

Slate's north star metric

How Slate used engaged time to increase reader loyalty and grow subscriptions

About Slate

Slate is an award-winning daily online magazine offering analysis and commentary about current affairs, politics, and culture.

In 2014, Slate launched [Slate Plus](#), a membership program that allowed the decades-old online magazine to lower their dependence on platforms and monetize their incredibly loyal audience. “The Facebook algorithm and referral traffic can be very fickle and not always controllable,” said Anna Gilbert, Director of Research at Slate. Today, Slate Plus is 35,000 members strong and is a core part of the business model.

To grow their most loyal audience, Slate needed to align everyone in their organization on the new goal of fostering intense engagement, instead of reach. How? By gradually replacing unique visitors with a new way to measure loyalty: the amount of time a visitor actively reads or watches a piece of content.

SLATE'S OUTCOMES



Flourishing paid membership program



Loyalty metric that every team drives toward



Reading experience that makes visitors stay longer



Deeper understanding of what engages their audience

35,000

paying Slate Plus members

8.5%

increase in engaged time using Parse.ly's API for content recommendation

50%

of Slate's total headcount use the Parse.ly dashboard

56

reports downloaded per month

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Our deliberate shift in strategy stems from our belief that the engaged time goal uniquely aligns the priorities of readers, advertisers, and our editorial team.



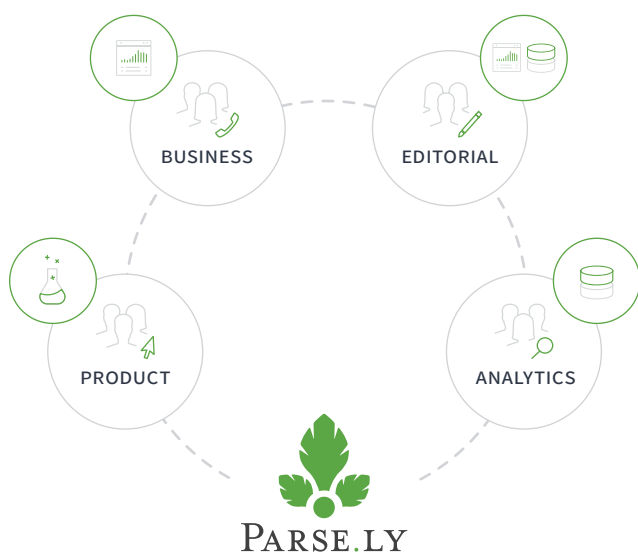
DAVID STERN

Director of Product Development, Slate

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“Our deliberate shift in strategy stems from our belief that the engaged time goal uniquely aligns the priorities of readers, advertisers, and our editorial team. If readers spend more time with content that they value, they’ll be more likely to view more ads while they’re reading, they’ll be more likely to share our content, and they’ll be more likely to join our membership program, Slate Plus,” said David Stern, Slate’s Director of Product Development.

Slate implemented their new “north star metric” team-by-team. At every step of the way, Parse.ly provided access to audience data that helped Slate’s product managers, journalists, and analysts understand how to move the needle forward on engaged time.



How do you track loyalty?

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Engaged time was just a good metric to capture how people are flowing through the funnel, and at each stage. Whether they’re first time visitors or everyday visitors, are they staying on Slate longer?



ANNA GILBERT
Director of Research, Slate

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When Slate shifted toward loyalty, the first question was “How are we going to track this?” There were a variety of metrics on the table. They considered returning visitors and number of visits, but finally settled on engaged time.

“It’s just a great way to measure the sincerity of first time visitors,” says Anna Gilbert, Slate’s Director of Research. “If we have first time visitors that come to Slate and read two or three articles and spend a minute and a half or two minutes, we want that to be reported and credited in this loyalty initiative. And we think that those everyday visitors, or those twice a week visitors are also captured really well.”

