

## AD-BLOCKERS, TRACKERS, AND HOW READERS ARE ENCOURAGED TO OBSTRUCT DIGITAL PUBLICATIONS' REVENUES

ANDREI STIPIUC<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** Online publications that use outdated web platforms still support themselves financially through old-fashioned ad promotion methods inserted into the web pages of press articles. While many readers harm the publications they read by blocking advertisements or using Read It Later technologies (in most browsers) or content curation and bookmarking tools (Pocket, Feedly, Instapaper), which involve the extraction of the text for "clean" reading formats or stripping the extra content from the site, the Romanian media landscape bursts with publications which do not fully understand the effects of blocking advertisements on the web and the impact on revenues from old forms of advertising such as pay per click, per view, per acquisition, or ad-words. Or, if they are doing it, they are exposing the users to some data privacy risks. In the first part of the article, we will try to outline how these technologies and applications offer readers a less distracted reading experience, as well as how much online advertising revenues on which newsrooms depend upon were affected. In the second part, we will try to illustrate the ways in which the media could convince the audience to abandon the blocking software or to propose and adopt, if they have not already done so, new financing models: reader revenue (by partial or full subscriptions) or CPM (cost per thousand impressions) partnerships. The study contains a brief recording and analysis of the number of ads and online trackers present in the homepages and throughout the articles of 5 mainstream media publications and 4 unaffiliated publications, as reported by Ad-Blocker Plus and Disconnect Mozilla Firefox add-ons.

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<sup>1</sup> *Facultatea de Litere, Catedra de Jurnalism și Științe ale Comunicării, Universitatea „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, Iași. Email: andrei.stipiuc@gmail.com.*

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## 1. Introduction. Ads, revenues and the media background

“I run a browser plugin called Noscript, and another called Ghostery. I don’t recommend them, not because they aren’t good, but because they turn web browsing into a part time job. No one has time to deal with these things. In order to not be tracked, you have to constantly be paying attention to what every page is doing.” (Quinn Norton, 2015)

# Forbes

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Please help us continue to provide you with free, quality journalism by turning off your ad blocker on our site.

For instructions on how to disable your ad blocker, [click here](#).

**I've Turned Off My Ad Blocker**

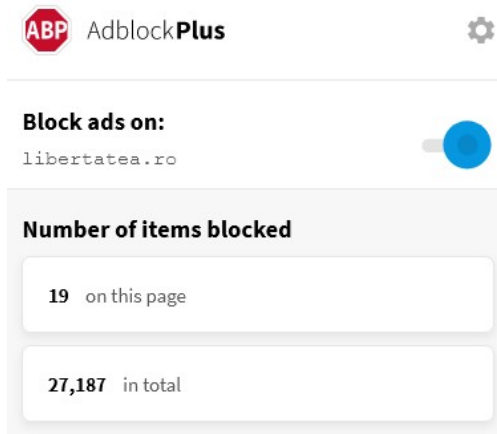
See our [Privacy Policy](#).

**Fig. 1.** Forbes ad-blocking detection message

Advertising initially transposed in online medium in the same forms that could be found in the analogue space: static messages, placed as banners on web pages, for a certain period. To track the number of readers that have been getting their messages, agencies were basing their statistics depending on this rudimentary way of doing advertising. Online ads were sold similarly to the ones in print, depending on some criteria like the size of the ad and the estimated number of unique visitors of the site or webpage. Between 2000 and 2010, the web designers were coming from traditional media and were treating sites like digital brochures with covers (most of the times very animated),

content areas and template pages. The continuous development of the digital space led to the most profitable and influent web advertising: Pay-per-Click (PPC). This has developed a commercial model by classifying the content, which was a way of measuring and calculating budgets for advertising agencies. Additionally, the formula contained storage files of individual statistics on the use of web pages (cookies), which have been utilized to identify users that accessed certain sites and that helped companies move their ads from one web page to another. Cookies offered a measuring instrument for online climate, on behalf of the advertising agencies.

