



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Doing more with less: how to ‘decontentify’ your newsroom

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Introduction

Pop artist Miroslav ‘Meky’ Žbirka’s death on 10 November 2021 should have launched a torrent of news reports in his native Slovakia – and it did. Just not at *Denník N*, which put out only a brief alert:

“Miroslav Žbirka has died, aged 69. ‘The news of my death is true,’ Meky would say if he were alive, the singer’s Facebook page announced. It was confirmed by his PR manager, Rado Mešša.”

They could have put together a wordy report – as news publishers are wont to do on such occasions – and perhaps even a feature about the witty Facebook post. But *Denník N* operates by a distinct philosophy: publish what is most relevant or original, no more.

Meky’s passing was, at that moment, the most relevant piece of information, so that’s all *Denník N* published. They felt no obligation to wrap it in a story of a few hundred words. Reports and features exploring the life and works of the iconic singer would follow in due course: a bouquet of original journalism rather than the chaff of rehashed content.

Originality, in content or its treatment, is a core precept. “A lot of original added value has been our strategy from the beginning,” Lukas Fila, director of *Denník N*’s publisher, N Press, told Nieman Lab. “People are not willing to pay for things they can read elsewhere.”¹

¹ Sharp, R., Alazab, M., Macfarlane, K., Scire, S. and Benton, J. These Slovak journalists quit their paper and built an independent rival with 23,000 digital subscribers. Nieman Lab. <https://www.niemanlab.org/2017/05/these-slovak-journalists-quit-their-paper-and-built-an-independent-rival-with-23000-digital-subscribers>

This philosophy, baked into the Slovakian news platform's conceptual design, has earned it success in an industry grappling with the loss of readers, revenue and trust. *Denník N*, only seven years old, boasts 1.55 million visitors a month and 67,000 subscribers. It made €6 million in total revenue in 2021 – over 60% from subscriptions – and €1.3m in operating profit.²

Denník N's approach to journalism is what French journalist Sophie Casals summarises as “publish less, but publish better”.³ It's an approach that represents a break with the flailing but still dominant news industry practice of generating content on an industrial scale. It's a counterpoint to a pressing problem: the “contentification” of journalism.

In this paper, I outline how and why contentification came to be a problem for the news media. I interviewed editors and researched content limiting strategies at *Mediapart* (France), *Denník N* (Slovakia), *Tiempo Argentino* (Argentina), *El Diario* (Spain), the *Ken* (India), *Quartz* (U.S.), and the *Guardian* (UK) to understand why and how they cut back on content, and what the limitations of this strategy may be.

² List vydavateľa: Aké boli výsledky Denníka N v roku 2021 a kedy spustíme správy v maďarčine. Denník N.

<https://Dennikn.sk/2733104/list-vydatela-ake-boli-vysledky-Dennika-n-v-roku-2021-a-kedy-spustime-spravy-v-madarcine/?ref=inc>

³ Jenkins, J., 2020. Publish less, but publish better: pivoting to paid in local news. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/publish-less-publish-better-pivoting-paid-local-news>

The genesis of contentification

“Contentification”, blessedly, is not yet a word in the English dictionary. It has its roots in the world of content marketing, and I use it to describe the practice of publishers who believe that cranking up their volume of output will help them win the war for digital advertising revenue.

The genesis of this thinking is as much rooted in the unpredictability of digital media advertising as it is in fealty to a concept of news production and distribution that is no longer relevant. Overdependence on advertising for income and on technology platforms for distribution has cast the news industry in the role of a machine that must perpetually churn out content to keep the customers hooked. Failure to recognise digital news as fundamentally different from the printed newspaper – digital news is no more newspaper than Netflix is cinema – has obscured the realisation that the machine is worn down and needs mending.⁴

One of the most profound disruptions the web caused the news industry was that it unbundled the newspaper and atomised its readership.⁵ The sports enthusiast or politics junkie no longer needed to buy the full newspaper to read the section they cared about. They had the equivalent choice of picking up only sports or politics pages, even individual articles within that section.

Social media threw another spanner in the works by supplanting last century’s information economy with an attention economy.⁶ Now publishers had to compete

⁴ Nielsen, R. *Lecture: The Power of Platforms*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/lecture-power-platforms>

⁵ Nielsen, R., 2018. *The Changing Economic Contexts of Journalism*.

⁶ Tufekci, Z., 2018. *How social media took us from Tahrir Square to Donald Trump*. MIT Technology Review.

<https://www.technologyreview.com/2018/08/14/240325/how-social-media-took-us-from-tahrir-square-to-donald-trump>

for attention not just with their rivals, but with technology platforms as well. And they were competing with a handicap: unlike Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, they could not tailor their content to each customer's taste.

Another existential challenge: digital ad exchanges, monopolised by Big Tech. As platforms pulled ahead in the race for people's attention and their ability to target niche audiences, their slice of the advertising pie grew larger – and the news media's, conversely, smaller. In 2021, Google, Meta and Amazon accounted for 74% of all digital ad spending.⁷

Nearly 20 years since the introduction of Web 2.0, the penny has dropped for many publishers: to survive, they need to diversify their revenue streams. The “Covid shock” has only “reinforced a view that the industry needs to break an unhealthy dependence on digital advertising, which is blamed amongst other things for encouraging clickbait, reducing quality, and creating a poor user experience”.⁸

⁷ Joseph, S. and Shields, R., 2022. *The Rundown: Google, Meta and Amazon are on track to absorb more than 50% of all ad money in 2022*. Digiday.

[https://digiday.com/marketing/the-rundown-google-meta-and-amazon-are-on-track-to-ab
sorb-more-than-50-of-all-ad-money-in-2022](https://digiday.com/marketing/the-rundown-google-meta-and-amazon-are-on-track-to-absorb-more-than-50-of-all-ad-money-in-2022)

⁸ Newman, N., 2021. *Journalism, media, and technology trends and predictions 2021*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/journalism-media-and-technology-trends-and-predictions-2021>

Why is contentification a problem?

