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Article

Community Building as a Tool for Sustainability in Hungarian Digital Media

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Abstract

The disruptive effect of digital platforms is forcing media companies to rethink their business models, particularly when it comes to increasing revenues from the audience as a share of their total revenues. Audience engagement has become a key issue for media companies since, without it, there is no basis for the introduction of subscription fees, paywalls of any kind, or schemes for soliciting donations/support. Hungary is no exception in this regard; but Hungarian media companies must also contend with other challenges. In a captured media environment, independent media are struggling to survive and have essentially been relegated to the digital space. However, in the last decade, several projects have been launched in the digital market, and many of these projects have become financially sustainable. This sustainability owes largely to the fact that these media companies have been able to monetise their popularity: the awareness of Hungarian media consumers has increased, and more people are willing to pay for quality content. The present study examines the extent to which news media have been able to build communities around their organisations, as well as the special place these communities occupy for many consumers in Hungary's illiberal democracy. The paper presents the various forms of community-building used by independent media, and it draws on in-depth interviews to examine how media company managers view the importance of these communities.

Keywords: media capture; pay willingness; community building; news media

1. Introduction

The state of the Hungarian media is best described by the term media capture. Correspondingly, in recent years, there have been innumerable state interventions in the market. The process started with the adoption of the new media laws in 2010 and continues to this day, even if the instruments have changed (Polyák, 2019; Kovács et al., 2021; Urbán, 2024).

From a market perspective, the biggest problem is that investors close to the government have a dominant position, and a significant part of the Hungarian media landscape is owned by entities close to the government. These companies receive continuous illegal state aid through state advertising spending, which also means that independent media companies are at a competitive disadvantage and the market is distorted (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020; Dragomir, 2017; Peruško, 2021; Szeidl & Szucs, 2021).

Media capture is not just a market problem. As Hallin and Mancini (2004) pointed out, the media system and the political system are connected; their operations involve mutually reinforcing processes. In a captured state, the media is also typically captured, and once that

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has happened, the media system serves to further reinforce the position of those who hold political power. As the Council of Europe (2021, p. 1) report on Hungary states, "Freedom of expression and information are prerequisites for any functioning democracy and the media play a crucial role in promoting public access to a diverse range of information."

In unconsolidated democracies, clientelism and favouritism flourish, and media resources are often captured by political actors with the aim of promoting some views while marginalising others. In such cases, media policy aims at enhancing private interests rather than the public good (Bajomi-Lázár, 2017). The problem of media freedom in Hungary is illustrated by the fact that, while according to Reporters Without Borders's (2025) press freedom index, Hungary had ranked 23rd globally in 2010, by 2025 it had dropped to 68th. The main problem areas over the last decade and a half included changes in the regulatory environment, the distortion of the media market and obstacles in the way of journalists' access to information.

The media system in Hungary today is highly polarized (Bene & Szabó, 2019; Benedek, 2024). The weight of pro-government companies is very significant, and several studies have shown that the pro-government media present the government's position in a biased way, essentially publishing propaganda. Independent media are much more diverse, with a variety of perspectives within a single newsroom, and the news they present does not tend to be based on a single undisputed narrative (Rácz, 2016; Gerő et al., 2023; Urbán et al., 2023). It is also noteworthy that while the pro-government media often lose press correction lawsuits, independent media only rarely do (Erdélyi & Szabó, 2024).

In this market environment, independent media are in a difficult situation. Although the media industry is also facing challenges globally, in addition to these challenges, Hungarian media outlets have to operate in a distorted market (Griffen, 2020). Moreover, the independent media outlets are in strong competition with each other and survive only thanks to continuous innovation. There is constant competition not only for consumers' attention, but also for their money and loyalty. Some media companies invest heavily in building a community of supporters who are willing to pay, and these media companies regularly share content with their communities. Part of the audience is very open to this, and larger, visibly successful communities are being built around media brands.

The objective of this article is to examine what possibilities independent media have in this media environment to survive or even develop. One research question seeks to examine how revenue streams that do not stem from market transactions grow side-by-side with traditional forms of media market revenue. Another related question is whether it is possible to mould media audiences into communities, thereby increasing consumer loyalty and enhancing the viability of media organisations. The article does not introduce new business models or potential income streams that no one has yet thought about. Nevertheless, it does add to the established descriptions of the relations between the media and audiences in that it provides a better understanding of audience engagement in the context of a repressive environment, while at the same time it highlights the importance of the consumers' emotional attachment to the media they consume.

1.1. Willingness to Pay for News and the Role of Communities

The financial viability of media companies is now unimaginable without audience revenue. This is nothing new; media market business models have a centuries-old tradition of media consumers paying for access to content. This only changed in the 1990s, when the spread of the internet made growing amounts of free content available, and consumers increasingly expected content to be free. During that period of techno-optimism, it was widely believed that advertising revenues could cover content production costs, especially

since digital distribution allowed for a significant reduction in cost compared to other forms of distribution, such as print media.

Today, we know that the free access model is not sustainable in the long term, at least not for the industry as a whole. Most media companies need audience revenue, and in recent years, a growing number of media companies have convinced consumers that quality news services have value and that there is "no free lunch." Convincing news consumers is a slow process; based on data from 20 countries, the Digital News Report found that only 18 percent of consumers have paid for online news in 2024 in the form of online subscriptions, memberships, donations, or one-off payments (Newman et al., 2025). When it comes to business models based on audience revenue, the key issue is the consumers' willingness to pay and examining why someone would be willing to pay for news in the digital age.

