

## Publisher Good Practice Principles for Content Licensing and Syndication

### Introduction

The AOP has established Good Practice Principles ('the Principles') to guide its publisher member companies in content licensing and syndication. These Principles provide guidance to help publishers develop the best strategy for their businesses as well as to navigate negotiations with partners.

Given the diversity in publisher size, industry focus, and commercial strategy, each company's approach to licensing and syndication will vary. There is no universal strategy, and each publisher will have a range of agreements with different partners, with each offering distinct benefits and risks.

**As such, these Principles are advisory only: they do not prescribe a specific approach or constitute legal advice. They are designed to inform publisher teams and their decision-making. Publishers are free to adopt or disregard any part of this guidance when evaluating the opportunities and risks of their strategy.**

### Content Licensing & Syndication

Content licensing and syndication is a key component of many publishers' commercial strategies. It involves republishing original content across third-party platforms, leveraging it to expand reach and achieve business objectives through mutually beneficial partnerships. At the same time technical and legal considerations must be carefully managed to protect the original content's value. Content is typically delivered via RSS feeds or APIs for automated ingestion and display. The primary objective is to increase reach, drive traffic, and maximise ad revenue for all parties involved.

According to the [Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023](#), the vast majority (85%) of UK publishers leverage content licensing and syndication as a key part of their distribution strategies. Industry reports suggest that programmatic licensing and syndication make up around 40% of these partnerships. The UK digital publishing market is projected to grow significantly in the next few years, with AI-driven syndication tools becoming widespread. However, [75%](#) of publishers express concerns over AI threatening content quality.

While content licensing and syndication delivers benefits, such as boosting ad yield, expanding audience reach and helping to monetise journalism, it also introduces risks for the publisher. A major challenge reported by UK publishers is licensed or syndicated content outranking original sources in search results, diverting valuable traffic and revenue away from content creators. This underscores the need for publishers to carefully weigh the trade-offs when shaping their strategies.

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## Good Practice Principles

The AOP believes the following Principles constitute good practice to help publishers with their content licensing and syndication strategies:

### **1. Designate a Content Licensing and Syndication Lead:**

To streamline content syndication efforts, publishers should consider designating a Content Licensing and Syndication Lead (CLSL), an internal employee responsible for overseeing licensing and syndication strategy as well as partnerships. This dedicated role would serve as the central point of contact, coordinating across teams - including legal, commercial, and editorial - to ensure alignment on strategy. The CLSL would also champion good practice, educating internal stakeholders on optimal syndication approaches, while balancing revenue opportunities with brand and audience protection.

By centralising oversight, publishers can mitigate risks, maintain consistency in partner negotiations, and maximise the value of their licensed or syndicated content.

### **2. Optimise Content Selection:**

Not all publisher content is equally suited for licensing or syndication. To maximise reach and engagement while preserving SEO value, publishers should strategically select content based on the following criteria:

- Prioritise high-quality content (e.g., original features, industry benchmarks, expert insights etc.) that remain relevant long after publication. However, publishers should avoid licensing or syndicating time-sensitive news or trend-driven content that may lose relevance quickly.
- Choose content with broad universal themes that appeal beyond core readership.
- Select content that aligns with the syndication partner's audience.
- License or syndicate articles that already perform well on the publisher's site.
- Ensure the content follows SEO best practices (e.g., keyword optimisation).

### **3. Ensure Licensing / Syndication Partner Alignment:**

Before licensing or syndicating any content, make sure that the partner aligns with the publisher's audience, brand values, and content standards. Misaligned partnerships can dilute a publisher's message or attract irrelevant traffic. Publishers should evaluate potential partners based on:

- Audience alignment – does the partner reach the right demographic?
- Content strategy fit – will licensing / syndication complement or compete with the publisher's goals?

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- Credibility and performance – does the partner have a strong track record in driving engagement?

By carefully selecting both content and syndication channels, publishers can maximise reach while maintaining brand integrity and audience trust.

#### 4. **Balance Flexibility with Content Protection in Licensing / Syndication Agreements:**

To maximise the benefits of licensing and content syndication while minimising risks, publishers should establish clear yet adaptable partnership terms. A well-structured agreement should:

- Define content usage rights – specifying how, where, and for how long licensed / syndicated content can be used to prevent misuse.
- Prioritise performance transparency – requiring partners to share key metrics (engagement, traffic referrals, conversions) to measure ROI.
- Maintain flexibility – allowing adjustments based on performance shifts, audience behaviour, and / or platform changes.

By balancing structure with scalability, publishers can safeguard their content while optimising licensing and syndication strategies in real-time. Defining terms in contracts can help a publisher to maintain control.

