



Journalist Fellowship Paper

# Snow White Mirror Syndrome: Safeguarding editorial values in a reader revenue model

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# Introduction

As winter's frost retreated from Ukraine in mid-April of 2022, a temporary slowing of the Russian invasion allowed journalists on the ground to report on the atrocities of the war in better detail. Dozens of reporters risked their lives to independently document events and shed light on what's happening there. Among them was elDiario.es's team.

The Spanish news outlet offered its readers first-hand information from Ukraine and opinion columns about the invasion. But their coverage produced recurring “editorial friction” between the newspaper and a section of its audience. Part of elDiario.es's community of readers were unhappy the outlet didn't blame NATO for the invasion.

They wanted the outlet that they pay membership fees for – elDiario.es's business model since its foundation in 2012 – to twist its coverage, and some threatened to withdraw their support if it did not.

The editor-in-chief of elDiario.es, Ignacio Escolar, calls this ‘Snow White Mirror Syndrome’: readers who are incapable of processing information that challenges their worldview and only want journalism that backs up their outlook.

Escolar told me he is used to this kind of pressure and not willing to cave to such demands. The media outlet he founded with his colleagues will continue to practise independent journalism – it does not exist to reinforce ideas and preconceptions but to speak the truth, he said.

But as more news outlets turn to reader revenue, what systems are in place to ensure that editorial impartiality is safeguarded from the influence of those who fund it?

After all, these readers are sending constant feedback: indirectly in the form of audience data, and directly in the form of on- and off-network commentary or cancelled memberships. To what extent should that information influence editorial decision-making? How do we face the pressure from readers without watering down the journalistic mission, and without alienating subscribers when they are also a primary source of income? How much audience data should journalists have access to? Do we need new lines drawn to protect editorial independence and impartiality?

This essay aims to contribute to the conversation. It will outline the facts in favour of reader revenue, and consider the values put in the crosshairs by this shift. Then, through interviews with experts and newsroom leaders, it will explore the different approaches taken to mitigate against direct and indirect feedback becoming editorial interference. Finally, we will weigh the opportunity and threat of opinion journalism in a reader revenue model.

# Reader revenue as a silver lining

Journalism has endured hard years: the deterioration of a traditional business model centred on advertising and sales, coupled with declining readership, meant newspaper advertising revenues decreased by [almost half](#) in the 10-year period preceding 2019.<sup>1</sup>

Then came the coup de grâce of COVID-19, dealing a further [contraction of revenue](#) by 25% in 2020.<sup>2</sup> Even in countries with long traditions of safeguarding free and independent journalism, outlets were not safe.<sup>3</sup>

Of newsroom leaders surveyed in the [Journalism, Media, and Technology Trends and Predictions 2022](#) report, 79% said a subscription or membership strategy was their most important revenue priority, ahead of both display and native advertising.<sup>4</sup>

Pushed by the need for new income sources, some media bosses have finally opened the door to innovation. There are now several organisations practising independent journalism – in multiple countries and with diverse content offerings – that prove reader revenue models can deliver reliable results.

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<sup>1</sup> Unesco, “World trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development”, 2021, p. 161. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380618.locale=en>

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center's Journalism Project. 2022. Newspapers Fact Sheet. [online] Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/newspapers/>

<sup>3</sup> Poynter. 2022. More than 100 local newsrooms closed during the coronavirus pandemic - Poynter. [online] Available at:

<https://www.poynter.org/locally/2021/the-coronavirus-has-closed-more-than-100-local-newsrooms-across-america-and-counting/>

<sup>4</sup> Nic Newman, 10 January 2022, “Journalism, Media, and Technology Trends and Predictions 2022,” pag. 6. Available at:

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

It's one of the "more transcendental changes" within the industry, according to Ismael Nafría, who authors a weekly newsletter, [Tendenci@s](https://tendencias.substack.com/), about digital media developments.<sup>5</sup> "There is enough evidence to sustain there is plenty of room for subscription models," he told me.

