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The globalisation of journalism online: A transatlantic study of news websites and their international readers

Some British news websites are attracting larger audiences than their American competitors in US regional and national markets. At the British news websites studied, Americans made up an average of 36 per cent of the total audience with up to another 39 per cent of readers from countries other than the US. Visibility on portals like the *Drudge Report* and on indexes such as *Google News* brings considerable international traffic but is partly dependent on particular genres of story and fast publication times. Few news websites are willing to disclose breakdowns of their large numbers of international readers fearing a negative reaction from domestic advertisers. Some see little value in international readers—some of whom read 3–4 times fewer pages than their domestic counterparts. Others are actively selling advertising targeted at their international audience and even claiming their presence is beginning to change their news agenda.

Keywords: online journalism, international readers, globalisation, British news websites, user metrics

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Introduction

The London *Times*' 1960s' advertising slogan—'Top People Read the Times'—was indicative of the confidence newspapers used to have in the social homogeny of their readers. When the geographical reach of newspapers was defined by the limitations of printing technology and distribution mechanisms, a culture in which journalists and advertisers targeted narrow 'readerships' made perfect sense. Peter Jay's sarcastic dismissal of a subeditor's query about the complexity of an article written while he was *The Times*' economics editor—"I told him I was writing for three people in England and he wasn't one of them"—represents a way of thinking now challenged by the rapid diversification in readership that the World Wide Web is bringing (Rusbridger, 2000). A majority of *TimesOnline.co.uk*'s audience now comes from outside the UK and it has become one of the top thirty online news destinations for American readers. It is no surprise then that the company believes it is the "right time to extend our reach overseas" (Times Online, 2004). Are reversals like this ushering in a new era of globalised news? This study of British news websites in the American market aims to provide some answers and presents empirical data for future research.

Globalisation has been a significant theme in new media discourses. John Pavlik (in Silverstone, 1999: 58) claimed that "audiences are rapidly shifting from almost exclusively local to communities of interest that transcend geographic and political

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boundaries". Philip Seib (2001: 100) proposed that "'distance' may turn out to be meaningless in the era of cybercommunication". Vin Crosbie (1998) concurred, envisioning a future where "distance disappears. Geography ceases to be a factor, except for language and culture." For Michael McKinley (2001: 155) "the web offers unique opportunities to create a new form of interactive communication within the global community". According to Mike Gasher and Sandra Gabriele (2004: 312) these "death-of-distance" arguments characterize "much of the literature on computer-mediated communication".

The implications for journalism are clear. As Pablo Boczkowski (2004: 64) suggests, online, journalism need no longer be confined by the distribution costs that made newspapers primarily a local artefact, rather it can go "global"; and it is doing just this. Publishers have responded to the growth of Internet use by launching thousands of sites on the World Wide Web. By July 2005 at least 1,375 North American daily newspapers were online (Newspaper Association of America, 2005) and the Newspaper Society (2005) listed 713 regional newspaper websites in the UK.

That the news media have adopted technologies that facilitate global distribution raises interesting questions: to what extent, for what reasons and with what mechanisms are regional and national news publishers appealing, on the Web, to the global audience the Internet allows? And could the presence of the international reader be changing the commercial and editorial practices of news organisations?

With almost infinite combinations of news websites and audiences across international boundaries, for the purposes of this study it was decided to concentrate on British news

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websites and, in particular, their American audience. Qualitative data came from research interviews conducted with senior editorial personnel representing nine major British news websites[1]; and quantitative data from one of the two major commercial research companies that provide Internet audience measurement. The results are described in three parts:

Part (I) presents quantitative data on the size and significance of the international audience for news online, focusing on the American audience for British news websites.

Part (II) looks at how international readers find their way to UK-based online news providers; at the characteristics of the stories they read; and suggests why some sites are significantly more successful at attracting and retaining readers from other countries.

Part (III) examines the economic implications of international readers, combining qualitative and quantitative data to investigate the advertising market, cannibalisation, subscription charges and reader engagement.

(I) The size and significance of news websites' international audience

Technologically it is a given that the web provides the news media with access to an international audience, but building a site does not necessarily mean that the world will beat a path to your door. The number of international readers varies considerably from region to region and publication to publication. With Americans making up nearly a quarter of the global Internet audience (Internetworldstats, 2005) it is unsurprising that British news websites attract more international readers than their American counterparts—they can draw on the large, English-speaking, technologically advanced

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Internet audience that exists in the US. The UK's *Guardian* newspaper receives 78 per cent of its web readers from overseas (Mayes, 2004), compared to 30 per cent for *The New York Times* and 17 per cent for *The Washington Post* (New York Times, 2005; Tedeschi, 2004). Outside the Anglo-American milieu, sites such as *The China Times* (60–70 per cent) and *The Jerusalem Post* (90 per cent) find that a majority of readers come from overseas (Chi and Sylvie, 2001; Abbey, 2003), although these publications may not be typical, existing, in part, to provide information for the large Chinese and Jewish Diaspora.

With the exception of the publications already mentioned, most mainstream news websites do not to publish information about their international readers. Of the ten British news sites studied, only two—the *BBC News* website (Deverell, 2004a) and the *Guardian.co.uk* (Mayes, 2004)—publish, albeit limited, geographical breakdowns of their readers' locations.

