

The Future of Newspapers: From “News Papers” To “News Organization”

The Mr. Magazine™ In-Depth Interview With
Joanne Lipman, Chief Content Officer,
Gannett, Editor In Chief, USA
Today Network



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they always ask is will it appear in print? I don’t want it to disappear online. So, there is still a perception of premium with print. I think that’s something that we can think about going forward.” Joanne Lipman

“But I also think that publications that have done away with print too quickly have suffered. Look at what happened in New Orleans; look at what happened when Newsweek Magazine went out of print and then tried to come back in. There really is a value to that print product and those that have tried to move out of it too quickly have really suffered, in terms of loss of brand and loss of value, even if they provide good content.” Joanne Lipman

When many are saying that newspapers are on their way out, [Gannett's USA Today Network](#) is saying something entirely different. With 108 different properties across the country, Gannett has brought all of its entities together to form one network that pools talent and resources to produce the most premium digital and print content around today.

However, “our mission is digital first,” says Joanne Lipman who is at the helm of USA Today Network as editor in chief and also heads up Gannett’s content as chief content officer. “The USA Today Network brings



together 108 publications, with USA Today as the flagship and including news organizations such as the Detroit Free Press, Cincinnati Enquirer, Arizona Republic, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Des Moines Register, to create a nationwide network with 3,800 journalists, over 100 million unique visitors a month, and more than 1.5 billion page views consumed each month.”

Add in this Gannett’s extraordinarily large digital footprint and you get a combination that can’t be deterred no matter what some naysayers are prone to report. Lipman adds, “Our nationwide news footprint – literally boots on the ground in big cities and small towns, red states and blue states – gives us a reporting advantage that no other national news organization can match.”

Joanne knows a thing or two about news content and news organizations as she began her career at the Wall Street Journal, ultimately becoming Deputy Managing Editor – the first woman to attain that post – and supervising coverage that won three Pulitzer Prizes.

Today, she brings that expertise and knowledge to Gannett, having joined the team in January 2016. I spoke with Joanne

recently and we talked about her excitement to be with a brand as far-reaching and broad-based as Gannett. And about the new structured network that joins all of its properties together. It was a most delightful and interesting look into the world of today's newspaper – or news organization, as Joanne puts it. And Mr. Magazine™ agrees, after all, you can't chase news on paper anymore – it just isn't possible.

And now please enjoy the [Mr. Magazine™](#) interview with Joanne Lipman, Chief Content Officer, Gannett, Editor In Chief, USA Today Network.

But first the sound-bites:



On whether her job has been what she expected or if there have been any surprises along the way:

What's been great is first of all, when I came in because USA Today Network was a brand new concept, I thought that part of my job would be convincing people that they needed to work together collaboratively across multiple newsrooms. Instead, what I found was a culture of collaboration that existed here and exists. The culture is quite extraordinary when you have journalists across multiple different publications, coordinating coverage, cooperating with one another. So, we're able to accomplish so much more than any one of us could individually.

On some of the priorities that have been uppermost in her mind since coming onboard:

We're focused on innovation and that includes video, social, mobile and virtual reality. Another priority is a budgeting and communications system to connect us. As I mentioned, this was a company made up of siloed organizations. Before I got here they created a unified CMS, so everybody is on a content management system. So, that's a good step. But what we don't have is a content budgeting

system or a communications system that connects all of us.

On people saying there is no future for newspapers: It's funny; we don't use the word newspaper here. We talk about our news organizations and our news sites, so we're really focused on digital. Obviously, we still have print papers and obviously, the revenue for paper is still great, but our focus has really been on becoming digital-first. I'm located in Tysons and I'm right off the USA Today newsroom. And USA Today under Dave Callaway and Larry Kramer, who's the previous publisher, over the past four years really have made it digital-first and I've been in a lot of newsrooms, this is definitely the most digitally-oriented newsroom I have ever been in.