It's not all good news though: the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2021 found that successful increases in income based on subscriptions and memberships was far from equally distributed throughout the industry. On the contrary, "in most countries a large proportion of digital subscriptions go to just a few big national brands, reinforcing the 'winner-takes-most' dynamics."<sup>6</sup>

Another concern about reader revenue models is that media outlets tend to put their content – either all of it, or their premium journalism – behind paywalls. "That may be pushing journalism towards super-serving richer and more educated audiences and leaving others behind," according to RISJ.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ismael Nafría, "Tendenci@s," <https://tendencias.substack.com/> [Accessed 13 May 2022].

<sup>6</sup> "Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021" p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## Eroding Chinese walls

Before the digital revolution, when advertising was the main source of income for the news, we knew instinctively that Sales and Editorial had to be clearly separated to preserve the impartiality of the news.

A “Chinese Wall” existed between the newsroom and the business side, and media outlets went to lengths to make that separation clear – for example, locating the newsroom and the advertising department on different floors.<sup>8</sup> Journalists knew that if any pressure leaked through that wall, it had to be resisted.

Keeping a clear separation between editorial and advertising is still necessary, but what happens when the money comes straight from the readers? Does building a “wall” make sense when your journalistic mission is to understand and serve your audience’s information needs?

The old “wall ethos” goes some way to [explaining the initial resistance](#) in newsrooms to the audience analytics that came with the move to digital media: journalists were suspicious of receiving information about how readers reacted to their copy because it felt like ceding their editorial independence to an outside force.

To old hacks, this felt particularly true in the early days of digital, when advertising revenue was determined solely by how many people were reached, and the incentive to get more traffic led to clickbait strategies at some outlets. Journalists felt they were not

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<sup>8</sup> Corinna Lauerer, “Advertising and Journalism,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Communication*, by Corinna Lauerer (Oxford University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.775>.



only ceding editorial independence, but now they were being asked to produce high volumes of low quality work to meet higher distribution targets.

With time we've come to understand that analytics are not implicitly a threat to independence; the data can also be used to make a business case for old values like editorial independence and high standards – a profitable USP that readers are willing to pay for.

“Memberships and subscriptions require a different mindset,” Eduardo Suárez writes in [How to build a good reader revenue model](#). “Any newspaper willing to adopt them must focus on its most loyal audience, rethink its organisation, and learn to tell its own story compellingly. It must also rewire its value proposition to the needs of its readers and adapt its digital products to their daily or weekly routines.”<sup>9</sup>

Analytics are now so important that entirely new positions have been created in newsrooms for audience engagement and analysis. The existence of these roles, [some researchers say](#), further symbolises the institutionalisation and normalisation of this approach.<sup>10</sup>

It would be naive, however, not to note that the consolidation of this business model is occurring within the context of increased political polarisation and the decline of freedom of expression in several countries worldwide. Both of these realities add complexity to the development of the model and its implications for how journalism is practised.

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<sup>9</sup> Eduardo Suárez, 20 February 2020, “How to build a successful subscription news business: lessons from Britain and Spain”, p. 11. Available at:

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

<sup>10</sup> Raul Ferrer-Conill and Edson C. Tandoc, “The Audience-Oriented Editor,” *Digital Journalism* 6, no. 4 (April 21, 2018): 436–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2018.1440972>.

For example, while “a majority of the population” wants the media to provide impartial coverage of the news” (and “reflect a range of different views and leave it to them to decide”), there are still a few “in favour of the news media ‘arguing for the views that they think are the best’,” according to surveys carried out by the [Reuters Institute](#).<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, Institute director Rasmus Kleis Nielsen describes a “[trilemma](#)” faced by the news media and the journalists who work for them, who typically want their work to uphold values of:

1. seeking truth and reporting it;
2. having moral clarity; and
3. serving the whole public.<sup>12</sup>

But when reporting in the current political environment – particularly on divisive issues – those values may contradict each other. Nielsen describes three possible combinations adopted by news outlets, each with its own trade-offs.

#### Take a clear and explicit editorial line

These news organisations try to combine truth-seeking with moral clarity. Consider as examples the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mail*: it might be argued that both seek truth, while offering their own versions of moral clarity. This results in coverage that is often divisive, and definitely not for the whole public.

