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# Platforms as Editions & the Daily News Cycle

A SEVEN-DAY STUDY OF HOW THE WASHINGTON POST COVERS  
PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP ABOVE THE FOLD

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## **Introduction**

While working with the idea of how much copies of physical media are altered with new processes, I came across the idea of one form of media that alters itself in the moment. As a former journalist and digital content manager for a number of news organizations, including the Washington Post (my subject for this study), I have a very intimate knowledge of how the news cycle transforms during a 24-hour period.

News stories, especially if they are breaking, can have as many as 20 new editions (or more in certain circumstances) during a news day. When I was employed at the Washington Post, all I had to manage was the WashingtonPost.com. This was just a year before social media became a factor in how news was delivered to content consumers and two years before smart phones began to dominate the market place.

The remainder of my knowledge in this area was learned while in graduate school at Rutgers University and my experiences working at two local television stations prior to returning to school. I have used my experience and knowledge of how the news cycle works to be the basis of this project. My goal for this project was to show how much top news stories revolve and evolve. The secondary goal was to also show how The Washington Post treats its platforms in relation to the audience that they anticipate are using said platforms.

Since President Donald Trump is currently dominating the news cycle due to his possible impeachment, I used this opportunity to show how much focus the Post did on this subject or related Trump issues.

I selected this subject matter because I wanted to show the evolution of the 24-hour news cycle within a week. Historically, the 24-hour news cycle began in the 1990s with CNN's

coverage of the Gulf War. But newspapers and the news cycle were headed in that direction for a while. Until the early 1980s, there were two newspapers in Washington D.C., the Washington Post and the Washington Star. The Post was the morning paper and the Star was the evening paper. Local television news eliminated the evening paper (most shuttered by the early 1990s). I delivered the Washington Post as a teen. I received the earliest edition or the home edition at 4 a.m. daily. That edition was different from the edition Washington Capitals played the Los Angeles Kings in L.A. the night before, the score would not be in the home edition, but you might find the score and a story in the newsstand edition. Already, you were seeing a version of the changing daily news cycle.

Fast forward to 1990s when the Internet became a platform for news. Now, news could be broken in real time. As we entered the 2000s, social media came on the scene. Breaking news is now more than likely to land on Twitter or as a push alert to your phone before breaking anywhere else.

It is also important to understand how the Post is now produced. Since there is little money in print editions, nearly all daily newspapers have pivoted to focusing on the digital side of things. Because the Post is a well-known brand, there is still daily production of a print edition but the organizational focus is on digital platforms. Prior to 2019, the post purchased their content management systems (CMS) to produce their online version. Since then, their new owner, Jeff Bezos, who also owns Amazon, made it a priority to create their own CMS, Arc publishing. Since its inception, ARC has provided CMS software for news organizations such as the Chicago Tribune and the Los Angeles Times. According to the Washington Post, “Arc Publishing supports more than 100 microservices composed of more than 3,000 containers running on more than 150 Amazon Elastic Compute Cloud (Amazon EC2). In addition, Arc,

which is a software-as-a-service (SaaS) platform, is built as containerized microservices running on AWS (Amazon Web Services)” (2019)

In the next section, I will describe the methods I used in my research.

## **Methodology**

For a ten-day period, I purchased a physical edition of the Washington Post. Living in Richmond, Va., which is roughly 90 miles from Washington, D.C. created my first roadblock. If I waited past 10 a.m., the local Barnes and Noble that I was purchasing from was sold out of the edition. I wanted to get my physical paper from the same location because the Post does have earlier editions that come out, so the 7-11 near Virginia Commonwealth University might have an earlier or later edition. I thought that consistency with the physical edition was a key component (full disclosure: in the seven days I used for my data, six were from the same location). I chose to use the editions from October 9 to October 15, 2019.

In addition, I also tried to collect my digital data within the same time daily (most of the data was collected within two hours of each other daily, but there were at least two days that I was unable to keep within that time frame). I collected digital data from WashingtonPost.com, the paper's official Facebook and Twitter pages, and screen shots from the mobile app on my iPhone. The daily newsletter was delivered to my email by 12:30 p.m. daily.

I was looking for the top stories that are placed "above the fold," which is news paper terminology for how a broad sheet paper is folded. There can be as few as one story above the fold (like when 9/11 occurred or when John F. Kennedy was assassinated) to five. The fewest on the physical papers I collected were three stories and the most were five (four days had three, two days had four, one day had five).

