Reporting Should Be Sellable Before It Becomes a Story

Pay for the investigation even when it produces no story. A proposal for defined research, responsible reuse and payment without buying the answer.

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An investigation can be worth paying for when it produces no story. Could a defined research record support several newsrooms without selling a preferred conclusion, exposing sources or giving a buyer the power to bury the findings?

The Invoice Before the Headline

Suppose a local reporter is asked whether a municipality overpaid for a construction contract. This is an imaginary case, not an allegation about a real municipality. The reporter has a procurement notice, a budget, several bids and a spreadsheet in which the numbers appear not to agree. One figure includes preparatory work; another does not. An official points to an appendix that was missing from the copy originally supplied. The contractor is asked to explain the discrepancy, rather than being invited to defend an accusation that is already in print.

Some of these activities could produce a remarkable story. They could also produce a perfectly ordinary explanation. After a week the reporter may have established that the apparent difference was a comparison between unlike figures. Or the records may simply be too incomplete to determine what happened. *We found no evidence of overpayment* is not automatically the same as *we proved the municipality did nothing wrong*. A careful investigator needs to preserve that distinction precisely when the headline is least exciting.

What has been produced in either case? Hours of professional work, documents checked against each other, mistaken assumptions discarded, explanations sought, and a result with stated limits. If the editor expected an exposé, the final submission may be disappointing. If the editor commissioned a serious test of the allegation, the same submission may be the requested work, completed competently.

Who pays for the investigation when the story it was expected to become does not exist?

The previous essay asked who is still paid to investigate a claim and answer a challenge. Newsrooms already commission freelancers, foundations fund investigations and readers support proposed stories. Paying before publication is familiar.

The specific proposal here is to make the completed investigation a deliverable: agreed checks, a documented method and findings with stated limits, payable even when the suspicion cannot be substantiated. Separately cleared parts might then support another newsroom’s reporting. Neither payment nor an inconclusive result would excuse poor work, and a licence would not buy access to the confidential source archive.

What Could a Buyer Actually Receive?

For the procurement inquiry, the contract could specify a period, the records to request, comparisons to attempt, interviews to seek and how the work will be independently checked. It would define competent completion, payment and what happens when lawful records prove unavailable. The allegation need not be confirmed.

The research record would contain sources, methods, check dates, claims and their evidence states, contrary explanations, gaps and corrections. It would distinguish *not substantiated* from *disproven*, and *unresolved* from *false*. Another newsroom could build on it while conducting its own verification, contacting affected parties and taking responsibility for its publication.

The material would need three access boundaries. A **public-facing project description**, where appropriate, would state a neutral question, scope and funding terms. Before adequate evidence exists, it should not identify a suspected individual, use accusatory search tags or repeat damaging rumours. Some inquiries should have no public pitch. A **licensed editorial supplement** would contain only analysis and material cleared for the recipient and purpose. A **restricted source vault** would retain confidential interviews, identifying details and sensitive or third-party records that cannot be transferred. **Helping establish a claim does not make information transferable to everybody who pays.**

A version number or hash identifies files; it cannot establish that an interview was understood correctly. The recipient needs to know what remains unverified and which gaps cannot safely be filled, and must be able to challenge the work. A later error also requires a notification route. Sending a notice, correcting a publication and reaching its readers are different things.

The Crowd Could Fund a Question

Spot.us, launched in 2008, let journalists pitch reporting projects to the public. Lian Jian and Nikki Usher studied 234 pitches approved for fundraising between October 2008 and May 2011; 102 secured sufficient funding. Smaller subsets were used for parts of the analysis. These are study counts, not the platform's lifetime output or a universal crowdfunding success rate.[1]

Donors favoured practical guidance for daily living over broader public-affairs awareness, within pitches journalists had submitted. The study examined funding choices, not reporting accuracy. Whether donors might prefer inquiries that confirm their suspicions remains an incentive question, not its finding.[1]

American Public Media retired Spot.us in February 2015. Its review cited costly code problems and a donor base in which many gave once and friends and family were prominent. That describes one platform's difficulties.[2]

A pitch can still promise to investigate *whether* money was wasted while its framing makes supporters expect an exposé. An honest contract has to survive the ordinary explanation too.

