



KRAUTREPORTER

The Engaged Journalism Playbook

Simple and practical instructions to help you build a sustainable future for your independent publication. Give your audience a voice, earn their trust and eventually their financial support. This is how your readers will become trusting members — not because they have to, but because they want to.

Krautreporter is a digital magazine in Berlin that specialises in collaborative journalism. Our editorial mission is to help our readers to understand the world better. We deliver on that mission by publishing original background pieces every day covering politics, economics and social issues. Our focus is collaborative journalism: we work in close contact with our members, asking them for input, expertise and contacts in the research process.



THE AUTHOR

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This playbook has been created as part of the European Journalism Centre's Engaged Journalism Accelerator. Thanks to its support, Krautreporter was able to conduct member research and develop new pathways for audience engagement.

The playbook is intended to provide other membership news outlets with insights from the experience Krautreporter has gained over the last five years, as well as guidance on how to build members' trust. The playbook covers four key areas.

- **Our insights into building members' trust**
- **Our engagement principles**
- **A guide to our survey engagement strategy**
- **Advice on attracting new members**

SECTION ONE:

Understanding Trust

When you ask readers what builds their trust in a news organisation, they invariably answer by invoking the journalistic principles of fact-checking and reliable sources.

That is what we found when we naively surveyed our members about what makes them trust a publication to get an initial grasp on the issue of trust. However, when we at Krautreporter talk about trust, we are striving for a higher standard: We want to gain the personal level of trust that humans develop within communities. And we recognise that this kind of trust has to be built, just like in any relationship, by interacting with our members. That is why engagement is a fundamental part of our membership concept and not just a business tool. It means doing journalism *with* your audience instead of *for* it.

But engaged journalism does have one crucial obstacle. It requires plenty of resources. Although every personal email you send to a member works to build trust and keep members on board, you simply cannot stay in touch with everybody. That is why you need to be systematic. You will need to establish general touchpoints for members. For Krautreporter as a member-engaging news outlet, these are our comment section (which we call contribution section), our reporters' issue-focused newsletters, our topic-related surveys among members, and our Facebook discussion groups. But in order to use those touchpoints effectively it is important to understand how your members behave and how they gain trust. In order to do that, we have dug deep into our members' behaviour.

Member Habits

Once members have been recruited, they will start to form habits. To understand these habits Krautreporter evaluated members' usage data. We combined datasets from all our services to members such as our mailing tool Mailchimp, our webpage and our survey tool Typeform. To link these data sources we matched e-mail addresses across platforms. Then we asked ourselves several questions to get a better understanding of the link between digital behaviour and their loyalty and trust towards our brand:

- How often do members comment, read articles, open newsletters or participate in surveys?
- Are there groups of members with specific usage habits?
- How are members' interactions linked to metrics of trust, such as membership duration or reading frequency?

The results of our statistical analysis offer several insights. Firstly, they show that our most frequent readers are the same people each month, with the same being true for commenters and those who open our e-newsletters. This means that members form the habits that suit them best. And these habits are not necessarily related. We found that being a diligent reader is not necessarily associated with being a frequent e-newsletter opener. This is why you need to establish different touchpoints for members to be able to form different habits. For Krautreporter the touchpoints used most regularly by readers are email newsletters and our news articles themselves. As a result of the insight that newsletters are popular with our members, we have developed a newsletter strategy with several topic-focused newsletters, each written by a responsible reporter.

Building Trust, Binding Members

So members form the habits that suit them. But how are these habits related to trust? And can members be nudged into different behaviour? In our analysis we have found that we have one powerful tool for nudging members' behaviour and generating trust: Surveys.

There are several reasons for using surveys:

→ Survey engagement is not habitual. While we see the same members reading and commenting time and time again, it is hard for us to predict who will partake in a survey. Of course, a few of your super members will always respond, but member data shows that generally it is quite normal for members to only take part in surveys from time-to-time. So surveys engage members not as a matter of habit, but just occasionally. In our member interviews we have found a simple explanation for this fact. Interviewee Ute said: *I do not participate in all surveys, but check whether a topic is interesting to me. If it is, then I will click on it and respond.* So surveys create the opportunity for an out-of-habit experience related to a topic that a member cares about.

→ Surveys have a sustainable effect on reading behaviour (see figure 01). We have found that for the four weeks after a survey was conducted, the members who participated tended to increase their reading frequency. This outperformed our other engagement efforts.

