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## **MEDIA@LSE Working Paper Series**

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### **The Guardian: Game of Editions**

Colleen Murrell

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**Colleen Murrell** ([colleen.murrell@deakin.edu.au](mailto:colleen.murrell@deakin.edu.au)) is a senior lecturer at Deakin University in Melbourne, where she chairs and teaches units in radio, television and international news. Her main areas of research are international newsgathering, transnational broadcasting, and digital and social media. In 2015 her book 'Foreign Correspondents and International Newsgathering: The Role of Fixers' was published by Routledge. In her previous career she was a news editor for media organisations including the BBC, ITN, and APTN.

Published by Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science ("LSE"), Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. The LSE is a School of the University of London. It is a Charity and is incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act (Reg number 70527).

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# The Guardian: Game of Editions

Colleen Murrell

## Abstract

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In 2013 The Guardian launched its third online iteration as ‘Guardian Australia’ – complementing ‘Guardian US’ and Guardian UK’. Via these three digital editions the Guardian has expanded its global readership, which is one of its strategies to strengthen its future viability in the digital and mobile news sphere. The Guardian’s journalists, while gathering news from around the world, now report in to the different news hubs. In the three main newsrooms, the journalists also create particular stories for their niche audiences in Australia, the USA and the UK. This paper examines the editorial content the Guardian has created on the back of digital disruption. Two months’ worth of ‘Editor’s Picks’ from across the three platforms are analysed to reveal how much the Guardian is promoting new, distinctive, locally created content versus how much it draws on material written by journalists from the other editions. This content is compared to data derived from interviewing those in charge of the three editions (Editor in chief Kath Viner, Guardian Australia Editor Emily Wilson and Guardian US Editor Lee Glendinning) plus interviews with other senior managers of the news organisation. In mid-2015 a fourth online edition of the Guardian began rolling out – Guardian International. This edition is not geo-specific and will instead promote and aggregate international news gathered from the other editions on its digital ‘front page’. In January 2016 the Guardian announced it planned to cut annual costs by £53.6m due to rising losses: a move that will almost certainly involve staff redundancies. Later in the same month, Guardian Australia’s editor, Emily Wilson, said in a public forum that the operations in Sydney and New York would be ‘completely insulated’ from these cuts. This paper explores the Guardian’s global digital strategy during this difficult era for media that straddle the legacy and digital worlds.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This article examines the content of three online editions of the *Guardian* – ‘*Guardian Australia*’, ‘*Guardian US*’ and ‘*Guardian UK*’ – in order to understand how the editors seek to customise their output for their different audiences via the website *theguardian.com*. This is achieved through content analysis of two months’ worth of ‘Editor’s Picks’ stories, which are sent out via emailed newsletters. The gathered data operate in conjunction with interviews<sup>1</sup> with the editions’ editors and attendance at their main editorial meetings in Sydney, New York and London. This emphasis on the editors’ missions is similar to that of Philip Schlesinger and Gillian Doyle when they stress the importance of research at the ‘managerial level – the point at which attempts are being made to devise strategies for dealing with a rapidly changing environment’ due to digital disruption’ (2015: 308). Since gathering the newsletter data in late 2014, a fourth digital edition of the *Guardian*, called ‘*Guardian International*’, has emerged. The beta edition was tested in early 2015 and was rolled out later that year, in conjunction with staff recruitment. This edition will not be headquartered in a particular geographic location, but will be overseen by international editors based in newsrooms in Sydney, New York and London, depending on where it is daytime in the 24/7 news cycle. Data from this latter online edition was not investigated here, due to its emergent state.

## **DIGITAL DISRUPTION OF NEWSPAPERS**

There has been an abundance of research looking at the changes wrought to traditional print newspapers by digital disruption over recent years. The viability of journalism itself has been called into question and the myriad international conferences with titles referencing ‘the future of journalism’ are testimony to the enormous changes that have taken place. Among the different research foci, scholars have covered the downsizing of newsrooms (Scott, 2010; O’Donnell, *et al.*, 2016); the evolution of news practice (Duffield & Cokely, 2006; O’Sullivan & Heinonen, 2008; Dick 2011; Anderson 2013); the growth of video on newspaper sites (Bock, 2015); the automation of journalism (Clerwall, 2014); networked journalism (Castells, 1996; Beckett, 2008, Heinrich, 2014); and the use of social media, UGC and citizen journalism (Deuze, *et al.*, 2007; Domingo, *et al.*, 2008; Hermida & Thurman 2008; Murrell & Oakham 2008; Hermida, 2010; Jönsson & Örnebring, 2011; Himelboim & McCreery, 2012;

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<sup>1</sup> A full list of interviewees can be found at the end of the paper

Lasorsa, 2012; Paulussen & Harder, 2014). As newspaper managers battle to keep their operations afloat, scholars have charted newspapers' different strategies for monetising their product via pay-walls or subscriptions (Herbert & Thurman, 2007; Cook, *et al.*, 2012; Chiou, 2013; Carson, 2015). In 2015 Schlesinger and Doyle invoked Joseph Schumpeter's 1950 account of 'the process of creative destruction' in order to show the inevitability of change that has led to our current crisis regarding how to manage and monetise journalism's output (2015: 306). The article compared the approaches of the UK's *Financial Times* and *The Telegraph*, to understand how managers were harnessing technology to try to build new digital platforms and products. In a similar way to Schlesinger's methodology, this article will adopt the managerial perspective in order to understand how the *Guardian's* digital editors are trying out new growth strategies to transform the *Guardian* from a national British newspaper to a global digital brand. The *Guardian's* investment in three online operations – complete with reasonably-sized local newsrooms - has surprised the industry. It is worth examining first how this came about.

