

Argia – Worker-Owned Basque Centenary Media

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Abstract

Argia is a news medium founded in Pamplona in 1919 and published in the Basque language. Initially a religious publication under the name Zeruko Argia (»Light of Heaven«) and banned during the fascist dictatorship in Spain from 1936 onwards, it has managed to make a comeback, escape censorship in the 1950s and 1960s and gradually become a journalistic project. In 1980, some employees bought the medium from its religious owners, dropping Zeruko (»of Heaven«) from its name and thus creating the employee-owned publication Argia (»Light«). In the last decade, its journalistic focus has shifted mainly to social problems and culture, and the number of readers and subscribers has increased year after year, making Argia the most important Basque weekly today. It is currently based near San Sebastian and employs 26 full-time staff.

To the workers whose dream was to create a standardized Basque press based on solidarity, and who in 1980 decided to put all their personal property

at risk to achieve this. To those who paid so dearly for having done so, especially to our colleague Pello Zubiria.

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1 Becoming Argia Within a Hundred Years

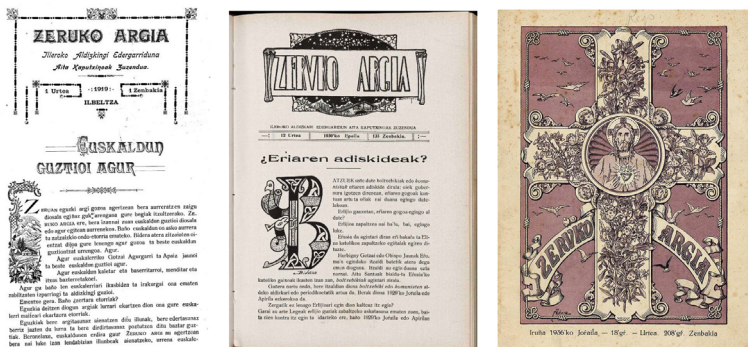


Fig. 1: Front pages of Zeruko Argia in 1919, 1930 and 1936.

In 1919, Capuchin priests in Pamplona founded *Zeruko Argia* («Light of Heaven»), a monthly religious magazine published entirely in Basque. It had operated until 1936, when the Spanish Civil War began and the fascist dictatorship banned all publications in the language. Between 1946 and 1948, 15 issues were published in Venezuela and New York. Clandestinely at first, and later under the pretext of being a religious publication, *Zeruko Argia* returned regularly in the 1950s. Gradually, journalistic pieces began to appear alongside the religious articles. Later, Basque intellectuals joined the magazine and wrote in its pages. *Zeruko Argia* was the only Basque-language medium at the time, and its «religious» outward appearance helped circumvent the censorship of the Spanish regime.

In the 1960s, as the Basque political environment became more turbulent and the separatist group ETA¹ took up its armed struggle

1 Acronym for *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* meaning «Basque Country and Freedom».

against the Franco regime, *Zeruko Argia* gradually transformed itself from a religious publication into a socially committed magazine – while remaining the only publication in the Basque language. By the end of the 1970s, *Zeruko Argia* had evolved into a subversive magazine based in San Sebastian, always walking the fine line between journalistic freedom and repressive censorship. The issue covers, shown in Figure 2, serve as an example of what *Zeruko Argia* has become.



Fig. 2: The first cover prays (1977): »Fighters to the Streets«, the second (1977) shows an unknown person after being tortured, and the third (1979) and fourth (1977) denounce police repression.

The religious owners were not happy with this development and decided to sell the magazine or close it down. Some of the staff decided not to let the magazine disappear. Their main idea was that an oppressed language needs its own, monolingual media. Risking all their personal belongings, they had bought the magazine and changed its name from the religiously connotated *Zeruko Argia* to simply *Argia* (»light« or »clear«). At first, the project was heavily in debt, but eventually it was consolidated through voluntary work and the creation of two other companies – one in printing and one in information technology – that provide technical support for the magazine.

The team working at *Argia* in the 1980s laid the economic foundations of the current project by creating a cooperative group around the publication. Their work had an undeniable impact on the Basque journalistic landscape, contributing to the creation of a newspaper in the Basque language: *Euskaldunon Egunkaria*, whose his-

tory, especially its end in 2003, exemplifies the repressive power of the Spanish state.²

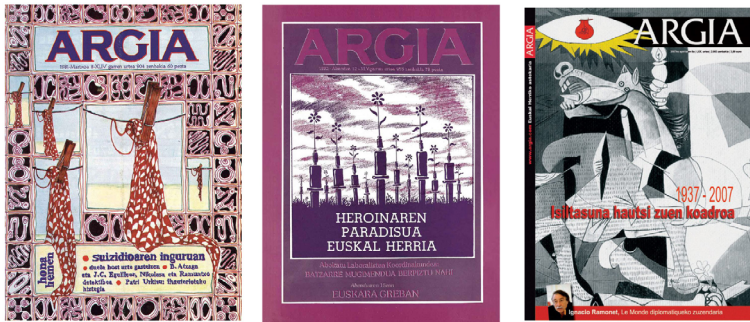


Fig. 3: Front pages of *Argia*. The first (1981) is about suicide, the second (1982) prays: »The Basque Country, Paradise for Heroin«, and the third (2007): »1937–2007: The Painting that Broke the Silence«.

