

# Newspack Pilot Project Assessment

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In April 2019, 12 newsrooms were chosen as the pilot cohort of the Newspack development project. At this time, technologists at Automattic began developing the core software and by October they were ready to start working with newsrooms to launch new, Newspack-backed sites.

During the launch process, each newsroom was provided with a staging site. Staging sites housed an outlet's previously-published content, which had been migrated into a new, Automattic-hosted Wordpress installation using the Newspack theme. Before launching -- that is, pointing the outlet's nameserver to the staging site -- technologists and newsroom liaisons worked together to rebuild the publication's web pages within the staging site, ensuring that it was up to the visual standards of the previous site and that all necessary features were in place.

**The goals of this study are to assess whether the pilot version of Newspack solved the problems identified in the original report; to understand how newsroom participants and Automattic technologists experienced the pilot project; and to record learnings from the pilot that might help shape how to approach future Newspack cohorts.**

The key findings from this study were:

- **All pilot participants and technologists were very happy with the process.** Newsrooms felt like active participants in feature development, and technologists found great value in working directly with their users.
- **Newspack undoubtedly solved the problem of visual flexibility and allowed newsrooms greater potential for creative publication than they had previously possessed. Newspack has begun to solve the problem of presenting promotional content.** In users' eyes, the latter features are not yet at the same level of maturity as the visual tools, but technologists are working with newsrooms to ensure that engagement and revenue-generating features are effective enough to compete with existing plugins.

- **The role of Newspack in reducing or replacing the need for website management-related technical resources is unclear, and depends greatly on an individual newsroom's technical knowledge and resources.** If a newsroom has a go-to technical person, that person's job is likely made much easier by having foundational technical problems (such as performance and upgrades) taken care of. If there is no technically knowledgeable help available within a newsroom, Newspack users may have difficulty understanding all of Newspack's features and using it to its full potential.
- **The biggest potential area of misalignment is the cost of Newspack versus the perceived value as expressed by the cohort participants.** Newsrooms see customization and face-to-face interaction with developers as part of the value provided by Newspack, and this may be difficult to scale for the Automattic team.
- **Potential improvements going forward should focus on increasing transparency and providing deeper, more standardized education and documentation to broad groups of users.** As Automattic scales, it is important to provide clear expectations around cost and the level of support newsrooms will receive with their subscription. It may also be helpful to create a persona of a Newspack user who has never had contact with the Newspack development team, and to ensure that there are materials to help onboard this persona.

### Interviews and Contextual Inquiry

In order to gather data, we conducted one-on-one, remote interviews with 9 participants from 5 newsrooms in the pilot cohort, and with 5 Automattic team members who worked on the pilot project. During the interviews, we asked participants to reflect on the pilot process and to discuss whether the product fulfilled their expectations.

Newsroom participants were also asked to demonstrate tasks they regularly performed in Newspack by sharing their screens and narrating their processes. All interviews were remote, and all participants were guaranteed anonymity to ensure they felt comfortable giving honest feedback. For the sake of clarity and anonymity, we will refer to all newsroom-based participants as “newsroom participants” and to all Automattic roles as “[Automattic] technologists” in this report.



# Measuring Success

## Initial Product Goals

In the [initial study](#) of WordPress in the newsroom, the two most widely-felt pain points were the inability to visually arrange content, and not having adequate control over promotional content. The latter category includes pop-ups, newsletter signups, and other CTAs that help to generate engagement and revenue. Publishers also noted that lack of technical knowledge and time was a challenge that made their use of WordPress less than satisfactory.

## Visual Arrangement

***“In terms of the aesthetics and the range of ways to present content, it’s excellent.”***

**Newsroom participants were unequivocally positive about Newspack’s visual arrangement features.** All newsrooms felt that Newspack provided the opportunity to produce high-quality multimedia journalism, as well as the flexibility to create standalone series and story projects with special visual treatments -- all of which were goals stated by participants in the initial study as well.

