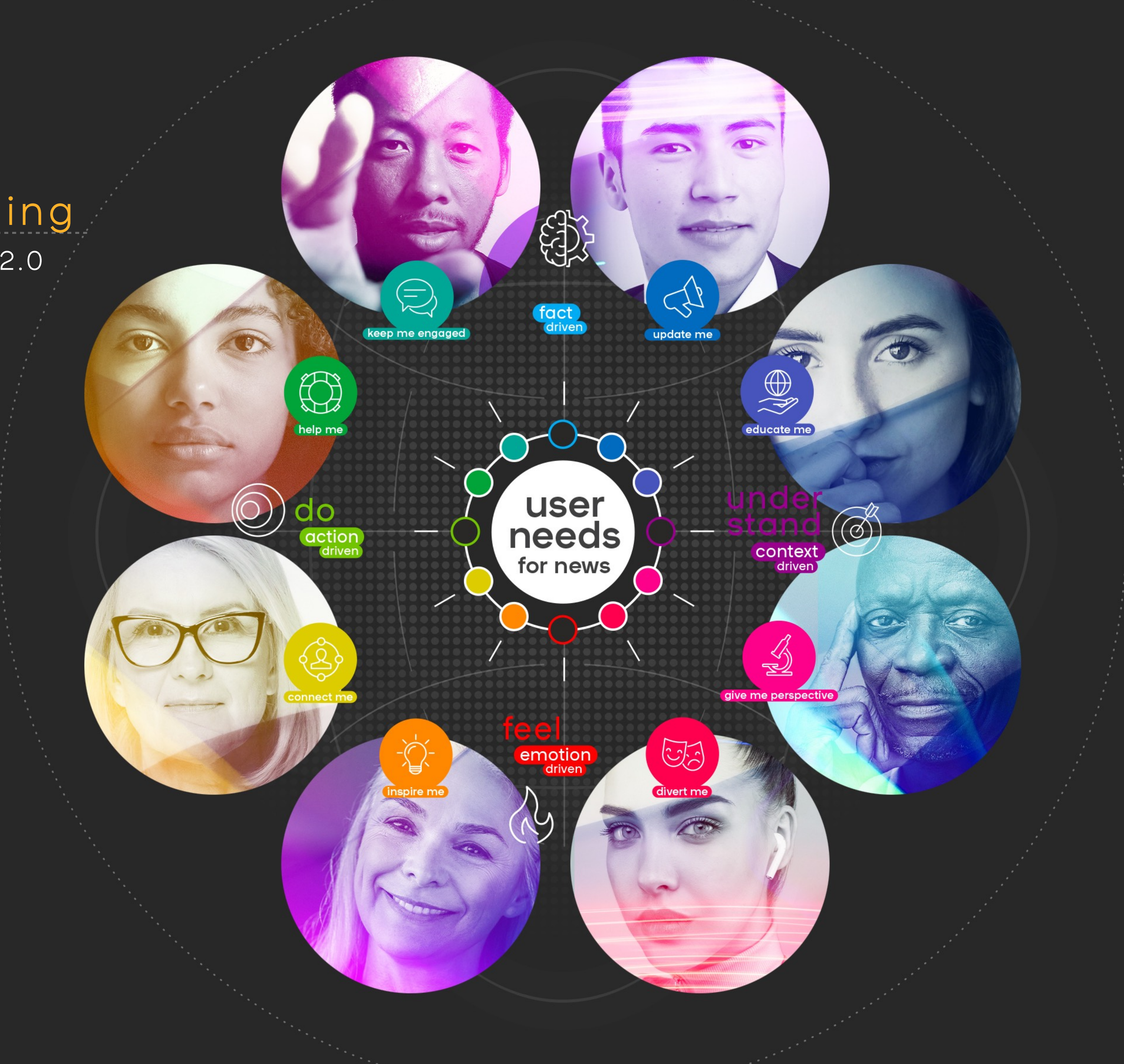


the evolution of
audience-driven publishing
user needs model 2.0



O Foreword

This paper has been in our heads for a couple of years now - as we witnessed news user needs models grow from a few workable prototypes into a fully-formed and legitimised publishing trend.

What follows is a practical guide to enable your newsroom to gain better synergy between balanced content curation, a sharp focus to improve your output, and the inevitable search for efficiencies.

It should be equally helpful to those who have not yet been exposed to this concept, and to those who have pioneered or experimented with it already.

The paper provides practical insights for every discipline within your newsroom - from front-line editorial, product and data, to audiences, marketing and commercial teams. It should be shared with your senior management, too.

User needs are at the heart of building a true bond with your audience - one that is based on trust and value. Any newsroom can be successful as long as it finds its product-market fit and its output satisfies audience user needs strategically, consistently and creatively.

Ultimately, this paper gives you tools, techniques and examples, showing you how the model can work for you and how it leads to various alternative and attractive stories.

Over the last few years we have not only collected, studied and analysed the most complete collection of existing user needs models, but together we shaped the most comprehensive version yet. It maps all the most important user needs on the four axes of 'know - understand - feel - do', but it goes further.

If your newsroom strategy is based on user needs, the key reach and engagement metrics improve. Conversion strategies become demonstrably more effective, as do your internal processes and workflows - from planning and commissioning, to tagging and optimising. We share the best practice and actionable insights in all of these areas.

building a true bond
with your audience

O Foreword

Any new concept always comes with caveats and challenges, and the user needs concept is no exception - from big data (are samples large enough to train algorithms?) and automation concerns (what if an article has three needs at once?), to tagging inconsistencies and culture change management issues.

We also look ahead to see where it all goes next: clearly, the accuracy of predictions and the quality of actionable insights will improve, and newsrooms' efficiency will grow. We also expect more non-news user needs models to appear as more sectors start creating content of their own.

a must-have
in modern newsrooms

The new news user needs model is the ultimate guide for storytelling, a must-have in modern newsrooms where the online competition for attention has never been more tangible.

Enjoy it, and please let us know how you're going to improve your content strategy after reading it!



Rutger Verhoeven
smartocto co-founder and CMO



Dmitry Shishkin
Independent digital publishing consultant

March 2023

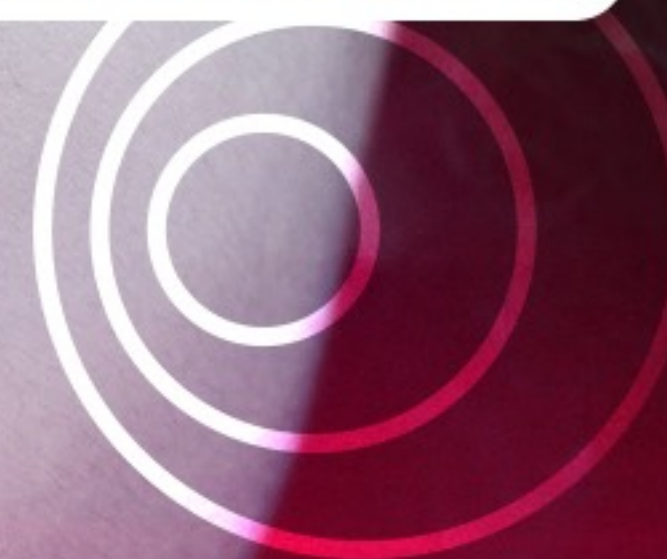
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user needs for news

the user needs model 2.0



help me



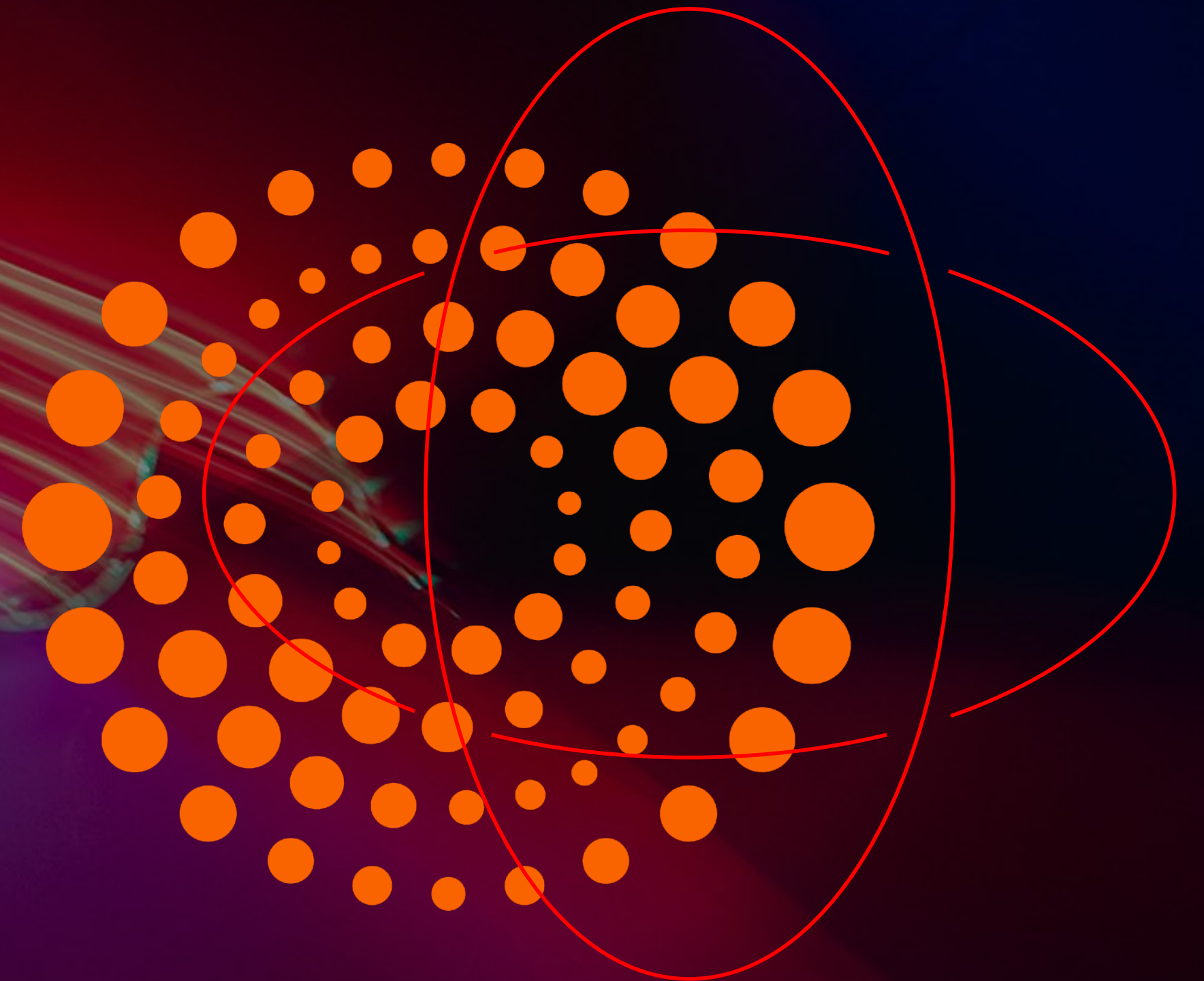
1 Background

Another key trend is the way in which product and editorial teams have been embracing 'user needs' models and 'jobs to be done' methodologies to help identify opportunities.

These processes ask searching questions about what role publisher products can play in a world of abundant media choices. They drill down, for example, into specific problems that audiences have and think about different ways these could be solved.

*Journalism, media, and technology trends and predictions 2023,
Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford ([chapter 7](#))*

Understanding your audience's needs and satisfying them to the best of your ability is at the heart of any digital success, including publishing. The premise is simple - have a crystal clear focus on the niche you are trying to excel in and provide content of the highest and differentiating quality to that very audience in ways that are valuable and meaningful to them.



1 Background

It took almost six years from the first public unveiling of the now-famous BBC 'news user needs' model ([summer 2017](#)) to make it into the 2023 Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism annual media predictions report. It's official: user needs for news are now a trend in global news publishing.

If they hadn't already been dabbling, newsrooms are now actively exploring what impact user needs-based content strategies might have on audience engagement and their business models.

While quality is relatively binary, the number of ways to be focused — that is, the number of niches in the world — are effectively infinite; success, in other words, is about delivering superior quality in your niche — the former is defined by the latter.



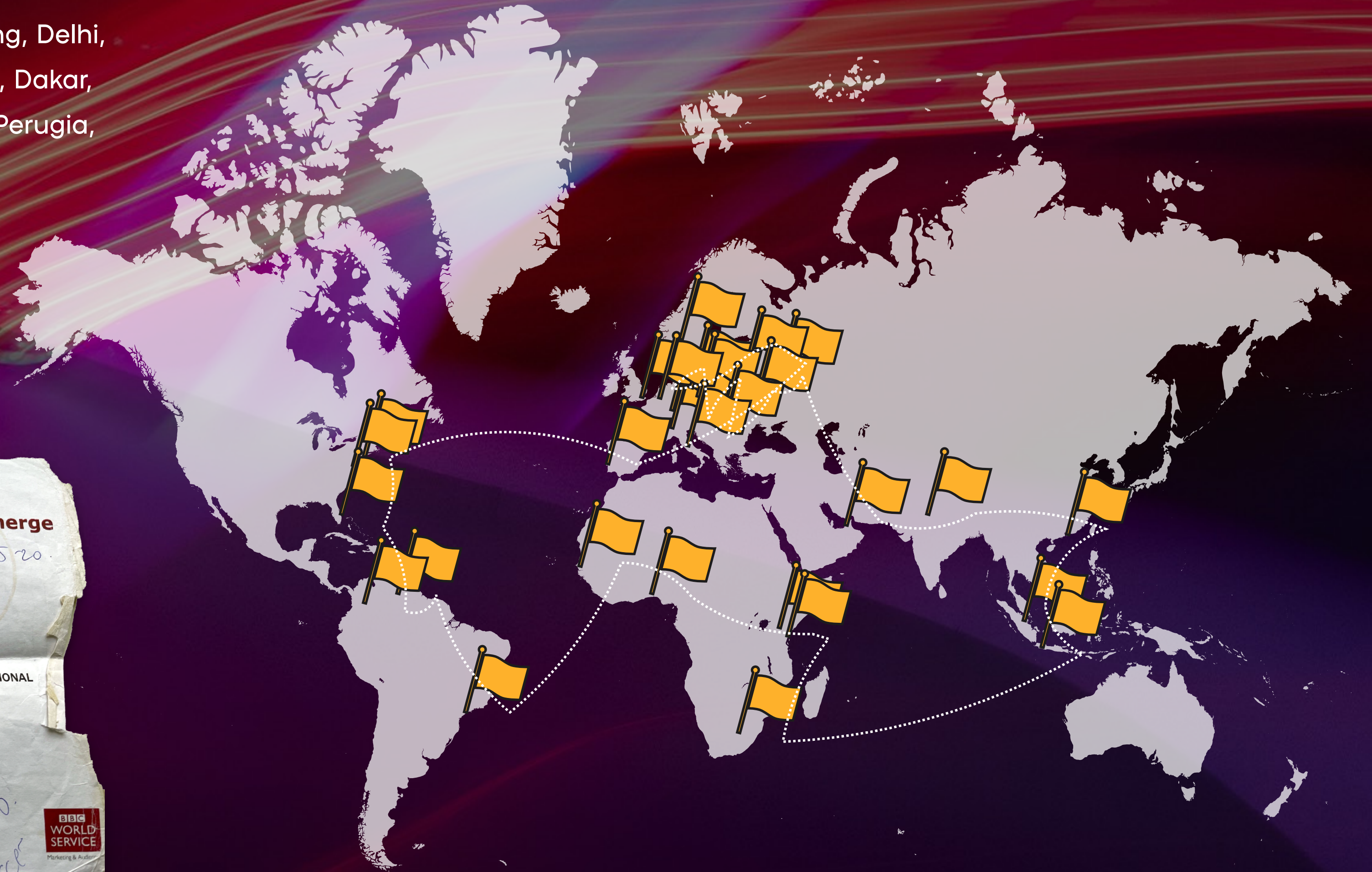
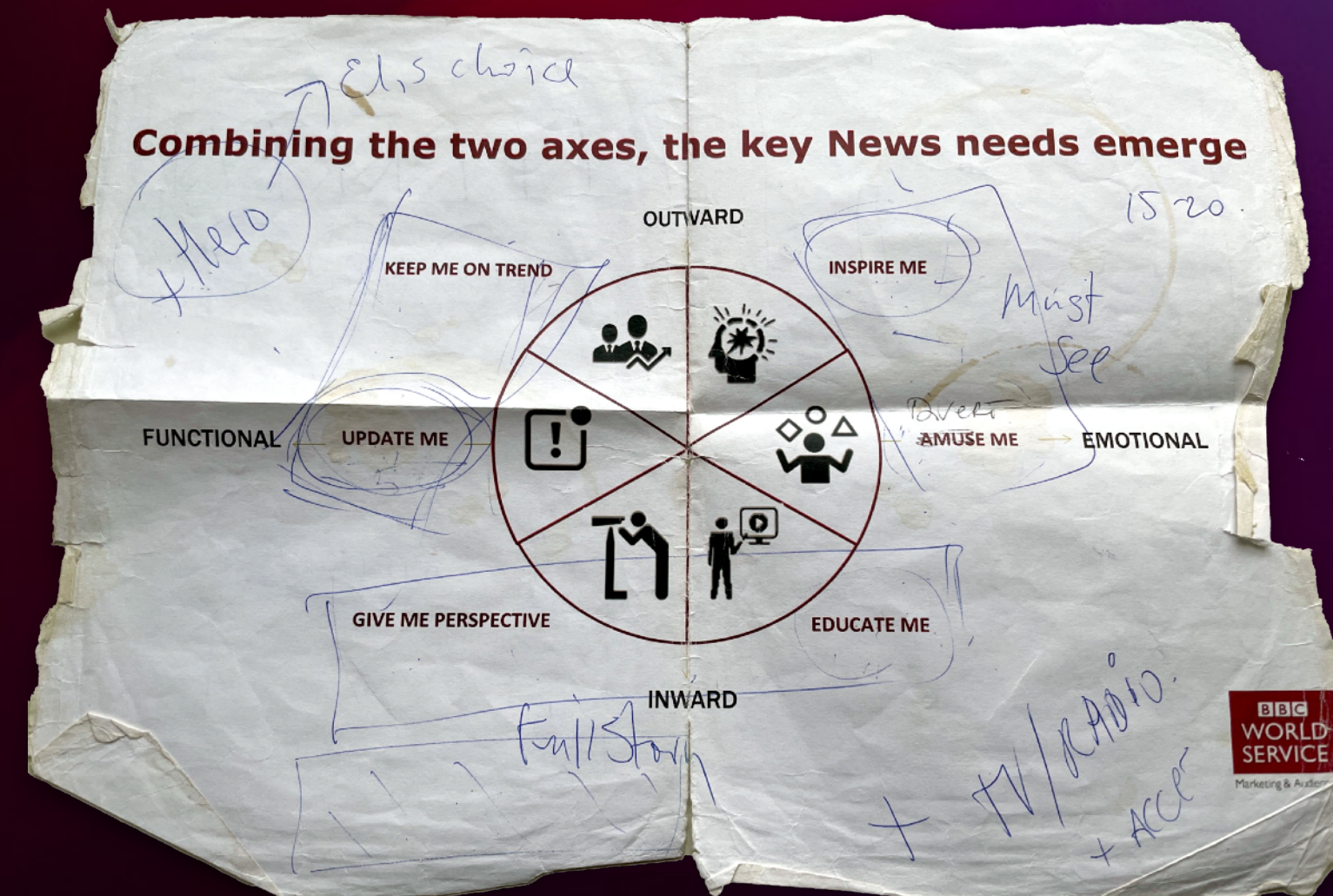
Stratechery's Ben Thompson made [this point in 2020](#).

A few months later we published the [first white paper on news user needs](#), to confirm its positive impact on journalism's search for focus and quality.



1 Background

As part of his user needs work, Dmitry took this model to newsrooms in Jakarta, Singapore, Hong Kong, Delhi, Nairobi, Dar-es-Salaam, Lagos, Johannesburg, Dakar, Dubai, Moscow, Kyiv, Belgrade, Vienna, Bonn, Perugia, Oslo, Lisbon, London, Zurich, Berlin, Hamburg, Utrecht, Riga, Bogota, Caracas, San Paolo, Miami, Washington and New York.



1 Background

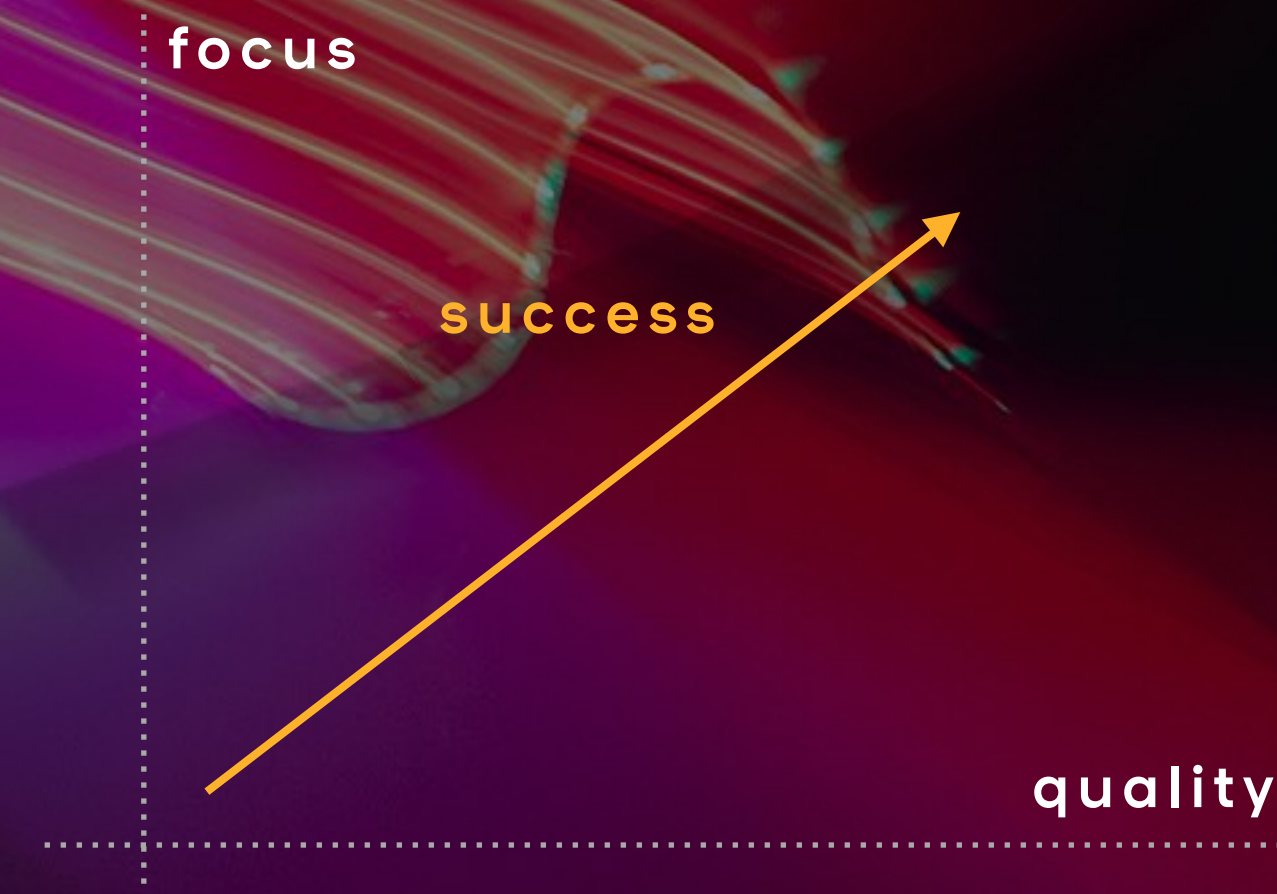
It's not an easy task at all. For years, newsrooms have been finding themselves dealing with two sets of complicated challenges.

On the one hand, they have been transforming themselves into **audience-first businesses**.

On the other, they have been trying to navigate a **complex external environment** dominated by the attention economy's best-in-class social media platforms.

