

# *Decoding news media relevance and engagement through reputation, visibility and audience loyalty: a scoping review*

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## **Abstract**

The sustainability of the news media is a priority for democratic societies; yet, in the hypercompetitive digital world, they are losing relevance and face the forbidding challenge of public disengagement as trust in the news wanes. Boosting media relevance and engagement are critical in this quest for sustainability. Still, there are clear opportunities to enhance their specification. We seek to illustrate how they can be operationalised by fostering three of the industry's key dimensions: reputation, visibility and audience loyalty. The first two dimensions are explicitly related to relevance, while the third enables us to be unequivocal when addressing the multifaceted concept of engagement. To operationalise these dimensions, we first perform a scoping review of reports published by the industry's think tanks and, then, categorise the best practices they recommend. Three critical issues emerge from this exercise: 1) the careful management of staff and resources to meet the demands of digitalisation, 2) the strength of the ties between reputation and loyalty, and 3) the powerful relationship between visibility and organisational size. Ultimately, news

media face the challenge of ensuring their staff and resources effectively address the task of maximising reach while guaranteeing a user-centred focus that can generate social impact.

**Keywords:** news media, relevance, engagement, reputation, visibility, loyalty, reach, trust in news, media digitalisation.

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## Introduction

Boosting media relevance and engagement are at the heart of the debate centred on new business models that can guarantee the economic sustainability of the news media sector. The concern for relevance is justified by the relative loss of public trust in the media (Newman et al., 2022) and in their ability to interpret reality and shape opinion (Gundlach & Hofmann, 2020); the concern for engagement reflects the need to build audience loyalty and secure its monetisation, through subscriptions and advertising (Nelson & Tandoc, 2019).

The academic perspective on these concepts, as analysed by Castells-Fos et al. (2022), points, on the one hand, to their richness and, on the other, to the need to operationalise them in the day-to-day activity of the media to enhance the sector's financial prospects. For these reasons, the present study seeks to define the concepts of relevance and engagement, which at times might appear highly abstract, by using three dimensions that are more readily interpreted operationally: that is, media reputation, visibility and audience loyalty.

In the theoretical framework developed herein, the evidence underpinning this decision to convert the relevance-engagement *binomial* into the reputation-visibility-audience loyalty *triad* is presented. We show how these first two dimensions – reputation and visibility – are explicitly related to relevance, while the third – audience loyalty – enables us to be unequivocal when addressing the multifaceted concept of engagement.

In considering how these three dimensions form part of the professional practice of journalism, we analyse the global vision of the industry by the sector's think tanks, that is, institutions or groups of experts – veritable laboratories of ideas – that work to promote the media as sustainable organisations. These institutions shed light on the professional practice of the news media and are, generally, much more accessible than the media outlets themselves. At the same time, by exploiting a *scoping review* methodology, we can gather data on the insights and proposals of these think tanks for three main geographical areas: Europe, Latin America and the United States.

To address our stated objectives, we pose the following research questions:

1. How do the newspaper industry's think tanks address the question of the news media's reputation?
2. Can a system of indicators of news media reputation be identified?
3. How do the think tanks address the question of the visibility of the news media?
4. Can a system of indicators of news media visibility be identified?
5. How do the think tanks address the question of audience loyalty?
6. Can a system of indicators of news media loyalty be identified?

The rest of this study is organised as follows. In developing our theoretical framework, we present a state-of-the-art of the key concepts of relevance and engagement. In so doing, we highlight the convenience of focusing their analysis on the three key dimensions of reputation, visibility and loyalty. We then outline the method employed for selecting the evidence base that underpins this study: the reports published by the news media think tanks. We employ this evidence to derive our results. The study concludes with a discussion of these findings and a presentation of our conclusions.

## Theoretical framework

The primary impact of digitalisation, especially since the appearance of social networks, is the loss of the audience monopoly that the news media previously enjoyed (Myllylahti, 2020). The advent of the Internet has transformed how information today is produced and consumed (Villafañe et al., 2020) and an environment of intense competition for user attention has been created (Lehtisaari & Grönlund, 2018). The crisis that has hit the sector's business model is a result of this loss of relevance suffered by the news media as a platform for advertising (Maestro Espínola et al., 2016). Relevance as an object of study is, first and foremost, largely unequivocal, being concerned with media visibility in the digital environment. Moreover, this visibility is intricately tied to brand relevance since a strong brand guarantees visibility in a hypercompetitive environment (Krebs et al., 2020).

Digitalisation has changed how users access the news media, as the rules controlling natural positioning in search engines have conditioned their findability. Indeed, Gundlach and Hofmann (2020) stress that relevance – expressed in the volume of search queries carried out with a particular brand name – favours visibility in search engines such as Google. In this way, the brand manages to endow all the content of that news media company with greater relevance (Bakshi & Mishra, 2016).

Yet, visibility alone does not generate a sustainable audience. Social networks can furnish large but not, necessarily, loyal audiences (Chen & Pain, 2019). For a news media organisation to be relevant, it must be visible. However, it must also possess a series of other attributes that have been identified, primarily, as credibility and trust. Recently, Villafañe et al. (2020), in a study of the reputation of Spanish digital newspapers, examine these two attributes which they consider indicative of “quality” or “model” newspapers.

The credibility of a medium is reinforced by its evolution over time, in short, by its history. As Villafañe et al. (2020) stress, this is consistent with the theory of reputation, since time is necessary for a reputation to consolidate. Similarly, Bakshi and Mishra (2016) identify the dimensions of credibility, entertainment, ideology, and localisation as those that positively impact a media outlet's perception.

The concept of trust is also linked to a media brand's reputation, which shields them from an environment of increasing polarisation and misinformation (Newman et al., 2022). Brands function as anchors of public trust and can boost the willingness to pay (Vara-Miguel, 2020). Kim et al. (2020) likewise stress the importance of reputation in the degree of trust generated by the media, while brand value management is identified as necessary for a firm seeking to retain its relevance and prestige (Victoria-Mas & Lacasa-Mas, 2015).

