

***Attracting Young Readers – Tactics for Engagement.***

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The issue is replicated in readership figures worldwide. When Rupert Murdoch addressed the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 2005 he drew on a report by the Carnegie Corporation, which highlighted receding youth readership in the US.

*“What is happening is, in short, a revolution in the way young people are accessing news. They don’t want to rely on the morning paper for their up-to-date information. They don’t want 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” (Murdoch, 2005).*

Research conducted in 2007 found that ‘Millenials’ (those born between 1981-2001) consume most of their media via the internet, with print the least preferred resource for news.

<b>Media</b>	<b>Time Spent (Weekly, Hours)</b>
Internet	37.16
Television	11.4
Radio	4.1
Print	2.9

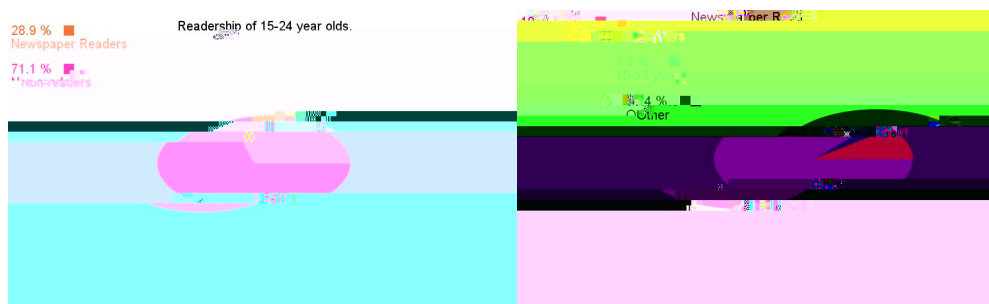
(TechWyse, 2008)

The reasons for youth’s rejection of traditional news formats are varied. Meijer claims the declining appetite has to do with “fundamental technology changes in our culture” (2006, p.1). This aligns with the statistics set out above, and will be explored more in the first

*“Let’s say you have a 70 per cent penetration rate between 19 to 25 year olds, and 80 per cent in 25-35 - that looks like people pick up the newspaper when they get older. But if you look at the 25-35 year olds, when they were younger their penetration was probably higher than 80. This younger group; this will be the highest they will ever be...so that will decline over time” (McMane, 2011).*

The theory does not bode well for assumptions that younger readers will become more interested in newspapers as they get older. When the New Zealand statistics are taken into account, which show that only 10.7 per cent of 15-24 year olds are reading the paper, it presents a dire situation for the print industry if this is to decline even further over time - as the negative cohort effect theory would suggest.

But there is hope – this 10.7 percentage of newspaper readers which are aged 15-24 years old, is only 28.9 per cent of the total potential readers within this age range. This means the industry has ample room for manoeuvre, as it has the opportunity to engage with the other 71 percent of 15-24 year olds which are not reading newspapers, and draw them into becoming part of the audience.



But in order to engage with the remaining 71 per cent which are not interested in print news, publishers need to realise and accept the situation, and significantly change their news production practices in order to produce a product which aligns with the modern desires of the digital natives.

### 1. Understand your audience.

In order to engage a youth audience, a publisher needs to understand both how that audience prefers news to be presented, and exactly what news is of interest.

Both the way youth consume news, and their preferred news media, have significantly changed from the preferences of generations before them. A key reason for, firstly, the change in news consumption, is the birth of digital media: the Internet has worked to provide much more information for the digital generations in comparison to what was available to earlier generations.

“An array of media services is available anytime, anyplace” Meijer states (2006, p.1). This has led to a significant change in *where*, *when* and *how* young people access news, and has subsequently changed the *way* in which that news is consumed.

Youth can now access news via their mobile phone on a bus, through email alerts, social networking sites and various other digitally-enabled mediums, in addition to the traditional news sources which have been around for decades.