Consider India, where I live. In a country of over 1.38 billion people – and as many stories – the bulk of what’s published online in the name of news has little value.⁹ There is some excellent journalism in India but much of it is poor quality, often created by underpaid, overworked journalists who are required to create content quickly and cheaply. Little wonder they go after the easy pickings – celebrity gossip, political slugfests, social media chatter, and, increasingly, religious hatred.¹⁰

An army of “content makers” are running full tilt on the “churnalism treadmill”.¹¹ Befittingly, top news outlets have redesignated their journalists as “content producers”.

According to the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer, nearly one in two people see the news media as a divisive force in society and rank journalists as the least trusted societal leaders behind only government leaders.¹² Not surprising then that interest in news is declining across countries, as the Reuters Institute’s 2021 Digital News Report notes, “despite the turbulent times in which we live”. One reason, a Nieman Lab survey indicates, is that readers don’t find content produced by media platforms valuable or are simply overwhelmed by its abundance.¹³

⁹ Bidwai, P., 2011. *The growing crisis of credibility of the Indian media*. Transnational Institute. <https://www.tni.org/es/node/11017>

¹⁰ Lone, M. *Killed, vilified, cut adrift from the national community. What’s the Indian Muslim to do?* News laundry. <https://www.news laundry.com/2020/04/15/killed-vilified-cut-adrift-from-the-national-community-w-hats-the-indian-muslim-to-do>

¹¹ Fisher, C., Flew, T., Park, S., Lee, J. and Dulleck, U., 2020. *Improving Trust in News: Audience Solutions*. Journalism Practice.

¹² Edelman. *2022 Edelman Trust Barometer*. <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2022-trust-barometer>

¹³ Staff, N., Alazab, M., Macfarlane, K., Scire, S. and Benton, J. *Cancel culture: Why do people cancel news subscriptions? We asked, they answered*. Nieman Lab.

<https://www.niemanlab.org/2021/10/cancel-culture-why-do-people-cancel-news-subscriptions-we-asked-they-answered>

Nearly 13% of the survey's respondents "thought a publication had become too clickbaity or non-substantive, or found that the content generally wasn't useful to them or just wasn't worth paying for". An equal percentage cancelled their subscriptions "because of information overload". Some complained that the content wasn't original. Why would they pay for content they could get for free elsewhere? The contentification of journalism, thus, not only undermines trust, it's also a risky business gambit.

It's injurious to democracy too, for trust in the media and democracy go hand-in-hand. If the media isn't considered trustworthy enough to keep voters informed, its worth as a key pillar of democracy is diminished. Indeed, a public institution without trust in a democratic society arguably has no legitimate reason to exist.

The nexus of contentification and the loss of trust, readers, and revenues also enables a more malicious phenomenon. Again, take India. The ruling Hindu supremacists and their allies in the media – taking a lesson from American rightwing ideologue Steve Bannon's playbook – constantly flood the news with so much distraction and hatred it's hard to tell news from propaganda anymore.¹⁴ To be effective, propaganda and distraction must be relentless. Co-opted media, therefore, must generate ever more content to shrinkwrap lies, xenophobia and ressentiment in.

One outcome, by default if not design, is the dystopia of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, where the public is controlled not by being deprived of useful information, as George Orwell feared, but by being drowned in trivialities. Huxley lamented that the early advocates of free press who envisaged propaganda as a binary (it "might be

¹⁴ Illing, S., 2020. "*Flood the zone with shit*": How misinformation overwhelmed our democracy. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/1/16/20991816/impeachment-trial-trump-bannon-misinformation>

true or it might be false”) did not factor in the growth of “a vast mass communications industry, concerned in the main neither with the true nor the false, but with the unreal, the more or less totally irrelevant”.¹⁵ Huxley saw irrelevant words, “words without reason”, as potentially more harmful than false words.

Yet, “words without reason” could double as a descriptor of much of the content created by digital news publishing.

The “publish less but publish better” credo is a solution to problems outlined above, and more: audience fatigue, staff fatigue, quality assurance, and resource allocation to name a few. To paraphrase Bannon, the media won’t be “flooded with shit”.¹⁶

Mediapart has shown that it can be a winning strategy. The French news outlet, which went live in 2008, is a pioneer of the ‘publish less but better’ model. The decision of its founders to rely from the outset on readers and not advertisers for revenue freed them from the obligation of producing content for clicks. They devoted their resources instead to doing original and investigative journalism – and to audience engagement – and quickly found success, disproving conventional wisdom.¹⁷ They knew they would only be “a little fish” in the news industry, Edwy Penel, Mediapart’s co-founder and guiding force, told me, but they would be “a clean, proud fish in a putrid sea”.

Mediapart now boasts over 221,000 subscribers. It’s staffed by 131 people, nearly half of them editorial staff who publish 12-15 articles per day, in three editions. It

¹⁵ Huxley, A., 1995. *Brave New World Revisited*. New York: Harper & Row.

¹⁶ Illing, S., 2020. “Flood the zone with shit”: How misinformation overwhelmed our democracy. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/1/16/20991816/impeachment-trial-trump-bannon-misinformation>

¹⁷ Wagemans, A., Witschge, T. and Deuze, M., 2016. *Ideology as Resource in Entrepreneurial Journalism*. Journalism Practice. Alain Minc, then president of Le Monde’s supervisory board, said the Mediapart model would never work. ‘The model chosen by Edwy Plenel is an absurd one,’ Minc told the radio station France Info in October 2008. ‘The online press cannot work except when it is free. A paid online press cannot work.’

earned 21.3 million in revenue in 2021 and a net profit of about 4 million, 18% more than the previous year and 97% from subscriptions.¹⁸

Mediapart's model, or elements of it, have since been adopted by publishers around the world, with varying degrees of success. *Denník N*, the *Guardian*, the *Ken*, *Tiempo Argentino*, *El Diario*, and *Quartz*, each guided by their particular journalistic vision as much as by financial compulsion, have all either stepped off the churnalism treadmill, are trying to, or never jumped on in the first place.