Based on this evidence, we break the concept of relevance into these two dimensions: visibility and reputation. The former is widely present in the literature, especially regarding analyses of media brands and their impact on findability. Indeed, by focusing on this dimension of relevance separately, we can imbue our analysis here with greater clarity. The other aspects of relevance we consider in this theoretical framework – primarily credibility, trust and the consolidation of a brand over time – are best captured by the dimension of reputation (see the discussion in this regard in Villafañe et al., 2020).

In the case of engagement, studies of this concept and related literature reviews present a broad range of definitions in terms of distinct levels, phases, gradations, even opposites, centred on audiences and their behaviour. At one extreme of this spectrum, we find the interpretation of engagement as salvation from financial ruin for the for-profit media (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2019). Having a loyal audience – and here the bigger the better – allows the digital newspaper to sell both subscriptions and advertising (Lehtisaari et al., 2018).

At the other extreme, engagement is analysed within the theoretical framework of participatory journalism. Here, Lawrence et al. (2018) map out an engagement practices proposal which identifies active and/or passive users in the production and/or reception of news. Chen and Pain (2019) analyse user behaviour from the simple exposure of the audience to its interaction with the news, while Ha et al. (2018) examine the concept based on four levels – exposure to the news, the use of various platforms, news sharing and participation – considered, that is, from the lowest to the highest degree of engagement and from the involvement of a greater to a lesser number of users, where the latter move between these levels depending on the degree of their political or social commitment.

Belair-Gagnon et al. (2019) speak of professionals who differentiate between online engagement – a transactional phenomenon oriented towards audience metrics – and face-to-face engagement – a relational phenomenon focused on regaining public trust. One study that stands out here is the systematic review reported by Nelson (2019), in which the author identifies two visions of engagement: one oriented to news production – in which the audience creates content or proposes newsworthy material – and the other oriented to news reception – which involves measuring time consumption and social media interactions.

Given the multifaceted nature of engagement, we have opted to base our analysis on the facet that has the strongest links with the economic viability of the news media, that is, audience loyalty. In line with Belair-Gagnon et al. (2019) and Lehtisaari et al. (2018), we focus our attention on this facet of engagement, which aims to create a loyal audience for its subsequent monetisation in the form of subscriptions or advertising.

To conclude this theoretical framework, the study reported here seeks to discover the operative, actionable versions of relevance – by analysing, on the one hand, media brand visibility and, on the other, its reputation, a concept based primarily on the trust and credibility that the firm must generate among its audience so that it can fulfil its social function of informing the public and monitoring power (Nelson, 2019) – and engagement – by focusing on audience loyalty, the facet most closely related to the generation of sustainable business models for the digital news media.

## Materials and methods

We performed a literature review by undertaking a scoping study, given the capacity of this methodological framework to provide an exploratory examination of a field of knowledge (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005). More specifically, we analysed industry reports, a class of materials referred to as “grey literature”, a body of evidence made up of reports published by the leading international think tanks operating in the journalism sector.

We adhered to the SALSA framework to design this scoping review and followed the approach described by Popay et al. (2006) to design the analytic schemes and conduct the narrative synthesis. Subsequently, we employed the PRISMA framework to verify the quality of the entire process (Tricco et al., 2018). Table 1 below presents the main components of our scoping review.

**Table 1:** Characterisation of the literature review using SALSA

Phase	Explanation
SEARCH	Identification of the leading think tanks concerned with the financial sustainability of journalism as their sole mission or among their main research interests. Identification of reports published between January 2020 and March 2022.
APPRAISAL	Selection of reports that meet the inclusion and exclusion criteria (n=22), based primarily on date of publication, topic, report format and being free to download.  Note the exclusion criteria are applied to the reports rather than to the think tanks publishing them. In this way, we prioritise content over a specific geographical or ideological distribution in the final data set.
ANALYSIS	Application of a systematic analytic scheme
SYNTHESIS	Presentation using tables and narrative synthesis

To draw up the list of institutions for inclusion in our analysis, we began by considering the content curation carried out by the Cybermedia Observatory of the Pompeu Fabra University (UPF). The final list of centres was further enriched by employing several additional methods, including expert consultation and Google verification searches. The data set comprises 14 reports from seven centres in the United States, four reports from three centres in Europe, two reports from two centres in Latin America, and two reports published by two centres with offices in several countries/continents. The reports are written in either English (17) or Spanish (5).

Initially, we recorded all the best practices identified in each report. The objective was to categorise the results inductively before proceeding to their interpretation. In this process, the best practices were classified as actions or metrics. Note that the term “action” includes all the best practices

identified in the reports that can be considered proposals for experimentation or being tactical or strategic. This differentiation allowed us to organise our results around the research questions addressed.

The actions and metrics can potentially impact one or more of the dimensions studied (i.e. reputation, visibility and loyalty). For example, 'experimenting with innovative formats' can strengthen any of these three dimensions. For this reason, the 270 best practices listed in the document generate up to 318 possible actions or metrics that might positively affect a news media outlet's reputation, visibility and audience loyalty. Further, affecting more than one dimension indicates a best practice's broader impact, as does the number of times it is mentioned (i.e. its frequency) in the reports. Finally, we grouped the resulting categories into five guiding principles, which serve as the basis for presenting our conclusions.

## Results

Below, we provide a general overview of the main issues addressed in the reports reviewed, and then we present the core of best practices and their categorisation.

### *Digital transformation*

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated digitalisation around the globe, and the news media have not escaped this trend (Evolok, 2021). Although they have suffered reductions in advertising revenues that have exacerbated this crisis (Radcliffe & Wallace, 2021), they have also benefited from a revival in public attention (Roseman, McLellan, & Holcomb, 2021). This triple effect – the acceleration of digitalisation, the further drop in advertising revenues and audience growth – constituted a turning point towards direct audience monetisation (Espada, 2021).

Many of the best practices identified in the reports apply to any digitalisation process, regardless of sector. The American Press Institute, for example, analyses how customer service can help grow audience loyalty (Li, 2021). Similarly, another report by the same Institute identifies best practices that apply to any company seeking to improve its results by enhancing customer experience and subscriber retention, such as solving online payment problems (Sonderman & Vargo, 2021).