→ Engaged members stay on board longer (see figure 02). Those who have participated in at least 1 survey stay members for, on average, 4 months longer. Commenting on an article has a similar, but slightly weaker, effect of 3 months. Other touchpoints do not show similar patterns. This carries two competing explanations that both speak for the use of surveys. Either, surveys and comments generate members' loyalty and trust or they cater to the users that are looking to enter long and trusting bonds.

Krautreporter has built its engagement strategy with a focus on surveys, based on these three pieces of evidence.

FIGURE 01

While leaving a comment has a stronger effect on reading behaviour initially, this drops off after 2 weeks.

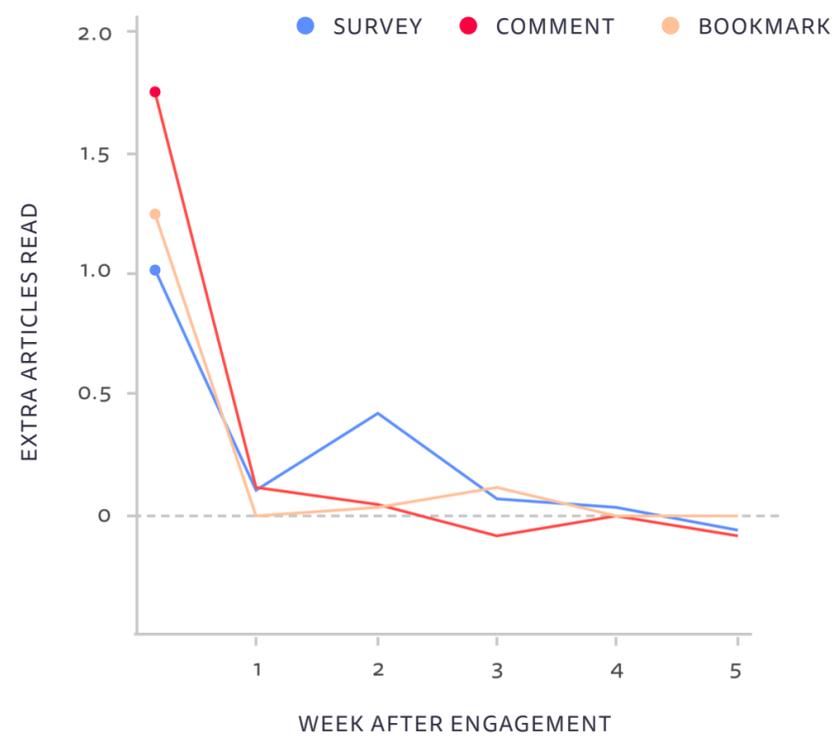
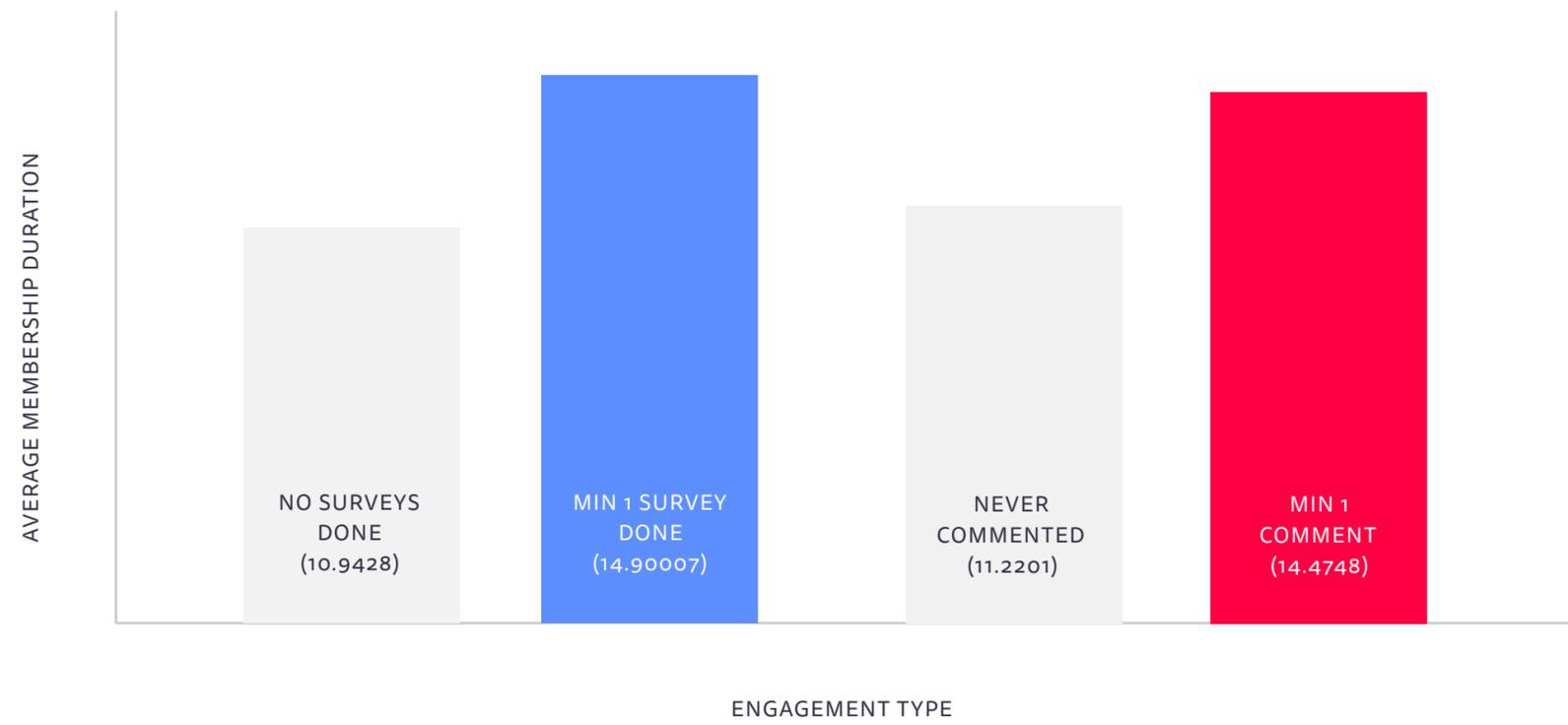


