

WEBSITE AND THE READERSHIP REFLEX - A PAGE, BY ANY OTHER NAME...

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Synopsis

Initially, we review the findings of several studies on how people read web pages. We do so for the fundamental purpose of evaluating how similar Internet readership is to traditional print readership.

We found that despite the fact that web-page authors tend to design pages within a poster format, users read them much more as if they were traditional print pages.

This means that the fundamentals of "readership" of text, pictures and graphics may be the same regardless of the medium delivering them. Ironically, this may be because readers have different paradigms of behavior for assimilating information, and, cues such as words and pictures set off the readership paradigm. This is in distinction to the television and video game paradigms for absorbing information.

However, just because people "read" a web-page in the same way that they read a print page - it doesn't mean that the measurement of that readership is or could be conducted in the same way.

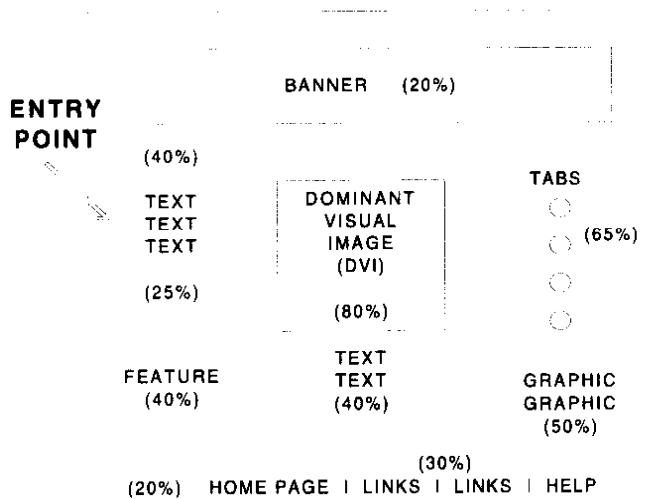
This paper reviews the impact of the electronic delivery of print on the readership techniques of the future.

Noting To Navigating

Noting scores, as many of us know them, are recall scores describing which print pages and which elements of a print page were noticed, given the fact that an issue of a magazine was read. On behalf of several clients, we have tracked how readers of web pages visually navigate those pages and have generally reached two conclusions:

- designers attempt to produce visually pleasing posters, concerned with the look of the page in general, but playing less attention to how readers move from element to element on a page, and,
- readers, at first try to "navigate" a page using the readership paradigm of behavior, looking top-to-bottom, left-to-right, but allowing the density and thus gravity of pictures, graphics and hybrids to deflect their flow.

This last point introduces some of the new vocabulary of noting. Some of this vocabulary and the statistics of page navigation is best reviewed by illustration. The data presented represent a compendium of eye tracking studies conducted by our company which were done to evaluate how users visually navigate a web page.



(%) = Percent Users Scanning Element

In the process of conducting these analysis, we find a new hybrid vocabulary situated between the language of web usage and readership.

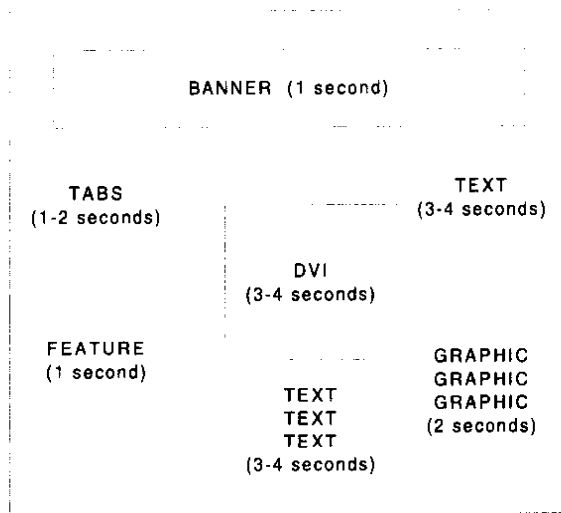
Entry Point

For example, there is an entry point, where the users eyes first enter the page. They do so in the upper left corner about 10-20% of the way down. This entry point is significantly affected by the presence of a *Dominant Visual Image* - often placed in the upper center of the page. Time spent with all the other elements on the page are determined by the presence of this image.

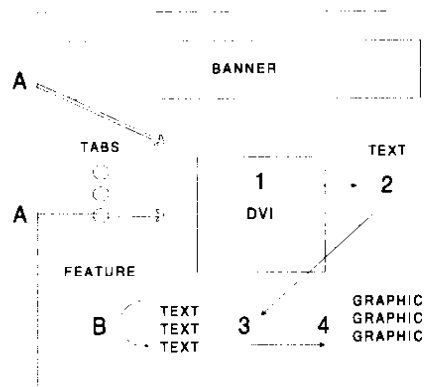
It serves as the center of gravity on the page, because, being visual, it contains more information than the same space allocation of words. While only 20% of the users may read the banner on the very top of the page, 80% attend to the central image.

