

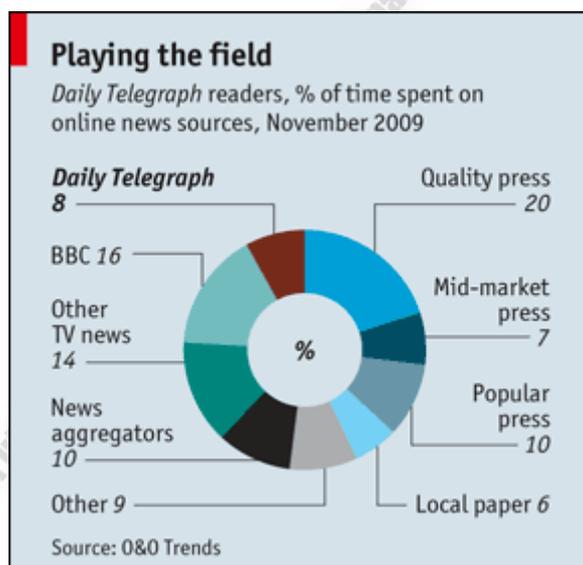
The promiscuity problem

More bad news for the embattled newspaper business

The decision to give away newspaper content free online is increasingly viewed as the business equivalent of Eve's decision to munch on an apple. But any proprietor who wants to undo this error has a problem. If one newspaper starts charging, readers may migrate to those that remain free. If, on the other hand, a lot of papers begin charging at the same time, readers might be jostled into paying. This plan has always seemed optimistic. A study released this week suggests it may be completely wrongheaded.

Oliver & Ohlbaum, a media consultancy, began by asking people what newspaper they tended to read and whether or not they subscribed to it (most get their papers from shops). Then they quizzed readers about where they went for news on the internet. The results were consistent: when it comes to online news, Britons are shamelessly promiscuous.

The theory underlying most papers' online strategies is that people will buy a favourite newspaper and then go to its website for breaking news and extras such as blogs. But fans of the Daily Telegraph, for example, the most popular quality daily paper, got just 8% of their online news from its website (see chart). They spent twice as much time visiting the BBC's news website and more than twice as much reading other quality papers. Most surprising, they were more likely to read tabloid papers like the Sun and the Daily Mirror online than their own favourite paper. Others were no more loyal. Sun readers, for example, visited the websites of quality newspapers about as often as they did those of tabloids, including their own Sun.



Another surprise is how little readers rely on online news aggregators such as Yahoo! News and Google News. The latter in particular has been accused of stealing newspapers' content and undermining their attempts to charge for it. On December 1st Google offered to let publishers who want to charge for news restrict traffic to five articles per reader, per day. This week's study suggests that the olive branch may be almost irrelevant. Readers do not need aggregators to point them to news sources, and they graze so widely that few would reach the five-article limit.

The survey also contained devastating news for those publishers hoping to co-ordinate attempts to charge. When Guardian readers were asked whether they would pay £2 a month to read their favourite paper online, 26% said yes. But if all newspapers charged? The proportion prepared to pay for the Guardian might have been expected to rise. Instead it fell to 16%. This seems odd, until one considers readers' promiscuity. Faced with having to spend

rather a lot to keep snacking from a wide variety of news sources, they protested. The questions are hypothetical, and people may react differently when and if pay walls actually go up. But this will hardly encourage newspaper owners.

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