



# Attracting subscribers with a different editorial approach



In this second installment of the series *"Building a sustainable media with solutions and constructive journalism,"* we explore how newsroom's editorial product innovations have enhanced reader engagement with and attracted financial support for their media outlets.

**\* When adapting their journalism to better meet the needs of their users and the communities they serve, several publications conceived solutions and constructive journalism as an editorial product that offered a different value proposition.**

By pursuing a range of different engagement tactics with their readers, media outlets are able to produce a less alienating and more empowering journalism that aligns with their readers' values and sense of purpose, which also galvanizes a sense of community and their financial support.

## Key tips for reader revenue strategy

- Be clear about how constructive and solutions journalism fits into your mission, objectives and goals and create buy-in within all teams in your media organisation.
- Actually produce constructive and solutions journalism content as a key component of your work (Also, see resource 1 about culture change).
- Adopt engagement strategies oriented towards solutions-focused coverage that brings you closer to your audience. Using various types of surveys, events and online forums, create opportunities to listen to, learn from, reflect on contributions from your readers.
- Provide deeply researched reporting on subject matters that your community and readers care about and identify how to bring in solutions-angles.

- Be prepared to remind your community often of the role that you play in serving the community and what you're doing differently with your journalism. Deliver this message in your engagement strategies.
- While not necessary, you can choose to brand the content that is more solutions oriented through editorials, editor's notes, logos, website sections, dedicated newsletters, etc...
- Track the motivations of people to support your work. Adapt your products and strategies to expressed civic needs.
- Identify opportunities to make a clear ask for financial support based on your constructive work.
- Set up a digital infrastructure that helps you measure the conversion rates of solutions stories. Make data-driven decisions.

## Audience-centric media answers need for solutions-oriented worldview

In Europe, Nice-Matin, a French publication saved from bankruptcy by staff taking ownership, was a pioneer of this type of transformation. Starting in 2014, the new leadership decided to tilt its coverage towards solutions journalism and began consulting their readers monthly on the topic they wanted to see covered as a matter of priority. These became the subject of in-depth dossiers providing well-rounded angles of coverage.

The reporting was complemented by regular events offering readers the possibility of engaging with the journalists and subject-matter experts featured as sources in the solutions-oriented reporting.



Then-subscriptions manager Ati Roufai said that this type of journalism helped readers feel more a part of the publication. It also outperformed other content in driving subscriptions. [According to Sophie Casals](#), journalist at NiceMatin, “online solutions articles generate most subscriptions with a conversion rate of 10%, compared to 1% for other articles.”

In the case of [Zetland](#), a digital publication with a national scope of coverage founded in 2016 in Denmark, “**fight cynicism and search for solutions**” is a foundational tenet of the publication’s [guiding principles](#). It stands alongside others such as “**Try to explain, not simplify, the world,**” or being “passionate about our journalism and honest about everything we do.”

Lea Korsgaard, Zetland’s Co-founder and Editor-in-Chief, said “journalism has no value in and of itself,” adding, “the value comes when (...) people find it valuable and actually use that journalism.” Zetland’s member-centric mindset is essential to keep a finger on the pulse of their members’ needs and to shape their constructive approach.



In the beginning phases of their new ventures, Zetland’s founding team launched a crowdfunding campaign as a small test to evaluate the business case for their new media venture, especially the potential for generating reader support.

They also invited initial backers to discuss the media outlet’s business, products, and the kind of editorial output they would provide. This approach informs what they do to this day. For instance, they set a relatively low frequency for publishing content, so as to not bombard readers with an overwhelming flow of information. Meanwhile, their pieces are longer and more deeply reported.

Riding on the appeal of podcasts, they started providing audio versions of their articles, read by the journalist. Rather than remaining strictly text-based, this format fits their users’ news consumption habits and enhances their affinity for the personalized voice of the journalists reporting the stories.

As a result, engagement with the content increased steadily over the last few years. Of the approximately 30h of content Zetland releases every month, members spend, on average, up to seven hours listening to content. They even created a 5-minute audio morning brief to answer the daily information needed by listeners.



\*Photo: Lea Korsgaard, Zetland’s Co-founder and Editor-in-Chief, explains the evolution of member engagement with their content at 13:35 on October 17th 2024, at the Zetland office in Copenhagen.

