



## The virtual SciCon conference series | Transcript

### **Matt Rogerson, Martin Jönsson: On the future of newspapers and publishers (21 April 2021, 5 pm CEST)**

Moderation: Jeanne Rubner

[Jeanne Rubner] OK, I guess it's 5:00 pm and we're ready to start. Our speakers are here, so welcome, a very warm welcome to this last online session of SciCon, Science Journalism in the Digital Age, an online conference which wasn't being planned as an online conference but had to move to the virtual world as many events that we know. And it's organized by the WPK, the Association of German Science Journalists, and the Acatech, the German Academy of Science and Technology, funded by the Federal Ministry of Research and Education. So, many thanks to our funders.

And a technical detail ahead of time, ahead of the session. All these sessions are being recorded, they're being transcribed, so by asking questions, you also agree to the fact that you're being recorded. So if you have a problem with that, just write your questions in the chat or you may anyway write your questions in the chat, this is an option as well.

And so this is the last online session before the big event in May, the actual conference. And I'm very happy to announce two speakers that are really worthwhile listening to them because they are fully already embedded in the digital age, in the future of newspapers, that's what we're going to talk about, namely Matt Rogerson, he's director of public policy at the Guardian Media Group, and hi, Matt. And he's there responsible, and his job is responsible for data safety, for questions about independent journalism, for the future of media in general. And we're very pleased to have him here because we know The Guardian has interesting ideas and interesting, very good ideas about the future of publishing and also has some interesting models of how to have a public even though there is business-model problem with newspapers in general.

And I'm also very thrilled to announce that Martin Jönsson is a part of the podium. He is head of the editorial department [indistinct] at the *Dagens Nyheter* Swedish newspaper, also with sort of ideas about the future of the print business. He was a digital director at the Swedish public radio, so he has a broad view on the on the media business and is also a professor of journalism at the University of Gothenburg.

My name is Jeanne Rubner, I'm a member of the WPK, I work at the German Public Broadcasting, the *Bayrischer Rundfunk* based in Munich. Right now I'm in Hamburg at the Hamburg Media School, participating in a class about digital journalism. And somehow I'm glad to talk now about newspapers because all we did all day long was

coding. So we are supposed to build something that's related to the Internet of Things and to the future of media. So I'm sort of immersed in the digital age already, which is a good preparation for this session.

So a very warm welcome to our experts and to all of you. And we'll start with two short presentations before we start, we go into the discussion, and I would like to ask Matt to start to share your screen and start your presentation.

So, Matt, we see the first slide, but we don't hear you, so I hope that everything's working well for you.

[Matt Rogerson] Can you hear me now?

[Jeanne Rubner] Yeah, now it's OK.

[Matt Rogerson] Yeah, OK, apologies, my apologies. So just about The Guardian. 2021 marks the two hundredth anniversary of The Guardian. It was founded in Manchester in 1821. And possibly the most influential editor in the history of the paper was C.P. Scott, who became editor at the ripe old age of 25 in 1872. And under his editorship, The Guardian rose to national and international prominence through its kind of investigative... investigations on issues like housing, working-class health. And he also did things like oppose the South African War and laid the groundwork for the welfare state in the UK. So it was very influential. C.P. Scott bought The Guardian in 1905 from the owner's son, the original owner's son.

And then the big moment came in 1936 when Scott decided to place the Guardian in trust to protect the legacy of The Guardian. And that means that today, The Guardian's structure means that any profits made by The Guardian, by The Observer, our sister paper, or by any businesses within the wider Guardian Media Group are reinvested back into the business to create more high-quality journalism. We don't have an outside shareholder who takes money out of the business. It all goes back into the business, into journalism.

And the way that we structure the business is that any profits that are generated go into an endowment fund. And while the total of this fund fluctuates according to the markets, its current value is around a billion UK pounds or Great British pounds. And any interest that's generated from that fund is used by the board to power the business through uncertainty or to enable strategic investment. So, that's the kind of structure and model of The Guardian.

And our kind of modern purpose, if you like, is outlined on this next slide, and that's to build and inspire new audiences through our journalism. And there you see the kind of open nature of our website, the non-pay-wall nature of the website, is important in doing that. And crucially, I think with the current strategy is to build greater value from the relationships we have with our readers. I'll come to that in a moment as to what that means. And the third area is to ensure that our kind of purpose, our wider purpose as a business, that that runs all the way through the organisation. And that's kind of a continual process, I think that's a good aspect.

