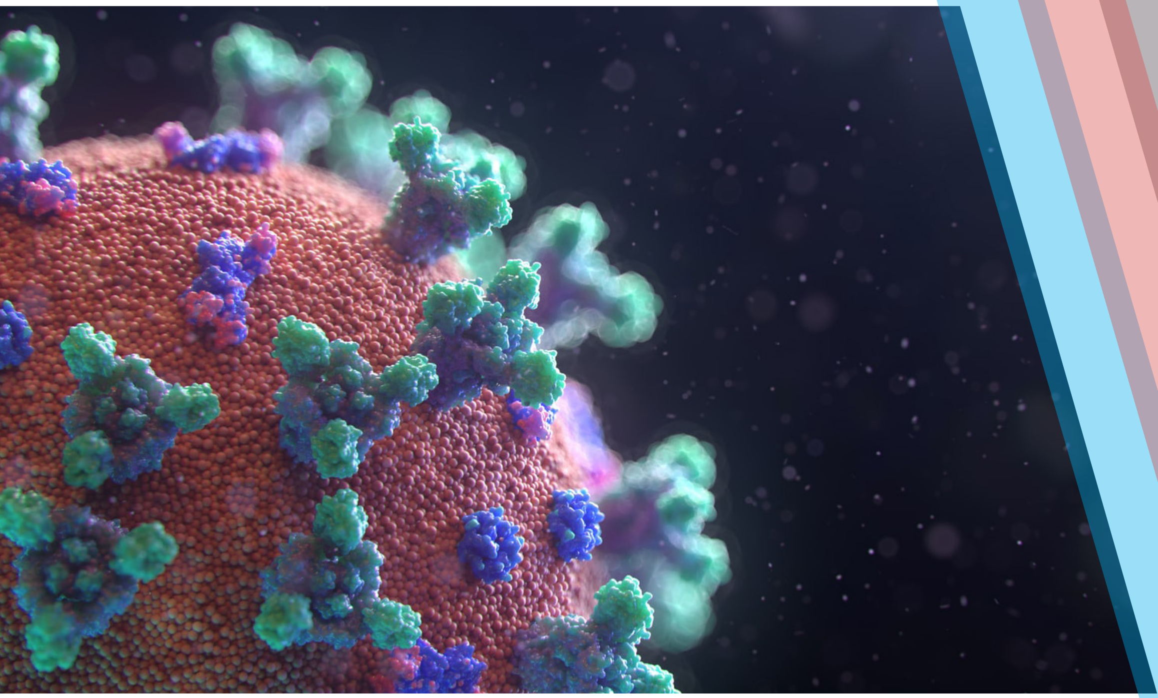
WHAT'S NEW IN PUBLISHING

INSIGHT REPORT



THE PUBLISHER'S GUIDE TO

NAVIGATING COVID-19

Supported by:

UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

School of Journalism and Communication

Written by:
Damian Radcliffe

Sponsored by:

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Contents

Editor's note

@EstherKeziaT

We at WNIP had a long list of ideas for reports we wanted to write this year to help publishers. This was not one of them.

The pandemic is one of those rare events which has touched every aspect of our lives. Our day-to-day routines have changed beyond recognition, with the lines between family and work life completely evaporating. Most of us still don't know if or when we will be able to resume 'normal' life.

But what has been encouraging is that people have turned to you, the publisher, in this crisis. Whether it's for vital, trusted news and updates about keeping safe and healthy, or for entertainment during the long summer evenings in lockdown, publishers of all shapes and sizes have seen huge boosts in traffic, susbcriptions and support. All whilst managing disruption within your own businesses and personal lives.

We've been following the pandemic's impact on publishing closely over the past few months. While it has been sad to read of the inevitable closures of titles as margins are squeezed, there have also been some really encouraging successes.

Our intent with this report is to bring together all the best examples we've seen of how organisations have risen to meet the challenges of Covid-19. Damian Radcliffe, the report's author looks at a range of tips and tactics to help all kinds of publishers, from subscriptions to eCommerce, the state of ad tech, and tools for building loyalty.

We hope that this upheaval will accelerate a process that many of you have already been undertaking over the past few years; broadening revenue streams, reducing reliance on advertising, and renewing focus on your audience. This year has proved that there are media models that will weather even the most challenging of circumstances.

WNIP will continue to bring you the success stories, best practice and tools to build a truly sustainable publishing business. You can see our previous reports, including *The Publisher's Guide to eCommerce, 50 Ways to Make Media Pay,* and *The Publisher's Guide to Podcasting* on the website under the 'Resources' tab. We also have our annual Media Moments report launching soon, looking at the defining developments of 2020 and what they mean for publishers.

Stay safe, and best wishes from the whole team at WNIP for you and your business over the following months.

Esther Kezia Thorpe
Deputy Editor, What's New in Publishing

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Damian Radcliffe is the Carolyn S. Chambers Professor in Journalism, and a Professor of Practice, at the University of Oregon.

Alongside holding the Chambers Chair, he is also a Fellow of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, an Honorary Research Fellow at Cardiff University's School of Journalism, Media and Culture Studies, and a fellow of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA).

An experienced digital analyst, consultant, journalist, and researcher, Damian has worked in editorial, research, policy, and teaching positions for the past two decades in the UK, Middle East, and USA.

This includes roles in all media sectors (commercial, public, government, regulatory, academic, and nonprofit/civil society) and all platforms (print, digital, TV and radio).

Damian continues to be an active journalist, writing monthly columns for ZDNet (CBS Interactive) and *What's New in Publishing*, and frequently appears in other publications such as journalism.co.uk and IJNET.

He writes about digital trends, social media, technology, the business of media, and the evolution of journalism. Damian is the author of *50 Ways to Make Media Pay* (available in English and Spanish), *The Publisher's Guide to eCommerce* and the *The Publisher's Guide to eCommerce: Case Studies*, special insight reports sponsored by Sovrn and published by *What's New In Publishing* in 2019-20.

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ABOUT US

Founded in 2008, *What's New In Publishing* provides a single destination for independent publishing businesses looking for news, advice and education across a wide range of publishing subjects.

We cover developments in digital publishing, magazines, and newspapers, focusing on the issues and technological advances confronting the industry at a time of profound disruption, offering practical and useful advice from "What's New?" to "What Next?".

With many thousands of publishers worldwide subscribing to our weekly e-newsletter and many more visiting the site regularly, *WNIP* is one of the world's longest running and leading B2B websites covering the publishing industry.

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WHAT'S NEW IN PUBLISHING

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UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

School of Journalism and Communication

About the University of Oregon

Nestled in the lush Willamette Valley, with an easy drive to both the Pacific Ocean and the Cascade Mountains, the University of Oregon is renowned for its research prowess and commitment to teaching. The UO is one of just two Pacific Northwest members of the prestigious Association of American Universities, a consortium of 62 leading public and private research institutions in the United States and Canada. It is also a Tier 1 national public research university.

Find out more: www.uoregon.edu

About the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication

With a century-long history, the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication (SOJC) is one of the first professional journalism schools in the country, the only accredited comprehensive journalism program to include advertising and public relations in the Pacific Northwest, and one of only 112 accredited programs worldwide.

The SOJC is a community of media scholars and professionals dedicated to teaching, research, and creative projects that champion freedom of expression, dialogue, and democracy in service to future generations.

Our home in the Pacific Northwest and the opportunities of our location are reflected in our explorations of media, technology, and the human condition.

Through our undergraduate and graduate programs in media studies, journalism, public relations, and advertising, we conduct research and craft nonfiction stories on such critical and global subjects as the environment, diverse cultures, and international issues. We facilitate relationship building that entails respect for consumer advocacy, transparency, and civic engagement.

By integrating theory and practice, we advance media scholarship and prepare students to become professional communicators, critical thinkers, and responsible citizens in a global society.

Find out more: journalism.uoregon.edu

There's reason to be optimistic.

The publishing industry is showing signs of rebound in the wake of COVID-19, and new tools and strategies have helped insulate publishers from the economic effects.

From eCommerce to data, this report details the ways that publishers are successfully navigating the pandemic. Diverse, stable revenue streams and the ingenuity required to take advantage of new opportunities are crucial to success in this new, challenging ecosystem.

The resources within are adaptable for all publishers—we hope they serve you well.

Power to the publisher.

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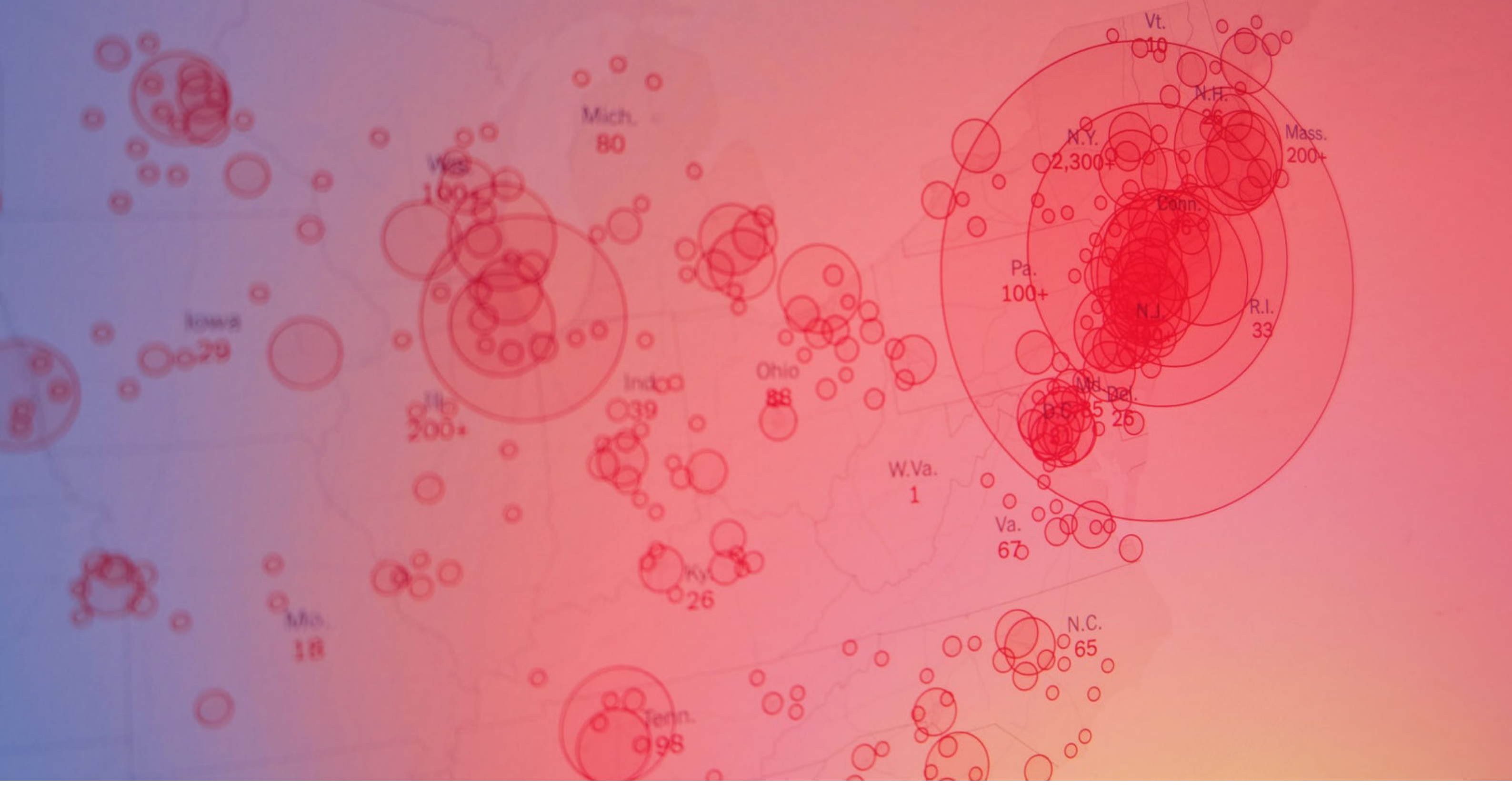


COVID-19's impact on the media in ten charts

It's too early to understand the full implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on publishers.

For some, it could be an "extinction-level event"[1] with outlets around the world[2] being affected. Others may emerge stronger, as a result of increased digital subscriptions, revenue diversification, and reduced – or hollowed-out – competition.

Whatever happens, it's likely[3] that the industry will look very different on the other side of this crisis. Given all of this uncertainty, what do we know about the current media landscape?

Although there are some data-lags, we can discern some notable trends. Here are ten of them:

1: Marketing Budgets are down worldwide

"Almost all product sectors will record a decline this year," WARC predicted this summer, "with the most severe falls seen among travel & tourism (-31.2%), leisure & entertainment (-28.7%), financial services (-18.2%) and retail (-15.2%)."

The company published the data in a recent Global Ad Trends report[4]. This makes for sobering reading for those publishers who remain heavily advertising dependent.

For newspaper publishers, in particular, these challenging prospects were further compounded in PwC's Global Entertainment and Media Outlook report for 2020-2024[5]. According to the Press Gazette[6]:

> "The report forecasts that global newspaper advertising (print and online) will fall from $49.2bn in 2019 to $36bn in 2024, a decline of more than a quarter (27%) over five years..... [alongside this] global circulation and subscriber revenue is expected to fall from $58.7bn in 2019 to $50.4bn in 2024."

"In the digital economy, the newspaper industry is having to adapt or face irrelevance," the authors remark, a message - of course - that's also applicable to other publication areas.

One of those segments, consumer magazines, saw overall revenues slumping by more than 14%, PwC reports, with COVID playing a key role in this. "That said, digital offers a silver lining," PwC predicts[7], "a tipping point for consumer magazines in 2023 will see their global revenue from digital advertising overtake that from print advertising."

Despite this challenging backdrop, "opportunities can come from this, both for advertisers and for media owners," writes[8] Brian Wieser, Global President, Business Intelligence at GroupM (WPP).

Newspaper revenue 2019-24 (print and online)

Advertising revenue	2019	2020	2024	CAGR (2019-2024)
Global	$49.245bn	$41.241bn	$35.937bn	-6.11%
UK	$1.499bn	$1.141bn	$1.058bn	-6.74%
US	$15.056bn	$13.067bn	$10.887bn	-6.28%

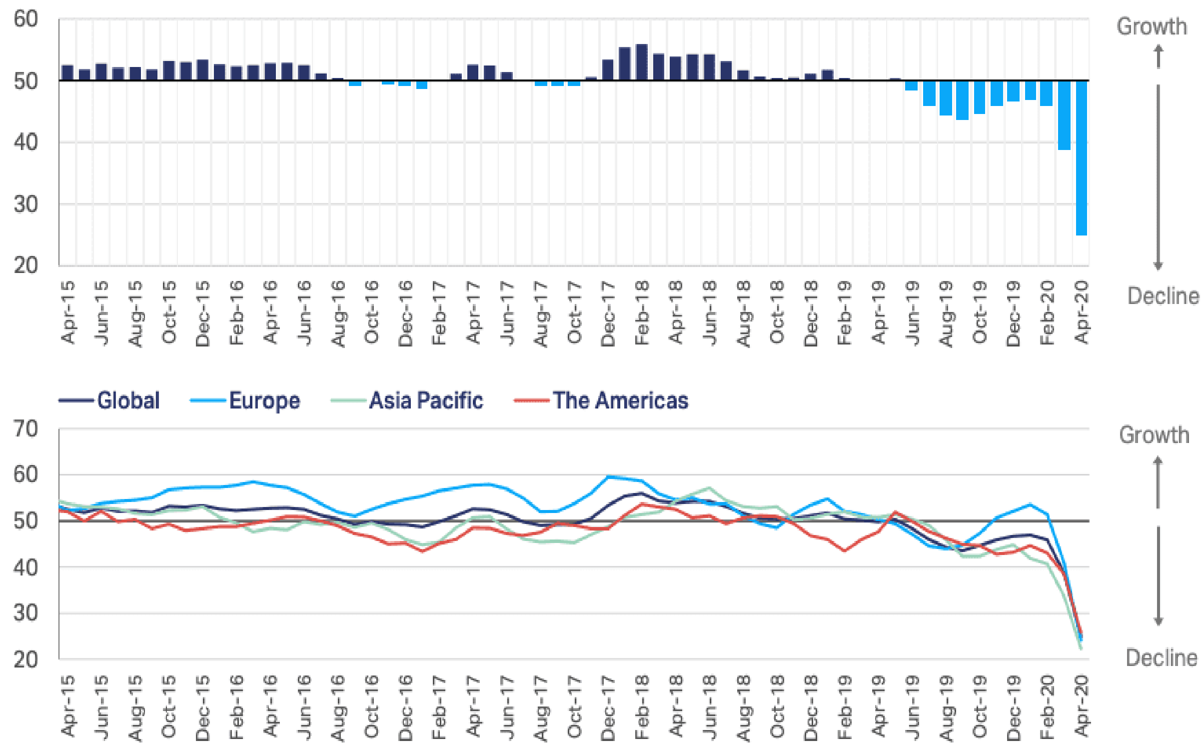
Circulation revenue	2019	2020	2024	CAGR (2019-2024)
Global	$58.714bn	$52.163bn	$50.411bn	-3%
UK	$2.385bn	$2.133bn	$2.133bn	-2.21%
US	$11.399bn	$10.182bn	$9.995bn	-2.60%

Via PWC / Press Gazette

"Every brand should be looking for opportunities, and questioning assumptions about their company's competitive position. What are the ways in which you can reinvent the category? That the economy will be weak is a given, but any one business's outcomes are not, and shouldn't be taken as given."

Addressing this should be a priority for publishers, as well as the brands we work with.

Marketing Budgets Index, worldwide and by key regions



Note: A value above 50 indicates growth, a value below 50 indicates decline. Larger/smaller values signal severity.

Via WARC Data Global Marketing Index

2: COVID-19 has changed our media habits

Declining marketing budgets come as no surprise. Neither does the finding that, with much of the world on lockdown for large periods of time, our media behaviours have evolved too.

Research from Kantar[9] indicated in late-May that one in five UK homes signed up for a new video streaming subscription during COVID-19 lockdown, although much of this was led by Disney+ which was scheduled to launch during this time anyway. How much of a bump it got, as a result of the pandemic, is hard to say.

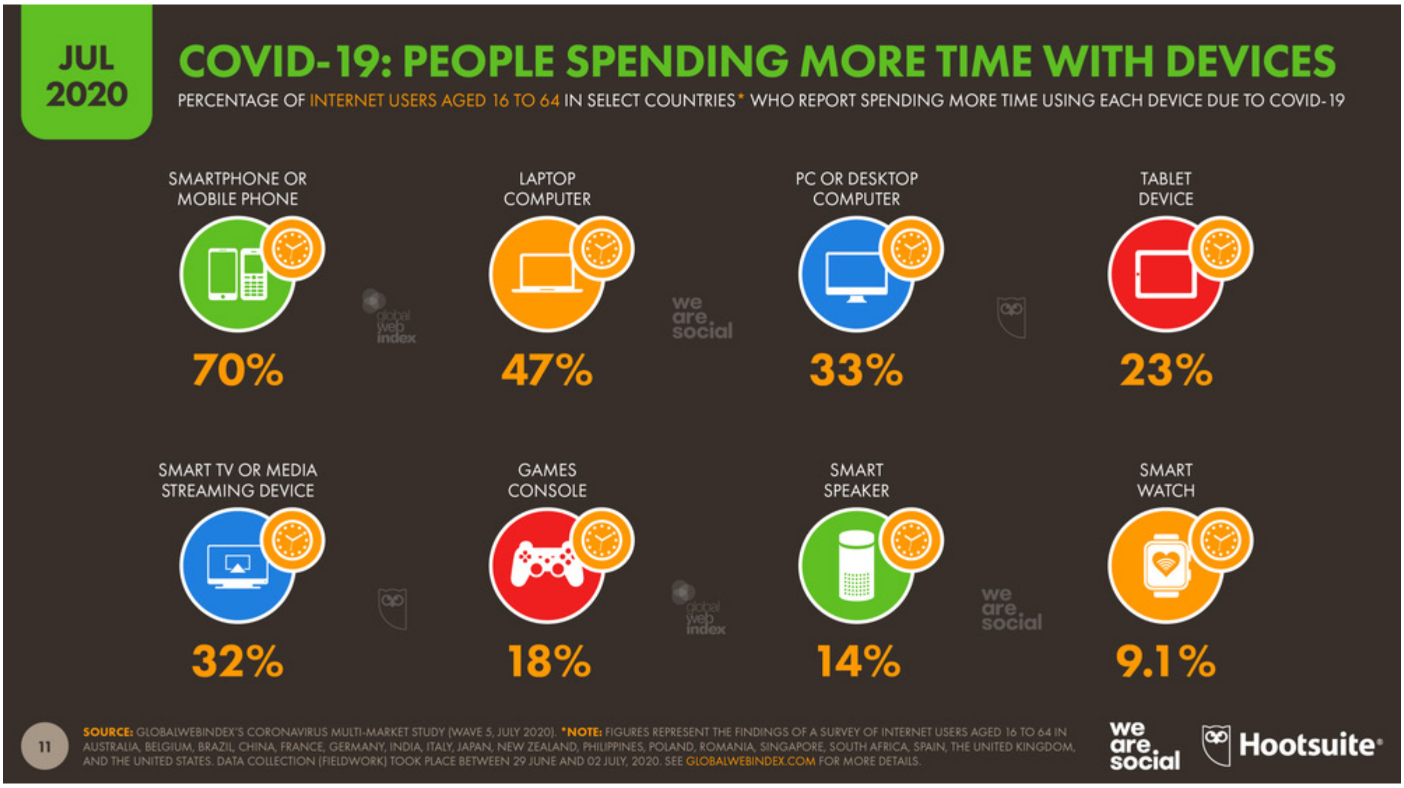
What we can say, however, is that globally, the data consistently found that we were spending more time with streaming services, social media and messenger services. Gaming has also seen a major pandemic bump[10].

Notable here, as Simon Kemp identifies[11], is that:

> "Many people say that they expect their new habits to continue after the COVID-19 outbreak passes too. One in five internet users say they expect to continue watching more content on streaming services, and one in seven (15 percent) say they expect to continue spending more time using social media."

Given this, publishers need to apply further thought to ways in which they can make their new relationships with audiences as "sticky" as they can.

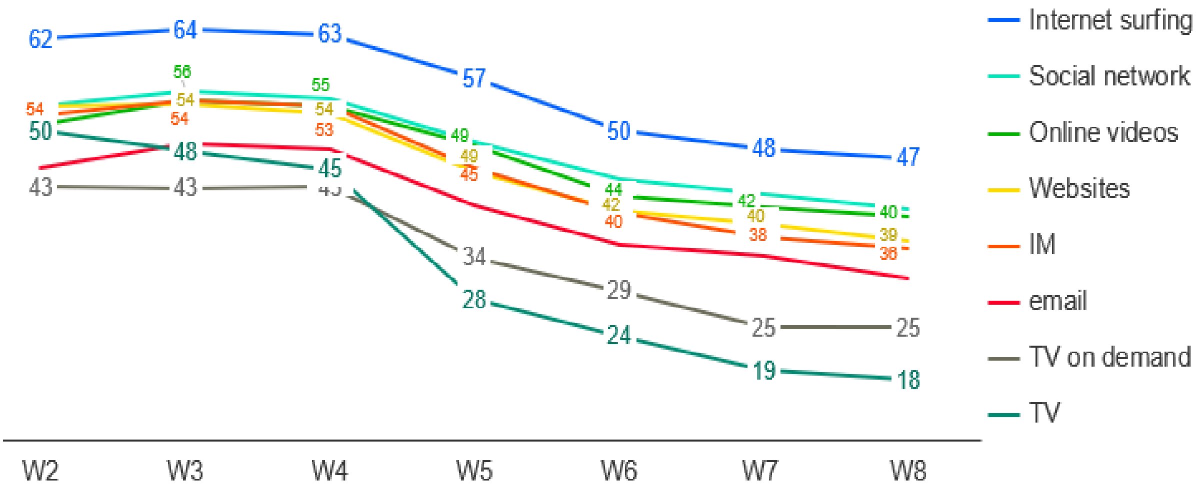
This strategic consideration matters all the more, given that there is some evidence to suggest COVID's digital bump may be on the wane.



"Surprisingly, though, our digital existence has lost some of its charm lately with media consumption, including social media, having fallen considerably since the end of April, despite having enjoyed a surge at the beginning of the pandemic," Kantar revealed in September, using data from their 60-market COVID-19 Barometer[12].

"Perhaps the sensory deprivations of an increasingly digital lifestyle will find future counterbalance in an uber-analogue to come," they speculated.

All media, including social media, have fallen off after enjoying an initial surge



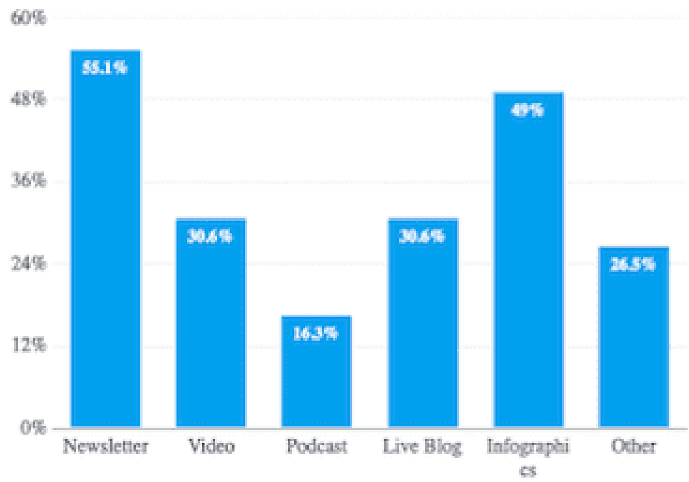
Via Kantar COVID-19 Barometer

3: Publishers are producing new products

In response to our new media habits and changing information needs, many publishers have experimented with efforts such as dropping their paywall (with the hope of converting some fly-by's into subscribers) and launching new products like (but not exclusively) coronavirus podcasts, alerts, and newsletters[13].

According to members of WAN-IFRA's Global Media Trends Panel, more than half of the editorial executives they surveyed had launched new products as a result of the pandemic[14].

"Newsletters are the most common product," they found, "with some 55% saying they have launched them, followed by infographics (49%), and videos and live blogs (30%)."



New products launched as a result of COVID-19.
Via WAN-IFRA

4: Some local outlets are seeing a coronavirus bump

"While publishers are yet to release digital subscription figures which shows their performance since lockdowns started, internet traffic numbers hint that local news publishers might be the biggest beneficiaries of changing internet behaviour," observed James Hewes, President and CEO of FIPP earlier this year.

Hewes, cited an article[15] from the New York Times which revealed: "Among the biggest beneficiaries are local news sites, with huge jumps in traffic as people try to learn how the pandemic is affecting their hometowns."

"These figures suggest a welcome consumer shift for more locally focussed news media, who have been struggling to grow their subscription bases as rapidly as market-leading national news outlets and specialist content publishers," FIPP commented in their Global Digital Subscription Snapshot 2020 (Q2)[16].