On the web site, the stories above the fold show up differently due to the ability to add corresponding links to each top story. I saw as many as 15 headlines above the fold most days when you factor in the additional links. I treated the digital above the fold to begin at masthead and end within that frame of vision. For Facebook and Twitter, I considered what the top five to

seven articles were in the feeds within my data. The mobile site only shows about one to two articles per frame so I took snapshots until I did not see any more “hard” news or the Trump stories ended. The newsletter format was the most consistent, so I just based my data again until Trump articles and/or hard news tapered off.

I created a scoring system so that my data had a numerical element that I could take into consideration. The system was as follows:

**Scoring System**

**Trump Impeachment Articles – 5 points**

**Trump Domestic Affairs Articles – 4 points**

**Trump Foreign Affairs Articles – 3 points**

**Trump Adjacent Articles – 2 points**

**Hard News without Trump – 1 point**

**Soft News/Feature Articles – 0 points**

There are a number of other factors I considered:

**Headline Length and Placement**

**Story Length and Placement**

**Evolution of the Headline**

**Art and/or Graphics**

**Number of Top Articles Above the Fold**

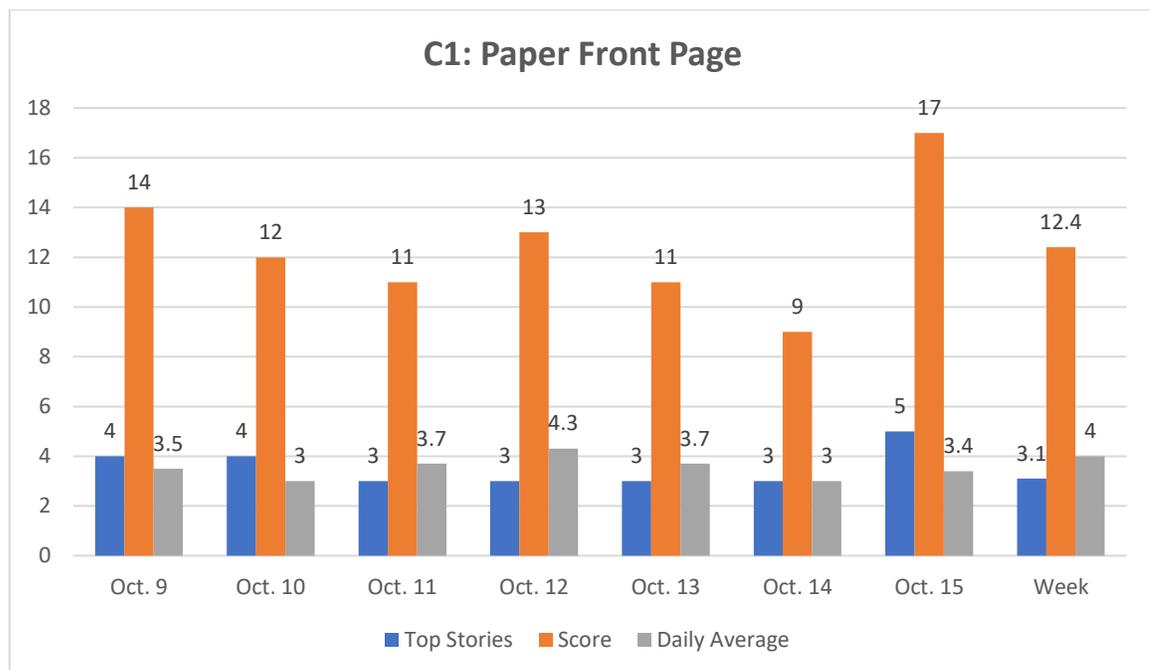
**Story Order**

**All content was considered (articles, blogs, opinion/editorials)**

## Physical Front Page

There were a number of ideas I had and wanted to do with the physical front page. Presentation of the stories were probably the biggest factor when just looking at the front pages. All seven additions had rather large pictures featured. Just from my knowledge of the industry and from what I have researched, physical papers still value a large color photo above the fold to attract purchasers. This, of course, steals valuable real estate as far as featuring additional top stories.