And in terms of our business model: over the last few years, The Guardian has become less reliant on our print newspaper to drive revenues. And while print is still a healthy part of the business, digital revenues represent about 56 percent of our total revenues. And with revenues coming from our readers directly, that represents about 58 percent of our total business. And while we do sell advertising both in print and online, I think the truth is you can't rely on it as a market to fund all journalism. It's facing at the moment huge technological disruption and it also faces pretty urgent action by regulators to drive transparency, accountability and competition. And I'll come to that in the last slide in relation to the platforms.

And The Guardian is not just a UK-based publication now. It has a strong presence globally. We have an office in Australia and in addition, in Australia, it's made a big impact since its launch in 2013 and we continue to make an impact in the US, where Guardian US was launched in 2011.

We also serve the European market with print products. So we have Guardian Weekly, which is a print, weekly print magazine. And over 2020 we've seen strong growth in key markets in Europe as well.

And then the last thing to add is that we have, do have a small number of specific projects that are funded through philanthropic grants and about 1-2 percent of total editorial spend. And that is... those kind of projects enable us to produce independent journalism that accords with the goals of the founders, but which is written independently of the founders by our journalistic staff.

And so the past couple of years have been huge for us in terms of audience, the appetite for news is undiminished and in fact is growing. So 2020, unsurprisingly, in terms of our journalism, we saw 19.7 billion unique browsers during 2020, which was up 30 percent on the year before. And then in terms of, kind of we look at both unique and regular visitors, and for us regulars is a, uniques are really good at showing off the journalism to new audiences, regulars shows that people are coming back for more and enjoying it. And as you can see from the charts, uniques were up 62 percent year-on-year. And 52... and regulars were up 55 percent.

And again, just in terms of our European audience, that now accounts for around 17 percent of the total page views on The Guardian, which is double what it was in 2016. So it's... our presence across Europe has grown as well significantly. And that really peaked in Europe in March 2020, unsurprisingly, as COVID hit. And we were just under 80 million page views and 12.5 million uniques in that month.

And our science coverage has played a major part in that audience growth. And so what we found is that traffic to science-tagged journalism has grown by 270 percent between 2019 and 2020, and average page views per piece of content were also up by 81 percent, which reflects the fact that we've got a larger audience coming to each piece of content, not just that we were publishing more science-tagged journalism. And obviously COVID news dominated the consumption on our site. So consumption page views to content where to coronavirus-related stuff peaked at about 84 percent of all page views of all content on the 20th March 2020.

And typically, the sort of content that really drives audiences are our popular live blogs, which drive huge amounts of traffic to The Guardian, huge amounts of interest and engagement. And I think in terms of the role of science journalism in the sustainability of news organisations, it certainly plays a key role in driving engagement with new and existing readers because it builds trust in The Guardian brand and a willingness to subscribe, contribute or just continue reading Guardian journalism. And there's no doubt that our reporting on COVID-19 led to substantial rises in reader financial support for The Guardian.

In terms of why our site's journalism's performed so well and we sought to cover the pandemic in five distinct ways, which are on the screen there, but first is to hold power to account in terms of how they've handled the crisis; to bring empathy and humanity to the stories we've told; to publish evidence-based journalism and rigorous analysis; to bring an international perspective to a global story; and I think the overarching narrative is about how the pandemic is going to change how we all live in the future.

And we also have an excellent team. So we have a fantastic health and science reporting team who've been reporting brilliantly, updating trackers, Q&As and explainers and answering readers' questions. And they republish journalism, not just on our own site, but off-platform on other sites. And so if you look at some of our explainers, which have been really popular: on YouTube, our coronavirus explainer with our health editor Sarah Boseley has clocked up nearly 10 million views alone on YouTube. And so we've really sort of taken our journalism off the site into new territory in order to find audiences.

And I suppose I'm asked to summarise the future sustainability of newspapers and where that's all heading, and I think you do have to look to the debate about platforms to do that. I'll just end on that, if that's OK, because there's no doubt that online platforms are vital to the future distribution, consumption and monetisation of journalism. And while news organisations were once kind of the gatekeepers to news and information, global tech companies now play that role and their decisions and policies have a major impact on free expression and on the choices that people make in our society, not least whether to get vaccinated or not. And the policies and behaviour of those platforms also impact on the distribution, consumption and monetisation of digital journalism. And historically, many of these have run counter to the commercial interests of news publishers. But I'd argue also counter to the wider public interest.