The banner can be considered the most rudimentary form of advertising. It has been transposed in online in the early 90s, when the web page owners were seeking for additional incomes to support their content. Online service provider Prodigy, displayed on the lower part of the screen banners promoting Sears products (Schmid, 2017). The first online banner was sponsored by a law firm in Silicon Valley, in 1993. At present, the simplicity of this type of advertising represents a weak point, as, even though users would see the banner, they are so used to it that they would not even click it or even block it from the very beginning using an ad-block technology.



**Fig. 2.** Blocked ads on the website of Libertatea publication

Another traditional source of income is sponsorship. An advertising agent can sponsor a whole site or just a certain page or column. Sponsorship is usually used to bring in a new product, for a certain time period, so that most likely users will engage more than in the case of rotating ads. This type of advertising comes as an advantage for advertisers, as the audience perceives it as a partnership between the sponsor and the website so that the product benefits of the same credibility as the website on which the advertising runs. For the editor, the main perk is the financial stability that comes from the sponsorship.

The newsletter, tested as a form of advertising in 1987 by Garry Thuerk (Pavlidou, 2019), created antibodies to spam messages among e-mail users. Spam messages have become industrial operations, especially because the authors use many computers connected via botnet (a computer network controlled by a central one) to send spam remotely. Nowadays, newsletters sent via e-mail have turned this service into a „killer app” and have created, in the information congestion, the concept of news curator journalist (Gupta, 2014).

Pay-Per-Click (PPC) is, perhaps, one of the most advantageous forms of traditional advertising. Generally, advertising agencies pay for each click on the ad. Most of the times, these ads are links displayed as part of search result pages. Google AdSense is the most popular system based on this methodology. Equally, we can also include here Google AdWords and Yahoo Search Marketing services.

Affiliated advertising programs are based on a concept where agencies are rewarding websites for any added benefit. Technically, web pages mark the broadcasted ads with a code that helps the advertiser identify from which website the user came. A good example of this type of ads is Amazon, that provides links to products from the same page. The ones that benefit are the editors that earn a few percent of each sale generated. Unfortunately, affiliated advertising works only for big websites, where transaction volumes are considerable.

Pop-ups are, generally, new windows that open from the browser on top of the one already opened by the user. Their main purpose is to attract traffic or to collect e-mails. They are normally generated using scripting languages such as JavaScript, and can take advantage of the

browser's security breaches. A more subversive version is the pop-under, a window that opens in the same way only that it is hidden under the active window, which makes it difficult to identify the website that opened it. Pop-ups and other related technologies are not recommended by the web standards and consortia that regulate the web space.

Trackers are web technologies that secretly collect data on users through the web page on which the material accessed by the reader is located. Trackers contribute to *invasive surveillance* and seriously breach the ethics principles of journalism, especially in the case of self-funded journalism, financed by the readers who are paying for the quality and transparency of the content and practices. Trackers also congest communication and makes it difficult to access the site and loading time of the media material (Lembert; Pickard, 2015).

As journalism is going through major changes, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where education and tradition did not pave the way for the digital era, journalists managed to communicate and earn the audience trust in just a few places. In addition, even if there is an abundance of information, subjects dwelled by the media nowadays are of inferior quality and do not fully meet the needs of the public or the principles that journalism follows (Cook, 2016: 5-6). Also, in the absence of detailed journalism and with the crisis of journalist specialized in certain areas, the subjects that are being addressed are mainly general. Not being able to understand modern formats of reading, due to the same financial crisis that mass media is experiencing, or the lack of interactivity of the web pages, that are more and more accessed through smartphones, are other pain points (Tulio, 2013: 11). Another issue encountered in today's media is the affiliation to political groups. The political partisanship is radically separating the audience. Printed media and televisions are highly dominated by politicized information, random opinions and weak social, political and economic debates. In this equation, emerges also the economic influence of social media, a field that is still being explored in countries like Romania, where the audience uses social media not only in interpersonal relations, but also to read the most important headlines, which they then share.

In this climate, old editorships are learning how a certain message has been received, observe the reaction of the audience and institutions and get to decide whether they can intervene in a way that is adequate for each situation. From editorial offices where inertia was too high, or from those where a lot of restructuring took place, emerged a wave of journalists, publishers and supporters that laid the foundations of new editorships that are politically unaffiliated and that have found means of financing, producing what it has also created in Romania an important segment of independent journalism.

