The Optimization of *KSHB 41 Action News* –
*Newsroom Analytics Team*
Casie Kolbinsky and Kearston Winrow
Reporting, Editing & Marketing Converged Media
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Executive Summary

In January 2014, Casie Kolbinsky and Kearston Winrow began working as members of the Newsroom Analytics team for the course Reporting, Editing and Marketing Converged Media. Brad Best, the professor of the Missouri School of Journalism’s Interactive Advertising II class, served as their mentor. KSHB 41 Action News, a broadcast television station located in the Kansas City metro area, was their client. The assignment? To increase KSHB’s revenue and up the ante on its audience engagement with the help of digital analytics.

The two worked with the students of Brad’s Interactive Advertising II class in order to make KSHB as efficient and successful as possible. Their main purpose was to provide a journalistic perspective to the project – since the client was a news organization, and because the students in the advertising course had little-to-no experience working for news outlets, Casie and Kearston were able to provide input when necessary on how journalists thought and worked.

The class held a conference call with KSHB’s news director in March where they learned more about the opportunities they had to improve the newsroom. The class then conducted an extensive amount of secondary research to come up with suggestions for KSHB.

Some of the challenges they faced throughout this project were a) having to quickly learn subjects that were fairly unfamiliar to them, such as Search Engine Optimization, advertising, marketing and user experience; b) finding the time to attend a number of Brad’s lecture classes in order to educate themselves further about the aforementioned subjects; and c) helping to manage a class of 15 to 20 people in order to
finish this project successfully. However, the outcome of the project was worth the costs; after they completed their research, the class was able to devise a plan that could potentially increase *KSHB 41 Action News*’ revenue by as much as $194,000 to $263,000. This report will go more in-depth of the ways they were able to accomplish this great feat.

**The Project**

One of the first things Casie and Kearston set out to do was schedule regular meeting times with Brad. They thought that by doing this, they would be better able to communicate with their mentor about the project and keep one another updated on the work they were doing. Therefore, the three planned to meet every Friday at Brad’s office at 11 a.m. During these meetings, they discussed the progress of the project, any questions they had and goals for moving forward. These meetings proved to be extremely effective and had a positive impact on the outcome of the project. In addition, Casie and Kearston met every Sunday to work on the project and keep each other updated on where it was going.

Next, Kearston and Casie began conducting initial research over *KSHB*’s coverage. The two downloaded the station’s breaking news and weather apps so that they could observe how *KSHB* engaged with its audience through mobile devices and tablets, and they kept an eye on how the *KSHB* website looked in terms of user friendliness. Also, they “liked” *KSHB*’s Facebook page and began following the station’s breaking news and weather Twitter handles. They kept notes of their findings and discussed them with Brad during their weekly meetings.

Just from their initial research, Casie and Kearston discovered quickly that the *KSHB* website was not exactly user friendly; the site contained a lot of unattractive white
space, and the home page did not seem to have a lot of video. They found it a little
difficult to find topics they were looking for, and the text seemed pretty small, as the
screen shots below indicate:
However, they did find a lot of positive aspects of the mobile app. *KSHB* sent weather alerts about two-to-three times per day and would also send alerts relating not only to breaking news in Kansas City, but also news relating to the state and country. By clicking on the alert, Casie and Kearston could navigate to the app itself and read more about the story.

In addition, Casie and Kearston did not find a lot of serious issues with *KSHB*’s Facebook or Twitter sites; the station used a lot of large, eye-catching photos and
However, the two noticed KSHB did not interact much with its audience via social media and that the station did not post a lot of video. Also, they noticed the news station did not use its Google+ or Instagram accounts often and that it did not have a Pinterest page.

In addition to researching KSHB’s coverage, Casie and Kearston had to educate themselves on strategic communication. Coming from a journalism background, the two had little experience in strategically concocting ideas for ways to optimize a news organization. Therefore, by reading scholarly articles and attending Brad’s Interactive Advertising II lectures, the two tried to learn as much as they could about Search Engine Optimization, advertising, monetization, etc.

In the beginning, Casie and Kearston also tried educating themselves on SiteCatylist, the analytics platform KSHB used to measure its metrics, by watching training videos and taking notes. However, they found out shortly after the project launched that KSHB had switched to Google Analytics Premium in January. This was
somewhat of a relief for Casie and Kearston – the two used to work on the Columbia Missourian’s Community Outreach Team, where they used Google Analytics to write data reports for the rest of the newsroom and were therefore already pretty familiar with this particular metrics tool. However, neither Brad nor the class had a lot of prior experience with Google Analytics. Therefore, Brad assigned everybody to complete the Google Analytics course, which was available through Google Academy. The course offered videos and text pieces that taught the basic skills behind using Google Analytics. If the students passed, they earned a Google Analytics certificate. Both Casie and Kearston are now Google Analytics certified.