And things are changing, undoubtedly. I think public and political pressure means that the online platforms are changing some of their policies. But the reality is that the business model of the platforms, it doesn't focus on the quality or veracity of the content that's published, rather, it thrives on the volume of content that they're able to publish, the collection of huge tracts of consumer data in and outside walled gardens and which they use to generate huge amounts of targeted advertising inventory over which the platforms then take minimal responsibility for either the advertising or the content that they publish. And this is a business model that's largely automated, so it determines what content is shown to whom, what ads are served, where articles appear, what price is achieved, all of which are done in a largely opaque way. And I think in that kind of world of platforms, as a business and

as consumers, we've got very little ability to compare the outcomes that we receive with each other. So we've got no sense of whether the actions of online platforms are fair, just or accord with principles of equality in a digital world.

So I think after many years of policymakers being too scared to intervene, we're now seeing competition regulators and politicians across the world waking up to actually the need to intervene to sustain industries like journalism, but also kind of wider creative industries and content businesses and also the interests of consumers. So, across Europe and the UK, Australia, United States competition regulators are finding evidence of market concentration, conflicts of interest, breaches of data protection law.

And I think I'm hopeful we're now pushing through the sort of Dark Ages of Internet regulation to a renaissance. And that through the formation of legislation, consumers, businesses and regulators can put in place standards against which the platforms are judged and held to account, and that we're heading towards hopefully a digital economy where more news publishers can thrive and work efficiently in the public interest.

And so I'll stop there. And thanks for listening. And I look forward to the rest of the session and any questions you might have.

[Jeanne Rubner] Thank you. Thank you, Matt. That was a really great introduction to the topic and that you've raised so many questions. Before we tackle them, I am very happy to ask Martin to sketch his... the views of his newspaper about the future, about business models, about regulation, maybe, too, Martin.

[Martin Jönsson] Yes. Thank you. And thank you for the introduction. And thank you, Matt. It's always thrilling to hear about The Guardian story, it's always very impressive.

I maybe will not talk so much about regulation. I will talk about how we have gotten where we are and what we want to see in the future. And I am actually going to travel in time a bit. I will get to the future finally. But let's start in 2015.

*Dagens Nyheter* is the leading newspaper in Sweden and six years ago we really had problems, partly because we were totally dependent on print. We had almost no digital subscribers and we saw clearly the development in the ad business that Matt was talking about, where ad money was moving to the global players, Facebook and Google mainly. So that was a bad situation for us, and since then we have lost a lot of our print circulation, 47 percent to be precise. And actually, I think that's great news because I believe truly – and this is not because it's fun to show the slide – but I believe that the disruption of the newspaper business is the best thing that has happened to us. And by disruption, I mean, of course, all these structural changes, both in media consumption and in ad money and in technical challenges and platforms and the inevitable downturn of print because it has forced us to reinvent ourselves.

And for us, it's been a large, total focus on digital subscriber growth since then, where we have grown from almost none in 2015 to now 220,000 paying digital-only

subscribers. And then we have our print subscribers, of course, at 140,000 that also have digital access and are digitally active. But we have been able to grow by 40 percent despite that print-circulation loss. And since Sweden is still quite a small country, if you will translate the number of digital subscribers that we have today, since we have grown a bit since this tweet, it would be close to about two million digital subscribers in Germany.

So I, like Matt, I will look into a few numbers – sorry, a bit fast there. Let's get back to the previous slide. There we are. Today, we have a reader-revenue situation where 76 percent of our total revenue and 15 years ago it was just 25 percent. We were much more dependent on ads. So we have managed to get away from the ad dependence. And now we basically live on the long-term relationships, the paying relationships, with our readers. And that is also why we don't talk so much about traffic numbers and page views and uniques. We talk mainly about financial stability. And last year, despite the pandemic, it was our best year in more than 20 years. And we had record profits and record growth in digital subscribers.

And today we have more money in digital reader revenue than we have in ad revenue. We have been using this to invest more in our journalism. Today actually we opened a new editorial office in Malmö, the third-largest city in Sweden. Three years ago we opened in Gothenburg. So we are expanding nationally with six journalists employed in Malmö and six in Gothenburg. Since we have a national digital growth, we have also invested recently in more resources in both climate coverage and right now we are recruiting more science journalists. We are expanding that and actually forming a totally new department based on science, medicine and climate crisis in order to really emphasise the importance of those topics in our editorial direction.

So, I would start by getting to the future, by travelling back in time a bit further, actually go back to 1992. In August 92, this man, Bob Kaiser, wrote what has been called the "Kaiser memo". Sorry for that. He was visiting... he was invited to a conference that was hosted by Apple in '92 by John Sculley. And after... that was a time when compute, the importance of computers, the digitalisation was starting to affect media companies if they were looking at much at the future. And when he came back to Washington, The Washington Post, where he was managing editor, he wrote this memo to the owners and to the other managers and saying that this will affect us very, very much. And he believes that newspapers will have a very strong position in the digital world, but we must act on it now. And he had two suggestions. And one was: let's develop an electronic newspaper. And the other was: let's develop an electronic ad market. And the managers and owners discussed this. And they said, "OK, well, we'll do an electronic newspaper." It took some time, but they did. Nowadays, we would call it a website. But on the other question, a suggestion of an electronic ad market they say, "No, we don't want to cannibalise on what we have. We are extremely strong in our local position as a newspaper, and we will never lose that strong hold that we have on the ad market."