None of the other sites studied published information about the size and composition of their international audience. This reticence to disclose geographical demographics is common amongst the large online news providers in the English-speaking world. In the media packs they provide to advertisers, *The Houston Chronicle*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *MSNBC.com* and *The Australian* give the number of readers their websites attract, their age, gender, annual income, education and online shopping behaviour but make no mention of geographical distribution. A belief that providing such information could jeopardise sites' relationships with their existing advertisers is part of the explanation as Richard Burton (2004), the editor of the UK's *Telegraph.co.uk* explained: "A lot of the

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blue-chip clients that we deal with are very focused on where their demographics are. . . . I don't think that it is going to go down well if we tell them we've got two million people reading us everyday from Washington".[2]

In the relatively recent past—when British newspaper executives regarded their online operations as a "way of building community", "a marketing arm of the newspaper" or as a way of escaping an "old fashioned, fuddy-duddy image" (see Thurman, 2005: 227)—they were more likely to be open about their international audience. For example, in 1998 the London *Times* and *Sunday Times* websites provided four months' worth of user data and personal details of their, at that time, million or so subscribers to researchers from City University, London. Nicholas (et. al, 2000) showed that 26 per cent of registered users were from the US, 43 per cent from the UK and 31 per cent from other countries. In the years following this study news organizations have invested heavily in their online operations—the *Guardian.co.uk*'s staff numbers rose from thirty in 1998–9 to 120 in 2002 (Thurman, 2005: 227)—and many claim to be approaching profitability. As a result, they are now more guarded with information that could be regarded as commercially sensitive.

As an alternative to the limited and often out-of-date figures that publications themselves and trade bodies such as ABC Electronic provide, a number of commercial research organisations collect data on the size and composition of Internet audiences. For this study data was acquired from Nielsen//Netratings' US panel, which consists of 149,516 individuals, randomly selected in an attempt to mirror Americans' use of the Internet at home and work.

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The data was analysed to find:

1. The significance of British news websites in the largest overseas market, the US.

2. The proportion of British news websites' total audience that US readers make up.

3. Differences in usage patterns of international, US and domestic (UK) readers.

4. The sources of US visitors to British news websites.

Competing in international markets

The US online news market is crowded. Over 1,300 domestic daily newspapers have a web presence; and the sites of the American broadcast networks—*NBC*, *CNN*, *ABC*, *CBS* and *Fox News*—are five of the eight most visited destinations for Americans reading news online. In this competitive market place, British news sites such as *BBC News* and *Guardian.co.uk* attract significant numbers of US unique users: at the time of this study they were, respectively, seventh and fourteenth in popularity (see **table 1**). Moving further down the list, London's *Times* (at number 27) and *Evening Standard* (at number 31) and the British broadsheet *Independent* (at number 35) all have a notable presence in the US market.

That *BBC News* is able to attract more American users on a monthly basis than the sites of US national domestic brands like *USA Today*, *Fox News* and *The Wall Street Journal* is significant. The data also revealed that a British regional newspaper, the *The Evening Standard* (which serves London), has more American visitors than a large number of US-based local and regional titles including *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, *The South Florida Sun-Sentinel* and the *Star Tribune* (serving Minneapolis-St. Paul).

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TABLE 1
US unique users of news websites worldwide *(000/month)*

Rank	Website	Unique users (US)
1	MSNBC	23,598
2	CNN	20,783
3	The New York Times	10,476
4	The Washington Post	6,639
5	ABC News	6,107
6	CBS News	5,682
7	**BBC News***	**5,614**
8	Fox News	5,498
10	USA Today	3,842
11	San Francisco Chronicle	3,578
12	Los Angeles Times	3,325
14	**The Guardian***	**2,985**
16	Time Magazine	2,880
18	Wall Street Journal	2,465
21	The Houston Chronicle	2,210
24	Chicago Tribune	1,895
27	**The Times***	**1,577**
30	The Miami Herald	1,451
31	**Evening Standard***	**1,447**
32	Seattle Post-Intelligencer	1,405
33	South Florida Sun-Sentinel	1,391
34	Star Tribune	1,387
35	**Independent***	**1,371**

Note: The data is for April 2005 and records both home and work use. 'Rank' denotes websites' position in Nielsen//Netratings' *News and Information* > *Current events and global news* category (with the addition of the Wall Street Journal, which is categorized differently).
*** UK based website.**
Source: Nielsen//Netratings (2005).

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The international reader in proportion

For online news publications interested in international markets, knowing how well their sites do relative to domestic titles overseas is only part of the picture. The proportion of international to home readers is important, informing decisions about subscription, advertising and content.[3]

Previous research on US regional newspapers found that, online, the "long-distance" market accounted for about 34 per cent of readers (Chyi and Sylvie, 2001: 231). For the national British news sites in this study the "long-distance" market is international and is considerably more significant as a proportion of the whole.

Based on the data acquired from Nielsen//Netratings and a variety of other sources, **table 2** shows the significance of US unique users to British news sites as a proportion of their total readership. Eight of the ten sites received between 28–42 per cent of their visitors from the US and the average for all sites was 36 per cent. Two sites fell outside this relatively narrow band: The *Independent.co.uk,* which receives almost three-quarters of its visitors from the US and the *DailyMail.co.uk* at 11 per cent.

US users make up the majority of sites' international readers and for comparative purposes formed the basis of this study. They are of course not the only source of international visits. Published data shows that 39 per cent of the *Guardian.co.uk*'s unique users are from countries other than the US (Mayes, 2004), compared to 28 per cent for *theSun.co.uk* (Picton, 2005b) and up to 18 per cent for *BBC News* (Deverell, 2004a; Nixon, 2005a; Neilsen//Netratings, 2005).