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<sup>11</sup> Newman et al, 2021, “Reuters Institute Digital Report 2021”, p. 39. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021>

<sup>12</sup> “The Journalists’ Trilemma,” *Rasmuskleisnielsen.Net* (blog), November 5, 2020, <https://rasmuskleisnielsen.net/2020/11/05/the-journalists-trilemma/>. [Accessed 2 May 2022]

### Attempt to remain duly impartial

Other news media try to report the news while serving everybody. Consider the BBC or Reuters. Serving everyone often prevents these outlets from exercising moral clarity on issues that divide us, like racism. Seeking truth while trying to serve the whole public can lead to coverage that is deliberately obtuse on the divisive moral issues of our time.

### Opt for jingoistic “journalism”

These outlets pursue moral clarity that serves a very specific public, even when it is at the expense of seeking truth and reporting it. As Nielsen himself notes: “I think news media who give up on the first value, seeking truth and reporting it, lose all claims on what the term journalism means to me”. But it remains an option some “news” outlets opt for.

When a digital news business adopts a reader revenue model, it may be forced – knowingly or unknowingly, through a process of constant trial and improvement – to choose between these value combinations, each of which can have a measurable economic impact.

In the next chapters we will unpack how different outlets deal with indirect pressure (from data) and direct pressure (through feedback).

## Indirect pressure: data

In a report published in 2017, *The New York Times* (NYT) announced that the company was now a “subscription-first business” and addressed the importance of using data to make decisions focused on the audience. The announcement included a vital caveat: “The newsroom should also understand that no metric is perfect. To a significant extent, we will need to rely on a mix of quantitative measures and qualitative judgments when deciding which stories to do and promote. Achieving the right balance is tricky.”<sup>13</sup>

What information about the audience a newsroom gets – and how it is used in editorial decision-making – varies significantly. From “page views” to “time spent” to conversion data: journalists may be exposed to different metrics in real-time or in trend reports. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to analysing audience needs. The solutions working well for one outlet will not necessarily work for others.<sup>14</sup>

We do know, however, that an unchecked stream of information about audiences without providing proper support to journalists (or a clear set of goals and how to achieve them) can create anxiety in newsrooms.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The New York Times, “Journalism That Stands Apart,” *The New York Times*, January 17, 2017, sec. insider, <https://www.nytimes.com/projects/2020-report/>. [Accessed 13 May 2022]

<sup>14</sup> Michael Letner, 30 May 2019, *How media companies use data to sign up digital subscribers (and keep them)*. Available at:

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/how-media-companies-use-data-sign-digital-subscribers-and-keep-them>

<sup>15</sup> Elisabeth Gamperl, [13 September 2021, How to calm your newsroom's metrics anxiety and use analytics to grow](#). Available at:

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

## Understand your reasons

With no perfect recipe – and considering that the ingredients are constantly changing to keep pace with evolving technology and audience consumption trends – reader revenue newsrooms require that journalists understand how the business works. In interviews for this essay, leaders in newsrooms operating at different scales and in diverse socio-political contexts – the *Financial Times* (FT), *El País* de Madrid, elDiario.es, Dennik N and 444.hu – all agreed on this.

“I think it is 100% absolutely fundamental that the newsroom is aware of the business model, even if it doesn’t go beyond any more than awareness,” said René Kaplan, Head of Digital Editorial Development at the *FT* and Assistant Editor. “A news media business becomes financially viable only if there is real collaboration across all departments. Digital business pay-for-content models are, by definition, integrated models where format, product, product experience and topics and coverage and data and marketing and sales are all inextricably linked.”

The *FT* reached 1 million digital subscribers in March 2022.<sup>16</sup> Kaplan acknowledged that being a business publication – where there is an extended literacy and culture around business and money-making – may have facilitated how the newsroom discussed the issue and implemented the strategy early on.

“That said, there were cultural limits,” she said. “Part of what makes a successful cooperation between a newsroom and its business model, more broadly, is one that knows and deeply respects and speaks newsroom and newsroom culture above all else.”

