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World Association
of News Publishers

ASIAN NEWS MEDIA FOCUS

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26 YEARS REPORTING THE NEWS MEDIA BUSINESS FOR ASIA

Lakshmi Chaudhry
Founder
Splainer Media



SPLAINER MEDIA

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NEWSLETTER 2.0

**Digital Media
India 2021**

2-4 March

**See page 11 for
programme**

USA: Gannett will outsource 485 business-side jobs to India

Those being laid off will be notified by Jan. 15 but can stay on until April to 'transition' their work, a company FAQ document says.

Gannett told its business side employees that 485 of their jobs will be outsourced to Hyderabad, India, early next year.

All of the jobs involve "business process," the company said in a frequently asked questions document — things like paying bills, invoicing customers, preparing

monthly summary reports and reconciling the books.

The company said it does not have plans right now to do more outsourcing later in 2021 but did not close the door on that option.

It explained the move as follows:

Gannett is undertaking a massive company-wide transformation. To help the company transform quickly, we must remain nimble and focused on the needs of the business, while keeping our operating costs low, our control environment tight and our processes as efficient as possible.

New Media Investment Group and its GateHouse chain acquired Gannett (retaining the Gannett name) a little more than a year ago. To do so it took out a \$1.2 billion loan from Apollo Global Capital and assumed another \$600 million. Of that debt, \$180 million has been repaid and another \$500 million refinanced at a lower interest rate.

CEO Mike Reed said at the time that the company will need to lock in at least \$300 million in annual cost-saving "synergies" to make the deal work.

By Poynter

Dainik Bhaskar PAT up by 21.3% to Rs 99 crore in Q3 FY21

The group's advertising revenue stood at Rs. 291 million.

Dainik Bhaskar, Divya Bhaskar, Divya Marathi and Saurashtra Samachar, announced their financial results for the quarter ended December 31, 2020.

The circulation team's continued efforts and focused strategies have enabled the group to achieve around 90 percent of the pre-Covid circulation level. They are witnessing continuous improvement in circulation numbers and expect to gain back most of the copies once normal market operations, including running of normal railways and bus services, are allowed.

Advertising revenues are reclaiming pre-Covid levels (YOY), and with the festive season providing a strong impetus, the company has reached print

business advertising at 87% of last year Quarter 3 with festival months of October and November together seeing an advertising revenue achievement of 95 percent. The print business EBITDA in Q3 FY2021 stood at Rs.1699 million (EBITDA margin of 36.8 percent) as against Rs.1380 (EBITDA Margin of 24.7 percent) million last year, which translated into an EBITDA margin expansion by almost 1200 basis points, underscoring the benefits of improved economic perfor-

mance, soft newsprint prices & cost-cutting measures.

The consolidated revenue for Q3 FY2021 came in at Rs. 4966 million, which registered a growth of 42 percent compared to the previous quarter Dainik Bhaskar continues to set milestones of publishing 'Mega Editions' across its major markets.

By Exchange4media



AI-backed Dataminr integrates real-time risk detection into newsroom workflow

Dataminr is recognized as one of the world's leading artificial intelligence (AI) businesses.

Providing both global and hyper-local coverage, Dataminr's AI platform detects the earliest signals of high-impact events, in real-time, from publicly available information enabling journalists to know and report on critical information.

Unprecedented events can occur anywhere at any moment, radically affecting people, businesses and public sector operations. As the landscape of public data sources expands and diversi-

fies, leads can come from anywhere, at any time.

Dataminr, founded in 2009, is a news gathering tool that aims to be an integral element of newsroom workflows. Alerts are delivered via desktop applications, workflow-integrated notifications, mobile applications, and customizable APIs as brief captions facilitating quick understanding of real-time risks and other relevant incidents. Settings can be configured to align to a journalist's specific interests.

For example, on November 9, 2020, Dataminr provided its cli-

ents (USA Today, CNN, Al Jazeera, The Washington Post, The Sun, Daily Mail) with the one of the earliest, hyperlocal warnings of Typhoon Vamco, locally known as Typhoon Ulysses — one of the most devastating natural disasters of the year to strike the Philippines and Vietnam. Dataminr's platform sent over 100 alerts including information on mandatory evacuations, suspended flights, and power outages.

To find out more visit <https://www.dataminr.com/news>

By Dataminr

Bloomberg | Quint

India: BloombergQuint restores salaries to pre-COVID levels

It's effective April 1, 2021, for all employees and it will also kick start its annual performance appraisal cycle for the year 2020-21.

BloombergQuint (BQ), a leading business and financial website has announced the restoration of salaries to pre-COVID levels of March 2020 for all its employees. In an email, BQ said the restoration will be effective April 1, 2021, and revealed it will kick start its annual performance appraisal cycle for the year 2020-21 from February this year; all those who joined before BQ before September 30, 2020, are eligible for the appraisal.

Founded in 2016, BQ is a joint venture of Quintillion Media, co-founded by media entrepreneur couple Raghav Bahl and Ritu Kapur and Bloomberg News.

By Afaqs

European digital publishing solutions platform, ePublisher BV, expands to Asia

ePublisher BV, a leading digital publishing system in Europe, launched its Asia office in February this year.

The company publishes digital news, ePapers and digital magazines. It also offers native applications and eSolutions for several European publishers.

The company's success in Europe determined its move to expand to Asia to enable publishers to be online with their own branded solutions in a matter of days. The system is equipped with all relevant functions and features for publishers, is standardised and flexible. In Europe many news and magazine publishers have been using the ePublisher system for years, and the company expects a similar response from Asia. The Asia office has been set up in India's Mangalore.

By ePublisher BV

Print ends year with marginal dip thanks to H2 ad volume recovery: Tam AdEx

As per data, the jacket-full page was the preferred ad position in the print medium in 2020.

Though print advertising suffered a massive setback during Covid-19 induced lockdown, the industry did look up during the subsequent unlock period. As per latest TamAdEx data, the average ad volumes per publications dropped by only 11 percent in the second half of 2020 as compared to the same period in 2019, showing a recovery in print ad volumes during the unlock period.

In the wake of the Covid-19 crisis, the lowest average ad volume per publication was seen in the second quarter, which includes the lockdown period. However, the average ad volumes per publication increased by 90 percent in the fourth quarter compared to a combined average of the first three quarters of 2020. Turns out, the ad volumes in print recovered to pre-lockdown level during the festive period observing a double-digit share.

