

British paper turns readers into newshounds

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A journalist looks at the 'Newlist' on the Guardian website on November 10. The left-leaning Guardian is asking readers to help shape the paper's coverage by contacting its reporters on Twitter.

A British newspaper has thrown open its office doors, let the readers stride in, and invited them to peer over reporters' shoulders -- digitally, at least.

The website of the left-leaning Guardian daily is publishing its 'newlist' -- a schedule of stories its [journalists](#) are working on -- and asking readers to help shape the coverage by contacting its reporters on Twitter.

In a country known for its raucous, fiercely competitive press, where tabloids have sometimes paid journalists at rival papers for access to this list, the idea seemed risky.

"The immediate reaction from other journalists was to say it seemed like insanity," science editor James Randerson told AFP in the Guardian's cavernous newsroom.

"Competitors are going to see what you're doing. But we haven't had problems with competitors stealing stories from us, or breaking embargos -- we're careful to keep exclusives and embargoed stories off the list."

The [computer screen](#) behind him displays five grids showing the day's domestic, foreign, sport, business and science coverage.

A link to the writer's Twitter page accompanies every story, so readers can contact them with tip-offs or suggestions.

"The overwhelming reaction was very positive," says Randerson. "Most people quite enjoy the voyeurism of being able to see into the workings of a paper."



A journalist looks at the Guardian website's 'Newlist' on a computer screen.

Interactive experiments like the open newlist are part of a 'digital-first' strategy that it hopes can reverse last year's £33 million operating losses.

A key advantage is that editors get a better sense of what the audience wants. "There was a big health story one day and we hadn't done enough on it," he recalls.

"We really got a sense from Twitter that people were worried about the future of the NHS ([National Health Service](#)). So the next day, we responded with a much bigger investigation.

"You've got to take it with a pinch of salt, because [Twitter](#) is not representative of the world at large," he admits. "But it's useful to have some feedback."

The paper's national editor Dan Roberts said that in the wake of Britain's [phone hacking](#) scandal -- which forced the Rupert Murdoch-owned News of the World to close down -- people have a greater interest in seeing how news is made.

"There's a cynicism about journalism at the moment," he says. "People no longer trust the model that goes: 'We'll work out in secret what we're going to tell you, and you don't need to know whether we hacked someone's phone or lied to get it, or whether we made it up'. To gain credibility, in a more transparent age, you need to show your workings."

The Guardian admits the experiment has so far only attracted a small minority of the website's 2.9 million daily readers.

Randerson estimates that reporters receive roughly a hundred messages a day about the newlist, of which just a handful are useful.

But Charlie Beckett, director of the Polis media think-tank, said this was to be expected -- and did not mean the open newlist was a failure.

"The people getting involved are the kind of people who used to write letters to the editor," he told AFP.

"They're news nerds. Not many people are going to spend all day coming up with ideas for the Guardian. Probably only one percent of readers will ever contribute, and only one percent of their ideas will be good -- but that's better than nothing."

The experiment is not the first of its kind; for two years Norran, a Swedish regional newspaper, has been running a chat room where readers can suggest story ideas.

The paper says this has driven traffic to the site, bringing back advertisers who fled during the recession.

In Canada the Winnipeg Free Press has gone a step further, opening a cafe where readers can discuss the news with journalists face-to-face.

For the Guardian's parent company Guardian Media Group, interactive experiments like the open newlist are part of a 'digital-first' strategy that it hopes can reverse last year's £33 million (\$52.9 million, 38.4 million euros) operating losses.

The Guardian's 190-year-old print edition now has a circulation of just 233,000 copies. GMG's chief executive Andrew Miller warns the group could run out of cash in three years, so online success is crucial.

Executives want the website, which in September launched a separate edition for US readers, to boost the group's digital revenues from £47 million this year to £91 million by 2014/16.

Guardian editor-in-chief Alan Rusbridger hopes that more participatory journalism will attract readers and therefore advertisers and Roberts believes the open newslist will be adopted by other newsrooms.

"People want professional journalism, but they also want to discuss it," he says. "There's a large number of people now who really engage in the news. It's a small sub-set of the readership, but at a global level, that's millions of people who want to be part of the news process."

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