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Save money, lose impact

Neil Thurman and Richard Fletcher

Ditching the print version has brought The Independent financial sustainability but reduced the attention it receives

Over the years there has been regular speculation about how long newspapers will remain in print. Microsoft's former CEO, Steve Ballmer, went so far as to predict that there would be no print newspapers or magazines by 2018. His prediction has ended up somewhat wide of the mark. Many newspapers' print editions are not in their best-ever shape, it is true, but most are still with us.

While many papers have slimmed down, shed staff, and even gone into the red, relatively few have gone online-only. Some have, including *The Christian Science Monitor*, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, and Finland's *Taloussanomati*.

One of the reasons newspapers are reluctant to ditch print is that it still delivers by far the largest part of their revenue – an average of 91.6 per cent worldwide, according to the 2017 World Press Trends report. However, with print circulations falling, some newspapers have been unable – or unwilling – to sustain the very high costs of print distribution.

In March 2016, the British *Independent* newspaper reached that point and went online-only. *The Independent* is an interesting case because it is the first national, general-interest daily newspaper to take this step, and on current trends, more will follow. It entered the UK market relatively late, in 1986, as a national daily. A Sunday edition followed four years later, and in 1992 the paper briefly surpassed the circulation of *The Times*.

However, despite a strong start, its fortunes began to change in the 1990s. Following an economic downturn and newspaper price war, it was taken over by an Irish media group.

A succession of new editors and relaunches followed including, in 2004, a change to tabloid format. Print readership continued to decline, however, and in 2010 it was sold to a Russian oligarch and his son for £1.

They quickly launched a sister newspaper – the *i* – and, for a number of years, supported a print business that was losing tens of millions of pounds a year. Although Alexander and Evgeny Lebedev have deep pockets, with print circulation down to less than 60,000, in March 2016, they decided to pull the plug on *The Independent* in print and go online-only. At the same time the sister newspaper was sold to a regional publisher.

There has been limited research into newspapers' transitions to online-only. Until now only two cases have been explored in depth. The first is the Finnish financial daily *Taloussanomat*, which went online-only in 2007. The second is *The Christian Science Monitor*, which dropped its daily print edition in 2009.

These studies focused mainly on institutional and professional change, looking, for example, at the increasing influence of audience metrics in these newly online-only newsrooms.

The case study of *Taloussanomat* did touch on audience change, but only to a limited extent. It showed that, although *Taloussanomat* saw some growth in online traffic post-print, its performance was not better than that of other newspapers that retained a print edition.

We have analysed changes in the net readership of *The Independent* post-print, interrogating its claim of "significant audience growth". We also looked at the change in attention attracted by *The Independent*. To do this, we calculated the time spent with the brand before and after it went online-only. This enabled us to examine whether, as media consultant Douglas McCabe has claimed, *The Independent* now has "reduced visibility".

Thirdly, we looked at how its international traffic has changed. Has *The Independent*, as its management hoped, taken advantage of its online-only status to achieve its global ambitions?

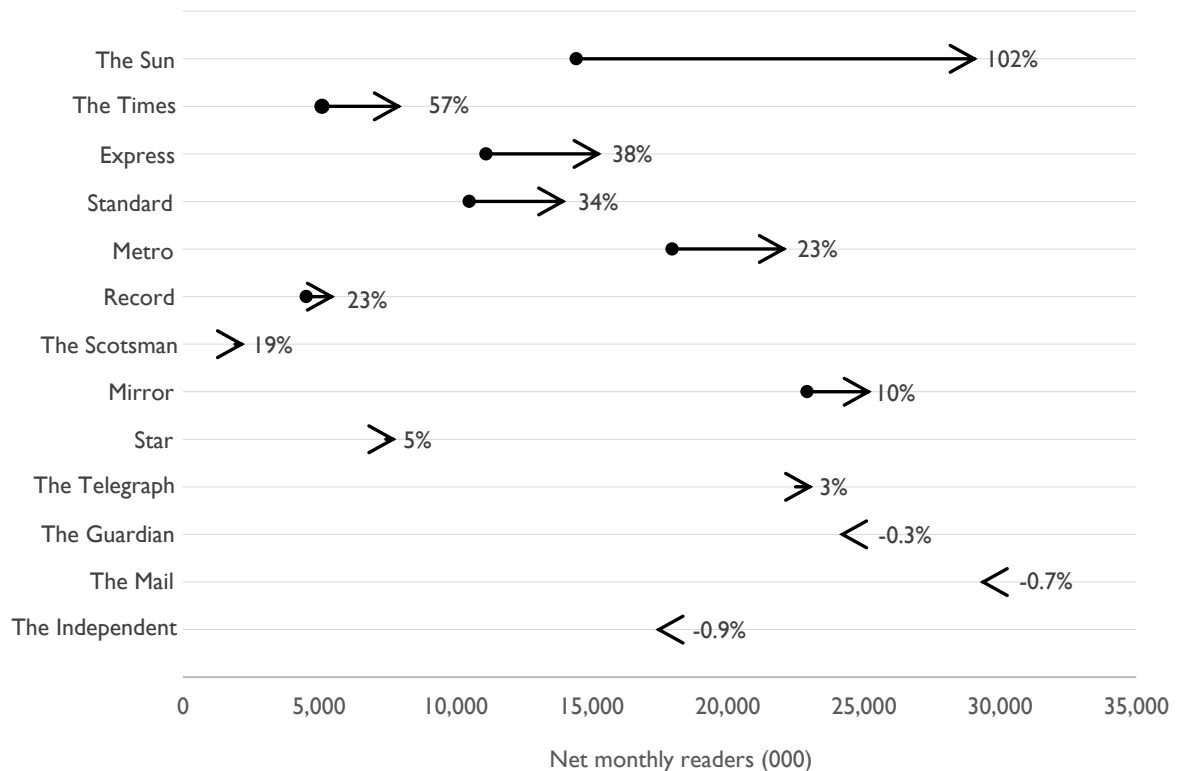
So, what did we find? Looking at changes in net monthly British readers, we see a small increase, of 8 per cent, in the 12 months after the move to online-only compared with the 12 months before. However, those gains were lost in the second year of *The Independent's* online-only existence, leaving the brand with slightly fewer readers than it had before it ditched its print editions.