On her vision for the printed paper: I think there is no question that we're all moving more and more toward a digital future. So because of that I think the printed paper becomes more of a premium experience. And like I said, I would love for the printed paper to reflect more of the depth and excitement that you see digitally. So, the printed paper can also be a way to send the consumer back online to get even more of the information that we're providing.

On whom her audience is for the print product: In USA Today's case, the print product has always been a newspaper for business executives and travelers, and that remains true. When you're traveling, that's what you pick up because that is the nation's newspaper. In that way it's a little bit like CNN; wherever you go in the world you turn on CNN because you know what you're getting and they give you the information that you need.

On why she thinks it took so long for newspaper people to realize that the word news and paper is an oxymoron: I think that really smart newspaper people have been thinking about this for a long time. I think it's been difficult because of the economic model, I really do. The big issue has been that

print dollars are important. You have your digital dimes and your print dollars. And so you have to weigh the economics of it.

On the special interest publications USA Today is putting out on the market, such as the glossy magazine on Ali: I don't think we're doing any more than we ever did before. We tend to be very sparing when it comes to our special issues. We have regularly scheduled what we call "tab sections," they're not glossy, but they're specials. The Ali Special magazine is highly unusual for us; we don't do that frequently. The last one that I'm aware of, and I've only been here six months, but the last one that I'm aware of was several years ago with the death of Michael Jackson.

On what motivates her to get out of bed in the morning: This is the most fun job that I've ever had. What I love about this is the fact that we have so much potential, there is so much that we can do with the journalism here. The idea that we have essentially a giant firehose of content now that we are a network, as opposed to a bunch of individual organizations, is exciting. So the idea of taking that firehose of content and taming it and thinking of all the different ways that we can go about slicing and dicing and using it; it's a very creative job because you're constantly thinking about the amazing talent that we have all over the country.

On why we aren't promoting journalism in a much better way than we used to: That's a good question. On the one side, there's the business model, which is clearly influx. And I think that's a big piece of what we're hearing. But I also think that one of the great things about being here with USA Today Network is what we are doing is – and I take no credit for this, because I came in after USA Network was invented by Bob Dickey, the CEO, and by his executive team, – but it's such a smart idea. Every newsroom in America is resource-constrained, but when you put our 108 newsrooms together, with our 3,800 journalists, suddenly it feels expansive, a growing

operation. If there's an idea that we have, an idea that originates in any newsroom, no matter how small that newsroom is, we have the ability to execute that idea and support those journalists in that newsroom to get those ideas done.

On whether we should continue teaching journalism and having journalism schools: We should continue teaching journalism, absolutely. And I see a lot of talented young people who want to go into journalism; it's definitely tougher than it was when I started. There are probably more jobs, not newspaper jobs, but more jobs if you add in all of the blogs and the other various outlets where you might be a writer. I think the issue is that there are fewer well-paying jobs with insurance. There is plenty of freelance, low-paid, unpaid work out there, but it is tough. I look at young journalism students, and I look at the young people we're hiring, who are fantastic, and you can see that it's a tougher world for them than it was for me.

On what someone might find her doing if they showed up unexpectedly to her home one evening: If you come after work, I generally go from the office to the gym. I guess you would find me at the gym.

On what keeps her up at night: I've been hiring a lot. I came in as a new position and my team was not filled out, so I focused a lot on finding just the right people to hire and now my team is almost all in place, so I think I'm sleeping easier now than I have in a long time.

And now the lightly edited transcript of the Mr. Magazine™ interview with Joanne Lipman, Chief Content Officer, Gannett, Editor In Chief, USA Today Network.



Samir Husni:
It's been six months for you as chief content officer at Gannett and USA Today; has it been everything

that you expected, or have you been surprised in anyway?

Joanne Lipman: Let me back up for a moment and explain the background here; I think that will be useful. Gannett was a holding company and it was a holding company that owned USA Today and 92 other local news organizations. And they were all siloed; they all operated independently.