The following chart (C1) will show the score of each day's physical front page:



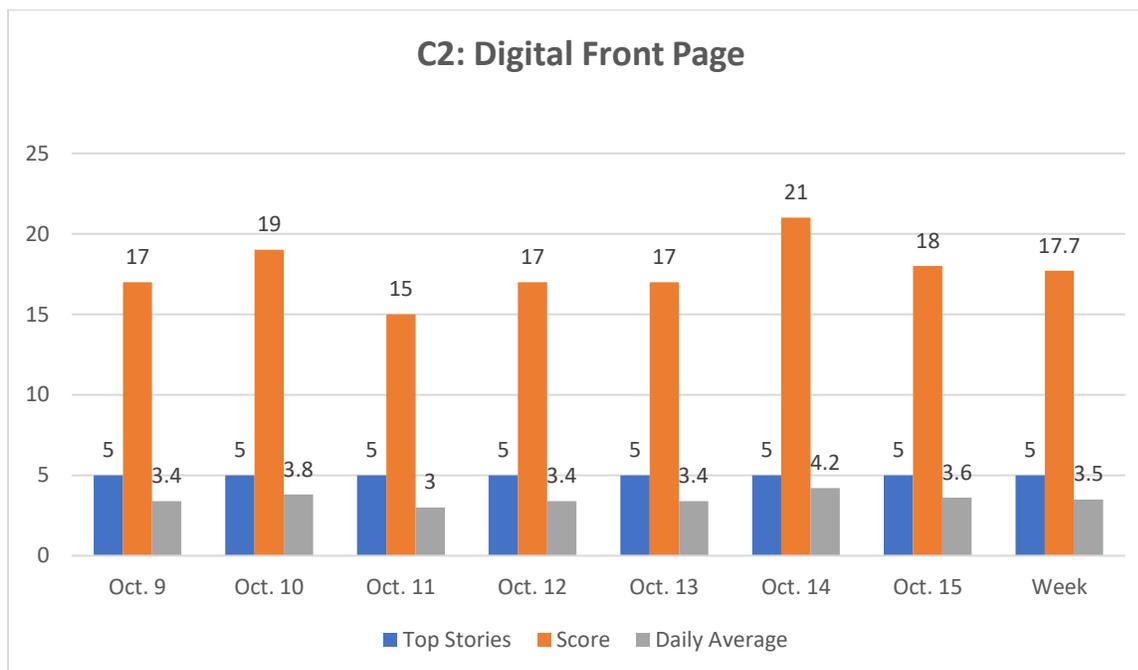
As shown, for the week examined, the physical edition was relatively consistent. Outside of October 9, there was at least one (but in most cases two) impeachment article or editorial. We see in the conclusion how this stood up against the other areas examined.

## Digital Front Page

I ran into a few conundrums with the digital front page because there is a plethora of content above the fold on WashingtonPost.com. I decided to omit any related links to stories in my content equation in order to be as uniform as possible. I did take the top five stories on the page, which, due to design, is how they layout the website.

If a consumer is looking for the most content, the website is by far, the place to go (see Digital Front Page PDF).

The following chart (C2) will show the score of each day's digital front page:



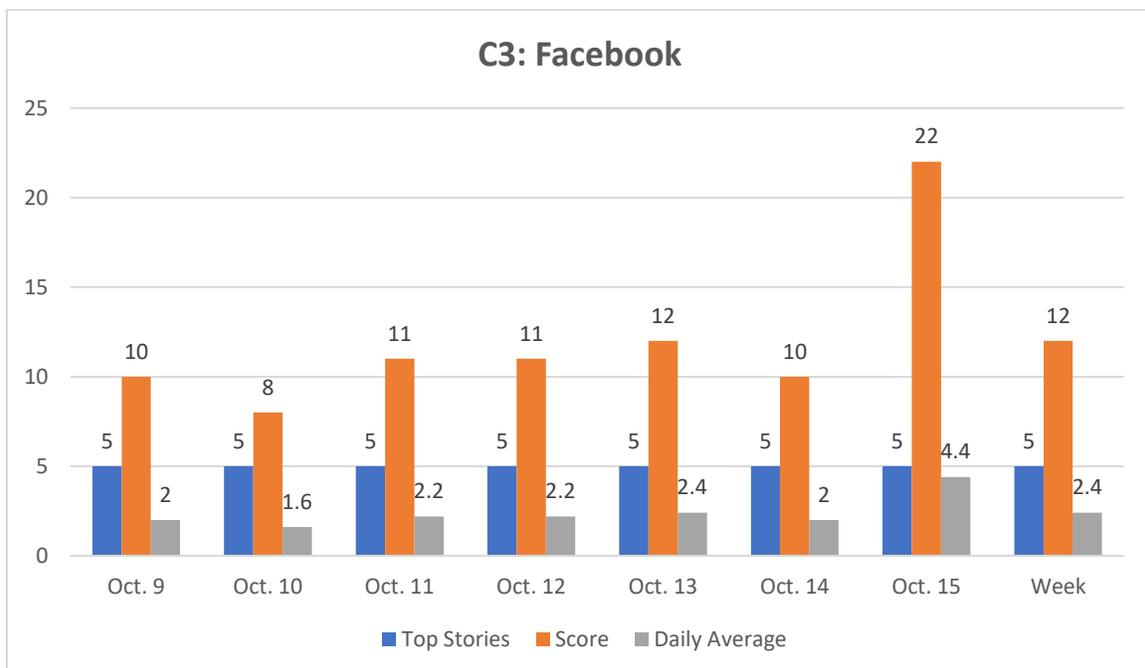
As you tell from this chart, the Post's digital strategy appears to be relatively consistent. I attribute that to how they have decided to present the news on this particular platform. From my experience, most news websites like to keep their look consistent. Due to inside information I received, the current content management system (CMS) the Post uses is something that they have created. But I will point out that the layout has been close to the same since 2007, when I last worked for them and they have used three different CMS since then.

