The Audience That Sustains Journalism

A White Paper on Donations, Trust, and Sustainability in Independent Journalism

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Executive Summary

Independent journalism is the cornerstone of democracy, essential for ensuring transparency, plurality of information, and oversight of power. However, its ability to fulfill this role is seriously threatened by a convergence of structural crises.

The Spiral of Precariousness

The traditional economic crisis in the media, coupled with digital saturation and fragmentation, has drastically limited journalistic business models, particularly affecting freelancers and independent media outlets. This financial precariousness reduces the resources available to produce in-depth investigations and high-quality content. This creates a downward spiral in which scarce resources diminish perceived quality, which in turn undermines audience trust, making it difficult to obtain financial support (advertising, subscriptions, or donations) and reinforcing instability. Added to this scenario is the so-called "Snow White effect," where audiences prioritize the consumption of information that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs, complicating the work of journalism with a clear democratic commitment.

The Donor Audience as a Key Player

In this context of extreme professional vulnerability, a key player emerges that is capable of breaking the spiral of precariousness: the donor audience. This The Audience That Sustains Journalism: A White Paper on Donations, Trust, and Sustainability in Independent Journalism analyzes the factors that drive donations to independent journalism, understanding crowdfunding as a financing mechanism based more on social and symbolic logic than on purely economic considerations.

Focusing on the active role of audiences transforms the relationship between freelancers and the media into a virtuous circle of trust and mutual support. Projects such as Taktak, funded by the European Union to implement a system of direct donations to journalists, illustrate how direct financial support from citizens can be the key driver for the economic viability and independence of the sector.

Motivations for Donating: Trust, Legitimacy, and Civic Value

Academic literature on journalism funding confirms that donations to independent journalism are explained less by the logic of payment and more by the social relationship established with audiences.

People contribute financially when they perceive trust, social value, legitimacy of the project, and the possibility of expressing their civic identity. In this context, perceived legitimacy is the most decisive factor in maintaining sustained support, even above the quality of the content.

This legitimacy is built through editorial consistency, financial transparency, professional track record, independence, and a clear social purpose. Unlike subscriptions, donations incorporate symbolic motivations: supporting journalism becomes a civic act, a way of protecting public goods such as truth and the oversight of power.

Methodology and Successful Case Studies

The seven case studies selected respond to a methodological strategy aimed at representing the diversity of donation-based funding models and identifying the different factors that activate, consolidate, and sustain the economic participation of the audience.

- Sham Jaff (Germany) highlights the model of a freelance journalist financed by crowdfunding, where support is based on personal trust, narrative consistency, and shared values, showing how editorial autonomy can be sustained outside of hegemonic media agendas.
- *Soberanía Alimentaria* (Spain) provides the perspective of a small, thematic media outlet that uses donations as a survival mechanism, highlighting the importance of community identity and political commitment in the decision to financially support projects that raise awareness of struggles ignored by traditional media.
- *De Correspondent* (Netherlands) represents a membership model focused on transparency, editorial participation, and belonging, useful for analyzing how cooperative values and a narrative of "journalism of what remains" motivate recurring contributions.
- *Investigative Reporting Project Italy* (IRPI) (Italy) allows us to study donations as a form of institutional protection against legal risks, especially strategic litigation (SLAPPs), showing how the audience can become a democratic shield that guarantees the continuity of investigative journalism.
- CIPER (Chile) shows how the donor audience can become a pillar of sustainability through civic motivations, identity, and legitimacy generated by high-impact social investigations.
- *La Marea* (Spain) demonstrates the effectiveness of a membership model based on ethics and transparency, where the audience becomes a civic partner that invests in critical journalism and a public service.
- *OKO.press* (Poland) shows how digital design, trust architecture, and the reduction of technical friction are key to converting the audience's democratic motivation into stable financial support.

These seven case studies offer a comparative and multifocal view that serves as the empirical basis for the white paper's recommendations.

From One-off Support to Lasting Loyalty

For the long-term sustainability of freelancers, media outlets, and projects, it is crucial to convert one-off support into stable contributions. This requires building a lasting bond based on trust and activating an "affective economy." The pillars of recurrence are based on transparency and offering value-added or experiential content (access to events, exclusive newsletters) that strengthens the sense of involvement and closeness. It is vital that digital design acts as a trust architecture, minimizing technical barriers and friction in the payment process, so that the audience's intrinsic motivation is not diluted.

Recommendation Framework

The report concludes with a set of recommendations for freelancers and independent media outlets, focused on three strategic objectives: 1) securing the first donation, 2) converting one-time contributions into recurring ones, and 3) building loyalty and increasing engagement.

1. The focus should be on minimizing technical friction (short forms, universal payment methods such as Visa/PayPal) and establishing editorial legitimacy through calls to action that trigger narratives of urgency or risk, positioning the donation as a "shield against litigation."
2. It is necessary to change the perception from a transaction to a civic commitment, incorporating incentives such as tax relief and offering value-added or "experiential" options to strengthen reciprocity.
3. This involves continuously optimizing the digital experience as a means of retention and creating spaces for active listening so that donors can express their opinions on editorial priorities, treating them as serious partners and not as a "passive crowd."

Ultimately, this white paper seeks to encourage the creation of an ecosystem in which public support translates, in a sustainable manner, into pluralistic, rigorous, and high-quality journalism.

Introduction

1. The Donor Audience as a Key Player in Journalistic Sustainability

Independent journalism is the cornerstone of democracy, essential for ensuring transparency, plurality of information, and checks on power in Europe and the rest of the world. However, its ability to fulfill this role is seriously threatened by a convergence of structural crises.

1.1. The spiral of precariousness

The traditional economic crisis in the media, coupled with digital saturation and fragmentation, has drastically limited journalistic business models, particularly affecting freelancers and independent media outlets. This financial precariousness reduces the resources available to produce in-depth investigations and high-quality content, directly impacting public perception.

This creates a spiral in which the scarcity of resources diminishes perceived quality, which in turn undermines audience confidence, generating an increasingly precarious dynamic. Lower confidence translates into greater difficulty in obtaining financial support (whether through advertising, subscriptions, or donations), reinforcing precariousness and compromising editorial independence.

Added to this scenario is the so-called "Snow White effect" or "Snow White mirror syndrome," a phenomenon described by communication studies as the selective tendency to consume only content that reinforces one's preconceptions, acting as a cognitive filter that hinders the integration of new contradictory information (González Velasco, 2018). This confirmation bias manifests itself critically in journalism, where it transforms into pressure from the audience (particularly in subscription models) on the media to validate their ideological positions (Draper, 2022).

These challenges not only jeopardize the stability of freelancers and independent media, but also limit journalism's ability to function in a safe, ethical, and sustainable environment.

1.2. The donor audience: an emerging solution

Focusing on the active role of audiences in contrast to other journalistic business models not only seeks an economic transaction, but also transforms the relationship between freelancers and media outlets with the people who read, listen to, and watch their projects into a virtuous circle of trust and mutual support.

Projects such as [Taktak][1], funded by the European Union to implement a system of direct donations to journalists, and platforms such as [Display Europe], which facilitates the multilingual distribution of independent content, illustrate how direct financial support from citizens can be the key driver for the economic viability and independence of the sector.

Continuing the reflections begun in the first white paper (De Frutos-García, 2025), published in November 2025 and focusing on the situation of freelancers in Europe, *The Audience That Sustains Journalism: A White Paper on Donations, Trust, and Sustainability in Independent Journalism* aims to explore one of the possible solutions to the financial precariousness of freelancers and independent media. Beyond mere financial survival, the report analyzes how crowdfunding campaigns reinforce the legitimacy, credibility, and intrinsic link between those who practice journalism and the communities that are created to support their projects and their very existence.

The work is structured to provide tools for dealing with this paradigm shift. Following this initial diagnosis, the subsequent chapters delve into the motivations of freelancers, media outlets, and audiences, as well as the psychological and social mechanisms that turn a passive audience into active donors, examining the relationship between trust, perceived quality, and willingness to donate. At the same time, it examines the narratives and the technological and legal architecture that facilitates the transition from one-off to recurring donations, a crucial element in ensuring the transparency and efficiency of micro-patronage over time.

The report presents seven successful case studies from different countries that illustrate how active audience engagement not only ensures survival, but also strengthens editorial independence and protects freelancers and independent media from external pressures.

Ultimately, this study not only offers an up-to-date diagnosis of the challenges of financing independent journalism today, but also provides concrete recommendations for freelancers and media outlets to harness the potential of the donor audience. This white paper seeks to encourage the creation of an ecosystem in which citizen support translates, in a sustainable manner, into pluralistic, rigorous, and quality journalism.

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[1] The Taktak platform, currently under development by the Taktak Consortium, is a pioneering solution designed to empower media outlets and individual journalists through an innovative donation and revenue-sharing system.

2. Objectives and Methodology

2.1. Context and objectives of the white paper

The main purpose of *The Audience That Sustains Journalism: A White Paper on Donations, Trust, and Sustainability in Independent Journalism* is to analyze and understand the factors that drive donations to independent journalism, a financing mechanism that is explained by social and symbolic logic rather than purely economic considerations.

This research is crucial when considering that journalism carried out by self-employed professionals in Europe operates in an environment marked by profound precariousness, with intermittent income and weak or non-existent social security schemes, according to the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (Blagojev et al., 2025).

The report also points to the lack of detailed data and monitoring on the specific conditions that encourage donations to freelancers, media outlets, and/or specific journalistic projects, which makes it difficult to conduct a comprehensive assessment and formulate appropriate crowdfunding strategies. In this context of economic fragility and job vulnerability (De Frutos-García, 2025), four secondary objectives are proposed:

O1. Identify the motivations of freelancers, independent media, and donor audience for requesting or making contributions to donation campaigns, considering the journalistic, community, identity, and symbolic dimensions.

O2. Examine the narratives, communication strategies, and design of the microfinancing platforms used by freelancers and independent media to obtain funding.

O3. Analyze successful crowdfunding cases promoted by freelancers and media outlets in order to identify best practices that can be transferred to other journalistic projects.

O4. Develop a framework of strategic recommendations aimed at (a) securing the first donation, (b) converting one-off contributions into recurring contributions, and (c) building audience loyalty and increasing engagement.

This framework will seek to promote the ongoing sustainability of projects and consolidate donation as an essential means of ensuring editorial autonomy and the survival of independent professionals.

2.2. Methodology

To achieve this main objective and the four secondary ones, a mixed research methodology has been adopted that integrates the depth of qualitative analysis with the rigor of empirical review. The methodological design has been structured in three chronological stages to ensure the depth and validation of the data.

Literature review

The first stage consisted of an exhaustive review of the academic literature on journalistic crowdfunding and audience behavior, carried out from June to December 2025, which established the theoretical framework for understanding donor motivation.

1. Academic studies, incorporating findings from relevant academic research on donations in the field of journalism, with a special focus on studies of crowdfunding and crowdfunding campaigns.
2. Reports and publications from European professional organizations, consulting documents from associations, unions, and/or federations of journalists.
3. Finally, information from media outlets and magazines specializing in the media sector was consulted to obtain an up-to-date perspective on relevant trends and debates.

Case studies

The second stage focused on the analysis of seven internationally selected case studies that exemplify successful models of crowdfunding and audience relationship management, meaning that their campaigns were fully funded (Hunter & Di Bartolomeo, 2019: 278). This phase of the work was carried out between November and December 2025.

- Case study 1. Sham Jaff and *What Happened Last Week*

German journalist Sham Jaff's proposal exemplifies freelance journalism based on the direct relationship between creator and audience, where donations and subscriptions are based on personal trust and the editorial consistency of a single voice. Her project *What Happened Last Week*, focused on the global south, offers depth and context outside the fast pace of the mainstream media. The recurrence of support stems from a coincidence of values: the audience perceives that their contribution strengthens Jaff's autonomy, enables coverage of regions and topics outside the hegemonic agenda-setting, and creates a bond of sustainability based on mutual recognition.

- Case study 2. *Soberanía Alimentaria* in Spain

The magazine *Soberanía alimentaria, biodiversidad y culturas* (Food Sovereignty, Biodiversity, and Cultures), which specializes in agroecology, peasant rights, and food justice, represents a model of thematic journalism in Spain where donations are driven by a strong sense of identity and community. Its funding relies on an audience committed to social movements and the defense of common goods, who see their contribution as a way to support alternative narratives in the face of agribusiness and media concentration. Financial support functions as a political and symbolic act that strengthens the autonomy of a media outlet dedicated to raising awareness of territorial struggles and sustainable production practices.

- Case study 3. *De Correspondent* in the Netherlands

The Dutch project *[De Correspondent](#)* offers a model of journalism financed exclusively by its members, based on depth, collaboration with readers, and the absence of advertising. Its editorial approach prioritizes structural analysis and context over immediacy of information, and due to its success, it launched an English-language edition called *[The Correspondent](#)*. The motivation to donate, both from the audience that supported it in Dutch and English, revolved around belonging to a global community that values transparency, participation, and independence.

- Case study 4. Investigative Reporting Project Italy (Italy)

[IRPI](#) represents a model of independent investigative journalism rooted in the Italian context, where the motivation to donate is geared toward institutional defense and the protection of democracy against political, economic, and mafia pressures. As a collaborative platform, IRPI exposes networks of organized crime, corruption, and abuse of power, relying on its community to strengthen its resilience in the face of SLAPPs and litigation that seek to hinder its investigations. Donations are seen as a civic act that guarantees the continuity of critical journalism capable of challenging opaque structures.