Their familiarity with living in a digitised world has shaped their news consumption so it is a habit which is fragmented, and only focuses on significant news items or issues (Meijer 2006, p.9). It is widely agreed that youth do not want to spend time, nor do they have the patience, to read a newspaper from cover to cover as their parents or grandparents did. Nor is it necessary for them to do so in a world where they are bombarded with information, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Youth no longer sit down at the breakfast table to read the newspaper – they are much more likely to flit through key headlines on their iPhone as they walk to the train station.

Many different terms have been applied to this manner of news consumption, such as “zapping” or “grazing” (McMane 2007; Meijer 2006, pp.10-15). This has resulted in newspapers being left behind when it comes to the preferred medium, as they do not fit with the fragmented news consumption habits. Newspapers now must be different to what was on offer and accepted by youth’s parents, and instead should simulate the digital environment in which they live. All this is possible by simple changes in the ways in which news is produced.

The observances that youth now follow news in a fragmented pattern has transgressed into assumptions that youth are not interested in news. That is, if youth do not fully engage with a news source, then they must not care for current affairs as previous generations before them did.

However, there is significant research discrediting that assumption.

In 2008 the World Association of Newspapers commissioned research consultancy DECODE to outline key issues within youth newspaper readership. More than 60 studies, reports and academic papers covering six continents were reviewed, summarised, and followed up with surveys of youth in different countries (Barnard 2007, p. 15).

One of the key findings showed youth value the control surfing the net afforded them in comparison to the laptop control when reading a print product. However, most participants said they still valued traditional media sources and formats as they appeared more accurate, reliable and trustworthy (Barnard 2007, p. 18) – thus rejecting the assumptions that youth do not value news.

If they state they value traditional news sources because they are more accurate, then they clearly have an interest in reliable news and current affairs. Rather, what appears to be the issue is the medium and style that the news is presented in which is turning youth readership newsprint.

All of the media companies visited for this research confirmed youth value print publications; youth were more concerned about seeing their name or picture in the newspaper rather than online - the newspaper appeared to be the ‘premier product’.

These research examples provide indications of how youth are now behaving in terms of news consumption, and show lagging readership levels appear to be related to an issue with the medium rather than a rejection of the content.

However, publishers which take these findings into consideration have only taken the first step in the process of understanding their audience. To be successful in a particular market, publishers need to take a harder look at their target audience to understand exactly who and what they are; one market in a quiet country region will have different preferences in terms of newspaper content compared to a city-based market, despite the fact that youth may hold the same fragmented pattern of news consumption.

The majority of companies visited for this research have followed strict lines of research to uncover what the audience wants in terms of content, and then deliver on those desires. Basic market research may seem like an obvious thought, but it breaks the mould of traditional

newspaper production where editors decide what the most important things are for the audience to know without consultation.

Going back to Murdoch's quote, youth do not want to be dictated to. In order to avoid this, a publisher needs to learn to adhere to the audience's wishes without playing a role which dictates the news.

Poland's third most-read daily, *Metro*, has consistently adhered to the wishes of its readers, and has succeeded because of this. *Metro* was crowned Newspaper of the Year in the WAN-IFRA annual awards in 2010 and boasts a daily circulation of around 526,000. The paper is owned by Agora SA, which also publishes *Gazeta Wyborcza* – *Metro's* 'big brother' and Poland's most read daily. *Metro* was initially launched as part of *Gazeta* in 1998, but

In 2010 the online platform underwent a relaunch and changed the design, which resulted in the online platform consisting of more white than blue.