Once March hit, Brad split the class into 11 different sections so that each group could focus solely on one of the components of KSHB’s coverage. These sections included: Web design; Google Analytics; SEO and Google+; Facebook; Twitter; Pinterest; Instagram; Video; Email; Mobile apps; and Dashboards. With the number of students taking Interactive Advertising II, each group consisted of at least one-to-two people. After they were assigned to their different sections, the students were to begin conducting secondary research on ways KSHB could improve upon their particular subject matter. Once the students had found substantial research, they were to present their findings in front of the class in April. Then, each student was to create his or her own slideshow presentation and complete a write-up offering suggestions to KSHB while using the research to back up the suggestions. Once their presentations and write-ups were completed, the students were to send their slides and text to Casie and Kearston – in addition to researching effective usage of dashboards, the two were also responsible for copy editing the final paper and assembling the final presentation they would present to
in May. Casie and Kearston would also present the introduction and conclusion during the final presentation. Therefore, the two stopped taking notes over KSHB’s Web design, mobile apps and social media platforms and instead began to focus solely on KSHB’s use of dashboards.

Next, the class began to prepare for the conference call it would have with KSHB News Director Bill Smith on Tuesday, March 18. The students came up with a list of questions to ask Bill that pertained to their specific sections. The class was able to speak with Bill via Skype during one of Brad’s lecture classes. Casie and Kearston gained a better understanding of the goals behind KSHB after the class conducted the conference call. They learned that one of the station’s main goals was to draw people to its website without sacrificing the effort it took to invite its audience to watch its nightly broadcasts, and vice versa. In regard to dashboards, Bill Smith told Casie and Kearston the station had just begun experimenting with dashboards and was a little unsure of the best way to utilize them.

Following the conference call with Bill, the class really began to dive in and get to work on finding ways in which KSHB could improve its user engagement and raise revenue. Casie and Kearston began to attend every one of Brad’s lectures, which took place Tuesdays and Thursdays from 12:30 to 1:45 p.m., so that they could keep themselves updated on the project and get to know the students better. The majority of the class looked at online articles from scholarly publications to come up with an extensive amount of secondary research relating to the students’ specific sections.

In April, each group put together a slideshow presentation of its findings and suggestions and presented its research in front of the class. The main purpose behind
these presentations was to provide feedback to classmates on the work they had done and to answer any questions the students had. The following is a list of the suggestions each team came up:

**Web Design:**

- Fill the header with an advertisement.

- Fill two-column white space.

- Make video content more accessible.

**Analytics:**

- Evaluate the analytics for the sports section.

- Make a clearer distinction between the News and Entertainment sections.
- Distinguish original stories from aggregated stories.
- Remove overlapping sections or duplicate content.
- Indicate which section the user is currently in on the website.
- Fix in-page analytics, and make use of heatmaps.

**Video:**

- Display video more prominently on the homepage of the website.
- Re-organize the video section on the website.
- Re-organize the *KSHB* YouTube channel.

**Mobile:**

- Provide a how-to navigation guide for the mobile app.
- Revise and shorten push notification headlines.
- Redirect breaking news notifications to their corresponding stories.
SEO:

- Consider becoming more active on Google+.
- Attain Google Authorship.
- Set up Google Webmaster tools.
- Be careful with duplicate content.
- Implement the <news_keywords> meta tag.

Email:

- Make Newsletter sign-up more accessible.
- Expand content distribution to other news categories.
- Match Breaking News email template to Weather Alerts template.
Facebook:
- Consider improving content creation and community management.
- Add more variety to content.
- Consider using Facebook advertising.

Twitter:
- Learn more about all that Twitter has to offer.
- Add personality to tweets.
- Keep the target audience in mind.

Pinterest:
- Share unique content.
- Build back links.
- Utilize keyword targeting.
- Use the ‘Pin It’ button.
- Build followers.

Instagram:
- Be sure to send the right vibe.
- Focus on the target audience.
- Involve viewers in the content.
- Take advantage of contests.
- Be sure to use hashtags.
- Consider multiple uses.

Dashboards:

As stated before, Casie and Kearston were responsible for researching effective usage of data dashboards and coming up with suggestions on ways *KSHB* could improve its data reporting. One of the first things they noticed after observing *KSHB*’s dashboards was that some of the dashboards contained quite a high number of metrics and that all this information in one space tended to be overwhelming.

