Publish Less, but Publish Better: Pivoting to Paid in Local News

Joy Jenkins

REUTERS
INSTITUTE
FOR THE STUDY OF JOURNALISM

UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

Contents

About the Author

Joy Jenkins is an assistant professor in the School of Journalism and Electronic Media at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and a research associate at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Her research focuses on the sociology of news, particularly changing organisational structures and roles in newsrooms, and gender representations in the media. She earned her doctorate in journalism from the University of Missouri in 2017. Her work has been published in multiple academic journals. She previously worked as a copy editor and reporter at an alternative newsweekly in Oklahoma City and as senior editor at a city magazine in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

This report examines how local and regional newspapers around Europe have adapted their editorial and business strategies to remain sustainable in the digital media environment. Although these legacy media continue to derive the majority of their revenues from their print products, they recognise the need to invest in high-quality, distinctive digital content that serves existing readers while attracting the new readers who will ensure their future.

We focus on how these local and regional news organisations have embraced the shift to paid content online, including freemium, premium, micropayment, and reader-donation models. This 'pivot to paid' (Newman et al. 2019) has resulted in significant changes to how the news organisations approach their editorial products and distinguish value-added journalism, leading to new newsroom roles and routines, content-creation and management strategies, and tactics for platform distribution.

This research is based on 20 interviews conducted between December 2019 and March 2020 with managers and editors at eight local and regional newspapers in four countries (Finland, France, Germany, and the UK). Seven of these news organisations were featured in the 2018 report *The Digital Transition of Local News* (Jenkins and Nielsen 2018); The *Yorkshire Post* in the UK is new for this report. These case newspapers represent both independent and group-based ownership models, and the responses of interviewees reflect both country-specific and universal concerns affecting local media.

This report finds that:

- In the last two years, all of the case newspapers have shifted from digital strategies emphasising the pursuit of audience reach, monetised through advertising or a blend of paid-content models and auxiliary sources, to a focus on building lasting relationships with readers who will pay for online content in the form of subscriptions, memberships, access to premium articles, donations, or micropayments.

- The news organisations prioritise loyal readers over 'fly-by' visitors driven by platforms such as Google and Facebook. They aim to attract these audiences through producing distinctive, 'value-added' content that reflects both the classic functions of local journalism – coverage of crime, courts, and traffic – and also allows for continued experimentation in long-form, data-driven, and solutions-oriented reporting.

- The newsrooms have embraced a commercial mindset that supports the adoption of new editorial processes and roles to enhance digital revenues, including strategies for scheduled content, quantifying attention and engagement, breaking online news, producing in-depth features, developing new products such as podcasts and newsletters, collaborating between editorial and commercial departments, and sharing content among multiple publisher holdings.

- This emphasis on relationship-building has spurred changes to these organisations' platform strategies, particularly in regard to Facebook, which remains a significant traffic-driver. Just as Facebook as a company has shifted its focus from public posts to groups and private messaging, the newspapers have scaled back their reliance on the platform for achieving algorithmic reach and instead use it strategically to promote subscriptions, connect with targeted groups, and reach new audiences.

Overall, the editors and managers interviewed for this report are optimistic about the potential of payment-driven strategies for maximising resources, and many are seeing gradual increases in their digital revenues. They also expressed concern about their ability to continue to innovate their digital offerings, retain newsroom talent, and maintain and attract readers who recognise the value of supporting high-quality local news.

Follow-up interviews in August 2020 reveal that these challenges have been enhanced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although many of the news organisations initially saw unprecedented online traffic as audiences sought out local information about testing, infection rates, and closures, they also experienced sharp declines in advertising, event revenues, and print deliveries. Some organisations also faced furloughs, layoffs, and closures. Even so, the need for accurate, credible local information persists, and these outlets remain committed to producing and reinforcing the value of local news.

Introduction

The challenges facing the local media sector have been the site of mounting interest, research, and concern. Local and regional newspapers have long seen their market power and legacy print operations decline alongside the rise of digital consumption and powerful platforms, leading to reductions in publication frequency, shrinking newsrooms, and closures. Research has chronicled the prevalence of 'news deserts' and 'ghost newspapers' (Abernathy 2018) in countries such as the US and the UK and examined how the loss of local outlets alters the social, political, and economic fabric of communities (for example, Hayes and Lawless 2018; Karlsson and Rowe 2019; Napoli et al. 2019; Wahl-Jorgensen 2019).

Meanwhile, news organisations are increasingly moving to paid-content models online and adapting to a platform-driven media environment in which audiences turn to messaging apps to consume and discuss news (Newman et al. 2020). Although the number of readers paying for online news has increased in many countries, this trend is driven by a 'winner-take-most' trend in which large national news brands draw the highest proportion of subscribers (Newman et al. 2020).

Audiences, however, are often not aware of the revenue challenges their local outlets face. In countries such as the US, conversations about nonprofit and publicly funded models for local news are gaining steam (Pickard 2020). Additionally, local newspapers are valued more in some countries (Germany, Norway, Spain, the US) than others (the UK, France), which directly translates to readers' willingness to subscribe and donate to local news (Newman et al. 2020). Although interest in local news, as compared to other types of news, is more evenly distributed among those with different levels of education, interest among young readers has been more difficult to obtain (Newman et al. 2020).

The global COVID-19 crisis has caused even more strains. Many local outlets have seen unprecedented traffic levels and increases in digital subscriptions as audiences seek credible local information about the pandemic. However, news organisations have also faced losses in advertising and event revenues, declining newsstand sales, and consolidation and closures, leading some to predict that 2020 could be the worst year yet for local media.

Despite these challenges, local and regional news organisations have devised innovative ways to serve their readers and communities, creating new digital offerings and developing alternative revenue strategies (Ali et al. 2019; Jenkins and Nielsen 2018). They also operate as ambidextrous organisations, exploiting their legacy products while experimenting with digital innovations (Jenkins and Nielsen 2020).

This report builds on previous research investigating the digital transition of local news in Europe (Jenkins and Nielsen 2018). Through interviews with editors and managers at eight local and regional newspapers in four countries, we examine how they have evolved their editorial and business strategies to remain relevant in a quickly changing – and increasingly competitive – media environment.

In our previous report, managers, editors, and journalists at local and regional newspapers and their parent companies identified common challenges and opportunities in their work. Staff members at nearly all of the newspapers noted that they had seen declining circulation numbers and advertising revenues, particularly for their print products, and were working to monetise

online content and traffic; develop new digital products, particularly around video; and attract younger readers. They also highlighted the importance of better understanding and engaging with their audiences, reducing their reliance on distribution through platforms, and convincing readers of the value of investing in digital content.

This report explores how local and regional newspapers are navigating the 'pivot to paid' (Newman et al. 2019) embraced by many legacy news organisations in recognition that revenues from digital advertising and auxiliary sources, such as events and e-commerce, are unlikely to compensate for print losses. The adoption of paid models has led these outlets to: develop new products to attract and build relationships with loyal readers; adapt newsroom structures and routines to prioritise the creation of premium content; adjust their tactics for platform distribution, particularly on Facebook; and work to better engage with and build trust among audiences.

The report is based on 20 interviews with managers and editors at local and regional newspapers in Finland, France, Germany, and the UK, conducted largely in person between December 2019 and March 2020. The countries selected represent different media systems (Hallin and Mancini 2004) and the chosen newspapers operate according to different ownership models. Although two similarly sized newspapers in each country were chosen, the sample as a whole reflects a range of circulation rates, newsroom sizes, and parent-company assets (see Table 1). Therefore, the challenges and opportunities these news organisations face do not necessarily reflect the realities of all local and regional newspapers.

The local media environments in these countries also feature significant differences, with a heavily consolidated local press operating alongside strong public- and private-sector national news in the UK, dominant regional newspaper companies in France, and robust local and regional newspapers in Germany and Finland. Therefore, comparatively evaluating European local media can reveal diverse challenges, opportunities, and innovations.

The news organisations included in the report are: *Kaleva* and *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat* (Finland), *Ouest-France* and *Nice-Matin* (France), *Westfalenpost* and *Main-Post* (Germany), and *Yorkshire Post* and *Kent Messenger* (UK). The *Yorkshire Post* is owned by JPIMedia, which took over the assets of Johnston Press in 2018; the *Kent Messenger* is owned by privately held regional publisher Iliffe Media; *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat* is owned by Keskisuomalainen, one of Finland's largest local and regional publishers; *Westfalenpost* is owned by Germany's third-largest publisher, Funke Mediengruppe; and *Main-Post* is owned by German publisher Mediengruppe Pressedruck. *Ouest-France*, *Nice-Matin*, and *Kaleva* are independently owned.

This report finds that in shifting their emphasis to paid-content models, news organisations are redirecting their focus from producing a consistent stream of breaking, high-traffic news to more in-depth, localised approaches. Although these outlets continue to derive the majority of their revenues from their print products, they have embraced the need to enhance their digital revenues through diversified business models, including paid articles, subscriptions, and donation and membership programs, as well as newsletters, events, podcasts, videos, and other offerings.

