



Publish.ORG

ANNUAL REPORT 2017

LETTER FROM THE FOUNDERS

We're feeling very optimistic about the future of journalism here at Publish.org. The skeptical voices inside every editor and reporter out there may worry about the clouds hanging over the trade, and there are many, but progress is happening.

Support for innovations over the last few years seems to be having an effect around the world. Hundreds of impactful projects have appeared ranging from business model improvements around things like subscriptions to new technologies that will capture and tell important stories. Distribution, promotion and reader engagement have all evolved dramatically in recent years. And arguably more people are involved in the journalism process in one way or another than ever before.

One such innovation was our own - Publish.org.

We received a grant last year and began building the Internet's News Desk with our little team here. In the autumn we had a functioning platform and we invited hundreds of editors and writers to test the idea with us. After opening up to more users in November we began to see it actually starting to work.

Independent freelance journalists were pitching stories for the open commissions offered by our Editorial Board, and the community helped them edit their work in the open before publication on the Publish.org web site.

This initial exploration proved itself.

The opaque commissioning and editing process traditional news rooms have built around themselves over the years can be opened up for a much wider, global community of journalists. The Internet can in fact enable high fidelity news production by independent participants.

Can it scale?

At our End-of-Year Board Meeting in December in London we discussed how big this idea could go. We believe the ceiling of opportunity is immense for the global journalism community. If we stay focused on providing the tools and services that support quality journalism we may be able to fuel a whole new generation of freelance work that pays well and resonates with readers.

2017 was a big success. In this first annual report from the team we look at the achievements we've made and lessons learned editorially, technically and commercially. Our hope is that our success improves the state of journalism in the world, whether by sharing what we know for the benefit of everyone in the community, providing services to those we can help, or by supporting great journalism directly.

Read on and wish us more luck as we continue.

Matt, Sarah, Dan and Dean

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OUR COMMUNITY FACES BIG CHALLENGES.

HOW CAN WE HELP PEOPLE?

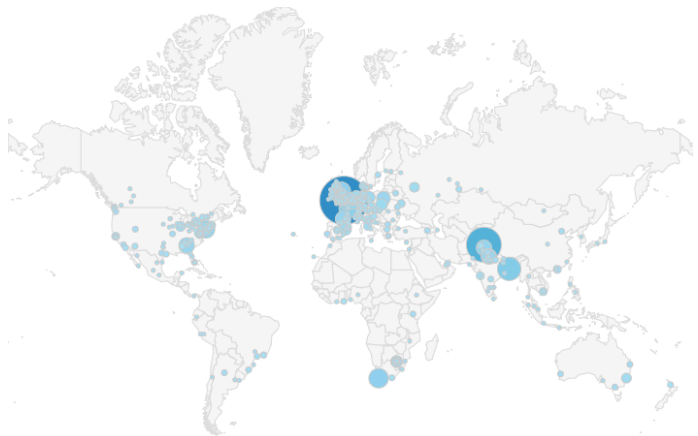
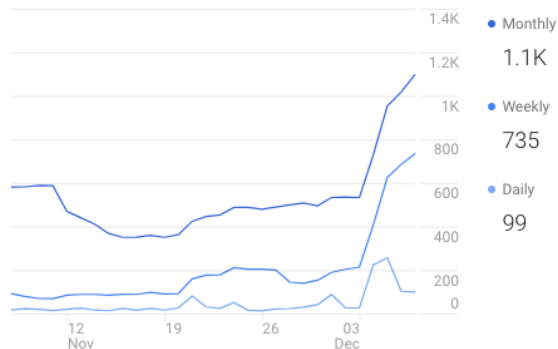
JOURNALISM AS A PROFESSION	METHODS OF PRODUCTION	IMPACT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Weak career prospects ❖ Knowledge, best practices disappear as jobs go ❖ Editors are too busy to invest in challenging stories ❖ Journalists left to fend for themselves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Contributing to major news orgs is opaque, black box ❖ Communities want to get involved, learn, contribute, but resourcing support for them is costly ❖ Most stories get poor distribution, even at big co's ❖ Media tech requires more disciplines, skills for complex output 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Local journalism in a steady decline ❖ Democracy losing its independent health monitor, accountability disappearing ❖ Trust in important systems and institutions failing, eroding progress and stability in society
<p>Solutions</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Peer review helps educate, inspire, raise standards 2. Crowdfunding enables creative work with no ROI expectations, makes connections 3. Journalism communities help people help each other - tips, legal advice, funding ideas 	<p>Solutions</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Open reputation systems can surface quality, suppress error, encourage rigour 2. Analytics provide reader insights to indicate what people care about 3. Collaborative production brings disciplines together for more relevant output 	<p>Solutions</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Open platforms can support large groups, fuel diversity, distribute authority 2. Open editorial processes create trust in output 3. Open source tools spread benefits globally, cheaply, quickly