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<sup>16</sup> “FT – About Us”, [https://aboutus.ft.com/press\\_release/one-million-digital-subscribers](https://aboutus.ft.com/press_release/one-million-digital-subscribers), [Accessed 9 May 2022]

The *FT* has integrated data on how readers consume the news they produce into the newsroom and its workflow. The goal is to let the data help them make informed decisions about editorial but “never lead the journalist or the commissioning or the writing or the reporting”, she said.

FT journalists know, for example, that a high proportion of their audience like “quality” in-depth articles, respond to and share visuals, and subscribe to many newsletters – and that this consumption combination is a good predictor of whether a subscriber will stay with the brand. “Whether consciously or unconsciously [this information leads to] informed decisions like: ‘Oh, maybe there is an opportunity in this piece to integrate a chart’ [...] or ‘maybe there is an opportunity to promote the related newsletter more prominently in the story I’m commissioning’,” said Kaplan.

“We, the team trying to drive this transformation, don’t dictate which of those decisions the editor makes. Those are his [or her] decisions. We can deliver the full toolkit of possible things to do, but it is up to them. That is where the line is drawn”, she said.

As Financial Times Group CEO, John Ridding, said in an interview in 2018: “We’re very data-driven, but we’ve always been very clear that we are fundamentally editorially driven. We will never second-guess our editors, but the data is very useful for them to understand what’s working.”<sup>17</sup> This, Kaplan said, remains true today.

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<sup>17</sup> Recode Staff, “Full Transcript: Financial Times CEO John Ridding on Recode Media,” Vox, April 10, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/4/10/17219738/financial-times-ceo-john-ridding-recode-media-transcript>. [Accessed 10 May 2022]

### Data should direct, not dictate

*El País* de Madrid surpassed 200,000 subscribers in April this year, only two years after its new reader revenue model was launched.<sup>18</sup> This milestone occurs with the Spanish news team still in the process of internal adaptation to a new model, which has undergone successive modifications since it became operational. Mari Luz Peinado is a digital strategist at *El País* and, by her definition, she is in charge of “evangelising” about the model to the newsroom, explaining how to use the data, and giving an editorial perspective on the decisions made by other company departments.

Like Kaplan, Peinado believes it’s essential for the newsroom to understand how the model works without becoming hung up on it. “You have to understand it because it is a different strategy than trying to reach [as many people as possible] or trying to have many parachuters who arrive through Facebook,” she said. Understanding the offering, she said, will allow them to “give readers the best service”.

“Everything is about putting the reader at the centre and finding out if we manage to deliver the news to them,” Peinado said. This perspective informs adaptation of how the news is delivered, but not what it contains.

At *El País* metrics showed the editorial leadership that their culture critics – a team whose work they are proud of – didn’t do well on the digital front page. *El País* decided to search for different strategies to increase the readership of those pieces. Instead of killing content that the outlet considered valuable and unique, it sought ways to

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<sup>18</sup> El País, “EL PAÍS supera en solo dos años los 200.000 suscriptores,” El País, May 1, 2022, <https://elpais.com/comunicacion/el-pais-que-hacemos/2022-05-01/el-pais-supera-los-200000-suscriptores.html>. [Accessed 10 May 2022]

improve its reach. Now the newspaper distributes the cultural content through a newsletter and achieves better readership levels.

“The journalistic and editorial standard is [a given] because otherwise, you lose the essence of who you are,” said Peinado. “That is even more important in a subscription model, where you need to be clear about who you are and what you want to transmit.”

### Use data to deploy resources accurately

Reducing the number of articles produced every day is a goal recently pursued by media outlets, such as *El País*, *elDiario.es*, FT, *Denník N*, and [many more](#).<sup>19</sup> Metrics can help newsrooms to inform that process.

Take *El País*' Ukraine war coverage for example: instead of writing a constant stream of smaller articles, the newsroom has found readers are more likely to interact with an aggregated live feed. “Writing 30 articles about the war makes no sense in an online world; nobody will read them,” she explained. “We cannot be certain that the reader will read the next article and, what is worse, that he read the previous one. [...] Data from the audience helps us learn if a topic that we think is relevant, is reaching the readers or not.” The same was true of their COVID-19 coverage: a daily article about COVID-19 stats was incorporated into a live feed and a daily tweet based on audience data. The information was still recorded and shared – only more efficiently in line with readers' needs.