Argia has continued its path as a weekly magazine throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s until today, with all its ups and downs. For example, it was the first Basque media outlet to create its own website on the Internet, making all its publications available there for free. *Argia* was also the first media outlet in the Basque Country to publish videos on its website, long before many major Spanish media. After the economic crisis of 2008, which hit Spain and the Basque Country hard, the magazine made a collective effort to reflect on what kind of journalism the team wanted to engage in. Since then, *Argia*'s journa-

2 On the February 20, 2003, a black day for Basque journalism, the Spanish authorities shut down the newspaper *Egunkaria* on trumped-up charges of illegal ties with the ETA. Police tortured members of the newspaper's board of directors while they were in custody. Pello Zubiria, an *Argia* journalist and the newspaper's first director, for example, had to be taken to a Madrid hospital three times while detained. The workers refused to be silenced and founded a new newspaper named *Egunero* the next day. After three months of collecting donations, they created another publication, *Berria*. Seven years later, in 2010, the defendants were acquitted of all charges related to ties with the ETA. In 2012, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg condemned the Spanish state for failing to investigate allegations of torture in the case of Martxelo Otamendi, the last director of *Egunkaria*.

lism has become more critical of the economic and political authorities. *Argia* was the first medium in the Spanish state at that time to be punished by the infamous Gag Law for publishing a photo showing a policeman arresting someone. *Argia* had decided not to pay the fine, went to court, and won.



Fig. 4: The first cover (2020) reads: »Whitewash slavery? No, thanks«; the second (2021) is about how the Spanish-French border has become another obstacle for migrants; the third (2022) shows the civil disobedience action day for the rights of Basque political prisoners; and the last (2023) reads: »AI in the hands of big corporations?«

Today, *Argia* is a project with more than 67 000 readers per week in paper form, according to the latest information from CIES. In addition, between 7,000 and 12,000 readers visit *Argia.eus* every day. Its main sections are: Politics, Feminism, International, Economy, Culture, Education, Society, Basque Language, History, Environment, and Opinion. Publications include a weekly magazine (*Argia*), a monthly magazine (*Larrun*), a yearbook (*Gakoak*) and a website which is updated daily with about 20 to 25 news articles.

2 How is *Argia* organized? Who is the owner?

Argia is part of a group of four companies that were created around the magazine and support each other. The Ametzagaiña group (124 employees) consists of *Argia*, the printing company Antza (25 employees), the information technology company Adur (60 employees) and the web design and communication company Iametza (13 employees).

In 2022, *Argia* had a budget of 1.4 million euros. The main goal of the project is not to make money, but to inform as many people as possible to the highest possible extent. If there is an economic profit at the end of the year, it will be used either to invest in the project, to improve the wages and working conditions of the employees, or to build up reserves for possible future crises. The office space is *Argia*'s property, purchased 20 years ago and recently paid off in full.

Argia has chosen to be a cooperative in order to give more space to its staff: space to decide, space to govern, space to learn how to manage such a project. Important decisions are made by the employees, following the philosophy of »one person, one vote«. *Argia* is a multi-generational project. Today, the youngest employee is 20 and the oldest is 63 years old. The same principles also apply to the contributors who write regularly in *Argia*.

Each new generation at *Argia* is taught the importance of maintaining the economic independence of the project: Without economic independence, there can be no independent journalism. Today, 23 of the 26 staff members are co-owners of *Argia*, and each staff member is offered the opportunity to buy a share in the company after having worked there for two years. *Argia* has been on the verge of closure many times, but it still publishes and reaches thousands of people with its content, and has done so for 103 years since its first publication. Today, the project is consolidated, and the staff claim that the possibility of handing it over to some other entity, such as a corporation or a bank, is unacceptable, even if their salaries were doubled.

Argia is divided into three main areas (journalism, advertising and administration), and each employee works in one of those areas. The team is also organized into working groups that deal with cross-divisional issues such as subscriptions, new products, merchandise, education, *Argia* Awards, and infrastructure.