Although the title has not, in the UK at least, achieved its aim of significant audience growth, perhaps, in a tough market, it has performed better than its competitors? After all, *The Independent's* owner, Evgeny Lebedev, said that by going online-only *The Independent* could become more flexible and digitally focused and better serve its online audience.

In fact, its dozen national newspaper competitors – which retained print editions – have all performed better, increasing their reach by an average of around 25 per cent, while *The Independent's* readership numbers have remained static post-print. *The Times*, *Daily Express*, *The Sun*, and *Evening Standard* performed particularly well, all recording above average increases – of between 34 and 102 per cent (see Figure 1).

What about the change in the time spent with *The Independent* by its British audience? Although there was a Brexit bump in June and July 2016 – as there was at other news sites – the time spent with *The Independent* online changed less than 1 per cent in the 12 months following the switch compared with the 12 months before.

FIGURE1: Changes in average net monthly British readers between the 12 months up to *The Independent's* move to online-only and the second year after



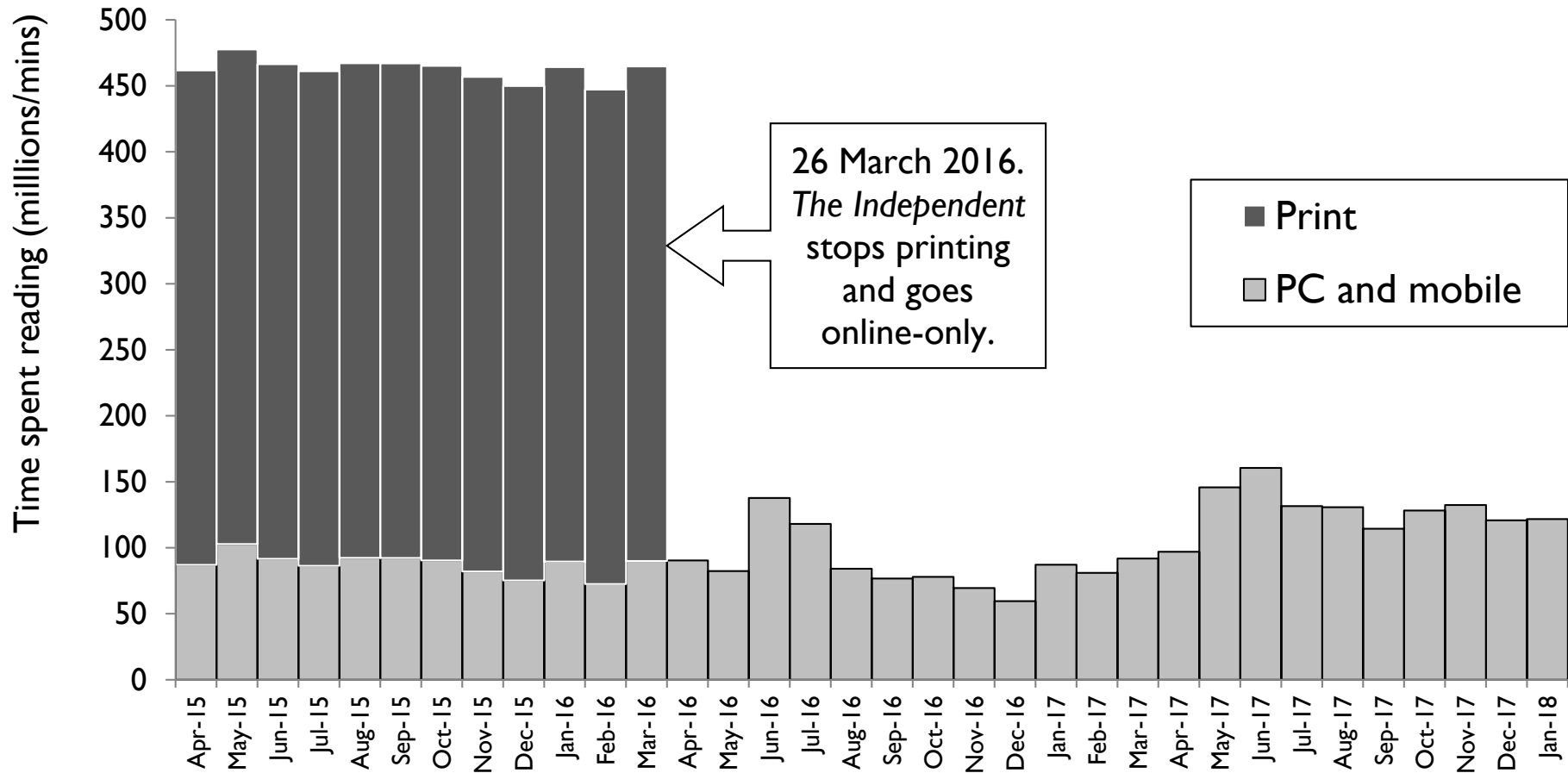
Source: NRS PADD and PAMCo. Data are for adults aged 15+. Monthly net readership is a 12-month average (for April 2015 to March 2016 and for April 2017 to March 2018) and includes PC, mobile, and (if applicable) print readers.