- Case study 5. Centro de Investigación Periodística (Center for Investigative Journalism) (CIPER) in Chile

[CIPER](#) works with audience motivations anchored in editorial trust, the proven effectiveness of its investigations, and identification with a democratic project in Chile. Its contributing membership model is based on public legitimacy gained through reporting that has had real effects on policies and institutional processes. This case demonstrates how the donor audience can sustain high-impact journalism in Latin America through a civic commitment that links identity, trust, and shared responsibility.

- Case study 6. *La Marea*: 13 years of crowdfunding in Spain

[La Marea](#) exemplifies an independent, membership-based media outlet whose request for support is based on a rigorous and transparent ethical framework, formalized in its Decalogue of Independent Media (Carballar, 2022). The funding received guarantees structural sustainability and protects editorial autonomy from political and business interests in Spain. For its audience, donating is an investment in critical journalism that operates as a public service, generating the relationship of trust and shared responsibility necessary to counteract media concentration and sustain alternative narratives.

- Case study 7. *OKO.press* in Poland

[OKO.press](#) is a key example of a Polish investigative and fact-checking media outlet that relies on citizen support to safeguard its independence in an environment of strong political pressure. Its case study shows how civic motivation must be channeled through platforms and user experiences that reduce technical friction and facilitate recurring engagement. The audience perceives its contribution as a symbolic and practical act that guarantees the continuity of investigative journalism in a fragile democratic context.

In-depth interviews

Finally, the third stage of the research consisted of conducting in-depth interviews with a key representative person from each case study (Table 1).

These interviews were conducted between November and December 2025, with the aim of verifying the information gathered in the previous stages, validating qualitative trends, and delving deeper into aspects of professional practice, such as operational decisions, challenges in campaign management, and the dynamics of digital participation.

Interview requests were sent to all crowdfunding campaigns, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven individuals from the following media outlets and projects: *OKO.Press*, *Soberanía Alimentaria*, *DeCorrespondent*, *La Marea*, CIPER, IRPI and *What Happened Last Week*. The interviews were conducted via videoconference or written questionnaire. The interviews lasted between 40 and 52 minutes. The average duration was 46 minutes.

Table 1. In-depth interviews illustrating the case studies

Case study	Country	Name	Position	Interview date
OKO.press	Poland	Dominika Michalak	Grants Manager	28-11-2025
Soberanía Alimentaria	Spain	Amal El Mohammadiane Tarbift	Campaign Manager	02-12-2025
Sham Jaff	Germany	Sham Jaff	Freelance journalist	03-12-2025
La Marea	Spain	Ana Veiga	Head of Communications	04-12-2025
The Correspondent	Netherlands	Irene Caselli	Founding partner and journalist for the media outlet	06-12-2025
CIPER	Chile	Claudia Urquieta	Membership Manager	08-12-2025
IRPI	Italy	Giulio Rubino	Co-founder and Co-director of the media outlet	12-12-2025

Own elaboration

The aim of semi-structured interviews is to understand a person's "lived experience" and "perspective" (Johnson & Rowlands 2012, 100). As part of the ethical process, interviewees gave their consent for their names to be used in this research and were provided with a copy of their interview transcript for approval.

The combination of these methodological approaches provides the report with a solid and holistic foundation, allowing not only for the diagnosis of the audience's intrinsic motivations, but also for the formulation of a set of practical and contextualized recommendations that seek to transform one-time support into a permanent relationship of loyalty, understanding the donor audience as a key player in the democratic sustainability of journalism.

Chapter 1
Motivations for Donating to Independent Journalism

Donations to independent journalism are explained less by the economic logic of payment and more by the social relationship established between freelancers and media outlets with their audiences. Academic literature on prosocial behavior and crowdfunding shows that people contribute financially when they perceive trust, social value, legitimacy of the project, and expression of their civic identity (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011).

Unlike the subscription model, donations incorporate symbolic motivations: supporting journalism becomes a civic act, a way of protecting public goods such as truth or the scrutiny of power (Newman et al., 2025; Levi & Nielsen, 2010). Affective and community factors also come into play. Thus, audiences donate to maintain a space they feel is their own, or to empower themselves in contexts where they perceive threats to independent information.

Trust and legitimacy function as structural variables. Recent studies confirm that the perceived legitimacy of the project is the most decisive factor in maintaining sustained support, even above the quality of the content (Foster, 2021). Legitimacy is built through editorial consistency, financial transparency, professional track record, independence, and social purpose.

In this context, the motivations for donating should be understood as multifactorial, combining journalistic (quality), psychological (personal consistency), social (community), identity (civic), and symbolic (democratic values) dimensions.

These motivations are analyzed below, differentiating between those who request funding (freelancers and media outlets) and those who donate (audiences).

1. Freelancers' Motivations for Requesting Donations

Freelancers work in an environment characterized by structural precariousness, intermittent income, and a lack of institutional support (Deuze, 2009). This reality means that donations are perceived not only as a mechanism for economic sustainability, but also as a tool for editorial autonomy (De-Frutos-García, 2025).

The academic literature on freelance journalism confirms that these individuals seek to sustain their own projects without depending on assignments from newsrooms or advertisers, prioritizing topics that require time, sensitivity, or depth. For this reason, donation campaigns emphasize independence, the need for time to research, and the social value of specialized work.

In addition, freelance journalists base their legitimacy on their direct relationship with their audience, which some authors refer to as "relational journalism" (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018). Trust is built not through an institutional brand, but through personal identity, transparency, narrative consistency, and emotional authenticity.

1.1. Case study of freelancers in Germany: Sham Jaff and building legitimacy through community

Although most research on audience funding in journalism focuses on media organizations, there is an emerging and increasingly relevant model: direct support for freelance journalists (De Frutos-García, 2025). This model illustrates how donations can sustain not only editorial projects, but also individual careers that depend on autonomy, narrative consistency, and trust.

In the German ecosystem, a prime example is Sham Jaff, a freelance journalist who is funded almost exclusively by subscriptions from her audience. Since 2014, Jaff has been publishing *What Happened Last Week*, a weekly newsletter focusing on news and analysis from Asia, Africa, and the Americas, regions historically underserved by Western media. Her goal is to expand her audience's perspective beyond a Euro- and U.S.-centric focus, offering a more diverse and comprehensive view of the global South. Every Monday, Jaff carefully selects the most relevant stories from these regions, presenting them in an accessible, relatable manner, free of unnecessary jargon or sensationalism.

> The tone of my newsletter is conversational and critical, which makes people feel like they are learning from someone they trust rather than from an institution with hidden incentives. My podcasts and panel work helped expand that circle. They put a face and a voice to the project and made it easier for people to feel connected (Jaff, 2025).

The newsletter prioritizes transparency, providing full access to sources and avoiding algorithms that prioritize clicks over quality content. Since 2023, a paid subscription model has been introduced, allowing her most committed followers to receive expanded content: more extensive analysis, cultural recommendations, positive news, and weekly playlists of viral music from different countries. As the

journalist herself points out, the introduction of financial contributions transformed the relationship with her readers:

> When financial contributions became part of the model, the relationship with my audience became more reciprocal. Readers started paying closer attention to the sustainability of the project, not just the content (Jaff, 2025).

With over 30,000 readers in more than 100 countries, *What Happened Last Week* combines independent journalism, specialized focus, and direct engagement with its audience, illustrating a model of funding through subscriptions that supports the editorial independence of a single journalist.

> Direct support definitely lets me invest time in the type of journalism that doesn't fit rapid news cycles. It also gives me independence from the incentives of advertisers and the taste and trends of mainstream media (Jaff, 2025).

Unlike organizations that use crowdfunding models to expand operations, Sham Jaff's project shows how subscriptions can finance the time, effort, and independence necessary to produce purposeful journalism. The relationship between the audience and the journalist is based less on material benefits and more on shared values, the representation of marginalized communities, and trust in a particular journalistic voice, thereby reinforcing perceived legitimacy and sustained support.

> People who donate tend to be globally minded. Many are academics, development workers, journalists, diaspora communities, and people who feel disconnected from traditional news. They support me because the work helps them understand the world in a deeper way, and because they trust my judgment. The feedback I get usually centers on clarity, tone, and the sense that I pull them into stories they would never encounter otherwise. Some say they support the mission. Others support me as an individual voice. Many say they want to preserve a space where journalism feels human, curious, and structurally aware (Jaff, 2025).

The case of Sham Jaff exemplifies how, in freelance journalism, personal identity, narrative consistency, and transparency translate into a model of sustainability based on trust and community, which activates recurring paid memberships and reinforces the social relevance of the content produced.

2. Media's Motivations for Requesting Donations

Independent media outlets, understood as those that do not depend on the interests of political or business power groups, maintain the editorial autonomy of their journalists, are accountable for their sources of funding, and are committed to public service and social transformation (*La Marea*, 2022) tend to appeal to motivations other than those of freelance journalists.

According to the [Decalogue of Independent Media](#) drawn up by *La Marea* (Carballar, 2022), these media outlets meet criteria such as: not depending on

shareholders with business or political interests; limiting institutional advertising; publishing their accounts and reporting transparently; avoiding sponsored content without clear indication; ensuring decent working conditions; and maintaining editorial independence in the face of internal or external pressures. These requirements establish an ethical and structural framework that underpins the audience's demands for financial support.

The literature on membership models and institutional crowdfunding highlights three key motivations for soliciting donations:

1. Structural sustainability, ensuring editorial continuity, maintaining work teams, producing rigorous research outside the mainstream agenda-setting, and financing the organization itself.
2. Social impact, positioning itself as an actor of democratic oversight and surveillance and, therefore, fulfilling its public service mission.
3. Urgency or threat, facing risks of closure, political pressure, strategic litigation, or reputation crises that compromise the existence or independence of the media outlet.

When independent media outlets face external threats, these motivations intensify, articulating narratives that combine defense of the common good, institutional resilience, and protection of freedom of information (Olivier, 2025; The Membership Guide, n.d.).

Furthermore, the request for donations is reinforced by internal factors within the profession. Job insecurity, dependence on institutional advertising or large advertisers, and pressure to maximize digital audiences can limit editorial autonomy and journalistic quality. In response to this, the creation of communities by a committed audience not only ensures financial resources, but also generates a bond of trust and mutual responsibility between the audience and the media outlet, reinforcing the perceived independence and legitimacy of the journalistic project (Barbas cited in *La Marea*, 2022).

In this sense, independent media outlets that apply these practices combine economic sustainability with ethical values: transparency in financing, editorial consistency, accountability, and social commitment. Thus, donations are justified not only as an economic contribution, but also as an investment in critical, rigorous, and transformative journalism that seeks to counteract media concentration, misinformation, and the loss of public trust.

2.1. Case study: *Soberanía Alimentaria* (Spain) and the struggle for survival

Soberanía Alimentaria, Biodiversidad y Culturas is a magazine founded in 2010 with the aim of becoming a space for critical thinking about land, food, peasant struggles, and agricultural policies. As an independent media outlet, its editorial project articulates feminist, decolonial, anti-racist, and rural approaches that rarely

find space in the conventional media ecosystem. Unlike centralized structures, the magazine operates as an associative and cooperative project, composed of more than sixty entities and a hundred individuals, and managed on a daily basis by the cooperative El Pa Sencer.

Soberanía Alimentaria's editorial approach is based on close ties with rural areas and social movements linked to agroecology and food sovereignty. Its decision to continue publishing a print edition is both a political choice to slow down and a structural necessity: to guarantee access to readers in contexts where the digital divide persists and limits the possibility of participating in public debate.

Motivations, strategy, and community

In 2025, the project faces a deficit that jeopardizes its continuity at the end of the year. The cooperative structure and the cost of the print edition create a financial imbalance that is difficult to sustain solely with membership fees and subscriptions. The threat of closure has triggered an emergency campaign on the Spanish platform Verkami, designed not only as a way to cover immediate costs, but also as a strategic mechanism to expand its social base, as highlighted by journalist and campaign manager Amal El Mohammadiane Tarbift.

> We decided to resort to donations through the Verkami campaign because we would be closing at the end of this year with a deficit, which threatened the survival of the magazine. We began designing the campaign in September, with the aim of ensuring its survival at the end of this year. The key is to increase the number of partners and subscribers (El Mohammadiane Tarbift, 2025).

The [crowdfunding campaign](#) launched in fall 2025 is planned to run for four months, with a minimum target of €20,000 and an optimal target of €35,000. Its design aims in two simultaneous directions: on the one hand, to ensure short-term survival and, on the other, to strengthen medium-term autonomy by increasing subscriptions. Initially, the campaign represents 15% of the annual budget, but the team projects that it could grow to 30% if it manages to convert one-off support into stable membership (Image 2).

Image 2. *Soberanía Alimentaria*'s crowdfunding campaign

Source: *Soberanía Alimentaria*

The communication strategy prioritizes direct channels: newsletters, personalized emails to related entities and networks, and messages aimed at people who read the magazine for free but do not yet contribute financially. Although social media serves as a support, the magazine recognizes the need to improve its digital presence in order to reach young audiences who are not connected to associative spaces.