¹⁸ Interview with Edwy Plenel.

Why cut content?

Journalism, in conception and purpose, is a public service; in practice, a business. For a public service to be valuable and business to be sustainable, a critical ingredient is quality. In journalism, quality derives from a latticework of values, all of which can be fortified by cutting down, if not eliminating, words without reason. Trust and independence are the most fundamental of these values.

Trust and independence – intellectual, operational, financial – are also the values the content for clicks model undermines the most. Not least because “advertising is often a volume game” which “requires getting as much traffic as possible”.¹⁹ In other words: it incentivises publishers to chase clicks above all else. To which end they resort to gaming platform algorithms, crafting today-clever tomorrow-outdated SEO strategies, generating clickbait.

But as per-click ad revenues dwindle and tech platforms tinker with their algorithms to down-rank clickbait, publishers are increasingly compelled to ask their readers for money.²⁰ The same readers, mind, who are accustomed to paying for content in clicks, not coins. Now that publishers understand that digital news is a subscription business, they need to make a new sales pitch to their readers: “pay for our content”.²¹

Will they?

¹⁹ Suárez, E., 2020. *How to build a good reader revenue model: Lessons from Spain and the UK*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/how-build-good-reader-revenue-model-lessons-spain-and-uk>

²⁰ Nel, F. and Milburn-Curtis, C. World Press Trends 2020-21. Frankfurt: World Association of News Publishers.

²¹ Ibid.

They will, Eduardo Saurez concludes in his Reuters Institute paper examining various news subscription models, provided that the content is valuable enough. “Nothing,” he noted, “beats journalism as an acquisition tool”.²²

Now more than ever, retaining trust is “not only a journalistic aspiration, but a business imperative”: readers who put a “higher premium” on trust “are more engaged with news, are more likely to pay for it, install news apps, or share and promote news with their friends”.²³

Since trust is a function not of quantity but quality, publishers can earn and keep it by “boosting the amount of in-depth reporting” and producing more exclusive content.²⁴ After all, as most of the publishers examined in this paper have realised, readers are unlikely to pay for content that they can find for free elsewhere.

“We were convinced that potential readers would not agree to take out a subscription for information that they found free of charge elsewhere,” Marie-Hélène Smiejan-Wanneroy, one of Mediapart’s co-founders, told me. This now requires them to constantly reflect on, “what is important today, what angle, what subject, what added value the editorial team must bring?”

So they either produce original content or buttress its value proposition by, say, adding a layer of new reporting, a piece of missing context, or a fresh lens of analysis.

²² Suárez, E., 2020. *How to build a good reader revenue model: Lessons from Spain and the UK*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/how-build-good-reader-revenue-model-lessons-spain-and-uk>

²³ American Press Institute., 2016. *A new understanding: What makes people trust and rely on news*. <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/trust-news/single-page>

²⁴ Fisher, C., Flew, T., Park, S., Lee, J. and Dulleck, U., 2020. *Improving Trust in News: Audience Solutions*. Journalism Practice.

It's a smart bet. The "future of publishing is really a 'differentiate-or-die' scenario".²⁵ As Plenel from Mediapart put it: "I understood that if you have quality, you can charge for it."²⁶

A common fear among publishers is that cutting volume will result in a loss of readers. On the contrary, publishers who have done so have seen "growth in audience traffic, higher dwell times and more subscriptions", in part because "journalists with more time can produce more in-depth stories, with fresher angles, and more exclusives".²⁷

The *Guardian*, for example, cut its content by a third – from about 12,000 articles a month to 8,000 – and saw an uptick in both readers and revenue.²⁸ *Dagens Nyheter* in the Netherlands grew traffic by making a 15% cut in content and instead "focusing on the right stories".²⁹

The *Ken* has "publish less but better" baked into its design, too. An Indian news platform launched in 2016 with investor funding, it has earned a reputation as a go-to place for in-depth reporting focussed mainly on business and tech. It publishes one article a day, five days a week.

²⁵ WNIP., 2018. *Why are news publishers pivoting to subscriptions?* What's New in Publishing <https://whatsnewinpublishing.com/news-publishers-pivoting-subscriptions>

²⁶ Borelli, J., 2020. *Journalism in Argentina is in crisis. Lessons from Spain and France may hold the key to survival.* Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/journalism-argentina-crisis-lessons-spain-and-france-may-hold-key-survival>

²⁷ Gamperl, E., 2021. *How to calm your newsroom's metrics anxiety and use analytics to grow.* Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/how-calm-your-newsrooms-metrics-anxiety-and-use-analytics-grow>

²⁸ The Guardian., 2021. *Guardian Media Group plc publishes 2020/21 statutory financial results.* <https://www.theguardian.com/gnm-press-office/2021/jul/27/guardian-media-group-plc-gmg-publishes-202021-statutory-financial-results>

²⁹ Suárez, E., 2020. *How to build a good reader revenue model: Lessons from Spain and the UK.* Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/how-build-good-reader-revenue-model-lessons-spain-and-uk>

“We started the *Ken* because we wanted to write. We were journalists and we wanted to tell great stories. And we wanted to figure out a business model that would allow us to do that. It wasn’t the reverse. It wasn’t, ‘Hey, there’s lots of money to be raised in the content space, so what can we say,’” explained co-founder and CEO Rohin Dharmakumar.³⁰ “If that’s your starting point, it stands to reason that it’s impossible to produce quality longform journalism on a schedule that’s measured in days and not weeks. Then, we looked at it from the consumer’s point of view. We aren’t entering a market where there’s no journalism, right? We have access to an infinite supply of stories, breaking news and analysis. And the reader doesn’t have unlimited time. Perhaps 10 to 15 minutes a day. How many stories can they read in 15 minutes? One. That compact between the writer and the reader is important.”