Community Manager Ben Ellerman says this was a mistake emanating from a lack of research conducted prior to the relaunch. He addresses readers in the April 2011 edition of *Daz Magazin* about the redesign (translated);

*“In September last year we made the biggest change to our online platform in its history. The new version was called Stayblue, which, above all, looked more white than blue. The long and short of it is you did not like Stayblue. It was an error. We have had 3,500 private messages sent to our community manager about this.*

*In January this year we did a survey of our 8,500 users – the biggest survey we’ve ever conducted. 90% of users wanted the old blue design back again. OsCommunity is your community. Your desire was the blue colour. Here, in April, we are now blue again” (OsCommunity – Daz Magazin, May 2011).*



OsCommunity.de screen shot. Accessed 3/04/2011

Ellerman describes the redesign, of something so seemingly insignificant as the colour of the platform, as the biggest mistake in the history of the community, which cost the publisher a lot of users.

However, its commitment to its users and readers is key to its success – it is giving users

the design phase, the implementation phase and the advertising phase, we check regularly with the personas, to see if we are really creating something that really fits with stereotypical attributes within that target group” (Ellerman 2011).

To be successful in providing a print news product which appeals to youth, a publisher first needs to accept the newspaper can no longer continue to be produced in the traditional format – it needs to be fast, snappy and colourful in order to simulate the digital environment which youth are accustomed to. Secondly, publishers need to go out of their way to understand their audience and what they consider to be important topics for inclusion in the product. Without completely understanding the audience, a publisher has no hope of successfully engaging with it. This goes beyond having a simple understanding of how news consumption habits have changed with the introduction of digital media, to instead also fully understanding the audience’s hopes, dreams, desires and key issues which affect them. But it should not end there; publishers should deliver a service which gives the audience value in their lives by covering issues and topics which affect them, in a format which replicates the digital media environment they are familiar with. This commitment to delivering a service of value and worth to the youth demographic should be questioned on a daily basis with publishers asking themselves if what they are creating is delivering on youth’s key requirements, and should continue to reassess and test the audience.

## **2. Do not trivialise news.**

As discussed earlier, youth consume news in a much faster, fragmented and less thorough way than previous generations before them. With this knowledge has come an assumption from news publishers that youth are not interested in serious news, such as politics or





can present serious stories in a lighter way by finding a careful balance in the length of stories, visual layout, and tone, without appearing immature.

While it will publish a front-page article on the current Big Brother competition, *24sata* is just as likely to publish an expose of a corrupt politician. And if this is the case, the issue will be covered in a serious and mature way because the publisher recognises that if there is a story relevant enough to warrant front-page coverage, their readers will be interested.

*We are not afraid to put them on the cover and say you're guilty or whatever, there is that bravery, not just to see what sells.* (Almer 2011).

In some respects this 'bravery' Almer talks about may be what the youth audience values in the newspaper because it clearly positions itself on one side, if there is a side to be taken. Rather than taking the 'objective route'. This will be discussed in more detail later.

Ellerman from *OsCommunity* agrees there are times when, as a publisher, you need to inject some humour into copy so it aligns with the audience's desires, after all, research has shown too much depressing copy will not attract young readers (Meijer 2006; Lewis 2008, pp.46-47).

*Sometimes you have to be a little bit entertaining...[but] also we make it clear we are not some sort of silly little magazine.* (Ellerman, 2011).

A final note on the trivialisation of news comes again from Grzegorz Piechota of *Gazeta Wyborcza*. While it may still be tempting for publishers to present news in a tone that makes it easier for youth to understand, there is a fine line to be walked when doing so –

A study done by the British Youth Council (2006) found 98% of respondents felt the media portrayed them as anti-social and more than four out of five thought the media portrayed them as a group to be feared. Instead of this negative coverage, the survey respondents wanted their achievements to be recognised, and to be given positive attention.

Lewis' research found that if young people had positive perceptions of news they were significantly more likely to anticipate becoming heavy users of "traditional" news sources (2008, p.45). Therefore, if publishers continue catering to the majority audience and ghettoising youth, they will further marginalise the youth demographic. If it continues, youth are going to increasingly turn away from the traditional news sources due to lack of positive experiences; if youth constantly feel a publisher is attacking them and not representing them and their peers in a fair way, they are unlikely to chose that news source over another, which would perhaps represent them more fairly.