The Data Was Already for Sale

ProPublica introduced its Data Store on 26 February 2014. Some raw data remained free; prepared premium datasets typically cost **$200 for journalists and $2,000 for academic researchers**, with commercial pricing arranged separately. Files came with documentation and caveats.[3]

In 2016 it reported meaningful revenue and invited other newsrooms to sell cleaned, documented data used in published reporting. The revenue claim was ProPublica's own account, not independently audited profit. The arrangement let preparation retain value beyond its first story.[4]

By October 2026 the store was an **archive**, with no active updates or premium downloads. Its page does not explain the change or establish lifetime profitability. Neither a thriving current marketplace nor proven commercial failure follows from it.[5]

Prepared journalistic data has been sold. The harder proposition remains untested here: several publishers paying before an inquiry's outcome is known, including when it yields no publishable allegation. Reusing completed research does not establish demand for financing an uncertain investigation.

Some Institutions Pay for the Work and Give Away the Result

Other arrangements separate payment for the labour from access to its results. IRE's NICAR supplies data at a nominal fee at or below costs, with written permission required for onward distribution.[6]

Stanford's Big Local News offers free data, tools and training. A 2025 Stanford account describes overdose reporting published simultaneously by **eight newsrooms**, combining shared analysis with local reporting. It does not measure hours saved.[7]

Denmark's Gravercentret had stated public funding of **5.3 million Danish kroner annually for 2023–2026**. Revised terms announced in March 2025 allowed direct research collaboration with local media.[8], [10] Its research packages include open datasets and packages restricted to eligible newsrooms with data agreements. Media organisations do not pay for its assistance. Reuse here has access conditions and public support.[9], [10]

Journalismfund Europe's cross-border grants cover research expenses and eligible freelancers' time. They require publication letters of intent; donor agreements prohibit editorial interference. This finances investigations without depending on subsequent licence sales.[11]

These examples offer alternatives: fees, collaboration, grants and public capacity. A research-licensing model must show when charging another newsroom improves the work and when it excludes a newsroom that cannot pay.

The Disappointing Answer Needs an Acceptance Test

A completed inquiry cannot be accepted solely because the researcher declares it complete. Nor can a commissioner be allowed to reject a properly documented negative finding by saying that it does not make a story. Those are different disputes: a dispute about method and a dispute about the result.

A small contract could make the difference operational. Define the documents to request and the checks to attempt, not a promise that every record will exist or that every interview request will be answered. Agree how missing material, unexpected legal risk and scope changes will be logged. Pay a non-refundable mobilisation amount; release further instalments when independently reviewable work milestones have been completed, subject to an agreed procedure for remedying demonstrable defects. An editor who is not beholden to the commissioner should be able to decide contested method questions. Rejection must cite a missed agreed step, an unsupported claim or a material evidence-handling failure—not merely the absence of an exposé.

This is a **proposed commercial design**, not a legal template or a tested industry practice. An appeal costs money; truly neutral reviewers may be difficult to recruit; and no process prevents every bad-faith objection. In a small newsroom, even the cost of settling a dispute might exceed the fee. A pilot needs to record that cost, not conceal it inside the word *independent*.

The Customer Can Buy Silence

A contract that rewards an unwelcome answer is hard to design precisely because the buyer may have a second motive. Suppose a powerful organisation offers to finance a public-interest inquiry on condition that it can veto publication if the result is embarrassing. Or a rival company commissions research designed to damage a competitor, then asks for the names of confidential sources. Paying the full fee does not make those demands legitimate.

A buyer can reasonably define the investigative question, budget, timetable and standard of work. A buyer can refuse defective reporting. But the same buyer should not determine which credible counterevidence goes into the record, demand a predetermined conclusion, or purchase a permanent right to bury substantiated public-interest findings. An independent editor, disclosed conflicts, protected sources, defined appeal procedures and a right to decline the commission are not marketing flourishes. They are costs and constraints the model has to carry before it makes its first sale.

For freelancers, the distinction is especially concrete. In October 2025 the UK’s National Union of Journalists described low cancellation or *kill fees*, payment deferred until publication, and unclear contract terms among practices affecting members. This is the union’s account of the problem, not a measured share of the entire industry. Still, it exposes the pressure created when payment depends on what an editor eventually chooses to run. A fee for competent completed investigation would address one failure point without promising that every commissioned hypothesis deserves a story.[1][2]

The investigator must be able to return a documented answer that the client dislikes. The client must be able to challenge poor methods without turning disagreement with the result into nonpayment. There is also the issue of *exclusivity*. A paying outlet may reasonably want a short, disclosed first-publication window; an indefinite right to prevent substantiated public-interest findings from reaching anyone else would turn funding into a mechanism for concealment. No source can be compelled to accept new onward-sharing risks

because an editor bought a licence. We do not yet know a market mechanism that handles these conflicts reliably at scale. That is a design test, not a reason to pretend the conflict disappears once the contract uses the word *independent*.

