Youth publications, Generation Y and hopes for the future of newspapers

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Abstract

If readership projections are correct, newspapers in the United States will become niche players by 2010. That is, in about half a decade fewer than half of American adults will read a daily newspaper. This will produce major problems in attracting advertising, the lifeblood of the newspaper business. The biggest decline in readership has occurred among Generation Y—people born between 1977 and 1995. They do not read newspapers to the extent their parents did. They get their news elsewhere, mainly online. As part of a process to attract readers, many of America’s major publishers launched a series of youth-focused newspapers in the 18 months to March 2004. The aim was to try to get the elusive 18-24-year-old demographic into the habit of daily reading, hoping that over time they would migrate to more traditional outlets. This paper explores the background to these youth-focused publications, describes the main players and issues involved, and provides a case study of a youth-focused pioneer: the Tribune Company’s RedEye, which is published in Chicago.

Introduction

In the last months of 2003 and early in 2004, most major newspaper publishers in the United States accelerated their ventures aimed at attracting the elusive 18-34-year-old demographic. Some commentators argue that this is the latest effort by a group of dinosaurs to elude extinction. Others regard it as yet another example of the newspaper industry’s ability to rise, phoenix-like, from the ashes of declining circulation. And others see it as merely part of the evolutionary cycle that is typical of the publishing business. Regardless of the view one takes, most publishers and advertisers will be watching the developments with considerable interest. Despite the fact newspapers were making more money at the start of the 21st century than ever before, privately newspaper
executives are worried. In the past half-century, total circulations have declined markedly, especially when matched against population growth. Calculations by the author indicate that in 1950, America had 1772 daily newspapers with a combined circulation of 53.8 million, in a population of 151.5 million. By 2004, the number of newspapers had fallen to 1457 with a total circulation of 55.1 million, in a population of 292.2 million. That is, the combined circulation has remained almost static – a rise in half a century of a mere 2.4 per cent – while the nation’s population has almost doubled.

A decline in the number of 18-24-year-olds who read newspapers remains the biggest concern for newspaper executives. Studies conducted in 2003 by the Readership Institute, part of the Media Management Center at Northwestern University in Chicago, showed that readers aged between their late teens and early 30s spent less time reading newspapers than their parents did at their age, and significantly less time than their parents do now. Fewer than six in 10 Americans aged 18 to 24 read a newspaper, compared with just over seven in 10 of the 45-64 demographic. Noted Mary Nesbitt, managing director of the Readership Institute: “If the current reading trends among younger generations continue with the next generations coming up, that spells a serious problem for newspapers.” (quoted in Steinberg, 2003b, p. B1) Mike Smith, managing director of the Media Management Center, pointed out that newspaper readership can be tracked by generations. Generation Y – people born between 1977 and 1995 – was the first to grow up with online technology as a major part of their life, and many get their news and media almost exclusively online (Brown, 2005). In 2003 this generation made up about 21 per cent of America’s population (80 million). By 2010, this generation will represent about 29 per cent of the adult population and, if newspapers have failed to capture them, overall newspaper readership will fall below 50 per cent. The Newspaper Association of America reported that 54 per cent of adults read newspapers in 2001. “In order for newspapers to remain a mass medium, you need to penetrate this generation [Y] and you need to think about what this generation comes to newspapers for,” Smith said. “Some of them [newspapers] despite the very tough times, are still successful and unless they are really hurting, it’s hard for them to pay attention.” (quoted in Negron, 2003)

In a report for the Carnegie Corporation on young people’s changing news consumption habits, Merrill Brown found that 44 per cent of respondents in his study went to the Internet for news at least once a day, compared with 19 per cent who read a daily newspaper. A mere 9 per cent described newspapers as trustworthy, 8 per cent found them useful, and only 4 per cent said they were entertaining. Asked to look forward three years, 39 per cent of respondents said they expected to use the Internet more to learn about news. But only 8 per cent said they would use traditional newspapers more by 2008 (Brown, 2005). News Corporation CEO Rupert Murdoch, in an April 2005 speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE), described these changes as a “revolu-
tion” in the way young people were accessing news. Murdoch told the association that the next generation of people accessing news and information, whether from newspapers or any other source, had a different set of expectations about the kind of news they would get:

They don't want to rely on the morning paper for their up-to-date information. They don't want to rely on a god-like figure from above to tell them what's important. And to carry the religion analogy a bit further, they certainly don't want news presented as gospel. Instead, they want their news on demand, when it works for them. They want control over their media, instead of being controlled by it. (Murdoch, 2005)

In his 2004 book *The vanishing newspaper: saving journalism in the information age*, Professor Philip Meyer predicted the last reader would recycle the last newspaper in April 2040. “Unless we awaken to these changes,” Murdoch noted, “we will as an industry be relegated to the status of also-rans.” (Murdoch, 2005)

One explanation for the decline in newspaper readership is the fact that consumers have many media choices. The public’s media consumption is higher than previously reported, according to research by academics at Ball State University. They studied citizens of Muncie, a city of 70,000 people in Indiana, using 401 phone surveys, 359 diaries and direct observation. Researchers shadowed 101 people from the time they woke to the time they went to bed, to record media consumption. The researchers reported that phone surveys were “largely useless” in measuring media behaviour. One of the team, Dr Michael Holmes, said phone surveys reflected a person’s perception of their media use but not their actual behaviour. In all, the people who were shadowed spent an average of 10 hours a day with media. The observation results showed that those people spent almost a quarter of this media day using more than one medium at the same time. “I think some of our most significant findings involve the complexity of how people really use the media because we are looking at the inter-relationships among various media,” noted Holmes’s colleague, Bob Papper. The research was conducted in July and August 2003, typically a time of the year when media consumption is lower than in the northern winter. Generation Y has been described as the “perfect” multi-tasking generation, and this particularly applies to its media usage. “They use a variety of media for news and entertainment - radio, television, cellular phones, the Internet, magazines and newspapers.” (Smith, 2003)

On July 1, 2003, the International Newspaper Marketing Association (INMA) surveyed just over 700 people at leading newspaper companies in Europe, North America, Latin America and the South Pacific. INMA sought to find, by email, what research topics executives considered the academic community could help the industry discover. INMA’s executive director, Earl
Wilkinson, said the 139 responses covered a wide array of subjects, but noted that several themes emerged. Top of the list was how to attract and hold young readers. Commented Wilkinson: “Recognising an overall decline in youth readership, newspapers want to get more intimate with their potential youth audiences, but are uncertain how to go about it.” He noted that executives place particular importance on understanding young people’s media habits, interest and desires, particularly in terms of how technology and the spread of media had changed the youth media diet. “The industry is also struggling to measure the results of existing programs designed to reach out to this audience, and to develop innovative new ways to start a newspaper-reading habit among young people.” (Wilkinson, 2003)

Some of the individual responses, available on the INMA website, are revealing: “We need to know more about the media usage habits of the 18-34 year-olds,” said one executive. “Do young people between 18 and 29 still look at newspapers as a main source for classifieds?” asked another. “What do people between 18 and 29 want and expect to read in a newspaper?” another queried. “To what extent do changing lifestyles and reading habits impact the long-term viability and sustainability of print as a primary medium?” said another. Wilkinson presented the results of the survey to the annual conference of the Association for Educators of Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) in Kansas City, Kansas, on July 31, 2003. At the start of his presentation, Wilkinson dryly observed that his colleagues believed only a “small percentage” of academic research was useful to newspaper executives. Asked to quantify the percentage, he replied “maybe 2 per cent”. He was saying that too much academic research had no relevance to the newspaper business. This situation presents an opportunity for media educators and researchers to partner with the newspaper business to produce research relevant to that business. I will be fascinating to see whether academics take up the challenge.