Hansen and Goligoski (2018) distinguish between three types of income from audiences. Donations are based on charity, subscriptions provide access to content, while membership reflects a higher level of commitment and a more active relationship between the media and its audience. In the prevailing media environment, with the associated challenges to the established business models, media organizations need revenue from audiences. Kang (2025) argues that citizens need credible information and quality journalism, and as a result, their commitment to achieving this should involve financial contributions.

Based on research conducted in six countries, Fletcher and Nielsen (2017) found that socialisation plays a major role: those who pay for print news are more likely to either currently pay for online news or are more willing to pay for it in the future.

Price is also an important factor in decision-making, both in terms of whether a consumer is willing to pay for content in general and whether there are other news sources available for free (Groot Kormelink, 2022; O'Brien et al., 2020). At the same time, contradicting the aforementioned, the research results also show that those who consume free online news disseminated by public service media are not less likely to currently pay for online news or less willing to do so in the future (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017).

Sociodemographic variables also play an important role in media spending decisions. Several studies found that younger people are more willing to pay for online news (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Buschow & Wellbrock, 2019; O'Brien et al., 2020) in general, and that they are more likely to be already paying or be more willing to pay for online news in the future. After analysing data from 20 countries, Newman and Robertson (2023) concluded that long-time news subscribers tend to be older, while younger people tend to pay less but are more likely to make donations than older groups.

Some research showed that male and more educated consumers are more willing to pay for news (O'Brien et al., 2020; Newman & Robertson, 2023). John et al. (2022) found surprising results concerning gender differences in research conducted among Australian news consumers. Demographic variables, like age or education, which had been found to be significant in earlier studies, were only found to play a role with respect to male audiences. Among female respondents, the willingness to pay was largely a function of their perceptions of women's news representation and the fairness of reporting.

O'Brien et al. (2020) provided a literature review of factors that contribute to consumers' past spending on news and willingness to pay for digital journalistic content. In many cases, they found that researchers do not take into account psychological aspects, such as consumer needs and motivations when it comes to digital journalistic products.

The analysis of consumer behaviour and loyalty is typically based on the so-called audience engagement approach. According to Broersma (2019), audience engagement refers to the cognitive, emotional, or affective experiences that users have with media content or

brands. The role of communities, and the question of whether a community can be built around a media brand, are less prominently discussed in the relevant academic literature.

Steensen et al. (2020) developed a heuristic theory based on four dimensions of audience engagement—the technical-behavioural, emotional, normative and spatiotemporal—and identified five dimensions in terms of different relations of engagement, namely human-to-self, human-to-human, human-to-content, human-to-machine, and machine-to-machine. Although the authors refer to the "physical or visual places, in which social interaction around media occurs" in the spatiotemporal dimension and human-to-human relations, the analysis does not use the term "community".

In theorising the journalism-audience relationship, Uth et al. (2023) described six categories, namely (1) discursive, (2) expectation-based, (3) network-oriented, (4) technological, (5) parasocial, and (6) strategic-organisational conceptualisations. In the network-oriented approach, the relationship between journalists and their audience is based on interactions and connections in a networked public, and this model considers audiences to be equal actors in journalistic production. The idea that journalists and the audience could connect with each other outside of content production, that there could be an emotional connection between them, or even that members of the audience could get to know each other, is not part of the theory.

There are studies showing that belonging to a community plays an important role in news consumers' content consumption and payment decisions. Chen and Thorson (2024) summarised the results of in-depth interviews and online surveys and identified six underlying motivations that drive people to pay for news: support for journalism, the quality of journalism, triggered by the paywall, community attachment, affordability, and content utility. Those who support local media often actually want to become part of the local community, to understand local problems, and to gain insight into local decision-making.

There are several definitions of community in academic literature. For our purposes, we used that of Bradshaw (2008), who argues that "a community has shared norms and values or some of the attributes of culture". The fact that many consumers pay for media does not in and of itself generate a community. Still, the experience can have a formative dimension with respect to group sentiment. In his study, Tajfel (1974) defines the concept of social identity, which claims that an individual's self-concept also includes their group identity and the emotional significance of the latter. An individual will remain in a group as long as the group membership contributes to the positive aspects of their social identity, and the latter provides satisfaction.

Although the supporters of a media outlet are likely to have some interests and values in common, which could serve as a foundation of group formation, the existence of such shared interests and values does not necessarily mean that there will be interactions between individuals. Ren et al. (2007) have compared the respective theoretical literatures on common identity and common bond. They found that the difference between the two theories is the reason for the individual's group membership. In the case of a common identity, the individual likes the group as a whole, while in the case of a common bond, they like the individuals that make up the group. The study examined 22 academic articles and found that common identity may stem from social categorization, interdependence, and intergroup comparisons. By contrast, what underlies social bonds are social interactions with others, personal knowledge of them, and interpersonal attraction toward them, often because of similarities. Despite the obvious differences between the concepts, connections between individuals based on common identity can morph into connections based on a social bond, and vice versa, because participating in a community creates a possibility for creating new types of bonds between individuals, regardless of what had originally given rise to the bond between them.