Professionals from advertising and informational industry are aware of the decrease in the value of the „cost per thousand impressions” (CPM). Traditional media business models have reached a dead end. Readers are on the move in online and they want a smooth and fast way to information. The transition from print to web was fast and needy, and did not have the expected results on the advertising market. Raju Narisetti, chief editor of *Washington Post*, estimated before the ad-blockers crisis an annual loss of around ten million dollars, cause by this transition (Narisetti, 2011).

## **2. Ad-Blockers, trackers, ad-blocking related techs and how they obstruct digital publications’ revenues**

Like beta-blockers, ad-blockers keep at a low pace the pulse of revenue but, as opposed to the pharmaceutical drugs, they increase the hypertension of/or between media publishers and advertisers. Not as much as in 2016 when Ad-blockers created hysteria but it still does. The old-fashioned funding model of advertising was initiated by the press, and then it pierced the web. For a more pleasant online experience, users started using Ad-blocking and Read Later technologies, and then a hot war spreaded among readers, journalists and advertisers.

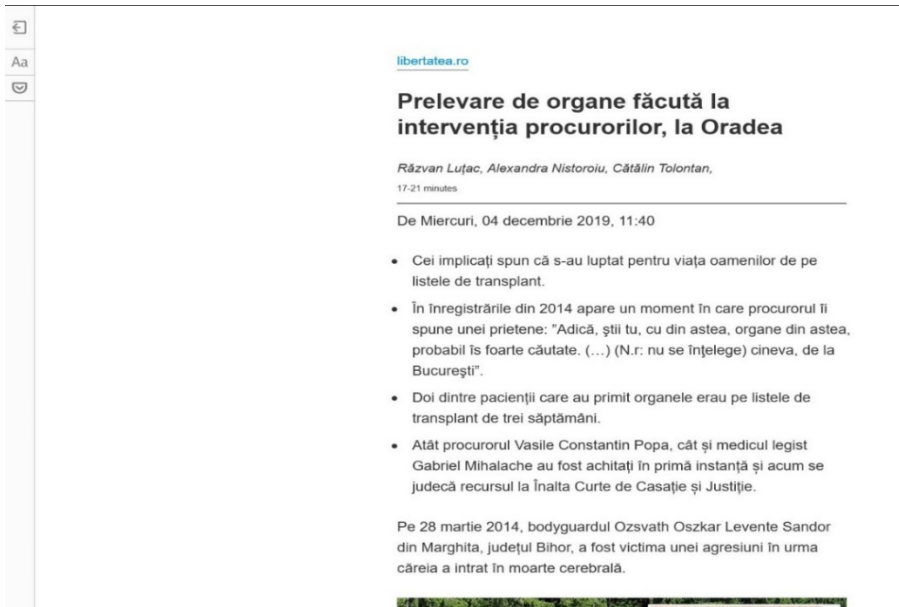


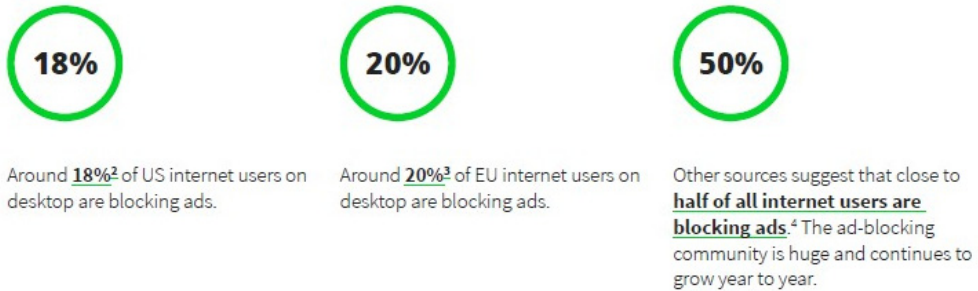
Fig. 3. Reader View mode in Mozilla Firefox

In the US, the CEO of the Interactive Advertising Bureau claimed that “ad-blocking is robbery” (Malyarov, 2015). The Eyeo & PageFair Ad-blocking report for 2018 highlights the global growth of ad-blockers and the financial impact it has on the online advertising industry growing every year.



