

FORGET THE READERS: ARE JOURNALISTS WRITING FOR GOOGLE?

LE 2 AOÛT 2010 ADAM WESTBROOK

The Sun's famous front page from May 1982, reporting the sinking of the General Belgrano, which simply said "GOTCHA!" would have no relevance to a search engine today.

OWNI's team would like to welcome **Adam Westbrook** for his first article written for **OWNI.eu** :)

For a newspaper, news channel or magazine online the undeniable target is traffic. How many people have looked at our front page today? How many people have read that article? Eyeballs, eyeballs, eyeballs...

With well over 200 million websites out there and counting, it's a vast ocean and easy for even a familiar brand to sink beneath the waves.

Then along came an enticing alchemy which promised solve that problem almost instantly. With a bit of keyword wizardry and some hyperlinking spells, SEO – or *Search Engine Optimisation* – can boost your website up Google's rankings and get you that passing traffic.

Today almost every online publisher engages SEO in some form, whether it's individual bloggers, like myself, installing a free plugin for Wordpress, or major news organisations creating entire job posts to oversee an SEO strategy.

So SEO is an important tool for news publishers. But at what cost?

Making SEO work

SEO works by emphasising keywords from a given article so they're easily searchable, or actually manipulating certain words which the publisher believes people will search for in Google.

According to **Melissa Campbell**, an SEO Consultant with **Distilled** in London, a publisher can do it in several ways.

"The big things search engines look at are *title tags* (the text that appears at the top of the browser when you view a page), the *meta description* of the page... and sitemaps (which tell the spiders how to crawl the pages)" she says.

So journalists and sub-editors can put some of the keywords into the title of an article, the sub-headings and into the first couple of paragraphs of text. They can load the article with keyword tags, as well as put keywords into any images included within the article.

It's led to fears news organisations are manipulating their content in order to get a better Google ranking; in other words, writing for Google and not the reader.

Let's take the headline of an article. Say, you have a limited number of characters for your online headlines – the BBC News website, for example, has room for just 55 – and inside this you have to create a headline that conveys the story, but also plays to the SEO rules.

It's an added challenge for sub editors beyond simply enticing a reader. But it goes beyond that, to the very content of the article itself. A **post on Social Media Today** last year summed up the problem:

"With a paper newspaper, you flip through all the pages and glance at all the headlines. Online, you search for stories that interest you. The headline you see while turning pages isn't one you'd ever think to inform your search when exploring Google News."

SEO has affected articles and journalistic writing in other ways, particularly in the growing use of 'kickers' – naming the issue in a headline, and writing the actual story headline behind it.

On running stories, such as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, some papers started using kickers to allow them to optimise their story for search engines. **"BP Oil Spill: US orders**

new emergency plan as seepage detected” (Telegraph, 19th July); **“BP Oil Spill: seepage not a threat to capped well”** (Guardian, 20th July) are two easily found examples.

This gets the words ‘BP oil spill’ into the headline & keywords and then allows the journalist to sum up the story.

Murray Dick, a **lecturer in multi-platform journalism at Brunel University** in the UK is carrying out in depth research into the effect of SEO on journalism. He says the consequences of using kickers for the surfing public “can be stark”.

“Searching for these kicker keywords results in search engine results pages (SERPs) that look like the sort of lines teachers used to punish school kids with. This in turn can make for poor usability, and frustration for the surfing public – which could have consequences both for aggregators, and the publishers of these headlines.”

Riding the search wave

Perhaps the most concerning consequence of SEO manipulation is in the choice of story itself. Optimising your article is one thing, but what about writing an article purely because you know people are searching for it?

A **presentation by SEO experts Tunheim Turners** on how newspapers should use SEO recommends “riding the search wave”: looking at popular search terms and writing articles on that.

A cursory search through the UK Daily Mail’s website for example brings up no fewer 479 articles with the phrase “teen sex” in them, including ‘The Truth About Teen Sex’ (April 2005), ‘Will the teen ‘sex advisors’ be silenced?’ (June 2003) and ‘Teen sex campaign backfires’ (April 2004).

On the other hand, of course, it could be seen as simply responding to what your audience wants to read, a long ethos of many populist newspaper editors. Is there anything wrong with that?

The end of the pun

And of course, it’s been known for a while SEO could spell the end to that much loved journalistic convention – the creative or pun headline. Puns don’t work with SEO because Google doesn’t have a sense of humour, and won’t understand what the story is about. The Sun’s **famous front page from May 1982**, reporting the sinking of the General Belgrano, which simply said “GOTCHA!” would have no relevance to a search engine today.

So here’s the concern: is there a danger journalists are writing more for Google’s benefit instead of the human being? Is it damaging the reader experience? Murray Dick at Brunel says his research to date suggests it could be concern:

“Editors who commission copy to satisfy wider online trends regardless of the established news values of their brand, risk alienating their core audience, and diminishing trust in their brand” he told me.

“By the same token, journalists who write copy with the primary aim of ranking highly in search will inevitably frustrate their readers with clunky keywords – and risk sending the wrong signals to search engines.”

Distilled’s SEO Consultant Melissa Campbell is less concerned though. “The implication of all this for journalists is that the internet is becoming much more interpersonal again (like the original message boards), so very soon, you’ll just be writing for people, which means that you can get more creative with titles of articles. Although unfortunately,” she adds, “I think the days of punny headlines may be over.”

A human approach

Not everyone out there is writing to satisfy an algorithm.

Slate Magazine in the US is defying the conventional wisdom in many ways, it seems stubbornly breaking some of the big rules of online publishing.

Firstly, rather than trying to use Google to get as *many* readers as possible, Slate wants only ‘the right’ readers. Editor David Plotz told the **Nieman Lab at Harvard University** in July:

“Our job is not necessarily to build Slate into a magazine that has 100 million readers...It’s to make sure we have 2 million or 5 million or 8 million of the *right* readers — readers who are

the smartest, most engaged, most influential, most media-literate people around. That's more attractive to advertisers.”

In other words, they're being selective about *who* they write for – fewer readers is better, goes the theory, as long as they're the right readers.

To do this, Slate has invested in letting its writers pursue their own passion projects, including one long-form article on US dentistry. And it appears to be doing some magic that SEO cannot do on its own. Nieman claim the long-form passion pieces have attracted more than three million page views each.

Two very different approaches

So two very different approaches to getting that most valuable commodity in the online world: traffic. I suspect the solution lies in a mutual embracing of both SEO and passionate high quality journalism. But there is a warning however: as appealing of the alchemy of search optimisation is, journalists must make sure they never harm the reader experience to satisfy a machine.

BENIZ

le 4 août 2010 - 15:03 • SIGNALER UN ABUS - PERMALINK



Il faudrait redonner le contrôle aux utilisateurs sur les algorithmes de recherche. Dès lors SEO pourrait devenir l'acronyme de 'Social Engine Optimisation' avec un fond de traitement de l'information et une transparence plus rigoureuses. Cf. le projet Seeks, <http://www.seeks-project.info> par exemple.

VOUS AIMEZ



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VOUS N'AIMEZ PAS



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