![KSHB dashboard, above-the-fold](image-url)
Casie and Kearston’s research indicated that organizations should try to include only about three-to-five metrics per dashboard and that a business’s dashboard should definitely never contain more than 10 metrics (II). Data dashboards should only tell its audience what it needs to know (III). Therefore, one of the suggestions Casie and Kearston drew up was for KSHB to not only narrow down its metrics, but to also take a poll of the newsroom’s reporters, editors and sales team members and ask them what they needed their dashboards to tell them.

Another thing the two noticed was that KSHB’s dashboards provided little context to the data. The dashboards listed important metrics such as bounce rate, the number of page views and the average time spent on a page, but they did not show how the numbers were significant.
Casie and Kearston’s research said organizations should never report a metric by itself. Digital analytics expert Avinash Kaushik said on his blog *Occam’s Razor*:

*Rule number one is that there is no metric on a dashboard that exists without context because it is the only way insights jump out rather than questions (I).*

Kaushik also provided an example dashboard that provided great context by comparing two different date ranges:
As one can see from the dashboard above, the chart provides a line graph showing the number of visits compared to previous visits as well as the percentage changes between the date ranges’ number of visits, page views, bounce rate, etc. The dashboard effectively showed how current data was significant.

The third suggestion Casie and Kearston came up with was to interpret the data. Sure, KSHB utilized dashboards and shared them with the rest of the newsroom, but what it failed to do was explain what the data meant. Based on their prior experiences working in various newsrooms, Casie and Kearston knew that many journalists were not exactly data-savvy and that they probably did not know what certain metrics, such as “bounce rate” and “traffic source,” meant. The two suggested that KSHB include written reports with their dashboards that a) explained what some of the important metrics meant, b) explained why those certain metrics existed, and c) offered call to actions on ways the newsroom could use those metrics to either continue what it was doing or try to improve.

Casie and Kearston both used to work for the Community Outreach Team at the Columbia Missourian where they regularly wrote analytics reports for the newsroom. The two remembered how the reports not only provided context, explained the data and offered suggested actions, but also how the newsroom held analytics discussions during its budget meetings. In addition, they recollected how the Missourian had a screen that showed a dashboard providing real-time data for the reporters and editors to see on a regular basis. The two planned to explain the Missourian’s excellent analytics work during the final presentation as a way to back up their suggestions.

After each of the groups presented their findings in front of the class, Casie and Kearston got to work putting together the final presentation and report. Once they
finished these tasks, they put all the information onto two different flash drives to give to Bill Smith and Brad at the end of the final presentation. Next, the class held a rehearsal presentation, where the students had one last chance to practice as a group and to make sure none of the sections lasted too long. Finally, on Thursday, May 8, the class formally presented its research and recommendations to Bill Smith at the Reynolds Journalism Institute at the Missouri School of Journalism.

Casie and Kearston learned a lot from this project. For one, they learned to think more like the every-day news consumer rather than a journalist. When coming up with ideas in which KSHB could improve upon its Web design, mobile app, email newsletter and social media platforms, the two had to try to put themselves into audience members’ shoes and try to determine what they wanted and needed from a local television news station. They knew KSHB’s viewers might become frustrated if they could not immediately find what they were looking for on the website and that they might seek a competitor if the email newsletter did not provide them with everything they needed to know. They realized that many journalists published content without taking the time to find out if their audience members were interacting with their work. This project forced Casie and Kearston to step away from their “journalist” selves and think more like the average news consumer.

The two also learned about the numerous ways newsrooms could optimize and become the best they could be. By studying 11 different areas in which KSHB could increase revenue and better engage with its audience, they learned about different strategies newsrooms could use to improve upon its Web design, SEO, social media channels and mobile apps. Learning from one another’s secondary research allowed them
to form conclusions based off of facts, not hunches. Overall, Casie and Kearston are now much more informed on ways journalism can change to become better.

The class came up with monetization figures for the design, analytics, mobile, video, SEO, email, Facebook and Pinterest sections based on the number of page views and cost-per-mille for advertisements. The students determined that if KSHB implemented all of the class’s suggestions, the news station could increase its annual revenue by as much as $194,000 to $263,000. In addition, Bill Smith praised the class at the end of the final presentation for taking the time to conduct its research and recommendations. He said he, himself, as well as many of the other workers at KSHB simply did not have the time nor the resources to accomplish the work the class had done.

“It was nice you could break down and analyze each section for us,” he said.

Therefore, assigning other optimization/analytics projects such as this one to future Convergence Journalism capstone students would be an excellent idea. The project would allow future journalists to be more aware of their audience and to keep in mind the ways in which a news station could optimize. Casie and Kearston greatly enjoyed taking part in this project and will take with them all the things that they learned.
Bibliography

