



- Founded 1976
- San Francisco based
- Investigative and in-depth reporting
- Budget ~ \$ 17 million
- Audience: 8 million across all platforms

Mother Jones

First, a little bit about Mother Jones

Mother
Jones

BIRDS



(Named after an early 20th century labor leader, Mary Harris Jones)



A word about me: Grew up in Germany and Italy, my father was a journalist, at the time I grew up, the memory of fascism was a live one, many of the adults around me had been perpetrators, victims, or looked the other way. That got me thinking early on about the fragility of democracy. But it didn't seem like a really live issue when I came to the United States in my 20s. The problem with America was not a fragile democracy, it was extending a robust democracy to everyone. And the press could not have been more vibrant. I fell in love with investigative journalism, which seemed the perfect corrective to injustice and abuse of power. But what I didn't realize was that the writing was already on the wall.

THE END OF NEWS?



Fast forward through the next 25 plus years (oh god I feel so old), and I don't need to tell you the details. The advertising business model has collapsed, more than half the journalists in the United States have lost their jobs, and it may not be a coincidence that the decline of news that began in the late 1990s has been accompanied by a rise in disinformation, propaganda, and now a serious threat to the fabric of democracy. So do we give up?



This brings me full circle. I never thought, when I came to the United States, that I would end up studying the history of democratic collapse in Europe to understand my adopted country. But here we are. In the United States, and in many of the countries represented in this room, we see leaders attacking the press even as they also manipulate and control it. But as a young marcher said January 2017: [

FEARLESS JOURNALISM NEEDS...



Until I leave. When I drive home, I wonder who I am becoming. I feel ashamed of my lack of self-control, my growing thirst for punishment and vengeance. I'm getting afraid of the expanding distance between the person I am at home and the one behind the wire. My glass of wine with dinner regularly becomes three. I hear the sounds of Ash unit as I fall asleep. I dream of monsters and men behind bars.

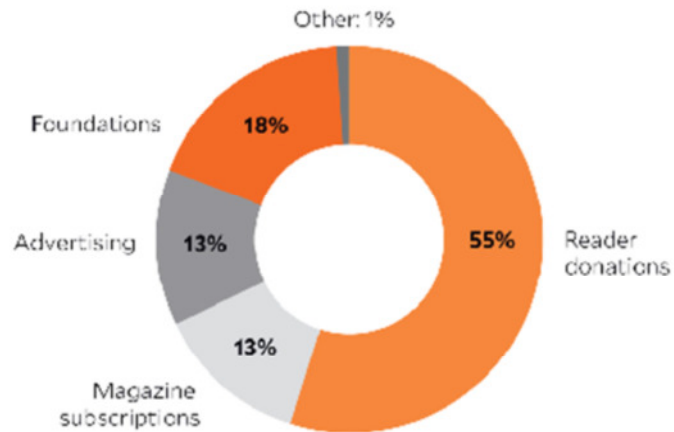


Mother Jones focuses on investigative and in-depth reporting—the stories that others won't touch. This story is a couple of years old but to me it really epitomizes the work that journalists can do. Our reporter got a job in a private for-profit prison and spent four months there, plus another year of research and factchecking. There was no other way to find out what happens in these places. Government couldn't do it because they awarded the contracts. A regular member of the public couldn't do it. But journalists also increasingly can't do it. Because there's no time. Who can spend 18 months on a project? How would you ever pay for that with any of the traditional business models for journalism?



A PUBLIC-SERVICE BUSINESS MODEL

2019: 16.2 million



That's why Mother Jones and organizations like it can't rely on those traditional models. Everyone in this room knows that you can't pay for investigative journalism with advertising. That's why Mother Jones was founded as a crowd-funded nonprofit back in 1976 (the crowdfunding happened in the mail) and why today two-thirds of our revenue comes from readers. Some pay for a subscription (we don't have a paywall, so this is a subscription to the print magazine, in print or digital form). Some give a donation.



