

News Guest Episode 201: Know and Grow Your Audience

August 2, 2022

Rebekah Monson

I mean, I think this market sizing thing is great. Actually, we found this in every city that we were in as well, like, yes, we're aimed toward millennials. But our audience is actually like demographically much more diverse. And we really had we really like pushed ourselves to try to start thinking about things more in behavioral terms. And I think that's really important.

Candice Fortman

So one of the hardest parts of running an independent news business is building an audience from scratch, especially if you're trying to do it on a shoestring budget. And really, aren't we all? I'm Candice Fortman. And in this episode of News Guest, I'm joined by two people who have worked deep in the weeds of audience strategy, to talk about how researching and understanding the communities you want to serve, can help you grow your audience faster. And Anita Li is the founder and editor in chief of the green line in Toronto. And Rebekah Monson is the co founder of whereby us and letterhead and Miami. And I should add, that they are both board members at LION publishers. Anita and Rebecca, welcome to News Guest.

Anita Li

Thank you. Great to be here.

Rebekah Monson

Great to see you.

Candice Fortman

You know, I've gotten the opportunity to talk to you both about audience and a lot of other subjects inside of journalism inside the ecosystem. But we're gonna get started in talking about the journeys that led you to the work that you do today. So I'm going to start with Anita, you've worked in a lot of newsrooms, what led you to audience work, like, what did you feel what was that connection like for you?

Anita Li

So my background is that I'm 35. Now I started off working in journalism when I was 14 years old. In just freelancing, doing paid freelancing. I went through the pipeline and Canadian journalism, which is a very kind of centralized ecosystem. So there's a clear kind of pathway towards success in my industry in this country. And I work that you know, the newspaper of record the Globe and Mail, the largest paper in the country, the Toronto Star, I also worked at our national broadcaster CBC, just a whole manner of places. And then I ended up in just kind of my first full time job was actually at an American digital media publication called Mashable and Mashable at the time had done really early audience work, audience engagement work and kind of, at a high level, monitor data analytics, like native analytics from social media, as well as Google Analytics.

Anita Li

And so I started to see the way engagement at that level could really lead to like, just better outcomes in journalism, and just, yeah, just a more engaged audience. And so what ended up happening was, around the time that I joined an American American publications, I was feeling a bit disenchanting with Canadian publications, because I was really interested in issues of equity, and justice and race in particular. And I just didn't have any sort of opportunity to do that at the publications I was working at. In fact, I constantly pitch those kinds of stories, and was constantly told that the audience, this is not our audience. This isn't what our audience cares about. But it was kind of this amorphous blob of an audience that was never really defined by my editors, and it really kind of men's people who look like them.

Anita Li

And at the time, it was largely white men who are running those newsrooms. So I started becoming more interested in engagement, because I thought about how I grew up as a woman of color in an under resourced part of Toronto, my hometown is Scarborough. It's a town of like, close to 700,000 people. But it is really under resourced working class largely full of new immigrants as well as people of color. And I felt like it was a great way to actually surface stories from those communities.

Candice Fortman

Yeah, we're gonna get into more of that. I just want to say Anita was 14 doing freelance work, I was 14 trying to win Boys II Men tickets. So we are a little bit different in that way, but otherwise, exactly the same. So Rebekah, I want to talk to you about the star of your work, as well as journalism, but also particularly audience, which I think for you starts in J-school, right?

Rebekah Monson

We did a lot of work in civic journalism when I was in college, and a lot of that was about how do we do community listening? How do we get community people invested in the work of journalism, and I think that that was really the idea that hooked me into being in journalism, to be honest with you. And then, you know, in my career, I worked in local newsrooms, for the most part and did kind of like every kind of job, I was a designer, I was an web editor. And then I became a reporter. And I, I just really was this is like, right, when like, Twitter was coming out and Facebook and like newsrooms are grappling with, like, how do we use these things? And I was kind of always the one. You know, I was always like an early adopter. And I could see like, potential of like, wow, we can, we can really get a lot more engagement, a lot more like interactivity with the people that we're trying to serve if we leverage these tools, and it really led me to sort of think a lot differently about how we cover news.

