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The Burden of Subscribing: How Young People Experience Digital News Subscriptions

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes how young non-paying news users experience digital news subscriptions in Norway. As news organizations face declining advertising revenues, digital subscriptions are considered the sustainable financial strategy of the future, with young people a particularly challenging group to convert. We analyze the *experiences* of young adults who do not pay for news and identify three key dimensions to why they do not subscribe: lack of exclusivity, subscriptions as too time-consuming, and unattractive payment models. We also detail how the informants maneuver around paywalls, and we highlight “multi-perspectivism” as an overarching concern guiding the informants’ preferences. Empirically, the paper furthers our understanding of the challenges facing business models for journalism, especially problems with long-term, provider-specific subscriptions. Methodologically, we demonstrate how a combination of recurring interviews and a media diary matching a subscription test period yields a deeper analysis of motivations for, and experiences with, news use. Theoretically, the paper shows how approaching news through users’ experiences can provide insights not just into what users appreciate from news but also into where they consider there is a lack of value.

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Facing declining advertising sales and decreasing print readership, news organizations are pressured to find new revenue streams. A key strategy is to re-introduce the subscription model formerly used by print newspapers and charge users for online content, thus far with mixed results (Newman et al. 2022).

Pursuing this opportunity, news organizations, as well as journalism research, have focused on people’s “willingness to pay” for news. Survey data show correlation between low such willingness and young age, low educational levels, low income, as well as low news interest and extensive use of social media (Chyi 2012; Goyanes 2014, 2015; Kammer et al. 2015). In particular, younger people appear as a challenge, as a group who seldom actively seek out news, but rather rely on a “news find me”-perception (De Zúñiga, Strauss, and Huber 2020) based on “incidental exposure” to news in social

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media (Fletcher and Nielsen 2018). Studies have found that young people do recognize “the attractiveness of paywalled content” but still are reluctant to pay (Olsen and Solvoll 2018b, 118), much in line with a “culture of free”-orientation to news (Goyanes, Demeter, and de Grado 2020). Such patterns have raised concern not just for the future of quality journalism but for the lack of learning from news, leading some to fear a less informed citizenry (Benson 2019; Olsen and Solvoll 2018a). As such, how to get more young people to pay for news is a crucial question for journalism as well as society.

Previous studies illustrate considerations and attitudes toward digital news payment, and recent work tells us some about the overall news habits of youth (e.g., Berthelsen and Hameleers 2021; Peters et al. 2021). Yet, research into people’s opposition to paying tends to study users across age groups and platforms (Groot Kormelink 2022), focus on one particular newspaper (Kammer et al. 2015; Ross, Lester, and Konkes 2021), or be encapsulated within studies of those who do not use news much, or avoid it (e.g., Palmer and Toff 2020). We know less about how young potential subscribers—who use news but do not pay for it—*experience* news subscriptions. A recent review of the literature on willingness to pay calls for examining users’ needs and motives for not paying through qualitative inquiries (O’Brien, Wellbrock, and Kleer 2020). On this basis, our research question is: *How do young adult non-subscribing news users experience subscription-based news?*

To answer this research question, we opted for a qualitative approach. Drawing on rich empirical data from two interview rounds ($N = 15$) and a subscription period combined with media diaries, we investigate what young non-subscribers experience when they get access to paid news content and how they maneuver between different forms of paid and free content. The study acknowledges motivations for payment can change over time, and that lack of payment does not necessarily mean lack of access to subscription-based content, as people often borrow others’ subscriptions (Olsen 2020). Our case context is Norway, a Nordic “media welfare state” (Syvertsen et al. 2014), considered the most mature market for subscription-based online news, with as much as 41% having access to for-pay news, according to the 2022 *Digital News Report* (Newman et al. 2022).