Today, the *Ken* has over 30,000 paying subscribers and, according to Dharmakumar, is “very close to being profitable”. “We have a close to 50-person organisation today, not just in India but also in Southeast Asia (SEA). We are running an operation across countries and are heavily invested on the tech and infrastructure side. We aren’t profitable, but very close. Our burn rate is completely controlled,” he added, without divulging specifics. The SEA edition runs an article a day, four days a week.

The more revenue newsrooms earn from readers, the less dependent they will be on money from governments or corporations, and the more independent they will be perceived. Since perception of independence is essential for publishers to earn public trust, doing better rather than more journalism can create a self-perpetuating value loop where independence, trust, reader revenue, and quality flow from and reify each other. That’s what *Tiempo Argentino* found out.

³⁰ Interview with Rohin Dharmakumar.

In 2016, the Argentinian newspaper's owner decided to close it because it was no longer profitable. The employees wouldn't let him. They formed a cooperative and revived *Tiempo* as a digital news platform with a print edition on Sundays. They "took a chance on reader revenue", recalled Javier Borelli, who was elected the cooperative's first president, and found success almost overnight.³¹

"I think there were two factors for our success," said Borelli, who also served as *Tiempo*'s general information editor before leaving last year.³² "First, under private ownership *Tiempo* received a lot of advertising money from the government and so it was seen as a pro-government newspaper. Once it became an independent organisation, we could criticise the government. And people started noticing that. It gave us legitimacy. In December 2015, under private ownership, *Tiempo* sold 3,000-6,000 newspapers per day. After the co-op took over, we sold 30,000 copies. Then we dropped off because the market for print editions changed quite a lot. Still, the print edition now sells 10,000-15,000 copies a day. As for digital, *Tiempo* didn't even have a website of its own, the articles were published on the website of the corporation that owned it. We launched our own website after the co-op took over and it now gets 700,000-1,000,000 unique visitors a month. So its reach is much more than it was."

The other factor was that they drastically reduced the volume of content. "We published a daily newspaper with 60-80 pages and at least 100 news articles. After the co-op turned it into a digital paper with a weekly print edition, we realised that we could provide all the information our readers needed in no more than 20 articles a day," Borelli added. "*Tiempo* became far more important in the Argentinian media landscape with this approach."

³¹ Borelli, J., 2020. *Journalism in Argentina is in crisis. Lessons from Spain and France may hold the key to survival*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/journalism-argentina-crisis-lessons-spain-and-france-may-hold-key-survival>

³² Interview with [Javier Borelli](#).

Today, *Tiempo* earns over 40% of its revenue from readers. “People know what they need. They give us the money necessary to publish information that they are looking for. So, we focus on publishing information and not clickbait,” Borelli said. “Try and differentiate our work from what’s out there already, that’s what we decided at the start. It was like, okay, these are the resources we have and this is the model we want to pursue. What’s the way to get there? Do less but better.”

The less but better strategy can work even for publishers that can’t or don’t want to give up on advertising revenue. Producing more distinguishable content – and not simply more content – can help elevate a brand to “premium” status and earn publishers a higher price point on ad exchanges.

Quartz found this out the hard way. It started out in 2012 with the aim of being the “*Economist* for the current era”, publishing “sharp analysis about the global economy”. Not more than half a dozen pieces a day. For revenue, it built a premium advertising business, “selling marquee advertisers on a new generation of yacht owners and Rolex wearers”.³³

The “quality-over-quantity” advertising mantra worked. In its fourth year, *Quartz* made operating profit. Traffic was booming, thanks largely to Facebook, and the media platform was expanding into new markets.

The “boom times”, however, created “a more confused newsroom”. Instead of “sharp analysis about the global economy”, it started covering “news across the map, from geopolitics to culture”. The writers were “encouraged to ‘take swings’ and pump out more content to see what would work”, and they were expected to write 20 stories a month each. In the process, *Quartz* “got caught in the mushy middle of 2010s digital

³³ Perlberg, S., 2020. *Caught in the mushy middle: How Quartz fell to earth*. Digiday.
<https://digiday.com/media/caught-in-the-mushy-middle-how-quartz-fell-to-earth>

media, like *Mic* and *Mashable*. Not quite niche enough to be essential to a small group of readers, but not quite big enough to compete at scale”.

Sure enough, “*Quartz* articles started to look more like commodity news stories one can find elsewhere”.³⁴ Then, as “native advertising became increasingly competitive” and Facebook changed its algorithms, *Quartz* lost much of its traffic. It started bleeding money and, after two rounds of layoffs in 2019, cut nearly half its staff in 2020.³⁵

Stung, *Quartz* pivoted back towards publishing less but better, seeing it as a way to grow subscription revenue and supplement income from its bespoke advertising business. “We have over 25,000 subscribers at this point. We have had very solid growth. But that is still not where we want to be in the long run. There is a multi-year process to get us to be the size of business we think we can be,” Walter Frick, executive editor, membership told me. “We have advertising as our steady underlying business model right now while membership grows gradually year by year. The long-term plan is for income from these two sources to be closer to parity.”³⁶

To that end, Frick said, they are “refocusing and reminding ourselves why *Quartz* exists and why it’s different” – figuring out what kind of journalism they should publish and how much is central to this strategy. “Our view is that to succeed with the reader revenue model you need to do fewer things better. Then the question is, well, what are those things? What is our differentiator? Global business and how it’s changing: that’s the core. We have spent a lot of time over the last two years figuring out what really belongs in that bucket. Basically tech trends, consumer trends and

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Interview with Walter Frick.

work advice. That's three of our most successful things for conversion specifically," said Frick. "So we focus on fewer areas now."

They do less of American politics and culture, for example. "We still do a lot of reporting on the business of culture – like streaming wars or the production of entertainment as an economic question – but we are not doing coverage of, you know, TV recaps. It's not like that was ever a huge focus area for *Quartz*, but there was more cultural coverage, some of which was great," Frick said. "But as we asked what we could really be best at, we felt business lens was a big part of it."

Quartz are still doing more content than they did in the early days, but they are "part way back". "Our volume per reporter is down from what it was a few years ago," said Frick.