These strategies rely less on fly-by readers attracted through platforms, such as search and social, and more on loyal readers seeking distinctive local content. As a result, the organisations have implemented new newsroom roles, content-management strategies, and social media tactics to produce premium content more efficiently (and identify the readers willing to pay for it). These strategies also require the news organisations to reinforce to their readers – and, in some cases, governments and platform companies – the value of investing in local news. Even as competition from other local news sources – such as Facebook groups, political parties, local enterprises,

ESS ETELÄ-SUOMEN SANOMAT	*Etela-Suomen Sanomat* (Southern Finland News) is a metropolitan daily newspaper published in Lahti in southern Finland. Founded in 1900, the newspaper became *Etela-Suomen Sanomat* in 1914, after the merger of multiple newspapers in the area. *Etela-Suomen Sanomat* was family-owned until 2016, when it was purchased by Keskisuomalainen Oyj. The Keskisuomalainen media group consists of 60 newspapers, including paid local newspapers and free city papers, and two radio stations.
KALEVA.fi	*Kaleva* is a daily regional newspaper that has been published in Oulu in northern Finland since 1899. The newspaper, which is the largest in northern Finland, also has offices in Raahe and Vaala. The Kaleva 365 Oy media group publishes *Kaleva* as well as *Forum24*, a free city newspaper for Oulu city centre. Kaleva also recently acquired *Lapin Kansa*, a regional newspaper formerly owned by Alma Media.
nm	*Nice-Matin* is a regional newspaper group based in Nice in southeastern France. The group, which was founded in 1944 and consists of newspapers *Nice-Matin*, *Var-Matin*, and *Monaco-Matin*, was formerly owned by Groupe Hersant Média. Facing bankruptcy in 2014, employees formed a cooperative and crowd-sourced €400,000 and secured other financial support to acquire the media group. *Nice-Matin* is no longer a cooperative company but now has a shareholder, NJJ Holding.
ouest france	*Ouest-France* is a regional newspaper group based in Rennes in western France. Founded in 1944, the Ouest-France group includes 58 editorial offices in 12 departments in Brittany, Lower Normandy, Pays de la Loire, and Paris. Ouest-France publishes 53 daily local editions and two digital editions, and owns other newspapers, including *20 Minutes*, *La Presse de la Manche*, *Le Maine Libre*, *Courrier de l'Ouest*, as well as four radio stations including Hit West and Radio Cristal.
MAIN POST	*Main-Post* is a daily regional newspaper based in Würzburg in Franconia, Bavaria, Germany. Beginning as *Würzburg General-Anzeiger* in 1883, *Main-Post* was licensed in 1945. The Holtzbrinck publishing group owned the newspaper until 2011, when the family separated from *Main-Post*. It is now owned by Pressedruck, a family-owned publisher in Augsburg, Germany. The Main-Post Group includes the flagship newspaper and 16 local editions, as well as four other newspaper titles.
WP	*Westfalenpost* is a daily regional newspaper based in Hagen. It is the largest newspaper in southwest Westphalia, Germany. *Westfalenpost* is one of 12 regional newspapers owned by Funke Mediengruppe. The newspaper was founded in 1946 and includes 26 local editions.
ILIFFE MEDIA	Iliffe Media is an independent publisher serving markets in England, including Kent, East Anglia, Cambridgeshire, and Hertfordshire. It also part-owns Highlands News and Media in Scotland, which produces 13 newspapers, including the *Inverness Courier*.
YORKSHIRE POST	The *Yorkshire Post* is a daily newspaper based in Leeds in the north of England. It began as the *Leeds Intelligencer* in 1754 and was one of Britain's first daily newspapers. The newspaper was owned by Johnston Press until 2018 and is now owned by JPIMedia, the group of creditors who purchased Johnston Press's assets after the company went into administration.

schools, and churches – rises, local newspapers remain trusted news sources and are generally viewed as nonpartisan (Newman et al. 2020).

This report is structured as follows. First, it examines the models interviewees use to monetise content, from freemium to premium to micropayment and donation models. It also explores the news organisations' strategies for attracting readers and developing 'value-added' content. Next, it addresses how the newspapers are adapting their newsroom structures and roles to produce these editorial products more efficiently. Finally, it charts outlets' changing relationships with

platforms, particularly Facebook, including efforts to scale back platform distribution and leverage the potential of social media for broadening and deepening audience engagement. An epilogue describes how the outlets are navigating the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1. Local and regional newspapers covered

Country	Organisation	Print Circulation	Total Monthly Unique Users (000)	Number of Journalists	Parent Company	Total Annual Revenues of Parent Company
Finland	Etelä-Suomen Sanomat	39,000 (subscriptions); 86,000 (readers)	60 (ess.fi)	40	Keskisuomalainen Oyj	€231m (2019)
Finland	Kaleva	47,500	1 100 (kaleva.fi)	50	Kaleva Oy	€71m (2019)
France	Nice-Matin	115,680 (Monday-Saturday); 109, 216 (Sunday)	6 000 (nicematin.com)	190 (9 local editions)	Groupe Nice-Matin	€86m (2017)
France	Ouest-France	630,000	25 000 037 (ouest-france.fr)	530 (53 local editions)	Societe Ouest-France	€321m (journal), €1b (group) (2017)
Germany	Main-Post	115,000	174 (mainpost.de)	135 (17 local editions)	Mediengruppe Pressedruck	Not reported.
Germany	Westfalenpost	110,000	214 (wp.de)	131 (12 local editions)	Funke Mediengruppe	€1.3b (2015)
UK	Yorkshire Post	17, 551	1,794 (yorkshirepost.co.uk)	Not reported.	JPIMedia	Not reported.
UK	Kent Messenger Group	62,845	1,163 (kentonline.co.uk)	75 (21 local editions)	Iliffe Media Ltd.	Not reported.

Sources: Circulation and journalist numbers from interviewees; reach data from comScore (total unique visitors, June 2020); ess.fi, nicematin.com, and ouest-france.fr total unique visitors reported from interviewees; total revenues from interviewees.

1 Monetising Content

The most significant aspect of digital transformation at the newspapers in the sample is the emphasis on paid-content models online. Legacy publishers around the world have continued to turn away from advertising models and toward subscription, membership, and other paid strategies to enhance digital revenues, with some larger brands drawing significant numbers of subscribers. However, this 'winner-takes-most' trend (Newman et al. 2020) disadvantages smaller outlets, particularly in a mobile- and platform-driven environment.

The local and regional newspapers in the sample have incorporated various forms of paid content, including metered paywall, 'freemium', and 'premium' models (see Table 2). Some have only recently implemented paid models, while others have had them in place for years. Across the board, interviewees continue to experiment with their strategies to determine which types of content are most likely to draw paid subscribers.

Table 2. Online monetisation approaches

Organisation	Country	Payment Model	Main Source of Digital Revenue (Reported)
Etelä-Suomen Sanomat	Finland	Premium (50% online articles paid)	Subscriptions
Kaleva	Finland	Premium (two-week free trial period)	Ads and subscriptions
Nice-Matin	France	Freemium (focus on paid 'solutions journalism')	Ads and subscriptions (60%/40%)
Ouest-France	France	Hybrid freemium/premium	Subscriptions (online and print-online combination packages)
Main-Post	Germany	Recent conversion from metered paywall to freemium	Ads and subscriptions
Westfalenpost	Germany	Freemium (70% online articles paid)	Ads and subscriptions
Yorkshire Post	UK	Ads-based (reader donations programme implemented in August 2020)	Ads
Kent Messenger Group	UK	Micropayments (20p per article; 60p for full access)	Ads

1.1. Models for Monetisation

Etelä-Suomen Sanomat uses a premium model in which stories covered by other newspapers are free while exclusive articles and those produced by the joint national news desk are paid, comprising about 50% of content. Managing editor Hanna Myyra said the number of paid subscribers is growing steadily – 37% over the last year – with a continued aim of 30% year-to-year growth. To meet this goal, the staff must learn more about readers, particularly non-subscribers, and invest in producing greater amounts of exclusive content. Myyra said:

> *About five years ago, when we [...] got a paywall, the amount of readers didn't go down at all, and peaked. It didn't affect us as much as we thought it would.*

Kirsi Hakaniemi, head of digital business for Keskisuomalainen Oyj, which owns *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat*, said that at the company level digital-only subscriptions have grown at a rate of 46%

(in 2018 compared to 2019), with a goal of 115,000 monthly digital-only subscribers by 2024. The company is also working to create a unified platform for attracting digital subscriptions.

Kaleva's premium model was introduced in 2018 and has grown to emphasise feature-length local stories, including those focused on health, history, profiles, and human-interest topics, content director Niiles Nousuniemi said. Readers can also take advantage of a two-week trial period of free access, and content on the coronavirus pandemic is offered for free. The news organisation, however, remains engaged in daily A/B/C testing to determine what content draws paying readers. The strategy has resulted in a 30% growth in digital subscriptions over the last year.

Ouest-France uses a hybrid freemium/premium model, developing multiple digital offerings to draw subscribers and maintain scale, including a complete digital subscription that offers access to five different products: the morning digital edition of the print newspaper, the evening edition, paywalled 'high-value' online content (30–40% of articles), digital archives, and a new digital newspaper called *Minuit Sport* (Midnight Sport). To retain the news organisation's loyal base of print subscribers (70,000), *Ouest-France* charges an additional €3 per month to access digital content. Fabrice Bazard, director of digital activities, said of the paid strategy:

> *We wanted to get out of the digital-for-free. We absolutely did not want to tell the customers, 'Look, the digital is not worth much, and it's free'. We really did not want this. And, moreover, the digital journalists would not have appreciated this.*
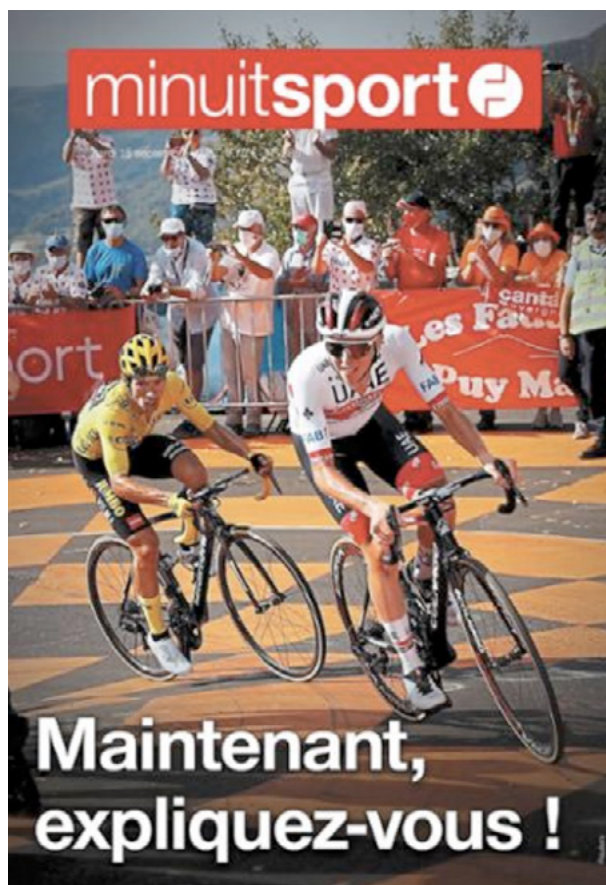
Ouest-France's new daily digital newspaper, Minuit Sport (Midnight Sport)

Bazard considers *Ouest-France*'s website a 'conversion funnel' to reach as many readers as possible, with a goal of attracting 300,000 subscribers by 2023 (from 110,000 currently). Although the site has increased traffic, from 20 million online visits per month in 2014 to 110 million in 2019, editors realise 'a large audience will not necessarily produce a lot of subscribers,' as Bazard said.