> The best strategy that has worked for us is (…) sending newsletters and emails to partner organizations and other like-minded individuals and groups who had not yet made donations but continued to read the magazine's content, which is freely available. The print edition is what drives up costs, so we have designed a campaign with this in mind. We want to continue to preserve the print edition so that we can take a break for reading, as opposed to the immediacy of digital media (El Mohammadiane Tarbift, 2025).

The motivations expressed by donors point to elements that define the publication's identity: analytical depth, a feminist and anti-racist perspective, a complex territorial reading, and the preservation of print. For part of its rural community, receiving the magazine in print is not just a matter of format, but a guarantee of access.

> The main reasons are related to the magazine's complex, dialogical approach to different territorial realities and its feminist, decolonial, and anti-racist perspective. They also value the fact that there is still a print publication, which continues to bridge the digital divide that exists in many rural areas. A magazine with a rural

perspective and critical thinking, which recounts the achievements, experiences, and improvements of projects that promote closeness and care for the land, is non-extractivist, and far removed from the agri-food industry (El Mohammadiane Tarbift, 2025).

The campaign also confirms an implicit motivation related to the perception of the magazine as a necessary resource for sustaining critical thinking about the region and food.

Impact, structural risks, and strategic lessons

Covering printing costs and ending the year without a deficit is the immediate goal of *Soberanía Alimentaria*'s crowdfunding campaign strategy. This result, although partial, would prevent the closure of the media outlet and provide scope for deploying a strategy to expand its social base (Image 3).

Image 3. *Soberanía Alimentaria* crowdfunding campaign on Verkami

Source: *Soberanía Alimentaria*

However, the team identifies significant risks, including the possibility of having to repeat a survival campaign every year, the fragility of ad hoc support, and the difficulty of sustaining a steady pace of growth.

> Next year we could be in the same situation, which is why our campaign has been and continues to be focused on increasing our membership base through subscriptions and adding new partners, both individually and collectively. This will allow us to continue building and ensure continuity. It is important to take care and follow up so that they don't leave and it is not just a one-off donation (El Mohammadiane Tarbift, 2025).

From a learning perspective, the media outlet highlights the importance of strengthening relationships with the community through face-to-face meetings, debates, talks, and the promotion of spaces for participation. For *Soberanía Alimentaria*, sustainability does not depend solely on increasing income, but also on consolidating political and emotional ties with readers.

The campaign manager also acknowledges that digital strategy is an area that needs improvement: they do not have sufficient experience in SEO, digital campaigns, or formats capable of attracting new urban or young audiences.

> Improving our strategic approach to positioning ourselves on social media is something we would do differently if we were to start over. We are not experts in SEO or online campaigns. I believe we could reach a younger audience more effectively, one that is not present in collective or physical spaces (El Mohammadiane Tarbift, 2025).

In conclusion, this experience leaves open a central question for the future of independent journalism: how can a critical editorial project be sustained without falling into annual dependence on emergency campaigns? For *Soberanía Alimentaria*, the answer lies in community growth, transparency, ethical consistency, and the defense of journalism that serves local communities.

2.2. Case study: *De Correspondent* in the Netherlands

The launch of *The Correspondent* in 2019 was one of the most closely watched experiments in journalistic membership internationally. Derived from the successful Dutch media outlet *De Correspondent*, a project with more than ten years of experience, the English-language version sought to replicate that model in a global market.

The project adopted many of the participatory elements characteristic of the original media outlet. The interaction dynamics sought to create an ecosystem where the audience became collaborators and sources of knowledge. Irene Caselli, founding member and journalist at *The Correspondent*, explains it this way:

> Members had a space to meet with the editorial team, ask questions, and propose ideas for topics. We also had a conversation editor, basically a person in charge of engaging with the audience (Caselli, 2025).

This approach reinforced the experimental value and horizontal participation, where members contribute ideas, sources, and knowledge, which had traditionally been one of the pillars of *De Correspondent*'s notoriety in the Netherlands.

> Onze missie is om zo veel mogelijk mensen dieper inzicht te geven in hoe de wereld werkt. Zodat je niet alleen weet wat er gebeurt, maar ook waarom het gebeurt. Een missie die urgenter is dan ooit (*De Correspondent*, s.f.).

The Dutch project is managed by a mixed structure, combining a relatively small editorial team, a technical team dedicated to its digital platform, and an active community of 62,000 *leders or* members (Image 4), as they call the people who contribute ideas, specialized knowledge, and debate.

Image 4. Sign-up page on *De Correspondent*
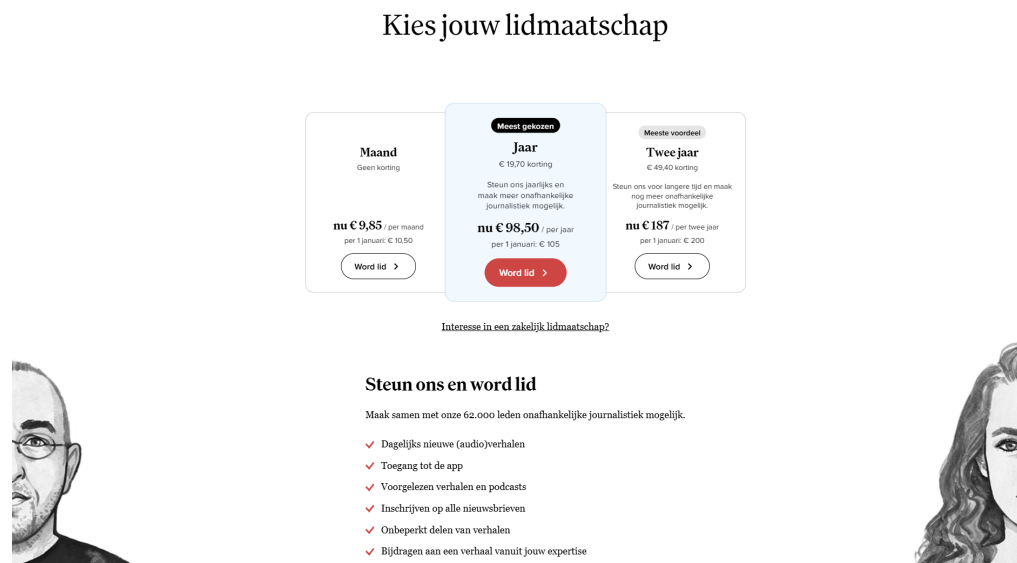
Source: *De Correspondent*

Although its launch was an extraordinary success, becoming one of the largest journalistic crowdfunding campaigns to date, *The Correspondent* soon encountered the harsh realities of the international English-language market, a much more competitive environment dominated by established media outlets. Its 2018 campaign raised more than $2.6 million in just one month, thanks to contributions from 45,888 people in more than 130 countries, making it one of the largest crowdfunding initiatives in the history of journalism (Pfauth, 2018).

> *De Correspondent* works well in the Netherlands because they operate in Dutch in a smaller market, and we were trying to operate in English in a global market competing with large media outlets, so it was difficult to find our niche (Caselli, 2025).

After the initial crowdfunding boost, membership experienced a significant decline during the second year. Caselli attributes this drop mainly to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the difficulty of consolidating a global community. In her own words:

> Many people lost their jobs and had fewer financial resources to pay for membership. A significant portion of our members resided in the United States (approximately half), and many informed us that they could no longer afford to continue. It was also a post-crowdfunding effect. We had up to 60,000 members in the first year, but that number quickly declined and the founders decided not to continue with the project (Caselli, 2025).

Even so, the project's short life cycle offers relevant lessons for media outlets considering expanding community models to other markets or languages.

2.3. Case study: IRPI and donation as a shield against litigation in Italy

The case study of the *Investigative Reporting Project Italy* provides a clear understanding of the motivations that lead the Italian audience to financially support independent media operating in high-risk environments. IRPI is an investigative journalism center dedicated to exposing organized crime networks, political corruption, environmental crimes, and opaque financial flows affecting Italy and other countries in Europe and the Mediterranean.

Its mission is to provide the public with accurate information about how these illicit networks operate and how they affect public life, promoting institutional transparency and social change through accountability. In the scientific article "The Accountability and Transparency of Whistleblowing Platforms Issues of Networked Journalism and Contested Boundaries," published in 2020, the director of IrpiLeaks[2] said:

> Our actions are very similar, if not the same, to our journalistic principles. Questions we ask ourselves once a leak is received are: is this or public interest? Why does the leaker want to share this? Is the information solid? […] The evaluation process is not different to the one typical of a journalist dealing with a source. (IrpiLeaks, interview with the authors in Porlezza & Di Salvo, 2020)

Founded by journalists working on organized crime, IRPI is characterized by a collaborative model that includes partnerships with colleagues and media outlets from different European countries, as well as global investigative networks. This flexible structure allows for the coordination of cross-border reporting that tracks the movement of illicit capital, links between mafia groups and political elites, and companies that facilitate covert operations on an international scale. Over the years, IRPI has worked on high-impact investigations into waste trafficking, municipal corruption, Italian mafias abroad, and complex economic crimes (Porlezza & Di Salvo, 2020).

A distinctive feature is its focus on building publicly accessible tools: databases, court documents, corporate records, and investigative materials that facilitate the work of other newsrooms and strengthen the culture of transparency. IRPI also produces reports and contextual analysis that enable citizens to understand criminal phenomena that, due to their transnational nature, often remain invisible behind sophisticated legal or financial structures. In this context, financial support from the audience appears to be a logical extension of its conception of independent journalism, although it still occupies a secondary place within its

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[2] IrpiLeaks is a collaborative leaks platform, managed by IRPI journalists since October 2013. It was the first anonymous whistleblowing initiative created in Italy and serves as a source of materials for IRPI investigations.

funding structure. Giulio Rubino, co-founder and co-director of the media outlet, warns:

> If you ended up being reliant on readers' revenue too much, you would not be able to tackle the stories that you feel are important because that would probably make a dent in your funding (Rubino, 2025).

Growing threats

In recent years, the legal and political risk environment for IRPI has intensified. Like other European investigative media outlets, the collective faces judicial pressure, threats of defamation, smear campaigns, and an increase in strategic litigation against public participation. These lawsuits, known as SLAPPs, are often filed by individuals or entities seeking to curb or punish sensitive investigations by imposing prohibitive legal costs and forcing journalists to devote time and resources to their defense.

Although the magnitude and frequency of these threats vary depending on the case, the general pattern coincides with trends documented in other research projects: journalists repeatedly summoned to court, lengthy proceedings that affect the operational capacity of newsrooms, and the risk of financial penalties that could compromise the continuity of the media outlet. These dynamics not only jeopardize IRPI's financial viability, but also directly threaten its independence.

> In my experience, in a legal defense context, it is not hard to get that first donation. We are underfunded citizens that try to tackle big companies and important issues, and once you are under legal threat, just explaining the situation very often works. However, I do not think these one-time donations are the ones we should directly aim at turning into recurring support. They are two different strategies (Rubino, 2025).

This testimony highlights a key distinction in IRPI's strategy: donations triggered by legal emergencies serve an immediate defensive purpose, but do not form the basis of a stable membership model, which remains in its infancy and is marginal within the project.

Faced with this scenario, IRPI has strengthened its national and international alliances and developed internal mechanisms to deal with legal pressure, consolidating a professional and social support network that acts as a line of defense against legal attacks. Paradoxically, these attacks tend to reinforce the commitment of the editorial team, which interprets SLAPPs as a sign that its investigations are revealing practices that certain actors would prefer to keep in the dark.

Donations as institutional and symbolic defense

The case of IRPI shows how donations from the public can acquire a value that goes far beyond day-to-day financial sustainability. In contexts where the main

threat is political, legal, or mafia-related, contributions become a mechanism for institutional protection that allows editorial autonomy to be maintained in the face of external pressures, even when they do not represent a central source of income.

> In our long-term contribution campaigns, we appeal to the idea of journalism as an important tool for democracy, to the readers' civic sense. We show results. We show our work. We end up not begging, but if anything, bragging to say 'Look how cool we are, how effective we are when we can be, and we could be more effective with your support' (Rubino, 2025).

The motivations expressed by IRPI in requesting support are articulated in four main areas:

1. Legal defense against strategic litigation that seeks to halt investigations into corruption, organized crime, or influential business and political interests.
2. Protection of editorial autonomy, ensuring that no external pressure can influence the continuity or focus of investigations.
3. Civic and solidarity commitment on the part of an audience that views investigative journalism as a public good that transcends borders and plays an essential role in protecting democracy.
4. The symbolic value of the donation, where the act of contributing reaffirms the legitimacy of journalistic work in risky contexts, transforming the legal threat into evidence of the impact and social relevance of the investigations.

This case study shows that, although audience memberships and financial contributions still play a marginal role in IRPI's financial model, their strategic and symbolic importance is significant. For the media outlet, receiving direct support from its audience reinforces its identity as an independent project and socially legitimizes its work; however, total dependence on this type of income could condition the agenda and scope of its investigations. In this unstable balance, donations operate less as an economic pillar and more as an institutional and symbolic shield against legal, political, and mafia pressures, allowing for the maintenance of investigative journalism committed to transparency and democracy.

3. The Audience's Motivations for Donating

Audiences that financially support freelancers, independent media, or specific journalistic projects have a complex set of motivations that can be organized into a five-part model: journalistic, experiential, community, identity, and symbolic.

The first refers to journalistic value and focuses on the quality, independence, and rigor of the work. People donate because they perceive that their contribution guarantees solid investigations, accurate information, and critical coverage in the face of political or corporate interests. This value connects directly with trust in the

legitimacy of the project, considered by studies to be the most determining factor for continued support (Foster, 2021).