MAKING THE CONNECTION

Mother Jones This is What's Missing From Journalism Right Now [f](#) [t](#)

SUBSCRIBE DONATE

This June, we published a big story—Shane Bauer's account of his four-month stint as a guard in a private prison. That's "big," as in XXL: 35,000 words long, or 5 to 10 times the length of a typical feature, plus charts, graphs, and companion pieces, not to mention six videos and a radio documentary.

And we had to take considerable financial risk. Conservatively, counting just the biggest chunks of staff time that went into it, the prison story cost roughly \$350,000. The banner ads that appeared on the article brought in \$5,000, give or take. Had we been really in your face with ads, we could have doubled or tripled that figure—but it would have been a pain for you, and still only a drop in the bucket for us.

In the wake of our investigation, lots of people offered thoughts similar to this, from *New Yorker* TV critic Emily Nussbaum:



emily nussbaum [@emilynussbaum](#)



Following

(Incidentally, that [@shane_bauer](#) [@MotherJones](#) undercover investigation is literally why journalism exists & why we have to pay for it.)

Reader support lets *Mojo* dig deep and uncover scoops like this.

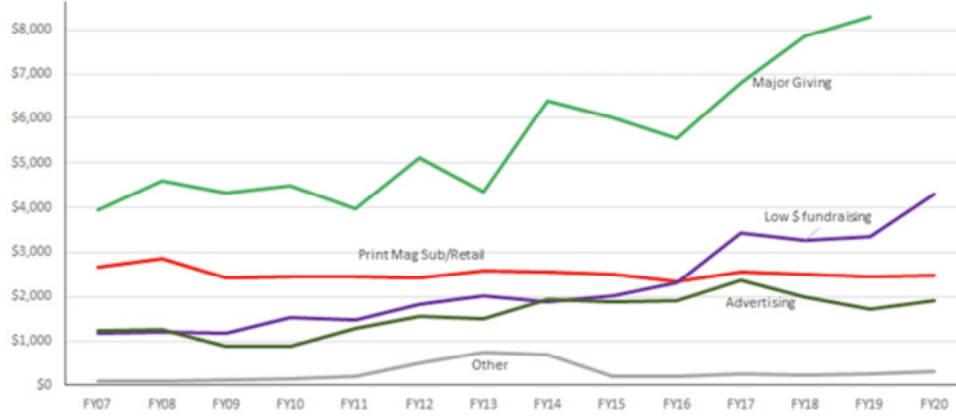
Help us do more of it with a tax-deductible donation today.

DONATE

We all know this, but do our audiences know it? No! And why not? Because we don't tell them! Why don't we tell them?? I remember when I wrote this column, to explain to our readers what it took to do that prison investigation. It went against everything we had ever done, and I worried: Should I really be specific? Wasn't this competitive information? What if people turned it against us somehow? Worse, what if they didn't care? But instead, they rallied.



IT'S WORKING



And making this connection really works! Here you see Mother Jones' source of revenue. The bottom three lines—the gray, dark green, and red—are all traditional publishing sources of revenue. The top two, major giving and low-dollar fundraising, are the things that were not historically part of how we paid for journalism. But now they are the mainstay for Mother Jones, and I believe that almost everywhere in the world, if we're going to have independent, investigative journalism, it's going to have to be sustained by the public it serves.



STRATEGY TAKEAWAYS

A culture of reader support

- Don't "monetize traffic"—earn support.
- It's journalism, not marketing
- Build a relationship
- Always be campaigning.
- Be nimble, react, and be opportunistic.
- Experiment publicly.
- Question conventional wisdom.

So what of this is duplicable? Here are a few key things we've learned:



STRATEGY TAKEAWAYS

It's journalism, not marketing

- Fundraising comes from the same values, quality, and voice as the reporting.
- Fact-based, independent journalism is the cause readers are supporting. ("Our budget" isn't).
- Tied to news cycle, specific stories that are uniquely yours.
- Substance and transparency over gimmicks—unpack the boilerplate.
- Online asks that don't look like ads.
- Try at least one new thing each quarter.



