To: The Masthead
From: Newsroom Innovation Team
Subject: Our recommendations

Six months ago, at the request of Jill and Dean, this team of journalists began studying our newsroom and the changing digital landscape with the goal of making recommendations about where The Times can improve.

This effort comes at a moment when The Times is buzzing with innovative new initiatives. NYT Now is changing the way our journalism is presented on mobile devices. Cooking is reimagining our service journalism for digital platforms. Times Insider is pulling back the curtain on how our journalists work. The Upshot combines smart analysis, writing and data visualization with personality.

Even as we celebrate success in these new areas, our mandate was to look further into the future and ask what else we should consider to foster innovation around our core: The New York Times and the world-class journalism we produce day after day.

Our team embarked on a deep reporting project focused on how to expand the reach and impact of our journalism at a time when technology, user behavior and our competitors are evolving more rapidly than ever. We talked to more than 300 people, both inside The Times and at more than 50 other media and technology companies, studied our internal analytics and ran a number of targeted experiments.

Last month we completed our work and shared our findings and recommendations with Jill and Dean and a handful of other newsroom and company leaders. Jill has asked us to provide an overview of our work.

We made five major recommendations, which we will describe in greater depth below:
1. Create a newsroom audience development team
2. Create a newsroom analytics team
3. Create a newsroom strategy team
4. Collaborate with the reader-focused departments on the business side
5. Prioritize digital hiring to help the digital-first transition

Strong momentum
Before we dive into the details, we want to provide a bit of context about The Times's performance and the changing landscape.

Only seven years ago, our print and digital journalists worked in separate build-

ings. Since then, thanks to the work of countless newsroom leaders, we have made remarkable progress. Each year, our digital and traditional operations have become better integrated. Each year, our reach is expanding on new platforms. Each year, we produce more groundbreaking digital journalism.

This progress has not always been easy. Print and digital are different in countless ways, and often require juggling many competing demands. Our standards mean we sometimes value deliberation over speed and tradition over change. Still, it is not just cheerleading to suggest that no traditional news organization has been more successful in the transition to digital than The New York Times.

That success starts with our journalism. Of all the challenges facing a media company in the digital age, producing great journalism day after day is still the hardest and most important. Our daily report is deep, broad, smart and engaging. Our reporters and editors are the best in the business and are constantly pushing us forward by experimenting on their own. Our storytelling has been made richer and deeper with the help of Graphics, Interactive News, Computer Assisted Reporting, Digital Design, Social and Video. On this most important front — the core journalism — we've got a big lead over the competition.

Meanwhile, the success of the paywall — proof of our enduring value to readers — has provided financial stability and a clear path forward for our overarching strategy. With subscription revenue surpassing advertising revenue for the first time, our newsroom and business colleagues are more aligned than ever around the mission of serving our readers. Meanwhile, the sale of properties like The Boston Globe and the rebranding of The International Herald Tribune have allowed the company's leadership to focus squarely on The New York Times.

Relentless Change
Still, the pace of change in our industry demands that we move faster.

Digital media is becoming more crowded, better funded and more innovative. Our new-media counterparts are investing more in quality journalism. Our traditional rivals are becoming more digitally sophisticated.

Start-ups like Vox and First Look Media, backed by venture capital and personal fortunes, are creating newsrooms custom-built for the digital world. BuzzFeed, Facebook and LinkedIn are pushing deeper into the journalism business by hiring editors and unveiling new products aimed at newsreaders. Traditional competitors like The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, The Financial Times and The Guardian are moving aggressively to remake themselves as digital first — digital reports that also produce newspapers, rather than the other way around.

The pace of change requires us to rethink traditions and quickly identify new opportunities to adjust to the massive shift to mobile, the growing importance of social media and other disruptive trends.

These changes also demand the newsroom invest more time and resources in

building up the right digital talent and technology. Phrases like audience development, social engagement, page optimization, user experience and content-management systems may sound like jargon to some traditional journalists, but they are becoming standard vocabulary in many newsrooms.

The reach and impact of our journalism is still the envy of the industry, but some of our competitors are growing faster than we are. There are a couple of important asterisks: Most of our competitors do not require their readers to pay for their content and many have adopted growth strategies we would not want to replicate. Even so, we can benefit from perfecting the art and science of expanding our audience — and there are many ways to do so without jeopardizing our values. Imagine the possibilities if we can become as good at promoting our journalism as producing it.