By Exchange4media

India: Struggling to recover from pandemic, print industry now hit by rising newsprint costs

Newsprint cost has shot up by 20% in the past three months and is expected to go up further by at least another 10% this month.

Already struggling to come back to normalcy from the pandemic-induced lull in businesses, print publishers now have increasing newsprint prices to deal with. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, newsprint cost has shot up by 20% in the past three months and is expected to shoot up further by at least another 10% this month.

Newsprint prices, which had gone below 300USD/tonne in 2020, have now touched close to 500USD/tonne and are expected to go up by another 100 USD/tonne in the coming months.

According to the marketing head of a popular Indian language daily, newsprint consumption has been low almost throughout 2020. "It has, how-

ever, started recovering in the fourth quarter of 2020, but the numbers are far below the levels seen in Q4 of 2019. India's earlier newsprint consumption of about 2.5 -2.7 mn MT per annum has gone down drastically due to the impact of the pandemic," he said.

With no relief announced for the industry in terms of waiving import duties on newsprint in the 2021 Union Budget, the print fraternity is struggling to boost business.

"Around 50-60 percent of our costs go into acquiring newsprint, and with no relief in import duties from the government, we are only left with increased costs. During tough times like these, increasing newsprint prices are a major concern for the printing industry which also has to pay salaries to the lakhs of the employees engaged in the sector," said MV Shreyams Kumar, Managing Director, Mathrubhumi.

By Exchange4media

ppi Media's editorial solution Content-X integrates Gutenberg Editor

ppi Media's editorial solution 'Content-X' is set to support the Gutenberg Editor known from WordPress and Drupal.

'Content-X' will feature a version of the online editor with deep InDesign integration, enabling editorial offices to write and publish content for print and online channels in one single tool without any system breaks.

After conducting extensive customer surveys and market analysis in recent months, ppi Media has drawn a plan to develop and expand its 'Content-X' editorial solution into a comprehensive,

scalable and cost-effective platform for publishers and businesses.

"Whenever we develop Content-X, we try to use open-source solutions and existing technologies where possible to make sure we can fall back on tried-and-tested system components and the expertise of a globally networked community," said Dr. Hauke Berndt, CEO, ppi Media.

"It's important to ensure that all future elements integrated in Content-X are compatible with our solution's established system components. That's how we protect the investment of our existing customers and allow them to carry out modular upgrades if required."

By ppi

How an Indian news group doubled Facebook video views in 15 months

Punjab Kesari Group is a family-owned newspaper organization established in 1948 in Punjab, India. The group publishes four daily newspapers in three languages – Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu.

While they're an established and successful print organization, they wanted to build a sustainable future for their newspapers by entering the digital space. Owner and director Abhijay Chopra led the adoption of a Facebook-first video content strategy and the launch of several digital-first news and news-adjacent brands in May 2019.

Results From May 2019-October 2020

1. 107%+: 3-second video views
 2. 93%+: 1-minute video views
 3. 3.9x: in-stream ads revenue
- (1) according to public CrowdTangle data, (2&3) results provided by Punjab Kesari Group

Strategy

Build a diverse content portfolio to better connect with audiences: Punjab Kesari Group's network of 20+ Facebook Pages cover core news, entertainment, women's lifestyle, spirituality, health and food. "Hyper-local video content driven by a network of video-first journalists has been our stronghold for regional audiences, while lifestyle content finds traction with a larger user base," Chopra said.

Produce high-quality videos to grasp audience attention: The group's focus on creating 3-minute+ videos has helped them gain optimal distribution and in-stream ads monetization on Facebook. Aiming to capture and maintain user attention, the team follows best practices like cold opens, usage of subtitles and enticing video thumbnails.

Impact

Chopra believes a Facebook-first video approach helped Punjab Kesari Group's digital transformation reach new audiences around the globe. "Facebook empowered us to run a low-cost, high-impact organization wherein high-quality content combined with cutting-edge data drives scalable digital revenues," Chopra said.

By Facebook

National Geographic India adds Kannada Feed to its language portfolio

National Geographic India has been made available in Kannada since 31st January 2021.

With this launch, National Geographic is now available in six languages - Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, Bangla, and English.

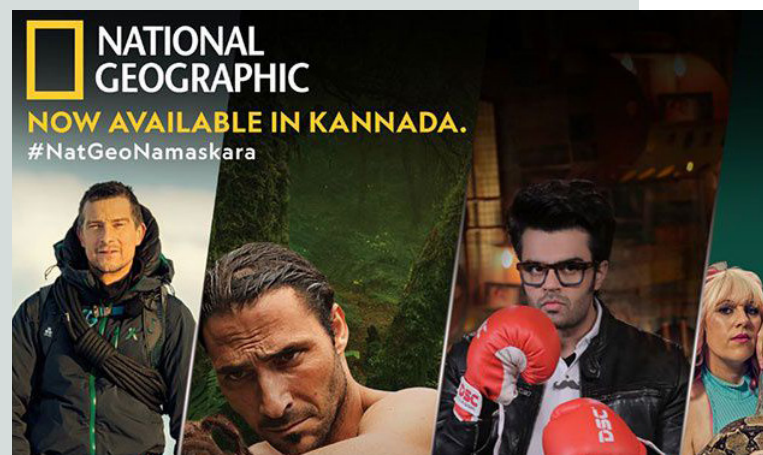
From popular series such as Primal Survivor, Vegas Rat Rods, Great Human Race, Dirty Rotten Survival, Bear Grylls Mission Survive, Airport Security Brazil, and Peru to the newly launched Spot-

light that showcases specially curated best-in-class films and a range of fresh and new events such as the Mars Rover Landing; the audience will now get to experience the entire gamut of groundbreaking stories in Kannada accompanied by stunning visuals and path-breaking technology, that will continue to push the boundaries of knowledge and understanding of the world.

"We have been constantly working towards making our rela-

tionship with our viewers more personal, relevant, and connected through our localized efforts. Over the last years, we have seen a significant interest in our authentic style of storytelling from our viewers in the regional market; including Karnataka," said Kevin Vaz, President and Head - Infotainment, Kids & Regional Entertainment Channels, Star & Disney India

Globally, National Geographic is available across 43 languages and 172 countries. By Dailyhunt



India's The Federal doubles down on data visualisation

When India's New Generation Media decided to launch The Federal digital media platform in 2019, visual storytelling was deemed so vital to its success that a dedicated data visualisation team was formed from day one.

