GUIDE TO AUDIENCE REVENUE AND ENGAGEMENT

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The Tow Center for Digital Journalism provides journalists with the skills and knowledge to lead the future of digital journalism and serves as a research and development center for the profession as a whole. Operating as an institute within Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, the Center explores how the development of technology is changing journalism, its practice, and its consumption—particularly as consumers of news seek ways to judge the reliability, standards, and credibility of information. By commissioning research in these emerging areas, and developing teaching methods and courses, the Center seeks to convene debate around the most pressing issues facing digital journalism today, and help individual journalists, news organizations, and areas of relevant media policymaking with their thinking and practice. For more information, visit www.towcenter.org.

The Platforms and Publishers project at the Tow Center is a multi-year project researching the relationship between journalism and social platforms in order to promote mutual understanding and best practices for conducting journalism on the social web. The Platforms and Publishers project is underwritten by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Foundation to Promote Open Society, and The Abrams Foundation, Inc.

The Membership Puzzle Project

The Membership Puzzle Project is founded by New York University professor Jay Rosen's Studio 20 program and Dutch news organization De Correspondent. It is jointly funded by the the Knight Foundation and the Democracy Fund. The project is delving into research on ways that organizations are diversifying their revenue with a particular focus on optimizing news organizations for trust. At the heart of the Membership Puzzle is the social contract between the organization, including journalists, and its supporters. For more information, visit www.membershippuzzle.org.

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John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

The Knight Foundation is a national foundation with strong local roots that invests in journalism, in the arts, and in the success of cities where brothers John S. and James L. Knight once published newspapers. Its goal is to foster informed and engaged communities, which the Foundation believes are essential for a healthy democracy. For more, visit www.knightfoundation.org.

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About the Authors

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Executive Summary

This report is intended to aid staff from news organizations and media entrepreneurs who wish to grow their revenue by deepening interactions with their audiences. It's based on hundreds of conversations and interviews with journalists, managers, and members themselves, including newsroom fieldwork and observation, as well as focus groups with supporters of news sites. We use these findings to share strategic and tactical considerations for building audience revenue programs. We also share detailed examples of ways that news organizations around the world are experimenting with new approaches to raising funds and supporting myriad forms of audience participation.

We differentiate between three models of audience revenue generation:

- A **donation** model encourages audiences to give their time or money to an institution in support of a common cause or common values. Donation conveys a charitable relationship.
- A **subscription** model requires audiences to pay money to get access to a product or service. Subscription conveys a transactional relationship.
- A **membership** model invites audiences to give their time, money, connections, professional expertise, distribution to their networks, and/or ideas to support a cause they believe in. Membership in its "thick" version represents two-way knowledge exchange between journalists and members. You might think of membership as a more committed relationship that is robust and active.

Key findings

1. Rarely are news organizations 100 percent funded by direct audience revenue alone. Digitally native publications are relying on a mix of revenue approaches—including advertising, corporate underwriting, foundation funding, article syndication, events, affiliate programs, merchandise, and book sales—in addition to or instead of direct revenue from audiences.
2. For publications with highly differentiated journalism and a strong audience base in their coverage areas, a product-based subscription offering can be appealing. If readers, listeners, and/or viewers see a site's news and analysis as providing enough unique value, subscription might be a viable revenue strategy. A subscription strategy can also work well for

publications that have strong institutional audiences in specific industries and when subscribers' employers can pay the cost of work-relevant media.

3. One of the major challenges in creating a sustainable membership program is finding participation activities that are both of interest to members and valuable to the publication. A good way to start identifying potential projects is to ask current and prospective members how they want to participate and what they want to learn.

4. News membership isn't about premiums, tote bags, mugs, or local business discounts. Readers become members or donors when they want to be part of the larger cause that the news organization represents or when they think it represents something unique in the world. To put it another way, no one ever became a member of a journalism site offering news that feels like a commodity.

5. In crafting an audience revenue strategy, it's imperative that a publication can tell compelling, accurate stories about its mission; the value it provides in the world; and the member community it wants to foster. These "who we are" stories are strongest when they reflect what audience members say they value and need from the organization.

6. Some publications' membership programs are "membership" in name only and operate much more like subscription strategies, with little or no audience engagement. Similarly, some publications' donation strategies employ many of the best practices of audience engagement, even though they don't run a "membership" program per se. The important distinction is in recognizing that the level of editorial engagement a publication chooses to have with its audience members can impact organizational sustainability.

7. If you choose to build an audience revenue program, think about your conversion strategy as one of progressive stages in a funnel: research, expose and attract, engage and deepen, convert, and sustain. Research entails deeply understanding your audience's needs, preferences, and daily habits. Attracting potential supporters requires exposing your content to a wide audience. Bring as many audience members as you can into the top of your funnel by making smart use of social media and in-person events.

8. Engage your audience and deepen the relationship with them through the practice of your journalism, face-to-face interactions, and the design of your digital products. Email newsletters are one of the best digital ways to build a loyal and engaged audience whom you can turn to for support. When it comes time to convert your audience members into paying supporters, make good use of the data you have to target your appeals, don't be afraid to ask for support often, and be sure to thank your supporters in meaningful ways.

9. Becoming an audience-driven—and especially member-driven—newsroom requires a huge culture change for reporters and editors that demands significant leadership. The two-way engagement between publication and audience required to sustain a successful membership strategy can initially feel uncomfortable for those who expect a clear boundary between newsroom staff and audience members. But culture change is possible.

Glossary

Audience engagement: A set of audience-focused tasks that include identifying and interacting with people who use your site, as well as prospective audiences. Functions include online and offline event hosting, comment moderation, social media management (both on native platforms which don't link to your site and networked platforms like Twitter that refer visitors directly), search engine marketing, and more. Newsrooms are increasingly asking editorial staff to engage with audiences to improve coverage reach, spark story ideas, and supply user-generated content.

Conversion funnel: The series of experiences that are intended to progressively deepen your visitors' interactions from occasional to regular engagement with your site's work (as indicated by becoming a newsletter subscriber, for example) to a "converted" donor, subscriber, or member. As there are more people at the "occasional visitor" end than the more engaged end, this is called a "funnel."

Churn rate: The percent of subscribers, members, or donors who fail to renew (usually calculated on an annual basis) and who must be replaced in order to maintain the same amount of revenue.

Digitally native: A reference term for a news site that was founded as an online-only or online-first news publication without a print product at launch.

Donation: A charitable relationship in which donors give their time or money to an institution in support of a common cause or values.

Human-centered design framework: An approach to design that includes three key elements for product development: desirability (asking *what do people want?*), feasibility (*can we make what they want?*), and viability (*can we actually be successful in making what they want?*). See also "user experience research."

Membership: A more committed relationship in which members give their time, money, connections, professional expertise, and/or ideas to support a cause they believe in. Membership in its "thick" version represents two-way knowledge exchange between journalists and members to benefit the operation and its journalism.

Membership-concerned staff: Professionals who focus some or all of their job tasks around talking with and working with members and other supporters. These can include people with a range of different job

functions, including copywriters, community managers, web developers, fundraisers, project and program managers, designers, and user researchers.

Meter: A segmentation and targeting strategy that involves limiting the number of articles a visitor can access on a publisher's site during a specified period of time, usually one month. After the visitor hits the meter limit, they may be blocked from viewing more coverage on their device and served a call to action such as a subscription request.

Paywall: Restrictions on digital coverage based on payment. Metered paywalls allow visitors to sites like *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* to access only a certain number of articles per month. Stricter paywalls grant little or no access until someone is a paying subscriber of sites like The Information.

Subscription: A transactional relationship in which subscribers pay money and get access to a news product.

User experience research: Interviews, surveys, usability testing, observation, co-design techniques, and other methods to collect information about audience members' behaviors, needs, and product preferences. Results can be highly useful when combined with analytics data.

Introduction

As we publish this report in February 2018, Facebook is once again changing its news feed algorithm, this time to de-prioritize publishers' content[1] and to emphasize "meaningful interactions"[2] with friends and family. This is perhaps no surprise given the recent history of platform-driven changes in news distribution.[3] Still, each one contributes to deep transformations in the business of news: the rise of behemoth social media platforms that dominate audience attention and shape some of publishers' fates;[4] the destruction of a commercial model for supporting the production and dissemination of news;[5] and the increasing prominence of one-to-one, digitally mediated relationships for sharing information. To some in the news industry, this foretells a catastrophe.[6][7] But we see reason for hope.

We've met staff from dozens of news organizations who are pursuing audience-oriented business models. These arrangements support a different vision for the relationship between journalists and the audiences they serve. We're enthusiastic that publishers around the world are rethinking their approaches, and taking the massive economic and technical changes rocking the news business as a prompt to act differently. We hope this report gives those who are interested in charting new paths a way to think about how editorial practices and revenue streams can support each other. The cornerstone of next-generation, sustainable business models for news, we believe, will be direct audience revenue supported by high levels of reader engagement.

Audience revenue and engagement programs that are sustainable and effective feature a combination of powerful journalism, well-served audiences, and revenue generation. These programs take a number of forms, including donations, subscriptions, and membership, each involving different levels of investment from staff and audience members. They each offer distinct but related approaches to the social contract between news organizations and readers: what each party gives and what they receive in return.

Converting audience members into financial supporters can help news organizations diversify their revenue and become less reliant on advertising or foundation funding. And in the most engaged model of audience revenue generation—membership—audiences can even participate in the organization's operations and journalism as technical proofreaders, volunteer producers, video editors, and more.

Though this report's strategies for audience revenue and engagement apply to different types of business models, we adopt a particular focus on membership. Membership as we describe it goes well beyond asking audiences for money, and involves forms of participation beneficial to a news organization's bottom line and the quality of its coverage. We see a spectrum of member engagement ranging from light-touch, "thin" membership (such as access to members-only forums and newsletters) to high-touch, "thick" membership (including members offering their expertise as sources, technical proofreaders, and fact-checkers).[8] You can explore the range of sites we've studied in the Membership Puzzle Project's "membership programs in news" database at https://membershippuzzle.org/tools/database. As you look across the publications included, you'll see that regardless of their coverage, size, and location(s), all sites with successful membership programs have designed them to elicit strong identity and affiliation experiences with members.

Whether your organization hosts membership or not, this guide will help you design a strong audience revenue program. Though we differentiate between types of audience revenue models, note that donation, subscription, and membership are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and many news organizations are mixing elements of each. We're enthusiastic about seeing members of news sites demonstrate that they value publications by supporting their missions financially and, increasingly, by participating in the journalism itself.

This report includes lists of considerations for your own work as you conduct audience listening, meet supporters in person, design campaign elements, and work to deepen audience engagement. It concludes with ideas for supporting culture change within legacy institutions that are shifting their audience interactions and stories. Throughout the report, you'll read examples of how creative news organizations have worked through resource constraints to develop streams of revenue that reflect what their audiences need.

We seek to highlight what has worked for some publishers, without suggesting that a single playbook works for all. As you read the examples in this report, it's imperative to factor in your organization's strategic goals and target audiences when thinking about which revenue model and related

strategies will provide the best potential returns. "Returns" can mean more than money. At its most robust, membership as a revenue model boosts trust and participation with the audiences you serve. This encourages knowledge sharing in ways that behoove journalists, members, and other audience members, who can benefit from coverage that may not have been published without journalist/member collaboration.

As we expand our collective understanding of sustainability and trust in news, we hope you'll provide your own ideas and experiences to an ongoing body of knowledge through the Tow Center and the Membership Puzzle Project.[9]

Note on Methodology

This report draws on in-person and remote interviews with publishers, newsroom staff, and membership directors at the following news organizations: Current, ProPublica, VTDigger, Berkeleyside, MinnPost, Voice of San Diego, Slate, Radiotopia, the Boston Institute for Nonprofit Journalism, Discourse Media, Stratechery, the News Revenue Hub, Chalkbeat, The Intercept, The Ferret, Honolulu Civil Beat, Greater Public, Inside Story, WhereBy.Us, Krautreporter, Maximum Fun, and NPR.

These "digitally native" nonprofit and for-profit news organizations were selected for their leadership and experimentation in the audience revenue space. They represent a mix of newsroom and audience sizes, coverage areas, business strategies, and geographies. We designed a series of semi-structured questions to guide conversation with interviewees (downloadable at https://membershippuzzle.org/articles-overview/2017/4/4/hack-our-user-research-material).[10] This ensured that we approached interviewees with similar questions, which has delivered a solid body of data about the strengths and challenges around various audience revenue models. Some of the participants were interviewed one on one; others participated in group interviews, more akin to focus groups. You'll find examples from these interviews throughout the report.

The Membership Puzzle Project has also conducted qualitative interviews with dozens of members of news sites around the world and we included some of its considerations throughout this report. This research is not intended to replace conversations with your own prospective, current, and former audience members, who can tell you more about their own information needs and willingness to donate.

The structure of the strategic planning portion of the report is based on a recommendation document prepared for the Institute for Nonprofit News (INN) on behalf of a member organization in 2016. The opinions and experiences of staff at publications involved in the 2016 INN Membership Working Group also helped shape this framework.

You will see sets of **Considerations** for publishers throughout the report. These are specifically intended for sites that are just getting started designing (or are overhauling) their audience engagement and reader revenue programs. You can think of these as thought starters for people pursuing this work for the first time.

