



BECOMING AUDIENCES FIRST

REPORT ON THE FIRST YEAR OF TABLE STAKES EUROPE



TABLE STAKES EUROPE

 Sustainability
Programme

 News Initiative
Digital Growth Programme

IMPRINT



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ABOUT WAN-IFRA

WAN-IFRA is the World Association of News Publishers. Its mission is to protect the rights of journalists and publishers around the world to operate independent media. WAN-IFRA provides its members with expertise and services to innovate and prosper in a digital world and perform their crucial role in society. With formal representative status at the United Nations, UNESCO and the Council of Europe, it derives its authority from its global network of leading news publishing companies and technology entrepreneurs, and its legitimacy from its 80 national association members representing 18,000 publications in 120 countries. www.wan-ifra.org

ABOUT TABLES STAKES EUROPE

Table Stakes Europe is a WAN-IFRA-led programme in partnership with the Google News Initiative Digital Growth Programme, created to help establish and grow the online business of news publishers who have more recently started developing their digital platforms.

A transformation and coaching programme for regional and local news publishers, Table Stakes Europe uses a challenge-centric, performance-and-accountability change methodology to identify and then close shortfalls against seven core performance challenges, the “Table Stakes”. The so-called ‘table stakes’ is an expression for the money needed to have a seat at the table in a poker game. The Programme builds upon the successful track record of an initiative designed and led by Doug Smith. In the United States, “Table Stakes” is a project of the Knight-Lenfest Newsroom Initiative.



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ABOUT GOOGLE NEWS INITIATIVE

The Google News Initiative represents Google's largest-ever effort to help journalism thrive in the digital age. Through its partnerships, programs and products, the Google News Initiative works with thousands of organisations world-wide to support quality independent journalism, financial sustainability, and development of new technologies that drive innovation. Google allocated \$300 million over three years to energise these collaborations, and to lay the foundation for new products and programs for a diverse set of news publishers, to benefit the entire ecosystem. This includes supporting thought leadership on topics like consumer revenue, advertising and data that are critical to the future of the news industry.

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One year ago...

In October 2019, a newly formed team from Table Stakes Europe engaged with 14 European publishers in a 12-month programme to change the way these companies run their digital operations.

The programme, designed by Doug Smith at the request of the Knight Foundation and the Lenfest Institute of Journalism, was developed and tested with major metropolitan news dailies in the US.

When it was launched in the United States five years ago, the programme was designed to accelerate the transition of journalism from print to digital, to help newsrooms change their practices, reach new audiences and better engage their communities.

The primary objective is still very relevant for many publishers, but the growing importance of reader revenues has made more collaboration essential. Editorial, data, marketing and product teams need to shift their culture from silos to cooperative working.

As Nick Tjaardstra, director of the programme, explains: “Table Stakes takes the big picture perspective, from defining audiences through to monetisation, all based on the input of US publishers who have been forced to innovate faster over the last decade under extreme financial pressure.”

The WAN-IFRA team with Doug Smith and coaches Alexandra Borchardt and Stéphane Mayoux led the Table Stakes Europe programme for this first year with the continued support of the people at the Google News Initiative Digital Growth Programme.

However, the true heroes of this adventure are the 14 companies that have worked so hard, going the extra mile to make measurable performance impact on their own businesses. And of course we're happy that they can share their stories with us.

Many thanks to them!

Le Quotidien
JOURNAL D'INFORMATION INDÉPENDANT JURASSIEN

HENNEO

DIÁRIO
de Notícias

groupe
Télégramme

HEIDENHEIMER ZEITUNG

Le Parisien

LENSINGMEDIA

Diário de Notícias

NOZ
MEDIEN

mh:n
MEDIEN

edinet
digital tailoring since 1996

DC THOMSON
MEDIA

MEDIENHAUS
AACHEN

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SÜDKURIER
MEDIENHAUS

“We entered Tables Stakes Europe with a big project to develop a reader revenue model in our group. We found in the Programme the help needed to create a good methodology for a successful launch of this new strategy. It helped us to get the active support of all the teams.”



Marta Algora Luño,
Digital business &
Reader revenue strategy,
Henneo Media, Spain

“Three main things come to my mind when I think about how the Table Stakes programme has helped us: we dare to work in a more agile way (“design/do”). We are taking the audiences’ approach (with emphasis on the “s”), which is new to us. It has boosted the digital transformation we started before Table Stakes Europe.”



Philipp Ostrop, Head of
Product Development,
Lensing Media, Germany

“By defining a shared Table Stakes challenge/mission, we solved some problems within the organisation that we had in the past. Now, a large part of the company walks in the same direction. Doug Smith’s “toolset” hugely helped us to manage the change and – even better – created a shared methodology of doing things within the leadership team.”



Julian Kögel, Head of paid content,
Südkurier, Germany

“Table Stakes has helped us gain subscriptions with new audiences, and we’re just at the start. It has also been a great motivation for our team. We see that our journalists have become the best ambassadors for the company’s project.”



Gilles Danet, Head of digital
content development,
Le Télégramme, France

“Table Stakes Europe has accelerated our development and given us a toolbox to accelerate our digital transformation. We have seen a positive development of digital subscriptions and newsletter performance (opening rate, CTR).”



Mélanie Monsaingeon,
Publisher,
Le Parisien, France

Introduction from Table Stakes architect Doug Smith

Beginning in 2015, Douglas Smith co-founded, designed and led an expanding effort to help US local news enterprises find audience-first, high-quality journalistic pathways toward sustainability built on digital transformation. These efforts are popularly known as “table stakes”. He is acknowledged as one of the world’s leading management thinkers and advisers, having contributed to improved performance results, innovation, strategy and change in scores of organisations across many industries in all three sectors: private, government and non-profit. In this interview, Smith describes his experience of the past year with the first European teams.

The first European Table Stakes programme ended in October 2020. If you had to tell people this story, what would it be?

Leaders from local publishers across seven nations speaking six languages have embraced the Table Stakes Europe opportunity to embark on transforming their respective news enterprises to be *audiences-first* and, within that, *digital-first and print later and better*.

At the end of this 12-month programme, these leaders plus *increasing numbers of their colleagues at work* have learned through real effort – *through actually working differently instead of just talking* – how to conceive, report, edit, publish and monitor stories in

ways that serve different needs and interests of different audiences.

Many of the skills, behaviours, and capabilities crucial to sustainable 21st century local journalism that, in October 2019, were unfamiliar or irregularly practiced, are now habits of thought and action: putting audiences-first, focusing on reader revenue as the essential path to sustainability, adopting funnel discipline and embedding goals, metrics and analytics in newsrooms, publishing across the day, using newsletters to engage and convert customers, changing editorial and audience engagement workflows while stopping activities that cost too much and/or add too little value, experimenting with different paywall approaches, and growing the number of folks with general management capacity at lower levels in the organization via the mini-publisher approach.



Many of the skills, behaviours, and capabilities crucial to sustainable 21st century local journalism, that were unfamiliar or irregularly practiced in many of the TSE newsrooms, are now habits of thought and action.

Importantly, the leaders also chose to make this journey *together* and to provide one another candour, support and commitment by sharing what works, what doesn't work, and how together they can support local democracy through audiences-first local journalism.

Impressively, they have been doing all this in the midst of a pandemic that pushed them "overnight" into virtual work. For much of the spring, the pandemic was *the* story and, one in which everyone – whether in the newsroom, marketing, tech or other departments – recognized they were *themselves* part of the audiences. Think about it: parents with kids, elders needing delivery services, employees working from home, business owners hit hard by weakened local economies – who depended on the *local* news for information essential to getting through the pandemic *locally*.

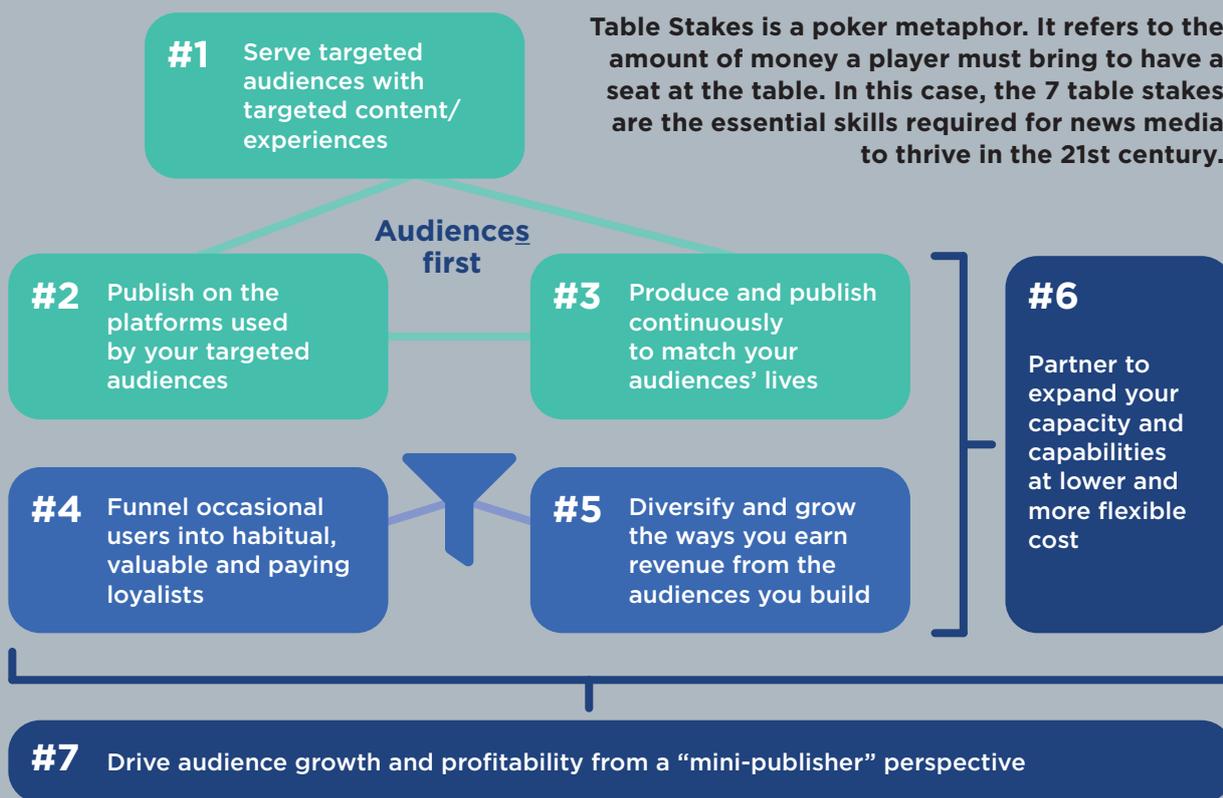
Do you think all 14 companies have benefitted from the programme, and how?