Tomas Bella is one of the founders of *Denník N*, a digital-born Slovakian news outlet that launched in 2014 and has surpassed 70,000 subscribers. Data influences editorial

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<sup>19</sup> Mehraj D. Lone, 19 April 2022, “Making the cut: how newsrooms fare when they publish less”. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/making-cut-how-newsrooms-fare-when-they-publish-less>.



decisions at Denník N when there is an “unexpected success”, he said. Once, they published an interview with a relationship therapist about improving marriage; it was a great success. “So we [realised] it was an extremely interesting topic that we were not covering before,” Bella said. They’ve subsequently done several stories on this topic, and all have performed well.

### Careful data can incentivize good journalism

At Denník N, journalists whose articles produce the most conversions receive a bonus. Does that risk journalists deciding not to cover an important topic because it won’t sell? “I have never heard anyone suggest anything like this,” Bella told me, adding it would be a “taboo”.

“We will never say we will stop covering this because it is not selling; if we think it is important, we will still cover and write about it,” he said. “If people are telling us that they are not interested in something, we will think if we should try to write it differently or approach it from a different angle. If we publish a reportage about a topic we think is important, but not many people are reading it, we will try doing an interview next time, or something more interactive.”

More often than not, Bella said, readers provide good incentives to newsrooms because they tend to reward good journalism. Four of five the “best-selling” articles, according to a list provided by Bella, are investigative pieces. The fifth was analytical reportage.

All of the interviewees highlighted that readers reward the best reporting. “But of course, in reader revenue you still have [to beware of] risks,” said Bella.

## Direct pressure: comment and cancellations

Spanish newspaper elDiario.es has had a membership model since it started in 2012 and its members – over 70,000 of them – account for around 50% of their income. It makes them “much more vulnerable” to those readers who try to “punish” the media outlet”, said editor-in-chief and co-founder Escolar.

“We see this in the reader or community member who looks to the newspaper for a mirror that tells him how handsome he is, how smart he is, how good his people are... and how bad the others are. That you endorse him not in the truth, but in his prejudices, in his ideology, in his values, in his biases.”

It is what Escolar described earlier as ‘Snow White Mirror Syndrome’. “We rebel against that,” he said. “We make a show of our rebellion and try to educate our community members that it is our job to contradict them many times.”

### Know your reasoning, be open to dialogue

When readers decide to stop paying for their membership, elDiario.es emails them thanking them for their support in the past and telling them that they can email the editor-in-chief with a complaint if their decision is due to editorial reasons.

Escolar receives at least three and as many as 10 emails a day with “editorial cancellations”. He answers 95% of them. Although he convinces most readers not to drop their membership, Escolar does not respond for economic reasons: he knows that answering one by one allows him to answer a “thousand by thousand” down the line.

The most recent example was uproar over their Ukraine coverage. “There’s a part of the Left that finds it much easier to think that NATO is always the bad guy,” he said. The editor-in-chief of elDiario.es responded to almost all community members who decided to unsubscribe because of the war coverage.

“You have to listen to them, you have to understand what their arguments are. What you can't do is pretend that this problem doesn't exist; you can't ignore that you have a point of friction with your community of readers,” he said. “It helps us improve: it helps us improve both how we explain what we are doing. And if we are doing something wrong, [it helps us] correct it.”

Esther Alonso, marketing and development director at elDiario.es, believes that the “pedagogy” that Escolar has developed with the community is “part of the deepest relationship” established in a membership model. Successful models are usually relational and not just transactional. “If we don't believe in membership, membership won't work. And to believe in membership is to be involved – answer and have a dialogue. Have an active listening and an openness to transparency, because these are the rules of the membership game and if you don't comply with them, it won't work.”

In the case of Ukraine protests, in addition to sending emails, Escolar also wrote a column for his readers addressing accusations they were “being paid by NATO to report”.<sup>20</sup> In the column, he explained that “few worse suspicions can be made of a journalist than being sold” and stressed that his newsroom is paid by its readers and keeps working “with the usual honesty”.