This paper makes several contributions to the field of journalism studies. Theoretically, we explicate how users’ lived experiences can provide insights not just into what users appreciate from news, but also where they consider there is a lack of value. Methodologically, we demonstrate how a rich three-part data collection, combining recurring interviews, media diaries, and a subscription test period, yields a deeper analysis of motivations for, and experiences with, news use. This argument is substantiated through an empirical contribution that untangles the intricate motivations non-payers have for their news use, identifying three key experiences with subscription-based news: lack of exclusivity, too time-consuming, and unattractive payment models.

Literature Review: Understanding Motivations for News (Non-)Payment

Analyses indicate that breaking news, syndicated news, and wire news tend to remain free for all, while local content is withheld for subscribers (Sjøvaag 2016). Studies show that users who pay seem to visit more often, spend more time per article, and thus become more loyal readers (Olsen and Solvoll 2018b; Olsen, Kammer, and Solvoll

2020). Such findings have triggered concerns of a widening knowledge gap between subscribers and non-subscribers (Benson 2019), exacerbating already existing inequalities in news use and political participation based on socio-cultural variables (e.g., Helsper 2021; Hovden 2022). As Olsen and Solvoll (2018a, 188) claim, “as large groups of the audience hit the paywall and ‘bounce off,’ seeking alternative news sources and reading less local news, we argue that paywalls may result in a less informed local citizenry”. These concerns warrant further attention.

Research into people’s attitudes toward news that require payment has borrowed the term “willingness to pay” from behavioral economics and marketing. In marketing research, studies of willingness to pay typically focus on the “how much”-question, identifying the maximum price customers want to pay for a product or service. This is measured by a range of data from store sales statistics via experiments and expert surveys to customer surveys (e.g., Breidert, Hahsler, and Reutterer 2006). Studies of willingness to pay for news, however, often focus on users’ history of past payments, or their drivers or intent to pay (see Chen and Thorson 2019; O’Brien, Wellbrock, and Kleer 2020 for discussion), and reveal paying for online news as a minority practice across markets. In the *Digital News Report*, some Northern European countries return the highest numbers, with Norway as an outlier (41%), followed by Sweden (33%) and Finland (19%) (Newman et al. 2022).

Researchers have set out to look for explanations for people’s reluctance. Findings can be distilled related to socio-demographic variables, expected value of news, notions of free news, payment models, and distinctiveness.

Socio-demographic Variables

Concerning socio-demographic variables, high income, and high educational levels indicate greater chance of paying practices. Age appears more complex as an indicator. US surveys have found probability of expressing intent to pay for online news to decrease with age (Chyi 2012; Goyanes 2014), but the other way around for local news (Goyanes 2015). A Danish survey found “young people having more reservations when it comes to paying for news” (Kammer et al. 2015, 113), while a Norwegian survey of local news use found “younger people with lower interest in local news” a particularly challenging group since they “recognized the attractiveness of paywalled content but still were reluctant to pay for it” (Olsen and Solvoll 2018a). Adding to the impression of young users as less eager users of subscription news, Wadbring and Bergström (2021) studied subscribers’ behavior and found young users with short-term accounts to be the least active. As such, age seems to matter, but in different ways for different kinds of news and across markets (also O’Brien, Wellbrock, and Kleer 2020).

Expected Value of News

This points to the complexities below the surface of other relevant variables that shed light on why people do not pay for news. Survey analyzes have unsurprisingly found news interest a positive predictor of paying intent (e.g., O’Brien, Wellbrock, and Kleer 2020). Complicating such findings and zooming in on young people, Olsen (2020) studied young adults’ relations to local newspapers and found proximity and integration

in everyday life to be valued, but she also showed how some informants (who did not subscribe) viewed local news as a “nice to have” rather than “need to have” (Olsen 2020, 9; Palmer and Toff 2020). As such, young people seem to weigh expected individual use against cost, considering whether they will use subscriptions “enough” (Berthelsen and Hameleers 2021). On the other hand, as Olsen concluded in her study, the value of local news media “cannot be reduced to the weighing of benefits and costs for the individual alone”. Yet, perceived societal value does not necessarily translate into willingness to pay (Chen and Thorson 2019, 1311). This resonates with the findings of Ross, Lester, and Konkes (2021), where informants (across age groups) highlighted the local newspaper’s importance to the community, not to themselves individually. Interest in news, then, seems to be connected to willingness to pay, but in a complex manner that invites further scrutiny.