## Facebook

If the Post is similar to other news organizations, they would use Facebook to feature less “newsy” articles and more conversational articles. Facebook is also a place for breaking news. One issue that news organizations have to consider when posting on Facebook is the fact that it is user friendly—meaning the consumers have the most access to the organization via comments. At news organizations that I’ve worked at in the past, you can also use Facebook to gauge what your news consumers are truly interested in. The scores for this section did not surprise me at all.

One trapping the Post does not fall into is the practice of posting articles that would be considered “click bait.” Click baiting is the practice of posting sensational stories and headlines that will attract people not really looking for substantial news. Due to their brand, the Post does not have to stoop to this level because their consumers are generally loyal and will go to their Facebook page no matter what. Due to how Facebook is laid out, I used the top five stories on the page (this also maintained consistency with the other platforms).

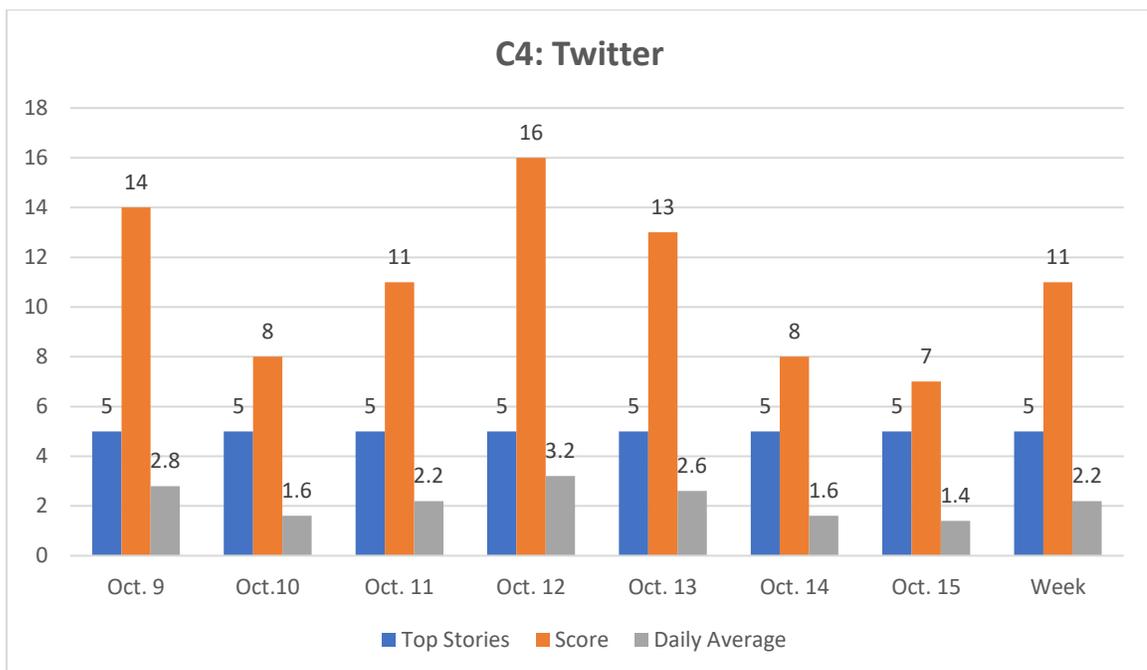
The following chart (C3) will show the score of each day’s Facebook page:



## Twitter

Most media organizations use Twitter to break news. That is the one consistent that I can attribute to Twitter. From there, how stories are pushed out on this social media platform vary from organization to organization. To be quite honest, I expected the Post to be a little more on the hard news side with Twitter, but that is due to my own social media experiences and practices. As the data shows, I was wrong. Again, due to how Twitter is laid out, I used the top five stories on the page (this also maintained consistency with the other platforms).