Yes.

Just as we've seen in the several different US Table Stakes programmes, European local publishers who gathered at last October's kickoff differed in terms of their starting points: they faced different degrees and kinds of gaps in the seven table stakes and they operated in widely different local markets.

The market dynamics, for example, confronting **Le Parisien** in the cosmopolitan world capital Paris contrast substantially from those faced by, say, **Le Quotidien Jurassien** serving Switzerland's smallest canton with a population of 80,000. The **NOZ** team who needed to pull together four different newsroom transformation task forces across more than 40 local papers in Germany confronted dissimilar challenges than **Empresa do Diário de Notícias**, the only non-government-controlled newspaper in Madeira.

The seven Table Stakes to be in the game



All TSE groups had gaps or shortfalls against the seven tables stakes. Yet, the pattern and extent of the gaps varied from team to team. For example, journalists in the Savona, Italy news outlet of **Edinet** (the one pure digital news enterprise in TSE) already worked virtually and digitally, whereas folks in **DC Thomson's** Scottish newsrooms were bound up in print-centric roles, skills, workflows and technology.

Unlike **Henneo** from Zaragoza, Spain, a group still waiting to embrace reader revenue and digital subscription strategies, **Le Telegramme** in Brittany had begun down that road but knew they must dramatically increase the effort in order to attain journalistic and financial sustainability.

All of the TSE teams have made important gains compared to their respective starting points with regard to the seven table stakes:

Table Stakes #1, #2 and #3: Serve targeted audiences with targeted content and experiences; publish on the platforms used by your targeted audiences; produce and publish continuously to match your audiences' lives

Le Telegramme defined distinct audiences, used the programme's design/do approach to succeed early and then converted that success into a playbook they rolled out to succeed elsewhere. They redirected resources gained by stopping doing things of less value, embedded key performance indicators and metrics in their newsroom, and more than doubled newsletter registrations while significantly increasing digital subscriptions. Because of these gains, Le Telegramme's board and senior management have embraced table stakes for the entire company.

Meanwhile, the **Henneo** team have been so successful with an audienceS-first strategy built around newsletters that they now can launch a new newsletter in less than a day, and also have understood, analysed and proven the significantly greater value of loyal audiences, so well that senior leadership have moved forward the launch of digital subscriptions from 2021 to September 2020.

Table Stakes #4: Funnel occasional users into habitual, valuable and paying loyalists

TSE teams have built strong funnel disciplines to support significant gains at all parts of the funnel:

■ **Top of funnel (get them to come)**

Aided by audiences' deep needs for trusted local news and information, teams had 50% to 100% more in local traffic, unique visitors and page views.

■ **Middle of funnel (get them to stay engaged and build habits)**

Teams have combined newsletters, multimedia storytelling, recirculation tactics, and audience-grounded criteria for stories to achieve increases in reader habits (number of visits per week) and time of engagement.

■ **Bottom of funnel (get them to pay and stay paying by reducing churn)**

Südkurier from Konstanz, Germany *tripled* the rate of daily web subscriptions in the first calendar quarter of 2020 – importantly, *before* the pandemic. **ARA** from Barcelona believed so strongly in the value of what they do for local audiences that they chose to keep their paywall up during the pandemic and gained over 2,000 new subscribers. **Medienhaus Aachen's** effort generated an invaluable insight – print and digital audiences are mostly different. And, this has propelled them toward embracing the digital audiences with much less fear of losing the print audience. **Heidenheimer Zeitung's** commitment to audienceS-first plus the funnel discipline have helped them get halfway to the goal they set in October of doubling digital subscription. Several teams have reduced churn through intentionally onboarding new subscribers in personal, “we care about you” ways while closely monitoring and proactively responding to signs of subscriber slippage.

Table Stakes #5 and #6: Diversify and grow the ways you earn revenue from the audiences you build; and, partner to expand capacity and capability at lower, more flexible costs.

Lisbon's **Diário de Notícias** team experimented with selling digital subscriptions through corporate marketing and gained 3,000 subs. **Edinet** launched a membership programme. During the pandemic, the Madeira team added delivery services of medicine, food, toys and more to non-subscribers; launched online conference events; and partnered with a local firm to offer digital marketing services. The team at **Le Quotidien Jurassien** in Jura, Switzerland, experimented with ticketed events, did co-marketing with a local brewery, expanded their relationship with the hockey team, and partnered with a university to attain much needed technical expertise.

Table Stakes #7: Drive audience growth and profitability from a “mini-publisher” perspective

Among the vulnerabilities of legacy newspapers when the wave of digital disintermediation began in the early 2000s was this: just at a time when they most needed as many general managers who could see and respond to the ‘whole business’, they really only had one: the publisher. Moreover, that publisher sat atop siloed functions that basically only knew how to coordinate for one purpose: putting out the paper each day.

TSE teams have adopted the mini-publisher perspective to overcome these severe constraints. **Lensing Media's** Borussia Dortmund mini-publisher team grew significantly even though, for the past few months, no live sports were allowed! And, **DC Thomson** have aggressively launched five mini-publisher audience teams on their way toward twelve.

The mini-publisher successes convinced DCT leadership so much that they announced to the entire company their “north star” goal of attaining 75,000 digital subs across DCT's five newspaper titles in five years.

What has been different – and what similar – in the Table Stakes experience for European local publishers compared to those in the United States?

The important differences in Europe arise from the greater range and impact of different nations, languages, cultures and legal/regulatory regimes. Language, for example, can be a competitive advantage for winning local audiences in Europe in ways that differ significantly from the US. Local American publishers, I think, have a lot to learn from their European counterparts in how best to use ePapers to serve local audiences.

Moreover, it would have been very difficult to bring Table Stakes to Europe without the stellar efforts of Alexandra Borchardt, Stephane Mayoux and Nick Tjaardstra, the TSE coaches who so capably helped teams translate my methodology into the local linguistic, cultural and market contexts.

And, while there are important nuances across Europe regarding how best to include and work

with unions and worker councils, Europe as a whole has a far more constructive labor/owner history and context than the US where, quite literally, the two sides are explicitly expected to engage in “economic warfare”.

Europe’s regulatory approach toward the now oh-so-dominant platforms is less beholden to free market ideology than is the case in the U.S. Having said that, local European and local US publishers are similar in one very big way: *Each must focus on building valued and valuable local audiences instead of fooling themselves that they can compete in a game of scale with international brands.*

In addition, now at the conclusion of this first round of TSE, I know European and American local publishers are similar in the extent to which, when they commit themselves to do so, they can use the methods of Table Stakes to succeed.

Lastly, there is one more major similarity. Just as happened in the US, the TSE teams have said they want to continue working together – and to welcome future TSE groups – into an ever-growing Table Stakes alumni community who, I know, can work together to ensure healthy local democracies through healthy and sustainable local news enterprises.

Similar to the US, the TSE teams have said they want to continue working together – and welcome future TSE groups.



Change Management with Table Stakes – Producing success stories that drive the effort

By Alexandra Borchardt

Media people accustomed to reacting to fast-paced developments can be ambivalent about plans that try to lay out every detail. Sure, structures are important. But at the same time, they need processes and tools that are highly adjustable to rapidly changing environments and less than perfect circumstances. This is where the Table Stakes methodology comes into its own.

There are project plans to die for. Full of columns, numbers, colours and dates, they seem to leave no questions open and radiate the promise of success. At least, some die-hard project management buffs might feel that way. Everybody else is less convinced. Particularly in newsrooms, where most of those involved in change management efforts are journalists, old-school project plans can scare the hell out of people. They look at the fancy tables and silently ask themselves: What if things, well... change? As journalists, they know about surprises and news developments that take unexpected turns.

The Table Stakes toolbox is derived from agile methods that originated in the software industry. Software is never perfect, there is always a beta version, and everyone works from there. The same holds for life in the newsroom – not even speaking about life in general. This is why the TS tools find acceptance among people that tend to be highly sceptical towards more orthodox management methodologies. And there is no requirement to use all of them all the time, no meticulous box-ticking needed.

These are just a couple of reasons why the Table Stakes methodology aligns so well with the thinking in the newsroom. It is plainly not true that “everyone hates change,” as often proclaimed. People hate change that doesn't fit reality, that is conceived for its own sake, and they particularly hate change that doesn't work because it doesn't produce results. Then there are others who detest change because it robs them of routines and privileges they hold dear. While this can not (and should not) be avoided, there are tools to bring them around.

There'll never be a quota of 100 percent change lovers. But the balance can be tipped so that a strong majority are in favour.

Design/do: Change is driven by small-scale success stories

The core principle that makes the methodology so usable has its origins in the software industry as well: test and experiment, in TSE lingo **design and do**. Change is driven by small-scale success stories that indicate what works. Even failures can be read as successes because they generate lessons. The philosophy behind this is that something like perfect doesn't exist in rapidly changing environments. As in nature, learning and adaptation are key. Progress isn't linear but requires constant adjustments to new circumstances. This is in contrast to old-style project planning, where progress is linear and step by step. The goals and milestones are defined in the beginning, and when they are reached, the project is done. **With Table Stakes, change is never done. It is the new normal.**

So what is the basic equipment needed for change made by Table Stakes, what are the tools? The first step in every transformation effort is establishing the "why" and the "what." A proper problem definition is at the core of change. And here is the problem in the current media environment: newsrooms and their audiences are not the allies and partners they should and could be from a "journalism as a service" perspective. This is why the corresponding business relationships are underdeveloped. The same holds for advertisers and publishers. Table Stakes is all about making newsrooms and publishers "audience first" by putting quality journalism at the centre.

Understanding your problem is half the solution

To start the journey, teams have to do a thorough **gap analysis**. How does the publisher perform against all kinds of requirements that make an excellent audience-first-newsroom: serving audiences with the content they need on platforms they use at times they turn to them.



Clearly defining a problem within an organisation is at the core of change. And here is the problem in the current media environment: Newsrooms and their audiences are not the allies they should and could be from a "journalism as a service" perspective.

