BEST INNOVATION IN NEWSROOM TRANSFORMATION

Transparency portal: How we work in VG

URL: www.vg.no/informasjon

WHY NOMINATE?
VG, Norway’s most read newspaper, has been at the forefront of transparency for several years. In 2022, the newspaper took a big step into the future media landscape through the launch of a transparency portal. The innovation, a transparency portal, is a ground-breaking concept, and raises the bar for the internal assessments. It creates transparency on a new level on the core of our content, to the benefit of users - especially young born digital users with totally different expectations from news providers.

HOW WE HAVE WORKED:
Claims about fake news, freedom of the press under heavy pressure in several countries, artificial intelligence and young people with a refusal to receive news are just some of the challenges the media face. In order to fulfil the main ambition of being Norwegians's preferred news destination, VG launched an internal project looking for solutions to “create the next generation of news experiences” with key people across the media house to specify what action should be taken.
As the basis for the project, we used an internal report from Schibsted News Media's eight trends that will affect the media in the coming years. One of these: That publicists will face increased pressure around trust and from value-driven consumers.

VG - and most newspapers - has traditionally apparently taken it for granted that users understand the media industry and press ethics as well as journalists and editors. The interaction with users through the comment fields, as well as social media channels such as Snapchat, tells a completely different story. User interviews emphasise the same: Many, especially young people, simply do not understand either news reporting or the assessments that are made. And it destroys trust.

A selection of questions VG received in the live studio Nyhetsdøgnet in October 2021 exemplifies the need for more explanations in our coverage:

"Why don't you write that the arrested man is a convert to Islam?"
Why is there no comment field under the review of Jagland's book?
Why do you leave out that those convicted of the kidnapping and violence against a Norwegian 14-year-old are from Albania?
So... a murderer is found dead? Why are you posting a picture of him?

These, and hundreds of other questions every year, are being left unanswered. Only in exceptional cases - and preferably accompanied by a picture of a chief editor pictured with his arms crossed - have we previously explained our editorial choices. It has mainly occurred in large disclosures, when we are asked to do so in the industry media or in connection with external complaints.

CREATIVITY & ORIGINALITY: We decided to build a solution based on existing transparency initiatives in the media house:

In autumn 2019, we launched the correction log. There have been over 1,500 corrections registered since then. In 2020 came the overview where external profiles on VG contracts' bindings are continuously updated. In the same period, we also
created the regulations for the employees of VG that we have left open. The same 
applies to the rules for what is allowed in the comment fields.

In the transparency portal How we work in VG, new elements were offered:

- VG’s editorial assessments in selected stories made available to our users.
- Frequently asked questions about whether VG’s journalism was made available with thorough answers.
- Every conclusion from code of ethics complaints where VG has been part of the Norwegian press council (PFU) made visible.
- Press releases and other information from VG, which is not journalism, were labelled and systematised.

A collaboration between the Editorial Development department and VG’s developers and designers created the technical solution on editorial assessments. Automation between enrollment in the newly created internal admin makes the content from the portal available in the CMS within seconds so that it can be pulled into relevant articles by journalists.

Internally, we put criteria for content that requires explanations to the reader.
- Identification or anonymisation in a criminal case.
- When using anonymous sources - especially where it can be perceived as controversial.
- When publishing particularly graphic images or videos.
- When publishing something we would not normally mention, e.g. suicide.
- When publishing secret documents/information.
- New editorial policy, for example a change in spelling from Kyiv to Kyiv.
- Assessments we make which from experience are perceived as controversial.
and can create debate, or where "what is the matter" appears obvious, or where we ourselves have had doubts about the publication.

- When VG as the sender requires further transparency (cases about other newspapers, cases about former employees, cases about Schibsted/ourselves, objects VG sponsors etc.)
- Where an editorial assessment can add color to the total coverage - everything we report as editorial assessments must not be from big projects.

The most important thing for the user is that these editorial assessments are made available in the same article / area as the original content.

It is, for example, in the case of TV host Fredrik Solvang's acquaintances that the majority of those engaged by him actually are - and then VG's explanation of how it intends to help the reader.

The solution in practice is shown below in the original article, with the title “Why we are covering Fredrik Solvang’s relations”.

Translation: That is why Fredrik Solvang’s relationships are mentioned: With the job of presenter for Debatten on NRK, Fredrik Solvang is the premise provider for one of the country’s most important debate arenas. Solvang’s friendship with people who...
hold power in society, and how NRK handles the relationships internally and towards the viewers, VG believes is of public interest.

In addition to these editorial assessments following the cases, we collect all the assessments in a separate feed in the transparency portal, in the same way as in the corrections log here:

Some issues are general and do not necessarily fit into individual articles. The need for answers to these issues is equally important. That's why VG's editors created a question and answer database of hypothetical issues, with experimentally in-depth answers to questions we know many people wonder about. Like here, where we raise the question: *Do you publish everything you know about a story?*
Translation:
Often the answer is no. Our goal is always to provide our users with the best possible insight. But no cases are the same, and we must always consider what is in the public interest. For example, we often omit information about children and vulnerable people. Even in big news stories of great public interest, we are careful about passing on details from people's private lives. It is not enough that the information is correct. It also happens that factual information is not included because it is not considered to have journalistic relevance.

Journalism in VG must also be balanced, and we must have sufficient documentation to publish information.

These answers are now actively used in the dialogue with users who ask questions by email or in the news studio - or are included in articles where applicable.

Press releases from VG, which earlier often only sent to other newspapers, are now published in a separate newsroom in our CMS, labelled as information - not editorial content - from VG. This secures control of this content, and also gives our readers clear information which separates press releases from editorial news content.

Under you see a screenshot from our feed from 2022:
In total, we point out to 14 different landing pages in the transparency portal: The link to “How we work in VG” is always in the bottom menu on www.vg.no.

**RESULTS AND ENTHUSIASM:** From the launch the 18. th of October and until the New Year, VG published more than 30 editorial assessments, and it’s now a natural part of our daily publishing strategy. It has changed the thinking in the newsroom, from introvert to extrovert. VG has received a lot of coverage in media websites, and invited the project to hold a keynote session in the Norwegian Editor’s Association annual meeting in Oslo.

Our YouGov report shows a positive development on a young audience’s “trust” on VG the last months of 2022:
(Answers in the category 15-24 years on question: Which of the following publications publish news you trust?)

CONCLUSION:

By aiming higher than other publicists nationally and internationally, we risk negative attention in the industry and among readers if we do not explain choices. But we are convinced that the introduction of the transparency regime has been "the right thing to do" - and that it increases trust in editor-controlled media.

Norwegian Freedom of Expression Commission presented its report on 25 August 2022, where the subject transparency in the media was mentioned (chapter 12, point 5,7):

*The media's trust in society depends on them living up to their own ideals of compliance, independence and ethically responsible decisions. Here, the media naturally have the responsibility themselves for meeting the public's expectations. The commission will highlight transparency as a key factor and recommends that the media show even greater transparency about editorial choices, priorities, fact checks and uncertainty.*

*We believe VG's transparency portal creates transparency and increased trust.*