

Attribution Syndication

Proposal Sketch by Atul Tulshibagwale at Cambridge, Mass., Sept. 23, 2015, for the Information Trust Exchange task group on authentication and identity.

BACKGROUND

Digital News Media are the most important and popular news media in the United States today. The largest digital news media company – AOL (now a part of Verizon) – is on track to make upwards of \$2 billion annually from digital advertising alone. The combined AOL properties get over 396 million monthly uniques.

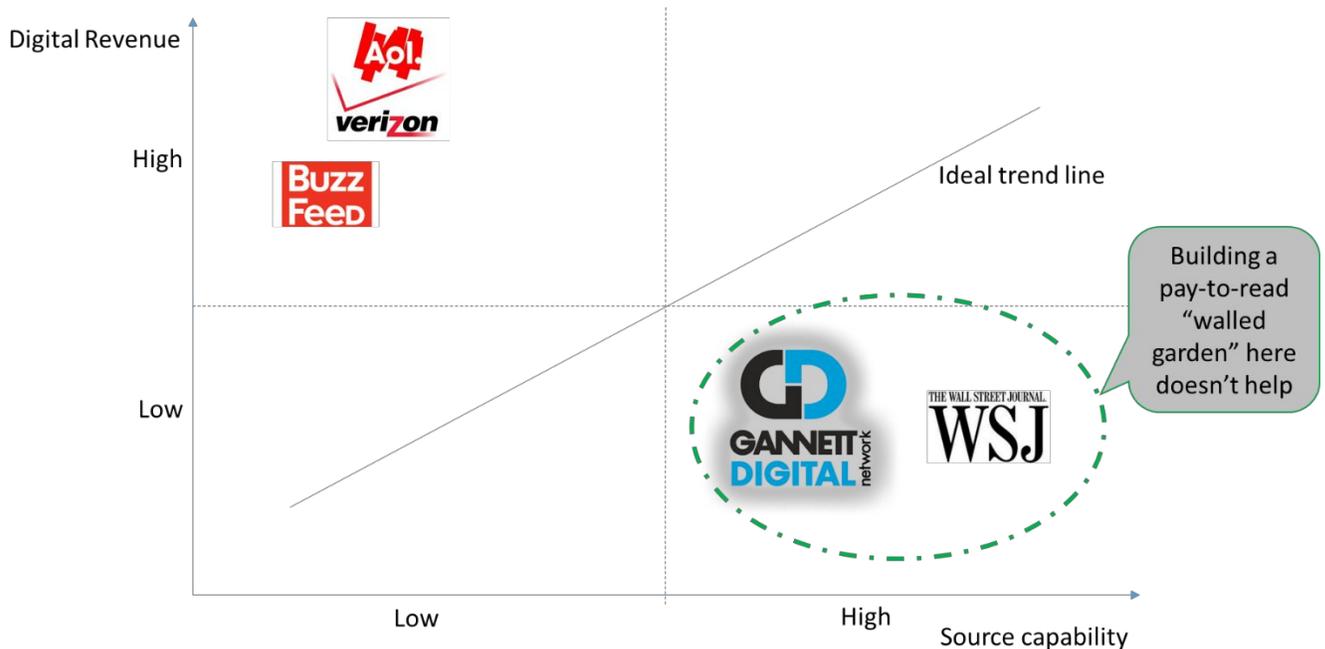
Conventional news media have been successful in producing interesting stories through a mature and effective network of field personnel and editorial staff. However, there is a highly popular form of online journalism today that can be referred to as “aggregated attribution”, in which a story is almost entirely made up of attributed references to other stories from publications that have produced the original story. Even where the story has other content (in most cases opinions or reflections on the original attributed story), the most important nugget of news is the attributed content itself, which reveals crucial information that severely diminishes the need to read the original story. So, even though such attributed content has links to the original content, it does not bring any benefit to the original publisher.

1 ISSUE DESCRIPTION

The central issue therefore is that while a few “new media” companies with low to moderate original production capabilities are flourishing, the companies that have the best original content production capabilities are struggling to generate digital revenue. This is seen in the table below:

No	Name	Monthly Uniques (millions)	Digital News Revenue
1	Verizon (AOL)	396	Approx \$2 bn
2	Vox	150	
3	Yahoo	128	Approx \$1 bn
4	CNN, NBC	101 (each)	
6	Gannett Digital	92	
7	CBS	84	
8	BuzzFeed	78	
...	New York Times	57	

This is creating a completely inverted dynamic in terms of revenue versus “source capability” described below:



The issue is therefore defined as: Since unabated attribution of news undermines the need for users to read original sources, building a pay-to-read system around those sources will not solve, but in fact aggravate the challenge of growing digital revenue for those publications.

To be clear, attribution is not the only issue faced by conventional news media in the digital world, there are significant other issues that are not within the scope of this “attribution issue” and its proposed solution. These include:

- Presentation and interactivity
- Social momentum
- Willing sources (e.g. Google doesn’t need AP to break a corporate story, it just posts on its blog, and is picked up by all)

However, attribution is a significant issue, which might be addressed as follows.

2 PROPOSED SOLUTION

The ITE defines a common framework for attribution, together this is referred to as the “Attribution Pixel”. This has the following elements:

1. **Technical Implementation** A technical implementation in the form of “Attribution Pixels”
2. **New Fair Use** A binding “Terms of Use” agreement between its readers and the publication that places restrictions on attribution
3. **Guidelines** Rules on how companies should independently reconcile attribution numbers and resolve conflicts.

2.1 TECHNICAL IMPLEMENTATION

There are three ways in which a publication may attribute anything digitally published within their publication to another publication.

1. **Paraphrased Attribution:** The text is original but derives directly from text in another publication, and mentions the source publication.
2. **Paragraph Attribution:** A paragraph is reproduced from a source publication.
3. **Article Attribution:** An article is reproduced from a source publication.

2.1.1 Paraphrased Attribution

For each attribution reference to a source publication that is not the same as the attributing publication, the attributing publication must place a transparent pixel in its page at the point of reference. The transparent pixel must automatically load without any user interaction requirement when the attribution reference loads. The transparent pixel must be referenced directly from the source publication as follows. If “Pub A” is referring to content from “Pub B” located at “www.pub-b.com”, then Pub A must insert the following tag in each page that attributes anything to Pub B:

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This tag should be placed in such a way that it is loaded simultaneously with the HTML of the referring page. Pub B guarantees the image delivered to the browser in response to this request is a 1 pixel by 1 pixel transparent image.

2.1.2 Paragraph Attribution -- TBW

2.1.3 Article Attribution --- TBW

2.2 NEW FAIR USE

The attribution of content from a news source must include an “Attribution Pixel” as defined in the previous section, in addition to naming and linking to the source article. A publication may limit the number of times another publication causes the Attribution Pixel to be referenced.

2.3 GUIDELINES

TBD

3 ADVANTAGES OF THE ATTRIBUTION PIXEL

The attribution pixel offers the following advantages to the source publications:

1. **User Data:** Since the attribution pixel creates an HTTP connection to the source publication, the source publication is able to track the user independently on every visit to a page that contains such attribution, regardless of the publication.
2. **Audience Growth:** The source publication may see much more traffic on Attribution Pixels from referring site, thus creating a greater value for its advertising platforms.
3. **Off-site Monetization:** The New Fair Use policy of a site may require the referring publication to pay a license fee depending upon the number of views of attributed pages.