Publishers Look Beyond Politics to Mitigate Deflating 'Trump Bump'

In the weeks and months before Election Day, media organizations have been considering the possibilities of life after President Donald Trump and what that means for traffic and subscription rates.

Unsurprisingly, publisher website traffic and cable viewership has been eye-popping this week. The Guardian recorded its highest-ever digital traffic on Nov. 4 reaching more than 190 million page views and 52.9 million unique browsers globally in 24 hours. CNN Digital also broke records that day, as 116 million unique visitors logged on to the site. The Washington Post had its "highest number of pageviews in history by over 40%."

For The Washington Post, that traffic led to a "surge" in subscribers. It was all the result of years of assiduously building a framework to grow and retain its subscriber base, said chief marketing officer Miki King. Bloomberg Media has also seen subscriber gains this past week. On the local news front, digital subscriptions for The Philadelphia Inquirer rose 83%.

"The Trump Bump" refers to spike in news interest at the beginning of the president's term. These spikes in web traffic and viewership tended to be triggered by the latest presidential controversy, no matter or trivial. Some publishers claim the Trump Bump was ephemeral. But for most, the breathless coverage of the president has served as an addictive shot in the arm for publishers' digital businesses.

As of this writing, it appears the expected end of the Trump era is upon us. And publishers feel in danger of that extreme reader interest deflating.

Pushing readers beyond politics

The New York Times now has 7 million subscribers. For the first time, the company is generating more revenue from digital subscribers than print (which is a statement about the macro downward trend of print subscriptions). The Times is not reliant on any single story or topic to drive its growth, said CEO Meredith Kopit Levien. “In fact, the breadth of our core news report is both a differentiator and a driver of our business,” she said on its third-quarter earnings call this week.

Each additional topic someone engages with on The Times increases their likelihood of subscribing by 50%, the publisher said. And it’s not just politics that people are reading: Around 80% of readers go beyond politics to read other subjects each week. The popular Games and Cooking properties have 1.4 million subscribers combined. The Times will also continue investing in ancillary revenue lines like affiliate sites such as Wirecutter. It is also banking on audio, as the company was buoyed by its acquisition of subscription audio app Audm in March this year.

Nonetheless, investors anticipate a slump in subscription growth under a Biden administration.

“If [Trump] is no longer President, this bump will fade,” said independent media analyst Alex DeGroote. “The post-Trump world may feel very boring, and this may impact news consumption.”

Without an antagonist, those titles who have set themselves up in opposition to the president may lose subscribers who paid as a political act of support. Not having Trump in office could have implications on a media organization like CNN’s identity and purpose; it’s all about that “symbiotic

relationship.”

However, Trump and interest in his pronouncements are unlikely to disappear. It’s possible that Twitter might crack down more on his more salty tweets. Media outlets then face another existential dilemma on how much oxygen to give Trump’s words.

Deals can be dangerous

In the US over the last few months, the election frenzy has protected post-pandemic traffic fatigue, said James Henderson, CEO of Zephr which helps publishers drive subscribers. Traffic, and so subscriber bumps, will plateau in the next few months.

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