The second layer, experiential value, relates to direct interaction with the media and its journalists. The audience values access to exclusive content, personalized newsletters, events, or the opportunity to participate in Q&A sessions, which strengthens their sense of involvement and closeness. These elements generate psychological benefits, such as a sense of coherence and empowerment, and transform donating into a rewarding and participatory experience.

The community perspective is related to the motivation to donate, which arises from belonging to a group that shares values and objectives. Financial contributions not only fund the media outlet, but also strengthen the cohesion of a community committed to transparency, justice, and the common good. The relational dimension reinforces the perception that each donation has a collective impact and that financial support translates into social backing and cooperation.

The identity value connects the act of donating with the individual's self-image. Donor audiences recognize themselves as informed, critical citizens committed to society. The consistency between their personal values and the media outlet's mission reinforces the donor audience's identity as a responsible, conscious, and participatory actor.

Finally, the fifth aspect is symbolic and reflects civic and altruistic motivations. Donating is perceived as an act of defending democracy, protecting the right to information, and supporting journalistic independence in the face of political, legal, or economic pressures. This symbolic dimension is particularly relevant in contexts of risk or external threats, where donating transcends the economic and becomes a gesture of resistance and social legitimization.

Studies on civic and journalistic crowdfunding carried out by Spanish platforms such as Goteo and/or Verkami also highlight that, in addition to these layers of value, there are psychological and social factors that influence financial contributions: altruism, a sense of coherence, empowerment, the pleasure of participating, and a feeling of direct impact. It is important to differentiate between stated motivations, which tend to focus on the common good, freedom of information, or the defense of democracy, and behavioral motivations, which respond to factors such as fun, interaction, and active participation in the media community.

3.1. Case study: CIPER in Chile: transparency and civic motivations

The case of CIPER is a prime example of how the Chilean donor audience can become a key player in ensuring the sustainability of independent journalism. As a non-profit foundation dedicated to investigating corruption, conflicts of interest,

and institutional deficiencies, focusing on the search for information of public interest, CIPER has built a model in which credibility and community relations have become financial and symbolic pillars.

Its sustainability depends mainly on recurring donations from individuals, preventing large advertisers or institutional funding from influencing its editorial line, which guarantees editorial autonomy and legitimacy, as stated on its website. Its membership structure is based on the idea that people contribute not to receive exclusive content, but to protect a public good: access to rigorous and verifiable information (Urquieta, 2025).

The media outlet maintains that the trust of its audience is forged on an uncompromising editorial principle based on publishing only what can be proven. This policy has allowed nearly 7,000 people to finance the project on a stable basis, motivated by the legitimacy of its work and the perceived social impact of its investigations (Urquieta, 2025). Unlike other membership models based on differentiated benefits, CIPER's support is articulated as an act of defending the right to information, reinforcing the civic nature of the donation.

One of CIPER's distinctive features is its transparency. Since 2017, Fundación CIPER has transparently published its annual income, allowing the composition of its resources to be known and its economic sustainability to be evaluated (Image 6).

Image 6. Breakdown of information about CIPER on its website
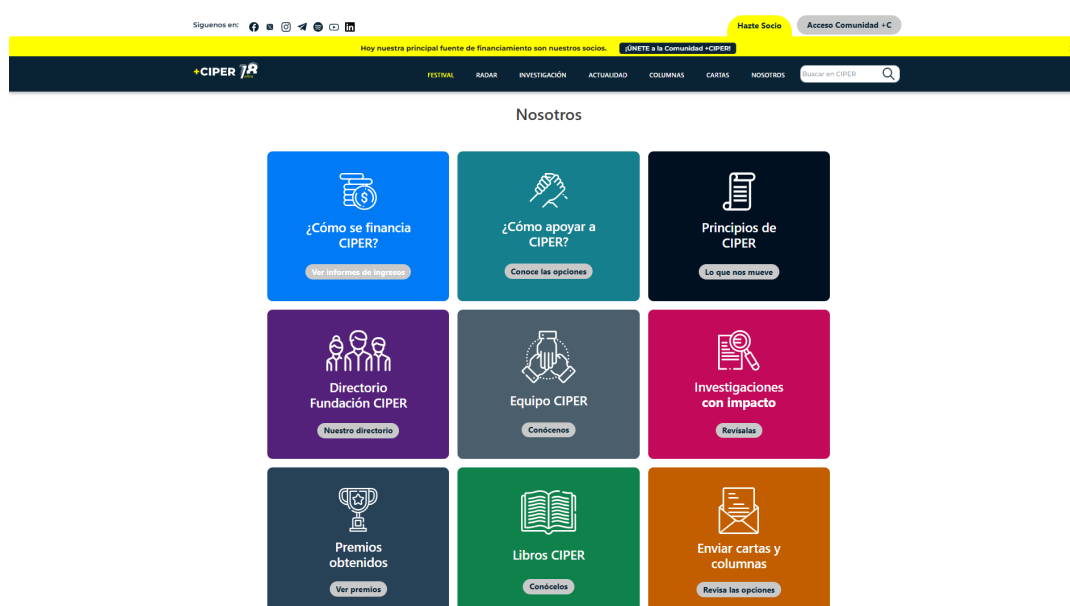
Source: CIPER

Among the most relevant data are donations from individuals, which include one-time and recurring contributions from the +CIPER Community; unrestricted institutional contributions, such as those from Universidad Diego Portales; funds allocated to specific projects, such as those from the Heinrich Böll Foundation, The GroundTruth Project, or Fondo CLIP; and income from professional services, teaching, and copyrights. In 2024, these items totaled 549,761,895 Chilean pesos (approximately €617,000), reflecting significant growth compared to previous years (CIPER, n.d.).

This commitment to accountability not only strengthens community trust but also reinforces the perception of the effectiveness of financial contributions, as it allows for a direct visualization of the impact of citizen funding. According to Urquieta (2025), journalist and membership manager at the media outlet, CIPER is "the only media outlet in Chile that publishes what it does with its money," which sets it apart within the local media ecosystem.

It has also developed experiential engagement mechanisms that reinforce the sense of belonging among its donor audiences. These include virtual meetings called "Coffee with CIPER" and, for the past five years, the well-known +CIPER: Periodismo para la ciudadanía festival (+CIPER: Journalism for citizens), an annual event organized in conjunction with CIP and the School of Journalism at Diego Portales University. These initiatives strengthen the identity value of membership, as being a "ciperista" (a member of CIPER) is not understood as a simple subscription status, but as an expression of civic commitment and collectivity (Urquieta, 2025). In this model, membership is acquired as a symbolic rather than a transactional act.

> If the event is not free, we ask people to contribute what they can, with no minimum amount. This allows anyone who wants to participate to do so regardless of how much money they have, and that creates a strong community where people really feel that we care about their participation and their being part of the project (Urquieta, 2025).

The motivations that drive *CIPER*'s audience to donate combine journalistic, civic, and symbolic dimensions. On the one hand, the rigor of its investigations and its editorial independence constitute an indispensable journalistic value, a condition that the audience recognizes as scarce in the general media environment. On the other hand, the community activates identity-based and collective motivations; that is, people donate because they want to be part of a project they consider democratic, necessary, and transformative. Finally, financial transparency and constant communication about results strengthen the perception of effectiveness and justify recurring support (*CIPER*, n.d.).

> If a media outlet truly wants people to be its main source of support, it has to publish news, reports, and investigations that are necessary for its audience. It has to create something that makes people say, 'If this media outlet does not do it, I will not find it anywhere else' (Urquieta, 2025).

Thus, the membership model is now a priority because it provides economic stability, something that occasional donations do not guarantee. CIPER recognizes that its potential audience is limited (a niche interested in being informed), but its goal is to consistently reach that committed core. The membership manager summarizes two key recommendations for other media outlets seeking to sustain themselves through their audience: produce indispensable content and devote real time to the community.

Chapter 2
Crowdfunding, Trust, and Connection:
From One-time Support to Recurring Support

Independent journalism is undergoing a period of transformation marked by the economic crisis in the sector, the erosion of public trust, and the collapse of traditional business models. In this context of structural vulnerability, crowdfunding is emerging as a means of sustainability that not only provides funding but also redefines the relationship between freelancers, media, and audiences (Hunter et al. 2014). Far from being a simple transactional mechanism, crowdfunding turns the audience into a civic actor that participates directly in the preservation of the right to information and in the collective definition of journalistic agendas.

> Crowdfunded journalism is an alternative platform that can allow for decentralized decision making about stories, and it has been argued a source of greater diversity: in building new audiences, knowledge, sources, and possibly story topic coverage (Ladson & Lee, 2017: 147)

However, experience in the sector shows that attracting one-off donations does not guarantee their recurrence. In order for financial support to be sustained over time, it is essential to build a relationship based on consistency, transparency, and participation, which are the pillars that make up the perceived legitimacy of the project (Aitamurto, 2015). Asking for support also implies adopting an ethic of solicitation that rejects emotional manipulation and recognizes that the audience donates for a greater cause, not for material rewards.

This ethic is also necessary in the use of technology, with the aim of using channels that promote transparency, the protection of personal data, and the use of technology that is as sustainable as possible. This dynamic, which addresses ethical aspects in form and content, redefines the professional role of journalism, whose actors come to see their donors as "civic investors" to whom they must be clearly and responsibly accountable.

The chapter analyzes how narrative strategies, the humanization of journalistic work, the visualization of impact, and the intelligent use of technological tools contribute to strengthening this link and transforming one-off crowdfunding into recurring support. Through the case study of the Spanish media outlet *La Marea*,

this paper examines how these principles are put into practice and how the crowdfunding strategy they have been developing for thirteen years can function as an explicit social contract between a media outlet and its community, consolidating a model of sustainability that combines collective identity, civic engagement, and active audience participation.

1. Building Trust and Connection through Crowdfunding

1.1. Pillars of trust and credibility

Consistency, transparency, and participation

In order to shore up the pillars of trust and credibility in donations, the perceived legitimacy of a project must be considered the most decisive factor in receiving sustained support. In a context where audiences not only contribute resources but also recognize themselves as part of a broader process of information production, this legitimacy must be communicated through clear signals of consistency, transparency, and public commitment (Hunter & Di Bartolomeo, 2019). This involves demonstrating that the project is real, serious, and socially valuable, especially in environments where freelancers and media operate outside the traditional and hegemonic media ecosystem.

Consistency between the project's values, identity, and narrative generates meaningful links with the donor audience. This link can encompass multiple dimensions of value: from symbolic identification with a cause to the perception of contributing to a safe, inclusive, or transformative space. Journalistic crowdfunding campaigns (Hunter, 2014) are often presented not only as editorial projects, but as attempts to create a community or even a movement. In these campaigns, symbolic legitimacy emerges when audiences feel they are supporting journalism that challenges dominant discourses, broadens media representation, or drives broader cultural change.

> Researchers looking at crowdfunding in different areas, such as film and music, have noted that crowdfunding can be positioned within an "affective economics" framework, where the people running the campaigns appeal to audiences' sense of connection to the product or people behind the campaign (Hills, 2015; Wodtke, 2015 en Hunter & Di Bartolomeo, 2019: 276)

This process manifests itself as a contemporary form of participatory culture, powered by what various authors describe as an affective economy: a logic in which campaigns appeal to empathy, identification, and the desire for social transformation to mobilize support.

In this context, participating in a campaign is not just about donating, but also about helping to define what deserves to be made visible or investigated.

From the ethics of petitioning to civic role and community

Given that the audience donates in the name of a greater cause (such as the right to information or the defense of democracy), the ethics of petitioning become central to the processes of crowdfunding journalism (Aitamurto, 2015). This principle requires avoiding strategies that blame or emotionally manipulate donor audiences and, instead, promoting a relationship based on transparency, openness, and respect. Rather than begging, those engaged in journalism should issue a frank invitation to participate and co-finance a story, recognizing that each contribution constitutes a public statement about the news agendas that the community considers a priority.

The academic literature on journalistic crowdfunding shows, however, that this ethic is intertwined with more complex professional tensions. As various authors point out, resorting to crowdfunding models seeks to preserve professional autonomy from traditional media, but at the same time develops a strong sense of responsibility towards its funders, which can generate identity and ethical conflicts (Hunter, 2014; Jian & Usher, 2014). Hunter emphasizes that this type of relationship redefines the role of journalists by placing them within a civic and community logic: professionals no longer operate solely as gatekeepers, but as agents who constantly negotiate with an audience that is now also an investor, participant, and co-producer of the information process.

In this way, the ethics of the request not only seek to avoid manipulation, but also articulate a form of civic engagement in which journalists and the community recognize each other as jointly responsible for sustaining the information ecosystem. Ultimately, this reconfiguration of the journalist-audience relationship nurtures practices that challenge traditional objectivity and favor journalism with a perspective or vocation for advocacy, understanding that community involvement not only finances stories, but also shapes the democratic values that those stories represent.

1.2. Narrative strategies for building bonds

In a context where traditional business models are losing stability, audiences are regaining a central role as agents of democratic sustainability. They are not just consumers of news, but donor audiences who actively participate in the financing of journalistic projects through forms of micro-patronage.