PRODUCT TEAM + PARSE.LY'S API

Create an engaging user experience with relevant content suggestions

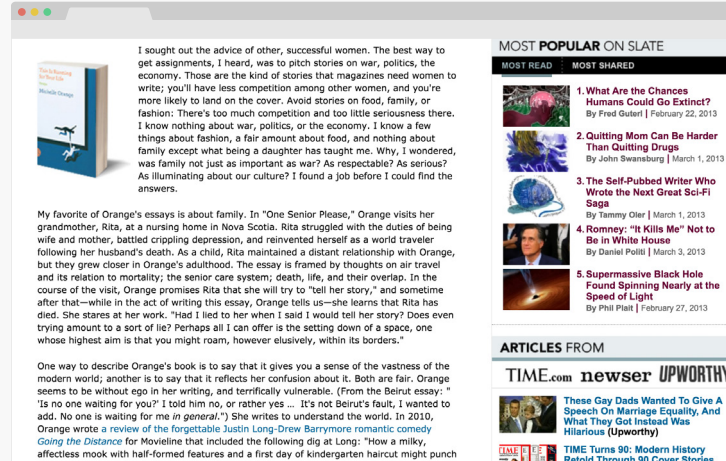
Slate's first step toward increasing engaged time came with a redesign of the readership experience. Director of Product Development David Stern and his team wanted to eliminate two "usability sins" in the product's design: lists of recirculation links crammed in next to every article and pagination after 1,000 words. To move forward, they needed to find a replacement. Pagination alone was responsible for 10% of Slate's page views and ad impressions.

The ultimate solution? Personalized content recommendations and thoughtful product design. Slate brought these together in an [infinite scroll reading experience](#). When a reader reaches the bottom of one Slate story, another relevant story appears. The next story is selected by Parse.ly's [recommended content API](#), which semantically analyzes the content of the current story and finds other recent stories that cover similar topics.

Since Slate rolled out infinite scroll in 2016, engaged time per visitor has increased by 8.5% and 17% of total page views occurred on scrolled articles. "The Parse.ly algorithm was pivotal for us to be able to do this," said Anna Gilbert, Slate's Director of Research.

The goal of increasing engaged time guided the entire development process. Stern stated, "With engaged time at the forefront of our minds as we developed our infinite scroll implementation, we were able to avoid the trap of pitting user experience and revenue against each other."

BEFORE INFINITE SCROLL



I sought out the advice of other, successful women. The best way to get assignments, I heard, was to pitch stories on war, politics, the economy. Those are the kind of stories that magazines need women to write; you'll have less competition among other women, and you're more likely to land on the cover. Avoid stories on food, family, or fashion: There's too much competition and too little seriousness there. I know nothing about war, politics, or the economy. I know a few things about fashion, a fair amount about food, and nothing about family except what being a daughter has taught me. Why, I wondered, was family not just as important as war? As respectable? As serious? As illuminating about our culture? I found a job before I could find the answers.

My favorite of Orange's essays is about family. In "One Senior Please," Orange visits her grandmother, Rita, at a nursing home in Nova Scotia. Rita struggled with the duties of being wife and mother, battled crippling depression, and reinvented herself as a world traveler following her husband's death. As a child, Rita maintained a distant relationship with Orange, but they grew closer in Orange's adulthood. The essay is framed by thoughts on air travel and its relation to mortality; the senior care system; death, life, and their overlap. In the course of the visit, Orange promises Rita that she will try to "tell her story," and sometime after that—while in the act of writing this essay, Orange tells us—she learns that Rita has died. She stares at her work. "Had I lied to her when I said I would tell her story? Does even trying amount to a sort of lie? Perhaps all I can offer is the setting down of a space, one whose highest aim is that you might roam, however elusively, within its borders."