"THE INTERNET'S OPEN NEWS DESK"

A STRONG RESPONSE FROM THE JOURNALISM COMMUNITY

- ◈ 870 requested access, 216 approved for early testing
- ◈ Sign ups from UK, US, India, France, South Africa, Germany and others
- ◈ Opened access in November, 1k active beta users by EOY

Active Users



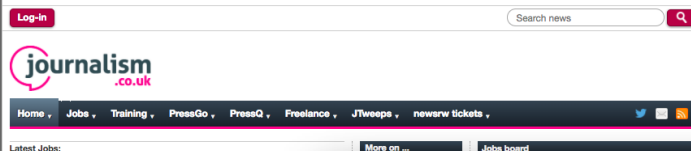
Want to write for Publish.org, now in public beta, champion open, peer-reviewed journalism

"Our big premise is, we're trying to be an open end of the day, we're just trying to fuel a healthy journalism."

By SHAN WANG @shansquared Dec. 4, 2017, 9:56 a.m.

If you want to write for the new collaborative Publish.org, you should be open to sharing your work.

The Publish.org platform, which had been in beta with a smaller group of writers in close



Latest Jobs: Program specialist - Open Society Foundations

Publish.org, now in public beta, champion open, peer-reviewed journalism

More jobs and training opportunities featured through publishing. Visit our jobs page for more.

Independent, open journalism

Publish.org is a not-for-profit, community platform for creating peer-reviewed journalism.

JOIN FOR FREE

Media houses shift access

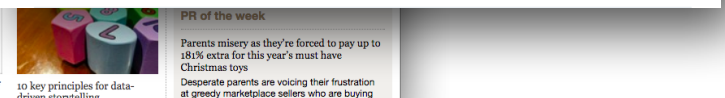
The platform aims to help fuel a healthy news ecosystem and become a hub for independent journalists

Read more

Other top stories



The Second Source: A group of women in journalism is



EDITORIAL REPORT BY SARAH HARTLEY

The first major topic for the platform encouraged members to look again at the European Union.

Moving the debate away from the Brexit-obsessed UK environment we asked writers from across Europe to pitch original journalism to disclose new insights into how change happens - or could happen - in the European Union.

We also invited expert journalists, editor of The New European newspaper Matt Kelly and well known Dutch journalism professor Bart Brouwers, to be involved in the selection process. The response has been remarkable. From a total of 13 pitches, we commissioned seven articles which cover EU related topics from banking to innovation.

Alongside this project, Publish.org members were also invited to pitch stories which looked at the general theme of democracy - a call answered by journalists working as far afield as Kashmir.

Lessons learned

We learned two important things from both of these initial activities. First, that the more precise the brief, the better level of response we get. This might sound obvious with the benefit of hindsight but, at the point we opened the 'democracy' commission, I had hoped the broad nature of that brief would prove

appealing to journalists looking to interpret it in new and interesting ways. Actually it seems the brief was just too vague for widespread involvement. The tighter requirements of the EU brief proved to be more successful and, despite this being quite a niche area of expertise, the level of interest proved to be much higher.

The screenshot shows the Publish.org website interface. At the top is a navigation bar with links: Home, Latest articles, Open commissions, Start a story, Donate, Join, and Sign in. Below this is a secondary navigation bar with categories: Ethics, Democracy, Solutions, Culture, Geography, and Science. A pink banner below the navigation bar reads: "Beta: we are currently testing **Featured image uploading**. Read more about it in [this post](#)." The main content area has a dark header with the text "DEMOCRACY / COMMISSIONS / COMMISSION" and a large yellow title: "'Our Europe': Considering the past and the future for Europe". Below the title is a table with commission details:

Pitch deadline	Open ended
Article deadline	Open ended
Format(s)	Written tbd
Budget	Tbd

To the left of the table is a circular profile picture with the letters "SA" and the name "sarah" below it, with the date "10 October 2017". Below the table is a large image of the European Union flag. Below the image is a paragraph of text: "We are looking to commission pieces of original journalism which will disclose new insights into how change happens - or could happen - in the European Union." followed by a bolded question: "Can you contribute to public understanding of how the EU has changed to be in its current form and how it might develop in the future?" and a paragraph of text: "Maybe you could expose the way global histories and individual personalities give the EU its current shape? Or interview visionary politicians or community leaders with bold ideas for the change that's necessary to tackle pressing issues on an international scale?"