Additionally, interviewees saw improvements in visual functionality as a path to increased efficiency and creativity in their newsrooms:

- ***“We’ve done more video in the last two weeks than we’ve done in the last two years, and that’s because we have the ability to show it on our site so much faster.”***
- ***“When the story is filed it’s in the regular template, and so it’s really neat to see how it transforms when we start putting special treatment on it.”***
- ***“There are [creative] decisions that we never even considered because we just did not have the flexibility, but now it’s just so easy to change something.”***



Several participants called out the value of Newspack for creating standalone series, noting that they could give the stories special visual treatment, as well as adding a table of contents, which they had previously had to create manually.

**Finally, two newsrooms reported that they received unsolicited positive reader feedback after launching their Newspack site, which they considered a strong initial indicator of success.**

### Homepage

Participants were enthusiastic about the homepage feature, and Automattic technologists were particularly pleased with how the tools were developed. As one technologist noted: “I did not predict how transformative a modern approach to the homepage was going to be. Sometimes, based on people’s reactions, it feels like that is the most compelling part of what we’re doing.”

Newsroom participants agreed. One singled out their new ability to schedule homepage publication in advance, without having to log into the site at odd hours:

***“You can build your whole page exactly as you want it to look, at that time, and have it ready to go. It just saves so much time for us.”***

### Block Editor

The block editor is integral to the visual flexibility that Newspack provides, but in the initial report, we discovered that there was fear and anxiety surrounding its adoption. All newsroom participants noted that, prior to starting the Newspack pilot, they had not switched over to the new Gutenberg block editor -- and in some cases, were prevented from doing so by technical problems, or delicate systems incompatible with updates.

The Automattic team was aware of these challenges, and sympathetic to their users' situations. In the words of one technologist, "It has felt like a big ask to be like, 'please change your entire tooling system in WordPress.'"

**All newsroom participants agreed that having Automattic technologists available for walkthroughs and tutorials was crucial to adopting the Gutenberg block editor and understanding its potential.** Two explicitly noted that they thought Gutenberg's copy-paste functionality had been "fixed" since the first time they tried it, a year before the pilot, and felt that this fact was worth publicizing: "I might say for future sessions to tell people, right off the bat, that they fixed this problem with Gutenberg."

### Promotional Content

Overall, newsroom participants reported that the promotional content tools were not at the same level of maturity as the visual tools had been. They understood that this was a result of the product roadmap, and that Newspack was still in active development regarding these features. One participant put it this way:

***"I feel they put more emphasis on the other editing tools and there was less emphasis on the business tools. I would have liked to see some more sophisticated, integrated features. But I think there's definitely potential and a willingness to improve upon it."***

Another, who had waited for the pop-up feature to be ready before launching, noted: "I was honestly stunned that any other news organization was able to launch without one of these [pop-up] plugins because they're so vital now."

This accords with the technologists' view of the timeline and product development map. **Several technologists admitted that they did not expect the post-publication tools ecosystem to be as complicated as it was**, with one observing that, “the way publishers generate revenue is kind of like a Rube Goldberg machine that you don't want to mess up.” Others expressed surprise at the range of advertising features used by sites, and described how they came to understand why this was a crucial element of generating revenue.

This was a key area of learning for the technologists: as they worked more closely with newsrooms, they began to understand the needs behind engagement and revenue features more deeply, which they felt helped them build a better product. One technologist put it this way: “If you hear it directly, you start to understand the nuance of why the ask is there.”

### Engagement

Engagement tools are primarily centered around newsletter signups, and in this regard users' perceptions of Newspack varied depending on what tools they were already using.

For some, the tools Newspack provided were adequate, and/or provided signup functionality they had not previously possessed. For others, Newspack's tools were not yet competitive with the existing tools they were already using. One participant, for example, noted that they didn't actually like to use a traditional pop-up:

***“[The pop-up] is too intrusive to use frequently. We prefer to use a modal or a floating bar that comes up from the bottom, or we use inline newsletter asks a lot.”***

With newsletters and other promotional content, part of the challenge was discovering and using all the tools that Newspack provided. **With limited time to explore Newspack and no centralized documentation, many users felt that they were missing tools or features that might be helpful.** Still, they were optimistic about Newspack's potential once they had gained full mastery of the available toolkit:

***“With our engagement on-site, we have much more potential to bring people in and try to embrace them and encourage them to be regular followers. I feel like we’re still learning to work all the levers to bring all of that about.”***

### Donor Management and Revenue Generation

Two separate newsrooms reported that Newspack had removed their previous ability to automatically synchronize donors to the website using a spreadsheet, and this had a detrimental effect on their efficiency. Both emphasized, however, that Automattic was working on fixing the problem.

