

Going online hits reader time. **Raymond Snoddy** peruses a study

From digital dream to readership nightmare

By the time The Independent went online-only in 2016, the decision seemed inevitable. The internal cannibalisation by the newspaper had seen the latter's cut-price sales shoot far ahead of the Indy.

The £25 million sale of the Independent to Johnston Press was the equivalent of sending the Independent's print edition to Dignitas.

It all looked like good business for the long-suffering owners. Going online was portrayed as the next great step forward for The Independent, which had always been a bit of a trailblazer.

Suddenly, the shackles of print dropped away and, like alchemy, print losses were turned into gold and the world was The Independent's new oyster.

It was not so good for the nearly 100 journalists who lost their jobs nor for the 'lucky' survivors who faced pay cuts to work online – but, come on, this was the future.

Amid the talk of modernisation were a few warning voices. Doesn't most newspaper advertising revenue come from print and, surely, people spend more time with a printed edition than casually flicking online?

Wouldn't there be a cost in terms of impact and influence even though metamorphosing into a digital butterfly produced a profit of more than £2.5 million?

We now know, thanks to research by Neil Thurman and Richard Fletcher, that the transition to digital does indeed bear a cost, certainly in The Independent's UK market.

At first sight, a drop in The Independent's UK readership of one per cent seems trivial, unimportant. It compares, however, with a 25 per cent

average rise in readership of the other 12 British national newspapers that have maintained print editions.

The reason behind the disparity appears to be a fundamental difference in behaviour between reading print and online.

More than 50 per cent of The Independent's print readers read the title nearly every day, and for between 37 and 50 minutes.

Last year, The Independent's online readers spent on average less than six minutes a month with the brand. The drop in reading time in the UK is down by more than 70 per cent.

Now The Independent sees the US as its largest market. In its first post-print year, online traffic from outside the UK grew by 50 per cent, followed by a further 20 per cent rise last year.

At the very least, the research suggests, British publishers should be wary about chasing digital-only dreams and make far greater efforts to shore up their print editions before declaring the move to online inevitable.

Many see The Guardian as the next online-only candidate, and certainly its US reach is impressive following the Pulitzer prize-winning Snowden coverage.

Under Alan Rusbridger's editorship, the primacy given to digital, detailed lovingly in his memoirs, *Breaking News*, suggests digital-only is the direction of travel. After all, other revenues – including digital and membership – now outstrip print advertising.

It would be a mistake to pull the plug on print and, even if it worked for The Guardian – which

is more a set of beliefs than a newspaper – it would not necessarily work for newspapers in general.

Beware the sirens singing of a digital-only future. They could lure you onto the rocks of 70 per cent less reading time, at least in the UK.

Eventually, even pragmatic advertisers will notice such a difference.

Thurman N, Fletcher R (2018) Are newspapers heading toward post-print obscurity? A case study of the Independent's transition to online-only. Digital Journalism. <http://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2018.1504625>

“ Beware the sirens singing of a digital-only future. They could lure you onto the rocks of 70 per cent less reading time ”



For the latest updates from Raymond Snoddy on Twitter follow @raymondsnoddy