The second lesson learned is the importance of external experts in the process. Having Bart Brouwers and Matt Kelly involved in the submissions for the EU project gave us an extra layer of expertise and interest. We will continue to pursue this approach in the coming months with new editorial projects.

To start 2018, we're collaborating with journalists already working worldwide to investigate lotteries via the Gaming the Lottery initiative.

That project has involved more than 40 people from 10 countries working in journalism, journalism students and civic tech organisations in Africa, Europe and the United States. Publish.org writers can now pitch to join that work and shine a light on state and privately-run lottery-type ventures around the world.

Now that the platform provides the ability for members to review and comment on the pitches and draft articles, the process is opening up and becoming more transparent. This is a unique aspect of our platform which will hopefully become more apparent to our community and demonstrate a new way of thinking about journalism in these times where credibility and truthfulness are such a big concern.

To keep track of all the editorial activities, a rolling update from the Publish.org editor can be found each week in the 'latest articles' area of the platform.

EDITORIAL BOARD



**Sarah Hartley – Editor,
Publish.org**

Sarah was on the founding team of Google's Digital News Initiative Innovation Fund. She also delivers journalism training across the world. Sarah worked at The Guardian for over a decade on products including Manchester Evening News, Guardian Local, n0tice.com and Contributoria.



Danielle Batist

Experienced freelance journalist, founder of Journopreneur and co-founder of the Constructive Journalism Project.



David Banks

Journalist and legal training consultant working with media companies, government, NGOs, charities and private clients.



Sameer Padania

Consultant focusing on innovation in journalism, human rights and philanthropy. Worked on a wide range of journalism, digital media and policy initiatives.



Raymond Joseph

ICFJ/Knight International Journalism Fellow. Former editor of the Big Issue South Africa and an assessor for the Poynter-hosted International Fact-Checking Network.



Paul Bradshaw

Runs the MA in Multiplatform and Mobile Journalism at Birmingham City University and works with the BBC England Data Unit.

THE DESIGN PROCESS

BY DEAN VIPOND

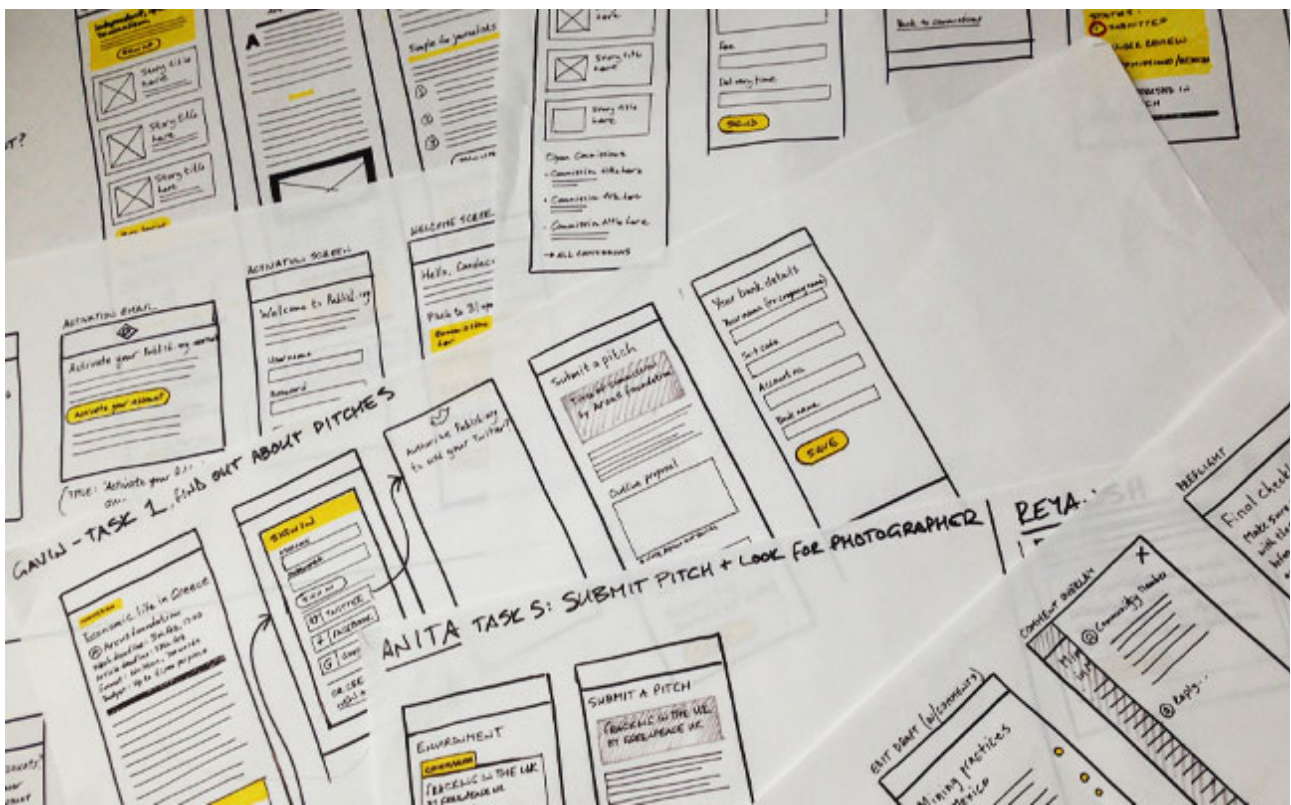
We spent a lot of time thinking about the design of Publish.org. My definition of 'design' is very broad in these early stages – what problems we are solving for people, what it is we want to achieve, how we operate as an organisation, etc. This is still evolving, and as the work progresses, we are still questioning, thinking and deciding.