One way to describe Orange's book is to say that it gives you a sense of the vastness of the modern world; another is to say that it reflects her confusion about it. Both are fair. Orange seems to be without ego in her writing, and terrifically vulnerable. (From the Beirut essay: "Is no one waiting for you? I told him no, or rather yes ... It's not Beirut's fault, I wanted to add. No one is waiting for me in general.") She writes to understand the world. In 2010, Orange wrote a review of the forgettable Justin Long-Drew Barrymore romantic comedy *Going the Distance* for *Movieline* that included the following dig at Long: "How a milky, affectless mook with half-formed features and a first day of kindergarten haircut might punch

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4. Romney: "It Kills Me" Not to Be in White House By Daniel Pollit | March 3, 2013
5. Supermassive Black Hole Found Spinning Nearly at the Speed of Light By Phil Platt | February 27, 2013

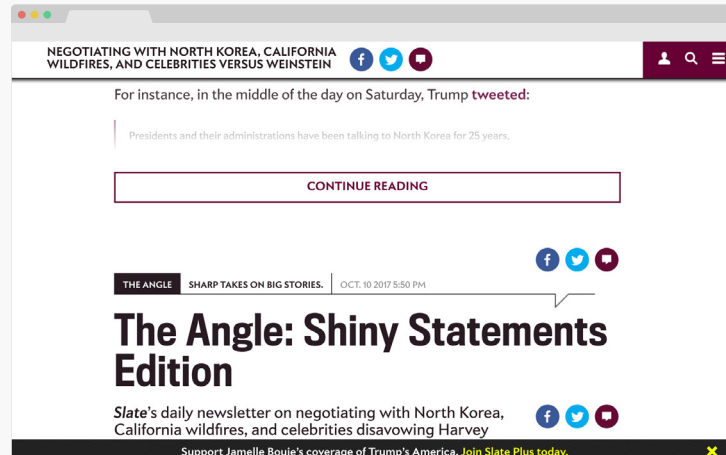
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TIME.com **newsier** **UPWORTHY**

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AFTER INFINITE SCROLL



NEGOTIATING WITH NORTH KOREA, CALIFORNIA WILDFIRES, AND CELEBRITIES VERSUS WEINSTEIN

For instance, in the middle of the day on Saturday, Trump tweeted:

Presidents and their administrations have been talking to North Korea for 25 years.

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The Parse.ly algorithm was pivotal for us to be able to do this.



ANNA GILBERT
Director of Research, Slate

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EDITORIAL TEAM + PARSE.LY'S DASHBOARD

Lead editorial's engagement efforts with a north star metric

Editorial has the most direct path to engaging an audience. If writers and editors don't buy into a strategy change, the strategy will never take hold.

Before there was any inkling that engaged time would become their core KPI, editorial monitored concurrents in Chartbeat. However, seeing how many people are on the site or page right now wouldn't help the team develop a long-term strategy.

Parse.ly's dashboard allowed the editorial team to slice the data in different ways: they could see a variety of metrics—like engaged time, returning visitors, and social interactions—over the past year or up to the last five minutes, for a specific author, section, or topic.

“The interactivity of Parse.ly's dashboard helps writers and editors—people who don't dive into Excel spreadsheets everyday—find answers to their top questions,” said Gilbert. “Parse.ly gives people what they're looking for in a way that's not overwhelming, but it's still a source for answering complex questions.”

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ANNA GILBERT

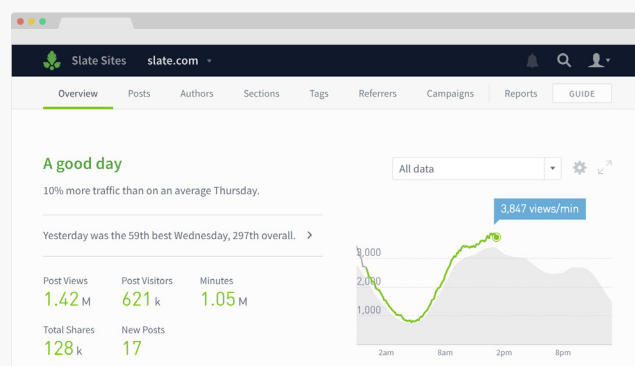
Director of Research, Slate

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When a reporter filters traffic by unique visitors or page views, minutes per visitors is always shown. This ever-present context made the switch from unique views to engaged time as simple as one click.