It can be dangerous to talk of "transformation" since suggests a shift from one solid state to another; it implies an end point. We cannot simply become a web-first newsroom or a mobile-first newsroom. We must become a flexible newsroom that continuously adjusts to the needs of the moment. Changes in technology require us to constantly reimagine what is possible. Changes in reader behavior require us to continually assess what's working. And these exercises shouldn't be treated as chores: They can elevate our journalism, extend our reach and enable us to better serve our readers.

This building is full of people who have been pushing tirelessly for us improve our digital operations, and their ideas have informed all our recommendations. And so some colleagues may find these recommendations glaringly obvious, while others may find them controversial at first glance. In some cases, The Times is already taking important steps to address these needs and seize these opportunities. In others, the work is just beginning. But everything that follows is offered with full commitment to upholding and advancing the values of The Times.

If anyone wants more information, please just ask. The team members are Adam Bryant, Charles Duhigg, Adam Ellick, Elena Gianni, Amy O'Leary, Andrew Phelps, Louise Story and A.G. Sulzberger, as well as two colleagues from the strategy team, Ben Peskoe and Jonathan Galinsky. We have plenty more research and insight that we are happy to share.

1. Create a Newsroom Audience Development Team

We've long viewed audience development — getting our journalism in front of readers — as central to our mission. Our home-delivery operation still stands out as an amazing testament to the lengths we are willing to go to ensure people read our work.

But we are putting less effort into reaching readers' digital doorsteps than we

have been to reach their physical doorsteps.

For the newsroom, our main audience-development strategy has been to produce quality journalism. (And we produce a lot of it: an average of 300 URLs a day, which are added to the 15 million articles already in the archive.) But audience development demands a sophisticated blend of other tools and tactics, such as promoting our work on social media, repackaging it for new platforms, optimizing it for search engines, personalizing it to meet readers needs and engaging with readers directly through email and comments.

Janine Gibson, who as editor in chief of the Guardian US played a key role in helping expand digital readership significantly in the last six years, captured this fundamental shift best in a recent speech: "The hardest part for me has been the realization that you don't automatically get an audience. For someone with a print background, you're accustomed to the fact that if it makes the editor's cut — gets into the paper — you're going to find an audience. It's entirely the other way around as a digital journalist. The realization that you have to go find your audience — they're not going to just come and read it — has been transformative."

A former leader of The Huffington Post, which in just a few years has eclipsed The Times in total readership, told us that if we want to improve our reach, we must think differently about what it means to publish a story: "At The New York Times, far too often for writers and editors the story is done when you hit publish. At Huffington Post, the article begins its life when you hit publish."

The home page has been our main tool for presenting our journalism to readers, and millions of them flock to it each month. But like all news home pages, its impact is waning. Fewer than half of our readers even see the home page. Instead of seeking us out, more readers are expecting us to find them on places like Facebook and through email and alerts.

Promoting our work is no longer just about arguing for better home page play. Getting our journalism in front of readers through other channels takes considerable effort and a growing array of specialized skills. We should resurface, organize and package our journalism in more useful ways, such as sending travel stories about Italy when you land in Rome or organizing our recipes by ingredient rather than publication date. Better technology provides us with more effective tools to ensure that we get our work in front of the right readers at the right place and at the right time, such as the mobile news alerts that reach nearly 14 million devices. NYT Now has shown the possibility of reimagining our report for a specific platform: bullet points allow for quick scanning, update markers help returning readers know what's changed in a story, tip sheets aggregate our most important work, and the "Our Picks" stream offers a guided tour of the best of the web.

Audience development is a goal for the whole company, but it can no longer be pushed forward exclusively on the business side. The newsroom must seize a leadership position because the work — much like writing engaging headlines — re-

quires both creativity and editorial judgment.

At a growing number of our competitors, new and old, audience development is considered the responsibility of every editor and reporter. An editor at The Washington Post told us: "I tell most reporters, 'Three percent of the people who want to see your work are seeing it. So if we can get that to even 4.5 percent, it's worth the effort, it's worth the struggle.'"

We recommend creating a senior audience development position in charge of a new team in the newsroom. This person would be responsible for developing the newsroom's strategy on social media, search and direct outreach like email. They would also help us answer questions like how to best personalize our report and how to make the best use of our archive.