Research conducted in the Netherlands shows that consumers do not want to get too close to the media; they do not want to commit and thus limit themselves to one medium (Groot Kormelink, 2022).

1.2. Role of Independent News Media in the Hungarian Media Landscape

The history of the Hungarian media market has not been one of organic development. Instead, it has been marked by several major turning points in recent decades. Hungary began to build a market economy in the 1990s, after communism collapsed. Subsequently, foreign investors entered the market, supply expanded, and it seemed that the media market was set on a stable trajectory of progress. Hungary. For two decades, the technological and economic challenges were similar to those in other developed countries.

Then the right-wing Fidesz government led by Viktor Orbán came to power in 2010, and one of the first major legal reforms involved the adoption of the new media law. The law fundamentally changed the regulatory environment of the media, abolishing the previous strict ownership concentration rules and giving the ruling party control over the media authority and public service media (Polyák & Nagy, 2015).

On account of the unfavourable regulatory environment, several foreign media investors sold their interests in the Hungarian market. The German ProSiebenSat1 television group left the Hungarian market, as did the German Funke Mediengruppe and the Finnish Sanoma. The Modern Times Group sold the free daily Metro, the Magyar Telekom communications company and its owner, Deutsche Telekom, sold the market-leading Origo.hu online news portal. Whilst planning their merger, Ringier and Axel Springer media companies sold a substantial portion of their newspaper portfolios and, subsequently, in 2021, Axel Springer also sold its remaining interests. The media companies were typically acquired by politically connected investors with close ties to the government. This transformed not only the ownership structure but the entire structure of the Hungarian media system (Kovács et al., 2021).

While one major segment of the media landscape is dominated by pro-government media outlets, a segment of independent media has emerged. These media are largely confined to the digital space. Print newspapers and television are difficult for independent players to finance due to high costs, and radio frequencies are distributed by tenders issued by the government-controlled media authority; this has resulted in independent stations being forced out of this market. However, the digital segment is available to them, so online media is practically the only free part of the Hungarian media landscape. A study on the critical junctures of the Hungarian media found that interest in politics among users is growing, and the internet is now an important news source. This is particularly positive for digital news media. At the same time, there is a risk that trust in the media is low and this is partly due to social polarisation (Urbán et al., 2022).

The ownership structure of independent media is characterised by the fact that none of the dominant digital news media have foreign owners. Two major media outlets were previously foreign-owned. One is the online news site of HVG, a long-standing and popular business print weekly, whose German majority owner sold his stake to the minority Hungarian owner in 2014. The other news site (24.hu) is part of the portfolio of a larger newspaper publisher, originally owned by the Finnish Sanoma and bought in 2014 by a Hungarian businessman who is independent of the governing party.

All the other major digital news media were created after 2010, during the Orbán regime, although Klubrádió is a special case: it was a well-known brand already before as a broadcasting radio, but it became a digital radio in 2021. The founders of these digital media were typically journalists who felt under political pressure and therefore left their former jobs or were fired, or their newsrooms were shut down. There is one thing

that all the founders of these start-up media projects have in common, and that is their entrepreneurial spirit and innovativeness. People who had not run a company before, who had no management experience, embarked on projects that have ultimately proved successful, enjoying the trust and support of the public. Today, these media have significant impact on political discourse in Hungary.

2. Materials and Methods

The first step in the research was to identify the independent media outlets that would be included in the analysis. Assessing whether a media outlet in Hungary is independent is not particularly difficult since the ownership structure of media companies is transparent and the political affiliations of the various media are well known. In the analysis, the independents are those whose ownership structure does not reflect any identifiable political affiliation, and no information was ever published that identified the media as affiliated with a political party or politician. Another important indication is that there is no significant state advertising spending in these media.

Relevance to the news market is more difficult to define. All the media analysed have a significant digital presence, even if their portfolio includes print newspapers or magazines. They typically have a high audience reach, but there are exceptions. Thus, for example, investigative projects do not have a particularly high direct audience reach. Nevertheless, they regularly give rise to stories that dominate the public discourse for weeks or even months.

For the selected ten media outlets, we look at their innovative formats, the tools in community building and their offer to the consumers. For digital-only media outlets, we examined the size and composition of revenues, which is indicative of the business model used by media outlets.

During the qualitative research, in-depth interviews were conducted with the heads or community managers of five selected media companies. All of the selected companies are innovative in this area, regularly organising events and keeping continuously in touch with subscribers and/or financial supporters.

The main consideration in selecting the five media outlets was the importance of community organization for these media, whether they have approaches and solutions to the latter that they had been the first to try in Hungary, and whether they qualify as innovative in this area.

Our study was strictly limited to media providers that are officially registered as such with the media authority and have a wide audience reach. The letter could be direct (high numbers of visitors) or indirect reach. The latter was typical, especially in the case of the two investigative projects; major investigative scoops are also reported by independent media, and as a result, the investigative media may themselves have low visitor numbers, but they can still exert a considerable impact on the political agenda. However, the study did not look at influencers, individual content producers or smaller, informal groups that play an increasingly important role in forming public opinion through popular podcasts or YouTube channels. The latter, too, may end up organizing communities around them, and their interactions with the audiences are typically informal in nature, including live events, but the present study limited itself to analysing media with a major audience reach.

