

Report: Newspaper Web sites see readership rise

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While print newspapers continue to dwindle in circulation, newspaper Web site readership is thriving, up 11 percent from last year, according to Neilson//NetRatings.

Newspaper Web sites attracted 39.3 million unique visitors in October 2005, up from 35.5 million in October 2004, Neilson said Tuesday.

This comes just a week after the Audit Bureau of Circulations released findings of a six-month decline in average weekday print circulation among the nation's 20 largest newspapers.

The most popular newspaper site for October 2005 was NYTimes.com, home of the New York Times. It drew 11.4 million unique visitors, up 15 percent from last year.

In September, NYTimes.com launched Times Select, a subscription-based service that allows only paying members and print-publication subscribers to access some news stories and many columns.

Susan Moeller, a journalism professor at the University of Maryland, said she thought Times Select was a misguided attempt by the Times to use its Web site for revenue.

"I'm not convinced Times Select is working for the New York Times," she said. "It's probably not going to grow exponentially."

The Times has thus far resisted revealing how many have subscribed to

Select.

Moeller said that by charging people to read popular op-ed columnists, they are hurting those columnists.

"A lot of the value of the New York Times is in the prestige and influence of their columnists," she said. "Having them read by fewer people on a subscriber basis is not the best idea."

The biggest gainer from last year is the Houston Chronicle, which had 2.6 million unique visitors in October 2005, a 35-percent jump from last year. Just trailing was WashingtonPost.com, which bounced 28 percent to 8.1 million unique visitors.

The only major newspaper Web site to lose ground was Boston.com, home of the Boston Globe, which fell 1 percent to 3.6 million unique visitors.

The top five: NYTimes.com, USATODAY.com, WashingtonPost.com, LATimes.com and SFGate.com, home of the San Francisco Chronicle.

Gerry Davison, senior media analyst at Neilson//NetRatings, said that added Web features that are not in print publications are helping to draw readers online.

"Most, if not all of the top newspaper sites offer interactivity such as blogs, podcasts and streaming video/audio," Davison said. "These interactive features, combined with Internet users' thirst for up-to-date information, make newspaper Web sites an increasingly appealing choice for news."

Moeller said that although newspaper presence in cyberspace is growing, it still faces an inborn problem.

"Clearly there's a tremendous amount of interest in getting news off the elite media Web sites," she said. "The problem is the business model."

Moeller noted that newspapers have traditionally had two business models: subscription-based formats and advertisement-based formats.

She said that on the Web, "the subscriber approach doesn't bring in anywhere near the kind of revenue that newspapers need to function. People want information on the Internet to be free."

Moeller suggested that if print newspaper circulation continues to flounder and newspaper Web sites don't take off, a new type of news source could take off.

"Another more information-driven model that has interesting potential is the Wikipedia model," she said.

Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that is updated by users and edited by Wikipedia employees.

"It's individual-generated information that's vetted globally on a practically second-by-second timeline," she said.

Moeller noted that the open nature of the Wikipedia model, while good for getting a variety of perspectives, puts the credibility of information at risk.

Neilson//NetRatings also found that men constituted 56 percent of newspaper Web site readership in October. Additionally, 52 percent of readers owned a bachelor's or postgraduate degree, and 21 percent had an income between \$100,000 and \$150,000.

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