And then one year ago, last summer, when the company did the split, broke into two, like News Corp and all these other companies have done; so all the broadcast properties went into a separate company called Tegna, and all of the print publications remained in Gannett.

Fast forward to December and the executives here made the decision, Bob Dickey, the CEO and his executive team, made the decision that rather than being a company full of siloed news organizations, we would actually create a nationwide network, which became the USA Today Network. And I was brought onboard in January 2016 to be chief content officer of Gannett and editor in chief of USA Today Network.

We bought Journal Media Group, so now we have 108 properties. What USA Today Network news did was go from being 108 siloed, individual news organizations to a nationwide network with 3,800 journalists, with over 100 million unique visitors per month, and over one and half billion page views per month, and the demographics are phenomenal. So suddenly you go from being

individual resource-constrained news organizations to a nationwide network where anything is possible.

And that's what was so appealing to me. I have to say that my surprises since I've been here have been on the upside, which is so rare when you go to a new place. (Laughs)

Samir Husni: (Laughs too).

Joanne Lipman: What's been great is first of all, when I came in because USA Today Network was a brand new concept, I thought that part of my job would be convincing people that they needed to work together collaboratively across multiple newsrooms. Instead, what I found was a culture of collaboration that existed here and exists. The culture is quite extraordinary when you have journalists across multiple different publications, coordinating coverage, cooperating with one another. So, we're able to accomplish so much more than any one of us could individually.

That's been the most rewarding part of this and I've talked about the three priorities that I have. When I came in from day one I said there are three priorities that I have for this year and the first one is strengthening the network. And on that one I have to say that we are ahead of my expectations.

I could give you a couple of examples. We've had some really topnotch investigative work and that's with the USA Today Network, the collaboration between USA Today and various local publications. We had one in February about teacher's misconduct.

With the teacher misconduct work, we looked at data across all 50 states for teacher's who had been fired for a cause; for physical abuse or sexual abuse and we found that they were able to get jobs in other states because of flawed background checks. And we were able to get the data for all 50 states. USA Today did a major, big investigative series on that.

But every market was able to localize it because they gave the data to all of the local markets. So, they could all localize their own stories. And that led to all kinds of state reforms and new legislation; a nationwide investigation. And that made us say, wow! That was the first time that we'd ever done an investigation where it ran in every single property.

And we followed that a month or two later with an investigation into lead in tap water. Again, we got data from all 50 states and we found that there were 2,000 communities across all 50 states that had toxic levels of lead in their drinking water. Again, we were able to do a big national investigation that ran in USA Today that was picked up by every television network. And because we had the data from all 50 states, we were able to localize it and we had more than 80 different individual, localized pieces that ran in our local markets, in addition to that national investigation.

I feel like we're just tapping into the power of what this network can be and we saw how quickly we're able to do that, and then you think: OK, going forward, if we're able to do that off the bat, where can we go next? And that's really exciting.

The one other thing that I would mention is that we've done an investigative series called "Trump and the Law" that's also gotten quite a bit of attention because all of the media describe Trump as litigious, so what we did is ask the question, how litigious is he? And our data journalists dug into this and ultimately found that he'd been involved in 3,500 lawsuits. By collecting that database of lawsuits, we were able to look and see what the lawsuits were involving and that helped us dramatically, because several stories, including one that you probably heard about, which was looking at the frequency of his not paying people like plumbers, painters and carpenters. There were multiple lawsuits along those lines.

Samir Husni: You said you came in with three expectations; one, the USA Today Network, what were the other two?

Joanne Lipman: The second one is focused on innovation and that includes video, social, mobile and virtual reality. On the virtual reality piece, we actually had some news very recently where we created the first VR news program; it's called "VRtually There" and we just debuted it at Cannes last week. We'll be putting that into production in the next couple of months, so that's exciting. That was actually another one of my upsides that I was speaking about earlier.