Crowdfunding, whether one-off or recurring (memberships, subscriptions), is a fundamental tool for connecting people's civic motivation with the survival of independent media. Its logic is based on collective intelligence: many small contributions generate not only funding, but also social validation of the type of journalism that deserves to exist. However, literature and practice clearly show that fundraising does not equate to loyalty. To convert one-off support into stable contributions, it is essential to build a lasting bond based on trust, consistency, and perceived legitimacy.

To create this bond, we start from the idea that trust is not a spontaneous by-product of journalistic work, but a strategic objective that is built on three main pillars:

- Consistency or alignment between values and practice
- Transparency, understood as clear information about processes, costs, and results
- Participation, that is, recognition of the civic role of the audience.

When combined, these elements transform donating into an act of democratic co-responsibility.

Campaign tone and key messages

The most successful donation projects articulate a social deficit, i.e., they respond to the maxim "this does not exist and should exist," and provide a concrete solution that is accessible to the public. The pitch should communicate the motivation and objectives of the project for which funding is sought.

The experience of independent media outlets such as the Spanish magazine *Soberanía Alimentaria* shows that appeals based on crisis and urgency trigger one-off donations. However, this strategy generates emotional fatigue and normalizes the state of emergency. Most importantly, it does not convert the audience from one-off to recurring donors and undermines the vision of journalism as a public infrastructure.

The link must be built on civic values and not on individual benefit. Interestingly, emphasizing tax deductions reduces donations from small contributors, as they perceive the act as "less moral and more transactional." Donations should therefore be presented as a contribution to the common good, not as personal gain.

On the other hand, audiences respond better when they can visualize exactly what their contribution will enable. Examples of effective narratives include the promise to "pay freelancers fairly" or "fund specific research." It is essential to show the potential impact of the story (such as changes in legislation or social practices), as donor audiences are interested in seeing the impact their support produces.

Donating to a journalistic project is an act that contributes to building the identity of the donor audience. Therefore, the platform should use design to establish an explicit social contract. In addition, the donation also contributes to the branding of the freelancer or media outlet. Therefore, the digital platform should be highly customizable to match the brand identity and strengthen the relationship.

2. From One-off Campaigns to Permanent Loyalty

2.1. Risk management and challenges of a successful campaign

If not managed properly, donations can be perceived as "a second full-time job," placing a significant administrative and promotional burden on the freelancer and/or the media outlet (de Frutos-García, 2015). This administrative burden contributes to the precariousness and burnout of professionals, a risk that must be mitigated with efficient tools. For long-term sustainability, it is crucial to manage the costs associated with the platform and its operation.

2.2. Key elements for recurrence

Rewards for long-term commitment

Sustained loyalty is achieved through an ongoing relationship between the media outlet and its donor audience, rather than through one-off incentives. Evidence shows that regular, meaningful, and two-way interactions generate more stability and larger contributions than isolated campaigns. Rather than focusing on exclusive benefits or restricted content (which can be perceived as transactional), the most effective rewards are symbolic and relational: personalized communication, public recognition, opportunities for participation, or transparent updates on the project.

Furthermore, it is important not to confuse building a long-term relationship with the obligation of a subscription. Many donors explicitly state that they prefer to support on an ad hoc basis, without making a fixed commitment, either because they want to diversify their contributions among several projects or because they see their contribution as an annual gesture of support for different independent media outlets. There is also growing interest in collective models, such as joint subscriptions between several media outlets (for example, agreements such as those between *La Marea* and *El Salto* in Spain), which allow the audience to support more than one project without being tied to a single permanent commitment.

In this context, the most valuable rewards are those that strengthen the bond and recognize belonging, but do not transform support into a contractual obligation. It is about cultivating a sustained relationship, not necessarily a renewable subscription. The goal is not to ensure the donor's mechanical permanence, but to offer continuous reasons for them to want to continue being part of the project.

Strategic use of technological tools

Technology plays a central role in optimizing processes, allowing freelancers and independent media to reduce administrative burdens, manage communities, and design more efficient fundraising and loyalty campaigns. Tools such as CRM systems, email marketing, and messaging automation facilitate audience

segmentation, scheduled messaging, and content personalization based on the level of engagement of the reader or donor.

Fundraising campaigns are significantly more effective when integrated into a planned communication strategy that combines public relations, consistent narratives, and direct channels managed by the media outlet itself. In the independent ecosystem, these channels include newsletters (such as Substack or Mailchimp), community groups on Telegram or WhatsApp, and closed spaces such as internal forums or partner channels. All of these allow for more transparent and horizontal conversations, without relying exclusively on the unpredictable reach of third-party platforms.

Precisely because of this dependence (whether on social media, donation platforms, or algorithms that modulate visibility), it is essential to strengthen one's own channels that guarantee stable and loyal contact with the audience. As an example, it is worth noting that among the most sought-after technological features in this area by European freelancers are advanced analytics and donation tracking systems per published piece (53.2%), as well as billing and administrative management tools (46%), which allow journalists and media outlets to evaluate which content mobilizes the most support and optimize their sustainability (De - Frutos-García, 2025).

3. Case Study: *La Marea* (Spain) and 13 years of Journalistic Crowdfunding

La Marea is a cooperative media outlet founded in Spain in 2012 that exemplifies how crowdfunding can be transformed from a one-off source of funding into a system of community engagement and recurring support. By not relying on private shareholders and having a cooperative structure, the Spanish media outlet has cultivated a civic relationship with its audience based on trust, transparency, and active participation for more than a decade. This case study examines how its crowdfunding campaigns function as financial, narrative, and community mechanisms, contributing to the sustainability of independent journalism.

La Marea was born after the closure of the print edition of the newspaper *Público* and the dismissal of 85% of its staff in 2012. A group of newspaper workers, together with committed readers, decided to join forces to buy the newspaper at a judicial auction. To achieve this, they launched the MásPúblico campaign through the Verkami platform, collectively financing the acquisition through crowdfunding.

The importance of public support became even clearer on Goteo (a platform that will close its current phase in December 2025 to transform into a new model in 2026), where *La Marea* has three campaigns among the ten with the highest number of donors. This data visually illustrates the extent to which its community has been decisive in sustaining and consolidating the project (Image 7).

Image 7. Ten projects with the most donations on the Goteo platform

Source: Goteo

Since then, it has carried out a total of seven crowdfunding campaigns on two different platforms: Verkami and Goteo, all of which achieved their minimum target. At the time of writing this white paper, it is in its eighth campaign, aimed at raising funds to deal with a SLAPP, a lawsuit to intimidate, punish, or silence the media for a journalistic investigation into surrogacy and to "shield its investigative journalism."

Table 1. Crowdfunding campaigns used by *La Marea*, according to their purpose

Founding campaign	
MásPúblico (2012)	Campaign to buy the masthead of the newspaper *Público* and thus transform it into a cooperative media outlet in which readers and workers would participate.
Specific projects	
La Uni en la calle (2013)	Publication of a book containing papers on public education
Yo!bextigo (2016)	Research on the economic power of IBEX
PorTodas (2018)	Journalistic investigation into femicides and institutional responsibilities
Sustainability and/or emergency campaigns	

Lo nuestro es de verdad (2022)	Environmental sustainability and defense of the cooperative model
Más Manos (2021)	2,000 subscriptions acquired in two months from its own website, with a counter and urgent messages
Dealing with a SLAPP suit	
La fuerza de 'La Marea' (2025)	Raise funds to fight a SLAPP lawsuit for their investigation into surrogacy

Own elaboration

The results obtained by *La Marea* over its 13 years of crowdfunding campaigns show the consolidation of a community funding model that is sustainable over time. In total, the media outlet has managed to mobilize 12,455 patrons, a figure that reflects the breadth and loyalty of its community. This volume of support demonstrates that crowdfunding has functioned as a stable social base, capable of responding repeatedly to the various calls for support promoted by the media outlet.

Figure 1. Campaign results

Campaign name	Launch date (Year)	Number of patrons (contributors)	Minimum target (€)	Total revenue (€)
MásPúblico.org	2012	417	30,000	33,170
La uni en la calle	2013	250	9,000	9,915
YoIBEXtigo	2016	3,372	70,000	98,285
Por Todas	2018	2,817	70,702	88,848
Lo nuestro es de verdad	2022	5,599	250,000	285,175

Source: *La Marea*

In economic terms, *La Marea* has raised €515,493 through its various campaigns on platforms such as Verkami and Goteo, as well as through its own initiatives on its website. This amount has not only made it possible to finance specific journalistic projects (such as in-depth investigations or the production of monographs), but has also contributed to sustaining the cooperative infrastructure and editorial independence of the media outlet. The total amount raised indicates a consistent ability to mobilize resources, even in campaigns of very different natures and objectives.

In addition to managing *La Marea*, the MásPúblico cooperative also promoted the launch of *Climática*, the first Spanish media outlet specializing in climate crisis and biodiversity. To ensure its viability, two specific crowdfunding campaigns were carried out, which made it possible to involve a new community of readers with a

strong interest in the subject. In total, *Climática* attracted 3,581 patrons, demonstrating the existence of an audience willing to finance independent and specialized climate journalism.

Figure 2. Results of *Climática*'s campaigns

Campaign name	Launch date (Year)	Number of patrons (contributors)	Minimum target (€)	Total revenue (€)
Dale cuerda a Climática	2021	1,403	50,686	67,281
Impulsa la cooperativa de información Climática	2024	2,178	122,000	132,258

Source: *La Marea*

3.1.   Crowdfunding campaign strategy

La Marea's crowdfunding strategy is based on a coherent link between its editorial values and the way it requests financial support from its community. Since its first campaigns, the media outlet has insisted that contributions are not simply used to "keep the media alive," but to finance journalism with a clearly defined social mission: to investigate issues that other media outlets do not address, to sustain a cooperative structure, and to preserve its independence from political and business interests. This consistency between the editorial message and the financial request is one of the central pillars of the model, as it reinforces trust and legitimizes the request for support.

Transparency is another essential element of the strategy. In each campaign, the Spanish media outlet provides explicit and understandable details of the associated budgets, including the actual costs of research, printing, design, and remuneration of external professionals. This openness not only reduces uncertainty among its donor audience, but also builds a lasting bond of trust by allowing contributors to perceive their contribution as a real investment in a common good: information. This logic transforms the act of donating into a civic gesture, closer to supporting a public infrastructure than to an economic transaction.

Community building is a crucial aspect of the media outlet's approach. For *La Marea*, participation does not end with financial donations: it includes the possibility of influencing editorial decisions, suggesting topics, following research processes, or actively participating in cooperative deliberation spaces. Campaigns are designed with a narrative that combines civic urgency and collective hope, and are articulated around values such as independence, social commitment, and joint action. This avoids alarmist or victimizing discourse and instead strengthens the idea of an organized community that finances a transformative journalistic project,

as highlighted by Ana Veiga, head of communications and vice president of *La Marea*'s cooperative since June 2025.

> The narrative of campaigns starts with the reason behind the campaign, and then analyzes the emotional arc we want our audience to experience: from the cause of the campaign (which raises a problem), to the proposed solution, the key role played by the community, and the shared future we want to build (Veiga, 2025).

One of the lessons learned from the recurring use of crowdfunding campaigns is the importance of rewards that provide added value. In this regard, since 2022, the cooperative media outlet has included symbolic rewards that humanize and expand the community (such as access to meetings, participation in closed communities, or public recognition) as opposed to costly material rewards, which could turn the relationship into a commercial transaction and compromise the campaign budget (Image 8).

Image 8. *La Marea*'s campaign "La Marea: Lo nuestro es de verdad" (La Marea: What's ours is real) on Goteo

Source: Goteo.

This approach, in which it is not only the amount of money raised that matters, but also the number of people reached by the campaign, maintains the vision of journalism as a common good and prevents contributions from being perceived as purchases of products, preserving the civic nature of the contribution. In addition, rewards serve an additional strategic function: encouraging the conversion of one-time support into recurring support, especially through subscriptions.

> In the 2022 crowdfunding campaign carried out by *Climática*, 21.8% of patrons waived their rewards, demonstrating the great commitment and loyalty of this audience. In the crowdfunding campaign being carried out by *La Marea* in 2025, with 10 days to go before the deadline to reach the minimum target, the percentage of patrons without rewards has already reached 19.1% (Veiga, 2025).

Finally, technological support is key to sustaining this strategy over time. In the case of *La Marea*, segmentation during the writing of this white paper (December 2025) is not yet carried out using a fully developed CRM, but manually through the messaging software itself (Mailchimp), applied with a CRM-like relationship management philosophy. This system allows the content to be partially adapted to different patron profiles based on their behavior and degree of involvement, personalizing communication, activating rewards, and reducing subscriber loss.

> Managing and segmenting donor data is almost more important than having a long list of contacts. Raw data is unmanageable, and many audience segments that are detected when analyzing that data are overlooked. For example, have these crowdfunding patrons donated to other campaigns? Were they already on the media outlet's weekly newsletter? Had they been subscribers at any point? Did they attend any of the events organized? Tracking these milestones allows us to identify the most effective and repeated conversion funnel so that we can replicate or modify future strategies (Veiga, 2025).

The media outlet is currently implementing open-source CRM software (a process that is already underway) that will enable it to automate and further develop this segmentation in the future. The combination of an ethical narrative and the progressive use of technological tools makes crowdfunding a strategy for ongoing relationships rather than a one-off action, facilitating the evolution of one-off support into a more long-term commitment.