**Participants did not expect to see an enormous jump in revenue right away, and reported that the value they saw in Newspack was in the potential of the tools,** stressing the need to think strategically about the engagement and revenue funnel:

***“When I go to conferences, the first thing people ask about Newspack is, ‘Has your revenue gone up? Has your readership gone through the roof?’ My answer is always, ‘It’s too early to tell because there are so many factors involved.’ You can make your asks more visible through Newspack but that’s no guarantee that the dollars will just come rolling in.”***

Other participants echoed this sentiment, saying that they wouldn't expect to see immediate increases in revenue or reader numbers, but that they were confident they had more tools to gradually increase their metrics.



Newspack technologists should stay mindful of these questions as they continue development, and try to proactively answer them by creating high-impact features, benchmarking progress when possible, and producing additional documentation.

### Technical Resources

***“It was like someone said, here, let me take all of the stuff you like least about your job and we’re going to build this bulletproof site so that you don’t have to do any of it.”***

Automattic technologists frequently stated that one goal was to make sure Newspack could reduce or remove the need for newsrooms to have an in-house WordPress developer or pay for supplemental contract developers.

For those newsroom users who had some technical expertise, this attempt was a resounding success. Only one technically-savvy participant expressed frustration that they were not able to do more coding themselves, but ultimately felt that the standardization of content was worth the sacrifice. Another technically-savvy participant, who served as the sole IT support for their newsroom, noted:

***“That was what I liked the most, that it seemed tailor-made for our organization, where you have a little bit of tech talent and skill but you waste it on some of the most boring, routine stuff. I’ve spent weeks of time fine-tuning load speeds or removing this plugin and trying a different one just to get the site going a little bit faster. And that’s gone, I won’t have to worry about that.”***

Other newsrooms, however, felt that they still needed technical support. Most needed technical help to understand and set up their new Newspack site, and because of the initial learning curve they assumed that they would still need technical help in the future.

Many did not know what to expect from Newspack and Automattic in this regard, with one stating that they were trying not to become too dependent on the help they received in the Slack channel that Automattic set up for support.

Finally, one newsroom participant reported that during the Newspack pilot they hired a contract developer to aid in understanding the new site, and that they intended to hire that person for future consultation. In the same newsroom, another user who was not in direct contact with Automattic during the pilot was stymied by trying to create a full-page photo because they didn't have enough HTML knowledge to diagnose the layout problem.

**It is concerning that users who didn't receive face-to-face training or communication were less able to take advantage of Newspack's potential.** Of those who did have direct contact with Automattic, none felt they had enough knowledge to fully take advantage of all the features Newspack had to offer. For this reason, several asked that there be more detailed step-by-step documentation on how to configure and use features, or a library of tutorials to help them understand the system.

Moving forward, it is advisable to think about the varying technical skills of newsroom employees. There is a wide spectrum of capabilities, and to address any knowledge gaps Newspack technologists could create educational resources for those who need more basic instruction; this way the value of Newspack will scale more easily, even without face-to-face instruction from technologists.

### Other Pain Points

While the overall success of the project is clear, some small pain points remain. The majority of these stem from the fact that newsrooms are dependent on many third-party, JavaScript-based tools that must be integrated into the WordPress publication system and embedded into stories.

Third-party integrations did not always run smoothly with Accelerated Mobile Pages (AMP) and the block editor. Additionally, participants had difficulty with discovering blocks, as well as with understanding features whose names were not intuitive. Discovery and nomenclature were both pain points identified in the initial study, and while they may be a reflection of core Wordpress technology, they continue to create small points of friction for users.

### AMP Integration

**Several participants reported that they had to turn off the Accelerated Mobile Pages (AMP) functionality of posts in order to use their current engagement or data visualization tools.** They noted that Automattic developers had been very helpful in trying to facilitate integration with various plugins but, in the absence of a solution that allowed for both AMP and existing plugins, newsroom users generally chose to turn off AMP and use their preferred tools. This has the potential to negatively impact site speed, undermining a key goal of Newspack.<sup>1</sup>

Given that AMP aims to eliminate excess JavaScript, and that JavaScript is the basis for a large variety of third-party data visualization and engagement tools ubiquitous in newsrooms, it may be helpful for Automattic to review all potential tools they have been asked to integrate, and to think about making a list or guide to help newsrooms understand their options.