The core of the Table Stakes effort is *the three-part challenge statement*



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A more detailed analysis distinguishes between internal and external gaps. For example, a print-focused content management system would be an internal gap, a dismal performance among users age 25 to 34 an external one. Participants are encouraged to switch from the “balcony” perspective to the “dance-floor” perspective and back again. With the gaps analysis, honest self-assessment is critical. Ideally, every member of the team shares his or her view, comparing notes leads to meaningful discussions. The more gaps teams identify, the better they can monitor progress later.

The second one of the longer lists will stay with the teams as well, and it requires equal honesty: assessing **assumptions versus knowledge**. Many business decisions are taken based on assumptions and gut feeling, not based on evidence and knowledge. Examples for assumptions are: “Our audiences enjoy our investigative sports coverage,” “Our onboarding process is frictionless,” “Our customers are willing to pay 9.99 euros per month.” In this exercise all these assumptions need to be

rated on a scale from 1 (barely know) to 4 (full certainty). This sounds a bit like tedious work but also helps a lot to monitor progress.

Performance-driven change: what will be done, how and what does success look like?

The core of the Table Stakes effort is the **three-part challenge statement**. This is the carefully crafted guiding vision for the newsroom or publisher. It’s ideally done in clear and telling language, a piece that every participant can quote like the lyrics of a famous pop song.

This sounds like drafting an ordinary mission statement, but the challenge statement is a far cry from those cloudy feelgood-sentences that are predominantly made for marketing materials. The challenge statement includes a vision, clearly defined expectations including finishing line and a set of strategic principles that guide the effort.

“What will be done,” “How we will measure success” and “How we will do it” are the three parts that leave no excuses. Done or not done? That should be easy to clarify in the end. And once it is done, you’d better come up with the next challenge already.

“What will be done,” this can be something like: “We will build sustainable, economically viable relationships with people in our region by being their trusted ally. We will help them navigate their daily lives and responsibilities as citizens by providing them with first-class information and spaces to communicate.” The criteria for measuring success could read something like: “We will triple our number of digital subscriptions to x until the end of 2021.” And “how we will do it,” will surely include something like: “Producing sought after products for existing and new audiences, providing a first-class user experience, fine-tuning and monitoring the entire subscription experience ...” It is important for the challenge to be ambitious yet attainable and understood by everyone in the company.

The “how we will do it” part is the hardest because we are talking strategy here. And the strategy is different from tactics. It bundles the small steps into the overall direction the journey is headed. **Teams might have a hard time distinguishing strategy from tactics. But identifying the big picture is important to make sure that tactics feed a bigger goal.** A helpful exercise is constructing a *strategy tree*. It starts with the vision as a starting point, the stem everything emerges from. The strategies are the major branches, and tactics are the little twigs that spring from the branches. Tactics that don’t connect to a strategy (branch) are useless, using the image of the tree, they are deadwood. Strategies that don’t connect to a vision are not rooted in the ground, they will lack nourishment. To complete the homework, every tactic should have a clear numerical goal plus time stamp attached to it.

Remaining focused, overcoming obstacles, whatever they may be

There are three things about Table Stakes that make a big difference to other programmes: *First of all, it puts quality journalism front and centre.* This is good news to all seasoned journalists who have been a bit wary about digital transformation since they feel this inev-

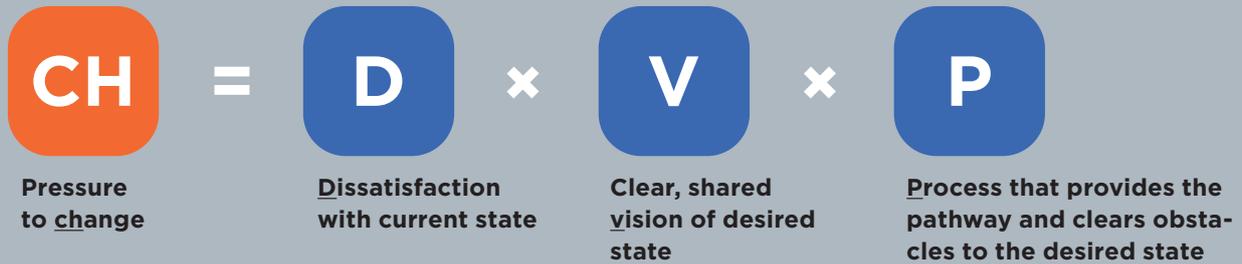
itably involves clickbait and “giving away great content for free.” Letting them know that their precious work is at the core of the effort will certainly help to win some of them over. One can fill days with discussions about the true meaning of “quality journalism.” It suffices to say here that it involves the honest effort to research and provide accurate, timely and comprehensible information that is independent of interests and meets ethical standards, but at the same time captures audiences’ interests and serves their needs.

Second, Table Stakes has a strong focus on results, defined as measurable outcomes. While every transformation effort starts with activities, many just get stuck there or barely make it to the output stage. Myriads of meetings result in plenty of papers, concepts, project plans, new hires and teams, huge restructuring ventures – and fall short of showing sizable outcomes and impacts. **Table Stakes forces teams to analyse every action that is taken along clear categories: Is this just an activity, is this an output (like a new dashboard or different newsdesk setup), or does it produce an outcome (like new subscribers, additional revenue)?** Or can you even attach an impact to it, like a new community centre or a cycle highway being built because of the relentless exploration and coverage of audiences’ needs? In Table Stakes lingo, this is called the *RAOOI evaluation*: Is what you are doing just allocating resources (R), engaging in activities (A), producing outputs (O), or is it about outcomes (O) and impact (I)? This clear focus on results prevents teams from falling into the “shiny new things”-trap many digital transformation efforts get stalled at – cool new technology bought to impress, but leading to no change in outcomes.

Third, Table Stakes is pragmatic. It takes into account the resources and people that are there instead of planning for a perfect world that doesn’t exist. This is reflected in two tools in particular. First of all, there is the *power/opinion matrix*. Bluntly put one could call it a map of friends and enemies, but it should be more detached from the emotional baggage this terminology implies. The power/opinion map classifies every person or group who is needed for a particular challenge along two axes. One is: are they important for the success of the challenge, or can their role be neglected? The second is: how favourable are they to the effort? All those needed are then classified as favourable, wafflers, opponents and “don’t know.” If a team finds plenty of names in the

The Formula for Change

Only adults can take responsibility for their own performance and change. You cannot do that for them. **Key: What is their “D”?**



Source: Eric Abramson, Columbia Business School

box where favourable and important meet, the challenge is likely to succeed. If too many are grouped in the box of “important opponents,” it might be time to adjust the challenge. And with lots of “wafflers” and “don’t know,” the main task is lots of communication, ideally backed up by early wins.

Note that an “opponent” is not a bad person, she or he might have good reasons for being sceptical. Maybe they feel threatened and are afraid of losing privileges. But before wasting too much energy on winning them over, ignore them, if possible. They might hop on board once they see an opportunity to become part of a winning team.

To produce early wins, another matrix is needed: the **high/low impact and easy/hard to implement matrix**. Possible actions can be grouped accordingly. And it doesn’t need much reflection to get started with the stuff that is easy to implement while promising a high impact – the so-called low hanging fruit. Everything that is hard to implement and doesn’t promise too many gains, well, forget about it for now.

Ignoring and stopping to do things that consume too much energy and don’t lead far enough is an important part of Table Stakes: It is critical to decide what to do, of course. At the same time, it is vital to figure out what not to do any longer. Resources are always finite, and focus is essential.

It is possible to analyse the likelihood of success. While there is no magical formula that produces results, the **D x V x P formula of lasting change** can tell you a lot about what’s missing in your effort. “D” stands for dissatisfaction, “V” for vision, “P” for processes. All three are multiplicative, this means – remember mathematics – that if one of the parts is zero, the result will be zero. If there are a vision and processes but no dissatisfaction with the status quo, the “why” is unclear and the venture will take a back seat to other efforts. If there are dissatisfaction and a vision but no processes, teams will get confused and anxious, because they don’t understand the “how.” And if there are dissatisfaction and processes but no vision, no one grasps the “what.” Journalists are skilled at asking all these questions and coming up with the answers. That’s another reason why change management with Table Stakes should hit very close to home.

How DVP logic works

The factors (tools) are **multiplicative**. If D, V or P is zero, then CH is zero and change fails.

- D × V × P** = Successful, lasting change
- × V × P** = Bottom of the in-box
- D × × P** = Fast start that fizzles
- D × V ×** = Anxiety and frustration

Source: Douglas K. Smith

Interview with Andreas Müller,
CEO, Medienhaus Aachen



TSE gives us that 'Just Do It' mentality

Medienhaus Aachen participated in Table Stakes Europe, led by its hands-on CEO Andreas Müller. Markus Schöberl, editor and publisher of pv digest in Germany and an authority on reader revenue strategies, talked to Müller about the company's TSE experience.

I have a problem with the term 'Table Stakes'. For me, it fails to evoke any associations. How is it for you? What does the term mean to you?

"It is the same with me. At first, I had to Google the term. And at the conference in Glasgow, where the project was presented, I had to be persuaded to participate in the session. By the time I left the session, I knew what it was about. Moreover, Doug Smith [the inventor

of and most important coach for Table Stakes] had convinced me. A very experienced coach, he convinced me by using charts that, despite having been produced in a very poor quality, something highly untypical for a consultant, had a very strong content.

Today, I would say that 'Tables Stakes is like Weight Watchers for Paid Content'. It is a special form of coaching, a type of group therapy for persons responsible for paid content. I mean this only positively. It is a major compliment for Doug Smith, who is highly experienced and, in every respect, a professional and focused coach.

Like many colleagues, in the last years I have participated in trips to the USA or Scandinavia. I have attended congresses and listened to many presentations. Of all the measures initiated by our associations and industry organisations, Table Stakes has been the best by far. It enables an exchange of views with peers, publishers from other countries who are in a very similar situation. Not Scandinavian companies that are miles ahead of us and not the New York Times that also cannot be the benchmark for our Aachen newspapers."

That is a very strong recommendation. Could you also imagine any circumstances under which you would advise against participation in the programme?

"Yes, I can. Namely if the participation is not sufficiently serious. Table Stakes only makes sense if you genuinely believe that the industry can still be saved.

And that this is possible with digital products and paid content. The programme participants must be able to get things done. They must be the decision-makers themselves or colleagues in whom I invest the authority to implement measures. Otherwise it makes no sense.”

With how many colleagues did you participate in the programme? How costly was it?