We contacted the interview subjects by phone or e-mail, and all five media organizations selected agreed to participate in the study. The interviews were conducted in person in November and December 2025. The semi-structured interviews typically lasted an hour, although some substantially exceeded that timeframe. The study had an ethics permit, and the interview subjects had the opportunity to study the privacy policy before the interviews, and they signed an informed consent form. The interviews touched on three

major themes. For one, we wanted to know what the interview subjects know about the motivations of supporters and subscribers. Second, we asked them about their experience with the communities that are attached to their media brands. Finally, we queried them about the risks and challenges they associate with community-building. We compiled the most important insights and quotes immediately after the interview.

3. Results

3.1. Competition Among Independent Media Companies for Consumers

Despite the distorted market, there are several successful companies operating in the independent media scene, and they are very popular. There is clear product differentiation in the market, media brands have readily distinguishable profiles, and their target audiences are also different, although there are obviously some overlaps (see Table 1).

Table 1. Profile and ways of community building of the most important independent news media in Hungary.

Brand	Core Product	Additional Formats	Community Building
24.hu	news portal; premium content behind paywall (membership system)	podcast and video channels; newsletter	live events; merchandising
HVG	news portal; premium content behind paywall (membership system)	podcast and video channels; stand-up comedy videos; newsletter	live events; special programs for members (open newsroom)
Telex	news portal; free content coupled with a donation scheme	podcast and video channels; newsletter	live events; filmclub; book club; hiking tours; merchandising, Facebook group for the supporters
444	news portal; premium content behind paywall (membership system)	podcast and video channels; documentaries; bookazine; book; newsletter; fact-checking as a side-project	live events; Facebook group for the members; merchandising
Magyar Hang	news portal; premium content behind paywall	podcast and video channels; books; newsletter	merchandising
Válasz Online	online magazine; free content with a membership system	podcast and video channels; bookazine; newsletter	exclusive events for members (including wine tasting)
Partizán	YouTube channel	video; podcast; newsletter	live events; uncut version of interviews for the Patreon members; merchandising
Klubrádió	digital radio with a donation system	podcast; video; live events; filmclub	call-in shows on the radio; film club
Átlátszó	investigative project; free content with a donation system	podcast; video; data journalism	merchandising
Direkt36	investigative project, free content with a donation scheme	podcast (on a small community radio); long-form video; e-book; newsletter	exclusive events for members; members receive a summary of new stories a few hours before publishing

Four of the ten media outlets analysed are news portals. HVG and 24.hu have a strong publishing background, and both companies were acquired by independent Hungarian

owners after foreign investors pulled out. The publisher of 24.hu has an extensive print and online magazine portfolio. HVG's publisher is well known for its professional conferences and book publishing. Both are innovative, as HVG was the first mainstream media that introduced a paywall back in 2019, while 24.hu launched its podcast channels in the same year. Buttressed by a strong portfolio of print publications that supported it in the background, 24.hu was free for readers for a long time, but in October 2024, a subscription system was introduced.

The other two major news portals are not backed by big companies. They were both launched during the period of the Orbán regime, and both were founded by former journalists who quit the previously independent and popular news portal Index (444.hu was launched in 2013, Telex in 2020). 444.hu is owned by the editor-in-chief and the CEO, while Telex is owned by the editorial staff. There is no corporate backing behind any of them to provide cross-subsidies if needed. This means these companies are financially vulnerable, but given the Hungarian context, it boosts their resilience against political pressure.

Válasz Online and Magyar Hang are both conservative, right-wing media. Válasz Online was started in late 2018 by journalists from a former Fidesz-affiliated weekly after the weekly closed down, but now the editorial team is clearly critical of the government. The site publishes one longer piece a day and does not participate in the news competition at all. The content is free of charge, and the newspapers fund themselves through donations instead. Magyar Hang was also launched in 2018, the founders having previously worked for a pro-government daily; they also became critical of the government after their newspaper was shut down. Their print newspaper is published weekly, and their YouTube channel, which runs in parallel to the website, is especially popular.

Partizán is perhaps the most successful project of the Hungarian independent media. The YouTube channel was launched in 2018 and started broadcasting daily programmes in 2020, when the COVID-19 epidemic began. In addition to talk shows and interviews, there are investigative reports, live broadcasts, election coverage (including important foreign elections) and a myriad of programme formats. The most popular programme, which reached 2.6 million views, was a live interview with the new opposition leader who had entered politics in 2024. Over two and a half million views is a high figure, especially considering that television programmes do not have anywhere near this kind of viewership: the most-watched programme in the 2024 television top list was a football match broadcast on the public service media's sports channel, which drew 1.2 million viewers. And the most-watched news programme was broadcast on a commercial television channel and reached 850,000 viewers (Médiatanács [Media Council], 2025). Partizán came into the international spotlight in October 2025, when former German Chancellor Angela Merkel gave an exclusive interview to this channel during her visit to Hungary.