## **GUARDIAN AUSTRALIA**

The *Guardian* launched its Australian online edition on May 27 2013. The money came from multi-millionaire *Wotif.com* co-founder Graeme Wood. The size of the investment loan was reported to be \$14.9m (Crikey.com, 2014), however, neither the editor in chief of the *Guardian* Kath Viner (personal interview, 2015), nor *Guardian Australia* Editor Emily Wilson (personal interview, 2015) would confirm this figure. Viner insisted the approach came from Wood, and the edition would never have been set up without his money. Wilson argued this gives the edition relative independence (personal interview, 2015):

*Guardian Australia* is a company with only one investor. We're wholly owned by 'Guardian Global'. So our business model here is completely different. It's an experiment that's completely different from any of the rest of the *Guardian*. So everything else, America and the UK - all their money comes from 'Guardian News and Media' (GNM). We're separate, we stand on our own two feet and they don't give us any money. We're a separate company. We're Australian.

The operation began small, with just a handful of cherry picked reporters and commentators from the best of the Australian media. From two offices in Sydney and Canberra these reporters covered the federal parliament and the big national stories of the day. In 2016, it has reporters in six states and territories and three offices in Sydney, Canberra and

Melbourne. Its 80 members of staff include 42 full-time writers, with another ten on contract (Wilson, personal interview, 2015). *Guardian Australia* has found a gap in the market that is otherwise largely a duopoly between Rupert Murdoch's News Corp and Fairfax Media. Its overnight success has led to it being joined by new offerings and/or offices from *Daily Mail Australia*, *Buzzfeed Australia*, *HuffPost Australia*, *Mashable Australia* and a beefed-up BBC online operation in Sydney. Australia's Nielsen Online Ratings for January 2016, show that the *Guardian* came in at 7<sup>th</sup> position nationwide with 1.812 million unique viewers per month, behind News Corp, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the ABC, *Daily Mail Australia* and *NineMsn and Yahoo7* websites. It now attracts more viewers than the websites for the upmarket Melbourne *Age*, and the two popular tabloid outlets the *Herald Sun* and Sydney's *Daily Telegraph*. *Guardian Australia* has broken some high profile stories, including airing the first interview given by the former Prime Minister Julia Gillard, after losing power. In 2013 an interactive feature called 'Firestorm', which charted a family's tale of survival during the Tasmanian bushfires, won a 'Walkley Award for multimedia storytelling'. In 2014 it was joint winner of another Walkley for 'Scoop of the Year' for an investigation, in conjunction with the ABC, concerning Australian secret service spying on the Indonesian president.

## **GUARDIAN US**

The former editor in chief of the *Guardian*, Alan Rusbridger, is said to have been planning an expansion into America since 2003, when the Iraq War resulted in a spike in online traffic to the *Guardian* website (Wolff, 2014). After a few false starts, *Guardian US* was launched in 2011. In 2015, *Guardian US* ranked 17th in the country in the Pew Center's 'Digital Top 50 Online News Entities (2015)' list. According to its editor Lee Glendinning, it has 50 writers and journalists, who are mostly based in a main newsroom in New York, a smaller office in Washington and in 2015 another office was opened in San Francisco. There are also reporters and/or stringers in Portland, Chicago, Florida, Texas and Detroit. Since opening its latest US operation, its biggest coup has been a slew of awards for the reporting of Edward Snowden and NSA surveillance - including a Pulitzer Prize for Public Service and an Emmy Award. *Guardian US* finds itself in a crowded media market and so has played to its strengths, chasing stories about civil rights and particularly gun violence. It has capitalised on its digital creativity: an ongoing example being an interactive feature called 'The Counted' that tells the individual stories of people killed by police. Over 2015 a total of 1,134 people had been killed by police by 31 December (*Guardian*, 2015a). In June 2015 a *Guardian US* press release announced it was launching a news innovation lab, 'focused on using mobile technology to create deeper journalism' with \$2.6 million from the Knight Foundation (*Guardian*, 2015b).

With 50% of the *Guardian's* traffic now coming from mobile phones, it plans to spend the money finding new and better ways to engage people on smaller screens. According to Glendinning the US newsroom is the ideal place to experiment with mobile as it has a young workforce that is 'unencumbered from the newspaper'.

## **GUARDIAN UK**

*The Guardian* in the UK has been experimenting with online publication of various parts of its business since 1994/5. The '*Guardian Unlimited*' sites launched in 1999, morphed into *Guardian.co.uk* in 2008 and became part of *theguardian.com* in 2013. UK monthly figures from the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC) for October 2015 show that *theguardian.com* had 8.15 million daily readers, making it second only to the *MailOnline* which had 13.24 million (Albeau, 2015). On the biggest stories – such as those related to Julian Assange and phone hacking - the website operation has been integral to disseminating information to the widest possible audience through innovative multimedia storytelling. The *Guardian UK* site has consistently led the field, garnering many high profile awards. In 2015 GNM won major prizes at the British Media Awards, the AOP Digital Publishing Awards, the Webby Awards, and the European Digital Media Awards. These wins cover the full range of categories from digital innovation and investigative journalism to advertising campaigns. In London the digital team is deeply embedded within the existing structures of the large newspaper operation. Overseeing both the newspaper and the *Guardian UK* front pages is the editor in chief Kath Viner, who took over from Alan Rusbridger in 2015. Viner has had a meteoric rise through the paper since joining as a reporter in 1997. She held a series of senior positions from 1998 to 2008, when she became one of two deputy editors of the paper. In 2013 Viner launched and was editor of *Guardian Australia*, where she became known for her commitment to digital news and the open web. Viner gave the prestigious 'A N Smith Lecture' in Melbourne in 2013 in which she said: 'Digital is a huge conceptual change, a sociological change, a cluster bomb blowing apart who we are and how our world is ordered, how we see ourselves, how we live' (Viner, 2013). Viner then became the editor of *Guardian US* in 2014, where she laid out the structure for pushing the *Guardian* into the forefront of journalism aimed at a mobile rather than desktop digital future. Viner was the popular favourite in the staff ballot which placed her on the shortlist for the editor in chief's position. She won 434 votes, against Emily Bell (188), Janine Gibson (175) and Wolfgang Blau (29). In her manifesto for the job, she stressed her belief in the importance of digital journalism:

We urgently need to reach young readers, who are already into platforms we've never even heard of. We'll find them where they are, not where we want them to be (*New Statesman*, 2014).