There were only two of us at the first meeting, my assistant who manages many in-house projects, and myself. Five of us attended the second meeting. And these five continue to constitute our core team who take part in all meetings and carry the project into the organisation. Our core team came together once weekly to agree on a mu-

tual strategy. That always took about one hour. And we prepared the four meetings with the other Table Stakes participants in own workshops. These were half-day, or occasionally full-day events. The meetings themselves took place in Paris, Lisbon and London. Due to Corona, the fourth meeting was an online-only event. Besides travel costs, we spent no money.”

Can you summarise the benefits participation in Table Stakes brought to you?

“Many good impulses to take a radical approach to the challenges facing us. A ‘Just Do It’ mentality. With his very clever follow-up enquiries, Doug Smith repeatedly steered us in the right direction. He made it very clear to us how important it is to make all measures quantifiable. Each publisher had to define for itself its so-called ‘Challenges’, therefore clearly defined objectives. In our case, for example, we want to double our number of web-only digital subscribers by the end of this year.



“Five of us attended the second meeting. And these five continue to constitute our core team who take part in all meetings and carry the project into the organisation.” Andreas Müller, CEO, Medienhaus Aachen.

We set out from 1,264, so we aim to reach 2,528. At present we are at 2,034, and I am confident that we will reach our target.

One way of getting there is via our restaurant team. We recognised – as a result of a tip given by a Scottish project participant – that reporting about new restaurants is a subject that really interests the readers. We use it to attract subscribers. In the past, we used to regard such articles more as a way to sell advertising space. Now we use it to make our products measurably more attractive for the readers.”

One of Doug Smith’s principles is: ‘Stop Doing Things’. What have you stopped doing?

“We compiled a list, an entire A4-sized page, of subjects and typical articles that we no longer want to report about in our newspaper. Shooting club festivals, honoring of sportsmen and women, awarding of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, all are topics that we bring in our free newspapers, but no longer in the daily newspaper. This has freed up capacities that we can use to produce longer, more in-depth articles.”

And what did you start with? ‘Rigorous Start Doing’ is another Doug Smith principle.

“I can take the example of our business newsletter to clearly illustrate this. As a product it was discussed and ready to go, and we had said ‘we will launch it when our automated marketing is operable, when we distribute the mails in an automated process and the opening rates, etc., can be measured’. But Doug Smith says, ‘Why wait? You have the email addresses, you have already sent out emails, so why wait any longer? Do it now!’ And he kept pushing for this until we did it. Start with simple means, don’t wait for the big SAP solution, that is an important principle of Table Stakes.”

A recommendation of Table Stakes is to appoint ‘Mini-Publishers’, colleagues given a wide scope of responsibility to develop and market products for target audiences. Do you now have Mini-Publishers and if so, how is this reflected in the organisational chart? On business cards? On salary slips?

“Yes, we have this arrangement for our restaurant reporting. There we have added a small team to process these contents for online presentation and create cross-links. We want to use this to attract subscribers. We don’t have an organisational chart, nor is there any indication of this task on business cards. That is our restaurant team, in the same way as we have a business team. These teams have the responsibility, they report to a wider circle, there is someone who is in charge. They organise themselves, they have the task: ‘just do it!’. But we took the deliberate decision not to embed it in a firm structure, as it can always emerge that something doesn’t work and then you have a structure that it is difficult to dissolve.”

Keyword ‘conclusion’. The organised programme is coming to an end now, or more precisely after the final meeting in October. Is Table Stakes over for you then?

“I don’t believe that it simply comes to an end. For one thing, a genuinely friendly contact has developed between the publishers. Although it requires a major effort to maintain it across borders, to arrange to meet again to exchange views and opinions. But everyone regrets that it will now soon be over.

Doug Smith says: ‘I have shown you how it works. If you continue along this path, you will reach your objective. You must just bear in mind that everything you do must be measurable. You need concrete challenges that are achievable and must orient yourselves accordingly.’”

Interview by Markus Schöberl, pv digest

‘Going Public’

‘Going Public’ in the Table Stakes methodology means a communication outside of the challenge team to stakeholders both inside and outside of the organisation.

“I drew this idea from when President John F. Kennedy announced that the US would put a person on the moon within a decade,” says Doug Smith.

“Kennedy did not have to declare this publicly. He could have simply asked NASA to work toward the goal. Instead, he put his own character – and the character of his administration – on the line.

In doing so, he also put constructive pressure on himself, NASA and all those involved to meet the 10-year goal.

When any of us declare to people beyond ourselves a commitment to some goal and/or result, we similarly put our character on the line in ways that, again constructively, pressure us to pursue that goal.

In addition, going public provides crucial opportunities for teams to ask other folks to get involved and help them. This is why we encourage the teams to think about which audiences they wish to go public with – and what will be the ‘ask’; that is, whom will the teams ask to get involved and make commitments to performance results advancing the overall challenge.”

“When table stakes teams ‘go public’ with their performance challenges and success goals, they commit themselves in ways that go beyond ‘keeping it to themselves’.”



Doug Smith, Co-founder and Architect of Table Stakes

‘Going public’ How Südkurier handled this essential TSE step

Context

Südkurier is a regional daily newspaper based in Constance in the south of Germany. The paper is published six times a week, and has a circulation of around 115,000 copies. There are 11 local editions and 15 local offices. Part of the larger media company Pressedruck, Südkurier has around 700 employees, about 100 of whom work in editorial. The publisher joined Table Stakes Europe as part of the paper’s mission to transform from a print-focus to an audience-based one and to help achieve their goal to triple the number of their digital-only subscribers by the end of 2021. For Südkurier, joining TSE was an extension of an internal initiative called the Shift project, with an emphasis on loyal readers, subscriptions and digital.

Choices

“It was a good decision for us to go public very early,” says Julian Kögel, who is responsible for digital products at Südkurier. “The programme started in October last year in Paris, and our second meeting in Lisbon was in December, and in between that, we went public.”

Kögel says he felt that Südkurier had a big advantage compared to other TSE participants because they had already organised a joint management group from both the editorial and the business sides. This group had unified goals and was holding regular meetings before TSE started.

“So we were really quick in developing our challenge and developing the mission ahead, what we wanted to achieve. For us, that was to triple the number of digital only subscribers until the end of 2021, and to develop from a print-focused publisher to pioneer audience-based publishing,” he says.

In terms of “Going public,” the Südkurier Table Stakes team had a series of three meetings shortly after the first TSE session. A first meeting with top leadership for their approval, then a meeting with the management team for their feedback. After that, they held a big event they called “Future Day” for all editorial staff as well as those who work closely with them from IT and the business side in marketing and product.

“We all gathered in a town hall, if you will, and had a big presentation, where we as a group presented who we are, what our mission is and how we wanted to proceed from there,” Kögel says.

Adds Chief Digital Officer Matthias Kiechle: “We as a team, eight people, represented different parts of this strategy and what it means in practice. This was a crucial moment for us because we didn’t know how people would react to it.”

Going public to everyone at once was helpful for a number of reasons. For example, Kögel points out it eliminated the possibility of rumours that otherwise might have spread. “So that went away because everybody knew,” he said. “I think it really helped us in the process moving forward. Of course, the work just started there.”

While holding a big event basically worked well, Kögel says there were a lot of questions.



“We all gathered in a town hall, if you will, and had a big presentation, where we as a group presented who we are, what our mission is and how we wanted to proceed from there,” says Julian Kögel, responsible for digital products at Südkurier.

“Looking back, it was the right decision to have a big event and gather all the people. And to accept that there will be questions that we can’t answer yet. But everybody was prepared that at some point in time, the transformation, the challenge will arrive on his or her desk,” Kögel says.

Outcome

As TSE coach Alexandra Borchardt notes, Going public isn’t something that happens once, it’s an ongoing communication process within the organisation to keep everyone focussed on achieving the goals.

With a targeted goal that still has more than a year remaining of it at the time of this writing, Südkurier has taken several steps to keep the Going public process active.

For example, after the Future Day presentation, the team spoke with key influencers within Südkurier. These are people who don’t

necessarily have a management position, Kögel says, but they are well respected and when they say something, their co-workers usually listen. On a recommendation from Table Stakes architect Doug Smith, they made a list of influencers and gathered them together to talk about their opinions about the mission.

“That was very important in leading the opinion within the organisation,” Kögel says. Otherwise, he adds, “you present something, and the next day people go back to their office and it’s all the same.”

Südkurier also created an editorial development team, which helps the organisation’s various offices to manage the challenges.

“We have a dedicated team helping with this transition, so we are able to say to the local editorial office in whatever town, ‘You will have support from the editorial development team in four months and this change will arrive at your desk,’” Kögel says.

They have also implemented tools, such as a dashboard, so staff members can easily see current numbers to know how things are going.

Says Kiechle: “Our main dashboard shows how many users we had on the paywall. This is a crucial number for us, getting more people on the paywall, because we have a metered paywall. So it’s important in getting more readership, making them more loyal and bringing them through the paywall.”

The dashboard also tells staff how many subscriptions were sold the day before, how many subscribers were active, and what articles have helped to sell the most subscriptions, he said. The focus, though, and the number in the middle of the dashboard, is on the new subscribers.

“When you look at Schibsted or Amedia that have big sales numbers, they are focussing on retention and churn prevention. But we are at an earlier stage,” Kiechle says. “For us, it’s more important to get more people to subscribe. This is the main thing we are talking about.”

Adds Kögel, “I’m a marketing guy, and today, it’s not me who asks ‘How many sales did we make with this article?’ The editors are asking each other that. I don’t have to be in the room to make the discussion sales driven. That is something I’m very proud of and very happy about.”

Kögel’s advice for Going Public to publishers just starting out in Table Stakes is: “Don’t wait too long. Don’t wait until you have all the details, all the answers. You will not ever reach the point where you have a perfect preparation for an organisation larger than 100 people. So just storm out of the gates and involve the organisation. And also, very important, one of the really essential things from Table Stakes is that it’s not solely an editorial project, it’s not a solely business project, it’s ‘How can we save journalism and our business model for the future?’ That is something that concerns all the silos. And when you get on stage, use people from all silos.”

Another key way Südkurier keeps the communication process going is through a monthly newsletter that Kiechle writes. “This is a personal email from me to the entire newsroom and the people around it who are working directly with the newsroom, and it’s mainly about efforts and success stories,” he says.

“This is the main channel where we are constantly giving information and bringing the people onboard, but it’s not the only one,” he adds. “We have things like team rounds and Zoom calls so we are speaking with different groups.”