The following chart (C4) will show the score of each day's Twitter page:

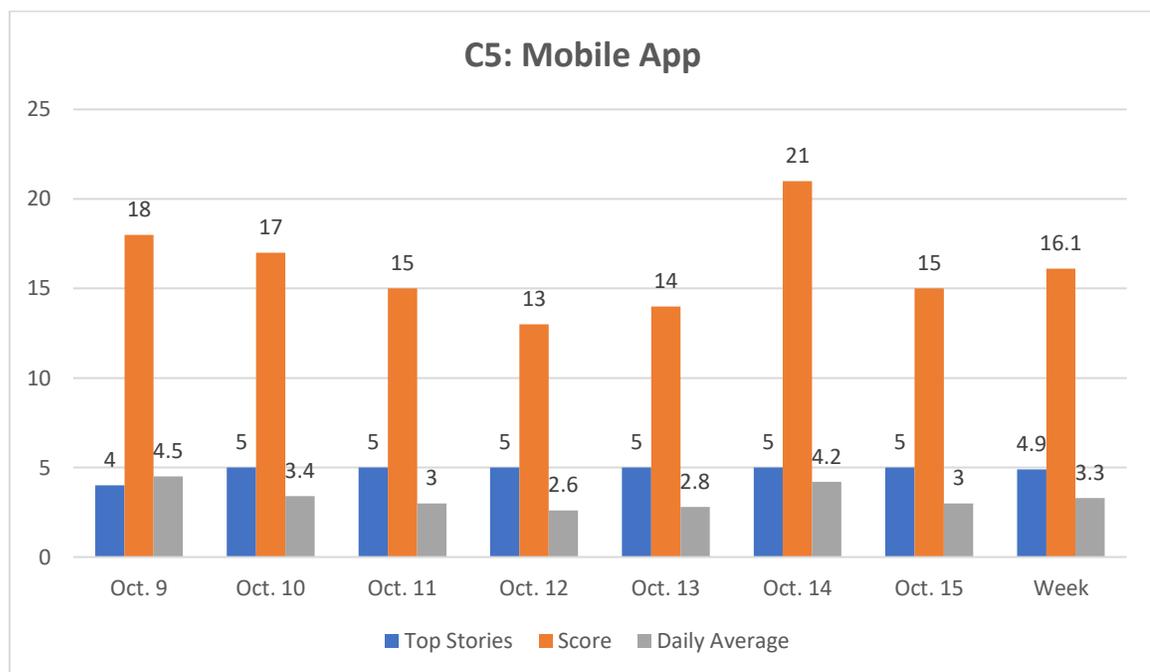


## Mobile App

The challenge I found with using the mobile app site in this assessment of platforms is trying to determine where the “fold” was. I decided to go with the same system of using the top five stories except for Oct. 9, where there was a clear separation of the top stories and the rest of the content. Mobile app sites, in my opinion, struggle to grab views because you have apps like Facebook and Twitter on smart phones as well as news feeds (similar to what Apple does daily).

I think that the app and the physical editions are the two formats that your loyal consumers use. These are people who get their news from pretty much one and only source. That said, I observed that the mobile numbers were the one of the highest Trump news aggregators.