A Press Gazette report analyses paywall evolution, comparing the situation in the developed world with that in developing countries. This evolution has extremely little to do with the work of journalists or the challenges they face. While the hazards of mobile payments stand out in developing countries as an essential obstacle to developing a subscriber base, developed countries emphasise dynamic paywalls and a greater focus on UX (user experience) (Evolok, 2021).

WAN-IFRA provides another perspective, focused on cultural change, and highlights its four main drivers: user centricism, a digital product development mindset, effective leadership and a data-driven strategy (Schulte, 2021). Similarly, the Tow Center for Digital Journalism presents a case study of a membership program launch. It addresses such ideas as the start-up mindset, the 'fail fast' concept to correct and iterate faster, and the focus on the consumer experience to guide product definition (McKisson & Pallack, 2021).

### *The specific nature of journalism*

Although some of the best practices apply to a broader set of companies, the reports insist on journalism as offering an essentially different content due to its social function. The WAN-IFRA report advocates this differentiation, arguing that news organisations should aim at effectively combining what the data tell them about audience preferences with their journalistic "instinct" (Schulte, 2021).

Newsrooms are reluctant to adopt a data culture because they fear the data will decide what is and is not news. The think tanks analysed, though, seek to introduce newsrooms to a data culture, knowing this is unlikely ever to take root if not put at the service of journalism's mission (Piechota, 2022). Therefore, a cultural change is required rather than a change of newsroom leadership. The path forward requires aligning the data with the journalistic mission, embracing a new way of covering the news (Schulte, 2021).

### *Metrics for complex concepts*

Experimenting with metrics has been part and parcel of the news media digitalisation process. The Membership Puzzle Project report concludes that no single metric is sufficiently informative to guide the sector, but that this task requires a whole set of metrics (Grover & Kho, 2021). The answer lies in a holistic view of the data and various quantitative and qualitative measurement tools. This combination should help bridge the media's knowledge gap when confronted with what seems impossible to measure, specifically "the impact of journalism on individuals and society" (Piechota, 2022).

Sembramedia reports the media's concern for measuring their impact: 70% of respondents claim to measure their impact somehow but are aware of their clumsiness (Iastrebner, Warner, & Best, 2021). Their concern again is related to the fulfilment of their mission. The culture of user-centred data unsettles journalists who advocate striking a balance between what users demand and their journalistic instinct for deciding what constitutes news (Schulte, 2021).

### *Rebuilding public trust*

According to the Digital News Report survey (Amoedo et al., 2021), falling trust in the news constitutes the sector's severest challenge. However, this general loss of trust has had a positive impact on those leading media brands that have been able to consolidate their position as quality benchmarks. The same report states that, for some media outlets, trust is being undermined by growing polarisation. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, this situation has continued; yet, we find a surge in trust in the local media. Thus, while audience polarisation erodes reputations, proximity serves to promote them.

Beyond the political meddling and economic interests that generate public mistrust in the news, the sector faces various risks that it must address urgently to avoid further exacerbating the public's disconnection with the news (Newman et al., 2022). Thus, Guzik et al. (2022) signal the liability

freelance journalists represent as a possible source of disinformation, as they may lack the resources to contrast their sources.

### ***Experimentation to maximise reach***

The reports analysed deem it critical to maximise digital visibility. Two studies conducted by the Pew Research Center publish media consumption data that focus on the evolution in news access and stress the importance of web pages, apps, search engines, and the surge in podcast audiences (Matsa & Naseer, 2021; Stocking & Khuzam, 2021).

The news media reproduce their presence on digital platforms by multiplying formats and adopting strategies such as incorporating firms from the *creator economy* (Iastrebner, Warner, & Best, 2021). Journalists sometimes believe their digital presence satisfies a marketing approach more than user needs; yet, they consider it necessary and accept the challenge of adapting journalistic content to entertainment platforms, such as TikTok (Espada, 2021).

News consumption is also examined qualitatively. Each social network is associated with a different use: incidental news consumption on Facebook, passing the time on Instagram, and a more proactive form of consumption on Twitter (Amoedo et al., 2021). Encrypted messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram represent a new channel. While they can provide secure access to news, these applications are not suited to large-scale distribution, so their use has been much more punctual (Oliver, 2022).

### ***The ceiling on subscriptions***

In the annual survey conducted by the Reuters Institute, only 17% of respondents said they paid for news. Norway, Finland and Sweden are the exceptions, with 45, 30 and 20% of paying readers, respectively (Newman et al., 2021). Sembramedia cites a 2020 study on subscription models in Latin America where 13% of those surveyed declared paying at least one subscription service (Iastrebner, Warner, & Best, 2021).

Therefore, the news media must cater to their most loyal user base and ensure they complete the conversion funnel that leads to subscription or membership payments. A report by the Membership Puzzle Project offers a bench study of community building, showing that if communities are highly engaged, this engagement can increase the subscriber base (Grover & Kho, 2021). In a foreseeable scenario of subscriber fatigue (Newman, 2021), reputation and loyalty will be even more consequential in avoiding the loss of paying users.

### ***User loyalty based on reputation***

The Gabo Foundation report describes a broad proximate concept of reputation. For digital natives who cannot claim years of experience, reputation involves mobilising citizens and the political and legal changes they might inspire (Espada, 2021). Likewise, the Institute for Nonprofit News comes to a similar conclusion: the non-profit media have a different understanding of reputation from that of the commercial media, prioritising depth over diversity in the topics they cover, seeking audience



loyalty and satisfying their needs (Roseman, McLellan, & Holcomb, 2021). Their way of boosting reputation is the same as seeking audience loyalty.

As for long-established legacy brands, their reputations help consolidate their standing as the industry's authorities and, thus, they concentrate the majority of subscriptions (Amoedo et al., 2021). Nevertheless, according to the same study, the local media have emerged strengthened from the pandemic as reference points for news proximity and loyalty.