Preparatory design work – research, concept, and tasks

We started the whole process by conducting interviews with freelance journalists from a variety of backgrounds. We wanted to understand their day-to-day work, how they manage their business, what's good about the job, and what problems they face. The recurring themes we discovered were not with journalism itself, but the business side of

things. Getting paid on time, pitching to the right person in an organisation, lack of feedback and clarity on the selection of pitches.

We used this to inform our thinking and devise a system that would address these issues, and let journalists focus on actual journalism. We used 'personas' (a way to force people to think about people using a service, rather than biasing the process with your own views and experiences). Then as a cross-disciplinary team (design, development, editorial and business), we used them to map out how different types of people could use Publish.org to achieve their aims. The whole point of this process is to put people at the centre of the design, and also highlight the technical and organisational things that need to be in place, to ensure this happens. Normally we would all do this in a room with sticky notes, but as a distributed team, we used an online brainstorming service called Stormboard.



This helped myself as the designer, and Dan as the engineer, prioritise important tasks and build an early version of the service. Dan needed to spend a lot of time preparing the back-end systems (account creation, pitching and commissioning, payment systems, peer review, etc), so I then got on with more detailed interaction design as well as art direction.

Interaction and visual design

Whilst Dan was away putting all the plumbing in place for an early version of Publish.org to function, I focused on individual task flows. How will pitching an article work, and what will people need to understand, to be able to do that? How will someone change their profile picture? How should someone be able to find all journalism on a given subject? I used the work we produced as a team to inform this more detailed interaction work, sketching out each task step-by-step.

During this process, I was also thinking a lot about the overall visual feel of Publish.org – how should the visual design support the service? How can it encourage people to participate in the Publish.org community, and read (or eventually, watch or listen to) the journalism created here? I spent time researching lots of news sites, online publishers and other outlets. I'm a huge fan of de Correspondent's slick, stylish art

direction, and also The Outline's daring, bold visual style. They couldn't be much further apart in their approach, but they're both really interesting sites, and helped form my thinking for Publish.org.

Publish.org is an inclusive, professional community for creating journalism. It requires a design that encourages collaboration and gives the journalism authority. It's early days, and I have big plans for the future of the creative direction of journalism produced through Publish.org – but for now, even at prototype stage, I want the creation and consumption of journalism to feel credible. We're not just testing isolated interactions; we're testing the spirit of what Publish.org is about.

We already had the core brand designed, and I expanded this to create a design



system that was consistent and clear, without losing the inclusive, independent, authoritative tone Publish.org carries. This covered everything from the visual style of site components, the wording of buttons and messages, and how photography would be used, to graphics for use on social media, the design of emails, etc.

Once we had these principles in place, it was time to make the prototype.

Prototype design and production

By now, we knew what we were going to make, a rough idea of how people could participate with Publish.org, and how the site/service would look and feel. It was time to make a prototype that will let people try out certain parts of the service, and give us feedback on their experiences.