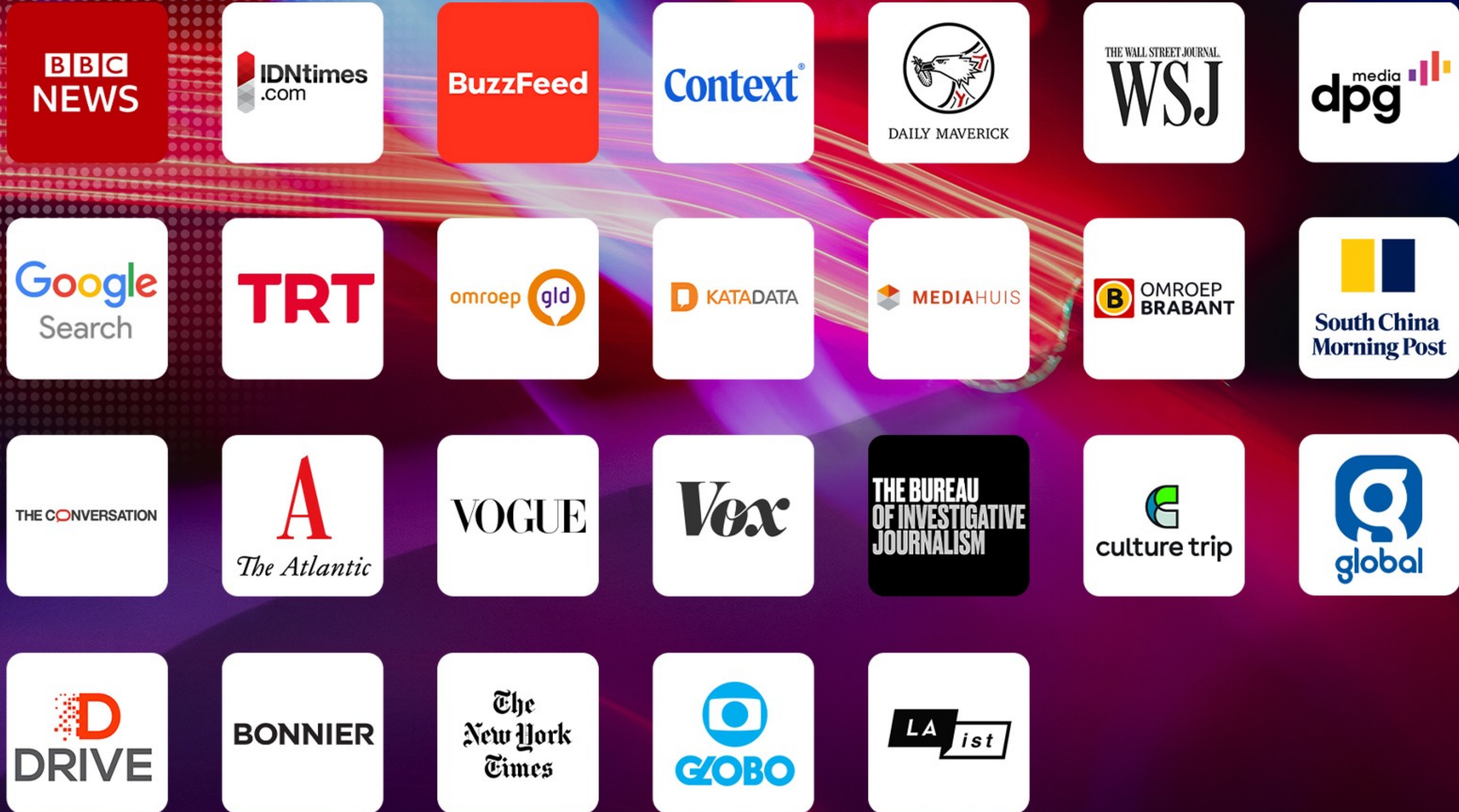
Increasingly, they are facing intense competition for trust and a new trend of news avoidance among their audiences. If that wasn't enough, media now faces its third macro challenge - the advent of **generative AI**, which will present its own issues for legacy (and even digital-first) content companies.

In the midst of all this, some progressive newsrooms realised that user needs-centric content strategies allowed them to address both success axes mentioned above - focus and quality.



We have seen effective applications of user needs models on all levels of publishing - global, national, regional, local, and niche.

Early adopters of The User Needs Model





“

Any editorial and product strategy needs a framework to drive decision-making and to use in the evaluation of success.

Looking at user needs is a helpful way to create organization-wide discipline in thinking about what utility their stories and product features serve for audiences

Every organization can **select and tailor** which exact needs they are trying to serve - the key is talking about them, crystalizing them and rallying around user needs as a common undertaking.

I have seen first-hand how a user-needs framework can lead to strong growth in both the impact of journalism and the financial results needed to support it.

”

smartocto

louise story

former chief news strategist WSJ

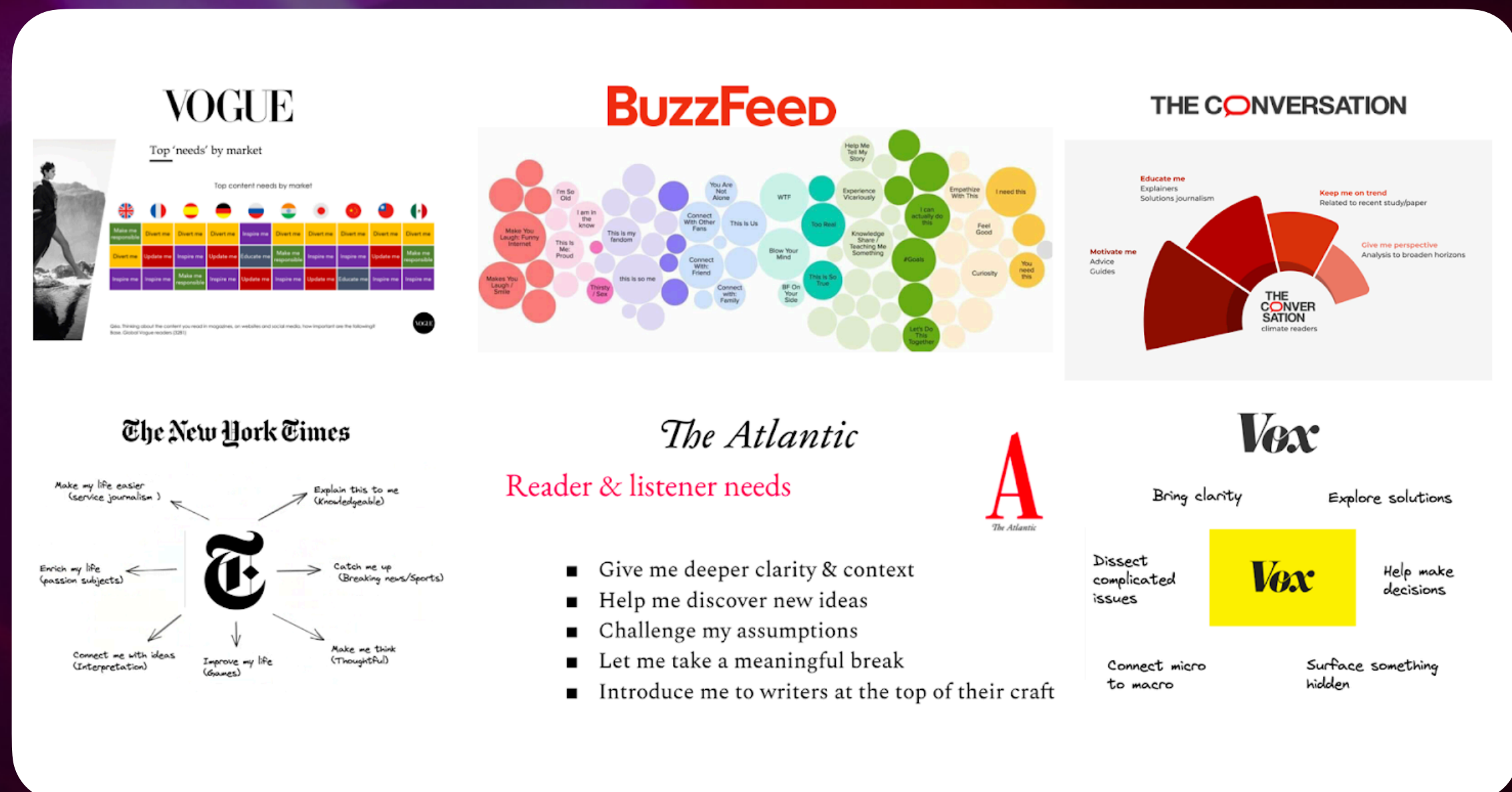
1 Background

Helpfully, some publishers, like the BBC in its initial groundbreaking research, shared their insights publicly, and by doing so strengthened the trend. Amongst the early adopters were [Buzzfeed](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [Vogue](#), TRT and [Culture Trip](#).

Recently, [Atlantic](#), [Vox](#) and [LAist](#) have become the latest publishers to write up their strategies. We'll also go as far as to say that audience needs strategies are now being considered within the New York Times, based on their latest investors deck ([slides 83-84](#)).

Unsurprisingly, podcast listeners have their specific needs, over indexing on contextual and emotional ones, according to a recent [Global report](#).

Large media holdings are taking a pan-portfolio view to help their newsrooms adopt user needs models (one example is Mediahuis and their Article DNA work, another is DPG Media). Elsewhere, publishers from the same country joined forces to create a shared model for themselves (Germany's [DRIVE](#)) and user needs models are being actively used by media consultancies to improve their clients' audience engagement ([FT Strategies case](#)).



1 Background

When it comes to another challenge media faces - trying to stay relevant and attract a younger audience - considering their users' needs helps as well. Looking at a recent paper by Ethar El-Katatney about Gen Z and their content needs, we see a direct parallel between the original BBC model and younger people's expectations of news ([Page 14](#)).

ATTRACTING YOUNG(ER) AUDIENCES:

A Guide for Small(ish) Legacy Organizations



In addition to the editorial advantages (more efficient working, helping to tackle overproduction and waste, and sharpening focus in defining product-market fit more effectively), there are numerous positives to do with internal alignment. Product, audience, data, marketing, and commercial units all benefit from a unified approach, finetuning their own strategies and tactics.

When BBC World Service launched 13 new news websites around the world in 2017-2018, their front page structure and modules reflected user needs groupings. Thereafter, 41 language teams in total reported that more than 90% of stories published were tagged with a user need in their CMS, making further content analysis and optimisation even more robust.

Nic Newman, the author of the RISJ 2023 annual trends report, predicts that "this year we can expect more examples of user needs models driving new product development, not just content commissioning".

A portrait of Nic Newman, a man with glasses, smiling. The image is overlaid with a purple and pink gradient and abstract geometric shapes. Large white quotation marks are positioned at the top and bottom right of the image.

“

This year we can expect more examples of user needs models driving new product development, not just content commissioning.

smartocto

nic newman

reuters institute for the study of journalism

”

1 Background

To sum up, the topic in question has changed a lot since it was presented to a wider world. Smartocto has been leading the way in editorial analysis and insights based on user needs for a number of years now. This knowledge, powered by a close collaboration with user needs evangelist Dmitry Shishkin (the original BBC model was known internally as 'Dima's wheel of news'), allowed us to become experts in the area.

The result of this experience and collaboration has been the creation of an upgraded version of the news user needs model. We studied and analysed alternative systems across the globe and based on those practices and experiences, have come up with a new, comprehensive model - one that can be used almost off the shelf.

It reflects the new expectations. It caters for different types of newsrooms. It offers solutions tried by others.

We present it to you here.





divert me

2

News user needs model 2.0

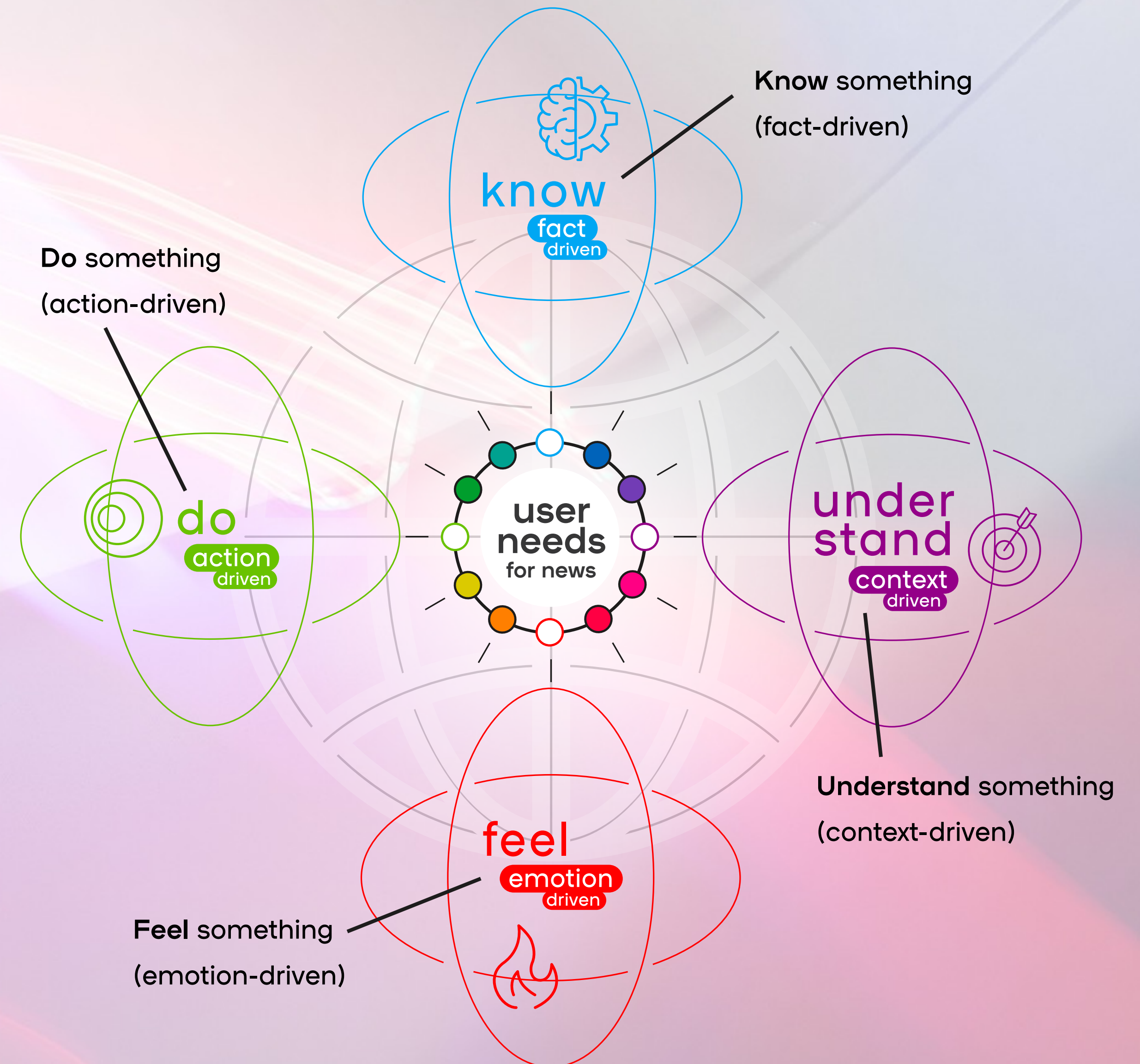
Fundamentally, the new model distils the wisdom, experience and learnings from both our own research and development and those approaches used by other publishers and presents it into a rock-solid schema.

The new model is both more comprehensive and more actionable than those before it, and its visualisation is strikingly clear. One of the original user needs has been reframed; two new user needs have been added.

At the heart of the visualisation, are four drivers that will be instantly recognisable to content creators: fact-driven, context-driven, emotion-driven and action-driven. These drivers provide clear guidance for creating the desired content and makes it easier for content creators to decide how to frame their piece.

The four fundamental axes

Can user needs be distilled down to four elements? Well, yes. Fundamentally we have found that content sits within four essential and basic needs that readers have:



2

News user needs model 2.0

The biggest departure from our previous user needs model is the inclusion of this last category, which reflects the development and consolidation of [solutions journalism](#) in the industry. Often based on practical tips, this type of content tries to inform readers how to make their lives easier: **it's the news you can use**.

This is a noteworthy development and comes as the media plugs the gap left by the service sector, where the emphasis is more on self-sufficiency and less on personal guidance.

Understand what your audience needs

The most revolutionary aspect of the original user needs model was the data research which [clearly showed](#) that focusing on the needs of your audience can lead to much better figures. Pageviews and engagement go up if you make fewer [Update me](#) articles and seek a better balance of coverage across all needs, preferences and pain points of the reader.

The approach also leads to a better understanding of the target audience, and results in the creation of more relevant, engaging and useful content that resonates with readers.

What we've seen the last couple of years is various players adapting this model to suit their own unique place in the market. This is to be applauded, but there is a risk that without a proper understanding of how the model functions in the workplace, it is likely to quickly fall short in implementation.

This is mainly due to the confusion between user needs and formats. To clarify: a format is the form that an editor chooses to meet the needs of a visitor. For example, an analysis complements the user need [Give me perspective](#). **The pitfall for editors** is that they then quickly think that visitors need an analysis of something when in fact they need to address the [Give me perspective](#). To make a better assessment, you need to separate user need and format.

2

News user needs model 2.0

It's analogous to a greengrocer who decides to start selling ready-made salads. His recipe is a hit with his clients. He thinks this is because he's made a delicious dressing because that's what makes the salad unique, right? And, besides, people have been complimenting him on the taste.

The greengrocer decides to sell the dressing separately in a bottle.

What happens? Not a single bottle is sold.

It turns out his customers wanted the salad mainly for convenience. They could eat healthy without having to chop the vegetables themselves. The need he meets - initially unwittingly - is therefore convenience. The form is a ready-made salad. The way he made the dressing is quality - of course.

Quality is always a condition.

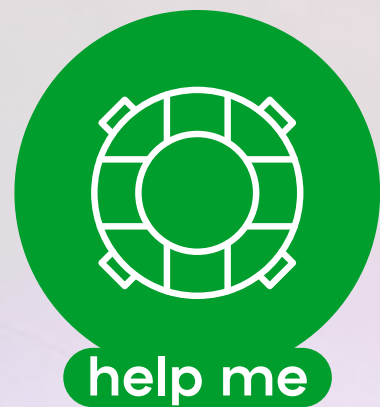


2

News user needs model 2.0

Two new user needs, one reframed

As we've seen in [the evolution of the user needs model](#), the need to 'do' something has - until now - often been underdeveloped. Publishers found words for those needs and we adopted them in this 2.0 version: [Help me](#) and [Connect me](#). At the same time we were troubled by the framing of the [Keep me on trend](#) need, which felt too narrow, so that concept was renamed.



help me

Your visitors are searching for information that helps them act on [a personal level](#). Sometimes it is enough to show the impact of developing events, as long as they encourage your audience to do something. Take readers by the hand, mark the steps, and present a clear [solution](#) to their problems.

[How to write a Help me article](#)



connect me

Your audience wants to feel connected and at the same time wants to act on that feeling. The stories created with this approach connect people around [ideas or experiences](#). In many cases these stories build empathy or affinity with the subject or topic.

The big difference between this and the Help me need is that it's [societal](#), not personal. This need is extremely important for regional and local publishers. Visitors want to cherish and validate a sense of belonging and feel proud of their (local) people and neighbourhood.

[How to write a Connect me article](#)

2 News user needs model 2.0



keep me engaged

This user need emphasises the importance of staying up to date with current events and participating in the conversations and discussions surrounding them. It places an emphasis on the desire to not just be a passive consumer of information, but an active participant in the community. **Keep me engaged** takes into consideration the broader scope of trends, not just those limited to social media. This is the point of difference from the original **Keep me on trend** which we deemed too narrowly connected to social media.

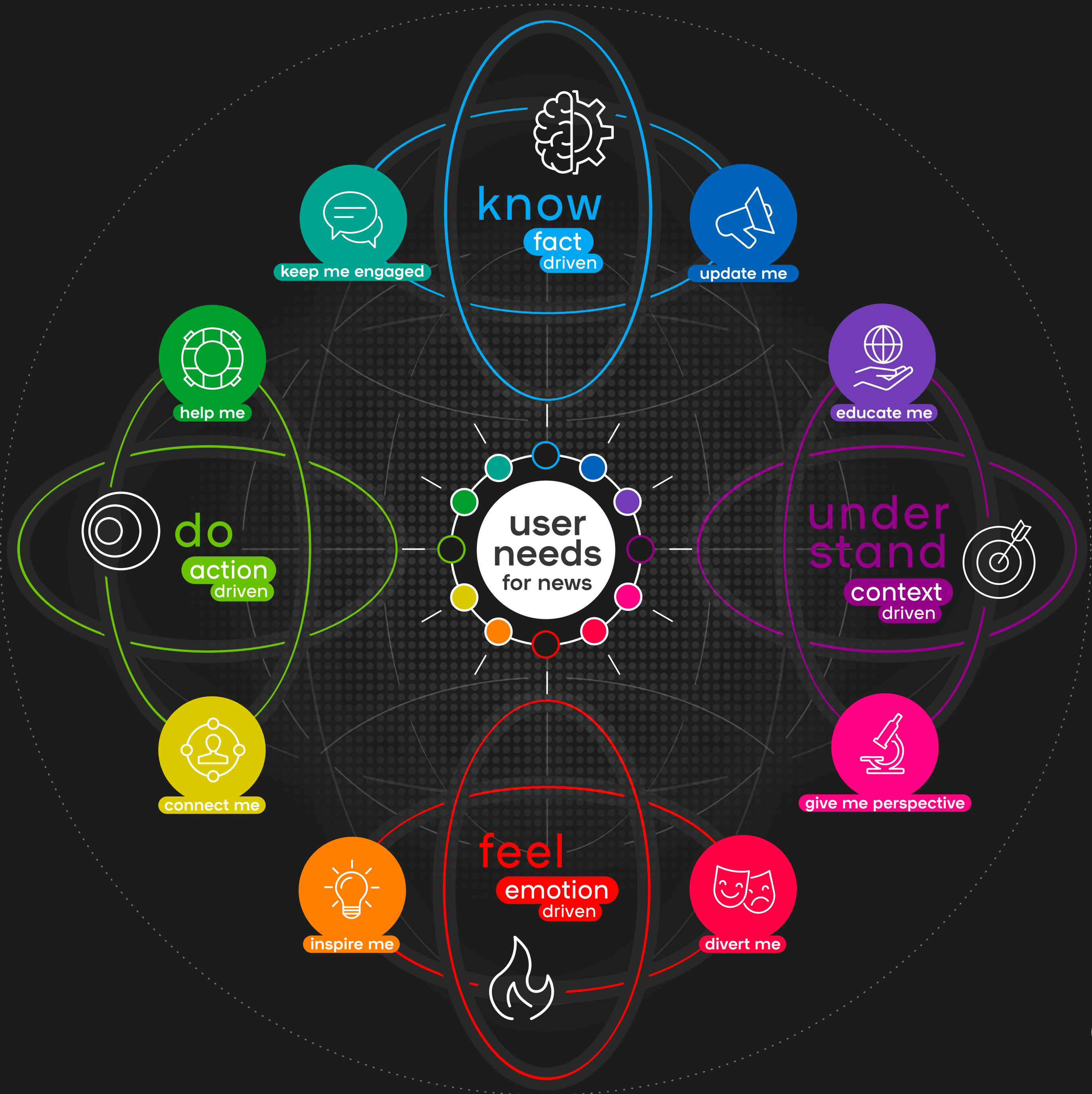
[How to write a Keep me engaged article](#)

The user needs come to life when they're placed in the correct position around the axes. For example, **Update me** and **Keep me engaged** are the user needs that answer readers' desire to know something. This tells you in which direction to look for the need and at the same time gives an idea of how to meet that need - namely with factual information.

The complete model

In the new model, the basic needs are found on the axes. The user needs form a circle. The place in the circle has been chosen very carefully to express the relationship between the axes, the circle and each brand-specific need.

Update me is, for example, fact driven and placed in this section, but there is a good chance that some explanation is needed in addition, explaining why it sits on the side towards those needs nestled under the Understand axes.



A portrait of Ade Wahyudi, a man with dark hair and a mustache, wearing a blue shirt. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent dark blue shape containing text. The background is a gradient of blue and purple with a subtle dot pattern.

“

In the old journalism era, it was the newsroom's ultimate decision on what information should be delivered for public consumption.

However, in the digital era when information is very easy to obtain in various forms, **the public determines** what information they wish to consume.

In conditions like these, the User Need model becomes **crucial** in helping newsrooms to understand the public's need for information.

The User Need model is a **guide** for journalists in producing content, in order to work **more effectively**.

smart●ct●

ade wahyudi

coo katadata

”

2 News user needs model 2.0

Example: hurricane

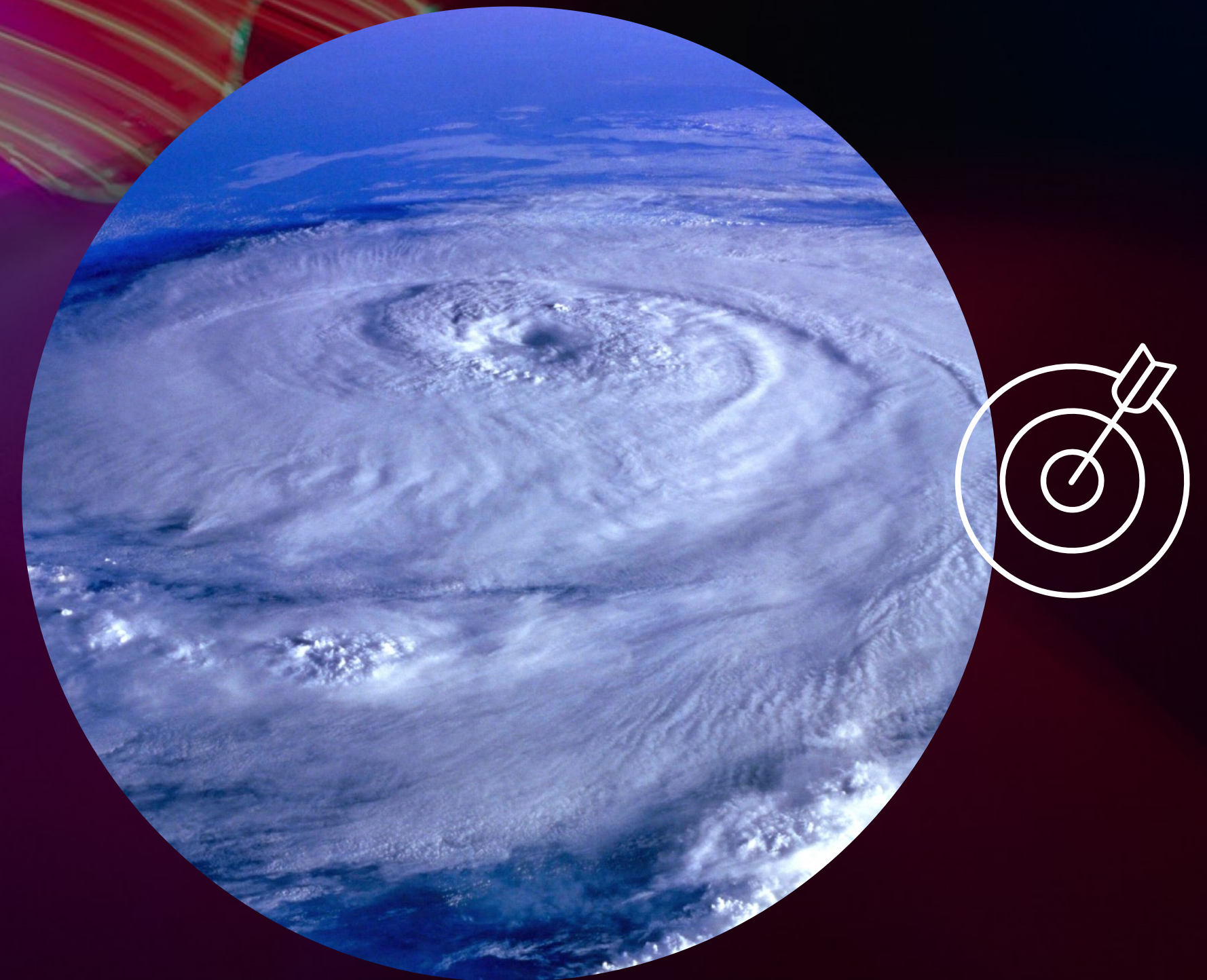
In a breaking news article stating that a **hurricane** has hit Haiti (a classic example of an **Update me** piece), it's likely that the report will also include information about whether or not the hurricane will reach Cuba or mainland United States.