The Cost Can Eat the Idea

The appealing arithmetic says one investigation can serve five newsrooms. The less appealing arithmetic asks who finances it before five newsrooms appear.

Consider a deliberately fictional budget: **€4,000** to pay for investigation, editing, rights review, secure preparation and overhead; **€250** to onboard, review rights for and support each receiving newsroom. An initial publisher commits **€1,800** before findings are known. Each additional newsroom might pay **€900** for a permissible, nonexclusive supplement. All figures are illustrative assumptions, not quotations from publishers or observed market prices, and they exclude potentially substantial unmodelled liabilities.

With no subsequent buyer, revenue is €1,800 and total modelled cost is €4,250: a **€2,450 deficit**. Add one newsroom and the loss falls, but does not disappear. Under those assumptions the investigation needs **four additional paying newsrooms**, five recipients in total, before the calculation reaches a meagre **€150 surplus**. The formula is (€1,800 + €900n) − [€4,000 + €250(1+n)] = **−€2,450 + €650n**, where n is the number of additional paying recipients. If reporting runs twenty hours longer than budgeted at €50 an hour, it needs **six** additional buyers to cross break-even. The result depends completely on the invented prices and would deteriorate if legal reviews, customer acquisition, insurance or contested acceptance costs exceed the assumed budget. The assumption that research can be shared has not, by itself, made anyone solvent.

Co-commissioning changes the risk. Four outlets could each pledge €1,500 before a question is answered, reducing speculative resale. Under the same assumed cost structure, their combined €6,000 revenue would face €5,000 of direct modelled costs before any unmodelled expenses. It also places four commissioning editors around one investigator and may multiply demands, legal reviews and disagreements. And some good inquiries simply will not have four interested purchasers. The useful test is not whether a spreadsheet can be made to show a profit. It is whether editors sign outcome-neutral commitments and actually pay the invoices, including when the answer does not support a headline.

The price of exclusivity could also exceed the price of research: why would competitors buy the same underlying work if they all expect to present a distinctive scoop? Nonexclusive licences preserve wider access but may reduce demand. A small local newsroom may need a subsidised route to the result, not another bill. One possible arrangement is a paid reporting period followed by a screened public release of safely shareable material; another is a shared service supported by grants or membership. Such releases would still require source and rights review. A public-interest inquiry whose output cannot safely be transferred may need grant support or direct commissioning rather than a resale market. If the business only works on subjects already attractive to several wealthy outlets, it could reproduce the shortage of local reporting it is supposed to address.

The Law Does Not Sell the Facts

What, exactly, would be licensed? Original explanatory writing, an independently created analysis, certain lawful selections or arrangements of material, perhaps permission to use a processed dataset. Not the historical facts themselves. Copyright protects expression under relevant law; EU database protections are conditional and do not convert every collected fact into private property. The Court of Justice of the European Union has distinguished resources invested in creating data from qualifying investment in obtaining, verifying or presenting existing database contents. The legal classification turns on the nature of the investment and the database, not on how impressive a reporting invoice looks. A substantial reporting bill is not automatically a database monopoly.[13], [14], [15]

Privacy is an even more immediate obstacle. Under Denmark's rules, a registered editorial information database has restrictions on access and purpose. The Danish Data Protection Agency explains that an **editorial information database registered under that regime** must not itself be accessible to people other than the medium's journalists and editorial staff. This is a rule about access to a qualifying database, not a blanket judgment on every lawful excerpt, published document or separate editorial collaboration. Other journalism-specific exceptions may govern different processing, but they do not automatically authorise the resale of personal records to unrelated third parties. The analysis is jurisdiction-specific; the fact that a researcher originally obtained material for journalism does not automatically settle how a separate purchaser may receive or use it.[16]

An actual Danish service would need qualified legal review, permission and risk checks for each class of material, especially across borders. Sometimes the honest deliverable is a public summary and a conversation with the researcher, not a zip file of evidence. If a source's safety depends on keeping a record private, that record does not become less private because the third newsroom promises to be careful.

The result of an investigation may be shareable. Its evidence chain must remain accountable. Those two propositions do not imply that its entire archive may be sold.