When I came in, I asked our chief technology officer about it. I was seeing The New York Times and others talking about virtual reality, so I wondered if we'd thought about it. He said that we'd been doing virtual reality for two years and in fact, the National Press Club gave its first award for virtual reality and it went to the Des Moines Register, one of our properties. The Des Moines Register had done a piece on farming two years before.

So, we were ahead on that and I didn't realize it, but I think that's partly because Gannett has had such a low profile and such a modest ethic that we didn't talk about ourselves. We're continuing on that virtual reality course and I recently hired a senior director of social media, who's looking at our social strategy and I am currently interviewing for a senior director of video who will be reporting directly to me. So, we're fast forwarding on those issues.

And then my third priority is a budgeting and communications system to connect us. As I mentioned, this was a company made up of siloed organizations. Before I got here they created a unified CNS, so everybody is on a content management system. So, that's a good step. But what we don't have is a content budgeting system or a communications system that connects all of us.

As a result, all of the work that we're doing requires endless rounds of emailing and yammering, you name it. So, there's a lot of work when it comes to us communicating with one another. So, I brought in Jim Pensiero from the Wall Street Journal. Jim worked with me at the Wall Street Journal for 30 years and he led the copy desk. He's a fantastic journalist, but he was also the guy who understood how to do these kinds of systems and the CMS's. He was the one who unified the Wall Street Journal in Asia and Europe and he put all of that together.

So, he came in with me and he's leading our effort to put in place a budgeting communications system that will scale across all 108 properties.

Samir Husni: You hear people saying all of the time that there's no future for newspapers.

Joanne Lipman: It's funny; we don't use the word newspaper here. We talk about our news organizations and our news sites, so we're really focused on digital. Obviously, we still have print papers and obviously, the revenue for paper is still great, but our focus has really been on becoming digital-first. I'm located in Tysons and I'm right off the USA Today newsroom. And USA Today under Dave Callaway and Larry Kramer, who's the previous publisher, over the past four years really have made it digital-first and I've been in a lot of newsrooms, this is definitely the most digitally-oriented newsroom I have ever been in.

For example, most newspapers will have their morning meeting at 10:00 or 10:30 in the morning, sometimes even 11:00 a.m. because they're thinking about the paper. And most newspapers still do that. At USA Today it starts at 8:30 in the morning, everybody is up and running, and there's no discussion about what section does this or that go in, it's all about the digital piece; it's all online. And it really is run like a digital news organization.

If you spend a little bit of time on the USA Today site you'll see that it's really very robust. In fact, the digital operation is so robust that one of the things that I hope to do going forward is I would like to see more of the digital variety that can be done. There are all kinds of interesting and in depth things and fun stuff on our site now. It really has a lot of texture and depth, and I'm actually hoping that we can move the print product in that direction to reflect the wealth of content that we have online.

Samir Husni: I think we are the only English-speaking country that still includes the word "news" in its paper. Most of the other countries call it journal or daily; if you were to write a prescription for the future of the printed paper, do you see USA Today as the preferred medication for the future's solution? What's your vision for the printed paper?

Joanne Lipman: I think there is no question that we're all moving more and more toward a digital future. So because of that I think the printed paper becomes more of a premium experience. And like I said, I would love for the printed paper to reflect more of the depth and excitement that you see digitally. So, the printed paper can also be a way to send the consumer back online to get even more of the information that we're providing.

One of the things that you do see in print, and I think this true everywhere, I know it's true with my friends at The New York Times and the Washington Post, there is something about print that is still very, very compelling. When you have the big interview with the politician or the world leader; the celebrity, the first thing they always ask is will it appear in print? I don't want it to disappear online. So, there is still a perception of premium with print. I think that's something that we can think about going forward.

But we all are really focused on a digital future because that is where we're all going.

Samir Husni: You saw the most recent Reuters study that not only are the millennials getting their news from the web, but also the 55+ audience. So, who's your audience for the print product?