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TABLE 2
Proportion of unique users from the US at selected British news websites

Publication	US unique users as a percentage of total unique users
Independent.co.uk[a]	73%
TheSun.co.uk[b]	42%
TimesOnline.co.uk[c]	41%
Ft.com[d]	39%
Guardian.co.uk[e]	39% *
Scotsman.com[f]	36%
ThisisLondon.co.uk[g]	33%
News.bbc.co.uk[h]	28%
Telegraph.co.uk[I]	28%
DailyMail.co.uk[j]	11%

Note: Where two or three sources are given, the proportion of US visitors was calculated by dividing Nielsen//Netratings' projection of the absolute number of US unique users by the total number of unique users the site received, a figure provided by the other source or sources listed.
* MacArthur (2004) gives the *Guardian's* US readership as 44%.
Sources:
a. Nielsen//Netratings (2005) and Directorym (2005), September 2004.
b. Picton (2005), November 2004.
c. Bale (2005), November 2004.
d. Nielsen//Netratings (2005) and Rohumaa (2005), December 2004.
e. Mayes (2004), June 2004.
f. Nielsen//Netratings (2005) and Kirkpatrick (2005), January 2005.
g. Nielsen//Netratings (2005) and Anm.co.uk (2005b), January 2005.
h. Nielsen//Netratings (2005) and Deverell (2004a), November 2003.
i. Chudha (2005), September 2004.
j. Nielsen//Netratings (2005) and Anm.co.uk (2005a), December 2004.

Page consumption

The data obtained for this study also allowed a comparison to be made between international, US and domestic readers' monthly page impressions. The data presented in **table 3** shows that across a selection of British news sites, when taken together, domestic (UK) and international users view an average of 12 pages per month. US readers view 3 times fewer pages—just 4 in an average month. In comparison, domestic readers of the

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Guardian.co.uk average 17.5 page views per month (Guardian, 2005). The reasons for and the implications of the relatively small number of pages viewed by international readers are examined in the next and final sections of this paper.

TABLE 3
Comparing the page impressions of all users with those of US users of selected British news websites

	Average page impressions per month for each unique user	
Publication	**All readers**	**US readers[a]**
News.bbc.co.uk	26.60 [b]	8.46
Telegraph.co.uk	10.50 [c]	6.84
TheSun.co.uk	14–24 [d]	6.58*
Guardian.co.uk	10.90 [e]	4.90
FT.com	12.94 [f]	4.89
TimesOnline.co.uk	8.82 [g]	2.99
Independent.co.uk	13.50 [h]	2.76
ThisisLondon.co.uk	7.27 [I]	1.82
Scotsman.com	6.65 [j]	1.78
DailyMail.co.uk	15.52 [k]	—

* Excludes traffic from *Page3.com* and *Dreamteamfc.com*.
Sources:
a. Nielsen//Netratings (2005)
b. Nixon (2005a), average January–May 2005.
c. Chudha (2005), data is for September 2004.
d. Estimate. Taken together *theSun.co.uk*, *Page.com* and *Dreamteamfc.com* deliver 26 pages per user per month (Picton 2005). It is estimated that, on its own, *theSun.co.uk* serves between 14–24 pages per user per month. Pete Picton (2005a) confirmed that "in terms of page consumption [number of page impressions per unique visitor], *Sun Online* is on a par with the *BBC News website*".
e. Guardian (2005), data is for January 2005.
f. Rohumaa (2005), data is for December 2004.
g. Bale (2005), data is for November 2004.
h. King (2005) and Directorym (2005), data is for September 2004.
i. Anm.co.uk (2005b), data is for November 2004.
j. Kirkpatrick (2005), data is for January 2005.
k. Anm.co.uk (2005a), data is for November 2004.

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(II) Finding foreign news sites: the role and influence of portals and indexes

Despite being a relatively recent entrant to the newspaper market (launching in 1986) and having the smallest circulation of all Britain's 'quality' dailies, *The Independent*'s website has a very large proportion of US readers—73 per cent (Nielsen//Netratings, 2005)—at least 31 per cent higher than any of its rivals. Why US readers patronise some UK news sites, such as the *Independent.co.uk*, more than others is an interesting question. This study suggests an important mechanism for achieving popularity is the visibility sites have on manually-aggregated news portals and automatically-generated news indexes, which favour certain types of stories and, as a result, certain publications over others. What's more, a majority of British news sites' US traffic is referred[4] by a small number of portals and indexes and, as a result, some unlikely dependencies have developed.

Manually-aggregated news portals

Manually-aggregated news portals, such as *Drudgereport.com* and *Fark.com* publish links to stories in other publications and are an important source of international visitors for British news sites. *Drudgereport.com* alone refers 25 per cent of the US visitors to the British news websites studied (see **figure 1**). The significance of *Drudge* was confirmed by the journalists and executives interviewed for this study. The editor of the

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Independent.co.uk had the impression that "the way half of America found out about us is *Drudge*" (King, 2004). The editorial director of *TimesOnline.co.uk* who had "been following *Drudge* for six years" was "surprised how effective it still is in getting reach like this" (Bale, 2004). Both the *FT.com* and *Scotsman.com* have noticed large traffic spikes when *Drudgereport.com* linked to a story of theirs. The *Telegraph.co.uk* had "a million hits on one story" courtesy of the aggregator. Their service was "absolutely overwhelmed" (Burton, 2004).

The editorial leaning and influence of the *Drudgereport.com* is exemplified by the fact that for the *TimesOnline.co.uk* their "most read story this year was a story about an x-ray machine at Heathrow airport which was showing naked images of people" (Bale, 2004). That single story, "Plane passengers shocked by their x-ray scans" (Gadher, 2004), accounted for 30 per cent of their US traffic in November 2004. Most of that traffic came via *Drudgereport.com* (Nielsen//Netratings, 2005), which temporarily promoted a link to the story to the top of its front page.

