

# A Case Study on the Impact of Auto-Refresh

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It's no secret that some Australian websites continue to report traffic from their automatically refreshed web pages, even though the inclusion of this traffic is condemned by sectors of the industry because in most cases it significantly inflates the figures used in the market.

Within the local debate, there have been many ethical and commercial arguments for and against the practice but little empirical evidence to shed light on what actually happens to traffic figures when auto-refreshing pages are counted towards market metrics. This article will explore the impact of auto-refreshing, not only on Page Impressions, but also on other key engagement metrics such as Session Duration which contribute to the commercial appeal of a website.

## The problem is bigger than you think

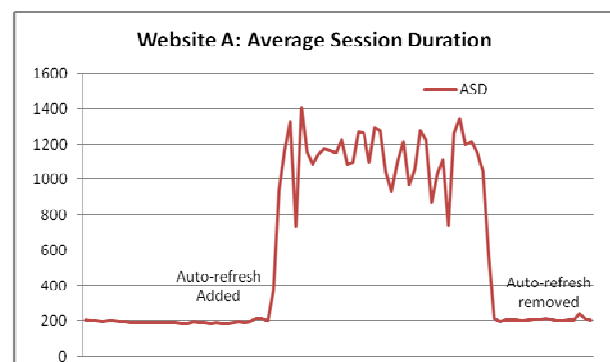
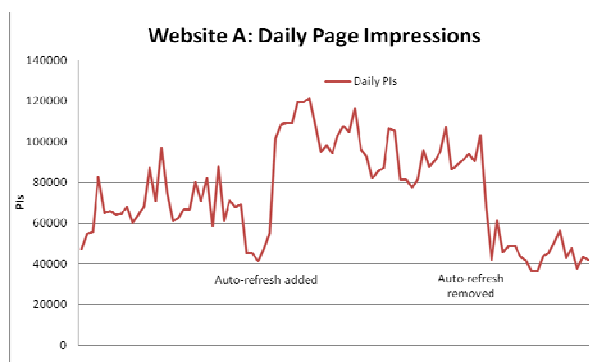
You may hear that auto-refreshing pages is not a problem. However there is a significant impact of auto-refresh inflation on audience figures. The addition of this simple line of code can **double page impressions** and more than **quadruple session duration**.

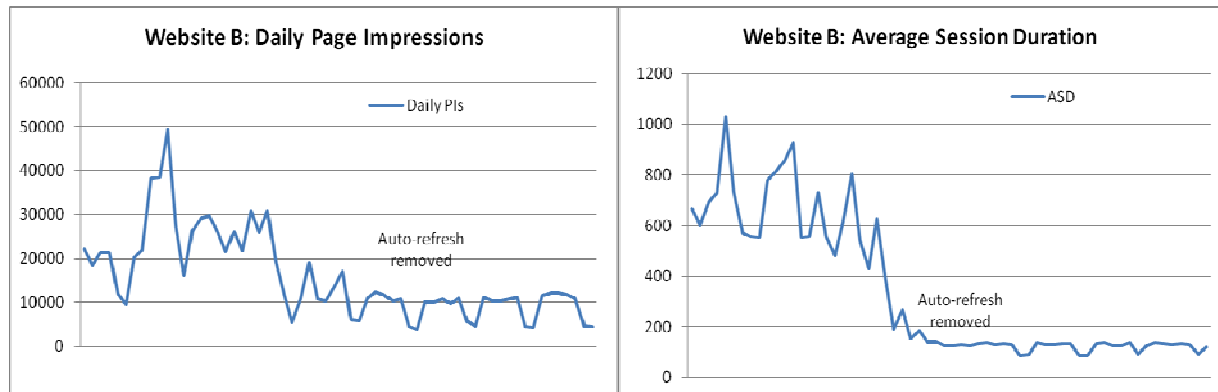
It's possible that the impact of auto-refreshing was relatively minor when it was first introduced, but the online landscape has changed significantly since then. Given the take-up of multi-tabbed and always-on web browsers, it's important for the industry to understand the full impact on market metrics when publishers count a web page constantly refreshing in the background, regardless of whether it's being viewed by human eyes or not.

## A case study

To understand the true before-and-after effect of auto-refresh inflation I analysed the traffic changes to two ad-supported websites that have previously experimented with auto-refreshing **every 15 minutes** and then have subsequently removed the auto-refresh code from their pages. This analysis uses 2008-9 data available to the market from Nielsen Online Market Intelligence. As you can see below, the impact is enormous, with page impressions essentially doubling and session duration being so vastly inflated to the point of being unusable as a meaningful metric.

<b>Daily Web Metric</b>	<b>Website A Inflation</b>	<b>Website B Inflation</b>
Page Impressions	<b>+ 75%</b>	<b>+ 140%</b>
Page Duration	<b>+ 115%</b>	<b>+ 112%</b>
Session Duration	<b>+ 426%</b>	<b>+ 342%</b>





## Audited Protection

Media-buyers in particular should be aware of the risks associated with buying on unaudited web audience figures. The Audit Bureau of Australia (ABA) and Media Federation of Australia (MFA) have been closely working together to protect their agency members and ensure they can easily identify websites that have passed the ABA measurement rules audit with a green tick.

## Other viewpoints

In addition to the empirical evidence identifying auto-refresh inflation, it's important to note that there is little international support for the practise of including auto-refreshed traffic in web audience measurements. Following is a collection of various industry standpoints on auto-refreshing:

1. In the US, the IAB's Audience Measurement rules do not allow the measurement of auto-refreshed pages on normal websites (but gives some leeway for rich media applications).

*"only those pages in which user interaction occurs can contribute to calculations of Time Spent, or to counts of additional impressions beyond the first measured impression."*

[http://www.iab.net/media/file/Audience\\_Reach\\_Guidelines.pdf](http://www.iab.net/media/file/Audience_Reach_Guidelines.pdf)

2. The **ABA Digital Watchdog** committee (which includes the MFA and audited publishers) do not allow the inclusion of auto-refreshed traffic in market metrics.: [http://www.auditbureau.org.au/breaking\\_news.php#oct0909](http://www.auditbureau.org.au/breaking_news.php#oct0909)
3. This practice does not comply with the **W3C Accessibility Guidelines**: <http://www.w3.org/TR/2008/NOTE-WCAG20-TECHS-20081211/G76> because it discriminates towards people with vision impairments.

*"let the user control if and when content is updated, in order to avoid confusion or disorientation caused by automatic refreshes that cause a change of context"*

4. There is very little public support either, according to a recent local CBS Interactive survey, only 9% of respondents thought it was acceptable for publishers to use auto-refresh: <http://www.cbsinteractive.com.au/survey/thanks.htm?id=4>

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