We brought on an experienced designer/developer, the excellent Rich Jones to build a component library, that would allow us to assemble all the screens we'll need quickly and efficiently. A component library acts a bit like a model kit, letting Dan put together different combinations of elements (e.g. a block of text, some buttons, and a photograph) to make a web page. It will also allow us to respond quickly to outcomes from user testing of the prototype, and reorganise elements or build brand new pages, without having to go back to the drawing board.

In the Alpha and Beta periods we want to see how people react to the different parts of the service. Writing pitches, posting drafts of early work, conducting peer review on each other's work – all of this contributes to a system that allows for the collaborative, transparent production of journalism, that keeps journalists in control of their work, but with insights and support from the Publish community.

Design is a constant process; it's never 'finished'.

ROADMAP

ALPHA NOVEMBER 2017		BETA ONGOING	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Server	<input type="checkbox"/>	Flagging and moderation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Data model	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Peer reviewing
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Node.js	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Hypothesis integration
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Front-end templates	<input type="checkbox"/>	Invoices/banking
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Article page	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Slack notifications
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	User profile	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Formatting interface
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Channel pages	<input type="checkbox"/>	Reputation system
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Create commissions	<input type="checkbox"/>	Multi-image handling
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Create pitch	<input type="checkbox"/>	Video support
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Pitch page	<input type="checkbox"/>	User alerts
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Write a draft	<input type="checkbox"/>	Language/translation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Sponsored channels	<input type="checkbox"/>	Tagging of articles
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Commissioner admin page (approve pitches and articles)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Custom log-in / sign-up
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Image uploading	<input type="checkbox"/>	Multi-currency support
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Upvoting		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	User management (create commissioners etc)		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Featured articles selector		

DEVELOPING THE “STACK”

BY REV DAN CATT

With Dean’s initial designs in hand and the prospect of creating a prototype that will typically evolve into the finished project, it’s my roll as developer is to figure out what the “stack” is going to be.

I’ve heard of The Stack described as an English trifle, made out of layers; jelly at the bottom, sponge fingers, then custard and finally cream and sprinkles on-top to make it look fancy. When making a trifle you decide what type of jelly, custard and so on you’re going to use for each layer based on past cookery experience, personal preference and a bit of whatever’s ‘on trend’ at the moment.

And so it is with The Stack, where jelly is the underlying database, the sponge layer is the backend code that grabs the data from the jelly, processes it and hands it off to the custard front-end web pages. The cream and rainbow sprinkles, that’s

your javascript and CSS that make the web pages function in fancy ways and look nice.

It’s good to get all of this worked out before embarking on the whole thing, which is obvious if you’ve ever attempted to change the custard layer on a trifle on your way from the kitchen to the dining table.

What we got right.

The database jelly layer!!

We decided to go the whole NoDB (No Database) route. This is where you don’t set up one of the more common databases but instead use text files sat on the file system. Traditional databases are really good at holding millions of records and quickly giving you just the ones you need if you ask it correctly. The down side is they can often be a pain to set up, to keep running, to move from one place to another and to keep backed up.



For Publish.org we’re not looking at millions of records but rather various drafts of a number of well thought out commissions, pitches and articles, plus a few other bits and bobs. Which is perfect for just keeping tucked away in text files. Actually .json files, which are plain text files structured in such a way that it’s easy for both computers and people to read.

The advantage of this is there's no tricky database to keep running. Backing up the current system is as easy as just copying whichever files have changed since last time (think MacOS Time Machine or Dropbox). And moving them from our production server to our test server to our local development machines so we can test new code against the latests users, commissions and pitches is kept simple.

You can also easily send of commissions, pitches or posts to be translated if needed just by grabbing their text file.

The custard front-end layer.

Speaking of translations, one of the other things I think we got right was building

for translatability. The front-end web pages are generally what we call templates, you write the whole page with the headers, generic text on the page, footers already in them, and then the bits that are going to change, i.e. the current post with it's title and images are handed over to the template from the backend. The dynamic parts are placed into the template and then shown as a whole page to the user.

What we did right from the start is also keep all the static text in a single separate file, so the template is just structure, the framework into which all the words are placed. This creates a little bit more overhead when building pages, you have to take time to separate out any text you want to use. The advantage now is that

```
},  
"commissions": {  
  "here_are_some":  
    "We have a variety of commissions available right now.",  
  "here_is_one":  
    "There is a commission available right now. Pitch an ori",  
  "here_are_none": "There are no commissions available right",  
  "all_commissions_in": "all commissions in",  
  "edit_commission": "edit commission",  
  "create_commission": "create a commission",  
  "title": "title",  
  "title_placeholder": "Enter the commission title here",  
  "pitch_deadline": "pitch deadline",  
  "article_deadline": "article deadline",  
  "deadline_placeholder": "dd/mm/yy",  
  "format(s)": "i.e. 'Written (780 words)'",  
}
```

you can get the whole file with all the static text in translated into different languages.