What Is Audience Revenue?

Exploring the potential of various forms of audience support and participation.

The larger context for audience revenue

News publishers of all types are facing two stark realities that are pushing them toward building streams of direct audience revenue. First, publisher revenues from digital advertising are collapsing.[11] Given the massive availability of digital content—both journalism and entertainment—even publishers with large audiences are finding it difficult to reap meaningful revenue from digital advertising.[12] Helping fuel this downward trend is the rising popularity of ad blockers,[13] which take a bite out of whatever small digital media revenue stream publishers are able to command.[14]

A second factor pushing publications toward direct audience revenue is the ever-increasing dominance of Google and Facebook in both digital advertising revenue share[15] and audience attention.[16] A majority of U.S. adults now get at least some of their digital news from social media.[17] The consumption data generated by those visitors is used by platforms to sell finely targeted advertising much more effectively than publishers can. This change in digital behavior and digital targeting means that for many publishers, control over their coverage, monetization through advertising, and a direct relationship with audiences are increasingly slipping away,[18] if they ever existed. A handful of premium publishers are finding success with branded content and other forms of native advertising, but those efforts are labor intensive and not scalable.[19]

In this context, building direct audience revenue programs (whether donation, subscription, or members) is looking increasingly attractive to many digital news publishers as a way to both cultivate loyalty and bring in dollars. As Erin Millar, editor in chief and CEO of the independent news site Discourse in Vancouver, said: "We see a huge potential in innovating on membership at this particular moment in the industry's decline in Canada, because we know the future of the news business is in audience-centered strategies (whether membership, subscription, or otherwise) and we see an opportunity to get out ahead of our competitors."

What is audience revenue?

In developing and undertaking an audience revenue and engagement strategy, it's important to recognize the differences between three related audience revenue terms: donation, subscription, and membership. Though the differences may be non-obvious as all involve user payment to an organization, they carry different give/get bargains between publishers and their supporters. These terms are often used interchangeably. In offering the following distinctions, we hope to encourage consistency in the way the news industry refers to each moving forward:

- We define **donors** as people who give their time or money to an institution in support of a common cause or values. Donation conveys a charitable relationship.
- **Subscribers** pay money and get access to a product. Subscription is primarily transactional.
- **Members** give their time, money, connections, professional expertise, or ideas to support a cause they believe in. Membership in its "thick" version represents two-way knowledge exchange between journalists and members. You might think of membership as a more committed relationship that is robust and active.

These categories aren't mutually exclusive, but they are different, as we'll explore. It's also important to understand the ways these terms can be conflated.

From subscription and donation to membership: Increasing engagement

A basic distinction between donation and subscription as forms of audience revenue involves access to the core news product. Sites that maintain subscriptions often restrict most or all of their coverage unless a visitor pays a monthly, annual, or recurring price. Sites with donation and membership strategies such as The Texas Tribune often keep access open to anyone who wants to access their journalism. They rely on the willingness of a subset of news consumers to contribute money to support the publication's operations.

Choosing whether and how to restrict access to news is a strategic choice that should reflect the news site's long-term mission and values. (Gating access should not be undertaken lightly. As Jay Rosen told Poynter, one of the Membership Puzzle Project's "biggest discoveries is that members don't want a gate around the journalism they're supporting."[20]) We see membership as a related but different strategic choice—to what extent to bring audience members into an ongoing, engaged relationship with the publication—and one that is equally consequential.

Today supporting news can involve knowledge exchange that goes well beyond the traditional approach of publications talking *at* readers to talking *with* them. This represents a paradigm shift from involving audiences only post-publication to tapping audience members' ideas earlier in the production cycle to benefit publishers' coverage, sites, and apps.[i] Increasing the level of audience engagement and participation—from an arms-length relationship to an ongoing, two-way knowledge exchange between audience and publication—is what differentiates a membership revenue strategy from a pure donation or subscription revenue strategy. (We detail a host of engagement strategies in the second section of this report.)

That said, individual supporters have preferences for how much they want to hear from and be heard by the organizations they support, and there are high variations in member, donor, and subscriber motivations. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to designing a detailed audience revenue program that reflects what supporters need, and high-engagement revenue strategies may not work for every publication.

The importance of revenue diversification

In our research it's been very rare to see a news organization be 100 percent funded by direct audience revenue alone. We see that digitally native publications are relying on a mix of revenue approaches—including advertising, corporate underwriting, foundation funding, article syndication, events, affiliate programs, merchandise, and book sales—in addition to or instead of direct revenue from audiences. In this context, we believe adopt-

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i. Note that nonprofit broadcasters around the world have been at this community building work for decades and their listener/producer barrier breakdowns warrant more investigation.

ing a membership model, which can incorporate many of those components under a single strategy, is an attractive way to integrate revenue diversification efforts.

However, managing multiple funding streams is resource-intensive and requires staff alignment around what and whom a publication works to serve and how (e.g., advertisers' seeking high page views versus audience members' interests in specific reporting and analysis). Also, there are complex external factors at play for sites with donation and/or membership revenue streams, including the availability of funding; the local, regional, or national giving culture; and income levels and ages of the audience they serve. Revenue diversification is healthy and encouraged.

While we have found there is no "magic number" of revenue sources for running a sustainable digital news operation, it's important to strike a balance between diversification and focus. Too few sources can make a site too dependent on advertising or a single foundation, for example. Too many sources can result in lack of staff focus and poor quality of events, member and major donor communication, and more. (See more in this Better News resource from the American Press Institute on revenue diversification and growth.[21])

Special resource considerations for building membership revenue programs

Depending on goals and staff bandwidth, some organizations will be better prepared to build and grow membership programs than others. Membership benefits, including the unique experiences, knowledge exchange, and access that foster a differentiated experience and sense of affiliation, are labor intensive to deliver. Newsroom staff has to implement the strategy and outreach, not just business staff. Sustaining membership requires providing space: virtual, physical, and rhetorical. We've heard over and over that this can represent a significant cultural shift for some journalists and editorial staff. For these reasons and for the sake of maintaining your audience members' trust, membership should be considered carefully before being pursued.

Subscriptions As a Source of Audience Revenue

Information for organizations for whom a more straightforward transactional model is advisable

For publications with highly differentiated journalism and a strong audience base in their coverage areas, a product-based subscription offering can be appealing. If readers, listeners, and/or viewers see a site's news and analysis as providing enough unique value, subscription might be a viable revenue strategy. A subscription strategy can also work well for publications that have strong institutional audiences in specific industries and when subscribers' employers can pay the cost of work-relevant media.

However, while paid subscription models require readers to show that they value a publication's journalism as a product by paying for it, cultivating an audience with a willingness to pay can be difficult in a crowded media environment. As advertising revenues continue to fall, subscription-based publications are increasingly looking to build more broad-based relationships with readers through events, newsletters, podcasts, and other editorial products. One reason is that publishers with subscription offerings can see how much engagement subscribers have with the product(s) they've paid good money for, and publications have an interest in retaining those subscribers over the long term. A user who pays for a digital subscription but uses it only rarely is a precarious revenue source. They may soon add to the churn rate, which is the percentage of the subscriber base that has to be replaced as people fail to renew.

Given the high volume of free "commodity" coverage available online, subscriptions are not effective for every publication. With few exceptions, news consumers are acculturated to not paying for access to digital news. Access to digital news is often subsidized—by advertisers, platforms, private funders, and reporters themselves—in ways readers don't see. To earn a share of consumers' valuable attention and money, paid news products must be invaluable in terms of use to the subscriber and/or represent an editorial mandate they support (ideally both).

For more on these topics, a useful resource for learning about subscriber motivations is the report "The 3 Types of News Subscribers: Why They Pay and How to Convert Them" from Tran Ha and the American Press Institute.[22]

Examples of subscription revenue strategies

Subscription revenue strategies take a variety of forms from supporting revenue stream to the driving idea behind a business model. Two examples are The Information, a site for technology industry professionals[23] in which subscription is the leading business model, and Current, a site for public media professionals where subscription is one revenue generation stream amongst several.

Digitally native site The Information appeals to people who want to get an "edge" on competitors who aren't subscribers. The Information has a tight paywall which does not allow regular access to text articles to non-subscribers. The publication maintains short-term exceptions to encourage limited trials: for example, subscribers can share article links with friends who can view after providing an email address. It also producers a free podcast. Subscribers, who pay 399 dollars per year for the site's basic subscription option,[24] don't treat The Information's coverage as a public good but as market intelligence worth paying for.

The Information's subscription tiers, per its website.[25]

Current, touted as "news for people in public media," is one example of a publisher with subscription revenue that accounts for one of multiple revenue streams. It originally launched as a newsletter for public television stations and now covers public media more broadly in its print, digital, and podcast products. In addition to its advertising business, Current has transitioned: it once charged only for subscriptions to its print product

and left its digital coverage free. It now has a "digital-first" subscription strategy and visitors hit a paywall after viewing three free stories monthly. Individuals can subscribe and stations can pay for access for some or all of their employees. Julie Drizin, Current's executive director, explained, "We are continuing to experiment with how many and what kinds of articles we keep free. Obits and Job postings are free, for example."

The site experimented with a digital donation strategy but found that it was not successful given the industry-focused nature of its coverage. Drizin said, "After five campaigns over two years, we concluded that despite our best intense efforts, donor campaigns will not be a significant part of our business model. Some readers do feel passionate enough about our service to give, but as a trade publication that's related to work, it's been a really tough sell." And despite a boost in revenue with the re-architecting of their subscription strategy, Current relies heavily on a single foundation for funding.

Combining membership and subscription revenue: Paid email newsletters

There are a few notable examples of publications that are growing subscription revenue with paid email products on top of free-access membership models. The politics and public policy site The Texas Tribune publishes The Blast,[26] a "premium daily newsletter" that is used by elected officials, lobbyists, consultants, and political junkies looking for insider intel beyond what they can get on the site for free. Likewise, Politico publishes Politico Pro,[27] a paid "policy news service offering indispensable policy news in real time" which includes two exclusive daily news letters, breaking news alerts, and special events.

The tech news and analysis site Stratechery founder Ben Thompson chooses the term "subscriber" to refer to his paying readers, as he sees the arrangement between them as a direct exchange of well-defined value, a concept he's written about in detail.[28] "The greatest commitment I ask of my readers is for money," Thompson said. "They give me money, and I give them value," referring to the three weekly posts he writes for a subscriber newsletter in addition to one free weekly post.

Implementing subscriptions: Paywalls and meters

In considering a paywall strategy, it's important to differentiate between meters and paywalls. A meter is a segmentation and targeting tool keyed to a specific limit on the number of articles a visitor can access on a publisher's site in a specified period of time. After the visitor hits the meter limit, the site serves a call to action. That call to action could be a subscription request (with the rest of the coverage gated until they subscribe) or a membership request. A metered site can help publications identify and target their most regular visitors.

Paywalls are a means to restrict access to digital coverage and prompt payment. Metered paywalls let visitors access only a certain number of articles per month while strict paywalls grant very limited to no access until a person pays to subscribe. Meters are often used in combination with paywalls in executing a subscription strategy, but not necessarily always. Tim Griggs, former publisher of The Texas Tribune who is a consultant on consumer revenue and audience strategy, said, "While it's true that subscription products often employ a metered approach, one of the major execution problems at news enterprises is they see subscriptions and meters as related (or worse, synonymous.) But they're two entirely separate things. A subscription requires payment for access to a particular product or service or suite of products/services. A meter is just one of many devices to segment or target prospects, in most cases, based on heavy usage."

Considerations:

If you choose to pursue a subscription offering, your organization will need to create pitch and support communications for potential subscribers, straightforward payment processing and delivery mechanisms (including paywall technology), and subscriber retention mechanisms. This can be a sensible way to proceed with your publication's users if you serve institutional subscribers, have a well-defined and well-differentiated news product, or if you lack the bandwidth or interest to engage in ongoing direct interactions with audiences.

What Is Membership in News?

In its ideal form, we define membership as a two-way relationship between readers and a publication that often involves monetary exchange (and, in many cases, non-monetary contributions such as time and expertise). While a donation can represent an expression of support for a particular cause or value, membership signifies a higher degree of participation and engagement between audiences and a publication.

Our research has shown that one of the major challenges in creating a sustainable membership program is finding participation activities that are both of interest to members and valuable to the publication. A good way to start identifying potential projects is to ask current and prospective members how they want to participate and what they want to learn (for more details, see the upcoming User Research section). A few examples of ways that publishers have engaged their members' interests in contributing include fact-checking, comment moderation, and video and podcast editing with some staff training and involvement.

What is membership not?

News membership isn't about premiums, tote bags, mugs, or local business discounts. While some supporters do appreciate those benefits, especially when joining for the first time, they often tell us they'd rather have their money go back into the site's journalism. We hear from people who work in membership programs and from members themselves that while material items can signal affiliation, they are often not the reason that individuals join media organizations.[ii]

When people "join the cause" because they believe in a site's journalism, they typically want that work to spread and be freely accessible to everyone. Members of news sites tell us they are committed to news being a public resource, not an exclusive preserve with a gate around it. They recognize that, in many cases (including funding public radio), they are helping to underwrite news that others access for free, and this is a point of pride for many. We hear members of news organizations say that they want

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ii. Premiums can serve as a perk, a prompt to give urgently, or rationale to give at a higher level. Consider them a-nice-to-have nudge, not a need-to-have. And always balance revenue goals with the total cost of designing, developing, and shipping physical goods.

news and information to be accessible to more members of the public, not fewer. Since journalists want the same thing—for their work to spread—we think it makes sense for many journalism institutions to invest in a membership model.