It hasn't taken long for The Federal to get recognised for its compelling interactive content: In December, the company took home the 'Best Data Visualisation' in WAN-IFRA's South Asian Digital Media Awards (SDMA) 2020 competition with its Mars Mission 2020 interactive project.

The interactive received over 1,200 organically achieved unique views, with each user spending an average of 2.5 minutes on the page. The website hits 1 lakh views daily (with about 60K-70K uniques) and the interactive projects register 5,000 monthly visits from its mostly mobile, young audience.

The data visualisation department is a core part of the editorial team as it comprises eight people, of which two are data journalists, three are developers and three are illustrators and designers. With 29 staff total, that commitment to such a team says a lot about The Federal's vision.

The Federal's vision

Data is now far more ubiquitous than ever before. The team now produces double the number of stories than it used to a year ago.

"It is now important to consider data visualisations as objects for critical scrutiny and not just as mechanisms to communicate data. One of the aspects of journalism that many journalists are now focusing on is data visualisation, which is an attempt to take complex datasets and turn them into fascinating visualisations to be used in 'storytelling' that would otherwise look boring," said S. Srinivasan, Editor-in-Chief.

Readers now consume content mostly on their smartphones and ensuring complex, interactive visual content fits the small screen specifications is no easy feat.

After working on a range of topics, the team managed to overcome this difficulty by understanding the importance of minimalism, concise writing, and sifting through the sea of content to choose what small screens adapt to best.

"We have learned to think in a mobile-first way and keep the UI and UX as clear and easy to understand and navigate as possible," says Ravishankar. "We have a better understanding of what technically works with our infrastructure. We use our tools, libraries, and plugins accordingly, which saves us time while not compromising on the execution of the project."

S. Srinivasan says that while creating compelling visuals for a given dataset is challenging for most people, there are now many online tools and softwares (SaaS) available that make it easy and faster for journalists to create visual content.

"This has been made possible due to the intersection between journalism, computation and emerging research on HCI (Human Computer Interaction). In our newsroom, we see that data visualisation is now bridging the gap between quants and wordsmiths, and locating outliers and identifying trends that are not just statistically significant, but relevant to understanding the inherently complex world of today," he says.

What makes for good visual storytelling?

According to Ravishankar, every visualisation has a purpose. "If you are able to convey what you want to say without having to explain it, that makes a good visualisation," he says. "Cosmetics are subjective and not a factor for considering a good or bad visualisation."

How does the team ensure its readers do not feel that they are not equipped enough to decode a particular story? V. Srinivasan admits to taking that risk at times, but mostly believes in sticking to simpler forms of data visualisation such as line, bar and pie charts to put across the crux of the story. The complex interactives come equipped with a note to help the reader navigate and understand the storytelling process.

Ultimately, it comes down to letting the story define the mood, navigation and style of the visualisation. "If the reader feels empathetic and in sync with the mood of the story, we believe we have achieved the intention of the project," says Ravishankar.

Keeping the audience hooked

How does The Federal's data team decide which visual would land most effectively with the audience?

The team's target audience is mobile readers between 22-40 years of age, who are exposed to and comfortable with technology, are politically astute and generally in sync with global news. Keeping this in mind, the team focuses on covering politics, art, culture, education, health and technology.



Context is one of the most important things they rely on for striking a chord with the audience.

"Creating nice visualizations and putting them together as a story or an interactive is not just an exercise in providing information to our readers," says V. Srinivasan. "After all, there can't be one size that fits all."

After having published over 45 visual stories, the team agrees that it is the seemingly insignificant things such as color, arrows, text, and other visual cues, that help viewers interpret information.

"Normally, readers tend to spend more time on interactives as compared to a text-based story," says Devi Prasanna Pradhan, Manager - Marketing and Branding. "The interactive projects add to reader loyalty, which is proven by the fact that their return rate is higher compared to those who come back for textual stories."

The process – ideation to execution

Prathap Ravishankar, Design Editor at The Federal, says that on an average, it takes about 3-4 weeks to finish a big, complex project like the award-winning Mars project, whereas the team wraps up a simpler project in about a week now, as

compared to two weeks when they started out.

A typical day in the data visualisation department starts with a 9 a.m. meeting when the team discusses ideas for the day and decides on potential topics for interactive projects. Once a topic is chosen, the data team starts scraping and curating data, while the design team begins researching and collecting information. This process takes about 2-3 days, says Venkat Srinivasan, Senior Data Journalist.

After collecting the necessary information, the design team starts illustrating and working on the UI on Photoshop or Illustrator. The interactive is actually laid out as a print mock-up and the content is simultaneously sent to the desk for proof-reading and adding elements such as subheads, captions, etc. This takes another 2-3 days.

During this time, the developer team is briefed on the scope of the project and they start discussing the tools and libraries needed for the project, and lay out the necessary groundwork before the creatives and content reach them. This process takes a week.

Once the design and content is final, it is passed on to the development team. A rough mock-up would have already been passed on to the developers to have a ready prototype and to test the browser and feature compatibility across devices before the actual content is added.

The development team then works with the design team to get the artwork and text in place with the workflow. Once that is over, it is moved to a testing environment to check the final browser and device compatibility before publishing.

A subscription model?

The Federal launched a 'Freemium' paywall model in November, last year. This means that about 97-98 percent of the website content remains free while the rest is monetised through reader revenue.

Currently, the data visualisations are not behind the paywall but the possibility of making them subscription-based in line with its Freemium model exists as and when a monetisable opportunity presents itself.