A second recommendation is to provide support and guidance to reporters, editors and desks in advancing these goals. Many journalists have already had significant success doing this type of work on their own. But part of an audience development team's mission would be to support those efforts by providing tools, templates and training to journalists to ensure that their work is reaching a growing audience of readers.

We spent a lot of time examining how journalists can help this effort in ways that support, rather than distract from, their work. We ran a number of studies and pulled together best practices for experimenting in these areas. This is the type of work that we believe an audience development team would take on but we are happy to share our research with anyone who would like to hear more.

2. Create a Newsroom Analytics Team

How often should we refresh content on the home page? How deeply do readers engage with our multimedia packages? Are our regular features and columns developing loyal digital followings?

Analytics teams are already a cornerstone of digital newsrooms. Traditional competitors like The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post and The Atlantic have embraced analytics. Digital competitors like The Huffington Post and BuzzFeed have put data at the heart of their growth strategies. The insights they glean from data have improved their reach and ability to engage readers. An editor at The Guardian put it this way: "Editors are our first filter, readers are our second." Generations of editors had to guess what readers wanted; this is the first one with the ability to know if their guesses are correct.

Establishing a robust analytics team in the newsroom is essential to virtually any major initiative. Our first recommendation was to quickly develop our data-gathering and analysis capacities — including expanding our collection and use of

structured data to enable new ways of linking and surfacing stories — while finding smart ways to share that information with the broader newsroom.

Our analytics operations on the business side are strong and have pushed us forward in vital and important ways, but we only recently started integrating this work in the newsroom. Building up that newsroom operation would help us expand our audience and provide valuable insights for our digital transition.

In our reporting, we heard concerns about data hijacking our journalists' judgment. One worry is that analytics will be used primarily to gauge the performance of individual stories, and that it will encourage a singular focus on page views and steer us toward lowest-common-denominator journalism.

We believe that such fears are misplaced. Our journalistic values are deep and solid. And we are all aware that our readers come to The Times for our editorial judgment. The success of the paywall reinforces the notion that readers value us for what we do, day in and day out. Simply put, metrics can help us make smarter decisions to extend the reach and impact of Times journalism. And it is important to remember that in many cases the best metric is simply quality journalism.

Data collection and analysis have grown more sophisticated. We can measure time spent reading, the number of people who share a story with friends, how far readers scroll in an article and the percentage of readers returning to the same feature week after week. Data can play a bigger role in helping us identify trends, share successes and shape strategy. An example is the data-rich memo Ian Fisher sent the newsroom, to emphasize the importance of having a story ready, even in minimal form, when we send out a breaking news alert.

In our conversations with reporters and editors at The Times, many colleagues said they craved more information about how readers are engaging with our work. They also wanted insights about the metrics that newsroom leaders consider most important to our journalism and for our future growth. And they expressed the hope — which we share — that such metrics could provide a counterweight to our traditional markers of success, such as Page One stories.

We will have to wrestle with tricky questions. What are the most important metrics? How widely should information be shared? How can we ensure that information is clear and actionable rather than vague and confusing? We have to get the answers right. But we cannot afford to ignore the wealth of information and insights at our fingertips.

3. Create a Newsroom Strategy Team

Previous newsroom leaders have had the luxury of being able to focus almost entirely on the newspaper. Today, running the New York Times newsroom means

not just overseeing the newspaper but also a vast web operation, a growing array of mobile products, newsletters, news alerts and social media accounts, as well as an international edition, a video unit and a range of new standalone products.

The masthead, in particular, is being asked to fill two huge roles: to oversee the day-to-day needs of the news report and, simultaneously, to chart a course through a changing media landscape. And because this is a newsroom, the short-term demands of news often steal precious time from long-term planning to ensure that we are tracking and adjusting to the continuous changes in technology, reader behavior and the competitive environment.

We recommended creating a permanent strategy team in the newsroom. This group should be small, removed from daily operations and contain a mix of backgrounds in journalism, technology, user experience, and analytics.

The business side already has a strategy team, which will continue to be a valuable resource across the company. But we also see value in creating a separate newsroom team specifically focused on advising the masthead on our distinct set of questions about our journalism and its reach. Examples include: How can we make our service journalism more useful on mobile devices? What are the best practices in audience development? How are others using email to reach readers? How do we balance personalization with our editors' news judgment? How can we mine our archive to better serve readers?