Zetland journalist Nanna Schelde, explained that Zetland’s journalism is reflexive and circular. An initial piece of reporting usually leads to feedback from readers, with questions and input from people with knowledge or first hand experience of an issue, which seed new story ideas. This was the case for a series on the effects of smartphones on young people, in which Schelde explored best practices on the matter.

It took four years for the publication to break even, after years of adapting and refining not only the content, their engagement methods and the business strategies.

Key to their success is how they built an understanding of the value of their journalism, by presenting behind-the-scenes insights into how they work and what it takes to produce quality, solutions-oriented content.



Eventually they tapped their community of supporters to carry their message beyond the limits of what they could achieve with traditional marketing campaigns. Word-of-mouth recommendations from yearlong [ambassador campaigns](#), where supporters convince people in their social circles to join as members, were and remain the main factors in their membership growth. Over 28,000 members pay a monthly average of 139dk or €20.

### Legacy publications find stability and a little growth

For legacy publications where the constructive approach wasn't baked into the workflows and editorial focus from inception, it has contributed to remarkable financial improvements compared to the downward business trends they experienced previously. This is the case for the [Midtjyllands Avis](#), in central Denmark.

While, like in Norway and Sweden, [people in Denmark](#) maintain relatively high levels of trust in the media (57%) and pay for online news at an above average rate (17%), these two publications had seen a decrease in the number of subscribers before embarking on a shift in their editorial approach.

On November 1st 2024, according to Hans Krabbe, Editor-in-chief of the Midtjyllands Avis, the paper had 500 more subscribers of all kinds (year, month, 24 hours, e-paper) compared to the year before. If all the new financial support cannot be attributed to constructive journalism with causal certainty, he says there is "no doubting for one second that our approach to local journalism is an important means for us to keep and increase subscribers."

Of the three titles that form the media group Midtjyllands Avis is a part of, they are the only one to have changed their approach to journalism and stemmed the drain of reader's financial support. The level of subscriptions have not plummeted like at other publications. They have even increased a little.

Krabbe insists they don't talk about their constructive approach overtly in any regular way as a means to market themselves. Rather than "tell", the emphasis comes from their consistent practice of solutions-oriented, engagement-driven, civic-minded ways of producing information to serve the community. People "need to sense it and perceive it gradually," he said.

## Room of solutions

- Invite a panel of diverse local experts to a meeting where we focus on possible solutions to a specific problem. The "Solutions Space" concept typically works well as a conclusion to extended coverage of a current issue. Ensure the panel includes individuals who can effectively implement the debated solutions. Consider rotating the panel as needed throughout the process.



\*Photo: Of the multiple ways to Midtjylland Avis promotes a constructive approach, one is by bringing experts together to discuss solutions. This is a screenshot taken from their internal guide, the Formatbook.



And it pays off. "People say they have noticed something is different" about how the publication operates, asserts Krabbe. They provide feedback on the reporting and send in ideas for follow up stories, based on information needs they have. They engage with one another in the website's comment sections with a level of mutual respect and factual information that contrasts with the toxicity of exchanges on social media platforms.

In the context of major plans to tackle infrastructure and traffic issues in the city of Silkeborg, instigated by the local authority, Midtjylland Avis launched a series, exploring the matter with sustained coverage and multiple angles, including solutions-oriented stories looking at how the city could inspire itself from success elsewhere. This work proved so effective at keeping people informed and engaged that the local authority considered their work as an act of public service. The paper counted more than 500 different reactions from the readers, such as comments, ideas, questions and debate.

Politicians too appreciate the civic function of the publication in the midst of politicised debates between various political factions. Based on this experience and looking at the long term sustainability of their organization, Krabbe is adamant about their "need to make it harder for local civil society to not have us here" and becoming "one of the strongest structures in the community."

There is no straight line between producing solutions-oriented content and generating reader revenue. However, a consistent pursuit of this editorial approach along with deeper forms of community engagement can demonstrate civic value and attract financial support.

TRANSPORT



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**Intet tog fra Silkeborg mod Herning**



POLITIK

**Flere penge til forbedret bus-information**



POLITIK

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POLITIK

**Silkeborg får millioner til bedre trafikikkerhed**



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**Trafikkaos på Nørrevænget - hvad mener du?**



POLITIK

**Borgere anmeldte dybt hul på Spættevej**

\*Photo: A screenshot of the Midtjylland Avis' website page dedicated to covering the transport beat.