By Neha Gupta

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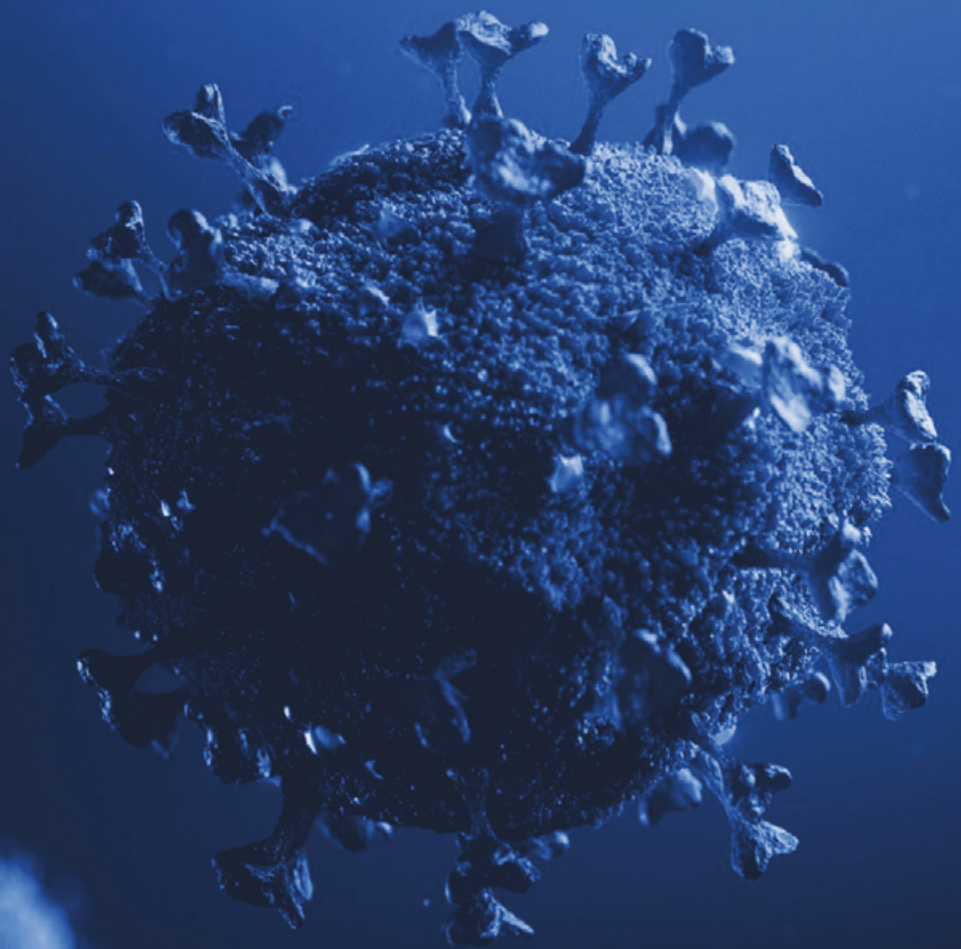
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Preparing for the Unexpected

No one knows what the future holds. In January 2020, whilst journalists were in the early days of investigating the outbreak of COVID-19, the world carried on as normal unaware of the unprecedented year that lay ahead.

If last year taught us anything, it is that unexpected events will happen and they will happen quickly.

With Dataminr, you'll gain access to the earliest indications of high-impact events in real-time - ensuring you have the knowledge you need to act with confidence. Our technology has been tried and tested by the best newsrooms in the world, setting the gold standard for newsgathering, verification and engagement.



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LAKSHMI CHAUDHRY ON HOW UPSTART SPLAINER GRABS A NICHE – AND SUBSCRIBERS

By Neha Gupta



Lakshmi Chaudhry
Founder
Splainer Media

“Today, any media entrepreneur has to be vigilant about news fatigue and ‘doomscrolling’ because no one will pay for something that makes them feel bad every day. So, how do we make news consumption a positive experience?”

– Lakshmi Chaudhry, Founder, Splainer Media

Lakshmi Chaudhry forayed into journalism with Wired.com, co-founded Firstpost, before starting Broadsheet, a newsletter targeted primarily at women, in 2018 and shutting it down in March 2020, owing to the lack of a feasible business model.

Splainer came about in June 2020 as a response to the crowded, rapid-fire Internet news cycle that persists today, backed by a sound business model. It goes against the drone-like format of everyday news, with intelligent and empathetic content punctuated with humour.

Splainer is a paid news service delivered daily via email and WhatsApp, with a current annual subscription priced at Rs 1,500 (€ 17.06). In India, where people are still sceptical of paying for news, the company has managed to acquire 3,000 subscribers in six months.

WAN-IFRA spoke to Chaudhry about how Splainer was conceived, how it’s run by an all-women staff, its unique content strategy and business model, at least for India, and her plans for growing the company.

Here is an edited version of that interview.

What was the motivation to launch Splainer in the middle of a pandemic, and how did the pandemic affect the launch and the company?

The primary reason was the outpouring of disappointment from subscribers when I shut Broadsheet down. I didn’t realise how much the work we had done meant to them, and how much they relied on it. It left me with two insights:

One, you cannot launch a product without a definite business model. It can't be an afterthought, as it was with Broadsheet, which is why we employed a paid-subscription model from the get-go. If you are confident of offering real value, then you must be willing to ask your audience to pay for it. Nothing in the current environment — be it shrinking advertising revenue or attention spans — bodes well if your audience is not willing to pay for what you offer.

Two, I became sharply focused on the experience of news. The pandemic has helped turn the spotlight on the tension between being well-informed and staying sane. If you want to know what is going on in the world today, a person must endure endless news application notifications, endless Instagram and Twitter scrolls, sift through innumerable links to find the good stuff, etc. We, in the media business, do not appreciate how incredibly unpleasant and painful it has become to consume news. When things go wrong, as they did with the pandemic, the effect on people's mental health and wellness becomes apparent.

And no, I am not being starry-eyed or mushy about what we do. Today, any media entrepreneur has to be vigilant about news fatigue and "doom-scrolling" because no one will pay for something that makes them feel bad every day. So, how do we make news consumption a positive experience? That's a big and likely decisive question we must answer.

Why newsletters as the core product?

Is it a newsletter? Yes, it is, in the sense that the content is consumed in one continuous scroll. But I think of a traditional newsletter as text-only content delivered via email. From a user's experience, do we really 'feel' the same as an Axios or Stratechery or Skimm or Times Top 10? Maybe not.

I deliberately created an edition that is consumed on the browser, which allows us to do a variety of things — in terms of images, videos, design — that are simply impossible in a rigid email template. The possibilities are endless and I see Splainer as a product that is in the process of becoming. I don't have a name for it. Maybe this is newsletter 2.0 or maybe it is evolving and will become a new kind of product in itself. I've left that possibility open.