### *The view of advertisers*

The Local Media Consortium analyses advertisers' needs and expectations concerning local media. For the local media to be more attractive as an advertising platform, they must ensure their commercial staff are well-versed in the digital environment. By so doing, they can generate greater trust among agencies and advertisers (Day & Wills, 2020). Although the smaller relative audience size is an obstacle (Iastrebner, Warner, & Best, 2021), with greater transparency and analytical depth, advertisers are willing to invest in local media because of their proximity to their audiences. The overriding motive is to present their goods and services in trusted settings (Day & Wills, 2020).

Despite being a relatively under-analysed topic, a *cookieless* world emerges as an opportunity (Newman, 2021). Without third-party cookies, the news media can regain their position as a reliable source of information for advertisers and avoid going through programmatic agencies. The ADEPA report follows this train of thought. However, it stresses the technological requirements this opportunity demands, which are only within reach of the most extensive media groups (ADEPA, 2022).

### *Media size matters*

Not only does the size of a news media outlet, measured in terms of its audience, attract advertisers, but it also influences sustainability. Two studies report a similar percentage of audience – standing at somewhere between 12–13% – paying for their news (Amoedo et al., 2021; Iastrebner, Warner, & Best, 2021). This indicates that a critical mass is needed to generate a sustainable source of income.

When a media outlet has specialised resources, it yields better results. The State of Nonprofit News report notes that bigger non-profit media outlets with a dedicated donation team capture larger donations (Roseman, McLellan, & Holcomb, 2021). Large donors, in turn, make their most generous donations to media outlets with more years of experience and associated reputation.

Technological resources determine the media's ability to process their user database, as in the case of personalisation, with 80% of the major news media companies offering personalised content for their users compared to just 41% if we consider the whole of the population analysed (Li, 2021). Indeed, data are a paradigmatic example of the relationship between size and results. The larger they grow, the more valuable databases become, as the patterns they identify are better informed (Iastrebner, Warner, & Best, 2021).

## Challenges and trends

The trends and predictions report (Newman, 2021) published by the Reuters Institute points to a greater concentration of ownership in the sector, a trend that journalists see as a threat to long-term sustainability. Regarding subscriptions, two contradictory challenges emerge: on the one hand, subscription fatigue; and, on the other, the risk of reducing the informed public to a handful of affluent and educated subscribers (Newman, 2021).

The Future Today Institute report analyses professionals' concerns and the public's perceptions (Guzik, 2022). News media professionals worry about the evolution of legacy structures, especially print newspapers and radio. The challenges to face are the recovery of public trust, user experience, addressing staff turnover problems, and developing new business models.

Staffing concerns are observed in the Local Media Consortium report (Day & Wills, 2020), with advertisers warning that the lack of preparation of the media's sales team is a brake on advertising investment. The Sembramedia report highlights the need for dedicated advertising, sales and technology teams (Iastrebner, Warner, & Best, 2021). In the same vein, it recommends focusing on two or three revenue sources for efficiency so as not to spread its technological, economic and human resources too widely.

Finally, the Tow Center report also mentions ownership concentration in large corporations with a short-term profit orientation as a risk to facing the necessary investments in digitalisation (Radcliffe & Wallace, 2021). The authors identify three further challenges: attracting younger audiences, audience engagement and providing diversity in their news coverage. In general, the respondents claim that news media should strive to be more objective.

## Best practices

We present a summary of the best practices extracted from the reports (see Table 2), categorised according to their impact on the three dimensions analysed: reputation, visibility and audience loyalty. A best practice can affect more than one dimension, so they have been counted as many times as the dimensions impacted. So, the 270 individual best practices provide an overall total of 318. We group the 270 best practices into 70 categories, with the first ten categories – listed below – accounting for more than half the best practices.

**Table 2:** Best practices assigned to the first ten categories

CATEGORISATION	Individual best practices included	
	Nº	%
Multiply and innovate formats	38	14.1
Automate and personalise content	15	5.6

Analyse user behaviour	14	5.2
Publish exclusive content	13	4.8
Measure number of interactions	13	4.8
Measure number of members mobilised	12	4.4
Gather audience feedback	10	3.7
Provide management tools	9	3.3
Improve user website experience	9	3.3
Understand reasons for subscription cancellations	8	3.0
Total number of best practices in top ten categories	141	52.2

Content automation and personalisation account for 15 best practices that use artificial intelligence for simple content curation and distribution. Personalisation is based on user behaviour analysis, which accounts for 5% of best practices with proposals for both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Following it, exclusive content in the form of non-journalistic products or events consolidates the idea that the best practices tend to focus on user loyalty.

Ranking fifth and sixth appear two metrics: measuring the number of interactions and the number of members mobilised, which once again reinforces the turn to the user. Only two categories in the table have a distinct focus to that of the user: “management tools” and “continuous improvement of UX”, which account for 6.6% of the recommended best practices. “Management tools” addresses the need to provide teams with technological tools to manage digital processes such as audience segmentation. Improving user experience is a concept that is gaining ground as it positively impacts audience loyalty and media visibility.

Of the best practices, 63% can be classed as actions and 37% as metrics. Thus, there is not always a one-to-one ratio between actions and metrics; for example, there may be several actions aimed at improving UX that are captured by a sole retention metric. The 75:25 ratio concerning visibility in the table below (Table 3) reinforces this idea – only one measure, the number of pageviews, serves many visibility actions. Here, the concentration of good practices around the dimension of loyalty is of utmost interest, accounting for 55% of the contributions and being consistent with the turn towards the user and their direct monetisation.

**Table 3:** Multiple best practices classified by actions and metrics according to the dimension they seek to enhance

Best practices	Nº of actions	Nº of metrics	Total	% of actions	% of metrics
Reputation	29	39	68	42	58
Visibility	56	19	75	75	25
Loyalty	115	60	175	66	34
Total	200	118	318	63	37

### *Actions by dimension analysed*

Below we list the categories ordered following our research questions. The most frequently mentioned proposals for enhancing reputation are editorial focus and the prestige of its collaborators (Table 4). We also find traditional methods, such as applying for awards, transparency and objectivity, alongside new approaches, such as those related to community participation (gathering audience feedback and creating a community), UX improvement and a product development focus.