Given the sheer number of tools and the unlikelihood that they can all be integrated, it may also be worth taking steps to optimize Newspack for sites that choose to disable AMP. Even if it is not ideal, we expect users to continue to use unsupported third-party tools, so **Newspack should still try to meet speed benchmarks when AMP is turned off.**

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<sup>1</sup> Source: [Newspack FAQ](#). Performance was also identified as a deliverable in the initial specification list for developers

**Finally, the AMP notification itself was universally ignored by users,** despite appearing at the top of the post editing interface, primarily because most did not understand what it meant, or know what they should do about it.

***“This little notification about the 17 issues? I get that on almost every single post that I’ve ever worked on. I was told early on [by teammates] ‘don’t worry about it, everything’s working fine, it’s just a symptom of the new site working in the old system.’”***

### **Block Editor Integration with Third-party Tools**

In a similar vein to AMP, third-party tools sometimes conflicted with the instructions given by the block editor. One user reported that they could no longer just “pop in” the embed code, and had to go through a multistep copy-paste process because the invitation to paste a data visualization URL into the block did not work. It is possible that this specific integration problem could have been solved by using a different block -- for example, a pym.js block. But the fact remains that the user was not aware of this option and could not understand how to fix the problem without a laborious workaround.

Overall, and in a similar vein to AMP integration, it will be helpful for newsrooms if Automattic begins taking inventory of (or documents what it knows about) the wide variety of data visualization tools used in stories, and has an opinion or method for migrating this content. Finally, this is another area where education would benefit users: understanding which blocks to use for which tools would benefit newsroom users who are frequently tasked with embedding visuals or other tools in stories.



### Block Discovery and Nomenclature

A small usability issue was the fact that adding new blocks was still not intuitive to users after working with Gutenberg. This was not felt as a severe pain point, and as one user noted: “It’s a little bit hard and clunky inside, but most of the clunk is WordPress. The Newspack part actually does its job.”

Relatedly, some users reported that the naming conventions in Newspack were confusing: “Some of the naming conventions are a little difficult to understand. The parallax thing is called ‘cover’ -- why would it be called that?” The naming problem, in turn, makes discovery of features more difficult, which adds to the problem of users feeling they are missing the full potential of Newspack.

# Lessons Learned

In addition to examining the overall usability of Newspack, we also discussed participants' thoughts on the process of developing Newspack, launching sites, and general communication. We asked every participant what they had learned from the project, and what was most important for others to know when signing up to participate in a Newspack development cohort.

### Expectations from the Pilot

***“[The Automattic Team] could have probably had a better plan at the beginning for explaining how everything was rolling out. There was always a kind of sense that it was improvised. But we all accepted that that was the gig.”***

All participants were satisfied with the overall experience of the pilot program, and newsroom participants praised the Automattic team for their availability and communication skills. Even when participants reported communication difficulties, both Automattic and newsroom interviewees were aligned in identifying problems, agreeing on how they were solved, and expressing satisfaction at how the development process evolved to address challenges.

For example, participants noted that the communication at the beginning of the project was somewhat inconsistent. **While newsroom users appreciated the weekly meetings, some found them hard to understand, especially if they were neither technically inclined nor already familiar with the software product development process.**

These users, however, noted that communication got better as the pilot progressed, and particularly praised the addition of a newsletter to supplement the weekly calls. They also emphasized that the communication with individual technologists was excellent, and that their questions were always answered via Slack, email, or other means.