Notions of Free

Digital news has been a non-rivalrous and non-excludable public good. Subscription models make news an excludable good (a “club good”). In such cases, “the availability of free content sets the reference price for fee-based content at zero” (Punj 2015). Studies have indeed found widespread notions of news as a free good (see O’Brien, Wellbrock, and Kleer 2020). Based on Spanish interview data, Goyanes, Demeter, and de Grado (2020) found a “culture of free” with four dimensions: People saw news as a public good, they had an ingrained habit of free consumption, they preferred ad-funded free alternatives, and expressed a lack of interest in current events, politics or news. Some studies found a strict separation between those who on principle opposed paying for news and those who “accept the very premise of news organizations charging for online news” (Kammer et al. 2015, 117). The former group is mirrored by informants in a more recent study of young people, which argued that some were “on principle against the idea of paywalls—especially since, as a few mentioned, ‘we already pay a [media] license’” for a public service broadcaster (Berthelsen and Hameleers 2021, 13). Concerning those who do acknowledge the legitimacy of charging for news use, studies indicate that knowledge of the financial situation of journalism might increase likelihood of payments (Goyanes 2019, 9). While the zero-reference price for online news does seem widespread, there appear to be divisions between user groups both on the principled stand towards paying and regarding the reasons (e.g., ad-funded alternatives or public subsidies as other ways to fund news).

Payment Models

These intricacies also spill over to specific payment models. An early US survey study found different payment models to not matter for paying intent (Chyi 2012, 242). Still, scholars have pointed to micropayments as an opportunity (Graybeal and Hayes 2011), and a Danish focus group study found that young audiences expressed interest in novel payment models, wanting to select and personalize their news in a portfolio (Kammer et al. 2015, 117). As such, exactly how the availability of different payment models matter appears difficult to ascertain. In addition, there is also the question of non-subscribers’ knowledge of available models.

Distinctiveness

Among news professionals, exclusive or distinctive content is often highlighted as a key quality dimension of newsworthiness, expected to attract loyal and paying customers (Schultz 2007; Strömbäck, Karlsson, and Nicolas Hopmann 2012). Subsequently, the question is what users experience as distinctive journalism and how they describe distinctive content (see Lee and Chyi 2014). Kammer et al. (2015) found that informants who did pay for a specific quality newspaper's online edition pinpointed distinctiveness as a reason (Kammer et al. 2015). Echoing this finding, but inverted, Ross, Lester, and Konkes (2021) found informants who did not pay for their local newspaper to highlight lack of distinctiveness: The same information could be accessed for free elsewhere, and other sources were quicker publishing breaking news. Adding to this, a Spanish survey experiment found exclusiveness of content and prestigious journalists as "significant factors to increase readers' perception of online news economic value" (Goyanes, Artero, and Zapata 2021, 1732). As such, while (impressions of) distinctiveness do appear as important to understand (lacking) motivations to pay, it remains unclear which aspects make a news provision "distinctive" and how users in practice weigh distinctiveness against other elements in their motivations.

Media Experience

The findings reviewed here warrant further attention, especially to understand which kinds of sources the non-subscribers rely on. Such an analysis needs to keep in mind the muddled divisions between actually paying for a subscription (short or long-term) and having access through others' subscriptions (e.g., family, friends, or workplaces) (Olsen 2020; Ross, Lester, and Konkes 2021). Also, scattered examples of how non-subscribers use technical tools to circumvent paying (Ross, Lester, and Konkes 2021) merit exploration. The concern for non-subscribers' news diets would profit from insights into actual practices of young adults who make do with free news, and/or resort to others' subscriptions or in other ways maneuver around payment models. Exploring qualitatively life situations appear as a fruitful way forward here.