**Table 4:** Actions proposed to enhance reputation

Type of action	Nº of mentions
Clarify editorial focus: fewer topics addressed in greater depth	4
Enhance the prestige of authors (journalists, influencers, creators)	3
Analyse user behaviour	2
Automate and personalise content	2
Collaborate with other media outlets	2
Build a brand and a unique positioning	2
Focus on product development	2
Multiply and innovate formats	2
Promote participation	2
Gather audience feedback	2
Bring technology to the public	1

Apply for journalism awards	1
Promote proximity	1
Create a community	1
Improve user website experience	1
Practice transparency	1
Total	29

The following two tables (5 and 6) categorise the actions to enhance visibility and loyalty. Regarding visibility, 46% of the actions involve format innovations. As maximising reach is the primary objective here, most proposals are journalistic byproducts, such as format variation, SEO and content automation. Format innovations are again the main actions proposed for enhancing user loyalty (16%), as the news media try to adapt to audience needs and expectations. The recommended actions reflect journalistic values, such as participation and objectivity, alongside organisational strategies applicable to any industry – including addressing subscriber abandonment, training staff, and growing data to generate intelligence.

**Table 5:** Actions proposed to enhance visibility

Type of action	Nº of mentions
Multiply and innovate formats	26
Collaborate with other media outlets	5
Analyse user behaviour	4
Automate and personalise content	3
Enhance the prestige of authors (journalists, influencers, creators)	2
Launch new services and content	2
Develop an SEO strategy	2
Make acquisitions for scaling audiences and advertising revenues	1
Develop products of content and data verification	1
Improve user website experience	1
Clarify editorial focus: fewer topics addressed in greater depth	1
Produce exclusive content	1
Buy advertising	1
Make first-party data cookies	1

Offer free temporary subscriptions to obtain referrals	1
Provide management tools	1
Provide subtitles for audiovisual materials	1
Focus on product development	1
Train staff and share knowledge	1
Total	56

**Table 6:** Actions proposed to enhance loyalty

<b>Type of action</b>	<b>Nº of mentions</b>
Multiply and innovate formats	18
Produce exclusive content	12
Analyse user behaviour	12
Automate and personalise content	11
Provide management tools	8
Gather audience feedback	8
Understand reasons for subscription cancellations	8
Improve user website experience	7
Develop an onboarding process for new subscribers	5
Test	4
Clarify editorial focus: fewer topics addressed in greater depth	3
Train staff and share knowledge	3
Grow data to generate intelligence	2
Launch new services and content	2
Provide dynamic paywalls	2
Communicate need for financial support	2
Focus on product development	2
Develop products of content and data verification	1
Practice transparency	1
Engage dedicated team	1

Promote proximity	1
Create a membership program	1
Promote participation	1
Total	115

### *Metrics by dimension analysed*

In the case of metrics, the proposals to enhance reputation begin with interaction measures to understand impact (clicks, openings, shares). However, given the difficulty of measuring this dimension, the media typically resort to market research. Long-established approaches for defining the reputation of an outlet are the number of prizes won, legislative changes achieved or years of experience.

Finally, advertising revenues and donations stand out as reputation measures. There is less variety of proposals for the visibility dimension, and it tends to be dominated by advertising metrics, such as the number of unique users and pageviews.

**Table 7:** Metrics proposed focusing on reputation

<b>Metric</b>	<b>Nº of mentions</b>
Measure number of interactions	6
Carry out market research	5
Measure number of subscribers/members/donors	5
Measure number of new subscribers/members/donors	3
Measure number of members mobilised	3
Measure number of legislative changes promoted by a publication	2
Measure number of pageviews	2
Measure number of media companies that re-publish content	2
Measure number of journalism prizes	2
Measure sponsorship revenue	1
Measure average donation	1
Measure number of referrals	1
Measure number of sources	1

Measure time dedicated to investigative reporting	1
Measure number of testimonials about the value of the community	1
Gather audience feedback	1
Measure number of unique users	1
Measure number of years of experience	1
Total	39

**Table 8:** Metrics proposed focusing on visibility

<b>Metric</b>	<b>N° of mentions</b>
Measure number of unique users	5
Carry out market research	2
Measure number of pageviews	2
Measure number of followers	2
Measure number of pageviews in one session	2
Write reports for advertisers	1
Measure click-through rate	1
Measure sponsorship revenue	1
Measure number of subscribers using exclusive content/services	1
Measure number of interactions	1
Measure number of subscribers/members/donors	1
Total	19

As mentioned before, the chief concern of think tanks is direct user monetisation to ensure sustainability. Indeed, roughly half the proposals for metrics focus on loyalty (60 out of 118). The most important are the metrics of mobilisation, event participation and collaboration with the newsroom. The number of interactions is second and includes social network interaction, newsletter open rate and giving feedback. The number of frequent visitors is the third most important indicator of loyalty. Finally, several metrics focus on the number of subscribers, their retention and renewals.



**Table 9:** Metrics proposed focusing on loyalty

<b>Metrics</b>	<b>Nº of mentions</b>
Measure number of members mobilised	11
Measure number of interactions	9
Measure number of frequent visitors	5
Measure number of subscribers/members/donors	4
Measure number of new subscribers/members/donors	3
Measure number of referrals	3
Measure number of pageviews in one session	2
Measure lifetime value	2
Analyse user behaviour	2
Create a conversion funnel	2
Measure number of comments	2
Carry out market research	2
Measure number of days a user has been active as a subscriber	2
Measure time elapsed since last visit	1
Measure last article read before becoming a subscriber	1
Measure bounce rate	1
Write reports for advertisers	1
Measure time dedicated to reading	1
Measure number of unique users	1
Measure number of articles read	1
Measure number of renewals	1
Measure click-through rate	1
Measure number of pageviews	1
Measure number of testimonials about the value of the community	1
Total	60