Fig. 4. The Eyeo & PageFair Ad-blocking report for 2018 (I)

Ad-blocking is not such a harsh talking point in the digital media industry anymore, but it continues to fault traditional means of funding. A lot of publishers and advertising agents are seeking refuge. Just that the blocking software, Adblock, is a very popular one, as the numbers of users that utilize plugins and ad-blockers is continuously growing. Page Fair estimates that the total count of customers that use various plugins to block ads is around 150 million, most of them being educated young people that know how to use computers.



**Fig. 5.** The Eyeo & PageFair Ad-blocking report for 2018 (II)

As per the PageFair annual report on the usage of ad-blockers, software programs that block ads determined a loss of 5,8 billion dollars in the US in 2014, 10,7 billion in 2015, while for 2016 a total loss of about 20,3 billion, with an estimated global cost of 41,4 billion, has been confirmed. According to the same report, gaming sites users are more inclined to use Adblock, whilst the less tempted ones are the users that access websites on health, government or charity (Eyeo & PageFair, 2015; 2016; 2018).

„Ad blocking is a serious threat for the entire advertising industry”, stated David Frew, senior manager of Internet Advertising Bureau. It is essential for Internet users to understand that online content is not free of charge, and in this matter, it is interesting to take a closer look at Facebook, which makes use of the personal data of users not by chance (Wall, 2015). As stated by Brian O’Kelley, executive director of AppNexus, a digital technology company, websites are to blame for the users’ reaction of using ad-blocking programs, because they became too greedy when displaying banners on about 50% of the screen of a homepage.



## AD-BLOCKERS, TRACKERS, AND HOW READERS ARE ENCOURAGED TO OBSTRUCT DIGITAL PUBLICATIONS' REVENUES

In Romania, an ad-blocking program can be found on approximately 14% of the browsers, and a recent estimation shows 18% of the browsers, according to a study conducted by TailWind and IAB Romania (Tail-Wind; IAB, 2017). The same study shows the fact that the highest tolerance rate is registered in the case of in-stream ads, retargeting or interstitial.

Less Ads through subscriptions can be a luxury for those who choose to buy ad-blockers so that their webpages load faster. Digital technologies impact not only the forms of distribution of content but also its marketing models, monetization and financing, as well as strategies and alliances that media organizations must adapt to new competitive scenarios. *Washington Post* was among the first publications to install a block wall in a fight of blocking the blockers.

Ad-blockers are applications (plugins or browser extensions) that remove or alter advertising content on a webpage. While a webpage is loading, the ad-blocker looks at the site's scripts and compares them against a list of sites and scripts it was built to block. If it finds any, it blocks them. In the form of browser extensions (for the 2 powerful ones, Mozilla Firefox and Chrome), software and mobile applications (Reader Mode, Feedly, Pocket, Instapaper, Send to Kindle), ad-blockers identify and remove common display ads for individual users.