“Try to use every touch point you have to talk about your challenge,” Kiechle adds. “Touch points can be some usual group meetings, displays in break rooms, or wherever people meet, showing our daily performance. These are real numbers so people can make their own image of where we are, and what things they can do.”

“Looking back, it was the right decision to have a big event and gather all the people. And to accept that there will be questions that we can’t answer yet. But everybody was prepared that at some point in time, the transformation, the challenge will arrive on his or her desk,” Kögel says.



Henneo finds using a crucial metric key to ‘Going public’ success

Context

The Zaragoza, Spain-based news media company Henneo, which publishes the newspapers 20 minutes and Heraldo de Aragon, has spent much of the past year focussing on its audiences and developing more targeted content. This is being done in concert with efforts to launch a digital subscription model.

Says Marta Algora Luño, Henneo’s Media Engagement & User Revenue Manager: “At the end of last year, we decided to explore our reader revenue model. And that’s why we decided to start with the Table Stakes project with the main goal of finding the right reader revenue model for us.”

The company had previously tried a premium model a few years ago, but it hadn’t worked out for them. Paywalls were extremely rare in Spain at the time, and most people were reluctant to pay.

“With this programme, we changed our approach to our audiences to not just being focussed on the volume of our users but also to be engaged with our users,” she said.

Choices

After returning home from attending the first Table Stakes Europe meeting in Paris in October, 2019, the team from Henneo almost immediately began the Going public process, Algora Luño said.

“We started the Going Public process with that moment,” she said. “We needed to talk to the different areas and departments to involve all of them. This step was crucial for us.”

The first thing they did was to have a meeting with the directors of the digital, editorial, marketing, business and IT departments to explain the goals and the strategy they planned to follow.

“The main point here was to make them understand the importance of this. And basically, we wanted to make them understand that for us the goal was to increase the number of registered users. Why? Because we had done an analysis and discovered that a registered user gave us much more money than an anonymous one. That metric was very strong for us in helping them to understand and get involved in this process,” Algora Luño said.

With this key metric, they gained the support of the directors of the different areas and then they moved to the newsroom.

“The editorial director told us to start with the digital team,” she said. “It was a very small group, and we started talking with them about the strategy. After that, we did another meeting with another editorial group, which were the heads of desks. And after that, we did another with the social media and search group, the audience department.”

Each of these meetings lasted about half an hour, Algora Luño said.

“We started by telling them we were very happy in terms of the volume of our audience, but that now we wanted to involve them in the process of helping to register more users because this is an important way for us to make more money,” she said.

She and her team explained that by knowing more about their users and their behaviour, they would have a better understanding of their loyalty.

“We also told them that they were a very important part of this strategy, and we asked them for opinions and what they thought,” she said. “We always tried to take their opinions, not just: ‘We do it like this.’”

In addition, one of Algora Luño’s colleagues started to physically work in the newsroom to share the metrics and the number of registered users as well as the number of loyal users with the editorial staff.

“This person has been essential in the newsroom’s daily routines to share our knowledge and have them involved in the process,” she said.

Algora Luño and her team then did a follow-up meeting each month with a small group made up of a member each from the marketing, editorial and IT departments.

After about three months, they made a presentation to Henneo’s Board members, owners, and CEO.

“That was a very important meeting because we shared all the results that we were achieving in this process, and it was important because we gained their support to keep going,” Algora Luño said.

Outcome

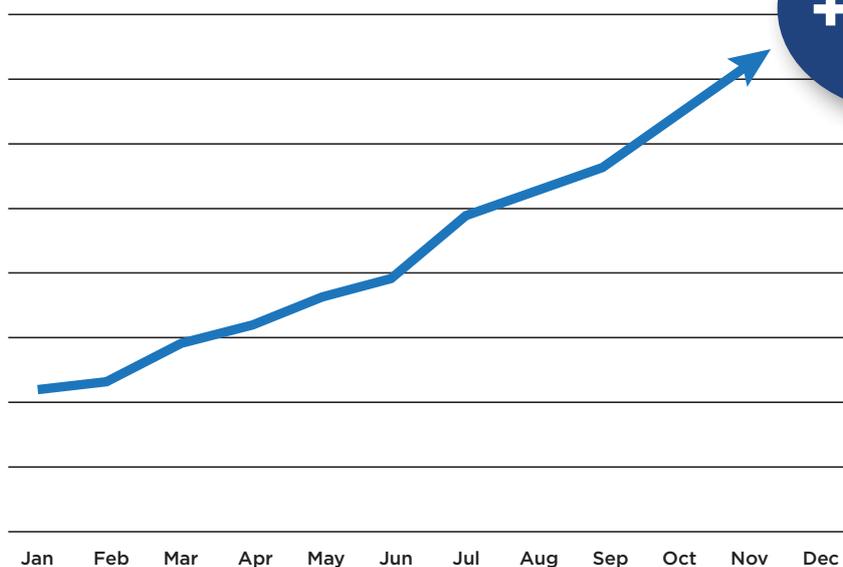
Henneo decided to boost the numbers of their registered users by introducing a series of newsletters targeted at various audiences as well as requiring users to register after reading a fixed number of articles for free.

Algora Luño said they started this year without any newsletters, but today they produce 13 different ones across a variety of topics from local sports and business to one for families with small children.

“With a newsletter we can register users on different topics so that we can know more about our readers,” she said.

On the registration side, Henneo implemented a free metered registration model in February. Users could freely access 39 articles, but beginning with the 40th article, they had to register.

Registered users – Heraldo 2020



+181%

“We wanted to make them understand that for us the goal was to increase the number of registered users. Why? Because we had done an analysis and discovered that a registered user gave us much more money than an anonymous one,” said Marta Algora Luño, Henneo’s Media Engagement & User Revenue Manager.



After attending the first Table Stakes Europe meeting in Paris in October, 2019, the team from Henneo (here, during the February meeting in London) immediately began the Going public process internally, Algora Luño says.

That number was reduced to 30 articles at the beginning of March, and then went to 20, with plans to reduce it further, Algora Luño said.

As the number of articles has decreased, she said Henneo has seen a dramatic increase in the numbers of users registering – jumping from 66 percent to 99 percent.

“We are really impressed with the results, and we want to carry on with that. ... I think this has been very relevant for us because the newsroom has had to think about what kind of content they need to create to convert users,” Algora Luño said.

Today, at the end of every month, she and her team continue to do a follow-up meeting to share results, and talk about the next steps they need to take.

They also have regular group meetings through Microsoft Teams to discuss results and share good practices.

In addition, Algora Luño said they started an internal newsletter during the summer of 2020 as another way of keeping the Going Public process going.

Asked for her advice to publishers who are just starting out in Table Stakes, she says “I would say it’s very important to start with small groups. Groups who understand digital processes and digital strategy to make sure that they follow you and that you have their support.

“It’s also very important to have a big metric that supports your presentation,” she adds. “Just to say that ‘We’re going to do this, because this number is very important for following our strategy.’” That was an important tool for us, so I would recommend that other teams have a figure that’s really a north star that will help get people involved with your journey.”

What is a mini-publisher perspective?

Table Stakes participants have all adapted the mini-publisher concept to their organisations as they quickly understood how it would help them speed up the realisation of their projects. A mini-publisher team is cross-functional, composed of people with different skills and a team leader.

The team owns the project (e.g develop an audience segment, a specific topic...) to increase performance using all the necessary means from content creation to distribution and revenue strategy. It has a general management perspective (hence the use of publisher in the wording), a goal to better serve audiences and an incentive to collaborate with whomever in the company is needed to succeed.

DC Thomson serves targeted audiences with mini-publisher teams

Context

DC Thomson is a publisher based in Dundee, Scotland. The group owns magazines, radio stations and four daily newspapers: The Press and Journal, Evening Express, The Courier and The Evening Telegraph. The group joined Table Stakes to strengthen its internal Apollo programme, which was working on their digital transformation. Their challenge statement described their ambition for the 12-month

programme: “We will refocus our newsroom – currently 95% print-focused – to one where we create higher quality, indispensable digital journalism and a first-class user experience for local audiences to drive subscriptions through a metered/premium paywall model.”

DC Thomson used almost all the tools recommended by Table Stakes. However, they particularly liked, and successfully implemented, Table Stakes 7: Drive audience growth and profitability with a mini-publisher perspective.



Nick Tjaardstra (standing) from WAN-IFRA is the Table Stakes Europe project lead and he was DC Thompson's coach during their TSE year. In this photo, he is working with the team during a meeting in London.

“DC Thomson team were talented editors and journalists themselves, able to coach and bring colleagues on-side. They unleashed the creativity of the newsroom this year at a level they probably never dared before. Always keeping the discipline of measuring and learning from what they tried,” says Nick Tjaardstra.

The DC Thomson impact team works on special projects (documentaries, investigative journalism).

DC THOMSON MEDIA

KING OF THE SWINDLERS
The inside story on the north-east financial adviser who stole £13m from hundreds of his own clients
By The Press and Journal

CANIGGIA
20 YEARS ON
DOCUMENTARY PREMIERING THURSDAY 6TH OCTOBER

**Impact Team content
– 3.5 times more likely to lead to a subscription**

Daily number of texts carried out in Scotland
The results of 1000 out of 1000000 Texting Survey sent to residents on June 15.
The chart shows a significant increase in the number of texts carried out in Scotland, with a peak in 2018.

Choices

DC Thomson decided to start with their newspaper The Courier in Dundee and plans to use the learnings to roll them out across their other titles. Their measure of success was to have 15,000 newsletter subscribers by the end of their TSE programme and gain 1,200 paid digital-only subscribers (the entire group had 1,000 digital subscribers when they started).

Their first task was to develop an understanding of their audience data in order to know who was reading what, when and for how long. The first lever of improvement was to increase what was working well and to identify weak points, as well as to stop doing things that really didn't work.

