

The Guardian invests in digital video to drive audience growth

Guardian News & Media publishes The Guardian and The Observer newspapers in the UK and theguardian.com, one of the world's leading English-language newspaper websites. The Guardian is renowned for its agenda-setting journalism and has been recognized with a Pulitzer Prize and an Emmy.

OPPORTUNITY

The Guardian wanted to find innovative ways of telling the stories that matter to a younger generation so it could better connect with them. It saw an opportunity to expand its digital video journalism and experiment with new video-first formats to increase community engagement and drive growth — specifically for young viewers and female audiences.

APPROACH

The Guardian invited staff from across the video team and a small selection of specialized video freelancers to join a dedicated, digital video focused team to explore and test new ideas and best practices. The team leveraged their different skill sets and backgrounds to focus exclusively on testing new formats, creating content, and building community around them. They also collaborated with subject specialists from across different departments at The Guardian. The learnings were then captured and shared with the wider video team and across the organization.

Defining the project and building the team: The Guardian wanted to innovate with digital video in a way that would drive a sustainable, long-term video culture within the organization. It built a team up from internal staff with the intention that, at the completion of the year-long project, staff would move back into their original teams to ensure that the skills acquired during the project would permeate throughout the organization.

Prioritizing diversity: The Guardian ensured the team working on this project was diverse and reflective of their YouTube audience and the young, female audiences they wanted to better serve.

Setting the team up for success: The purpose of the project was communicated throughout the business, so all departments understood its importance, and structures could be implemented to enable its success. The dedicated digital video team was given the freedom to create their own workflows and processes, experiment with new formats, and push the boundaries of what The Guardian's journalism on digital video should be.

Training and development: The Guardian scheduled regular team meetings, creative reviews, research and development sessions for content ideas, and hosted team 'away days'.

Experimenting with formats: The team selected two formats they wanted to test, to see which would drive growth amongst different audience segments — specifically, younger viewers and women.

Explainers: These are a format prevalent on digital video platforms, and one that The Guardian had wanted to focus on developing and publishing more consistently:

- Explainers give background context to a wider, more complicated and sometimes ongoing story. They can be pegged to current news stories, or stand alone on certain themes. They are a great way of covering stories and themes which are tricky to explain in a more standard film.
- In user testing and research, explainers rated highly across all audiences categories, especially amongst those less inclined to consume large volumes of news content.

- The team looked at known audience preferences to select broad themes and then topics — for example, under the umbrella theme 'better living', which was aimed at females, the team covered topics such as: period trackers, how the abortion movement in the US started, and big tobacco.
- The team considered audience feedback to make decisions around stories covered, treatment of topics, and presenters and producers.

Series: The Guardian wanted to test more personality-led, subject-specific series as this is a format native to digital video:

- They learned that on-screen personality is essential to driving success of a series — the journalist/presenter has to authentically 'broadcast' to and engage with the digital video audience.
- The team prioritized listening to the audience, asking them what they wanted to see. For example, they used user comments to help craft the tone and feel of the series', "Modern Masculinity" and "Death Land", whilst retaining Guardian style and values.

Defining new processes: The team set a clearly defined schedule for research and development, and started properly planning for the publication regularity and consistency they needed to maintain in order to drive loyalty and growth. They used centralized software to manage and approve content.

Engaging the audience: The Guardian hired a Community Producer to manage audience engagement. The team wanted to engage viewers in a 'conversation', so they aimed to create content that took the viewer on a journey, and adopted a personal tone — which is totally at odds with how you traditionally create video content within a news organization. They used Community posts to interact with the audience and to publish GIFs, still images, and other promotional content. The team also experimented with Live commentary, live chat, and YouTube stories as ways to drive engagement.

Testing, iterating, refining: Throughout the course of the project, the team was always listening and learning, then pivoting where necessary. They used data to inform all their big decisions around what and when to publish, and restructured themselves as needed — for example, when one series started performing very well they ensured the team was agile enough to respond to where the demand was. They reduced the number of people working on explainers so they could dedicate more resources to the series'.

RESULTS

The Guardian increased engagement and subscriber numbers, and grew its female and youth audience segments. As intended, the staff who worked on this project have continued to develop the skills they acquired, and upskill other team members around YouTube best practices. In addition, the team was honored with nominations and wins for prestigious awards — e.g., an explainer about period tracking won the 2020 Webby People's Voice award for video (technology) and "Modern Masculinity" was nominated for a Royal Television Society journalism award for digital.

- **The Guardian channel grew to over 1M subscribers** during the project.
- During the project, the team tested **47 videos**, which generated **11% of views** and almost **12% of watch time** from subscribers (compared to ~3% across the entire channel, and ~8% for other new content published over the same period).
- **Reached a 70+% female audience** with the "Death Land" series and a collection of explainers — previously, the average audience was 70-75% male.
- **~70% of views on new content from the under 35 age group** (compared to ~53% on other content).

LEARNINGS

Be authentic: Stay true to your organizational values and keep that at the core of everything you do.

Don't be afraid to push the boundaries: Be bold, innovative, brave, and editorially independent. Take the essence of digital video and marry it with your brand and values.

Be relentlessly audience informed: Analyze audience insights, listen to your community, and learn from your viewers about what they want — and what they don't.

“**Digital video is an important way for us to grow and engage with our audiences off-platform. We have developed a large and engaged audience, attracting more people to Guardian journalism with innovative formats and relevant content. We hope to further develop our relationship with these audiences as part of our wider strategy to deepen our relationship readers.**”