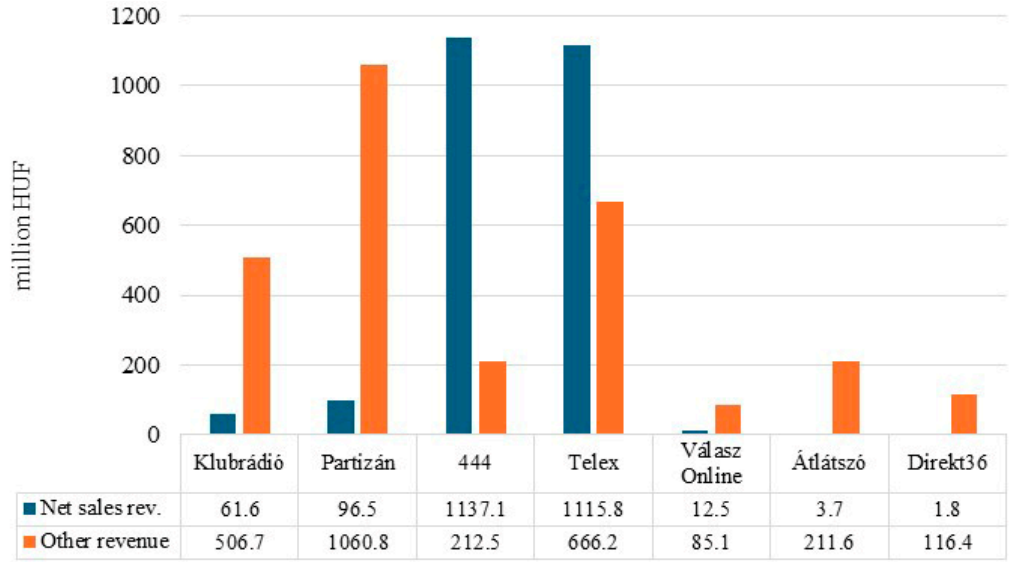
Klubrádió was launched in 1999 and has since changed ownership and profile. Since 2010, it has also been one of the most vocal critics of the Orbán regime. Over time, the talk radio station was gradually stripped of its rural frequencies, and when even its application to retain its Budapest frequency ran into complications in 2013. The controversy attracted international attention at the time (Bilefsky, 2013). Finally, in 2021, the radio lost its Budapest frequency and has since been operating as an online radio station. Interestingly, after 2010, when advertisers disappeared from the radio, which was highly critical of the government, the station turned to the public and asked for donations. A large number of listeners started to support the radio, and such donations have since emerged as its main source of income. However, at the time, crowdfunding was not as widespread as it is now. Another interesting fact is that crowdfunding is successful despite the fact that the station's audience is mainly made up of elderly listeners.

Átlátszó and Direkt36 are high-quality investigative projects, both founded by journalists who had to leave their former newsrooms. Átlátszó was launched in 2011, and it publishes new materials almost every day, but not all of the new articles feature major investigations; in many cases, it covers everyday corruption. Direkt36 publishes far fewer articles, often going weeks without new content, but its major investigations often dominate the public discourse. In February 2025, Direkt36 released the documentary entitled The Dynasty, which scrutinises the business dealings of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's family. The docu reached 3.9 million viewers.

Today, media outlets offer consumers a variety of formats. In addition to text content, podcasts, videos, and newsletters are now commonplace, and this is a prerequisite for financial sustainability. According to the annual Media Pluralism Monitor, which systematically assesses media-related risks in European countries categorizes media viability in Hungary as high risk. However, the study also acknowledges that independent news media are innovative and have introduced several new business models and new formats. The national study is uncertain about their sustainability; these innovations are rather costly, mainly because of the high human resource needs. Revenues are uncertain in the long run, and high inflation and the growing economic problems may jeopardise the revenue from audiences (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2025).

The fact that independent media projects have moved to a new business model is evident not only based on the diversity of their activities, but also from the composition of their revenues. In addition to traditional advertising and subscription revenues, new sources of revenue have emerged. First, individual donations, typically for media outlets that provide their content for free (Telex, Partizán, Válasz Online, Klubrádió, Átlátszó, Direkt36). Second, subsidies from various donors, including EU projects. This is very common. Only Válasz Online decided not to apply for any grants, focusing instead on a donation-centred business model. Thirdly, we have to mention the 1% of income tax that taxpayers can donate to an CSO each year. Several media projects (Telex, Partizán, Válasz Online, Klubrádió, Átlátszó, Direkt36) receive income from this source. It is noteworthy that in 2025, among all Hungarian CSOs, Telex collected the highest amount of revenue from these so-called 1% donations (HUF 580 million, ca. EUR 1.5 million), edging out even CSOs that help sick children or animal shelters.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of revenues for media projects. This analysis excludes the three publishing companies with regular print products. The revenues from print publishing are beyond the scope of this analysis. Hence, we focus on seven digital-only media outlets, even if some of them occasionally publish bookazines or books. For ease of identification, the figure features the publicly used media brand name rather than the registered company name. Net revenue from sales refers to the type of income stemming from market transactions. In the case of a media company, this category includes revenue from advertising (an advertiser buys advertising space) and subscription fees (the subscriber pays for access to content). The category of other revenues includes incomes that does not stem from market transactions, such as grants, readers' donations (when the money provided is not aimed at buying content but instead at supporting the media organization financially), and income from what are known in Hungary as 1% donations (taxpayers can select CSOs to receive 1% of their annual income tax payments). Unfortunately, the financial reports do not provide more details on any of the categories, which makes it impossible for us to break them down further. However, distinguishing between the two types of revenue helps us differentiate between traditional, market-type revenues and incomes that are not market transaction-based (see Appendix A—Table A1 for the exact data).