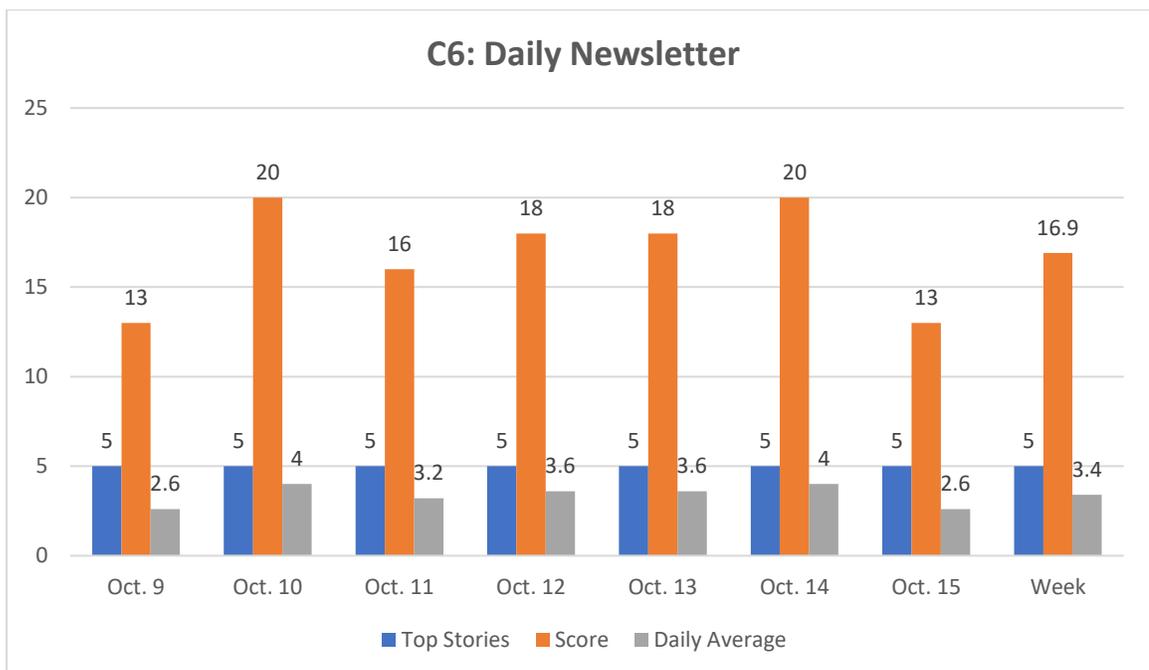
The following chart (C5) will show the score of each day’s mobile app page:



## Daily Newsletter

The Post Most, a daily email I received as a part of my subscription was a late addition to my data collection. Similar to what I stated in the previous section, this is something that people, who are loyal to the Washington Post brand, would be attracted to. The one thing that was unique about the daily newsletter was that it arrived in my inbox no later than 12:30 p.m. By far, this platform was the most consistent. Similar to the mobile app, this is the section that I noticed the most use of Trump articles. Again, I used the top five articles posted.

The following chart (C6) will show the score of each day's daily newsletter page:



## Nuances

I selected a top story of October 12 to make a comparison of how each platform displayed the story. I think one thing to take into account with this comparison is how newspapers work with their platforms. My experience in the industry has taught me that there are editors for each platform that communicate with each other but also have ownership on how they will use their specific platform's news hole.

For example, there are inch restrictions on the physical front page and we have to take into consideration that the physical paper is in the business of selling the paper by making an aesthetically pleasing front page. That may include a large headline and a vibrant picture.

On the website, there are character limitations to the lead story in the news hole. For the Post, the top story generally has three lines of characters needed for a headline. Editors at the website are tasked with playing a game of character "Tetris" to make create a headline that fits but also draws in the reader. The top story also gets what is called a "blurb," which is a summary of the lede paragraph. Some organizations will just repurpose the lede; the Post has very strict editorial restrictions on their digital front page. In other words, using the lede paragraph for the blurb is frowned upon and rarely used.

Twitter has a character limit on every post of 280. For the social media editor, this means creating a succinct headline and description that will make the consumer click the story. If it is too vague, savvy social media users will consider it to be click bait and if it is too descriptive, you run the risk of giving away the content and losing the click. Facebook, on the other hand, has no restrictions, but this can be problematic as well. You run the same risks with Facebook as you do with Twitter in terms of being too much, too vague, or too prone to be considered clickbait. Another element that the social media editors must deal with is that the consumers have the ability

to comment on each post. Creating content that will generate a good discussion (or even discourse) is also a big element in creating the perfect post.

On the mobile app, size restrictions come into play. You want a mobile site that represents the website well but is not too intimidating or contains too much content. The app site should be sleek and easy to navigate.

The newsletter gives editors the best amount of freedom in my opinion. The Post had a number of consistencies. For example, the newsletter was digitally delivered at 12:30 p.m. daily, a good midway point of the news day. The newsletter was also the most diverse. It had something from just about every section of the paper or whatever was the most up-to-date version of an article.