FIGURE 02



SECTION TWO:

Engagement Principles

When undertaking engaged journalism, cultural norms that govern the newsroom are different to conventional journalism.

And that's the crux of engaged membership journalism. Undergoing the cultural transition necessary to work with your members is quite a task when most of your reporters come from traditional media backgrounds. This is why we recommend the following principles for any membership newsroom.

Conversation Starter, Not Just Author

At Krautreporter we think of our reporters as conversation starters rather than just authors. That means that they have a wealth of expertise which they use to report on new developments from the frontlines.

This also has a practical aspect. At Krautreporter, reporters moderate their articles' comments since they are the experts on the given topic. We do not separate reporters from community editors. Our reporters lead their communities themselves. Also, all our conversation starters have a newsletter on their topic that they curate themselves.

Conversations starter also reach beyond the Krautreporter community, to lead discussions on social media and in person. They take their topics to heart and

touch everyone engaged in that issue. As an education reporter, if you are the voice for the teaching community, people will notice you and want to know what you think as a journalist. They will follow you back to your membership to read your expert reporting.

Engaged Research

When doing research for a piece, our starting point is always the community. Thus members are not merely our financing tool, but also the biggest pool of experts we have. If you have 10,000 members, then soon enough you will have 10,000 willing interviewees. These potential experts trust you, because they have known you and your work for some time.

Say you want to write a piece on federal tax policy. Among your members you might find an insider to explain the secrets of the finance ministry. You will probably also find someone to tell you about how they have been affected by tax increases or cuts. There are two ways to go about this: Survey or seek out. Surveys will give you stories you didn't know you were looking for, while seeking out the experts in your community will give you access you wouldn't usually have, because

they wouldn't talk to you or you didn't know they existed. We have had high-ranking government officials explain to us the background of a policy area because they felt committed to Krautreporter. In order to know who is an expert, all new Krautreporter members are invited to provide us with information on what they are working on so we can seek them out for help.

Not Just Engagement But Influence

Asking your members questions can go a long way. However, asking members questions is only one part of the trick. Engagement only achieves its binding power if it results in real visible influence. During a member interview, one member called Petra told us, "Once I did an interview with Krautreporter on a topic I was an expert on. That really made me feel like I had something to say and was heard. That made me incredibly happy. It is just nice to feel like a contributing member of a community. In the end, isn't that what we are all looking for?" This highlights that engagement serves a deeper need to be a visible part of a community. And you can feed that desire by making engagement visible. In your newsletters, write about who you talked to.

