

Newspaper ad execs must target wealth of online readers overseas

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Media analysis

Any number of elements can conspire to influence a newspaper's agenda, but one factor consistently predominates: its view of its readership and what it wants. In the digital age, however, Fleet Street finds itself straddling shifting sands.

According to the latest figures from Nielsen//NetRatings, the media researcher, Guardian Unlimited and TimesOnline, the UK's two largest "quality" newspaper websites in terms of users, have more American than British readers. *The Daily Telegraph's* online offering is approaching a similar tipping point. *The Independent* is nearly twice as popular in the US as on its home turf. Perhaps most strikingly, the *Daily Mail*, commonly regarded as speaking to Middle England, has more than three times as many US readers online as British ones.

This is not a new phenomenon. At least 1,375 US daily newspapers are on the web. And yet, as long ago as 2005 (which counts as another age on the internet), the *Evening Standard* was the 31st most popular online source of news for Americans. London's local paper punched well above its weight in a field dominated by the American broadcast networks

NBC, CNN, ABC, CBS and Fox News.

It turns out, indeed, that Brits are in a minority among readers of Blighty's e-papers. In an article published this month in *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, Neil Thurman, a senior lecturer at City University, says that Americans make up an average of 36 per cent of the online audience for British news websites, with up to 39 per cent of readers coming from other overseas destinations. That means that as few as one in four readers hails from the UK.

A diaspora effect probably plays a part and has boosted traffic for sites outside the Anglo-American orbit. The *China Times* site gets as much as 70 per cent of its readership from overseas, and *The Jerusalem Post* as much as 90 per cent. However, a glance at reader comments attached to online stories on UK-based sites suggests that much of the readership is, genuinely, new and foreign.

There is an opportunity here for British papers to become lucrative, global brands. Online advertising can be targeted by region and companies such as Google are focused on developing localised advertising platforms — tricks that Fleet Street will surely pick up.

There is, however, a hefty snag: much of this traffic is of a "drive-by" nature. Online readers dip in and out of newspaper sites and are likely to

reach them through search engines or news aggregators such as the Drudge Report (a huge source of online readers for UK papers, but one that critics say reaps parasitic profits for itself). In short, online readers are chronically disloyal.

Thurman cites a study that found the average US newspaper website user visits it only two or three times a month. By comparison, those who stick with physical newspapers tend to read them every other day.

Still, British news executives, eyeing declining print advertising revenues at home, are intent on expanding overseas. Guardian

'Web-savvy papers tweak stories to gain prominence on Google'

Unlimited signalled its ambitions this week by advertising for two staff to turn around wire copy for Guardian America, "a new website tailored to US news and opinion and based in our Washington DC bureau". Outsourcing copy editing seems a rather drastic move. It is far easier to write "traffic bait" headlines in London, designed to grab the attention of Google's search engine and news service, the two most important sources of traffic — domestic and foreign — for UK newspaper sites. Yesterday's

most-searched-for terms on Google in the US were the "bridge collapse" in Minneapolis, a large recall of "Fisher Price" toys and "Ice Cube movies". That's a ready-made schedule for a US-focused homepage on a UK site.

Meanwhile, a clutch of web-savvy UK newspapers tweak their stories to gain optimum prominence on Google. Ultra-literal headlines, for example, work better with the algorithms that power the search engine than witty puns.

Of course, the ever-excitable Fleet Street needs to draw a line when playing to its newly scattered readership. The most popular search term on the Google News site last year was "Paris Hilton", a fact that will send a shiver through Britain's "broadsheet" faithful. But don't forget that a globalised news environment swells the audience for serious reporting and trivia alike. It also opens journalists' eyes. *The Sun's* online editor, for example, told Thurman: "We are not afraid to look at stories from abroad because we know the readership is there."

People are even known to pay subscriptions (whisper it) for high-quality financial news. Ms Hilton's detractors take solace: old media's most-prized properties — scoops and must-read comment — will, by definition, continue to drive traffic, wherever readers hail from.