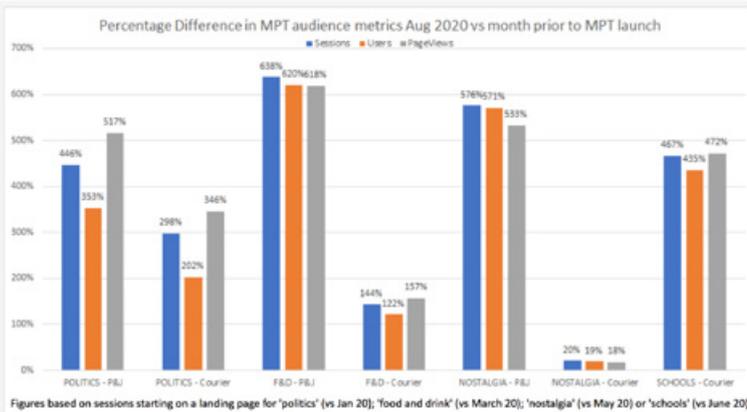
They formed mini-publisher teams to focus on the contents they wanted to develop following the concept of Table Stakes 7. “A mini-publisher team is filled with journalistic experts in a specific chosen field and their job is to super-serve their audience with brilliant content,” explains Richard Prest, Project Lead for Content Development at DC Thomson Media.

“It's as simple as that. And importantly as well, to serve that content how the audience wants it, primarily by mobile (Editor's note: in their case) and also when they want it”.

Each mini-publisher team has a team leader who sits at its centre and is there to act as a coach. “It's their job to inspire the team, and improve everybody's skills and knowledge to get the team to meet their goals as a team itself,” says Prest.

The team are the experts, the ones who should make key decisions about the content for their audience, he adds. They get support from the audience team, from content development and from product development, but ultimately, it's the journalists on the front line who understand their audience and should know best what to serve them.

“Those teams that we have set up so far include Impact, which is an investigations team, and we have a political team, Food & Drink, Schools, and also Nostalgia, which looks at local history and events and anniversaries,” he says. Mini-publishers teams in the Table Stakes concept don't only have their audiences in mind, they also have the company objectives so, as Prest continues: “We felt it was fundamental that each member of the team understands the entire company mission and why we are involved in subscriptions and reader revenue. So we spend quite a bit of time explaining the funnel, how subscriptions work, why we use them, and why this is going to be more successful going forward than the print model.”



“In Table Stakes we talk often about what we need to stop doing to achieve a performance challenge. In setting up mini-publisher teams, the most difficult part is sometimes to start doing: to select a promising audience and start producing content for that audience. DC Thomson got ahead of the game by jumping in from the very beginning,” says Nick Tjaardstra.

MPT in the graphic stands for mini-publisher team.

Each team gets data insights to help them follow the progress of what they are doing. They get their own dashboard with various metrics and a mini-publisher trend report that shows their aggregated performance, so they can see how they performed in the last month and months prior to that as well.

“We’re now managing to produce high-end video material. We’re toying with data visualisation and audio as well as our traditional stories,” says Prest. Once the content has been published on the digital platforms, when and where they can best reach their target audiences, then it is published in print. Today, DC Thomson has around 30 journalists working digital-first within their mini-publisher teams: “The ethos really comes from Table Stakes,” explains Prest, “which is digital-first, print later and better, with the rationale being that if you have really super focussed teams covering subjects particularly well, then the content that ultimately ends up in the printed product will be better.”

Outcome

The Courier ended the programme with 15,022 newsletter subscribers, including those for Politics, Food & Drink, Nostalgia that their mini-publishers teams started. Their sister paper The Press and Journal has also adopted mini-publisher organisation and they now have more than 26,000 subscribers to their newsletters. The Courier has 2,300 digital paid subscribers (their original target was 1,200) and the group has close to 8,000 digital subscribers in total.

Recently, they shared a reorganisation plan with their newsrooms: “Absolutely fundamental to us is that the mini publisher teams are right in the centre of the whole business. That’s the driving force, the heartbeat behind what we are trying to do. Everything from a live-news breaking team through to crime and courts, to transport and environment and entertainment.”

Support for these teams will continue as well as additional training when needed across areas such as audience management, audio-visual, content development, product, data insights and more.

Le Télégramme:

The power of empowerment – local mini-publisher teams with direct access to data colleagues

Context

Le Télégramme has always been recognised as one of the best regional daily newspapers in France. Its 150,000 print (home delivery) subscribers are loyal but ageing and Le Télégramme needs to speed up the acquisition of digital subscribers to fuel its growth again.

When Le Télégramme's team joined the TSE programme, it was with the realisation that its newsroom was too focused on print production and on covering information by geographical areas (where readers lived) without really knowing the people they were serving and the new audiences they could reach.

Their TSE challenge was to accelerate the growth of digital subscriptions to reach 30,000 digital subscribers by 2022 and, in the longer term, to recruit the 110,000 digital subscribers needed to finance its 220-strong newsroom.

Achieving these objectives meant mobilising all teams (journalists, marketing, IT, etc.) and adopting the TSE method to push back the boundaries faster and overcome internal resistance in order to give digital publishing the necessary focus.

Choices

They stopped considering their audience only from a geographic point of view and started to think audiences, identifying segments they want to pursue (following Table Stakes rule #1). They have defined 9 profiles (personae) they need to serve better. Each persona has a detailed description to help understand habits and information needs. Their understanding of segmentation evolved after the two first meetings in that they started with a very general segmentation and it became more precise and more actionable between the second and third meeting.

As a result, around February, they started to customize their newsletters to serve specific contents to those personae (versus sending news selected because they are in a local area). They adopted a design/do approach using their Lorient newsroom for experimentation. They created a targeted product (newsletter for a specific persona) for a targeted audience (30/40 years old, living in and around Lorient, employed, with children). They worked within a mini publisher principle (using TS#7): marketing and data worked closely with editorial to define the target and assess impact. They had clear quantifiable goals which they reviewed before expanding the experiment to other local editions.

The TSE team created the first mini-publisher structure (journalist, designer, marketing, IT, etc.) in Lorient. The team was enthusiastic about this way of working (breaking traditional organisation silos) and this, of course, helped spread the practice. During our June meeting, we learned that mini-publishers' teams were launched in three new local newsrooms and that the news verticals (e.g. on sailing) were also adopting the concept of cross-functional teams. They have also created expert groups in the newsroom to explore strong topics like health, economy, education.



Table Stakes provides a lot of opportunities for exchange between the participants. On the left of this photo, part of the Le Télégramme team is brainstorming with the Swiss team of Le Quotidien Jurassien.

Outcome

The Lorient newsletter showed a greater opening rate (50% versus 36% for the traditional newsletters) and higher registration than their other newsletters (#TSE4 funnel occasional users into loyal & paid subscribers), and they are confident it could help them get 1,000 new paid subscribers in this local area by the end of the year.

They started building awareness and skills across the newsroom on the digital content priorities (increasing the use of analytical dashboards across the newsroom) and redesigned their digital products. Those efforts had already increased their audience by January (+25% page views), and there was naturally a big surge in March and April as they deployed a very impressive mix of live Covid19 coverage and services to their readers (2 million page views a day, approximately doubling their average performance).

Their pilot local newsroom team in Lorient summarised the essential knowledge to work on the digital platforms in a digital Playbook with recaps on how to improve stories with high digital potential, how to create specific digital content, monitor the dashboards and the story clusters, create specific digital content (daily/weekly news roundup and evergreen stories, etc.), use data visualisation tools and so on. This digital playbook (and a video explainer) will be shared by the six local newsrooms and is better received as it concerns peer-to-peer recommendations.

Targeted local newsletters and mini-publishing structures are now “fine-tuned” according to the needs of all local bureaus and the specific personae they want to work on.



8 Tips for publishing companies

Stéphane Mayoux was Le Télégramme's coach during their Table Stakes year. He lists what he believes are actions they are taking that could be reproduced in other publishing companies:

- Identify and appoint digital specialists/contact people in every team.
- Make sure your challenge is first supported by pioneers/people who volunteer to carry it out.
- Analyse successes and learnings before expanding them, and then share results widely.
- Invite mini-publisher teams to explain their project to other teams. Peer-to-peer works best.
- Data teams must not be seen as suppliers only. They have to be treated as involved partners in digital transformation.
- Never give up. A good idea has three phases: first, it is rejected, then discussed, and finally accepted as obvious.
- Always work across silos: communicate without prejudice, without criticism, and with resilience.
- Offering clear objectives, properly timed skill support and TRUST to front-line teams pays off.

Le Parisien reorganises to better serve readers and drive digital subscriptions

Context

Le Parisien was the largest company in the first round of Table Stakes Europe with a newsroom of 440 journalists. The print newspaper is still by far the largest revenue generator for Le Parisien (90% of the revenue). However, with a steady annual decline in print paid circulation, the newspaper needs to gain 200,000 digital-only subscribers to offset the print decline and sustain its editorial ambitions.

They entered the programme in a “commando mode” with a clear objective to accelerate the company’s trajectory towards digital transformation. And a commando team was exactly what they sent to the different TSE meetings: the CEO, the publisher, the CDO, the Head of the Newsroom and the Circulation & Marketing Director.

Although they had already started their digital strategy before entering Table Stakes, the programme gave them a framework and tools to tackle their transformation project.

The Table Stakes team of the daily newspaper Le Parisien in great conversation with their coach Stéphane Mayoux and Doug Smith. The company’s CEO, publisher, CDO, Head of the Newsroom, and Circulation and Marketing Director attended TSE.



Thanks to the team's profiles, they were able to work in parallel on the different levers of success and with a level of collaboration between services probably never before achieved.