	Klubrádió	Partizán	444	Telex	Válasz Online	Átlátszó	Direkt36
Net sales rev.	61.6	96.5	1137.1	1115.8	12.5	3.7	1.8
Other revenue	506.7	1060.8	212.5	666.2	85.1	211.6	116.4

Figure 1. Net revenues from sales and other revenue categories at selected media companies (2024). Source: own figure based on annual financial reports (https://e-beszamolo.im.gov.hu/). Accessed on 22 September 2025.

As is apparent, the digital media projects we analysed have a strikingly high share of "other revenues", up to several times their net revenue from sales. Only the two major news portals, Telex and 444, achieved significant net sales revenues; in the case of the other media outlets, this source of income is negligible compared to other sources of revenue. Looking at the aggregated data of the seven media outlets, the total net revenue from sales is HUF 2.43 billion, while the share of other revenues is HUF 2.86 billion. If we look only at these two main revenue sources and exclude marginal types of revenue (e.g., income from financial transactions), we find that 46 percent of revenue comes from net sales and 54 percent from other sources.

There are both positive and negative aspects associated with the high proportion of "other revenues." On the positive side, revenues are diversified, and donations play a significant role in the revenue streams of several media outlets. Today, media companies consider it important to strengthen consumer loyalty and build a community around their media brands, which contributes to financial sustainability. On the negative side, these non-market revenues tend to be rather unreliable in reality. It is hard to predict how much they will yield over any given period. Changes in the regulatory framework could lead to the elimination of the 1% tax donation, and in the event of economic deterioration, many would be likely to cut back on donations first; considerable uncertainty attaches to international projects and grants, too. Although these sources of income have become very important over the last few years, they do not provide the stability that the centuries-old media model, in which advertisers pay for advertising space while audiences pay for accessing content, can provide.

3.2. The Experiences with Community Building

As part of this research, we conducted interviews with the representatives of five media companies, talking to managers whose positions involved keeping in touch with subscribers or financial supporters. What these media companies had in common is that they are highly engaged in community-building, and they are continuously engaged with their financial supporters and subscribers both online and in person. Of the five media companies we selected, two are major news sites, two are smaller news sites that produce content for smaller targeted audiences, while one focuses on audio content.

Only one of the media outlets we looked at works based on a subscription model; the other four all offer free access to their content. In other words, they can only offer supporters something extra in return for their donations in a form that goes beyond the content they publish. Four of these companies were launched in the 2010s, during the Orbán regime, and even though they started out as—and fundamentally remain—producers of online text content, these days they also regularly offer podcasts and videos, as well as newsletters. Although the fifth media company's historical origins date back further, since 2010, they have also comprehensively overhauled their operations. While previously their business model had been based on advertising income, since 2010, donations have emerged as their main source of funding. As far as their resources allow, all five media organisations are active in building their own communities and hosting live events for their financial supporters or subscribers.

3.2.1. What Motivates Subscribers and Financial Supporters

In trying to understand what motivates paying consumers, it is essential to consider how the Hungarian media system works. The terms captured media, distorted market and political pressure are the most suitable for summing up the system as a whole. State-funded disinformation plays a huge role in this market (Polyák et al., 2024), which is why the segment of the market with the highest level of political awareness tends to appreciate the independent media companies that produce quality content.

It is hardly surprising that when we were mapping the motivations of consumers, all interviews mentioned the notions of social responsibility and support for independent media first. The social stratum that pays for content is aware of the important role that quality journalism plays in sustaining democracy.

> *"It is typical for [subscribers] to be already oversaturated with news. They do not necessarily want to read more; they are not paying specifically for content."*

> *"One of our financial supporters said: I donate money so that this content can reach my neighbour as well."*

The quotes also highlight that although a subscription is a transactional/market relationship, subscribers nevertheless do not necessarily see it as transactional. Although it seems reasonable to assume that if someone pays for a subscription, they will at least sometimes consume the contents, social media comments show that many subscribers are increasingly likely to view themselves as supporters helping their favoured media outlets remain financially afloat. This applies even as, financially speaking, subscriptions can be regarded as market transactions, whereas donations are not transactional in a market sense; in the audience's thinking, the distinction is not necessarily as clear-cut. There may also be other, more personal motivations, which reflect the given consumers' own needs rather than just the social utility of the media organisation they support.

One such preeminent motivation is the desire to experience a sense of being an insider. Supporters and subscribers value opportunities to meet with and talk to journalists.

> *"They go to these events because they'd like a glimpse behind the scenes, they want to ask the journalists questions."*

> *"They want to feel like insiders. Some of them even applied to the school of journalism because they are interested in public affairs and wanted closer ties to the newsroom."*

According to the feedback from readers, some participants like attending the events even if they are passive throughout and do not tend to seek out the company of journalists; they nevertheless have a good time at the event.

> *"One of our subscribers wrote us that they have a strong aversion to the word 'community', but they nevertheless feel good about belonging somewhere."*

Some display an active interest in public affairs and are happy to attend community events where they might encounter similar people.