Famous last words, because then Craigslist happens, which might be the ugliest website in the world, but it totally changed the ad market and it started in the US, followed by other actors, Facebook and Google, that is totally being dominant in the ad market and creating almost a duopoly when it comes to global ad revenue. So,

by not acting on Bob Kaiser's suggestions, Washington Post lost out a lot when it comes to taking early positions in the digital market.

So, moving from Bob Kaiser, who is a great man and a great editor, I met him a number of years ago and I was very inspired by him. If I move back to 2015, what needed to do in that situation with all the structural change and the print-dependent situation, basically the only thing that we could do was to change and change radically. So we said that we are focusing on totally changing our strategy, digital subscriptions as the most important part of the strategy, totally changing the editorial culture – I always think that culture is key to all kinds of change in newsrooms, and also see the possibilities in gaining new audiences, younger, more women, more outside Stockholm where we were focused as a print business – and to optimise those stories online as if print does not exist, which was something I claimed very often in the newsroom, which I would say that now is exactly what we are doing. And also to work much more with data, be data-informed but not data-driven is one of my mottos. And to change the way we work, focus much more on the digital planning and the digital production work much more in teams in the newsrooms.

Also to look on what we had to compete with: if we want to get into the market of paying for news, we can't really provide basic news, general news. We have to focus much more on the original journalism, high-quality journalism, that people would be willing to pay for. So: identifying the areas which we are going to cover most was a process that we started, but also the kind of journalism that the most important part of us is the investigative journalism, that is the unique storytelling and the in-depth content where we really focus on areas like science, for instance, in order to compete with something that wasn't available on the market for free.

And also to, of course, spread the word, distribute this and reach out on platforms and to learn very much from the data, and breaking news is a part of the recipe, of course, it's still extremely important to get traffic and bring in new readers, but it's not what actually is the backbone of our business model: the backbone will be the original journalism.

And what we see is that if we have traffic bumps, if we have situations like COVID, like US election, like national elections, they are extremely important for us to be able to introduce new readers to the brand, which they may not be acquainted with, with our, to our best content, and to make sure that they not only read the general news stories about the dominating topics, but also that we can present and package our journalism in ways that we can reach out with what we believe is our highest-quality content.

And if you have paywalls, it's very easy to scare away new customers, especially younger customers. But in general, they will not be ready to buy if they are not acquainted with the brand and you risk losing them first thing if you have a hard paywall. So we have been working very much with trying to introduce them, converting through the content with perhaps longer trial periods where they only have to register, being... make it possible for them to really get to know the kind of journalism that we do. And then basically, if they are returning users, try to convert them with paywalls or discounts in order to get them to be loyal users and loyal

customers and to do that as fast as possible. And we have seen during the last year that it is possible to reach a very large number of new readers and quite quickly convert them into paying customers.

We started the COVID coverage to open all our content and to make it available to everyone out of sort of a public service since it was such important reporting. And gradually we put things more behind the paywall and to... gave people a trial period so they can register and try the content, open up possibilities to read for free. And the result was that 300,000 people had tried these trial periods. And out of those, a third, 100,000, have later signed on for short term or longer-term subscriptions. So it has been important to use this traffic bump in order to get people to become paying customers.

So one of my mottos that I have is that the general news may be seen as a gateway drug. It's very important to get people to get acquainted to you, but it's not really what makes them stay. So the original content, the quality content, the focus on in-depth and storytelling and investigative, is so much more important than the breaking news in itself.

Because what we do is try to focus on loyalty, to create habits, to serve, to get people to engage, to get people to get daily reading habits and to spend a lot of time, to be focused very much on reading time. We focus very much on completion rates and to get people to have a daily routine where they read the longer stories for a longer time, because that is how they will define quality and what will make them loyal.

So what would Bob say if we go back to him and Bob Kaiser in '92? Yes, that the key, if we look into the future, is to focus on the changing needs and behaviour of the audience. You must be aware of what's happening and act upon it, but also to provide the best possible product, to really focus on what you have to offer on a market where competition is getting fiercer for every day. And that's it for my presentation.