For the British news sites studied, after *Drudgereport.com*, *Fark.com* was the most significant news portal referring about 3 per cent of British sites' US traffic—see **figure 1**. *TheSun.co.uk*'s editor described *Fark.com* as being "in the spirit of the *Sun*" (Picton, 2004). The editor of *Scotman.com* was more direct, describing it as "a puerile site that collects weird news".

According to the editor of *Independent.co.uk*, the popularity of sites like *Fark.com* and *Drudgereport.com* has been a function of the relatively narrow range of opinion available in the mainstream US press: "In America there are very few outlets like them". King

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(2004) called them “sceptical, well independently minded may be putting it too weakly, sceptical to hostile probably”.

It is perhaps surprising that the *Drudgereport.com*—whose founder and editor Matt Drudge calls his own politics “libertarian” and has been described as having a “dedicated right-of-center following” (Pachter, 2003)—was seen by the left-of-centre *Independent.co.uk* as “matching our image”. For *Independent.co.uk* losing the hits that come their way from *Drudgereport.com* would, their editor said, be “a bit of a pain” (King, 2004).

Although sites such as the *Independent.co.uk* value the traffic that manually-aggregated news portals such as *Drudgereport.com* bring, its nature—the *Scotsman.com’s* editor called it “drive-by” (Kirkpatrick, 2004)—is such that sites have begun to question whether these aggregators are parasites rather than the symbionts they previously assumed them to be. *Drudgereport.com* and *Fark.com* have grown large by feeding off the stories their hosts provide. Respectively they receive 150 million (Intermarkets, 2005) and 33 million (Fark, 2005) page impressions per month and are as or more popular than many of the publications they aggregate content from. This fact was not lost on the syndication department of the *TimesOnline.co.uk* who have had “issues” with at least one aggregator, *Moreover.com*, “about how they [are] redistributing [our content] for other customers” (Bale, 2004).

As a source of international visitors a solid reputation is more attractive and sustainable than the whimsical tastes of Matt Drudge and Drew Curtis (editor of *Fark.com*). The *Independent.co.uk* claimed to have built just such a reputation in the US

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market, saying they were “a source that can be trusted by those people who are very unhappy with the American press” (King, 2004).

International and in particular *US* readers are interested in the British view on American and international political issues, a trend that was particularly evident in 2004 with a US presidential election and continuing conflict in Iraq. At the *Independent.co.uk* stories that were “questioning of the Bush administration over the Iraq war” put them “into meltdown” (King, 2004). The front-page story published immediately after the 2004 US presidential election results, ‘Four More Years’ (“Four More Years,” 2004), “was well up there with the greatest ever record breakers” because, according to the editor, its “despairing tone” caught the mood of a significant number of potential readers. In fact in the run up to the 2004 US presidential election “anything that could be seen as not showing the Bush administration in a good light” did very well with the *Independent.co.uk*’s US readers (King, 2004).

At *TimesOnline.co.uk* a story on French President Jacques Chirac commenting on Tony Blair’s support for George Bush during the second Iraq war, “Backing Bush has won you nothing, Chirac tells Britain” (Bremner and Webster, 2004), was very popular with US readers, accounting for 15 per cent of *TimesOnline.co.uk*’s US readers in November 2004 (Nielsen//Netratings, 2005).

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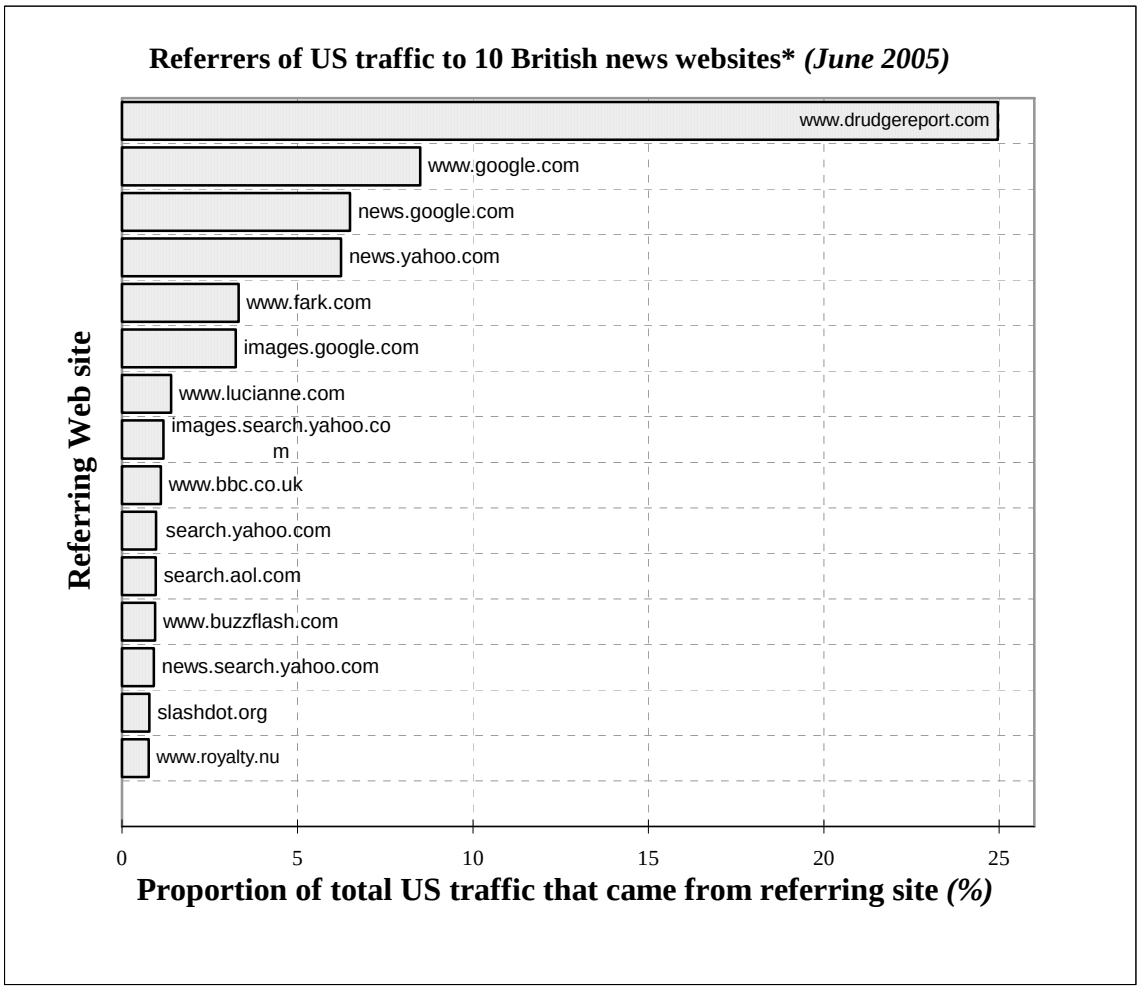
FIGURE 1



