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THE YEAR AHEAD FOR...

NEWSPAPERS

Dominic Williams says newspaper content has never been more popular – but taking advantage of this in the digital age remains a challenge

Reports of the demise of national newspapers have been greatly exaggerated. Sure, in 2009, it felt at times that this wasn't the case but, in 2010, most of the national newspapers bounced back and, at the end of the year, spend in the market was up by just under 9 per cent. What's more, the first paid-for newspaper launch in a generation, *i*, hit newsstands, demonstrating a faith in the public's continued appetite for the printed word.

OK, so circulations continue to decline, but I'm of the opinion that any medium that reaches 36 million adults every week in the UK and continues to be habitually purchased by the majority of them – even in this age of austerity – has something going for it.

But it isn't all sweetness and light. The ubiquity of digital in all media channels continues to fill national newspapers with more uncertainty than certainty. Digital threats and opportunities emerge every day – and, arguably, it's easier to understand the threats than the opportunities.

In addition, circulations continue to go down and that's not likely to just stop happening. What's more, the national press media owners seem to have a hard time making sense of the audiences they have created in other places, mainly on the web. Plus, the sophistication and flexibility of other media channels continue to grow, offering advertisers the opportunity to reach mass audiences more and more cost effectively, or incredibly niche audiences with hardly any wastage.

In 2011, we are going to start to see these issues being tackled head-on. Arguably, the beginnings are already there: last year saw *The Times*, *The Sunday Times* and *News of the World* disappear behind a pay-wall. The limited figures we've seen so far aren't cause for celebration but the experimentation is. *The Guardian* has consistently claimed that its online future is free. Others like *The Telegraph* con-



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importantly, consumers are prepared to pay for newspaper content on them. Especially at the quality end of the newspaper market, I'd expect this to be a focus for audience and revenue growth next year.

But all of this opportunity is hindered by the way we understand audience interaction with print content in its many places. The Audit Bureau of Circulations and National Readership Survey are trying their best but we need much more investment in this area so we can understand not just audience numbers at each press touchpoint but also define the value of that audience. The arrival of UKOM data last year was a step in the right direction but the recent data error discovery has knocked confidence in the system somewhat. 2011 needs to be the year we start to transform this and, in turn, move our trading metrics on for the benefits of clients, agencies and newspapers.

The ongoing moves by News International to transform its trading may not be for the benefit of the print market but at least they offer the opportunity to move the debate on. The current tools and lack of market buy-in mean that any fixed trading of audiences via a scarcity model may face resistance. However, change would be welcome. The national press doomsayers are wrong – newspaper content has never been more popular or more heavily consumed. Yet the fact is that our current tools don't allow us to articulate the value of the audience of press content. For example, the *London Evening Standard* went free in October 2009, but what's the value of that reader vs the value of a reader of *The Sun*, or *The Guardian* online, or the *Financial Times* on a tablet? In 2011, we need to push ahead with new tools, techniques and trading approaches that address all of these points and that seek to understand the value of each audience and each reader.

When Alan Rusbridger was asked last May if he thought *The Guardian* would be still be published on paper in ten years' time, he replied: "I don't know." While the market isn't going to go completely digital in 2011, it makes sense for advertisers and the industry as a whole to develop their tools, techniques and trading approaches as national press continues to evolve. 2011 should be the year that we work together to crack this and, in turn, realise the true value of newspapers and newspaper content across all touchpoints.

There are big changes ahead for all national press media owners in 2011 but I am very positive about the future – next year and beyond.

Dominic Williams is the press director at Aegis Media

tinue to operate a "wait and see" policy. The fact is that the recession brought with it the realisation that there was a mismatch between online advertising revenue and online editorial costs. This all now needs some rethinking.

2011 will see emerging strategies from each media owner. I expect to see each title auditing the value of its own brands and sub-brands. There's value in those sub-brands online that can limit the need to throw all your content behind a pay-wall, can deliver engaged consumers to advertisers and can increase the likelihood of those same consumers opening their wallets (think bingo and fantasy football).

Once you've got some happy paying customers, there is a value to the product. Once that value is there, it can be bundled with other products as added value – witness the free entry offer to the *Times* websites for pay-as-you-go customers on 3 mobile broadband. Now imagine the opportunities for

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such bundling if Rupert Murdoch gets to buy the 61 per cent of BSkyB he doesn't currently own. But even if this merger doesn't go through, there are still plenty of opportunities for brands to offer "free" pay-wall access in partnership with Times Newspapers.

2011 will also be the year of the tablet and digital mobile formats aplenty. There are loads of new devices coming on to the market and, by the end of the year, it is estimated there will be around 100 million tablets worldwide. Add that to the explosion in smartphones and there is an enormous opportunity for newspapers to capitalise. The tablet format plugs the gap between the "lean back" newspaper and the "lean forward" web in more ways than one. They are portable, can be updated, can deliver a newspaper to your home without the need for a boy on a bike and offer creative flexibility and click-through opportunities that you just can't emulate in paper. And, most

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Fonte: Campaign (UK), n. 2, p. 26, 2011. [Base de Dados]. Disponível em: <<http://web.ebscohost.com>>. Acesso em: 21 fev. 2011.