

Which is greener: print or web? The answer is far from obvious, discovers **Lorna Howarth**.

Weighty subjects side by side



Two sides to every story

If you're reading this in print, rather than on the screen, you're consuming more energy and so emitting more carbon. Aren't you?

Not necessarily. For all the talk of the 'weightless economy', and of a digital future that 'lives on thin air', there's growing evidence that the humble website packs a hefty footprint. According to Martyn Eustace, Director of the newly-launched TwoSides initiative, "recent research suggests that producing and reading a traditional newspaper can consume 20% less energy than reading news online for more than 30 minutes".

On the surface, it seems an unlikely claim. A print magazine like *Green Futures* depends on heavyweight industries like forestry, paper, printing, distribution, and so on, while a laptop hardly uses any power at all, surely?

True – but behind the laptop is a surprisingly energy-intensive infrastructure of IT systems, servers and so on. Until recently, its environmental impact hadn't been questioned, much less quantified. But as carbon calculators become more effective and industry-specific, all this is changing – and the relative impact of electronic media is becoming all the more apparent.

Google's new data centre in Oregon, for example, is expected to use as much energy as the entire city of Newcastle when it comes

online in 2011. And Google is arguably one of the most environmentally-aware IT giants, which has led it to invest heavily in renewables [see 'Google's green ambitions take to the waves', GF71, p9]. By contrast, research by ATS Consulting shows that the energy used to produce the average amount of paper consumed by each of us during a year is just 500kWh. That's equivalent to burning a 60W light bulb continuously for 12 months.

This is the sort of statistic which TwoSides hopes to bring to people's attention. "Our challenge is to present a simple, understandable message that print and paper products can be far more sustainable than the equivalent electronic version," Eustace says.

As part of its three-year campaign, TwoSides will also undertake research into how we interact with print and paper, as opposed to a computer screen – including the way children learn. Initial findings suggest that people can retain information better from a printed document than from screen-based learning.

Eustace is keen to point out that TwoSides is not anti-technology. "Of course we recognise how important the IT revolution is," he says. "But we need to remember that print and paper can work alongside e-communication very successfully: marketing campaigns that use multi-media techniques are far more dynamic than those that just use 'e-media'.

The argument is not about what is more *effective*, it is about the misconception that electronic media is better for the environment."

TwoSides' membership includes a wide range of paper, print and publishing companies. Among them is Beacon Press, which prints *Green Futures*. It signed up, says Director Richard Owers, because "this is a forum for a broader discussion about the improvements that can be made in both the print *and* IT sectors". Owers presides over a company that has put greener printing at the core of its business, but he isn't complacent. "As the climate debate intensifies and carbon footprinting is on everyone's agenda, knowing the impact of, say, sending an email with massive attachments, as opposed to printing and posting the same, is important. People need balanced information with which to make their decisions." ©

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