Your Younger Audience Is Declining Faster Than It Looks

Last week, I argued that habitual publisher traffic – direct and branded – has been eroding for years, and that the under-35s are leading the charge. Not directly provable, but a theory.

Now that I am no longer part of that cohort, it's easier to pin the blame on them. Which is entirely what I intend to do.

Younger Audience *Share* Isn't Declining Dramatically

Based on 15 of the biggest UK publishers (and Similarweb's always excellent data), 18-34s make up 29.5% of the average publisher audience. That's marginally above our estimated ONS population benchmark of 28%.

On that number alone, publishers look broadly representative of the country they serve. I use the word *serve* loosely here.

It even looks quite stable. The average publisher share of 18-34 year olds has slipped only slightly over three years:

- Premium publishers: -3.0pp
- Public service: -2.6pp
- Popular publishers: -1.0pp
- Platforms have seen the largest drop in younger audience share: -6.8pp

Image Credit: Harry Clarkson-Bennett

Not ideal, but certainly not numbers that warrant the furor around younger audiences. Particularly when you see that platforms have lost audience share in the 18-34 bracket too.

> *Platforms average 49.2% younger audience, roughly 1.7 times the publisher figure. No traditional publisher clears 40%. The New York Times tops the set at 39.1%, albeit only their UK audience; the BBC is next at 35.1%.*

So What’s All The Fuss?

Share doesn’t tell the full story. It is just a ratio. Your younger audience share can look less depressing if you’re also

losing an older audience. Which is exactly what this data shows.

In every publisher segment, the younger audience is declining *faster* than the older one – on a total that is itself down 12%-32%. For publishers, younger audiences look like a shrinking slice of a shrinking pie.

Image Credit: Harry Clarkson-Bennett

In real terms, younger audiences have declined far more significantly:

- Popular publishers: -34.2%
- Premium: -30.7%
- Public service: -16.9%
- Platforms: -9.2%

So while platforms have seen the largest drop in younger audience share (-6.8pp), they have seen the smallest younger audience decline by volume.

These figures have obvious caveats: third-party data estimates both share and volume. And these are only website visits; the data doesn't include app data. But when you compare apples with apples, the *direction* is what matters. Even if the apples have wasps in them.

Have Young People Left To Go To Platforms?

Not according to this data. Not to their websites at least, which is a limitation of this data. The app experience for TikTok, YouTube, Reddit, etc., is significantly better and almost certainly one of the platform's primary goals.

It's very difficult to say that younger audiences have all left to go to social media platforms based on this data alone. Particularly while their *older* audience grew by more than 10% in real terms.

Nothing in this data proves platforms are *absorbing* the audience publishers are losing. I'm sure that these users have just migrated into feeds and apps that are harder to measure — they certainly haven't gone to the open web.

What's defensible is simpler and more uncomfortable: At publishers, the younger audience is in absolute and unambiguous decline.

What Do We Do About It?

If you think attracting and retaining a younger audience is a problem, you are not an outlier. Most traditional publishers are in the same boat. The first step is to diagnose the scale

of the problem. Understand precisely where *you* sit compared to your competitors.

That’s the exact job our younger-audience diagnostic does: A position scan that benchmarks your younger share and engagement against the right peer set and drops you into one of four quadrants:

- A distribution problem.
- An engagement problem.
- A relevance problem.
- Relevant AND engaging (no one exists in this position of the quadrant, but we can dream).

We combine this data with a capability scan that maps where you win or lose younger readers across the younger audience funnel. From inspiration (awareness) through to fandom (advocacy).

Instead of panicking, we can diagnose, position, and give some clear, data-led recommendations. Much healthier.

More Resources:

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