Inside the newsroom, meanwhile, not having to spend every waking hour mass producing content can help rescue journalists from the epidemic of overwork.³⁷ Reducing content, Elisabeth Gamperl noted in her Reuters Institute paper, "can have positive implications for the workload of journalists, and [...] encourages processes of self reflection and standard setting that all good editors promote. In the best case, the process also has the advantage of providing more clarity to readers too".³⁸

Indeed, one of the reasons *El Diario* wanted to cut content was to "reduce the amount of work". "We produce a lot and work very long hours. Because we are ambitious, it's always hard to say, 'No, I am not gonna write about that.' Maybe we can look at data a bit more and realise that this story is not important or doesn't need a whole piece, or doesn't need such a long investigation," said Esther Alonso,

³⁷ Wagemans, A., Witschge, T. and Deuze, M., 2016. *Ideology as Resource in Entrepreneurial Journalism. Journalism Practice*.

³⁸ Gamperl, E., 2021. *How to calm your newsroom's metrics anxiety and use analytics to grow*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/how-calm-your-newsrooms-metrics-anxiety-and-use-analytics-grow>

director of marketing and development. “Maybe just an audio [file] will do instead, or a short video [to] share on Telegram.”³⁹

The *Ken*, again, was founded with this understanding. “Nobody asks the journalist how many stories they want to write. Whether they’re enjoying writing three exclusives and two breaking news pieces and a wire copy. Nobody asks them because they don’t matter in the general scheme of things. They are replaceable,” Dharmakumar said. “Does anyone ask the readers? Are they going to give you two hours of their busy day to read all the stuff you are putting out? If not, then why are you doing it? We started out by asking what is it that we would like to do? What is it that our readers would like? Then, what is the logical business model aligned with these two objectives? A subscription model with an explicit promise: one story a day which we would put our heart and soul into.”

Reducing workload is often the gateway step to increasing quality. At *Mediapart*, since journalists aren’t required to keep the churnalism treadmill running, “they feel free to practice what they regard as good journalism”.⁴⁰ *Denník N*’s articles are getting a little longer every year because its “editors have time to go deep”.⁴¹

And a sustainable newsroom built around publishing substantive journalism and not drowning it in a “sea of irrelevance” is, as Huxley put it, essential for the “maintenance of individual liberty and the survival of democratic institutions”.⁴² An abundance of superfluous information, on the other hand, serves mainly to distract. And distraction is the enemy of accountability.

³⁹ Interview with Esther Alonso.

⁴⁰ Wagemans, A., Witschge, T. and Deuze, M., 2016. *Ideology as Resource in Entrepreneurial Journalism. Journalism Practice*.

⁴¹ Denník N., 2021. *Denník N bilancuje rok 2021 vo veľkej infografike*.

<https://Denníkn.sk/2665022/Denník-n-bilancuje-rok-2021-vo-velkej-infografike/?ref=inc>

⁴² Huxley, A., 1995. *Brave New World Revisited*. New York: Harper & Row.

Another upshot of breaking with the content-for-clicks model is that it can spur innovation in an industry that has largely lagged behind rather than stayed ahead of challenges thrown up by the digital economy. Yes, innovation is tough “because it requires a lot of courage to raze the old to raise the new”, but publishers don’t necessarily have to “start from scratch”.⁴³ Innovation can also mean “reinventing what already exists into something superior”.⁴⁴ That’s what *Mediapart*’s founders did by crafting “a business model and medium that were new to them, but that allowed for independent journalism, interaction with readers, and required less financial capital to create than a print medium”. Today, Plenel is eager to point out, their news outlet “is also an economic exception in the French press”.⁴⁵

In other places, “executives from organisations that have a strong culture of innovation are reporting greater digital audiences and higher profits, and are more optimistic about their firm’s prospect to fully recover from the coronavirus pandemic in the future”.⁴⁶

The importance of innovation is even higher in societies where the media has been co-opted by monied and political interests, or – in places like India – emasculated by sociocultural forces riding the rise of extremist übernationalism.⁴⁷ As Lucia Naldi and Robert G Picard wrote, “one of the main reasons for starting a new journalism business is the [...] discontent with existing journalism, and the demise of legacy media institutions”.⁴⁸

⁴³ <https://www.pressreader.com/international/the-insider/20180101/page/71>

⁴⁴ WNIP., 2018. *Why are news publishers pivoting to subscriptions?* What’s New in Publishing <https://whatsnewinpublishing.com/news-publishers-pivoting-subscriptions>

⁴⁵ Wagemans, A., Witschge, T. and Deuze, M., 2016. *Ideology as Resource in Entrepreneurial Journalism.* Journalism Practice.

⁴⁶ Nel, F. and Milburn-Curtis, C. World Press Trends 2020-21. Frankfurt: World Association of News Publishers.

⁴⁷ Dutta, A., 2018. *In 2018, Team Modi plans to unleash über-nationalism on your television & radio.* <https://theprint.in/india/governance/modi-govt-media-blitz-national-pride/31314>

⁴⁸ Naldi, L. and Picard R., 2012. *“Let’s Start An Online News Site”: Opportunities, Resources, Strategy, and Formational Myopia in Startups.* Journal of Media Business Studies.

A key field of innovation for new products is in limited content, and digest content: “In a digital environment dominated by endless feeds,” Saurez wrote, “finite products are quite appealing”.⁴⁹

Even digital platforms outside the news ecosystem, such as Netflix, are realising content volume isn’t reliable bait. “One of the fair criticisms has been we make too much and not enough is great,” Scott Stuber, Netflix’s global film chief, told the *New York Times*. “What we want to do is [...] make a little less better and more great.”⁵⁰

Why, you might ask, can’t publishers just publish a lot of high quality content? Firstly, producing high-quality original journalism is prohibitively expensive. Scaling up quality isn’t feasible without substantial capital outlay and global reach (like the *New York Times*, or *Washington Post*). Even then, publishers risking this gambit will need to invest in “artificial intelligence as a way of delivering more personalised experiences and greater production efficiency” to avoid waste.⁵¹

Secondly, as journalism is increasingly accessed through third-party platforms, each piece must be compelling enough to stand on its own.⁵² It no longer matters if your masthead is trusted, each reader must trust and find value in every single piece of content you publish to come back.