## **GUARDIAN MONEY**

The Guardian's finances have always intrigued media commentators who question how the organisation can survive, given its continued financial losses. Competitor media organisations in particular have enjoyed speculating about its imminent demise as a media brand. But past examples show that the *Guardian's* editors and managers have usually been canny financial investors, right from the start of the business. In 1821, when John Edward Taylor launched the *Manchester Guardian*, he did so with little risk to himself:

Ten men put up £100 each and an eleventh contributed £50. These sums bore interest at 5 per cent. They were to be repaid if and when the paper was in a position to do so; if it failed, there was to be no claim against Taylor, who was to be not only editor but sole proprietor. It was a singularly generous method of financing the venture (Ayerst, 1971: 22).

More than a century later in 1936, when death duties for the sole owner JR Scott looked crippling, he handed over ownership to the 'Scott Trust'. The trust was set up like a private equity firm, to use its profits to help preserve in perpetuity the less commercially successful part of the overall portfolio – in this case, the newspaper. It was called upon:

[...] to devote the whole of the surplus profits of the Company which would otherwise have been available for dividends... towards building up the reserves of the Company and increasing the circulation of and expanding and improving the newspapers (*Guardian*, 2002).

Over the years the *Guardian* has often faced tough moments, and the newspaper even contemplated a merger with the *Times* in the mid-1960s. However, it has always been creative in finding solutions to its most pressing financial problems. In the mid-70s, as part of a cost-cutting drive, it revamped the *Guardian Weekly* newspaper to take in stories from the *Washington Post* and *Le Monde* (*Guardian*, 2002). This experiment of conjoining content from multiple sources, provides an early example of its ability to find savings via economies of scale, while squirreling away money for the high-profile investigative reporting for which the *Guardian* is recognised. Nonetheless, the newspaper continues to lose money, with readership figures from the Audit Bureau of Circulations (August 2015) showing the

*Guardian* newspaper was down month-on-month by -1.66% to 168,369 readers. Media commentators have argued that one way out of this conundrum might be for the *Guardian* to start charging its online readers – via a paywall or subscription model. In a *PBS NewsHour* discussion (2013), the *New York Times*'s David Carr discussed the *Guardian* with the *New Yorker*'s Ken Auletta. Carr said the paper's management should consider this option while, 'the eyes of the world are upon them', due to the breaking of such global stories as WikiLeaks, phone hacking and Edward Snowden. Auletta said that Alan Rusbridger was against paying for content on principle, although he had told him they weren't 'the Taliban of the free, we'll consider it'.

The *Guardian* has sought salvation in an expanded digital arena. These new digital platforms have added exponentially to the outlet's global readership and allowed it to boast a fully functioning 24/7 newsgathering operation. Two years ago it moved its local domains to a new 'global domain' with a single .com address [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com) 'as part of its transition from a respected UK newspaper to a leading global digital media brand' (Guardian, 2013). According to a *Guardian* press release, this global domain now has over '120 million monthly unique browsers' accessing theguardian.com - up 'almost 35% year-on-year' (Guardian, 2015c). Andrew Miller, Guardian Media Group Chief Executive (until June 2015) argued that sales from the group's portfolio, increased digital revenue and 'a disciplined financial approach' had 'secured the financial future of the *Guardian*' (Turvill, 2015). However, this rosy prognosis now looks premature. In 2016 Miller's successor David Pemsel, announced that the group must cut annual costs by 20% due to rising levels of expenditure. The issue of pay-walls might be back on the table in the future. Back in October 2015, Kath Viner had said she would be very disappointed if she had to bring in pay-walls:

I would never say never on pay-walls. I'm not convinced they work financially. I'm certain that they're not as good in terms of getting as wide a readership as possible and in getting people to interact with your content as much as possible (personal interview, 2015).

The *Guardian* has been experimenting with a mixed model in terms of generating money. The expanded global digital readership had been seen as a potential opportunity to win more advertising. However, Kath Viner (personal interview, 2015) said that the recent collapse in ad-spend, (with advertisers preferring to spend their money on Google, Facebook and Twitter), combined with the arrival of ad-blockers, meant that this was a 'precarious' model. In our interview in 2015 she foreshadowed a number of initiatives for 2016 to boost the membership scheme, which is currently an opt-in scheme, with different levels of access to

*Guardian* events and content pegged to different levels of financial commitment from readers. Viner sees the current membership deal as, ‘transactional. It doesn’t look like it comes from editorial because it doesn’t. Editorial is going to be getting much more involved in what the membership offers members’ (personal interview, 2015). She said she was employing ‘an editorial team’ to work out what the organisation should offer to make its ‘liberal progressive’ demographic join up. She was open to all ideas that led to engagement and tapped the readers’ loyalty to the *Guardian* concept. She said: ‘It could be anything from a quarterly magazine to a members-only space to discuss an event online or discuss a good piece online, talk-boards, meet-ups, even phone calls from me!’ In the meantime she was pursuing ‘different strategies for different platforms’ and was involving the *Guardian* in an experimental phase of publishing ‘instant articles’ on Facebook. Until the data was in she was not prepared to discuss its viability for the future, but added, ‘You know, Facebook has 1.4 billion users – I wouldn’t mind getting close to a few of those’. In 2016, these initiatives look more urgent with news about the bad financial losses the paper was incurring. In terms of what this might mean for the Australian and US digital editions, Emily Wilson (2016), speaking at a public forum in Melbourne on 28 January said that the two editions were “completely insulated” from the current round of cuts. This is underlined in the *Guardian*’s new three-year plan, which aims to: “focus international growth on the US and Australia, increasing their contribution to the overall business” (Ponsford, 2016).