The editor may even include a sentence stating that hurricanes are becoming more powerful due to climate change. That is **factual** information, but it already leans a bit towards **interpretation** and **context**.

There are - necessarily - nuances in the user needs model.

The need to be inspired borders on the need to feel connected to a society or an idea.

That's why **Connect me** and **Inspire me** are next to each other in the circle - although they have a different drive and meet a different basic need.



2

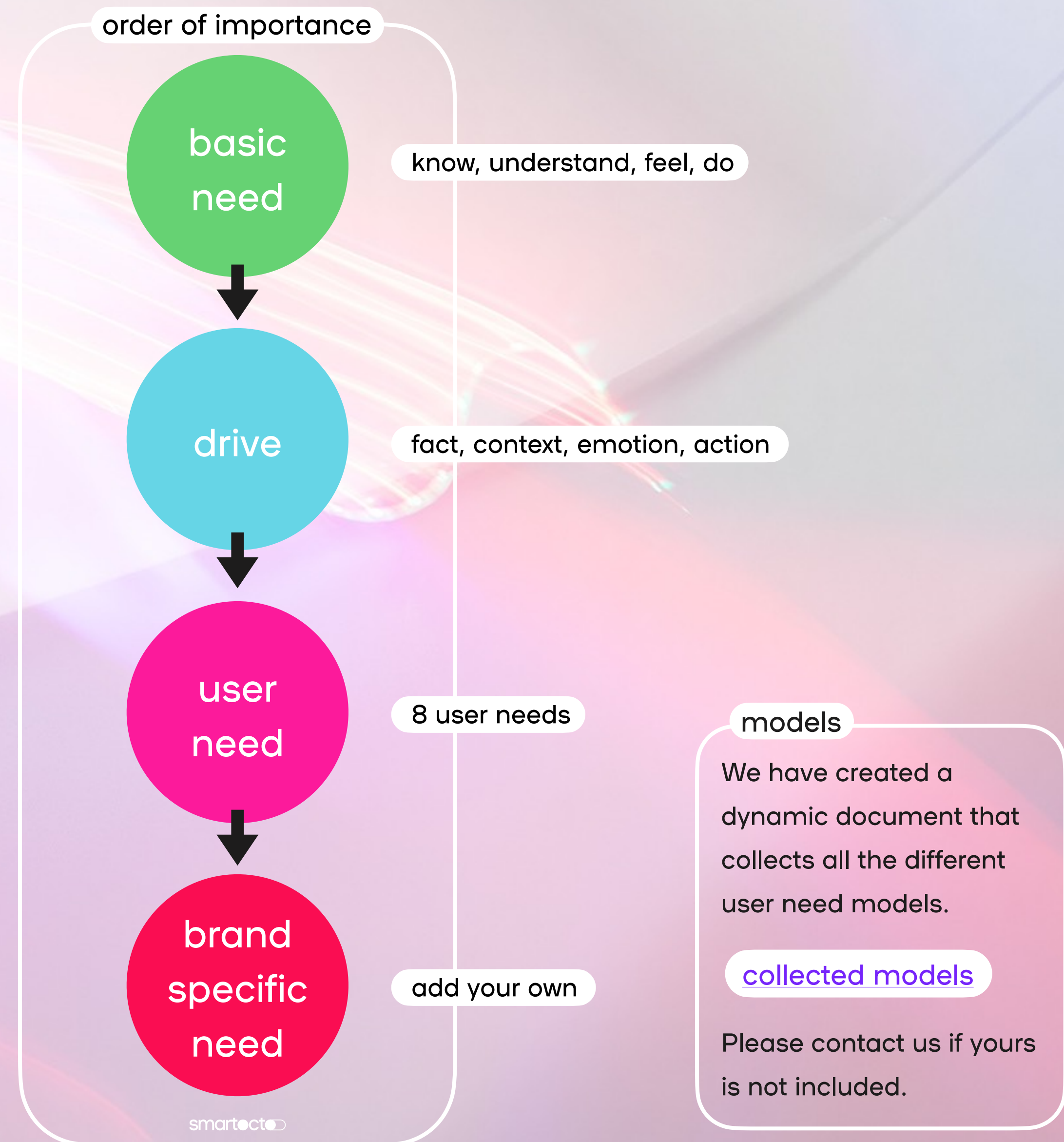
News user needs model 2.0

The introduction of brand specific needs

To do justice to all user needs that have been developed by various publishers in recent years, we added a final ring to the mother model, containing **brand specific needs**. In many cases, they define what visitors are looking for even more clearly - and they often give a brand more colour too. This is important. Why should visitors come to your website rather than the competition's? By choosing the right palette of user needs combined with brand specific needs, you can better answer that question.

By understanding that these specific needs drive all readers to seek out news in different ways and at different times, news brands can better serve their audience, optimise their storytelling, and achieve their business goals.

Outlets that spend time carefully considering their niche and their brand DNA - and then how user needs can and should be applied to it - are those that understand their product/market fit best.



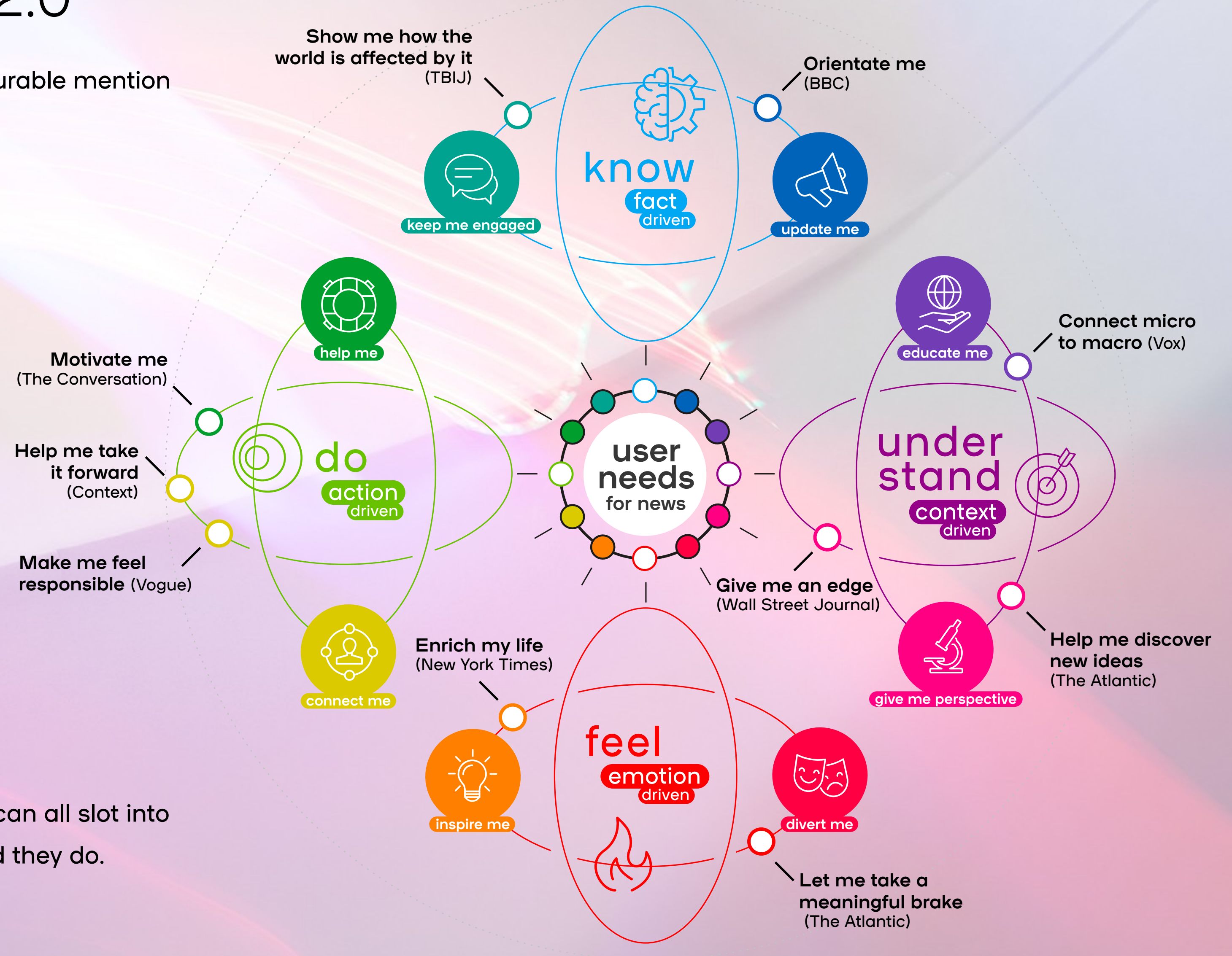
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News user needs model 2.0

Some are particularly noteworthy and worth an honourable mention here as well:

- Orientate me (BBC)
- Help me discover new ideas (The Atlantic)
- Connect micro to macro (Vox)
- Enrich my life (New York Times)
- Give me an edge (Wall Street Journal)
- Make me feel responsible (Vogue)
- Let me take a meaningful brake (The Atlantic)
- Help me take it forward (Context)
- Motivate me (The Conversation)
- Show me how the world is affected by it (TBIJ)

Interestingly, no matter how unique user needs, they can all slot into the eight user needs identified on the 2.0 model - and they do.

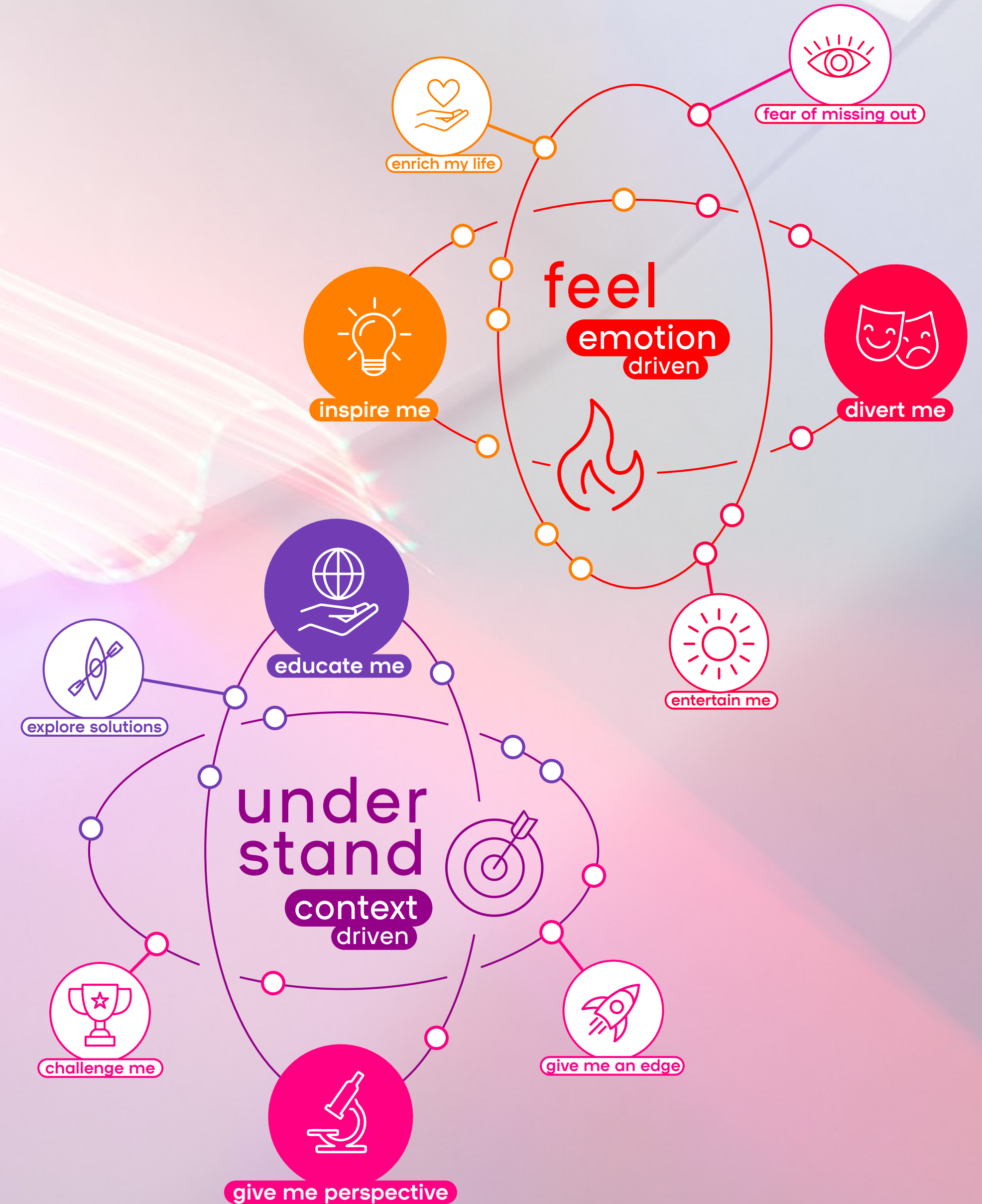
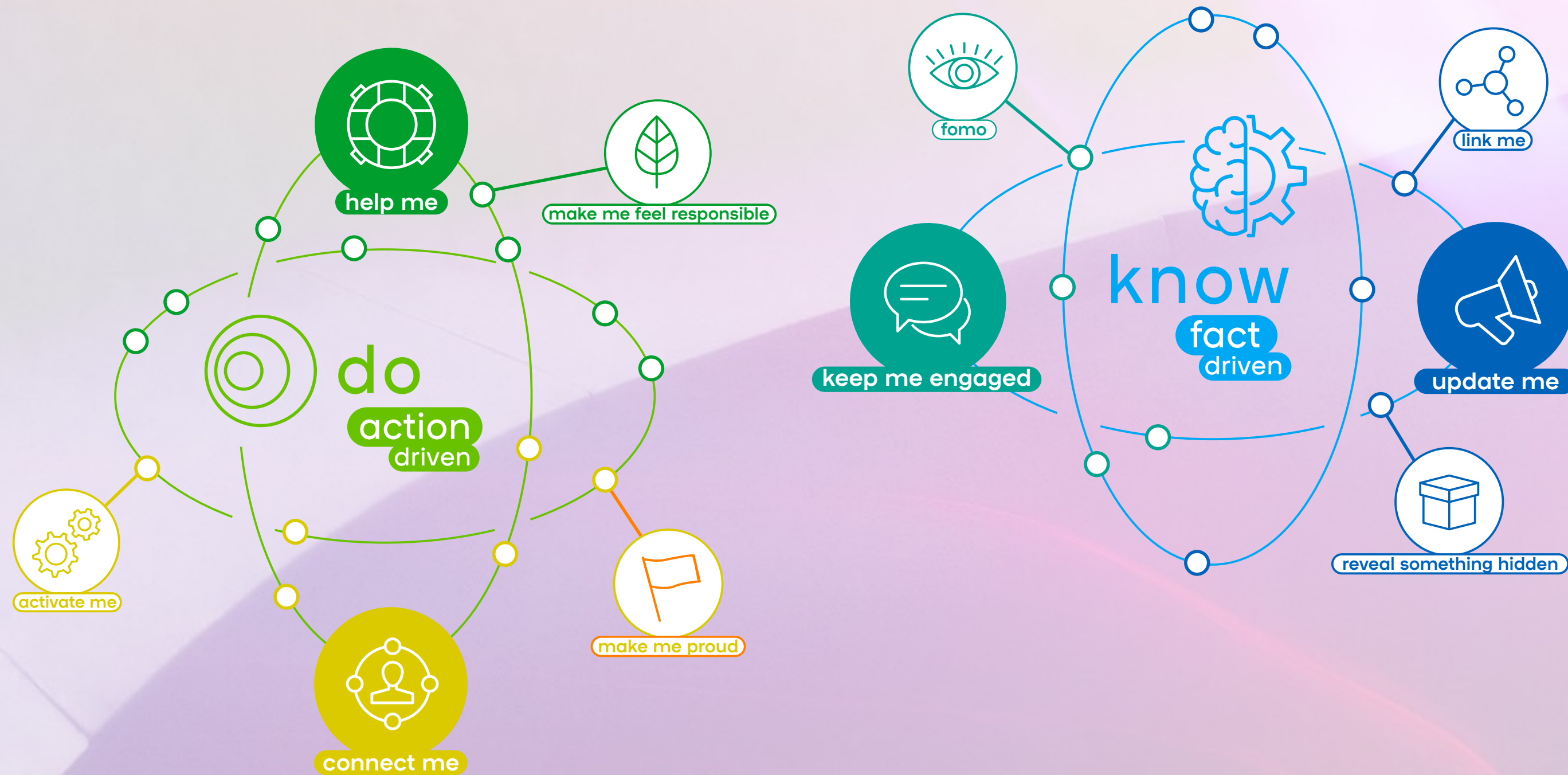


2

News user needs model 2.0

That's why we visualised the brand-specific needs in orbits around the basic needs - as if they were stars that light up your own organisation if you focus your telescope on them. Since we haven't filled in all the dots, publishers can add their own brand-specific needs and we invite you to create your own subsets.

Please get in touch with us if we did not include your model in that table.



2 News user needs model 2.0

On the next pages, you can see how they work in practice, through an example of stories written in response to one topic.



the topic

70 years since a big flood killed
1836 people in the Netherlands

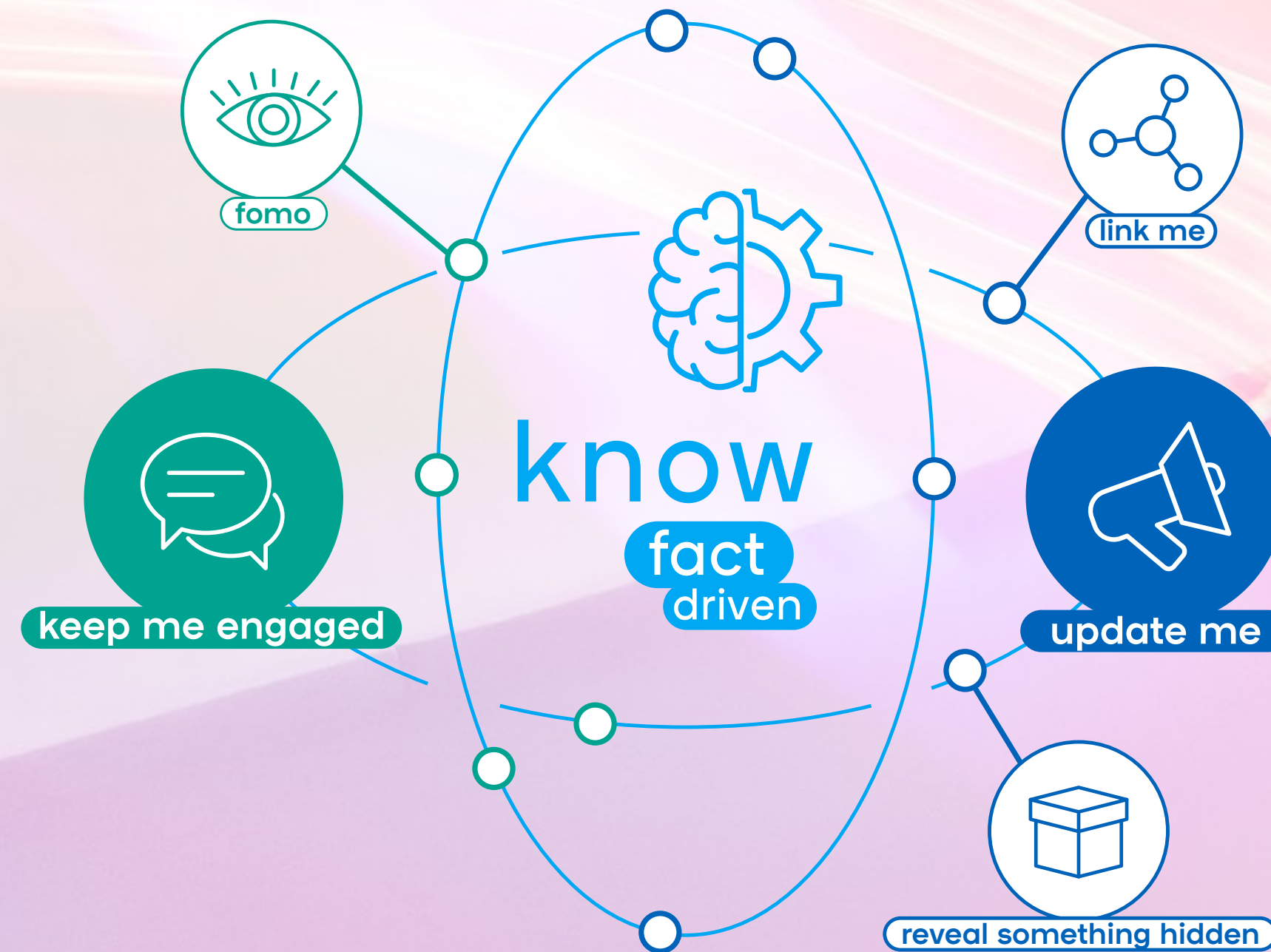
if you choose to go for the KNOW side you can ask

Is there a TV documentary or special edition of a newspaper about the flood? Are people reacting to something about the topic on social media?

Report about the most impressive tweets or comments. Remark how the newspapers cover this historical event. Collect remarkable things in the news about the coverage of the topic.

headline

Documentary shows the flood's impact is still felt: 'I fear water'



Do we know what kind of events will take place to commemorate the disaster?

Create a timeline or plain news article where you can read what will happen, when and where.

headline

The Netherlands commemorate the great flood

if you choose to go for the UNDERSTAND side you can ask

Is there reason to worry that a similar flood will happen in the (near) future?