* The sites were: *News.bbc.co.uk, Independent.co.uk, ThisisLondon.co.uk, DailyMail.co.uk, TimesOnline.co.uk, theSun.co.uk, Telegraph.co.uk, Guardian.co.uk, Scotsman.com* and *FT.com*.

***Source*: Nielsen//Netratings (2005)**

Automated news indexes

Alongside manually-aggregated news portals, this study revealed that automatically-generated news indexes, particularly *Google News*, were a significant source of international readers. For the *Scotsman.com*, *Google* was "certainly the biggest referrer"

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(Kirkpatrick, 2004). The *TimesOnline.co.uk* reported that "after people's bookmarks, it is still the biggest" (Bale, 2004). When the *FT.com* changed their publishing system, for a short period their content wasn't listed in *Google* searches. This had a "noticeable impact on hits" (Corrigan, 2004).[5] The quantitative data in **figure 1** shows that the main *Google* search engine, *www.google.com*, refers about 8 per cent of the US traffic to British news websites, while *Google*'s separate news service, *news.google.com*, refers 7 per cent.

As a source of visitors from both home and overseas, *Google News* presents an interesting journalistic paradox. There is an indirect link between success on *Google News* and a practice most journalists view, at best, as a stopgap measure—the use of copy straight from wire services. The *Scotsman.com*, in common with *ThisisLondon.co.uk* and the *DailyMail.co.uk*, runs a Press Association[6] or PA feed on their site. For the editor, this feed means that they can carry breaking news without "diverting precious resources to re-write . . . PA". His journalists can instead work on "comment pieces or targeted specials on things like elections where we'll do a micro site" (Kirkpatrick, 2004). As well as having a benefit in terms of resource management, their PA feed allows the *Scotsman.com* to publish breaking news stories very quickly. Take, for example, a story about the British Prime Minister's wife, Cherie Blair—"Cherie causes controversy after attack on Bush" (Kirkup, 2004)—that appeared on *Scotsman.com* on or before 1 November 2004. The editor confirmed it "would have been one of the first up [on the web]". The speed with which their PA feed allows stories like this to be published helps contribute to the *Scotsman.com*'s remarkable success on *Google News*, and the

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consequent volume of referrals it receives (the Cherie Blair story was viewed 210,000 times—their second most popular story of 2004).

Taking *Google News*' UK page on 12 December 2004 (Google News, 2004), of the 91 outbound links, 16 were to the *Scotsman.com*, 17 per cent of the total. By comparison *BBC News* had 8, *Telegraph.co.uk* 7, *Independent.co.uk* 5, *Guardian.co.uk* and *TimesOnline.co.uk* 3, *ThisisLondon.co.uk* 2 and *FT.com* 1. A contributory factor is *Google News*' algorithm, which puts a very heavy reliance on the latest news story. The creator of *Google News*, Krishna Bharat, calls this attribute "freshness". "In the *Google News* service . . . if a story is fresh and had caused considerable original reporting to be generated it is considered important" (Bharat, 2003: 9). Sites like *Scotsman.com*, which use feeds from news agencies such as *PA* or *Reuters* who are often first to market with a given story, are favoured. For this reason some news executives criticised the relevance of *Google News'* story selection and presentation:

> You sometimes get very strange things where the *Kansas Evening Gazette* will give you an update on the Northern Ireland peace process today simply because it published three minutes ago and it doesn't link you to the *BBC News* website or the British *Times* newspaper web site, which may have much more detail and better explanation of the story. (Deverell, 2004b)

(III) The economics of the international reader: tensions and strategies

Whether they find their way to British news sites via news portals, indexes or their own bookmarks, there is no doubt that international readers are doing so in significant

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numbers. So, is their presence having any effect on commercial and editorial practices? This study revealed a range of attitudes and approaches.

On the one hand two News International titles, the *theSun.co.uk* and *TimesOnline.co.uk,* saw considerable potential in their international audience. *TimesOnline.co.uk* believed that it was the "right time to extend our reach overseas" (Times Online, 2004), while *TheSun.co.uk*'s editor commented that "five years ago you couldn't get [the *Sun*] anywhere [other than the UK] and now you can and it is up to us to earn money out of those people. Now we can do it with things like *Dreamteamfc.com*, charging for content".