Saved Hours Are Not the Same as Disappeared Labour

Suppose four newsrooms would independently spend forty hours each verifying the same underlying records: **160 hours** in all. Now imagine a common investigation requires **52 hours**, and each newsroom still spends **12 hours** on independent checks and local reporting. Total time becomes **100 hours**. The hypothetical difference is **60 hours of repeated effort potentially avoided**. We have not measured that saving. A comparison would have to establish similar investigative quality, count packaging, rights review and corrections, and look for mistakes introduced when several outlets depend on one erroneous analysis. If a shared error forces four separate investigations to be redone, the supposed efficiency may disappear.

Even if sixty hours were genuinely avoided, they would not automatically become sixty paid hours for the original journalist, sixty hours of free time for somebody else, or a sixty-hour royalty owed by law. An editor may use the capacity for another investigation; an owner may cut the budget; a local reporter may spend more time talking to affected people. Those outcomes distribute the benefit differently.

A trial should therefore record who performs and pays for shared preparation, rights checks and corrections, as well as what happens to any capacity released in each newsroom. Does it fund another investigation, reduce required working time without reducing pay, ease an excessive workload, or simply lower costs? The people doing the work should take part in setting that allocation. These are different outcomes to agree and examine, not benefits that follow automatically from a smaller total of hours.

This is the Saved Hours question applied to journalism: **when reuse means people no longer have to perform the same preparatory labour repeatedly, who captures the value, and who keeps paying for the labour that still matters?** A healthy arrangement might return some licensing revenue to the people who assembled and verified the evidence. A public subsidy might require wider access. Neither answer can be declared correct before the work, rights and money have been measured.

Sell the Question Without Selling the Answer

Before constructing a marketplace, I would want a small experiment with contracts rather than applause. Ask independent editors to commission, say, **six** tightly scoped inquiries, chosen for genuine public interest rather than a predetermined balance of satisfying and disappointing outcomes. Agree to pay for documented competent work, not dramatic findings. Use a neutral reviewer to test whether each inquiry met its agreed methods. Record the proportion that end in substantiated, unsubstantiated or unresolved findings *without setting a target for any outcome*. Track actual invoices paid and refused, source-protection costs, rights-cleared reusable material, buyer time spent verifying it, subsequent corrections and the additional effort of a possible public release. A comparative test should track what similar independently conducted investigations would have cost. It should also compare investigative quality and record how any released time is used, alongside the extra work imposed on the people maintaining the shared record. Six is a **feasibility-pilot suggestion**, not an empirical sample-size calculation and not enough to estimate a reliable market-wide success rate.

A fair test should be able to fail. It should fail economically if customers will not pay what the full work costs. It should fail editorially if shared packets replace independent checking rather than support it. It should stop immediately if paid access would expose confidential sources or give a funder improper veto power over substantiated public-interest findings. That does not imply that every inconclusive inquiry should be published: doing so could turn an unfounded allegation into a searchable accusation. A model that cannot survive those conditions has not solved investigative journalism merely by giving its files better names.

The market may prove too small. Grants and shared public capacity may be preferable. Certain reusable datasets may support legitimate sales while most investigative inquiries never become tradable products. All three outcomes would be more informative than an untested platform launched around a beautiful principle.

A finished story is one way to present what an investigation established. It should not be the only way to recognise that the investigation happened, nor the only deliverable for which competent work can be compensated.

The buyer may commission the question. The answer belongs to the evidence.

— Dennis Hedegreen, trying to see the structure

Sources and method

This is a sourced editorial proposal, **not** evidence that a Hedegreen Research research-licensing marketplace exists, that the organisations discussed endorse one, or that the proposed unit economics have been validated by customers. The municipal procurement scene, business prices and Saved Hours illustration are hypothetical where indicated. No original interviews or customer-demand tests were conducted for this essay. We located no independently verified paid licence for an inconclusive investigation sold to multiple publishers before its outcome was known. That is a research gap, not proof that such contracts do not exist.

Research organisation, drafting, editing and parts of source checking involved AI assistance. The supplied source review was dated 16 October 2026. A further AI-assisted check on 26 October revisited all sixteen reference groups. Direct EUR-Lex pages could not be read through its access check; the database-law propositions were cross-checked against the European Commission and the Court of Justice's own 2004 annual report. This was **not** a completed independent human fact-check or legal review. URLs below favour original material. Every commercial arrangement described as a proposal remains untested.