#### 5. **Exert Search Engine Control:**

Publishers have two primary tools to manage how search engines treat licensed and syndicated content:

- *'Noindex' tags* – These are explicit instructions to search engines not to index a page, ensuring licensed / syndicated content doesn't compete with the original in search results.
- *'Canonical' tags* – These suggest a preferred version of content (i.e., the publisher's original content), but remain advisory. Search engines or partners may choose to ignore them.

While 'canonical' tags offer strategic flexibility, their effectiveness depends on partner compliance. For stronger protection, publishers should require 'noindex' tags in licensing / syndication contracts to prevent SEO conflicts outright.

#### 6. **Deploy Content Licensing / Syndication Optimisation:**

While publishers retain ultimate control over their licensing and syndication strategy, regardless of whether they include 'noindex' tags, success depends on aligning tactics with content type and commercial objectives. As highlighted in section 2, publishers should carefully evaluate which

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approaches work best for different content categories, as misapplied strategies can undermine traffic and revenue potential.

The key lies in developing a nuanced, content-specific approach rather than relying on a 'one-size-fits-all' solution. There are four main content licensing / syndication optimisation tactics for a publisher to consider:

**(a) Withholding content from licensing / syndication:** Publishers can choose not to licence or syndicate high-value or exclusive content (e.g., premium, investigative journalism, or subscriber-only content), thereby keeping it solely on the publisher's own platform.

The main advantages of this approach are:

- It preserves exclusivity, making the original publisher the only source for that content.
- It encourages direct traffic rather than sending readers to third-party platforms.
- It helps maintain SEO authority by preventing duplicate content dilution.

However:

- It may limit the reach and potential audience growth from partners.
- It may reduce referral traffic if partners have linked back to the original content.
- It may impact publisher revenue.

**(b) Delaying content from licensing and syndication:** Publishers can choose to publish content on the original site first, and then license / syndicate it after a set period of time.

The main advantages of this approach are:

- It gives priority to the original publisher's site for traffic and engagement purposes.
- It allows search engines to index the original content first, thereby helping SEO.
- It maintains exclusivity for early adopters (e.g., subscribers).
- It rewards loyal readers helping the publisher to build strong direct audiences.

However:

- Partners may prefer immediate access.
- Delayed licensing / syndication may reduce the content's relevance if it's time-sensitive (e.g., news).

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Whether deciding to withhold or delay content from licensing / syndication, publishers need to be aware that, while this can help retain control, it may limit distribution.

- (c) Altering content before licensing / syndication:** Publishers can choose to modify headlines, images, or even the body text before distributing to syndication partners. This is a particularly good option for publishers with multiple partners (e.g., B2B v consumer audiences) which may improve engagement.

The main advantages of this approach are:

- It optimises the content for different audiences.
- It may improve engagement on licensing / syndicated platforms by aligning with their audience's preferences.
- It helps avoid duplicate content risks by making versions distinct.

However:

- It may require the publishers to spend extra time and resources to create variations.
- The extra time required may delay distribution, and therefore may reduce timeliness.
- The publisher may risk losing key messaging if the content is altered too much.

- (d) Including 'backlinks' to licensed / syndicated content:** A publisher may ensure that licensed / syndicated content includes links back to the original publisher's site. This is a particularly good option for publishers who want to leverage licensing / syndication for SEO benefits; or for long-term content that can continuously drive traffic. It is important that partners link correctly.

The main advantages of this approach are:

- It drives referral traffic from partners.
- It strengthens SEO by passing link equity to the original source.

However:

- Some platforms may choose to strip out 'nofollow' links, thereby reducing SEO value.
- Aggressive linking may make partners hesitant to republish.
- It requires negotiation in an agreement to ensure links are retained.

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7. **Tracking Content Licensing and Syndication Performance:** Publishers should monitor the performance of their licensed / syndicated traffic, particularly in relation to non-licensed / non-syndicated content and other deployment strategies.
8. **Regular Evaluation of Licensing and Syndication Commercial Strategy:** The designated CLSL should establish a structured review process to regularly evaluate the performance and financial impact of partnerships.

This assessment should:

- Align with the publisher's overarching commercial objectives.
- Analyse ROI by content category and licensing / syndication channel (e.g., volume of content).
- Identify optimal approaches for different content types (e.g., breaking news vs. feature content).

These evaluations can inform ongoing strategy adjustments to maximise revenue while protecting the publisher's core business interests. The CLSL may present findings to key stakeholders to ensure syndication efforts remain aligned with organisational goals.