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<sup>20</sup> Ignacio Escolar, “Gernika, 1937,” ElDiario.es, April 6, 2022, [https://www.eldiario.es/escolar/gernika-1937\\_132\\_8892809.html](https://www.eldiario.es/escolar/gernika-1937_132_8892809.html). [Accessed 9 May 2022]

Denník N is also attentive to reader complaints, whether in the form of Facebook posts or responses from their editor-in-chief. “We [rely solely] on reader revenue, so it is very common that the editor-in-chief will write many emails to people who complain about an editorial decision,” said Bella.

Asked if this approach works, he answered that it usually does. Readers like to receive a reply from the editor-in-chief explaining a decision, and they’re often surprised somebody has responded to them. What’s important, Bella said, is not that they resubscribe but that they see Denník N is sincerely engaged: “We have our reasons, and we disagree, but at least we are considering it”, he said.

### Ideological impartiality as a long-term strategy

In July 2020, Denník N broke news that the Prime Minister, the head of Parliament and the minister of Education had plagiarised their graduation theses. According to Bella, many readers complained that they were “helping the opposition”, largely seen as corrupted by Denník N’s audience.<sup>21</sup>

Escolar recalls a similar example when elDiario.es published a series of articles about politicians lying about their curriculum and fraudulent Master's degrees. Within a matter of months, the coverage led to the resignation of a minister from the progressive party and the conservative president of the Madrid region.

“When our work led to the resignation of Cifuentes [the conservative president of Madrid], we got 10,000 new subscribers. When we showed that a Socialist government minister had done the same fraudulent university degree, we got 25 dropouts”, he

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<sup>21</sup> Matúš Kostolný, “Prečo píšeme o podvodoch s diplomovkami,” Denník N, July 17, 2020, <https://dennikn.sk/1971538/preco-piseme-o-podvodoch-s-diplomovkami/>. [Accessed 10 May 2022]

recalls. “Losing 25 members is not a problem in a very large community, but it clearly shows that you can have much more reward by reporting in favour of the ideological positions of your readers rather than against them.”

Escolar believes that not caving pays off in the long term. “If we are to have credibility, it will be because we have published both stories, and not because we have silenced one thinking, ‘This will cause us a problem with our community’.”

At 444.hu, the editorial line is usually that they do not explain their decisions – the news should explain itself. But in December 2021, they made an exception to clarify why they had published a story about how the opposition parties were in disarray just a couple of months before the election.

The article included information about a poll commissioned by the opposition that showed them far behind the president and favourite for reelection, Víctor Orban.<sup>22</sup>

“After we published it, there was a huge uproar from both opposition parties/politicians and readers/subscribers,” said Peter Erdelyi, senior editor and business development director at 444.hu. “They said: ‘it’s fake’, ‘we are working for the government’, and ‘it’s irresponsible to publish such results even if they were true’.”

Two days later, 444.hu published a column in which it explained the relevance of their reporting.<sup>23</sup> “I don’t know if it changed any minds – I was in the camp of those who

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<sup>22</sup> Péter Magyar, “Hetek óta vitatkoznak a kampány színein, miközben a Fidesz egyre csak erősödik,” 444, December 16, 2021, [Accessed 10 May 2022]  
<https://444.hu/2021/12/16/hetek-ota-vitatkoznak-a-kampany-szinein-mikozben-a-fidesz-egyre-csak-ero-sodik>.

<sup>23</sup> Péter Magyar, “Micsoda kutatásról van szó?,” 444, December 18, 2021,  
<https://444.hu/2021/12/18/micsoda-kutatasrol-van-szo>. [Accessed 10 May 2022]

thought that we didn't have to explain ourselves – but I am sure it didn't hurt," said Erdelyi. "Don't get me wrong: no one likes to lose supporters. But at the end of the day, in this case, it was pretty clear: it was newsworthy, reliable, and there wasn't even a discussion. This is what I'm telling myself, and maybe it's a lie, but I think that most of our readers want the uncomfortable truth," he said.