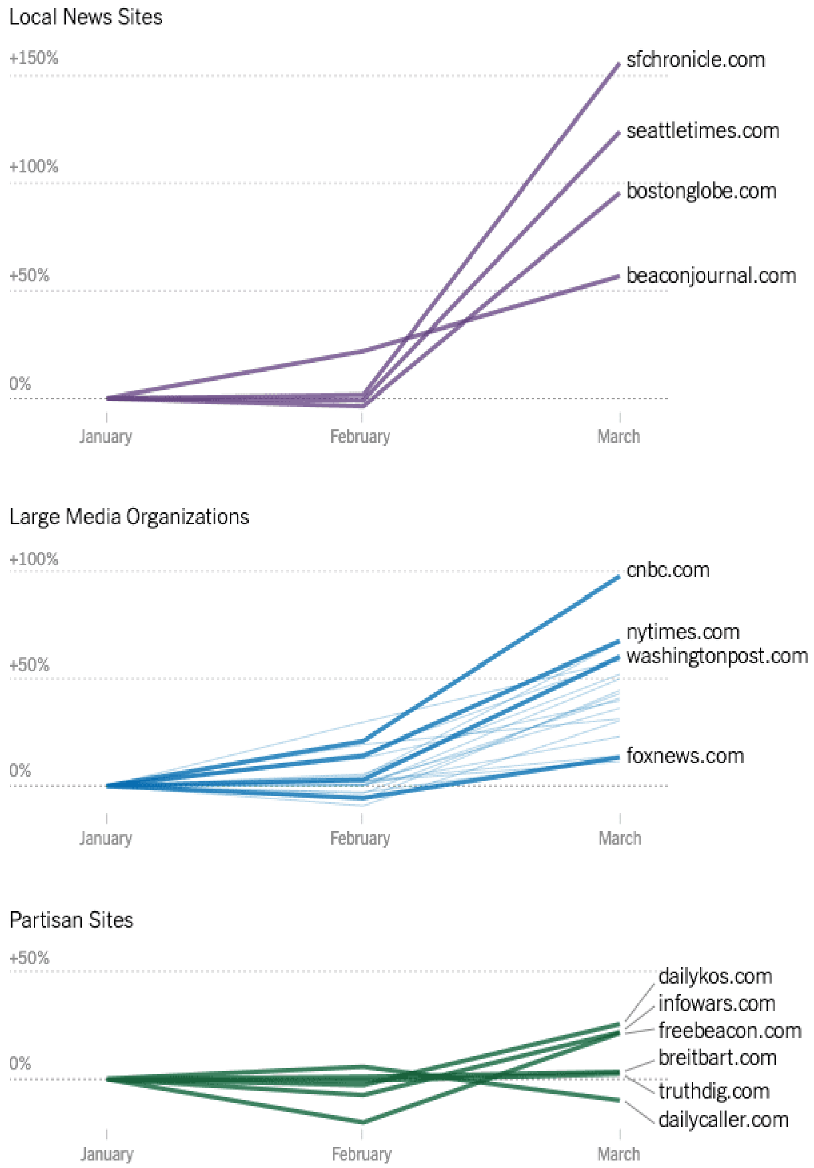
By Q3, FIPP had the data to back up many of these earlier assumptions. "Tribune Publishing, with its large network of local and regional news outlets, saw a 293% increase in digital subscription sales in March alone," they reported[17].

Elsewhere, "traffic to the San Francisco Chronicle is up 150%, the Seattle Times is up over 120% and the Boston Globe is up nearly 100% over the last month," they said in August. "These figures suggest a welcome consumer shift for more locally focussed news media, who have been struggling to grow their subscription bases as rapidly as market-leading national news outlets and specialist content publishers," they contended.

Unfortunately, increased traffic does not necessarily equate to increased subscribers. So, while some local publishers have seen a subscription bump, that's not true of everyone. And despite record audiences at many outlets, in the USA alone, more than 36,000 news media workers have been impacted by COVID-19[18], with jobs lost, journalists furloughed and over 30 local newsrooms shuttered[19].

The search for updates on the virus has pushed up readership for local and established newspapers, but not partisan sites

Percent change in average monthly U.S. traffic



March averages are through the 24th.

Via New York Times / SimilarWeb

A similar dynamic is playing out across the globe, driven by the fact that increases in subscription revenue (where applicable) seldom offset lost advertising and other revenues.

5: Pandemic-led subscription gains are holding steady

The shift to reader revenue has already encouraged many publishers to focus on reducing churn. After all, finding new subscribers is more expensive than keeping existing ones.

With the coronavirus driving new subscriptions, for some outlets (and advertising projected to be in the doldrums for some time), then this need has become even more paramount.

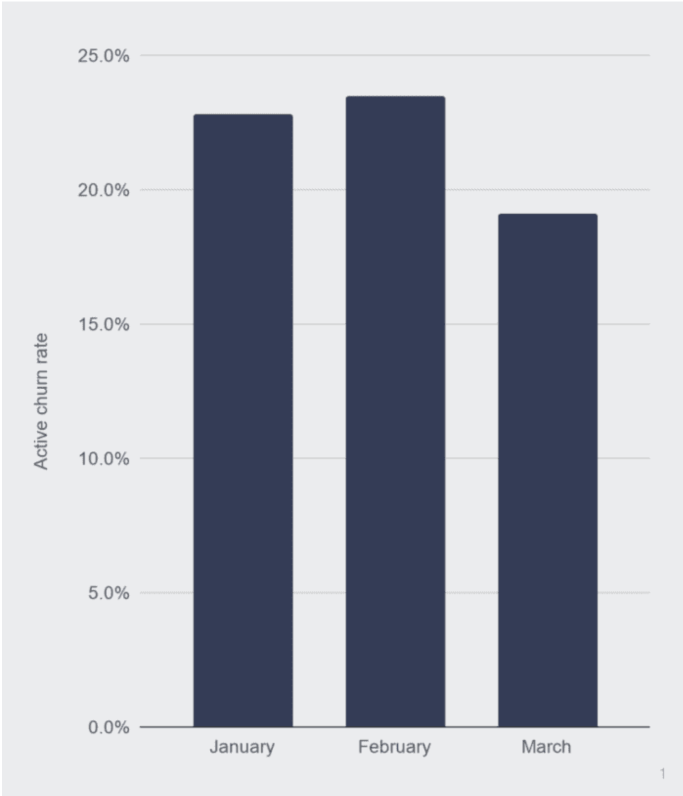
So far, early signs of subscriber growth are favourable. Although, as the Atlantic and others have found[20], subscription growth is not necessarily a panacea for wider business and revenue challenges.

Writing at the end of May, Digiday's Lucinda Southern observed[21]:

> "The curve in subscription growth is starting to flatten for some[22] but still remains higher than before coronavirus. Still, publishers including Bloomberg Media, The New York Times and The Guardian anecdotally say they are seeing signs of stronger retention rates from subscribers who have signed up since February and March."

"Most say it's too early to declare this as a win," Southern cautions, reminding us "Publishers measure churn in their own ways and discounted monthly trial periods often need longer for data collection."

Nonetheless, "Segmenting by geography, Europe is where the real churn improvement happened — dropping by about 34%," Piano noted[23] on their blog in May (the last time that they've shared this data on their site). "In the US, churn was flat overall. But even flat is impressive, given the big increase in acquisition."



Active churn in March decreased by 17% for monthly subscriptions.
Via Piano

The company – whose software is used by publishers such as GateHouse, Business Insider, NBC, Condé Nast, The Economist, and Hearst – highlights onboarding, encouraging repeat visits and strategically managing trials and price, as "fundamentals" that "Publishers looking to improve retention should focus on… regardless of the pandemic surge."

6: Consumers want brands to run "normal" ads

Insights from GlobalWebIndex (GWI) offered some interesting additional perspectives[24] on coronavirus-shaped attitudes and behaviours, based on a survey of more than 17,000 internet users in 20 countries.

For publishers, perhaps the most notable takeaway from their fourth multi-market study[25] saw consumers in favour of "widespread – and growing – approval of brands advertising as normal," a trend that held steady throughout the start of summer.

As Jason Mander, GWI's Chief Research Officer, wrote[26]:

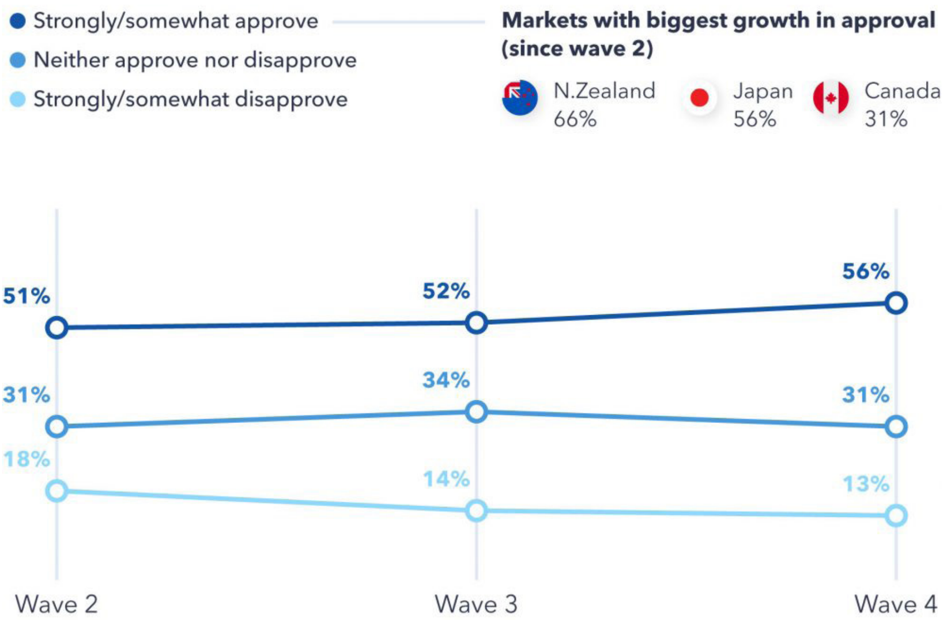
> "Across the 20 countries surveyed, only 12% of consumers disapprove of brands running "normal" advertising. That dips to as low as 6% in New Zealand."

"Conversely," Mander said, "we're seeing small but consistent decreases in approval for coronavirus-related advertising."

More widely, GWI also highlighted increased interest in staycations, on-going financial concerns and environmental sustainability, all of which publishers should be aware of.

Support for normal advertising steadily increases

% of internet users in 17 countries who say they strongly/somewhat approve of the following activities



Question: Many brands and companies are trying to decide how best to respond to the coronavirus/COVID-19 outbreak. To what extent do you approve/disapprove of them doing the following at the moment? (Running "normal" advertising campaigns) **Source:** GlobalWebIndex Custom Research March 31-April 2, April 22-27, May 19-26 2020 **Base:** 15,079 (March 31-April 2), 15,274 (April 22-27), 15,506 (May 19-26) internet users aged 16-64 in 17 countries

Via GlobalWebIndex

7: Global advertising down in 2020, but digital remains strong

Despite this consumer optimism for advertising to return to normal, data from WARC paints a less rosy picture. Their latest freely available Global Ad Trends report[27] concludes that advertising spend looks set to fall 8.1% – $49.6bn – worldwide this year.

Interestingly, this is a lower percentage than during the start of the Great Recession in 2009, when the advertising market fell by 12.7% ($60.5bn). In 2020, some sectors - notably social media, online video and search - are still growing.

Moreover, traditional media channels like newspapers (-5.9%) and magazines (-5.6%) were already declining year-on-year, pre-pandemic; with this trend exacerbated by the coronavirus.

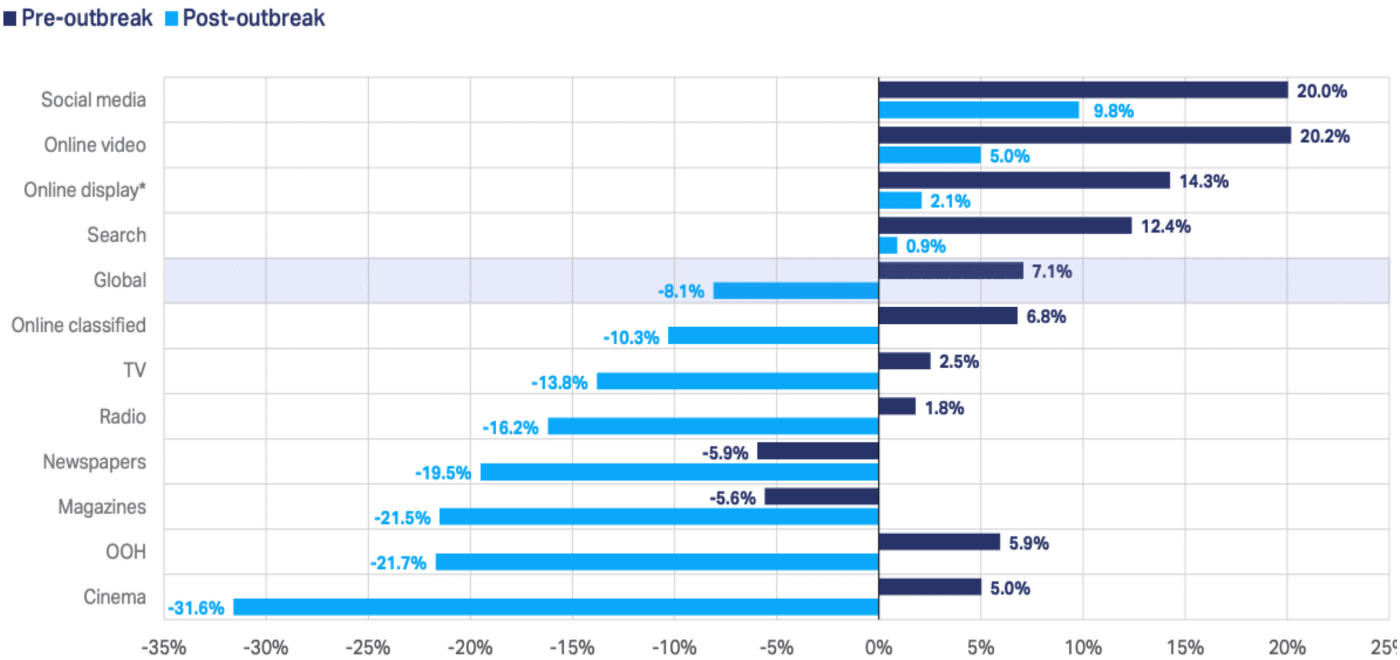
COVID-19 has also had an adverse effect on traditional channels – such as TV, Radio, Out of Home Advertising (OOH) and Cinema – which had previously been projected to grow this year.

Looking ahead, Dr. Daniel Knapp, Chief Economist for IAB Europe, reflected[28] how difficult it can be to make predictions in the current climate. “The basic dynamics are known,” he writes. “Advertising expenditure does not just follow economic trends – it amplifies them. This is particularly the case if GDP growth is flat or negative.”

“All three advertising recessions in Europe over the past 20 years – the dotcom crash and 9/11 in 2001, the financial crisis in 2008/09 and the Eurozone crisis in 2012, showed this dynamic,” he states.

“However, history is not always a good guide. The current crisis lacks precedent in its combination of factors from epidemiological to policy and economic issues, all while embedded in a global environment that is impossible to control in a local setting.”

Global, Year-on-year % change, US dollars, 2020



Note: Data are net of discounts, include agency commission and exclude production costs. Online display includes social media and online video.

Via WARC Data, Adspend Database, International Ad Forecast

8: Consumers, more than ever, need a broad content mix

Although the coronavirus outbreak produced a bump for many news organisations, it wasn't long before that appeared to be over[29].

One key reason for this, as the Pew Research Center shared[30], is that: "About seven-in-ten Americans (71%) say they need to take breaks from news about the coronavirus, and 43% say the news leaves them feeling worse emotionally."

News avoidance and fatigue, as the Digital News Report has shown[31], was already an issue pre-pandemic. Abstinence, the authors previously suggested, "may be because the world has become a more depressing place or because the media coverage tends to be relentlessly negative – or a mix of the two."

To address this, I argued at the start of the year[32], that it would be incumbent on news outlets to do things differently.

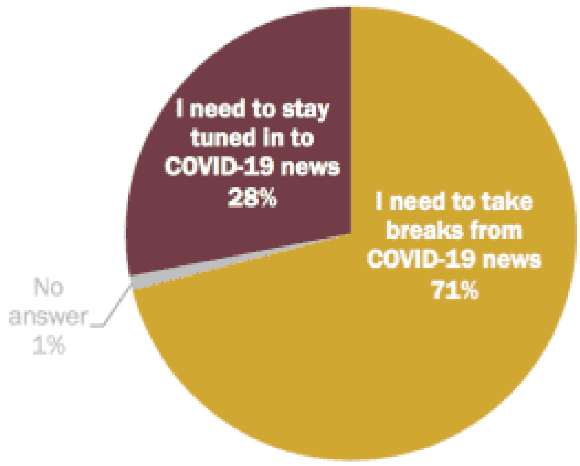
This may involve telling stories in fresh and innovative ways, changing the tone of content, engaging with audiences online and offline, as well as exploring new beats and approaches to storytelling (such as solutions journalism)[33].

In the world of COVID-19, those words seem more pertinent than ever.

To this, I would also recommend looking more at the power of your archive, evergreen content, and highlighting stories from the past 3-4 months which may have been overlooked as a result of the pandemic.

The coronavirus isn't going away any time soon, so publishers need to recognise that the "new normal," for advertisers and consumers alike, may not look that different from where we are today.

% of U.S. adults who feel...



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 20-26, 2020.
Via Pew Research Centre

What COVID-19 means for subscription strategies

Prior to the coronavirus outbreak, publishers were already pivoting to subscriptions.

At the start of the year, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ) found that 50% of digital leaders identified reader revenue as their major income focus for 2020.

"Reader revenue specifically, has very positive prospects," Jon Slade, the FT's Chief Commercial Officer, told RISJ, as part of their annual predictions report[1]. "Advertising revenue remains a major concern," he noted.

Those concerns have multiplied in a COVID world, where advertising spend has been decimated, making the need to focus on subscriptions and reader revenue more important than ever.

With that in mind, here are seven trends and strategic considerations for subscriptions in the COVID era:

1: Advertising revenues hit by short – and long – term trends

Globally advertising revenue will drop by at least 7.4% in 2020[2], predicts the research firm Omdia. This "best-case scenario" is based on an assumption that the global advertising market will pick up in the second half of the year.

In the United States, GroupM said it expects advertising[3] to decline by 13% this year (a figure which excludes political advertising for 2020's presidential and other elections).

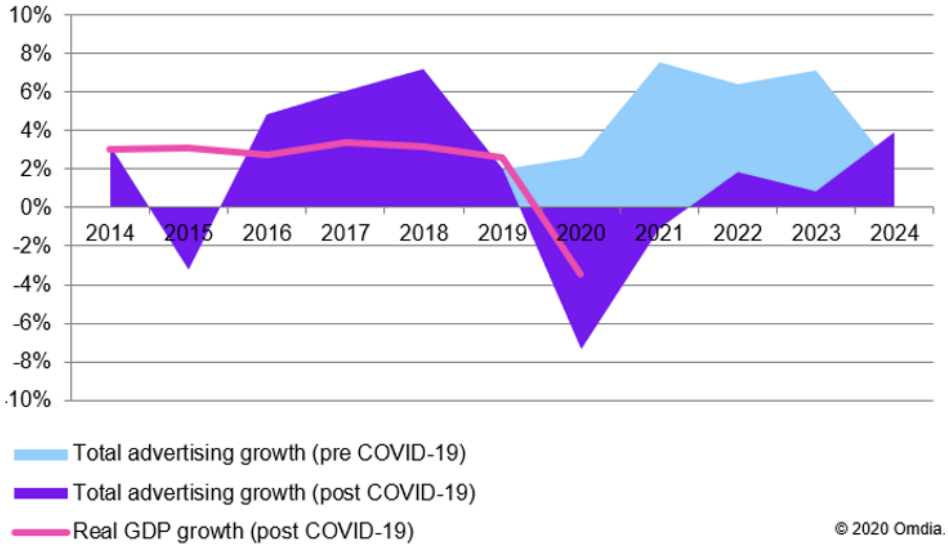
The impact of this will be felt across the board. In June, eMarketer reported that[4]:

> "For the first time since we began estimating ad revenues at Google, the company's net US digital ad revenues will decline in absolute terms. Facebook and Amazon will continue to grow but at severely depressed rates compared with earlier expectations."

Advertising spend is dropping, and has dropped, at a much faster rate for publishers.

In Canada, Postmedia, the country's largest newspaper chain, has seen print advertising fall by 36.6% ($23.7 million)[5], and digital advertising by 37.7%. The New York Times reported[6] that overall ad revenue fell in Q1 2020 by more than 15%, with digital ad revenue down 7.9% and print ad revenue down 20.9%. In Q2 the figures were even more striking[7], as "digital advertising revenue decreased 31.9%, while print advertising revenue decreased 55%."

Best case scenario: Correlation between GDP and total global advertising revenue growth



Many publishers have also been hit by advertisers using "blacklist" technology to ensure that their ads don't appear on stories mentioning the coronavirus[8]. In the U.K. alone, it's estimated that this could cost newspapers £50m in lost digital revenues[9].

Meanwhile, AdAge, citing[10] a report from the cybersecurity company Cheq, reported that "incorrect blocking of safe content on premium news sites" in 2019 already resulted in $2.8 billion in lost ad revenue, a figure which may be superceded in 2020.

2: COVID-19's subscription surge

At the same time as advertising has been falling, numerous outlets have reported record traffic during the pandemic, with audiences hungry for news and updates.

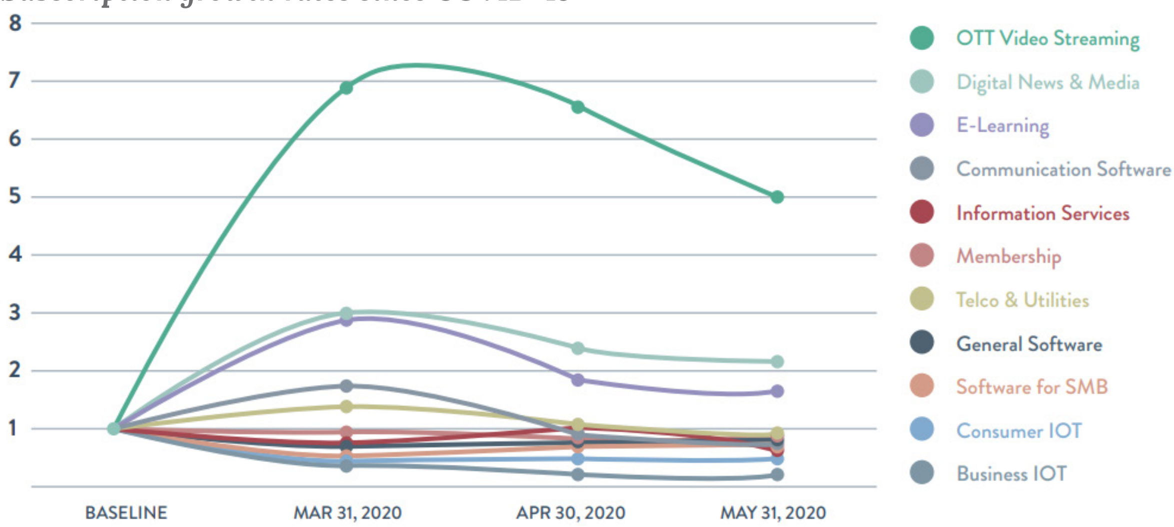
In March, around 15% of all web traffic was coronavirus-related[11]. Some of this interest has been successfully parlayed into subscriptions:

- The New York Times now has more than 6.5 million subscribers (print and digital), adding 669,000 digital subscribers in Q2 2020. In March, The Times had 240 million unique visitors and 2.5 billion page views, up from 101 million uniques in January.
- CNBC's website hit 1 billion page views for the first time in March 2020, more than doubling traffic from February. Subscriptions to CNBC Pro, a premium product costing $29.99 a month or $299.99 a year, were up 189% since January 2020[12].
- As we have already noted, Tribune Publishing experienced a 293% increase in new digital subscriptions between March and February 2020[13]. This included an increased conversion rate, from users hitting the paywall, of 109%.

According to Zuora's latest Subscription Impact Report[14], in comparison with the previous 12 months, subscriptions in Digital News & Media grew by 110% between March to May 2020, although that rate is slowing. This was the second-fastest subscription segment behind OTT Video Streaming.

Who are these new subscribers? Well, that appears to vary by publication. AdWeek states that new subscribers differ from publications' usual readership, and getting to know them is key[15]; whereas in a report for INMA, Grzegorz Piechota finds[16] that subscriptions tend to be from existing users, not new COVID readers.

Subscription growth rates since COVID-19



Via Zuora

3: Focus on building a long-term relationship

As MediaPost's Rob Williams observes[17]:

> "At the risk of sounding too cynical, the increased digital readership is an opportunity for publishers to tout their vital role in providing news and information to their communities — and to form ties that can last after the crisis subsides."

Tien Tzuo, CEO and Founder of Zuora, and author of *Subscribed: Why the Subscription Model Will Be Your Company's Future – and What to Do About It*, agrees, arguing[18], "If the Subscription Economy is about anything, it's about a fundamental return to relationships."

The most obvious way that many publishers have sought to cultivate a relationship with audiences has been through dropping their paywalls for COVID-19 related content.

Alongside this, many publications have launched free coronavirus newsletters, with the hope that these – along with partial paywalls – are a means of coaxing audiences into a paid relationship.

It's not a strategy everyone agrees with.


nxthompson
@nxthompson
Am thrilled that, despite lifting our paywall on coronavirus stories, subscriptions still shot up. Thank you!
Wired Sees Subscription Bump Despite Lifting Its Payw...
"It's a significant increase in subscriber growth from before the pandemic," says Wired site director Scott ...
foliomag.com
8:10 PM · Apr 9, 2020
119 See the latest COVID-19 information on Twitter

Tweet from Nick Thompson, Editor in Chief, Wired

"The newspaper industry seems to think that public service can't coexist with revenue," argues Howard Saltz[19], Knight Innovator-in-Residence at Florida International University's School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Saltz, who until recently served as the Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of the Sun Sentinel Media Group in Fort Lauderdale says:

> "That's a mistake — at a time when the beleaguered industry can't afford to make one..."
>
> "We hope the community will develop a journalism habit that'll continue when we start charging for access again, but we may be instead reinforcing the habit that news should be free."

4: Make the case for subscriptions

To counteract this risk, a number of publishers have emphasised why news and other media content needs to be paid for. As part of this, publishers are stressing the value of their work (and the cost of creating it) in their own marketing.

"There's nothing quite like a crisis for a news brand to show how we are really good at working quickly," Suzi Watford, the Wall Street Journal's chief marketing officer, told The Drum[20].

The Trusting News project showcases a number of these approaches[21], highlighting how outlets – ranging from the Guardian to the Coloradoan (Fort Collins, Colorado) and the Fort Worth Star-Telegram – have made the case for taking out a subscription. These efforts are not just being made on their own properties, but offsite on Facebook and YouTube too.

Interestingly, the Star-Telegram in Texas, like some other providers, began by making all coronavirus content free. But, in April, they started to take a different approach. As their executive editor Steve Coffman explained[22]:

> "We will continue to make stories critical to your health and safety available to everyone. But some of our coronavirus work will begin to migrate behind the meter, or paywall. Some examples are longer-form accountability and feature reporting, as well as tangential stories about the effects of the coronavirus on our economy."

"This is a matter of survival for the Star-Telegram and other local newspapers," he added.