### 3.2.   Lessons for independent journalism

Over thirteen years of crowdfunding campaigns, *La Marea* has learned that crowdfunding should not be understood solely as a financial tool, but as a space where identity, values, and community are activated. Each of the seven campaigns has become an event in itself, charged with emotions, expectations, and a sense of belonging. Over time, this process has even generated a "parallel brand": that of the crowdfunding campaigns themselves, experienced by the community as milestones. The main lesson learned in this area is that a campaign should be designed not only to raise funds, but also to strengthen the editorial project, broaden the conversation with the audience, and consolidate a shared narrative.

> During the campaign and throughout its subsequent development, we keep our patrons informed with regular, clear, and understandable updates. We report on progress, doubts, changes of direction when they occur, and technical challenges before they become problems. This constant communication helps ensure that no one feels they have invested money in something opaque (Veiga, 2025).

A second lesson learned is the importance of listening to crowdfunding: analyzing its evolution, detecting patterns, adjusting strategies, and knowing when it is necessary to change communication approaches or participation formats. In its early campaigns, the media outlet lacked segmentation tools and had little information about who was donating or why.

Based on subsequent projects, especially _Por Todas_, it began to collect data and identify specific motivations, recurring behaviors, and participation gaps, such as the lower presence of women in the initial stages (Image 9).

Image 9. _La Marea_'s "Por Todas" (For All) campaign on Goteo
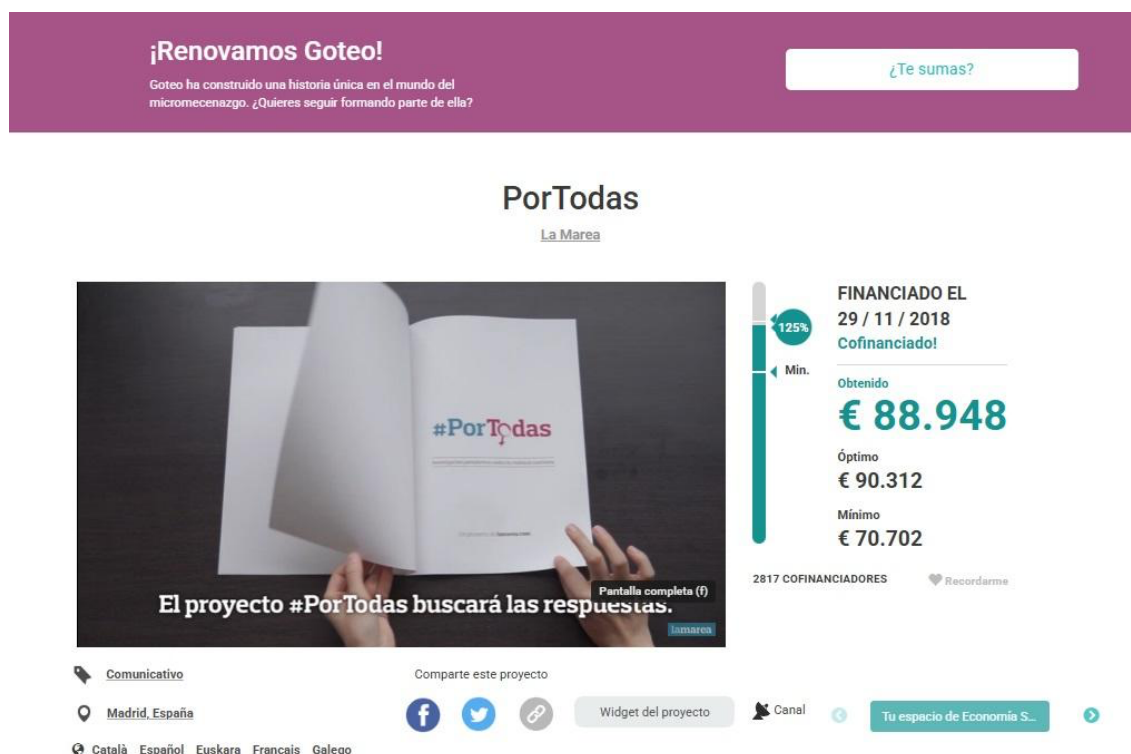
Source: Goteo.

This knowledge allowed to adjust the tone, messages, and pace of the campaign, as well as engage particularly active profiles through dedicated participation spaces, such as the Telegram group where 110 donors and cooperative members contribute ideas about the campaigns, "El club del F5" (The F5 Club). The challenge now is to build on this continuous learning and avoid generic communications that dilute the connection the media outlet has built.

> Context is another element of a campaign, and it is something that cannot be controlled. Whatever happens at the same time as the campaign launch will influence it, even if it seems unrelated. It is important to know how to read these moments and their effect on our audience in order to overcome obstacles and navigate them, turning a potential distraction or change of focus into an ally (Veiga, 2025).

Another key lesson has been the ability to incorporate the community into the campaign itself. In recent experiences, _La Marea_ has found that the most effective tool is not always the most sophisticated, but rather the most direct. Small Telegram groups, personalized messages, and targeted calls to action have proven to be more powerful mobilizers than mass communications.

In these spaces, people who act as patrons not only receive information, but also become ambassadors: they share the campaign, encourage new supporters, and even suggest ideas. Activating this "hard core" and facilitating their participation is one of the keys to transforming crowdfunding campaigns into a collective strategy, rather than simple calls for funds. The challenge is to maintain these channels without overburdening their members and without losing the spontaneity that makes them effective.

> The biggest challenge is responding to one of the biggest problems in today's society: lack of time. Many users have told us that they do not maintain their subscription or do not want to renew the one they obtained as a reward from a crowdfunding campaign because they do not have time to read the magazine. It is true that many others tell us that they support us despite this, because they share the values of the media outlet and believe in the ethical principles that guide us. Consistency as a brand is vital (Veiga, 2025).

The need to transform one-off support into recurring support is another key learning point. Although people donate primarily because they are moved by the cause, rewards (when managed well) help to strengthen the relationship and foster sustained engagement. To achieve this, it is essential that patrons know how to activate their rewards and receive support throughout the process. This follow-up not only encourages eventual conversion to recurring formats, but also helps patrons feel that they are part of a living community rather than an isolated transaction. The challenge here is to ensure clarity, accessibility, and careful management, preventing technical problems or delays from eroding the trust that has been built.

> We are a small team serving thousands of people in the community, but we try to respond to every query and incident. We also take special care of the technical side and follow-up: we prevent payment gateway failures, check that all contributions are correctly registered, and respond to every incident. If something goes wrong, we explain it and fix it in full view of the community. All of this has a direct impact on trust: when people see that we are present, that we are accountable, and that they can follow every step of the project, support ceases to be an act of faith and becomes a relationship. That is the difference between financing something and being part of it (Veiga, 2025).

The logistics of physical rewards have also been a recurring challenge. In campaigns with thousands of participants, shipping products, resolving incidents, and handling postal returns have resulted in unexpected costs and a significant workload. Experience has led the medium to reduce material rewards and prioritize more sustainable symbolic or digital formats.

In this regard, the lesson learned is that constant communication (to report progress, explain delays, show the process, etc.) is as important as the final delivery of the funded product. The challenge is not to neglect this support, which is key to maintaining an open relationship with the community.

Chapter 3
The Design of the Digital Environment:
How Platforms Shape Participation

The digital environment in which audiences, freelancers, and media interact has become a decisive factor in the sustainability of user-funded journalism. Although intrinsic motivations (such as democratic commitment or genuine interest in information) remain fundamental, they are no longer sufficient to guarantee consistent financial participation. Recent research highlights that platform architecture and user experience design are determining factors in converting the intention to support into effective and recurring contributions (de Frutos-García, 2025; Ordanini et al., 2011). Thus, monetization takes on a hybrid character, in which civic will needs a technological environment to channel it, as already recognized in the *White Paper on Freelance Journalism in Europe*.

In this context, the transition from passive audiences to donor audiences depends both on the editorial narrative of the media outlet and on the design decisions that structure the payment process. Elements such as the fluidity of the form, the simplification of registration, perceived security, and the contextualized integration of the request for support can either enhance or inhibit conversion (Fluent, 2024). The incorporation of strategies such as embedded donation demonstrates that the visual and functional layout of payment mechanisms significantly reduces the abandonment rate and directly influences support behavior, even beyond individual motivations (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023).

This chapter analyzes how the design of the digital environment shapes economic participation in journalism, addressing everything from the fundamental principles of user experience geared toward monetization to the dynamics resulting from the growing platformization of news consumption. Finally, it delves into the case study of the Polish online media outlet *OKO.press*, whose model combines transparency, community narrative, and technological optimization to transform civic interest into sustained economic support over time (Padalko, 2023; European Journalism Centre, 2020). Through this analysis, it becomes clear that a well-designed digital infrastructure not only facilitates the act of donating, but also strengthens the symbolic relationship between the media outlet and its audience, turning it into an active ally in the defense of independent journalism (Jian & Shin, 2015; Aitamurto, 2011).

1. The Design of the User Experience as a Factor in Monetization

Effective digital design has a direct impact on the transition from passive to active audiences in economic terms (Fluent, 2024), which can be referred to as donor audiences. Academic research highlights that user experiences with minimal reluctance to pay are essential, and these are characterized by few clicks, clarity of information, and a sense of security.

1.1. Minimizing reluctance to pay and prioritizing security

The fluidity of the payment process is essential to the user experience, whose intention may be fleeting (Fluent, 2024). In order to optimize monetization, platforms must be intuitive and secure, aspects that freelancers identified as priorities when evaluating payment tools (de Frutos-García, 2025). According to the white paper, self-employed information professionals demand widely used payment methods to ensure a smooth process. In this regard, two key aspects stand out: the payment method and the simplification of registration processes.

Firstly, payment methods that stand out above others, although preferences vary by country. The options most in demand among journalists are Mastercard (80.6%) and Visa (79%) due to their ubiquity and ease of use. Digital and mobile payment solutions, such as PayPal (57.3%), Google Pay (52.4%), and Apple Pay (50%), are also valued for their speed and security.

Secondly, simplifying registration and access processes also reduces reluctance. Although standard email registration is the most valued option (75.2%), quick access via Google login (42.4%) is seen as an important complement.

1.2. Technical barriers to intrinsic motivation

Research on monetization in journalism reveals that donations are more often lost due to technical barriers (cumbersome forms or lack of security) than due to a lack of interest or underlying motivation from users (Fluent, 2024; 56).

Although the motivations of donor audiences are linked to altruism and the common good (Jian & Shin, 2015: 165), donating money is the easiest and most direct way for the public to participate, especially for those who do not have the specialized knowledge to contribute information or ideas (Aitamurto, 2011: 438, 380). Therefore, good design is a channel for civic will; whereas if the payment process is cumbersome or generates insecurity, high motivation can quickly dissipate (Fluent, 2024).

2. Payment Integration Strategies and the Impact of Embedded Giving

The success of monetization also depends on the strategy for integrating the request for support into the digital journalism environment, as demonstrated by embedded donations.

2.1. The phenomenon of embedded donation and the decline in the abandonment rate

Embedded giving is a key design strategy that integrates donation functionality directly into the article the person is reading, eliminating the need to leave the page. The implementation of this method is associated with an increase in contributions and a drastic reduction in the abandonment rate. This demonstrates

that platform design has a powerful influence on donation behavior, even beyond individual motivation.

All in all, the trend reflects the growing phenomenon of the "platformization" of the media ecosystem (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023: 484-499), as freelance journalists' preferences for the location of the donation button are divided between institutional support and mass reach. Thus, the majority choose to place the button on the website of the media outlet (59.2%) they work for, taking advantage of institutional credibility; while also leaning toward mass consumption platforms such as Spotify, Medium, or X (formerly Twitter) (50.7%), YouTube (49.3%), and Substack (47.9%) (de Frutos-García, 2025).

This preference underscores the need to place the donation where consumption of content is most frequent and fluid, which is increasingly concentrated on social media and video platforms (Newman et al., 2025: 79).

2.2. Technology as an operational optimizer in the face of "platformization"

Although technology is vital to the process, the case of independent media outlets highlights that a perfect payment gateway is no substitute for a clear and solid value proposition. Technology, through segmentation and automation, is a crucial tool for optimizing campaign operations and reducing the administrative burden on freelance journalists (Hunter, 2018: 16).

Self-employed workers in Europe demand technological features focused on management and transparency, such as analytics and donation tracking systems per published piece (53.2%) and billing tools (46%) (de Frutos-García, 2025).

3. Case Study: *OKO.press* and the Dynamics of its Donor Audience's Engagement in Poland

OKO.press is a Polish digital media outlet founded on June 1st, 2016, as "an initiative of journalists concerned about the future of democracy and the media in Poland" (Prończuk, 2017). Its mission is to protect the democratic rule of law and exercise independent control over the authorities, defending human rights and actively combating disinformation and propaganda through investigative journalism and fact-checking.

The media outlet has a team of 42 people (approximately half of whom are journalists and the other half are professionals who make up the operational team, including administration, graphic design, and social media, among others). Recognized with several awards, *OKO.press* is funded through a combination of grants and, above all, individual donations, which account for up to 65% of its income. Its model, based on trust and community, makes it an ideal case study for analyzing how digital design can facilitate the economic participation of the audience (European Journalism Centre, 2020).