In addition to answering such questions, a strategy team would track industry developments and our own audience data to help the masthead establish and communicate priorities, particularly in more technical areas like content management systems, platform parity, and structured data.

These roles would address one of the most common refrains we heard from newsroom leaders. Both masthead editors and desk editors said they rarely had time to step back because of the gravitational pull of the news report. And both masthead editors and desk editors told us that they would appreciate more guidance to help them innovate.

This team would also promote innovation from around the newsroom, serving as a clearinghouse for ideas and proposals from editors and reporters. And it would provide a clear point of contact with the business side to connect new initiatives across the company.

4. Collaborate With Reader-Focused Departments on the Business Side

Many of the skills, insights and training we need to take our digital report to the next level are already inside the building — but often outside the newsroom.

Another recommendation is to encourage more collaboration between the newsroom and business-side departments focused on building, rethinking and studying the digital experience of our readers. These include Technology, Consumer Insight Group, R&D and Product. These colleagues, like digital designers in the newsroom, are focused on ensuring that the experience of reading, watching and interacting with our digital journalism is as impressive as the journalism itself.

Here, too, we already are seeing progress. Kelly Alfieri, a product manager, has been sitting on the second floor to help David Leonhardt launch The Upshot. James Robinson, from the Consumer Insight Group, is working in the newsroom on analytics. Erin Grau, a project manager, is now spending part of each week in the newsroom to help us prioritize digital initiatives. More recently, a team of developers relocated from Technology to the newsroom, which will greatly improve our ability to make rapid fixes and improvements to our publishing systems. And this is not a one-way street — Brian Hamman, who previously worked in Interactive News, is now a key member of the New Products team.

These collaborations do not mean we should abandon the historic divide between news and business. Advertising, in particular, should remain walled off to preserve the integrity and independence of the newsroom. That separation has served the institution well for decades and continues to be critical for protecting against conflicts of interest.

But as the paywall helps us become a more reader-focused company, not every department on the business payroll needs to be kept at arm's length.

At many of our competitors, developers, product managers, designers and data scientists are seen as key newsroom players. For example, Jonah Peretti, the founder of BuzzFeed, said that the contributions of such employees have been a big draw for digitally savvy journalists: "Our tech team, product team and data science team have built a very powerful publishing platform that allows us to serve our readers better."

The NYT Now product shows the benefits of such collaborations. Designers came up with a way to signal to NYT Now readers when important new information is added to a story. Developers built the technology that allows us to further customize the app for readers in different time zones. The reader focus groups assembled by Consumer Insight prompted the team to rethink some of its underlying assumptions before launching. Product managers helped find ways to satisfy both readers who wanted deep dives and readers who wanted quick scans. Though Cliff Levy and his newsroom team were in charge of the journalistic vision, such as the morning tip sheets and more conversational tone, the final product was a true team effort. It's easy to imagine how these colleagues could help elevate the work of a new blog, columnist, or desk.

We believe that bringing these reader-focused colleagues even closer to the

newsroom will unlock a tremendous amount of creative energy. Many of them work at The Times for exactly the same mission-driven reasons as our journalists — and many have turned down far more money from places like Google and Facebook to contribute to that mission. There are many ways to bring them closer to the report, such as embedding more colleagues from these departments in the newsroom, inviting them to newsroom orientation sessions, and creating career paths between the newsroom and these departments. But the first step is simply to encourage more collaboration.

5. Prioritize Digital Hiring to Help the Digital First Transition

One of the clearest themes to emerge from our reporting is that we need to do a better job of recruiting, empowering and promoting digital talent.

This is perhaps the most critical step in a transition from a newspaper that also produces a rich and impressive digital report to a digital publication that also produces a rich and impressive newspaper.

"We don't need to get there by the end of 2014," said Nathan Ashby-Kuhlman, our senior editor for digital operations. "But because this will be one of the most difficult transitions The New York Times's newsroom has ever made, it is urgent to start mapping out a strategy."

We are obviously not starting from scratch. The digital journalism readers see each day is exceptional: Departments like Graphics, Interactive News and Digital Design are among the best in the industry and home to some of our most talented journalists. Our immersive multimedia storytelling formats are loved by readers and replicated by our competitors.

