

WAN-IFRA Report | EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Best practice in reader revenue

Strategies from 10 global case studies



World Association  
of News Publishers



World Association  
of News Publishers

## Best practice in reader revenue – Strategies from 10 global case studies

Published by:

**WAN-IFRA**

Rotfeder-Ring 11  
60327 Frankfurt, Germany  
[wan-ifra.org](http://wan-ifra.org)

**CEO:**

Vincent Peyrègne

**COO:**

Thomas Jacob

**Director of Insights:**

Dean Roper

**Authors:**

Brian Veseling, Neha Gupta, Chee Jing Yee

**Editing:**

Dean Roper, Brian Veseling

**Designer:**

Gordon Steiger

# Table of contents

Why you should read this report .....	4
---------------------------------------	---

Executive summary .....	5
-------------------------	---

## CASE STUDIES

NYT pushes 'play' on Audio app to add value to subscriptions, reduce churn .....	8
---	---

Nikkei aims for greater subscriber engagement through new metrics .....	12
--	----

Deep dive: How The Hindu built its subscription business .....	15
--	----

How Mediahuis used data to increase retention by 14 percent in 3 months .....	19
--	----

Testing, metrics, products: FT uses data to ace the subscription game .....	22
--	----

With 700,000 paying subscribers, digital more profitable than print for Clarín in Argentina .....	26
--	----

The Mill finds sustainability by flipping scale on its head .....	29
---	----

How Germany's Die Zeit boosted conversions by 8 percent in one year .....	33
--	----

'The more you read, the less you churn,' and other lessons from Norway's Amedia .....	37
--	----

DC Thomson: New focus on communities brings big gains in paying digital subscribers .....	40
--	----

## Executive Summary

# Fine tuning your reader revenue efforts with new products, data, and quality content

**While the majority of news publishers realise they need to increase the percentage of revenue they get directly from their readers, how to best go about this can be challenging.**

One popular starting point is to require online readers to register to access content on the publisher's website and begin using a paywall, perhaps not a hard paywall at first, but one that gradually over time restricts the number of freely accessible articles that a user can access within a given time period. This is a model that has become increasingly popular in the past five to 10 years.

There are many benefits to this model. Requiring registration gives a publisher direct, first-party data, and can help them to learn much more about their readers and what they do while they are accessing their site vs allowing anonymous users to freely come and go. This model is becoming more and more important as it can directly help a given publisher to then fine-tune both their content and their subscription drives as well as help to reduce churning subscribers.

The aim of this report is to help news publishers find ways to further hone their reader revenue efforts and maybe consider some new streams and strategies as well.

### Getting people to spend more time with your products

For example, in our first case study, The New York Times is finding that audio adds a sensory touchpoint to the Times' overall bundle of key products to further bring them to life, to create and provide experiences that will encourage subscribers to return. This has led them to introduce NYT Audio, their first new app in nine years.

"If people subscribe to multiple products, they spend more time, they find more value, they are less likely to churn," Zoe Murphy, Assistant Editor NYT Audio, told participants of a WAN-IFRA webinar in December 2023.



Zoe Murphy

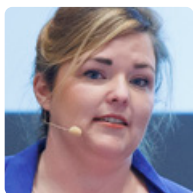
Meanwhile, in our case study about India's The Hindu, you will find how a major national news publisher that has traditionally been able to count on advertising for a huge share of their revenues, is balancing their reader revenue efforts while maintaining their advertising business.

"Every time we decided to take an action in favour of reader revenue, we had to calculate the probable loss in the ad revenue and only when we saw that subscription would get us a better return, we moved ahead," Pradeep Gairola, VP and Business Head – Digital, The Hindu, told us in a recent interview.

The company's ultimate goal is to become user-first, with sustainability playing an integral role in it, and a focus on data to learn from user behaviours.

"We strive to understand which user is better served with ads and who are the ones who should be asked to subscribe. This opens up opportunities in cross promotion, upselling, ecommerce, events, etc," Gairola said.

With our case study on Mediahuis, you will discover how they are working with data to drive new subscriptions as well as help them keep their existing subscribers.



Jessica Bulthé

“Machine learning models are great at identifying past trends from data sets, learning them and predicting new behaviour patterns for new users,” said Jessica Bulthé, Data Science Business Partner. “This helps us in splitting that huge pool

of users into different subgroups – People who are very likely to buy, people who might buy, and people who are lost causes.”

This helped Mediahuis increase retention by over 14 per cent in just three months, and they now have around 1.8 million subscribers across the group.