The media outlet's approach demonstrates that digital optimization is only sustainable if accompanied by a clear value narrative. Thus, its payment gateway is accompanied by a compelling explanation of the importance of journalistic work, both narratively and formally. *OKO.press* uses its digital platform as an argument for reliability and as a channel to activate the intrinsic motivation of its donor audiences. This philosophy is summed up in the premise defended by Dominika Michalak, the outlet's grants manager, who argues that the goal is not to "beg" the audience, but to ask honestly and treat readers as partners:

> You must treat readers and donors as serious partners, not as a passive crowd you can 'nudge' with clever tricks (Michalak, 2025).

3.1.   Digital design and trust architecture

The design of the *OKO.press* platform operates as a central component for activating the audience's economic participation. Its donation page features a clean, dynamic, and structured design that emphasizes the project's reliability, transparency, and social impact. This composition functions as a trust architecture, aimed at converting civic motivation into real economic support. The most recognizable element of this approach is the provocative slogan "Make us dependent on you!", which establishes a symbolic contract between the media outlet and its audience, giving the donor the role of direct guarantor of editorial independence.

Image 10. Trust architecture and embedded donation on the *OKO.press* website.
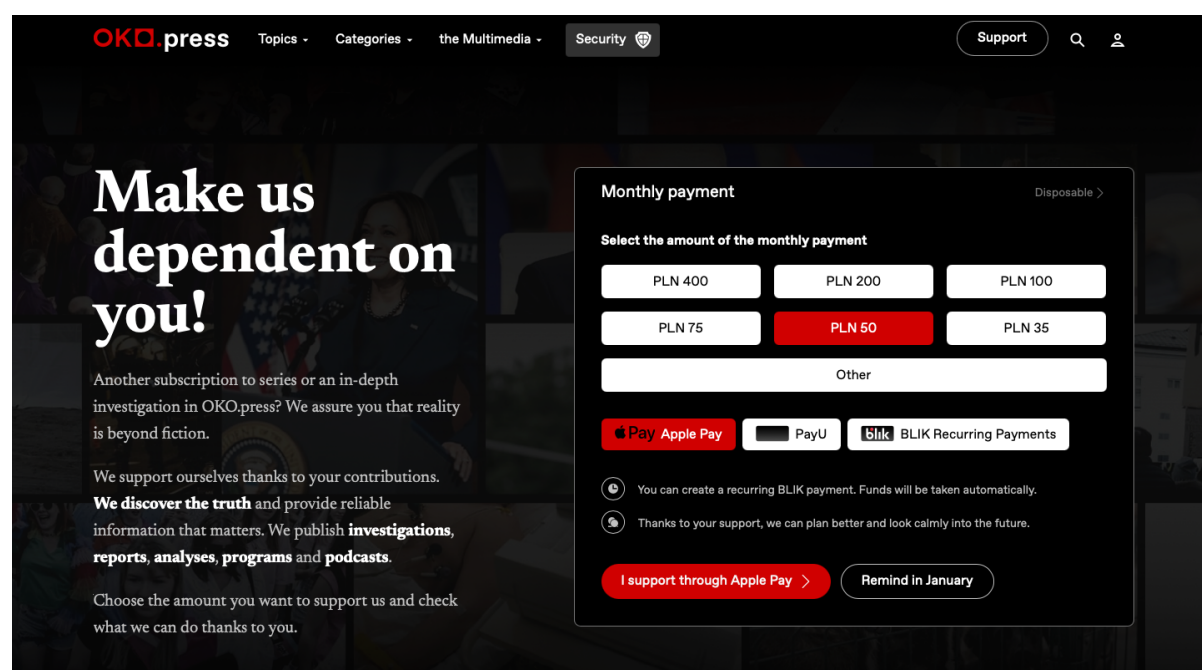
Source: *OKO.press*

An effective donation request requires simple forms, smooth payments, and compliance with current regulations, in this case those of the Polish state. These elements function as "minimum requirements" (de Frutos-García, 2025). Michalak

summarizes this idea by emphasizing that technology must be good enough not to interfere with the act of donating, but that it can never replace a clear value proposition:

> Technology and best practices (...) have to be good enough that they never become the reason someone does not donate. But they do not replace a clear value proposition (...). A perfectly optimised form cannot compensate for a weak story about why your work matters (Michalak, 2025).

To facilitate conversion, *OKO.press* incorporates an embedded donation module at the top of the home page, allowing immediate contributions. In addition, a highly visible red button labeled "finance" appears at the end of the editorial content and functions as an audience recovery mechanism, guiding the user back to the donation interface.

Transparency is the second pillar of the media outlet's digital design. The Polish media outlet dedicates a specific page to the option of donating 1.5% of income tax, where it provides detailed instructions and a report on income and expenses for the previous year (*OKO.press*, 2024). This clear and verifiable communication helps to reinforce institutional credibility, complemented by a voluntary annual financial audit and a flat salary structure (Padalko, 2023).

In addition, the platform includes graphic summaries that quantify the impact of the media outlet's journalistic work (number of articles, podcasts, fact checks, and investigations), which allows for immediate display of the social return on the financial contribution (Image 11).

Image 11. Graphic pills on the number of articles, podcasts, verifications, and investigations by *OKO.press*
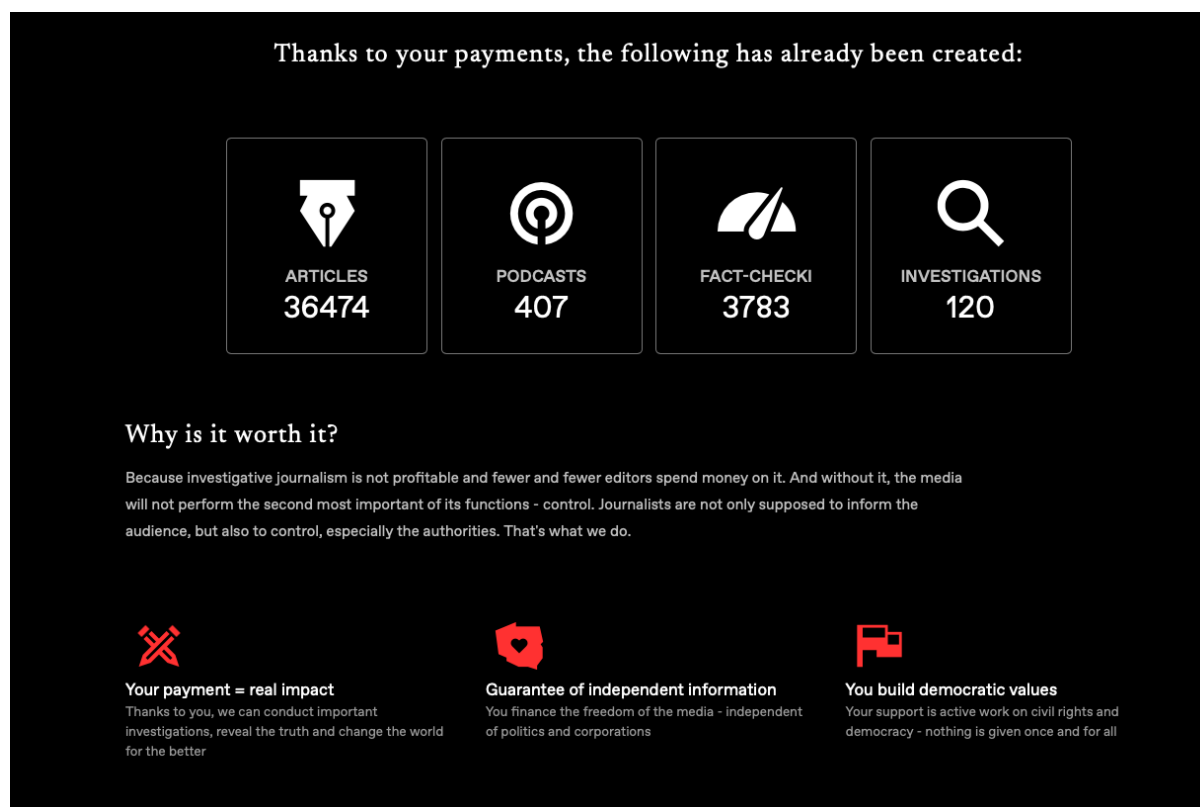
Source: *OKO.press*

This effect is reinforced by a carousel of awards and distinctions (Image 12), which presents the media outlet's recent accolades and generates an effect of editorial credibility through the accumulated achievements of the journalistic project (de Frutos-García, 2025).

**Image 12.** Carousel of *OKO.press*' awards and distinctions
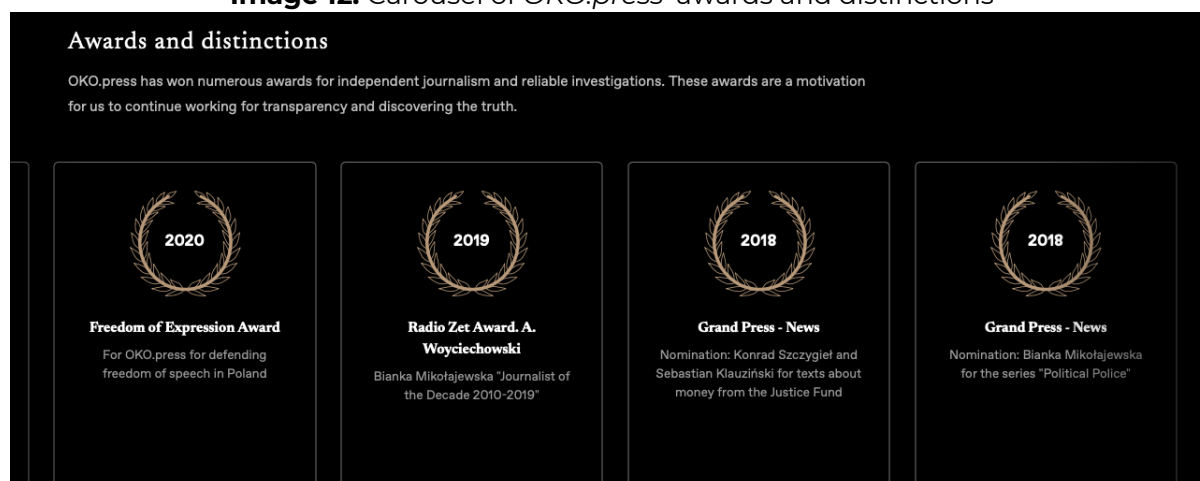
Source: *OKO.press*

Financial transparency is also expressed through interactive graphics that show the structure of income and expenses, including salaries, technology services, marketing, and administrative costs. This dynamic visualization reinforces trust by

directly showing how donated money is managed and under what ethical criteria it is used (Image 13).

**Image 13.** Interactive graphs on *OKO.press*' income and expenses
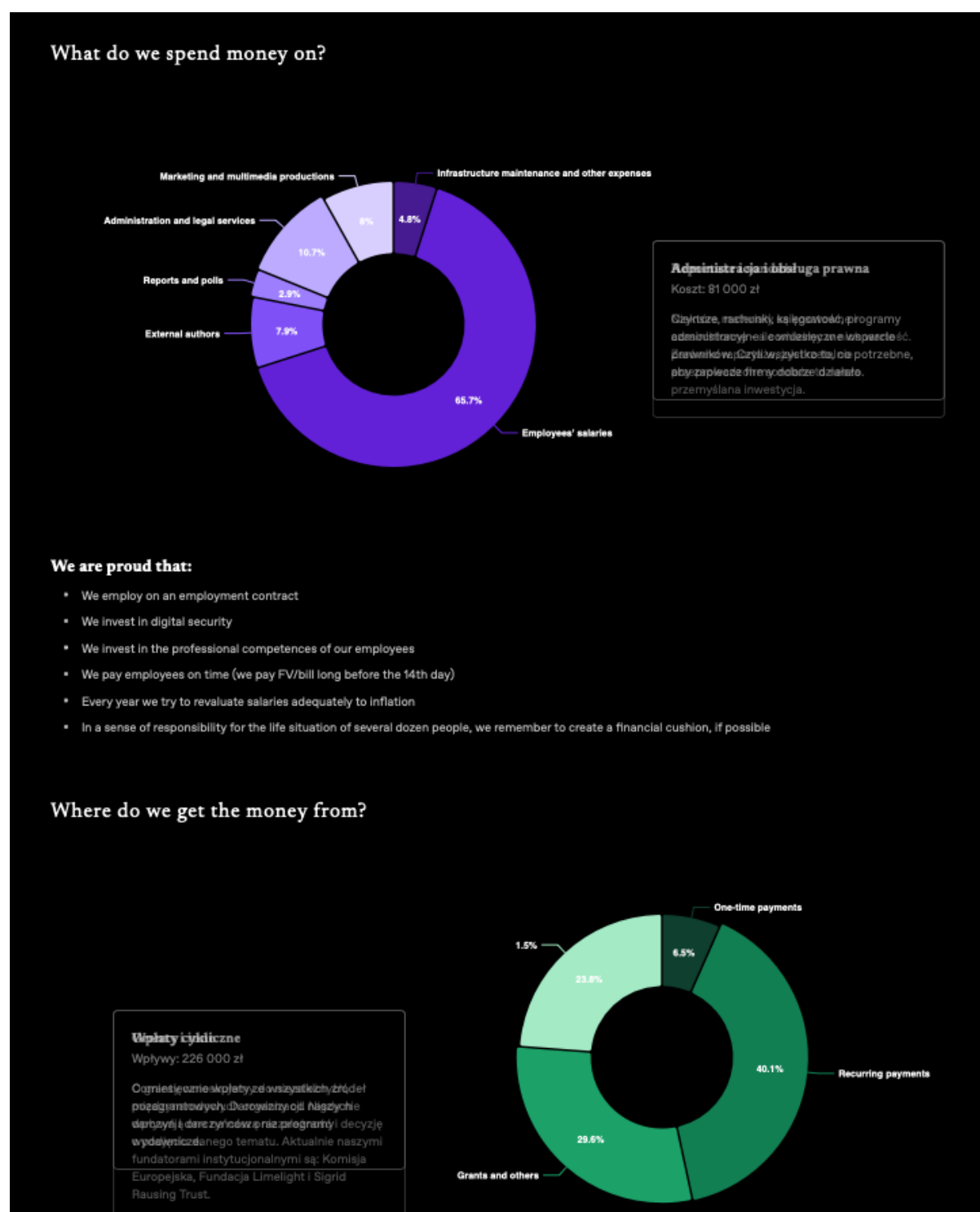
Source: *OKO.press*

OKO.press reinforces the sense of belonging through people-centered visual resources (Image 14). The team section, presented through a photo carousel under the slogan "Together we create more," humanizes the donation process and

presents the staff as a community committed to a common democratic purpose. This approach strengthens the emotional bond that the audience establishes with the news outlet (Jian & Shin, 2015: 165).