Kaplan, from *FT*, said that they take their readers' opinions into account, but in context. During the Brexit referendum and its aftermath, *FT* was accused by subscribers of being biased against Brexit. Others complained about their bias in favour of the UK leaving the European Union, and some complimented the impartial coverage of such a divisive topic. "If there are huge majorities of readers or commentators who felt that we were biased or partial, we might then have a real conversation about it. But the divisive issues are the ones where you most need to take into account comments within context and user data: if they are sharing a lot of content, and reading a lot, then they are taking a lot of value and our mission is accomplished."

#### Prepare for backlash through excellence

Pressure from readers can be diluted by the size of the subscription base and the combination of other revenue streams. But there is always "a risk in making a medium with a bias around its community," according to Escolar. He said *elDiario.es* values pressure from readers, even if it demands extra effort from him and the newsroom. It is "infinitely less" risk, he said, than the one they faced in the previous business model, when the pressure came from advertisers. "It's much better for readers to push than advertisers to push."

This may not always be true: not for smaller outlets, for example, and not in the case of real error or spurious scandal. In Spain, the deputy editor of digital outlet [La Marea](#), Antonio Maestre, [resigned](#) to stem a wave of subscription cancellations in protest of his association with a TV talk show that came into disrepute.

Maestre had appeared as a regular pundit on the talk show where the editor of OK Diario, a right-wing outlet, promoted a “scoop” about former vice president Pablo Iglesias. The scoop was later revealed to be based on false information leaked by a group of corrupt police officers, and Iglesias used his own popular podcast to agitate for public protests against media outlets. Maestre’s association with the scandal – by virtue only as a regular guest on the TV talk show – had a ripple effect on the outlet.

Journalists usually know which topics will generate a backlash from their audience. “When faced with these scenarios, exercise journalistic caution,” Escobar said. “Be very careful in applying good journalistic principles: there can be no technical faults.”

It’s also worth noting that there will always be those who are willing to pay for coverage that plays into their ‘Snow White Mirror Syndrome’. During a Global Journalism Seminar organised by RISJ, Jakub Parusinski, the CFO of the Kyiv Independent and co-founder of The Fix, was asked about this.<sup>24</sup> “[There is] a risk that there’s going to be media that are just going to focus on [...] pushing various political messages, activist messages as the way to fundraise. And, you know, can you do that a little bit without going overboard? Probably. Are there big risks about going too far with it? Definitely.”

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<sup>24</sup> “How the News Media Is Surviving in Ukraine,” Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/calendar/how-news-media-surviving-ukraine>. [Accessed 14 May 2022]

# The temptation of opinion pieces

444.hu's Erdelyi has identified a temptation that can arise when independent outlets look at what kind of content converts readers to members easily and cheaply. In an essay on the topic, he wrote: "Opinion pieces are known to drive conversions relatively well, while the resource cost associated with their production is relatively low. From a financial perspective, newsrooms are incentivised to produce more opinion journalism and more opinionated journalism."<sup>25</sup>

In an interview for this essay, he said media outlets operating a membership model have to be "very careful" not to cave to the "seduction" of opinion – particularly in countries like Hungary, where democracy has deteriorated and independent media is struggling.

"Great opinion pieces are not easy, but they are easier than a three-month investigative piece. Let's say we have a columnist, people like his style, he has strong opinions and brings a lot of revenue. So, when we hire the next person for the newsroom, why don't we go for somebody like him? I think that is a very dangerous path, and I am aware of the danger, but I don't have a solution as to how to deal with it. We are trying to be very conscious about our decisions and why we make them."

Bella agrees with Erdelyi: "In general, I think it is easier to have reader revenue if you have strong opinions, but we don't think it is a good thing."

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<sup>25</sup> Peter Erdelyi, 12 July 2021, *How to get readers in Central and Eastern Europe and the Global South to pay for public service journalism*, p. 31. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/how-get-readers-central-and-eastern-europe-and-global-south-pay-public-service-journalism>



“We are cautious not to go step by step towards the extremes because the extremes would attract more people, but in a bad sense. It is a risk that is there, and we are trying to be very careful about it. You don’t have to follow your readers when they push you to an extreme. This is the risk the media must actively think about.”