5: Build on wider subscription habits

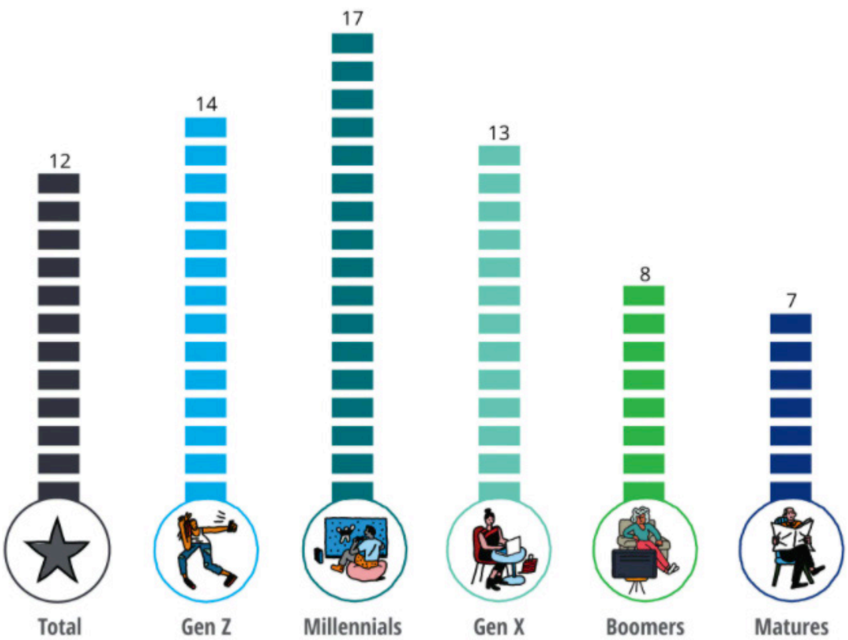
In asking consumers to pay for content, it helps that subscription habits are already becoming more commonplace.

According to Deloitte's latest Digital Media trends survey[23], "U.S. consumers had an average of 12 paid media and entertainment subscriptions pre-COVID-19." That figure was even higher for some audiences, with millennials averaging 17 subscriptions.

And although many people have less money in their pockets, Deloitte's data shows that consumers are busy adding new subscriptions (often taking advantage of trial pricing and ad-supported services), cancelling old ones, and also trying out new services.

Entertainment subscriptions add up

Paid media and entertainment subscriptions per consumer



Source: Digital Media Trends, 14th Edition (pre-COVID-19 survey), via Deloitte Insights

These wider subscription behaviors represent an opportunity, and a threat, that media organisations must be cognizant of.

6: Don't overlook the need to convert non-subscribers

Alongside this, companies also need to look at the reasons why the majority of their consumers do not subscribe and double down on efforts to convert that audience.

The market research company Resonate identified[24] four potential target groups for publishers:

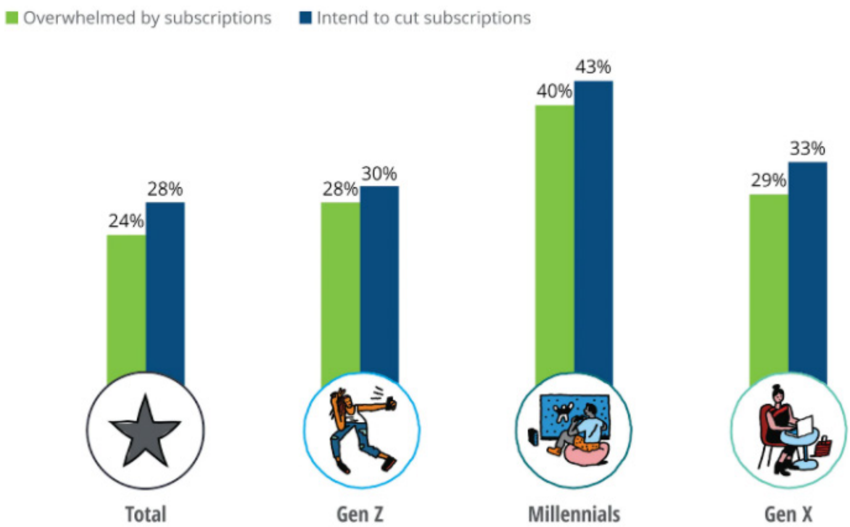
1. Those who do not have a digital subscription because they feel there is already plenty of free content.
2. Those who do not have a digital subscription because they are not interested
3. Those who do not have a digital subscription because it is too expensive.
4. Those who are engaged with newspapers online.

Understanding the information needs and consumption habits of these audiences is vital, as is creating compelling offers to reach out and convert them into subscribers.

There's no agreement about what constitutes best practice. Tactics such as the deployment of special sign-up offers, whether you do or do not provide COVID-19 content for free, subscription costs, and deviating from a "one-size-fits-all" subscription model, will vary from publisher to publisher.

That said, especially for news publishers, the pandemic has arguably created an environment where consumers may be more receptive to subscribing, and where the reason for doing so can be more readily understood. It's an opportunity that publishers need to capitalise on.

Younger consumers plan to cut entertainment subscriptions as fatigue mounts



Source: Digital Media Trends, 14th Edition (pre-COVID-19 survey), via Deloitte Insights

7: Become an audience first organisation

"Digital and print media companies wondering how best to keep new subscribers who signed up during the pandemic will need to prove to readers that their publication is invaluable after the crisis," writes AdWeek's Sara Jerde[25].

"Businesses that focus on the audience first and advertising second will be better equipped to handle the consequences of the pandemic," argues Curtis Huber, Senior Director of Circulation and Audience Revenue at the Seattle Times.

For companies who have seen a bump in subscribers as a result of the coronavirus, retention will be key.

That may mean deploying dynamic pricing, bundling and other techniques, such as highlighting non COVID-19 related content, which may appeal to a subscriber's wider interests.

Reducing churn, developing strategies for building loyalty, and generating recurring income from subscribers, is essential if an "audience first" approach is your new revenue model.

This is especially important given that advertising revenues are not expected to return to previously projected levels for some time. As a result, subscriptions and reader revenue are only going to become more important to publishers as we all adapt to this "new reality".

How eCommerce, memberships and donations are helping diversify revenues during COVID-19

If nothing else, the impact of the coronavirus has highlighted the fragility of digital publishing. There's a certain financial irony that although online traffic is up - with many outlets enjoying record page views - for a majority of organisations, overall revenue is down.

Given the challenge of current advertising markets, it's no surprise that many publishers are looking to increase their revenue from subscriptions. However, this isn't the only way they can generate more reader revenue.

It's a cliche to say that advertising delivers digital dimes compared to print dollars. But for evidence of the magnitude of this difference, look no further than earnings data from The New York Times.

- At the end of Q1 2020, The New York Times Company had 840,000 print subscribers and just over 5 million subscribers to its news and other digital subscription products (crossword, cooking and audio).
- Yet print advertising revenues were worth $55 million and digital advertising revenues $51.2 million (48.2% of total company advertising revenues) during this period.
- Print subscription revenues were also worth more: $155.4 million versus $130 million.

Advertising revenues by category for the first quarters of 2020 & 2019

	First Quarter 2020			First Quarter 2019			% Change		
Advertising revenues:	Print	Digital	Total	Print	Digital	Total	Print	Digital	Total
Display	$ 48,159	$ 39,894	$ 88,053	$ 62,342	$ 42,112	$104,454	(22.8)%	(5.3)%	(15.7)%
Other	6,820	11,264	18,084	7,203	13,431	20,634	(5.3)%	(16.1)%	(12.4)%
Total advertising	$ 54,979	$ 51,158	$106,137	$ 69,545	$ 55,543	$125,088	(20.9)%	(7.9)%	(15.2)%

Only in August 2020 did the New York Times Company report[1] that, for the first time, quarterly revenue (Q2 2020) was led by digital ($185.5 million in revenue for digital subscriptions and ads vs. $175.4 million for print).

What these numbers so clearly demonstrate is the continued value of print to many publishers, as well as the challenge of preserving print income (which is nonetheless in decline) while also growing digital and other revenues.

Here are three ways that publishers and media companies are going beyond subscriptions and advertising to bring in revenues at this time:

1: eCommerce

Not surprisingly, lockdowns and quarantine have had a substantial impact on eCommerce, as consumers increasingly shop online and from the safety of their own homes.

As a result, "the performance of the online economy becomes the performance of the retail economy overall," Vivek Pandya, lead analyst for Adobe Digital Insights told Bloomberg[2] during the early stages of the pandemic.

We've written extensively[3] about the eCommerce potential for publishers[4], as outlets move to close the gap between providing the inspiration for consumer purchases to offering a conduit for

CONTENT → IDENTIFYING & FINDING PRODUCT → PRODUCT PAGE → ADD TO CART → PAYMENT

Shoppable technology can **shorten** the conversion process to something like this:

CONTENT → PRODUCT PAGE → ADD TO CART → PAYMENT

Or in some cases, even this:

CONTENT → ADD TO CART → PAYMENT

The evolution of shoppable content, which offers potential for publishers
Via Styla and Digital Doughnut

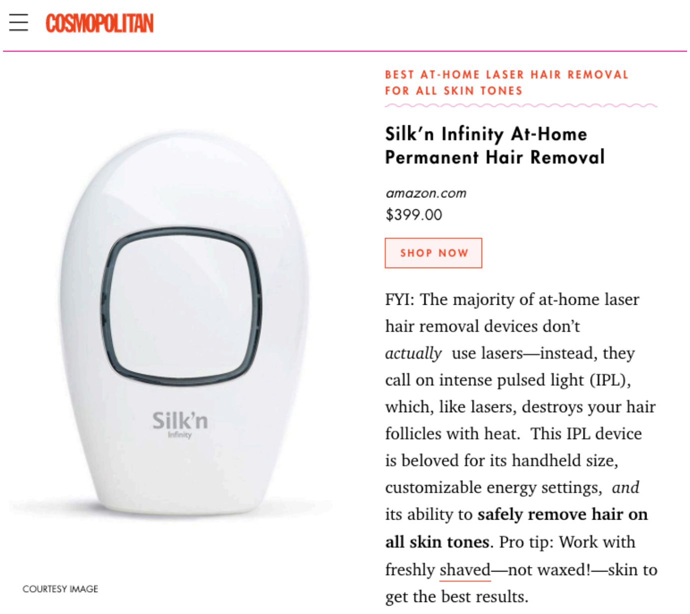
them. It's a strategy that we are seeing across verticals ranging from motoring to recipes and food, travel to fashion, as well as homes, beauty and DIY.

During the pandemic, a number of publishers have begun to further realise some of this potential.

In March, Hearst sold 1 million products through site content across its 30 brands. Their stable includes titles like Men's Health, Good Housekeeping and Cosmopolitan. Sales for April were likely to double again, they revealed[5] to Media Post, representing a 358% year-on-year increase.

"We didn't suddenly create a bunch of new content," explained Kristine Brabson, executive director strategy and editorial insights. Instead, the company ensured that editors audited high performing traffic, and followed this up by checking to see if the products being recommended were in stock and appropriate for the pandemic.

"We started to see an increase in certain categories among what we produce day to day and month to month," Brabson added. Hearst then "created more content in real time to answer some of those needs."



One of Cosmopolitan's most popular stories this year, '10 Best At-Home Laser Hair Removal Devices That Actually Work'.

It's a similar story at Meredith and Condé Nast, notes Folio[6]. "We're on track to drive over $500 million in retail sales this year," said Andy Wilson, SVP of consumer revenue at Meredith

Corp, with cooking supplies as well as home essentials - such as cleaning supplies and home office furniture and accessories - driving much of this growth.

At Condé Nast's Epicurious and Self, eCommerce increased by more than 70% in March, compared to 2019, again driven by people being at home cooking. Since the start of the pandemic, sales of recommended kitchen scales, for example, increased tenfold.

2: Memberships

"As a general rule of thumb, publishers who are covering the coronavirus pandemic should feel comfortable asking readers for financial support during the time," writes[7] Stephanie Miles, Director of Digital Content at Web Publisher PRO. "Publishers who are not covering the current crisis may want to take a more nuanced approach."

"Digital publishers are seeing surges in website traffic as people search for information about COVID-19, but capitalizing on that interest and asking visitors to pay for online memberships or subscriptions is a delicate proposition," Miles cautions.

Mary Walter-Brown, CEO of the U.S.-based News Revenue Hub agrees, telling the Membership Puzzle[8], "I think it's important not to appear opportunistic in this moment after we've worked so hard to build audience trust."

In the article, Ariel Zirulnick shares how a number of outlets around the world have responded to the crisis, sharing lessons from Red/Acción (Argentina) Krautreporter (Germany) The Daily Maverick in South Africa and El Diario (Spain).


elDiario.es

Un plan de emergencia para garantizar la supervivencia de eldiario.es

Vamos a recortar los salarios más altos de la redacción entre un 10% y un 30%; queremos repartir los esfuerzos de la manera más equitativa posible y evitar los despidos mientras tengamos otra opción

La redacción de eldiario.es, vacía durante la crisis de coronavirus Ana Ordaz

Ignacio Escolar 24 de marzo de 2020 - 18:12h 0
@iescolar

La crisis del coronavirus ha colocado a todos los periódicos en una situación

elDiario.es outline their emergency plan to guarantee the survival of the publication, which included cutting the highest salaries by as much as 30%, and increasing their annual membership prices.

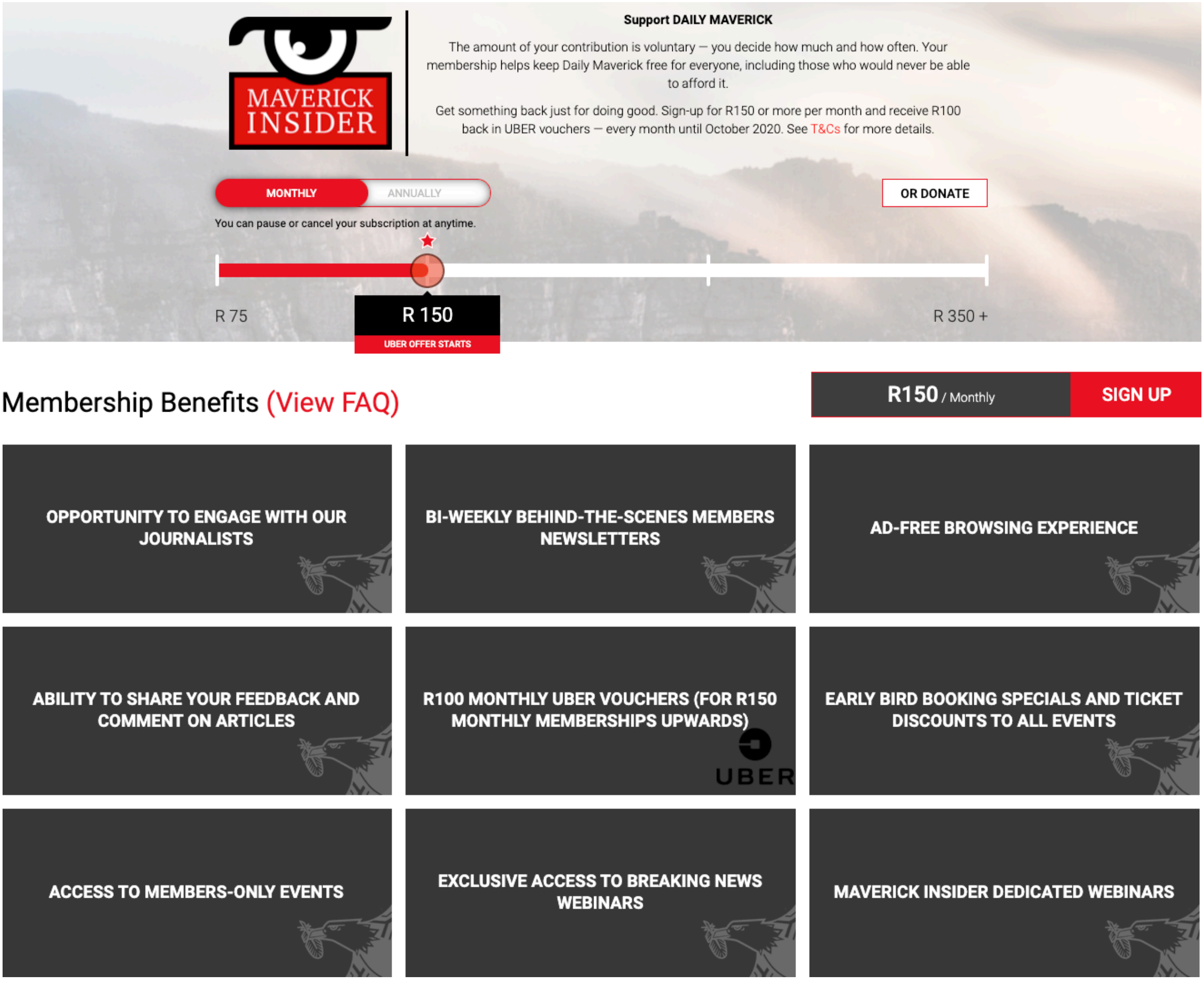
Of particular note, is that El Diario added 9,000 members (36,000 - 45,000) over a ten-day period in March, despite increasing their annual membership from 60 euros to 80 euros.

"Behind eldiario.es there is no bank, no great fortune, no political party, no large communication group. We need your help because we have no one else to turn to." said journalist Ignacio Escolar.

"They were transparent with their readers about this, detailing revenue losses, cuts they made to the salaries of top editors, and other budgetary adjustments," Zirulnick observes[9].

"Subscription and membership aren't the same, and the difference is more than semantics," Kate Myers and Emily Goligoski reminded us back in 2018[10].

"A membership model invites audiences to give their time, money, connections, professional expertise, ideas, and other non-financial contributions to support organizations they believe in."



An example of how a successful membership site, Daily Maverick (South Africa) outlines the benefits of membership.

In contrast, subscriptions are a more "transactional relationship," and the value proposition of each differs. Nonetheless, "both can – and will continue to be – critical to the future sustainable models that we so clearly need in this industry," they add.

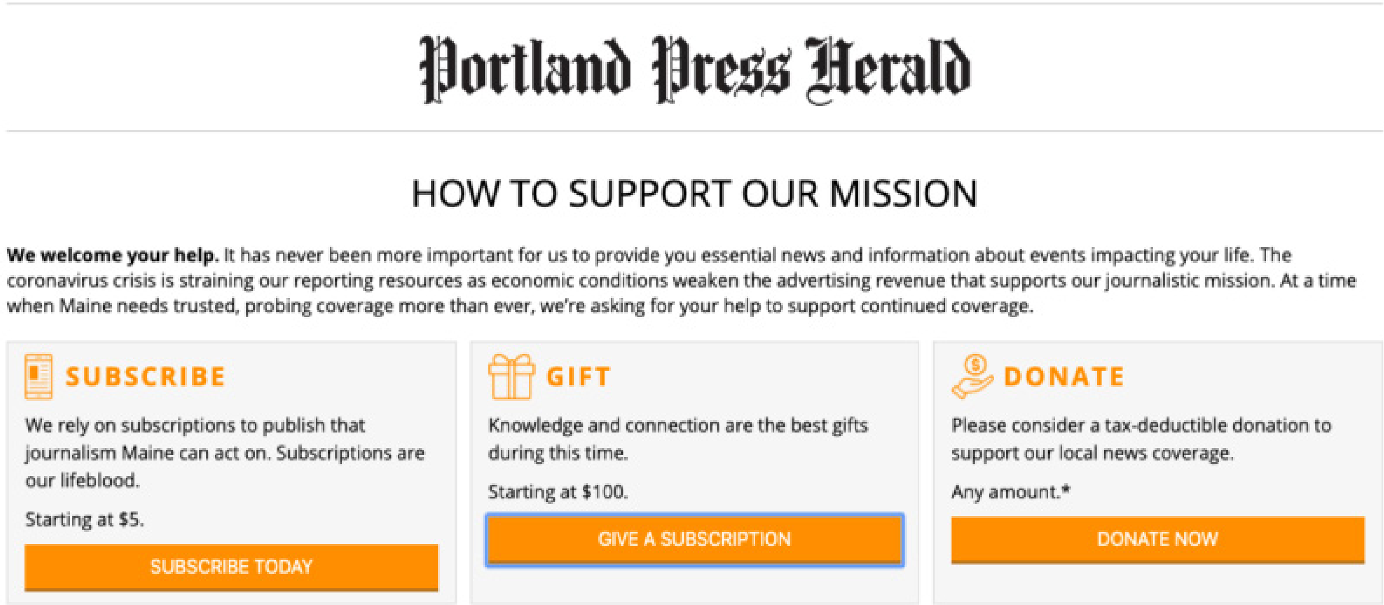
3: Donations

In some countries, members of a publication can benefit from their support being tax-deductible. In the U.S., an example of an outlet that highlights this possibility is The Rivard Report, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit[11], which covers San Antonio in Texas.

The site, which started as a community blog in 2012, became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit enterprise in 2015. According to its website[12], "it now features a staff of 18 full-time journalists and business team members and publishes a number of freelance contributors." It offers four different tiers of membership, each with different benefits.

The website also prominently features a button in its toolbar encouraging readers to donate. During the pandemic, the team has also used an email newsletter to encourage donations[13].

In a similar vein, the Portland Press Herald (Maine, USA) offers users the opportunity to subscribe, gift a subscription, or make a tax-deductible donation.



The Portland Press Herald's support options

As Stefanie Manning, vice president of circulation and consumer marketing, divulged to the Local Media Association[14]:

> "We have been very focused on our digital subscription strategy. ...When the pandemic hit, we thought really hard about how do we not get off that road while at the same time expressing our need for support from our community beyond subscriptions... We very quickly put up a support message saying that we needed support and that our coverage was going to be free but not free to produce."

The paper is part of Masthead Maine, the state's largest media network, which includes five dailies and 25 weekly publications and six specialty publications.

At the start of the year, before the coronavirus outbreak hit the U.S., the company had already announced[15] that it would stop printing Monday editions for 4 of 5 papers in March, moving them to online only. According to CEO Lisa DeSisto, the cost-saving measure stemmed from the fact that the Monday papers aren't profitable (other days are). They also have the lowest circulation and least ad revenue.

Of note here is that donations to The Portland Press Herald go to a program called the COVID-19 Local News Fund[16], which is administered by Local Media Foundation, a Section 501(c)(3) charitable trust affiliated with Local Media Association (LMA).

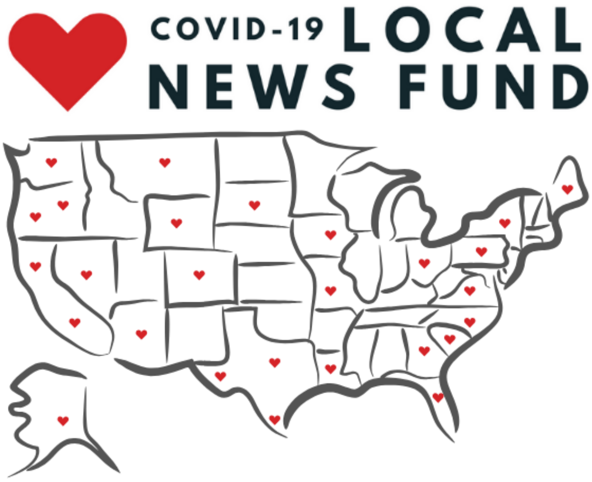
The program is only available for independent and family-owned media companies, with the express aim of increasing coverage of COVID-19 issues in local communities.

"All money raised by this effort will go directly to support COVID-19 reporting, to make sure the public has essential facts on this important topic," the donation page for The Portland Press Herald states[17].

More than 100 other local news outlets across the States have also signed up[18].

Alongside administering the fund, the LMA also provides participants with other forms of support, including "a library of turnkey marketing and promotion assets," as well as "customized campaign page(s)" and best practices, important angles to cover, and tips for remote reporting.

"Publishers who are being direct, honest and empathetic with readers about their challenges are seeing previously unthinkable levels of support from local communities," writes[19] David Grant Manager, Facebook Journalism Project Accelerator Program.



A map showing some of the locations of fund participants
Via Local Media Association

In the same post, Lynne Brennen, a former marketing executive at Dow Jones and The New York Times, and a coach in the Facebook Journalism Project Accelerator Program, argues that "the impetus for contributions needs to be clear and compelling."

"Connect donations to specific funds or newsroom initiatives, even in the context of supporting coronavirus coverage. Readers are suspicious of vague requests for support, at best, and see it as a reflection of mismanagement, at worst."

These principles apply to all three of these revenue efforts: eCommerce, memberships and donations.

In each instance, there needs to be a clear value proposition for audiences and transparency (at times lacking in the eCommerce space[20]) about financial relationships and where the money goes.

This approach is essential if publishers are looking to embrace, or grow, these potential revenue streams; especially at a time when some audiences may have less money in their pockets.

Four ways publishers are building loyalty during COVID-19

Loyalty is a rare, but valuable, commodity for publishers.

Acquiring new paying customers and members can be an expensive business. As a result, we've seen numerous outlets invest heavily in retention efforts in recent years, as content creators look to reduce churn[1] and retain existing audiences[2].

In the COVID-era, many publishers have seen spikes in traffic as consumers have sought out coronavirus related information, or alternatively, distractions from the crisis.

As publishers increasingly pivot to reader-revenue, finding ways to keep new (and existing) audiences on board is a strategic priority.

Here are four ways that publishers are endeavouring to build loyalty during the pandemic.

1: Launching new coronavirus products

With COVID-19 rapidly circumnavigating the globe, it didn't take long for publishers to seize the potential to create, and launch, coronavirus-focused news products. As Nieman Lab's Hanaa Tameez noted[3] at the start of March, "If you're itching for more information about coronavirus and its specific impacts, there's a product for you and it's probably free."

The most common of these have been coronavirus-themed podcasts and newsletters. These new products don't just meet audience needs for information, publishers also hope that they will offer a pathway to subscription for non-subscribers.

Sometimes this aspiration is implicit, but more frequently than not publishers are including a specific call to action within their content. The New York Times' daily Coronavirus Briefing newsletter, for example, makes the ask clear and simple.

It's an approach that they're weaving into other non-COVID content too. NYT's The Daily, is one of the most popular podcasts in the world. In the middle of each episode, you'll now typically find an explicit call to support the NYT's journalism with a subscription.

In seeking to drive and develop subscriptions, a key goal for media creators is to build habit and loyalty. Consistency, such as publishing to a regular schedule, which many newsletters and podcasts do, can help with this.

COVID-19 related products can also play a vital role as a gateway to other content and services. Coronavirus newsletters, for example, do more than just meet an immediate consumer need. They're also an opportunity for publishers to highlight non-COVID content. This is important if you want to try and build a long-term connection with new users; ideally, a subscription-based relationship that lasts beyond the pandemic.

> The Times is providing free access to much of our coronavirus coverage, and our Coronavirus Briefing newsletter — like all of our newsletters — is free. Please consider supporting our journalism with a subscription.

The New York Times' newsletter call-to-action

Nic Newman, in a deep dive into "The Resurgence and Importance of Email Newsletters,"[4] as part of 2020's Digital News Report, also comments how newsletters can go beyond being a fishing expedition for new subscribers. "...They can be equally valuable in providing regular prompts for existing customers to use the product more regularly."