The following will compare the top story's presentation on each platform. In each version reporter John Hudson had one of the bylines. I found that the Post placed a high priority of this story in its print, online, Facebook and mobile platforms. It was not included in the newsletter but there were two related articles in the offering. On Twitter, the Post did not give the story very much priority. The headline was altered three different ways. As I stated previously, that is probably due to presentation.

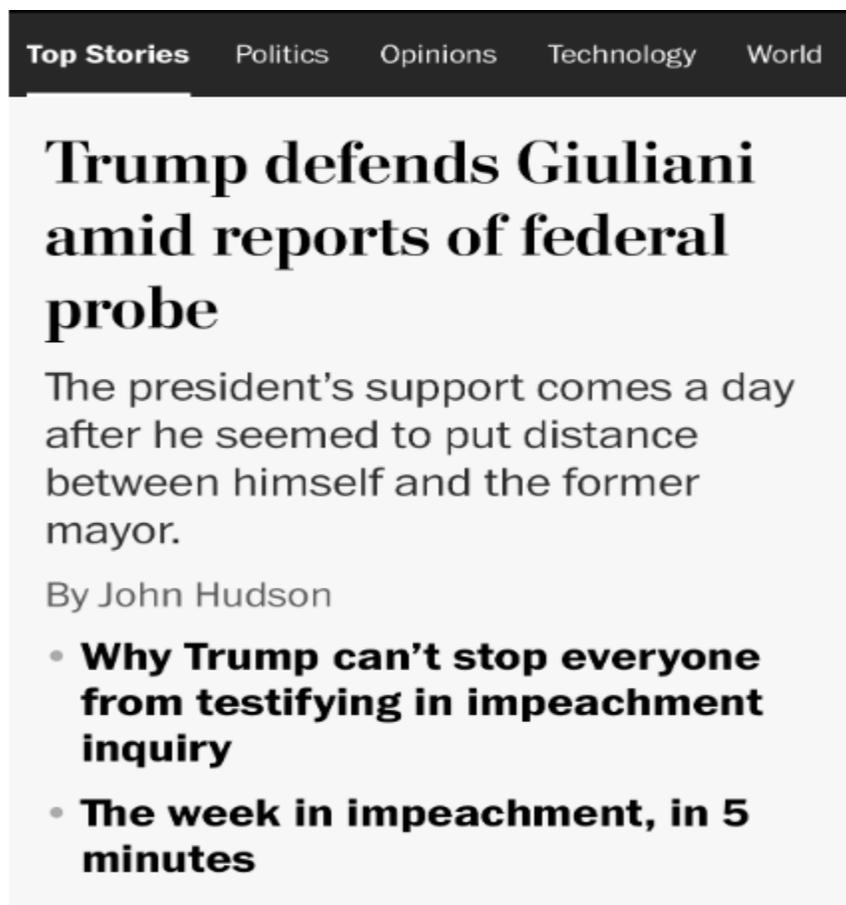
Print edition: **Envoy: Trump behind ouster** (location far right of front page, one of three top stories, and two sub headlines).



- Website: **Trump defends Giuliani amid reports of federal probe** (location far left of the web page, one of five top stories, and a three-line blurb and two related articles).



- Newsletter: No entry for this article.
- Mobile: **Trump defends Giuliani amid reports of federal probe** (Top story, a three-line headline, four-line blurb, and a two related articles).



- Facebook: **Trump defends Giuliani amid reports of federal investigation** (third top story, a four-line blurb that uses a quote from the story, and a photo is included).



**wap** Washington Post  
2 hrs · 🌐

“So now they are after the legendary ‘crime buster’ and greatest Mayor in the history of NYC, Rudy Giuliani,” Trump tweeted Saturday morning. “He may seem a little rough around the edges sometimes, but he is also a great guy and wonderful lawyer.”



WASHINGTONPOST.COM  
**Trump defends Giuliani amid reports of federal investigation**  
The president’s support for the embattled attorney comes just a day after...

- Twitter: **Trump defends Giuliani amid reports of federal investigation** (Eleventh highest story, a one-line blurb, which repeated the headline, and a photo is included).



**The Washington Post**  @washingtonpost · 3h

Trump defends Giuliani amid reports of federal investigation



**Trump defends Giuliani amid reports of federal investigation**

The president's support for the embattled attorney comes just a day after he seemed to put distance between himself and the former mayor when...

[washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com)

 98

 42

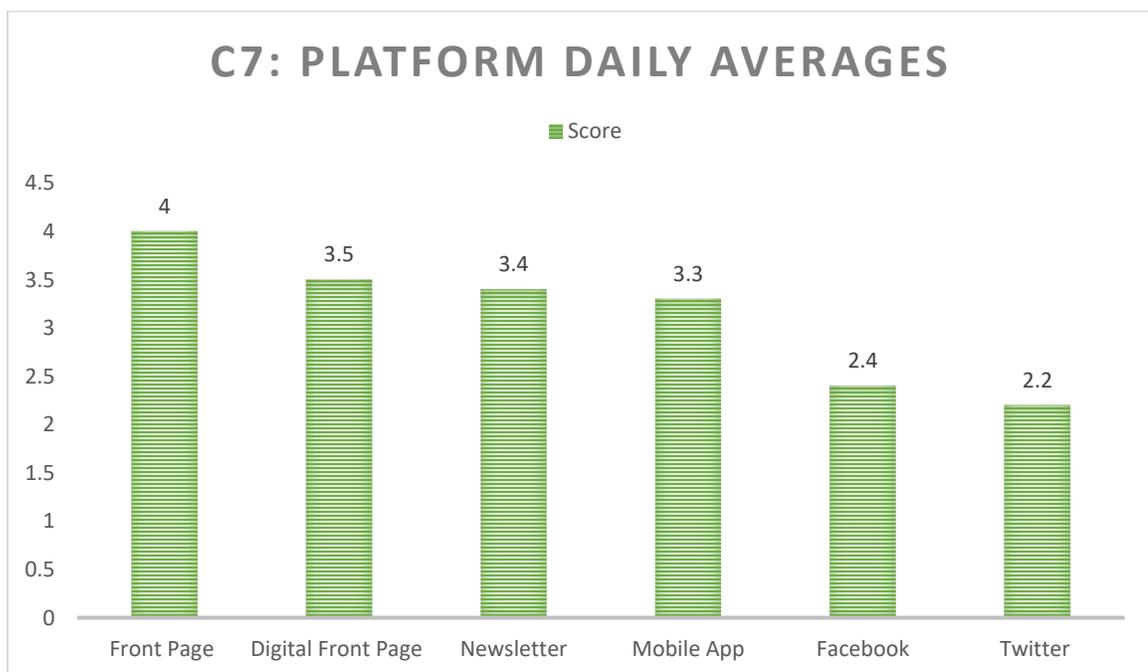
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## Conclusion

The results show what I had mentioned a few times: platforms that tend to attract loyal consumers had more direct visual access to Trump news, in particular the impeachment controversy. All of these articles were available on all platforms (although the physical edition tended to be a recap of the prior day), but the order differed by each platform. The following is the order of the scores (C7):

- Average Front Page Score: 4
- Average Digital Front Page Score: 3.5
- Average Newsletter Score: 3.4
- Average Mobile App Score: 3.3
- Average Facebook Score: 2.4
- Average Twitter Score: 2.2



The biggest surprise that I found from my data was the fact that Twitter finished last. I actually expected that score to be higher. I can possibly attribute the much lower scores on social media to the fact that the post wants to invest their news brand to platforms that create revenue, which Twitter and Facebook do not. The other reason could be the desire to not associate their brand with social media, which has been one of the biggest sources of fake news.

Some observations I made is that articles in the print edition generally force you to move to a different page for the continuation of the article. Today's savvy news consumers want their articles in one spot. Therefore, online definitely has an edge as far as easier to consume. Speaking of online use, going directly to the Washington Post homepage not only creates less clicks for the user, it creates what is called a "unique user" or people who go directly to a URL. Unique users are valued more by websites than coming in from Facebook, Twitter, Google, etc. This is what news organizations want. They spend money, resources, and time on a website in the quest to create revenue. While most news organizations are struggling, at least websites are a revenue option, unlike Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media sites.

For further study on this project, I could possibly look at how much the stories change from physical to digital. The reason I held back from that was because of the nature of the big difference in the physical front page and the digital content. I think as a reproduced product, the digital content is way too different to do an accurate study on the changes. Instead, I felt it was a better strategy to focus on how each platform creates a different daily issue. Another further study would be to circle back when there is not such a polarizing individual or subject matter and see how the Post really spreads out its content. It would also be beneficial to do another study in 2020 on how news holes are treated by additional papers like the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, and the Washington Times. This could provide a balance since the Washington Post

and New York Times are considered to lean more to the left while the Wall Street Journal and Washington Times lean to the right.

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