Impartial reporting, based on verified facts, is particularly necessary in places where disinformation is a political weapon and the deterioration of democratic institutions is snowballing. Instead of joining the off-key chorus of opinions that add nothing but noise to the public conversation, journalism should maintain a unique role of reporting factual information.

To quote [David Cox](#): “[Impartiality] is to be distinguished from balance (the allocation of equal space to opposing views) and objectivity (by which journalists usually mean an effort to exclude subjective judgement). Impartiality involves no more than the attempt to regard different ideas, opinions, interests or individuals with detachment.”<sup>26</sup>

Professor and journalist Richard Sambrook proposes applying three principles to “help rescue the core of what impartiality [...] delivered in the past”:

- Evidence. “We are awash with opinion and swamped with information. Yet without facts and the evidence to support them, opinion is worthless.”
- Diversity of opinion, which is “at the heart of impartiality” because it “provides oxygen to rational debate”.

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<sup>26</sup> David Cox, “Impartiality Imperilled,” Prospect Magazine, September 30, 2007, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/impartialityimperilled>. [Accessed 16 May 2022]

- Transparency. Because, in a context of increasing polarisation and mistrust, delivering the news in a transparently impartial manner can be a means to regain public trust.

In practice, this looks like maintaining a clear separation between opinion and factual output. Media outlets can and will have clear opinions about the main topics of the day, but that shouldn't leak into the reporting.

The editor-in-chief of elDiario.es regularly tells readers who complain about an opinion piece or a columnist: “This is a free news outlet, where people express their opinions freely. Even I, the editor-in-chief, disagree with some of those opinions. Nobody can agree with all the opinion pieces we publish, because in many cases they contradict each other. Readers need to understand that in a free media they will read pieces that may make them uncomfortable.”

# Conclusion

In reader revenue models, some media outlets have found a way out of the woods of the digital era. To follow that path, news organisations must be open to innovating their structures and working methods.

During this process of constant transformation, we must also discern which of our journalistic practices are just habits and which are core values necessary to maintain. A “Chinese Wall” is not the prescribed remedy when those paying for journalistic work are the readers themselves.

It is, however, worth safeguarding two core values of impartiality and independence from the pressures and temptations of the new model.

Throughout this paper, examples were given of media outlets that have defended their editorial independence and unbiased coverage of information from their readers’ explicit and implicit pressures.

All of the pressures they described are exerted at a time when politicians and other powerful actors seem to be playing by a set of rules that disregard facts and cast journalists as enemies. The rules are not new, but their amplification online is.

Journalists may feel, in this context, that their efforts are in vain and their work doesn't have the impact it should. They may feel that the public no longer cares about the wrong-doings they are reporting – that liars are dominating the discussion. This too may fuel a temptation to increase the volume of opinions. This is precisely the time to

revisit the rules of engagement with those political, economic and social actors who try to erode trust. Our goal should be to continuously improve coverage without falling into the trap of their game, which we cannot win.

Journalists: hold your ground, even when the audience pushes back. Because, as Erdelyi puts it, “If you are telling the truth about anything, you are carrying out a radical act.”

Journalists are used to dealing with pressures: they come from politicians, advertisers or other powerful actors, and now they come from subscribers. The issue is not in the existence of the pressure, but in caving to it.

Editors: remember that upholding these values can be an economic asset in the long term. And remember that the direct and indirect feedback you receive from readers is not solely a pressure, but can also be a key advantage in making informed editorial decisions.

When you can point to sound reasoning or relevant values in support of information that your audience would have you censure, stand by your instincts and experiment with delivery.

Creating dialogue with your audience is a key ingredient to creating the sense of community subscribers crave. But not every interaction should be taken at face value: when there are complaints about coverage, it is a good journalistic practice to check if mistakes were made and correct them. But when complaints are founded in nothing more than objections to impartiality, newsrooms should not relent. Instead, be ready to walk your reader through your reasoning. It won't calm every subscriber's anger, but the exercise will improve the quality of your newsroom.

The goal is to confront your readers when needed without alienating them. To this end, it is helpful to have a strong charter of principles that you can refer readers back to. This is part of transparency measures that Sambrook described.

Resisting Snow White Mirror Syndrome demands extra effort, but it's worth it.