Joanne Lipman: In USA Today's case, the print product has always been a newspaper for business executives and travelers, and that remains true. When you're traveling, that's what you pick up because that is the nation's newspaper. In that way it's a little bit like CNN; wherever you go in the world you turn on CNN because you know what you're getting and they give you the information that you need.

Digitally it's interesting, if you look at our digital audience, which is over 100 million, we actually over index on a couple of groups. One is millennials. We have a very robust millennial audience; more millennials than Vox or Vice. But we also do incredibly well with C-suite executives. We get more C-suite executives than the Wall Street Journal or The New York Times.

One of the things that we talk about here is we know that these are both audiences that value and come to our content, so we think about being a little more purposeful when it comes to what we're providing to those audiences. We think about that in terms of coverage and in other sorts of things as well. When we talk about innovation, we talk about virtual reality and many other innovations. We talk about events; there are a lot of ways to connect with our audience.

Samir Husni: Why do you think it has taken newspaper folks so long to discover what you were just talking about? Or do you disagree with me?

Joanne Lipman: It's funny, one of the people that I brought in here, John Brecher, who worked with me at the Wall Street Journal; he was my first boss as an editor. He ran page one; he had this unprecedented string of seven Pulitzer Prizes at

the Wall Street Journal; the guy is a genius. And he first hired me onto page one; I want to say 20 years ago. More than 20 years ago.

And I remember being on a business trip with him and he was telling me, and this was long before the digital world existed, and he said to me that print was going to go away. That people were going to stop reading physical, hard copies of the paper. And I looked at him like he was crazy. (Laughs)

Samir Husni: (Laughs too).

Joanne Lipman: There was no Google then, nothing, certainly no Facebook. So, I think that really smart newspaper people have been thinking about this for a long time. I think it's been difficult because of the economic model, I really do. The big issue has been that print dollars are important. You have your digital dimes and your print dollars. And so you have to weigh the economics of it.

But I also think that publications that have done away with print too quickly have suffered. Look at what happened in New Orleans; look at what happened when Newsweek Magazine went out of print and then tried to come back in. There really is a value to that print product and those that have tried to move out of it too quickly have really suffered, in terms of loss of brand and loss of value, even if they provide good content.

Samir Husni: I saw your Tweet on the glossy that USA Today is doing on Ali and all of the other specials that you have coming out; how do you differentiate, because most of the public, the minute that they hear print, they think newspapers. So, how are you making the case for all of these SIP's that you're producing and for all of these special interest publications? You're not necessarily flooding the market like Time Inc., but you're putting a lot of them out.

Joanne Lipman: I don't think we're doing any more than we ever did before. We tend to be very sparing when it comes to our

special issues. We have regularly scheduled what we call “tab sections,” they’re not glossy, but they’re specials. One on national parks; one on Black History month, so we have a regular schedule with these and they will appear on newsstands.

The Ali Special magazine is highly unusual for us; we don’t do that frequently. The last one that I’m aware of, and I’ve only been here six months, but the last one that I’m aware of was several years ago with the death of Michael Jackson.

Samir Husni: What motivates you to get out of bed in the morning?

Joanne Lipman: This is the most fun job that I’ve ever had. What I love about this is the fact that we have so much potential, there is so much that we can do with the journalism here. The idea that we have essentially a giant firehose of content now that we are a network, as opposed to a bunch of individual organizations, is exciting. So the idea of taking that firehose of content and taming it and thinking of all the different ways that we can go about slicing and dicing and using it; it’s a very creative job because you’re constantly thinking about the amazing talent that we have all over the country.

And then you think about how we can put these different talents together and you can come up with some really cool ideas. I’ll give you one example. One of my deputies is a guy named Randy Lovely. He is the VP of community content and came out of the Arizona newsroom, which he ran for many years. So, he knows people throughout the network really, really well. And we were trying to solve a very interesting problem. We had a guy in Jackson, Mississippi, a reporter who had a really great idea for a video series.

