS

## Debate over short-form vs. long-form content irrelevant

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*Tom Pachys is cofounder and chief product officer of Playbuzz*

By **Tom Pachys**

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The never-ending debate over whether short-form content is disrupting the traditional, long-form article has outlived its usefulness.

What began as a reasonable discussion about the merits of newer, digital-native forms of content and what effect, if any, those were having on the vaunted long-form article has devolved into an all-out war-of-words amongst aficionados of both camps.

Despite the many think pieces on the merits or supposed lack thereof of short-form content, the argument falls flat on a basic premise: it is based on an old-school idea of how people consume media.

Long and short of it

Quite often, long-form content can be a waste of a writer's talent and time. Why? Because nowadays, readers have less patience, with 55 percent of those who click on an article spending less than 15 seconds on the page, according to Chartbeat.

Publishers know this, even installing "Read More" buttons onto long-form content so readers do not see the article's entire text from the get-go.

Of course, some excellent, essay-style long-form content lives online. But how many of us actually take the time to read any of it or for that matter, finish it?

For example, if I see a headline for "Highlights from This Year's Presidential Debates," I will likely click on the link to see the top quotes from presidential candidates, rather than read a verbatim transcript of the entire debate.

As media consumption habits and audience traffic patterns changed, short-form became the answer to readers' commitment issues. This avenue offers brief reads that do not require a lot of time spent on page, thus aligning more with current and, likely, future media-consumption habits.

But short-form tends to lean towards the superficial, with many unable to use it to tell deeper, more serious stories, though cute animal slideshows are always enjoyable.

Like most things in life, a balance in our media diet is both healthy and necessary if we want to be exposed to the world's best content.

Choosing the right form to tell your story is what I call smart-form content.

Three top

Smart-form content means pairing the best format for telling a particular story with audience-driven writing. It marries data, interactivity and modern measurement goals, while being fully optimized for social, mobile and engagement, resulting in content people actually want to read.

So how do we condition ourselves to focus on creating smart-form content? Here are three suggestions for getting started:

1. Think outside of the article. The traditional article has served publishers well for more than 100 years. But in the digital-first, social media-centric world we all live in now, is it really the best first option when you think about how to create a great, engaging piece of content?

For too many publishers, the standard 600- to 1,000-word article with two often stock images is still the main attraction. That is a shame because there are many new content formats that can tell the story better and yield far higher reader engagement rates.

Do not default to long-form. Other formats can be equally as informative and rich in their storytelling techniques, and are far more conducive to our speedy lives which still require a level of information and, yes, entertainment.

Formats serve as an editorial solution that can also incorporate sponsored content, or ad messaging, into a vessel that readers might actually want to dwell on. Not to mention, some high-profile public figures are doing it, such as Hillary Clinton and Taylor Swift.

2. Focus on the right data, not just data for the sake of using data. It is common for publishers to study audience and content data to help inform their editorial strategies. Too often, though, that data amounts to the most blunt metrics: page views and social shares.

Page views, specifically, are a troublesome metric. They are the window shoppers of online content. Your window might look great, but when people enter, they can leave immediately without interacting or consuming what you offer.

Views are also subject to the actions you take as a publisher whether you buy traffic to a certain article or tease a piece of content on the homepage.

For too long we have used this metric in hopes that more page views would lead to increased reader engagement. This has not proven to be the case.

We have been holding on to the outdated notion that page views is the most important metric while ignoring bounce rates, time spent on page and completion rates.

Advertisers understand this and are now starting to measure more meaningful metrics, such as engagement and viewability. In doing so, they are forcing publishers to be more thoughtful regarding real consumption.

Publishers and brands need to align their content-consumption metrics around audience engagement as the critical digital content metric. The average article, in its current form, is not conducive to how people consume media today.

3. Apply your insights. There is a whole other world of data insights out there that do not require a huge investment on the part of publishers or their editorial teams.

For example, if your readers consistently share one particular graphical element or visual call-out from an article on your site, consider tweaking the article so that that visual element is more prominent, thus increasing share rates that, in turn, lead more people back to your site.

Another suggestion is to analyze at what point readers leave an article. Did a huge number exit the page at one section in particular? If so, apply these findings when creating your next item.

ARGUING THE pros and cons of short-versus long-form content distracts us from the real work that needs to be done: developing smart-form interactive editorial content, backed by data, that is easily digestible across any device at any time.

*Tom Pachys is cofounder and chief product officer of [Playbuzz](http://playbuzz.com), Tel Aviv, Israel. Reach him at [tom@playbuzz.com](mailto:tom@playbuzz.com).*

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