Although the second year of *The Independent's* online-only existence has seen some growth, total time spent with the brand remains more than 70 per cent lower than it was in the year leading up to the end of the title in print (see Figure 2).

The reason seems to be to do with how differently content is consumed in print and online. *The Independent's* print readers were much more frequent consumers than its online visitors are. More than half read the title almost every day. Compare that with online visitors who, in 2017, visited an average of just over twice a month.

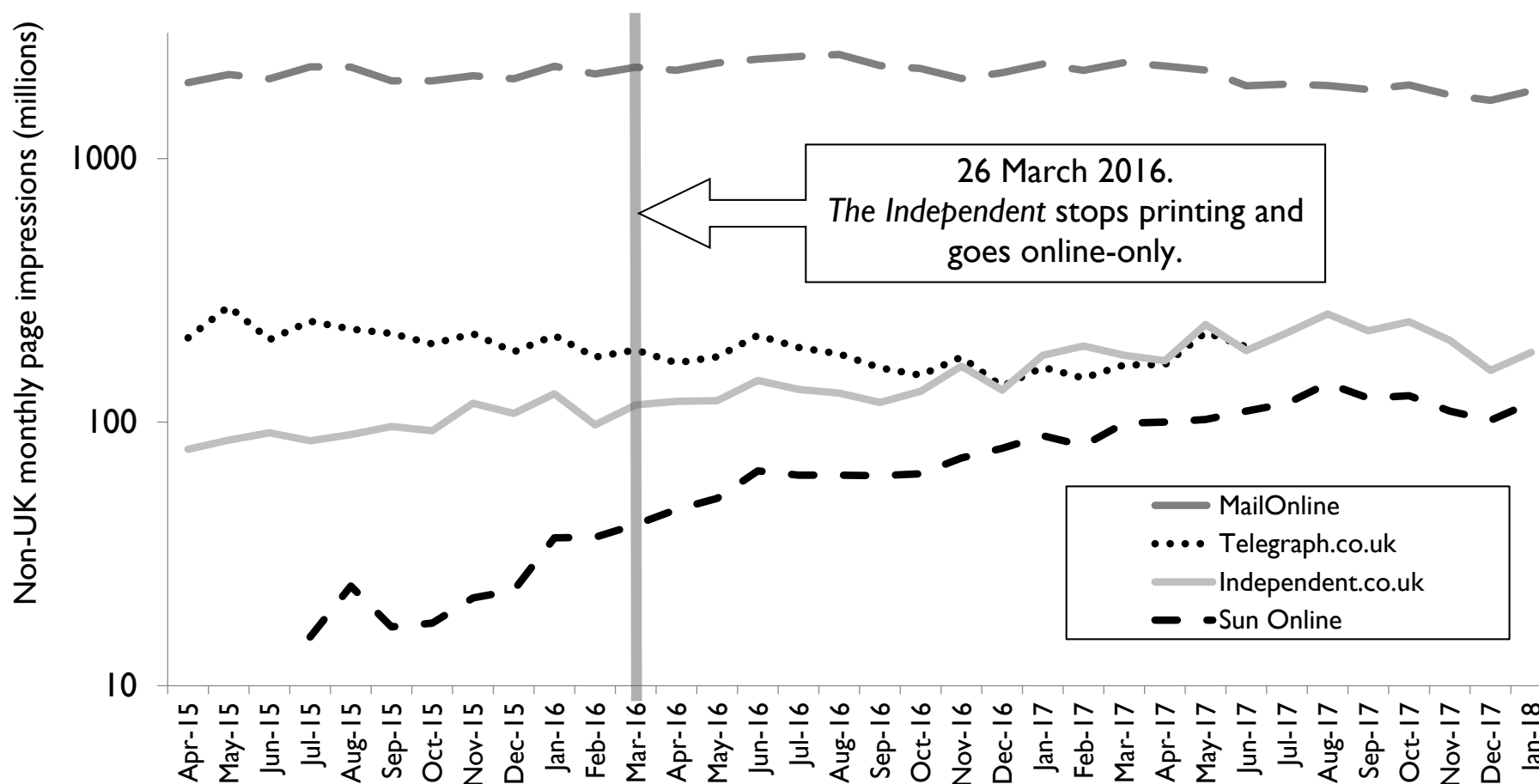
On top of that, the paper now finds itself in possession of a far more fleeting readership. For while its print readers were reading each edition for between 37 and 50 minutes, in 2017 *The Independent's* online readers spent an average of less than six minutes a month with the brand.