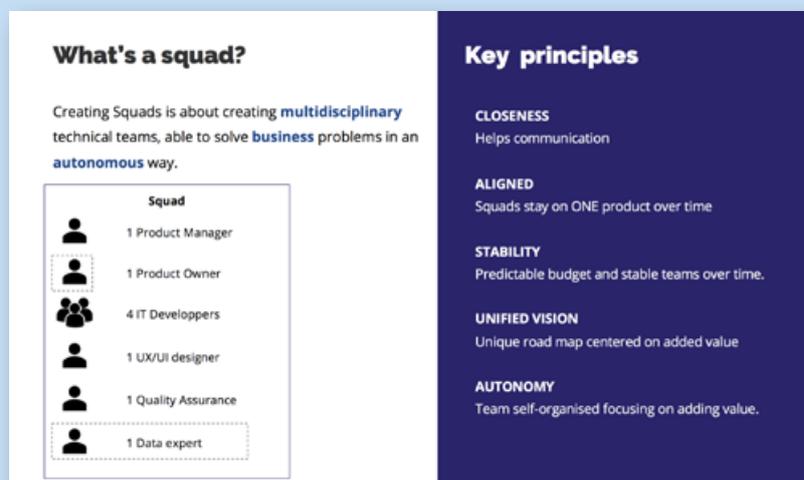
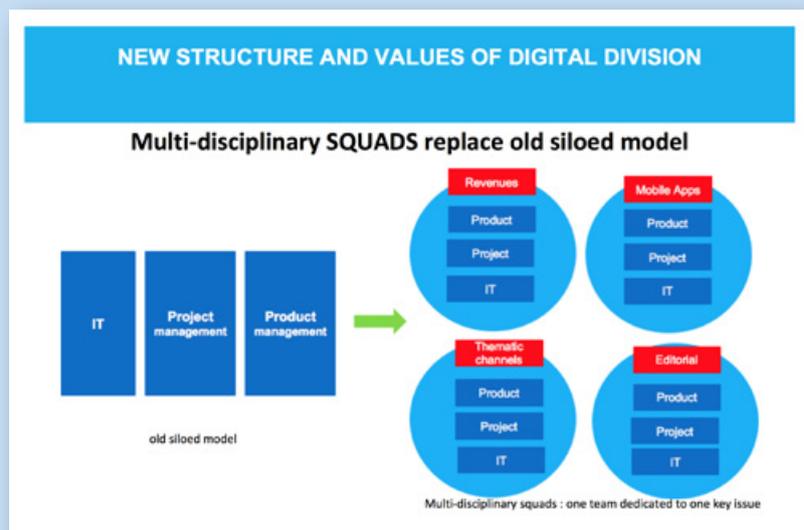
Their challenge touched on their editorial mission and newsroom organisation, their digital products and the subscription funnel. Quite a revolution, and as a matter of fact, they went public in June 2020 with the ambitious "Le Parisien 200,000" (their 2025 digital subscription target), not only to the newsroom but also to the outside world.

Choices

From the second TSE meeting in December 2019, Le Parisien's team had a fairly clear idea of what they wanted to achieve during their challenge. The first part of the project concerned the content. They wanted to increase their editorial value by offering solutions to the daily questions of their readers (on topics like education, purchasing power, a better understanding of national and international issues, etc.) and become more generally their readers' trusted spokespeople. They wanted also to feed their passions and become the favourite destination, from football fans to lovers of art.

The squads

■ Toward the end of the programme, **Le Parisien's** team presented to the other participants how they came up with an organisation that would allow them to keep that Design/do momentum and allow them to progress more rapidly while leading several projects in parallel. They called that "the squads". In a way, we could say that it's their adaptation of the mini-publisher concept. The Le Parisien squads inspired many of the other participants. The second graphic shows the description of what this organisation means at Le Parisien.



The team wanted to identify and serve better audience segments they identified as having high subscription potential (following the principle of Table Stakes #1). Equally crucial for the success of their challenge was to reorganise the newsroom for better digital production (digital platforms first, print later and better) and gradually implement a funnel culture, data and analytics, product management and developers across the newsroom (TS#2 and TS#3). Finally, they wanted to upgrade their digital platforms with a better UX for their website and apps. The redesign of their app was particularly strategic (launched in September 2020) as it is the main driver for new subscriptions.

Outcome

During their months in the TSE programme, Le Parisien's team decisively moved from generic editorial content to targeted content for segmented users, from print-focused skills set to specific digital competencies and from poor data to actionable dashboards within the newsroom.

They decided to produce fewer and better: prioritise contents with more digital impact – more engagement, more conversion with SMART goals for each desk. They identified that long reads, investigations, profiles, opinions were formats with high conversion potential and that they had to reinvent how they were covering local news, asking themselves how to increase value. This led, toward the end of the programme, to creating new teams and new positions so that they could cover editorial priorities with flexibility. A new organisation is still in process and that will include acquiring new skills in digital formats and a better understanding within the newsrooms of key data and shared performance indicators.

One thing that was obvious during their months working in TSE was how they took advantage of all the parts in the methodology that led to more agility in the way they conducted their projects.

They enthusiastically embraced the Design/do concept, and they were quick to execute new ideas, learn and adjust. It was particularly interesting in how they started to work on their newsletters, implementing new ones for specific audiences segments and adapting rapidly when Covid became the central focus for their audience.

Another discipline in Table Stakes is called Stop doing. In a nutshell, you should stop doing things that are less efficient for your objectives in order to free up time for what's core. Making these kinds of choices can be difficult, and they targeted one of the most sensitive areas for a regional newspaper, the way they were covering local news. Their decision to reduce local city news was much discussed by the newsroom and not easy to establish, but they took it because they can't do everything and their priority was to think about audiences and start targeting some communities with content specific to them.

When Le Parisien joined TSE in October 2019, it had 25,000 digital-only subscribers. Their goal was to use their TSE challenge and grow more rapidly, with a target set at 100K digital subscribers by January 2022. In June 2020, the growth of its digital subscriptions was 60% compared to their October 2019 level, with acceleration in March-April during the peak of the Covid-19 crisis in France. At the June meeting, the team presented a very detailed action plan to keep the new subscribers loyal to their brand. By December 2020 they will probably be half-way to their end of 2022 goal. But more importantly, they now have a clear idea of how to act on their destiny. Their 2025 goal is "aggressive yet achievable," as Doug Smith would say.

How ARA tackled their gaps decisively

Context

Barcelona-based news brand ARA launched in 2010. They publish a print newspaper and have a digital presence (website and apps) with [ara.cat](#). ARA has editions in Catalonia, Andorra, Girona, Tarragona, Lleida, Balearic Islands and Valencia. There is also ARA in Spanish and a selection of articles in English.

ARA has had a reader revenue model from the start, but began using a paywall model in 2015, which made it unique in Spain at that time. More than 63% of their revenue already comes from readers and, above all, subscriptions (40,000 when they started the programme), split equally between digital and print.

ARA's first years were quite eventful with the roll-out of local editions, a paywall, specific vertical communities with information on parenting, economics, pop culture, automobile, science, gastronomy and a TV station. All this has been achieved with a relatively small team (128 employees of which 103 are journalists).

As the company was preparing to start its second decade, Table Stakes came at the right moment to help them carry out an internal "health check" and identify (or confirm) what they could improve on central issues to help them thrive: did they have the right workflow in the newsroom? Was their content relevant enough? How well did they know their audiences? Could they grow their subscriptions?

ARA had a clear goal of increasing digital subscriptions by 15% at the end of their Table Stakes programme. And, above all, to "be audienceS first" as they wrote in their challenge statement. By this, they meant to provide their readers with unique, rich and valuable content, for which they would be willing to pay.

Choices

As Doug Smith often says, understanding the problem is already half the solution. In the Table Stakes method, it all starts with gap analysis, identifying the publisher's performance against the criteria listed in the 7 Table Stakes, with a particular focus on those relevant to the publisher's challenge.

ARA identified gaps in the way it served target audiences with targeted content. For example, they quickly realised that they had a "production gap": only 26% of the news they published really reached an audience (80% of the audience in fact). Moreover, their analysis showed that their newsroom workflow was too print-focused and that the editorial organisation did not allow them to deliver content on their digital platforms where and when their audience needed it during the day.

Another gap was in the subscription process: there were too many ways to avoid their metered paywall. They were not using the wealth of data they had on their readers and subscribers and were aware that they could improve payment possibilities.



The Ara's Table Stakes team at the third workshop in February 2020. As ARA prepared to enter its second decade of existence, Table Stakes came at the right time to help them focus on the core issues to go to that next level.

Outcome

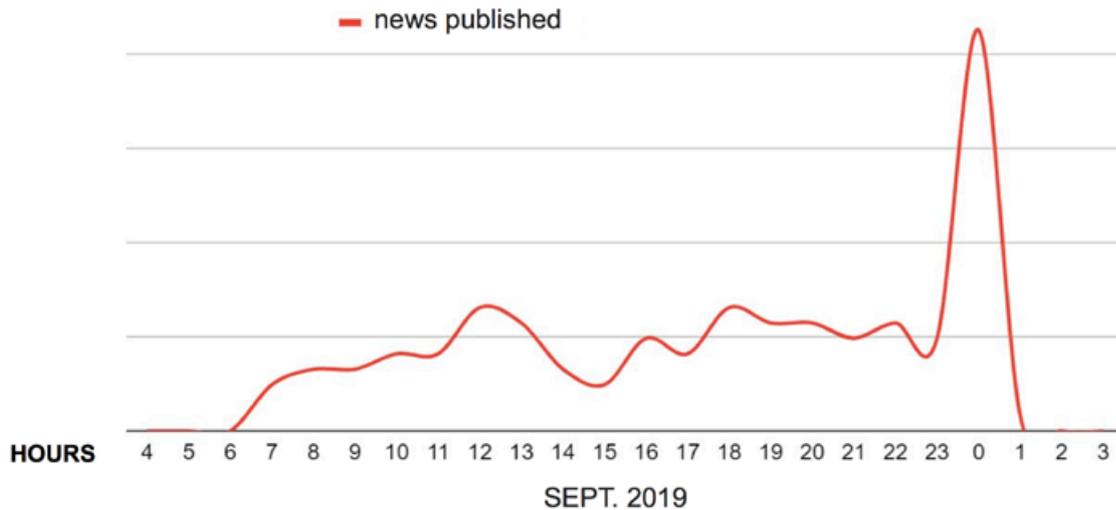
For ARA, a crucial element of their success in recent months has been to focus more on the content they create. With the Table Stakes Europe project, they started to use more data and analyse the behaviour of their audiences. First, they set up a dashboard that would provide more than just a binary view of their users: those who pay and those who don't pay. They segmented the one view on which they had the most data, the subscribers, to measure their usage habits and favourite topics, while at the same time assessing those who were more likely to churn. For non-paying users, they had less accurate data, so they set up a registration wall to refine their understanding and start taking measures to increase their usage. An in-depth analysis of their top 10 editorial sections in terms of users, visits and page views enabled them to identify the potential of their "Opinion" section to build loyalty.

They decided to make these articles accessible only to registered readers. As a result, they increased the number of newly registered users by 169% and the number of sessions logged in by registered users by 20%.

Step by step, they reduced the number of articles they produced and focused on increasing the amount of content read by at least 80% of users from 26% to 40%.