Therefore, *Ouest-France* has begun offering more video and audio products, as well as introducing an offer in 2018 of €4.09 for unlimited website access, which has drawn 12,000 subscribers, a third of whom are younger than 30. ('This could be the best piece of news of the year: young people are ready to pay if the price is reasonable,' said Bazard.) Offerings like the evening digital newspaper, the 'La Place' loyalty programme, which offers access to exclusive events, and free gift subscriptions for relatives have also reduced churn rates.

Nice-Matin's digital strategy focuses on premium content: long-form solutions journalism emphasising reader engagement. Subscribers receive access to solutions content and newsletters and can participate in the

reporting process through voting on upcoming investigation topics, suggesting ideas, completing surveys, and sharing their experiences. The solutions team is also focused on engaging with potential subscribers and following up on previous investigations, reporter Aurore Malval said.

Main-Post has used a metered-paywall model offering access to five articles for free per month, but it transitioned to a freemium model in May 2020. Managing editor Andreas Kemper said the metered strategy was effective; four years ago top stories drew 1,000 impressions in 24 hours, but that has risen to 7,000–8,000 and they now have 25,000 digital subscribers (including 11,000 to the e-paper). The freemium model, however, will highlight high-quality content and differentiate loyal online readers from fly-bys. Kemper said:

> *When you close all your gates, people don't know what good content you have. I think the main challenge now is to get the people to pay for our content. […] The conversion project will be very important for us to see, OK, this is content that can reach a big crowd. But is this a crowd that is willing to pay for us?*

Westfalenpost uses a freemium model in which 70% of articles are paid, most of which are original local content. Editor-in-Chief Jost Lubben said the proportion of paid content increased from 30% in 2018 to the current 70%, and the newspaper now has 6,010 digital-only subscribers. An initiative in the autumn of 2019, in which users could access four weeks of online content for free, also resulted in about 800 new subscribers. Lubben said that although he received some complaints initially and churn rates can be high, readers have become more amenable to the model as other newspapers in Germany adopt similar strategies.

Westfalenpost editors also identify what paid content attracts readers and follow up on those topics. As Deputy Editor-in-Chief Anne Krum described:

> *[Journalists] produce more content, especially for a digital reader. It's not only that we give out more content on a paid-for page, for paid readers only, but we produce more content for them, too.*
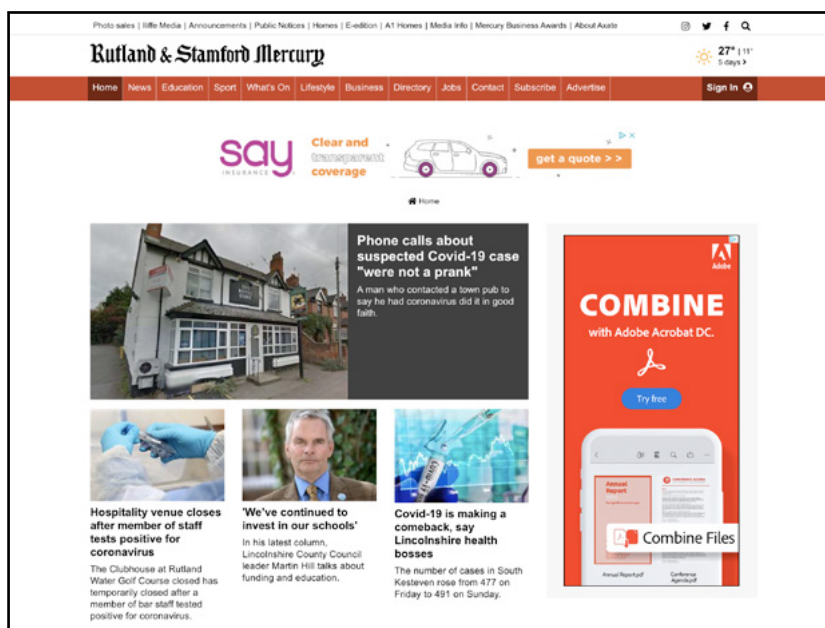
The home page for the *Rutland & Stamford Mercury*, which Iliffe Media acquired in 2017 and which is one of the websites serving as a test bed for paid digital news

In the UK in 2018, the newspapers in the sample (*Kent Messenger* and *Huddersfield Examiner*) followed an ads-based model prioritising digital traffic. In 2017, Iliffe Media purchased a number of titles serving the Midlands from Johnston Press. These titles included the *Rutland & Stamford Mercury*, the UK's longest continuously published newspaper. The companion websites of those titles were the test bed for the company's first experiments with paid digital news. The micropayment strategy asks readers to pay 20 pence from a digital wallet for selected

articles and multimedia content, with a cap of 60 pence for access to all online exclusives. Ian Carter, Iliffe's editorial director, said of the strategy, which was implemented in the autumn of 2019:

> *In terms of the number of people who have signed up and deposited money with us, it's slightly higher than we thought. But the way the system works, people effectively bank their money and they draw down on it and spend on each story. So, although people are depositing money, the trick is to actually get them to actually spend it once they've deposited it. […] So it's a real learning curve for us. It's really making us think about what people actually want to read, and what they want to spend money on.*

The model remains in the experimental phase, drawing the 'most loyal, most engaged readers', said Carter. The introduction of a paywall also drew some angry responses and even abuse from those who said they would never pay for content. Carter said he and others replied to readers to explain why they made the shift and the importance of paying for local news, a message that also pops up when readers click on paywalled articles. A direct-debit option ensuring ad-free access to paid content, as well as a paid app, are also in the works.

Paul Fisher, audience development manager for Iliffe Media, said micropayments ensure that public-service journalism – articles reflecting the 'core principles' of local news – remains free.

The *Yorkshire Post* uses a programmatic revenue model. Editor-in-Chief James Mitchinson said the *Post* and its sister title, the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, draw enough traffic – and the print newspapers draw high enough revenues – to allow time for investigating other models, but they should continue working to develop their online offerings. (In an August 2020 column, Mitchinson announced a new reader-support programme with £5 as a starting donation.)

1.2 Converting Readers into Subscribers

In the quest to effectively monetise content, better responding to reader preferences was also a key focus for interviewees. This process begins with using website and social media analytics to assess what content draws audiences, determining which of these stories they are willing to pay for and what types of readers are paying, and producing more of that content to appeal to that audience.

Iliffe Media's Carter said readers want in-depth long reads and investigative journalism, or the 'real bread-and-butter stuff that maybe we've stopped doing over the years'.

Similarly, Fisher noted that it is not the 'big, juicy murder cases' that have drawn paid readers; it is the more standard local-news fare, such as public court records, planning applications, 'consumer news' (for example, new shops and restaurant openings), and photo galleries showing families enjoying their communities. He said he keeps a daily log of the number of new subscribers gained, how much they've paid, and the types of stories they've purchased, which he shares with Iliffe editors to decide what they should define as 'premium' on their sites. In just four months, Iliffe Media had drawn more than 1,600 digital subscriptions. Fisher said:

> *You get smarter about what works and what people are willing to pay for. And the times of day, the days of the week. So it's a growing trend, and it's actually just saying to our teams, 'Look, I know you got that Facebook comment, but it's the vocal minority. There's a silent majority who are actually paying for our work.'*

Westfalenpost readers are drawn to news that is useful for daily life, such as recommendations for

local concerts, plays, movies, and art exhibitions, as well as insights into local sports and people. Ultimately, to attract paid readers stories should take a deep look at local and regional life. Jost Lubben described a recent project focused on how to live a more sustainable lifestyle:

> We had a project about sustainability, climate change, and the whole newsroom took a part, and we had good success with the pieces about giving advice on How should I live?, What should I eat?, What should I drink?, How should I commute?, What about my car or my bike? All that stuff, for example.

Etelä-Suomen Sanomat's Hannah Myyra said readers are drawn to free articles on crime and accidents, but paid subscribers prefer economic news, local politics, and profiles of local people.

Ouest-France regional director Vincent Jarnigon said his regional site has seen the popularity of local trial transcripts and coverage, as well as 'everyday life' topics such as minor accidents. He said his staff consults metrics on the most-read free and paid articles daily, which helps motivate journalists and serves as a guide for differentiating free and paid content:

> There was a serious accident some time ago, when a young woman on her bicycle was run over and killed by a truck of the City of Rennes. We managed to find the parents of that young woman, to learn who she was. This makes the story more humane, and readers want to learn who she was. If we only report about the accident, this is free content. If we tell her background story, as we are the only media to do it, it becomes paying content.