> *"They do not want to go to some party event, because the people there are true believers. Our events, by contrast, feature people who have doubts, and for them, it's a bit like going to a psychologist."*

> *"Our events tend to feature attendees who share similar values and have a similar socio-cultural background."*

3.2.2. The Communities That Emerge Surrounding Media Brands

Organising live events always plays a key role in building communities. In some cases, such events are more frequent, while in the case of other media organisations, they are rare. There are also differences in terms of the types of events offered; some media companies offer standardised events for their supporters and subscribers, while others take an entirely different approach and organise a wide variety of events, seeking to satisfy various needs and interests.

From the very start, the communities attached to the media organisations in question have played a role in all five of the companies we looked at. The need for a community had manifested itself already at the time of their foundation.

> *"When they shut our newspaper down, many people turned to us, existing communities, groups of friends, asking us whether there would be something new. When a few of us in the old editorial team decided to launch an online newspaper, we began calling those groups that had previously contacted us, and this led to conversations. We did not initially have a sense of how many supporters we would have."*

> *"When we created something, in opposition to the powers that be, everyone became invested in our success. For many, it continues to be important to this day that they have supported us from the very start, that they are founding supporters."*

> *"Initially, the donations were not limited to financial support alone; we also received many other offers of material and even in-kind support. Thus, for example, a cleaning lady offered to come and clean for free; naturally, we did not accept that, we paid her."*

The community network that emerged around the nascent media brands, the palpable devotion of readers, continues to play a decisive role in the everyday operations of these outlets. This is a resource that media companies can build on in the long term.

> *"We have been saying since the very start that it's all about the community."*

> *"I saw community networks that have my back rather than subscribers that I provide services for."*

This raises the question of how we can distinguish between donations and subscriptions. The two models differ not only in terms of accounting, but the underlying relationship between the media outlet and the audience is also very different, since those who donate are much more likely to experience emotional attachment to the media. At some of the media companies' events, many guests continue to linger even after the originally scheduled event, along with the live interview, is over. They can grab food or drinks and sometimes spend the entire evening there.

> *"It's not that these club nights have given rise to communities, but that they have become key venues for the existing communities to meet up."*

One of our interviewees said that the curiosity and devotion of supporters are always palpable. Although few of them had believed that would be the case when they launched their company, today every staff member feels that a strong community has emerged around their brands.

> *"Every autumn, we host a small festival for our supporters. When that happens, they have to close the entire street, and when the weather is good, we might see as many as 1000 attendees. But we also offer events for smaller groups. Thus, for example, they can visit the newsroom and get a picture of how and where we work."*

At one of the media outlets, the journalists offer to personally attend events where a supporter invites their friends for a joint discussion.

> *"There was an event where I was invited to a house [near Budapest], and they screened our documentary, and we talked afterwards. It was a fairly big group, although it seemed that the host knew everyone personally."*

The previously mentioned example is also interesting because it is safe to assume that, due to the time investment in the programme and the small audience reach, the returns will not match the spending in the short term, and hence it may not appear rational. Nevertheless, it could boost loyalty and foster the emergence of a small community surrounding the media organization in ways that can contribute to its long-term financial viability. At other newspapers, the experience is that although supporters attend their events, they go home immediately afterwards, and they do not stick around to talk and mingle.

> *"That is why we also organise gastronomic events, since those are a little less formal."*

One media outlet that organises a wide variety of events has altogether different experiences. They said that the type of event and the number of people in attendance have a major impact on whether the attending supporters, who do not tend to know each other, will start talking to each other afterwards.

> *"At our book club, which is a small, seminar-like event, people tend to mingle. By contrast, the film club and our political events draw larger audiences, and people talking afterwards is far less common. There were thousands of people at the birthday party, but when we played group games there, people started to talk to one another."*

In addition to its Budapest events, one of the news sites also organises an annual summer retreat for its supporters at a popular resort. At the most recent event, one of the supporters organised a ride-share network to allow as many people as possible to attend at a lower cost. It was a bottom-up initiative that proved extremely successful.

> *"Ultimately, we got 15 cars to join, not only from Budapest, but other major cities as well."*

3.2.3. Challenges and Risks

For the most part, the media companies we asked are in the early stages of community-building. Nevertheless, almost all of our interviewees mentioned that keeping in touch with the community takes up enormous time and energy. They always respond to enquiries from subscribers and supporters, and this is often burdensome.

> *"When the daily newsletter is delayed, the e-mails start coming in immediately."*

> *"We continuously communicate with our readers; we operate almost as a customer service."*

In the long run, the consumers' exaggerated expectations may cause problems. Several of our interview subjects noted that many readers openly profess that they want a change in government, and they often expect the media outlet they support to promote that objective. This expectation can obviously lead to disappointment, and it also involves the risk that

once this objective is realised, and there is a new government in place, they will cease to donate since the watchdog work will no longer be as important for them. The financial supporters' reaction to articles or broadcasts that they are unhappy with is also a major source of uncertainty for the media organisations.

> *"Sometimes our financial supporters behave as advertisers are wont to do, that is, they want to tell us what we should write about and what we should not write about."*

> *"They feel like they are co-owners and thus have a say in our content."*

One of our interview subjects mentioned that in their previous workplace, a hugely popular Facebook community had emerged around the brand (it was not a media brand). Over time, the Facebook community took on a life of its own, and the company no longer had any real influence on what was happening inside the community. The insight was that it is a good idea to keep some level of control over the development of this community and not allow it to evolve entirely separately from the underlying brand that had originally given rise to it.

