

WHAT THE WEB NEWS READER WANTS:
An analysis of smh.com.au readership story preference

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Abstract

Media audience preference for tabloid over broadsheet content has long been identified through newspaper circulation and broadcast ratings figures. Print media companies have relied on readership surveys as the primary measure of audience story selection. Due to the inherent size limitations this research can only be regarded as suggestive. Now, for the first time, through the development of news websites and associated statistical technology, a more accurate assessment of reader preference can be made.

This paper analyses the 'top five' accessed stories on the Sydney Morning Herald website [http://smh.com.au] over 12 weeks from August 16 to November 12, 2004. The average daily audience for smh.com.au is around 46,500 unique users. Thus, the story preference of all, rather than a sample, can be quantitatively assessed. This is the first time such a detailed analysis of web news reader preference has been undertaken in Australia. The twelve week survey period of Monday to Friday readership includes the Australian Federal election. While the results indicate smh.com.au audience preference they raise questions as to wider web news readership and overall media consumption.

Introduction

Australian news organisations have had online divisions for a decade. Despite an exponential growth in web news site usage there has been no academic research in Australia into web news audiences. Yet, a whole new audience is being created for a technology that is arguably the biggest revolution in the presentation of journalism since the introduction of television. Just as television newscasters found audiences responded best to pithy reports accompanied by vision, leading to major changes in newspaper journalism (Lasky, 2002, p.113), the web news market is now of sufficient size (Nguyen, 2003 ¶ 1) to determine what this new audience wants. Whereas it took decades after the introduction of television for the development of devices enabling audience monitoring, web audience' viewing habits have been electronically monitored ever since the first mouse click on a hyperlink, creating user profiles (Rainie, 2000, p.17). On news sites the computation of 'hits' on a link creates a complete inventory of every user's story preference, enabling analysis based on a total population rather than sample. Overseas research has found that a small percentage of online news readers scan the website homepage, reading only headlines, without selecting reports for further reading (HarrisInteractive, 2004, ¶ 7). This paper is therefore based on story interest of 'active' readers on John Fairfax Holdings' smh.com.au news site. As all stories on the smh.com.au homepage run a minimal one or, rarely, two paragraphs of copy before the reader is required to select a link for further information, the use of the link, and subsequent electronic tallying, is indicative of viewer interest. Already in the US this precise measurement of online news reading has been used to track reader behaviour (Tewksbury, 2003). That study analysed data sourced from the Nielsen Net Ratings company. The data was compiled from a sample of the habits of existing NetRatings panellists, not necessarily representative of the total reader population. The availability of the smh.com.au data enables analysis of all active site readers.

The smh.com.au site was selected because of the public availability of tracking data through the publication of the Top Viewings listings. While this and more data is held by Fairfax, other media and analyst companies its availability is constricted by commercial confidentiality issues and purchasing requirements. As smh.com.au is the second most popular online news site in Australia (Nielsen/NetRatings, 2004, p. 1) and, through its affiliation with *The Sydney Morning Herald* broadsheet, has a connotation of credibility as a 'serious' news agency (Mayer, 1964, p.267) and

agenda setter (Barr, 2000, p.52) it has considerable research value as an initial indicator of Australian online news readership.

Fairfax launched smh.com.au in April 1995. Latest ratings figures available show smh.com.au is now the second most visited news website in Australia, after ninemsn.com.au, with 1.4 million unique users visiting the site each month (Nielsen//NetRatings, 2004, p.1). smh.com.au is the online sister publication of the Sydney based broadsheet *The Sydney Morning Herald* - one of 30 websites under the Fairfax digital (F2) banner. *The Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper has a Monday to Friday readership of 875,000 and a Saturday readership of 1.2 million (*Roy Morgan Readership Results*, 2004). Overseas studies have shown a duality of reader interest in print and online reading habits with readers of a particular paper most likely to access the associated website for online news (Cotes, 2004, p.3). In Australia, it has been found that people who read newspapers are more likely to use the internet. (Flint, 2001, p.74). A survey of 2000 online news users by Australian Media Analysts AMR interactive found Sydney Morning Herald readers are the heaviest consumers of news sites (Juma-Ross, 2004, p.3). It is therefore possible to contend that a sizeable proportion of the site viewers are Sydney Morning Herald readers. According to smh.com.au's Managing Editor the site also draws an audience of ex Sydneysiders living interstate and overseas and other Australians living overseas wanting to access news from a major Australian media outlet (M. Van Niekerk, personal communication, June 2, 2004).