Let analysts explain if this threat is reasonable or not - from climate standings, technical standings, data (how much does the level rise each year and what does that mean? Or even take a look at disappearing islands across the globe.

headline

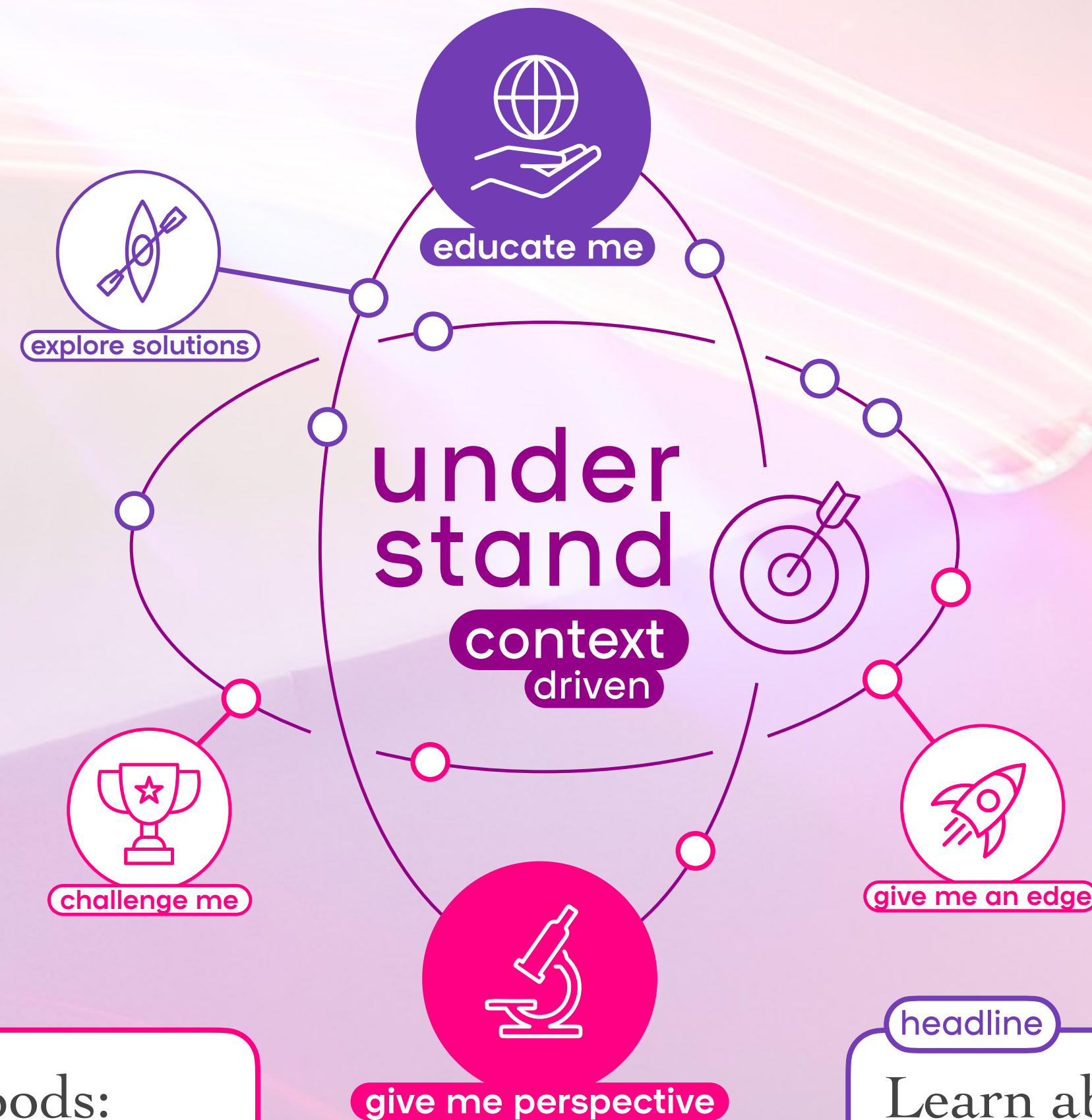
Experts worry about new floods:
'Climate change makes us vulnerable'

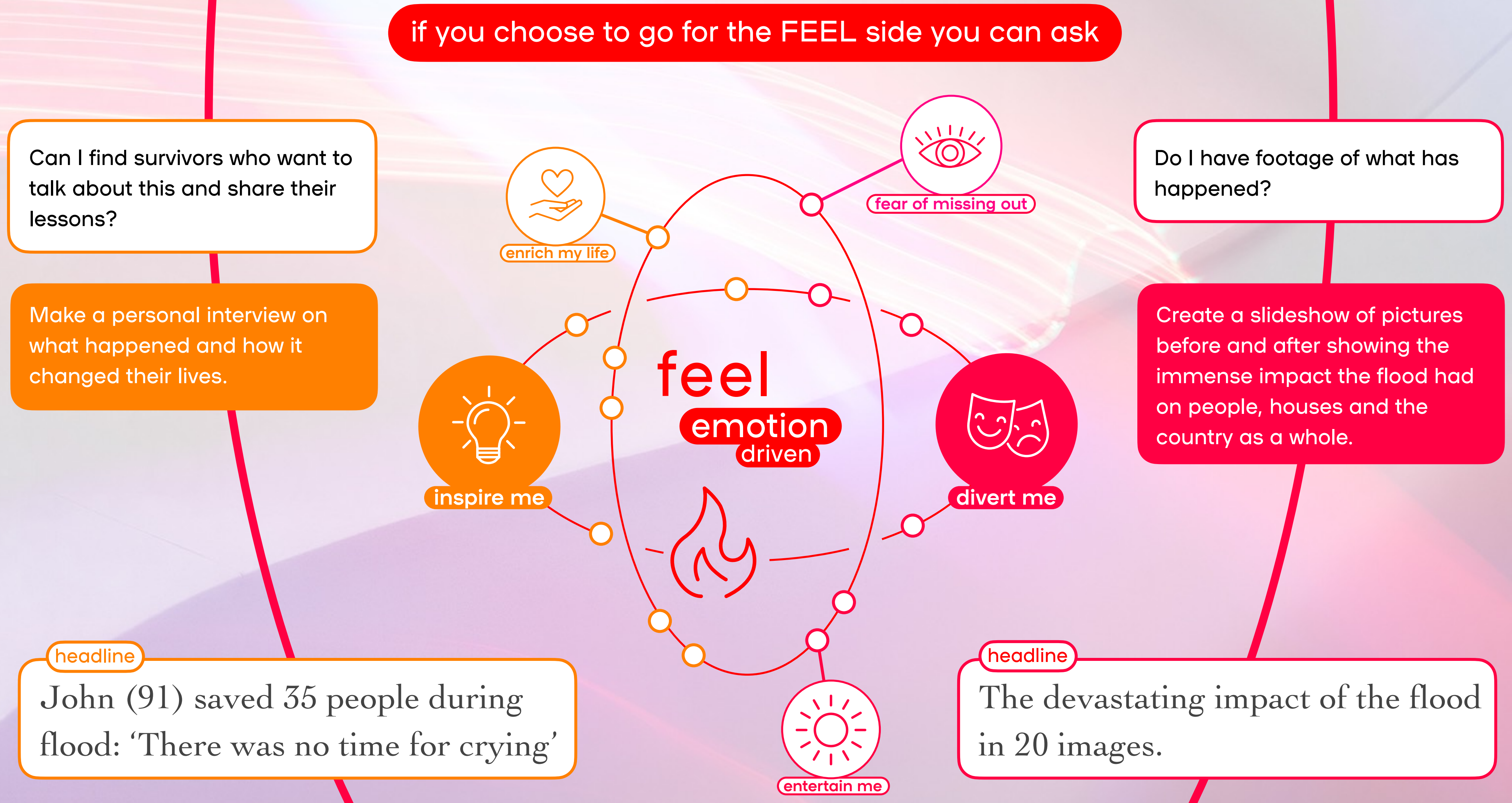
Is there anything that is complex or needs to be explained about this topic?

Make an explainer of the sea level in the Netherlands, explain how dykes work, what the function of a lock is, how the delta work functions etc.

headline

Learn about the Netherlands' ingenious sea protection





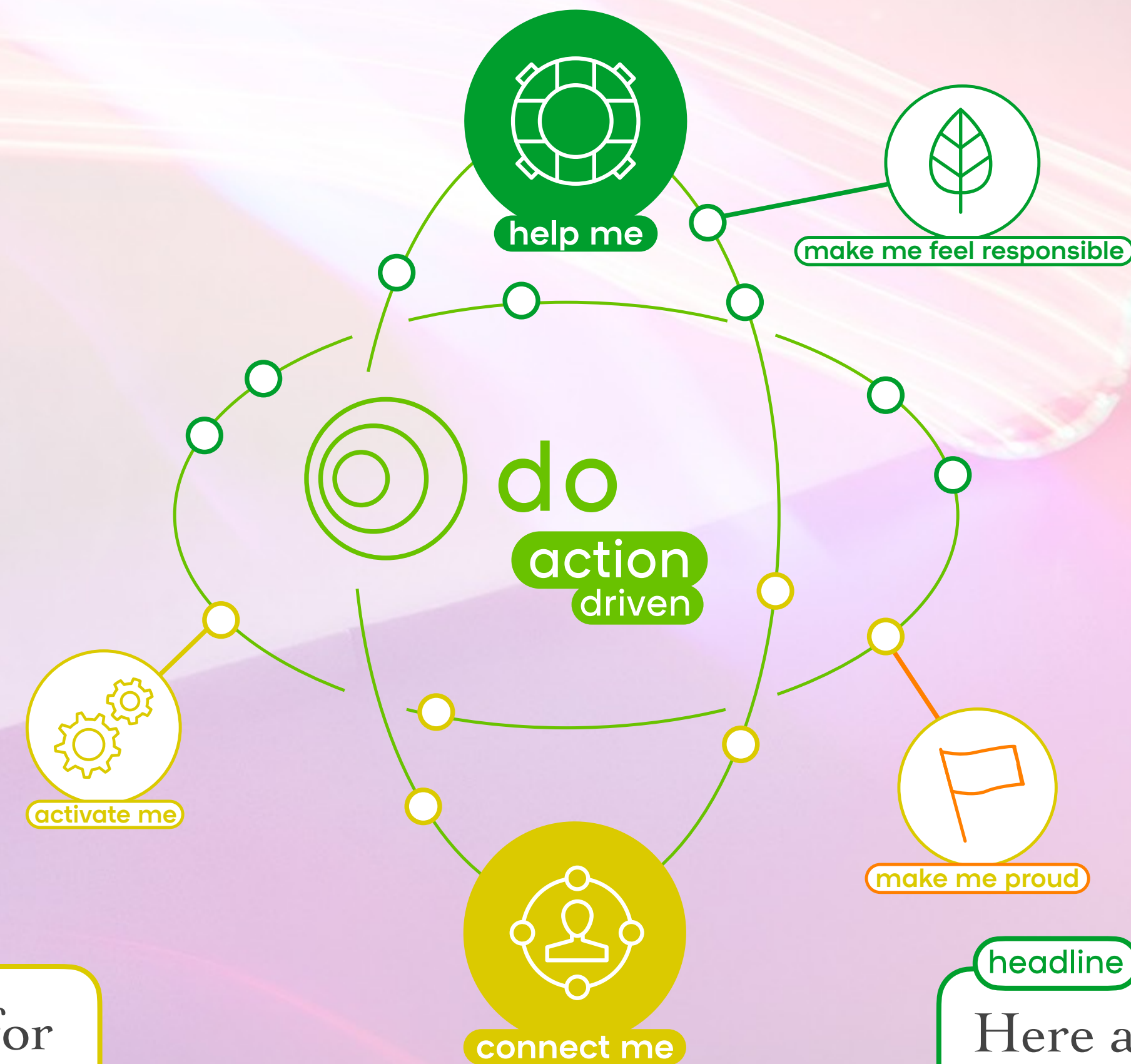
if you choose to go for the ACT side you can ask

Is a stronger societal movement necessary? Is something happening that makes your audience proud of their environment?

Try to find a movement or create one. We have volunteers that watch the dykes and also level the water in various canals, rivers etc. Report about the volunteers and invite your audience to join them.

headline

More volunteers needed for the water check weekends

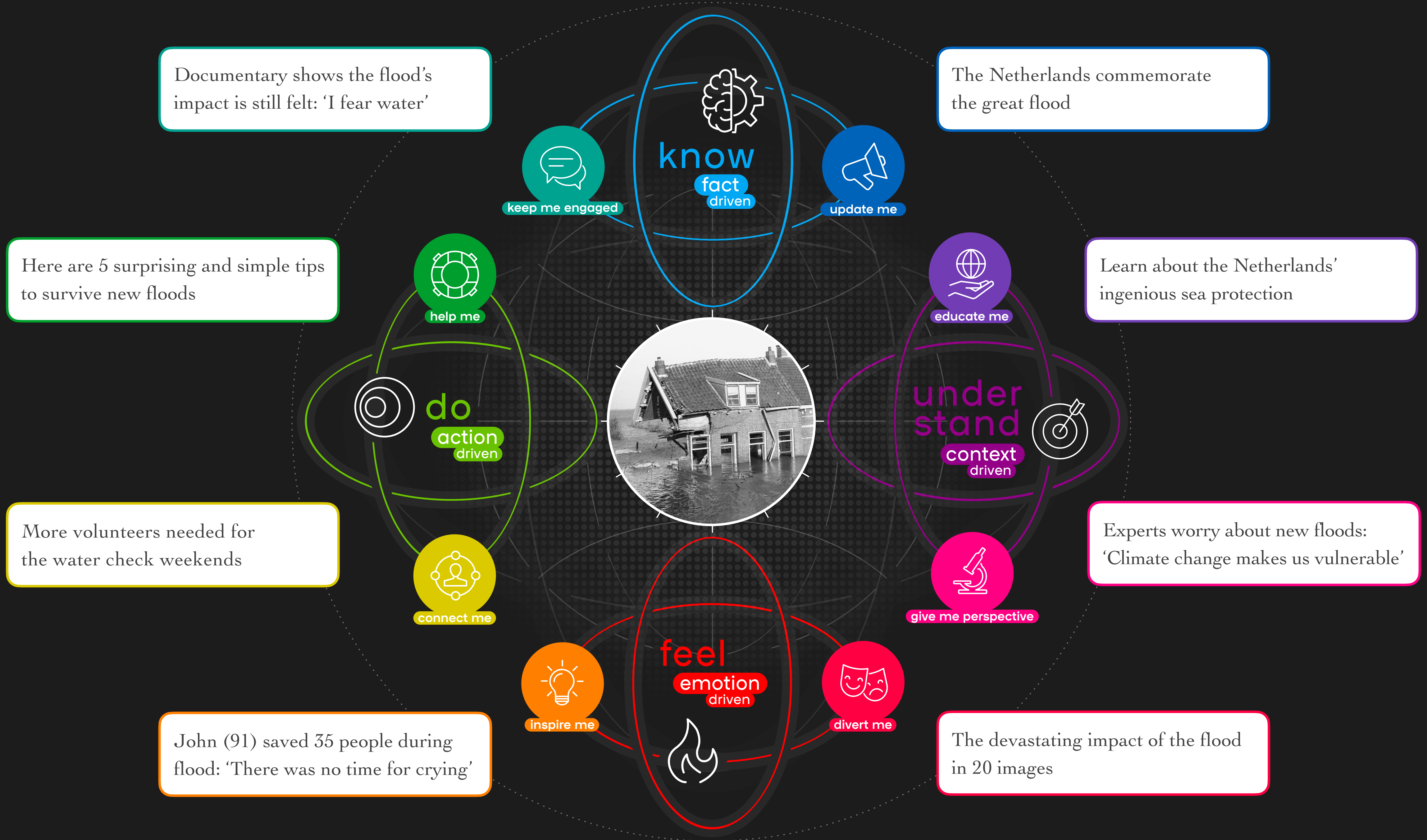


Is there anything to help people with on a personal level?

The main question in this story could be: are people well prepared for a flood nowadays? How? Write an article about the things you should have in your home to overcome a new flood. Show good escape routes for local societies if necessary.

headline

Here are 5 surprising and simple tips to survive new floods





smartocto

user needs for news

the user needs model 2.0

give me perspective

give me an edge

3 Data support

When you apply user needs data to your output and analyse it across time, you will start seeing trends that are more imperceptible in the day-to-day rush of your newsroom work. That's the beauty of data and data visualisation: *it's illuminating*.

Our data sources

Over the course of our research into user needs for news, we analysed over 20 brands in detail, but for the purposes of this whitepaper, we have focused on seven.

We understand that tagging user needs is something that brands do themselves - based on their own definitions and ideas - and that there might be some nuances in the way stories are tagged.

What's educational for me can be a *Give me perspective* piece for someone else etc. Smartocto has created an algorithm that is able to automatically identify articles based on the model that we present in this white paper.

Based on that, we are able to create actionable notifications that help newsrooms to optimise their storytelling and get better results.

We anonymised the data because it's less important to know precisely what brand is analysed - we believe the data itself should get the story across. The interesting part here is the spread of types of publishers surveyed.

Before we dive into the details here's some information on the newsbrands whose data we analysed*

(* all data is privileged, so while names are not specified, general information about those publications are. We have been given permission to share this anonymised data)

3 Data support

The analysed brands

brand
1

A large Asian online media and research company focused on business and economics. Well known for coverage of news, information, data, and research results.

brand
2

A privately held Northern Europe portfolio company with multiple news and background brands operating in many countries. They cover news, lifestyle, entertainment, sports, human interest, health, science and many more topics. Although we've analysed multiple brands from their portfolio, in this paper we looked at a multilingual popular science magazine because they have been specifically working with the user needs model.

brand
3

One of the largest regional broadcasters operating and covering news from a specific area in the Netherlands. They make daily TV news and radio programs, but they increasingly have an online focus and publish news on web, app & social media.

brand
4

A national opinion-driven newspaper with a large subscription base.

brand
5

A national newspaper with a high focus on sports and entertainment. With very pronounced columnists and a specific tone of voice.

brand
6

One of the largest commercial and solely online focused news platforms with a high volume of daily published stories. Big on sports, human interest, breaking news but also entertainment.

brand
7

A big regional newspaper with a focus on human interest stories, working closely within the news organisation with the national oriented newsroom to exchange both knowledge, insights as well as stories.

3 Data support

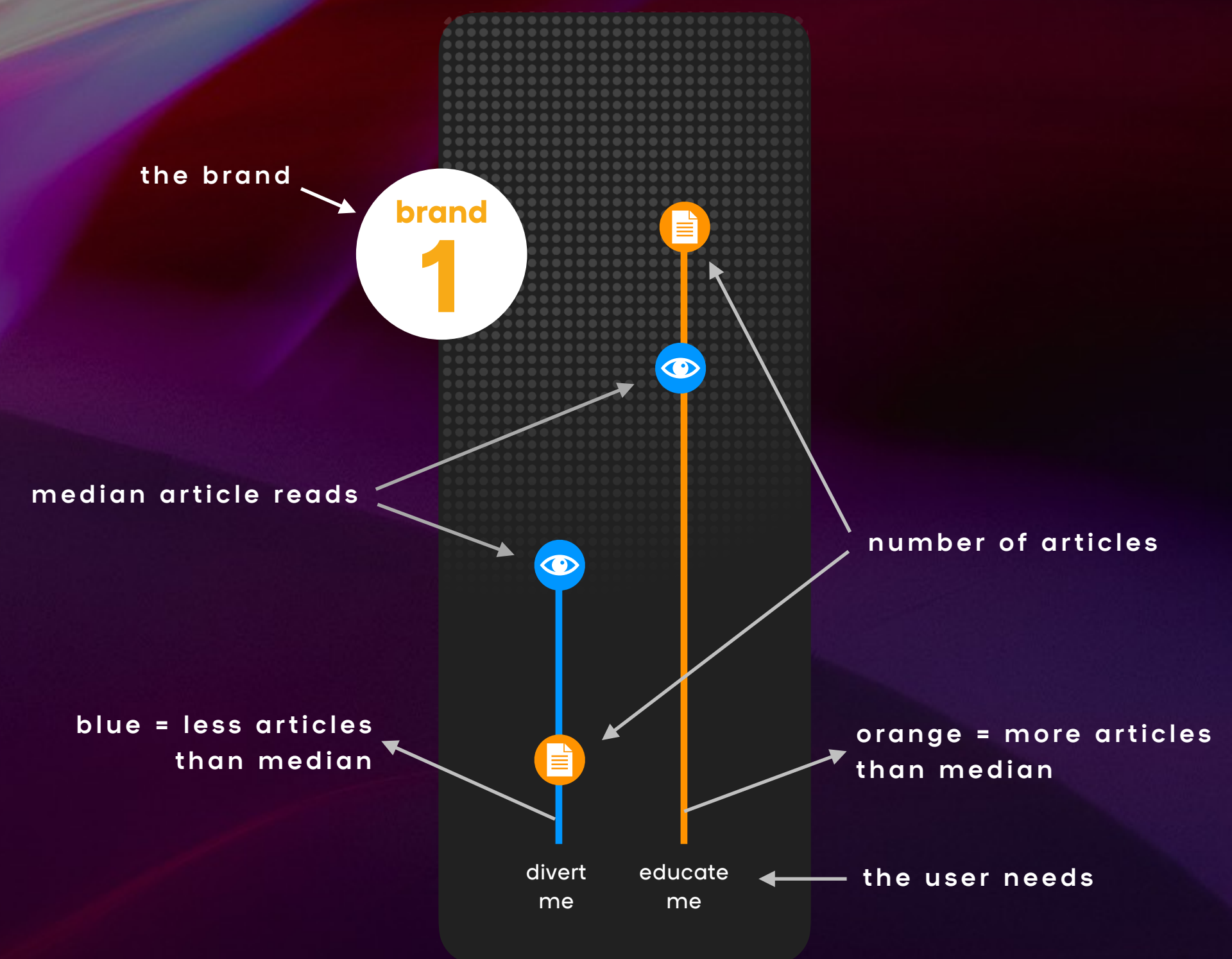
Average vs. Median

Not all stories are equally interesting - and not all weeks or months are evenly blessed with the same quantities of stories.

It's for these reasons that we decided to analyse a longer period of time and look at medians instead of averages. That way the data is not affected by outliers, and the overall conclusions are more in line with the overall impact of the various news brands. The data shown in this chapter is from Jan 2022 to Jan 2023.

Having recorded and analysed the data for each newsbrand, these are the conclusions we've drawn.

How the graphs are set up



A portrait of Vhanya Barba Mackechnie, a woman with long dark hair, smiling. The background is a vibrant purple and pink gradient with abstract light streaks and a halftone dot pattern in the bottom right corner.

“

The reason why the user needs model works so well is because it provides a solid **overarching framework** that can be applied across all news desks.

The South China Morning Post attributes much of the user needs model's success to its design premise - a common language that anybody from any department, with any expertise, can easily **understand, operate and connect with.**

smartoct

vhanya barba mackechnie

vp product at south china morning post

”

3 Data support

1. A well balanced User Needs approach helps prevent overproduction of Update me articles



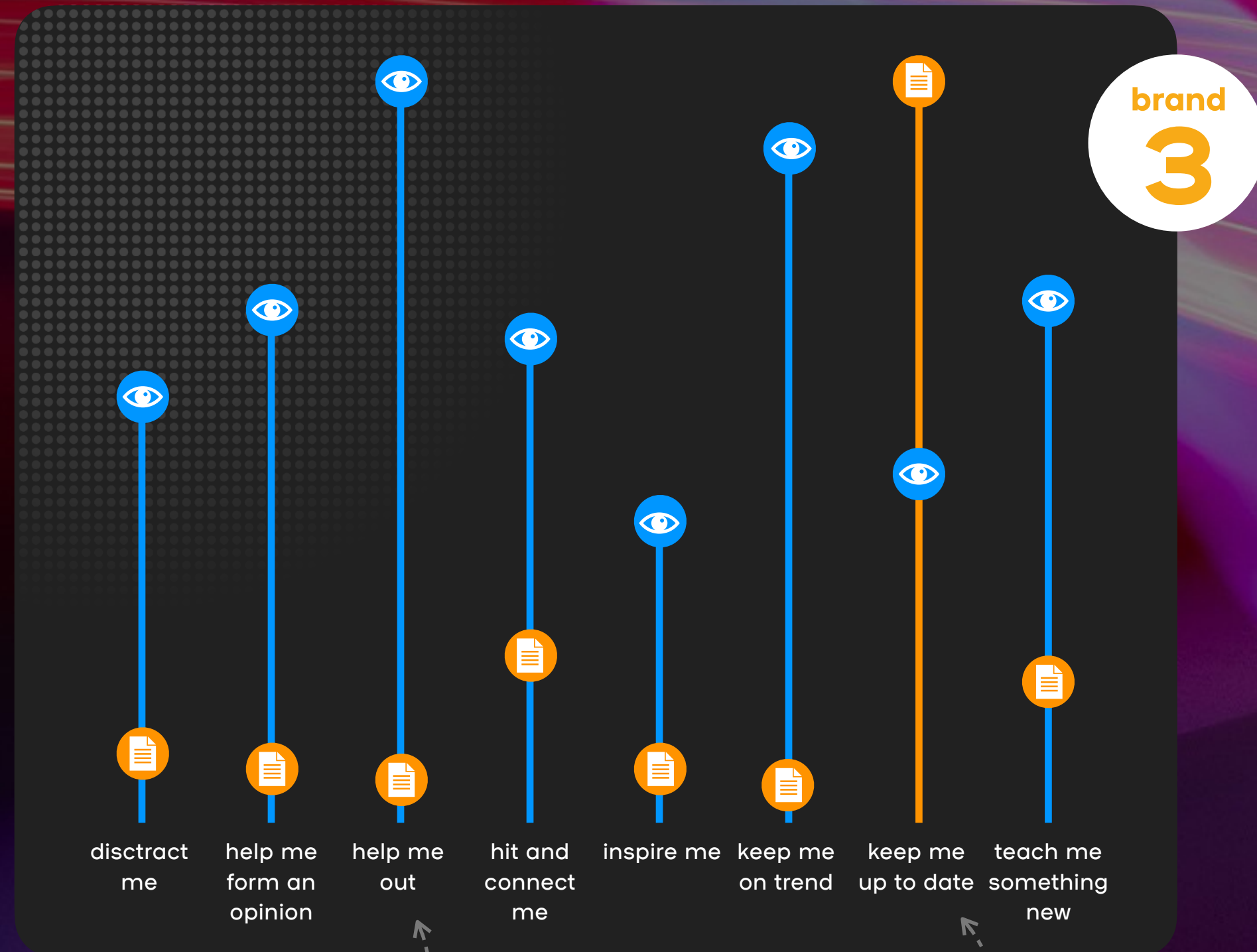
- 57% of all published articles fall into the **Update me** category - but account for only 8.5% of article reads
- Give me perspective** articles are balanced in terms of how many are produced and how many are read
- Educate me** articles are successful. They're the second highest produced type, but way outperform in terms of reads. There's clearly scope to produce more of this type

There's clearly an imbalance when it comes to commissioning articles here. The difficulty is that with this brand **Update me** articles are central to their USP (they are known for their factual news coverage, particularly in the areas of R&D and business). Creating articles that fall more evenly across the user needs would be beneficial - both for brand and audience.

Recommendation

When it comes to commissioning news articles, lower the number of **Update me** articles and create more stories based on the other needs.