Crafting a membership narrative

It's imperative that a publication tell compelling, accurate stories about its mission, the value it provides in the world, and the member community it wants to foster. These "who we are" stories are strongest when they reflect what audience members say they value and need from the organization. Stories need to be:

- translated into membership planning with paths to membership that are relevant to different audience segments, and
- understood by all of the organization's employees and functions, including editorial, design, legal, marketing, tech, and finance.

Are you ready for membership?

Mary Walter-Brown is the founder of the consultancy News Revenue Hub, which provides organizations with tools and coaching for their membership programs, and is the former publisher of Voice of San Diego. Based on the questions she asks potential clients of the News Revenue Hub, we put forth the following three questions that publications interested in building a membership offering should ask themselves to assess whether such a program is right for them:

1. Do you have a **loyal audience** who appreciate your content and know that your organization has produced it? Do they see you as offering distinct value they can't get elsewhere?
2. Are you prepared to put the energy and time into cultivating and maintaining a **membership relationship**? This requires creating meaningful, ongoing interactions and curiosity about what drives your members.
3. Do you have the capacity to maintain the **database and tools** necessary for managing members' information and privacy? This includes

email addresses, donation history, site behavioral data, and other information that can help inform your work.[iii]

Membership versus donation and ideal versus reality

An alternative to membership that will still generate audience revenue is increasing fundraising operations to raise more donation revenue. Some of the same operational and technological tactics apply, such as having a clean and functioning customer relationship management tool ("CRM" tool, described in the Engage section), and sending out compelling regular appeals (more such tactics in coming sections). But unlike membership, we believe that a donation strategy doesn't necessarily involve the same level of editorial engagement with audiences (and collaboration between fundraising and editorial) that a membership strategy does.

Here we offer a vision of membership in its ideal form based on the news sites we've studied. We include these definitions and guidance knowing that, in practice, there are differences between this highly engaged vision and the incredible variety of membership programs currently operating. Some publications' membership programs are "membership" in name only and operate much more like subscription strategies, with little or no audience engagement. Similarly, some publications' donation strategies employ many of the best practices of audience engagement, even though they don't run a "membership" program per se. The important distinction is not necessarily in the phrasing and naming that publications use, though we believe conceptual clarity would go a long way toward sharing best practices in the field. It's in recognizing that the level of editorial engagement a publication chooses to have with its audience members can impact organizational sustainability.

Next, we detail the strategic considerations your team should discuss when selecting an audience revenue strategy and building an audience revenue program. Roughly following the path to conversion—expose and attract, engage and deepen, and convert—each section lays out best practices

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iii. The News Revenue Hub provides integrated and customized SalesForce, MailChimp, and Stripe applications to clients who are running membership programs, but these publications must typically have more than 10,000 email subscribers or potential members in order to join the Hub.

from our research. Though this report gives special consideration to building membership programs, many of the practices we discuss are vital to building any form of audience revenue program. The strategic planning areas are framed broadly for many types of publications that seek to increase audience revenue.

Audience Revenue Program Strategic Planning

1. **USER RESEARCH:** Learn about and Design to Meet Prospective Member Needs

   A. User experience research
   B. Segmentation: Reach different audience groups strategically

2. **EXPOSE and ATTRACT:**

   A. Increasing reach through social media
   B. Increasing reach through in-person community events and conferences

3. **ENGAGE and DEEPEN:**

   A. Editorial engagement
   B. Article pages and site structure
   C. Email newsletters
   D. Using events to engage readers

4. **CONVERT:**

   A. Campaign structure
   B. Managing data infrastructure
   C. User data effectiveness
   D. Giving and asking frequency

5. **SUSTAIN:**

   A. Recognizing and thanking members
   B. Engaging and sustaining members

If you choose to build an audience revenue program, think about your conversion strategy as progressive stages in a funnel: research, expose and attract, engage and deepen, convert, and sustain. The following sections outline each step of the funnel and offer tactics and considerations as you build out your audience revenue program. (For a complementary take on audience conversion funnels, see this chapter from the Knight-Lenfest Table Stakes report for Better News and the American Press Institute.[29])

1. User Research: Learn about and Design to Meet Prospective Member Needs

A. User experience research

News teams can easily default to being overly dependent on their own instincts. Senior managers and editors can sometimes claim a right to "know" what the audience wants—and won't accept—as a perk of their position. Too often publications design news products without deeply understanding their audience members' needs, which can lead to wasted time and effort building products that don't get used or used to their fullest.

But it doesn't have to be this way. A nuanced approach to understanding audiences is available: user experience research. We've seen that audience engagement programs built on thorough user experience research generate deeper usage. They do so by employing a combination of methods for listening and observation, including but not limited to interviews, surveys, usability testing, and co-design techniques. The resulting feedback can be put to use to understand your users' propensity to participate in your efforts, and can help you understand how they want to engage with other supporters, if at all.

In developing editorial products, including those which support audience revenue, we've seen that it's helpful to use a human-centered design framework. This includes three elements for product development: **desirability** (asking *what do people want?*), **feasibility** (*can we make what they want?*), and **viability** (*can we actually make what they want successfully?*).

Understanding the desirability component is essential to fostering a sustainable relationship with the readers whom you want to convert into supporters. What motivates them? How do they budget their media time and contributions? Why do they want from your journalism, and what would they want you to change about it? It's crucial to note that asking *what do people want?* is intended to provide valuable input, rather than a mandate, for designing audience-informed news products that people will actually use. Think of it as spark, a source of inspiration and input, rather than a decider of things. Also, the more genuinely innovative a product or
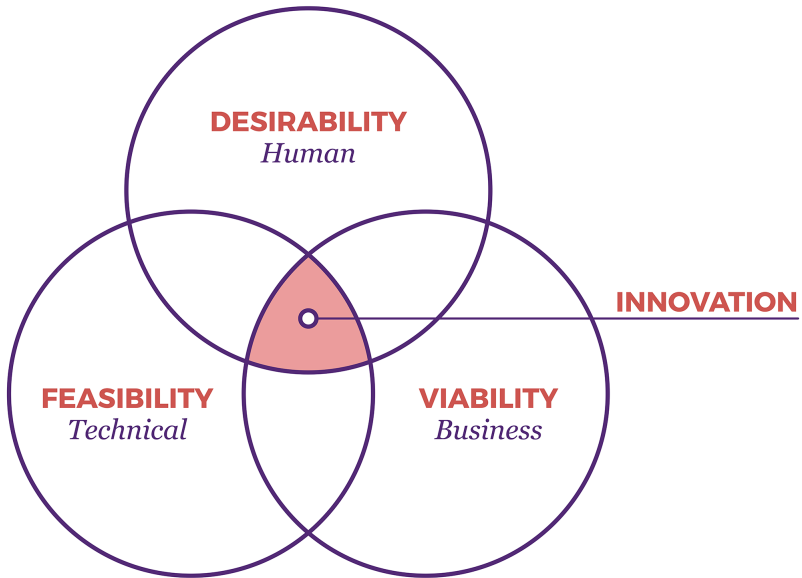
The human centered-design framework. Visual design by Leon Postma, De Correspondent.[30]

feature is, the less likely that visitors will specifically ask for it. You may have to introduce it first, watch data around usage, then ask people what they think. Research planning entails these steps:

1. **Recruit:** Carefully consider who you want to hear from, including current, potential, and former supporters, and how you'll reach them. A low-resource way to do this is hosting an informal feedback-gathering session led by reporters and editors and inviting representatives of the audience segments you most want to reach.
2. **Pick your method(s):** Interviews are good for understanding details about what your target audience members need, and surveys are useful for getting a broad cross-section of respondents. Familiarize yourself with the benefits, drawbacks, and resources involved in each approach.
3. **Prepare and ask your questions:** Create a guide with more questions than you'll need, solicit feedback from teammates, and assign roles such as moderator, observer, and data analyst. If you're conducting an inter-

view, plan a quiet place to meet in person or online and record them if they're comfortable.

4. **Synthesize what you've heard:** Plan at least as much time for research analysis as collection. This should be a collaborative effort involving identifying themes and preparing to share the ideas that you think are most actionable.

If you're wondering whether this effort is worth your time, know that improvements informed by user insights can help lead to needed financial stability for media organizations. As we saw at *The New York Times*, existing audiences who feel that they are heard and considered are more likely to remain engaged and pay to subscribe. Many sites use periodic or regular surveys with existing or target audience members to learn about preferences and habits. They then combine that intel with analytics data and other qualitative research to develop a richer understanding of the people they want to serve.

Digital and live journalism experiences that put users' needs at the center attract more attention, are more enjoyable to interact with, and are shared more often (see what follows for more on events). Even slight changes in design and delivery resulting from research can make audiences feel that a particular news product is an essential in their day-to-day lives. Amid widespread newsroom staff cutbacks and news organization closures, research insights can be invaluable for deepening relationships with audience members.

In conducting qualitative research with members of news sites around the world, we bring a member values worksheet[31] into small interviews to collect information and generate discussion about what drives members' decisions to support organizations (both news sites and other causes they participate in).

Two of the responses we heard most when asking members what motivates them to join were "offering the world something that I think should exist" and "a sense of uniqueness." Readers, viewers, and listeners want to support high-quality news they can't find anywhere else, and it helps if the site feels accessible. Other motivators that prompt their giving and participation include appropriate price, visibility into operations and the

the
**MEMBERSHIP
PUZZLE
PROJECT**

1 = not important
3 = very important

WHAT DO YOU VALUE IN YOUR MEMBERSHIP?

Please assign a 1 - 3 value according to how important these factors are in choosing
the organizations and causes that you give your time, money, and/or ideas to:

① ② ③   A sense of affiliation or belonging

① ② ③   Ability to interact with reporters

① ② ③   Feeling that my concerns are heard by the organization

① ② ③   Offering the world something that I think should exist

① ② ③   Makes things easier and reduces effort
(i.e., not having to work around paywall to view articles)

① ② ③   Exclusive or VIP access
(i.e., members-only content and access to staff)

① ② ③   Advocacy on my behalf

① ② ③   Staff diversity

① ② ③   A sense of uniqueness/something I can't get anywhere else

① ② ③   Being connected with other members or other like-minded people

① ② ③   Events/opportunities to connect in person and online

① ② ③   Interactions with like-minded organizations
(i.e., member discounts at local businesses or partnerships with other organizations that share values)

① ② ③   Merchandise / physical branded goods

① ② ③   User experience, including ease of use and visual appeal

① ② ③   Appropriate price

① ② ③   Other factor(s) _____

Tow Center for Digital Journalism

journalists behind the stories, and design—including both brand and user experience.

We know from previous research (for example, the Australian "Community Media Matters" report[32]) that one of the key reasons that audiences of nonprofit broadcasting listen and value their stations' contributions is because of the perceived "access" they have to the announcers and producers at the station. Listeners felt more comfortable contacting the station because the announcers seemed "just like us"—they presented as skilled yet accessible professionals. This approachability lessened barriers that exist between some mainstream news media and their audiences. We're all well served to consider what the non-commercial broadcasting sector might teach us about fostering loyalty and a sense of humility in how we present ourselves.

When we asked what they value less, members told us that physical goods and exclusive access aren't of great interest to them. They would prefer that access to the primary news product be publicly available so they are able to discuss stories with other people who don't pay. (They see benefits such as exclusive access to members-only channels and events with reporters as additive.)

We're using these direct-from-members insights from qualitative research to help shape membership programs, including De Correspondent's launch of a new English language news site, The Correspondent. For additional information on user research in journalism, see the "Guide to Journalism and Design"[34] that Heather Chaplin published for the Tow Center, IDEO's design toolkit,[35] and *The New York Times*'s product activity kit.[36] For more ideas on integrating product and business model design, try the Business Model Canvas modules.[37]

B. Segmentation: Reach different audience groups strategically

Developing audience segments based on user research (including conversations and surveys with current and potential users) and site analytics (including data on key metrics, such as return visits and user time on site) can help you plan distinct experiences for different types of readers.