Now the Jackson property is a small property. It alone did not have the resources to do a video series. So, Randy called

around to some of the editors in the network and the editor of the Des Moines Register said that he had a fantastic editor that I'm going to lend to that reporter to help with that series. And an editor at USA Today said that he would lend his top videographer for that series, so now we have this group that has been pulled from our different properties and has converged together in Jackson, Mississippi to create this video documentary series.

Everyday there are things like that happening with 3,800 journalists, all with different talents, and they're not all bunched up in one place; they're all in different properties. And that's what gets me out of bed in the morning. I love the excitement of thinking about where we can take this network. And how we've been able to take it so far, so fast, but there's so much more to do.

Samir Husni: What you're describing is a world where we have better journalism than ever, yet all we ever hear is that journalism is doomed and we should look at digital and TV and all of the cable networks. Why aren't we promoting the future of journalism in a much better way than we used to?

Joanne Lipman: That's a good question. On the one side, there's the business model, which is clearly influx. And I think that's a big piece of what we're hearing. But I also think that one of the great things about being here with USA Today Network is what we are doing is – and I take no credit for this, because I came in after USA Network was invented by Bob Dickey, the CEO, and by his executive team, – but it's such a smart idea.

Every newsroom in America is resource-constrained, but when you put our 108 newsrooms together, with our 3,800 journalists, suddenly it feels expansive, a growing operation. If there's an idea that we have, an idea that originates in any newsroom, no matter how small that newsroom is, we have the ability to execute that idea and support those journalists

in that newsroom to get those ideas done.

Samir Husni: So, you have no fear about the future of journalism; we should continue teaching journalism and having journalism schools?

Joanne Lipman: We should continue teaching journalism, absolutely. And I see a lot of talented young people who want to go into journalism; it's definitely tougher than it was when I started. There are probably more jobs, not newspaper jobs, but more jobs if you add in all of the blogs and the other various outlets where you might be a writer.

I think the issue is that there are fewer well-paying jobs with insurance. There is plenty of freelance, low-paid, unpaid work out there, but it is tough. I look at young journalism students, and I look at the young people we're hiring, who are fantastic, and you can see that it's a tougher world for them than it was for me.

One of the benefits that we have with the USA Today Network is that we have 3,800 jobs, all over the country, real jobs, full-time with insurance. So it's nice to be in a company that offers that. But the one thing that I would say to students, and I bet you say this to your students all of the time, is there seems to be a bias among journalism students that they think they have to go to New York or D.C. or maybe L.A. Somebody crunched some numbers and found that one in five journalists lives in either New York, D.C. or L.A.

We were really curious when we saw that, so we crunched our own numbers. And we found that for Gannett, for USA Today Network, that number is one in 39. So, the vast majority of our journalists are not on the coast, they're in the middle of the country. And I think that's a big benefit because it allows us to cover the country in a way that others cannot. We're boots-on-the-ground in big cities and small towns and in red states and blue states so that we can understand the

electorate better than the national news organizations.

But if you look at that point of view from students coming out, there are a lot of opportunities that aren't necessarily in New York or D.C. or L.A.

Samir Husni: If I showed up at your house one evening unexpectedly, what would I find you doing? Reading a printed newspaper, or your iPad, watching television, or something different?

Joanne Lipman: (Laughs) I live in New York City, but my office is in Tysons, Virginia. So, I have a little apartment two minutes from the office that I live in during the week, and I go back home to my family on the weekends, because my kids are now out of school, so we're now empty nesters.

So, if you come after work, I generally go from the office to the gym. I guess you would find me at the gym.

Samir Husni: My typical last question; what keeps you up at night?

Joanne Lipman: There are no really mega issues; I feel really good about this position and the company and the leadership. I feel really, really good about the leadership. I've been hiring a lot. I came in as a new position and my team was not filled out, so I focused a lot on finding just the right people to hire and now my team is almost all in place, so I think I'm sleeping easier now than I have in a long time.

Samir Husni: Thank you.