## **ANALYTICS**

Across its Australian, American and British web pages, the *Guardian* publishes between 400-500 stories per day (Sawers, 2015). The *Guardian* uses the in-house built tracking software ‘Ophan,’ to ‘inform and justify what stories [make] it onto the *Guardian*’s online front page’ (Ibid). Ophan gives real time feedback on the ‘reach’ of the *Guardian*’s content. From the prototype that was first imagined five years ago, it has been constantly tweaked to meet changing editorial demands. It holds 15 days of rich data and after that time, journalists can access a longer archive via the non-proprietary software ‘Omniure’. Access to these software packages is not just limited to senior editors but is used by around 1,000 *Guardian* employees per month, according to Audience Editor Chris Moran (personal interview, 2015). This has changed the culture of the newsrooms as all journalists are now able to access data on their stories in real-time and discover how they might edit them to increase either the number of readers or the engagement of readers. Over the past three years the software has been calibrated to test for different questions. At first it just fed back numbers on page views or unique browsers, which are metrics of ‘reach’. In the past year changes have been made to

feed back data on ‘referrers’, ‘median attention time’ and on the ‘loyalty’ of readers across the different articles read. Back when she was US editor, Kath Viner insisted that the software also be made accessible via mobile, so that she could read it on her phone as soon as she woke up (personal interview with Mary Hamilton, 2015). *Guardian Australia* Editor Emily Wilson, explained how she uses the software to check on the success of a particular article:

I can see how many people have read it so far, how long they spent on it, *where* it’s being promoted, *how* it has been promoted, the platforms it is being read on and where it’s being read. I can burrow down into a lot more detail, where readers came to it on, how they came to the story - their referrer. I can see what kind of reader they are and how often they come to us and I can see what all our staff has done to promote this socially [... points to graphs]. This shows us who moved what where – because we have so many ‘fronts’ – and how successful were the sells through click-throughs, and what did they do next – which is really important. Are we keeping them on the page, are the links rich enough, are we providing enough of a journey? [Changes graph]. And this is what other people have said on social media about that piece (personal interview, 2015).

Wilson believes that it is this constant access to data that has helped her team make decisions not just about stories to promote but about hiring staff. She cites the audience’s clear interest in migration issues that led to the decision to create a ‘specialised news round’ for reporter Ben Doherty. All three edition editors, plus members of the digital team I interviewed (Chris Moran, Aron Pilhoffer and Mary Hamilton), were keen to stress that Ophan does not *replace* human decision-making but it *bolsters* human decision making. According to Moran (personal interview, 2015): ‘We consider ourselves data-informed *not* data-led. I want a human being in between this data and decision-making. I don’t want this to turn into an algorithm’. One of the most useful metrics is the ‘referrer,’ which enables the *Guardian* journalists to understand which site readers were on before they arrived at a particular page (along with the ‘search words’ they used). Moran cited their highest rating story of all time as being ‘The Water On Mars story’ from September 2015 which had 4 million page-views over two days. He said 50% of those who came to the story came ‘from search’. He added: ‘On that page there was a video embedded and in total it was watched 1.2 million times. 900,000 of the views were people who came from Google’. Moran would not allow publication of the day-to-day breakdown of figures from search and referrals, stating carefully: ‘Google remains the *Guardian*’s biggest external referrer by a significant amount followed by Facebook, which exceeds Twitter by a significant amount’. Another, smaller ‘referrer,’ for which again no figures can be released, is the *Guardian*’s own emailed newsletters.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The three editions send out free subscription-based emailed newsletters each morning that alert readers to the 'Editor's Picks' for that day. I subscribed to all three editions' newsletters and gathered the data for the months of October and November 2014. The emails were sent every day from the Australian and US editions, and five times a week only from the UK edition. For comparative reasons I therefore chose to use only the weekday newsletters from all three: for October and November this comprised 43 work days. On each of these days, the newsletters offered a selection of the editor's top six stories from the edition's site to link to and read. In reality the emails are generated automatically from snapshotted data from each edition's 'front page' at a particular time. According to Glendinning (personal interview, 2015), this means that the editors *have* picked the stories for the front page and they represent not just what are the most popular stories, but also which are the stories the journalists worked hardest on and about which the team feels most proud. She said: 'The Editor's Picks box is put together by the things journalistically we feel the strongest about' (personal interview, 2015).

When I originally selected the data, I worked on the assumption that in order to mark out a range of stories as worthwhile of time investment, the editors would offer a selection of local and regional stories, mixed in with the 'best of the rest' of the *Guardian*. I collated the articles into a grid in order to check the data later against the editors' declared aims for the editions. I tracked back the sources to find out if they were '*domestic*' stories - compiled in-house by each edition's own reporters - or if they were '*international*' stories written by journalists from abroad or from other *Guardian* editions. All percentages were rounded off to the nearest full numbers. Site visits for interviews and to attend editorial meetings were made to *Guardian Australia* on August 17 2015, *Guardian US* on September 17 and 18 2015, and *Guardian UK* on October 16 and 23 2015.

## **FINDINGS – GUARDIAN AUSTRALIA**

In the Australian newsletters' 'Editor's Picks' section, 6 stories were featured on each day, making a total of 258 articles recommended as the top stories over the 43 days monitored. The principal finding was that the Australian edition's picks were 75% domestic-created content, sourced and written by journalists in Australia. This was higher than I expected, as a casual reader. I grouped the data into the most recurrent themes I discovered, and where stories crossed into two groups, like 'politics' *and* 'environment', I selected the category to

which they most correlated. Of the 193 stories (out of 258) that were *domestic*, were grouped into the following categories: Politics (60%); Rights: surveillance, security, data retention (12%); Environment (12%) Immigration/Asylum Seekers (11%) and ‘Terror’ (5%). In 2014 there were only 3 stories on indigenous issues picked over the 43 days. The stories from the *international* side (mostly concerning articles sourced from other areas of the *Guardian*) covered a wide range of issues, with none of them particularly standing out as a category: there were 7 stories on ISIS; and smaller numbers of articles on Hong Kong student protests, Ebola, President Obama, mid-term elections, and the rest was made up of assorted shootings, obituaries, violent clashes and miscellany. These stories were written by journalists in London, New York or in foreign bureaux or were from the international agencies. There were only a couple of instances where stories were written by journalists from multiple locations, which would have demonstrated cross-collaboration between editions. For example on November 13 2014 the story, ‘US-China climate deal boosts global talks but Republicans vow to resist’, was gathered by Suzanne Goldenberg in WDC, Lenore Taylor in Canberra and Tania Branigan in Beijing. The main article also linked to a story-graph put together from EIA statistics, called ‘How the world uses coal – interactive data’ and there was also an opinion piece by Damian Carrington, the Environment editor based in London. Overall, there were no light-hearted stories in the ‘Editor’s picks’ section, although some of the political stories contained humorous elements.

