

EDITORIAL

Whither the newspaper?

What does the future hold for newspapers? It all depends on what you think a newspaper is and where on the planet you are standing. If you are a literal-minded type who considers the concept inseparable from actual newsprint *and* your view is restricted to, say, North America or Japan or Australia or parts of Europe, where daily newspaper circulation has been edging downward, the future may look a bit gloomy.

If, however, you agree with Timothy Balding, head of the Paris-based World Association of Newspapers (WAN), first, that "newspaper" is a thoroughly elastic term and, second, that the only proper view is a global one, then things look a lot brighter. As Mr. Balding said cheerily last week during the latest World Newspaper Congress in Moscow, "Overall, the audience for newspapers keeps on growing, both in print and online. Newspapers are increasing their reach through the exploitation of a wide range of new distribution channels, ranging from free daily newspapers to online editions."

Both in print and online? Well, that's one way of silencing the doom-and-gloom folks who keep fretting about the shift of readers and advertisers to the Internet. You just include the Internet in your definition of a newspaper, and instantly the industry outlook brightens.

Theoretically, just about anything can be a newspaper as long as a newspaper company owns it and it disseminates news. (Radio, anyone?) So what's to worry about?

According to the WAN, not too much. For those in the business, it's a matter of knowing your market, which is where the Association's figures for the past year come in handy. Here's the global view: Newspaper sales rose slightly, and advertising revenues showed the largest increase in four years. More than 439 million people worldwide buy a newspaper every day, up from 414 million five years ago. In other words, newspapers are more than holding their own against television.

What *is* variable is the way people in different places are choosing to read their newspapers. Paid circulation of conventional papers jumped in the huge markets of China and India, for example, as well as in South America, but dipped in many other countries, including Japan, as the numbers of people getting their news either online or through free dailies continued to rise. According to the WAN, the global audience for newspaper Web sites was up by nearly 9 percent last year and by more than 200 percent since 2001. The number of such sites jumped an impressive 20 percent in 2005.

For those putting out newspapers in the most Web-happy countries, the trend represents both a reassurance and a challenge. On the one hand, the newspaper as such is clearly not dying: The Japan Times online is still The Japan Times -- some would say even a better Japan Times, with vastly greater reach and flexibility than the paper version.

On the other hand, though Internet advertising revenues are soaring, most newspaper companies have yet to figure out how to turn a sufficient profit from their online operations without taking the unpopular step of charging for access. It seems only a matter of time, however, before they begin harnessing that advertising potential.

For print-and-paper fans, meanwhile, the picture is pretty much all rosy. These are the civilized people who can't imagine beginning their day without a cup of coffee and half an hour with the newspaper that has conveniently been delivered to their door. Others escape into the paper to block out their tedious bus or train commute.

Still others postpone the precious, relaxing interlude until after work, substituting an evening paper for the morning edition and maybe a glass of wine for the coffee.

Collectively, these are the hard core, the very lifeblood, of the traditional newspaper business. And they may well have feared their print-reading days were numbered. They can all cheer up. Online readership may be growing by leaps and bounds, but it's still just a fraction of the traditional print readership.

According to the latest National Newspaper Publishers & Editors Association poll, 31.3 percent of the Japanese public, a highly Web-literate group by global standards, regard the Internet as an "indispensable information source." At the same time, 92.5 percent read regular newspapers, still an astonishing number despite the fact

that it is down from previous years. Obviously, it will be a while before the Internet puts the door-to-door delivery people out of a job.

In the newspaper world, it's a good time to be a consumer. The people who put out the paper may have some scrambling and adjusting to do. Readers, however, can just sit back and enjoy their growing options.

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