⁴⁹ Suárez, E., 2020. *How to build a good reader revenue model: Lessons from Spain and the UK*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/how-build-good-reader-revenue-model-lessons-spain-and-uk>

⁵⁰ Sperling, N., 2021. *Netflix Turns Its Attention to Films It Hopes Everyone Wants to See*. The New York Times.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/22/business/media/netflix-movies-theaters.html>

⁵¹ Newman, N., 2022. *Journalism, media, and technology trends and predictions 2022*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/journalism-media-and-technology-trends-and-predictions-2022>

⁵² Newman, N., 2021. *Journalism, media, and technology trends and predictions 2021*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

“It’s very easy to identify multiple user needs but impossible for most newsrooms to answer them all directly,” Chris Moran, the *Guardian*’s head of editorial innovation, pointed out. “So a big part of it is making sensible and pragmatic calls about how much you really need and how much you can meaningfully show to people.”⁵³

⁵³ Suárez, E., 2022. *Tips from the 'Guardian' on live-blogging and covering breaking news on Ukraine*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/tips-guardian-live-blogging-and-covering-breaking-news-ukraine>

How to cut content

There's more than one way to clean the gutter. The guiding principle, though, can be expressed as a double-loop of editorial judgement and a data-informed plan of action, each augmenting the other.

The newsroom, Plenel pointed out, is not a "communication office"; its purpose is to "find and supply information". "We're in the middle of a democratic battle for information," he argued. "Not only for the media or the journalists. We speak about the right to know rather than the right to inform. Knowledge as power, as emancipation."⁵⁴

How would a newsroom determine which information is valuable? Plenel proposes a reasonable standard: "Ask what is it contributing to the public debate?"

Is this piece of content enriching public debate? Is it in public interest? Is it valuable to the readers? Yes, publish it. No, bin it.

This is editorial judgement. Which, when dictated by the basic principles of journalism and not the rules of the ads-for-clicks game, will go a long way in weeding out superfluous content. "Journalists should remember that their job is not publishing as much as they can," said Richard Furness, managing director, customer

⁵⁴ Borelli, J., 2020. *Journalism in Argentina is in crisis. Lessons from Spain and France may hold the key to survival.* Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/journalism-argentina-crisis-lessons-spain-and-france-may-hold-key-survival>

engagement and business development, at the *Guardian*, “but editing what is important.”⁵⁵

The second piece of the puzzle is using data to “inform rather than lead” editorial decisions, as Moran puts it. “I don’t want the audience team to have a commissioning function,” he said. “We can’t walk into the morning meeting and say, ‘We don’t get loads of page views if you write about this, write about that.’”⁵⁶

The editors at *El Diario* understand this well. “We don’t chase clicks. We believe in our editorial line, we believe our journalists know what sort of content they have to produce. So, when content isn’t getting good engagement, we don’t stop publishing it. We consider whether the content is there because our journalist thought it was important. We need to balance data with not-so-objective indicators,” said Alonso.

“We actually did an experiment with one of our sections a few years ago. We looked at 50-60 articles per week that were at the bottom of the list in terms of engagement and interest. Why were these articles not successful? For some, we realised that maybe they were not needed. We wrote them because we felt they were important to our readers, but when we looked again, we accepted that they were not necessary. ‘OK, next time we won’t do it.’ But we also had articles that weren’t so successful even though we still thought they were important. So, we had to look at other aspects, like was this article shared on social media, was it featured on our homepage, was it included in our newsletters? Maybe that is it. If not, you keep investigating. This way, we managed to understand why some of the articles weren’t as successful as others.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Suárez, E., 2020. *How to build a good reader revenue model: Lessons from Spain and the UK*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/how-build-good-reader-revenue-model-lessons-spain-and-uk>

⁵⁶ Interview with Chris Moran.

⁵⁷ Interview with Esther Alonso.

The *Ken* operates by similar logic. “We are, by design, not a metrics-driven organisation. We don’t look at what the data is telling us and try to [game it]. What we offer is a curated product,” said Dharmakumar. “As a hypothetical example, we are going through a Fintech boom and Fintech stories are very popular. Should we start doing three Fintech stories per week because that is where the money is? We won’t. We are aware that we have to be on the scene, but we continue to exercise our judgement.”⁵⁸

Most importantly, data can point out where the flab is. The *Times* stopped covering breaking news back in 2016 after data showed it had no takers. The message from their readers “was very clear”, said Alan Hunter, former head of digital at the British newspaper. “They valued us for our insights, our analysis and the authority of our reporting, not for the ability to catch up very quickly.”⁵⁹

The *Guardian* cut its output by third because the lower third was generating less than 2% of the audience. “Huge efforts were going into articles that very few people were reading,” said Moran. “That was worrying considering our resources. We have half the editorial staff of the *New York Times*, but we were publishing a lot more than them. So, are we wasting our time? Math dictates that if you cut a third of your content but it makes up only 2% of your audience, you are only going to lose 2% of your audience. And more to the point: if you are then clearing space out of the promotional funnel by a third, all the good stuff you are producing will have more space to prosper through search, social and your own direct channels. This is a question most people ask me when they are thinking of doing this, ‘How did you make sure that you didn’t lose traffic?’ The answer is cut the stuff that nobody reads.

⁵⁸ Interview with Rohin Dharmakumar.

