The state of content (mis)management

Why content creators are settling for average with their publishing platforms
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Getting the future of publishing right

The Chorus x Digiday State of the Industry (SOTI) survey indicates that the digital media industry is in a state of malaise.

One enterprise CMS, WordPress, dominates the market, followed by a few other systems. Despite widespread dissatisfaction with the options available, most publishers have not switched platforms in years. As a result of aging systems and barriers to innovation, dissatisfaction increases with time spent on the same underperforming platform.

Whether coming from content or revenue stakeholders, enthusiasm for CMS capabilities runs a narrow gamut that ranges from mildly approving to profoundly dissatisfied. The resignation among media professionals is clearest from professionals’ demand for customization, flexibility, and innovative features that they feel are sorely lacking from their platforms. Revenue professionals are particularly keen for advertising features that balance user experiences with ad volume and placement.

All of this comes at a time when the CMS is more critical than ever in determining the success of a media brand’s digital presence, and when a media brand’s digital presence is more critical than ever in determining the success of a media company.

For these companies, getting the future of publishing right calls for new CMS solutions for their newsrooms and revenue teams.
Introduction

New research by Digiday and Chorus by Vox Media finds that digital publishers are dissatisfied with their content management systems (CMS) — the software that is perhaps most central to media companies’ digital presence. The survey sampling of several hundred media industry professionals indicates that CMSes are often technologically dated, misaligned to consumer behavior, and removed entirely from revenue strategies.

C-M-What?

In the early days of online publishing, content management systems were akin to early iterations of computer operating systems. They required complex technological knowledge and performed limited functions — essentially transferring copy from a keyboard to a web interface.

As the media industry evolves its focus beyond print and television to digital audiences, the CMS (also referred to as a publishing platform or story editor) is today expected to satisfy multiple demands.

To accommodate a 24/7 news cycle, content creators anticipate, at a minimum, an intuitive CMS backend that supports rapid publishing.

With the proliferation of multichannel publishing and the near-universal adoption of responsive web design, audiences anticipate beautifully designed web experiences everywhere they consume content.

And most critically, with digital ad revenues surpassing traditional ad spend for the first time in 2019, CMSes carry the added responsibility of accommodating and facilitating digital revenue streams, which can include e-commerce, subscriptions, programmatic advertising, and direct sold advertising.

Despite the importance of the CMS, Digiday and Chorus by Vox Media’s new research indicates that the enterprise CMS has not kept pace with current demands placed on it. This is causing widespread dissatisfaction in newsrooms, poor experiences for audiences, and revenue inefficiencies for organizations at a time when competition for ad dollars is intense.
Methodology

What are their responsibilities?

77 percent of respondents indicated their responsibilities include content creation and 68 percent indicated their responsibilities include content editing. In a sign of how data-driven modern content creation has become, 60 percent also said their duties include SEO and analytics. Other responsibilities represented by participants include audience development (44 percent), revenue operations (26 percent), technology (25 percent) and sales (17 percent).

Which of the following domains are part of your responsibilities?

Content creation 71%
Content editing 68%
SEO and analytics 60%
Audience development 44%
Revenue operations 26%
Technology 25%
Sales 17%

CMSes by prevalence and length of use

The research found that 44 percent of media professional respondents use WordPress as their predominant CMS. Twenty one percent of respondents use a proprietary or homegrown system, while nine percent use Drupal. Adobe Experience Manager (AEM) is used by three percent of content creators.

Which platform are you using?

Wordpress 44%
Proprietary or homegrown system 21%
Drupal 9%
Adobe Experience Manager (AEM) 3%
Arc 2%

Digiday received more than one thousand responses to its survey, of which it examined data from a sub-sample of 154 media professionals who identify as either publishers or content creators for this research.
How long have they been using it?

A majority of respondents (58 percent) have used the same CMS for more than three years, with 42 percent remaining on their CMS for more than five years.

Does longer tenure mean greater satisfaction?

A majority of respondents (58 percent) have used the same CMS for more than three years, with 42 percent remaining on their CMS for more than five years.

The small range of CMSes publishers are using, the length of time they are sticking with these platforms, and the low grades media professionals are giving their CMSes indicates a malaise among digital media practitioners. Publishers are settling for products they’re unhappy with, as indicated by long tenures with publishing platforms for which they express dissatisfaction.

Percentage satisfied with CMS customer service

Publisher are settling for products they’re unhappy with, as indicated by long tenures with publishing platforms for which they express dissatisfaction.

