Delving into Google Analytics

Peter Pavement takes a look at some interesting methods of analysis, both old and new

Since Google's web statistics software 'Analytics' became publicly available back in 2006, it has spread rapidly to the point where it's rare to find a site that doesn't use it. The arts sector has embraced the application, and many organisations and institutions use Google Analytics generated statistics as key performance indicators for their online activity. Your first experience of Analytics might be to collect the 'top line' statistics (visits, unique visitors, pages per visit, time spent on site and the strangely named 'bounce' rate) in order to pass them on to management, colleagues or funding bodies.

As important as those figures are, there's a lot more to Google Analytics. You can use it to delve far deeper into the nature and behaviour of your visitors as well as the quality of your site's structure and content. Google is continuously updating and adding to the user-interface; a process that can be as frustrating or confusing as it is beneficial.

This new feature boasts an alluring interface that gives you a quick way to visualize the main pathways that people take as they move through your site. You can extend the analysis beyond the confines of the site itself by choosing from a number of metrics about where audience members originated. Metrics include geographical (down to city level), link source (search engine, referring site, email campaign) and device (mobile, operating system, browser features). In the example here (Figure 1) we have selected the city of origin for a museum. The museum is London-based so it's reassuring that the largest distinct visitor segment accesses the site from the capital. Most people pass through the home page and predominantly into pages with information for a trip to the venue.

The (red) 'waterfalls' to the right of every page's block represent people who have left the site at that point. A glance at these can help you gain insight into the performance of different pages. For example in this case, there are a lot of visits to a page about Ludwig Guttmann,