Paying for attention

Such is the desire to reach the 18-34-year-old demographic that many experiments are being conducted into new ways to find out what they watch, listen to and read. In February 2004, a company in Danville, Virginia, launched a scheme in which several thousand students from more than 60 campuses across the country were paid to watch advertisements via the Internet. Kivir Varghese, CEO of BrandPort, said students received between 25 and 50 cents for each TV, radio, print or Web advertisement they consumed. Payment depended on length and format. Immediately after students viewed each advertisement, BrandPort staff asked five follow-up questions via email. The service’s ability to target by age, geography and gender was especially attractive to advertisers, Varghese said. Another company, RewardTV, registers students online to answer questions about TV programs and commercials. In exchange, students receive gift cards from advertisers.
Several studies have shown that people in the elusive demographic appear to get most of their news from the Internet, assuming they are interested in news. Commented one newspaper executive: “Our own in-house survey found that 24 to 34-year-olds don’t know or don’t care what is going on in the world - that is, they are ignorant and it doesn’t bother them.” (Anonymous, 2003) Diffusion of the Internet has increased further in the US in the past few years. Geoffrey Ramsey, CEO of eMarketer, announced early in 2004 that more households had Internet connections than cable TV, the most common vehicle for television in the US. As of January 2004, Nielsen Media Research showed that just over 98 per cent of all American households had at least one television set - for a total of 106.7 million households (Fadner & Mandese, 2004). Ramsey analysed a range of data sets from the US Census, Nielsen’s NetRatings, the Pew Research Center’s Life on the Internet series, studies from the University of California at Los Angeles and Harris Interactive. He estimated that household Internet penetration in the US was almost 68 per cent, compared with 66 per cent for cable. While cable TV penetration had essentially been flat for several years, online penetration continued to expand (Fadner & Mandese, 2004).

Experiments with youth-focused newspapers containing condensed news have begun in most major markets in the US, and in a growing number of smaller markets. The aim is to attract the elusive 18-34 demographic to read newspapers and perhaps get them into the habit of buying a newspaper. This generation has come to expect free information. Jack Fuller, president of the Tribune Company, told the annual meeting of the Online News Association in November 2003 that it had been a mistake to give quality information away on the Internet, though at the time it was perceived as the main way to build an audience. “It’s easy to persuade people that information is free. It may be one of our biggest mistakes. We could not afford not to build an audience. For rational reasons we got everybody used to the idea that high quality news ought to be available for absolutely nothing.” (Fuller, 2003) The Chicago-based Tribune Company is an innovator in American media. It has aggressively started newspapers for the Latino community, the fastest-growing demographic in the country, in major population centres. On March 1, 2004, Tribune launched the Los Angeles edition of its Spanish-language daily Hoy. The paper competes against La Opinion, the highest-circulating Spanish-language daily in the country. Tribune already publishes editions of Hoy in Chicago and New York. The latter started in 1999 with a circulation of about 94,000. Tribune debuted a paper aimed at the youth market, RedEye, in Chicago in October 2002, seemingly based on a model the Metro International Company had refined in Scandinavia, the UK, Australia and western Europe. Metro publishes almost two dozen free newspapers around the world. The Tribune’s rival in Chicago, the Sun Times, launched its condensed daily, Red Streak, at the same time.

The Tribune Company launched amNew York a year later, on October 10,
2003. That same month, the *Washington Post* started a free commuter weekly in Miami, Florida, another major population centre, the *Miami Herald* introduced the *5 Minute Herald*. This two-page spread condenses the contents of that day’s newspaper into several dozen entries, each no more than a paragraph with lots of color and graphics. In smaller markets, the giant Gannett Company launched free tabloid weeklies in cities where it owns major dailies. Gannett is the biggest newspaper chain in the US, with 101 dailies and several hundred non-dailies (see http://www.gannett.com/). *Cincinnati Weekly* in Cincinnati, Ohio *Velocity* in Louisville, Kentucky, and *Intake* in Indianapolis, Indiana, all started between October and December 2003. The previous November, Gannett launched *Thrive* in Boise, Idaho, and *NOISE* in Lansing, Michigan. On November 10, 2003, *The Morning News* in Dallas, Texas – owned by the Belo Corporation – began publishing a free, tabloid-size daily called *Quick*. Initial reaction to several of these newspapers is discussed later in this paper. Cannibalisation of the parent paper has long been a fear of executives. But John Morton of the media consulting firm Morton Research doubted whether the free papers would cut into the circulation of the parent companies. “Basically what they’re trying to do is attract those people who don’t now read newspapers as a daily habit.” (quoted in Steinberg, 2003a, p. D1) Lauren Fine, a newspaper analyst with New York-based stockbroker Merrill Lynch, said early research suggested some of the papers appeared to be succeeding in that aim (quoted in Steinberg, 2003a, p. D1).