Edouard Reis Carona, Editor-in-Chief for Digital Content and Innovation, said people come to the *Ouest-France* site to read minor news items, such as sports, health, and everyday life, but the articles that convince them to stay are those with added value, such as a recent investigation in Syria:

> Some articles serve as hooks for new subscribers; other articles contribute to retain them. So we work a lot on the so-called 'dashboards', which list all topics that have the most chances to transform, and simultaneously we work on the retention, reading durations, practices, so that the contents are as attractive as possible, once they have crossed the subscription wall.

Vesa Karki, Editor for News, Culture, and Sports at *Kaleva*, has seen a similar mix of interests, with readers drawn to breaking local news, such as articles focused on the impact of coronavirus, as well as more lighthearted fare, such as a video of puppies. He said paywalled content offers more background and context on local topics, such as an interview with a restaurant owner about how the pandemic has affected his business; crime stories and lifestyle and health topics are also popular:

> People's normal living in their houses or during their leisure time, that kind of story. Not big stories but these kinds of very human stories. I think they are quite popular, but, of course, these kinds of big crime stories, if they are around our world, something like that. Lot of stories because no one tells about them more so than Kaleva.

Reaching younger readers remains a priority. *Ouest-France*'s Fabrice Bazard said local news draws readers of all ages, particularly around sports, which has made the *Minuit Sport* digital publication an important addition, and *Ouest-France* has aimed to reach the student population through offering practical information: 'How to find accommodation, how to get a grant, how to find a summer job, this kind of thing. This is part of their everyday life, and practical life.'

Ouest-France's Jarnigon said the Ille-et-Vilaine regional edition draws 245,000 visitors to its website each day and 35 to 40 online subscribers each week, with 40% of content paywalled. However, he said he realises the need to develop more exclusive local content:

> *When we have our own information obtained by in-house journalists, thanks to their networks, people buy them, because they consider we are the only ones to have it. This is quite encouraging for the further economic development Ouest-France wants to have.*

Similarly, *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat*'s Myyra said younger readers are drawn to articles focused on climate change, sports, and national news. The newspaper also participates in an annual Newspaper Week at local schools to raise awareness, offering free access to the digital newspaper for participants.

Some of the newspapers have launched initiatives or projects focused on connecting with readers. Keskisuomalainen earned a Google Digital News Initiative grant in spring 2019, funding a two-year research programme to evaluate what emotions the company's articles bring to readers, as well as how those feelings correlate to subscriptions and engagement. As Kirsi Hakaniemi described, 'Many times, the news outlets are telling just sad stories or desperate stories. People don't like to only read these kinds of stories. How can we evoke empathy, et cetera?'

JPIMedia launched Digital Acceleration, which is focused on how the news audience is changing and the ways in which newsrooms can adapt. The approach, Audience Engagement Director Mark Thompson said, moves beyond chasing page views to fully understanding where readers come from and who they are, moving them through the funnel of engagement and understanding what they want from their local newspapers:

> *I always use the shop analogy of, if we were running a shop and we got fly-bys, as we call them, who come in and buy one Mars Bar a week, and there are lots of them. But then you've also got another bunch of people, a lot fewer of them, but they come in and they fill their baskets and trolleys. Every week, every day. And, if we were running that shop, we would know those people's names. We would give them loyalty cards, we'd know their kids' names, we'd give them Christmas cards. We are trying to get to that point as a company where we really kind of appropriate those people.*

Thompson uses the example of nostalgia-focused content, such as articles focused on a 1980s school or a 1990s pub, as well as more recent events, which has drawn high engagement on social media and, as he said, 'puts us fully at the heart of the community'.

The *Yorkshire Post*'s James Mitchinson said identifying what readers want is challenging, because when you ask people they may say they prefer positive journalism that reflects well on their city, but they still click on stories about crime, sports, and niche interests. As a result, he said:

> *We need good technology that enables us to have absolute clarity on what it is that people are willing to pay for, which will enable us to adjust the commission process. So, are people ready to pay? I think if the media package and proposition is right, we're already there. If you think about Amazon Prime, Netflix, Spotify, people are paying for media. Clearly there are digital propositions in the marketplace that people are willing to pay for. It's up to us to make our proposition one that people are willing to pay for. That's the game, isn't it?*

2 Producing Value-Added Journalism

The move to paid-content models has, for news organisations across the sample, led to a heightened focus on producing high-quality local journalism that appeals to loyal readers. Although interviewees said their newsrooms continue to produce the traditional daily news that consistently draws online audiences, including traffic, weather, courts, crime, breaking news, and other topics, they have also invested resources into producing in-depth investigations and long-form human-interest stories.

This value-added content prioritises original reporting with a local focus over stories that draw the most traffic and reflects diverse understandings of what constitutes quality journalism, from in-depth articles about history, people, sports, culture, and infrastructure, to service-oriented features offering advice on navigating day-to-day life in cities. Newsrooms are also pursuing data-driven reporting, solutions journalism, and new digital offerings, particularly podcasts.

Westfalenpost's Jost Lubben said that to attract digital subscribers he focuses on local and regional stories that are important for daily life and reflect the ideals of high-quality journalism. He shared an example of a project focused on 55 people living in the region who 'never gave up in their life and they changed their life completely', such as a man who was formerly part of a motorcycle gang, was sent to prison, and then met his son there. He is now a social worker focused on local schools. Lubben said the project allowed staff members to work across departments, and it attracted online subscriptions.
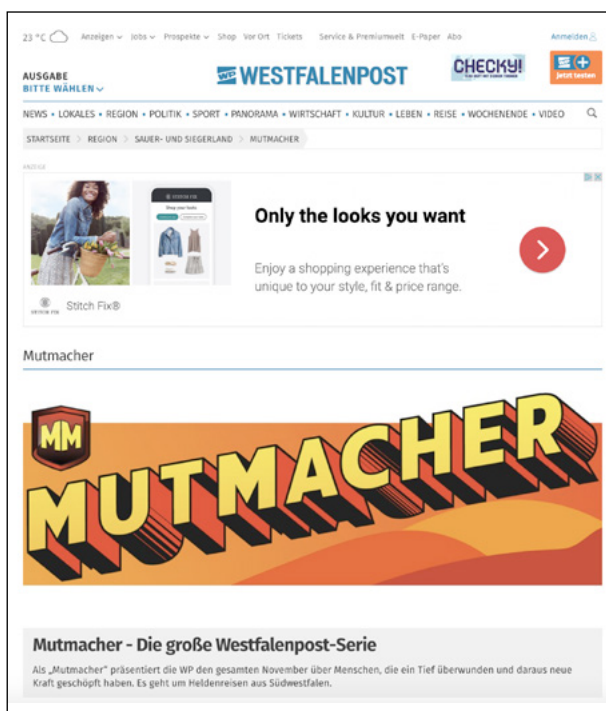
Westfalenpost's 'Mutmacher' (Encouragement) series, which was published in November 2019 and featured the stories of local people overcoming difficult circumstances

Anne Krum said the project featured multimedia elements, such as high-quality photos and videos but, more importantly, it emphasised a commitment to 'very, very good content':

> *We wanted to catch the people with our stories. We said, OK, these stories should have the three E's: excellently written; emotional, if possible; and, in a way, exclusive. That does not mean it's breaking news, of course – it's not. But it's a biography, it's people, it's a man, it's a woman who is very special. And let's find them in our region.*

Etelä-Suomen Sanomat's Hanna Myyra said that although her team follows analytics closely, they are not driven by metrics. Readers may be drawn to crime and accident stories, but 'it's not what they mainly want and need. They want something that makes them cleverer and wiser and better people. They want something that is meaningful. So, if we just look at figures, I think we would just go wrong. I think we might lose our credibility for that.'

Myyra said the media environment has become more hostile in the 'post-truth era', as she described it, and she aims to maintain the integrity of her newspaper's reporting and readers' trust: 'I think the challenge aligns with the opportunity, that we produce credible, good journalism.'

Iliffe Media's Ian Carter said the shift to micropayments has allowed newsrooms to move beyond stories functioning as 'scale page pushers' and invest in quality content, such as long reads and in-depth investigations. One Iliffe publication produced a long-form, immersive investigation into assisted dying, sharing multiple women's experiences of helping their partners. Carter said this project is 'the stuff that you wouldn't necessarily think would be local-newspaper fare, but […] if you want to charge for content, you've got to really aim for stuff that wouldn't look out of place in a national publication.'

He said positive news is also effective, such as stories about lifestyle and consumer issues:

> We're going to move towards producing a lot more of that kind of content. Stuff as basic as what's happening in your town centre and new openings and those kind of lifestyle topics. […] That doesn't mean we obviously shy away from the [hard news] stories. We have to report them. We do report them. But, in every way, they're actually slightly less valuable to us.

The *Yorkshire Post*'s James Mitchinson said differentiating between popular content and public-interest journalism is vital. Popular content, he said, has the limitation of attracting a 'promiscuous audience, people who don't really care about the brand'. Public-interest journalism, however, is:

> content for the betterment of a place, probably, in regional journalism. It is journalism that enhances people's lives in whatever way, shape, or form, I guess. That could be identifying and addressing injustice. It could be fundraising for a local community. It could be something as simple as information journalism that helps people to decide what to do. But what it is, is properly researched, fact-checked, accurate, and in good faith.

For example, Mitchinson said, an article listing the worst-performing schools in their area could be a hit online and rely on reliable data, but it would also likely inflict harm on people in the community:

> It will drive a lot of attention, but it gives the teachers a headache. It gives all the families anxiety. […] That will eventually somehow, someway reach the children. The publisher will have done that because it will generate a large number of clicks and probably through feeding off that anxiety that I'm talking about. That's an example of publishing in bad faith.