On the other hand Avril Williams (2004), editorial director of Associated New Media who publish the *Daily Mail* website and *ThisisLondon.co.uk,* saw little value in having any international readers. One of her titles, *ThisisLondon.co.uk,* gets nearly one third of its readers from the US, a proportion she believed to be "too much" and "would far rather they had a hundred per cent UK audience". Citing the *Guardian.co.uk*'s international readership of more than 70 per cent, she didn't believe that they or "any UK web publisher, has found a way of commercialising" the international reader, and added that "you are just paying an awful lot of bandwidth and an awful lot of server costs to serve those people".

Although some executives like Williams would prefer a small or non-existent international audience there is inevitability to their presence. A site like the *DailyMail.co.uk*, which has an unusually low proportion of US readers (about 11 per cent), does so because it is a relatively recent entrant to the online news market.

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Launched in June 2004 it has not yet come to the attention of the large audience that exists, particularly in America, for British news websites. The percentage of US readers at *DailyMail.co.uk* started low but has grown rapidly—ten times between May 2004 and May 2005—and almost certainly will continue to do so (Nielsen//Netratings, 2005). The longer established stable-mate of *DailyMail.co.uk*, *ThisisLondon.co.uk*, receives a third of its readers from the US and compared to the *DailyMail.co.uk* has less international appeal: as its title suggests much of its content is London related.

Interesting advertisers in international readers

In the face of a large and growing international readership, editors interviewed for this study had mixed feelings about whether it would be possible to sell advertising to this audience. The *TimesOnline.co.uk*'s decision, in October 2004, to lift subscription charges for international readers was a way of giving their "advertisers a chance to reach audiences outside the UK more effectively" (Times Online, 2004).

For the *Scotsman.com*, having international readers:

> is important for some advertisers. For instance whisky brands are trying to push hard in the States at the moment and it doesn't exactly hurt us that we have a very, very strong Scottish identity. For some people in the United States a strong Scottish identity matters and these people are trying to sell something that is Scottish in the United States and we are aware of them and try to do business with them. (Kirkpatrick, 2004)

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Indeed the *Scotsman.com*, following the success of their 'haggis hunt' game, were planning to launch premium services in 2005, which would "certainly have an eye to the US market" (Kirkpatrick, 2004).

One publication that has had some commercial success with international readers is *FT.com*. As an international brand with a 24-hour a day news operation and news desks in Hong Kong, New York and London, it is unsurprising that they have managed to sell "quite a lot of global advertising" (Corrigan, 2004). They have online advertising sales staff in London, Hong Kong and New York, from where online advertising is coordinated.

Not all editors were so optimistic. For Richard Burton at the *Telegraph.co.uk*, the idea of "building a bigger foreign sale" would make his readers "very unimpressed." He felt that for "a lot of the blue-chip [advertisers] that we deal with" it is not "going to go down well if we tell them we've got two million people reading us everyday from Washington".[7] However he did leave the door open if media buyers convinced advertisers that a publication with a global reach could get their message across "simultaneously throughout all times zones" (Burton, 2004).

Although *theSun.co.uk* was relatively upbeat about the commercial potential of the international reader they admitted that the two globally targeted advertising campaigns that they had won were "small nibblings". Their editor believed that a global advertising market existed and was "not going to go away", but wanted to concentrate on "UK sales at the moment, investing a bit more to sell to global brands" at a later date. He did not doubt that "the potential is great" and looked forward to whether and when it might be

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possible to talk about *The Sun* as "a world newspaper", "maybe that is the next step for us, to think in those terms" (Picton, 2004).

It maybe surprising that a paper that whose coverage has been called "xenophobic" (Greenslade, 2002) was thinking in these terms, but the global readership *theSun.co.uk* has may already be changing their news values:

> With our breaking news it seems to have recently developed slightly more of a global feel. I don't think it is intentional it is just that we are not afraid to look at stories from abroad because we know that the readership is there whereas the paper is probably thinking more of the UK. (Picton, 2004)

Such a change would contradict other studies, which have shown that websites are unlikely to change their news agendas in response to increasingly far-flung audiences. Kevin Barnhurst (2002: 477) found that newspaper stories in the US "differ very little online from those printed in the originating newspapers", and although Mike Gasher and Sandra Gabriele (2004: 311) found that *The Montreal Gazette*'s website "carried far more international news items than its hard-copy edition", this distinction was largely explained by the website's very heavy reliance on wire-service copy and its emphasis on sports news.

Subscription charges: contrasting strategies

Whether or not to raise a subscription barrier to international readers (as well as those from the domestic market) is an important commercial consideration for news sites. Amongst the sites studied, the *FT.com* and *TimesOnline.co.uk* have been notable for their

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experimentation with charging, the effects of which are clear in the data acquired for this study.

Between July 2002 and February 2005 the *FT.com* lost one million unique users from home and abroad (ABCe, 2005b; Rohumaa, 2005). A significant contributory factor was their policy, implemented in May 2002, of charging all readers a fee for viewing much of the content they publish. Moving more content, specifically corporate news, behind a subscription barrier in early 2005 did nothing to reverse this trend, something the *FT.com*'s editor predicted would happen. "Inevitably our unique user numbers are likely to go down". In the American market the *FT.com*'s unique US users fell from 690,000 in December 2004 to 262,000 in May 2005, a drop of 61 per cent (Nielsen//Netratings, 2005). Although they now have less traffic to sell to advertisers, their editor hoped that more of their unique users would "be encouraged to subscribe over a period of time" (Corrigan, 2004).

TimesOnline.co.uk too has experimented with subscription. They started to charge international readers in May 2002 and stopped in October 2004. After lifting the subscription barrier, visits from other countries jumped. In November 2004 they registered "more overseas readers than UK readers" (Bale, 2004) and in May 2005 they had 2,268,000 visits from American readers, six times more than a year previously (Nielsen//Netratings, 2005).