Sarah Glen, product and growth manager at the education site Chalk-
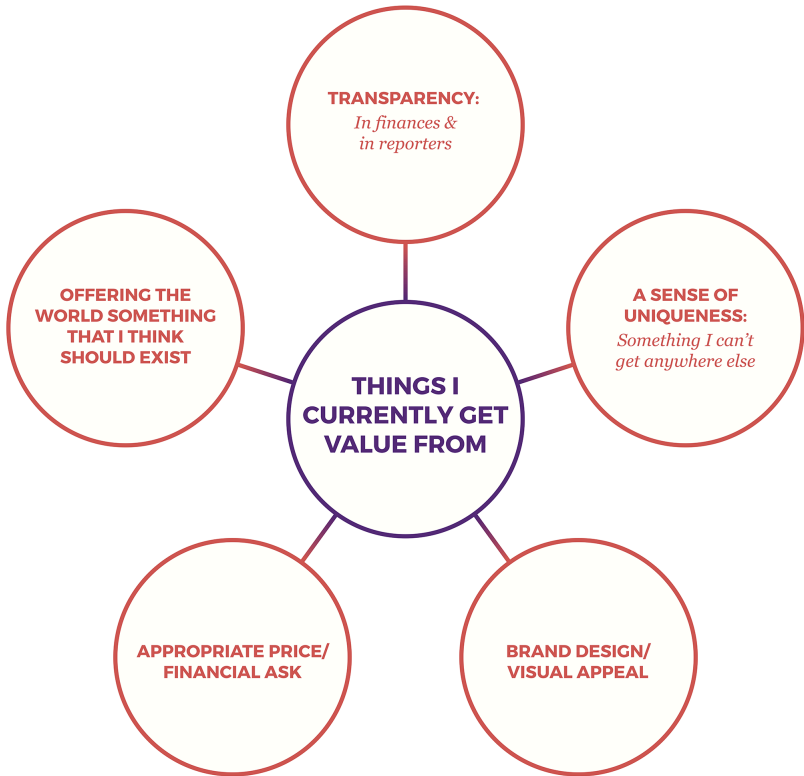
The most frequently heard values from our research with members. More information is at https://membershippuzzle.org/articles-overview/why-supporters-pay-for-journalism. Design by Leon de Postma, De Correspondent.[33]

beat, said that the site has become more fastidious about how it connects with different readers, working to meet their needs and not treating them all the same. "We've dramatically improved the ways we communicate with our readers," she said. "We can now filter out prior donors from donation campaigns (no duplicate asks!) and we're building our lists based on the ways readers said they want to engage with us (opportunities to connect with other readers for those who asked for them!). Over the course of the 2017–18 school year, we plan to use these lists and others to get feedback from our most member-ready readers on what our program should look like."

It's useful to create clear definitions of each audience segment visiting your site that are well understood by all staff. You might explore whether a content tagging system would help you track which stories do well by audience segment and by distribution mechanism. You'll also want to consider what's most appropriate for new versus regular or heavy site visitors knowing that each will come with different understandings of what your site does. First-time visitors to your site will need to be appropriately introduced and you'll want to present a set of stories that demonstrate your work well. The Food and Environment Reporting Network does this well with its comprehensive page detailing the impact of its reporting,[38] and Reveal from the Center for Investigative Reporting recapped how its stories led to significant change in 2017.[39]

2. Expose and Attract

A. Increasing reach through social media

You want to maximize your audience reach for many reasons: it expands potential policy impact, helps you seek ideas and commentary from people from a wide range of backgrounds, and exposes your work to more potential members. Social media is a natural way to begin undertaking this work. In-person events (which we'll describe in more detail) can also help maximize your reach. Other top-of-funnel tactics include search engine optimization, partnerships, and word-of-mouth marketing. The guide to partnerships[40] by the American Press Institute's Better News initiative is a comprehensive primer on partnership strategies for news organizations. Lynda.com offers a course on SEO strategy,[41] and Better News has an overview of audience funnels for reaching "occasional users to habitual and paying loyalists."[42]

In crafting a social media strategy for maximizing reach at the top of your conversion funnel, it's helpful to understand that there are two types of platforms, native and networked, to consider when it comes to social media.[iv]

- **Native platforms** like Snapchat or Instagram don't link back to your

iv. Thanks to Emily Bell, director of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, for this helpful nomenclature.

site. Posting stories to this type of platform can be a good way to build awareness and brand exposure, but your posts will not drive traffic or potential members to your site unless they seek it out beyond the platform. This can make their influence difficult if not impossible to measure.

- **Networked platforms** like Twitter and Facebook that link back to your site offer the potential to drive readers immediately to you. (Note that Facebook is complicated because some formats such as posts refer traffic back to your site, while others such as Instant Articles do not.) You can expect that many of these inbound visitors from social media will bounce away from your site quickly (known as "one [page] and done") and not proceed to the next step of the funnel. Ultimately, the amount of traffic coming to your site from social media platforms may be quite small, especially in comparison to direct and search-driven traffic. The idea with networked platform participation is that the more readers are at the top of your funnel—in terms of both brand awareness and actual traffic—the more potential members you can potentially drive to your stories.

In this era of social media prominence an article page is the item that travels and circulates on networked platforms; therefore it must contain a nudge or invitation for your visitor to explore more of your work. One example is how De Correspondent's articles feature a note when shared on social media attributing the member or staffer who posted it (as seen in the following image with "this article has been given to you by correspondent Mayke Blok").

Before you start blasting information through every platform you've heard of (though claiming your organization's name for accounts is good practice), consider that a small set of highly appropriate channels can be a better investment of your audience engagement time. Consider where your core audience segments spend time online and how other organizations reach them. You might also explore partnership potential and reciprocal communications with like-minded organizations.

Kate Myers, executive director of First Look Media, said that for its policy and analysis site The Intercept membership was a natural fit given the publication's "strong, loyal relationship with its core audience." Through
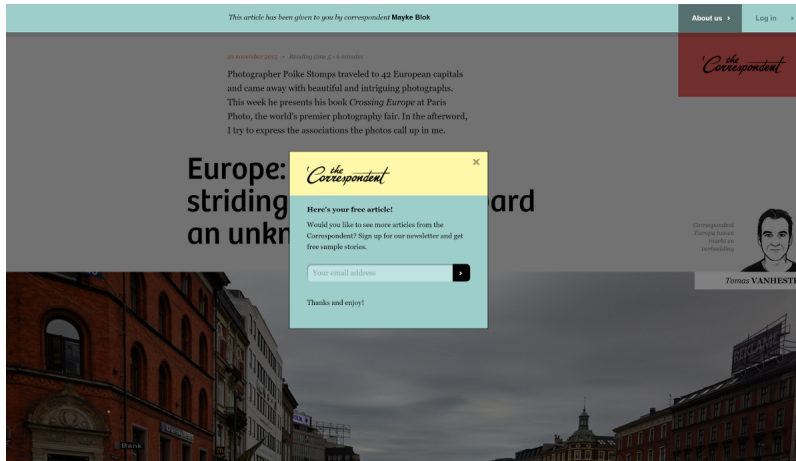
When De Correspondent members share articles on social media, non-member readers see a brief note at the top of the story naming the person who shared the article. This is intended to introduce the idea of member-underwritten journalism.

social media, staff has regular, direct communication with their readers and listeners. This has served two functions. First, deepening interactions and therefore membership potential, and demonstrating openness to audience members' story tips and ideas (which suggests humility and curiosity that many publications haven't historically practiced).

Increasing your reach can also mean diversifying to other digital media formats. An increasing number of publications, including The Intercept and Reveal, have experimented with podcast production in recent years to attract audiences that are supplemental to their existing users. Though they can be labor intensive to report and produce, podcasts can also help deepen engagement with current readers and offer a more intimate experience that goes beyond text. Before pursuing this, have a well-informed point of view on what news gap a new show might offer and how you intend for it to reach its targeted listeners in a crowded podcast ecosystem. (For an overview of podcasting, see the Tow Center's "Guide to Podcasting."[43])

Social media considerations:

- Review your social distribution strategy to make sure your journalism is

set up well to reach your intended audiences. Where do they spend time, and where might you best reach them?

- Can you encourage your reporters to promote their own stories better through Twitter and other platforms?

Podcast considerations:

- If you choose to develop a podcast, are you designing and producing the show to pay for itself through sponsorship or ad revenue? Or will it be a subsidized editorial-only product?
- How will you measure its success as a member recruitment tool? Will you try to?
- What will the podcast production schedule be, how will it be produced, and how will it fit with your other news products in focus, tone, and format?

B. Increasing reach through in-person community events and conferences

Events that are already on your community's calendar can be occasions to attract new readers and potential supporters. For geographically based publications and those with major reach, festivals, lectures, local arts events, and podcast listening parties can offer chances to show the "face" of your publication and learn from audience members about what matters to them. For example, the local news site Berkeleyside operates a table at outdoor summer events in the city to meet community members and collect email addresses.

Some of these events may require securing paid sponsorships but others may be financed by in-kind gifts or trade, like cross-site promotion. For issue-focused publications, professional or trade conferences can offer opportunities to talk to relevant audiences as exhibitors and session conveners. Send a representative who is well informed about your journalism and membership, and have them bring plentiful information about your work (including more business cards than they think they'll need) to hand out.

Considerations:
Review the existing events and conferences in your community that

your publication could participate in as an exhibitor or sponsor. Create a communications strategy for that event or conference and set a goal for what you want to achieve with your participation. You should consider:

- What messages do you want to share about your publication and its mission?
- How will you interact with relevant audience members?
- How will you collect participants' email addresses? An email address can sometimes be more valuable as an admission fee than actual dollars as you have a chance to repeatedly follow up and potentially deepen engagement.
- How do you intend to follow up, including in the months to come?

3. Engage and Deepen

Once you have attracted readers to your site, whether through social media, search referrals, a partners' link, or an in-person event, the next step is to engage those readers and deepen your relationship with them. This section presents a variety of ways of engaging and deepening. First, we outline some of the editorial engagement practices you can put in place to establish a two-way communication channel between the newsroom and readers. Next, we discuss how the structure of your article pages and your site in general can keep readers engaged longer. Then, we describe how email newsletters can be a particularly powerful way of delivering relevant journalism directly to reader's inboxes, and have the potential for incredibly high engagement and conversion. We next describe how publication-sponsored events are powerful tools for forging relationships with readers in person. Finally, we overview some exciting ways that publications are inviting direct reader participation into everyday operations.

A. Editorial engagement

Editorial engagement entails reporters and editors in the newsroom incorporating reader comments, questions, insights, and feedback into different parts of the story generation cycle—from generating story ideas to reporting to distributing. A strong editorial engagement strategy is the cornerstone of a successful audience revenue program since it builds the practice

of bringing readers' concerns deeper within the organization. We review a range of editorial engagement strategies below. All of them require that newsroom leaders help reporters and editors clear time to engage with their readers.

Responding to individual reader feedback

Encouraging reporters and editors to set a block of time each week to read and respond to emails from readers will help convey to the newsroom that reader participation is an organizational priority, and will in turn convey to readers that the organization is actively listening to their feedback. Demonstrating the importance of communication with readers then opens up opportunities for readers to share more ideas and feedback. It also gives your audience a sense that they can "access" the publication and its journalists—this will be considered a positive by your readers. Tristan Loper, co-founder and CTO of the News Revenue Hub, advises creating a triage system where reader email feedback goes to a central place and is routed to appropriate people as needed.

Of course, answering emails one by one doesn't scale, especially for busy reporters. However, reading incoming emails for patterns can tell you when you need to explain or offer something to all readers, including the ones who haven't written. Another reason to pay attention to feedback is that it teaches you that your audience is composed of members of different audience segments with distinct information needs.

Digital editorial engagement

There are a variety of ways for editors and reporters to engage readers in the digital space beyond email. Perhaps the easiest is using social media and on-site commenting tools. But beyond responding to reader comments and interacting with audience members on social media, editorial staff can provide virtual forums for feedback and story ideas through Twitter chats, Facebook groups, or Google Hangouts. Email newsletters can also be a way for readers to share their questions and feedback (more on email to come). Slightly more sophisticated and powerful newsroom tools such as Hearken and Groundsource allow readers to suggest story ideas and can help make your site more inviting for reader interactions. Here we detail a variety of

ways that publications are engaging readers in the editorial process using digital tools.

The Ferret, a reader-supported site in Scotland, has reporters and editors who commonly discuss investigation ideas publicly with their readers before undertaking their research and writing. Co-director Peter Geoghegan said, "When we did a story about homeless and housing, we put that on the forum[44] and asked people for help." Their last investigations into fracking and refugees got thousands of shares on social media because the whole process was transparent for members and contributors felt as though they made a difference. Those stories got mentioned in public policy documents and in both U.K. and Scottish parliaments.

VTDigger is highly focused on investigative work that often generates from locals' concerns. Founder and editor Anne Galloway said her staff asks for tips and ideas on problems that need to be solved via emails, comments, and in-person discussions. They recognize the role they play in their communities: "We are in the victim services industry here. We are helping people who are hurting." She tries to infuse a culture of accessible journalism, going so far as to publish her cell phone number for readers. "We're not in an ivory tower, we're just on main street in Montpelier," she explained.

Follow the Money, a Dutch investigative finance site that is funded by its members, has editors who sometimes continue reporting on a story after they see a high amount of reader discussion in comments. Beyond general reader commentary, the site's reporting benefits from professionals who share relevant subject matter expertise in the comments to improve others' understanding of the story. Top comments are highlighted on the front page of the website, something that is rarely seen on most publishers' sites in the interest of squeezing in more homepage stories.