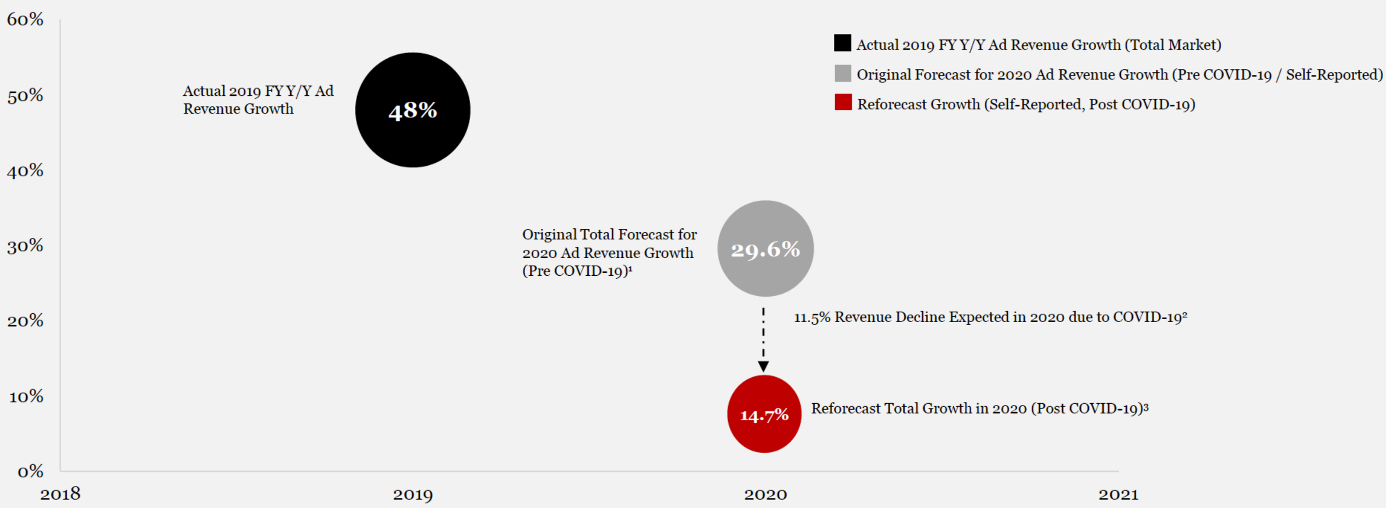
And lest we forget, these platforms - even during the COVID crisis- are also ripe for monetisation.

In the States, podcast advertising revenue is expected to grow by 14.7% in 2020, the fourth annual IAB Podcast Advertising Revenue Report reveals[5]. However, that's a substantial slowdown from the 48% growth in advertising revenues the format saw in 2019.

“Despite COVID, which has slammed everyone, we’re still seeing growth in podcast advertising,” said Zoe Soon, VP of consumer experience center at the IAB[6]. “It’s definitely a resilient media.”

Meanwhile, Digiday observes[7] how The Washington Post’s coronavirus newsletter has created new sales in the form of sponsorship opportunities with companies like Goldman Sachs, Slack and Salesforce.

2020 Forecasted Podcast Advertising Revenue Growth for Self-Reporting Companies
(Annual[1] & COVID-19[2] Submissions)



1| Of the 19 companies to self-report revenues in the annual survey, 15 companies provided revenue forecasts for 2020-2022. Based on these responses, forecasted revenues were originally expected to grow 29.6% in 2020. 2021 and 2022 expected growth was excluded from this analysis due to potential impact of data from COVID-19.
2| Of the 17 companies to self-report revenues in the COVID-19 impact survey, 15 companies reported impact to 2020 forecasted revenues and expected a cumulative impact of -11.5%.
3| Calculated a revised expected growth rate of 14.7% in 2020 using the initial 29.6% growth from the annual survey and 11.5% decline in revenue from the COVID-19 impact survey.

IAB/PWC - FY 2019 Podcast Ad Revenue Study, July 2020

2: Hosting digital events

Pre-COVID, a number of publishers were heavily invested in the revenue potential of events.

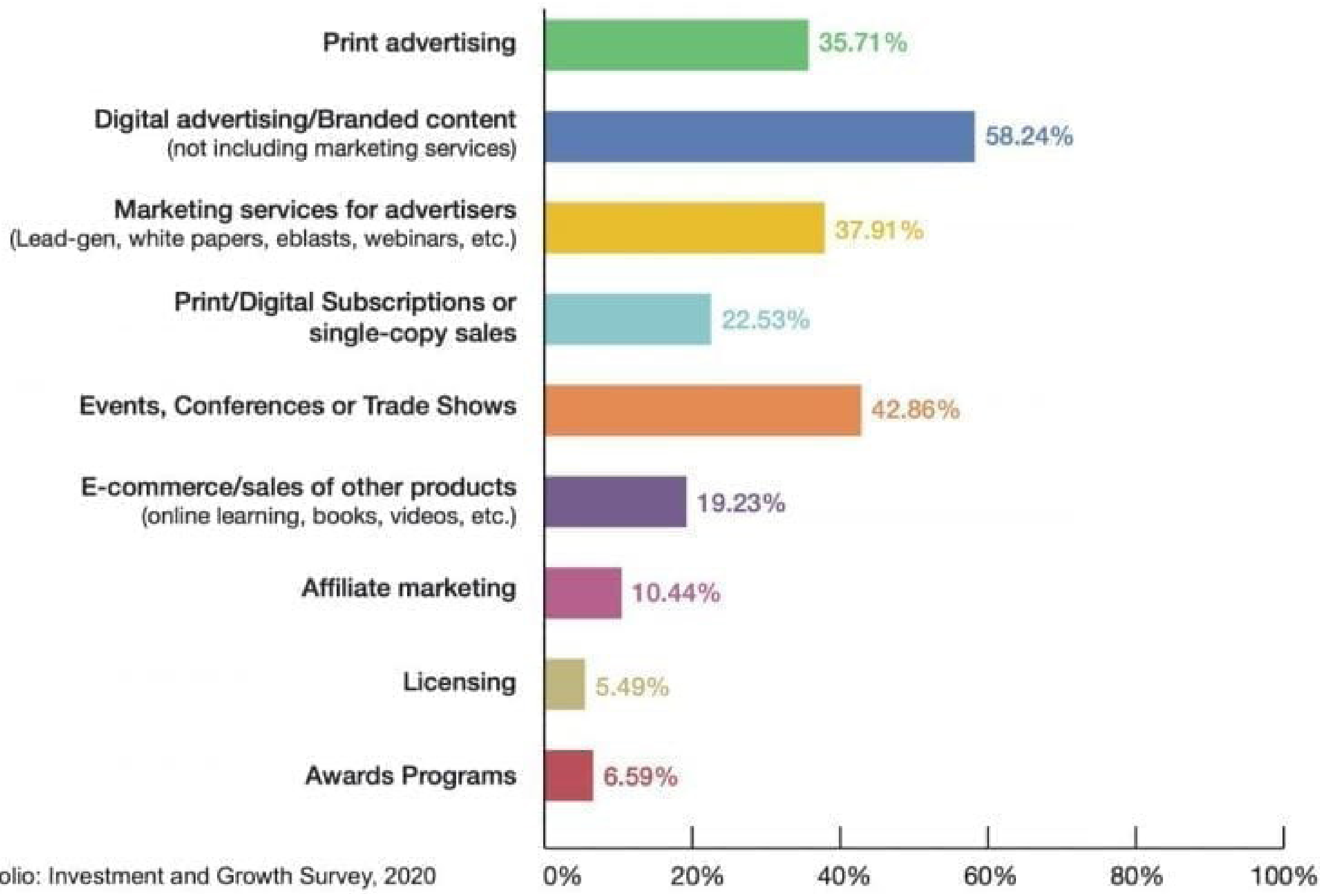
As HubSpot commented back in 2016[8]: “As a media company, one of your biggest strengths is your ability to create communities of people… Why not extend your value and offer in-person events to complement your content?”

“Even small independent publishers find events and publishing natural bedfellows,” FIPP observed[9] at the time, highlighting the success of Embassy Magazine, a niche publication catering for “news and views from the London diplomatic corps.”

Before COVID-19 upended these prospects, publishers were confident about the role that events would play in revenue growth this year.

In January, a Folio: survey of 182 industry professionals found[10] that live events were seen as the second biggest driver for revenue growth in 2020, with more than four in ten respondents identifying events as a driver for revenue growth. This was the second most popular revenue vertical after digital advertising and branded content.

What will drive revenue growth for your company in 2020? Please select all that apply.



Folio: Investment and Growth Survey, 2020

Lockdowns and quarantine orders kiboshed many of these ambitions, although this hasn't stopped publishers from pivoting to digital events[11].

Esther Kezia Thorpe, in an article[12] for What's New In Publishing examining how Hearst Live and New Scientist ran successful virtual events, shared takeaways from their pandemic experience. This includes monetising virtual events and using digital delivery as a means to overcome the geographic boundaries which many physical events face.

Looking ahead she quotes Nikki Clare, Head of Events and Client Service at Hearst Live, as saying that the pandemic experience will carry over into their post-COVID events strategy.

"In the short to medium term, we're looking at virtual events as our core products, but then our medium to longer term strategy will be hybrid events," Clare said. "We still believe very much in the power of live experience, but we also believe that we can translate a lot of that into virtual or hybrid events. It's a really exciting time for the industry in some ways."

3: Dropping paywalls

As the spread of COVID-19 gathered speed, many publishers made the decision to drop their paywalls for coronavirus related content. However, there have been notable exceptions, such as the Boston Globe and the Los Angeles Times, to this trend.

In Poynter, Kelly McBride and Rick Edmonds debated the ethics of this, with Edmonds noting[13]:

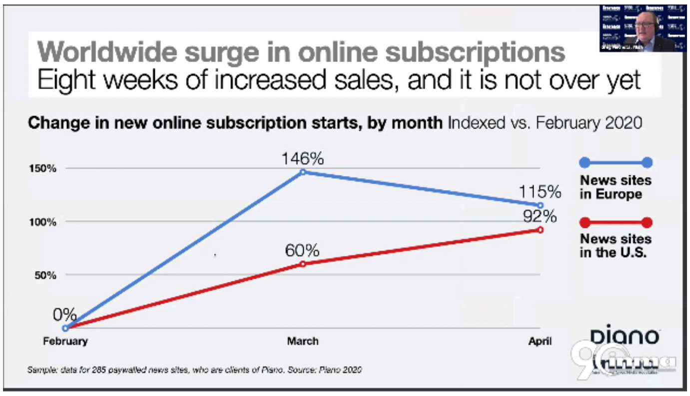
> "Legacy newspapers have a business imperative to build revenue from paid digital subscriptions. It could turn out to be a matter of survival. But dropping the paywall in a time of crisis makes essential and comprehensive local coverage available to the whole community, not just those who can pay."

At the same time, citing Poynter's writing coach Roy Peter Clark, McBride rightly warns us: "If you are out of business, the great journalism you had been doing is not going to be available to anyone."

Acknowledging this, numerous news outlets, whether they dropped their paywall or not, have used the crisis as an opportunity to remind audiences[14] of the cost of producing journalism, and why financial support is imperative.

This is important because as Joy Mayer at the Trusting News project reminds us[15], most people don't know how journalism is funded, or the financial state that it is in.

In doing this, publishers have not just to deliver on their public service responsibilities, but they've also hoped to parlay this renewed reader interest into subscriptions. Some magazine publishers, like Condé Nast, Dennis Publishing and Bauer Media, have reported growth in subscriber numbers[16].



Courtesy of INMA, via journalism.co.uk

News sites, as Grzegorz Piechota, researcher-in-residence, INMA, demonstrated at May's INMA Virtual World Congress[17] saw an initial subscription spike. Although that has slowed, at the time the current rate of growth remains higher than pre-COVID.

One major challenge, of course, is that even with increased subscriptions and donations, these revenues do not get even close to the revenue losses that publishers are seeing from other income streams (such as advertising and events).

In response, some publishers, like the U.S. newspaper group McClatchy have reinstated their paywalls. At the end of March, Axios reported[18] that the company was letting local editors determine which stories would be in front of the paywall, and which ones would be behind it.

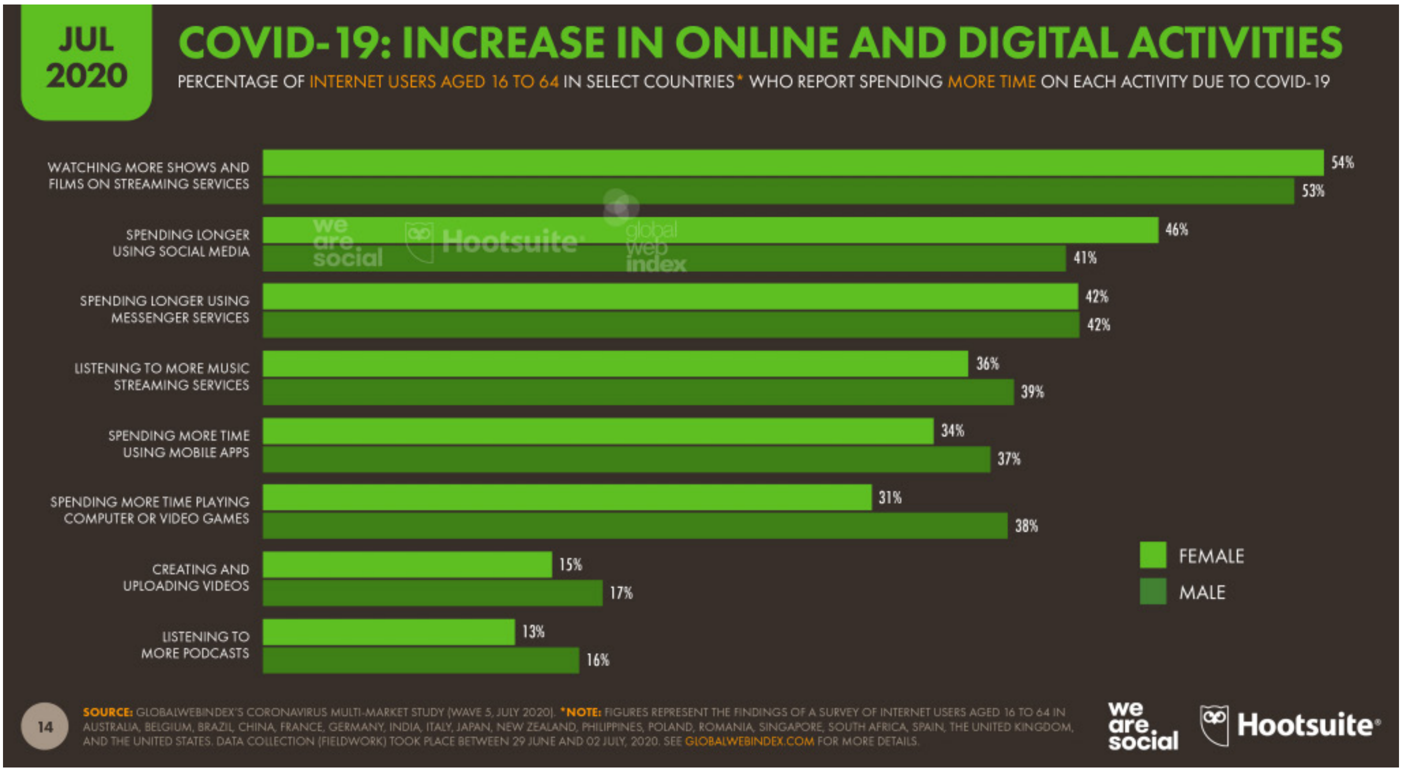
4: Offering premium content and new services

At the same time as many publishers have tweaked their paywall during this crisis, others have used the pandemic to launch new paid-for products.

This is most obviously true of streaming services. Disney+ launched in the UK during the pandemic. (The timing was incidental.) In the U.S. NBC launched Peacock, it's long-planned OTT channel, which also - like Hulu - includes a premium ad-free version[19].

Not surprisingly, many of us are watching a lot more content during lockdown, and streaming services have been the main beneficiaries of this.

GlobalWebIndex's Coronavirus Multi-Market Study finds[20] that in a number of major markets more than half of internet users are spending more time watching shows and streaming services. They also found 13-16% are listening to more podcasts too.



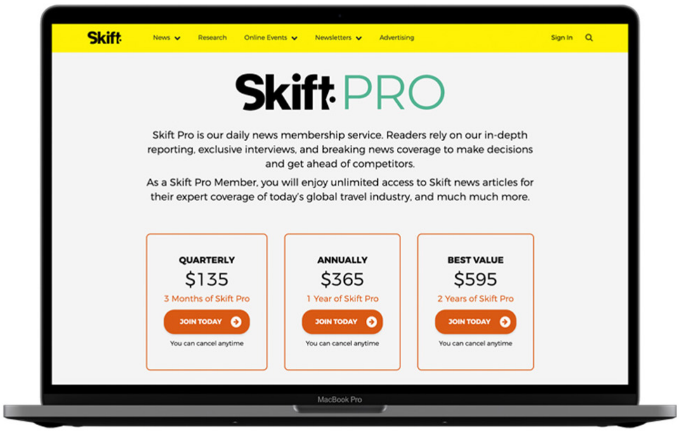
Alongside these long-planned streaming launches, other content creators are also unveiling premium services at this time.

In July, Skift, the travel industry intelligence site, launched a new membership product, Skift Pro. Costing $135 a quarter, or $365 for a year (and $595 for 2 years), benefits for users include unlimited access to news stories, a members-only weekly newsletter, conference calls with Skift editorial staff and guaranteed access (plus a discount) for Skift events.

According to co-founder and Chief Product Officer Jason Clampet the product had been in the pipeline for over a year. Its launch, however, comes at a time when the travel industry has been heavily impacted by furloughs and layoffs. Marketing and advertising spend for the travel vertical have been one of the most hit by the coronavirus.

“It’s hard to know what is a good time right now for anything,” Clampet told Digital Content Next[21]. “The reality of business is that direct from consumer revenue is vital to just about any media business.”

“We also know that there are people who are still at companies in Europe and Asia, which is waking up again. They need actual information to do their jobs better and make smarter decisions. We’re still here providing that, so in that sense, it is a good time [to launch].”



The move, CEO and founder Rafat Ali said on Twitter[22], means that “Skift is now officially a Subscription-First business information company.” “This is an important shift for Skift,” he wrote. “This decision builds a key revenue stream that will be more resilient to industry down cycles.”

Takeaways

What these examples demonstrate is that many publishers are using tried and tested techniques to serve audiences and build loyalty.

Other efforts, such as digital events, are more experimental, but are an opportunity to pivot existing revenue models (events being an area many publishers have invested heavily in), harness digital platforms to meet existing - and pandemic-emerging - needs.

Deloitte, in their report “COVID-19: Maintaining customer loyalty and trust during times of uncertainty,” stresses that the foundations of customer loyalty are trust and confidence[23]. These “are being put to the test,” they observe, “and people are scared.”

“By putting your customers’ interests first, this can be a time for your company’s brand to lead,” they advise. “Even though you might be taking a short-term hit to your bottom line, putting flexible refund, pricing, and change policies in place, and finding other ways to help your customers through this crisis will be beneficial to the long-term health of your company."

This guidance isn't aimed specifically at publishers, but as we have seen many outlets are putting these ideals into place with new products, changes to their paywalls and new services which meet consumer needs, as well as on-going revenue requirements.

Publishers should optimize for loyalty, Content Insights' Milos Stanic argued last year[24]. Many players have already made that move, or begun that process. For all publishers, regardless of where they are in this transition, COVID-19 has made this strategic imperative more relevant and important than ever.

Tactics to generate engagement during COVID-19

Publishers have deployed a range of means to generate loyalty during the pandemic.

By harnessing new products and services, as well as pivoting old ones to meet COVID realities[1], content creators are using a number of different techniques to pique the interest of audiences[2].

Building consumption habits is a key driver for creating loyalty. But it's not the only tactic that publishers are using. Alongside these efforts, they are also exploring other ways to deepen the experience of their users. One key reason for this is that loyal subscribers are more likely to stay subscribers[3].

At a time of financial stress (with consumers having less money in their pockets), and an expanding subscription economy[4], not only is reducing churn a priority, publishers also want to find ways to super-serve their most loyal audiences.

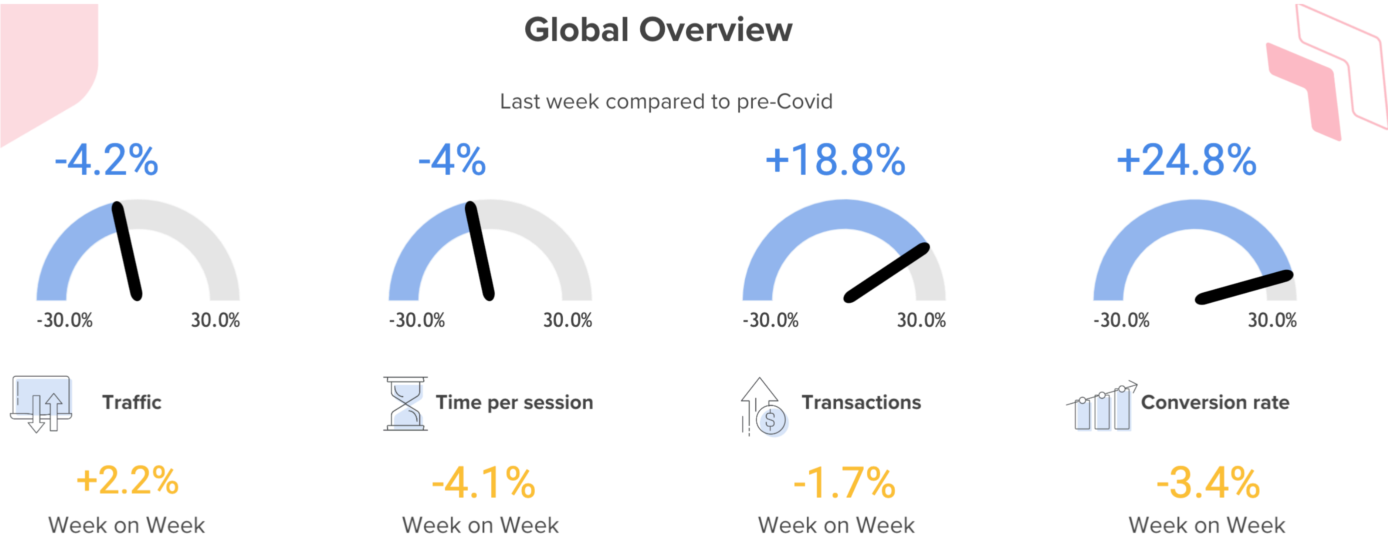
Here are four ways that publishers are generating engagement during the coronavirus crisis.

1: Encouraging eCommerce

With large swathes of the world on lockdown at various points in the pandemic, many of us have needed to change our shopping habits. Where possible, consumers have shifted to online transactions. And although that's starting to decline a little as restrictions on physical shopping have eased, eCommerce has been a clear beneficiary of the COVID crisis.

Compared to our pre-COVID world, as data captured by Simon Kemp in his Digital 2020 July Global Statshot report[5] shows, "ecommerce transactions have increased across almost every category."

Data from Contentsquare shows[6] that overall eCommerce transactions are up nearly 19% compared to the same time last year, and conversion rates (the ratio of transactions to sessions, expressed as a percentage) are up nearly 25% since the outbreak began.



Contentsquare's global dashboard, August 8th 2020

Given this trend, it's no surprise that some publishers are trying to capitalise on these behaviours.

Cosmopolitan and The Strategist are two publications who have explored new ways to drive eCommerce during COVID-19[7]. To do this, both outlets have focussed on special events as a means to drive online sales.

The Strategist's Two-Day (Actually Good) Sale, ran from July 29 - 30, offering deals on 30 different products, ranging from vibrators to dog carriers, reading glasses to noise machines, as well as a $1,400 "smart bassinet" for new parents[8].

Deals were launched hourly on the site. Newsletter subscribers also had access to other offers, which were not publicised elsewhere.

"Though it's the first deals event for the Strategist," the company noted in a press release[9], "the site has previously experimented with IRL retail, launching a holiday pop-up shop in 2018."

Illustration: Joe McKendry, via The Strategist

Cosmopolitan devised Hauliday, "an exclusive two-day shopping extravaganza" in partnership with the eCommerce platform Klarna. The online shopping event features discounts of up to 50 percent between 8-9 August for purchases made with brands such as Sephora, Adidas, and H&M.

"While virtual shopping festivals are nearly nonexistent in the U.S., these events have seen huge success from consumers across the world," WWD's Alexandra Pastore writes[10].

Cosmo's 72 million monthly readers spent more than $9 billion shopping online last year, according to David Sykes, head of U.S. at Klarna, which helps explain why the publication is keen to try and get a bigger slice of the eCommerce pie.

"Beauty will be a winning consumption category for Hauliday," predicts[11] Nancy Berger, SVP, and Publishing Director at Cosmopolitan, "with an opportunity for our readers to treat themselves to a new fragrance, a luxury skin care regime or their favorite makeup products."

Research from the NPD Group[12] shows that although overall sales of prestige beauty products have been down during the pandemic, online sales grew by 90% during Q2 2020, representing about 61% of industry sales volume, and a great space for publisher-retailer partnerships.

U.S. Prestige Beauty Category Sales Performance
Dollar Sales, April-June 2020 versus 2019

Category	Q2 2020 Dollar Sales	% Change vs. Q2 2019	Online Only % Change vs. Q2 2019
Skincare	$1.1 B	-18%	+93%
Makeup	$869.0 M	-52%	+79%
Fragrance	$586.2 M	-37%	+104%
Hair	$197.2 M	-10%	+95%

Source: The NPD Group, Inc. / U.S. Prestige Beauty Total Measured Market & Online Only

As we noted in our special report[13], *The Publisher's Guide to eCommerce: Case Studies*, a number of publishers - such as Marie Claire UK and POPSUGAR - have moved into the beauty space with their own branded products.

"Moreover," Simon Kemp says, "research from GlobalWebIndex shows that almost half of all internet users expect to make more use of eCommerce even after the outbreak is over, with consumers in some of the world's largest developing economies most likely to foresee increases in their online shopping activities."

Given this, more publishers may want to explore eCommerce[14] as both a revenue source, and a means to deepen their relationship with their audiences. It's worth noting that the data from this also offers further monetisation and partnership opportunities.

2: Highlighting non-COVID content

eCommerce is a good example of a vertical which isn't explicitly about COVID-19, but one which caters for evolving consumer habits and needs during the pandemic.

Similarly, I believe that publishers should be investing more effort in evergreen content and recirculating stories which may have been lost during the early COVID-noise.

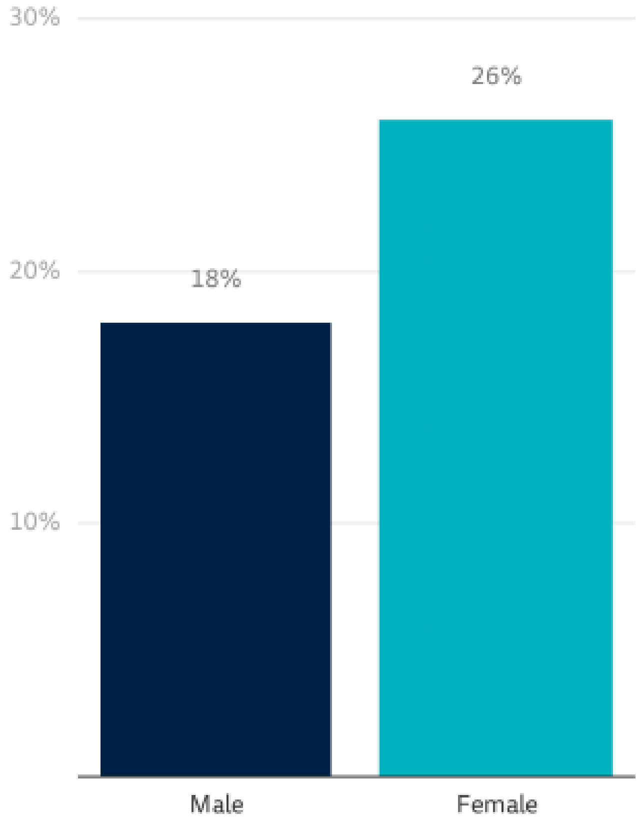
One key reason for this is that the audience's appetite for coronavirus stories has dissipated as we have adjusted to the "new normal." As their needs change, so publisher strategies must evolve.