Research Questions

The initial research question came out of the numerical ability through the top five to reveal readership habits on the site:

1. *What is the demonstrated story preference of smh.com.au readers?*

This data could then be used for comparative analysis, prompting two further research questions:

2. *How does this compare to other online readership findings?*
3. *How do demonstrated preferences compare to 'stated' preferences in readership research?*

Cumulatively this analysis led to a fourth question:

4. *What purpose does online news perform as a media choice for smh.com.au readers?*

Methodology

This research is based on initial findings of a three month log that followed viewing patterns of the smh.com.au site.

The site home page features a continually updated ranking of the top five stories as revealed by the number of 'hits' on those stories from midnight AEST. As the "Top Five" changes throughout the day it was decided to use a standard time to record the ranking chart. Thus, the top five each weekday from August 16 to November 12 was logged at midday. This time was chosen as it came after the first peak viewing time,

just after 9am when sites are accessed from work and prior to the second peak of the Australian work lunchtime (M. Van Niekerk, Personal Communication, June 2, 2004). The logging period covered 65 weekdays as there is minimal online readership on weekends (M. Van Niekerk, Personal Communication, June 2, 2004). For this initial research the midday logging time was chosen as the website news agenda is more reflective of the morning newspaper agenda and allows any impact from the overnight viewing audience to be tracked. This overnight audience represents the third peak viewing time and is predominantly overseas based. A later logging time would have confused any international trend due to the domination of local traffic.

It should be noted that the top five is a ranking generated by 'hits' as opposed to 'users'. Therefore, there may be some repetition of the one user if readers returned to a report for further viewings. However, given the rankings track around 46,500 unique daily users, multiple viewings are unlikely to have a major impact on overall trends. It is also not known how readers access the site, whether through the home page or alerts. Thus, alerts for particular story categories, such as Entertainment, could skew the rankings. A further caveat on the findings is the possibility that the top five list itself generates its own popularity, in that readers may access reports through the rankings list. Access to F2 held data, would provide further explanation.

With these limits in mind it should be remembered that this research and its findings is considered indicative rather than empirical. The large number of users tracked justifies its indicative value. Empirical findings could only result from access to F2 data, which has not been made available.

Analysis was undertaken using 14 story categories, based on the Pew Center's News Interest Index (*News Audiences*, 2004, Ch IV). One obvious alteration was made, changing Pew's category of Washington politics to Australian politics. The categories: Crime, Community, Health, Sports, Australian Politics, International, Local Government, Religion, Science and Technology, Entertainment, Business and Finance, Consumer News and Culture and Arts are generally self explanatory. However, it is worthwhile noting inclusions in the Entertainment and Crime categories. Entertainment included all stories focused on film and television celebrities, while Crime, as well as murders and robberies also included crime related court reports and other stories in which emergency services were involved, with the exception of hail storms or other natural phenomena which were classified under the Weather category.

Story occurrences were calculated using Microsoft Excel. Initially, each story was entered under its category type in ranking order. Four calculations were then made to determine:

1. the number of total entries for each category at each rank
2. the number of total entries, regardless of rank, for each category
3. the percentage of occurrences for each category at the 'number one' rank
4. the overall percentage of appearances in each category

On two days, November 3 and 4, only four and three top stories were listed respectively. Therefore, a total of 322 stories were classified. The logging period included the Athens Olympics, The US Presidential election and the Australian

Federal election as well as four 'standard' news weeks. The smh.com.au site created a separate Olympic story top five during the two Olympic weeks. Therefore Olympic stories did not appear in the main rankings during these weeks, adding a further two 'standard' news weeks to the survey period.