We have one text language, French, converted by Google translate so therefore never seeing the light of day, but enough for us to test that we can quickly switch language if we need to so Publish can be used in different countries, or simply by users who want to use it in their first language.

The tricky sponge fingers

One thing that has caused trouble is that sponge fingers backend layer. The one that delves into databases and passes the results onto the front-end.

We decided to use Nodejs as the backend. Nodejs is very popular with a huge ecosystem built up around it, it's based on taking the traditionally front-end language of Javascript and allowing it run on server. There's all sorts of good reasons for this, including the ability to reuse code (such as validation) on both the front and back ends.

The problem wasn't with Nodejs, but rather with Javascript itself, being a somewhat messy language that has evolved over time there's a lot wrong with it, but it's worth it for all the good parts.

When Publish.org started there was a move in the community to make javascript better, but it was very much a moving target. So there were various middleground fixes such as CoffeeScript and TypeScript, which allowed to you write javascript how everyone thought it should be written, with the added step of the computer then turning that lovely

code into the messy javascript code that Nodejs could actually run.

It was a great solution at the time.

However since then everyone has pretty much settled down on the next version of Javascript, the good version, a version called ES6.

So we're in the process of converting the backend (sponge fingers) layer from CoffeeScript to the new better ES6. But sticking with our analogy, trying to change the sponge fingers layer in our trifle to a different better sponge finger layer, after the trifle has already been made!

Where this is taking us is a very stable code base, easy for anyone else to pick up and work with. Plus there are already plans for ES7 and ES8, meaning moving from one to the next over the following years should be painless, making the whole thing a good stable platform to maintain into the future.

Picking the stack, the layers to be used, is a combination between research, experience and just old fashioned gut instinct. I think we did pretty well, it's an important part of the process, the initial selection and the ability to maintain each layer as we move forwards, and certainly not a decision to be trifled with.

THE SPONSORSHIP CONUNDRUM

BY MATT MCALISTER

The revenue opportunities for platforms like Publish.org are numerous, but getting the right kind of income is not easy.

It was important to us from Day One that journalists and readers alike understand the relationship between the sources of funding and the work. People have different ideas about where to draw the lines between those things, and we decided to put off that decision until we built the platform and people were using it.

That gave us a chance to test one model we were unsure about - sponsorship.

We spoke to companies who were interested in doing something innovative with their campaigns and negotiated deals that consisted of a good chunk of funding in exchange for brand presence and influence on the commissions in a particular area of coverage.

It became obvious this idea was taking us in directions we didn't want to go. Here's why:

1) No matter how much the buyer wants to value engagement or

presence of the brand, the ultimate measure of success for a sponsorship program is the number of people exposed to something. The kinds of numbers we needed to achieve were challenging, but the numbers weren't the real problem. The real problem was that using reach to measure success for Publish.org encourages us to minimise costs of production and optimise for distribution. That's backwards. We want most of our energy focused on the journalism and a fraction on distribution. The costs for us would go to the wrong things and change what we were about.

2) If a sponsor writes a brief for a commission and invites journalists to pitch for it then they are acting as content buyers. The journalism is not just influenced by the sponsor, it is defined by it. Doing advertorial in that way felt like a

Publish.org Pollution is sponsored by UNEP



The United Nations Environment Programme is an agency of United Nations and coordinates its environmental activities, assisting developing countries in implementing environmentally sound policies and practices.

How this article was made

1. Funded by [UNEP](#)
2. Commissioned by [Publish.org](#)
3. Veracity and journalistic quality reviewed by 4 community members
4. Submitted on 5th June 2017
5. Published on 1st July 2017

[See full article history](#)

potentially smart thing to do because there would be total transparency in the process, not to mention the benefit of supporting freelance journalists financially. Of course, the sponsors were nervous about the level of transparency our platform applies, and after speaking to the Editorial Board it became obvious that journalists would be confused, too. And, to top it off, the readers would likely be disappointed by the output - Publish.org is supposed to be about independent journalism.