Image 14. Carousel featuring *OKO.press* members
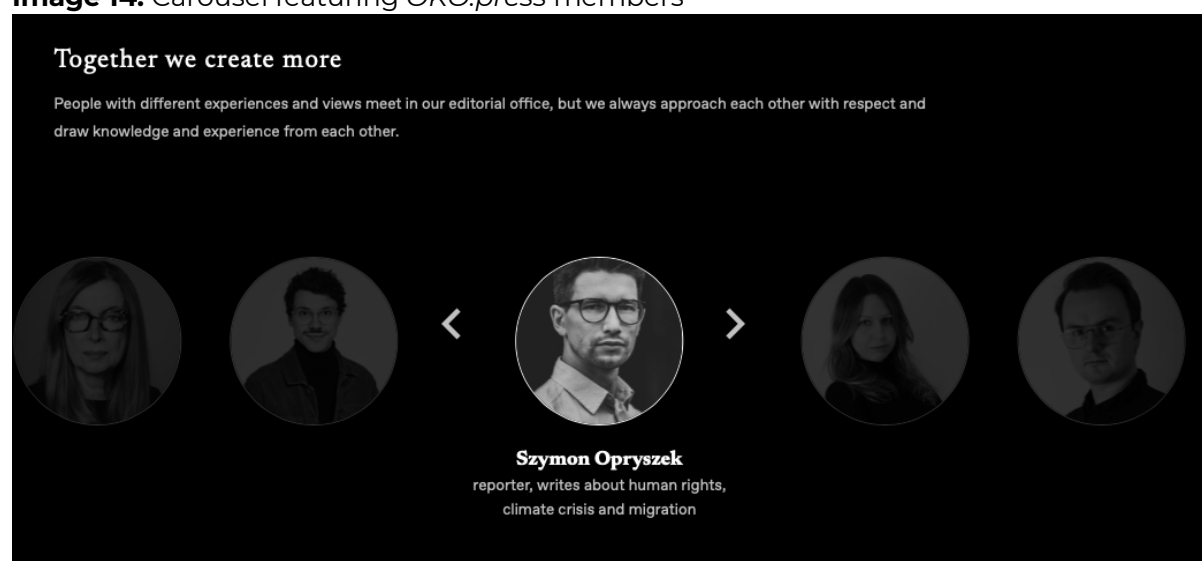
Source: *OKO.press*

In its mobile version, the platform incorporates a fixed horizontal menu with a heart icon under the word "Support," ensuring that the call to action is always accessible. This decision responds to the specific needs of mobile browsing, where loss of button visibility can affect conversion.

OKO.press maintains a culture of constant experimentation, understood as a fundamental principle for ensuring the effectiveness of its donation model. Before implementing any changes, the media outlet conducts small-scale tests to assess whether the proposed technology actually facilitates the act of donating or whether it introduces unnecessary friction. Michalak points out:

> Testing is the only way to know whether technology is actually helping your readers to support you – or just adding another shiny layer between them and your work (Michalak, 2025).

This approach is complemented by behavior tracking and conversion attribution tools, which make it possible to identify which content (articles, newsletters, campaigns, or landing pages) triggered the first donation. This information enables more precise segmentation and subsequent messages that respond to the explicit interests of the donor audience, increasing the likelihood of recurrence in micro-donations.

The design of *OKO.press* incorporates a wide variety of funding methods, including one-time payments, recurring contributions, bank transfers, PayPal, and especially the possibility of donating 1.5% of income tax, an option that makes donating a fiscally efficient act. This mechanism acts as a rational incentive by offering a direct

economic benefit that complements the symbolic and community motivations for support.

To minimize difficulties on mobile devices, all this information is presented in a compact carousel that reduces the need for excessive scrolling and maintains the clarity of the offer (Image 15).

Image 15. Reminder of the possibility of tax relief thanks to support for *OKO.press*

Source: *OKO.press*

3.2. Lessons for independent journalism

The analysis of the *OKO.press* case allows us to identify several key lessons relevant to freelancers and independent media outlets that want to build a sustainable donation-based funding model, with a special focus on crowdfunding design.

First, experience shows that the value narrative is an irreplaceable factor. A technically flawless platform does not compensate for the absence of a message that explains why the media outlet deserves to be funded. Second, radical transparency, expressed through visual data, audits, and clear communication, is

essential for building trust and sustaining long-term relationships with the audience.

Likewise, design must be understood as a trust architecture. Embedded donations, persistent buttons, impact visualization, and community-oriented narrative resources help reduce friction and reinforce the motivation of people who want to contribute financially to the project. Added to these factors is the importance of considering the donor audience as the protagonist, an idea crystallized in the slogan "Make us dependent on you!", which reverses the conventional dynamic and gives the audience a central role in the sustainability of the project.

The Polish case study also shows that the impact must be visible. In this sense, journalistic metrics, awards won, and social return visualizations turn donations into a tangible investment. In addition, a culture of constant experimentation ensures that every decision is backed by data and avoids implementing changes that do not improve the user experience and micro-donation uptake.

Finally, payment flexibility such as tax incentives and the humanization of the team strengthen the emotional bond with the media and increase the likelihood of recurring donations, thus consolidating the sustainability of the project.

Chapter 6
Recommendations regarding Donations

1. To Get the First Donation

The goal is to reduce friction (technical and psychological) and establish legitimacy (editorial and institutional) as the basis for the first contribution.

1) Minimize technical friction during the payment process

  a) Design a short, clear, and straightforward donation form, eliminating non-essential steps that increase the abandonment rate.
  b) Offer universal payment methods (Visa, Mastercard, PayPal, Google Pay, Apple Pay) that convey security, familiarity, and reliability.
  c) Facilitate immediate registration using quick methods (Google login, Apple login) in addition to traditional email registration, minimizing obstacles for those who want to contribute impulsively or on a one-off basis.
  d) Incorporate a clearly visible progress bar during the donation process to explicitly show how many steps remain to be completed, which helps reduce uncertainty, decreases user anxiety, and contributes to lowering the abandonment rate.
  e) Ensure optimal loading speed: forms that take more than 3 seconds to load significantly decrease conversion.

2) Convey security and legitimacy from the first contact

  a) Display basic transparency elements (who they are, their mission, funding model, and editorial processes) even before opening the form.
  b) Incorporate signs of professionalism and credibility: awards, audits, certifications, code of ethics, or commitments to independence (adherence to decalogues or ethical frameworks for independent media).
  c) Add micro-interactions that inspire trust: secure payment seals, visible SSL encryption, or messages such as "Your contribution directly funds independent research."
  d) Use the value of independence as the main argument in the donation copy, emphasizing that the contribution is a "mechanism for editorial autonomy" that allows for in-depth coverage of topics outside the mainstream agenda (freelancers).
  e) Show verifiable impact figures (number of patrons, investigations funded, milestones achieved), activating social proof from the first contact.

3) Use embedded donation to eliminate intermediate steps

a) Embed donation modules directly within relevant articles and pieces to avoid page changes that interrupt the user's intention.

b) Place support buttons in highly visible areas (header, persistent navigation, fixed mobile menu) so that the option to donate is always within reach.

c) Design the experience as a "trust funnel": consistent calls to action, respectful tone, and permanent accessibility, always reinforcing the idea of contributing to a common informational good.

d) Incorporate a call-to-action (button and copy) that activates narratives of urgency or risk in sensitive investigations, positioning the donation as a "shield against litigation" (SLAPPs) or institutional protection.

e) Add a button and copy to maximize your click-through rate (Example: "Support this journalism," "Make this investigation possible").

2. To Convert One-time Donations into Recurring Donations

The purpose is to change the perception of a transaction to a reciprocal relationship based on values and belonging (identity and community value).

1) Build a value narrative that connects the contribution with social impact and civic mission

a) Clearly visualize what donations enable: research, articles, podcasts, relevant stories, or annual achievements.

b) Demonstrate the social return on contributions through metrics, graphs, or dashboards that quantify impact and results.

c) Frame recurring donations as a "civic act" and a way to "protect public goods such as truth and oversight of power" (symbolic value).

d) Show "lines of continuity": how recurring donations allow for long-term research planning, not just one-off projects.

e) Highlight the "social deficit" or issues neglected by traditional journalism that the media outlet or freelancer is covering, creating a sense of "urgency and relevance" for citizen participation.

2) Strengthen trust through ongoing transparency and accountability

a) Maintain a transparency page that is always accessible from the main navigation and regularly updated.

b) Publish easy-to-understand reports on income and expenses (with dynamic visualizations) that include, where appropriate, information on financial audits, absence of dividends, salary model, and editorial processes, thereby reinforcing the organization's trustworthiness and credibility.

c) Send regular, specific, and differentiated updates to donors, reinforcing a sense of civic community and "mutual accountability."

d) Explain controversial or complex editorial decisions in an accessible manner, strengthening the perception of integrity and accountability.

3) **Simplify the transition to recurrence through flexible and contextualized options**

   a) Offer multiple payment options: one-time, monthly, annual, bank transfer, or PayPal.
   b) Incorporate incentives such as tax deductions when possible (emphasizing that it is not a transaction but a civic commitment).
   c) Use gentle, contextualized reminders to invite those who have already contributed to set up recurring support.
   d) Incorporate value-added or "experiential" content options (more extensive analysis, exclusive newsletters, events) for recurring donors, strengthening the sense of reciprocity.
   e) Show a clear comparison between one-time and recurring payments, emphasizing how stable support multiplies the impact of the project.

4) **Facilitate the transition to recurrence through flexible and visible options**

   a) Offer different types of support (one-time, monthly, annual) and various payment methods (card, transfer, PayPal).
   b) Incorporate incentives based on civic responsibility (including tax relief where applicable), avoiding messages that turn the act into a transaction.
   c) Activate gentle, personalized, and contextualized reminders to invite those who have already contributed to join on an ongoing basis.

3. To Build Loyalty and Increase Engagement

The goal is to enhance community and identity value to ensure long-term retention, transforming the donor audience into a civic partner.

1) **Strengthen the sense of belonging and the symbolic role of support (identity value)**

   a) Promote shared identity and identity value by using names or hashtags that allow donors to recognize themselves as "informed citizens" and use the donation as a "symbolic marker" of commitment.
   b) Include testimonials from donors explaining why they support the media outlet and what impact they perceive.
   c) Communicate from a philosophy of "partners" rather than "passive patrons."

d) Encourage ongoing participation through virtual or in-person meetings that consolidate the symbolic and emotional involvement of the community (live interviews, film forums, transparency sessions such as balance sheets or editorial decisions).

e) Activate community dynamics (such as thematic groups, reading clubs, or moderated forums) that reinforce shared identity and a sense of empowerment.

f) Complement these initiatives with a constant demonstration of cooperation: highlight alliances with related projects, support and promote third-party campaigns, and foster a culture of open collaboration.

2) Humanize the relationship and build trust through authenticity

a) Introduce the team with photographs, personal descriptions, or carousels that reinforce closeness and authenticity (especially important for freelancers, where personal identity is the basis of legitimacy).

b) Create spaces for active listening where donors can give their opinions on topics to be researched or editorial priorities (not necessarily voting, but consultation that activates experiential value and a sense of coherence).

c) Use a conversational and critical tone of communication that makes donors feel they are learning from someone they trust and not from an institution with hidden incentives.

3) Continuously optimize the digital experience as a means of retention

a) Ensure, in mobile browsing, a persistent and non-intrusive presence of the donate option (for example, through a fixed element optimized for small screens) so that it never disappears from view without causing friction. It is important to coordinate this solution with other persistent elements (such as the progress bar) to avoid overlap and maintain a clear and comfortable experience.

b) Reduce excessive scrolling through compact mobile designs and carousels that speed up reading.

c) Use segmentation and automation (CRM, email marketing) to personalize thank you notes, updates, reminders, and special communications, reducing administrative burden and increasing loyalty.

d) Measure conversion funnels and specific drop-off points to adjust content, buttons, and locations.

e) Implement a personal dashboard for donors where they can view their history, cumulative impact, and upcoming updates.

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