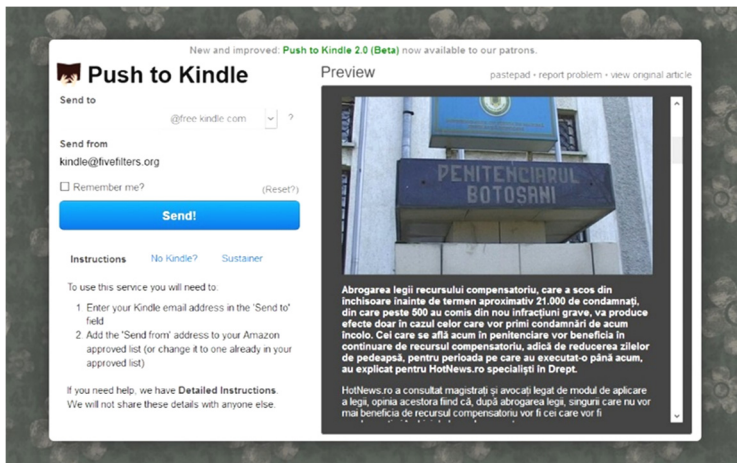


Fig. 6. Send to Kindle "stripping" model plugin

If we are to take into account the schism in the media industry, it is mandatory to impose a business model meant to help media agencies produce quality journalism, by keeping their independence and equidistance from public institutions or political spheres at the same time. Digital reality cannot be ignored anymore especially in the countries that have a lot to catch up in this technology race. While digital journalism production and distribution start to be acknowledged, the ways of making money out of digital journalism are yet to be well understood (Mele, 2016). A possible alternative has been already suggested at the end of 2011 by Jeff Jarvis, which, related to *The New York Time's* decision of introducing Paywall, proposed not to sanction loyal readers with a fee, but to reward them through an inverted paywall system. More clearly, it was suggested to offer an initial bonus that, in time, was spend on reading articles or, content rewards if users were accessing ads, sharing materials through social media or providing personal data, as well as rewards for increased activity in the comments section.

Not only traditional media was struck by the public's absenteeism, but also informative websites and apps. The old distribution control model, where most of the users were visiting a homepage or app connected to a single media organization, will continue to lose ground to supersharing as readers distribute materials among them.

In this new business model, the partnership between journalists and the audience is essential. No news will be spared by supersharing.

*Le Monde's* tactic was to actively discuss their strategies both internally and externally, involving their audience and advertisers, every three months. This ensured that all parties are being informed about any changes that might occur. To transfer this concept in offline, the company organized in 2014 *Le Monde Festival*, where readers could pay to meet journalists, to engage in discussions, to attend shows, meetings and workshops. A year ago, *Le Monde* launched an app that offers a morning limited edition, at 7 am, as opposed to their long tradition of afternoon publication (Phys.org, 2015). Dreyfus's concept was that a company needs to reinvent itself every two, three months in order to survive on the market.

### 3. Romanian Media Short Case Study

In order to better understand ads and trackers within the Romanian media landscape, we first monitored the homepages of 5 online mainstream publications and 4 unaffiliated (independent) publications. In the second phase, we monitored one stand-alone material from each of the above publications and illustrated the ads behavior in connection to the format of the articles. The number of trackers and peculiarities were catalogued from the same individual articles, as reported by Adblock Plus and Disconnect for Mozilla Firefox, one of the safest and most transparent web browsers. From the mainstream monitored publications we recall the following: Adevărul, Evenimentul Zilei, Libertatea, Newsweek and Hotnews, and from the independent ones: PressOne, Recorder, Casa Jurnalistului and Rise Project. The list of articles can be found in the *References* section, and the captures in a link at the end of the list.

Disconnect is a browser extension used in most of the desktop or mobile operating systems, developed by Brian Kennish and Casey Oppenheim (Disconnect, 2019). Disconnect is trying to identify and stop online trackers from webpages, that are running without the user's consent. As the matter of fact, all trackers run without user consent. In its history, there have been many arguments between Disconnect and Google on the fact that, in reality, blocking trackers is affecting the ad-based revenue system, endorsed by Google for companies with which they had agreements.

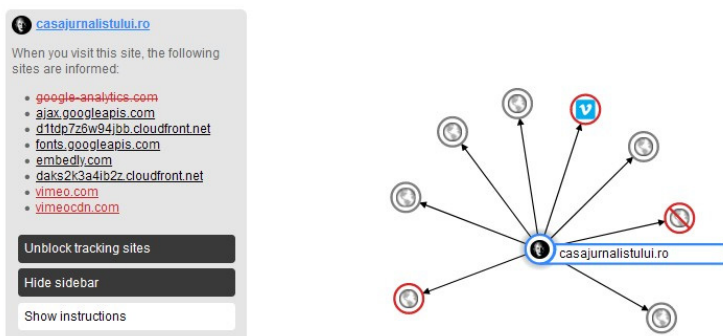


Fig. 7. The Disconnect Plugin on Casa Jurnalistului Article

Developed by Wladimir Palant, Adblock Plus is the most popular add-on, blocking certain forms of advertising on websites. Adblock Plus is also available for most of the operating systems, desktop or mobile. The extension operates based on filters connected to an open access database, to which around 30.000 users contribute to maintain and care (AdblockPlus, 2019).