To probe further into such aspects related to non-payment for news, we mobilize the approach of *media experience*. Rather than focusing on apparent attitudes and intents, the notion of experience moves beyond immediate articulations and opinions, and facilitates insights grounded in everyday encounters with news (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer 2020). Consequently, this approach necessitates people to undergo something in order to experience it (Tuan 1977), emphasizing an outcome of interaction (Costera Meijer 2022). Within human-computer interaction studies, the notion of *user experience* is defined to include all "emotions, beliefs, preferences, perceptions, physical and psychological responses, behaviors and accomplishments that occur before, during and after use" (Mirnig et al. 2015, 437). As such, media experiences are essential to capture rich, empirical descriptions of how people motivate their news use and how they value subscription-based news.

Studies focusing on capturing media experiences have shown that quantifiable user metrics do not necessarily mirror what audiences experience as worthwhile (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer 2018, 2020), indicating that preferences rather should be

understood through complex, subjective, and *meaningful* media experiences (Costera Meijer 2022; Oliver et al. 2018). As such, the perspective of media experience allows us to analyze in-depth the choices people make when facing subscription-based news.

To sum up, existing studies point to young people's considerations for not paying for news as especially interesting. The multi-level nature of news interest, and its importance for paying, appear worthy of further attention in this context, as do attitudes towards the principle of charging users for news and the circumstances in which that would be considered justifiable for different users. In addition, the question also remains whether availability and knowledge of different payment models matter for such considerations, and so does the role of the amorphous idea of distinctiveness.

Applying the analytical lens of media experience, our study focuses on young adults who use news but do not pay for it. By studying young people's willingness to pay for news through their lived experiences and encounters with subscription-based news, we aim to provide rich insights into why they refrain from paying.

Methods and Data

Responding to the challenges discussed above, we propose a methodological approach suited to capture aspects of everyday news use. Our research question is: How do young adult non-subscribing news users experience subscription-based news? To answer this question, we draw on a three-step data collection, combining two interview rounds, media diaries and a subscription period of one month. In what follows, we outline our case context, and the triangulation of the different methods.

The Case of Norway

Given challenges facing journalistic business models, Norway makes an interesting case context for studying experiences with paid content, as it is considered the world's most mature market for subscription-based online news (Newman et al., 2022). Historically, Norwegian news media have had a unique customer base with a large and stable group of paying customers, both for single sale and subscription newspapers. In contrast to many countries, Norwegian news media have generally succeeded in converting print readers into paying online customers, with as much as 41% having access to for-pay news, compared to an average of 17% across countries in the 2022 *Digital News Report* (Newman et al. 2022).

The Norwegian online news market includes a diversity of subscription-based providers and free high-quality alternatives, such as Norwegian public service broadcaster *NRK*, Norway's most trusted news brand, with an overall trust score of 80% (Newman et al. 2022). Other free news sites include national newspapers such as *VG* and *Dagbladet*, where most of the content is available for free, while consumer-related content typically requires subscriptions. Most regional and local newspapers have transitioned over the last years to primarily metered or subscription-only models, where the minimum subscription fee typically grants full access for a month. The diversity of free and paid quality alternatives, combined with the relatively high trust and willingness to pay for online news, make it interesting to examine the experiences of non-subscribers when facing subscription content.

Sampling

We recruited 15 informants in the age between 26 and 30. Despite the relatively small sample, we considered data saturation to be reached within the first round of interviews. The comprehensive design of the study produced a lot of data and required quite a time-commitment from the informants. Therefore, we closely followed up with informants to facilitate that as many as possible completed all three steps. Based on previous experience (Moe and Ytre-Arne 2022), we expected some to withdraw during the diary phase and were prepared to add substitutes, yet no one did, apart from one informant who did not complete the final interview. The sample has a somewhat skewed gender distribution (ten women and five men), as some male informants withdrew during recruitment. We still chose to proceed with the sample as this exploratory study does not focus on gender differences. Initially, the sampling criteria included the age group 25–30 years, as we aimed to recruit young adults in the establishment stage and, at the same time, minimize the number of students who typically have less purchasing power. As a result of those who initially withdrew from the study, the age range was narrowed to 26–30 years. Most informants were employed and had higher education, but the sample also included three full-time students. Informants were recruited from urban and rural areas on the Western coast of Norway through snowballing, starting from the social networks of the interviewers, and had to meet the criterion of not paying for news. However, our sampling did not exclude informants who could access subscription-based news through others or previously had paid for news services. Still, nine of our informants had never paid or subscribed to online news services in the past.