This data backs up what I found in the morning’s editorial meeting: the stories that fired up discussions centred on politicians, political bias, and the environment. Top of the agenda for Editor Emily Wilson was a question regarding the number of readers over the previous 24 hours. ‘Pushing 1.5 million yesterday – but may not make the top ten’ came the reply. The ‘top ten’ refers to the days when the number of ‘pieces read’ overall boosts the page clicks into the records. These particular days are tagged with the name of the biggest story and are taped to a girder in the middle of the newsroom, in the manner of *Top Gear*’s leader board that records the ‘fastest lap times’. The top stories of the previous 24 hours were all political. They were the ‘Politics Live Blog’, a wrap on the weekly ABC TV show ‘*QandA*’ (featuring politicians) and a Canberra piece by political reporter Lenore Taylor. There were only four *non*-Australian stories recorded in the top 20. The meeting debated the merits of the stories for the day ahead, including: an escaped prisoner recaptured, an update from a royal commission into child sexual abuse, political bias at a union corruption hearing, the IAAF president’s election vote, a video of octopi fighting in a tank and another of a production of ‘Tristan and Isolde’, a portrait commissioned by former cricketer Shane Warne, an update on the Ashes, and a summary of the current work of the *Guardian*’s top political cartoonist ‘First

Dog'. The features editor outlined stories on the lack of female baristas and a hiking travelogue from Tasmania. The Northern Territory's reporter was in Sydney for a few days and she contributed stories about indigenous affairs she was covering long-distance. From Canberra, reporter Lenore Taylor talked through three hard-hitting political-environmental stories, via Skype. The international editor was currently in the UK and those stories were referred on to a later meeting.

I did not disclose the data findings in my interview with Emily Wilson, but simply asked her for the stories she believed interested *Guardian Australia* readers the most:

There are two massive stories we lead the way on: immigration and asylum. We would hope to consistently break most of the news in that area, always lead the way. [...] Canberra – politics, and their incredibly measured, cool-headed but no punches-pulled coverage is like another massive thing for us. The environment is massive. So anything we can produce. We have an almost full-time environment writer – Oliver Milman – and also Lenore Taylor is a global expert really on carbon and carbon policy, so that's a huge area. And the fourth massive thing for us is around surveillance, everything around personal freedom, data retention, the state, freedom laws generally, clamping down on activists, protests and the right to protest and the right to free speech. [...] And an increasingly strong fifth area – that we're really strong on – is indigenous affairs.

Later, in an interview with Executive Head of Audience Mary Hamilton, (who had worked for the Australian, UK and US digital editions), I discovered that these 'themes' were in fact completely embedded in the reporting production process. Hamilton said the core areas had been conceived by Kath Viner and had been followed by Emily Wilson:

The Australian edition has these five core areas on which it focuses very heavily and I think it's pretty much the best in the country for – migration and refugees, the environment, politics (at the national level primarily), freedom and security (things like data retention and the 'Queensland Bikie Laws'), and the fifth one is indigenous affairs. [...] They focus very carefully on what fits and they have very limited resources so stories that don't fit in the five things they want to be the best in the country at [...] If it doesn't fit then they're very ruthless about 'well should we be doing that at all?' (Hamilton, personal interview, 2015)

## **FINDINGS – GUARDIAN US**

In the American edition of the readers' newsletters there was a greater variety of stories chosen for the 'Editor's picks' section. 148 of the 258 stories selected (57%) were written by the edition's own journalists about American domestic matters, with the rest being an assortment of international content. The topic that was covered the most, (and which included both domestic and international stories) was in the category 'Terror', which was mostly related to ISIS, but also took in articles written about the treatment of prisoners from Afghanistan and Iraq in Guantánamo Jail. 10% of the total number of stories overall was related in some way to 'terror'. *Internationally*, there was interest in the student protests in Hong Kong and also with stories from and related to Israel. There were a few stories concerning Canada – but these were mostly related to the Ottawa parliament shooting, and there were 5 stories from Latin America – 4 from Mexico and one from Brazil. Another topic that was covered from both the domestic and international ends was Ebola: there were 25 stories on this overall, 16 from the USA and 9 from West Africa and Europe. When you isolate the 148 *domestic* stories, the main topic themes were: 'Police shootings/Crime' (16%); 'Midterms' (13%); 'Rights', including abortion rights, data protection and gay marriage (12%); 'Ebola' (11%) and 'Terror' (7%). Other than 'Midterms' there were not many political stories. Stories that had government input (and emanated from the White House, Senate, Supreme Court and Pentagon) were mostly related to the above categories and filed as 'Terror', 'Midterms' or 'Rights'.