What learnings did you take from Firstpost and Broadsheet that perhaps impacted Splainer?

Until Firstpost came along, legacy publications repurposed their content, slapped it online and called it digital media. We got started in 2011 and created that 24/7, on-all-the-time publishing cycle in India, taking on a highly opinionated, edgy take on the news. Now, everyone is doing the same thing but with diminishing returns, churning out 500 news stories, where 80 percent of the content is created to please the Google news bot or SEO algorithm. News now feels like sheer noise, and the pressure for high volume, both in the amount of generated content and the decibel level of debate, drives news globally.

Splainer is the anti-Firstpost. It is slow, focused on quality, not quantity. We send out one edition every day with the aim of rescuing our subscribers from a media environment polluted with negativity, fake news, and high-volume, low-quality reportage.

Each edition sifts through this landscape to deliver a carefully researched and curated edition of daily news — offered with intelligence, humour, and empathy.

How do you sift through the clutter of everyday news to decide your 'big story' and the subsequent headlines? Please elaborate on the process from ideation to execution.

The 'big story' must meet two criteria.

One, it must be significant. So, the Union budget is a no-brainer, but when we do something on Viktor Navalny or Facebook's war with the Australian government, it is our job to also explain why it matters.

Two, it must add in some way to our audience's deeper understanding of how the world works, and why. So, it is not just about the farmer protests, but also about the structural issues with farming and the new farm laws. We want people to feel well-informed in the richest sense of the word.

As for ideation, honestly, it's a bit of a mad scramble. We have very simple processes. There are WhatsApp groups where all of us dump in stories we see. At some point in the evening, we decide our big story for the next day — but it is often written very early in the morning (think 5 a.m.) since reliable reporting doesn't come out until the following day.

As for the rest, headlines are balanced between global and Indian because we write for the global Indian who cares about both, whether she is in Dubai or Delhi or New York. Everything else — smart and curious, good place, sanity breaks — exists to remind our audience that despite the bad or difficult news, the world we live in is complicated, interesting and, yes, even wondrous.

And that's what I mean about the U/X of news. Each time you read our daily edition, you should have a positive experience, even at a time when much of the news is negative. That is the challenge we try to meet every day. You should feel powerful and well-informed, you should laugh, you should be intrigued, you should feel curious...

India has only begun testing digital subscriptions. What was the thought process in deciding on Splainer's revenue model and is it sustainable?

Yes. Indians are like people anywhere in the world who will pay for something if it adds value to their everyday life. If they can't see the value in your journalism, they won't pay for it, however good it may be. If you want to charge your subscribers in the news business, and grow beyond a niche, you have to learn to be useful to your audience.

What are some of your subscription targets / milestones? Can you share any initial figures or results?

We now have 3,000 subscribers in just six months. A significant number are founding members who contribute anywhere between Rs 2000-10,000 (€22 to €113) to support us. My target audience is Indians everywhere so our long-term aim is to hit 100,000 subscribers in the next 3-5 years.

This compares very well with any paid digital product in India. The best part is that we don't need a large newsroom to deliver. A product like Splainer requires a small but talented team. So, we are very lean and very high quality.

Do you see opportunities to diversify your revenue streams?

Yes, if we can move into targeting different demographics, such as school or college students.

Yes, if we can create a unique template that can be franchised in other geographies. Yes, if we can

get brand sponsors on board. After six months, we are now looking at all sorts of possibilities as we move forward.

However, the key is to make the most of your money from your actual content, not side hustles as a content creator for brands or as an events management company. We will also have brands who sponsor a given edition and feature sponsored content at some point, but no programmatic ads or banners.

How does Splainer approach engagement, and what are your key metrics? Conversions?

We look at open rates and time spent, of course, and conversion from monthly to annual subscriptions. But we also look at key indicators of brand loyalty like referrals and gift subscriptions.

We are building a brand that has direct and intimate relationships with our audience. So, our subscribers are extremely loyal and committed. For instance, several of our readers added an extra 12 months to their subscription during the Diwali sale just to signal their commitment, and others gifted Splainer subscriptions to anywhere between 5-10 people during Diwali and Christmas.

How are you combatting churn, and could you share some statistics on that?

Most of our churn happens around gift subscriptions, which, given human nature, isn't very surprising. We often aren't the best judge of what our friends and family will appreciate.

What's interesting is that we rarely lose those who actively choose to subscribe to us. So our churn is around 10 percent, and that is fine because every gift that fails to convert is still valuable in what it tells us about our subscribers.

How does operating a completely woman-run media company, for women, differ from working in a typical Indian mainstream newsroom?

This is a common misconception. Broadsheet was for women; Splainer is for everyone. We are an all-women team but our content is not for women per se, which some people find mind-boggling even though all-male newsrooms have been the norm for centuries.

Splainer is very popular with women, but 40 percent of our audience is male. I am sure we would work as well with men in the team, but currently I am focused on creating an environment and opportunities for young women to thrive and succeed, and I don't apologize for it. We have an excellent trainee program and our overarching aim is to incubate women who will go out and become leaders in their workplaces one day.

What are the challenges of establishing an all-women organisation in a male-dominated media space?

None. We are boot-strapped and make the revenue required to pay our own bills. Financial independence is the secret to women's freedom, be it in the case of a startup or in a relationship.

What are the top priorities for Splainer in 2021?

Grow, grow, grow. We have to scale. It's a big challenge, but we are a small and mighty company, and I know we are going to do it!

How Slovakia's Denník N hit 65K paying subscribers in 6 years

By Neha Gupta

Denník N, a Slovakian news company, has built a profitable business purely on reader revenue with 65,000 active subscribers. Tomas Bella, Head of Digital, joined WAN-IFRA's recent Digital Media Europe conference to talk about Denník N's subscription journey.

In 2014, after the largest newspaper in Slovakia was bought by an oligarch, a group of 50 journalists decided to launch Denník N. In 2018, they founded a second paper in the Czech Republic.

Tomas Bella, Head of Digital, joined WAN-IFRA's recent Digital Media Europe conference to talk about Denník N's subscription journey.

"When we launched, we knew we would face problems in getting advertisement money because of the oligarch influence," Bella said. "We figured that our best shot was asking people to subscribe to our product. So, we still print a newspaper, but our whole business is based on subscriptions, where 95 percent of those are online subscriptions."