It is fair to say traditional newspapers, particularly national dailies, are not good at

newsroom financial budget, and their total financial budget to producing youth content (Graybeal 2009, p.137).

Population figures from Statistics New Zealand show the number of “youth” comprising at least 20% of the overall population. Given this, and the fact that it is these people the print industry should be trying to engage with, surely it is imperative publishers allocate

A survey conducted by the Readership Institute (2007) at Northwestern University in America asked newspaper executives to name the three most effective responses for declining readership among young people – while it is not a New Zealand study, it gives good indication of where print publishers' priorities lie.

The most popular response was to create non-print products, followed by marketing, understanding the audience, adding special print products aimed at youth, improving content and hiring younger staff.

It should be a concern that the idea of allowing readers to be involved in news production did not surface in any of the 12 answers for solving the declining youth readership debacle.

However, the successful European media companies visited during this research have identified that facilitating reader involvement is a key technique to successfully engage the youth demographic.

In particular, *Metro* regularly takes submitted stories direct from its readers for publication. Any reader has the ability to submit stories, which will be published with minimal editing. This is a very significant technique in that it gives readers the ability to contribute, as the Internet does, but even more so as readers are able to see their name in print, which, as discussed earlier, is more satisfying than an online publication because newspapers are still considered the 'premier' product.

However, *Metro* Editor Waldemar Pas says involving the audience has to start before the stage of simply asking for articles to be submitted.

*You cannot just one day ask people to send stories – because getting engaged is a process, so you need to repeat it many times. It also means that when you ask people to get engaged you really have to ask them to do something serious and something important (2011).*

In 2009 the paper took reader engagement a step further and, after striking up a rapport with the audience throughout the relaunch of the newspaper and series of debates, it asked youth readers to get involved in a campaign to decide what the 20 most important goals for Poland should be over the next 20 years.

A list was formulated from reader suggestions, alongside expert suggestions. This initial request for reader input is not unusual. However, what *Metro* did next sets it apart from other news publishers. It took the suggestions from readers and held a roundtable debate with experts, young scientists, trade unionists and other representatives to reduce the 20 goals down to five. The example here shows that the readers' involvement clearly led to a significant outcome which was publicised greatly – their time spent contributing to the paper was not wasted.

*24sata* and *OsCommunity* also actively facilitate involvement and contribution from readers.

*OsCommunity*'s main editorial team is made up of what it calls 'user-editors'. Ellerman says it was the users that initially pushed for editorial content and articles to be published on the site.

Subsequently, the desire to self-produce news for the site was realised with a team of about 20 users who expressed a desire to write being established. The team is made up of interns and volunteers, while an editor oversees their work and teaches journalistic standards. Once the writers finish outside studies they then have the opportunity to become paid writers. However, the company regularly throws 'get-togethers' for the team as a way of rewarding their involvement.

Ellermann says his goal is now to get more involvement from the readers, but it is a difficult task unless there is some reward involved. The situation between reader and publisher has now

become more of a relationship – if a reader is going to participate in the active discussion, there needs to be a reason or incentive for them to do so.

The printed magazine also started a regular section called ‘My Lovely Clothes’ where readers are invited to write about their favourite article of clothing. Four or five of the submitted stories are selected and printed in the magazine, and also then posted online for readers to vote on which story they consider to be the best. The writer who receives the most votes receives a 100 Euro clothing voucher – thus a clear incentive for involvement.

*24sata* offers a similar level of involvement for its readers. In the first instance, the editorial team makes itself constantly accessible to readers, who are able to contact the team directly through a freephone number, emails and text – a prime example of the barriers between editorial members and readers being broken down.