In 2011, the extension introduced the Acceptable Ads Initiative, which allows advertisers and websites that serve non-annoying ads apply to get their ads whitelisted. The Acceptable Ads guidelines suggest, among other rules and regulations, giving back to the user the content control and also creating innovative user and web friendly ads (Acceptable Ads Initiative, 2019).

Most of the ad-blocking software tries to identify in different ways the communications between the browser and the ads servers and to stop a series of HTML elements from loading or being displayed to the final user. From a technological perspective, the Energy Consumption of mobile web browsing drains the battery faster (Visser, 2016), while, from a legal perspective, we need to consider that in some countries it is considered fraud and it became prone to legislation. If we are to talk about trackers, even if we consider mainstream publications or unaffiliated journalism platforms, in most cases, you, as a reader, already pay with your privacy, because every move is watched and saved by a plethora of trackers: Chartbeat, Google, Nielsen, Moat.

Mainstream Media	Article Blocked Ads	Articol Trackers
Newsweek	15	15
Libertatea	13	63
Hotnews	6	23
Adevărul	4	20
Evenimentul Zilei	1	13

Independent Media	Article Blocked Ads	Articol Trackers
Recorder	9	20
Rise Project	0	14
Casa Jurnalistului	0	8
PressOne	0	8

Fig. 8. Ads statistics and trackers in Romanian media

All the monitored Romanian publications, mainstream or independent, contain trackers.

## Mainstream Media Article Trackers

Note: One Article Sample.



Reported by Disconnect.

Source: A. Stipiuc • Created with Datawrapper

**Fig. 9.** Trackers in mainstream Romanian publications

The number of trackers can seem surprising in the case of publications that get their funding exclusively or partially from readers' donations. The majority of trackers run as an API (application program interface) subset for other content distribution platforms (Google YouTube, Facebook Instagram, Vimeo, Medium) and social media (Facebook).

## Independent Media Article Trackers

Note: One Article Sample.



Reported by Disconnect.

Source: A. Stipiuc • Embed • Created with Datawrapper

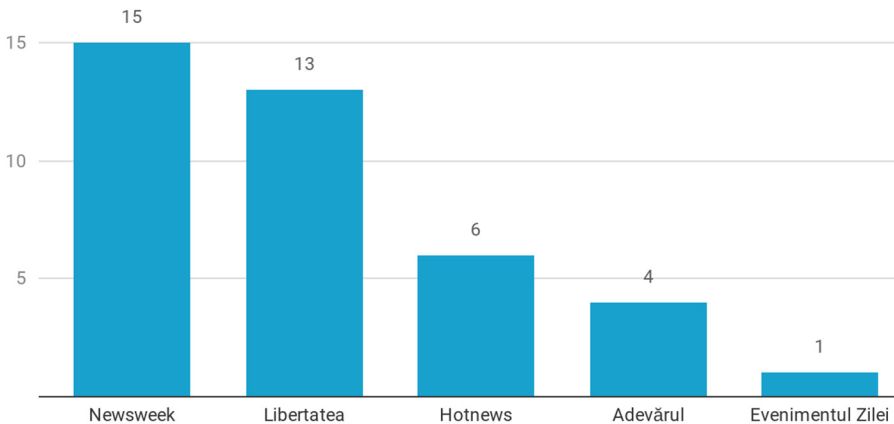
**Fig. 10.** Trackers in independent Romanian publications

Others are joined in API subsets with various web platforms for journalists (fonts, cloud storage etc.), but not all of them. There is also a series of trackers that connect media content to certain companies with which you cannot establish a fast, transparent link: Amazon CloudFront, for, most probably, affiliated advertising programs, AdOcean or Gemius (companies that “provide advertising or advertising-related services such as data collection, behavioral analysis or retargeting”) (Whotracks.me, 2019). As an important note, the trackers reported by Disconnect also contain incomplete site errors / roots, and incomplete URLs (Me and My Shadow, 2019).