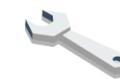
Underneath your articles, mention the participating members' names. This will create an experience of the power that members gain through their membership.



On a process level, you can implement this in your newsroom in two ways: Firstly, in the editing process, make sure reporters are reminded of engagement and mention it. So when an idea is pitched, make it a rule to ask whether member engagement would make sense. Secondly, in your news conferences, have a round where one-by-one each person talks about how they made member influence visible in the last week.

Balance

Your role as a reporter changes in a membership model, but the journalistic principles stay the same. The goal is to strike a balance between listening to your members and inspiring and pushing for new thinking. Don't only write about what your community wants to know about or what they believe in. Speak to the uneasy truths they ignore, write about the topic they find boring. Serendipity is always a winner.



Set a division of labour and let your own reporters do the community-intensive writing, as they are the experts at member engagement, while freelance journalists provide the input your community didn't ask for.

Engagement For Super Users

Most of the engagement we described here is specific to surveys with hundreds of participating members. However, a great part of our work with members takes place on entirely different channels with a smaller group of super members. These are an invaluable resource for us, because they help us on an everyday basis. Our work with these super users is highly collaborative and part of a membership newsroom's work. It is part of everyone's job in the newsroom to communicate with loyal members and involve them in their work. Here are some of the tasks that they do with us:

- Moderate topic group discussions
- Co-author pieces on their areas of expertise
- Bring interesting topics to our attention

SECTION THREE:

A Guide: Engaging With Surveys

Because we believe in the power of surveys for our reporting and trust building, we want to give you our practical survey manual as well as a couple of survey examples that you could implement.



- 01.** Set Up
- 02.** Design
- 03.** Test
- 04.** Distribute
- 05.** Evaluate
- 06.** Write Up
- 07.** Make Visible
- 08.** Reward

01:

Set Up

When running a survey (which we do on a weekly basis), you need to get your tools right. Choose your weapon carefully. You want to use an online survey platform that allows you to quickly set up surveys that can easily be completed on mobile (where about 50% of our responses come from) and integrates well with other tools such as [Airtable](#). At Krautreporter we use [Typeform](#) to set up our surveys. Here is our [template](#). Try it as a member and non-member to get an idea of how it works.

02:

Design

Generally speaking, you need to design a questionnaire that's fun for the respondent. [Here's a translated example](#) of what our surveys generally look like. Click through it as a member or non-member to get a better idea of how it works. There are several variables that determine whether your survey is of use to you and your respondents:

- Introduce yourself at the start of the survey. Say what the purpose and the topic of the survey are and state the main question on the first slide. This provides some context.
- Keep it short. The longer a survey takes, the fewer completed questionnaires you can expect to receive. Text fields are heavily informative since they give you stories. But our data shows that click-only surveys are the ones that encourage a greater number of responses, likely because they take significantly less time to complete.
- Ask respondents for the reasoning behind their answers. If you only ask for the experience/opinion of your respondents, you will get lost when trying to assess what the meaningful answers are. Ask

“Why did you do that?” or “Why do you think your answer is important?”

- Make your survey an easy dialogue. It should feel like a conversation rather than like somebody is squeezing information out of members.
- Ask for names, email addresses and consent to contact respondents for follow-up questions, publication updates or a newsletter subscription.
- Abstract or very open questions do not work as well as concrete questions that refer directly to members' experiences. Recently we conducted a survey with the opening question “When was the last time that you were not the person you aspire to be?” While some answers we received were intriguing, the overall response was low. We realised that starting with a concrete question about readers' shameful short-distance flights or shopping frenzies might have triggered more responses.

03:

Test

Test your survey before sending it out. Let a colleague — or, even better, several colleagues — answer your questionnaire and check whether their answers correspond to what you were hoping to receive. Often the phrasing of the questions can inadvertently mislead respondents. For instance, asking, “When did you have surgery?” will get you many responses with dates or information about timing, but, “Under what circumstances did you have surgery?” will give you stories of the surgeries. In order to discover these pitfalls, you need to test your survey.

04:

Distribute

Disseminate your survey in your newsletters, on your website and on social media. If your question asks for a tangible experience that people can relate to, it will spread throughout the community. Seek out the places where this community lives — Twitter pages, Facebook groups or subreddits. This is a fantastic way of engaging non-members in a topic they care about, while introducing them to your organisation. One of our surveys that recently spread in social media was about readers’ reasons to cancel their church memberships — a question that is dear to many young, modern atheists. When you post the survey on social media, include the main question in the post and use a minimum amount of branding, so the focus is on the question.

