

BuzzFeed News builds a video newsroom and experiments with formats to improve YouTube performance and grow subscriber base

BuzzFeed News is a global news organization providing original online reporting and video programming across digital platforms. They average 40M+ unique monthly views across all platforms.

OPPORTUNITY

BuzzFeed News wanted to grow subscriber numbers, improve engagement (watch time), and solidify their role as an industry leader in breaking down internet hoaxes and conspiracy theories. They saw an opportunity to test how new formats and metadata could help.

APPROACH

The BuzzFeed News team first decided what their test-and-learn approach would be, then they built out a dedicated YouTube studio space and hired a production team. With the groundwork in place, they experimented with format and presentation to help reach the widest possible audience.

Building out infrastructure for video success: BuzzFeed created a permanent, purpose-built studio in Toronto, and purchased the necessary equipment needed to run it, including studio lights (Kino Flo kit and softbox, Arri Fresnel Kit for hair/backdrop lighting), a C100 camera with lens and tripod, and a seamless rig. They also expanded their digital video team by hiring new staff.

Experimenting with new formats: Next, they worked as a team to define which formats they would test to drive audience engagement. They decided on evergreen explainers that unravel persistent hoaxes, fast turnaround videos in reaction to breaking news hoaxes, and interactive educational formats.

Using data to optimize for success: They used insights to determine metadata best practices, making tweaks around titles and keywords based on trends of what was performing well. They found these small changes helped increase views. They also began optimizing titles and keywords so that their videos would surface when users would search for a corresponding conspiracy theory.

RESULTS

By experimenting with different formats, and tweaking as they went along, BuzzFeed News was able to improve performance of their videos on YouTube and grow their subscriber base.

- **Fast turnaround videos proved successful**, especially when released quickly after a breaking news hoax — their most successful piece, “Don’t Fall For These Hoaxes About Nipsey Hussle And Dr. Sebi,” got 136K+ views (4K+ hours of watch time) and was responsible for adding over 250 new subscribers to the channel.
- **Evergreen content performed well**, especially when aligned to a relevant news cycle story — “Why Sam Hyde Goes Viral After Every Mass Shooting,” garnered over 95K views and generated nearly 3K hours of watch time.
- **Explainer format “QAnon Explained” was viewed over 59K times**, and 158 people subscribed to the channel after watching. The effective use of keywords in the metadata helped drive ~70% of traffic through YouTube search.

“

Identifying what kinds of video we should focus on producing, how many of each kind, and which resources we need to achieve this can help us make long-term plans around our video priorities as BuzzFeed News grows and evolves its digital video strategy.

”

LEARNINGS

Lean into what’s already working: Collaboration with other YouTube channels, specifically through Community posts, is a great way to grow your audience. For example, when BuzzFeed’s “Unsolved” channel linked to a video in a Community post, views for that video quadrupled within 24 hours. Also, look at topics and ideas that have worked for you in the past on other platforms and adapt/optimize them for YouTube. For example, make them longer, add a memorable host, or create a series (all YouTube best practices).

Tell the same story in different ways: Videos performed better when there were at least two other uploads throughout the week, as this provides more chances to direct traffic between videos. But you don’t need totally unique pieces — supplement your most successful videos with content on similar topics using different formats (e.g., evergreen, interactive).

Packaging counts for a lot: Thumbnail selection plays a huge role in click-through rate and viewership for new formats. For example, BuzzFeed found that thumbnails showing images of specific hosts only worked well if this person already had an established on-channel brand. Otherwise, thumbnails representing the topic worked better. Also, series with cohesive thumbnail looks had higher click-through rates than those using a disparate collection of thumbnail images.

Evergreen content resonates with the YouTube audience: Content that has a long shelf life tends to perform better than breaking news stories. So, while news organizations need to address breaking stories, ensure you have a library of evergreen content as well so that your audience will keep coming back.