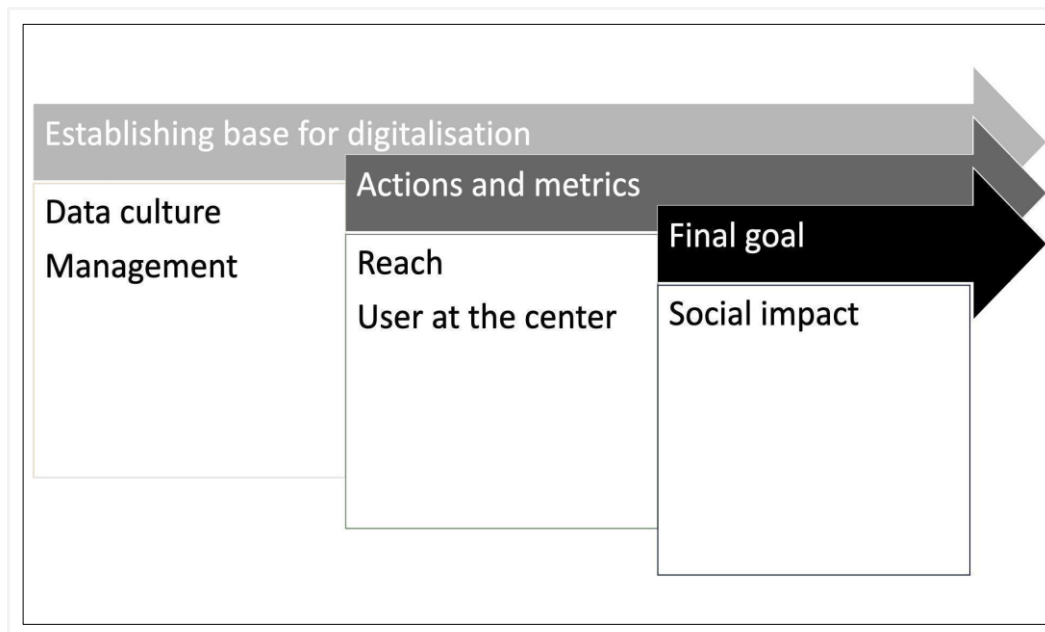
## Guiding principles

By way of summary, we can group the 70 categories of best practices according to five “guiding principles”, each of which shares a main objective:

1. **Reach:** best practices that seek to improve the visibility of the news media. Examples include both innovative formats and SEO strategies.
2. **Social impact:** best practices that seek to fulfil the social function of journalism. For example, increasing citizen participation in social and political life.
3. **Data culture:** best practices that combine two principles linked to digitalisation. On the one hand, the constant use of data and, on the other, the use of massive data, that is, the idea that size further enhances the value of data. Examples include the best practices of testing initial subscription offers and the obvious case of heeding all the metrics proposed.
4. **Management:** best practices centred around the management and training tools designed to ensure the technical and human resources are suitably prepared to face the challenges of digitalisation. Examples include customer relationship management (CRM) systems and communication between departments.
5. **User at the centre:** best practices that seek to improve the user experience, such as web page design and content personalisation.

Figure 1 proposes a sequencing of these five guiding principles. If we were to order the think tanks’ best practices in a logical sequence, we would start with proposals to establish a solid base for the digital transformation of the news media outlet, paying particular attention to its organisational needs and data culture. With this base in place, the outlet can maximise reach and put the user at the centre. If it succeeds, the media can move on to its final goal of generating social value or impact.

**Figure 1:** Sequence for implementation of the guiding principles

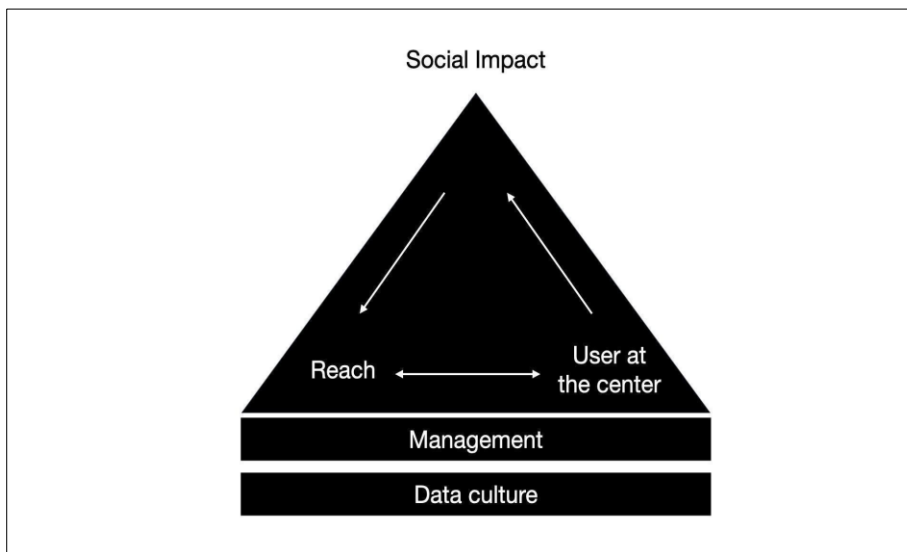


We complete this proposal for the temporal sequencing of the guiding principles by showing how they interrelate conceptually. Figure 2 shows that the implementation process is underpinned by a series of proposals to prepare news media companies for their digital transformation. At this juncture, it is essential to have sufficient technological and financial resources and a fully qualified staff. Moreover, a well-prepared news organisation needs to be data-oriented to profit fully from its journalistic product and unique nature.

With this foundation of resources in place, the first objective is to maximise reach with the user very much at the centre. The arrow in Figure 2 that connects these two guiding principles is indicative of their mutual dependence: that is, without reach, it is impossible to connect with the user, and without this focus on the user, reach cannot be achieved.

In short, validating the journalistic product without visibility and without serving the user is impossible. Finally, this product must generate value – that is, fulfil its social mission – and so feed into the whole. Likewise, putting the user at the centre is necessary to create value, which impacts the media’s reach because, as seen above, its reputation facilitates visibility.