Candice Fortman

So Anita, oftentimes the words are audience and community are used interchangeably. And in the news industry in particular, and I, and I'm one of those people, but I'm often very specifically talking about the community of people we serve, which is very different, right? So for you, you know, what is the difference between those two words? And how do you think about the folks that you're working with in Toronto?

Anita Li

You guys know that engagement journalism has been kind of something that has emerged over the last decade, these definitions are constantly evolving. But the the definition that I loved was one that actually Ariel Zirulnick from the the Membership Puzzle Project, she wrote about this in her most recent Nieman lab prediction, and to me, and what she says is that audience engagement is more data oriented. So it's things like quantitative data that you meet, and may see from various like engagement platforms from analytics platforms, that kind of paints a picture of like a picture of the audience you're serving.

Anita Li

So you know, demographic or basic psychographic information that you can use to put together user personas that draw kind of a broad picture of who your audience is, and allows you to segment your audience better. Community engagement is different to me, it's actually boots on the ground, talking to people in the community, conducting surveys, having office hours, just setting up town halls to figure out what they actually care about in their respective communities. So it's really about just authentic connection with people that you're serving in your journalism. And the way we do that in Toronto.

Anita Li

So I run a hyperlocal independent publication called The Green Line. That's all about investigating the way we live to help young Torontonians and other underserved communities survive and thrive in a rapidly changing city. So the idea is that we largely serve two local audiences. One is action-oriented urbanites. And then the other is underserved Torontonians. And the way we define that are people who live work and play in highly dense, highly populated areas of Toronto.

Anita Li

And Toronto is a really big city. It's like the biggest city in Canada. And it's actually a very oversaturated media market. But there's tons of news deserts as well, at the same time, including my hometown of Scarborough, that's actually how I knew that there were these deserts because I grew up in an environment where people Rhett Link came up to me and told me how terrible my hometown was, and that it was full of crime. Basically, the way we engage with our audiences is by going out into these communities and trying to figure out what they actually care about in these underserved areas.

Candice Fortman

One of the things we're talking about at Outlier is the idea that some communities are in news deserts, where there literally is no news infrastructure, and other places, and I think this is what you're saying about Toronto, it's true for us in Detroit is that you're living in a news donut, where there is a lot of news infrastructure. But the center so the whole of that doughnut is not being served, which is often the inner city, in particular, its when it is being talked about or written about is, it's for the entertainment or the eyes of audiences now that don't actually live and have to deal with the realities of what happens in those places. So I definitely understand it.

Candice Fortman

just want to also call something else out Anita, that Torontonians, it might be the most sophisticated way to describe a city. And now I'm very sad that I'm not a Torontonian. Because that is very let's talk about community and whereby us and building community and those beginning days of when you are

starting, what was the strategy that you put forward? And what were you thinking about in the building? Of whereby us?

Rebekah Monson

Yeah, I mean, I love of course, I love that. Ariel gets a shout out here, because, of course, she's like one of the people that really built the nootropic into what it is and what it's become. And I think when we started the nootropic, that's where we started. And we started as Miamians. Much, much like you and Anita like where we heard the rhetoric about our city. And we didn't get really lined up with what we were seeing on the ground. And it became really obvious to us that we were in I love that term news donor, I think that is like 100%, where we where we saw ourselves as well.

Rebekah Monson

So we did a bunch of research, which was really not to your point. And Anita was very qualitative. And that phase, right? I think it's really difficult. You know, as a startup founder, I think you're always encouraged to like follow the data, follow the data, but qualitative data is also data. And I think that that's a really critical thing to do when you're starting a news organization. So, you know, we went out and talk to just a ton of folks in this like millennial Miami audience, and this was 2015. So this is like a long time ago in Miami time, right. And so, we really understood that they weren't reading the Herald, which is a tremendously wonderful local newspaper. They weren't really watching local news. They were sort of time shifting all their media. They were actually very engaged on a national level with certain big topics, and really interested in urbanism and how the city would develop, but there wasn't really a quick on ramp right into those things.