05:

Evaluate

This is likely to be where most of your hours will be spent. You need to evaluate and cluster responses and maybe even factcheck them. At Krautreporter this falls within our reporters’ responsibilities. Good questionnaire design will save you some time. Also, Excel skills will probably be helpful. At this point, look out for interesting protagonists. Sometimes our whole newsroom is captivated by the individual stories that we receive in a simple survey text response.



06:

Write Up

Depending on your survey and the outcomes, there are different ways to use your responses. Use journalistic reasoning to decide how to use this input. Many of the articles produced as a result of our surveys are simple write ups of the clusters of answers that we received — crowdsourced knowledge that you can't simply Google. For instance, we put together a summer reading list of female authors suggested by members. You might also follow up on the most interesting responses and tell the narrators' stories. If you decide not to use the responses at all, tell the respondents how you came to that decision.

07:

Make Visible

Make your members' influence and contribution to your work visible. Mention the members that answered your survey within or underneath your article and notify them of the results. Krautreporter does this by sending respondents an email notification. When members see that their contribution is visible to others in the community, then they will really start to feel like they are part of your project.

08:

Reward

For non-members that have participated, offer them something in return for their help at the end of your survey: A test membership or access to an article for free, for instance. Also, invite them to sign up to your newsletter, where you will announce the survey results. This is the moment your survey becomes a tool to attract new members directly into membership, or as leads for your newsletters. Make sure you track how many new email addresses you acquire and how many members follow you into a trial membership with the link tracking tools that you use. This helps you understand your reach and growth via surveys.

Survey Types

Our manual offers you the *how*, but we want to go beyond that and also give you the *what* of surveys. Here is a comprehensive list of our different surveys, which your newsroom can pick up and use immediately.

- **Topic Vote**
- **Ask About The Spin**
- **Ask For Resources**
- **Ask For Experiences**
- **Source The Crowd's Knowledge**
- **Ask What Matters**

Topic Vote

With a membership model, you are in the unique position of finding out what your readers want to learn about. To do so, make surveys about which topics they are interested in. These topic votes can be short and sweet — they're the perfect light-touch engagement tool. For instance, send out a survey that contains five topic options to vote for. When you go on to write about the topic that received the most votes and publish the results you have the perfect engagement experience: Question — Member Response — Newsroom Reaction. Even the members who engage the least will take part and enjoy this quick engagement. At Krautreporter we have a reporter, Susan, who writes a column, *A Manual For Everyday Life*. For each piece, she creates two surveys. One, in which she collects questions that readers want to have answered and a second one in which she lets readers vote for the questions that she collected. Time after time, her surveys get a great number of responses.

Ask About The Spin

Our editor-in-chief Rico likes to ask our readers: What questions do you have about topic X? Once he did this when researching Bitcoin. Surprisingly Rico not only received questions, but several responses saying, "I don't even know where to start." This changed Rico's whole spin and approach to the story. Without his survey he might have written a piece about the intricacies of Bitcoin politics that potentially 3,000 people would be interested in, but instead he was able to write a much more basic piece about Bitcoin that was relevant to a much larger audience. Asking members about their questions on a given topic helps steer your spin or angle on a story.

Ask For Resources

Sometimes reporters simply ask for books, experts or other resources on a specific topic. It might sound like cheating but why not use a hundred people's knowledge instead of just your own?

Ask About Experiences

The topics that journalists cover often capture a phenomenon that many readers have experienced themselves. Often the hard part is finding an interesting protagonist for your story, but with surveys that is a much easier task. Simply ask what experiences members have on your topic. When an intern at Krautreporter, Rebecca, wanted to write about municipality-level taxes, she asked our members what experiences they had with these taxes. One of the respondents to her question was a city councillor in a small municipality that provided her with an interesting case that she could use in her writing. Our other editor-in-chief Theresa once asked why people ate meat despite the fact that animals suffered for it. Her question triggered a range of responses that provided her with a plethora of people and experiences to write about.

Source The Crowd's Knowledge

A crowd will always hold more knowledge than the individual. With surveys, you are able to collect your audience's knowledge and pass it back to your members. This works really well with lists of advice. For instance, ask your members for their best ways of doing something — really, anything. Whether it is studying, coping with the heat or finding a job, writing up a fact checked list of the best submissions from your members is always a useful way to make the crowd's knowledge available to everyone.