⁵⁹ Suárez, E., 2020. *How to build a good reader revenue model: Lessons from Spain and the UK*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/how-build-good-reader-revenue-model-lessons-spain-and-uk>

I mean, you are not going to lose half your traffic unless, weirdly, you cut stuff that you believe in and people like.”⁶⁰

In the Netherlands, *Dagens Nyheter* “realised that using copy from AP or Reuters didn’t work” since their readers were “in search of deep dives, not quick summaries”. They reduced the number of articles by 15% and no one complained “because no one was reading them anyway”. It helped increase their readership.⁶¹

Another Dutch publisher, *De Correspondent*, only covers stories which help in “shifting the focus from the sensational to the foundational and from the attention-grabbing headline to the constructive insight”. Its journalists “refuse to speculate about the latest scare or breaking story, but work instead to uncover the underlying forces that shape our world”.⁶²

So, as a rule of thumb, don’t publish content that’s freely available elsewhere unless there’s clear public interest involved. This, however, requires knowing your audience, especially if you are asking them to pay. Are they coming to your platform for investigative reporting or sports coverage? Regional news or cultural criticism? Or if you are a big newsroom that does full-spectrum journalism, which of your work is being widely read?

Knowing your audience will require looking at data and reader feedback. That’s what Ignacio Escolar did. He founded *El Diario* a decade ago not as “another general-interest newspaper but one with a sharp focus on politics and

⁶⁰ Interview with Chris Moran.

⁶¹ Suárez, E., 2020. *How to build a good reader revenue model: Lessons from Spain and the UK*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/how-build-good-reader-revenue-model-lessons-spain-and-uk>

⁶² Filloux, F., 2017. *De Correspondent's Successful Membership Model*. Global Investigative Journalism Network.

<https://gijn.org/2017/11/30/de-correspondents-successful-membership-model>

investigations”. As the outlet’s audience grew, Escolar considered publishing sports news. It didn’t go well. Many members complained that they weren’t paying “to know more about the Real Madrid matches”. “The sports coverage didn’t create either substantial ad revenue or new members and *El Diario* dropped the project. It hasn’t covered sports ever since.”⁶³

Tiempo too wrestled with this dilemma. “*Tiempo* is a general news outlet,” said Borelli. “So, we wanted to keep covering every area that we did in the past so as not to lose readers. We couldn’t. We realised, for example, that we couldn’t compete with sports magazines. We just didn’t have the money to, say, send our reporters to every beach in Argentina to cover football matches. So we decided to focus instead on the business side of sports: mainly agreements between advertisers and football associations, or the links between football hooligans and political parties. And it paid off. Nobody was going to come to us to read about the last victory of Boca Juniors. But they were going to come when we said, ‘OK, these Boca Juniors hooligans went to those demonstrations in favour of the government and did this’. That kind of stuff gave us prestige and allowed us to work with a small newsroom.”⁶⁴

Similarly, *Mediapart* launched with the plan to “cover less and better instead of more and worse”, meaning “a limited number of public interest topics; to publish scoops; and to produce quality articles instead of trying to compete with legacy media in every area of information”.⁶⁵

⁶³ Suárez, E., 2020. *How to build a good reader revenue model: Lessons from Spain and the UK*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/how-build-good-reader-revenue-model-lessons-spain-and-uk>

⁶⁴ Interview with Javier Borelli.

⁶⁵ Borelli, J., 2020. *Journalism in Argentina is in crisis. Lessons from Spain and France may hold the key to survival*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/journalism-argentina-crisis-lessons-spain-and-france-may-hold-key-survival>

Denník N found that in-depth articles attracted the most subscribers, so that's what they focused on, said Filip Struharik, an editor at the Slovak news platform.⁶⁶ They gradually went from publishing 13,024 articles in 2015 to 10,275 in 2021 even as the newsroom staff grew from 43 to 108.⁶⁷ “Our main focus is on in-depth stories and you can see it,” he said. “[The] number of published articles is decreasing while their length is growing.”⁶⁸

El Diario is working out how to cut content further now that it has more subscribers and, thus, has to rely less on advertising revenue. Through the pandemic, the Spanish media platform grew its share of subscription revenue to around half. “We had an amazing increase. The revenue is 50-50 now. It used to be 30-70 in favour of advertising,” said Alonso. “This is a big change.”

They are currently discussing how they can further their aim to publish less but better. “Our editor-in-chief is really keen, the board of directors is very keen on making this happen. It's not happening as fast as we want for many reasons,” she said. “But our goal is more quality and less quantity. We believe we can reduce the number of articles we produce and focus on adding more value for our readers.”

How much content is too much? The answer will differ by outlet and audience. But as a rule of thumb, if your newsroom is producing more content daily than your average reader is able to consume (between their commitments to work, family and fun), it's probably too much.

⁶⁶ Struhárik, F., 2019. *Independent news website Denník N in 2018*. Medium. https://medium.com/@filip_struharik/independent-news-website-denn%C3%ADk-n-in-2018-infographic-765fc72cf95

⁶⁷ Denník N., 2021. *Denník N bilancuje rok 2021 vo veľkej infografike*. <https://Denníkn.sk/2665022/Denník-n-bilancuje-rok-2021-vo-velkej-infografike/?ref=inc>

⁶⁸ Struhárik, F., 2019. *Independent news website Denník N in 2018*. Medium. https://medium.com/@filip_struharik/independent-news-website-denn%C3%ADk-n-in-2018-infographic-765fc72cf95

Limitations

If not done well, simply cutting content can upset the harmony between a newsroom's editorial and business aims. Particularly if the cull is "data-led rather than data-informed" because, as Gamperl cautions, "metrics are not there for rating journalism".

In other words, simply cutting content that isn't finding readers is a perilous proposition. Should newsrooms stop covering, say, human rights abuses or the corporate theft of natural resources because it doesn't "click well"? That would spell the death of journalism.

A newsroom, instead, must be guided by core principles in their content cutting strategy to not end up hollowing itself out. At the same time, it must recognise what Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, describes as "the journalists' trilemma" which "necessitate hard decisions" about which of the three key values of journalism to prioritise: seek truth, work with moral clarity, serve the whole public – "knowing there are likely to be tradeoffs involved".⁶⁹

To resolve the trilemma honestly – not merely profitably – it's essential for the newsroom to be diverse and representative. The news industry in India, for example, is run overwhelmingly by privileged upper caste Hindus, who account for less than a fifth of the population but near monopolise editorial positions.⁷⁰

The issues that move them are often not the same as those that affect the marginalised masses. This dynamic translates to newsrooms that are focused on a handful of "issues" that upper caste proprietors and editors deem important such as

⁶⁹ Nielsen, R., 2020. *The journalists' trilemma*.