The solutions journalism team at *Nice-Matin* has focused on slow journalism addressing complex topics, both through text and interactive elements. As Aurore Malval described:

> We wanted to take the same amount of time and energy in our reports, and this is the reason for being on the solutions team – to go deep in the subject and to have long-form and long reads. And to deliver this kind of slow journalism. The aim of all that has never been to have ten articles in a week.

Malval said that in addition to improving the news organisation's website, her team is working to make the reporting process more transparent and emphasising opportunities for readers to get involved, such as through voting on what topic the team will cover next and engaging in crowd-sourced reporting initiatives:

It's really important that people can have access to all content. So, I think it's the principal issue we have now. It's that some people subscribe, but I'm not sure that they enjoy the full [slate] of what we have to offer, particularly these solutions articles, and how is the investigation done? And all those participating moments we can offer – we have to make them known again and again and communicate.

At *Ouest-France*, a focus on premium content has led to a shift in mentality among journalists that has improved the organisation's ability to monetise online content and resulted in better-quality reporting, *Ouest-France* regional director Vincent Jarnigon said. He shared two examples: a series of reports on traffic jams that relied on a reader survey and offered tips for adjusting driving routes and schedules, and an article on a local bar where women can order a specific cocktail when they fear sexual harassment or assault:

For years, Ouest-France *journalists have reported on minor events of everyday life in a very linear way. This leads us to go more into journalism. Behind the small stories there are consequences on families. This extra information about the small stories is what people want to read, so it modifies the way to process the information. It also stimulates the journalists. I tell them 'Watch out, there is this story; you need to dig further into it.' And this 'further' is the element that can bring results on the website. So, before we publish an article, we determine the supplementary information needed, because we know this kind of information will work.*

Many of the news organisations have also embraced data-driven journalism. *Ouest-France* has a team of data journalists who enhance daily reporting. As Edouard Reis Carona described: 'These are the people who work on real-time news. If someone dies, they will treat the information right away. Then another team will take over to enrich the information, give more detailed information, about his life, his achievements, et cetera.' Jarnigon said *Ouest-France* works with a special department that provides ready-to-use data for journalists to incorporate into their reporting, such as data on population shifts that they can use to report on key issues in municipal elections.

Iliffe Media is also investing in data journalism. According to Carter, a reporter who participated in the BBC's immersive data initiative:

is working on a series of features that can be adapted easily for each of our regions. She's one person at the moment, but she may become two, three people as time goes on. Because that, again, it's the kind of content that is immersive; it's interesting, it's informative, it's valuable, it's potentially payable – chargeable as well.

Nice-Matin's Aurore Malval is a member of a data collective of local journalists, which has offered her training and tools to incorporate into the newspaper's solutions journalism. She can identify local problems and build investigations into solutions based on data. For example, she reported on cars getting into accidents with pedestrians:

In Nice, there are problems with sidewalks and with the pedestrian being pushed away by cars or having accidents. And then I searched in the database of the car accidents in four years. […] The data showed us the real problem: there was a lot of mortal or serious injuries in the pedestrian area and sidewalks. And most of the accidents occurred by daylight, and also, many, many things to identify –the compartment, the behaviours of the drivers and pedestrians. So, it was really helpful in this perspective to tell the problem and to identify it.

2.1 Developing New Products

To draw paying readers, the news organisations have also developed new digital products, including videos, podcasts, newsletters, and mobile apps.

Kaleva's sports reporters launched a paid podcast in early 2020 with guests such as local coaches and athletes. *Ouest-France* works with its four radio stations and independent producers to offer two to three free podcasts daily, attracting about 500,000–600,000 listens per month. The podcasts are advertising-supported, but Edouard Reis Carona said subscriber-only content is a possibility:

> The only thing we are sure of is that without any value, there is no subscription. To hope for subscriptions just because of the name of a brand is useless. The only thing which makes the difference is the content. Something different than what they get from the other media. Before, we were a printed newspaper. Now we are a press brand on all possible media, and the target is to provide information on all available channels.

Kaleva's podcast offerings include shows focused on sports, education, news, and culture

Ouest-France has adopted a 'quality over quantity' ethic for its video offerings, Carona said. The organisation produces three types: instant short reports (developed for social media), longer reports, and photo compilations, but it is investing in longer-form options with editing, subtitles, and testimonials. Keskisuomalainen owns two radio stations – with one more in progress – which provides expanded opportunities to serve multichannel advertising as well as cooperate with the newsroom.

Iliffe Media's Kent division has partnered with a local university TV station, allowing them to produce 'really high-quality TV news, at a minimal cost to Iliffe,' reports Ian Carter. The videos have enhanced engagement and time on *Kent Messenger*'s website, although monetising them has been challenging. Iliffe is also producing podcasts and developing an app for home speakers.

Newsletters are another important way to reach readers for many of the news organisations. *Westfalenpost* produces a daily news-focused newsletter for all readers and newsletters from its local bureaus and is testing whether automatically produced or journalist-produced newsletters are more effective. *Ouest-France* offers newsletters for the larger towns it covers as well as newsletters on running, technology, religion, military, family, and other topics. Overall these newsletters draw 900,000 subscribers.

2.2 Prioritising Local Coverage

Although interviewees emphasised value-added content, they said audiences seek more traditional local-news fare, such as crime and council reports. Many interviewees have embraced a shift from the daily rush to produce a constant flow of online news to an emphasis on 'lean back' content, as *Westfalenpost* editor Jost Lubben described.

Aurore Malval said the shift to solutions-focused, big-picture reporting requires thinking differently about the stories, sources, and routines that have driven daily newspapers for decades. She said local news is at a crossroads, requiring new ways of reporting and engaging with readers:

> I think the hardest part is to catch and understand what readers are waiting for. I mean, that's all we want to know, in the news industry. What does the reader want? And it cannot only be driven by this question, because it's reductive. But still we want to know, how can we be useful? How can we be a part of daily life? Because we have a daily newspaper. So, the hardest part is how to get to them, how to get into touch, and how to build this so-called bridge.

Nice-Matin's Sophie Casals said that to produce high-quality paid content, journalists need time and managerial support. As she put it, 'Publish less, but publish better'.

Interviewees also value positive content that uplifts communities, including campaigns, a staple of UK local journalism. The *Yorkshire Post*'s 'Power Up the North' campaign focused on investment injustices and inequalities in the northern region of England and united 33 (formerly competing) news organisations. A campaign focused on loneliness has been running since 2015 and led to a visit from the then Prime Minister Theresa May and the creation of a Minister for Loneliness.

James Mitchinson said a campaign typically consists of 'slow-burn journalism' without a set end date, that benefits both staff members and readers through creating meaningful connections and tangible change:

> Campaigning is a way of working with your audience to achieve something that improves their quality of life. They're hard to do. You have to be patient. You have to be creative. If the regional press doesn't manage to get through this period of change and crisis that it's in, I wonder who will run those campaigns.

Iliffe Media is developing a company-wide campaign focused on organ donation to address a change in UK law. Ian Carter said Iliffe newspapers will feature human-interest stories of those whose lives have been affected by organ donation in an effort to increase the number of people on the donor register:

> I think campaigns are going to be hugely important, because they are one of the few things that will set us apart from the Facebook, general news agenda of just easy stories. [...] It makes a difference to the community still.

JPIMedia's Mark Thompson said his organisation is working on new ways to facilitate campaigns that prioritise the perspectives of readers. The 'Sunderland Speaks' campaign, for example, will involve visiting all the communities served by a JPIMedia newspaper and asking people about where they live – both the positives (festivals, local heroes) and negatives (racism, inequality):

> We all need to make money but at the same time be a voice for our communities in a different way. Not just telling them what's going on but also getting them to tell us what's going on.

To better facilitate these approaches to reporting, managers and editors have focused on developing consistent standards for quality and ensuring the distribution of adequate resources across company holdings.

Jost Lubben said that although the churn rate for paid content remains high, ultimately, quality journalism is more important than scale:

That is a good story you can tell the colleagues in the newsroom. That means good professional local and regional journalism has a future. That's why we have to be successful. In the end, it's not important whether we get 150 a day or 140 or 45. That's not important, but we have to be successful. We have to show journalism is necessary.

For all the interviewees, showing the necessity of quality journalism involves addressing misperceptions of how local news is funded and produced, at the level of both national governments and local readers. As Mitchinson said, 'I want to see an acknowledgement of the contribution regional journalism makes to the fabric of society. I want to see, once we have a clear vision of what that contribution is, something that we can wrap around it and preserve and protect it forever.'

Interviewees discussed efforts ranging from pop-up ads explaining why they are being asked to pay for an article, to engaging with readers' questions about payments on social media, to hosting events to meet readers in person and discuss and debate issues affecting their lives.

Iliffe Media's Paul Fisher said readers still have an appetite for quality journalism, but funding that journalism is more challenging than ever:

There has been for many years a growing thought, a growing swell of opinion, that news is free and it's free to produce, it's free to access, and that it is a given right that you have news. […] One of the best things that somebody ever said to me on a telephone was, 'Why haven't I got a copy of your newspaper? I pay my taxes.' And I didn't know how to respond to that. I thought, that's got nothing to do with anything at all. That remains a challenge, getting people to understand that quality journalism costs.

The *Bishop's Stortford Independent*

Iliffe Media has reopened five newspapers in town centres. In 2017, the company resurrected the *Bishop's Stortford Independent*, housed in the former offices of the *Herts and Essex Observer.*

Bishop's Stortford is a historic market town located in rural Hertfordshire in southeastern England, near the Essex county border. The affluent community's population numbers just over 40,000, including many financial and tourism workers who commute to London and nearby Stansted Airport.

Editor Paul Winspear and News Editor Sinead Corr had worked on the *Herts and Essex Observer*, which was founded in 1861. It was part of the Herts & Essex Newspapers group (along with the *Hertfordshire Mercury* and *Harlow Star*) owned by the Iliffe family and then purchased by Local World, which was eventually taken over by Trinity Mirror (now Reach) in 2015.