Figure 1. Sample of smh.com.au's most viewed articles (September 2, 2004)

Findings

What is the demonstrated story preference of smh.com.au readers?

Entertainment stories dominated the Top 5 rankings. Nearly 40 per cent (25 out of 65) of all most viewed stories were related to Entertainment, in particular celebrity lifestyles. Across all rankings Entertainment stories recorded 25 per cent of all top 5 viewings. Crime stories were the next most popular. Crime reports garnered 20 per cent (13 out of 65) top one viewings as the second most popular category choice. Crime featured strongly at other rankings to attain 21 per cent of all viewings. Cumulatively then, 46 per cent of all viewings focused on Entertainment and Crime stories while these categories were even more dominant in the number one ranking accounting for 58.5 per cent viewings. The magnitude of this choice relegated much smaller or non-existent viewings to the remaining twelve categories.

Australian Politics garnered the third highest viewer preference, yet was much less preferred to Entertainment and Crime. Australian Politics drew almost 14 per cent of number one viewings and 15 per cent of all viewings. Of the 49 political story viewings in the Top Five, reports concerning the October 9 Federal Election accounted for 41 per cent. However, only two election reports were viewed sufficiently to place number one rankings. The remaining Australian Politics viewings covered Federal politics outside the election period and New South Wales state politics.

Type of News	No.1 %	Top 5 %
Entertainment	38.5	25.6
Crime	20.0	21.4
Australian politics	13.8	15.2
Science and Technology	7.7	3.7
Business	6.1	5.6
International	4.6	12.1
Sports	4.6	7.1
Community	1.5	5.0
Weather	1.5	2.8
Health	1.5	0.9
Arts	-	0.9
	(n=65)	(n=322)

Figure 2. Most popular viewings on smh.com.au from August 16, 2004 to November 12, 2004.

The International category was the fourth most viewed, with 12 per cent of all viewings. A more detailed analysis of the 39 viewings showed a reader propensity for event based stories -12 related to acts of Middle East terrorism and the Jakarta Embassy bombing, six related to the US election and five to the Beslan massacre. However, International stories recorded only three number one viewings, relegating it to joint sixth with Sports in the number one ranking. Over the five rankings sports stories were the fifth most popular with 7 per cent of all viewings, Science and Technology reports achieved almost 8 per cent (5 out of 65) of number one rankings, making it the fourth most viewed number one category. Minimal viewings in the other rankings relegated science and technology to sixth overall. Business (4 out of 65 or six per cent) was fifth in number one viewings, and sixth overall. Community, Health and Weather each recorded one number one ranking across the logging period, with overall viewings of less than five per cent. Arts and Culture was the only category with any recordings that did not have a number one ranked story. As with Health only three arts related stories made it into the top five in the 13 weeks. No recordings were made in the Local Government, Religion or Consumer categories.

Overall, the story preference of the smh.com.au reader from August 16 to November 12 is decisive. The dominance of Entertainment reports strongly shows a preference for 'lighter' rather than 'serious' news. The favouring of Crime reports shows further preference of 'tabloid' agendas with criminal subject matter a long-standing preference of media consumers (Graber, 1980, pp.50-51). While there is a greater demonstrated interest in Australian Politics, its rankings still demonstrate relatively low viewings, particularly given the Federal Election. With no major distinctions between rankings in Science and Technology, Business, International, Sports, Health, Community, Weather and Arts, these categories demonstrate the plurality of news, rather than a strong viewer preference.