Today, Denník N has 100 employees and boasts of 1.5 million unique readers on its website, which is nearly a third of the country's population.

Denník N's subscription model

Denník N's website works on a freemium paywall model and is divided into two parts, which are clearly separated on the left and right sides of their homepage. The left side includes long form articles on politics and investigative reporting, which use black headlines, and this con-



Photo:
Denník N

tent is behind a paywall. The right side hosts high-quality breaking news stories, which have red headlines, and help to attract traffic to the website.

Two priority areas

Denník N achieved its relatively quick path to profitability by focussing on:

Quality journalism:

The company launched in 2014 without having a single person responsible for advertising, marketing, sales or management. All 50 employees were journalists. The reporters were asked to keep the business and profitability angle in mind while producing content. The company hired its first head of marketing four years after the launch.

Every morning, reporters receive an email listing their articles, the ranking and the number of subscriptions they sold. Editors can decide which stories will be retained on the homepage according to the conversion rate of each article.

"This sounds quite horrifying but it works because we realised that the corre-

lation between what our journalists want to write and what people want to pay for is very strong," Bella said.

"Ten years ago, the focus was on page views that led to clickbait, but it is not possible to cheat the subscription business. The content must be unique and have enough value for people to see and pay for," he added.

Subscription software:

Denník N started its first payment cycle two days after the launch. After about two years, with the help of Google grants, the company decided to make a big shift and start publishing all its software open source. "Six years down the line, our software is now free for use by publishers globally. We currently have 30 publishers who make use of it," said Bella.

What do the workflow and software look like? Here are the features and tools it comprises:

Subscriber source: The chart below displays conversions on the right side, where the conversions come from on the website in the centre and external sources of

those conversions on the left. Denník N's case, half the conversions come from articles and the other half from landing pages.

"We hear publishers complain about how the traffic from Facebook is high but not good quality. For us, social is the highest generator of subscriptions," said Bella.

Ending subscriptions: The company software gives its employees the ability to analyse its readers and predict future subscription patterns. Combined with machine learning, it also has the ability to look at data granularly and study a user's basic data and predict the churn rate, based on which the company can customise discounts and subscription rates for each user segment.

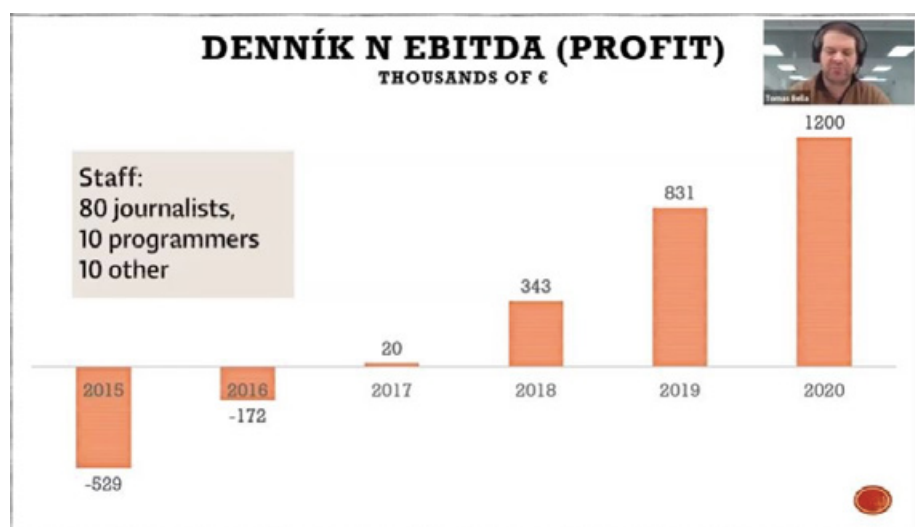
Campaign: This tool enables launching banners with A/B testing which lets staff see which banner has a higher conversion rate.

Reducing churn: What happens to the subscriptions a company sells, six months down the line? With this tool, they can analyse and track retention.

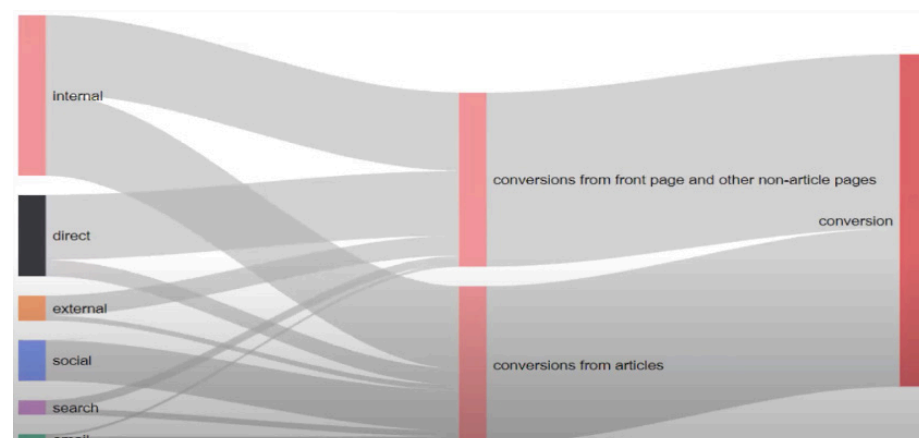
"In the chart below, the 'blue' is the result of the coronavirus. In March and April the number of new subscriptions jumped up, but after 2-3 months the retention of users was worse than our normal. However, after four months, we are back to the usual," said Bella.

In addition to this, the software also has tools for automation, newsletters, emails and customer onboarding.

"We manage to keep this software free, even though it is open source, because we have had a profitable subscription business. After our Google funding ran out, we still managed to retain our developers thanks to our reader revenue," Bella said.



This bar graph shows Denník N's financial results from 2015 to 2020. The company expects a profit of €1 million for the 2020-2021 financial year.



Media Laws in India – a WEF (South Asia Chapter) Report

A new report by WAN-IFRA analyses the media laws and press freedom in India, explores alternatives and offers tips to journalists.

In post-independence India, freedom of the press is derived from the freedom of speech and expression guaranteed under Article 19(1)(a) by the Indian Constitution. This means that the media enjoys the same freedom of expression as any Indian citizen and there is no separate set of laws that define the rights of the press.

