

5 things to know about listicles

What journalists want readers to know about the listing-age of digital reporting.

By Kendall Breitman

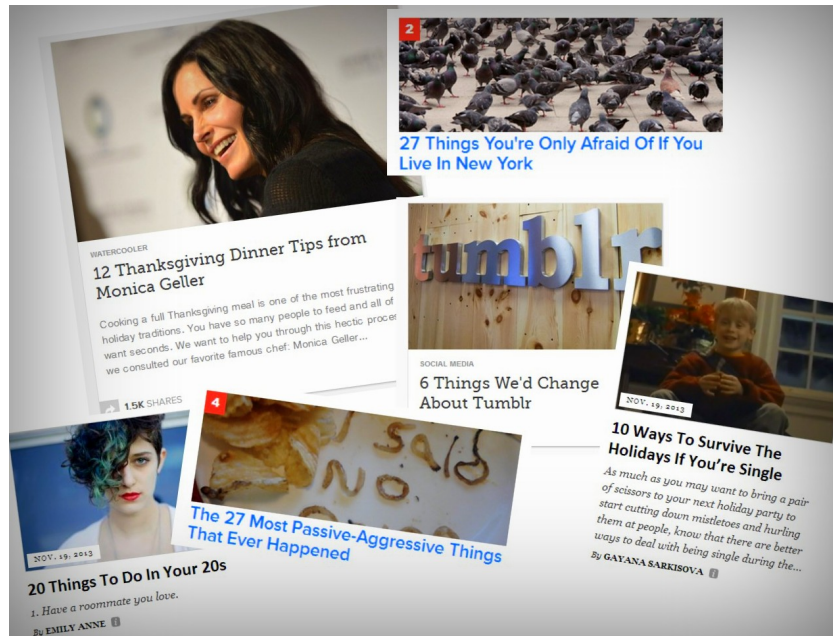


Photo: [Depth in PR Blog](#)

They are in too many places to list. From Mashable to BuzzFeed, the journalism trend of listed articles, known as listicles, has become a fixture in online reporting. With the scroll of a mouse, readers can skim through the [“18 American Hotties Who are Heating Up Sochi”](#) and share [“The 7 Most Popular Valentine’s Day Gifts in the U.S.”](#)

For more serious topics, listicles reach a point of contention. Newspapers are joining the list of list providers, and questions are raised on if subjects like politics and foreign affairs can be packaged in simple lists. To understand the formatting craze, here are 5 things that journalists and editors want readers to know about listicles:

1. The listicle is the new black

Magazines have been listing for decades, but numbered lists are a relatively new trend in newspaper reporting.

According to Shira Center, a politics editor at Roll Call, listicles have been appearing much more in the past two years than ever before.

“I would not say that we are formally encouraging producing these types of articles, but I think I’ve encouraged them more than my predecessors,” Center said in a phone interview.

“We’re doing it more than we did two years ago, but everyone is. The Internet is evolving how we write.”

One reason for this change is that the Internet offers a list-conducive medium. With the format of a webpage, vertical lists are no longer constricted to the size of a newspaper.

“[Listicles] work really great with digital journalism and the ability to be able to scroll through an article,” Brian Tumulty, a politics reporter for Gannett New York, said. “That’s why we see more of it online, and not as much of that in print.”

According to Tumulty, the switch to digital has left him with a larger audience. The Internet has expanded his reach beyond the state lines of New York. A new online audience requires new writing techniques.

“I’ve always operated under the assumption that people who read the news on the Internet have a little less patience and a shorter attention span. So things in small portions like lists are always helpful because they keep the reader going,” Tumulty said. “I think that the trend of lists is a direct product of journalists trying to adapt to digital.”

2. News consumers are eating them up.

News audiences seem to be responding well to the trend. According to an email with BuzzFeed Senior Press Director Catherine Bartosevich, one-third of the company's articles are lists, excluding ads and community posts. From 2012 to 2013, the period that it increased its listicle output, BuzzFeed's audience tripled to [85 million per month](#).

Roll Call has had similar feedback. According to Center, political listicles like Kyle Trygstad's ["The 7 Republican Senators Most Vulnerable to a Primary"](#) saw "major success" on the Internet.

"We could, if we wanted to, have made that article into a narrative, but it would have gotten maybe ten percent of the hits," Center said.

David Beard, the engagement editor at the Washington Post, spends his days monitoring article traffic. According to Beard, articles like Max Fisher's ["9 Questions You Are Too Embarrassed to Ask"](#) series, summarizing key facts on a handful of foreign affairs topics, have consumers reading more content for a longer period of time.

"I know the tendency is to say that people whip through these lists and leisurely scroll through articles, but that's a stereotype," Beard said in an email interview. "Well-written lists, particularly vertical lists with type and charts, can be as lengthy a ride as a magazine article, and they get a lot of attention"

3. Some are skeptical about the listicle.

Lists may break issues into more sizeable chunks, but they can also leave out important information. Skeptics question whether this style of writing is conducive for certain topics.

"There are some people who are purists and don't think that listed articles should be in political news," Center said.

To Center, listicles can sacrifice nuance. An article listing religious quotes used by Mitt Romney's 2010 campaign may be sharable, but a narrative focusing on how mentions of God relate to his political views would bring a deeper meaning to the subject.

"A list can give the basics with categories clearly listed, without the 'code,' or some might say, some deeper emotion, elicited from the usual narrative," Beard said.

This is why newspapers like the *Washington Post* have begun producing these lists as part of a bigger package. Most listed articles online are presented with links to longer narratives, according to Beard.

"A list is good if it helps you tell a story, but its bad you don't tell the rest of the story," Beard said.

4. ...But they bring benefits.

Other journalists are welcoming the new trend.

Tumulty, who has embraced the style, claims that listicles provide the ability to cover more ground.

"The political listicle works because you are able to cover more topics," Tumulty said. "For articles about subjects like the Farm Bill, I can take a really complex issue and pull from that 10 things that New Yorkers need to know. It may not be the deepest article, but these people are taking in this information better than they may have with a long article."

The concise writing that lists demand may offer less insight, but they also lessen the complexity of political issues. For many readers, lists provide clarity on important topics.

"We may be sacrificing some nuance for more sharable pieces, but I think that certainty is also important." Center said.

5. Don't get stuck on the listicle diet

Journalists agree that listicles should not be the entirety of a person's daily news consumption. Lists may be simpler, but the need for a traditional narrative remains a staple in online journalism.

"The lists may dominate some things that are 100 percent about social sharing, but there will always be narratives, as part of a package or in different forms, on long form sites," Beard said.

The switch to online journalism has forced new and more creative ways to report news, but readers shouldn't dismiss the traditional formats. The key is moderation and balance.

"It kind of comes down to this," Center said. "People should have a healthy news diet. Go ahead and share '10 Things about Mitt Romney,' but your news consumption should not be a list of lists."