Automattic technologists reported the same experience; they noted that during the first few months, they were learning about their newsroom partners' needs, and because they saw gaps in understanding, they chose to modify how they communicated. One Automattic technologist noted:

***“It’s essential to communicate what’s happening and to connect the dots for people so they understand how what the development team is doing applies to them . . . We did hear time and time again that people said they weren’t entirely clear what was going on.”***

Relatedly, several newsroom participants noted that they were surprised at how rough Newspack was when it was unveiled in the fall; initially they had expected a more finished product to work with. But, they reported, after they better understood their role in the product development process, they were excited to partner with technologists to create and perfect new features. **In the end, all newsroom interviewees agreed that they were active participants in developing the product, and were glad to help shape software that could help other newsrooms.**

Finally, many newsroom participants were surprised by the need to rebuild their sites on the staging platform, and weren't sure where to start. According to one newsroom user:

***“They [the Automattic team] showed a few templates with fonts and styles, and were kind of like, go! You basically started with a blank slate.”***

The ability of newsrooms to visualize and rebuild their sites depended on their technical knowledge, and some Automattic technologists realized in retrospect that this gap between design and execution contributed to delays.



They recalled that initially, the team had shown designs to the newsrooms without personalizing the content, and one technologist observed that they wished they had done more to help newsrooms connect the product designs to their individual sites, as well as to visualize what they were building. Finally, the Automattic team did eventually assign a technical lead to assist newsrooms as they built out their sites, which helped the newsrooms greatly.

### Barriers to Launch

The pilot cohort experienced significant delays and deviations from the expected schedule. These delays came from the interaction of several factors:

- Migrating the site content, both for the staging site and at launch.
- Conflicting priorities: newsrooms needed time to rebuild and perfect the staging site, in addition to keeping up their day-to-day publishing activities.
- Newspaper features that a given newsroom considered essential were not ready in time for a planned launch.
- Mismatches in timing: publishers didn't want to launch during revenue drives or holidays, for example.

### Content Migration and Site Readiness

**Automattic technologists were unanimous in saying that the biggest technical obstacle to launching sites was the migration of content.** Technologists observed that, at the beginning, there was no established procedure and a launch could take days, during which the news site could not publish any new content. The technologists improved their process greatly during the pilot, as they are aware that this can cause significant friction, and are continuing to find ways to operationalize migration more smoothly.

Technologists also reported that they often had to nudge newsrooms to complete staging sites, though they also acknowledged that this created additional work on top of newsrooms' daily routines. For this reason, Automattic developers didn't want to push newsroom liaisons too hard, but did want to encourage them to make regular progress towards launch.

### Feature Readiness and Timing

**When speaking to newsroom users, the most frequent barriers mentioned were feature readiness and timing.**

Most newsroom participants described waiting for at least one feature to be available before launching. According to one interviewee, although the pilot launch process began in October 2019, "the features we couldn't live without were not nailed down until January [2020]." Specific visual customizations were also part of the iterative development that Automattic technologists worked on for each newsroom.

Launch timing also came into play. Because of the aforementioned migration difficulties, which introduced risk into the process, newsrooms were unwilling to launch during specific time periods (like winter holidays) or during important revenue-generating events, such as NewsMatch or an end-of-year revenue drive.

Overall, participants were not fazed by the delays. They understood that since this was the initial run of the project, there was not yet a standardized plan for launch. The only caveat newsrooms had was that they had been promised a free year of Newspack, but felt -- because discovery, migration, and launch took several months -- that in reality they were receiving more like a month or two of free service. Similarly, an Automattic technologist noted that the current business model, where newsrooms were encouraged to iterate with their development partners, did not push users towards launching and therefore using their Newspack subscription right away.

## Potential Areas of Misalignment: Balancing Standardization, Support, Value, and Cost

### The Perceived Value of Newspack

In addition to the specific Newspack features discussed in detail above, newsroom participants consistently mentioned communication and expert knowledge as part of the value that Newspack brings. Many participants noted that direct and personal access to technical help was a key factor in the product's value:

***“That’s the big thing that I think I missed up front, is that part of Newspack’s service is selling this access and ability to have people respond to your needs.”***

Participants knew that their level of direct access would change after launch, but weren't clear what that would look like. Some participants weren't sure if they would continue to have access to the Slack channel, and for this reason, mentioned that they were trying not to become too dependent on their current level of direct support.

One newsroom participant had explicit doubts about Automattic's ability to scale Newspack to a larger number of newsrooms while still providing the same value and service; specifically, they wondered how the technologists would be able to scale the level of personal attention that made the product worthwhile.