**Figure 2:** Conceptual relationship between the guiding principles



## Discussion

One of the most important findings to emerge from our scoping study is the inherent nature of the relationship between reputation and loyalty: user loyalty being unlikely to materialise without a good reputation. This finding sheds further light on what Creech and Nadler (2018) consider to be the uncritical discourse of the think tanks. They claim that when the latter analyse the sustainability crisis, they avoid any normative debate of the media’s mission in a democratic society. While it is true that this debate is marginalised in the reports, a clear relationship does, nevertheless, emerge between reputation and the democratic values of journalism. In a certain sense, it seems to be taken for granted that defending these values is the path to sustainability via a focus on retaining audience loyalty.

Our study also highlights the interest in formats, a concern likewise stressed in a recent literature review (Lopezosa et al., 2021) and a journalistic feature that impacts all three dimensions. In this regard, expanding to incorporate new and younger audiences is a commonly expressed goal of news media professionals. Zeng et al. (2016) conclude that young people prefer professional content to user-generated content when the source is a news media outlet. New audiences pose the challenge of maintaining journalism's distinctiveness in the ever-growing morass of digital content.

Those interested in the news and, consequently, willing to pay for it have higher income and education levels (Newman, 2021). The concentration of the media around somewhat elitist audiences is disturbing and consistent with the acknowledged difficulty in winning the interest of a broader set of the public.

Several authors identify the brand as a critical asset of visibility (Krebs et al., 2020; Victoria-Mas, Lacasa-Mas & Marimon, 2018). However, it is not explicitly included among the best practices reported, albeit it is hinted at when talking about reputation. A possible measure within reach of all the media is monitoring brand searches (Gundlach & Hofmann, 2021) or analysing website traffic sources, as Chen and Pain (2019) suggested. This absence from the best practices list may indicate that there needs to be more understanding of the digital environment.

The variety of proposals adopted from the *Market Information Regime* (Anand & Peterson, 2000, as cited in Nelson & Tandoc, 2019), focusing on audience size and advertising sales, reflects a new reading centred on reputation and loyalty. This reading reveals a considerable effort to adapt the available measurement tools to traditional journalistic goals. However, just how they should be implemented is not stipulated; thus, their feasibility remains unknown.

Finally, there is a growing trend among media firms collaborating to provide greater visibility to journalistic content. Sembramedia reports that 80% of the media surveyed are already in working partnerships. This trend is consistent with the findings of Villi et al. (2020) on cost and knowledge sharing and Lehtisaari et al. (2018) on associations to achieve bargaining power in negotiations with technology platforms.

Our study identifies the following as potentially fruitful lines of further research: the viability of the wide variety of metrics proposed and the resources needed to implement them; a comparative study of the news media based on the metrics proposed as a way of validating these indicators; and, finally, an analysis of the size factor to establish if there is a critical mass that determines sustainability.

The limitations of the present study are mainly linked to the nature of the centres providing the reports we have analysed here. First, there is an unequal representation of digital-native media at the expense of legacy media. Think tanks are more concerned with offering possible solutions to those smaller media outlets that have fewer resources. Moreover, the goals of each centre may mean that they choose to study a certain topic based on their own particular mission rather than being guided by some objective need. Finally, any analysis of the sector's financial sustainability must consider the industry's vision – a vision defined here by its think tanks; yet, further research needs to include interviews conducted with professionals.

## Conclusions

The dimensions of reputation, visibility and loyalty cannot be conceived of in isolation, given that some of the best practices are likely to impact one or more of them simultaneously. The variety of formats is a paradigmatic example of this so that they can enhance reputation – by generating more impact due to the format’s novelty; visibility – by adapting formats to the requirements of each social platform; and loyalty – by reaching subscribers at different times and on different devices.

Reputation and loyalty are the two most closely related dimensions. Non-traditional media tend to substitute classical values of reputation – such as years of experience – for others more closely aligned with those of loyalty – such as audience participation. However, it is perfectly evident that without a reputation, it is impossible to generate loyalty and, as such, a solid base of subscribers. Thus, although loyalty is the dimension that receives most of the attention in the reports analysed, it cannot be separated entirely from reputation as the two feed equally on traditional journalistic values.

Our findings warn of the dangers of a ceiling on subscriptions. Various studies report figures of around 15% of users willing to pay for their news, a similar percentage to that found in Latin America and Europe, except for the Nordic countries. This finding can be linked with the relevant relationship between size and sustainability.

The more prominent media outlets have specialised staff for fundraising and advertising, guaranteeing them better results. Large donors seek the trust afforded by large outlets when it comes to making their donations. Media companies with more financial resources can face the challenges of digitalisation more efficiently by investing in new profiles or tools. Databases provide more precise information if they are massive. The big brands, generators of trust with their large audiences, concentrate most of the subscriptions. A large audience is needed to ensure a large enough subscriber base to make an organisation sustainable.

Another of the main findings is the tendency among professionals to reread the metrics traditionally linked to audience size and advertising sales and to interpret them in a way that serves reputation and loyalty. In this way, the media are taking steps to adapt to a data culture that helps to advance their digital transformation and the role of journalists and journalism. The solution lies in preserving a journalistic leadership of newsrooms with a holistic view of data.

In a hypercompetitive environment, relevance and engagement are two concepts on which to build media sustainability. The importance of maximising media reach and visibility strengthens the role of relevance for sustainability. However, relevance and engagement are woven together through the close relationship between reputation and loyalty. Therefore, although in the conceptual chain, loyalty – or that part of engagement we have chosen to analyse in this study – comes after relevance, it emerges as being fundamental for the sustainability of the news media.

Finally, the best practices form a model of closely related guiding principles. Media staff need a good grounding in the use of digital tools to operate effectively in an environment in which reach and a user-centred focus are essential for achieving the news media’s ultimate goal of social impact and fulfilling their journalistic mission.

## Funding

Parameters and strategies to increase the relevance of media and digital communication in society: curation, visualisation and visibility (CUVICOM)". PID2021-123579OB-I00 (MICINN). Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (Spain).