1. Visitors flow

(Figure 1)
Found at the bottom of the Audience section of the interface
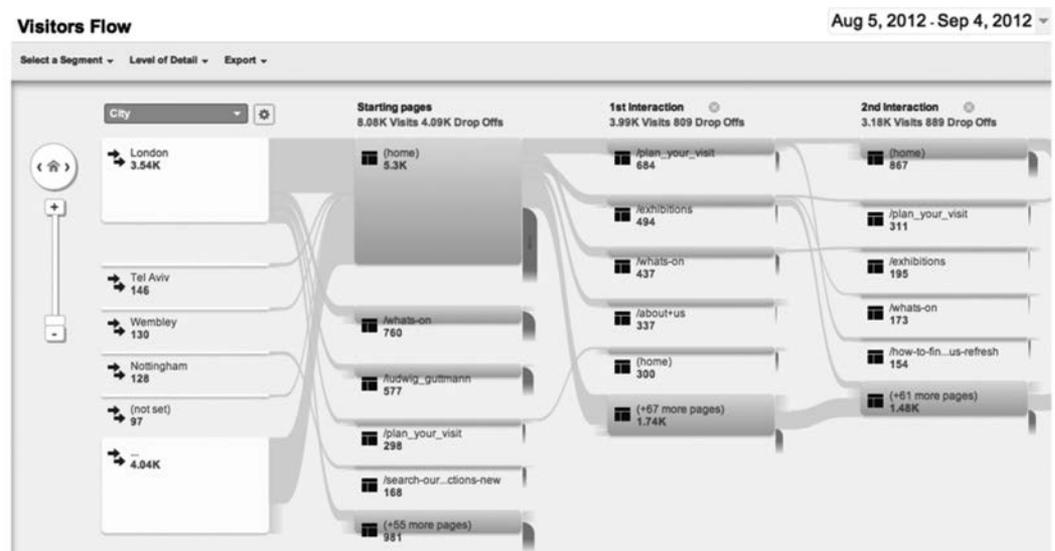
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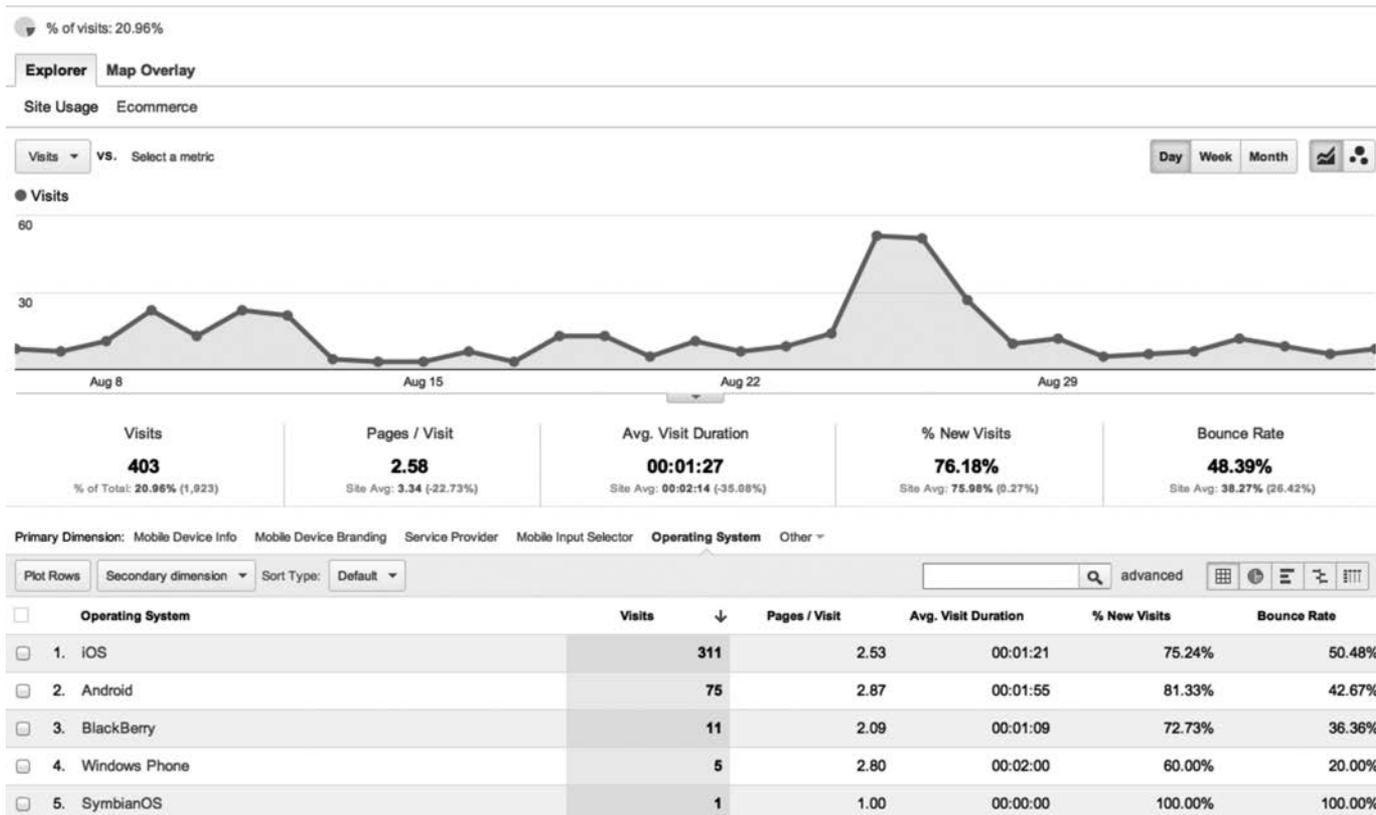
Figure 3

Operating System	Visits	↓	Pages / Visit	Avg. Visit Duration	% New Visits	Bounce Rate
1. iOS	311		2.53	00:01:21	75.24%	50.48%
2. Android	75		2.87	00:01:55	81.33%	42.67%
3. BlackBerry	11		2.09	00:01:09	72.73%	36.36%
4. Windows Phone	5		2.80	00:02:00	60.00%	20.00%
5. SymbianOS	1		1.00	00:00:00	100.00%	100.00%

Figure 2

the founder of the Paralympics, so naturally a person whose name has been attracting interest. However, a closer look reveals that most people visiting that page do not continue with the rest of the site. Perhaps, the page could benefit from some stronger calls to action and onward links to encourage the visitor to engage with the museum.

2. Mobile (Figure 2, above)
Also found in the Audience section

Google Analytics has made reports on mobile usage available since 2009, but access to the information has bounced around the interface somewhat. It's now settled down under the Audience section so it's easier to follow the rise of mobile access to your websites. Average mobile usage passed 10% some time ago and many sites are showing percentages as

high as 30%. In this example from a different website (Figure 2), I've switched to the 'Operating System' tab as this removes much of the detail about versions and models of phone that Analytics likes to show by default. This reveals the typical proportion of Apple (iOS) devices to Android and others in a nice, simple list.