3 Data support



- Just under 60% of this brand's output are **Update me** articles, but account for 9% of article reads
- **Help me out** is read best, but one of least produced
- **Help me form an opinion** and **Keep me up to date** are successful approaches too

Recommendation

It's not just reads or page views you should care about. If your overall alignment between the user needs stories and read quality is better, all your numbers will go up - including engagement, returning visits, number of articles read per session and even trust and value perception. Here, the obvious initial focus should be on producing more **Help me out** and **Keep me on trend** orientated articles.

The sunny side to it is that the misalignment was even bigger before we started working with these brands. In one highly publicised case, which newsbrand 3 was very aware of, close to 70% of the articles published were categorised as **Update me** pieces, but delivered only 5% of the pageviews. Armed with this knowledge, newsbrand 3 had already started applying the learnings from this (reducing the number of **Update me** articles) before we started working on 2.0 together, but they have continued to apply this approach and continue to notice positive changes and benefits.

3 Data support



- Another similar pattern emerging: more **Update me** articles than other needs, and lower traffic
- The audience seems to respond well to **Help me** articles - despite having the lowest number of articles here, this type got the best pageview results
- This publisher has been experimenting with user needs for quite some time and in fact the effects of that are evident here: the numbers here are more in balance than elsewhere.

Recommendation

As a commercial newspaper, there is likely to be a weighting towards **Update Me** articles, so the value of utilising user needs is likely to be found in how follow up content is commissioned, and to ensure that update stories don't end up as '[orphans](#)'. **Help me** articles, for example, might be a good approach to take for follow ups, considering their high pageview results and the current low production rate of this type.

3 Data support

2. If you value Engagement you need to pay attention to user needs

In this chapter we refer to CPI, a compound metric used at smartocto.

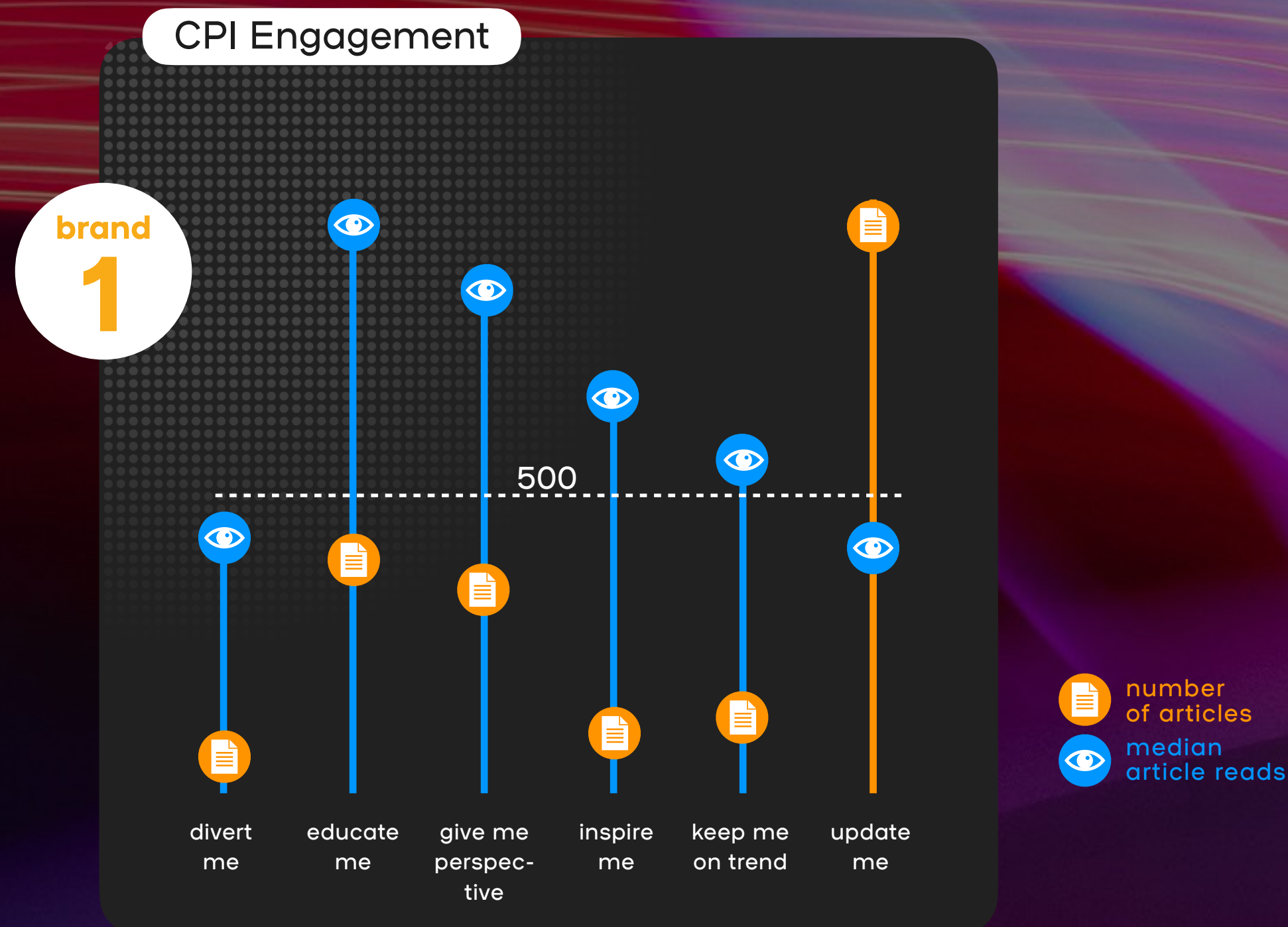
CPI (or Content Performance Indicator) is a compound metric that uses a single number to communicate the performance of an article, author, section or topic.

It's done by blending insights on things like scroll depth, attention time, social engagement and article length and presenting the results as a number between 0 and 1000. 500 is the average (for your own brand - CPI indexes results within your own newsrooms, not anyone else's).

So, the closer to 1000 you're able to achieve, the better.



3 Data support

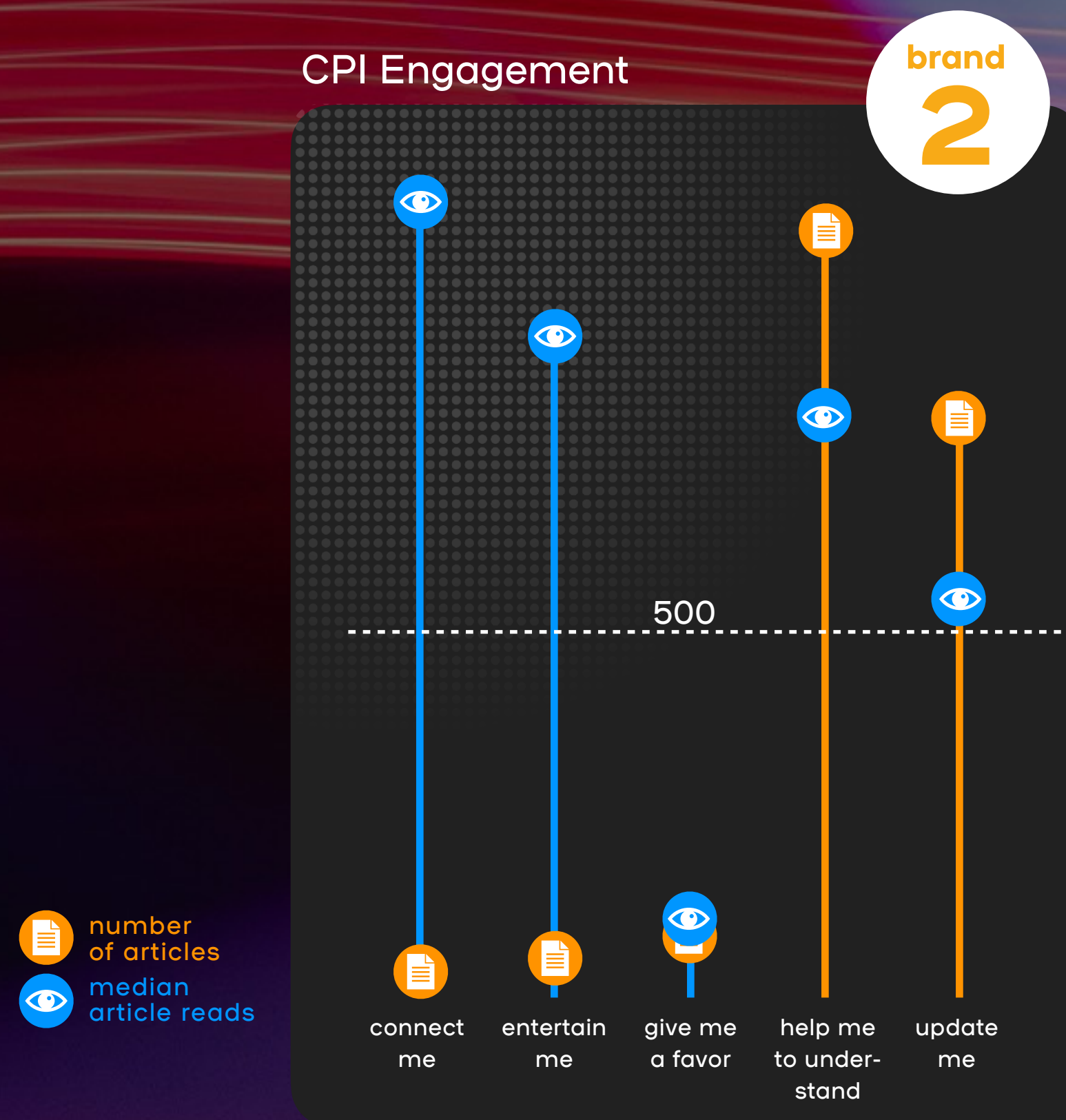


- The median engagement for this newsbrand's articles is 607, nicely above the average point of 500
- Two of the user needs sections score below average (**Update me** and **Divert me**)
- What this graph tells us at a more macro level is that there's a clear demand from their audience to write news stories from a contextual point of view - producing more **Educate me** and **Give me perspective** stories will help further boost engagement

Recommendation

In addition to the above, it would also be useful to take a closer look at the **Divert me** articles this newsbrand is producing, because we normally expect these kinds of articles to have a much higher engagement rate. Is there room for improvement here?

3 Data support



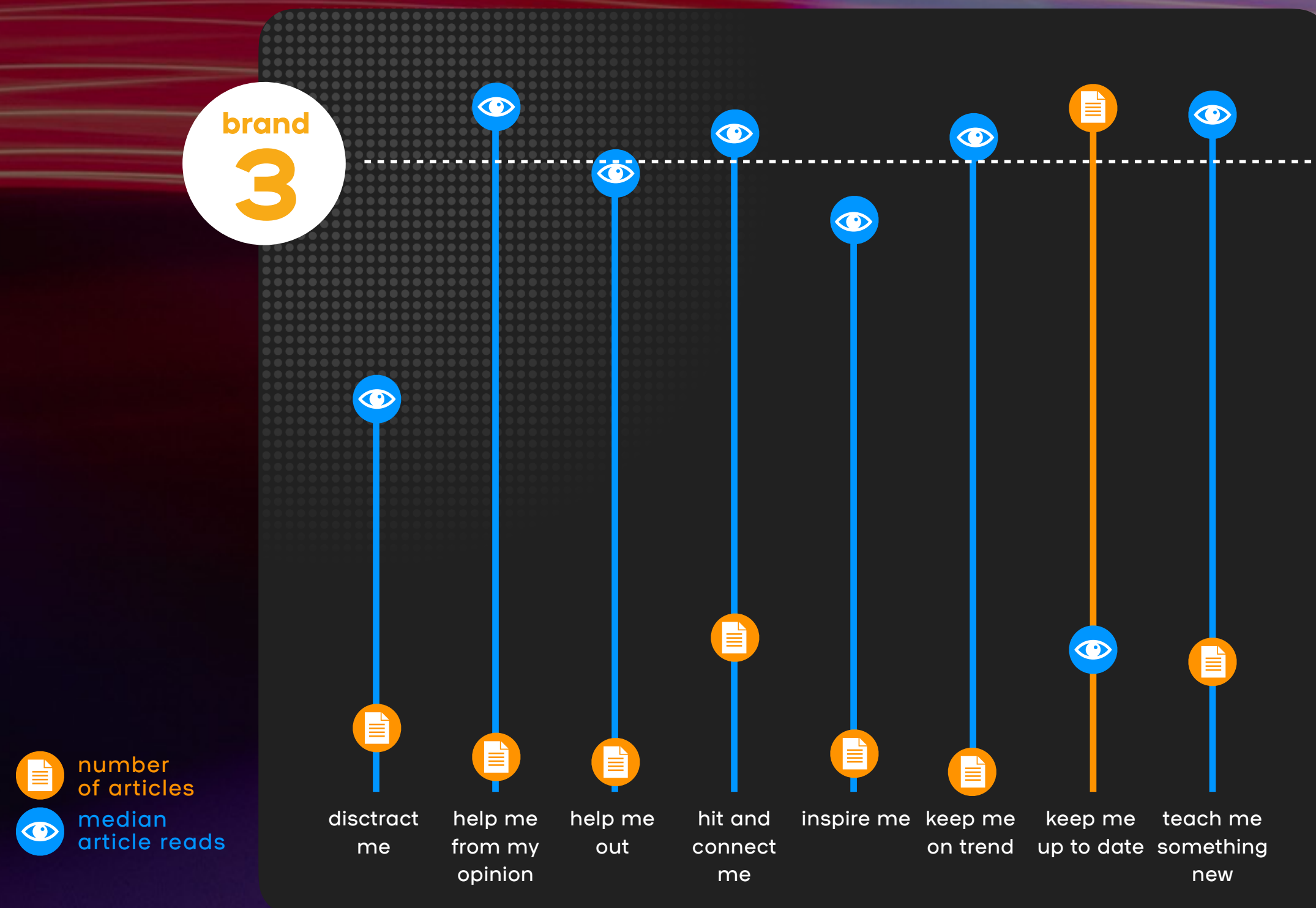
This brand has developed its own brand-specific needs: **Help me** understand is similar to the **Give me perspective** need, and **Give me a favour** is its interpretation of the **Help me** need.

- The median engagement rate here is 760 - only **Connect me** and **Entertain me** perform beyond this
- **Give me a favour** rates particularly poorly
- **Update me** does perform above median, but as audiences react more positively to other user needs articles, there is room for improvement
- Only **Give me a favour** is balanced in terms of articles and engagement (though not positively). The four articles knocking it out of the park in engagement terms (**Connect me** and **Entertain me**) are indicative of how the audience feels about the brand

Recommendation

A no-brainer perhaps, but producing more **Connect me** pieces would be a good move. Spending some time considering whether **Give me a favour** is on-brand, relevant, or why it is underperforming also makes sense.

3 Data support



- A brand with a very high median score for engagement - this brand clearly connects with its audience, yet there are still 'buts'
- **Keep me up to date** (aka **Update me**) continues the industry trend of being overproduced and under-engaged with

- **Distract me** articles are also low scoring - surprising considering the nature of these articles tends to encourage social engagement (sharing, commenting etc)
- **Keep me on trend** articles score highly, but are produced less
- **Help me** articles perform well, but aren't produced as much. As a regional broadcaster, there's significant potential in this area

Recommendation

Readers clearly find value in Contextual content (engagement rates of over 900 are worth noting), and considering the superlative CPI scores, it's safe to say this brand has nailed this content. In order to balance things out, it would be worth them now auditing content in those areas which fall short of the median, and critically assess how improvement could be made. As a regional broadcaster, service journalism (into which the **Help me** need falls) can be an excellent investment of time and resources as it helps strengthen trust, builds community and relevance.

“

The idea of user needs is not in itself revolutionary. There are few newsrooms these days that don't at least think about users or what they need...some of the time. And the basic premise of the 'uses and gratification' model in media studies goes back to the 1940s.

But what made 'user needs' a success at the BBC World Service was **weaving it into editorial workflows**, and making the results visible to all with a minimal time lag.

That is, journalists commission or design output using the framework, when publishing they tag the content with one or more of the needs, the analytics system recognises the tags, and an automated dashboard then shows the performance of your content against/ across the needs.

In theory, this allows the manager or editor **to optimise resources** and get **greater bang for their buck** and start **addressing the long tail problem** (a high percentage of underperforming articles). But even more importantly, it also enables them to pursue growth in a manner that is not dissonant with editorial values.

”

A portrait of Santanu Chakrabarti, a man with glasses, smiling. The image is overlaid with a red and blue gradient and some abstract light effects.

smartocto

santanu chakrabarti

head of audiences - digital, BBC

3 Data support

3. A wide range of user needs stories benefits your conversion strategy

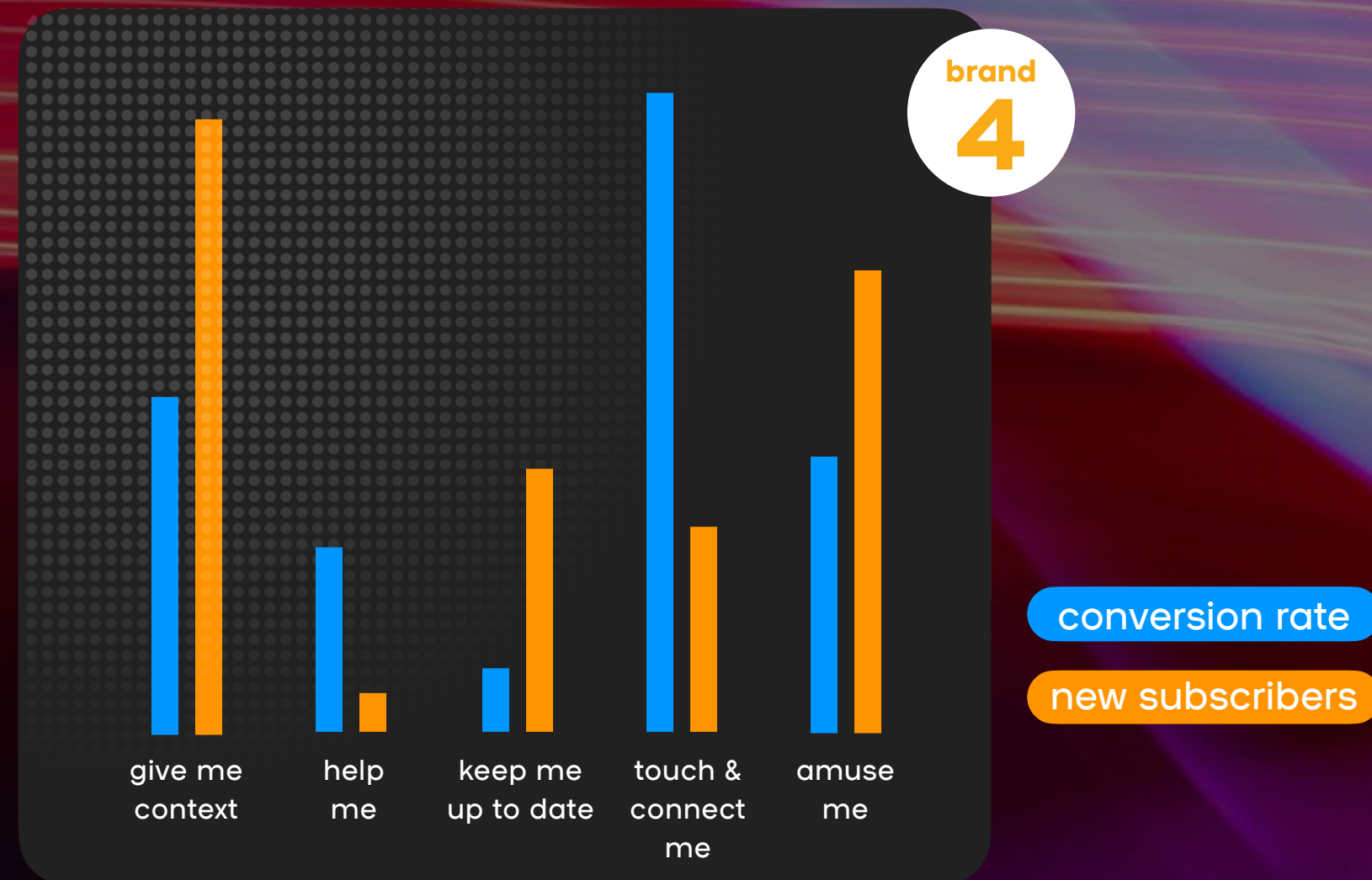
That there is a relation between user needs and conversion is a statement not without controversy - and there's certainly not a neat 'if this, then that' formula to quadruple your subscriber base.

What really influences rates of conversion is loyal behaviour, and this cannot be deemed the result of a single article. It's the sum total of all articles that contribute the value of a newsbrand, and there are many factors which turn readers into subscribers.

That said, we do have some interesting data that shows general insights about conversion and user needs. Here, we analysed the data from four newsbrands. The brands we looked at were two national newspapers, one online platform and one regional newspaper. They all have a conversion strategy (with paywalls, premium content) and are flagging their content based on user needs.



3 Data support



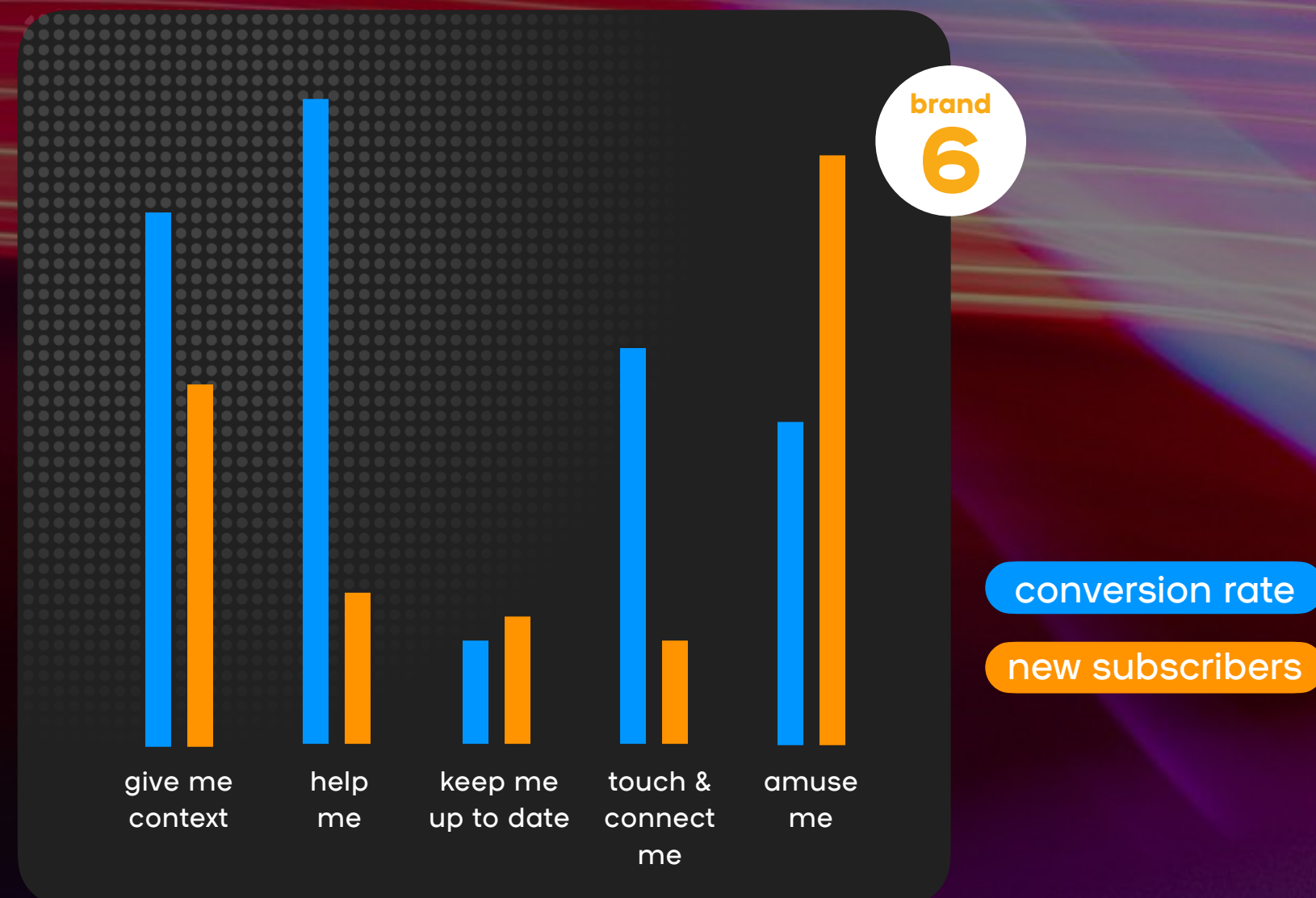
While people may enter a news site through an **Update me** story, the data seems to show that the thing they ascribe the most value to are those articles which add more value, context or perspective. That's not to say that **Update me** articles need culling: they're an essential part of the whole decision making and editorial process and you cannot have one without the other. It may be most useful to think of **Update me** as being the news equivalent of a 'top of the funnel' moment: opportunity to further coverage and expand information.

Based on this graph from one of the largest national newspapers we see that all the user needs contribute in a way to the overall conversion rate.

But we can also conclude that the conversion-ratio for this newspaper is the lowest for **Update me** articles.

It still means that they bring in the third highest number of subscribers during the investigated period but that's of course related to the amount of articles they write.