Analysis

One of the major innovations of the developing internet news audience is the ability of readers to move away from traditional news agendas, instead tailoring their own news hierarchies (Althaus, Tewksbury, 2002, p.197) thereby tilting the balance in the 'public needs to know' vs 'public wants to know' nexus. While media audiences have always exerted some control over news agendas through print sales and broadcast

ratings, online news allows greater individual freedom in subverting editorial priorities (Rainie, 2000,p.18). The smh.com.au findings demonstrate a marked divergence in these priorities. Primarily smh.com.au's leading stories are also those published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* of national, international and/or political significance. However, regular updating of the site's content, allows greater placement of less significant stories, particularly those of an entertaining or quirky nature. These are generally placed as photo stories or in the far right column. While the site still gives dominance to the more significant reports by following the formatting style of the print publication: through left hand positioning and larger headlines, the research findings indicate all viewers are not as sufficiently interested in these reports to 'click' for more, as they do on other visual and text material. Given the established assumption that many of the online *SMH* readers are already readers of the paper, it is possible the 'shovelware' reports – those replicated in print and online formats (Bruns, 2004, p.178) – have already been read in print and are ignored in favour of new, previously unseen material. However, regardless of motivation, it remains clear that the smh.com.au audience has a variant news agenda to that of the site's editorial staff, which generally reflects traditional news values.

This is best seen in the dominance of entertainment reports in the Top Viewings, which was far greater than expected. Given *The Sydney Morning Herald's* reputation as a broadsheet newspaper with a middle to high income and well educated readership -the so called AB demographic (Revell, 2004, p.1) it was suspected viewers of the associated website would demonstrate a higher preference for 'serious' rather than 'infotainment' journalism, especially as logging was performed during the Federal Election campaign.

A further explanation for reader story preference may be demographic with the majority of heavy and regular readers of Australian online news sites aged between 35 and 49 (Juma-Ross, 2004, p.2). This is comparable, particularly at the lower end of the age range to overseas findings and much lower than the average age of newspaper readers (Cotes, 2004, p.3). This younger audience is therefore more likely to be familiar with contemporary popular culture. *The Sydney Morning Herald's* Editor In Chief, Mark Scott recently said 'younger people in particular see entertainment as news' (Scott, 2004, p.13). Thus entertainment stories have a greater relevancy and a preferred status in story selection. It is also known that sales of daily newspapers to younger readers are diminishing (Rathmann, 2002, ¶ 1, Flew, 2005, pp.88-89). The dominant preference of entertainment stories shows, that given a choice, this is the type of material the younger *SMH* online news audience wants. Combined with low overall news engagement figures for this demographic (Flint, 2001, p.61) it is again suggestive of overall news preferences with the resulting implication for future news priorities. Already, it is being argued that the shift by younger people from traditional media to the web will lead to online news becoming the news medium of the future (Nguyen, 2003, ¶ 23).

A more detailed examination of the type of stories preferred shows them to be event based or 'one offs' rather than analytical pieces of ongoing issues. This was particularly evident in the Science and Technology where major discoveries, such as that of a new 'mini' human species in Indonesia (*SMH* October 28) scored number one rankings. Likewise the sole Health number one ranked story concerned a health warning about mobile phones following the death of a young girl (*SMH* September

20). As mentioned this trend is also evident in the Political and International categories. In the Entertainment category events surrounding Miss Universe, Jennifer Hawkins, including an on-stage trip, were the most viewed stories on three occasions (*SMH* September 2, 9, 13).

The preferences of overseas based viewers for smh.com.au are difficult to ascertain in the findings. Such an audience would be expected to be seeking news on Australian issues that is not available in overseas media. Yet this is not evident in the type of stories preferred. As discussed, viewings of Australian election stories were not outstanding, presumably an area of key interest for expatriates. The Crime category stories were generally of the type found in any major city while the Entertainment viewings did not show a preference for local over international subjects. So why are these overseas users logging on to smh.com.au? As established, reader affiliation with a web site often follows the paper of choice, perhaps many of these overseas smh.com.au readers are former *Sydney Morning Herald* readers. However, as their viewing patterns aren't distinguishable, this reinforces an overall preference for 'light' rather than 'serious' news.