3. In-page analytics (Figure 3, above)
Found in the Content section

This feature has been around for some time, but is a very useful way to understand how well your site is being used by your audience. 'Bubbles' are attached to links to show the percentage of clicks that they have received. You can quickly assess factors such as order, position on page and visibility of links and how those factors influence click through's.

Figure 4
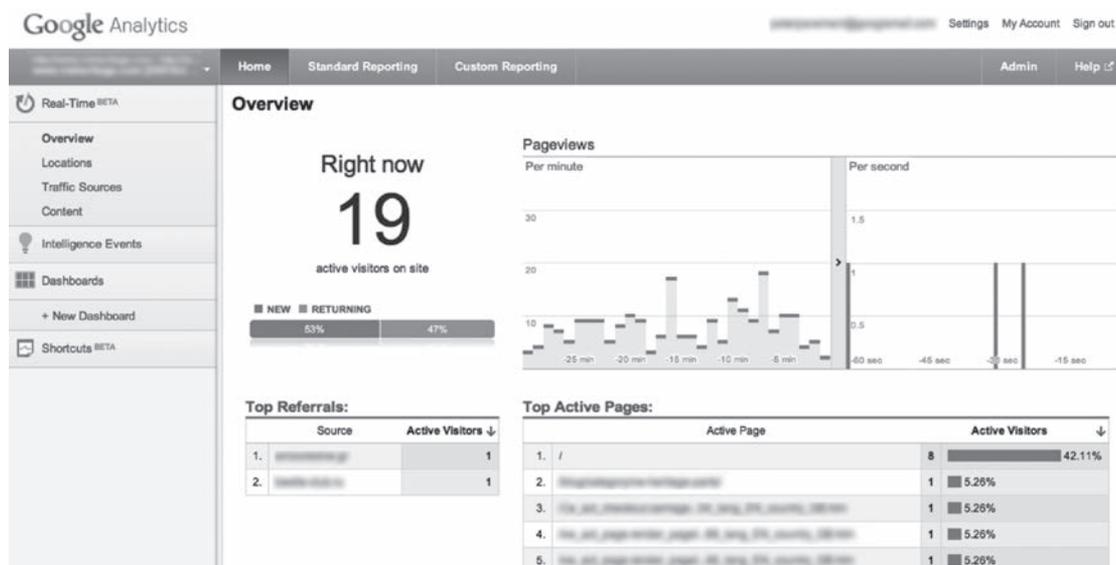
4. Real time tracking
Found under the Home tab at the top of the whole interface

Most reports in Google Analytics show data up to the day before the current date, but with this new feature, you can see who is using your site at this precise moment. You can't access the same level of detail as in the main reports, but you can see where people are, how they got to your site and which content they are viewing. This can be very useful for monitoring time-sensitive activities such as events, online application closing dates, ticket sales or responses to email or social media campaigns.

Obviously, this article can only scratch the surface of what is possible with Google Analytics, but these four approaches can give you great insights into the nature and trends of your online audience's behaviour. Combine those insights with analysis from other marketing metrics and models and you can build a very detailed picture. Then, when you try out initiatives on your site, social media or via email campaigns, you will be able to fully understand how well they impact upon your aims and objectives and will inform what course of action to take next. ●

Peter Pavement
Director of Surface Impression Ltd, a digital media development company that specializes in the cultural and heritage sectors
e   peterp@surfaceimpression.com
w   www.surfaceimpression.com
tw @peterpavement

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What is the 'bounce rate'?
A bounce is recorded by analytics if a visitor comes to a page and then immediately leaves the site. Bounces are generally taken as being an indication that the user did not like what they saw on the page and decided to go elsewhere, so the goal is to have a lower bounce rate. There are scenarios where a single page view may have served the user well – for example to retrieve a phone number or check the start time of a show. Google Analytics can't automatically help us distinguish between the positive and the negative bounces, but you can compare pages such as 'Contact us' or 'Staff profiles' against the overall site average to see if these have a significantly higher bounce rate.

Resources:

http://analytics.blogspot.co.uk/
Google's own blog for Analytics. A useful way to keep up with developments, as well as tips, case studies and discussion.

http://weareculture24.org.uk/projects/ action-research/how-to-evaluate- success-online/
A Culture24 report into best practice from 2011

http://www.martinbazley.com/
Cultural sector consultant who offers training in understanding online audiences via Google Analytics and other methods