Over time, the number of title editors was reduced from three to one, and the *Herts and Essex Observer* and its sister titles largely consisted of syndicated content. As Winspear described:

> *People just increasingly grew dissatisfied, venting their frustrations online in local social media forums. The paper just became irrelevant to their everyday lives, with nowhere near any type of resource required to look into issues. [...] They just didn't have their finger on the pulse of what was happening in Bishop's Stortford.*

In 2017, Edward Iliffe approved the move to launch a new Stortford paper from the *Herts and Essex Observer* offices. When Winspear announced the launch of a new newspaper, he received a massive outpouring of community support.

The *Bishop's Stortford Independent*, which emphasises its print edition, covers a smaller patch than its predecessor but is focused on 'content relevant to the day-to-day lives of the population and informing them, entertaining them occasionally, educating them, reporting on news as it happened, giving them news about issues we thought they should be aware of. And that's very much, yeah, basically we kind of reinvented the wheel,' Winspear said.

Iliffe Media's Ian Carter said this strategy is risky, but it allows Iliffe Media to maintain a local presence:

> *[Owner Edward Iliffe] strongly believes that having that presence in town centres is important for a sustainable business. Other publishers take a different view, and you can make a defending argument either way. But what it does mean is obviously the more individual offices you have, the harder it can be sometimes to get those economies at scale. So there's a balance to the struggle.*

Winspear said the continued enthusiasm of the community reinforces the importance of maintaining local newspapers' presence on communities' high streets:

> *We've been going almost three years and two months, and people will still come into our shop and just say, 'Oh, I'd like to buy a paper, and, by the way, I think your paper's brilliant.' And it's the feedback and support from the community that makes it all worthwhile.*

3 Streamlining Digital Content Production

As the news organisations embrace and refine paid-content models, they have adjusted their editorial strategies accordingly, reconfiguring their newsrooms to identify and produce distinctive digital content that not only attracts readers but also spurs attention and engagement. Some newsrooms, particularly in Germany, engaged in multi-year initiatives to develop more efficient and sustainable approaches.

Other interviewees discussed the creation of new newsroom roles, such as those focused on breaking online news, in-depth features, or new product development. Some also took advantage of opportunities for collaboration, such as between editorial and commercial departments, and opportunities for sharing local, national, and international content among company holdings.

3.1 Shifts in Editorial Routines

A priority for many news organisations in the sample has been the development of editorial routines that allow for efficient and integrated approaches to producing and monetising digital content.

Main-Post has developed a 'channel management' approach to editorial, which is overseen by a centralised editorial team – called 'the eye' – and focuses on creating stories around broad themes, such as retirement, lifestyle, traffic, and local events. The strategy, said Managing Editor Andreas Kemper, builds on a traditional beat system but uses more fluid themes that spur both breaking and planned news coverage. Channel management also lends itself to heightened search engine optimisation (SEO) potential.

To determine which articles should be paid, each is labelled as A, B, or C content: A topics are exclusive stories with regional relevance, have the potential for high readership (2,000–5,000 clicks), and are produced only five to ten times a week; B topics draw medium readership (800–1,000 clicks) and consist of top stories in the local editions; and C articles are always free (90–150 clicks).

Articles are also assigned a value of up to 40 points after a seven-day period. Points are assigned to teams of reporters, such as a regional, sports, arts, economics, culture, or police group, and are awarded based on the reach of the article (20 points); the duration of reader attention (5 points); the depth of reading (5 points); and the level of interaction, such as clicking on a hyperlink (10 points). Kemper said this approach ensures that articles are not ranked based on traffic alone:

> By putting in interaction, the duration, and the depth, you see that not only police and all the car accidents are on the top. At the top, you'll find good journalism. [...] It's research, it's exclusive. Quality journalism.

Main-Post has also centralised its print production through combining multiple news desks into one desk for the northern part of the newspaper's coverage area and one desk for the southern part, with all editors using the same workflow for each of the 17 local editions. Emphasising consistency among the editions means that editors can troubleshoot with one another more easily. Local bureaus and correspondents continue to operate in their communities.

To create these new processes, the *Main-Post* team participated in a three-year initiative called Aladin, in which staff members from different departments and levels of the organisation met in

small groups to devise new processes and workflows. Staff members also engaged in World Cafés, which were held twice a year and resembled a speed-dating approach to project development and problem-solving. Kemper said:

> *The collaboration of so many colleagues, I mean this was really key for the success, I think, because we could always say, and it was like this really, that the people themselves had an influence on the project. And they realise that it's their results, it's their ideas; they drove the change.*

The *Westfalenpost* staff underwent a similarly transformative process that aimed to unite workflows to better reach online target groups. Deputy Editor-in-Chief Anne Krum said the most important step was to create new editorial dashboards and heat maps showing how well content performs and its effectiveness in drawing users to the website and creating new subscribers, which alerts editors to assign more of those types of stories.

The staff has also spent the last two years transitioning its print-focused routines into a digital-oriented workflow addressing the question 'How does journalism fit in the daily life of our readers?' Journalists track readership throughout the course of the day on online articles as well as assess how long readers spend reading the e-paper edition. Editor Jost Lubben said:

> *We realised we have to start much earlier – much earlier. We have to be able to produce new and fresh content. It should be online about 10 a.m., for example, and no more old stuff after 10 – fresh stuff. And that means the lives of our reporters changed, I would say, completely.*

The *Westfalenpost* staff has continued to develop themed issues, such as the sustainability project, through which digital advisers in Hagen coach editors and journalists on how to produce multimedia content. The specialists also work with the sales team to create campaigns focused on the themes. Lubben said cooperation between departments has been key to the newspaper's digital transformation:

> *We are in a business that struggles, and it's not easy to be successful. And if I listen to the others, and I talk to them and I see them physically, that makes a difference. That's some benefit, pure benefit. […] The other thing we need is to create trust. We need to trust each other. That does not mean like a child to his parents, but if I am able to show you I'm not your enemy, so we are working together, we are partners, it helps a lot, because if that situation is created, you are much faster in going forward.*

Iliffe Media's Ian Carter said he has worked with newsrooms to move from an attitude of 'Your story's done fantastically well – 10,000 people have read it', to 'Your story's done fantastically well – 200 people paid to read it':

> *We did a lot of work looking at what the value of a story is. So, a story that everyone reads for free and has three adverts on it, what does that actually generate in real terms, compared to a story that is read by 10% of that, but everyone's paying to read it?*

Carter said this shift requires editors to have a much more 'commercial view on things', such as looking at a viral story and considering not only clicks and engagement but also the importance of placing that story behind a paywall. Iliffe implemented Paul Fisher as an audience development manager to work with newsrooms on SEO and best practices for digital, as well as oversee the Axate micropayments project.

Fisher said he has worked with newsroom staff members, from new reporters to veterans, to differentiate between premium and free content. In particular, he has created chains of communication so journalists have colleagues to consult when deciding how to approach the status of an article.

The *Ouest-France* newsroom is separated into a team focused on premium content and a team focused on traditional content. Edouard Reis Carona said he has worked with the entire editorial team to reinforce that, despite the continued value of the printed newspaper, they should invest time and resources into high-quality digital journalism, including reports and investigations:

> One team is in charge of the preparation of the premium content; that is, the organisation of the content planned to go on the web – the staging, the formatting – so that the reporter only has to go and write the report and the staging will be done by the team. The premium [section] holds the best content, which is personalised with first names, and also contains 'recommended to me' content related to their areas of interest. This helps us promote the content, as subscribers have access to all the content – there is no channel disruption between the digital publications, the website, etc. Ultimately, when they subscribe to Ouest-France, they have the feeling they belong to a community.

Ouest-France's Fabrice Bazard said that, initially, journalists focused on writing news flashes for digital media. As a result:

> We told them – if you want to get new subscriptions, the requirements are the same as for the print edition: we need analysis, we need enriched formats. But journalists can't accept the idea of producing an enriched format for free. The concept of choice motivated them: if you make an effort, if you produce a long format, you will be able to choose to make it paying. So, your effort will be rewarded. […] It's very difficult for journalists to admit the value of advertising revenue. A free article can generate revenues, thanks to advertising. But they don't realise that. On the other hand, if we tell them 'your content has produced a new subscription' then they are very happy.

This approach had drawbacks, however, as some journalists categorised too many articles as paid, which could frustrate and deter readers. Achieving a balance, therefore, is vital.

3.2 New Roles

The newsrooms that did not undergo substantial shifts in their editorial processes continued to introduce new roles and adjust existing positions to better accommodate digital production, and facilitated opportunities for collaboration inside the newsroom and with other outlets.

Ouest-France set the goal of producing a new editorial product each year for digital subscribers. This emphasis has resulted in the creation of 15 new positions over the last two years, including web designers, video editors, graphic designers, and IT developers. Additionally, two staff members from the sports department were assigned to positions focused on creating content for multiple products, including the website, print product, and evening editions.

Keskisuomalainen, which added 15 new local titles in eastern Finland to its portfolio in spring 2019, has created multiple new positions, particularly those focused on native advertising and advertorials, which are major areas of growth for the company. Kirsi Hakaniemi said she is working to integrate the new and existing titles into a common online platform, which requires a cultural shift encouraging individual newsrooms to work together to solve problems rather than attempt to resolve issues on their own:

> *We will put all 70 different titles to the same platform and same play-out. It's easier to develop them in the future when they are on the same platform, even though we have different-sized titles. So we have put them to three different categories. We have large, medium, and small titles. This is what we are doing a lot. We have to scale things, and do things at scale. We have to unify as much as we can.*

Hakaniemi said the centralised platform will be more efficient, allow for developing new features and updating national news across local sites, create opportunities for pilot testing and data creation, and better respond to reader needs.