Honolulu Civil Beat staff is in close touch with its community through events, email, and phone, and the organization recently decided to experiment with a different mode of reader communication through a human-moderated Facebook Messenger bot. Engagement editor Anthony Quinatano told Nieman Lab that Civil Beat wanted to "get to the closest point where people could directly message us. We want to be everywhere."[45]

Quintano said that within a few days of launching the bot, readers were sending news tips and story ideas through the tool, and it was proving to

be a unique way for the site to push its journalism to readers. "We don't know where this could take us," he told Nieman. "The goal is to find what potential there is as as far as reaching our readers and possibly getting some stories out of it."
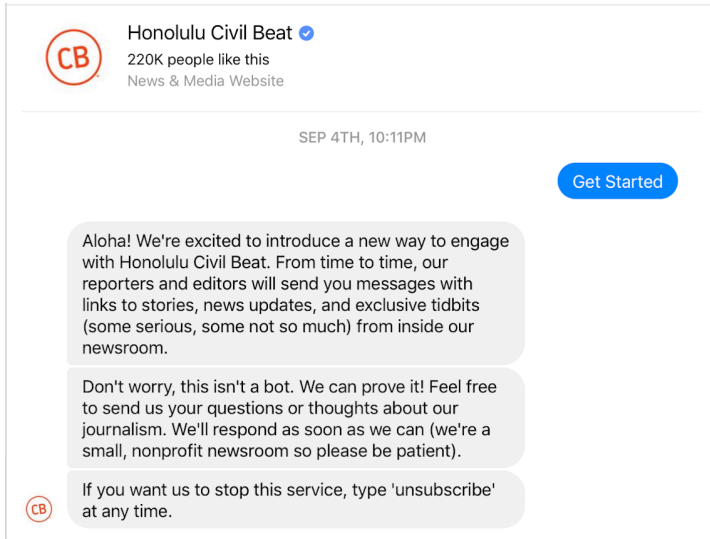
Honolulu Civil Beat introduces new users to its Facebook Messenger bot.[46]

In-person editorial engagement

When it comes to editorial engagement tactics that rely on face-to-face meetings, local and regional publications have an advantage in being physically closer to their core audiences, which offers valuable chances for staff to meet readers in person to solicit story ideas and feedback. National and international publications may need to be more creative but can hold these types of gatherings around specific topics, conferences, or populations. Finding online and offline opportunities for direct contact between reporters, editors, and audience members helps foster a culture of two-way knowledge exchange that successful audience revenue programs rely on.

Here are a few examples of successful in-person editorial engagement:

Honolulu Civil Beat hosts monthly conversations over coffee with members in its newsroom and has found the reporter-reader dialogue to

be generative. These regular events were inspired by Voice of San Diego. Civil Beat's casual gatherings encourage readers to speak up about "issues they have in the community, and also with Civil Beat," according to Mariko Chang, membership and events manager. "It's a way to build trust and get ideas in the door, [and] it's a way for readers to meet the reporters behind the story and learn about our process of how it came to be." The meetings are focused around a theme, such as judicial issues and introducing a new education reporter, and editors talk about work-in-progress reporting.

In one of these recent meetings a reader brought up the issue of the credibility of news on social media, which prompted a larger news literacy education series. High interest in the topic has spurred a partnership with the local library system which livestreams the series to other libraries in the state. This exemplifies audience listening that results in information and partnerships that reflect local news needs.

Berkeleyside has 400,000 monthly unique visitors with a total Berkeley population of 120,000. Co-founder Tracey Taylor observed that "because Berkeley is a small city, we know a lot of our readers. We go to City Council, School Board, and community meetings. We are out and about, and people know us." Staff host "open office" hours in their co-working space and at local restaurants where readers and community members come to share thoughts and story ideas.

While greater physical distance between readers can be complicating for general interest and topic-focused publications, they may be able to tap into highly specific networks, conferences, and other professional events that their core readers regularly attend. (As discussed earlier, it's valuable to learn where your target audiences like to congregate, and following them on Twitter can be a good way to get started.) Sending reporters and editors to these events can be a useful opportunity to connect with passionate audiences who care about the issues you cover and create opportunities to identify new members, show that you are a part of their community/cultural life, and solicit reader feedback and story ideas.

B. Article pages and site structure

Once a user has encountered one of your stories and clicks through to the article page on your site, you need to have a plan for what his or her ex-

perience on your platform will be like. Thinking through this part of your engagement strategy involves creating article pages that will prompt a deeper exploration of what you offer. Larger organizations and those with behavioral data may be able to personalize site experiences based on what they know about reader habits, ensuring that first-time and returning visitors are served the most relevant presentations possible. In lieu of being able to offer that, consider the website copy that greets new and returning visitors to your site.

Also, if your site hosts comments or regularly features social media posts with story reactions, you'll want to understand how readers are using (or not using) those additions. If the tone is hostile or the commentary doesn't add to your storytelling, strategize on how the digital spaces that run after and alongside your stories might be made more constructive. A toxic comment section can undermine the hard work of your journalists, and tools like those from The Coral Project (https://coralproject.net) can assist with comments management and moderation. (The project also has useful and tangible tools for your community planning, including its workbook and community planning guides.[47])

Encouraging reporters and editors to regularly interact with readers in the comments section of your site can be tremendously important, and guest moderators with relevant subject matter expertise can be highly effective. Also, while it's unrealistic to expect that all visitors will want to read comments or comment themselves, consider how to make these spaces as participatory as you can within your organization's human and machine moderation constraints.

At a higher level, the structure of your site should foster reader engagement by offering clear ways to participate. It's crucial to prominently highlight how visitors can sign up for your newsletter(s), become a supporter, or take any other action—and to make the experience of taking action easy. It's imperative to create simple donation invitations and design straightforward site and mobile flows. There is no substitute for watching people in your target audience segments try to navigate the interactions you've designed and attempt to join and pay.
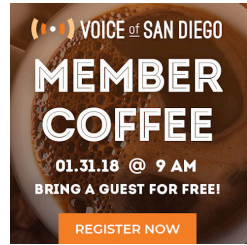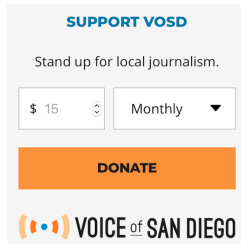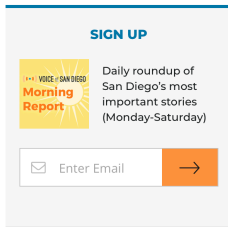
The Voice of San Diego's site design features a variety of subtle prompts to engage readers in the sidebar next to each article.

A good example of well-designed article pages and site structure is the Voice of San Diego. Its site offers a number of ways for readers to engage with the publication. At the top of the page and along the sidebar, readers can sign up for the daily newsletter or donate. On mobile, an email signup option is displayed within the body of the story and a prominent donate button is displayed in a "sticky" header. A previous site design also featured highly visible modules with reader testimonials and donation meters that updated in real time.

Knowing that the majority of readers access their news on mobile devices,[48] it's hugely beneficial to optimize your site for mobile. Article pages should be delivered over https and be able to load as quickly as Facebook Instant Articles and accelerated mobile pages (AMP) via Google. For more information on making your site easily readable on small screens and tablets, see resources from Nielsen Norman Group,[49] Smashing Magazine,[50] and A List Apart[51] on the topic.

Considerations:

- If you're in the midst of a site or app redesign or are contemplating a redesign, continue to test and develop your article pages as you roll out the new site. How is the structure of your article page working to encourage the next step of engagement? How does the structure and layout of your article page look on mobile devices with different operating systems and screen sizes?
- How effectively are your calls to action on your article pages and elsewhere on your site driving newsletter sign-ups, donations, and other ways to engage deeper?

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- Can you better serve recommended reading or related links on article pages in ways that increase your visitors' time on your site?
- How might users take other actions such as sharing and liking your coverage, and what can you do to increase those actions?
- How does your site reflect what you know about your audience members' interests and how they use your site? Have you tested usability with them?
- How does the messaging on your site communicate your mission and how to support it?

C. Email newsletters

For publications of all sizes, email newsletters are proving to be productive for encouraging repeat visits and eventually converting readers into supporters.[52] Reading email is a powerful daily habit, especially on mobile phones,[53] and becoming part of that daily habit is a particularly potent way for news organizations to build reader relationships. If your research into your audiences' format preferences suggests that their email inbox is a place where they regularly want to hear from your organization, consider what you can offer them that will be distinct.

Why email?

Email newsletters have been experiencing something of a renaissance in the news industry, thanks to a few of its differentiating properties.[54][55] First and foremost, it's a distribution format over which publications have complete control.[56] The timing, contents, delivery, and layout are chosen by the publication. Unlike social media platforms which control the curation and presentation of a publisher's journalism, and the corresponding audience data it generates, email is a digital tool at publishers' disposal that reaches audience members directly. Compared to tools which put publishers at the whim of news feed algorithms on social media platforms, email offers a more sure way to reach a user where they are. It's not an app that requires downloading or a new tool that needs to be learned. And publications can access and learn from the data that email generates about people who open it. Journalists, too, appreciate the closeness to recipients that email offers.

Though Facebook may generate the most total viewers, email inboxes

are a personal digital space where sites can find and build and relationships with relevant readers. Fostering an indispensible email newsletter habit is a hallmark of many successful digital news publications.[57]

Crafting email newsletter products

Carefully designing newsletter products can help you segment your audience members by behavior and interest. This can then help your site target future email calls to action around revenue. In designing the editorial focus of newsletter products, it's important to match audience interests with what your newsroom and communication staff can regularly deliver well. Daily or weekly briefing emails can generate repeat visits if you have enough new, interesting coverage, particularly breaking news where you are able to offer a different take than other sites. For longform and analysis pieces, less frequent updates may be best.

Jacque Boltik and Aisha Townes of the Shorenstein Center's Single Subject News Study recommend thinking about email newsletter products in three types:

1. Automated alerts for breaking news
2. Curated headlines
3. Personality-driven newsletters that build strong writer-reader relationships. This type of newsletters is most likely to be paid email newsletter products.

Before launching any email newsletter product, make sure to have a thorough understanding of the purpose of product, the production requirements (including internal processes), how it fits audience needs, and testable questions. Elisabeth Goodridge, editor for newsletters and messaging at *The New York Times*, said that to achieve excellence in a personality-driven newsletter, your product must:

1. Be targeted to a specific audience
2. Be written by expert source(s)
3. Be presented in a conversational, clear voice
4. Offer invaluable, useful information
5. Provide an engaging format and features

6. Be maintained with best practices in mind, particularly email subscriber habituation

It can seem tempting to send automated editorial newsletters that feature your site's most recent or top performing headlines sans curation or staffer explanation. This might save time ("set it and forget it"), but the resulting newsletter(s) can feel stale and automated to recipients. Automated alerts can be appropriate for breaking news, ideally with at least a portion including a written product (e.g., a short note from the editor), but all other newsletter products should have some level of editorial involvement.

Ben Nishimoto, director of philanthropy at Honolulu Civil Beat, said that the site finds newsletters to be a useful tool for member acquisition, and an important and successful standalone editorial product. Civil Beat has emphasized that the newsletter have its own unique voice and not just read like a feed of Civil Beat articles.

The hiring of an audience development editor at Civil Beat, who brought a fun, more human-sounding tone to the newsletters, has helped lead to a self-reported thirty percent open rate and ten percent click-through rate. Both of these percentages are high compared to other online communications, which often net less than a five percent open rate for email newsletters. According to SmartInsights, the average email open rate in Media and Publishing in 2017 was 22.1 percent, and the click-through rate was 4.7 percent.[58] MailChimp has published similar rates.[59]

Know that smart automation does have a role to play in email newsletter engagement strategies. Creating a "drip" campaign that automatically sends new subscribers a series of welcome emails on a specific schedule (orienting them to the product, and the mission and values of the organization) is a solid way to begin introducing your site and its impact. Honolulu Civil Beat created a five-part welcome series drip campaign, the first of which is featured with others in the Resources Appendix. For an introduction to drip campaigns, see the overview from Salesforce Pardot.[60]

When Honolulu Civil Beat shifted from its status from for-profit to nonprofit, it used email as the primary educational tool to explain how the change allowed it to be more mission aligned. If such information is not

Dear Reader,

Welcome! I'm Patti Epler, the editor and general manager at Civil Beat. I want to personally thank you for subscribing to our newsletter. We're so proud to cultivate an informed, active, and engaged community of citizens committed to making Hawaii a better place to live.

We've made it easy for you to engage not only with us, but with other readers and members of our Civil Beat community. If you are a new reader, or know someone who is, here are the ways to get more involved:

The first email in a drip campaign for new newsletter subscribers.[61]

being immediately obvious to new web and mobile visitors, you can make up for it by including this information in a welcome email or series.

Finally, know that no single email newsletter will serve all of your users' needs. Sometimes the more niche, the better. As *The New York Times*'s Goodridge explained, "Email can be a service (one drawing readers to the site, using alerts, etc.) and in other circumstances, standalone email products. Strategies should be different to address these differences."

Think of your email newsletter's specific target audience(s): some readers may want focused emails on specific subjects while others seek a selection of the latest headlines. ProPublica offers multiple free newsletter subscription options: a daily update; an occasional, alert-style email for major investigative stories; two weekly emails (one for ProPublica, one for

ProPublica Illinois) that include both original journalism and a roundup of the week's top stories; and a number of more topical emails some of which are short-lived "pop-up" products.

Regarding the weekly newsletter with behind-the-scenes details on their own investigations, Celeste LeCompte, vice president of business development, described it as focused email intended for a specific set of readers: "It's a good use of email" because it engages people personally in ProPublica's reporting. "[It's not] daily churn—it's for people who want that particular content."