Driven by a desire for news and information related to this new disease, many publishers saw an early bump in traffic during the early days of the pandemic[15]. However, some outlets found that this didn't last long as coronavirus fatigue began to set in[16].

In the U.K., research[17] from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford revealed that "after an initial surge in news use, there has been a significant increase in news avoidance."

"News avoidance is evenly distributed across different social groups, with small differences based on income, education, and political orientation," the researchers said[18]. Key drivers for news avoidance include the effect it has on their mood (66%), volume of news (33%) and distrust in the news (32% rising to 49% of those who identified as right-wing).

Proportion that (always/often) avoids news by gender, UK



Q1di_2017. Do you find yourself actively trying to avoid news these days? *Base: Male = 960, female = 1,013.*

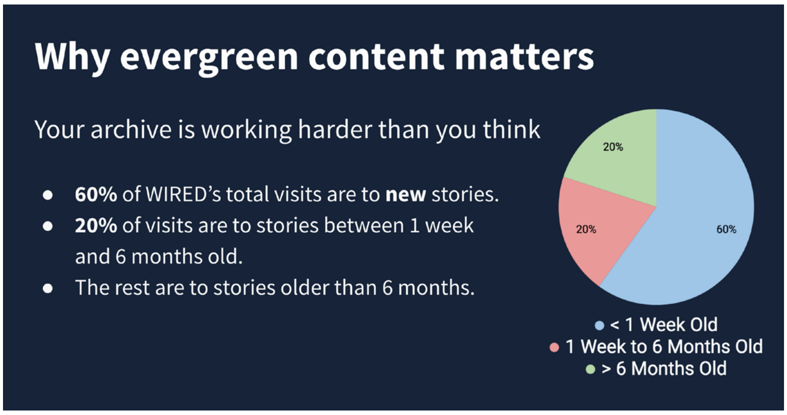
We've seen a similar story in the United States. In late-April the Pew Research Center commented that[19] "the continuous news churn has had an impact." "A majority of Americans say they need to take breaks from it, many say it makes them feel worse emotionally and half say they find it difficult to sift through what is true and what is not," Pew said.

It's worth noting that this trend of news avoidance, and many of the drivers behind it, are nothing new. The Digital News Report 2019[20] observed that "avoidance continues to be a real issue… almost a third (32%) say they actively avoid the news."

Given that the study's sample consists of news consumers, this statistic should give publishers pause for thought. It's not just coverage of the coronavirus crisis that audiences find exhausting. With trendlines which pre-date the pandemic, this is a media habit which publishers should be taking more seriously than they arguably do.

Active news abstinence "may be because the world has become a more depressing place or because the media coverage tends to be relentlessly negative – or a mix of the two," the Reuters Institute speculated back in 2019. Sound familiar?

Either way, news avoidance is a trend that most publishers cannot ignore.



Pre-COVID data (May 2019) on WIRED's evergreen content.
Via Parse.ly

In a COVID world, this may mean placing a greater emphasis on producing "feelgood" or non-coronavirus content, looking at where this is placed and introduced to audiences (online, on social, in newsletters etc.), making better use of archive stories and creating more pandemic-proof content.

Publishers need to be looking hard at their content mix, and determining how they can publish and circulate more evergreen content[21], along with topical COVID-related stories.

This is important if outlets want to retain relationships with audiences - especially those introduced to your work, perhaps for the first time, during COVID - after the pandemic ends.

To do this, showing that you're about more than just serving audiences' immediate coronavirus needs is an essential attribute that publishers need to be able to demonstrate.

3: Answering questions

In a pandemic the need for service journalism is more important than ever. Audiences have many questions about what's happening and the implications for their lives. Publishers can address this need by listening more and addressing head-on the concerns of consumers.

Not only is this incredibly valuable as a means for generating content and insights, but it's a technique which can help to build trust and demonstrate value. This, in turn, may also encourage audiences to be more likely to support your work.

Many outlets have turned to explainers as a popular format for addressing common concerns.

A visual piece of explainer journalism, "Why outbreaks like coronavirus spread exponentially, and how to 'flatten the curve'," is The Washington Post's most viewed story of all time[22].

The Guardian has seen something similar[23]. Their coronavirus explainer, first published on January 20, is their most-read piece ever. A separate coronavirus video explainer is the third most popular video on their YouTube channel.

Nevertheless, especially in this period of upheaval and disquiet, publishers and journalists alike shouldn't simply assume they know what questions audiences want answered.

"In the face of uncertainty, ask. Ask often, and ask everywhere. Ask your current audience and ask people you don't regularly reach. Ask over and over again and never stop asking," recommends the Solutions Journalism Network and Hearken[24].

Pre-COVID data (May 2019) on WIRED's evergreen content.
Via Parse.ly

To help them do this, content creators have been utilising a range of tools and techniques.

In March, NPR created a show based entirely on audience input and questions related to COVID-19. Listeners were able to submit questions through a questionnaire posted on their website[25].

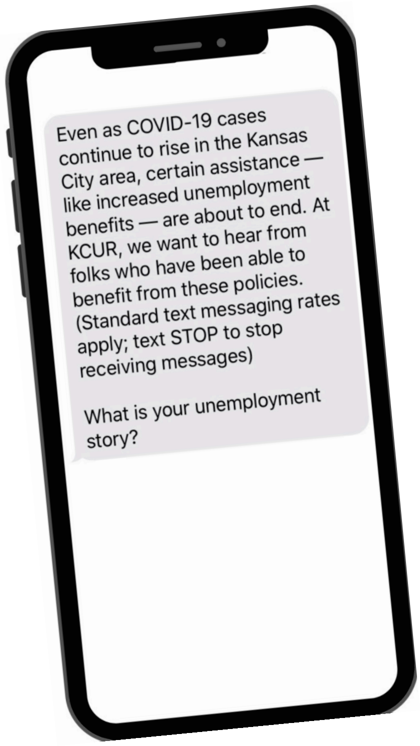
'New York NOW,' New York state's Emmy-winning, in-depth public affairs program from WMHT, has done something similar using a tool powered by Hearken, while the New York Times has used machine learning to help develop a giant FAQ based on questions from readers[26].

Text messaging also offers opportunities for interaction, including two-way communication.

"Texting is a low barrier to entry," says Andrew Haeg[27], founder and CEO of GroundSource. It is also more inclusive, given that not everyone has internet access.

According to an interview with Current[28], a news service about public media in the USA, his company is working with 42 clients to harness the immediacy and intimacy of text messages as a response to callouts on specific COVID related topics.

"Your story may become a radio feature or digital post on our website," explains one client[29], KCUR, an NPR affiliate serving the Kansas City region. "It may resonate with the stories of others and warrant a virtual town hall or Facebook Live. We might ask you to work with us on an audio diary. Who knows, hopefully, down the road, we'll be able to gather in person for a face-to-face conversation!"



KCUR using GroundSource

In California, the KPCC–LAist newsroom has also used texting as a means to ask questions in Spanish, a language spoken by 38 per cent of residents in Los Angeles county.

This was part of a suite of efforts used by Southern California Public Radio (KPCC) and the website LAist, which has also seen their engagement team receive over 3,300 pandemic-related questions from audiences. By June, they told Nieman Lab[30], using the Hearken platform, they'd already addressed over 2,900 of them.

They also created bi-lingual coronavirus mailers[31], with essential information (and kids activities) which they distributed to just under 13,000 households in zip codes where less than half of homes have access to a computer and fixed broadband.

KPPC / LAist's mailers in English and Spanish

4: Opening up

As well as organisational efforts to communicate with audiences, individual journalists are also using the pandemic to engage directly with audiences.

We have previously shared[32] how Diya Chacko, an audience engagement editor for the Los Angeles Times Metro desk, has been specifically encouraging questions about the outbreak, addressing them in the LA Times' Coronavirus Today newsletter.

Other outlets have used Facebook Live[33] as a means to talk about their work and approach to covering COVID-19, as well as a means for reporters - or expert guests - to address questions from audiences.

The Albany Times Union, in New York State, has hosted discussions on topics such as New York's reopening,

Governor Cuomo's meeting with President Donald Trump, and what the pandemic means for schools and education. Meanwhile, Illinois Public Media hosted an hour-long COVID-19 Q&A With Local Public Health Officials And Medical Doctors.

Alongside this we have also seen numerous publishers, large and small, frequently make the case for taking out subscriptions or giving donations.

It shouldn't have taken a pandemic to get outlets to talk so openly with audiences about the need for direct support, but hopefully, one legacy of the coronavirus is that publishers will continue to talk about this (and perhaps feel more comfortable doing so).

A Facebook Live with the Albany Times Union's Rachel Silberstein talking to members of the Shaker High class of 2020 about the fundraising efforts and work packaging meals for families in need during the COVID-19 pandemic.

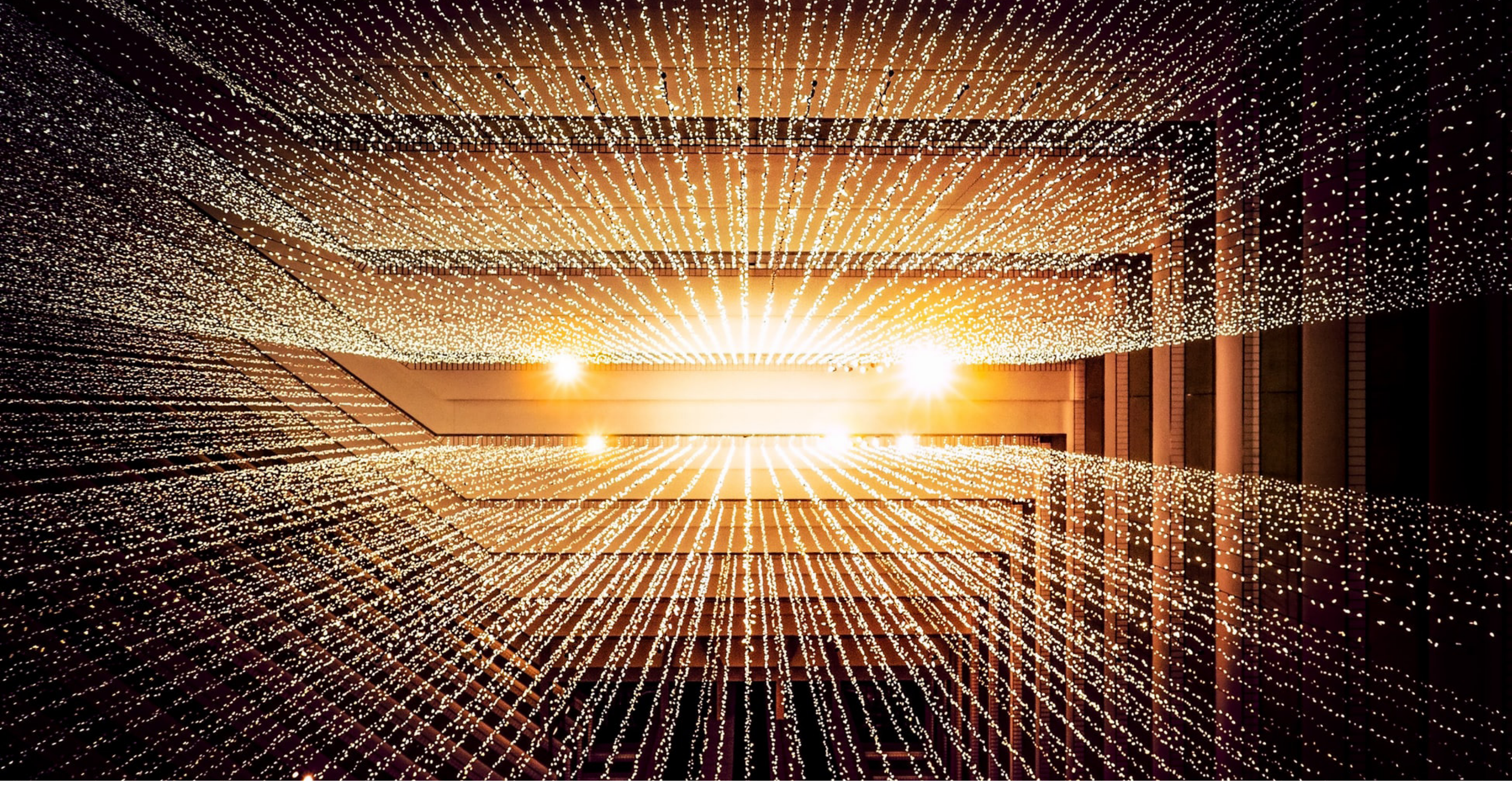
These efforts come against a well known backdrop of declining advertising revenues and reduced capacity to deliver on many other monetisation efforts, such as live in-person events. As a result, with the emphasis on reader revenue being more important than ever, we are seeing publishers be much more open with audiences about their business and revenue model.

Throughout this period, and beyond, publishers need to consistently make the case for the cost of creating content, and why audiences must pony up.

With advertising revenues on the wane, the pivot to reader revenue won't just be a passing fad. It's the only way that many organisations will survive.

Stressing the need for financial support, and what it buys, coupled with other engagement efforts - such as deepening relationships through eCommerce, offering more evergreen content, developing strategies to both listen to audience needs and tackle news avoidance - should outlive the pandemic.

Implementing these efforts offers the potential to provide products and a content mix which meet defined consumer needs. In the process publishers can support both new and established consumers, as they start planning now for their survival during the COVID crisis and beyond.



Navigating COVID-19 and ad tech

In response to an initial coronavirus news bump, a number of outlets witnessed record traffic to their sites, as well as a growth in subscribers.

At the same time, however, they also had to contend with a major slump in advertising revenues as marketers shut their chequebooks.

This meant that despite some publishers benefiting from increased reader revenue, this income did not act as a like-for-like replacement for the revenue losses being felt from other income streams (such as advertising and events).

Moreover, as we shall see, the nature of modern-day advertising technology (ad tech) also further compounded the financial challenges that publishers were experiencing.

Here's an overview of the key ad tech issues that publishers have had to contend with while navigating the COVID crisis, and seven potential solutions to them.

Challenge 1: Keyword blacklisting

In March, BuzzFeed News' Craig Silverman reported[1] that Integral Ad Science, a digital ad verification company, had over 3,000 advertisers blocking the term "coronavirus."

This double-whammy followed reduced ad spend in many categories, like travel, which had already hurt publishers' revenue streams.

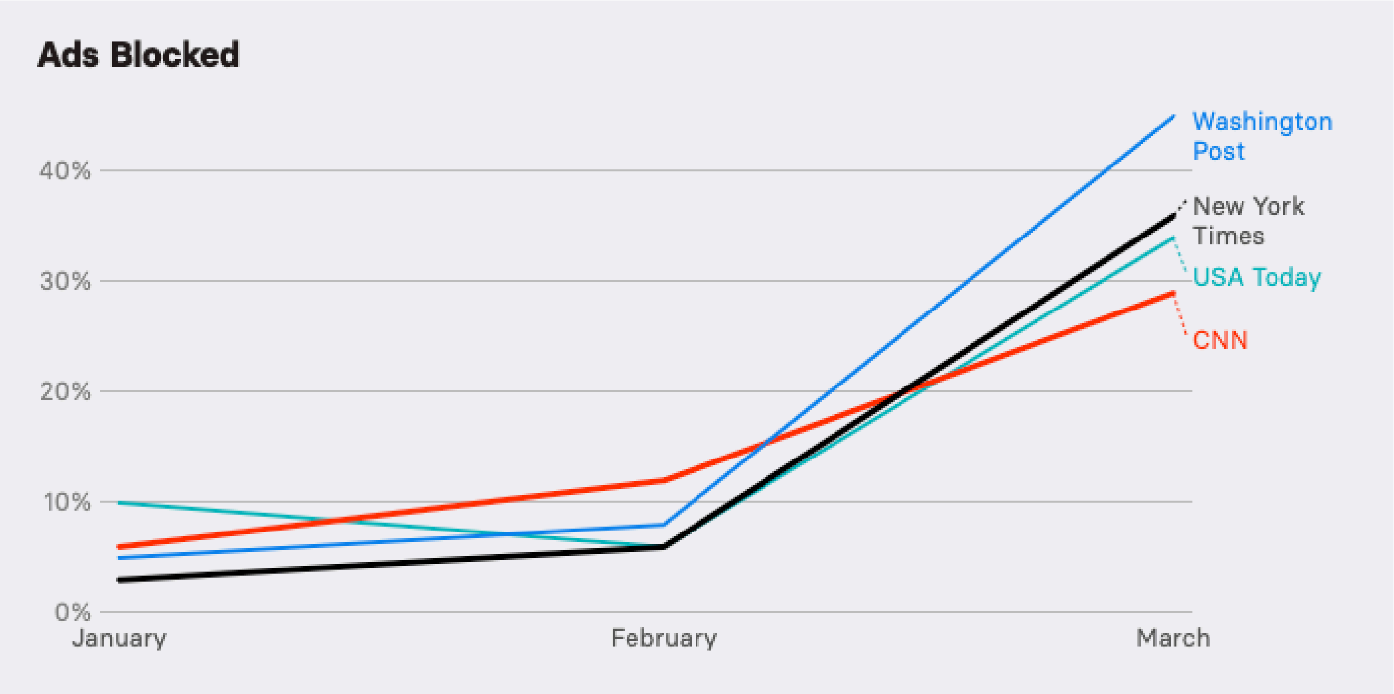


Chart via Craig Silverman / Buzzfeed News

Moreover, as the team at Branded, a newsletter written by Claire Atkin and Nandini Jammi, reminded us[2]:

> "Blacklisting keywords without whitelisting legitimate news sites deprives news organizations of ad dollars. By doing this, we are keeping ads away from real eyeballs. Worse, where do those ads go? They are likely ending up on fake news sites that know to avoid the word "coronavirus."

Research from IAB has reinforced this[3], finding that "news publishers are twice as likely to be blacklisted vs. others."

"This extraordinary event is exposing how brand safety tech works — using stupid keyword lists — it is not happening more often, it is just more evident," ad fraud researcher and consultant Augustine Fou told Digiday[4] earlier this year.

“Previously it was not as visible how bad keyword blocking was for legit publishers,” he said.

Fou’s comments came in response to moves from some advertisers to ensure that their ads didn’t appear on websites mentioning “coronavirus.”

As a result of keyword blacklisting, publishers including Der Spiegel, the Guardian, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, as well as countless others, have all been impacted[5].

In the UK it is estimated that news publishers lost around £50m in online ad revenue between April and July due to this practice.

A Twitter discussion started by Ari Paparo, CEO of Beeswax, a New York-based start-up building real-time bidding software.

Challenge 2: Declining programmatic revenues

Globally, according to Zenith, more than two of every three display ad dollars are being spent programmatically[6], with the worldwide market for programmatic advertising predicted to be worth $98.2 billion (pre-COVID estimates) in 2020.

Put another way, around 68% of worldwide digital ad spend is now programmatic, up from 44% in 2015, a figure which rises in markets like the USA (84.5%) and the UK (88.9%).

COVID-19, however, has demonstrated some potential pitfalls for publishers who may be dependent on this advertising model.

In the United States, at least one major local news publisher witnessed sudden declines in per-view programmatic revenue as a result of the coronavirus and keyword blacklisting.

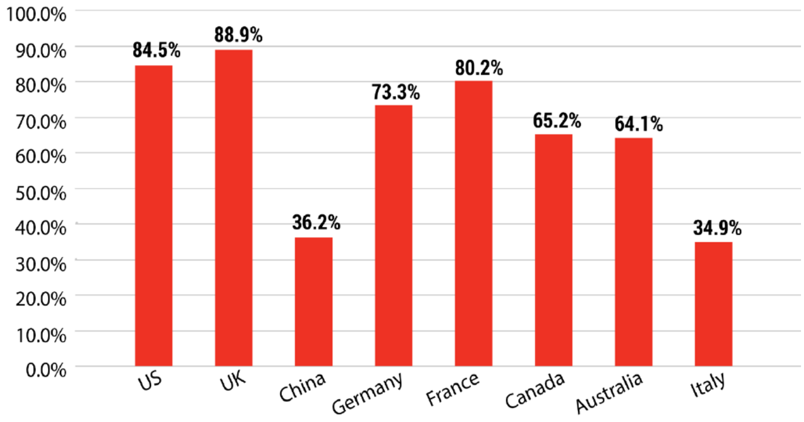
McClatchy's Vice President of News Kristin Roberts told staff, in a memo to staff obtained by Axios[7], that "the money we get every time someone reads or watches an individual story (“programmatic” revenue) is declining, rapidly - that per-view rate of revenue has dropped more than 15% in a single week."

It’s not easy to determine the impacts at other organisations, but other outlets may have seen similar numbers. Outside of the U.S., other markets and publishers have been similarly affected, but not necessarily to the same extent, given their reduced dependency on programmatic revenues.

As the President of the German Association for the Digital Economy (BVDW), Thomas Duhr, explains[8]:

> "One reason [for this] is that programmatic advertising is less advanced in Germany than in Anglo-American markets, thus the extent of automatic inclusion of brand safety technologies isn't comparable yet."

Programmatic % of Display Spend - 2020



Source: Zenith, "Programmatic Marketing Forecasts 2019," Nov 19, 2019 (includes search and social)

How publishers have responded to these challenges

In response to these twin challenges of reduced programmatic revenue and keyword blacklisting, publishers have explored a number of different options. Here are seven of them:

Solution 1: Doubling down on subscriptions

After initially dropping paywalls for COVID content, some publishers, like the U.S. newspaper group McClatchy reinstated them. The move to subscriptions and reader revenue is a long-term financial driver for many publishers. But, the need for this emphasis was reinforced by sudden declines in per-view programmatic revenue.

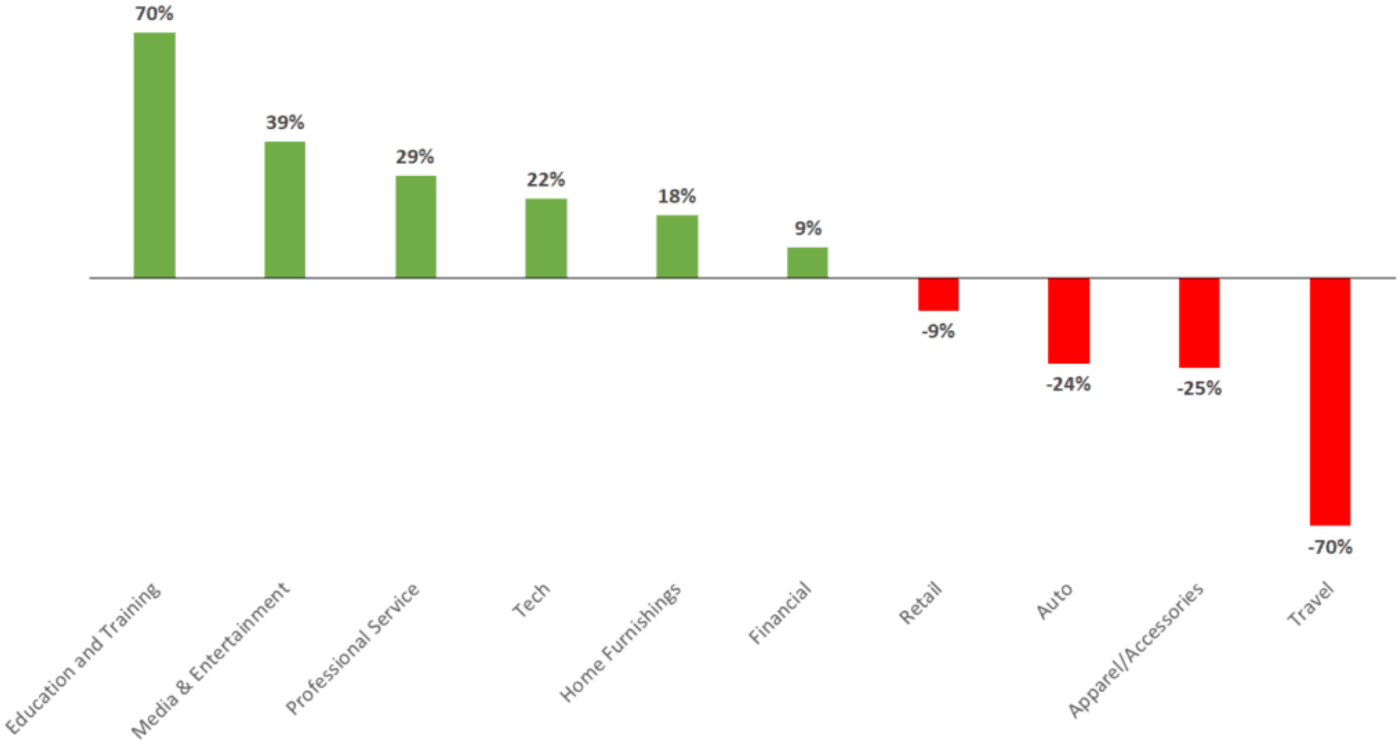
In a memo to staff, McClatchy's Vice President of News Kristin Roberts explained:

> "Since our coronavirus coverage began, 13% of views were by people who would have been stopped by the paywall if it had been up. If we converted even a tiny fraction of those people, we would have generated more in subscription revenue than we are earning on the per-pageview ("programmatic") revenue."

In response, Axios reported[9] the company allowed local editors to determine which stories would be in front of the paywall, and which ones would be behind it.

This decision, which other publishers will also have wrestled with, saw the company trying to balance the provision of public health information with an imperative to drive subscriptions in a bid to meet shortfalls from advertising and other revenue streams.

% change YoY in programmatic ad spend, April-July 2020



Research by MediaRadar in the States found that ad dollars began returning by May, but that there were huge differences on an industry-by-industry basis.