The morning meeting in New York had 24 people in attendance. Again, the first item on the agenda was the statistics for readers from the day before. There were 2.4 million unique browsers ('uniques') and 4.23 million page-views overall. This made it the fifth best US day so far, according to Sarah Eberspacher (personal interview, 2015). Of the 7 stories cited from the day before as the most popular (or as garnering the most interaction), 5 were political and 4 of these were related to the Republican election debates. One of these stories also crossed into 'gender' as it concerned charges of misogyny for Donald Trump, and another concerned political aspects of the environment debate. The top-rating story was the Chile earthquake (277,595 page-views), a story which originated in Australia, due to the time of day it happened, but was then updated from the US. The other non-political story concerned a black student Ahmed Mohamed who had been arrested with a clock he had made, on incorrect charges of terrorism. The stories being touted for the following day were mostly political and were related to ongoing issues from the Republican debate, including an extended discussion about Donald Trump's expressed opinions on Muslims. There were two

breaking environmental stories concerning Utah floods and Californian wildfires. A great deal of the half hour meeting was taken up in discussing preparations for the Papal visit to the USA (and there was to be a subsequent meeting on this issue). Stories from business, video, sport and arts/entertainment were discussed and a *Washington Post* story about a report linking napping to Type 2 Diabetes was mentioned. Two stories were set to discuss 'gender' issues - relating to women and unemployment and the ten-year anniversary of Chancellor Angela Merkel in Germany.

Lee Glendinning had worked previously in London and had held a senior position in *Guardian Australia* before taking over in 2015 as *Guardian US* Editor. When asked what she thought were the main areas that the edition covered, she said (personal interview, 2015): 'I think here we have chosen to focus initially on race and policing in a way that nobody else in the American media is doing. The fact that we are counting and reporting on every death in this country at the hands of police is a very big statement'. She also singled out 'environment' which she thought the Guardian overall was very good at covering, and it was a topic that was under-reported in the American media. And lastly she mentioned 'gender rights' as taking in employment, reproductive rights and equality and transgender rights: 'So I would say what we have achieved in covering race and police brutality we will then move on to doing environment and gender equality over the next year'.

Glendinning was focused on finding the gaps in the coverage of America that would interest a demographic of 'small "l" liberal progressives' who she thought were under-served:

In every new country, territory, that we've gone into, we've been able to quickly identify the areas and issues that have not been covered properly by the local media and obviously immigration, indigenous affairs and the environment and Australian politics *there*, and *here*, when you look at race, police, environment and gender it starts to get really exciting and income inequality and that sort of thing is also an interesting space for us. So that model has worked well in places where you feel you can make a difference, and to have a point of difference in your news coverage every day (personal interview, 2015).

Interestingly, Glendinning did not pick out 'terror' although it showed up in the 2014 data quite clearly. She did, however, mention 'rights' related to surveillance and equality. Kath Viner, in addressing US content said: 'I think they've been doing some really interesting reporting on radicalisation since I left. I mean that wasn't really a story when I left actually. It's become much bigger recently'. Glendinning, Hamilton and Viner all mentioned the

competitive media market in the States, which made it difficult to stand out in the political arena, although they were busy trying and the data show that a lot of political coverage is being carried out. Hamilton pointed out that the *Guardian* could not really be ‘the best’ at politics coverage as the competition was not only the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, but also *Politico*. She added that she thought the ‘core areas’ for newsgathering were still being worked through in the States.

## **FINDINGS – GUARDIAN UK**

The newsletter for the UK editor’s ‘Editor’s Picks’ section featured the widest range of international stories out of the three editions. There were articles from many of the *Guardian*’s bureaux and also from the international news agencies. In total, of the 258 stories selected over the two months, only 109 (42%) originated from the *Guardian*’s London headquarters. There were 34 stories overall on ‘Terror’, of which 13 were done in the UK and mostly concerned ‘home-grown jihadis’. On many days the Terror/ISIS stories came from multiple locations. For example on October 6 2014, updates on air strikes against ISIS were grouped together and filed by Constanze Letsch in Istanbul, Catherine James in Suruç, Paul Lewis in Washington and Nicholas Watt in London. This pattern of multiple sourcing was repeated on many days, illustrating how the ISIS story is still mostly coordinated out of London, which has a similar time-zone to Syria. Of the other 149 international stories: ‘Ebola’ featured fairly prominently (11%); ‘Hong Kong Protests’ (7%) and ‘Climate/Environment’ (3%). Out of the 109 *domestic* stories, the top grouping was ‘Politics’ (29%); followed by ‘Terror’ (12%); ‘Immigration/Asylum’ (8%); ‘Rights and Data Retention’ (7%); and ‘Health/NHS’ (7%). After this, the topics did not have a pattern but were miscellaneous. *Guardian UK* therefore appears to be appealing to its viewers with stories about UK politics, but otherwise it is promoting breaking news from abroad on topics such as ‘ISIS’, ‘Ebola’ or ‘Hong Kong Protests’. Many of the selected international stories were short ones from the agencies. For example on October 13 2014, 3 of the 6 stories selected as ‘Editor’s Picks’ came from Reuters, AFP and ‘agencies’.

The main editorial conference in London takes places at 10am and is chaired by Kath Viner: there were 86 people in attendance. Like in Sydney and New York, Viner began the meeting with the previous day’s statistics, and cited 34,000 page-views for a story on a shooting in Sweden. Later Mary Hamilton told me the ‘uniques’ for the day before were 7.8 million. This London meeting clearly illustrated how the online edition and the newspaper edition are grouped together and the stories are offered and discussed according to the ‘desk structure’ of

newspapers rather than by platforms (Hamilton, personal interview, 2015). Another story mentioned as performing well in the previous 24 hours was a first person account by a junior doctor, which garnered 3,000 comments from readers. Kath Viner (as demonstrated in her interview) is very interested in comments, as they signify reader engagement. Other stories mentioned were a live blog on the Clinton Benghazi hearings, a health story, an analysis piece on the tenth anniversary of the Paris riots in the ‘Banlieues’, a ‘ministerial code’, a controversial new grammar school, booing in sport, a Steve Bell cartoon about the Queen and the Chinese presidential visit, and an article in the *Times* that reported claims that women did not understand fracking. This latter story was an excuse for the swapping of many jokes at *The Times*’ expense. Of the upcoming stories, the China state visit dominated discussions, including a debate about whether the government’s alleged £40 billion trade deal could be stood up. An analysis piece was then commissioned on China’s long-term business plans. The meeting moved on to a complete roll call of stories from ‘the desks’ – from features, to books, the arts, video, to the weekend magazine. At the end of this roll call there was a 10-minute discussion, initiated by Viner, posing the question, ‘Is sugar the new tobacco?’ and exploring many different ways that the subject might be tackled from a ‘*Guardian* point of view’. Later Hamilton suggested that hiring a ‘sugar reporter’ might even be on the cards, as the *Guardian* planned to tackle the story over the long term in the same focused way as it planned to report on the ‘1%’ who own most of the world’s wealth.