Readers are also invited to submit stories. If their story ends up on the front page they are paid 100 Euro. Marketing manager Alice Almer says it has positive results not only for the writer, but also because youth reading the paper can see that their peers are involved in the production process. Key to the success is the two-way relationship between the news publisher and the reader; the youth readers are being given a voice through the established print product, and receive rewards for going through the effort of writing articles.

Finally, the Rheinische Post based in Dusseldorf, Germany, has devised a Newspapers in Education programme which allows students to produce their own newspaper on completion of the programme.

While New Zealand has been undertaking NiE programmes for years, the German example does not restrict itself to only using the newspaper in the classroom.

The newspaper, which has circulation of about 400,000, has been recognised for its extensive NiE projects.

Twenty years ago it started the programme in which students aged 13 to 16 ‘experience’ the paper for six weeks and conclude the programme by being involved in the production of an actual newspaper. NiE manager Sarah Dickmann says the project is very successful because the pupils like to see that they have been involved in producing a physical product, which brings a high level of reward for the age group.

Dickmann says while the young participants do enjoy the reward of having an article published online, it doesn’t beat the thrill of seeing their by-line in print.

As Murdoch stated in 2005, youth no longer want to be dictated to. Instead, the rise of new media has changed what youth consider to be the role of newspapers – instead of a disconnected arrangement between publisher and reader, they expect the publisher to establish more of a relationship with readers and facilitate instances where readers can have their voices heard. It is imperative that newspapers start to accept reader involvement in a more meaningful way in order to give readers more value from the print news industry than what they are currently receiving.

Newspapers are in a constant battle with new media, which has the advantage of allowing digital natives to create any copy they wish and post it straight online for millions to see. But newspapers have a different advantage over the internet which should be exploited: the youth demographic continue to show a greater thrill in seeing their involvement represented in a print product. If print news publishers begin to create more meaningful ways of allowing reader involvement, it would undoubtedly draw enthusiasm from youth readers who continue to hold the newspaper in higher regard than online publications.

## **5. Lessen the grip on traditional news production practices**

Facilitating reader involvement requires publishers to let go somewhat of traditional news production practices which are ingrained in the industry. Through visiting the successful European companies, it has become clear New Zealand publishers need to adopt a more modern approach to producing news by; abandoning thoughts that newsrooms should be staffed by journalists with 15, 20, 25 years of experience, being open about their biases, and becoming more than just a newspaper.

**5a. Recognise the value young writers can bring.**

One of the best ways to attract young readers is to place trust with young employees and recognise the value they can bring to a print product which is attempting to engage with an audience of the same demographic. There are unlikely to be better placed people to raise new ideas and content suggestions of interest to that audience. Publishers need to take advantage of this.

Aralynn McMane recognises that having young people around and placing significance on their views is a commonality among most of the successful organisations.

*It's having that mix and listening to the young people in the organisation. (McMane 2011)*

Graybeal says newspapers should make use of these competitive advantages held by young staff, and use this as leverage in attracting youth – young staff will give the newspaper more competitive advantage in attracting youth readers than a newspaper without young staff on hand (2008, p. 143).

*Metro* and *Gazeta Wyborcza* have both realised this technique and make significant attempts to employ younger journalists. Piechota agrees they are going to be the ones that can truly realise the interests and desires of the target audience.

However, it does not forsake the experience and knowledge of veteran journalists.

*You need young voices, but you also need some editors who are experienced. Young people also tend to get excited about things that old people know aren't so important. You need those experienced people to stop a young team making some mistakes, but they cannot be the MOST important, they cannot take charge on every policy. (Piechota, 2011)*