Our [member-curated summer reading list of female authors](#) is a good example of crowdsourced knowledge.

Ask What Matters

Ask your audience what matters to them. One angle on what we do at Krautreporter is provide an information service. This is especially true on specific occasions, such as elections. However, it is not always clear what the relevant information is. Before the 2019 EU election, we were not sure about this either. We put together a survey to assess the five policy areas that members wanted to read about in relation to the candidates. When we had the results, our roadmap was clear: Write pieces on the five topics with the most votes and explain each party's position on them. We also made the consultation process transparent in a [piece](#) describing our process. This kind of approach ensures that you do the reporting that matters most to people. Another tool we use is an ongoing survey that asks for the things our members want us to explain. This survey is integrated into our member onboarding emails and feeds into a Slack channel. This gives us a constant finger on our audience's pulse and a flow of ideas from new members. Whether we pick up on a member's input or not depends on whether we think it is interesting to a wider audience.

SECTION FOUR:

Attracting New Members

Attracting new members essentially means winning their trust before membership. This was our core hypothesis when we started research for this project.

As it turned out, winning people's trust is an impossible thing to do when your content is exclusive. In fact, one of the most frequent statements in our member research interviews was that members had no way of knowing what exactly membership was about before they got a trial. They had to take a leap of faith and join to see our work for themselves. This has one important effect: The promise of membership with all its underpinnings is a hard sell. New readers don't yet trust us because they don't know what awaits them, but instead give us an advance in trust.

This means that when it comes to member acquisition, membership models are playing in a market with every other news organisation. If the promise of membership doesn't sell, per se, you need to think about what your value proposition is — what makes you stand out from the masses?

As a membership model, Krautreporter's value proposition is made up of the following points:

- Our specialisation
- Engaged journalism
- Independence

This gives us three strategies for attracting new members. These avenues can be used and played in different ways and channels, but are a good vehicle to think about how to advertise your outlet.



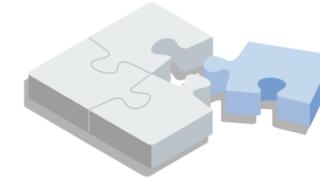
A Differentiating Mission

Our specialisation is explaining the bigger picture. We are the ones that will really go into depth on a topic, taking the time necessary to do so and explaining it so well that no questions are left unanswered. We explain the connections behind the story. If readers go on the hunt for a good explainer on a topic, they will stumble upon us and run into our paywall. Thus, our explainer pieces are a constant magnet for new members that convert members every week. One great example is Esther Göbel's [explainer on the Israel-Palestine conflict](#). Since the conflict is constantly burning and overwhelmingly complex, her explainer has become a Google hit. This gives us a constant flow of visitors and new members and we can always update and reuse our explainers on social media when a topic becomes newsworthy. For other memberships, the differentiating mission is different. You will need to make sure yours is clear. Your specialisation does not necessarily determine a specific marketing channel. However, it tells you what message to send and maybe even who to look for and where to look for them.



Let Engagement Sell

You might not be able to sell the promise of engagement, however, engagement itself might sell. If you get people to participate in your surveys or interact with your conversation starters on a topic they care about, you create an engagement situation that is valuable. If a pilot sees a survey that asks for their opinion or professional expertise, they will not only participate, but also want to know about the results published on your webpage. If teachers engage with your education reporter on social media, they will want to read their reporting. This way you introduce non-members to your outlet by engaging on a topic. At Krautreporter we have seen readers convert out of surveys and spikes of new memberships when our reporters received public attention with their field of expertise. However, attention within their field before membership requires visibility. Your reporters must visibly lead a civil debate on a topic and take ownership of it.



The Promise Of Independence

A large proportion of the members we interviewed in our user research were media experts. They are journalists, company spokespeople and users that consume a lot of news. For them, our membership model makes us stand out. When they heard about the membership business model, they liked it right away. They said for them the selling point was independence and in a membership model, independence is cemented in the foundation of your business. Being member-funded puts in place the accountability needed to create trust in your reporting. However, there are limits to this way of generating memberships. It only works for an audience that has a decent understanding of the media landscape. At the launch of your membership business, when you will likely receive greater media coverage, this is one of the aspects of your work to emphasise.

At Krautreporter we are building new open source tools to make surveys work as a tool for membership growth. Are you interested in that? Then leave your contact details and access our newest developments [here](#).