Because the operation in London is much bigger than the other two and is completely tied in with the newspaper operation, uncovering *Guardian UK*’s digital edition voice in the mêlée is much more difficult than it is for the Australian and American editions. According to Kath Viner:

The meeting is about print *and* digital. The idea is we talk about stories, and then afterwards they go and work out how to make them work on the different platforms, so print is separate. But I think we have a responsibility to produce a good newspaper, not just a good website. It’s obviously easier to have one platform but I just think, well, they’re different kinds of readers, give them different kinds of things. [...] We work out what the platforms need, and then work out how to deliver it. Sometimes you’ll have the specialists digging in, while a general reporter is just reporting the live event. And that tends to work quite well (personal interview, 2015).

The fact that the digital version is so integrated with the newspaper in London, goes some way to explaining why its content (selected via ‘Editor’s Picks’) is more diffuse. Viner stressed that the UK digital edition was ‘very interested in British politics, and we should stay

interested in British politics or you risk becoming irrelevant everywhere. You want to be very relevant in lots of places. The challenge is to make sure it doesn't feel a bit vague'. Viner, who has overseen all three editions, sees them as localised but very much representing *Guardian* values:

We've got a particular approach to things, a particular tone, it's this thing that you know it when you see it but... Story themes yes, but there's a particular approach and tone. [...] I think the editions would go wrong if, to take the Australian example, it didn't feel Australian enough, and nobody ever says that. Or if it didn't feel like *The Guardian* and nobody ever says that either (personal interview, 2015).

## CONCLUSIONS

I set out to discover how the *Guardian* was developing its different digital editions and to ascertain how distinctive and localised they were. This involved probing the editors' perspectives, as the setting up and evolution of the editions is very much management-driven, even if the *Guardian's* approach to its decision-making is fairly democratic. I found that the new editions are enabling the *Guardian* to run a 24-hour news operation during ordinary working hours across different parts of the world. The Australian and American editions are both producing a great deal of local content – in order to entice audiences away from other media in those countries. 75% of the 'Editor's Picks for *Guardian Australia* is written by its journalists in situ and it has a distinctly localised take on asylum seekers and indigenous issues. Its other three 'core areas' are very much in keeping with the interests of the small 'l' liberal *Guardian* reader – the environment, politics and rights/surveillance. In the US, 57% of the 'Editor's Picks' is locally produced and about domestic issues. According to a senior *Guardian* manager, the US is still refining its core areas of coverage, but the data show that coverage includes politics, terror, gender, the environment, police gun violence and race. The US edition has concentrated on the latter issue a great deal, making it a special feature of their coverage. In the US, the *Guardian's* general preoccupation with rights, takes on a localised slant – with women's rights and access to abortion being a recurring topic. The *Guardian UK* (via the 'Editor's Picks') promotes a wider range of international stories for its readers. As an online platform it has been around for a longer time, and it doesn't need to court its readers with an abundance of UK coverage, given that readers in the UK can always buy the newspaper for that.

The extensive human resources of the *Guardian* back in the UK, enable the Australian and American editions to function as full media players in their host countries, while retaining relatively small local teams. International commissioning, originally done by a large UK-based foreign desk, can now be carried out by one or two dayside journalists in Australia or the US (Munk, personal interview, 2015). The new ‘international’ edition of the *Guardian*, will not need a separate editor or desk, as it will not be commissioning new content but will instead be aggregating and updating material from the different editions onto an international ‘front page’. It is to be hoped that a human being will still be choosing the top stories for this edition, and that the placing and prioritizing of stories will not be left to an algorithm. This latter edition will enable the *Guardian* to service many different communities throughout the world using economies of scale. At set times of the day, different newsrooms will be in charge of the main news gathering and the front pages across all four editions. This gives the *Guardian* an enormous advantage over competitors’ media sites in places like Australia, which largely get put on hold overnight, except for News Corp. The international edition will obviate the need to keep building new country-based newsrooms, as global readers will be able to relate to the broader content in a way that they might not relate to the other more localised digital editions. The resources of the *Guardian*, and in particular the digital development team back in London, continually back up the fortunes of *Guardian Australia*, for example by building them a completely new website in 2014. And lastly, the different editions benefit from the output of the *Guardian*’s 40+ foreign correspondents, and the large teams in other locations. These background economies of scale and the 24-hour operation now enabled by the Sydney office have been key to the *Guardian*’s global readership growth.

Across all the editions, politics merits plenty of coverage. In Australia the *Guardian*’s political reporting has made a big noise, mostly because there is little competition from other media doing the *Guardian*’s style of political reporting. According to Kath Viner, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, while serious in print, has opted to go down-market in digital, leaving the *Guardian* to poach readers among the liberal progressives who browse online for ‘intelligent comment’. The American edition does a lot of political reporting, even though the editors know it is hard to be competitive, given the size of the US media market, and this gets ramped up during election times. According to Kath Viner, the UK digital edition and the newspaper do a lot of political coverage. The digital content is closely connected to the newspaper’s content and both come under her overall editorial control. Viner is cognisant of continuing to take the organisation from being a UK national paper to being a global media player. She is keeping all of her options open, in terms of advertising, open access articles via

Facebook, and changing membership models for the future. She is pushing ahead with research into mobile newsgathering, particularly in the USA, and believes this to be of supreme importance for the future of journalism. According to the executive head of digital, Aron Pilhofer (personal interview 2015), the *Guardian* is a trailblazer for mobile and ‘Google uses us as one of their test sites because we’re so fast. We used to do interactives that didn’t work on mobiles – but those days are gone’.