This first starts to become clear when we take a look at respondents’ appraisals of their customer service.
Length of use and satisfaction — a closer look

The connection between years spent using the same CMS and dissatisfaction is more notable when looking at individual CMS features.

Across key CMS attributes, media professionals who have used their platform for more than three years are less satisfied than those who have been using their CMS for fewer than three years.

Do you agree with the following statement?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My CMS makes revenue operations</th>
<th>Used same CMS less than 3 years</th>
<th>Used same CMS more than 3 years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My CMS creates great-looking user experiences</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My CMS makes it easy to distribute content across many platforms</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>51%</td>
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Missing the fundamentals: Analytics and content creation

The primary function of a CMS is to publish content. Content creators, however, don’t believe their publishing platforms perform even this baseline task very well.

Of the 116 respondents who said that content creation or editing were among their responsibilities:

- 31 percent said their CMS enables easy maintenance and content updates very well.
- 19 percent say their platform’s analytics tools show them their most popular pages very well.
- 21 percent say their platform’s analytics tools track site traffic very well.
- 30 percent say their CMS’s analytics tools allows them to view version history very well.

A more common perception among content creators is that their CMS can perform these simple functions only “somewhat well.” 37 percent feel this way about their CMS’s ability to show them their most popular pages, and 34 percent feel this way about the ability of its analytics tools to track other kinds of site traffic.

Please rank how well your CMS performs the following tasks:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Very poorly</th>
<th>Somewhat poorly</th>
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<tr>
<td>Viewing version history of a story</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracking site traffic</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showing what most popular pages are</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance/content updates</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
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* data from respondents who identified as content creators and/or editors
How does your CMS perform when it comes to enabling concurrent drafting of stories?

The ability to draft stories concurrently with others — collaboration core to any modern-day editorial or writing staff — is a feature that only a quarter (28 percent) of media professionals say their publishing platform allows them to accomplish very or somewhat well.

Common words used by respondents whose CMSes lacked collaborative features

Verbatim responses fielded for the Chorus x Digiday SOTI Report make clear that collaborative editing is sorely missed by content creators.

As one respondent described the challenges they face, “We regularly override each other’s work in a single document.” The research indicates that many publishers are turning to tools like Google Docs to do these jobs and using a combination of systems that can feel unwieldy and foster disorganization in already busy newsrooms.
In many cases these low ratings signify a CMS’s inability to perform these tasks (as opposed to indicating that they’re performing them poorly). Indeed, some of these features are typically not included in many widely-used publishing platforms.

For instance, of the survey respondents who explicitly cited “analytics” or “tracking” as a feature that’s missing from their CMS, 71 percent report using a commercial platform, including 53 percent who say they use WordPress.

The figures are similar for respondents who report collaborative editing as a missing feature. 77 percent of these respondents report using a commercial platform, including 54 percent who say they use WordPress.

Respondents also seek the ability to differentiate their website experiences from others. Given the limited number of CMSes in use, many media professionals regret that their website comes off as cookie cutter — similar in appearance to other sites. They feel limited by the layout and presentation options of their CMS, and may be unable to work beyond typical features like nav bars and article carousels.

Among the verbatim responses fielded in our survey, media professionals’ key desires include “Flexibility and simplicity,” “Customization,” “High possibility of customization (flexibility),” “Adding related content, flexibility on page layout/template,” and “Being customizable, flexible without adding a million extra tedious steps.”

Common words used by respondents who desired more customization and flexibility

Some advanced content features perform worse than others.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Only 30 percent</th>
<th>Only 29 percent</th>
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<td>said their CMS allowed them to directly assign editorial projects somewhat or very well.</td>
<td>said their CMS enabled them to develop custom or interactive story formats somewhat or very well.</td>
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For media professionals, what “positive” sentiments they have to offer about their CMSes are tepid, and could not be qualified as endorsements. Not a single content creation or analytics capability is deemed favorable by more than 60 percent of professionals. Meanwhile, many respondents — more than 60 percent in a number of cases — are indifferent or dissatisfied with higher-end features, including those involving analytics or collaborative editing.

When it comes to foundational CMS tasks like updating content, concurrent editing, and understanding site traffic, a significant portion of the industry is unsatisfied with the tools they have to work with. These findings are even more telling about the state of industry software when the wide range of legacy media companies making the transformation to digital are taken into account.

In the television space, digital ad revenues are forecast to rise to $4.95 billion, representing seven percent of all 2019 U.S. TV advertising revenue in 2019, according to the Convergence Research Group.

In the newspaper space, the share of newspaper advertising revenue coming from digital advertising has risen from 17 to 35 percent between 2011 and 2018.