“Seeing engaged time in the dashboard helped us make a much smoother transition from unique visitors and the Big Bang Facebook days to a more real relationship with our most loyal readers,” said Gilbert.

A dashboard for everyone



Editorial isn't the only team looking at the Parse.ly dashboard. The sales team uses metrics in Parse.ly to tell stories when they're pitching prospects. The product team watches traffic closely to understand user behavior and generate ideas for experiments to improve experience.

Gilbert said the whole company checks the dashboard to see what's trending each day: “A number of people are using the Parse.ly dashboard as their own version of a homepage.”

ANALYTICS TEAM + PARSE.LY'S DATA PIPELINE

Empower analysts to find deeper audience insights with flexible, raw data

Parse.ly's API and dashboard helped Slate's product and editorial teams engage their existing audience. The data team wanted to use audience data to answer critical business questions, but their bandwidth was eaten up by maintaining their legacy system's FTP server to line-level data dumps. With access to their raw audience data through Parse.ly's data pipeline, the team is figuring out how to engage audiences they don't have yet.

A geographic analysis of visitors revealed "the most [Slately](#) place in the United States" and prompted editorial to develop strategies for reaching audiences in places where Slate isn't quite clicking.

Another initiative is aimed at identifying factors—like referral traffic or publication time—that correlate with a high amount of engaged time. Gilbert said, "It's starting to answer our question of what are some good levers behind engaged time as a metric." Her team is also using their audience data to understand how engaged time impacts the bottom line: "So many revenue numbers have been framed around page views. We're working

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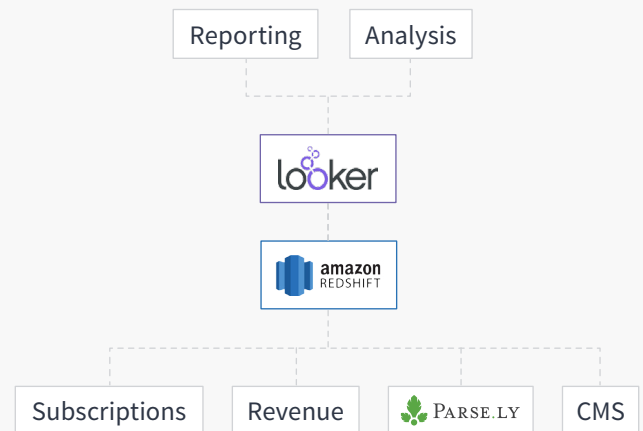
We're working to pivot our reporting to uncover a clearer relationship between engaged time and revenue making.



ANNA GILBERT
Director of Research, Slate

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How Parse.ly's Data Pipeline fits into Slate's stack



to pivot our reporting to uncover a clearer relationship between engaged time and revenue making.”

None of this deeper analysis would have been possible with Slate's previous analytics provider. The data team struggled to simply keep a customized daily report up-to-date. "It was an old system, and the report was old, and then the event scripts were old," said Gilbert.

Now, Slate doesn't have to choose between reporting and ad-hoc analysis. They can do both. They analyze and build reports on top of their audience data in Looker, a business intelligence tool, which automatically sends editorial a daily report showing yesterday's engaged time stacked up against their goals.

What's next?

Gilbert has ambitions to build a robust collection of reports covering traffic by source, section, and writer: "I think getting Parse.ly data in Looker will increase the usage organizationally and democratize the data. At organizations where you have really inquisitive journalists, the more data you can get into more people's hands in a way that is click and point friendly, the more people will be able to learn from it and have new and different questions."

Help every team drive toward the same goal

By introducing engaged time team-by-team, Slate gave their new loyalty initiative time to prove itself as a viable path to revenue. Now that everyone at Slate is aligned on engaged time as their core KPI and looks at one set of audience data, each team can contribute to forming real relationships with Slate's readers.

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