FIGURE 2: Time spent reading *The Independent* by its British audience



Source: NRS and comScore. Data are for readers aged 15+. Print reading time is a monthly average for the period April 2015 to March 2016. Online reading time includes both independent.co.uk and indy100/i100.

FIGURE 3: Page impressions from outside the UK



Source: ABC. Note: The vertical scale is logarithmic.

Looking at changes to international traffic at *The Independent* post-print, there is some better news for the title. Surprisingly, perhaps, after the transition there was more growth – about 50 per cent in the first year and a further 20 per cent or so in the second – in online traffic from overseas than from the paper's home market, despite the fact that the print product was already unavailable overseas (see Figure 3).

So, is this evidence that, as the company hoped, they have taken advantage of their new online-only status to achieve their global ambitions?

Initially *The Independent* rode the wave of interest in US politics from its overseas online readers more successfully than some of its competitors, such as *The Telegraph*. However, we believe this may be due to *The Independent's* historically strong following in the US and its anti-Trump stance, which is likely to have been more successful than the ambiguous position of the *Telegraph* in the extremely polarised US media market.

So where did *The Independent's* print readers go? Was their loyalty more to print than to the brand?

Given that net readership numbers did not, initially, fall, it is possible that some of the former print readers did move to the online *Independent*. But given that the time spent with the digital editions barely changed post-print, any who did switch appear not to be using the brand's digital products with anything like the same intensity as they used its print editions.

Did *The Independent's* print readers switch to other print newspapers? We might look for sudden increases in the print readerships of other papers as a clue. A seemingly likely candidate would be *The Independent's* sister paper, the *i*, but the *i* actually saw a fall in readers in the 12 months following the transition, though that fall, it is true, may have been made smaller than it would otherwise have been by some gathering in of those cast adrift by the print closure.

The only papers that saw increases in the period were *The Express* and *The Guardian*, the latter of which put on 89,000 print readers. It seems unlikely that readers would have moved to the *Express*, given its very different editorial stance and readership.

More likely is a move to *The Guardian*, whose print readers are of a similar age and social grade, though the fact that *The Guardian* also saw an increase in print readership (of 48,000) in the 12 months prior to *The Independent's* transition complicates speculation about where *The Independent's* print readers have ended up.

Following *The Independent's* transition to online-only its net readership has remained static, along with some of its broadsheet and middle-market competitors like *The Guardian*, the *Telegraph*, and the *Mail*. If reach were all that mattered, going

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online-only might make sense. It has allowed *The Independent* to make huge savings in distribution costs and become profitable, just.

However, the newspaper business has always been about more than reach. *The Independent's* former editor, Amol Rajan, now the BBC's media editor, suggests it is all about influence, something he thinks print delivers to a unique degree, although he can't quite fathom why.

We'd like to suggest that influence is generated partly through the attention a newspaper brand can attract. By going online-only, *The Independent* has decimated the attention it receives. It is now a thing more glanced at, it seems, than gorged on. It has sustainability but less centrality. For this reason we believe that most newspapers will persevere with print for as long as their paymasters permit.

The full study, Are newspapers heading towards post-print obscurity? A case study of The Independent's transition to online-only is published in the international, peer-reviewed journal Digital Journalism.