Solution 2: Getting more creative

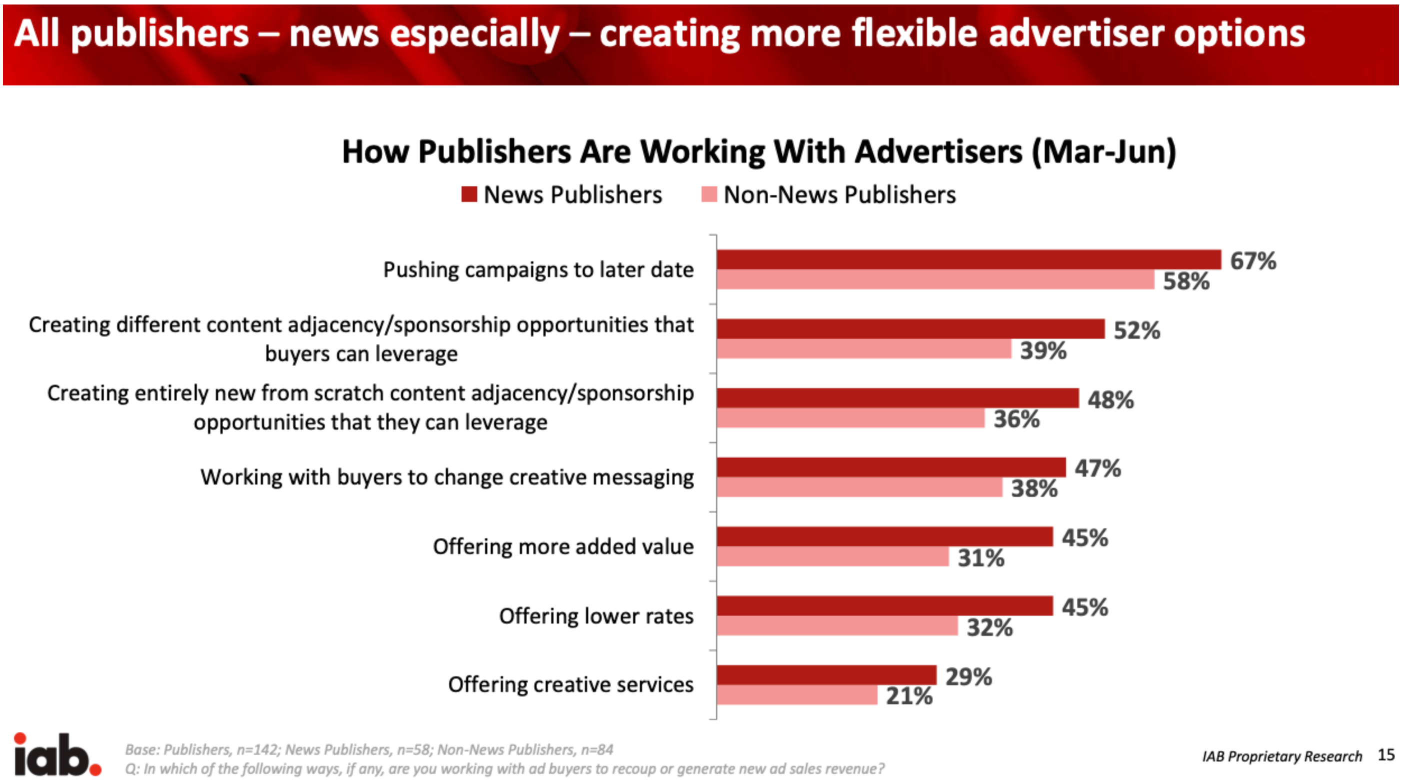
Although the coronavirus crisis had a positive impact on website traffic for many news publishers[10], they were not necessarily able to monetise it through digital advertising in the way that they would have liked.

As a result, this has encouraged some publishers to think differently about the ways in which they can work with advertisers; and perhaps emphasised the need to avoid going "all in" with ad tech solutions like programmatic.

The Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) highlighted[11] some of these opportunities in a report at the end of April, which included sponsorship and other content adjacent opportunities, as well as lower rates and pushing campaigns back to later in the year.

Elsewhere, in a webinar moderated by Dan Rua, CEO, Admiral, and Christian Hendricks, President, LMC (Local Media Consortium), publishers offered their thoughts on additional strategies and approaches[12].

Mike Orren, at The Dallas Morning News, for example recommended that publishers "carve out some of the premium inventory and offer it to local/premium advertisers for free to create goodwill."



Solution 3: Working with Big Tech

Recognising the challenging economics that many publishers faced (and the pressure they were under to help), platforms stepped in to offer funding and other forms of support for publishers.

The Google News Initiative, for example, distributed funding to more than 5,300 local publications via their Journalism Emergency Relief Fund[13].

They also agreed to an ad-serving fee waiver on Google Ad Manager[14].

"Many news publishers around the world use Google Ad Manager to support their digital businesses with advertising," Jason Washing, Managing Director, Global Partnerships - News wrote in a blog post[15].

Acknowledging the impact of the pandemic on the global economy, he announced in April that Google had "decided to waive ad serving fees for news publishers globally on Ad Manager for five months." These cost-savings, although only temporary, were no doubt welcome for publishers given the overnight impact of COVID-19 on their finances.

Nonetheless, there were understandable calls for the tech sector to do more. One such advocate, Jason Kint, President and CEO of Digital Content Next, argued that[16]:

"At the same time newsrooms have necessarily shifted coverage towards informing the public on this global pandemic, immature tech platforms are blocking the funding of this journalism.

We repeat our call for the advertising technology and verification platforms, including Google and Oracle, which have a strong history of reducing friction, to dedicate urgent resources towards solutions here, including exempting or encouraging trusted news organizations as a default."

Solution 4: Encouraging advertisers to be advocates for acts of journalism

Recognising the challenging economics that many publishers faced (and the pressure they were under to help), platforms stepped in to offer funding and other forms of support for publishers.

In response to the level of keyword blocking that publishers were seeing, David Cohen, President of the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB), offered some stark words for "brands, agencies, ad verification firms, and other companies in the digital advertising supply chain."[17]

"Please immediately instruct your brand and agency teams to update your programmatic and all other media buying to enable advertising surrounded by topics you would have previously avoided, including "crisis," "COVID-19," "coronavirus," etc." he argued. "The faster you do this, the more lives you will save."

"Every dollar you spend on credible news sites helps save lives," Cohen said, identifying three key benefits:

1. It ensures that credible news organizations can afford the staff required to provide critically vital information.
2. It ensures that reckless disinformation efforts will be blunted by news that is accurate, fact-checked, and reliable.
3. It ensures that the public at large — the people who buy your products — stay alive and well.

In a joint statement[18], the News Media Alliance and Digital Content Next made a similar call.

Alliance President & CEO David Chavern stressed the important life-saving work that news outlets were producing. "Keyword blocking serves to punish publishers for this very same coverage, with potentially catastrophic effects," he said.

"America needs a vibrant, ad-supported news industry, and it has never needed it more," IAB's Cohen added[19]. "Open the floodgates of advertising dollars to support credible news sources. Don't debate. Don't delay. Do it now. The stakes are too high to do anything less."

Solution 5: Whitelisting and ad blocking recovery

According to the 2020 PageFair Adblock Report[20], by the end of 2019, 763 million devices around the world were blocking ads. This includes 527 million mobile devices, as ad-blocking becomes platform agnostic.

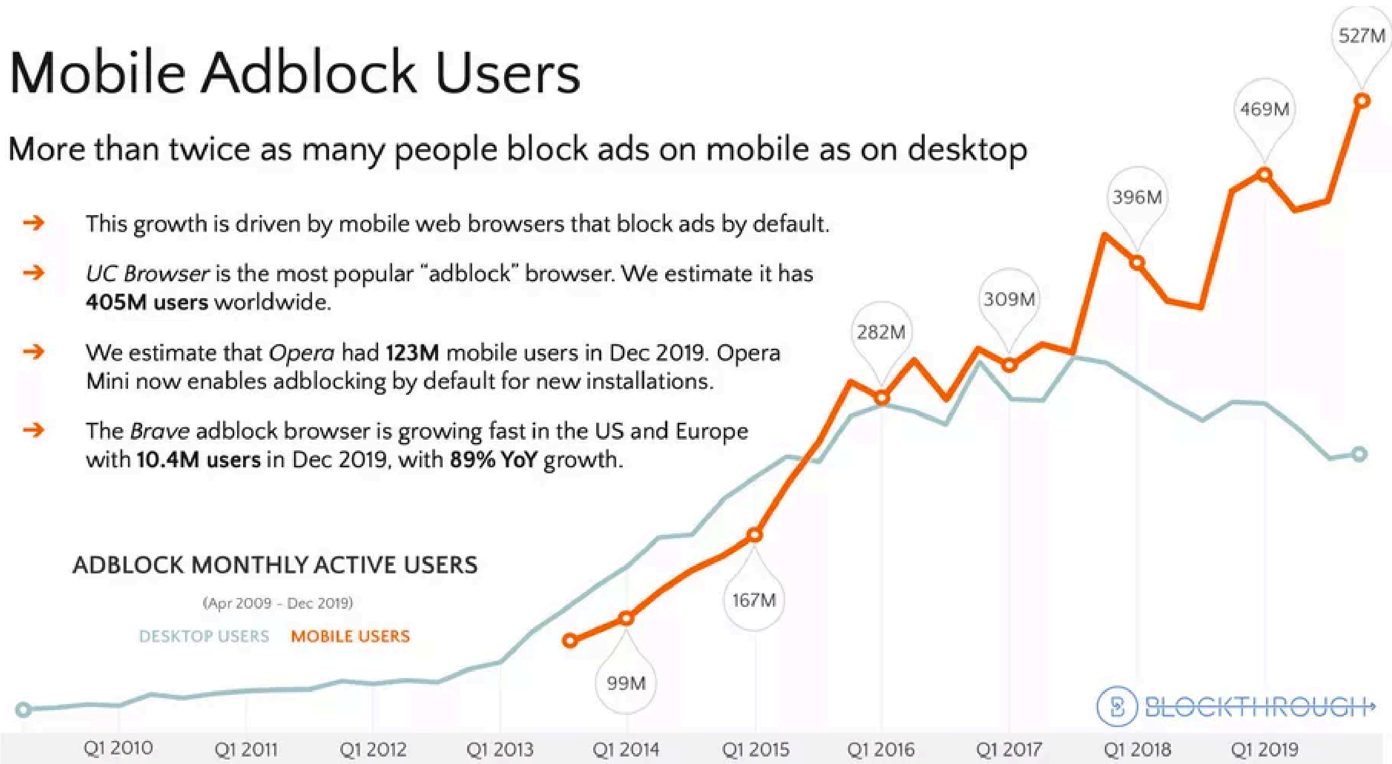
COVID-19 has once again identified the need for publishers to address this situation, by encouraging whitelisting, Adblock recovery (whitelisting + ad-reinsertion), as well as the need to serve better ads.

This is particularly important given the paradox whereby audiences were spending more time with media, yet publisher revenues (especially from advertising) appeared - in some cases - to be in freefall.

Against this backdrop, publishers can ill afford to miss out on potential income as a result of unserved ads.

"We've been engaging adblock users for almost a year now," David Rowley at Advanced Local told an industry forum[21], "and we've seen our adblock rates significantly reduced over time. I'm very grateful in the sense we did this before this pandemic and now we can monetize almost every user that comes to our sites."

It should not have taken a pandemic for other publishers to also embrace this need, but in some cases COVID-19 has acted as a catalyst for reviewing these issues.



Via Blockthrough / PageFair

Solution 6: Showing the impact of your ads

At the same time as addressing these issues, publishers arguably also need to make a better case for the impact that ads on their sites are having.

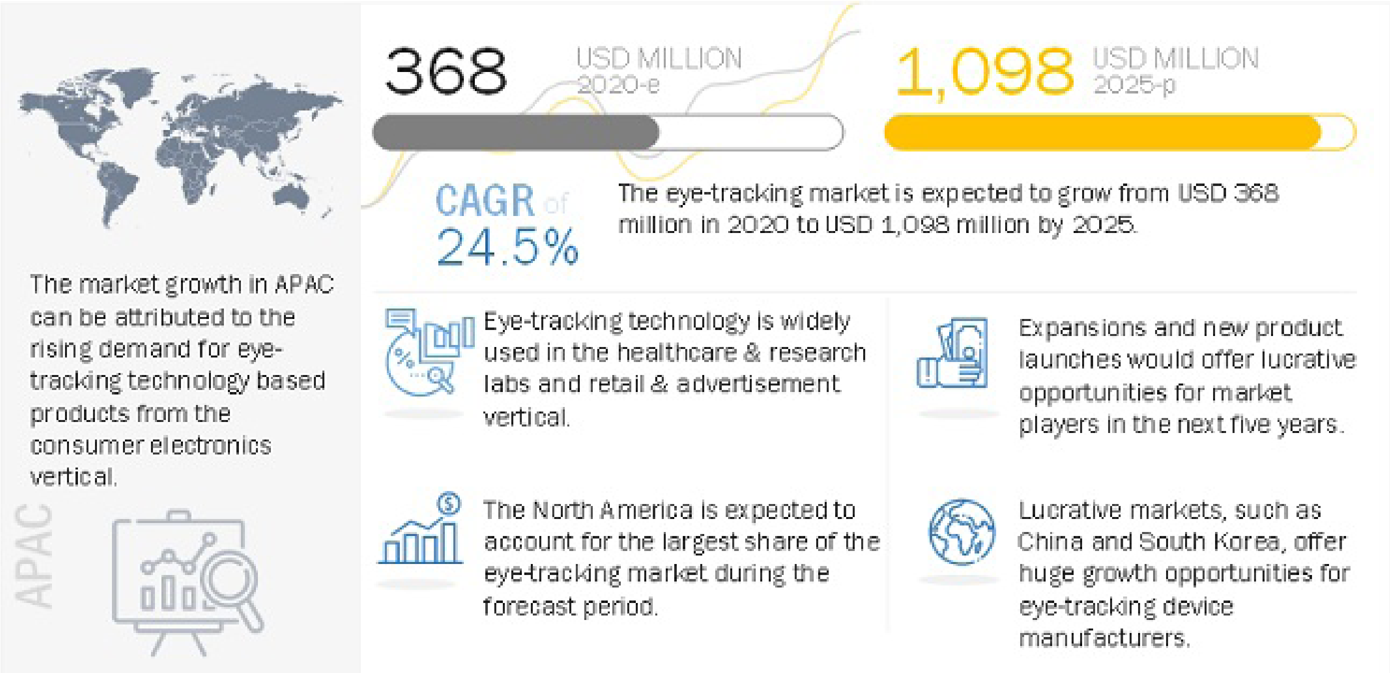
"Ads placed next to coronavirus content are getting more attention than they would normally," Mike Follett, managing director of the London-based Lumen Research, told German media giant DW[22].

Brands are shooting themselves in the foot by blacklisting around keywords associated with the coronavirus Follett said.

Eye-tracking research conducted by his company revealed that two-thirds of digital ads were being noticed, compared to just over half six months prior to the pandemic.

New research suggests[23] the global eye tracking market will grow at a CAGR of 24.5% from 2020 to 2025, to become a $1 billion industry by 2025 from $368 million in 2020, with APAC expected to be the fastest-growing region for the technology.

Opportunities in the eye tracking market



Via MarketsandMarkets

Solution 7: Next gen programmatic

Finally, another technological advancement is also worth noting. As ad tech evolves, AI and semantic understanding look set to offer potential solutions that will benefit publishers and enable advertisers to move away from crude one-size-fits-all blocking lists. In its place comes contextual targeting, whereby ad tech recognises that words can mean different things in different settings.

One example of this in action is Mantis, which IBM describes[24] as "an AI-powered screening tool that understands the context of articles and images to help publishers unlock more ad-safe inventory."

Created by Reach plc, the UK's largest commercial news publisher, the platform harnesses IBM Watson Natural Language Understanding and Watson Visual Recognition on the IBM Cloud. In testing for coronavirus and COVID-19 related stories, Mantis reduced adblocking between 70-75%, the company said in a press release[25].

Moreover, customers are seemingly more open to this technology, according to new data from DoubleVerify's 2020 Global Insights Report[26]. This suggests that better ads, more relevant to the content that they are reading, is more likely to be seen, improving both viewability and potential clickthroughs.

"The message is clear," Michael Feeley writes for The Drum[27]. "If your brand safety strategy is still based predominately on a keyword blocking strategy, it's time to talk to technology platforms about the other sophisticated options and tools they can offer."

"The COVID-19 pandemic shook the world, but it also helped bring many of the flaws in our advertising to the surface," says IBM Watson Advertising's Jeremy Hlavacek[28].

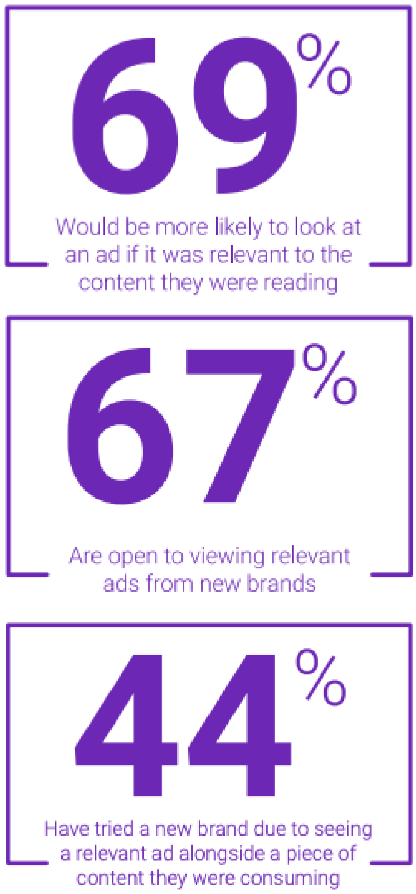
For publishers, this may have reiterated the need to deploy a wide range of strategies to improve the delivery of digital ads, as well as the creative relationships they have with advertisers.

Alongside this, the pandemic has shown how publishers can be advocates for change both in terms of reshaping the supply chain of digital ads, as well as getting marketers and agencies to think differently about their relationship with content and the adjacency of their respective brands.

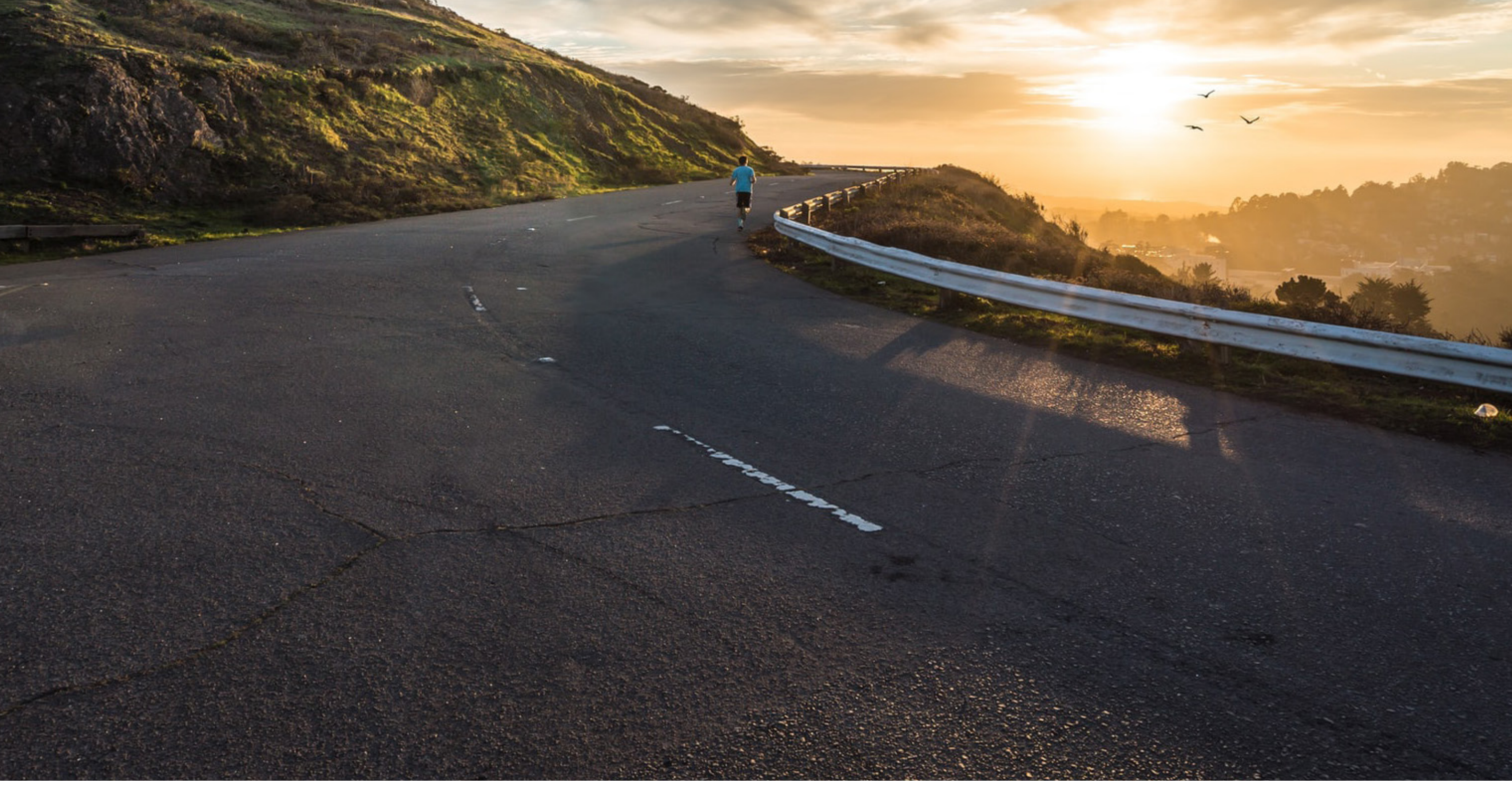
When it comes to advertising strategies and their relationship with ad tech, COVID-19 - as it has with engagement and subscription strategies - may be another instance where the coronavirus crisis acts as a catalyst for publishers to do things differently or reinforce the importance of existing strategies.

As Hlavacek advises, "It's now up to us to make sure we're flexible and ready for anything else that may come our way."

Consumers open to contextual targeting



Via DoubleVerify

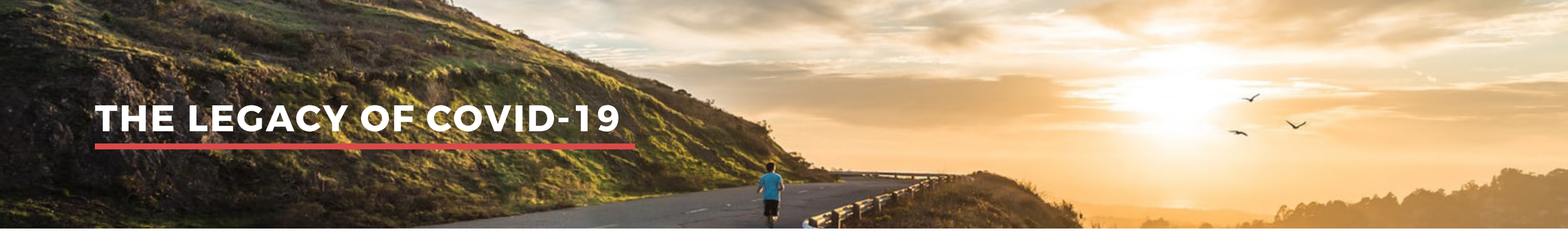


The legacy of COVID-19 for publishers

We are still in the middle of the pandemic, and while that makes it difficult to predict the future, some media trends seen in the past 6-9 months look set to continue. Elsewhere, the consequences of the coronavirus crisis will continue to reverberate and impact the sector.

Many of the foundations of these developments are not new. However, COVID has accentuated and accelerated underlying structural issues, catapulting the industry into a new and uncertain future much quicker than anticipated.

With that in mind, here are 19 COVID-19 inspired developments that publishers, researchers and policy makers need to be aware of.



Cuts and job losses

This is the most obvious impact of the crisis. As Bloomberg summarised[1]:

> "Many media companies are struggling during the pandemic with the sudden loss of revenue from advertising and other businesses, like live events. While some turned to furloughs and pay cuts, layoffs have become unavoidable as the crisis drags on."

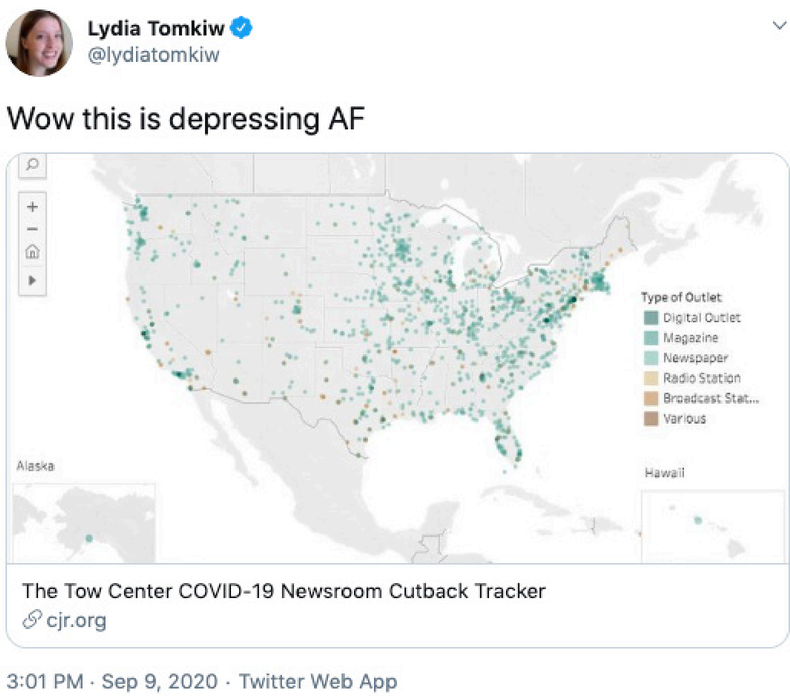
Digital doyens and legacy players alike have been impacted in this manner. Vox Media lost around 6% of staff[2], the Guardian determined that with revenues down by more than £25m it would cut about 180 employees[3], and the New York Times shed 68 jobs, largely on the advertising side[4].

These types of layoffs, furloughs and closures have been seen across all media sectors around the world.

In South Africa, for example, 17 magazine titles disappeared as a result of the closure of two publishing houses - Caxton and Associated Media Publishing (AMP) in May[5]. Two months later, Media24 - another South African company - announced the closure of five magazines and two newspapers[6].

It's a story we're seen time and time again, regardless of the country[7]. The one constant being that no type of media organisation appears to be going unscathed.

Smaller titles and outlets, as well as larger and seemingly well established players like Condé Nast and BuzzFeed in the USA[8], London's Evening Standard[9] and Reach the UK's largest newspaper publisher[10], have all been affected.

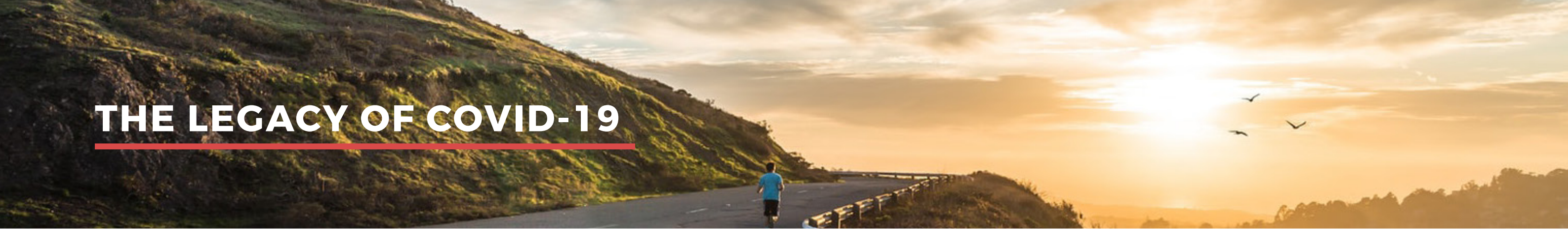


Tweet from the Financial Times' Lydia Tomkiw, reacting to the Tow Center COV-ID-19 Newsroom Cutback Tracker

Expansion plans are (mostly) curtailed

Although we have seen examples of publishers expanding during the pandemic, these moves have gone against the grain.

Typically, publishers and media companies have curtailed their plans to grow their businesses by moving into new verticals and international markets[11], areas often previously touted as essential for growth.



Telegraph Media Group in the U.K. revealed plans[12] in the summer to "significantly downsize" its branded content arm Spark, while Quartz laid off staff and closed physical offices in London, San Francisco, Hong Kong and Washington[13].

Bucking this trend, however, there have been some instances of companies who have expanded during the pandemic, including Vice[14] and CBS News, although Vice also laid off roughly 155 employees - prior to this - in May[15].

"It's always chicken and the egg with international," Christy Tanner, Executive Vice President & General Manager of CBS News Digital, told Axios, noting the need to build audience volume to create a robust advertising business.

Distributed newsrooms are here to stay

Quartz's decision to close physical offices, while continuing "to employ people in all of those cities and beyond,"[16] is part of an on-going trend to reduce physical overheads and unlock the cash value of these assets[17].