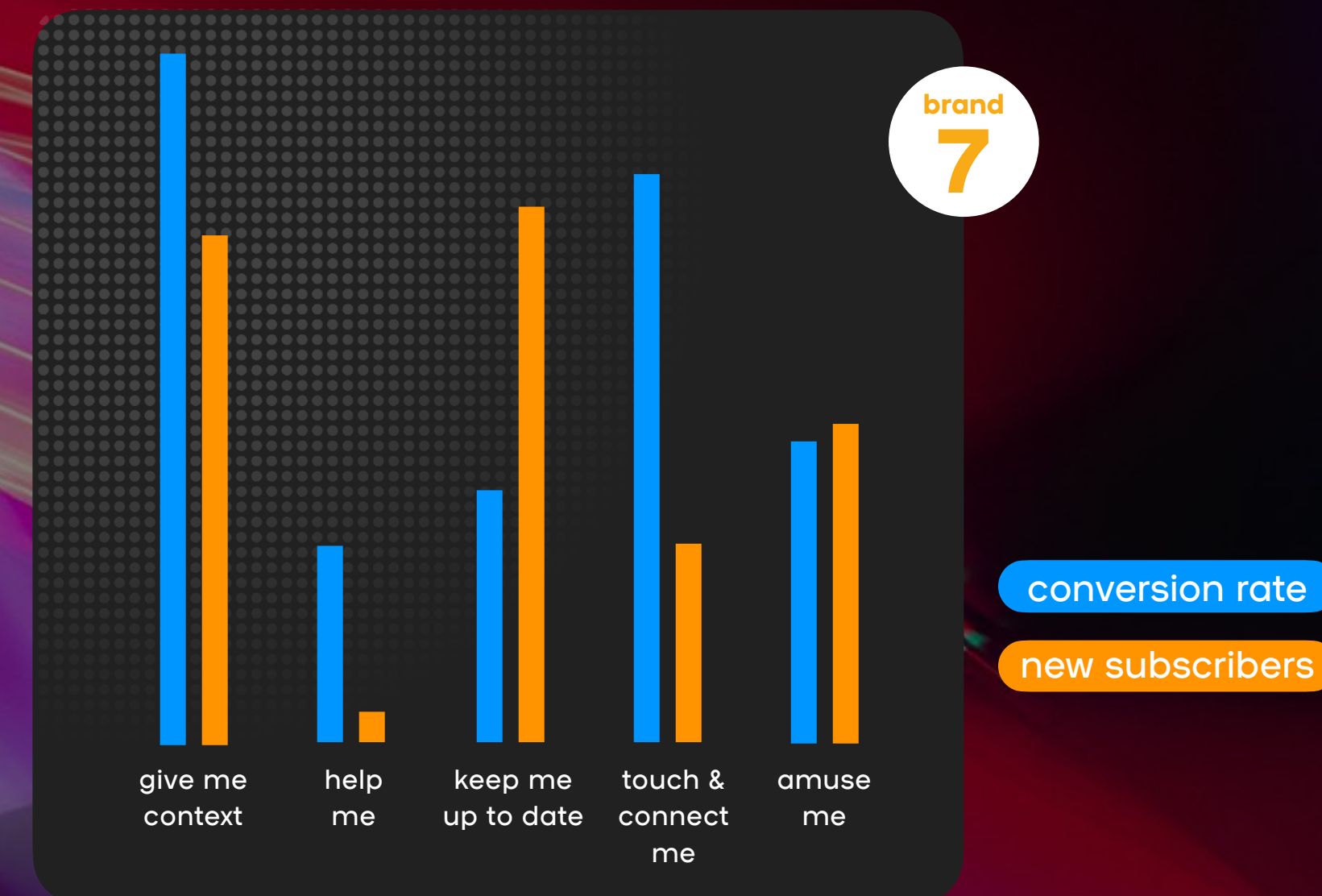
3 Data support



For this news platform we see similar results when it comes to the conversion. It's obvious that the **Update me** articles deliver the lowest conversion rate compared to the other user needs.

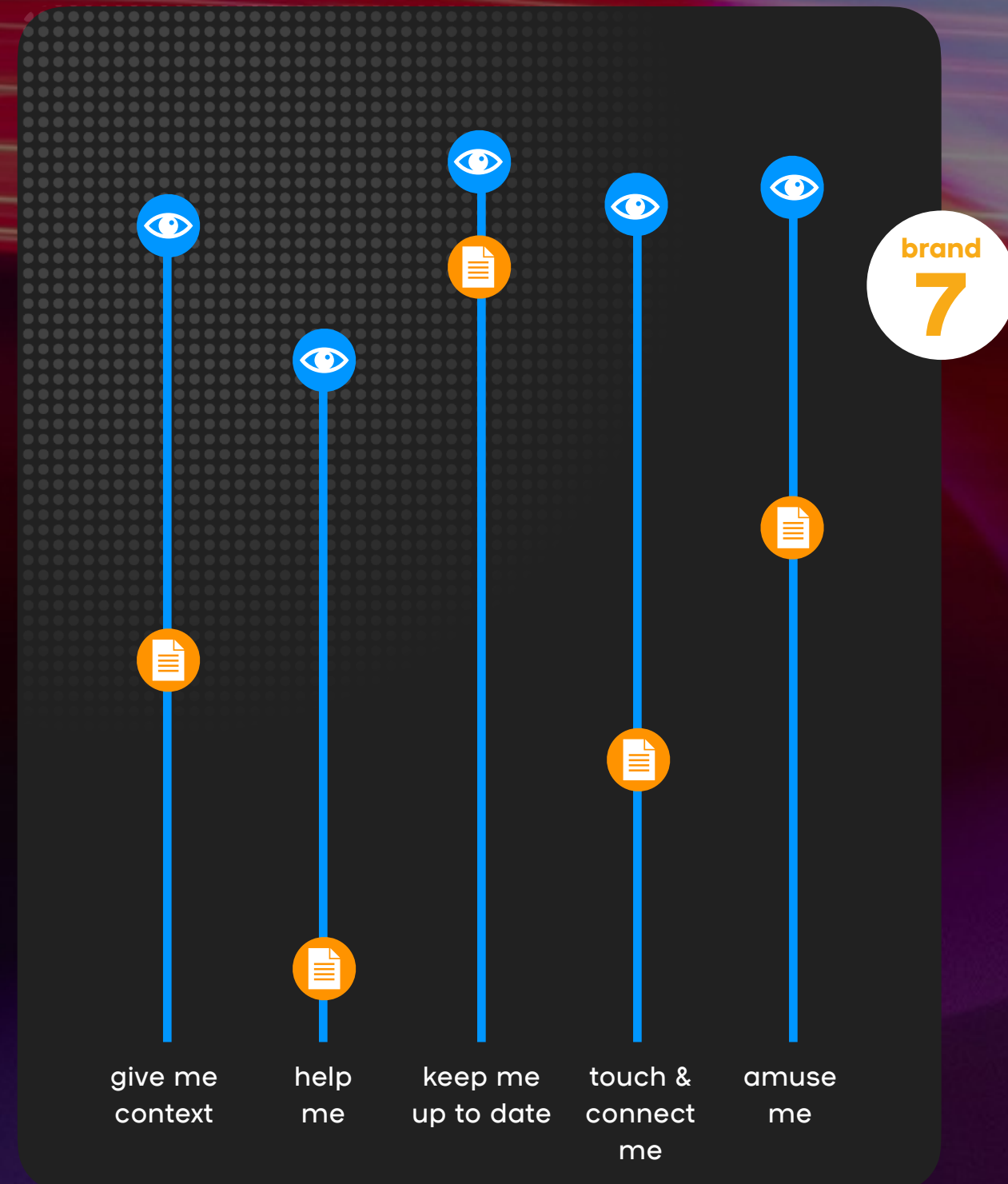
The brand clearly understands its product fit well as evidenced by the high rate of **Divert Me** articles leading to conversions.

That's impressive.



For this regional newspaper the data shows that its **Update me** articles have a fairly low conversion ratio. That said, in terms of the numbers of conversions they do bring in the highest number of new subscribers.

3 Data support



Looking at the number of articles published plotted against the amount of reach we can see another layer to this story: **Give me context** [Perspective] stories may not be published a lot, but they're valued by this brand's audience and have a high conversion ratio.

The big challenge for this brand is to see if creating more contextual stories (both **Educate me** and **Give me perspective**) will help them grow their overall conversion rates further - the ratio of these kinds of stories are more than twice the amount compared to the **Update me** stories and they bring almost the same amount of subscribers.

The examples that you've seen are all clients of smartocto. To make sure that the results are the same if publishers work with other data providers, we asked the Digital Revenue Initiative (DRIVE) to check their data on user needs. DRIVE is an initiative of the German news agency DPA and the management consultancy SCHICKLER, with the involvement of 21 regional media houses from Germany and Austria, as well as the Austrian news agency APA. Their goal is to increase digital subscriptions with the power of data science.

They were able to give us two clear conclusions:

- **Update me** articles are being offered too much, although they do deliver relevance to a certain extent.
- **Inspire me** and **Help me** articles are appreciated by the audience and have the highest engagement rate.

3 Data support

4. Conclusion: It pays off to have a well balanced user needs approach

The newsrooms in our survey may look entirely different, be headquartered in different countries and regions, have specific brand guidelines, and accordingly diverse audiences, but their experiences tell the same story. A better balanced approach to covering the news gets the numbers up.

Across the board we can see that reducing the proportion of **Update me** (or equivalent) articles helps grow other, vital metrics. Brand appreciation (Expressed in reach and attention time), engagement loyalty and conversions all benefit from a balanced, user needs-centric approach.

Of course, news brands can't generally function without **Update me** articles - when there's breaking news and nothing but the plain facts are available you don't have a choice if you want to inform your audience. But whenever you do have the option to create the article from an alternative perspective - or when additional information is available for a follow up on the breaking news story - in almost all cases it's worth the effort to do so.

Newsrooms that have worked with the user needs model for a longer time see the positive effects of this strategy.

Lastly, but importantly: this approach actually helps to show your journalists and storytellers the efficacy of the model. Not only does it help guide commissioning possibilities, it also demonstrates what's working, how - and why. It's possible to get relevant, essential insights and actionable data with smart analytic tools like smartocto, which proves that the strategy really works.

newsrooms that have worked
with the user needs model for
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“

News needs don't condescend to journalists by minimising their journalistic intuition. Instead, **it augments the impact of their ideas** and enables them to produce content that is even more valuable to people.

By anchoring ideas around relevant news needs, journalists see their work deliver real value to people. And in my experience, this is why most journalists become journalists in the first place.

To be valuable to people.

”

smartocto

khalil a. cassimally

audience insights, the conversation

smartocto

user needs for news

the user needs model 2.0



connect me



4 How to implement a model in your newsroom

So, having gone through the background of our own research, the million dollar question you're likely to have at this point is how to implement a user needs approach in your own newsroom.

There are three main considerations to go over

- agreeing on the model that suits your newsroom
- conducting a 'base zero' analysis as a benchmark
- creating an improvement action plan, including new workflows, for all newsroom units.

You will find a brief overview of each of those in the following pages, but if you have specific, more detailed questions, do [get in touch](#).

Selecting your model

Agreeing on the model to use is the first question to deal with. We have seen several ways of approaching it - from creating your own bespoke model to using one that's 'ready to wear'. Both approaches can work, with caveats.

One of the reasons we created the unified user needs model is to save you time and effort in identifying the version that's going to be the best fit for you, as there's a very good chance that whatever you come up with is already included in ours.

Do your [audience] research

A decision to go with a particular model must be based on audience research and content analysis. It should never come from the newsrooms itself though. Remember: the user needs analysis always challenges the status quo, and identifies misalignment and incorrect prioritisation. We don't recommend cheating yourself by 'marking your own homework'.

4 How to implement a model in your newsroom

Get qualitative

If you can afford it, doing a qualitative analysis is always recommended, if only to support the results of a quantitative review. This will indicate the content needs your audience has (and possibly doesn't even know it has).

These might be:

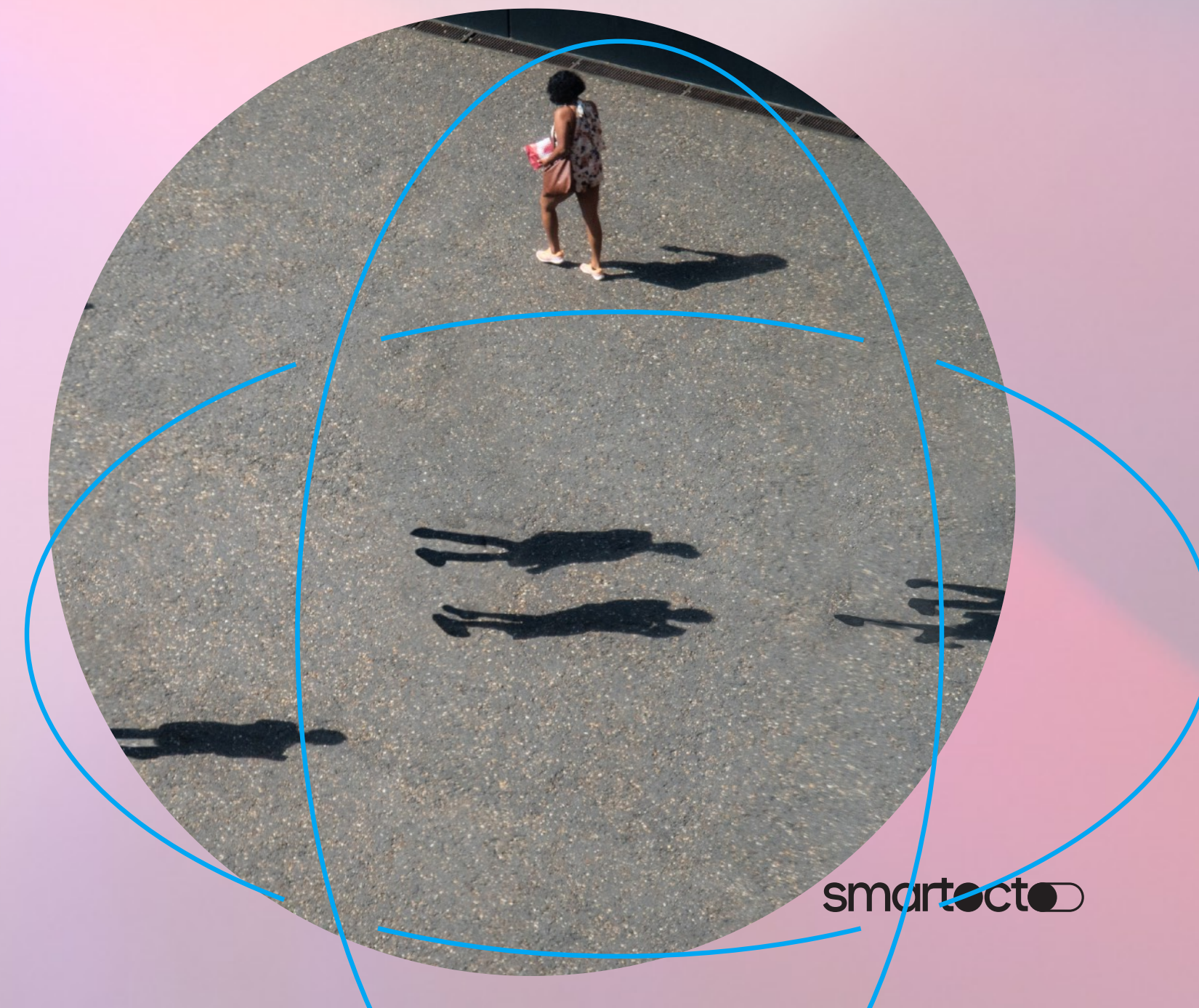
- Onsite questionnaire
- Email survey
- Social media activity (polls etc)

This is especially important if you are a niche player - the clearer you are on your niche's needs, the more effective your content strategy will become. If you are a secondary or even tertiary source of information, your model will be very different to the primary source's.

Ask your audience open questions

- Why do you use us specifically?
- What do you get from us that you don't get anywhere else?
- What would change in your life if we were to disappear tomorrow?
- What makes you choose us instead of competition when it comes to consuming the news?

You'll learn a lot about user needs through this. It's a process, and while you plan and execute the qualitative review, it's time to do a quantitative one.



4 How to implement a model in your newsroom

Content review

We recommend doing a quantitative content review based on our own new model of eight distinctive user needs which will form a 'zero-measure' set of metrics, which you will then use in forming your remedial plan of editorial growth hacks.

Normally the volume of content to review will depend on your output. We never recommend doing any analysis based on fewer than a couple of thousand pieces of content, across several months. Ideally, you'd have 3-6 months of data to counterbalance any spikes in traffic.



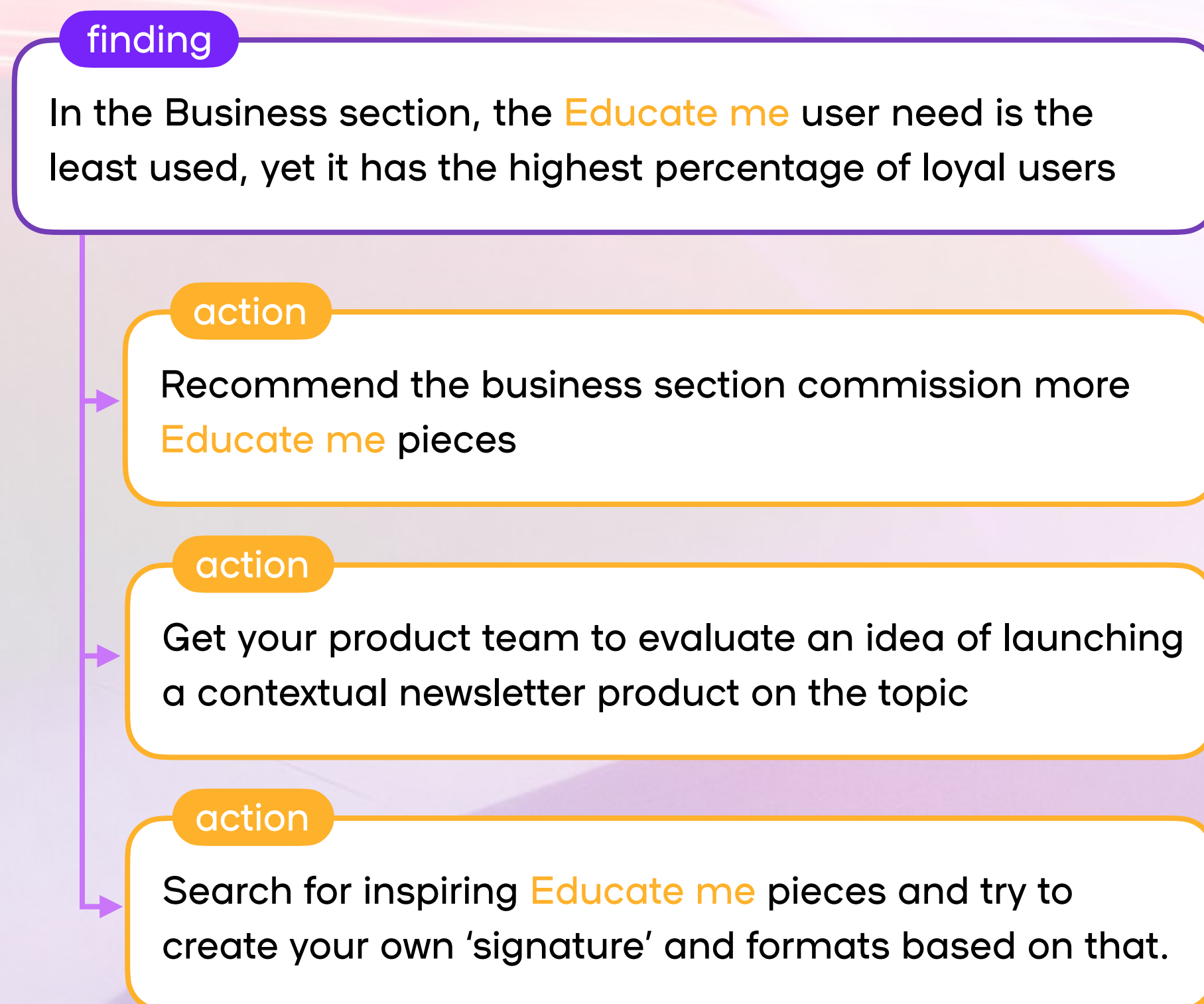
Export any meaningful set of metrics per each URL in a spreadsheet, and then get someone (and it is an important, but tedious job, so choose wisely) to go over the list assigning a single user need to each of the URLs. If you delegate this work to several people to make the process faster, make sure they share a common understanding of each of the user needs ([and we provide a very handy guide to all eight of them](#)).

Never forget that applying user needs is both an **art and a science**: you might disagree on a need for a particular story, but you should be pretty consistent when it comes to evaluating hundreds and thousands of them. From experience, a properly trained group of people will get nine out of ten user needs correctly, from a well defined sets of articles.

Normally we'd expect 20-30 charts and graphs to be created off the back of such a review - you can prioritise anything you'd want to be compared and analysed. Suffice it to say, you'd want to be looking at output volumes, and median engagement metrics across topics/ sections, formats and user needs. We have not yet seen a single review of this kind that did not produce a minimum of five actionable insights ready for some remedial action.

4 How to implement a model in your newsroom

Those takeaways will form the base of your editorial growth hacks.
For example, one such flow might look like this:



NOTES: Growth hacks pilots should last for a few weeks and their results should be compared to zero-measure metrics from the initial review.

Adapting your workflows

Once you've selected your model and built a 'zero-measure' understanding of where you are as a newsroom, you can start to plan to slowly introduce the model to your team for their day-to-day work. In the consultations and training sessions we've done on the subject of user needs, there are several key points we stress.

Avoid sharing general analysis messages

Be as specific as it's possible to get - no one needs more macro level data in their inbox. Go down to the section level of your site as the insights and trends will be different from, say, Politics to Business etc.

We recommend delivering individual section presentations, building user needs-based dashboards for your sections, and prioritising a single hypothesis-based pilot for each of your sections so as to not overwhelm them. Once your growth hacks are in place, track and review the changes, and communicate them consistently.

4 How to implement a model in your newsroom

Be patient

Any change management takes dedication, patience, and consistency. It's vitally important that you are prepared to repeat the key messaging, strategy and tasks until your team is comfortable with them.

Clearly, new ways of working will have a direct impact on the way your team is used to doing things - from senior editors to production support. You'll have to devise a plan for editors, sub-editors, planners, producers, correspondents, social media and audience engagement teams. We won't unpack every single function's responsibility here, but we will say that irrespective of the unit you'll need to pay particular attention to holding your staff to account, reinforcing user needs messaging, as well as regularly sharing learnings.

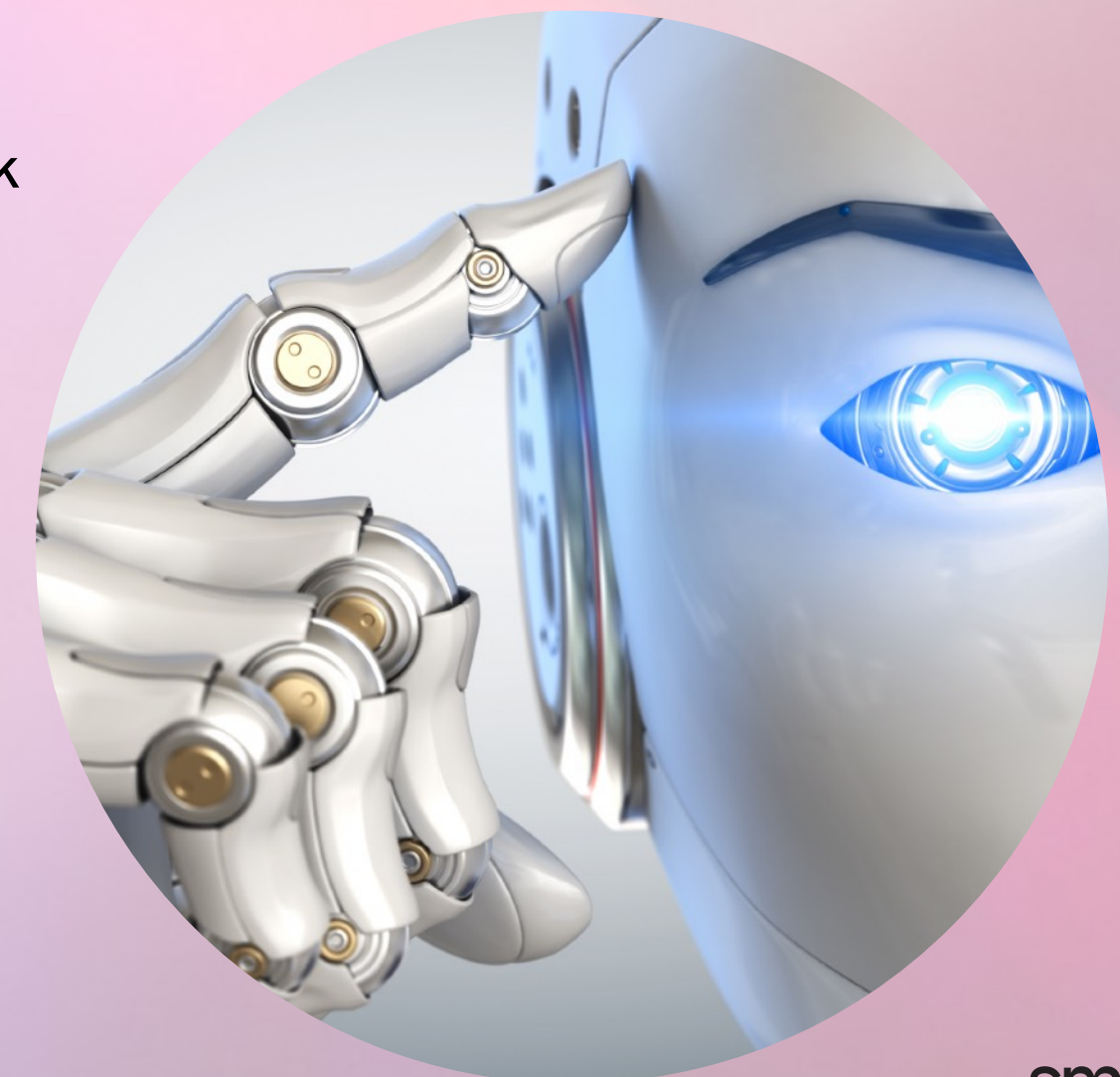
You might need to look at the structure, cadence and function of your meetings and at additional investment in editorial analytics, relevant posts and planning software.