How does this compare to other online readership findings?

The most comparable overseas research, Tewksbury's analysis of the Nielsen Net Ratings data (Tewksbury, 2003), compiled over two months in 2000, found a similar lack of interest in 'serious' news. That research found Sports recorded the greatest number of views (26%) with Arts and Entertainment the third most viewed category (10.9%) after Business and Money (13.4%). This data was produced from reader tracking across 13 news sites with broadcast affiliations, for example CNN, as well as print affiliations such as The New York Times, including seven 'local' or city based online versions of newspapers, like Dallas News. This broader base could account for the higher Sports readership. The excision of Olympic reports into separate rankings would have had a sizeable impact on smh.com.au Sports viewings statistics. This likely dominance is seen on August 31, the first day without a separate Olympics ranking, when three Olympic 'wrap up' reports featured in the Top Five. As the US research tracked 9,029 online readers compared with the total population of more than two million users of the smh.com.au Top Five viewings it would be statistically more sensitive to the effect of a major sporting event during the survey period. Further research could examine audience perceptions of smh.com.au as a site for sports news, given competitor Rupert Murdoch's NewsCorp's involvement in the National Rugby League and sports television programming.

At the core of concerns over the ability of online news readers to set their own agendas is the belief that it will lead to a less politically informed and more insular public (Althaus, Tewksbury, 2002, p.197). This has been termed the 'dystopian' view (Katz and Rice, 2002, pp.114 –119). Whilst the Federal election boosted Australian political readership in the logging period, interest was still significantly lower than that for Entertainment and Crime. As a pre-eminent political story a higher level of interest in the election would be expected. Also, the online political coverage was frequently updated throughout the day providing breaking news that had not been published in the morning paper. It is known that online readers use net sites for their immediacy and the ability to source the latest news (Gorman and McLean, 2004, p.203, Rathmann, 2002, ¶14, ¶ 23, Flint, p.76). Therefore, a higher level of election viewings would be expected. It could be assumed that readers are receiving political

information from other media sources and use the web for other information. However, the smh.com.au finding supports other media research demonstrating low levels of political engagement (Althaus, Tewksbury, 2002, p.185). Tewksbury found a similar result with Politics the eighth most viewed category, despite the survey period taking place partially during a presidential primary election campaign (Tewksbury, 2003, p.705). Other research has shown information on politics ranks poorly as a reason for seeking news online (HarrisInteractive, 2004, table 1). This research also found online readers stated even less interest in movie and television stars as a reason for going to online news sites for information. Yet, as the smh.com.au and Tewksbury research demonstrates once people are on the net interest in entertainment is substantially high. This discrepancy begs further research – what is it that changes people’s reading intention once they are online? Secondly, what role does web page design play in story selection? The US based Poynter Institute has developed Eyetracking technology to answer this question with findings demonstrating online news readers are initially attracted by headlines on the left of the screen (Outing and Ruel, 2004), replicating newspaper reader patterns. Further research with the smh.com.au data will look at story placement and design elements as indicators of reader preference. Regardless of reason, there are concerns for collective public knowledge with Fairfax online readers spending six minutes and 14 seconds at the site per viewing (Catalano, 2004). If this time is then principally devoted to lighter material, what type of an information superhighway is the internet ?

How do demonstrated preferences compare to ‘stated’ preferences in readership research?