3) Alternatively, if we disconnect sponsorship from the journalism process then other problems emerge. A wall between the funding and the output would mean that journalists could operate freely and independently without influence from the money. But demonstrating that wall in a way that resonated with our goals of openness and transparency and proved editorial independence is a tricky problem. The concept creates a different kind of tension due to the secrecy required. This started to feel like a bad idea, too.

4) Lastly, the model feels too small for our ambitions. It's conceivable that we could run a handful of sponsorship programs simultaneously ranging in value from €15k to €50k within a year's time, perhaps about 10 over the course of the year, increasing as we grow. Most of that money would go toward the journalism, so, yes, we could fund a lot of journalists to do interesting and valuable work. And while that might be a worthwhile thing to do we believe there's a much bigger

opportunity to help journalism as a trade and to do that globally. We started Publish.org to go head on into journalism's most challenging issues. A form of the sponsorship model may help us get there, but it may not be worth the costs if it damages our ability to do the big things.

Other models and a future direction

We looked at several other revenue opportunities and started testing them out, including donations. While we did raise enough to pay for a few articles the volume has to increase for it to have an impact.

We like the idea of readers contributing funding and even directing funding to specific areas of coverage that they care about. This is a much more pure source of funding that accomplishes all the things we care about in terms of openness, transparency, cost efficiency, and serving the journalism community.

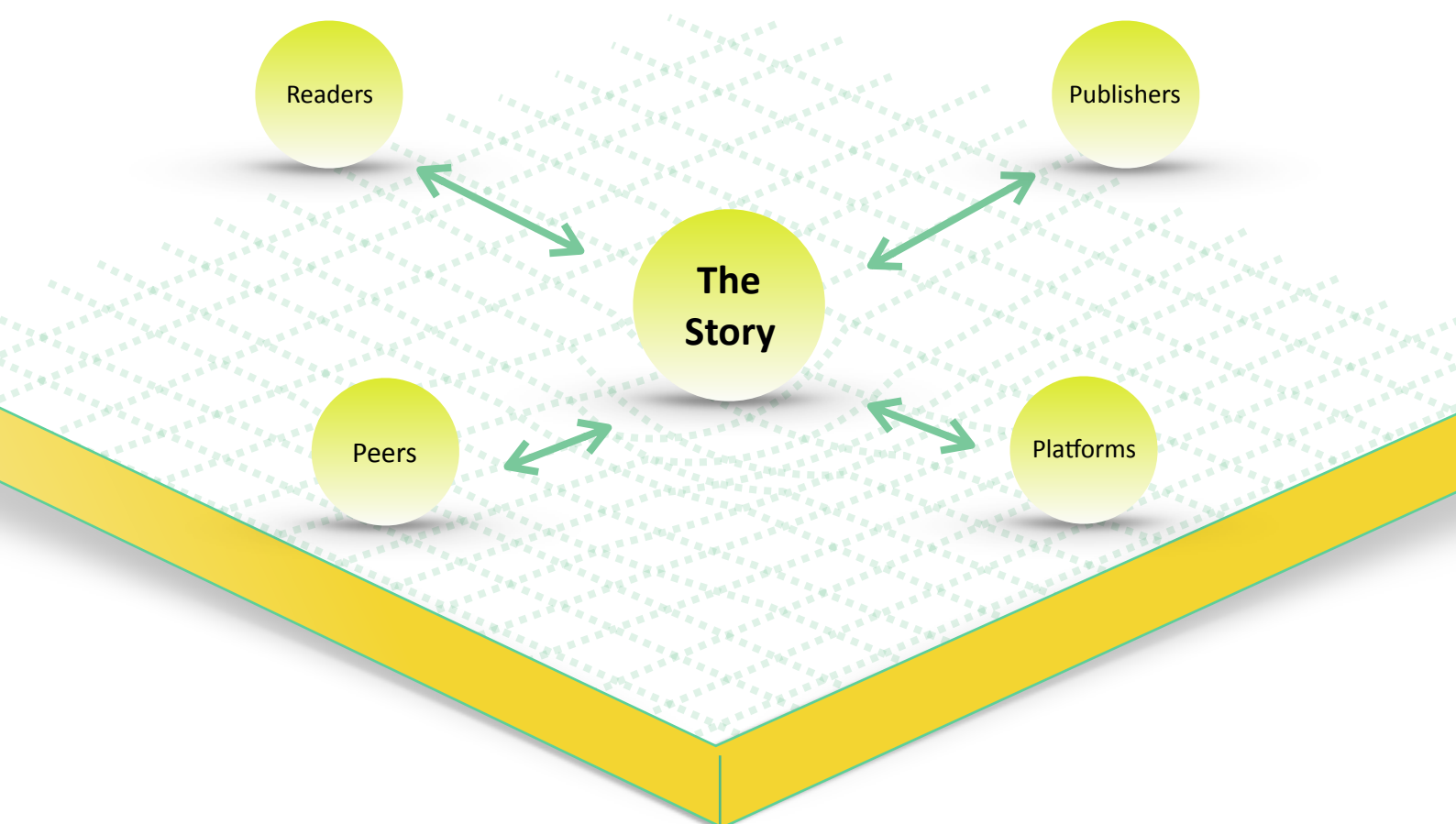
At the moment we're just taking donations in the traditional way. In the future we want to provide levels of access and authority that make a more robust membership program interesting to people.