Befriend the bots

Metadata will form the base for all of your tracking and analysis work. When BBC World Service introduced its user needs model in 2016/2017, it took their editorial teams three months to get to 90%+ of consistent tagging, and a Slackbot was built to alert individual producers of missing user needs tags in their CMS.

Ideally, you'd want to make sure that every single article has three changeable tags associated with it - for its **main topic**, its **format** and its **user need**. By automating some of your processes, you empower your individual teams to monitor their effectiveness by themselves.

This creates a positive feedback loop and a sense of ownership that will help with a successful implementation of a user needs model further.





“

The Modes (user needs) made so much sense from the beginning. They not only provided us with a clear mission for what this project would do each day, but they also help us frame each idea we come up with.

In every meeting, we ask ourselves,
'How are we **helping our audience** discover
or **navigate** something with this story?

How are we helping them connect to the city, or make change happen? You'll notice, too, that the Modes often end up in our episode titles or newsletter headlines.

smartocto

megan larson

how to LA

”



keep me on trend

smartocto

user needs for news

the user needs model 2.0



keep me engaged

5 The toolbox

Journalists tend to think in terms of subjects and formats, and when you roll out the user needs model to your newsroom, this may present a challenge. If newsrooms are given the tools to recognise the efficacy of their work, it's much more likely they'll be able to adopt a different way of working.

Fortunately there are some effective methods, tools and techniques to enable you to be more strategic, consistent and creative with user needs - and the smartocto toolbox is full of complementary tools to support this.

First, a case study

It's an unfortunate reality that newsrooms regularly have to report on disasters. A big accident, flood, fire, hurricane, earthquake - it's the kind of thing synonymous with 'breaking news'.

And, the standard response is to find answers to basic, important questions:



So much information comes in, that all attention goes to updating the liveblog. The risk is that the flow of information absorbs all the newsroom's attention and no one dares to ask the most essential question of all:

what is our audience actually waiting for?

5 The toolbox

Smartocto's notifications will lead you to the right user need

A data tool that takes on the task to ask the user needs question and alert editorial staff about useful actions through notifications is invaluable for newsrooms, especially in these hectic moments.

That's what smartocto does.

Thanks to **User Needs 2.0**, our notifications now incorporate user needs analysis - even in real time. Our Smartify feature uses artificial intelligence to connect with the workflow of editorial staff and by acting as an extra editor and indicating possible directions, the risk of missing opportunities is greatly reduced.

If you tag your stories correctly with user needs (**#UpdateMe**, **#EducateMe**, **#HelpMe** etc), smartocto is able to come up with these kind of notifications:



! notification

This story is shared on Facebook. There is a lot of commitment above the average (comments, shares, likes).

Suggestion will depend on the type of engagement.

! notification

This story is well read (based on loyalty)! Create a follow up for X user need!

There is at least X times last hour had clicked through from the homepage or sub-page.

! notification

This was such a big story, the editors can do a follow-up with X User Need story?

This story has had a minimum of X views and X comments, shares, likes (Facebook and Twitter).

! notification

Twitter goes crazy on this story. Follow up with another contextual story

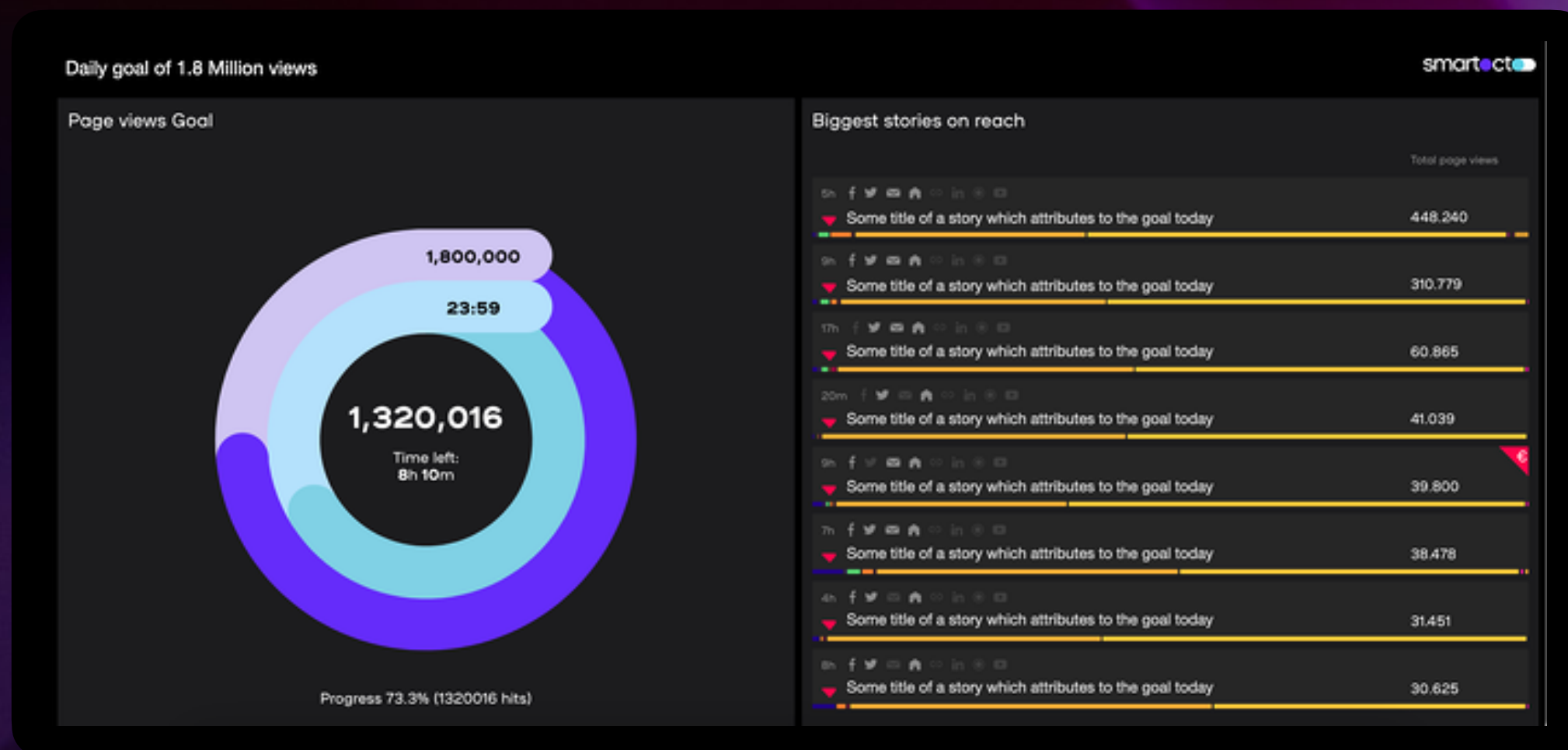
There is an above-average commitment to this story on Twitter.

5 The toolbox

Goals: the best feature to make newsrooms responsible

Smartocto Goals is the health app for the media industry: it shows you what you promised yourself and keeps track of the progress.

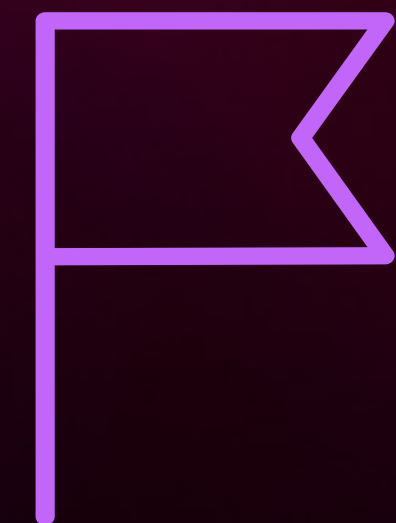
With just a few clicks you can choose a metric, set a target and define the timeframe in which you want to realise your goals, all of which leads to visualisations like this:



It's of particular relevance to user needs work because it allows you to set clear targets, such as:

- goal Make 5 'educate me' stories a day.
- goal Publish 100 'divert me' stories a week.
- goal Create 200 'help me' stories a month.

While newsrooms are in a transitional phase towards a more user needs based approach, keeping tabs on production rates can be useful - particularly if you're prone to overproducing a certain content type.



A portrait of Roy Wassink, a middle-aged man with short hair, looking directly at the camera. The background is a vibrant purple and pink gradient with abstract light streaks and a halftone dot pattern in the bottom right corner.

“

For me the User Needs model is a common language for our news organisation, **it's data in words**.

It provides editorial analysts with an additional dimension to learn more about our stories. It helps marketers to improve user profiles. But the User Needs model can exist without all that fancy data.

For journalists, it is above all a practical tool that they can use in their daily work. It helps them to focus, for example when writing a follow-up to a news story, while thinking about a good headline or a new intro. **And that's the most important thing in the end.** Writing better stories by understanding our readers' needs.

smartocto

roy wassink

insights manager of dpg media news analytics team

”

5 The toolbox

Waves: create your own dashboards to follow user needs

Waves enables you to build and customise your newsroom's big screen any way you want. It's fully flexible and allows you complete control of the communications you want to receive - and transmit - across the bullpen.

Whether it's custom layouts for each role in the newsroom, the most relevant notifications on the story level, actual insights on business goals or even the number of conversions or subscriptions you've achieved today, it's all possible - and it's there for you to make it work for your team.

Following the impact of a user needs approach becomes simple too. You can create dashboards in which you can see what the impact is on reach, loyalty, engagement and conversion for each user need.



5 The toolbox

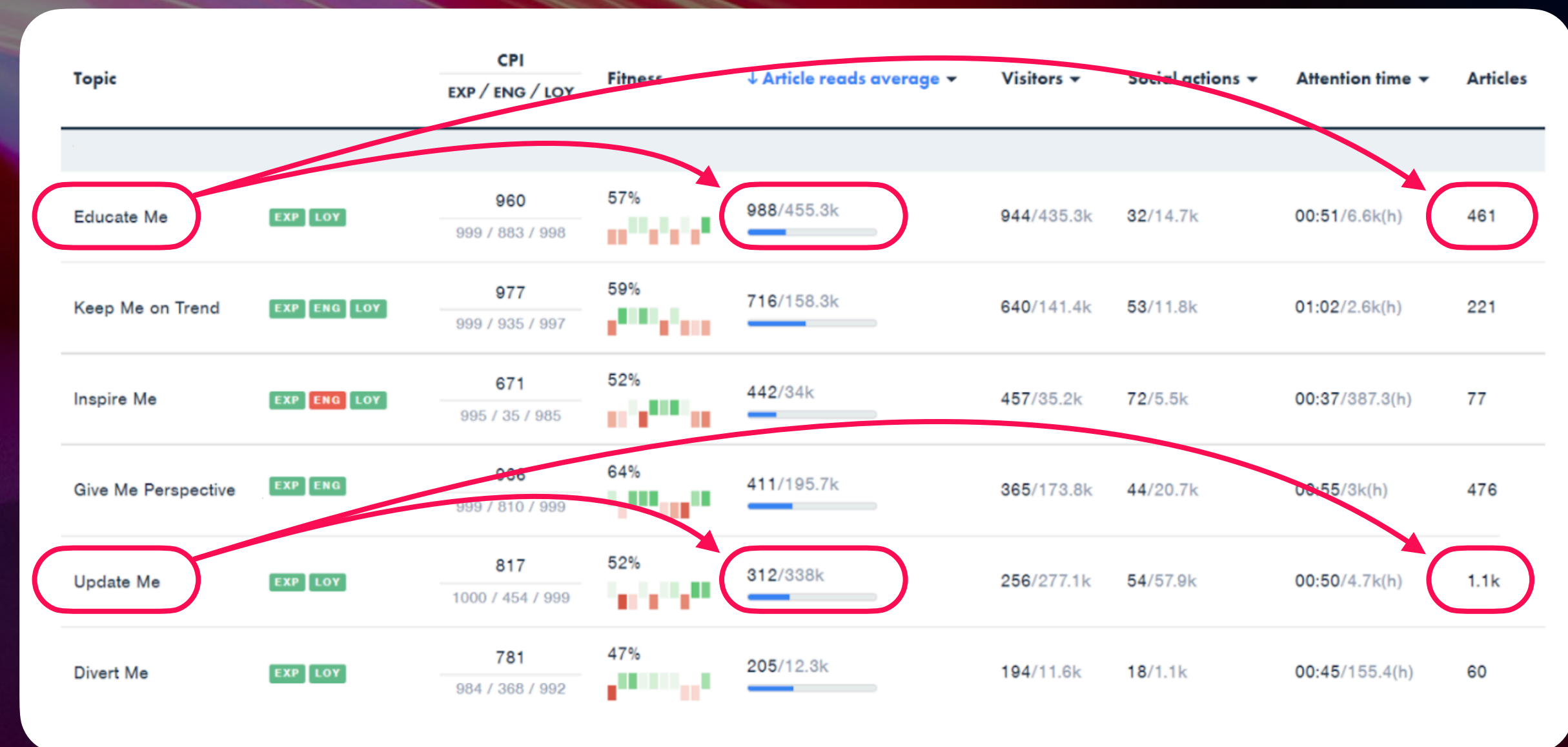
Historical insights: show the big trends based on user needs

Our reports within the **Insights feature** help you to reflect on your historical data, map the patterns in your readers' behaviour over a longer period of time and use these learnings to improve your future output.

It's now possible to see how articles grouped by their user need fare, and identify missed opportunities. You can get those reports in your mail on a daily basis.

The screenshot below shows the insights from a client that has organised their report by user needs. The client produced 1100 **Update me** stories, which generated 338k reads in total. The total number of **Educate me** articles is 461 with 455k reads. The article read average for the latter is more than 3 times greater and its loyalty numbers are also better. **Educate me** articles clearly work well for this newsroom.

User needs impact vs articles volumes vs other metrics



source: smartocto Insights

5

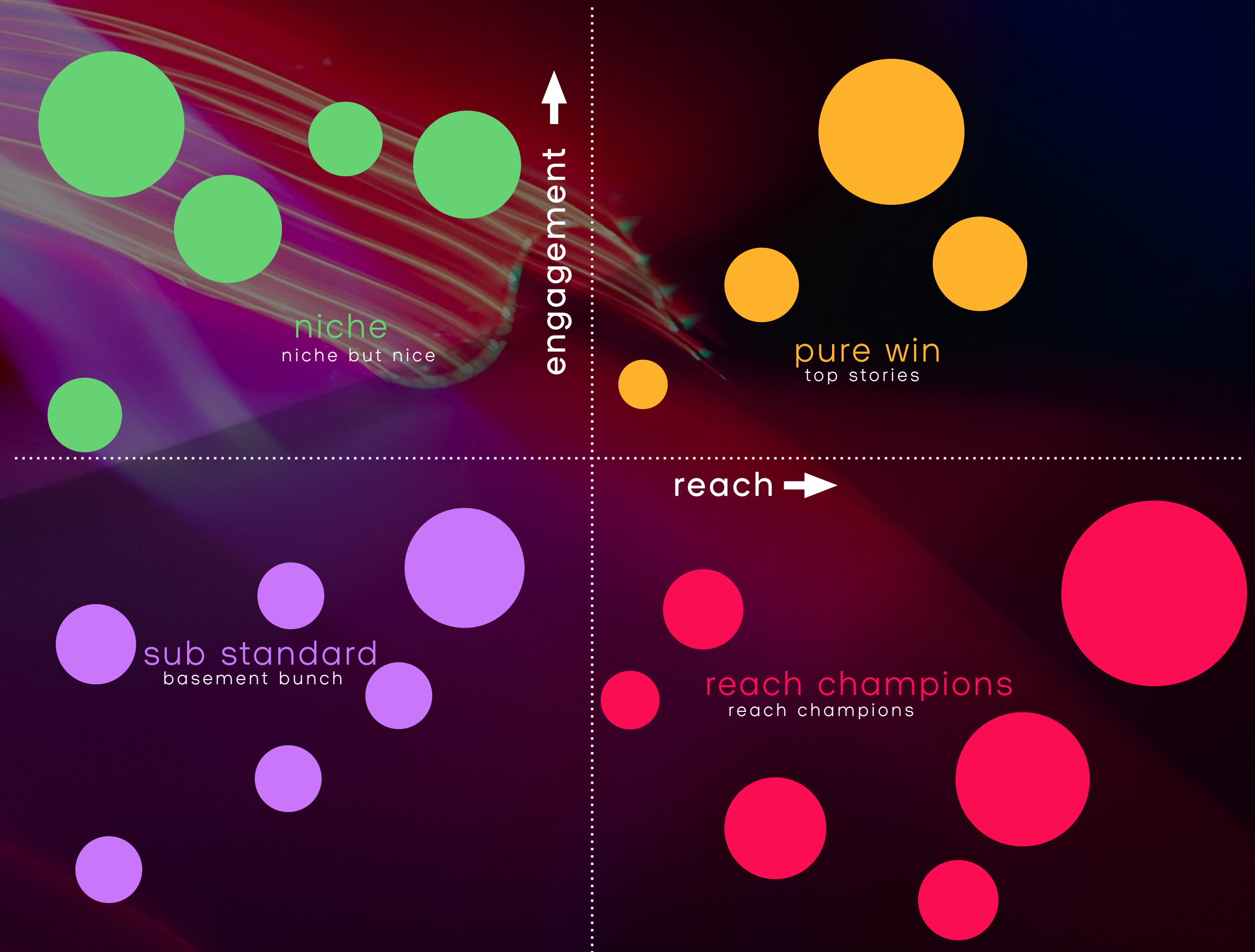
The toolbox

The Quadrant Model of Content Optimisation

User Needs 2.0 is about further refining an idea into an asset that's easy to use and slots seamlessly into the workflow. When it comes to how data and insights are visualised, this is something we obsess over. And for good reason: done right, insights are transformative. Done badly, they're often lost in translation. Clarity is king.

With the [Quadrant Model of Content Optimisation](#) anyone can see at a glance which stories are niche, sub standard, reach champions or a pure win.

The top right quadrant contains the top stories of your news brand: those articles which score highly in both reach and engagement. If you do well, the conversation rate to [subscriptions can go up by 39%](#).



5 The toolbox

Applied to user needs, it gets super actionable. If your tagging is in order, it's possible to plot user needs in the Quadrant Model for a very simple visualisation of what's working - and what isn't.

In this example, **Update me** articles are the ones languishing in the basement while **Give me perspective** and **Connect me** stories score highly.

If you have your tagging in order, you can plot the flagged user needs in our Quadrant Model. What do you see? **Update me** articles score badly (sub standard) and, in this case, **Give me perspective** and **Connect me** do really well. The model is customisable, so you can easily find what you think is most important to know. Besides engagement you can check loyalty as well. And if you want, we can notify on the combination of user needs and topics.

CPI Exposure cv CPI Engagement



source: smartocto Insights

If you think that our notifications can help your newsroom, it's even possible to stay at your own data analytics provider and add our smart layer. If you have any questions about this, please [request a demo](#) or send an e-mail to request@smartocto.com.

smartocto



educate me

user needs for news

the user needs model 2.0

6 The challenges

While news needs models have been around for a number of years, how they develop further depends entirely on how media companies respond to the changes, demands and developments in the sector. In this chapter we'll take a closer look at those issues connected to data evaluation and analysis. Some are organisational, but many more apply to the realms of data science and business analysis.

From a technical point of view, the issue is very much how tech companies manage their cognitive output. Data seems infinite, and the possible learnings you're able to extract from it are too.

'Never feed salad to a lion'

There's a difference between presenting all findings from data analysis (no matter how interesting they seem from a mathematical or technical perspective) and limiting those which are actually relevant and valuable to the clients of tools such as smartocto's.

When we started, for example, our goal was to create a tool that talks to you, the newsroom - and speaks your language. We know that most editors don't want raw data, they want something tangible and relevant - and that's actionable notifications based on the data.

These are the magic bullets. And that's where the transformative magic lies.

So, the end goal is simple and it is this: efficient curation by us enabling you to oversee massive change.

6 The challenges

Naturally there are challenges to this goal.

Can you tag it?

Let's start with an issue related directly to workflow. The quality of user needs data is directly related to how effective a newsroom is in applying this concept - from being clear about what each user need represents, to consistently tagging articles, to dealing with missing tags.

All of this can and does happen, but as with any workflow, it requires consistency, focus and perseverance to succeed. Failure to be consistent will lead to incomplete data, which will affect the precision of the results, and may lead to the loss of trust in the approach.

There are three things to remember here:

- 1 **Tagging** will always be **contentious** (see point 2, below)
- 2 **Training** is key: you need practical examples of what 'good' (in all its forms) looks like
- 3 This is a **circular process**: ultimately any story should have had a user need assigned to it at the commissioning stage, but it also needs analysing post-publication to inform follow ups

A portrait of Dmitry Shishkin, a man with glasses and a smile, wearing a light-colored shirt. The background is a vibrant, abstract design with purple and pink hues, featuring geometric shapes and a grid pattern.

“

In our experience, if newsroom members understand their company's user needs key components well enough, then nine times out of ten they will assign the correct user need to a story.

Editors and managers should ensure that you **keep sharing what 'good' looks like**.

smartocto

dmitry shishkin

digital publishing consultant

”

6 The challenges

Mudbloods & Big Data

That leads us neatly onto 'Frankenstein' articles - pieces that straddle several user needs. This might, for example, be an **Update me** story with elements of **Educate me** and **Divert me** in it.

This presents several challenges to newsrooms, but also to the data scientists working on the system itself:

- What user need will that be tagged under?
- What user need will the headline reflect?
- How will you tag it?

Does the 100% pure user needs news article actually exist?

Not everyone is convinced that news articles can be written from a pure and 100% dedicated user needs angle. There will always be **Update me** elements in an **Inspire me** story, and **Educate me** stories might have some **Give me perspective** components.

This has been a challenge since interpretation and definition has always had a human hand in it.

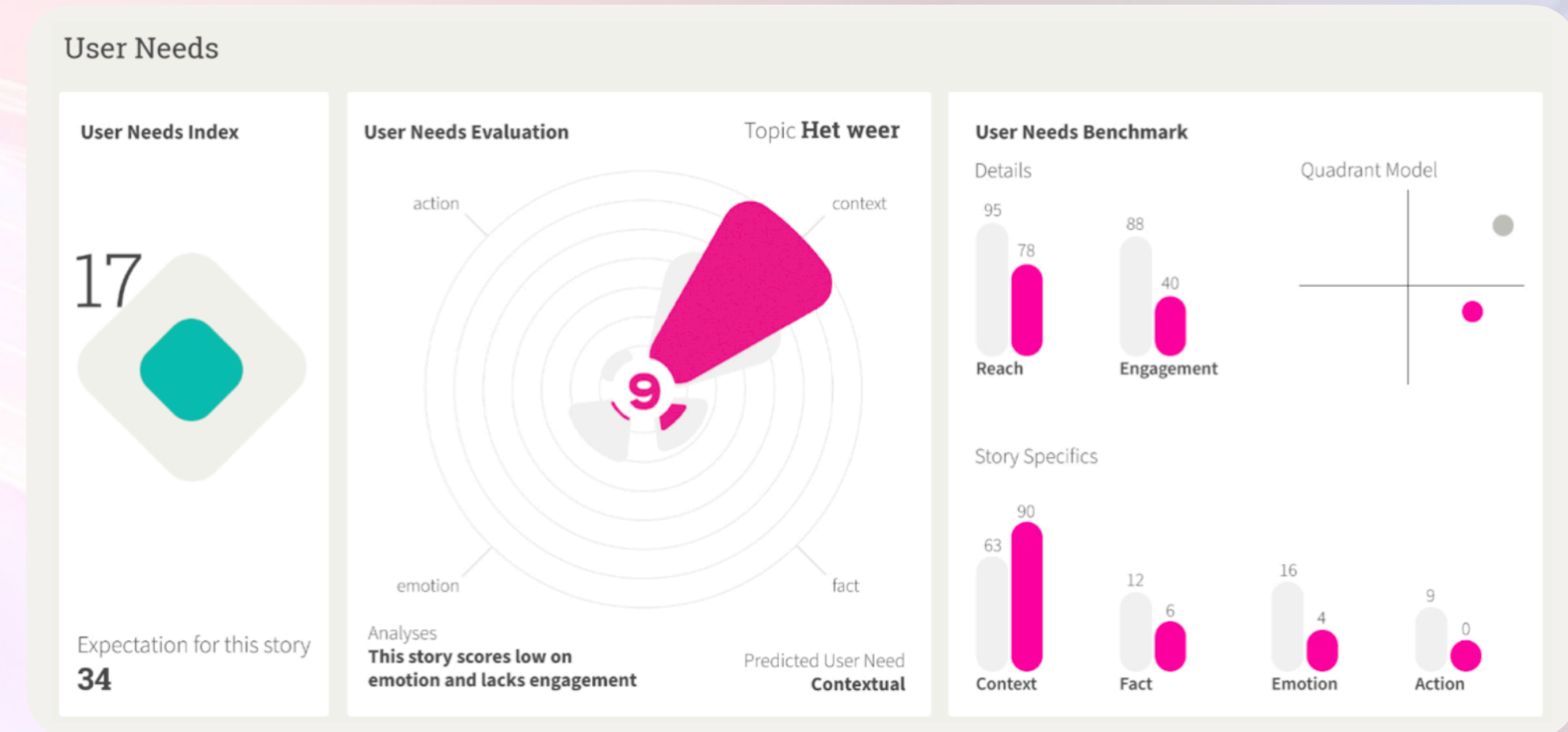
What has changed (ever since we published the [Triple N white paper](#)) is the way we measure and analyse user needs. We are now able to recognise user needs by labelling stories under various categories, so a story can be identified as 30% contextual, 60% emotional and 10% functional, for example. Sometimes, when we also have the metadata from a client, we can define it with an accuracy on both the main perspective as well as the specific user need (i.e. 75% accurate it's a contextual story, 95% accurate it's a **Give me perspective** one).