Rebekah Monson

And that's, that's where we started with The New Tropic. And we were really thinking about like, when you're new in town, how do you understand all the nuances of living in a place? And we don't think that's only political, that's not only investigative, we can't do that work as well as some other folks in our market. So can we point them in the right direction. But we were really good, especially in those early days, like, having those feedback loops, right? talking with folks and kind of pushing that back out and creating conversation.

Rebekah Monson

And I think, you know, I liked this idea that audience views people as like, just a blob of data points, right. Like the term itself, I feel like is dismissive in that way of like, you are just an aggregate data source, right. And I think when we talk about community, it forces us to reevaluate our work. And think about it in terms of usability in terms of like, how am I helping someone in the day to day, and that was always the thing that interested me about journalism. And most journalists that I know, like, nobody's getting in here for the extreme riches that we're all seeing in this field. We're getting into it, because you can clearly see a Lamborghini parked. back there.

Rebekah Monson

But like, you know, we're getting into this because we care about the communities that we want to serve. And we want to see that impact. I mean, I think that's really important. So being able to think of it, you know, particularly as media as local media got more consolidated, and run in a corporate way. It

felt like some of that was really leaving the newsrooms I was in and I was really excited to, like, reclaim that work, because I think it does a central part of what we do.

Candice Fortman

That's right. And I think that one of the things I say community a lot, and I say community, because as I'm sitting here talking to you all I am looking out onto the street that I live on in the city that I serve. So community, Detroit is not hyperbole. For me, this is a real place that I live in working in. And I deal with the repercussions of the same things that we report on every day.

Rebekah Monson

Yeah, I just wanted to add one thing like, yes, the data point piece is really important. The other thing that I that I kind of like think that when we say audience, it implies a one to many relationship and not the other way around. Right? When we talk about community, we're talking about many to many communication, right? We're talking about lots of people having lots of little interactions with each other, having interactions with power, all of these things, it's community is a messy community is very human community is like all of these things like woven together.

Rebekah Monson

Whereas when we talk about an audience, and we frame things in this, like data perspective, we're also talking about a relationship where we as journalists are up, we are the objective power, we are speaking to the masses, you know, we put ourselves in a position of authority over the people that we serve, just in that terminology. And I think that that, you know, as we talked about equity in our communities, like those are the kinds of things that we as journalists can really push against, even in just the little things like the language about how we talk about the humans that we're trying to use mentalism for.

Candice Fortman

That's right. And increasingly, as we are all relying on the folks that we serve to be a part of our revenue streams, we need to be real clear about how we speak to them and about them, if that's going to be true. So that's actually a bottom line issue for those folks who like to speak in numbers and cents.

Candice Fortman

So Anita, I want to I want to move to The Green Line and I want to talk a bit about the development, how did you all go about figuring out what the needs of young Torontonians? Where, and I think this is very specific, because I hear all the time at every conference, we all go to? How do we attract young audiences? And that's the exact audience that you've gone for. So how are you all thinking about how to serve the young folks in your community?

Anita Li

Yeah, that's a great question. I also want to say off the top that we have about 85% of our audiences like made up of Gen Z's and millennials. So we definitely do capture that our target audience. And it has to do with not only the the nature of like how we communicate to them, similar to what Rebecca was saying, it's never paternalistic, talking down way. We tried to use the law, we don't actually privilege any sort of language over others. One of my biggest inspirations that I read was actually about

a publication that was in North Carolina called The Slammer. And it would basically included just a bunch of mugshots of folks who went to jail recently.

Anita Li

But the thing is, like, people who were actually quite low income would buy these publications, because they were looking for people that they knew in them. So there was a value, there's a clear value proposition for these folks to actually buy this publication. So who am I to actually look down on that? And so that's something that I always remind myself of, but the way we started out was it was kind of a kind of a roundabout process because prior to launching the green line, I was director of communities at The Discourse, which you guys I'm sure many of you guys know out there, which is a really disruptive media company in Canada, that's based in Vancouver, BC. And so I started basically developing this community driven model along with my colleagues over there. And one of the committees that we were testing in was Scarborough, which was my hometown.