The *Yorkshire Evening Post*'s breaking online news is produced by a 'live team' of six journalists that James Mitchinson compares to hunter-gatherers. The team's shifts are aligned with audience news-consumption habits so that content is available throughout the day, and they cover a large region from a centralised desk:

> *We have a great aerial view over the patch we know we serve because of the technology that serves us. What used to have to happen was we'd have to wait for the phone to ring or somebody to come into reception; whereas now, we tend to get a private message on Facebook, 'This is happening.' That's one of the key ways of us receiving notice that something's happening. […] Way before the police publish anything. The general public, through Facebook largely, 'You might want to come to such-and-such street. It's all kicking off.' But Facebook, massive ingress of stories. Now, you don't need 50 people across a wide region waiting for that so we've got a discrete group of people who work six in the morning until midnight on a shift pattern. They are chasing anything that moves, and they generate a massive amount of page views, and they're brilliant at it.*

Mitchinson said the live-team strategy results in traffic-heavy articles that create revenues to support the slower, public-interest reporting.

The *Kaleva* newsroom features a separate online news desk, but over the last two years the whole newsroom has become more focused on developing online and mobile strategies, Niiles Nousuniemi reported. He said the emphasis is on everyone becoming digital storytellers. *Kaleva*, which recently acquired Alma Media regional newspaper *Lapin Kansa*, is also working to unite its newsrooms onto a centralised content-management platform to allow for more consistency and collaboration, as well as the integration of photos, graphics, and multimedia features.

Kaleva's Vesa Karki said his position has changed to accommodate more efficient online production, in that he supervises a team focused on producing daily news stories, while Janne Nyyssönen, Editor for Culture and Features, focuses on supervising long-term coverage. The teams working on these stories rotate between the desks every two weeks. Karki said the benefit of this approach is allowing journalists flexibility in the types of stories they report, as well as enhancing the potential for fresh content:

> *People on the news desk, they have said that it's so heavy to write every day, from the beginning to the end. When you rotate, it's a little bit easier maybe, this kind of two weeks' time to make longer stories. It's a little bit different than a daily news routine.*

Karki said he appreciates that the shared content-management system has allowed for collaboration among *Kaleva*'s newsrooms. In particular, *Lapin Kansa* often features human-interest and culture stories, which are also of interest to *Kaleva*'s readers. Karki said:

> *When we in* Kaleva *write about some writer who writes books, they can use it in* Lapin Kansa, *too, because the book is nationwide, so it's not so local. We exchange articles quite a lot, daily. They are mostly these longer stories, not just little news.*

Etelä-Suomen Sanomat's Hanna Myyra has also benefited from collaborative approaches, in that her newspaper is part of a large corporation with a joint desk offering access to national news and features on topics such as food and science, which frees up resources for reporting on local and regional topics. Sharing an online platform with other Keskisuomalainen outlets also makes content-sharing easier.

JPIMedia's turn to digital strategies has emphasised putting 'the content back at the heart of what we do', said Mark Thompson. As a result, staff members across the company's outlets are encouraged to take responsibility for social media, newsletters, home page functionality, video, analytics, and thinking about web top stories the same way they would for print front pages:

> *People feel they can make a difference. In many ways, in newspapers, it can be quite demoralising – fighting sales that are probably out of your control in many ways. With digital, it's all in your control. It's your content, put it online, being able to social it, then you can look at the analytics – you've done all of it. You have driven that personally, and you can look at the end of the day, the week, the month, I did that. That's what success looks like. […] It's giving people tangible numbers to look at.*

4 Rethinking Relationships with Platforms

Facebook has been a vital source of traffic, accounting for 15–40% of readership for the local and regional news organisations in the 2018 report. However, many interviewees were concerned about their dependence on the platform, as it rarely serves as a revenue driver and the algorithm could change on a whim.

Since then, Facebook has publicly expressed its support for local news, launching the Facebook Community News Project in the UK in 2018 and merging Today In and Facebook News to prioritise local publications in June 2020. Even so, several newsrooms in this report have strategically reduced their reliance on the platform, recognising that traffic did not always translate into loyal, paying readers.

Although interviewees expressed some frustration at the lack of transparency from Facebook, they highlighted the benefits of the platform in allowing them to broaden and diversify their readership. They also highlighted the potential of social media in helping them deepen connections with their audiences, such as through reader-engagement initiatives. Therefore interviewees discussed Facebook less as a 'necessary evil', as it was described in the 2018 report, and more in terms of a symbiotic relationship.

Overall, the influence of platforms could be organised into three functions: driving subscriptions, extending reach, and deepening connections.

4.1 Driving Subscriptions

As the news organisations refined their strategies for attracting subscriptions, they also evaluated the role of platforms, particularly Facebook, in converting paid readers. Although Facebook remains a key source of traffic, the numbers do not necessarily translate into subscriptions and paid readership. However, the outlets continue to explore tactics for building loyalty from platform-directed audiences.

Editor Jost Lubben said that for *Westfalenpost,* Facebook is the most important channel for selling subscriptions (it accounts for 30% of traffic), particularly for the flagship newspaper. However, he said the staff are working to differentiate fly-by readers from stable or loyal or heavy users, as well as reinforce to older or long-time readers that 'digital journalism in this style, how we make it, is not free. They have to pay for it. It's worth paying for.'

Ultimately, Lubben said he considers Facebook both an enemy and a friend. 'We are in the situation to cooperate and to compete. […] They want our stuff. They want our content. They want all that, but they don't love us.'

Kaleva has shared its premium local stories on Facebook and drawn paid readers. However, as Niiles Nousuniemi described, the 'game has changed' in terms of platform relationships as news organisations have shifted from a focus purely on drawing traffic.

Ouest-France considers Facebook a tool to convert casual readers into subscribers and paid readers, and the organisation has developed special programmes to attract readers from the platform so that 'when they come to our website, we can work on them so that one day they cross the paywall,' said Edouard Reis Carona.

For the *Kent Messenger*, 40% of readers come from social media, and 80% of that is from Facebook. However, Ian Carter said, 'We're trying to be a bit smarter about looking at the value of the audience, and value of the story, and that Facebook audience is definitely the least inclined to pay for content, and the least interested in the longer reads, and very much interested in clicking on something because it catches their attention for two seconds.'

Mark Thompson, Audience Engagement Director of JPIMedia, said Facebook, which accounts for a high proportion of traffic, is valuable because of its ability to drive loyalty among readers who frequently engage with certain sites, which also helps to accelerate the amount of local news that appears in their feeds:

> *Perhaps in the past we looked at Facebook as being somewhere where we pump out links and people click on them as they come across them. But I think that Facebook has got smarter, and it wants to be more relevant to people. There is nothing more relevant than if you live in Hartlepool, say, than getting content from the* Hartlepool Mail *because that is real to who they are targeting.*

Although JPIMedia is experimenting with other social media, such as Instagram, to build its brand and connect with new demographic groups, 'I think it's hard to see a future where Facebook doesn't play an important role,' Thompson said.

4.2 Extending Reach

Despite the focus on quality over quantity in terms of traffic, interviewees continued to value the potential of Facebook and other social media to help them diversify their readership.

At *Ouest-France*, between 16% and 19% of readers come from social media, which is relatively low compared to other French newspapers, Edouard Reis Carona said. However, 'We don't want to be too dependent on social media.' The company has a Facebook page for each of its local departments (60 in total), as well as themed pages focusing on sports, student life, events, and other topics, which helps it to draw young people and those outside of the '*Ouest-France* zone'. This approach has resulted in 1.5 million Facebook fans across the pages.

Etelä-Suomen Sanomat's managing editor, Hanna Myyra, said Facebook accounts for a significant amount of traffic to the newspaper's articles, but it serves primarily as a distribution tool, rather than a space for engaging with readers, which can limit relationship-building. She said, 'So I think that's part of the problem. Then the discussions go to other websites and other platforms.'

Iliffe Media outlets post content to Facebook daily, but Paul Fisher said he also ensures that when users come to a site, they receive quality (and personalised) content, multimedia and interactive offerings, and thoughtfully placed ads. As a result, 'If they are a fly-by-night visitor from social media, great, you've found us. [...] You are welcome here. Now let me show you why you should stay with us.'

Facebook is typically the biggest referrer for the *Yorkshire Post*, with James Mitchinson noting that the newspaper is 'absolutely reliant on them for the audience we have'. He credited the platform with reaching a broader and more diverse audience for local news, and it can generate loyal readers who prefer the Instant Articles format to the Post's native format:

> *It's a little bit of a vanity project because there's no money coming in, unless you can convert. [...] And also when Facebook switched on Instant Articles, they also take out your advertising, so you're getting less. It's a brilliant audience generator but not a brilliant revenue generator.*

4.3 Deepening Connections

In addition to broadening reach, Facebook offers opportunities to connect more deeply with readers and communities.

James Mitchinson described an example of a story from the newspaper's crime correspondent in which an elderly couple had their life savings of £15,000 stolen by a telephone scammer. When he saw the story, Mitchinson suggested to the correspondent that they could help the couple get their money back. The post went viral, and within 24 hours, they had raised the full amount back for the couple.

> Without those social media platforms, being able to almost instantly do a good deed of that nature, that would be impossible. I think it is absolute folly to demonise the platforms completely. Now that doesn't mean I wouldn't like a few of the millions of pounds back that we've lost in classified advertising and the rest of it, but it's too simplistic to demonise the platforms as the sort of archenemy of regional media because that's not entirely true.

For *Westfalenpost*, Facebook is an important source of story ideas and offers opportunities to connect with people as potential readers and sources. In particular, Facebook groups serve as outlets to distribute stories and connect with niche groups of readers. As Anne Krum describes, 'If you look to decades before, journalists just went into the bar in the evening. That time is mostly over. And now you are in Facebook groups or others to see what happens.'