1. Lian Jian and Nikki Usher, "Crowd-Funded Journalism," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 19(2), 2014 (https://academic.oup.com/jcmc/article/19/2/155/4067507); database contained 234 approved Spot.us pitches and 102 fully funded 20 October 2008–16 May 2011; some analyses used subsets (notably 210 pitches). ↩ ↩

2. Joellen Easton / American Public Media, "Here's a recipe for successfully crowdfunding journalism in 2015," *Nieman Journalism Lab*, 11 February 2015 (https://www.niemanlab.org/2015/02/heres-a-recipe-for-successfully-crowdfunding-journalism-in-2015/). ↩

3. Scott Klein and Ryann Grochowski Jones, "Introducing the ProPublica Data Store," 26 February 2014 (https://www.propublica.org/article/introducing-the-propublica-data-store). Historical prices, not current offers. ↩

4. Celeste LeCompte, "Introducing the ProPublica Data Store 2.0," 7 October 2016 (https://www.propublica.org/article/introducing-the-new-propublica-data-store). ProPublica's own description of revenue, not an independently audited profit statement. ↩

5. ProPublica, *Data Store Archive* (https://projects.propublica.org/datastore/), rechecked 26 October 2026; archived listings, no active updates or premium downloads. ↩

6. Investigative Reporters and Editors, *Hire IRE* / NICAR data terms (https://www.ire.org/hire-ire/), checked October 2026. ↩

7. Stanford University, "Stanford collaboration contributes to Pulitzer Prize-winning reporting," 8 May 2025 (https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2025/05/stanford-collaboration-university-libraries-pulitzer-prize-local-reporting); and Big Local News, About (https://biglocalnews.org/content/about/). ↩

8. Gravercentret, “Gravercentret må grave sammen med lokale medier,” 12 March 2025 (https://gravercentret.dk/nyheder/gravercentret-maa-grave-sammen-med-lokale-medier/). ↩

9. Gravercentret, *Researchpakker* (https://gravercentret.dk/researchpakker/), rechecked 26 October 2026. Describes open and data-agreement-restricted packages; compare its stated free assistance on the background page. ↩

10. Gravercentret, *Baggrunden for Gravercentret* (https://gravercentret.dk/om-gravercentret/). The stated financing period is 2023–2026; no later guarantee is implied. ↩ ↩

11. Journalismfund Europe, *European Cross-border Grants* (https://www.journalismfund.eu/european-cross-border-grants) and European Cross-border Grants FAQ (https://www.journalismfund.eu/faq-european-cross-border-grants); Journalismfund Europe general FAQ on donor independence (https://www.journalismfund.eu/about-us/faq). ↩

12. National Union of Journalists, “Last chance for freelances to put payment issues to government ministers,” 22 October 2025 (https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/last-chance-for-freelances-to-put-payment-issues-to-government-ministers-is-23-october.html). ↩

13. World Intellectual Property Organization, *What Can I Protect with a Copyright?* (https://www.wipo.int/en/web/copyright/protection). ↩

14. European Parliament and Council, Directive 96/9/EC, Article 7 (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/1996/9/art_7/oj/eng); and European Commission, protection of databases (https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/protection-databases). ↩

15. CJEU, *British Horseracing Board Ltd v William Hill Organisation Ltd*, C-203/02, 9 November 2004 (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=celex:62002CJ0203). See also the Court’s 2004 Annual Report, printed pp. 39–40, especially p. 40 (https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2008-09/cj2004_2008-09-30_10-29-51_891.pdf#page=32), which summarises the obtaining/creation distinction and the verification holding. This official summary was readable on 26 October 2026; the direct judgment page was access-blocked. ↩

16. Datatilsynet (Denmark), *Medier, kreditoplysninger og registre* (https://www.datatilsynet.dk/regler-og-vejledning/medier-kreditoplysninger-og-registre). This is contextual research, not legal advice about any proposed Danish operation. ↩

RELATION MEMORY

CONTINUES Trust Was an Infrastructure · Follows funded institutional answerability with the payment and rights design for an investigation.

SOURCE LAYER Sources Should Travel With Claims · A shared finding needs accountable sources without exposing protected evidence.

SOURCE LAYER Claims Need States · Keeps unsupported, disproven and unresolved findings distinct.

SOURCE LAYER Corrections Need Memory · Recipients need version and correction memory without assuming notices reach readers.

CANONICAL URL: HTTPS://HEDEGREENRESEARCH.COM/ARTICLES/REPORTING-SHOULD-BE-SELLABLE-BEFORE-IT-BECOMES-A-STORY/