[Jeanne Rubner] OK, thank you so much, Martin. Sorry, I had to move here at the Hamburg School, I had to move in the hallway. So I'm kind of there. I couldn't stay in the office because they closed everything down, so excuse the acoustics sound here.

We already have a few questions in the chat. I would like to ask you both a question before we tackle the questions from the audience, because since this is also a session organized by the WPK, the science journalists, to what extent, I mean, you mentioned, you know, that science topics seem to play a larger role because we also see that they work very well in the Internet. So do you expect to build more on science topics in order to keep and to grow your audiences? And to what extent you both expect that, beyond COVID, you will be able to draw more of the audience with science topics?

[Martin Jönsson] It's tough to answer. I think that continuous coverage with deep knowledge is what makes it possible for us to get people to be attracted to this kind of journalism that we do in any field, whether it's in politics or in foreign reporting



or in science. So I think that the key is to have the best possible editors and writers in that field. And I think that we have to, of course, look into what topics our readers are interested in. For instance, we see now that that climate crisis is a topic that we have actually the same kind of traffic as we have on Swedish politics. So it's really growing. And one trigger in that was the special edition we did in December with Greta Thunberg, as editor-in-chief guesting in for a day, which really triggered a lot of interest from new readers. So I would say that kind of specialised content in important areas is what defines the kind of quality, original quality journalism that we want to focus on.

[Matt Rogerson] Yeah, I'd say if you, there's no doubt that kind of our audience flocked to our science coverage during COVID. But even now, after we've we passed the peak, I think I mentioned in my presentation, about 20 percent of all consumption on our site is of science-tagged journalism. So there's the real appetite for it. And I, if you believe that COVID has changed everything and that we're going to have to find scientific solutions to a whole bunch of problems we didn't have before or were ignoring, then it feels to me like investing in a good base of science journalists is incredibly important. And I certainly think we've got that at The Guardian.

And in terms of, apart from COVID, I mean, climate change is something that we've tried to lead on. I think we were one of the first publications to sort of reform our language on it and call it climate crisis, which it is. And others have followed now, and certainly in our advertising business, we've done things like decarbonise, so we don't take any fossil fuel advertising as a business. And so I think there's a real appetite there.

It is interesting. I was doing some research for a separate consultation on how many people under the age of 18 come to our site. And what I found really encouraging was the section that they came to most was science and the environment. So actually you see a huge appetite among younger readers on The Guardian to access science and environment coverage. And I think that's really positive for us. But also I think for societies around the world where all those [figures?] are coming from.

[Jeanne Rubner] Thank you. One question, the question that came last by our colleague Volker Stollorz, who leads the Science Media Centre in Germany, and he asks, I mean, you already answered a little bit of a part of his question, but he would like both of you to explain a bit more how science stories, how they work, how they fare on your side compared to other topics and what kind of audience they reach. You said the environmental issues reach the younger audiences. But I mean, do you have more information about like male, female, for instance? Is there a difference?

[Martin Jönsson] Well, what we have seen is a bit similar to what Matt says for The Guardian is that the climate crisis attracts a lot of young readers and more women readers among those. We see a strong growth of digital subscribers below 30, below the age of 30. So it's, I mean, the change from going from a print paper to a digital paper is a change of 25 years in average of the subscriber, so it's generally it's much younger audiences today. And also we have a majority of female readers in general now. And when it comes to science coverage, it depends a bit on the kind of

coverage that you do: if it's very specialised or if it's more in the basic explanatory kind of journalism, which I think, which we use more on, for instance, social media to attract people to the kind of journalism that we do. We work like The Guardian a lot with explainers on space or on new fields of technology and science and so on. So it's a bit different kinds of stories that work well on different platforms and for different audiences.

[Jeanne Rubner] Thank you. And let us go on with one question to both of you. How did you manage asks [Marcus Brixius] to lure the readers away from social media to your platforms and what kind of monetisation you recommend?

[Martin Jönsson] Well, I can answer that for me. In regards of Facebook, we have say that we shouldn't use this as much as a news platform. We should use it to build the brand to get people interested in our original journalism. So a lot of promotion, a lot of editorial promotion, and a lot of explainers to get people interested in our best stories and not reporting general news on those platforms. The most important [indistinct] platform for us is Instagram Stories, is where we attract a younger audience, more women, and get people interested in the brand by using short video formats and so on.

And to constantly try to have a strong direct traffic, I think, is very important for the monetisation, because if you have that, you are not so dependent on others. We've gone from an ad-dependency in the noughties and tens to a platform-dependency or an aggregated dependency. And now we have at *Dagens Nyheter* we have 84 percent direct traffic, we have below one percent from Google News. We have below two percent from Facebook. And I'm quite happy with that because if we have the direct traffic, we have the direct relationship. So, and to get there is to try to use your own platform and to focus on that and not to give away as much as we used to do, perhaps on external platforms.