A *New York Times* reporter watching the launch of *AmNew York* in October 2003 noted the “challenge” of giving away a paper in a city saturated with media:

> The challenge of reaching that elusive group was evident in the effort Mr Johnson [the street distributor] was making: he had to meet the gaze of perhaps 20 passers-by before he successfully pressed the paper into the hands of one of them, and many of those hands appeared far older than his employer might have liked. (Steinberg, 2003b)

*AmNew York* debuted with 160,000 copies. Its opening editorial read: “In 20 minutes, we’ll update you on the most important news of the day. ... *AmNew York* will be your quick update on your city and the world.” The paper’s publisher, Russel Pergament, said *AmNew York* gave readers “boiled-down, to-the-point headline summaries” that aimed to be credible. Readers did not want “vast autobiographical tracts by self-indulgent writers with a point of view” (quoted in Steinberg, 2003b).

He was talking about the venerable *New York Times*. Its chairman, Arthur Sulzberger Jr, told an audience at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism on February 23, 2004, that his company would not enter the market (Fitzgerald, 2004). Sulzberger said his company had studied the youth and
commuter paper phenomenon – especially the competing Chicago papers RedEye and Red Streak – and concluded that a similar Times product would not fit with its psychographically defined audience. "I think they [youth papers] are condescending, I think they degrade the readership, I think they’re talking down to the reader,” he said.

They’re saying “You don’t [understand] what we offer ... so we’re going to give you this thing that you can get.” And you know something – bullshit. We don’t want to become less than we are to reach an audience whose needs we wouldn’t do a good job of meeting. (quoted in Fitzgerald, 2004)

Jennifer Carroll, director of news development for the Gannett Company, said all six of its youth papers were developed after careful research, feedback and attention to the interests, news and information needs and media use of young adults. “In focus groups, participants said they want relevant local news, including sophisticated coverage of their lives and lifestyles. And they reminded editors that most of them were beyond college and that many had started families and careers.” (Carroll, 2003) In Louisville, Velocity editors targeted young adults with local content, she said. Beryl Love, editor of Cin Weekly in Cincinnati, said the paper had a circulation of about 60,000 and was distributed at 1500 locations when it launched on October 29, 2003 (Carroll, 2003). “There’s a huge buzz in town,” said Tom Callinan, editor of The Cincinnati Enquirer (Carroll, 2003). “Cin has had an impact on the entire newspaper and website. It’s more than just a weekly product. It’s a new way of thinking.” The paper was planned to grow gradually from 72 pages, and Callinan said it reached 104 pages in four weeks. Bridget Lux, Thrive’s editor in Boise, said the paper focused on outdoors and environmental issues, entertainment and local news. The parent paper, The Idaho Statesman, promoted the new paper. The parent also redesigned idahostatesman.com to highlight young-reader content and to emphasize outdoors and entertainment on the home page (Carroll, 2003).

Case study: RedEye

It is informative to study one youth-focused newspaper in detail. This section of the paper looks at RedEye, one of the most innovative and an early leader. RedEye launched in late October 2002 with a circulation of about 100,000 on Monday to Friday and was aimed at the 18-34 demographic. Sports editor Mike Kellams said RedEye’s main mission was to attract younger readers who historically had ignored newspapers: “The paper is written and edited for 18-34-year-olds. They do not consider it odd not to have a newspaper.” (Kellams, 2004) Kellams predicted that if RedEye found a way to attract and retain readers and then got them to read the sister publication, the Chicago Tribune, “we’ll be much copied because everyone has been trying to solve that
one”. He admitted that the core readership of the Tribune was getting old, and RedEye had been launched to attract younger audiences. "We aim is to change habits, to get people reading newspapers.” The average age of a daily newspaper reader in the United States was 51, Kellams said.