Ouest-France's Vincent Jarnigon said Facebook serves two functions for his organisation: informing people and identifying stories within the community. Social media editors for the local departments also invite user-generated content:

> We ask people to send us their best shots of fields covered in snow. And this creates the link with the Facebook community. Another example is a documentary film about the local football team, the Stade Rennais. We invited our community to watch this film at the movies on Sunday; it was presented by a journalist and the director was there as well. There was a good response from the community, with 400 people there. They had to turn some people away because of lack of space. We know that Facebook drags in quite a lot of people.

As Iliffe Media's Paul Fisher described, Facebook is key for identifying 'communities of interest' who can be engaged in the journalism process through identifying local problems and options for solving them. JPIMedia has created Facebook communities based on the interests of different regions, such as a retro group where people can share old photos and memories, as well as groups focused on sports, crime, local politics, business concerns, and important people.

5 Conclusion

This report explored the ways eight local and regional news organisations in four countries have continued to adapt their editorial and business strategies to remain sustainable in a digital, mobile, and platform-driven media environment. As these outlets continue to see the decline of the legacy print model that sustained them for decades, they have invested in new products, processes, and positions to sustain their digital future.

The most significant development evident among the local and regional newspapers in this report is the adoption and development of paid-content models. Some organisations were newly exploring the potential of paid strategies, such as Iliffe Media's micropayments, while others honed existing strategies and developed new editorial routines allowing them to more efficiently produce premium stories.

These approaches suggested a shift among the newspapers from chasing reach to pursuing relationships. These outlets' strategies have involved not only distinguishing between fly-by (and usually platform-driven) online visitors and loyal readers willing to pay, but also determining what types of content attracted them and via which platforms. Newsrooms have also embraced a commercial mindset through which everyone can contribute to identifying premium content and developing new product ideas, from podcasts to newsletters to events.

This focus has led to an emphasis on value-added content among the news organisations. Interviewees suggested a range of stories that could fit this definition, from daily coverage of traffic, weather, courts, crimes, and store openings, to in-depth investigative reporting, long-form human-interest stories, and solutions journalism. They agreed, however, that 'value-added' translated to high-quality, locally focused stories only they could produce.

Organisations have adjusted their philosophies and strategies toward platforms, particularly Facebook. Recognising the risks of relying on Facebook for significant portions of their traffic, interviewees described efforts to scale back, using the platform more strategically to attract subscribers, extend reach to new readers, and deepen relationships with existing groups and communities.

Efforts to create a sustainable local press have been complicated by the coronavirus pandemic. Local news organisations' advertising has dwindled, newsstand sales and deliveries have declined, the events business is struggling, and staff members are facing furloughs and layoffs. This is despite the record spikes in traffic for many local outlets as readers seek local updates on testing, closures, and infection rates. In response, governments have adjusted taxes on e-newspapers and, in the case of the UK, announced national advertising campaigns.

Despite these challenges, in the continuing 'pivot to paid' (Newman et al. 2019) local news organisations have remained focused on helping their readers and communities recognise why local and regional newspapers' content is worth supporting, which has helped news organisations reconnect with the mission of local news. This emphasis could play an important role in helping local and regional news organisations continue to innovate and reinforce the vital functions they serve in communities, even as competing sources of information emerge and as they respond to the significant challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Epilogue

The initial interviews for this report were conducted between December 2019 and March 2020. The newspapers have faced significant shifts since then as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, including changes to their editorial processes, readership numbers, and business strategies. To explore these changes, and how the editors and managers responded, we conducted brief follow-up interviews in August 2020.

In the midst of the pandemic, interviewees experienced similar trends as news organisations around the world, with newsroom staffs adjusting to work-from-home arrangements and furloughs, while striving to keep up with record-high website visits from readers pursuing credible local information.

Etelä-Suomen Sanomat's Hanna Myyra said that in March and April 'the pandemic had such a profound effect on everyday life that there was hardly any story that did not have the word "coronavirus" in it.' She said that although non-subscribers requested that COVID-19 news remain free, news based on official press releases and press conferences is now offered free, while premium content is paid.

Myyra said the pandemic did not make a significant difference in online subscriptions, which have continued to grow steadily and are up 38% this year.

At *Kaleva*, the pandemic spurred editorial staff to 'think of new approaches to several topics', Niiles Nousuniemi said. 'In sports, for example, we were able to shift the focus to long stories that interested the audience tremendously.' With the significant interest in local coronavirus news, the number of visitors to *Kaleva*'s website increased enormously in March and April, 'breaking all previous records' according to Nousuniemi, and growth of digital subscriptions also increased.

Kaleva's Vesa Karki said that even amid the pandemic, creating 'more and more exclusive online content is our main focus'.

Nice-Matin's special feature answering readers' questions about COVID-19

From the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, *Nice-Matin*'s solutions journalism team began exploring ways to engage readers. Sophie Casals said, 'In order to serve our audience the best we could, we decided to engage them from the very beginning of the editorial process.' In mid-March, just before the lockdown began in France, the solutions team launched an online survey asking readers, 'What do you want to know about COVID-19? Send us your questions and the newsroom will answer.'

The survey has since drawn more than 12,000 questions, and articles answering them averaged 25,000 views each. Staff members are also developing a section of the website dedicated to the project. Additionally, *Nice-Matin* has launched a newsletter, 'Quarantaine à

l'Italienne', focused on how Italy has coped with COVID-19, as well as a series of long-form features, 'Contagion', and shorter articles with advice on how to respond to economic, social, and other consequences of the pandemic.

Overall, audiences for both of *Nice-Matin*'s websites have risen during the pandemic, with the overall online reach increasing by 159% in March, 80% in April, and 30% in May. More readers accessing solutions journalism has also resulted in a rise in online subscriptions (an additional 2,500 subscribers in three months).

During the lockdown period in France, *Ouest-France* offered its digital products for free for two months, leading to an increase in subscribers, Edouard Reis Carona reported. *Ouest-France* also created a new section, '*Ouest-France* answers you', in which readers could pose questions to journalists in real time, as well as a page for children in the print edition.

At *Main-Post*, the number of published articles declined week to week starting at the end of February, as a result of the decline in concerts, events, and other aspects of public life. Although the newspaper published 10–48% fewer articles than in the same period in 2019, it experienced 'enormous growth in reach', Andreas Kemper said, with increases of 13–88% for page impressions and 8–89% for visits, including an all-time high of 6.7 million visits in March.

Although Kemper said it is unclear whether this success will be sustainable, the pandemic has been an 'outstanding time for journalism and for journalists. We were in lockdown, too. We, too, had to fight with home-office and home-schooling and with the severe economic effects of the pandemic on our news organisation.'

At *Westfalenpost*, the onset of the pandemic was 'like an accelerator', Jost Lubben said, with staff members producing more local content and creating new digital products and projects. 'We literally felt how meaningful local journalism is for the people in the region', he said, resulting in impressive digital growth in the early months.

Iliffe Media's Paul Fisher said the company saw record numbers of readers visit its websites 'for trusted information about how COVID-19 was affecting the local area, explainers on what the latest lockdown measures meant for them, and analysis of local and regional datasets relating to the spread of the virus'. When lockdown began in late March in the UK, Iliffe moved from a 'pay as you go' to a 'pay if you can' approach to its micropayments. As Fisher described:

> *This gave readers the ability to support their local newspaper, if they were in a position to do so, but still access news, which was more vital than ever before during the heights of the pandemic.*

Despite the heightened traffic, the company had to shut some town-centre offices, furlough some staff members, and reconfigure workflows to produce the same number of – and, in some cases, more – articles for readers. They are also bracing for long-term effects, Ian Carter said:

> *It has expedited what was already a huge shift from print to online. People's shopping habits have changed, probably permanently. They may be shopping less frequently, and that has a significant impact on our newspaper sales – if they are only in supermarkets once a fortnight rather than once a week, our opportunity to sell is halved.*

The *Bishop's Stortford Independent* focused on how the community was responding to the challenges presented by lockdown, Paul Winspear said. The *Independent* was also the only Iliffe title whose office remained accessible to the public during this period, serving as a collection and

pick-up point for the National Health Service and other essential workers, with readers donating pens and personal hygiene products. A local nursery even donated more than 80 plants that readers could share with a 'deserving key worker', Winspear said, and readers could sponsor a free copy of the paper for three months for elderly and vulnerable people in the community unable to leave home to purchase the paper.

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List of Interviewees
Positions held at the time of the interviews

Finland

Hanna Myyra	Managing Editor, *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat*
Kirsi Hakaniemi	Head of Digital Business, Keskisuomalainen Oyj
Niiles Nousuniemi	Content Director, *Kaleva*
Vesa Karki	Editor for News, Culture, and Sport, *Kaleva*
Janne Nyyssönen	Editor for Culture and Features, *Kaleva*

France

Edouard Reis Carona	Editor-in-Chief for Digital Content and Innovation, *Ouest-France*
Vincent Jarnigon	Regional Director, *Ouest-France*
Fabrice Bazard	Director of Digital Activities, *Ouest-France*
Sophie Casals	Reporter, *Nice-Matin*
Aurore Malval	Reporter, *Nice-Matin*

Germany

Jost Lubben	Editor-in-Chief, *Westfalenpost*
Anne Krum	Deputy Editor-in-Chief, *Westfalenpost*
Andreas Kemper	Managing Editor, *Main-Post*
Ivo Knahn	Deputy Editor-in-Chief, *Main-Post*

UK

Ian Carter	Editorial Director, Iliffe Media
Paul Fisher	Audience Development Manager, Iliffe Media
Paul Winspear	Editor, *Bishop's Stortford Independent*
Sinead Corr	News Editor, *Bishop's Stortford Independent*
James Mitchinson	Editor-in-Chief, the *Yorkshire Post*
Mark Thompson	Audience Engagement Director, JPIMedia

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