In periods when the advertising market is weak, trading hits for guaranteed subscription income is tempting, especially for a title such as the *FT.com*, which has a relatively wealthy readership and specialised content. However the trade-off is that

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subscription charges put significant downward pressure on the home and international audience. With advertising being the most significant proportion of news sites' income, all sites need to generate enough traffic to satisfy their advertisers who, unlike in print, pay according to the number of times their advertisement is seen or clicked on rather than simply for space on the page. Even without subscription charges it has proved difficult for some sites to serve enough pages to enough users to fulfil the advertising contracts they have on their books. The editorial director of the *DailyMail.co.uk* reported that "advertisers are queuing up to advertise on [the] site. They'll advertise as fast as we deliver them new pages for them to advertise on" (Williams, 2004).

Satisfying the promiscuous reader

One problem with trying to realise the commercial potential of international readers is their promiscuous reading habits. The editor of *Telegraph.co.uk,* made the analogy between web and print readers and cats and dogs. "Print readers have canine loyalty but readers on the web have all the feline fussiness of cats. We get one thing wrong and they are off down *Google* alley to find another fresh bowl of cream" (Burton, 2004).

Vin Crosbie's work (2004) illustrates this problem. He reports that "the average newspaper website user in the United States visits only two to four times per month, spending less than thirty-five minutes on the paper's website each month." Whereas, by comparison, "the average newspaper reader reads the paper 3.4 times per week (14.7 times per month), spending an average of 28.2 minutes per day with the paper".

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If web readers can be characterised as capricious cats then international web readers are their even more fickle feral cousins. Whereas the average *NYTimes.com* user's visit lasts about six minutes (Crosbie 2004), the average US reader of the *TimesOnline.co.uk* in November 2004 stayed on site for about three minutes (Nielsen//Netratings, 2005). At the *DailyMail.co.uk* the situation is similar with US readers in November viewing between 1–2 pages and staying on site for just over two minutes (Nielsen//Netratings, 2005).

The data presented in **table 3** show that, in order of stickiness, *BBC News* has the highest number of page views per US reader per month (8.46), followed by *Telegraph.co.uk* (6.84), *theSun.co.uk* (6.58), *Guardian.co.uk* (4.9), *FT.com* (4.89), *TimesOnline.co.uk* (2.99), *Independent.co.uk* (2.76), *ThisisLondon.co.uk* (1.82) and *Scotsman.com* (1.78).

The loyalty of *BBC News*' US readers is partly a reflection of the fact that the site, unlike any of its competitors, has a dedicated 'Americas' index. Their funding model is also appreciated by users who "write and say we like *BBC News* because it doesn't have any adverts" (Smartt, 2004).

The fact that US users of both the *Telegraph.co.uk* and the *FT.com* read a relatively high number of pages per month is likely to be because they have to register on their first visit, and login on subsequent visits. *FT.com* readers must, in addition, pay for access to the majority of the site's content. Readers seek to profit from the time (and money) they have invested in these processes by returning relatively frequently and / or viewing a higher than average number of pages.

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The fact that *ThisisLondon.co.uk* and *Scotsman.com* get referrals from indexes such as *Google News* and portals such as *Fark.com* and *Drudgereport.com*, explains the relatively low number of pages their US readers view each month. Readers who use aggregators frequently are likely to be promiscuous, visiting a large number of publications for a single story and not exploring much beyond the boundaries of that report.

For *Associated New Media* these promiscuous overseas readers do not help commercially:

> All it does is momentarily inflate your figures. Although it's good for my circulation, and at the end of the day an editor gets judged on their circulation, in real terms does it help us commercially? Well no it doesn't and that's why the two goals of the editorial team are: firstly to build a loyal audience; and secondly to bring in the right kind of audience and that is difficult. *Google News* brings in an audience but sometimes they can be the wrong audience, an audience that doesn't stay very long. (Williams, 2004)

The *FT.com*'s editor made a similar point. Although promiscuous readers, who have often picked up a story from an aggregating portal such as *Drudgereport.com*, "will mean that a single story gets a huge amount of hits. It doesn't really make a big difference in terms of the business model because it doesn't happen with enough stories". Although these visitors result in advertising revenues, the editor of *FT.com* saw visitors' real value in their potential to become subscribers and believed that "if they are coming to look at one story" they are "not necessarily" going to take out a subscription (Corrigan, 2004).

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At the *Scotsman.com* US readers, although representing 36 per cent of their monthly unique users, only account for 9.7 per cent of the pages viewed (Kirkpatrick, 2005; Nielsen//Netratings, 2005). The editor admitted that they "get advertising revenue from a high level of traffic from promiscuous users who come and look at one page a month and then go away again" but, in the long term, their strategy was to concentrate "on the core, regular users" (Kirkpatrick, 2004).

TimesOnline.co.uk saw it as "a challenge . . . to get our overseas readers to stay more and to engage with them", adding that "there is no doubt it is a harder sell for an advertiser unless we find the sort of advertiser for whom that strategy suits" (Bale, 2004).

Serving the overseas news client: a publicly funded model

BBC News' experience of engaging with the international reader may provide a model to its commercial rivals if and when they begin to target their overseas readers with dedicated content.

After initially conceiving the 'international edition' as a separate site, *BBC News* realised that they "had enough material on the site anyway", so rather than begin again they decided that the material they were already generating "could be re-presented" to the international audience in "a different way" (Smartt, 2004). They have done this by presenting one of six dedicated home pages, or 'indexes', to visitors depending on their country of origin.