What about the wide range of interests of the 18-34 demographic? Kellams said the 18-34-age range was a convenient marketing niche, noting that the age groups of 18-24 and 25-34 were quite different. The key, he said, was to find what they had in common:

What do they share in common? They both download music, it might be different music, but they do download. He has wireless internet through his dorm[story room], I have wireless through my house. I think there is an interest in the same sorts of people - sports, entertainment, movies. Beyond that, it does not matter how old you are. If my mum is interested in J-Lo or Janet Jackson, it’s more about a mindset than a birthday.

Kellams said the paper’s editors were guided by an awareness of pop culture.

RedEye looks like a cross between a newspaper and a magazine. It is tabloid in size, printed on reasonable quality newsprint, and has the design and feel of a magazine. Like a magazine, a typical front cover has one lead story that features a large image, plus headline references to major stories inside. The news is offered in condensed form, with large and bold headlines, plenty of short news in brief items, and usually two or three stories on each of the pages that contains editorial. Almost all stories have an accompanying image or photograph. Colour is bold and attractive, with lots of shots of celebrities and sports people. Kellams said RedEye had taken a lot of criticism after its launch, just as USA Today did 20 years earlier. “Somebody said after we launched that the paper would not be here in a year. We ran that quote on the front page on our first anniversary.”

The paper writes about serious topics as well as entertainment. Late in 2003 RedEye’s sister publication, the Chicago Tribune, published a long investigative piece about a super-car, a hybrid vehicle with gasoline and electric engines, in its Sunday edition. The Tribune ran a major investigation into ways that General Motors and the federal Government had allegedly wasted money. RedEye ran the “short-attention span version” in eight paragraphs on the previous Friday, with references to the major story in the Chicago Tribune that coming Sunday. “We ran the story on the cover, with details of how to find more in the Tribune.” Kellams said too many people believed the only things that mattered to RedEye readers were J-Lo, Janet Jackson and Paris Hilton. “That’s not the case. We still wrestle with that – we give people broccoli and cheese. Parents struggle to get their kids to eat vegetables so they lather it with cheese. If you put it together both get what they want – and that’s RedEye.” His news-
paper was not cannibalising the sister publication: "We hope that readers will graduate to the Tribune, and perhaps readership will grow that way. Car dealers and drug dealers do it all the time. It's not a new idea but it's new to newspapers." Kellams argued that RedEye was ultimately good for democracy because it got people to read newspapers, noting that much research in the US had shown a correlation between newspaper readership and willingness to vote (Kellams, 2004).

The opposition youth newspaper in Chicago, Red Streak, was launched in reaction to RedEye, to cause confusion in the marketplace. This was shown in the guerrilla marketing techniques that paper used, Kellams said: "When we hand it [RedEye] out, we say 'Get your RedEye'. They [the Chicago Sun-Times] say 'Get your red paper...'." Kellams predicted that if the Tribune Company "pulled the plug" on RedEye, the Sun-Times would do the same the next day for Red Streak. A year and a half after its launch, RedEye's circulation is relatively unchanged, but paid circulation and home delivery have increased to 10 per cent of the total. RedEye sells for 25c. Is it making money? "We're doing OK. We're not making a profit – that will not happen for a while – the business plan has us making money in 2007 or 2008." Tribune executives told a New York Times reporter that it had attracted 250 advertisers who had not previously advertised in the Chicago Tribune, plus another 300 who had (Steinberg, 2003a).

Content is still king

Content is what brings people to newspapers. One of the problems with most youth-oriented papers is the need to rely on agency copy because of the small number of reporters. When amNew York launched, for example, it only had two staff reporters, though that number increased to 10 by May 2004. RedEye began with significantly more staff. As of April 2004, the paper had two co-editors, a deputy editor, three associate editors for sport, news and features and five full-time reporters, plus a full-time freelancer. All reporters are in the 18-34 demographic. RedEye also has six designers who work in all sections of the paper, two copy editors, one photo editor who is also staff photographer, and an editorial production manager who edits copy and pulls everything together. The paper has access to the full resources of the Chicago Tribune. If quality content becomes, as expected, the deciding factor in attracting readers, RedEye has a significant advantage over other youth-focused newspapers.