In August, Tribune Publishing in the States disclosed that it would be permanently closing the physical offices of five newspapers (the Daily News in New York, the Capital Gazette and the Carroll County Times in Maryland, the Allentown Morning Call in Pennsylvania and the Orlando Sentinel in Florida), although the titles continue to operate.

The move led to ruminations[18] on what would be lost, including a physical presence in their communities, newsroom mentoring and face-to-face engagement with colleagues.

At the same time, however, the need to cut costs, coupled with the desire of many employees to continue to be able to work from home[19] - or enjoy more flexibility in the location of their work - means that this trendline will only become more pronounced, driven by a mixture of financial and personnel considerations.

Sentinel Guild 🍊
@OS_Guild

This building has been @orlandosentinel's home since 1951 and now we're leaving, thanks to @tribpub — which has $80.5 million in cash btw. We're still a newsroom, even if we don't have a home, but this is why we need local owners who care about journalism

Orlando Sentinel to leave downtown office building after 69 years
Publisher Nancy Meyer said, "Amid a pandemic that prevents us from safely returning to the office for an undetermined period of time, the ...
orlandosentinel.com

7:15 AM · Aug 13, 2020

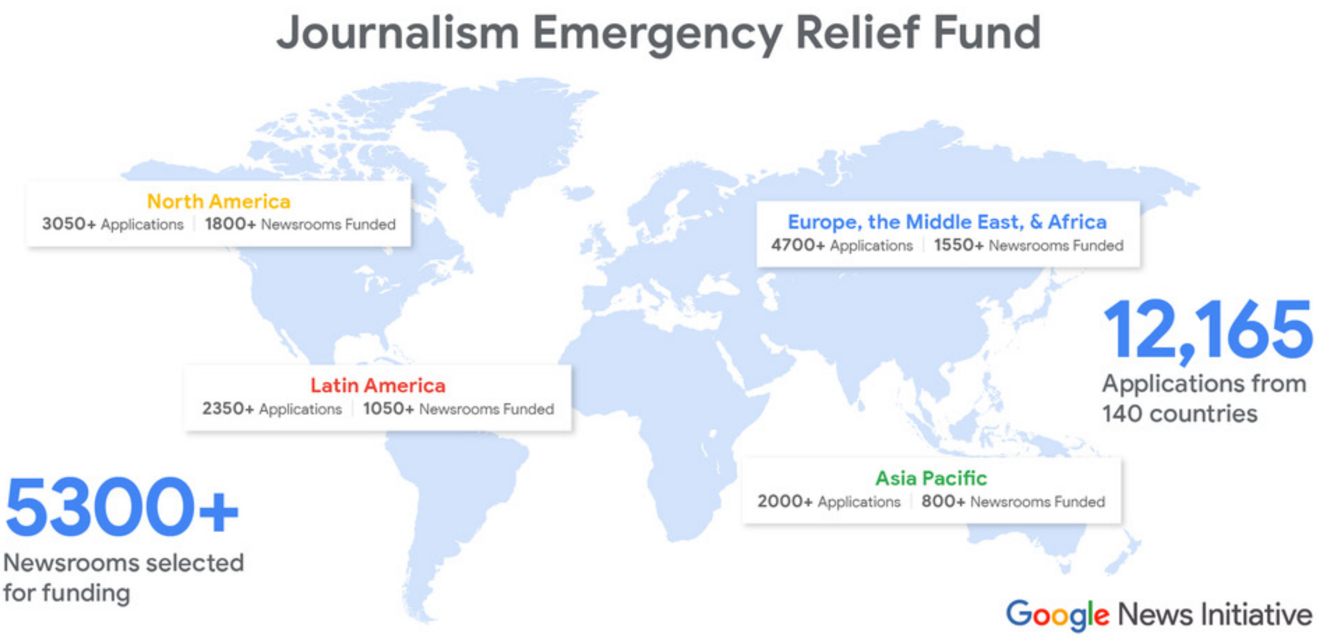
Pressure on platforms continues to grow

The advertising downturn has had a catastrophic effect on many publishers. For the big platforms, however, it's a different story.

"It's true the duopoly has been impacted," notes Arnaud Créput the CEO of Smart AdServer[20], but "even now, they remain enormously profitable." Créput highlights how ad revenues were down 8% year-on-year at Google, but up 10% at Facebook and 40% at Amazon.

"This demonstrates their unshakeable position and the way in which they are able to take advantage of situations where other industry players can't."

As a result, we can expect to see renewed demands for platforms to help the sector - as we're seeing in Australia[21] - as well as more antitrust investigations[22] investigating whether their dominant positions disadvantage others. Whether the emergency funds[23] they have established for the sector during COVID[24], and other long-running support efforts, help to offset some of these clarion calls, remains to be seen.



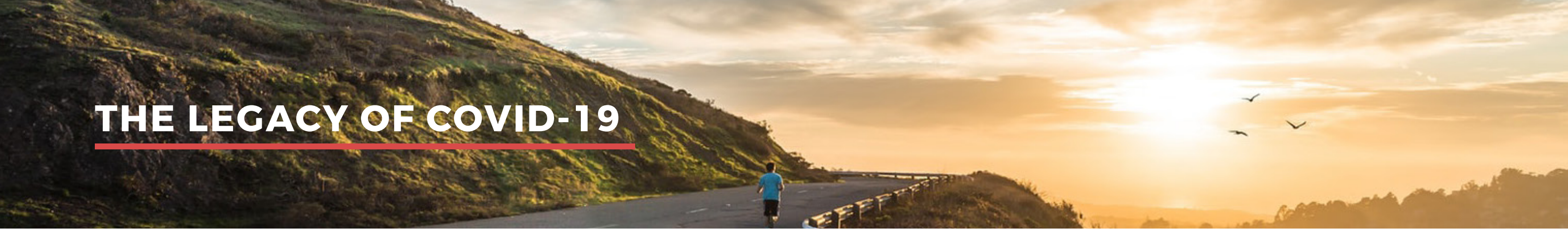
Via the Google News Initiative

Reduced dependence on advertising

Prior to the pandemic, many publishers were already diversifying their revenue streams. COVID-19, and the advertising downturn associated with it[25], has reinforced the need to embrace this strategy.

Particular efforts have been made by publishers to grow their subscriber base, pivot to digital events[26] and expand eCommerce efforts[27]. Although some of these non-subscription elements are quite embryonic, it's likely that all three of these trends will continue.

Reader revenue has been a growing focus for publishers for some time[28], and outlets are deploying a range of strategies to try to unlock its potential.



At The Dallas Morning News, one approach they've recently been testing uses reporter-specific promo codes to encourage followers/fans to subscribe[29].

Events are not only likely to continue to have a strong digital presence due to social distancing protocols, but also because of the larger audiences they can potentially unlock.

That won't work for everyone, but it's a good strategy for larger marquee brands, like The Atlantic. They hope to attract a million "attendees" this year[30], compared to the 2,000 who normally attend their in-person festival.

Tweet from Mallorie Sullivan, Audience Engagement Producer at The Dallas Morning News

Flexibility with ad products

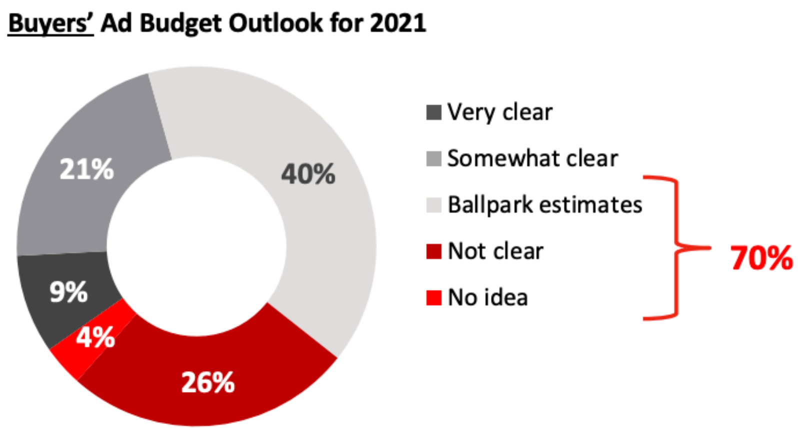
At the same time as these moves, Digiday's Max Willens has also identified that publishers are whipping up quicker, cheaper ad products for advertisers[31].

In one example, Willens shared how "instead of accepting that they couldn't execute elaborate branded content productions, The Players Tribune and Minute Media pivoted to content shot by athletes on their cell phones."

Separately, his colleague, Lucinda Southern discussed[32] how the Wall Street Journal had halved turnaround time for clients working with their content studio, The Trust. Campaigns are now typically going live within four weeks, instead of the pre-pandemic average of eight.

This twin track approach - blending diversification with a more fleet footed approach to traditional advertising - makes sense given the likelihood of continued uncertainty around ad budgets next year[33].

Budget clarity remains elusive for 2021, and at least 70% of buyers still have 2021 ad dollars in flux



Via IAB 2020/21 COVID Impact on Advertising, Survey #6 Results

Partnerships and collaboration

The impetus for collaboration is greater than ever when resources are more scarce. As a result, during COVID, where consumption habits, revenues and personnel numbers have all been affected, collaboration has taken multiple forms.

Stefanie Murray, director of the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University has identified editorial collaborations[34], including content-sharing and promotion by news organisations across the state of Oregon, and a digital guide to reframe reporting on coronavirus[35], produced by Resolve Philly in consultation with their partners.

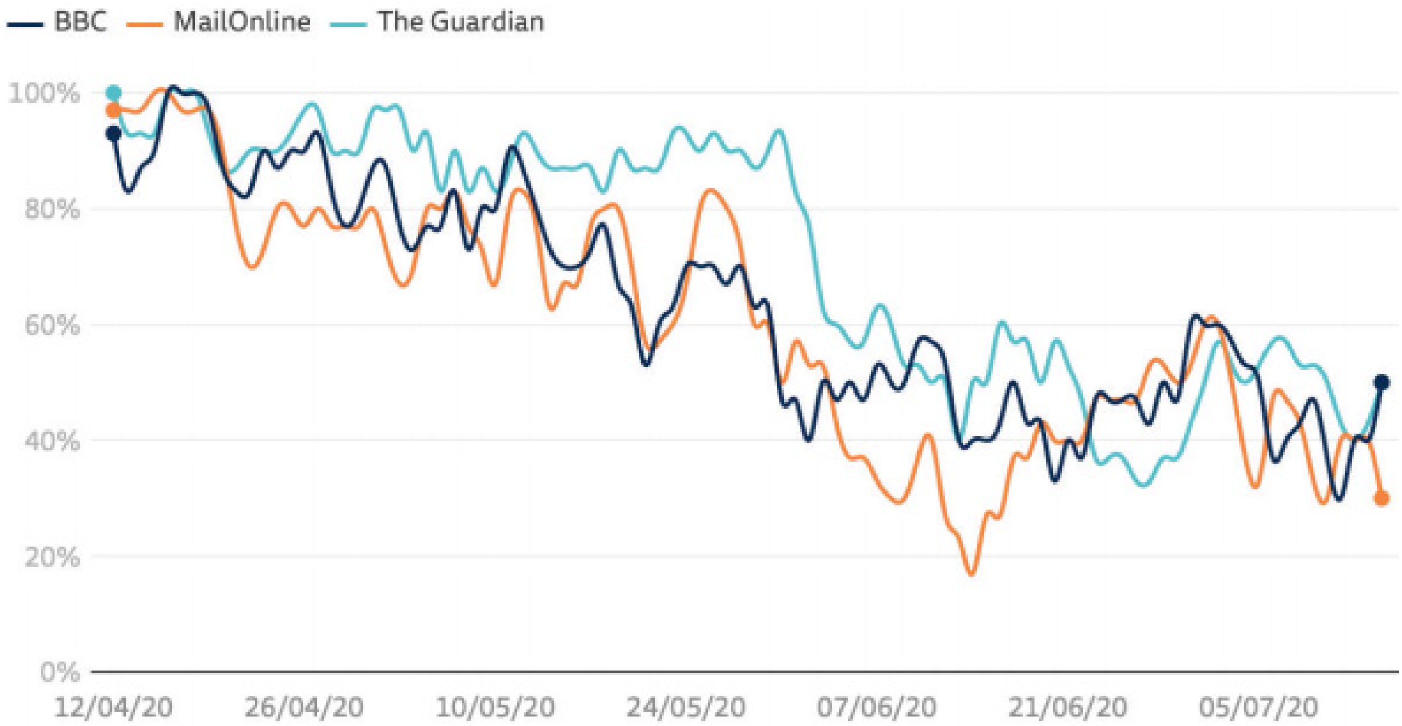
Commercial partnerships are also becoming increasingly important[36]. In September, The Washington Post and Financial Times announced[37] a special offer giving new readers of either publication 90 days access to the other the outlet as part of their subscription package.

The Post also launched[38] a new section in September, concentrating "on stories of success and struggle as individuals and businesses seek to repair the damage caused by illness and an economic shutdown." The Road to Recovery, is supported by AT&T and JPMorgan Chase, and available via their native apps, Apple News and as a Flipboard magazine.

Revisiting your content mix

The Posts' new COVID section offers an opportunity for fresh narratives around the pandemic. This matters given the continued presence of the coronavirus, coupled with the rapid drop-off of an initial COVID news bump, and the levels of COVID news avoidance which can be seen in many markets[39].

Proportion of top ten most-read stories that were about COVID-19 (3-day rolling average)



Via Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

Against this backdrop, other approaches - such as Solutions Journalism - potentially become more valuable to audiences. And publishers. As Liza Gross, Vice President of Practice Change at the Solutions Journalism Network, explains[40]:

> "Traditionally, newsrooms have excelled at reacting quickly when there is an emergency or disaster to cover. They are masters of the 100-meter dash.
>
> But a sustained, ongoing response to a massive crisis with uncertain outcomes and undefined timelines requires the mindset and capabilities of a marathoner."

One initiative putting this into practice is a solutions journalism project, Reasons To Be Cheerful, founded by the musician David Byrne (formerly of the Talking Heads). In September, they launched a new six-week-long series called "We Are Not Divided," designed to share "projects and initiatives that bridge divides and facilitate discussion and understanding — at a time when pretty much all we hear is how divided we are."[41]

Refreshing a potentially redundant editorial proposition

"We're Going to Run Out of TV," The Ringer warned in July[42], noting the impact of production shutdowns as a result of the pandemic. For some publishers an equivalent challenge involves producing content in spaces, such as sports, which have been adversely affected by the coronavirus[43].

The Athletic announced it had laid off 8% of its staff and mandated across-the-company pay cuts, in early June[44]. However, by September the sports website announced it had hit 1 million paying subscribers.

"It certainly helps that sports are back," said CNBC also noting[45] The Athletic's subscription-only business model, development plans and innovations such as bundling subscriptions with Bloomberg's business website[46] and giving away a free 1-year subscription to T-Mobile and Sprint customers[47].

Via T-Mobile promoting free subscriptions to MLB.TV and The Athletic

Elsewhere, outlets like ESPN and Deadspin have moved away from sports only coverage, to look at how their industry also traverses other issues.

"The media has long struggled with how to cover the intersection of sports and politics," notes CNN's Kerry Flynn[48]. "But amid a pandemic that forced sports to go dark and a national reckoning over race, sports journalists are learning that the firewall between sports and politics has vanished, if it ever existed."

Supporting audience aspirations for a post-pandemic future

Travel publications too have had to adjust, focusing instead more on inspiration for future travel, domestic road trips, the view from x (often produced by writers on lockdown in that location[49]) as well as travel news and armchair travel[50].

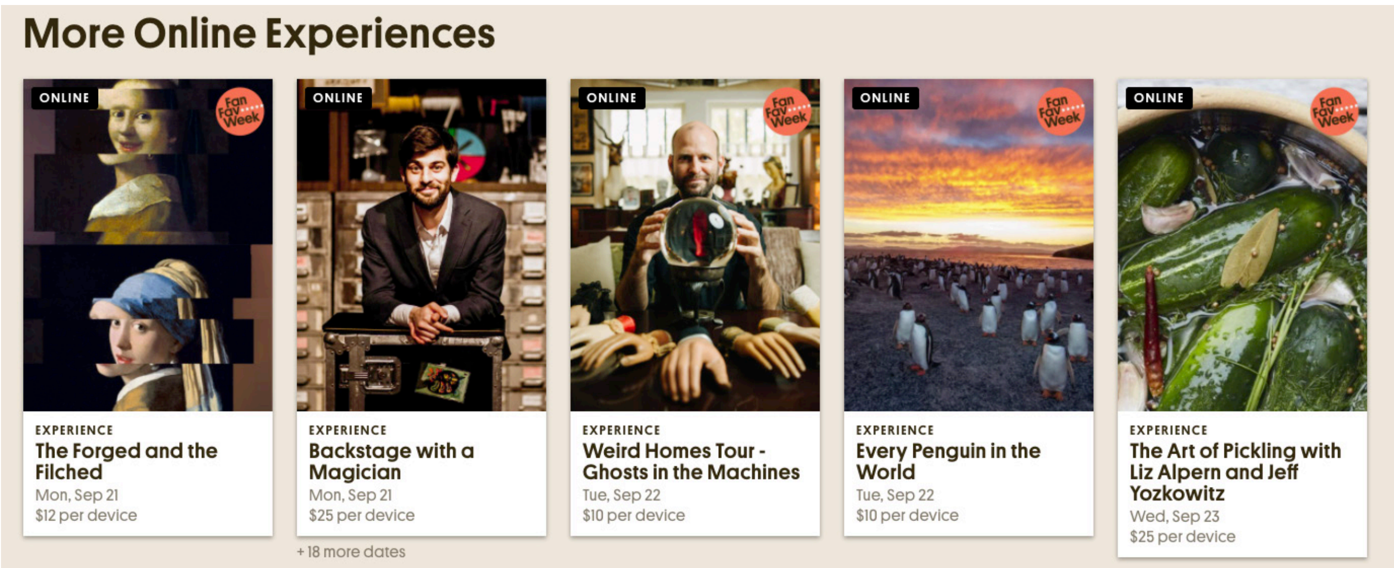
The travel sector saw a sharp advertising downturn at the start of the crisis, plunging by 90% in the USA alone during March[51].

In response, the loss in travel related revenue was identified as a leading reason for lay-offs at BuzzFeed, and the New York Times temporarily paused[52] its Sunday sports and travel sections. The Grey Lady replaced these print sections with "At Home," a vertical described as "a new print section for a new way of life."[53]

Travel specific publishers, like Nat Geo Travel, also pivoted[54]. In this instance moving "from reporting on the journeys of travelers to reporting on the journeys of places," according to travel editor George Stone.

Other publishers have followed suit.

Condé Nast Traveler has offered a focus on the human side[55] of the travel industry, with angles such as a cruise ship entertainer's perspective from quarantine and the impact on poaching in Tanzania. And Atlas Obscura has created live, hosted, experiences on Zoom - with tickets sold "per device" - to offset revenues lost from some of their face-to-face activities.



Virtual experiences offered by Atlas Obscura

In AdWeek, Andréa Mallard, chief marketing officer at Pinterest, shared[56] how users initially used the site for "immediate help." "Searches like 'pantry recipes' and 'how to entertain bored kids' spiked," she wrote. "But then, surprisingly quickly, people are getting back to future optimism. They've returned to searches about travel, event planning, summer, weddings and more."

It's a mood that Travel + Leisure magazine has tried to tap into. "Travel is never going to stop, and the magazine is all about dreaming and inspiration," says Aindrila Mitra, Editor-in-Chief, Travel + Leisure India and South Asia. "There is no quarantine on dreaming."

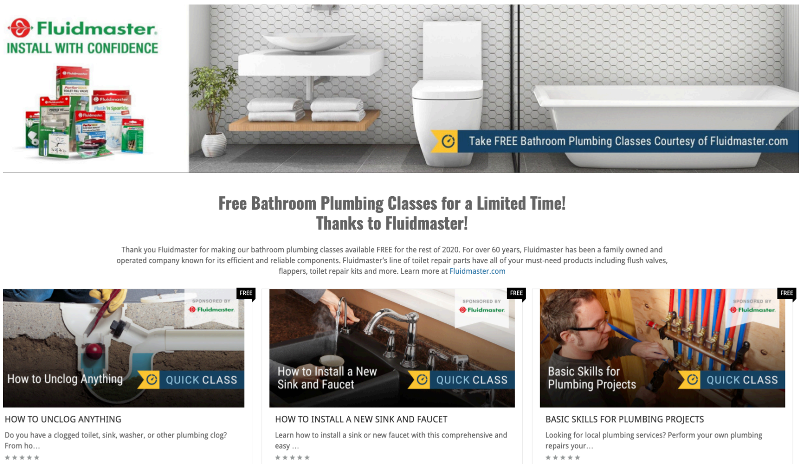
Making dough by tapping into lockdown lifestyles

Other publishers have doubled-down on efforts designed to cater for quarantine-era media habits and lifestyles.

Some publishers, like Trusted Media Brands, already have established properties which were well placed to take advantage of this. Taste of Home and Family Handyman, for example, saw record traffic in April 2020, as audiences embraced more home cooking and baking, as well as DIY and home improvements.

Taste of Home enjoyed a 22% increase in uniques from the previous month, coupled with an average view per visitor of 7.2 pages, which they reported "is two times more than the average site among its competitors."[57]

Family Handyman witnessed a 38% month-on-month bump, and revenues from online courses offered by their Family Handyman DIY University were up 53%. Meanwhile, a sponsorship deal with Fluidmaster enabled the site to make its bathroom plumbing free for the remainder of the year.



The Family Handyman DIY University website

Leaning into changing media habits

Alongside this, outlets are also investing in new verticals, covering areas - such as gaming[58] and esports[59] - which have grown during the pandemic. As CNN explained[60]:

> "The Washington Post, Bloomberg, and Wired have each announced investments in gaming coverage in recent months. These publications and others are looking to capitalize on this booming industry with the same rigor they've shown in reporting on Hollywood and Silicon Valley.

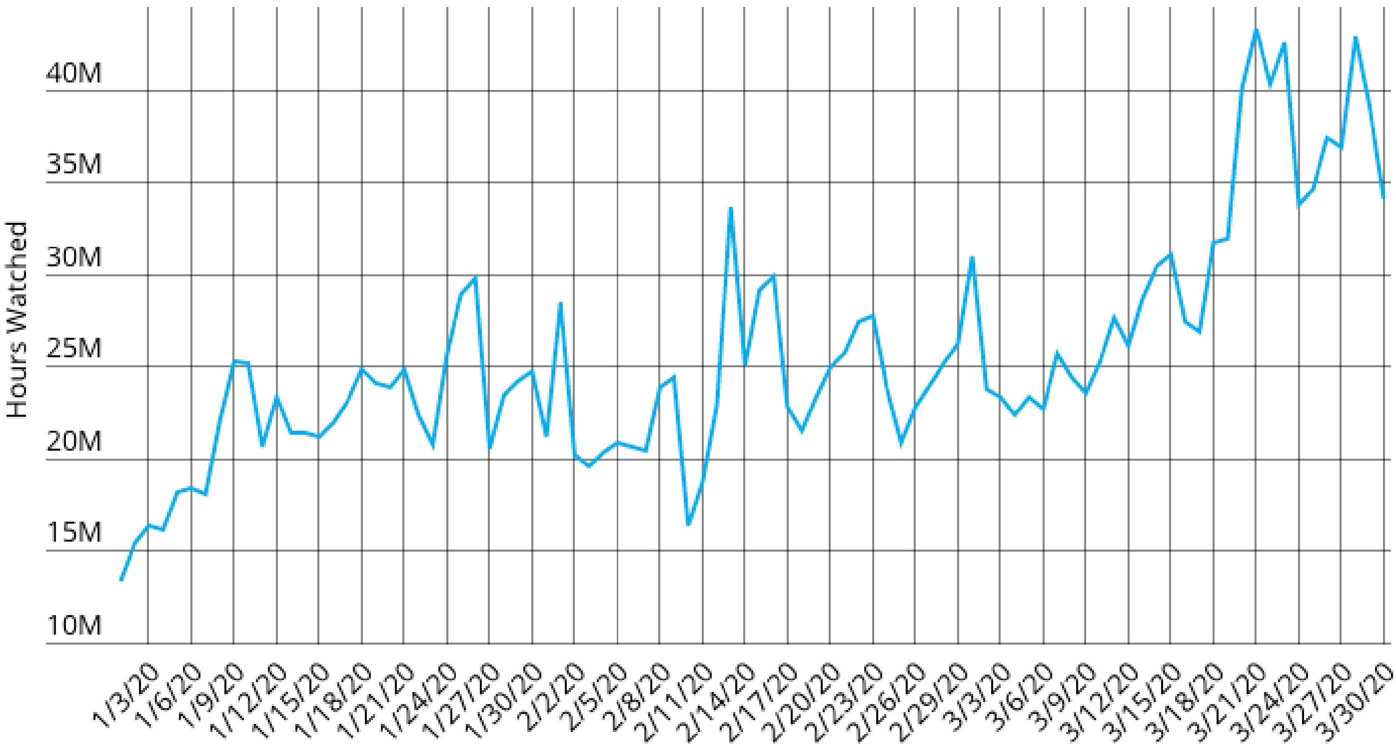
The plan is to investigate the business and culture of the gaming industry with stories that appeal to gamers and non-gamers alike."

These were already substantial businesses, but the pandemic has perhaps helped more publishers recognise the need to cover these beats in more depth.

Moreover, COVID has also sped up participation in these mediums. "What we're seeing is an acceleration of pre-existing trends," Mat Piscatella, a gaming analyst at NPD Group, told Axios[61]. "It's like we jumped ahead two years."

According to Nielsen Games Video Game Tracking (VGT), the number of gamers has increased[62] since March 23, 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nielsen found that 82% of global consumers have played video games and watched video game content since the start of the pandemic.

Daily Twitch viewership in the US more than doubled in Q1 2020



Viewership increase in hours watched measured across top 50 games
Via The Nielsen Company (US) LLC

Embracing eCommerce

Online retail is another area which has benefitted from growing its user base during the pandemic, especially among older consumers.

A number of publishers were already embracing the potential for eCommerce[63]. During COVID, however, more media players have come on board.

The top 50 U.K. publishers generate £86 ($113.42) average revenue per article, up by more than 100% in the past five months, Dunia Silan, vp revenue for Europe, the Middle East and Africa at Skimlinks, said at the end of August[64].

One of these publishers, The Sun, a British tabloid, now employs five people dedicated to producing Sun Selects[65], a collection of buying guides and product recommendations, as well as 10-15 freelancers.

On the other side of the pond, GQ U.S. launched its first ever eCommerce shop in August[66]. It's owners, Condé Nast, described the initiative as "the next logical step in the brand's eCommerce ecosystem."

The move builds on the success of GQ Recommends, which launched in January 2018[67]. These editor-picked selections generate affiliate sales, and revenues from this are up over 100% YTD compared to 2019, the company reports[68]. Revenues from the subscription based GQ Best Stuff Box are also up over 150%.