[Matt Rogerson] Yeah, I mean, that's, I mean, that those numbers are pretty amazing in terms of direct traffic. I mean, ours is slightly less than 80, 84 percent. And certainly I think the strategic focus has to be building a direct relationship with your reader. So any relationship you have with a third-party platform, you have to think through: is the reader going to stay on that platform or are they going to click on a link and come back to your own platform where you can communicate with them, where you can market to them, where you can hopefully get them to sign up to one or other of the products and services. And I think there have been some errors that the publishing industry's made in terms of some social media products. So: instant articles on Facebook was not a good product. It was kind of consumed on the platform, monetised poorly, there's very little control over monetisation and the brand. And, you know, we're seeing now Google Showcase, that's a much better product because that will click through from Showcase back to the publisher's site.

And I think the big imponderable for us all as publishers is dealing with Apple, where if you're aggregated within an Apple News environment, you don't get the traffic back to your site and you also get very, very little information to build a relationship with the end user. And now I think that's what I'm talking about in terms of regulation, where there are tactics and policies, the platforms, that you really need to crack open if you're a regulator, to enable independent businesses

like Bonnier or The Guardian to build direct relationships with those end users and hopefully get them to fund us directly. Yeah. So that's how we see it here.

[Jeanne Rubner] And let me just add to that. But Matt, I thought you had some kind of a membership model too, right, at The Guardian, right?

[Matt Rogerson] Yeah, so we have a range of... we have a range of digital products and services that you can subscribe to in the way that you would subscribe to a paywalled site and they give you additional functionality, whether on iPad or the mobile app, and we then have the ability to contribute, I think contributions is really the evolution of membership where people can pay as much as they want. They could give us 5,000 or fifty pence, depending on how they're feeling. And that I think gives the ability to ask people to contribute on the basis of an investigation or a particularly good piece of coverage that we do, rather than necessarily committing them to becoming a lifelong member of The Guardian. And so I think having that optionality, where some people really want to buy the product, some people really want to be seen to be part of a tribe, some people just want to sustain high quality journalism because they know it's good for society more broadly. I think having that optionality of funding is really, really important to give people options.

[Jeanne Rubner] So I have another question for you relating to the users, but before that, I would like to bring in Franco Zotta's question, he's also from *Wissenschafts-Pressskonferenz*. And he asks, how expensive is the digital subscription? I assume that, as you said, there's different models, but how expensive is a digital subscription to your newspaper? And does it cover really the costs in a sustainable way, is his question, or do you still need the print subscribers?

[Martin Jönsson] Well, if I could change print subscribers to digital subscribers today, I would be thrilled to do it because the print subscriber is linked to a lot of costs and production and distribution and so on. The margin on a new digital subscriber is close to 100 percent. It's always much more profitable to get a new digital subscriber, and it definitely covers the cost: our digital ad revenue covers the entire newsroom, for instance, cost. We could live without the print paper today if we wanted to. So, when you talk about print, often you tend to talk too little about the cost side of print, but print is getting more and more of a cost problem with the distribution and production. We try to work with other sources of revenue as well. For instance, packaged distribution when it comes to the distribution of newspapers to get new business areas and new revenue streams. But I would say that the digital revenue is what will be the base of our future.

[Jeanne Rubner] So how much do you...

[Martin Jönsson] We have different levels, different packages and bundles. For the basic digital access to the website is €10 a month. And the... if you want to have the e-paper, the replica or other services, archive and so on, that's about €25.

[Jeanne Rubner] OK, but, you know, Martin, would you be able, would you have been able to do this digital switch if you hadn't had that, you know, well-known brand that was established over many, many years in the paper area?

[Martin Jönsson] It's a very interesting question, because for many years, people will say exactly the opposite, that the old mainstream media companies, they are dinosaurs. It's the new interesting digital brands that will change the world. And they are the ones that will grow. We have actually shown that it's possible also for a dinosaur to survive in this setting, this digital setting. And I think it's not because we are an old brand. It's because we were able to change. So it's not the history. It's our possibility, our ability to cope with the changing behaviour and the changing possibilities of the market that that has made us so much stronger today than we were six years ago.

[Matt Rogerson] I think that's right. I think there's a narrative about legacy news publishers suggesting that we haven't been innovating for the past ten or 15 years. But I think actually we've been investing a lot in our sites, investing a lot in new forms of coverage, investing in formats and in high-quality content.