Broadcasters would go out of business if they relied on satellites that were satisfactory 50% of the time, and newspaper publishers would replace a press if it only printed papers half of the week.

Still, digital publishers remain committed to systems that fall short of expectations.
CMSes aren’t adapting to publishers’ expectations

While the baseline features that newsrooms expect their CMS to perform receive middling grades, more sophisticated features and add-ons receive even lower scores from media professionals.

Only 45 percent of respondents say their CMS allows them to distribute stories across multiple platforms somewhat or very well.

Only 45 percent say that their CMS directly enables them to launch a new content section, or new satellite sites, somewhat or very well.

Only 42 percent say their CMS lets them view what their editorial teams are working on within the CMS somewhat or very well.

Only 32 percent say their CMS lets them document audience behavior on their site somewhat or very well.

Please rank how well your CMS performs the following tasks

- Documenting on-site user behavior: 23% very poorly, 18% somewhat poorly
- Viewing what editorial teams are working on: 15% very poorly, 15% somewhat poorly
- Launching a new content section or satellite sites: 14% very poorly, 6% somewhat poorly
- Distributing content across many platforms: 11% very poorly, 17% somewhat poorly

* data from respondents who identified as content creators and/or editors
The dollars and the cents

While CMSes are built to tackle content creation, the ability to monetize that content is just as critical to the sustainable operation of any for-profit media company.

There are now plenty of revenue streams digital media companies can leverage, including subscriptions, e-commerce, affiliate direct sold advertising, open exchange programmatic advertising, and private marketplace programmatic advertising.

The ability to generate revenue from some combination of these channels is crucial for any media organization, yet our survey indicates that most modern CMSes fall short or fail to offer monetization tools at all.

Once again, media professionals who are engaged in revenue operations have only mixed-to-positive reviews for the CMS tools designed for the functions that they perform.

Only 38 percent of media professionals definitively agree with the statement “My CMS integrates ads well for the user.”

Only 34 percent of media professionals agreed with the statement, “My CMS presents advertising experiences in formats that feel seamless and non-intrusive,” either somewhat or strongly.

Only 45 percent of respondents say their CMS performs somewhat or very well when it comes to programmatic capabilities and performance.

As we can see, programmatic capabilities fare the worst. And even when functions receive appraisals that are ostensibly positive, the majorities are narrow. Meanwhile, the picture looks even less rosy when we take a look at the high percentages of respondents who rated their CMSes poorly or very poorly for these tasks.

Revenue operations professionals describe the revenue functions of their CMSes as average or below. Moreover, they’re not the only ones who matter: Professionals who are focused on content creation also see themselves as stakeholders in revenue operations and provide even lower scores in this category. When we take all our survey respondents into account, we see great frustration regarding ad placements in particular. Media professionals signal that disruptive ads as detracting from their content.

Please rank how well your CMS performs the following tasks

- Programmatic capabilities: 25% Very poorly, 3% Somewhat poorly
- Balancing reader’s experience with advertising volume: 18% Very poorly, 5% Somewhat poorly
- Advertising placement logic (i.e., provides enough inventory): 8% Very poorly, 13% Somewhat poorly

* data from who say that revenue operations and/or sales are among their responsibilities
Always Be innovating

Media companies are locked in an arms race for tech talent to keep up with the expectations of online audiences. This race is made all the more challenging for small and independent media companies; larger enterprises can often afford to scale their technology teams to embark on ambitious CMS improvements and additions.

Within this environment, media professionals feel that their CMS is falling behind, and that the gap between their platform’s abilities and that of their competitors is growing.

When asked whether or not they agree with the statement, “Our CMS is innovative and adapts quickly to changes in our industry,” only 36 percent of media professionals say they somewhat or strongly agreed.

36%  

How many content creators say their CMS is innovative?

Common words used by respondents who desired more innovation and adaptability
The publishing industry is profoundly unhappy with the state of CMS offerings — yet most of them aren’t taking steps to change anything. Respondents to our survey reported dissatisfaction with the key features that currently exist, and lamented that certain so-called advanced features don’t come standard.

Moreover, their tenure using the same platforms is long and getting longer, despite the fact that their satisfaction dips precipitously as that tenure grows. The result for newsrooms is grave. Media professionals are relying on platforms that don’t meet their needs, springing for a series of onerous, costly and imperfect add-ons, and turning to completely separate softwares when they inevitably determine that they’re not getting what they need.

The malaise needs to lift. But first publishers will need to take a hard look at the state of the industry, and forge a new path.
To learn more about Chorus by Vox Media visit getchorus.voxmedia.com