"The press is merely another way of stating an individual or a citizen. The Press has no special rights which are not to be given or which are not to be exercised by the citizen in his individual capacity. The editor of a press or the manager are all citizens and therefore when they choose to write in newspapers, they are merely exercising their right of expression and in my judgment, therefore, no special mention is necessary of the freedom of the press at all," said Dr B R Ambedkar, chairman of the constituent assembly in 1948, while debating if the media required a separate set of laws.

The freedom of the press has been upheld by our judiciary during several instances. Through several verdicts, the court has made it clear that the press has certain rights like the right to print and publish news, print views or opinions, dispense and circulate those views in the entire society, and more.

But no freedom is absolute. There is always the possibility that be it media or ordinary citizen, if left unfettered, would overstep their boundaries causing chaos. So, article 19(2) puts reasonable restrictions on freedom of speech and expression in the interest of the public.

However, despite the clear guidelines by courts, many a time these restrictions have been tools in the hands of governments or offended parties to be used against media organisations and journalists to curb their freedom of speech. An array of laws ranging from criminal defamation and contempt of court to draconian ones like sedition and UAPA have been pressed against journalists for pursuing and publishing stories that somebody wanted untold.

It is in this context that WAN-IFRA South Asia has brought out 'Media Laws in India', a report that looks at what is the extent of freedom of the press in India, what are the limitations on it and how several of the existing laws are being misused to hinder the independent and fair functioning of media houses in the country. Of the many laws that have a bearing on the independence of the media, the report focuses on those that have a direct impact on the editorial functioning of the houses, such as Criminal Defamation, Contempt of Court, Breach of Privilege, 'Offensive Speech' Laws, The Official Secrets Act, Obscenity Laws, and non-media laws like Sedition and UAPA. Through case studies, anecdotes and inter-

views, it aims to provide journalists working in the Print, Digital and Broadcasting arms of the media a better understanding about existing laws that affect them. The report also initiates a discussion on the possible solutions, offers tips and creates an awareness around how journalists should be more responsible while writing stories.

The lead article in the report, supported by Konrad Adenaur Stiftung, is written by Mukund Padmanabhan, former editor of one of India's leading national dailies The Hindu and The Hindu BusinessLine, along with Ananth Nath, Managing Editor of The Caravan, one of the top long-form narrative journalism magazines in India. The others who have supported the report through their inputs include Shekhar Gupta - Editor of The Print, Madhavi Divan - Additional Solicitor General of India and Geeta Ramaseshan - Lawyer at Madras High Court.

Members can download the report at:

<https://wan-ifra.org/insight/report-media-laws-in-india>

One can also watch the panel discussion at the launch of the report from the YouTube link:

<https://youtu.be/8o7oio7mOfk>

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Report examines underpinnings of reader revenue tech stack

By WAN-IFRA

As we were preparing the articles for this issue, two things happened that drove home the growing significance of reader revenue for news publishers.

Firstly, several major US-based publishing companies, including The New York Times, Gannett, Tribune and News Corp released their most recent quarterly results and all saw their digital subscriptions growing – often surging – by 30 percent or more.

Secondly, during WAN-IFRA's virtual Digital Media Europe conference in November, a number of speakers from European publishers such as Norway's Amedia, France's L'Equipe and UK-based DC Thomson discussed the rise in digital subscriptions they are seeing as well as the increasing emphasis they are placing on this key revenue source.

Late this past summer, WAN-IFRA released our second reader revenue report, titled "The building blocks of a tech reader revenue stack," which examines what publishers need to consider about the technology and systems that underpin this essential income source.

The following are our key takeaways from the report, which is available free for WAN-IFRA Members, and may be purchased by non-members.

What we have learned from our members and other exchanges is that many publishers are at different stages and trajectories with their reader revenue strategies. And many, particularly those starting out, have questions about the tech associated with reader revenue. But even the most advanced at this confess to the complex nature of it all.

And that starts with data

"While there are thousands of individual company scenarios, there seems to be at least one universal truth: Future-proofing your digital subscription business begins with getting your data in order."

Publishers we spoke with for the report include the Financial Times, The Economist, the Swedish regional news group Mittmedia, Nordjyske Medier and Politiken (both of Denmark), and Switzerland's Tamedia.

10 things to consider for your tech stack project

Here are some of the issues where the publishers and experts we spoke with seemed to reach common ground.

- **Template for a tech stack?** There is no single right way to implement a technology and data strategy associated with a publisher's reader revenue strategy, but a common thread that publishers told us...
- **Start with your data, then the tech:** Clean, easily accessible and actionable first-party data can serve as a backbone of any digital subscription strategy. The scope and objectives of a data strategy may vary, but whatever strategy is adopted, it should form the basis of all subsequent tech stack decisions.
- **Seamless integration:** It is not so much about which technologies or tools you use, or even how you implement them... it's more about how your technologies are talking to each other seamlessly, i.e. integrated.
- **Asking the right questions:** That means if / when you are investing in new systems, be sure the APIs are there and clear to pave the way so your data flows seamlessly between systems, and critically, from editorial to marketing to commercial to the

entire chain of a digital subscription journey.

- **Make it easy on your journalists:** If the above is achieved, it implies that your journalists have easy-to-understand tools and dashboards (and KPIs... more on that in a minute) to drive engagement, conversion and loyalty.
- **Common KPIs:** As Tor Jacobsen of Schibsted tells: "The great thing with digital subscriptions is that success is easy to measure. The KPIs are really the same for the editorial team, the marketing team and the team working with data analytics. [...] it's the perfect way of combining the KPIs for all internal teams. And to make that happen, you don't necessarily need to build a system, it's more about having some key KPIs to follow."
- **Regarding first-party data,** the publishers we spoke with broadly divided it into three categories: interactions, content, and consumers. The key to understanding an audience is to work out how the three are linked.
- **Building your own vs. buying or partnering:** Whether it is purchasing a data warehousing solution or building your own data layer platform or even your own analytics, for example, there are clear upsides and downsides to each. It mostly depends on your in-house skillsets, long-term strategy, and, naturally, budget. But what is clear is you should have...
- **Tech, data and product 'experts'** should be embedded in the newsroom and the entire chain to remain agile and to ensure that the right people have the right data at their fingertips to drive their KPIs.
- **Common comms across systems:** One of the most technically challenging aspects of driving digital subscriptions is getting customer journeys, promotions, marketing messaging and other customer communications aligned across systems as well as across platforms.