Time Spent with a Web Page

Like magazines, this is affected by the graphics and content on the page. A general rule of thumb is that users spend between 10-20 seconds per page while browsing till they find a page whose content is important at which time considerably more time is spent with every element of that page.



In essence - the mechanics of Internet readership are that user's initial reflex reaction to the appearance of a web page is that of a learned behavior - print readership - practiced with such repetition that its mechanics are now reflexive. This, however, results in a top-to-bottom, left-to-right visual navigation pulled towards various centers of information gravity (determined by information content and relevance) and time required to assimilate that information.



To show this navigation visually and summarily, means that through scattered and differential vectors (A), users enter the page and quickly are pulled to the dominant visual image of the page where they focus for a few seconds.

They then are most likely to move right (2) where the time spent is a function of information richness.

Then in a combination of forces including the readership reflex and information density of the elements on the lower part of the page, users return to the left (3), but sometimes not all the way (B) if there is more information density to the lower right of the page.

At the end of the day, one of the most important similarities between using the net and reading a magazine, is that the same schooled reflex action of readership, is the basis of the behavior that we are trying to measure.

The More Things Change

Ironically, we have a simple time reducing television and print exposures to a common currency (GRP's), but the mechanics of the two processes are completely different. But given the fact that people "read" web pages the way they read magazines, what does this mean for the measurement of both media.

There are some significant difference in the core issues of web and magazine measurement that present problems for the professional readership researcher.

For those unfamiliar with the web measurement in the U.S., I present a brief review of it.

U.S. Web Measurement

Currently, there are several companies engaged in three principal forms of web measurement.

The first form is the audit or analysis of server logs. This verifies for the advertiser the number of hits or visits to a home page but cannot generally provide reach, frequency or demographic composition. The research brands most known for these products are I/Pro, Netcount, ABC & BPA server audits. This is referred to site based measurement.

Secondly, several companies run their own online surveys and registration programs and have these files processed by a third party research company.

The third method is most akin to television or readership method and is called PC based measurement. This method involves recruiting a random panel of Internet users, installing a log program on their PC's and measuring which pages are downloaded and the time and frequency of each down loaded page as well as demographics. This is a page circulation audit and currently Media Metric (formerly PC Meter), Nielsen and Relevant Knowledge are using or fielding such systems.

The biggest limit to the PC based measurement is that only the very largest sites (IBM, MSNBC, Pathfinder, Microsoft) will have enough visits to evaluate usage and demos.

Web Readership is virtually always one reader per page/copy.

No, we don't necessarily need readership research to validate this - but we do need to know how to count reach, frequency and demos. But there is no real need for a readership method - that is given the fact that time spent with the page is on the site and PC logs .

What is the Role of Frequency, Recent Reading and Through the Book in an Electronic Print Environment?

Web Publishing is like publishing in Latin America in many ways. The concept of a discrete issue published during a specific publishing cycle is far less formal than frequency and recency based measures would require. Specifically, electronic magazines allow for simultaneous recall of new edit and old edit and custom edit - all associated with a specific logo and time stamps.

It is the concept of "issue" as we know it that becomes as metaphorical as candle power or horsepower.

What happens if there is no such thing as an issue defined by time. Recent reading is based on the assumption that "the number of readers reading any issue within the last publishing interval equals the number of readers reading a specific issue over time." Frequency as a readership method fares no better in that without a discrete issue definition, asking the number of issues read out of the last four is impossible to interpret.

Technically, edit recall, via through the book style techniques may also work poorly as a definer of web readership.

- First, the issue will have been fragmented, cut and paste to the extent that people will be recalling page elements rather than pages. These same elements might be scattered through several "issues" thus confounding the recall, and,
- Secondly, you are more likely to know whether a page exposure occurred through a site or PC based measurement systems - and - while these measure circulation and time on screen - this is sufficient in a one reader per copy environment.

Conclusions

The behavioral process of reading a web page is mechanically the same as reading a magazine. However, the structure of web publishing is radically different with extreme fragmentation of audiences, no set publishing cycle, variable issue content.

Consequently, this creates problems for the assumption of current methods for identifying audience. At the same time, evolving web measurement techniques are really circulation audits. However, in the one reader per copy environment, this may be all that is required of a currency.

This implies that survey style measurement will focus on qualitative and editorial in the future of electronic print research.