**CUVICOM**  
Curación, Visualización y Visibilidad en la Comunicación Digital



Càtedra Ideograma-UPF  
de Comunicació Política i Democràcia

## ANNEXE

### Table of think tanks and analysed reports

ID	Think tank	Report/Link
01	American Press Institute	How customer service can build trust and engagement with the audience <a href="https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/strategy-studies/how-customer-service-can-build-trust-and-engagement-with-audiences/">https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/strategy-studies/how-customer-service-can-build-trust-and-engagement-with-audiences/</a>
02	American Press Institute	What publishers do to retain subscribers <a href="https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/what-news-publishers-do-to-retain-subscribers/">https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/what-news-publishers-do-to-retain-subscribers/</a>
03	Institute for Nonprofit News	The State of Nonprofit News <a href="https://inn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/INN-Index-2021-Report.pdf">https://inn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/INN-Index-2021-Report.pdf</a>
04	International News Media Association: INMA	The Benefits and Risks of Media Data Democratisation <a href="https://www.inma.org/report/the-benefits-and-risks-of-media-data-democratisation">https://www.inma.org/report/the-benefits-and-risks-of-media-data-democratisation</a>
05	Membership Puzzle Project	Building healthy membership communities: Lessons from newsrooms around the world <a href="https://membershippuzzle.org/articles-overview/lessons-from-newsrooms">https://membershippuzzle.org/articles-overview/lessons-from-newsrooms</a>
06	Pew Research Center	News Platform Fact Sheet <a href="https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-platform-fact-sheet/">https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-platform-fact-sheet/</a>
07	Pew Research Center	Digital News Fact Sheet <a href="https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/digital-news/">https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/digital-news/</a>
08	Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism	Digital News Report <a href="https://www.digitalnewsreport.es/">https://www.digitalnewsreport.es/</a>
09	Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism	Digital News Report: Journalism, Media, and Technology Trends and Predictions 2022 <a href="https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/journalism-media-and-technology-trends-and-predictions-2022">https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/journalism-media-and-technology-trends-and-predictions-2022</a>
10	SembraMedia	Punto de inflexión internacional <a href="https://data2021.sembramedia.org/es/reportes/resumen-ejecutivo/">https://data2021.sembramedia.org/es/reportes/resumen-ejecutivo/</a>
11	Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy	Solutions to America's Local Journalism Crisis: Consolidated Literature Review <a href="https://shorensteincenter.org/solutions-americas-local-journalism-crisis-consolidated-literature-review/">https://shorensteincenter.org/solutions-americas-local-journalism-crisis-consolidated-literature-review/</a>
12	Tow Center for Digital Journalism	What types of messages, pricing, and perks motivate #ThisIsTucson super users to become paying members <a href="https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/what-types-of-messages-pricing-and-perks-motivate-thisistucson-super-users-to-become-paying-members.php">https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/what-types-of-messages-pricing-and-perks-motivate-thisistucson-super-users-to-become-paying-members.php</a>
13	Tow Center for Digital Journalism	Life at local newspapers in a turbulent era <a href="https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/life-at-local-newspapers-in-a-turbulent-era-findings-from-a-survey-of-more-than-300-newsroom-employees-in-the-united-states.php">https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/life-at-local-newspapers-in-a-turbulent-era-findings-from-a-survey-of-more-than-300-newsroom-employees-in-the-united-states.php</a>
14	Wan-Ifra	A quemar las naves <a href="https://wan-ifra.org/guia-del-programa-cultural-change-ignition-para-ayudar-a-activar-el-cambio-cultural-para-organizaciones-de-noticias/">https://wan-ifra.org/guia-del-programa-cultural-change-ignition-para-ayudar-a-activar-el-cambio-cultural-para-organizaciones-de-noticias/</a>

15	<b>Local Media Consortium</b>	2020 Advertiser Assessment of Local Media Digital Advertising <a href="https://drive.google.com/file/d/15ysrn5fqhsHxagVErh-vSDWDJuo2R9u1/view">https://drive.google.com/file/d/15ysrn5fqhsHxagVErh-vSDWDJuo2R9u1/view</a>
16	<b>Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA)</b>	Private Gatekeepers: Encrypted Messaging Apps and News Audiences <a href="https://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/CIMA_EMA-Report_web_150ppi.pdf">https://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/CIMA_EMA-Report_web_150ppi.pdf</a>
17	<b>UNESCO</b>	Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Media sustainability in Latin America <a href="https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377631_eng">https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377631_eng</a>
18	<b>Fundacion Gabo</b>	Innovación y periodismo local en América Latina (capítulo Sostenibilidad) <a href="https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hPW-9FyFy8OWM6LUd1kfvNg9-74_MFWa/view">https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hPW-9FyFy8OWM6LUd1kfvNg9-74_MFWa/view</a>
19	<b>Adepa</b>	Anuario 2021 <a href="https://adepa.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/anuario-adepa-2021.pdf">https://adepa.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/anuario-adepa-2021.pdf</a>
20	<b>Future Today Institute</b>	News & Information - 2022 Tech Trend Report <a href="https://futuretodayinstitute.com/mu_uploads/2022/03/FTI_Tech_Trends_2022_Book05.pdf">https://futuretodayinstitute.com/mu_uploads/2022/03/FTI_Tech_Trends_2022_Book05.pdf</a>
21	<b>Future Today Institute</b>	The Global Survey on Journalism's Futures <a href="https://futuretodayinstitute.com/mu_uploads/2022/03/GlobalSurveyJournalismFuture_031422-1.pdf">https://futuretodayinstitute.com/mu_uploads/2022/03/GlobalSurveyJournalismFuture_031422-1.pdf</a>
22	<b>Press Gazette</b>	The Paywall Revolution Goes Global <a href="https://pressgazette.co.uk/subscription-news-media-must-re-think-model-for-creating-new-revenues/">https://pressgazette.co.uk/subscription-news-media-must-re-think-model-for-creating-new-revenues/</a>

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