- **Test, test, test:** That is the cultural side of the equation, to start somewhere and create a continuous feedback loop. "You will never find the perfect solution for everyone, but you can perfect your solution over time."



Download Report

If your company is a WAN-IFRA Member, please use this link to download the report for free:

wan-ifra.org/insight/the-building-blocks-of-a-reader-revenue-tech-stack

The 10th edition of the digital media conference for ideas on digital revenue and technology

Programme of Digital Media India 2021, 2-4 March

2 March 2021

10.00 AM Keynote: Five key lessons in digital transformation. How to pivot to be a digital friendly news organization. WSJ experiences.

Edward Roussel, Chief Innovation Officer, Dow Jones and The Wall Street Journal, USA

10.35 AM The Hindu+ won Silver award for 'Best paid content strategy' at the South Asian Digital Media Awards 2020. After 2 year of its flagship site www.thehindu.com being behind the pay-wall, their bold approach towards digital subscription has started to pay the dividend. How has their business model evolved in the last two years, what are their learning and what are their future plans.

Pradeep Gairola, Business Head – Digital, The Hindu Group of Publications, India

11.10 AM Digital subscription roadmap – What are the successful models and trends around the world? The key takeaways to plan your digital subscription journey.

Gregor Waller, Principal Consultant, WAN-IFRA Consulting, Germany

11.45 AM Deep dive: Building for subscription success in Asia. As Asian news publishers accelerate their shift to subscription, differences in macro-economic factors, audience channels, available technology, and digital maturity are shaping the journey to sustainable reader revenue growth. From creating unique value propositions to understanding strategic pricing for their loyalty segments, the participants of the APAC GNI Subscription Lab will share about their four-month intensive experience and how they are galvanizing their organisations to build towards a success subscription business in 2021 and beyond.

Hosted by Google News Initiative

12.15 PM End of session 1

3.00 PM Premium newsletters: While the daily email newsletters are generally meant to attract readers to our sites, premium newsletters attract paying readers and helps in digital subscription journey. "India Cable" from TheWire.com is one such premium newsletter that is making the difference. What makes a newsletter premium. TheWire.com shares their experience.

Siddharth Varadarajan, Founding Editor, The Wire, India

3.35 PM Subscriber Retention Strategy: Case study from BILD. Learning from Product-lead strategy to keep the digital 'paying' readers 'loyal'.

Daniel Mussinghoff, Director Premium (BILDPlus), BILD, Germany

4.10 PM Panel: Is digital subscription the holy grail of digital news business? Are Indian news media companies ready for it? How technology partners and alliances help build it.

Puneet Jain, CEO, HT Digital News, India
Sheena Bhalla, Data & Innovation Strategy Lead, Google News Initiative, Singapore
Moderated by Pradyuman Maheshwari, Editor-in-Chief & CEO, MxM India

5.00 PM End of session 2

3 March 2021

10.00 AM Keynote: Business models for the post-covid media business. The key insights from Innovation in News Media World Report.

Juan Senor, President, Innovation Media Consulting Group, UK

10.35 AM What is brand studio all about. How do they enable connect with the customers. Listen to how Media24 develops native advertising campaigns and what worked well for them.

Jerusha Raath, Head of Brand Studio, 24.com, News24, South Africa

11.10 AM Panel: Digital advertising - Premium and programmatic approaches, how to thrive in the future.

Hemant Jain, Sr. EVP & Head of Digital Business, Lokmat Media Group, India
Durga Raghunath, News Head, Times Internet, India
Sanjay Sindhwani, CEO, Indian Express Online Media, India

11.45 AM End of session 3

3.00 PM Presentation of South Asian Digital Media Awards 2020

3.35 PM New revenue streams: Content to commerce leads the pack. Men-sXP brand of Times Internet shares the experience in monetizing the audience who come to this brand.

Angad Bhatia, Founder & CEO, MensXP, India

4.10 PM News media company as the digital agency. Insights from the business model that help both the advertising client and the publisher to generate high CPM.

Kevin Gentzel, Chief Revenue Officer, Gannett Inc., USA

4.45 PM End of session 4

4 March 2021

10.00 AM Building data capabilities and transitioning to be a data friendly news organization, Die Presse has developed a data platform that helps content, users and interaction. Here is an opportunity to learn how to set up and use smart data for audience engagement and retention.

Stefan Koerner, Project Manager, Die Presse Verlags GmbH & Co. KG, Austria

10.35 AM Using data for audience engagement and spotting advertising opportunities. How to build the tech stack and ensure data flows across the organization.

Kevin Anderson, Journalism and Communication Consultant, USA

11.10 AM Death of third party cookies, what is the way forward for publishers. Are the publisher alliances an answer to this. How to use data to develop user experience. South Publishers Association will tell us their plans.

Boby Paul, Head of Marketing & Monetisation, Manorama Online

11.45 AM End of session 5

3.00 PM Handling GDPR compliances, and the issues in managing the first party data collection. As news publishers take initiative to address global audience, what are the key points of data and privacy they should take care and how to do it in a friendly way.

Alexander Hanff, Think Privacy, Poland

3.35 PM Digital product for the future – a peek preview into Schibsted's product strategy and the focus for the next years. How do they set up teams across product management, technology and UX. And their approach to solving users problems.

Ola Stenberg, Product Director, Schibsted, Norway

4.10 PM CEO Talk: Transformation and growth of digital news business. The way forward for South Asian news publishers.

Bharat Gupta, Director, Jagran Prakashan Ltd. and Mariam Mammen Mathew, CEO, Manorama Digital. Moderated by Krishnaprasad, Former Editor-in-Chief, Outlook, India

5.00 PM End of the conference

For updates, please visit <https://events.wan-ifra.org/events/digital-media-india-2021>

Upcoming WAN-IFRA Events

INDIAN MEDIA LEADERS eSUMMIT 2021
28-29 June, Virtual
events.wan-ifra.org/events/indian-media-leaders-esummit-2021

WAN-IFRA INDIA 2021 PRINTING SUMMIT

The 29th annual conference in India
25-26 August, Chennai
events.wan-ifra.org/events/wan-ifra-india-2021-printing-summit

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