I think the danger is that, or the challenge really is, that the sort of people that you need to build your digital services – and they can always be outbid by tech companies that are making a lot more money – so there's a real challenge of resources and a lot of heat in the marketplace. But I think, to Martin's point, I think there is great value in high-quality news brands because people know what you stand for, people understand your values, people see what you did with investigations in the past, and they can see a sort of future where they, you know, they want to work towards that future and that purpose. And so I think it stands us in really good stead for the future.

And, you know, there are always fads in publishing and news publishing. The latest one is everybody's... actually in platforms, you know, every one of them is adopting a version of the clubhouse and I read this week, in every single platform and a few years ago it's pivot to video and a few years before that, it's something else. I mean, it's every couple of years, there's always something else that comes up as the latest innovation that publishers should try when in truth, in moments of crisis, like COVID it's having a bench, like a deep bench, of specialist reporters who can write great-quality content that people want to read, that people trust, which will mean that readers keep coming back to your site and are prepared eventually to subscribe or pay or contribute to your products.

[Martin Jönsson] That's why we talk about pivot to readers, which is much better than the two platforms.

[Matt Rogerson] Yeah.

[Jeanne Rubner] Let's stay with the money questions for a little while. And [Marcus Brixius] says, "I've made the experience that local ad customers are hesitant to pay for an electronic newspaper. So what do you tell them?" I mean, is it, I mean, we learn that you're not really relying anymore on the ad business, but you must get some of your revenue from there. So what's your stance on that?

[Martin Jönsson] It's, of course the ad revenue is still important, even though it's much smaller and diminishing percentage. And the reluctance sometimes to invest in digital platforms is because they don't see the kind of effect that they used to see

because they can't kind of measure it, although everything is measurable digitally, they don't see click throws and so on and it's harder to define. It's more easy to see that a print ad has its function than to see that that banner ad that has.

So I think that that the... you have to probably focus much more on your readers and your loyal readers as a target group and try to sell that, say that we have the kind of quality readership, we have the kind of readers who spend a lot of time and money on us, so they are... by spending more time, they are more interesting for the advertisers to make it possible to reach out to them. So I would say to focus on your loyal readers, is one key to get them to accept the possibilities of a digital marketing.

[Jeanne Rubner] And Matt.

[Matt Rogerson] I just... because I think that's right and there are examples of new startup locals in the UK, Bristol Cable is often touted. But I mean, I think local, traditional local newspapers are in real peril because that advertising money is going away. Again, not to be boring, but that's because they're operating against different rules to the online platforms. And I do think advertising is not going to solve all the problems. And they need to find... to diversify revenue streams. But you need to have a level playing field in terms of things like data protection, so that a local newspaper is running on the same rules as Facebook in terms of how they use consumer data. And yeah.

[Jeanne Rubner] By the way, Matt put there the link to the pricing in detail for The Guardian, so in the chat, so whoever is interested in it.

One question about readers, I mean, you mentioned that you – I think that was Martin – that you look a lot about, you know, like reading time, you focus on the needs of the readers. Is there more interaction than that? I mean, do you ask your readers, like, what stories do you want to read? Or do you engage in a really more deeper communication with them and let them decide what they want from the paper? Is that the future, too?

[Martin Jönsson] We look at the user experience, of course, and we try to work on the development of our digital products, so we see how they can have the best possible experience. And we also talk to them about topics, of course, but it's always hard to make those kind of inquiries to the audience. You tend to get that people just wish for a faster horse, to paraphrase Henry Ford. And it's, I prefer to look at the data.

I saw one question about what I mean by the difference of data-driven and data-informed. And what I say is that I don't believe very much in automation and to being totally run by algorithms, I still believe in the strength of the editors. But I think that we need constantly to look at the data and learn from the data. Why are people reading this story and not the other story? Why are they spending more time on this story and not that story? When is the best time to publish a kind of story, investigative or storytelling? And how long should the story be on a digital platform? And how can we make people spend more time on long stories? So those kind of using, the ways of using the data to understand people, I think that's much more

effective than having the kind of asking people, “What do you want to have?” So learning from the data is the key for us.

[Matt Rogerson] Yeah, I think that’s the key difference between editorial, editorialised publishers like news publishers, the tradition of having a publisher in place where you’re not dictated to by the individual, you’re informed by the individual and what they want to read, but you’re not dictated to by the individual. You’re informed by your judgment. And that’s a key difference between a newspaper and a news aggregator. And I think I definitely agree that you don’t use data to dictate what you write, but you do use it to make sure that every bit of journalism that you publish has the best possible opportunity to be read by your readers. So we have measures internally that the audience team look at and if a piece of content isn’t getting, is getting click-through, but not the attention that it deserves, is there something with the headline that doesn’t tally with the story or is there something about the headline that doesn’t accurately reflect the story so that people click back out of the story and don’t consume it for as long as perhaps they should do? And that’s I think you use data to really make sure that, you know, every bit of journalism gets the best life possible online.