Anita Li

So we did a lot of legwork at the time at the discourse of figuring out what the communities in most need would be. And we didn't identify them based on population density, and then how many local papers were actually serving that particular area. And we landed on five, one of which was Scarborough and I decided to pursue Scarborough for the discourse because I was connected to the community. And we were talking about how qualitative data or or just like under really, what that means is like having a real connection to the people that you're serving and understanding them in in a deep way.

Anita Li

After leaving The Discourse, I did some consulting work teaching work. And then I decided to start from the community when I was actually developing the green line. And the very first thing I did was actually go to I pulled I surveyed about, like, 20 to 30 people who were in my target audience, so basically, young, racialized folks, not just racialized, but like, especially underserved. So we're talking about like queer communities, we're talking about racialized communities, disability communities, but also people who just lived in news deserts in the city. And then I asked them about what their needs were, there were like just open ended questions. I also asked about, like, what kind of like what kind of language resonates.

Anita Li

But when we launched, it was really like a lot of traction was through word of mouth, because people were like, This is what I needed. I can't live like this is the best thing I've seen on the internet. Why is this not been around like this is where has this been my whole life. And what I was thinking about creating this, I really want to create it for like 12-year-old Anita, who like basically felt really disconnected from the rest of the state city, but also was really proud of coming from a place that I grew up in, I was I didn't feel ashamed of it at all. So it was like, there was a lot of like knee rooted in the publication, because I think young me or me now is like really representative of the audience or the communities that I'm serving.

Candice Fortman

There's more of this episode coming up. The first a quick word about the lion GNI Sustainability Audits and funding program, which is a very long name for a very cool new opportunity that gives independent news publishers a personalized roadmap and up to \$6,000 of funding to help them build a stronger, more sustainable business. Nearly 50 publishers have already been accepted into this program. And there's still time to apply for the next cohort. To learn more, check out the link in this episode description or email your question to hello@lionpublishers.com. And now, let's get back to the conversation with Anita and Rebekah.

Candice Fortman

I think that's really beautiful, which is why we need diversity in people starting news publications, because many of us in our community, including want to see ourselves reflected and I think I was thinking about the story you told about folks picking up their magazine and looking for their neighbors and friends and whatever.

Candice Fortman

And like the value of like, if you ever had somebody a friend who got into the newspaper, because you know, they want something with their sports team in high school, or, you know, your dad caught the biggest fish in the community or something like people frame those things. They put them, you know, in the family, you know, photo album, those sorts of things, stay with people. They are reflections of families and communities and their connections and and what I hear you're doing a degree line.

Candice Fortman

So Anita, what are some of the things that if you could go back maybe six months from today, you might do a bit differently in the development of your strategy?

Anita Li

So when I was serving the community of Scarborough, which is the suburb my hometown of Scarborough, there's two things that were I did I think I, I size the market to small. And he also ended up serving audiences that kind of competed with each other in terms of tone or there wasn't enough overlap. So we decided to serve this like news, desert, Scarborough.

Anita Li

And that's like about, you know, close to 700,000 people, but we ended up you know, minimizing that audience for further by serving millennials in Scarborough. So that that was not really there's two different value propositions for those two communities like for, you know, for the star Barians, there's like, a whole age range there. There's like very young people all the way to seniors, there's many intergenerational households there. So if I was going to serve that community, I had to speak in a way that was just very rooted sense of place, like Rebekah was saying, that's really focused on the local issues. And there wasn't any sort of tone that indicated like, you know, that, you know, we're for older folks over for younger folks, that the problem was introducing the millennial element was that kind of confused, the presentation and the tone of things, right.