Linking email newsletter data to other user data

Email newsletters generate a high volume of data on reader behavior that, when analyzed appropriately, can provide a range of insights into email subscribers' behaviors. At the very least, when putting together an email newsletter using email management software such as MailChimp or ConstantContact, make sure your address lists are segmented into members and non-members (or subscribers and non-subscribers). Organizing your email management this way will allow your outlet to make different appeals to newsletter subscribers during membership campaign season depending on their existing relationship to your publication. It will also allow you to analyze what communications are most effective in deepening engagement (e.g., a certain number of emails opened or interest in a certain type of email).

Conversely, email can be a powerful personalizational and follow-up tool that can build on (logged-in) on-site behavior to deepen reader engagement. Goodridge, editor for newsletters and messaging at *The New York Times*, shared, "What stories they have read on the site already may allow you to push complimentary stories to readers via email. Thus creating a nice loop."

Email newsletters and audience revenue

The relationship that can be forged between a publication and a reader on email lead directly to its importance as a conversion tool to bring in reader revenue—whether in the form of subscriptions, donations, or memberships. Kristi Waite, a product manager for newsletters at *The Seattle Times*, told *Editor & Publisher*,[62] that based on their data, "Newslet-

ters are the most efficient digital channel for converting readers to subscribers. Based on subscriber conversions per visit, SeattleTimes.com visits referred by an email newsletter are twenty-five times more likely to convert than a visit to our site referred by Facebook." And *The New York Times* has found that email newsletter subscribers are twice as likely as non-newsletters subscribers to become digital subscribers to the paper.[63] [64]

Publications are experimenting with different monetization strategies for email newsletters,[65] including:

- Affiliate product sales (e.g., theSkimm)
- Newsletter sponsorship (e.g., Quartz)
- Remnant ads
- Classified ads (e.g., Ann Friedman Weekly)[66]
- Sponsored content copy (e.g., Los Angeles Times)[67]
- Paid newsletter subscriptions (e.g., The Texas Tribune's "The Blast" and Ben Thompson's Stratechery "Daily Update")[68][69]
- Donations (e.g., B*tch Media)[70]
- White-labeled information (e.g., DailyChatter)[71]

When considering how your email newsletter strategy will support your reader revenue strategy, consider which types of behavior you hope to encourage with your email newsletter products. After studying the newsletter products landscape, NPR digital media designers Libby Bawcombe and Veronica Erb created a helpful continuum of newsletter consumption behaviors[72] from purely read to purely click-through. (They also offer a list of newsletter identity plans to help those interested in starting an email newsletter figure out which questions to answer first.)[73]

Think about the email subscriber interactions you want to encourage in choosing a revenue model for your newsletter, including how long you expect readers to be engaged with the product, whether they will skim or read, and how often. For example, consider your reader's experience with ad placements in a narrative newsletter. Where would the banners be least interruptive? Where will they be most impactful? If you want to embed "subscribe" or "donate" buttons in your newsletters, similarly review the layout and text flow. If you intend to monetize your newsletter with calls to action to donate or subscribe, consider how often you will send those

A continuum of newsletter consumption behaviors

Subscribers consume newsletters in different ways. Each newsletter should identify one primary audience need, and optionally one secondary audience need. No single newsletter can address all of these different needs at once.

Purely read	Mostly read	Read and click through	Mostly click through	Purely click through
Long form content written expressly for newsletter is only available here and not online. This encourages "full dive" behavior, e.g., Lenny.	Content written expressly for the newsletter offers subtle options to click through (such as hyperlinks), e.g., The Atlantic Daily.	Some content is written for the newsletter but options to click through are more pronounced. This encourages "skim and dive" behavior, e.g., Vox Sentences.	A curated list offers context but is meant to tease articles, e.g., NPR Books.	Curated or automated lists that act as a catch-up. This encourages "full skim" behavior, e.g., The Guardian Today.

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Serri Graslie from NPR Training wrote a userful "Want to Start a Newsletter? Read This First" primer based on two of NPR designers' look at current email newsletters.[74]

appeals and what tone is appropriate (see below for more information on conversion messages).

For more information on using email audience analysis tools to grow reach, see this research guide and open source data science tool from Harvard's Shorenstein Center: https://shorensteincenter.org/email-analysis-research-guide.[75]

Considerations:

- In your research with audience members, ask about the gaps they see in their personal news and analysis diets that your organization might be uniquely prepared to fill. You may get ideas to meet those needs that transcend email!
- If you decide to pursue an email newsletter, first ask which audience segment(s) you intend to reach. Which specific audience member needs are you looking to meet? How will you know if you're succeeding?
- How often will you publish? What will the tone of the newsletter be?
- Be very specific about the workflow for producing your newsletters. Who

will write, copyedit, produce, and send your newsletter(s)? Who will analyze analytics?

- How will you pay for producer time and email management software? How can you best balance effort and effectiveness to ensure long-term viability of your choices?
- How will you monetize your email newsletters if at all? How does that monetization strategy mesh with the tone, timing, and schedule of the product?
- How will you maintain a healthy email list and monitor its performance?
- How will you collect feedback from newsletter subscribers? How often will you revisit your strategy?

D. Using Events to Engage Readers

Live events complement digital journalism and engagement with a related but separate channel for building relationships with readers. (At The Texas Tribune Festival, we met some members whose entire relationship with the publication was centered around the annual gathering and who rarely read the site online.) Events can include behind-the-scenes looks at reporting projects, book readings, photo exhibitions, audience member listening sessions, debates, film screenings and discussions, conferences, and more.

Even if members can't participate in person or asynchronously, events are important signals of a site's mission and capabilities. For example, City Bureau generates such high interest in its weekly Public Newsroom gatherings that readers who participate via livestream have requested daytime events to involve people frequently left out of modern media: those who work outside of nine-to-five schedules, students, and the elderly. This also reflects the highly curious tone of these events, which are co-designed with community members and designed to represent their interests.

In this report's Editorial Engagement section, we explored how newsrooms can use in-person gatherings with readers to solicit story ideas, answer questions, and ask for feedback. In the Expose and Attract section, we focused on how publishers can participate in events organized by others as a way of attracting new audiences and promoting their brand. Publishers can also sponsor and organize their own live events to draw readers in and bring them closer to membership, and in this section we focus on publisher

events as a means to engage readers. Later in the report we discuss using events as a way to sustain membership.

Even when publishers have a strong audience revenue program in place, some use live journalism/events as opportunities to generate revenue through sponsorships and/or ticket sales. These events can be a way to engage and monetize readers even if they don't ultimately become paying supporters. Some publishers have found offering tickets to be a valued membership benefit. Other publishers create events that are free experiences with a primary intent of deepening the relationship between readers, their journalism, and their organization. Some publishers have adopted a blended strategy in which events are both sponsored but free to attend. Collecting participant email addresses at these events is key.

As a tool for deepening a publisher's relationships with readers, events can be designed to serve different audience member interests: to meet others similar to them, to meet or hear from journalists in person, or to participate in compelling political and cultural dialogue.

Here we highlight a variety of interesting approaches to events by a few publications:

Berkeleyside hosts a two-day Uncharted Ideas Festival as their major annual community and revenue-generating event. The event brings together nationally and locally known experts in their fields, artists, and performers for on-stage conversations and interactive sessions, and includes food and drink. Members who had participated in past festivals told us they appreciated that it featured ample time and space for them to meet one another face to face. It also provides staff opportunities to talk about their membership program and—while it is open for involvement—their pioneering direct public offering, as described by Nieman Lab.[76]

VTDigger has hosted events across Vermont on the topics including economic development, funding for education, the opiate crisis, and political candidates' forums. The site generates revenue at these events through sponsorships and participant donations, which are free to attend and often draw a few dozen participants. They partner with local underwriters who might not want to buy banner ads and offer to package their event sponsorship with online media buys. Former VTDigger publisher Diane Zeigler said, "These are not advocacy events and we don't sell our brand to do a

Digger-sponsored event. We won't take a position on an issue. Instead we present a problem and listen to potential solutions." These events are intended to help locals understand important issues, and VTDigger might increase their emphasis on events if they're able to add a full-time coordinator to plan them.

The Ferret ensures that its events offer high educational value to its Scottish readers. Its members have been more likely to participate in workshops to learn about fact-checking, reporting and investigating, and video editing. "Meet The Ferret"-type gatherings to encourage informal team and audience member interactions are less well attended.

Consider whether you might offer brief professional development sessions that bring potential members to the organization. Dr. Susan Forde, a researcher of alternative and participatory media at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia, said that this approach has worked well in community radio. "They might run sessions in professional audio recording, podcasting, interviewing techniques, basic journalism, and more," Forde said. "Half-day or full-day training workshops can generate revenue; bring people in; showcase the journalists' and organization's expertise and skill; and demonstrate transparency." Host newsrooms can offer completion certificates or other proof of skillbuilding and industry connections, all of which are attractive to students and people looking to expand their capabilities.

MinnPost plans events in two varieties: large annual parties and smaller issue-focused "live journalism" gatherings. Publisher Andy Wallmeyer told us, "Every year we hold MinnRoast which has been a winner for us in terms of net revenue. It is a variety show that takes a lighthearted look at state politics and features a mix of skits, videos, song parodies, and guest monologues. State political leaders and journalists join us."

They also have an anniversary party with higher priced tickets and a VIP reception and smaller fundraising events in members' homes. MinnPost Social gatherings are less formal and intended to be break even. They differentiate between their sponsor-driven and editorially focused events. Wallmeyer said, "In general we try to offer events as an incentive [to our readers], and a reason to take a step to become a member."

Reveal from the Center for Investigative Reporting hosts a series called "Lunch Breaking" through Facebook Live. Its staff publishes calls for

audience questions for potential short investigations through its newsletter and social media channels. A small reporting team selects a question to answer and spends its lunch hour investigating it. At the end of lunch, the attendees report their findings via Facebook Live.

Reporters demonstrate how they use investigative reporting processes to answer audience questions, sometimes with the collaboration of the people who suggested the questions. One Lunch Breaking investigation built on Reveal's past exploration of student debt topics.[77] [78] A listener asked which student loan consolidation services that had contacted him were valid. Reveal reporter Amy Walters took the listener along in trying to find answers.

Hannah Young, Reveal's director of audience, said this initiative serves several purposes: to gather community members virtually, to offer live journalism on relevant subjects, to show investigative techniques, and to directly hear what audience members are curious to know more about— all while working within a short, time-constrained window that uses few resources and leaves "no homework" for reporters.

Considerations:

Consider your publication's near-term goals and evaluate whether an in-person gathering or virtual event, such as a Facebook Live session featuring reporters talking about a recent story of interest, might help you achieve your goals. List the people you will need for planning, day-of production, and participant follow-up. Brainstorm potential programming ideas and determine how you will fund the event, which may be the first in a series or a one-time gathering. In some cases, hiring a producer or freelance event coordinator with connections to local caterers and other vendors can be a good investment in terms of saving your team's time. Because email is such a vital tool for raising reader revenue, consider how to design your events to gather as many email addresses as you can.

After the event, assess its success against your initial goals:

- How did attendees respond to the event? In the future should you plan something less formal, such as a happy hour with reporters, to preserve organizational bandwidth?
- What skills and workshops have you heard your supporters express inter-

est in? Could educational sessions with your staff be a future benefit for members?

- How well did you communicate your organization's mission and work?
- How much money did you generate or lose?
- How many email address did you collect and what your plans for follow-on communication?
- In the future, what will you change in your event planning? Could you offer additional educational components and/or volunteer opportunities?

4. Convert

Once you've reached members of relevant audience segments, engaged them in meaningful ways, and deepened your relationship with supporters, you need to plan your next steps. When it comes to creating a "conversion strategy" (the campaign of strategic communications that will convert your readers into paying supporters), consider timing (campaign time and non-campaign time) and the type of recipient for your appeals (supporters and non-supporters). You'll want a campaign appeal plan for each quadrant that factors in the following: communication frequency; communications means, including platforms; tracking; and payment processing.

A customer relationship management (CRM) database that is structured to reflect your conversion strategy will help you manage communications both during campaign time and after. Mary Walter-Brown, now CEO of the News Revenue Hub, said that the Voice of San Diego organized its CRM to reflect their membership strategy as follows: "When we started, we knew we wanted to have a membership program and monetize as many readers as possible. We had two buckets of people—members and potential members. So we devised a communication plan and touch points for each, and designed exclusive benefits for those in the membership fold to keep them there. Then we created in the database [a way] to keep members and non-member communications separate."