The reliance on agency copy at other papers has produced an opportunity for entrepreneurs. Early in February 2004, graduate students at New York University launched Live Wire, a news bureau that offers content written by young writers for young readers. Newspaper editors are invited to subscribe to a weekly email that lists story updates. Some of the early offerings included...
stories about hand-crocheted thong underwear, the problems some New York City residents endured when their suburbs were invaded by television crews from shows such as *Law & Order* and *Sex and the City*, and activists discussing how to avoid arrest as they prepared to protest at the 2004 Republican National Convention. Christy Slewinski, a section editor at the *Orlando Sentinel* in Florida, subscribes to *Live Wire*. She said she was keen to have students write for her. Many of the stories were too Manhattan-centric, Slewinski said, but she saw promise in some of the fashion and travel-oriented pieces. Students from journalism graduate schools at Columbia and Northwestern universities also offer student-written news services (Moore, 2004).

**Cell phone content**

Few newspaper companies in the US have considered the huge potential of cell phones to reach the 18-34 demographic. In October 2003, Nokia’s executive vice-president, Anssi Vanjoki, told a World Association of Newspapers conference in Helsinki, Finland, that mobile telephones and wireless provided excellent avenues for newspapers to market themselves. “Older people use mobile phones for efficiency. For young people, it is more about excitement and fun. They develop incredible uses for these devices. They play with them.” Vanjoki said this trend had serious implications for media businesses, given that in the future most information would be digitised. He described cell phones and wireless devices as “media terminals” that were ideal for marketing static media such as newspapers (Vanjoki, 2003). Interestingly, the sensational media in the US appear most willing to experiment. In February 2004, Sprint and American Media launched daily wireless editions of *The National Enquirer* and *Weekly World News* on Sprint’s PCS Vision service in a multimedia format. *Tabloid News* costs $3.95 a month (RCR Wireless, 2004). Wireless carriers are also developing next-generation networks that will deliver something akin to full-motion TV on cell phones. MobiTV (www.mobitv.com), was launched in November 2003 by a company in Berkeley, California, named Idecit. Subscribers must initially buy a contract for Sprint’s PCS Vision data plan that provides unlimited access to the Web and other online services. It costs $15 a month; MobiTV is an additional $9.99 a month. Subscribers get 14 cable television channels, including ABC News Live, CNBC, the Discovery Channel, the Learning Channel and MSNBC. Broadcast television runs at 30 frames a second, which generates the perception of movement. MobiTV broadcasts at one or two frames a second, more like a fast slide show than video (Landberg, 2004). BBC Interactive in London has been experimenting with showing television on cell phones at about 12 frames a second (half the British broadcast standard) since early 2003.

In Japan, *Asahi Shimbun*, the world’s second-largest daily, has been providing an online wireless news service since 1999. Users were mostly younger...
people who spend less than 10 minutes a day reading newspapers. The service appears to be as much about entertainment as it is about news delivery. Takashi Ishioka, project manager for the Asahi Shimbun Electronic Media and Broadcasting Division, told the World Association of Newspapers that newspapers were unable to change readers’ lifestyles. “So our approach is to familiarize users with news contents via mobile phones, with the final goal of actual newspaper subscription, which is more profitable.” (Stevens, 2003)

Conclusion

Mike Smith of the Media Management Center has highlighted the Tribune Company’s realisation that Generation Y needed and wanted its own newspaper. “That in itself is a bold and innovative move. It’s not as innovative as Col. McCormick [founder of the Chicago Tribune] entering radio or launching a TV station, but it probably is on the level of launching CLTV [Chicago Land Television, a 24-hour cable television channel].” (Smith, 2004) Smith concluded that RedEye would mostly attract people in Chicago who did not read a daily newspaper. “I’m sure that there may be some duplication in readership [between RedEye and the Chicago Tribune], but that is understandable because Gen Y is used to using a variety of media.” Smith said RedEye would be successful if the publishers thought in terms of attracting the 18-24-year-old age group. “That’s the real target,” he said. Smith also suggested that RedEye was a child of the Internet. The newspaper industry had learned a lot since the boom times of the late 1990s. “These efforts have given newspapers insights into content interests, information presentation, reader interaction and content promotion.” Concluded Kellams: “The Tribune [Company’s] investment is tangible hope for the future of newspapers.” (Kellams, 2004)

References

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