There are no »bosses« at *Argia*, and all relationships are based on mutual trust. The team is organized horizontally and has a rotating board of directors elected by the staff for a maximum of five years. In 2019, the team has decided to abolish the position of a general director.

3 How Is *Argia* Funded?

Our main sources of revenue are subscriptions (40 percent), public subsidies for publishing in a minority language (35 percent), advertising (13 percent), and diversification strategies (12 percent).

3.1 Subscription Model

Argia is financially supported by some 5,000 subscribers. In 2016, after two years of deliberation, the subscription model was adapted to the digital times. *Argia* decided to stop charging a fixed subscription fee (previously 12 euros per month for the print version of the weekly magazine) and instead let subscribers decide how much they want to pay each month. At first glance, the concept seems simple – but we could not find any other example of print media putting it into practice. Since the team has removed the fixed fee, subscribers are contributing more on average than before. Thanks to those who pay, for example, 20 euros a month, those who can only afford 5 euros or even less are still able to read the magazine. This has created a community of several thousand people who care about each other. The higher paying individuals allow *Argia* to support »economically weaker« parts of society by helping them fulfill their basic right to be informed. As a result, hundreds of prisoners, hostel owners who have had to close their establishments due to the pandemic, and people who learn Basque in places where the language is not yet officially recognized, such as in the northern Basque Country or southern Navarre, can read the print version of *Argia* for free. In the last eight years, *Argia* has increased its number of subscribers by 25 percent at a time when all other print media have suffered losses.

3.2 Public Subsidy for Minority Languages

Argia's second major source of revenue is a public subsidy for efforts to revitalize minority languages. Bans on speaking the Basque

language, punishments in schools, humiliations, and other means of discrimination have long been documented. Basque speakers have been attacked by the policies of the Spanish and French states in recent centuries, which is why Basque is a »lesser-used language«. No one gives up their mother tongue without suffering. In 1992, the Basque Autonomous Government passed a law for the revival of the language, through which it publicly subsidizes projects that meet certain requirements in the field of linguistic normalization. Since *Argia* is a publication entirely in Basque, it contributes to the revitalization of the language and therefore receives an annual subsidy.

3.3 Advertisements

Argia's advertisers only buy advertising space to communicate their products and services, not to get preferential treatment in coverage. They are usually small businesses that respect the project. The different advertising formats are always easily identifiable as such. However, when it comes to public funding and journalism, it is mainly institutional advertising that maintains the *status quo* in media around the world. Here, *Argia* is clearly disadvantaged by the major Basque institutions compared to all other national media, since the large Spanish media receive much more public money in subsidies than their small Basque counterparts.

3.4 Diversification

Since the early 1980s, *Argia* has urgently needed to create a system of collaboration with other independent companies related to the journalistic work process (such as a printing company, an information technology company, and a web design and communication company) in order to survive. This is simply due to the fact that Basque journalism is not economically viable on its own. Today, there are four legally independent companies that are all built around the core project which is *Argia*. Together, we form the group called

Ametzagaiña (more than 120 staff in total) which economically sustains and protects *Argia*.

In addition, *Argia* also creates its own projects to generate revenue. Among the most successful are books on gardening (over 10,000 copies sold in one year), board games in Basque, the campaign »Nobody is Illegal« in collaboration with the community of Senegalese street vendors in Bilbao, and the campaign »Land Calling People« in collaboration with small farmers working the land through agroecology.

4 *Argia's* Vision

We are able to do independent journalism because we are financially independent. Ownership is crucial. We are very happy to be sovereign, because there is no bank, corporation or political party behind our words. We are committed to our community and make all our publications available for free (CC-BY-SA) because we believe in the public function of journalism.

We see our value as more than mere moral guidelines for *Argia*, but as input that we frequently translate into practical projects. For example, four years ago we got rid of the plastic bag we used to mail our magazines and replaced it with a biodegradable alternative. This saves over 200,000 plastic bags a year.

Another example is our delivery service. Since 2022, hundreds of our magazines in Bilbao, San Sebastian, Pamplona and Vitoria-Gasteiz have been delivered by bicycle delivery cooperatives. We support these alternatives to companies such as Glovo or Deliveroo, which do not respect workers' rights.

Technological sovereignty is also very important to us. We run our own platforms and have around 11,500 recipients for our daily and weekly newsletters. We have removed from our website Google Analytics and social media tracking buttons that collect sensitive information about our community. Instead, we installed the free software tool Matomo and launched a public campaign called »Goodbye Google, Hello Matomo«.

Finally, *Argia*'s main challenge is to continue to grow the number of subscriptions. So far, we have been quite successful: In 2022, we had our eight consecutive year of positive subscriber growth.

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