Out of the mainstream publications monitored, the highest number of trackers was reported on Libertatea website.

### Mainstream Media Article Ads

Note: One sample article.



Reported by Ad-Blocker Plus.

Source: A. Stipuc • Created with Datawrapper

**Fig. 11.** Ads in mainstream Romanian publications

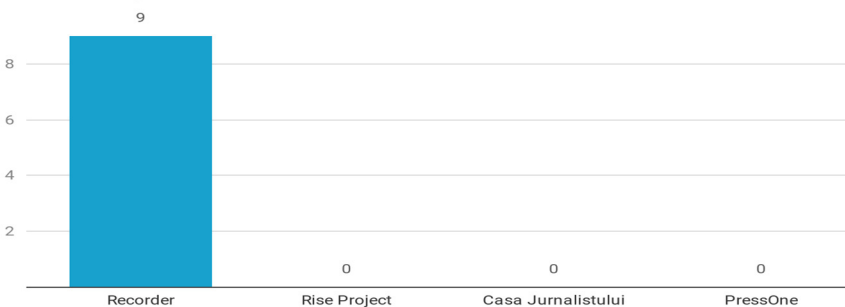
All the mainstream publications contain a significant number of ads; however, AdBlock Plus only reported ads in the Recorder material from the independent publications monitored.

In a short interview, the Recorder editorship declared that

"We never set up pay per view or pay per click. Our YouTube incomes are under 1000 euros per month. We generate profit from our success by building awareness about the support through donations we rely on from our viewers and until now, it worked. About 40% of our earnings come from donations and the rest from branded or advertising content - all the numbers can be found in our last online report. On Facebook, we only boost branded content posts or native ads when we need to meet the number of views we agreed on with the companies that contracted our services and we did not have an organic reach for that target. But most times we drive traffic to our site without paid distribution - if the story is good, even if we announce it as branded content, our viewers want to see it, without us needing to promote it. Some of our branded content materials have thousands of organic shares and thousands of comments on YouTube, especially our editorial pieces. The trackers we use are the ones that provide site analytics to measure traffic, cookies, Facebook share buttons, adservers for ads and YouTube, embedded in our site. As far as we aware of, Gemius tracker only collect basic data such as ip addresses, browsing history, searches, we don't use third-party web trackers." (Recorder, 11.12.2019)

### Independent Media Article Ads

Note: One sample article.



Reported by Ad-Blocker Plus.

Source: A. Stipiuć • Created with Datawrapper

**Fig. 12.** Ads on/in independent Romanian publications

#### **4. Instead of conclusions - What can be done?**

As they are stopping ads from displaying, ad-block technologies sabotage the traditional business model of digital journalism, that continues to rely on revenues from ads or from the number of clicks on ads links. The blocking model used by ad-blockers only makes the relationship between journalists and their readers worse. Besides, because ad-tech business is tracking online movement and throwing ads at readers, companies care even less about the quality of the journalist or of the media formats. Hence, advertisers will continue this defective policy of financing only the publications that manage to throw as many ads as possible in the readers' direction.

Although advertising blocking programs have been in place for more than ten years, they have become popular among users starting 2012. This has led to annual widening losses and media institutions are increasingly trying to persuade readers to disable the software when visiting their websites or pay a monthly subscription to view journalistic content without advertising. It is certain that the traditional business model is no longer functional. Although media institutions can still make money traditionally, they lose when they try to convert content. However, new companies are condemned to change how they respond to readers' behavior if they want to survive. Probably the most plausible business model is a formula of contributing key points:

- Native-advertising & advertising in general (no matter the form and how it is delivered) but truly more creative: i.e. Recorder advertorials;
  - Better Ads (Lecompte, 2015);
  - Sales & subscriptions for delivered content;
  - Value added services & products: the goodies (i.e. journalism books, special events etc.);
  - Studies of young adults' interaction with online news and advertising in the online Romanian mainstream (local & national)



landscape and Interviewing business (f)actors for real numbers to contribute to The Ad Blocking Report, regarding the forecast of the future of the online journalism advertising industry;

- Promoting the Adblock Initiative and registering as many companies as possible on the whitelist.

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