But amid all of this digital innovation and global growth, the *Guardian* continues to lose money. After various rumours about the *Guardian* had been circulating over the past year (Rees, 2015), it was finally confirmed that jobs might be lost. The organisation’s financial difficulties made headlines around the world in January 2016. The *Wall Street Journal* reported (Alpert, 2016) that of the ‘479 commercial and editorial staffers added over the past three years, a third of them have been in the US and Australia’. However, as noted earlier, Wilson has said that the Australian and US operations are ‘completely insulated’ from the proposed cuts. With regards to the UK HQ, one well-placed source told me that he believed any redundancies on the editorial side would probably be voluntary. In response to my earlier question about finances and possible job losses last October (personal interview, 2015) Viner had repeated firmly that, ‘The *Guardian* does not have too many journalists’.

It remains to be seen if the rescue plan – based on international growth, a revamped membership scheme, branded content for advertising and 20% annual cuts - will be sufficient to stem losses, which may largely have been caused by digital expansion. Emily Wilson was adamant that journalists would have to play a part in working with the membership team. She said:

I feel it’s completely my duty to make sure that we survive forever. Our big push this year is for membership, and unless the whole of editorial is completely behind it and involved in every bit of it, it won’t work (personal interview, 2016).

The membership scheme had been pegged in the past to physical talks and masterclasses that were due to be moved from King’s Place into the renovated ‘Midlands Goods Shed’ in Kings Cross. Now however, the future of this building, and even of the *Guardian*’s main offices, is in question (Williams, 2016), which means membership benefits might become more virtual than physical. So far, the elephant in the room - the future of the newspaper - is not up for public discussion. Kath Viner says she no plans to give up print just yet:

In my view, we keep the newspaper going as long as people want to read it. People who buy the *Guardian* in print are very loyal readers, they are very committed to the *Guardian*. They really like us, they're really part of us. And I think that's all right, you know? The newspaper model was a really good model and it still is, it's just we know it's got a time limit on it. I think some years ago, it looked more imminent than it does now (personal interview, 2015).

Viner, (along with the other two female edition editors), has been riding a wave of popular support. The editorial management team has worked together on building the digital editions, and the editions remain front and centre of the strategy for continued global growth. But one can't help but wonder if these editors were handed a poisoned chalice when long-term editor in chief, Alan Rusbridger, and the former chief executive Andrew Miller, departed the company after a burst of expensive international expansion. Emily Wilson is phlegmatic about the cuts, stating that they have happened before:

We are doing 20% cuts in London and not to underplay the seriousness of the situation, but in my 16 years at the *Guardian*, we've yo-yoed. We've periodically hired people, then we've had a round of redundancies, then we've hired people again (2016).

### **Acknowledgements:**

The author would like to thank the Department of Media and Communications at LSE for the visiting fellowship which allowed her to gather the data for this paper. In particular she would like to mention the head of department Nick Couldry, her mentor Charlie Beckett and the editor of the Media@LSE working paper series Bart Cammaerts. She would also like to thank the readers and reviewers who helped to improve this article along the way.

### **List of Interviewees:**

- **Sarah Eberspacher**, Engagement Editor. Interviewed in person in New York, September 18 2015.
- **Lee Glendinning**, *Guardian* US Editor. Interviewed in person in New York, September 17 2015.
- **Mary Hamilton**, Executive Head of Audience. Interviewed in person in London, October 23 2015.
- **Chris Moran**, Audience Editor. Interviewed in person in London, October 16 2015.
- **David Munk**, International Editor – Asia Pacific Region, *Guardian Australia*. Interviewed by email on August 27 2015.
- **Aron Pilhofer**, Executive Editor of Digital, the *Guardian*. Interviewed in person in London, October 16 2015.
- **Kath Viner**, Editor in chief, the *Guardian*. Interviewed in person in London, October 23 2015.
- **Emily Wilson**, Editor *Guardian Australia*. Interviewed in person on August 17 2015 with further email exchanges thereafter.

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An advantage of the series is a quick turnaround between submission and publication. Authors retain copyright, and publication here does not preclude the subsequent development of the paper for publication elsewhere.

The Editor of the series is Bart Cammaerts. The Deputy Editors are Nick Anstead and Ruth Garland. The editorial board is made up of other LSE academics and friends of Media@LSE with a wide range of interests in information and communication technologies, the media and communications from a variety of disciplinary perspectives (including economics, geography, law, politics, sociology, politics and information systems, cultural, gender and development studies).

### Notes for contributors:

Contributors are encouraged to submit papers that address the social, political, economic and cultural context of the media and communication, including their forms, institutions, audiences and experiences, and their global, national, regional and local development. Papers addressing any of the themes mentioned below are welcome, but other themes related to media and communication are also acceptable:

- Communication and Difference
- Globalisation and Comparative Studies
- Innovation, Governance and Policy
- Democracy, Politics and Journalism Ethics
- Mediation and Resistance
- Media and Identity
- Media and New Media Literacies
- The Cultural Economy

Contributions are welcomed from academics and PhD students. In the Autumn Term we also invite selected Master's students from the preceding year to submit their dissertations which will be hosted in a separate part of this site as 'dissertations' rather than as Working Papers. Contributors should bear in mind when they are preparing their paper that it will be read online.

Papers should conform to the following format:

- 6,000-10,000 words (excluding bibliography, including footnotes)
- 150-200 word abstract
- Headings and sub-headings are encouraged
- The Harvard system of referencing should be used
- Papers should be prepared as a Word file
- Graphs, pictures and tables should be included as appropriate in the same file as the paper
- The paper should be sent by email to Bart Cammaerts ([b.cammaerts@lse.ac.uk](mailto:b.cammaerts@lse.ac.uk)), the editor of the Media@LSE Working Paper Series

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**ISSN:** 1474-1938/1946