4. Discussion

The operation of independent media outlets in the illiberal Hungarian media system is special in many respects. For one, the underlying market distortion poses a major challenge at a time when media companies all over the world already face massive structural challenges. At the same time, however, the special social and political circumstances in Hungary also offer some distinct opportunities. The traditional forms of organising public life are weak, parties and trade unions have very few members, and the forums for political and public affairs discourse are wanting. When a media company hosts events and public discussions for its subscribers or supporters, for many, this fills a void, and the participants genuinely appreciate the opportunity to talk about public affairs with like-minded folks.

The academic literature is divided on the question of who pays for news and why they do so. Chen and Thorson's (2024) survey identified six drivers, including support for journalism and community attachment. Support for journalism obviously plays a decisive role in a country where the media is threatened; our interviews with media managers also revealed that many consider this important. Although the relevant studies suggest that community attachment primarily plays a role in supporting local journalism, in our own research, the interviewees also tended to mention it, which suggests that in Hungary, communities also play a role in the case of national media.

Based on our in-depth interviews, the circumstances that shaped the creation of the given media company also influence the importance of the surrounding community. In those cases when there was a palpable external demand for launching the media company, and the journalists began their project with a sense of this demand and the resulting encouragement from the community, the communities tend to work really well. However, in those cases when the community-building efforts only commenced after the media company was launched—and, in some cases, only years later—the efforts to build a strong community surrounding the brand tended to be less successful. One success story involves a left-leaning media outlet that had been launched before 2010 and has been very critical of the government since then. After the Orbán regime installed itself in office, the company's financial viability was threatened as advertising revenue dried up. The company clearly communicated this problem to its audiences, which began donating. Initially, this was just enough to survive in the short term, but over time, these revenues became more substantial, a community emerged around the media brand, and its live events are highly popular.

The study has shown that the transformation in the relationship between the media and its consumers is fraught with some risks. In the traditional theory of media audiences,

individuals did not play a role; they had no way of influencing how the media operate (McQuail, 2010). The emergence of a community surrounding a media outlet may be accompanied by a desire to influence the contents of the media, and two interview subjects have confirmed this. Furthermore, it also meshes with the results of a study by Jurg et al. (2024), which examined the phenomenon of audience capture and found that extreme audience engagement creates risks for the affected media.

The real question is how enduring the role of communities can be. Currently, it is hard to predict this. It is conceivable that in the illiberal Hungarian regime, supporting independent media and participating in the relevant events is seen as an act of civic resistance of sorts, a form of protest against the political regime. In the extremely polarised Hungarian society, many may indeed find it important to belong to a community where they can talk about public affairs without conflict. A major question is therefore what would happen in the case that there is a major change in the underlying political situation. On the one hand, we do not know the direction in which the current Hungarian political and media system will develop, and under what regulatory and business environment media corporations will have to operate in the future. Furthermore, we also do not know how audiences will react to changes, how those might shape their trust in media, and whether the existing independent media will be able to retain their prestige and consumers will continue to be willing to support them. There is a real risk that many of those who have supported independent media up to this point might expect these media to be less critical towards a new government led by the current opposition, and that the media outlets abandon their watchdog function so that they do not constrain the new government's freedom of action. It is even conceivable that in the event of changes in the political situation, the emergence of a more democratic and deliberative communication environment, the communities that have emerged around independent media organizations become less important and eventually disintegrate. This study is subject to several limitations. It analyses the experiences of a single country, which is a major caveat as to its generalisability. Furthermore, this country is in a rather peculiar situation, as it has experienced an extraordinary broad array of methods deployed to suppress media over the past decade and a half, as a result of which independent media have had to adapt in various ways to growing pressure from the government (Mertek Media Monitor & Rule of Law Lab at NYU School of Law, 2026). The methods that have helped independent media to adapt and survive in an illiberal media environment will not necessarily lead to the same result in different political, regulatory, and economic environments. A further limitation of this study is the small number of interviews and media managers have recounted their own personal experience, which might inevitably include subjective elements.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Net Revenue from Sales and Other Revenue of Independent Media Companies (2024).

Brand	Company Name	Net Revenue from Sales ('000 HUF)	Other Revenue ('000 HUF)
24.hu (+broader portfolio)	Centrál Médiacsoport Zrt.	14,254,791	128,340
HVG (+book publishing)	Heti Világgazdaság Kiadói Zrt.	5,150,784	79,779
Telex (G7)	Telex.hu Zrt.	1,115,811	666,208
444 (Lakmusz, Qubit)	Magyar Jeti Zrt.	1,137,110	212,548
Magyar Hang	Alhambra-Press Bt.	386,151	38,653
Válasz Online	Válasz Online Kiadói Kft.	25,828	97,500
Partizán	Partizán Rendszerkritikus Tartalomelőállításért Alapítvány	96,491	1,060,764
Klubrádió	Klubrádió Szolgáltató Zrt.	61,599	506,713
Átlátszó	atlatszo.hu Közhasznú Nonprofit Kft.	3665	211,649
Direkt36	Direkt36 Újságíró Központ Nonprofit Kft.	1793	116,429

Source: annual financial reports (https://e-beszamolo.im.gov.hu/). Accessed on 22 September 2025.

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