We see that newsrooms are developing their own ways of determining user needs in their overall storytelling. We believe that with automatic recognition of user needs - especially in the combination of accuracy - analytics will become more precise and with that more powerful and directive for newsrooms.

6 The challenges

It's also good to understand that what educates you might inspire someone else and what **diverts me** might be insightful and give perspective to another. As long as you have agreed on what constitutes what within your newsroom there's no harm in having this variety of interpretations. The essence of the user needs model is that the balance of various user needs should be in order: the amount of plain **Update me** articles should be reduced (fighting the imbalance), and you need consensus within your newsroom about the way you categorise and value user needs. All the data we've analysed shows that a well balanced and broad variety of user needs support all your business strategies.

Smartocto has been addressing this particular challenge as well and therefore we've developed a whole new way of categorising the user needs articles.



This is a first proof of concept that shows how we are trying and experimenting with analysing as well as visualising stories in accordance to the user needs model.

We visualise how well an article scores on the four different main categories (context, fact, emotion, action) showing directly that in this example the article is 'context heavy' and because it lacks a lot of engagement it can probably benefit from a more emotional follow up.

We believe this to be the right track and will continue to develop and optimise this way of analysing and visualising the user needs.

6 The challenges

Automated analysis on user needs is hard

The analytical, computational approach to the user needs model is a new endeavour in every sense. The usual approach (through distributional semantics) isn't able to entirely identify the author's intended user need based on the text alone.

The introduction of language pragmatics (discourse analysis) is a logical extension of the model smartocto is currently considering, but true discourse analysis is hard. Another limitation is related to the availability of appropriate data sets on which to train machine learning models for automatic recognition of user needs in text.

Fundamental to any mathematical modelling of user needs is the understanding that every newspaper text will generally contain some language characteristic of several different user needs, and that perhaps in the future editorial offices will also need to start thinking about them not as exclusive categories, but as different dimensions of the same article.

Machine learning approaches to user needs might as well prove to be the most challenging task in the near-future of editorial analytics.

More use cases

To learn more about the user needs approach and to create better and smarter tech around it we always are on the lookout for news use cases. Every client uses its own model and interpretation of the approach and that requires a lot of flexibility and 'working arounds' for the data science team. Every case helps to increase accuracy (check chapter 7) but in order to really gain essential insights it helps to welcome more newsrooms and publishers to join us in cracking this promising strategy. So if you're convinced that your newsroom is ready for the implementation of user needs reach out to us because we love to hear more.

contact us

So if you're convinced that your news room is ready for the implementation of user needs [reach out](#) to us because we love to hear more.

give me perspective

give me an edge

inspire me

smartocto

user needs for news

the user needs model 2.0

7 Take aways, where this is going

By now you have probably come to the conclusion that working with user needs is something your newsbrand and organisation can benefit from. But you might be wondering what's to be expected next. Do we foresee any new developments or is there proof of new areas where user needs might lead?

AI & text bots

Let's kick it off with one of the most revolutionary innovations available to newsrooms of late: Artificial intelligence, and more specifically GPT-3. There are massive opportunities to harness the power and potential of this technology, but it comes with caveats and many have reservations about its value.

While working on this whitepaper we challenged ChatGPT with numerous questions and the most interesting is seen in this simple Q&A form where we asked ChatGPT to write an **Educate me** piece based on a simple **Update me** intro with very basic information.

ST Show me how to write an article from the angle of the user need 'Educate me' as a follow up from this:

South Korea's fertility rate, already the world's lowest, has dropped yet again in the latest setback to the country's efforts to boost its declining population.



Are you curious about the reasons behind South Korea's declining fertility rate, and what this means for the country's future? As someone looking to be educated on this issue, it's important to understand the complex factors at play.

South Korea's fertility rate has been declining for decades, driven by a combination of economic, social, and cultural changes. In recent years, the high cost of living and the difficulty of balancing work and family responsibilities have made it increasingly challenging for young people to have children. Additionally, the country's patriarchal society and emphasis on education and career success have led many people to delay marriage and family formation.

The consequences of this trend are significant. With an aging population and a declining birth rate, South Korea's workforce and economy are likely to suffer in the long term. The government has launched a range of initiatives aimed at reversing this trend, including financial incentives for families and policies aimed at promoting work-life balance. However, progress has been slow, and more needs to be done to ensure the country's long-term stability.

🔄 Regenerate response

As someone looking to be educated on this issue, it's important to stay informed and

7

Take aways, where this is going

What is returned is impressive: the accuracy and relevancy of what this language generator creates gives us a glimpse into its potential.

That said, while AI like this can give good answers, it can't come up with the right questions - and it requires a solid foundation from which to work. It doesn't do the fieldwork of journalists either.

But it's a good start to get storytellers on the right track about fulfilling user needs. This technology is only going to develop and improve and as it does its accuracy and value will become more apparent as well.

How it could relate to user needs is interesting. Experiments and pilots will be part of the work we do with clients, and will entail applying robotic solutions to user need notifications and the actual follow up. More and more newsrooms seem to be open to give technology the opportunity to automate specific tasks.

It doesn't mean wresting creative control from editors, but outsourcing tasks that don't require the benefit of sophisticated human brains to complete.

This might be in composing newsletters, selecting which articles can go behind the paywall and other, more straightforward, tasks.

Accuracy

Nic Newman predicted that 2023 will be the year that user needs will drive product development. That means two things: firstly, the use of the user needs model will be widely embraced in newsrooms across the globe and, secondly, data analytic tools will need to support and measure user needs as part of their feature package.

It's safe to say that within the next few years everything we measure and predict - in relation to user needs - will become more accurate and precise. We now are able to measure if a story is written from one of the four main perspectives (fact, emotion, context or action) but pretty soon smartocto will be able to define which specific user needs belong to any given article.

We will have a whitelist, components that signal specific user needs, words, headlines, media types etc. which will all contribute to the overall optimisation of the algorithm.

“

If regional publishers want to grow their digital subscriber base, they have to get closer to the readers and need to understand their individual preferences. In the end newsrooms have to tailor stories to different user needs.

Our DRIVE data shows impressively that readers not only want to consume classical news articles but they appreciate stories that inspire and help them to understand the context and build their own opinion about certain topics.

smartocto

katja fleischmann

product manager drive at dpa

”

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Take aways, where this is going

Federated learning

This leads us on to the realm of federated learning, an interesting new way of using collective data in order to gain more local insight.

[IBM Research](#) describes this as a way for multiple parties to share their data in order to “collaboratively train a single deep learning model, improving on it iteratively”. Participants download a model from the cloud, train it on their private data, and then send it back. As updates are sent back to the cloud, improvements can be made, iteration by iteration.

It's a compelling model - and you can imagine how fast accuracy will improve if we add this technology to the existing ways we work on user needs.

Notifications

We believe that more and more content analytic tools will start creating notifications of some kind.

While it's likely that the majority will be on a 'if this, then that' basis, they should nevertheless prove helpful to newsrooms for the simple reason that they turn data into something practical and actionable.

We also think that newsrooms will invest more and more in their own data lakes and create their own insights and translations.

And since user needs will be introduced on a much wider scale, all sorts of tips will be developed to help newsrooms become better in executing the model.

Based on the developments described here, it's almost certain that a lot of new notifications will become available within the smartocto toolbox. We are already able to give advice on topics and user needs (even before articles are published) or insights on the performance of user needs articles. The next step is to have notifications that answer questions like 'if I want to write a follow-up story from the Inspire me perspective, which one should I pick'?

Or, if I want to optimise my conversions today, what topic and user needs combo works best for my audience?

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Take aways, where this is going

Data tools are certainly moving in that direction, but there's another element at play too: data agnosticism. Smartocto Connect enables users to plug their data sources into this, so newsrooms can get these smart notifications and actionable tips, but without changing their data silo.

At the heart of this is the simple goal: make tools that newsrooms actually need and want to use. User needs may help newsrooms put audiences first, but data tools need to put newsrooms' business goals and strategies at the forefront of their development too.

Data visualisation

Like notifications, we believe that visualisations within content analytic tools and dashboards will evolve to incorporate insights gleaned about user needs as well. Lists will be offered into dashboards showing which user needs article scores best and filtering on the most engaging stories or highest reading time and user needs will be made possible.

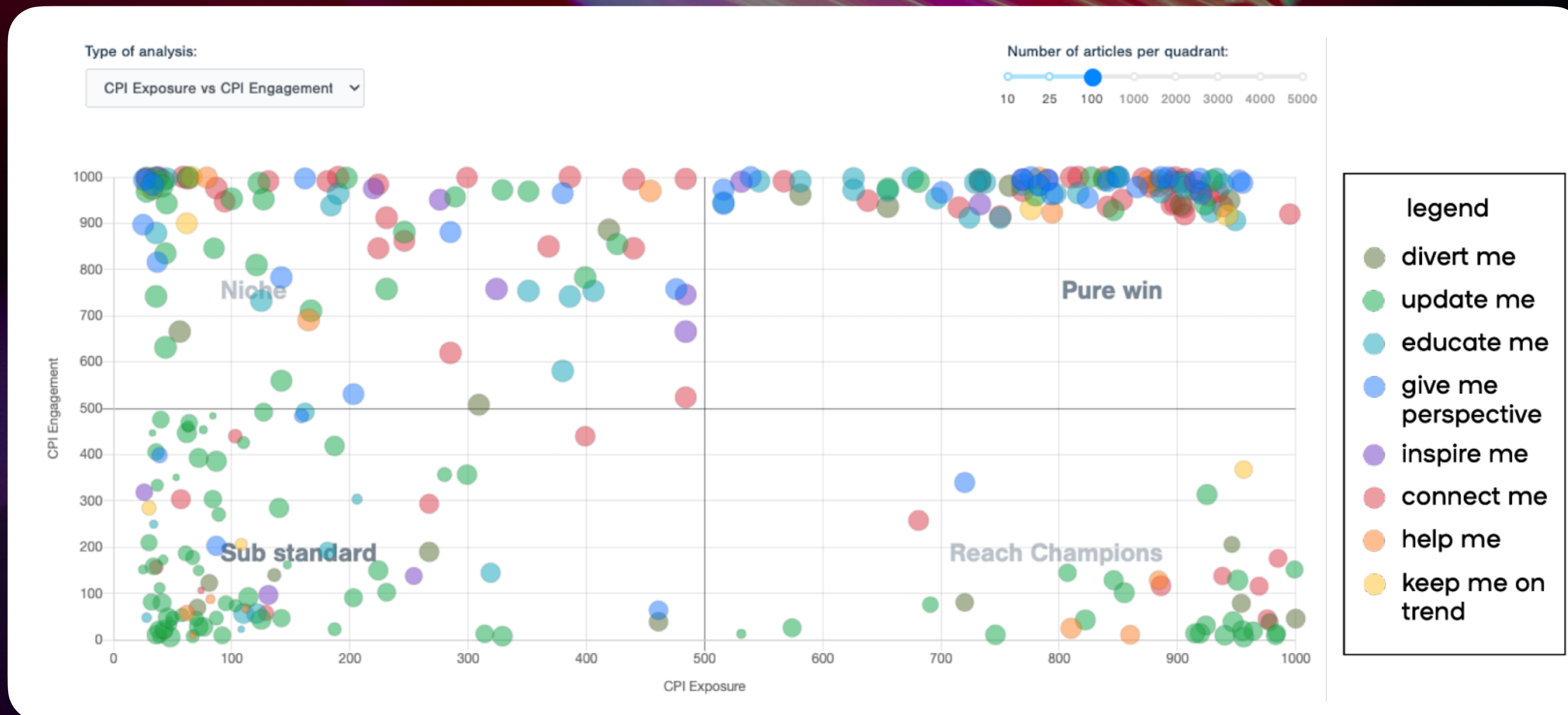
The Quadrant Model will become more advanced and will have more filter options making it possible not only to look at stories written from various user needs perspectives but also linking it to topics and channels or even business goals. In that way you are not only able to get answers to questions like 'what user needs are mostly in the top right quadrant?' but also 'what topics match best with which user needs if we want to grow our conversions?', or 'show me the least effective topics in the Business section by user needs and engagement'. As these smart insights become more helpful, they necessarily become more omnipresent in the newsrooms of tomorrow.

We also see a lot of development taking place at the intersection of topics, user needs and formats. We see - in the data of many newsrooms - that there's a strong connection between user needs and formats. How user needs are being used (and interpreted) varies across brands, audiences, channels and even countries. But, nevertheless, there's almost always a strong connection between user needs and topics.

7 Take aways, where this is going

Visualised so clearly, it's becoming easier and easier to spot trends, identify insights and make connections between topics and user needs. These will help you understand which stories to make, what's 'winning' (and what isn't) and which direction you should be taking your commissioning in.

It's clear that writing through a **Give me perspective** lens on political news will deliver you different articles then those that are written from a fact driven lens, but what are the results of that?



A portrait of Andy Jones, a man with short brown hair and glasses, wearing a dark jacket over a red shirt. The background is a vibrant purple and pink gradient with abstract light streaks.

smart●ct●

andy jones

senior director at essence mediacom

“

The news needs framework provides a clear and consistent understanding of the role content plays in the lives of audiences (and potential audiences) across internal teams. Obviously for journalists, but also for product, marketing and - importantly for me - insights teams.

To have this degree of alignment of purpose, underpinned by measurement and tagging, analysts can make targeted, **actionable recommendations** that drive real change across the organisation.

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Take aways, where this is going

User needs on paragraph-level

More and more newsrooms not only use and implement the user needs model as the core of their storytelling, but they also constantly search for ways to optimise its use. One of the things we see happening at some larger newsrooms is that they are convinced that breaking the user needs approach apart into smaller pieces will help them to create better news articles.

They analyse what user needs approach works best on intros and what user needs help to get their audience deeper into the story. They combine that info often with the placement of call to actions on positions that qualify best for that. This is fascinating.

One of the features smartocto has within the Insights tool is the breakdown of read depth. With this you can get precise insights about the way your audience is engaging with your content. Because we not only measure scroll depth, but also attention time and even mouse clicks and cursor movements, we hold detailed information about every single story.

The beauty of this is that we can combine it with notifications to indicate things like what position in the article to put a call to action button to attract your most engaged audience. Notifications might read something like: 'there's churn in this paragraph because readers are failing to understand something.'

Can you explain instead of update?

So, although user needs can be applied generally, there's massive scope to do so in greater detail through individual articles too.

Non-news user needs models

We expect more newsrooms to switch to user needs centric ways of working - and to be honest that's happening already - but we also predict more nuanced models based on the role and place individual media play in the market. Already we see unique collections being developed by niche newsrooms, like [Context](#) or [TBIJ](#) or [Big Issue](#). We know user needs are very much in use in travel content, as well as in fashion. Soon we'll see the first vertical models in different verticals like personal finance, retail, food, climate, sport and many more.

7

Take aways, where this is going

We also believe - as mentioned in the introduction of this paper - that user needs for specific audiences will be developed over time.

Think about user needs for the younger generation or for the news avoiders - each new generation brings with it a new relationship with news and news products - this isn't going to be something that is done once: **it will have to be revisited to maintain its relevance.**

7 Final thought

Working with user needs isn't just about optimising output. In developing this model we have been fortunate to work with newsrooms where the **passion for news** is apparent.

Through workshops, consultations and collaborations with these players, we've seen that the **user needs model works** because it provides ample opportunity and optimal conditions to **amplify newsrooms' storytelling efforts** - and ultimately that's what we're hardwired to do.

The user needs concept is an invitation to create engaging and valuable stories for our audiences. It **sparks creativity** and encourages journalists to create new angles and approaches to communicate events as they unfurl. Stories have the power to inform us, educate us, inspire and enrapture us, but it's essential **to understand what kind of story needs telling**.

Too often the challenging landscape of news media is presented in combative, military linguistic terms. There are fights for reader revenue, battles for attention, wars of attrition.

What the user needs model enables us to do is to stop trying to quash the competition, but flourish in our own unique niche by answering the questions and addressing the issues our own, very specific audiences have.

There's no fight here: just an opportunity to carve out new relationships with audiences by understanding **why they value us, what they ask of us and how we can deliver those things**.

We invite you to continue your own journey with this approach right now. **Start where you are.** Do it your way, keeping your brand DNA at the centre of what you do.

Your audience will thank you, your charts will start going in the right direction and you'll probably even have more fun in the process.

Thanks for reading. We're here if you have any questions.

smartocto

user needs for news

the user needs model 2.0

now
fact
driven

link me

reveal something hi

update me

Credits

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big thanks to

all smartocto partners who agreed to share their data insights

and thanks for sharing your thoughts

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link

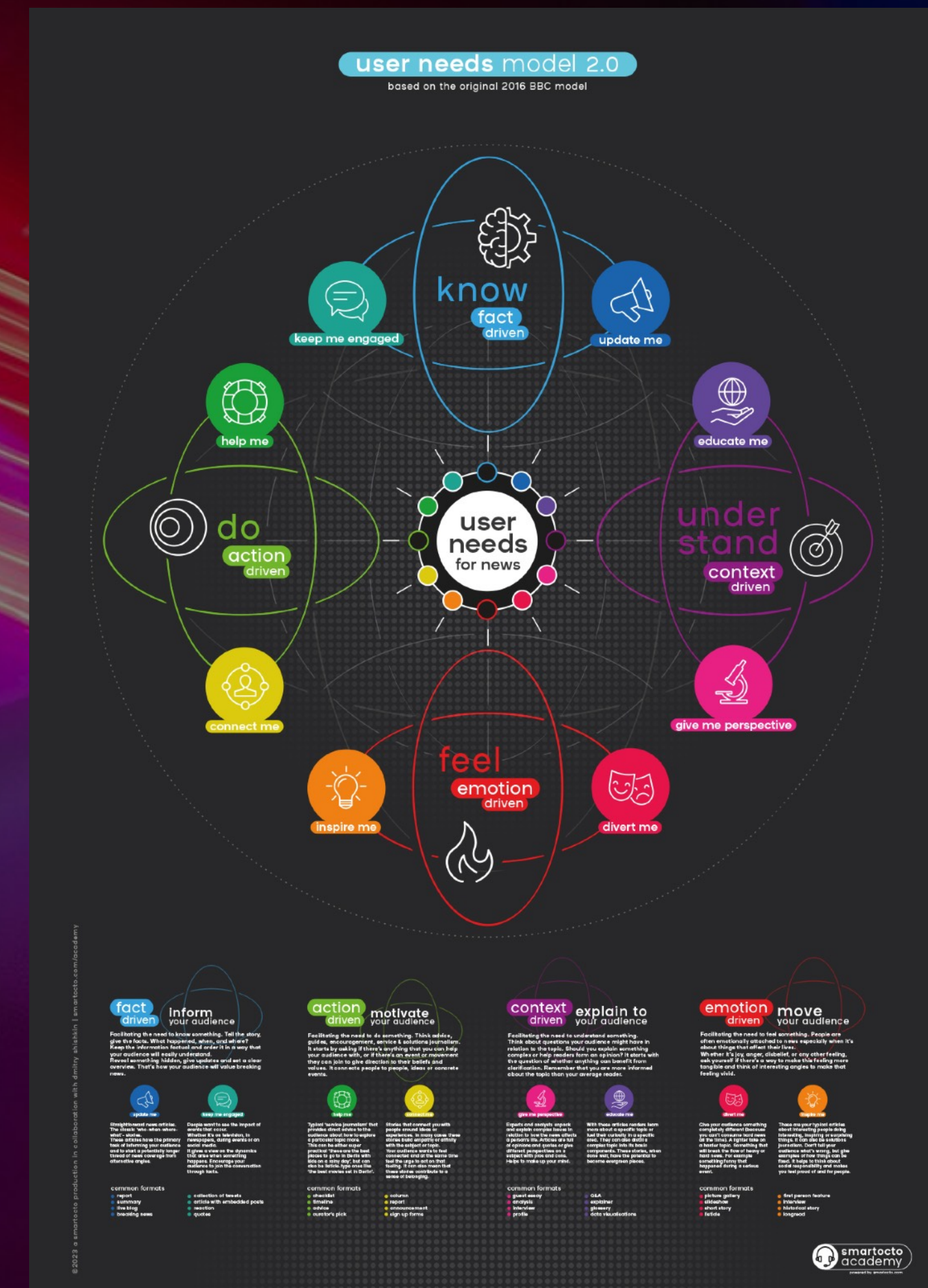
[all collected user need models](#)

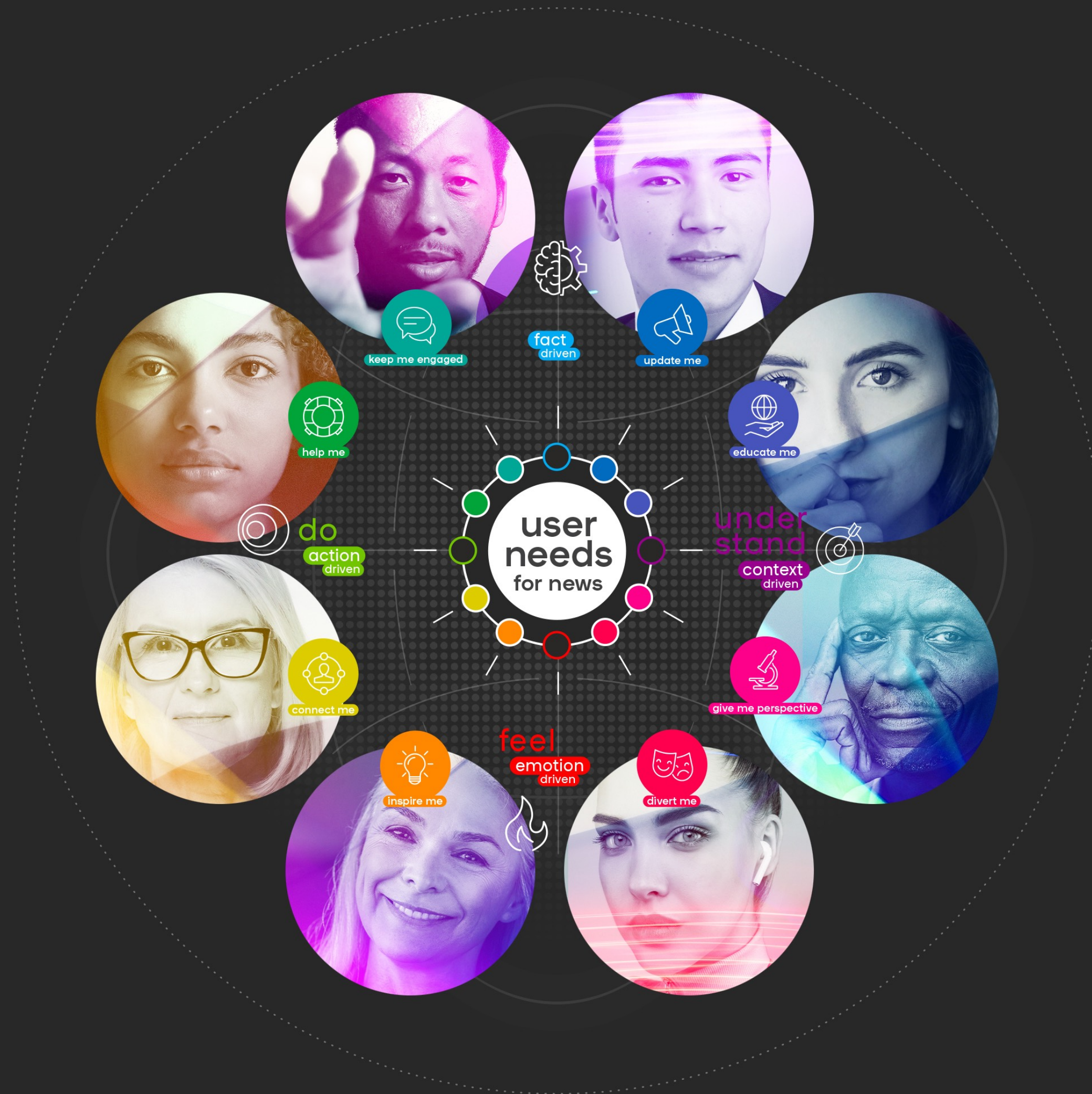
Downloads

for use in your newsroom

You can download our A1 poster User Needs Model 2.0 or the user needs magnets to use on a whiteboard.

Please follow this link:

smartocto.com



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in collaboration with dmitry shishkin