Anita Li

So it kind of segmented our audience so much that we had, we didn't have a lot of room to play with. And so we had this kind of neutral tone, where we're adjusting hyperlocal issues for Star Barians. But there's a largest swath of star variants. We're like, this isn't for me, because there's a for young people. So as a result, it was really hard to monetize that particular community for the reason that we just size it too small and that's something that I remember, just impact He has really like negatively right? It was hard to raise money. And we're already talking about an area that tends to be lower income.

Anita Li

So for me, at The Green Line, the way he envisioned that audience is now there are like action oriented young urbanites who tend to be more. They're upwardly mobile, oftentimes, they have some sort of education or they're go getters, they're going to be people who are needy, if not affluent, they'll have like a sustainable kind of income. Whereas in additional Torontonians are folks who are actually the parents and the grandparents of these people, right. Like, when I think of underserved 20s, I think that my parents were working class, they started off as waiters, they were very poor. Growing up in Hong Kong, I'm somebody who has two degrees now, like, I have a master's degree, like an undergrad degree, I can make a good living.

Anita Li

And so I think like, in a lot of ways, like attracting those two audiences are perfect, because there's one audience that can actually be more easily monetizable. And there's an another audience, like, you know, my parents age, for example, who are new immigrants are relatively new immigrants. They're being served simultaneously as we're serving these young folks.

Candice Fortman

So Rebekah, we have spent a lot of time talking about mistakes in lobbies, and hotels during conferences. That has been, we've spent a lot of our conference time together. So what are some of the things that, you know, in retrospect, you would have done differently? And in particular, as you're, you know, talking to an audience of folks that are building news rooms, you know, what advice are you handing down?

Rebekah Monson

Yeah, I mean, it's a great question. Because there are, there's an infinite list of mistakes, like, honestly, like you never run out of them. If you're building stuff, you're just going to, like, continually fail, and you need to, like, get real comfortable with that. And it can be hard, right? It can be very hard on your soul to do that work. I mean, I think this market sizing thing is great, actually, we found this in every city that we were in as well, like, yes, we're aimed toward millennials, but our audience is actually like demographically much more diverse. And we really had we really like pushed ourselves to try to start thinking about things more in behavioral terms. And I think that's really important.

Rebekah Monson

Like, as you're starting to see threads of like, connectivity. I mean, I'm gonna talk a real business, each one of the biggest things, you know, that, you know, I think I made a mistake on was, you know, some resource management stuff, frankly, like, and like, people management, those things, I think were difficult to learn as you're scaling a business. So like you're growing your product, right, you're growing

your community, and you're also trying to grow your ability as a manager. And if any of you guys are struggling with this, we're going into a recession, you're going to have to make decisions about what you're going to do with your organization. And those are hard decisions. And, you know, I think I could have handled those things better, obviously, you wish that you had more foresight of like, what the market conditions are doing.

Rebekah Monson

This idea of like, being slow to hire and like quick to let someone go, if they're not fitting, I think like in a startup, that is like, really great advice. I mean, it is difficult to adhere to, but some of the biggest mistakes that I've made, I think were letting people hanging around where I wasn't doing them a service, right, they were not going to thrive in the positions that they were in and like, you know, I couldn't help them level up. And yeah, that's on me, it's gonna string

Candice Fortman

I'm gonna say something here that I have said a lot that my therapist said to me, that was very useful and remains very useful. Success and failure feel different, but they weigh the same. And it has helped me more times than not both on the best days. And on the days that were really difficult.

Candice Fortman

So Rebekah, for the publishers that are listening to us right now, what are the first steps they should be taking to do to start audience research?

Rebekah Monson

I mean, there are so many ways to do research. First of all, the first thing you can do is a school that reporters are already grayed out, you can go out and talk to people and talk to different people and talk to people you don't know and ask those people to refer you to more people that you don't know. I mean, the biggest thing that you can do to start is just have as many conversations as you can with as many diverse people as you can to understand kind of the universe that you're working in. Because we're doing this for LION, right, I did a course a short course for Lion about audience research that is now available, because we're making these resources available to one members online.