## New products to reach new audiences

A major challenge for FT, as for most publishers, is to reach new, younger audiences. An added complicator is the FT has a hard paywall, with very few free articles.

“Even though we feel our luxury status symbol product is buying us a bit of time, we still need to look at these more price-sensitive, younger readers,” McKinley Hyden, Director of Analytics Business Impact, Financial Times, said.



McKinley Hyden

In that bid, the company launched FT Edit, a standalone app that allows a user eight articles per day. It is free for the first 30-day days and costs 99p a month for the first six months and £4.99 (€ 5.83) a month thereafter. The app has had 140,000 downloads since it debuted in March, 2022.

Another publisher aiming to attract younger users while maintaining a strong paywall is Argentina’s Clarín.

For instance, if they detect a teenager is reading show business news, they will let them continue reading.



Emilio Basavilbaso

“We want him or her to be loyal and to be in touch with our brand,” said Emilio Basavilbaso, Chief Operating Officer at Clarín, Argentina’s largest newspaper. “Maybe in a couple of months or in a couple of years, we will turn him or her into a subscriber. But we have to consider different clusters to be successful.”

Furthermore, Clarín has also expanded its offerings.

“We developed different business units because we are convinced that we have to develop different businesses to keep our business healthy,” Basavilbaso said.

For example, Clarín launched a sports newspaper called Olé, the first and only sports newspaper in the country. They are also investing heavily in games.

## People will pay if the quality of the journalism is high

And it’s not just traditional, legacy publishers that are seeing the importance and value of reader revenue.

Joshi Herrmann, a journalist who formerly wrote for mainstream publishers such as The Guardian and The Daily Telegraph, decided to launch a newsletter a few years ago to deliver news he felt was being unreported in the Manchester, UK, area.

“People are willing to pay for very small quantities of local journalism if the journalism is very, very good. And if the journalism is something they can’t get anywhere else,” he said. “The moment you start publishing things that people can get elsewhere, they can get for free on the BBC, or the Guardian, they won’t pay for it, obviously.”

“Our big focus, our big watchword is differentiation,” he added. “What I realised when I started this is a lot of people who are trying to solve the local news problem are recreating old style newspapers online but with stories that feel very similar to what is already out there.”

Despite seeing a steady rise in subscriptions, Germany’s Die Zeit has struggled with converting free trial users to paying subscribers and retaining them.

The company’s efforts in navigating this challenge have paid off in the past year after they recorded a 10 percent rise in engagement during the trial phase and a 12 percent uplift in the average retention rate. They now have 297,000 digital subscribers.





Christian Röpke

“The most important phase, not only for the initial payment after the trial phase but also for lifetime retention, is at the beginning of the relationship with our customers and how we seek to foster routines and commitment in that direction,” said

Christian Röpke, Chief Digital Officer, ZEIT Verlagsgruppe.

### ‘Our biggest sales channels are the articles’

Norway’s Amedia publishes nearly 90 regional newspapers across Norway, but for nearly four years now, digital has been their biggest subscription product.

In fact, their digital growth has more than compensated for the declines they’ve suffered in print, Eivor Jerpåsen, Amedia’s Editorial Product Director, told participants at our Newsroom Summit conference in Oslo.

**“Our north star is how many of our subscribers have read something of our local content. We don’t look at page views or unique users. Our subscribers are the most important. And we know the more you read the less you churn,” Jerpåsen said.**

“Our biggest sales channels are the articles, so we thought ‘How can we improve our most important channel? How can we make that optimal?’ ” she said.

They decided to try radically reducing the incentive text they were using when a reader hit the paywall down to a bare minimum and offering them a price.

“What we saw was a very high level of conversion, and for us, we have such a huge volume of these actions every day, and with just a small amount of increase in conversion base, meant an increase of almost 250 sales every day,” Jerpåsen said.

### Multiple factors across departments needed for success

Another important point about succeeding with reader revenue initiatives, is that they are nearly always team efforts that cross many departments within a publishing house. As Richard Prest of DC Thomson told participants at our Newsroom Summit conference in Oslo, there was no single factor that has led to DC Thomson’s success, rather it’s a combination of different efforts from different teams and different departments across the organisation.

“The growth is the result of various changes across various teams and various departments all combining to lift us up there. We have everything from simple changes to our calls to action on the site, very early on our journey. That boosted numbers. We then introduced more premium content: that boosted them again,” Prest said.



Richard Prest

“It’s multiple different factors, and different teams involved that have helped make that change possible. No one department can say they are responsible for the success,” he said.

We trust you will find even more valuable information from all of these case studies on the following pages, and we hope they will prove useful to you when developing and fine-tuning your own reader revenue efforts.