The use of the Pew Center News Interest index categories provided a further surprising contrast. The News Interest Index is a monthly index collated from surveys asking “what type of news was followed most closely”. The longevity of the index as an indicator of news interest suggested similar findings would occur from the smh.com.au data. However, apart from Crime, the Poll rankings are virtually overturned by the smh.com.au results. The cumulative News Interest Index data for 2004 shows Weather as the most closely followed category, followed by Crime, Community and Health and Sport. Just under a quarter of respondents follow Political and International news with just 15 per cent professing an interest in Entertainment (*News Audiences*, 2004, Ch IV). This anomaly can probably best be explained by the well known dictum that what people say they do and what they do can be very different. Admittedly the index is looking at overall interest in all media, whereas in its purest form the smh.com.au data can only be attributed to readership of that site. However, is it really likely that avid readers of entertainment news on the net, ignore such news elsewhere, preferring a diet of politics and world affairs? Tewksbury’s work is again of use. By simultaneously using Pew Center data he found media consumers stated the same subject interests for traditional news media and online media, however their actual engagement with public affairs news online was proven to be far less than their expressed interest (Tewksbury, 2003, pp. 702 - 703). The technological ability to track actual reader behaviour thus has immense implications for media research that relies on recall to determine news interests.

What purpose does online news perform as a media choice for smh.com.au readers?

The smh.com.au findings and supportive US research, pose the question: are online news sites news agencies in the strict sense of the term, or does their use dictate that they hold a primary role as an entertainment medium?

As discussed the smh.com.au viewings show preferred stories tend to hold high 'immediacy' and/or 'unexpected' news values. Therefore, readers are using the site in a predictable manner, that is, to keep abreast of news developments via a media outlet that offers the greatest immediacy. However, the sheer weight of preference for light material suggests an alternate primary use that is more entertainment than news based. It has been found elsewhere that online news is used as an adjunct to other news media (Rathmann, 2002, ¶2, ¶15). The smh.com.au findings show this additional purpose has enabled a marked divergence in reader habits from traditional news agendas. This result may prove to be a consequence of the early phase of the medium. As most online news sites continue to primarily replicate news from their other media affiliates (Bruns, 2004, p. 77, Flew, 2005, p. 89), as does smh.com.au with *The Sydney Morning Herald*, it is not unexpected that viewers who already source news from the traditional partner look for alternative copy when online. If, in the future, there is a greater divergence between hard and online editorial viewer habits may change.

Further research

There is widespread European and, in particular, US research into the relationship between online news and the user. Without a comparable body of research in Australia there are difficulties in identifying national idiosyncrasies. Research is also needed now to enable historical tracking of the Australian online news market in years to come.

The smh.com.au research in this paper has been performed on publicly available data. However, media companies, market research organisations including specialist online researchers hold substantially more data on viewer demographics and habits that are available for purchase, therefore necessitating further funded research. Using this extant data is demonstrably preferable to qualitative approaches based on reader surveys, given its statistical accuracy. However, such qualitative approaches, based on quantitative findings would be useful in verifying and explaining reader behaviour.

Conclusion

The web news reader, this and United States research shows, wants entertainment first and foremost. But what if online readership is a mirror on the wall – reflecting the 'secret life' of the news consumer. The exactitude of online readership measurement may in fact be exposing reader habits in all media - the habits that respondents to readership surveys don't like to reveal. The so called 'dumbing down' of the media and the sales success of tabloid over broadsheet style journalism is already indicative of a preference for less serious and consequential news (Schultz, 1994, p.164). Thus, online reader preference is potentially a formidable force in redirecting online news agendas, in the same way viewer preferences altered television news priorities. This new empowerment of the consumer via technology has been identified as the 'most

fundamental change of all' allowing a 'shift from supply-led development to a demand-led consumer user' (Barr, 2000, p.194).

The use of technology to track and record news reader preferences to an extent never before known gives market savvy editorial, marketing and management staff greater ability to respond to this consumer demand. Through online affiliations with traditional news outlets there is an implication for content in other media as well. As detailed earlier, research to date shows similarities between reader preferences on and off line, thus creating a potential for sales hungry media executives to seek further publication of online preferred material in other media. In this potential 'role' the online site becomes a 'litmus test' of readership preferences, with consumers more able than ever to ignore editorial decision making and dictate their own news agendas, not just for the web but with a potent flow-on effect to all media.

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