The site also has "a separate world core team", journalists who are employed specifically to work on international stories. Some of those journalists come in earlier in

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the day “to help us get going on the Asia Pacific side of things” and others stay later “to make sure we’re doing a reasonable job on US stories and other areas where stories are still going on”. They have a team of two or three people overnight who are “updating the core stories on the World and UK sites”, although the editor admits that “our coverage of more detailed regional stories round the world tends to fall away a bit overnight because we don’t have the resources to staff up around the clock for all those regions” (Clifton, 2004). They also have dedicated editorial staff outside the UK: “two people in Delhi one in Brussels and one in Washington”, and although the BBC’s head of News Interactive thought that they would expand this number, in part to help cater for their overseas audience, the expansion is likely to be modest in light of the “very extensive and expensive international newsgathering network” that already exists (Deverell, 2004b).

Discussion

There is a significant and underreported international audience for British news websites. The *BBC News* website is a truly global brand, able to attract more US readers than the sites of American broadcasters and newspapers such as *Fox News, USA Today* and *The Los Angeles Times. The Guardian* too has found considerable success in the US market, attracting more US readers online than *The Houston Chronicle, Time Magazine* and *The Chicago Tribune*.

The web offers a relatively level playing field for online news publishers, with the print parents’ brand not always an important a factor for the international reader. Witness the higher US readership of the British regional *Evening Standard*’s website against

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longer established, national publications such as *The Sun* and *The Daily Telegraph.* Although some news websites, like the *DailyMail.co.uk*, would like to maintain a low proportion of international readers, to do so would be to buck all the trends.

Demand is in part driven by the popularity of news indexes such as *Google News* and aggregating portals such as *Drudgereport.com* and *Fark.com* which, taken together, refer nearly half of US visitors. There is ambivalence towards these sites with, on the one hand, publishers wanting to ensure their continued inclusion but, on the other, not being entirely comfortable with the size and success of their parasitic partners. The value *Google News* gives to speed of publication and the whimsical tastes of portals currently make it difficult for news sites to grow the hits they get from these services while maintaining their journalistic credibility. The reputation British news sites have built for coverage that offers a particular perspective on international news offers a more sustainable source of international readers.

Commercially, some sites fear that their advertisers—who provide the lion's share of revenues—will be uninterested, or worse, deterred, by a high volume of international readers. Nevertheless the consistent ongoing demand, particularly from America, for news published online in the UK is difficult to ignore. Some sites believe international visitors, with their promiscuous reading habits, are not a good way to build reliable revenue streams. Others are welcoming the opportunity to sell advertising to a new audience; and with the unit costs of serving content to overseas readers falling, and a market in global media buying steadily developing, international readers may well prove more lucrative than they have been.

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If this does happen then British news websites are likely to try harder to retain the international reader who, compared to home readers, views half to a third as many pages a month. There are already stirrings, some deliberate, others occurring organically and in unlikely places: the only general interest, commercial news sites who mentioned generating content for overseas readers or changing their news agenda in response to their presence, were the tabloid *theSun.co.uk* and the regional *Scotsman.com*.

The *FT.com* and *BBC News* are already generating content for overseas readers, but as, respectively, a specialist subscription site and a publicly funded publication, the costs of employing staff to work on their international editions are defrayed by overseas subscription income and, in the BBC's case, direct Government grant.

International readers are still something of a novelty. Journalists are "enjoying the feedback" and "the immediacy" (King, 2004) that they get from the near instantaneous connection they have with their global readership, and remain "amazed" (Picton, 2004). by the volume and geographical spread of reader responses. Their presence flatters editors who value "simple reach" (Bale, 2004). When the novelty wears off it will be harsh commercial reality that determines whether and how international readers prevail upon the practice of online news publishing.

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Notes

[1] The editors and managing editors interviewed were selected to represent a range of publications: regional (the *Scotsman.com* and *ThisisLondon.co.uk*) and national (the others); publicly funded (the *BBC News* website) and commercial (the others); with broadcast (the *BBC News* website) and print (the others) parentage; and serving different readerships (in print terms *theSun.co.uk* is 'tabloid', the *DailyMail.co.uk* and *ThisisLondon.co.uk* are middle market while the *Independent.co.uk*, *TimesOnline.co.uk*, *Telegraph.co.uk* and *FT.com* represent the 'broadsheet' sector). Although outwith the scope of this study, there is potential for future research examining how practice and attitudes at publications such as these contrast with that at Internet-only news sites like those published by AOL and others.

[2] In fact they receive an average of about 40,000 US visitors on a daily basis (Nielsen//Netratings, 2005).

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[3] Although it is easy to determine where visitors are located geographically, to provide international readers with specialised content requires significant investment, as evidenced by *BBC News*' decision to offer a number of separate, region-specific 'indexes' ('Africa', 'the Americas', 'Asia-Pacific', 'Europe', 'the Middle East' and 'South Asia'). Setup costs were approximately £300,000 (Smartt, 2004) or about 2.5 per cent of their annual budget (Graf, 2004: 35); on-going operations are supported through a grant in aid from the British Government's Foreign and Commonwealth office; and the 'International edition' benefits from the 'free' content made available by the Corporation's global news gathering network.

[4] Website editors know where their readers arrive from because the 'referrer'—"the . . . URL of the page from which, via a direct hyperlink, a user reached the current . . . URL" (ABCe, 2005a)—is stored as part of the server log. In other words, unless users simply type the address of a web site into their browser, they leave a record of where they've come from.

[5] In editors' responses the distinction between *Google* and *Google News* was often not clearly made.

[6] The Press Association, the UK's national news agency, founded and owned by newspaper proprietors.

[7] See note 2.

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