Rebekah Monson

And, you know, there are a bunch of, you know, ideas about methodology in there, how you could use surveys, how you can do interviews, how you can do user testing, we go into pretty good detail and give you a lot of like templates and things for how to do that stuff. The more you can create feedback loops in the work, the better that you're going to be, especially as a small independent team, you cannot cover everything the way that the big guys can. So how did you use your community as a as a resource in like, even more intensive ways then if you're at a major metro daily or at a local TV station or whatever.

Candice Fortman

THAT'S right. And because we love our News Guest community, we will be putting a link to Rebekah's class in the show notes. So you'll be able to find that right here, click around somewhere, I'm pointing somewhere, but it doesn't work that way.

Candice Fortman

Okay, Anita the same question; first steps for publishers to start their audience research.

Anita Li

Just a little bit of extra, something I might add, is partnering with community organizations on the ground that already have buy in with this audiences or the communities that you serve like, man, is that an amazing way to not only organically market your news outlet, but also just to get the trust that you need and get to the people that are just completely overlooked. And it also is a fantastic way to build relationships that will just pay dividends in the future.

Anita Li

Because a lot of the work that I do and is through partnerships, it's through media partnerships, and new partnerships, educational institutions, partnerships, and community grassroots organizations. And it's kind of just a collective coming together. And like just working towards a shared mission. And I think it's also a beautiful thing. It's also super fun to work with people and other people who care about the same things as you.

Rebekah Monson

And Candice, I know how you feel about partnerships, like we do not do work alone, right? In this field, particularly when we're on the ground in a community, like it is not solo work, there are no solo geniuses trying to partner I love that we absolutely have to be in community with one another, and with the folks that we serve, are shame on us, and shame on our ability to sustain ourselves.

Candice Fortman

So we're going to wrap up our conversation with a question that I have for both of you, we're going to look into the future, you go on far as far into the future as you feel comfortable going right now, the world is heavy. And sometimes the future feels even heavier. But look ahead into the future. And what is something and give me just a couple sentences about what you are hoping you are able to provide for your audience in the future.

Anita Li

The tagline for The Green Line is "redefining shadow through the way we live." And a big part of the green line is, you know, serving not only as a journalism outlet, a news outlet, but as a public service. And if I can get young people to reimagine a different future for our city that's equitable for every single person, and to actually take action on the news that they consume in The Green Line for the betterment of their communities, then I will have one like that is fundamentally what I care about, it's less even about news, it's more about civic action and civic connection, and just honestly, making the city a nice place to live, because it's really not nice for a lot of people who can't afford to live here, you know, is lovely.

Candice Fortman

Rebekah, same question.

Rebekah Monson

My gig is now very different, right? Because I'm running the SAAS platform that's designed to help publishers, and we're really designed to help publishers be more invested in their community and like help help them grow their business with their community in mind. And, really, I mean, that's my dream, like, that's why I wake up and go to work every day, I really believe that the world needs more community oriented media, and there are really not a lot of tools out there to do the work well. And so if we can nail that we really can help a huge amount of communities.

Rebekah Monson

You know, Letterhead is just one solution. And lots of people are doing lots of innovative things. And I would really love for us to be on the forefront of serving like all these folks, particularly like, folks in Lyon. I mean, this is why I give so much of my energy to local news, local, independent online news is because I think it is, if you look at the state of democracy in America, it is critical, right? And I firmly believe that the greatest hope for our democracy starts in our own backyards. And if I can do you know if I can do any small thing to make it easier for committed dedicated journalists who serve their communities, like that's what I'm going to do.

Candice Fortman

Rebecca, Anita, thank you so much for being with us. Today has been a pleasure. And I'm so grateful that you decided to spend time with us.

Rebekah Monson

This was great.

Candice Fortman

Thank you for listening to News Guest, a production of LION Publishers. This episode was produced by Jenna Spinelle with editorial support from Ben DeJarnette. Visit lionpublishers.com for more information about News Guest and the many other resources LION offers for independent news publishers like you. News Guest will be back next month for a conversation about choosing the right revenue streams to prioritize for your publication. Until then, I'm Candice Fortman. Thanks for listening.