<https://rasmuskleisnielsen.net/2020/11/05/the-journalists-trilemma>

⁷⁰ Tiwari, A., 2019. *Indian media is an upper-caste fortress, suggests report on caste representation*. News laundry.

<https://www.news laundry.com/2019/08/02/caste-representation-indian-newsrooms-report-media-rumble-oxfam-india>

the country's "international image", political intrigue, stock markets, and the customs and practices of religious minorities. This is not acceptable in a country where nearly seven in 10 people live in poverty.⁷¹

Greater diversity is also a "business imperative" now, "with younger readers in particular paying close attention to content that speaks to or serves their identity".⁷²

The success of a "publish less but better" model may also be best suited to reader-funded outlets, which reduces the pressure to earn clicks for revenue. That is not to say all content-reducing outlets must give up revenue from advertising or other sources altogether, but it does mean striking a careful balance between volume and quality. "Volume is still fairly important for some things," said *Quartz*'s Frick, "but not for others. It's definitely less important for membership than it is for advertising."

Alonso said one of the challenges *El Diario* faced in cutting content was that they still rely for about half their revenue on ads, which requires producing a certain volume of content to meet a certain level of traffic.

A third limitation is that this model risks impoverishing journalism. As surveys indicate that paying readers are less favourable to opinion, a newsroom cutting content could take the axe to informed opinion, ideas, and cultural criticism. Many of the ideas that have profoundly shaped our world appeared in the pages of newspapers and magazines. As did fine literary and cultural criticism, even exquisite literature, all of which enriched our intellectual lives. Losing this would be a shame, indeed.

⁷¹ *Poverty in India: Facts and Figures on the Daily Struggle for Survival.*
<https://www.soschildrensvillages.ca/news/poverty-in-india-602>

⁷² Newman, N., 2022. *Journalism, media, and technology trends and predictions 2022*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/journalism-media-and-technology-trends-and-predictions-2022>

Fourth, the news media has a role to play in the “marketplace of ideas” – the lifeblood of a free society – as it equips the public with all relevant information to scrutinise an idea. “The survival of democracy”, Huxley contended, “depends on the ability of large numbers of people to make realistic choices in the light of adequate information”.⁷³ If reducing content compels publishers to serve only information that readers are receptive to or only to those who can afford to pay for it, it may have consequences for the complexity of the marketplace of ideas.

What would be the costs to a democratic society of a media landscape where, as American journalist Nathan Robinson puts it, “the truth is paywalled but lies are free”?⁷⁴ Such a society could end up split in myriad bubbles, shaped by ideology, class or interest, each served by its own niche news outlet.⁷⁵ Down that road lies disinformation, polarisation, social discord.

⁷³ Huxley, A., 1995. *Brave New World Revisited*. New York: Harper & Row.

⁷⁴ Robinson, N., 2020. *The Truth Is Paywalled But The Lies Are Free*. Current Affairs.

<https://www.currentaffairs.org/2020/08/the-truth-is-paywalled-but-the-lies-are-free>

⁷⁵ Schechter, A., 2021. How Place and Privilege Came to Define American News. ProMarket.

<https://www.promarket.org/2021/07/15/journalism-democracy-place-privilege-elites-nikki-usher>

Conclusion

In summary, the publishers I spoke to have found that publishing less but better enables them to invest in good content rather than more content which entices readers to pay for it, which reduces reliance on advertisers, which enhances perception of independence, which boosts credibility, which earns trust, which smoothes engagement with reader and establishes a channel of feedback that serves both parties.

In short, content de-addiction yields a model combining the essential elements of fine journalism – quality, independence and trust – with financial sustainability.

It doesn't lose readers either.⁷⁶

This approach has pitfalls, of course. It could lead to news publishers “super-serving richer and more educated audiences and leaving others behind”, dissuade exploration of revenue streams other than subscriptions lest that erode the perception of independence, deepen ideological rifts, and feed a situation where the “truth is paywalled and the lies free”.⁷⁷ It could, in sum, trap publishers and their loyal audiences in potentially self-destructive bubbles.

Such risks can be significantly mitigated, however, by creating a more diverse, democratic newsroom, making data-informed decisions, and ensuring greater transparency in editorial and business decisionmaking.

⁷⁶ Southern, L., 2020. *Publishers are growing audiences by producing less content*. Digiday. <https://digiday.com/media/publishers-growing-audiences-producing-less-content>

⁷⁷ Newman, N., 2022. *Journalism, media, and technology trends and predictions 2022*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/journalism-media-and-technology-trends-and-predictions-2022>

As the first step, though, publishers need to see content not as a product, but capital. Which will yield rich returns, for publishers and democracy, only if it is judiciously invested. Every single piece of it.

You probably know Aesop's fable of *The Crow and the Pitcher*, in which a thirsty bird fills a half-empty jug with pebbles so that the water rises to meet his beak. What if we consider that story an allegory for revenue-thirsty news publishers?

Only in this retelling, publishers have been endlessly filling the jar of digital journalism with the content equivalent of lightweight twigs, failing to displace the water they need. Another option awaits: it requires fewer, substantial “content pebbles” – and the publisher won’t have to expend all their energy collecting dirty flotsam that blocks up the pitcher and muddies the water.

In the parched world of digital news, the reward of reaching a trustworthy, independent and sustainable newsroom can be had by cultivating a paying audience. And it is quality, not quantity that people will pay to access.

Defining what content carries weight is the key question the news industry must reckon with if it does not want to keep bleeding readers, revenues and trust – and as a result continue shrinking in scope, scale, spread, and influence.

Not tackling the question, and urgently, will likely worsen the addiction to content flotsam. Which will cost more trust and push the news media into a destructive spiral. On the other side awaits Huxley’s dystopia.