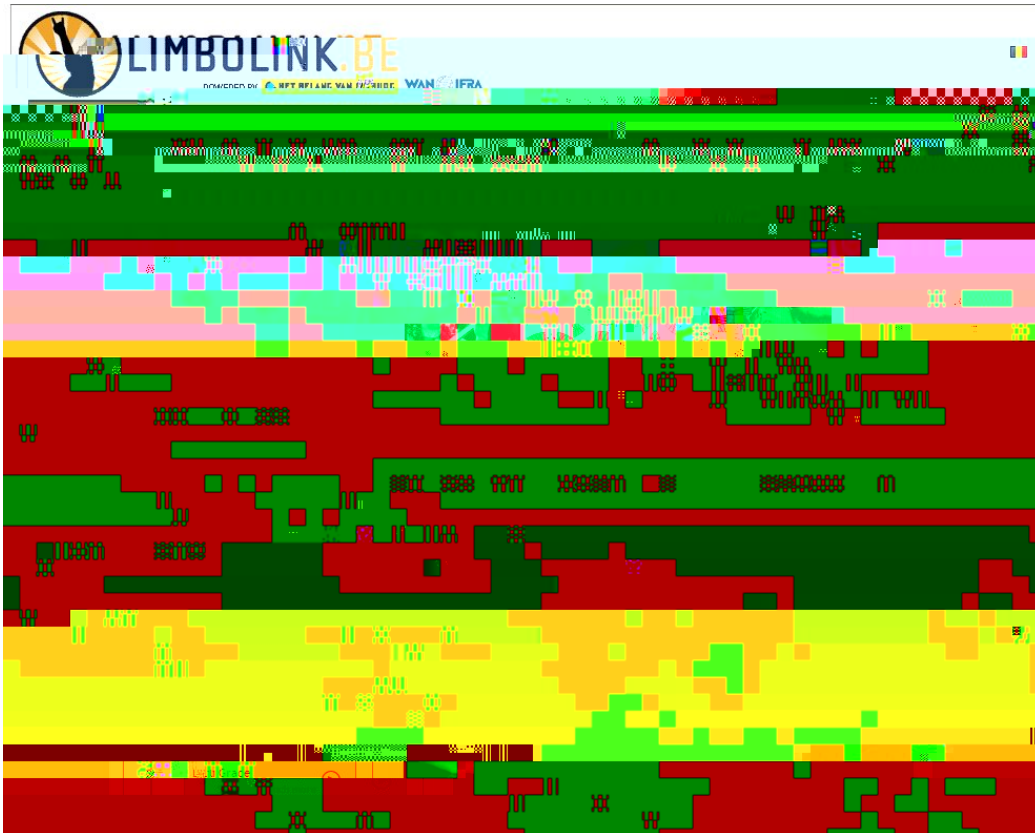
Piechota also does not place any relevance on whether a writer has been officially trained in journalism. Instead, he says he places value on people who want to get out and talk to people and make a difference, which he says is reflected in the newspaper's policy of the 25% rule (newspaper w226) TJ/ -1.1562 Td[(takeig pnd rs td23(dd tae irinteres)21(ts )] TJ/F17 1 Tf10.3789 0 0 10.3789 127.44 616368 Tm[(Y5b. Beopen23(ddabout tbases)2 T







The fact the site was set up solely out of interest for the musicians, and out of work hours, which shows a real dedication solely to the young audience *Het Belang van Limburg* sets out to include. Despite this being behind the scenes, it is clear to readers and those on the site that the newspaper it is affiliated with is willing to go out of its way to do something different to help the young demographic.



[www.limbolink.be](http://www.limbolink.be) accessed 26/09/2011

Ultimately, if a publication shows it is willing to work for its readers, and not stand-by simply reporting on debates, issues and/or serious acts of misconduct for instance, then youth will take time to appreciate what the newspaper can offer and be willing to pick it up and read it.

However, taking the step to work for the readers, and proving the publication is there to serve readers requires publishers to let go of traditional assumptions which are currently rooted in the New Zealand print journalism industry.

Taking the distant, objective role in covering news is not working to build respect and trust among youth readers – instead youth want publishers to show they care about issues by being

highest importance on the older, more experienced, journalists is not the key to engaging with youth readers.

**6. Be there for the firsts**







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