The technologists, too, were aware of the tension between being available to customize sites, and focusing on building a core product:

***“Some newsrooms have very specific tools they’re using or functionality they need on the site that has been an outlier. Getting the bare bones of a product that would work was the first priority and then pulling all these things in was second.”***

Another technologist emphasized that the ultimate goal was standardization:

***“One of our goals is to figure out the best practices of what each of these newsrooms are doing, and standardize the features and the workflows around those.”***

Given that newsroom participants saw in-person access to developers and the ability to request custom features as key factors in Newspack’s value, there is a potential misalignment with the Automattic team’s approach. Moving forward, it is important that Automattic has transparent communication with potential users about what continuing Newspack support entails.

### Cost

***“I would love if it was cheaper but I also understand that’s not something that’s on the table.”***

**The biggest area of dissatisfaction for newsroom participants was cost.** Several participants were frustrated at what they perceived as a lack of transparency during the pilot process, and a few still weren’t sure how much they would be paying (this was as of late February, and may have been resolved in the meantime). All newsrooms planned to apply to the Knight Foundation to support their subscription cost, and many wondered if there was any ability to negotiate Newspack’s price.

The Automattic technologists were aware of this issue, and noted that it was difficult to express a consistent value for all newsrooms because users had different levels of hosting knowledge and technological expertise.

***“If you’re used to normal cheap web hosting it seems extremely expensive. If you’re used to enterprise services like WordPress VIP it seems like a tremendous bargain.”***



They emphasized their desire to build a model that was sustainable both for Automattic and for the news publishers who used the product, and admitted that the current price -- \$1,000 or \$2,000 a month -- was identified as the point at which it would be sustainable for Automattic.

Newsroom participants understood the underlying logic for the price, but many were frankly skeptical that any small newsroom would have the budget for \$12,000-\$24,000 a year, even with continued access to WordPress developers and a good strategy for generating revenue.

Further, participants noted that even if the lowest-priced version of the product was out of reach, no newsroom could afford to turn down an offer of having their site rebuilt and put on an up-to-date Wordpress system. As one observed:

***“This was something a newsroom couldn’t turn down, but the initial rate that they quoted us after the pilot was completely inappropriate for a newsroom of our size. On the one hand newsrooms can’t turn down the opportunity, on the other hand they can’t afford what we’re talking about here.”***

Because of this predicament, some newsrooms said they had a Plan B wherein they would move the open source code to their own server if they could not work out payment details.<sup>2</sup>

**In the eyes of newsroom users, to justify the price of Newspack its developers and partners must demonstrate case studies or other documentation proving that small newsrooms, especially, have been able to generate enough revenue to allow for the proposed cost.** Particularly if there are no tech-savvy users in the newsroom, the product team should expect to demonstrate the product’s value with some form of dedicated tech support.

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<sup>2</sup> Having open source, portable code that is available to all regardless of whether they pay for WordPress' hosting is a key deliverable of the project. Source: [Newspack blog](#).

# Conclusions

**In the pilot program, Newspack established itself as a valuable tool for newsrooms, as well as a valuable method for building sites collaboratively. The challenge it faces is to scale the value found in that partnership, which goes beyond simply providing features.**

**Continue having users and developers partner closely at launch.**

The initial pilot cohort provided an excellent template for what one Automattic technologist described as “empathetic product development,” that is, development driven by a close and ongoing partnership between end users and product builders. The overall rate of satisfaction was very high for all participants.

**Consider how to address users’ concerns that the cost is simply too high and be prepared to demonstrate how the support justifies the price.**

It is important to show, not tell, the value of Newspack; case studies and actual numbers will be the best tool for proving the effectiveness of the product.

**Potential improvements going forward should focus on increasing transparency and providing deeper, more standardized education and documentation to broad groups of users.**

At scale, it is unlikely that every Newspack user will receive the face-to-face support which is currently necessary to use the product to its full potential. Resources are needed to help potential and new users understand the costs, the benefits, and the knowledge base to use the product effectively.

**When approaching potential Newspack users, take to heart the commonly heard observation that “Newspack isn’t for everyone.”** Potential users may want examples of the types of newsrooms it works best for, and want to know what the limitations of support will be, in addition to understanding the the specific features that will benefit their newsroom.