But we have to improve in areas that readers can't see: publishing systems, workflow and process, organizational structures, recruiting and strategy.

As one digital leader at The Times told us, the newspaper sets the gold standard not just because we employ world-class reporters. We also empower them with a world-class support system that includes foreign bureaus, travel budgets, a network of stringers, researchers and best-in-class backfields and copy desks. Now we need to put more work into modernizing that support system by focusing on areas like article promotion, search optimization, tools and templates, and our content management system.

We need to continually assess our changing digital needs and rethink our print-based traditions. And it's worth noting that the right structure for today won't be the right structure for tomorrow. Some of our moves will be big successes, while others will fall short. The needs of our journalists and our readers will continue to change. Some new roles may exist for only a few years.

Our print paper isn't going away anytime soon — nor would we want it to. But currently, the work of putting out the newspaper informs almost every aspect of how we do our jobs. Assumptions based on the newspaper's fixed dimensions and hard deadlines are so baked into our days that it is easy to overlook new possibilities. As one colleague so aptly put it, the question of what is "Timesian" is both our saving grace and an artificial limit on experimentation.

Other companies are wrestling with these questions, too. A few newspapers have taken disruptive steps to become digital first. The Financial Times cut the number of its print editions from three to one, moved 200 night production staffers to daytime hours, built up engagement, data and breaking news teams and then handed responsibility for the newspaper to a small group of editors. USA Today has been integrating digital staff — like developers and social editors — into each desk and leaving the production of the print paper to a small team. "The best online journalism goes into print at the end of the day," said David Callaway, the editor-in-chief. "But nothing is native for print."

Some other traditional competitors have moved in this direction as well. The Wall Street Journal created a "real-time news desk" and "audience-engagement desk" with social-media editors and analytics specialists. The Washington Post is building up a large "universal news desk" and recently opened an outpost in Manhattan to attract developers, user experience designers and data scientists. (Although many of the efforts have been successful — The Financial Times and USA Today have seen significant growth — others have stumbled trying to navigate the transition. The newspaper chain Digital First Media, for example, recently announced layoffs and put the company up for sale.)

Meanwhile, newer competitors like Vox, BuzzFeed and First Look Media are using their digital skills as a selling point, promising journalists the technology and talent to succeed without the old constraints. In the last year, many prominent journalists like Ezra Klein, Nate Silver, Glenn Greenwald and Kara Swisher all left established newspapers for digital-media startups.

Recent departures from The Times of some digital veterans underscore the need to improve how we recruit digital talent — both for purely digital roles and for more traditional reporting and editing roles — and how we empower them to elevate our report. Some desks have worked hard to improve in this area but we still need to do a better job dispersing digital skills across the newsroom. Hiring, including from non-traditional competitors, is one important step. Another is finding ways to make our current platform editors, social editors, producers, designers and developers more central to the report. All these efforts would be greatly helped by bringing more digital journalists into our leadership ranks.

Josh Haner, who just won the Pulitzer for feature photography, is a perfect example of the value of great journalists with broad and deep technical skills. Concerned that the laborious process of uploading and filing photos from events was

limiting how quickly we could post breaking news, he designed and built a special backpack for photographers that transmits pictures back to the newsroom instantaneously. That gives us a big jump on the competition in the field.

Conclusion

One question we've heard often from people around the building is, "What can those of us who are not senior newsroom leaders do to help The Times tackle these challenges?"

The broad-brush answer is that we encourage everyone to be open to new ideas, to be willing to challenge tradition, and to be patient as we try, and learn from, initiatives that don't work.

There are many more specific answers to that broader question. Desks can continue to recruit, elevate and empower digital talent to positions where these colleagues can help push our report forward. Individual reporters and editors can experiment with storytelling forms and learn best practices for promoting their work. We could all spend more time doing what the majority of our readers do: reading on phones, using social networks and paying attention to our newest competitors.

All of us are eager to continue talking about these important questions and to help experiment in search of answers. We'll be doing some presentations for the newsroom. And we're happy to help arrange brainstorming sessions — we've already done a couple with The Upshot and Times Insider — or share research. As with any big project, there is a mountain of reporting in our files.

We want to conclude by reiterating that not a single person among the hundreds we interviewed ever suggested tinkering with the journalistic values and integrity that make The Times the greatest journalistic institution in the world. But we must continue to evolve in the digital world to maintain that status over the coming decades.