[Martin Jönsson] I think [indistinct] that our ability as editors to make sure that we work with [stories?] in that way. Exactly.

[Jeanne Rubner] We have time for a few more questions. One is from Volker Stollorz and I find it interesting, of course, because I’ve been working for a newspaper as well before joining public broadcasting. How would you describe the relationship between the digital newsrooms and the journalism done in public broadcasting? Do you see an increasing competition in this space? I mean, in Germany, we’ve had models, I’ve been on, we’ve had competition, we also have models of cooperation. So what about your experience?

[Martin Jönsson] You start, Matt, for once.

[Matt Rogerson] Yeah, and I mean, so we’re supportive of the sort of public service broadcasting ecology in the UK but we do bump up against the BBC. The BBC gets £4 billion of public money every year. And they are going through a difficult process of trying to understand how they connect with younger readers. And I think there is a danger that they try and mimic what commercial news publishers create, and literally this week I’ve submitted something to our media regulator saying, I don’t think they should be doing that. I think they should be focusing on publishing impartial, independent news reporting of the day. They shouldn’t be doing long reads. They shouldn’t be doing opinion pieces. They shouldn’t be doing sort of whimsical listicles in the nature of BuzzFeed of five years ago. And I think actually this discussion about what attracts young people to and to coverage on news publishers, it suggests to me that the BBC should be investing in that sort of high-quality journalism about the big issues of the day and not on more whimsical stuff, because that’s where they will find an audience and that’s where they’ll find people who connect with the brand. So I think it’s... we’re supportive of them, but I certainly think we’re wary that they don’t squash out commercial competition.

[Matt Rogerson] I agree with Matt, and I think that in Sweden, we have both television and radio separate companies. I think that the radio companies should focus on audio and the television companies should focus on video as much as possible. And, but we are very supportive. We think that public service has been extremely important in a more polarised media landscape. And we absolutely need to support them. And if we look at Denmark, for instance, which is a country where the print, newspaper publishers have been very aggressive in attacking public service, that is not the kind of discussion we want to have in Sweden. So we believe in the strength of public service, but that there will be a need for some limitations on how they should compete and that we need to have both kinds of media actors in a sustainable society, both public service and commercial.

[Jeanne Rubner] There's one more interesting question that goes especially to Martin from Franco. Do you think that the success of your newspaper would be possible in a larger country, too. I mean, in other words, this is a typical Swedish success story. Is it singular to Sweden or could you imagine it would work, let's say, in Germany?

[Martin Jönsson] Well, some people might say that we've been ripping off New York Times or Washington Post or The Guardian and trying to do the same kind of focus on quality journalism. So absolutely, I'm certain and I know since I have a lot of contact with German newspapers, I know that many of those are doing great things. So I just believe that the... if we have had success, it's much depending on that. We have been very, very clear about our strategy and how important it is to change the culture and to constantly build the positive spiral out of investing in journalism in order to get more subscribers, in order to get more money to invest in journalism and to break the negative spiral. And that's a difficult thing to do. But once you started doing it, starting from a small, smaller scale, perhaps, it's quite possible to see that you have the business model that will be sustainable for a long time. And I think that in general, many of the newspaper companies I talk to are much more optimistic today about those possibilities when we see the change in the willingness to pay for content online. Even though Scandinavia is ahead of many markets, we see a positive development in all over the world, actually, when it comes to the propensity to pay.

[Jeanne Rubner] That was already almost a perfect last word for the session. But, Matt, I would like to give you the chance to add one last comment from your side.

[Matt Rogerson] Well, what can I say? Well, thank you for having me. I mean, I think it's been really interesting to hear about the Swedish experience and hopefully our experience in the UK has been of interest. If anyone wants to drop me a line to chat more about it, I'm very happy to do so.

[Jeanne Rubner] Yeah, we didn't have the time now to discuss the regulation of platforms, which is an interesting topic. You seem pretty optimistic about it. And so that would be probably a topic for the next, another session. And, you know, if you have not been able to follow the chat, there was a lot of praise for your great presentations, for interesting answers to questions, for interesting comments. So thank you very much. It was really a great session. We learned a lot and I think I

personally would look more optimistic into the future of newspapers in the digital age than I did before. Thank you so much.

[www.science-journalism.eu](http://www.science-journalism.eu)