In addition to regular dialogue with audience members via email, comments, events, and social media, Mary Walter-Brown's outbound planning considerations include the following:

	CAMPAIGN TIME	NON-CAMPAIGN TIME
MEMBERS	Sensitive (Customer service help)	Membership benefits
NON-MEMBERS	Intense	Frequent nudges (More personal asks)

A. Campaign structure

Many news sites use biannual campaigns for membership and/or donation in the spring and at the end of year and smaller campaigns throughout the year, sometimes including requests to fund specific reporting projects.[v]

Your communication strategy should create a sense of urgency and clearly communicate your goals. *Mother Jones* does this well: last year, the publication described the cost of financing its investigation into prison privatization.[79] As described by Nieman Lab,[80] *Mother Jones*'s "fundraising articles" serve an educational purpose into the economics of reporting, something we're eager to see more of.
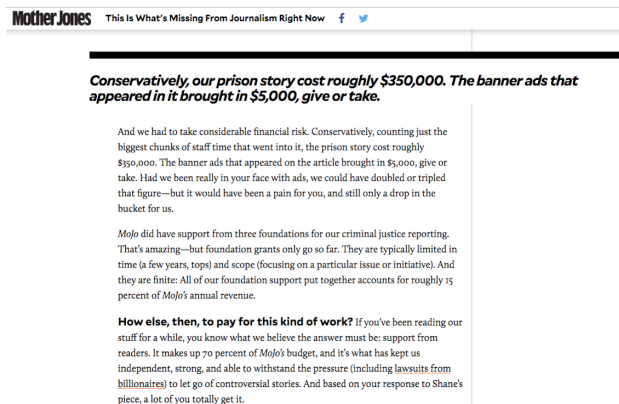
Mother Jones's fundraising strategy includes explaining the costs of the site's reporting to readers through its long-form "fundraising articles."

v. One example is *The Guardian* US's request for donations to fund its series of stories about public lands. *The Guardian*, "America's Public Lands Are in Danger. Help Us Fight the Government Sell-Off," June 5, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jun/05/public-lands-project-description

The possibility of exhausting regular donors or members with frequent or duplicate requests for giving is a common concern among news sites. During campaign time, smart use of your site, your email management system, and your CRM should help you manage pledge-drive overload. Segmenting your email database according to active and non-members will help you identify those who have already given so that you can either turn off email appeals to those donors/members or send them a gentle ask for an extra gift if their last donation was in a previous campaign. Tristan Loper of the NewsRevenue Hub shared, "[It's] worth noting that current donors have a high propensity to give again, so we do send them appeals—just fewer, and sensitive to the fact that they're already active." If you have a logged-in option on your site, you can turn off campaign pop-ups and other on-site calls to action when an active member is logged in.

VTDigger's former publisher Diane Zeigler shared, "We have to really balance [the volume of site notifications] with what a user can handle. You have to do the extra work to make sure you aren't appealing to [readers] who have already given." The site uses drop-down notifications from Sumo to decrease the annoyance of pop-up notifications.

The staff try to use humor in campaign messaging to disarm visitors. Zeigler said, "You can't use humor all the time, but if you are hitting people over the head [with an appeal], it is helpful to remove the earnestness quotient."

VTDigger uses DonorTools as its CRM tool and regularly reviews its email list to de-duplicate subscribers who also comment before sending membership appeals. It uses a rudimentary segmentation of its email list, including readers who comment, readers who hadn't given in the past two years, and out-of-state readers who care about Vermont issues. With each membership campaign, a staff member segments the master email list, tries to remove recipients who have given in the last twelve months, adjusts the message for each segment, and sends. Editor and founder Anne Galloway said their return on investment for DonorTools has been high and described their approach as a good way to use their resources so that VTDigger's business team has bandwidth to work on other projects besides membership.

Berkeleyside hosts four campaigns per year with one tied to holiday

giving. The others are "opportunistic," frequently based on new Berkeleyside coverage or a major upcoming story. Berkeleyside has also experimented with different campaign messaging. One past message told readers that they're getting news for free and asked if readers would miss their coverage if it weren't available. Another message reminded readers how dependent they are on Berkeleyside for community news, something that members have regularly shared with the site.

MinnPost has found social media to be largely ineffective for driving membership. Emails, "house" ads about MinnPost, and strategic pop-up ads have been most effective. Publisher Andy Wallmeyer said, "Our blog posts are not direct drivers of gifts. Very few people click on donation links contained in the posts. We nevertheless believe they encourage giving because they appear among our news headlines, giving added visibility to the fact that we're in member drive at the time they're published."

Considerations:

During campaign time, basic good practices of fundraising apply: make the online donation experience as frictionless as possible. Publish your campaign messages in a human voice. Don't be afraid to use smart defaults that increase suggested donation amounts and show a preference for recurring gifts. If your CRM allows, send appeals that are based on specific giving history and ask existing supporters to increase their gifts by a small mount. Turn off messaging to those who give; add a visible pop-up or lightbox on your site when you are in campaign season; provide tax deduction information; and send prompt thank-you notes (if a volunteer can hand write these, it may stand out from other direct mail). When your email file reaches 5,000 recipients, you can A/B test messaging to compare open and donation rates for campaign messages. This allows you to plan the communications you want to send to segments of your recipient lists for maximum impact.

Between campaigns, there are still plentiful opportunities to engage your supporters' time, money, and attention. It's beneficial to everyone to offer multiple means for their participation, including but not limited to how to comment, talk to reporters, suggest tips, and volunteer. Have visible calls to action and donation buttons on your site (no one wants to hunt for these

when they want to give). Consider including a note in email signatures and newsletter footers about the member or donor-driven nature of your work. Making sure that interested individuals can find out how to participate and donate from your article pages is also important.

B. Managing data infrastructure

Publishers' primary means for communicating membership appeals seems to be email newsletters, with online/on-podcast calls to action, direct mail, and events as other key supporting means. In planning email asks, it's important to segment email address lists into "member/donor" and "non-member/non-donor" categories and target messaging to each, if not more, segmented categories. We highly recommend you use your email provider or another CRM client for this as it's more secure than locally stored files. Popular community management tools among journalists include Sugar, Kindful, Raiser's Edge, Pico, CiviCRM, and DonorTools. Salesforce has a free nonprofit package[81] though nonprofit newsrooms can expect significant administrative and database maintenance costs.

Note that an ideal "journalism community management system" is something that should exist but currently doesn't. Publishers have told us that many of the current systems fall short in that they were designed for other use cases and decidedly not created with journalist/member interactions in mind.

Many publications also expressed concern about CRM tool selection and determining which user metrics matter most. Being able to manage your member data (e.g., names, email addresses, phone numbers, payment information, etc.), research and segment your users, develop targeted and strategic messaging, deliver that information, and track results are key operational components. It requires ongoing work to maintain a "clean" CRM database with up-to-date recipient contact information that includes information about how users have interacted with your publication (via comments, event attendance, or giving editorial suggestions). You'll want to ensure that email addresses aren't duplicated so you won't annoy recipients and to ensure an accurate sense of list size. (See the Shorenstein email report for good list management practices.)[82]

There are some key pieces of expertise for building a successful audience

revenue program using a CRM tool that are often difficult to find in a single person, including strategic communications experience, database management skills, marketing experience, and customer loyalty experience. Those skills and experiences are often distinct from traditional fundraising skills. This means it can be difficult to build a strong membership program with just one person. So as you build a membership program, plan ahead with the goal of hiring more than one person to support the program over time.

Database management is often the most difficult task facing publications launching membership programs because of the difficulty of learning CRM software and the ever-changing nature of the data itself. Migrating donor data from Excel into a CRM tool is a particular stumbling block that often holds publications back from being able to implement the strong audience revenue strategy they intend. Mary Walter-Brown observed, "Even if publications do set up a CRM, people often find it hard to be consistent [in how they manage the database]."

Some publications with solid CRM systems in place are thinking about analytics strategies that combine editorial and business-side metrics from their CMS, CRM, and email management software. This can involve creating bespoke software that can integrate data about reader behavior on-site with email newsletter consumption and giving history. As of the publication of this report, we aren't aware of reasonably priced, off-the-shelf tools that combine these types of metrics.

C. User data effectiveness

High user expectations about receiving personalized information (as fostered by habitual use of social media platforms and sites like Netflix, Spotify, and Amazon) are putting pressure on news organizations to collect and use data to deliver their coverage differently. Opt-in user surveys are one option for collecting user data and they can be useful for identifying the patterns that might be leading visitors to convert to donors, subscribers, and members. Though the data will be self-reported, they can give you a sense of the range of supporter motivations for giving.

These data can also help you segment and target users and can help you craft the language and timing of membership appeals. Understand-

ing aggregate user behaviors from your site statistics (or from third-party data from PodTrac or Nielsen) will help you learn which types of coverage perform well. If your site can link visitors' commenting behavior, event attendance, and newsletter subscriptions using email addresses, you may be able to get a sense of their various paths to membership conversion.

MinnPost has been experimenting with linking on-site user behavior and self-reported data to membership conversion. Andy Wallmeyer said that they used reader survey data to identify four factors that largely explained readers' likelihood of becoming members. "The two most significant factors were independent of anything in our control: donating to Minnesota-based public broadcasters and subscribing to a print newspaper," he explained. "Of the things related to what we do at MinnPost, we found the best predictors [of membership] to be a person's willingness to recommend MinnPost to others—a factor driven primarily by their perceptions of our content quality in politics and policy, education, and environment—and how frequently readers reported using the site."

Considerations:

There are important privacy considerations regarding the data you collect and use. Collect only the user data your organization needs immediately, such as on-site behaviors and geographic information that can be used for appropriate segmentation and messaging. Never sell your subscribers' information, including their email addresses: this would be a major breach of their trust. For more information, see information on the Privacy by Design framework, a defensive user protection approach.[83]

Many news sites have refrained from engaging in fundraising tactics such as sending advocacy and petition emails, renting email lists, and email list sharing. While these approaches have been very effective for nonprofits and political campaigns, journalism ethics and privacy policies have prevented many news publishers from pursuing them. This debate is ongoing, and there may be an opportunity for some local and issue-based sites to adapt some of these advocacy-flavored tactics to their own purposes. Any experimentation in the service of tapping willingness to support journalism should be carefully considered against risk of jeopardizing email subscribers' trust.

D. Giving and asking frequency

One-time, monthly, or annual giving

Small-dollar philanthropy, which some organizations classify as efforts to solicit gifts under 1,000 dollars each (as a parallel revenue stream to major gifts) has shifted from focusing primarily on asking supporters for one-time donations to encouraging them to enroll in automatic billing charged monthly or annually. News sites that accept donations and memberships this way say that auto billing reduces many of the overhead issues associated with seeking renewals. However, issues with users' credit cards expiring still remain, allowing recurring payments and intended gifts to lapse.

While some fundraisers fear that pursuing monthly giving can reduce the overall size of a supporter's annual gift, any particular membership appeal doesn't have to be exclusively for either a "lump sum" or sustaining/repeat gift. Some publications ask their members to give an extra gift for a special project or to include the publication in their annual giving list at the end of the year.

Differences in how people give may reflect their emotional connections to publications and their journalism. Melanie Coulson, executive director for member station services at Greater Public, described that one-time and lump-sum members often donate to pay for what they use (which we think of as a utility mindset) or to support a community resource that they value greatly. She differentiates them from recurring or "sustaining" members who experience a publisher's content as a primary news source and may have deeper and more emotional reasons to participate (such as interest in supporting a cause they think should exist in the world, which reflects more of a unique value mindset).

Ask frequency

The best practices for email fundraising suggest that emails are no place to be shy about asking for contributions from readers—the advice is to ask firmly and ask often. Oftentimes it takes work on the part of journalists to feel good about their work, and good about asking for money to support it. We encourage journalists to participate in the reader revenue generation process by making the case to readers for the quality of their work and its

importance. And remind your readers that you need their support in order to provide the stories they rely on.

For email fundraising, unsubscribes can be the price of stronger and more frequent asks. Yet this is not a reason to worry. If your newsletter readers can't stay in the relationship through campaign time, they were probably not very engaged to begin with. This is not to say that every email should be topped with a donation request. That tactic is important during campaign time, but between campaigns you can use footers or signatures that remind readers that their support matters and how to donate.

5. Sustain

Recognizing and thanking members

To retain supporters it's imperative to communicate your appreciation for their support and clarify how you use their funds and other forms of commitment, including their ideas and volunteer time. It behooves your organization to regularly ask for supporters' feedback, including what they'd like to see changed. This conveys curiosity about their needs and a desire to improve your work for the audiences you serve.

You'll want to create a communications strategy for donors/members that is separate from the approach you use with other users. Test different messages for supporters that emphasize the impact of their support on your reporting and news production. Expressing your gratitude consistently in your editorial and marketing, as well as in your organizational culture, promotes reliability and ongoing audience-centricity.

Physical product gifts are among many possible ways to express gratitude to supporters. However, it's vitally important to balance the cost of production and fulfillment against the revenue generated from physical gifts. If you aren't careful, the cost of your thank-you gifts to members can outweigh the additional revenue gained from implementing (too many, too expensive, all-together wrong) premiums.

People do enjoy expressing their affiliation with physical items like hats, T-shirts, mugs, and bags. If you give them, ensure they feature your logo legibly. But often non-physical membership benefits like events, behind-the-scenes newsletters, or seminars can be more impactful and valuable to

members. Being in close touch with current, former, and potential supporters is the best way to learn whether exclusive member access is of greater interest than branded bags, for example. Below we shared some examples of how publications are thinking about balancing physical premiums and perks with other types of member benefits.

Slate Plus editorial director Gabe Roth said that physical premiums have worked for the company. "But we haven't found the one thing that really drives everyone. Perks work when they are associated with an appeal to people's values," he said. The Slate Plus team takes an experimental approach to trying different benefits for members, including events and exclusive coverage in the form of show segments and in-depth "Slate Academy" shows on individual topics. That means cutting offerings quickly when they aren't offering worthwhile returns, such as TV recap podcasts that didn't stand out.

