

The challenge of connecting digital readers to quality content

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This article by Polis LSE Summer School student Eleanor Jackson.

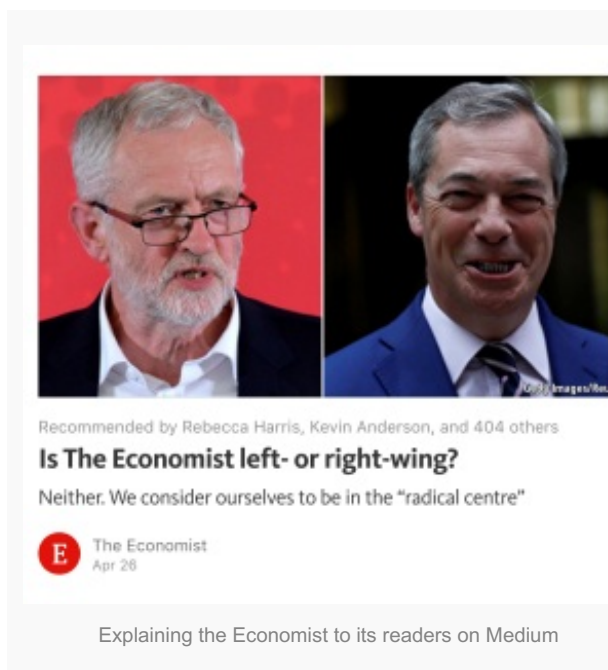
My Government teacher once told our class, somewhat jokingly, we should always read *The Economist* when flying. Why? Because once when a student of his began reading *The Economist* on the plane, a man sitting next to her commented on her good taste in news reading. After a brief conversation, she was offered an internship.

The Economist is highly respected however, the digital age poses new challenges to this one hundred and seventy four year old publication. As Denise Law, Community editor at *The Economist* explained in a talk to Polis/LSE Summer School students, moving the publication towards the digital age has revealed a complex relationship between the newspaper's culture and the demands of the "post-truth" era.

In the early days of going online some of *The Economist's* passionate, intelligent writers wanted to stick to their strengths and produce quality content rather than 140 character Twitter quips. But now under a digitally-committed editor the magazine is having to think through all aspects of its strategy.

The Economist speaks with a collective voice with no personal bylines on articles, believing that what is written matters more than who writes it. This practice, important both to their culture and to the creation and consumption of unbiased news, makes it harder for modern readers to form a connection with the magazine. There's no person to engage with, there's just a big, red "E".

Denise Law explained how they began to use [the blogging platform Medium](#) outside of the Economist's 'paywall' as a space to run some articles explaining to readers the production culture of the Economist and allowing their writers to explain the journalistic background to some of their stories.



On the key parts of Denise Law's job of bringing the Economist's content to an online audience is the relationship between the publishers and social media outlets, a relationship I had taken for granted. When news is consumed through Facebook, Twitter, or even Snapchat, that platform has a degree of control over the content. These platforms influence who can publish, what can be published, and what is viewed the most. This control leads some to believe Facebook should do more to monitor and combat fake news on its site, while others, like [BuzzFeed's James Ball](#), fear that giving the platform more power than it already has can be dangerous.

In light of these tensions, Denise Law has begun considering ways to move readers from the social networks over to *The Economist* apps and website. On these platforms, the newspaper can develop a more personal relationship with their readers.

It is important to manage the supply of the content to the reader so they don't feel overwhelmed. One of the most common reasons for cancelling Economist subscriptions is a sense of guilt that they are not consuming enough of the vast amount of quality content it creates every week.

When online attention spans max out at around a few hundred words and articles on how millennials treat their pets consistently out compete the more rigorous stories, *The Economist* has to find new ways to holding onto the curious yet distracted reader? We want to feel informed, but online we need it in a variety of formats that suit of mobile habits.

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