The GQ Shop's quarterly GQ Best Stuff Box, on sale for $50

Innovation and experimentation

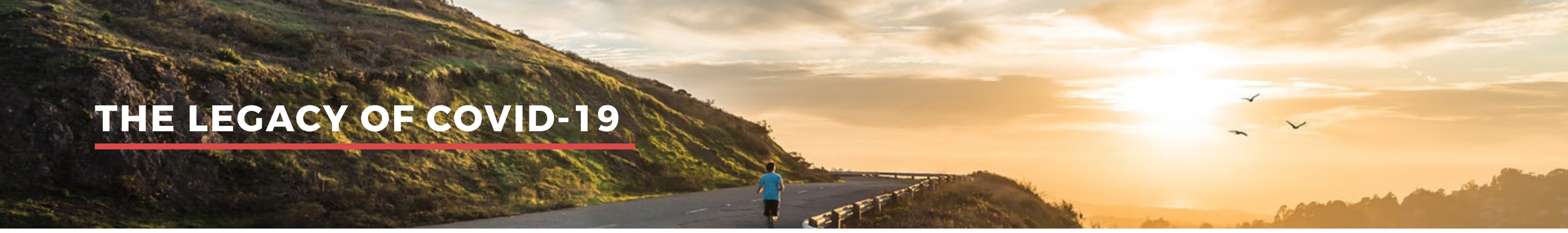
If necessity is the mother of invention, then one striking characteristic of the pandemic has been the continued emergence of new products and services. We have already seen some examples of this, but here are few other ideas which caught my eye.

Newsletters had a creative shot in the arm. Running short courses - and challenges - via newsletters having emerged as a pandemic format[69] parlayed by the Wall Street Journal, CNN and Wirecutter.

"As publishers look for pockets of audience engagement wherever they can find them, limited-run educational newsletters are a gambit gaining some traction," Digiday's Kayleigh Barber notes[70].

Another newsletter product also continues to go from strength to strength.

Substack continues to have its moment in the sun, with the newsletter provider now allowing you to find new publications from people you follow on Twitter.



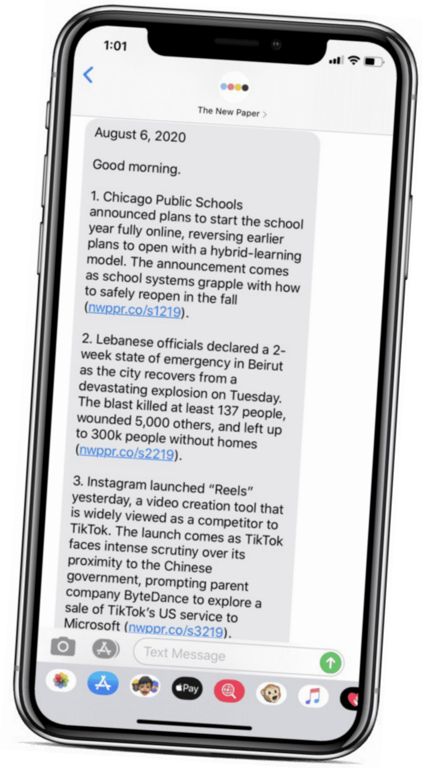
Another seemingly old technology is also being reingorated: text messaging.

As What's New In Publishing has previously noted[71], publishers such as BuzzFeed News and the Arizona Republic both launched COVID-related SMS services during the pandemic[72]. Into this mix comes The New Paper, an Indiana-based publication whose entire business model is predicated on curating and summarising the day's top stories into a daily text message.

Audio also continues to expand and be a source of investment for many publishers.

The Correspondent launched an audio only app[73] (one in English and the other in Dutch) as part of a move designed to support members directly, and avoid them having to use third party apps like Spotify.

Interestingly, on the subcontinent, Audible Suno, Amazon's audio streaming service in India, attributes a lot of their growth to the lockdown. Audible India Country Head Shailesh Sawlani argues[74] that "screen fatigue has led a lot of people to proactively explore audio content."



A sample SMS bulletin from The New Paper

News deserts and 'Pink Slime'

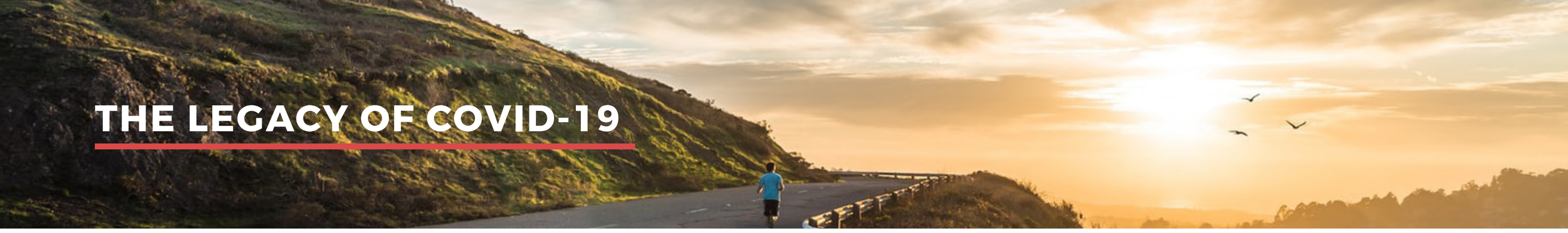
On the flip side, the crisis has also seen the emergence of some less welcome innovations.

Among them is the emergence of 'Pink Slime' local news outlets, highly partisan sites, which distribute algorithmically generated articles and conversative talking points on topics such as voter fraud.

An investigation by the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia Journalism School in 2019[75] unearthed at least 450 of these sites, forms of political advertising that Tow said "masquerade as newspapers," and which may "manipulate public opinion by exploiting faith in local media," which tends to be more trusted than national media.

Tow's Priyanjana Bengani shared how "a single algorithmically generated story with different stock photography that appeared across over 850 domains."

These types of outlets often flourish in "news deserts," areas devoid of local media. Unfortunately, for consumers, the impact of COVID-19 on local newsrooms has not been good[76]. Local journalism matters more than ever during a public health crisis, but the sector was quickly among those most adversely affected by the advertising downturn[77].



The Los Angeles Times was just one of a number of publications who recognised this risk at the outset of the crisis. "It's bad and it's going to get worse," they quoted industry analyst Ken Doctor as saying[78], with Doctor predicting COVID would be "the 2009 recession on steroids."

By August, new research from Tow[79] showed the size of this "pink slime" network had "increased almost threefold over the course of 2020, to over 1,200 sites." As job losses and shuttered titles continue, the risk of more "pink slime" sites[80] (and the need for reputable publishers to offset this) grows.

Tackling an explosion of disinformation

"In an increasingly polarized and impoverished media landscape, the accusation of "fake news" is often flung across the political aisle, but the phenomenon of fake news websites raises questions about the future of journalism and democracy to a new level of urgency," notes Andrea DenHoed, Managing Editor for the website NonDoc[81].

At the same time, globally, there has been mounting concern about the rise of digital disinformation. As with the emergence of "pink slime" sites, this isn't a new phenomenon, but it's taken on a fresh complexion during the pandemic. These efforts include false claims and information (e.g. the installation of 5G networks contributing to the coronavirus' spread[82]), snake oil cures (ranging from eating garlic to unproven drugs) as well as other rumours[83].

"We're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic," said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), in mid-February, suggesting fake news "spreads faster and more easily than this virus."

In response, many public health agencies, publishers and platforms have put steps in place[84] to counter incorrect - and potentially dangerous - misinformation.

Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres

"Much like the pandemic, we need to understand the infodemic if we are going to address it. We are still a long way from a solution for either," observes[85] Alistair Reid at First Draft.

Building trust and long-term relationships

For publishers, the need to build trust with audiences and ensure the delivery of accurate factually correct information should be paramount. Arguably, it always has been.

But in a public health crisis, for many publishers, that matters more than ever, and it's an editorial and business imperative that isn't likely to go away any time soon.

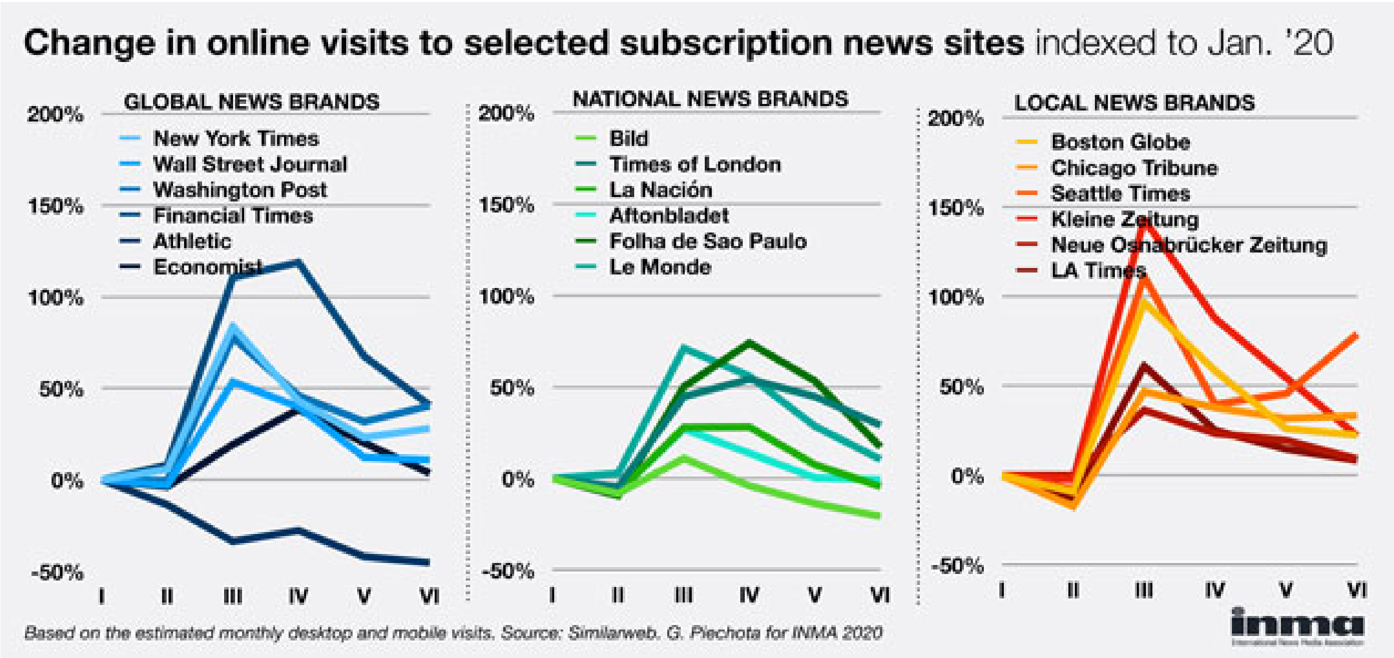
"COVID has taught us that the hunger and need around reliable relevant information has never been bigger," Marc Walder, CEO of the Swiss media group Ringier, says[86].

> "If the internet is a very loud place with a lot of content for people to consume – like rain pouring down on you – those media brands who clarify, explain, who are relevant and credible, they will win the race in the end. It's about helping people find their way in a life that's become complicated."

To do this, publishers have responded by launching new COVID-related products[87], debunking disinformation[88] and finding fresh ways to explain developments, including to younger audiences[89].

Conversely, as COVID-fatigue has begun to set in, outlets are also exploring ways to introduce new and existing consumers to non-coronavirus content, harness their archive and deepen relationships with audiences[90].

COVID bump and beyond: Traffic to selected news sites



Record traffic and subscription numbers at many publishers shows that if you can build trust, and meet readers' needs, you can grow your audience and revenue streams even during a pandemic[91]. Although, whether that's enough to offset other potentially declining income sources is a moot point, a publisher's paradox which COVID has so clearly highlighted.

Addressing the risk of subscription fatigue

"The best organisations know what their most loyal members want, but they also know what's coming around the corner," argues strategy consultant Robbie Kellman Baxter[92].

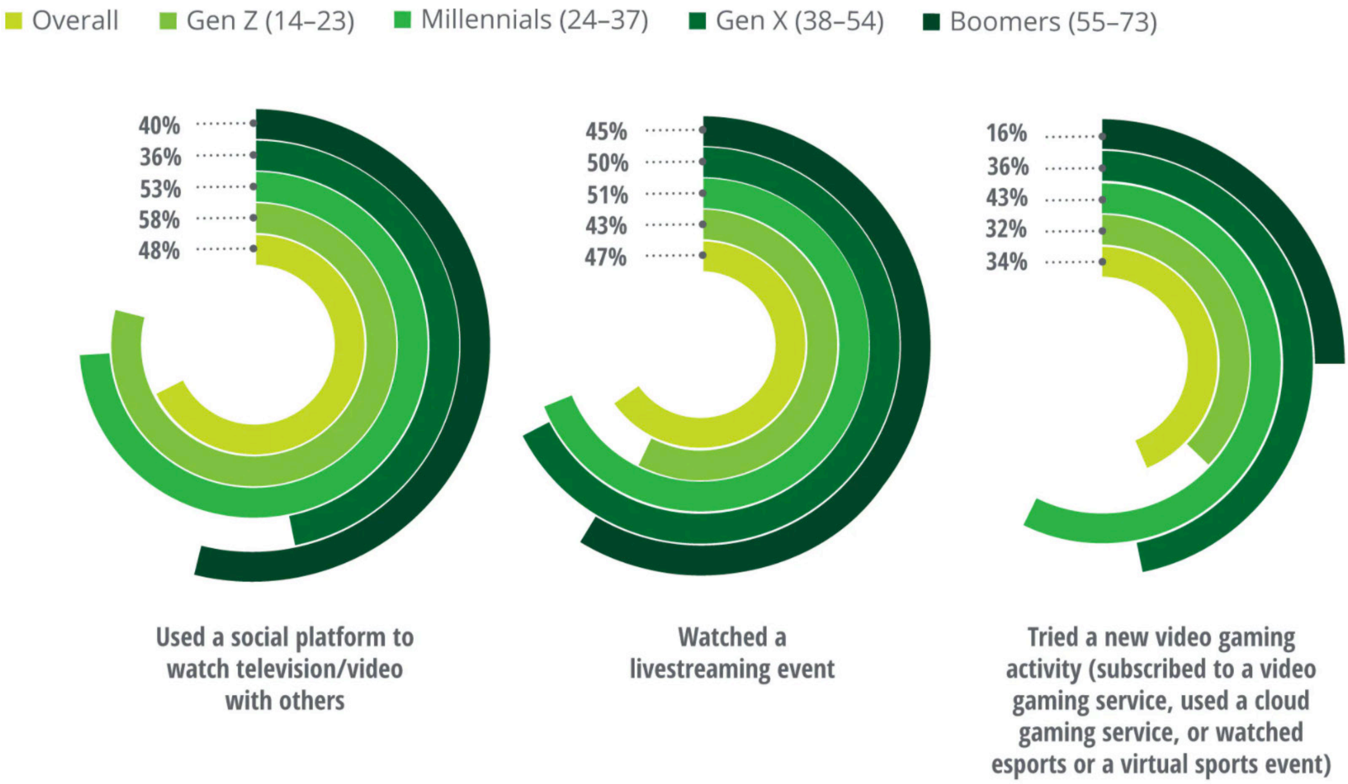
"Don't fall too much in love with the way you've done things in the past," she adds[93]. "Remain focused on the mission: it's not about any one thing, but about helping customers solve a problem and delivering on the promise you've made to them."

Kellman Baxter's words seem particularly apposite when exploring whether existing pandemic-level media behaviours will continue. Or not.

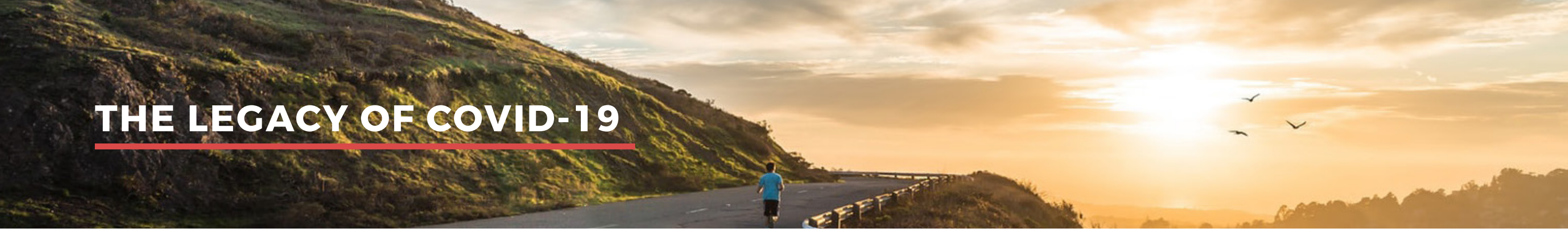
Evidence in the U.S. shows that during lockdown consumers are not only consuming more media, but also a wider range of media.

"Customer acquisition has accelerated, especially in paid streaming video, music, and gaming subscriptions," Deloitte found[94]. "People have more time on their hands to watch, listen, and play games, and they are adding new services to get new content."

Percentage of US consumers who have tried a new digital activity during the pandemic



Via Deloitte's Digital Media Trends Survey



Yet, at the same time, their research has also identified that it is hard to keep customers.

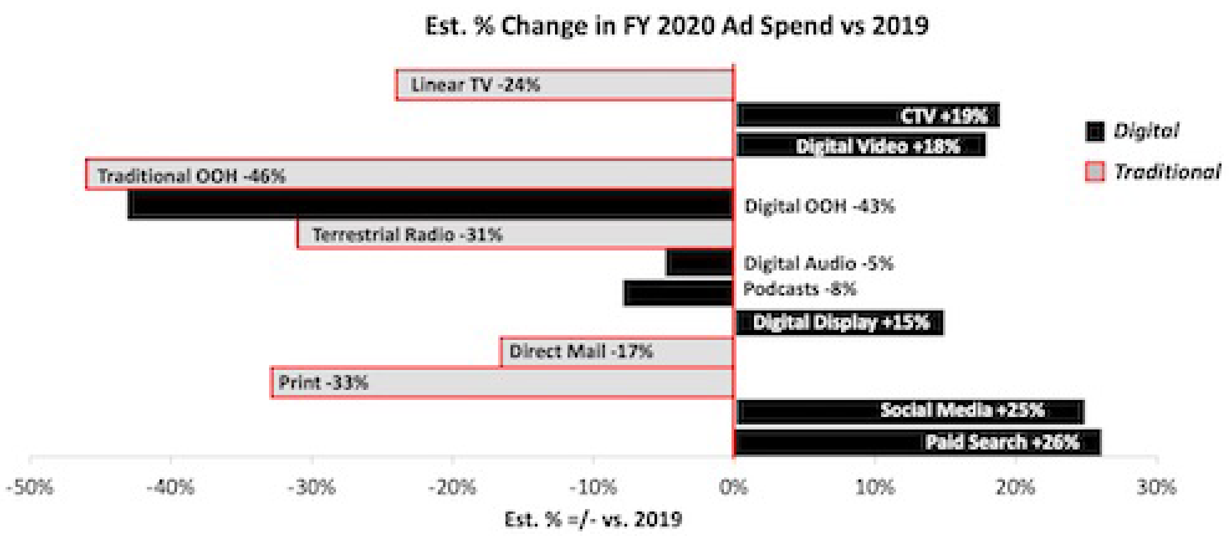
“Introductory offers of free or reduced rates, along with compelling original content, are attracting subscribers. But they’re likely to cancel a service if the content dries up and they can’t justify the full price,” they add.

Although these conclusions are led by streaming behaviours, they offer a cautionary tale for more traditional publishers too, emphasising the need to focus on deploying different tools and tactics[95] to build and preserve loyalty[96].

“Many consumers have signed up for more services than they can handle or afford,” Deloitte’s data suggests, “For providers, customer churn may become a growing problem.”

Planning for potential behavioural resets

For many media audiences, working from home and COVID-19 lockdowns, has created more opportunities to consume content. And as we have seen, data from Deloitte’s 2020 Digital Media Trends Survey found that consumption habits have broadened too, perhaps as a result of having more time, a desire to try something new and compelling new offers.



Via IAB

"It's unclear to what extent these new behaviors will continue once lockdowns have been lifted and people are able to socialize in person again," notes Simon Kemp[97], CEO of Kepios and chief analyst at DataReportal.

"But with many people now using these [different digital] platforms multiple times each day, it's likely that significant numbers of people have already overcome key barriers to trial and adoption," Kemp predicts.

"People are going to spend a lot of time online for the foreseeable future," suggested[98] Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, during the early days of the pandemic. "And so far, we have few examples of people returning to offline media once they have embraced online ones."

In the short-term, we are already seeing the impact of this trend in terms of media buys.

Traditional media advertising in the USA will decline around 30% this year compared to 2019, according to data from IAB. Within this, content reaching people in public places (out-of-home) takes a notable lockdown hit, but so too does other mediums: print (-33%), radio (-31%), TV (-24%) and direct mail (-17%).

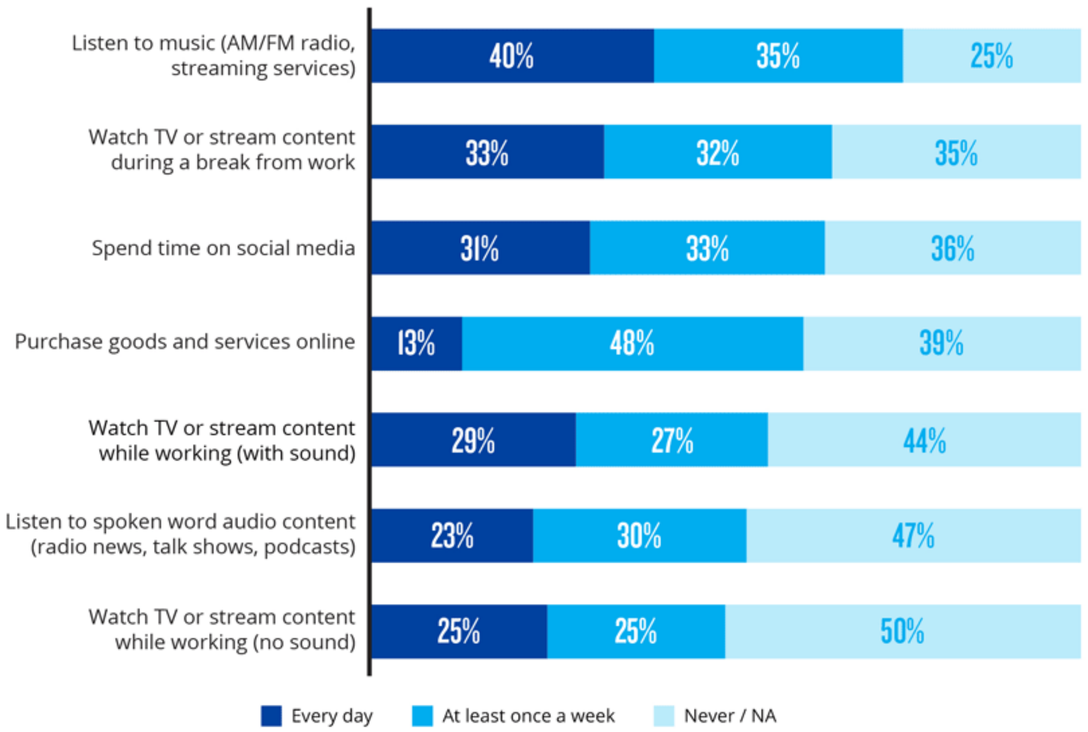
Whether these advertising trends continue post-pandemic, remains to be seen. But their short-term impact will clearly be felt by those sectors experiencing this level of downturn.

New consumer and advertising habits may prove to be sticky and resilient, as both parties preserve some of their new pandemic preferences. And even if they're not, it's unlikely that we'll see either pendulums swing back to their pre-COVID starting points.

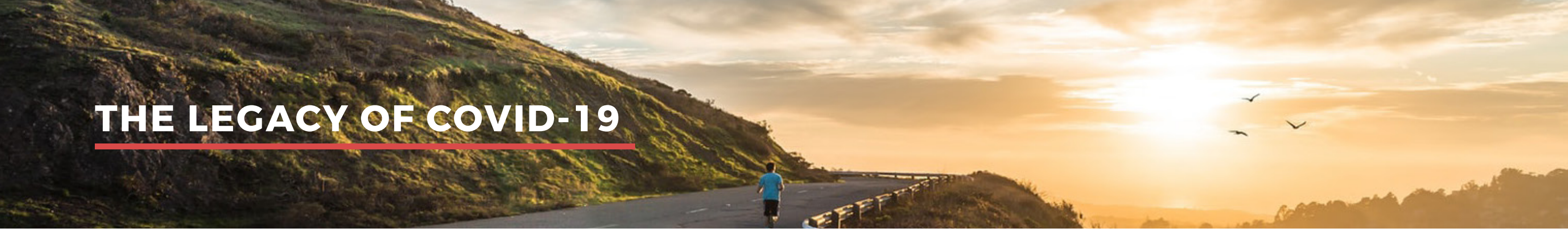
As the market research company Nielsen notes, in their analysis of American media habits:

> "The longer Americans work from home—regardless of whether by choice or not—the greater the likelihood that their recently developed media habits will stick around, ultimately changing the playing field for how publishers and advertisers are able to engage with audiences."

What people are doing during work hours



Via August 2020 Nielsen Total Audience Report



Moreover, flexible work schedules and the lack of commute has already resulted in “”less structured media consumption and an interweaving of work and play.”

“Whether it's streaming video content, listening to podcasts or browsing social media, a majority of consumers have reported partaking in these behaviors during work hours,” Nielsen reports[99]. “That means more windows of opportunity for content creators and advertisers alike to reach audiences outside of the traditional primetime, as well as potential new, creative ways to engage with consumers.”

Final thoughts

The outbreak of the pandemic sent large ripples through the industry at the start of the year. And although these initial shockwaves have eased, it’s clear that the road ahead will remain long and bumpy.

For better, or for worse, COVID has ushered in a brave new digital world. Publishers need to respond to current content needs, and anticipate how they may change and evolve as the pandemic continues, and when it hopefully ends.

Despite the advertising downturn, as well as the titles and jobs lost, there is some potentially good news for publishers to emerge from the pandemic, in terms of the number of consumers willing to try new things and pay for it.

Nonetheless, the continuation of this trend cannot be taken for granted. Boredom, predictability, cost and changes in personal circumstances (such as employment status, health or working habits and locations) can all have an impact. Subsequently, attraction and retention of audiences must remain twin-concerns for publishers.

Arguably, they are more important than ever - meaning that efforts to become audience-first, build trust, engage with new audiences, and super-serve existing subscribers will remain strategic priorities.

As this report shows, publishers large and small have put into place a range of ideas and strategies to make this happen and to navigate “the new normal.” We hope the ideas captured here offer inspiration and affirmation, so that we can all weather this storm together.

FURTHER READING

231 ways publishers can make media pay

COVID-19 has reinforced the need for publishers to diversify their revenue sources. With advertising proving to be both problematic and unreliable, for many outlets right now, the race is on to find other ways to make media pay.

Here, we've compiled 231 hyperlinked ideas cutting across areas such as: Advertising and Sponsorship, Content, Business Models, Philanthropy and Memberships, as well as Partnerships and eCommerce.

Read more here

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5 digital subscription trends for publishers, in charts

For many publishers, a key priority for the year ahead involves growing revenues from readers. This is nothing new. In recent years, the rise of paywalls and move to subscriptions has been a major trend across the media landscape.

In this two part series, we look at the lie of the land and determine the most important strategic questions that publishers – large and small – need to address.

Read more here

Digital subscription strategies: the seven questions you need to ask

For an industry where revenues have historically been advertising-led, the pivot to subscription is a major shift. And it's not necessarily an easy one.

Here's our take on the seven most important questions publishers need to be asking.

Read more here

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8 steps to strengthen your newsletter strategy

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a myriad of changes for publishers. Based on an analysis of more than 20 newsletters (including several COVID-19 focused products), here are eight recommendations to slay your newsletter strategy.

Read more here

APPENDIX

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