This isn't a one way street. When you open up to your readers, they will rally to support you, but it doesn't stop there. Now the readers are your boss. They are no longer "eyeballs" to be monetized. They are no longer the product that you sell. They are the reason why you exist, not just in an abstract sense of "we do this for the public interest" but in a very real sense of taking ownership. They want to be part of the conversation. This is a sample of responses we got from readers when we asked them how they were coping with Trump fatigue. But there are lots of different ways to do this. We asked our readers to contribute their stories of immigration troubles, and of the women's march, and of grappling with their carbon footprint.



BUILD A RELATIONSHIP

Do you have ideas we could dig into, or an experience of how corruption affects you personally? Fill out the form below, or if you'd rather, send us an email at talk@motherjones.com, or leave us a voicemail at (510) 519-MOJO. If you have sensitive information to share, you can securely [reach us here](#).

Let us know what you'd like us to dig into, or if there are ways you see corruption affecting your daily life.

0/5000


Your contact info

Name	Email address	City, State
Age	Pronoun	Phone number (Optional)

Sign me up for newsletters and other updates
 Please don't publish my name

Submit

We may share your response with our staff and publish a selection of stories that could include your name, age, and location. We respect your privacy. Your email address will not be published and by providing it, you agree to let us contact you regarding your response.

 **notifer** APR 2:00 PM
[Click here to go to your Hearken dashboard!](#)

Question

I'm in Georgia and have been fed up with corruption for decades. I would like to see investigations into the following state and national issues.

1. State Real Estate Boards: Here the members are all RE pro's with a "consumer rep" who's a lawyer who represents the HOA/COA industry. In GA, a lawsuit against the Management Company is a suit against the Board of Directors of the HOA. The defense of the BOD is charged to the homeowners/condo owners hence, they are powerless to remove corrupt BOD's and their partnering (often owned) Management Companies. Other states surely operate under the same rules. Search: Leon Benzer and read all you can.
2. State and local Boards of Education: Fraud, corruption and outright negligence costing the Country billions. All states have written policies to comply with Federal rules in order to receive funding. That's as far as it goes! Pick any from the list:

There are plenty of tools that can help us do this. We use Hearken, but a Google Form, which is simple and free, will also do. Whatever the tool, if readers are our bosses and supporters, we owe them accountability and an interest in their needs, values, and suggestions.



RESOURCES

- INN.org = Institute for Nonprofit News. 200 + nonprofit news orgs; startup guide
- membershipuzzle.org; research effort studying reader-supported news orgs around the world
- Single Subject News Project Shorenstein Center/Harvard
- YOURS?

The screenshot shows a webpage from 'Learn' with the title 'Guides and Resources for Nonprofit News Organizations'. The main content area is titled 'The Startup Guide' and 'Starting and Sustaining Operations'. Below this is a section titled 'PRACTICAL TIPS FROM 19 NEWS SITES AROUND THE WORLD FOR HOW TO INVOLVE YOUR SUPPORTERS IN THE WORK MAKING JOURNALISM MORE MEMBERFUL'. At the bottom of the screenshot is a bar chart titled 'EARLY COHORT RESULTS' showing organic traffic measured from Sept 2017 compared to May 1, 2018 - all sites - (average). The chart shows five groups with the following percentages: Group 1 (28%), Group 2 (56%), Group 3 (29%), Group 4 (57%), and Group 5 (58%).

Group	Percentage
GROUP 1	28%
GROUP 2	56%
GROUP 3	29%
GROUP 4	57%
GROUP 5	58%

Traffic Jam: SEO is driving clicks to these Nonprofit Newsrooms

The title of this panel is “What we can learn from each other.” We learn from other nonprofits all the time—for me as CEO, every day is a reporting project. What can I learn from someone else? So let’s gather some resources.



THANK YOU!

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