MinnPost provides some member-specific coverage and on-site perks. "MinnPost +" member benefits include reduced pop-up ads on site, a subscription to *The Atlantic* magazine, curated links to work published elsewhere, and republished reporting from other nonprofit news organizations that is relevant to Minnesotans. Andy Wallmeyer explained: "The design of our membership program was based on a big reader survey. We saw that some people cared about wrap around stuff (off-site stuff) and some just cared about the on-site experience and the content. We wanted a program that had a benefit at every level that would have strong appeal to each kind of user."

Wallmeyer continued, "It was hard for us to come up with [a content benefit] that also didn't violate what we set out to do with our main mission [of journalism], and by extension weaken our case to philanthropic donors and funders. We didn't want to change the original journalism that we do. But there is an aggregation and curation function that we feel okay about."

ProPublica provided an optional gift for donors in 2017. The "secondary opt-in" offer came via an email from its director of online giving, Jill Shepherd. She said that seventeen percent of email recipients responded to receive gifts as of one month post-campaign. Comparatively, when Shepherd worked with public radio stations including Chicago Public Radio

she saw gift claim rates closer to forty percent, which may reflect public broadcasting's frequent use of physical goods in membership and donation offers.

ProPublica emailed donors, after they had given, to offer a voluntary thank-you gift.

B. Engaging and sustaining members

In our interviews with publications, we were impressed with the number and quality of organizations that are taking members up on their interest in being involved by having them contribute in two ways: by helping organizations operationally and by aiding the journalism itself. Public media stations have led the charge in having multiple opportunities for member volunteers to help out during events and pledge drives. We're now seeing volunteering that strengthens stories, too, with members participating as fact checkers, co-reporters, and technical proofreaders. We think this deepened involvement will point to long-term sustainability for publications that goes well beyond the campaign cycle. These sites are among the leaders in participatory member-supported journalism.

Inside Story in Athens, Greece, publishes articles and hosts events that start with members' pitches. When one of its members wondered why Greek agricultural products fail to stand out in the international market, he pitched it as an investigation idea during one of the publication's #YourStory events.[84] Finalists pitched their fellow members and the winning four stories were co-reported by members and staff. Inside Story's editor, Machie Tratsa, who specializes in environmental issues, conducted additional research and reporting on the agricultural story. Member Evan-

gelos Gerasimou commented on one of the #YourStory pieces after it ran: "With this story, my money [to support Inside Story] was worth it."

The New Tropic in Miami offered space for ten members to join hard-hat tours of one of Miami's science museums, which served as a chance for staff to talk to members about what they care about. Reporters learned that there was a great amount of interest in the topic of the museum budget and complications that resulted in a delayed museum opening, and this led the team to extend coverage more than they might have otherwise. Co-founder Rebekah Monson said that in inviting members to join the tour and "putting out the call, we got high responses and knew it was of interest. And we had people to call [on] once the stories ran."

Krautreporter, a news cooperative in Germany, prioritizes working with different members based on their strengths. It asks them to share their hobbies and occupations when signing up, then uses the information that members offer to target the most relevant members with asks about specific stories. Publisher Sebastian Esser says that the site takes a non-precious but intentional approach to its membership. Its strategy is three-fold: "explain, collaborate with members, [and] be personal." Krautreporter researches topics that its members suggest warrant independent investigation, even if they're covered on other sites. Their most popular topic to date has been a 60,000-character explainer on the Civil War in Syria[85] written in informal language.

Slate Plus, Slate's membership program, represents the company's strategic shift toward loyal and engaged readers and listeners, including members, and has entailed more work but also greater rewards. Editor in chief Julia Turner said that publishing with these readers and listeners in mind has had substantive virtuous effects on Slate's journalism. With their willingness to provide feedback[86] and offer story ideas that sometimes make their way into editorial, Turner considers "persuading Slate readers and listeners to become members the princess at the end of the video game." (This is a more colorful take on the funnels, pyramids, targets, and other metaphors that dominate conversations about audience targeting within digital journalism.)

This orientation toward members entails significant costs in staff and freelancer time, as well as systems to manage workflow. Staff who work on

membership efforts in news frequently told us that they need better systems for identifying which audience members they might engage with for best returns, and for testing and tracking communications to different audience segments. It's important not to underestimate the amount of ongoing effort that goes into maintaining and growing membership efforts. Sites such as De Correspondent in the Netherlands anticipate that its reporting staff will spend approximately one-third to half of its working time in communication with readers. While intensive, these sites find regular audience collaboration to be a good return on investment as it demonstrates concern for members and encourages more interactions, both of which aid its future journalism.

Newsrooms, Member Support, and Culture Change

Some publications' staff members reflected to us that becoming an audience-driven—and especially member-driven—newsroom requires a huge culture change for reporters and editors. The two-way engagement between publication and audience required to sustain a successful membership strategy can initially feel uncomfortable for reporters, editors, developers, and designers who have worked in traditional legacy institutions that maintain a clear boundary between newsroom staff and audience members.

This boundary can be problematic in building a successful membership revenue strategy. As Merel Borger writes in her report "Participatory Journalism: Rethinking Journalism in the Digital Age": "Journalism's ideology has long provided a sense of who is *in* and by consequence also of who is *out*: professional journalists are in, while, amongst others, sources, the audience, and those from neighboring occupations, like public relations and communication, are out. "[87] The result is too often an attitude of "readers/viewers/listeners are not my problem—call the marketing department" that badly needs to be modernized.

These are a few bright examples of publishers emphasizing that communities are indeed the concern of editorial teams and not just that of their "business-side" colleagues. Sweden's citizen-funded Blank Spot Project manages topic-specific closed Facebook groups where members can share perspectives on investigative topics that they consider underreported. Gimlet invites members to offer feedback on its pilot podcasts. *The New York Times* is setting up a reader hub in its newsroom, a major change for the legacy outlet.[88]

For making audiences more visible, the subscription-based tech outlet The Information highlights community members' contributions[89] and WNYC has a community advisory board, which gathers listener feedback for the station.[90] By expecting writers to be in touch with their communities, De Correspondent is finding community members to be generous with their time and talents. Correspondents regularly and successfully request readers' expertise on the basis of their jobs, such as asking teachers about their classroom experiences for the benefit of education reporting. De Correspondent writers told us about instances of readers providing invaluable tips, technical proofreading, connections to sources, and help drumming up interest in their reporting in advance of publication. These aren't one-off

instances: members are contributing with high frequency because journalists are asking for their help.

Many of our interviewees shared that exchanges between members and newsroom staff have ultimately been very rewarding for both. For example, Gabe Roth from Slate Plus said that editorial staff has participated in member-focused work with interest, even when it entails an extra twenty minutes in the recording studio creating bonus coverage for each episode. He said that he wants Slate political writers to feel validated by readers joining as members in high numbers after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The membership program growth was a testament to their reporting and the value people got from it, Roth said.

Direct engagement with an audience that is also funding the work can be deeply meaningful to journalists in their everyday work. For example, Celeste LeCompte of ProPublica reflected to us about what she learned from working with the crowdfunded reporting project Climate Confidential: "Having a direct relationship with the people who wanted to read our stories and believed in our work was surprisingly meaningful to me. I am always trying to think about who I am writing for and who the audience is. But when the audience was also the people who were giving us money and felt they had a stake in us, that meant they wanted to give us tips, and to tell other people about us. That kind of relationship has other psychic benefits for the newsroom that are hard to discount."

Becoming a member-supported operation requires significant leadership. At podcast network Radiotopia, founder Roman Mars invests a significant portion of his time in encouraging audience members to support the organization. His frequent use of "we" in communications refers to staff and supporters alike and conveys a closeness that is well in line with the way that Radiotopia talks with, not at, its donors.

Jesse Thorn, founder of the member-supported podcast network Maximum Fun, said that "as a rule," everyone in the organization, from show producers to hosts, is involved with creating, leading, and engaging their show's audience. Creator-led audience engagement ties directly into Maximum Fun's efforts to grow membership. All shows in the network rely heavily on audience participation, which includes global meetups throughout the year, regular listener call-ins, and several active social media groups

made up of listeners and staff. Maximum Fun's staff also works closely with members throughout the year to set goals for its annual membership drive, for example, and members become heavily involved in the network's two annual conventions. "It's not just lip service," Thorn said. "The teams are always trying to deepen the connection with the audience. [And] the discovery of much of our current network of talent has actually been guided by audience."

Conclusion

The decades-long decline in traditional and digital ad revenue is forcing publishers to shift their business models. Some have seen that listening to their audiences instead of acting as an at-arms-length, all-knowing institution helps them to better serve those community members' interests and to use feedback to improve coverage and user experiences.

Together these trends have led to increased interest in membership strategies, including from publishers that hadn't previously considered developing such programs. In recent years, the news industry has seen an evolution as more legacy institutions, news startups, and nonprofit publishers have redesigned or launched membership programs. In many cases, they've conducted audience research and adjusted their communications from "subscribe" to "support" messaging as part of these efforts. These endeavors strengthen their existing audience development efforts and provide opportunities for staff to work together across disciplines. For example, Slate's editor in chief, Julia Turner, told us that publishing with members in mind has had substantive, "virtuous effects" on Slate's journalism: it has freed reporters to pursue more in-depth stories of interest to committed audiences.

As Drs. Tamara Witschge and Frank Harbers from the University of Groningen in Holland write in their report "The Entrepreneurial Journalist": "The future of journalism is envisaged in the form of journalists who (alone or in collaboration) are able to monetise content in innovative ways, connect to its publics in interactive new formats, grasp opportunities and respond to (and shape) its environment."[91] We see all of these effects at work in well-designed and highly interactive audience revenue programs.

In designing for audience revenue—building the series of interactions and touchpoints that turn a casual reader into a paying supporter—publishers face the difficulty of getting people to pay. The publishers we spoke with know that most online news consumers aren't used to regularly paying to support journalism. As Chris Faraone, founder of the Boston Institute for Nonprofit Journalism, told us, "People are just not used to funding journalism directly."

Simultaneously, though, many publishers share Faraone's experience that "people want to be involved with journalism, especially at the local and community level." Our research suggests that news sites need to offer

transparency about their funding along with information and analysis that audiences can't find elsewhere online. They must offer usefulness and a mission that readers, listeners, and viewers want to support. We conclude from our research that news sites offering unique coverage and visibility into their processes are better poised to turn audience interest into revenue to grow their work.

No matter which issue(s) your site covers, its size, or its legacy with supporters, we hope you'll bring curiosity about prospective visitors' needs when crafting editorial products and designing revenue streams. A spirit of experimentation aids this important work. We encourage your organization to consider multiple ways that supporters might participate in and further your work. This includes but is not limited to revenue generation.

Appendix I: Interviewee List

We'd like to thank these interviewees for their ideas and time:

Alex Villari, fundraising and strategy consultant for PRX,
    Grand Army Advisors

Andy Wallmeyer, publisher, MinnPost

Anne Galloway, founder and editor, VTDigger

Arelina Merakou, engagement editor, Inside Story

Ben Nishimoto, director of philanthropy, Honolulu Civil Beat

Ben Thompson, founder, Stratechery

Celeste LeCompte, vice president of business development, ProPublica

Chris Faraone, founder, Boston Institute for Nonprofit Journalism

Diane Zeigler, former publisher, VTDigger

Elisabeth Goodridge; editor, newsletters and messaging;
    The New York Times

Erin Millar, editor in chief and CEO, Discourse

Gabe Roth, editorial director, Slate

Gina James, manager of development and operations, PRX

Hannah Young; director of audience; Reveal, Center for
    Investigative Reporting

Jesse Thorn, founder, Maximum Fun

Julia Turner, editor in chief, Slate

Julie Drizin, executive director, Current

Kate Myers; executive director; First Look Media, The Intercept

Lauren Bracey Scheidt, senior product manager for listener
    journey, NPR

Mariko Chang, membership and events manager, Honolulu Civil Beat

Mary Walter Brown, CEO, News Revenue Hub

Melanie Coulson, executive director for member station services,
    Greater Public

Peter Geoghegan, director, The Ferret

Rebekah Monson, co-founder, WhereBy.Us

Sarah Glen, product and growth manager, Chalkbeat

Sebastian Esser, publisher, Krautreporter

Susan Forde, Ph.D.; professor of journalism and director; Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research, Griffith University

Tim Griggs, independent consultant and advisor

Tracey Taylor, co-founder, Berkeleyside

Tristan Loper, CTO, News Revenue Hub

Appendix II: Resources

State of the industry

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User research

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"Product Discovery Activity Guide," *The New York Times*, https://www.slideshare.net/almingwork/nyt-product-discovery-activity-guide

Revenue streams

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"The 3 Types of News Subscribers: Why They Pay and How to Convert Them," American Press Institute, https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/news-subscriber-types/single-page/

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Email #2—Our Guiding Principles: Ben Nishimoto
   https://us1.campaign-archive.com/?u=e23104acf3e9c0a23f9d89163&id=
4040cf2f55

Email #3—Events and Engagement: Mariko Chang
https://us1.campaign-archive.com/?u=e23104acf3e9c0a23f9d89163&id=d276f3f375

Email #4—Refer-a-Friend: Landess Kearns
https://us1.campaign-archive.com/?u=e23104acf3e9c0a23f9d89163&id=a2b1074c95

Email #5—What Sets Us Apart: Patti Epler
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