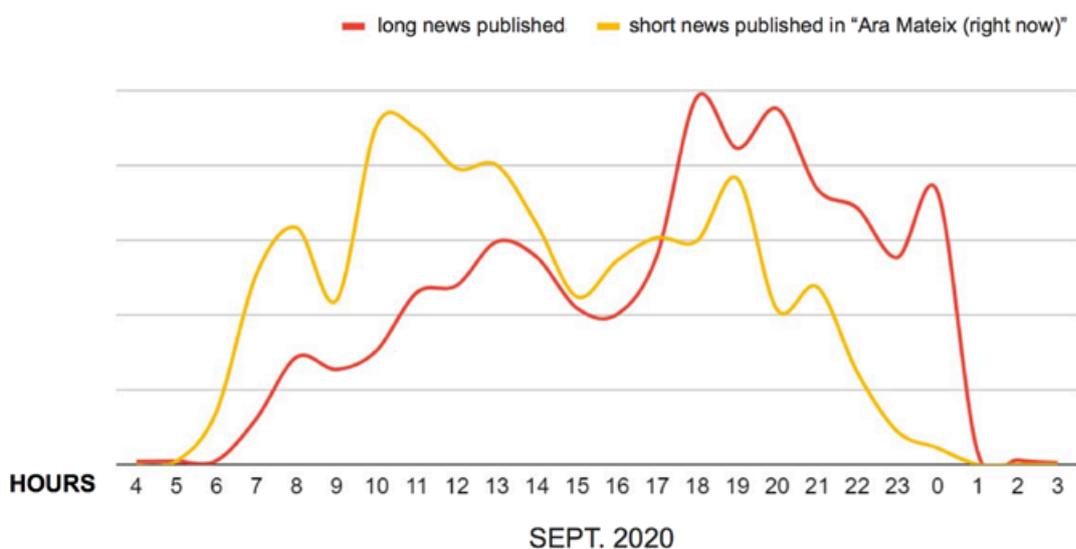
They also changed the timing of publication. A long effort that resulted in a mix of short news items and longer articles published throughout the day on their digital channels. The team also worked on indicators and dashboards to help each journalist understand the interests of the audiences they had defined. Although this work is still in progress, the aim is to help them add value to the stories their audiences want and ultimately decide whether they should stop doing some of the content, in other words, produce less but better.

DAILY PRODUCTION BY HOURS BEFORE TSE (SEPTEMBER 2019)



ARA identified gaps in the way it served target audiences with targeted content. Moreover, their analysis showed that their newsroom workflow was too print-focused and that the editorial organisation did not allow them to deliver content on their digital platforms where and when their audience needed it during the day. Between the start of the programme in 2019 and summer 2020 they changed the timing of publication. A concerted effort that resulted in a mix of short news items and longer articles published throughout the day on their digital channels.

DAILY PRODUCTION BY HOURS AFTER TSE (SEPTEMBER 2020)



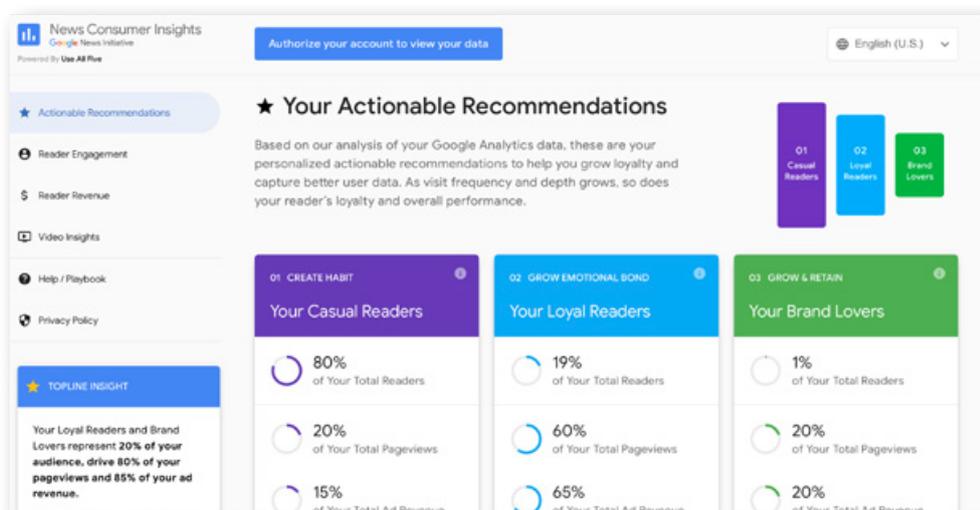
In addition, the ARA data team has reproduced the RFV (Recency is for when users last visited? Frequency for how often do they visit? And Volume for how many articles have they read?) system created by the Financial Times and now they can predict new acquisitions with 85% reliability and churn with 65% reliability. As we know, this can only be an ongoing project, one that must be continuously refined and adapted.

The ARA team would likely say there is still a lot to be done as their ambition has grown with the possibilities they have seen through using the data and asking themselves the right questions.

“Now we want to bring data to our newsrooms to produce more for our target audiences. We need to produce less, and the content we produce, we want to make it more attractive to our audiences. We want to increase our subscriber base, and we want to reduce our churn. It’s not that high, but we want to reduce it further. We want to find out where the gap between our subscribers’ expectations and our production is, and then we’re going to renew all our digital channels, so that’s our plan for next year,” says Georgina Ferri, Chief Innovation and Revenue Officer at ARA.

They also have set ambitious targets for the next few years, one of them is to reach 19 million users by 2022. And, with the funnel they have built these last months, to convert as many of these unique users as possible into registered readers and paid subscribers.

Benchmark your data, plus relevant reports and other resources from the Google News Initiative toolbox

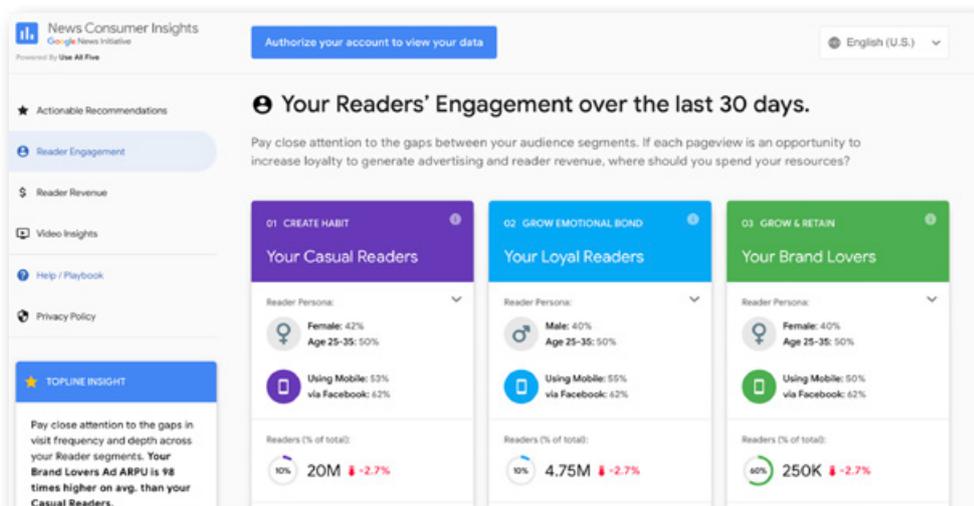


News Consumer Insights (NCI)

News Consumer Insights (NCI) helps publishers make data-driven business decisions that increase profitability and build deeper relationships with their readers. Through a data framework and decision engine designed exclusively for News Publishers, NCI provides key insights and actionable recommendations based on a publisher's Google Analytics account to help grow Reader engagement and Reader revenue.

What's new in News Consumer Insights:

- 1. The Decision Engine to deliver personalized recommendations** will deliver personalized actionable recommendations based on your Google Analytics data so you don't have to spend time analyzing insights.
- 2. New insights to grow overall performance.** The Reader Revenue page provides deep insights to optimize the conversion rates or any goal you might have in Google Analytics. The "Video Insights" page will allow you to maximize video content consumption across your site and audience.
- 3. New value metrics:** Advertising Revenue and Average Ad Revenue per User. If you have Google Analytics 360 connected to Ad Manager, it will populate your Advertising Revenue and Average Ad Revenue per User (ARPU) throughout the tool to better inform value. If you don't have Google Analytics 360, you'll have the option to enter average CPMs/RPMs per device to allow us to show estimated Ad Revenue and estimated Average Ad Revenue per User (ARPU).

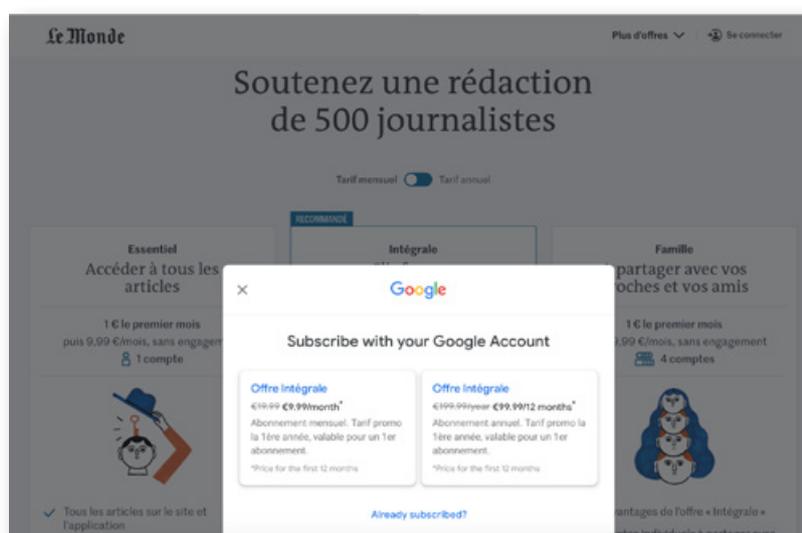


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Subscribe with Google is a platform designed to help publishers drive conversions and engage existing subscribers across Google and the web.

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After subscribing, the users will be able to access their subscription content whenever they’re signed in to their Google account. Paying for a subscription is a clear indication that people value and trust a publication as a source. So Google will also highlight those sources across Google surfaces, beginning with a dedicated module on Search. When someone searches for a news topic for which his/her subscribed publication has relevant results, Google will showcase these so they’re easy to see and access—without disrupting search ranking for the rest of the page.



The Google News Initiative (GNI) Reader Revenue Playbook

The Google News Initiative (GNI) Reader Revenue Playbook and its accompanying exercises are meant to help news organisations address the strategic and tactical decisions required for building and strengthening a digital reader revenue model.

The playbook, exercises, and workshops are informed by insights from more than 50 publishers around the world and represent their collective expertise, as well as that of the expert authors in the GNI team.



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