We've considered other business lines such as events, job listings or perhaps gig match-making. We're unsure about content licensing, but there might be something there.

There's a much bigger idea we really like around offering the platform as a service. If we got that right it could serve all kinds of purposes across the journalism world and provide a nice steady stream of income for Publish.org. We aren't certain where we should start on that one, so we're still letting the idea brew for now.

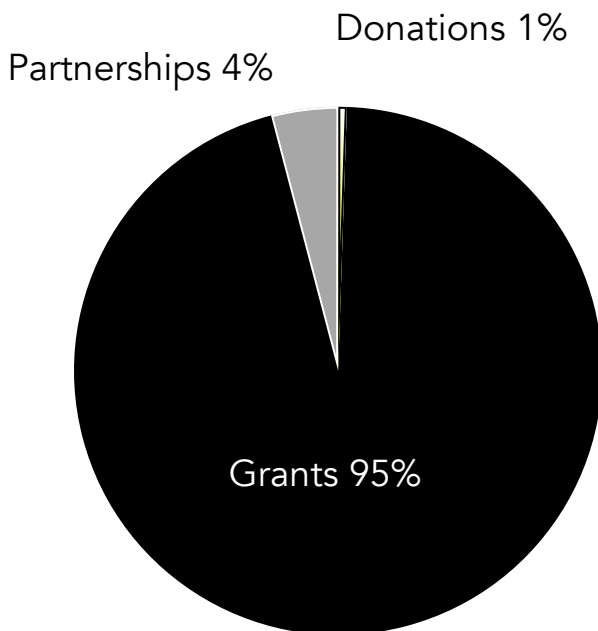
Regardless, we know a lot more than we did a year ago before the platform and the community around it existed. Our investment into the sponsorship model was time well spent. We can see some benefits to it, and it could help us in the short term.

The thing is, we're not doing Publish.org for short term benefits, particularly if they impose long term costs. In order to create a lasting thing that people actually genuinely care about we need to be very careful about what role money plays in the system. Sometimes that means saying 'no'.

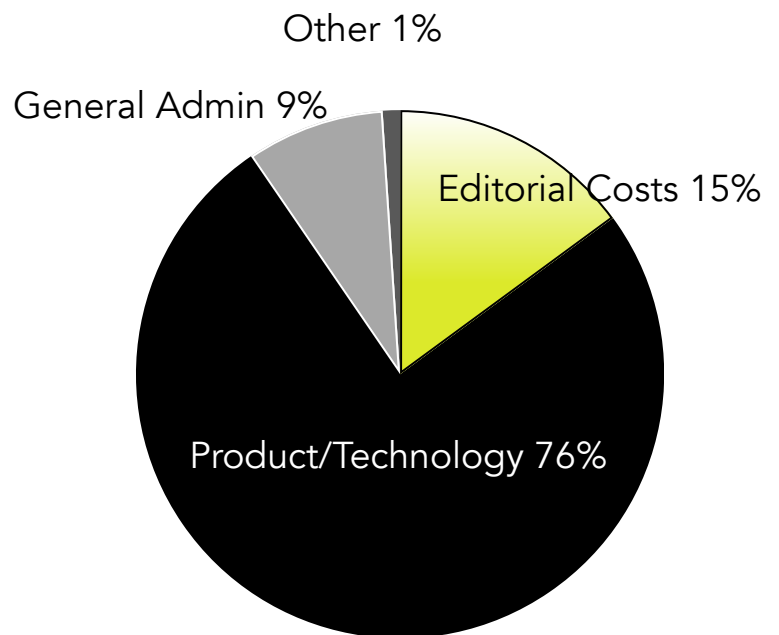


YEAR 1 BUDGET

€160,000



INCOME



EXPENSES