Figure 1 outlines the set-up of our data collection. After recruitment, the authors *interviewed* each informant, focusing on their life situations and the role of media in their everyday life. We mapped news and media habits, interests, and preferred news sources. Questions also explored attitudes toward subscription-based content in general, media budgeting, past news habits, and how informants maneuvered between paid and free content. The interviews lasted between 40 and 75 min. The study was conducted a year into the Covid-19 pandemic, during a third wave of outbreaks. As a result of the social restrictions, all interviews were conducted digitally via Zoom. Compared to many other countries, however, the infection and mortality rates in Norway were comparatively low (Yarmol-Matusiak, Cipriano, and Stranges 2021). Still, the context of the pandemic was reflected in the interview guide, which included questions on how they experienced the pandemic news coverage and how it potentially impacted their willingness to pay.

To help our informants move beyond general attitudes toward paying for news, we opted for an approach where they could access for-pay content through subsidized subscriptions (Groot Kormelink 2022). As such, the subscription period could provide



Figure 1. Outline of the sequences in the three-part data collection.

reflections grounded in actual experiences with paid content rather than their general impressions and attitudes. Behavior economics has shown that customers treat expected losses and gains differently, typically overweighting prospective losses and underweighting equivalent gains (Thaler and Benartzi 2004; Tversky and Kahneman 1986). Consequently, potential subscribers will often be more concerned about losing something in a short-term perspective (such as subscription fees or forgetting to cancel trial subscriptions) than happy to gain something in the long run and thus refrain from paying. From this vantage point, focusing on people's *intent* to start paying may uncover a methodical weakness within the field. By offering our informants subsidized subscriptions, we attempted to push them over this barrier and give them the opportunity to gain experiences of their own.

The informants received access to a Norwegian online newspaper of their choice for a period of four weeks in May 2021. Most informants chose subscriptions in regional metered *Bergens Tidende* ($N = 6$), followed by national free newspapers *VG's premium subscription offer VG+* ($N = 3$) and metered *Aftenposten* ($N = 3$). Two informants opted for subscription-only local newspapers. As such, the informants got access to different types of paid news content, varying from consumer-related content in *VG+*, to news about local constitution day celebrations and Covid-19-updates in local newspapers. We allowed this spread in outlets to motivate interest in their trial subscriptions. Informants could use the subscriptions as they saw fit. While most used them several times per week, two informants never made use of them. Apart from the subsidized subscriptions, the informants did not receive any compensation. The subscriptions stopped automatically as the trial period ended.

To investigate how they experienced their subscriptions, informants were encouraged to fill out weekly *media diaries* during the four-week period. Diaries have previously proven to provide unique insights into how people use media to orient themselves to the public world (Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham 2010; Moe and Ytre-Arne 2022). Reported benefits include lowering chances of recall bias, where informants are provided with more freedom of expression as compared to interview situations (Bolger, Davis, and Rafaeli 2003; Kaun 2010). Our informants received a link to a digital diary where they could reflect on their experiences. To make the diaries more accessible, we opted for an online version adaptable to smartphones (SurveyXact). Diaries also included questions about how they would characterize their week in general and whether any particular news stories caught their attention, either through subscriptions or elsewhere. As such, the diaries sought insights into experiences grounded in informants' everyday encounters with news.

After the four-week subscription period, informants were *interviewed* a second time about their experiences with the subscriptions based on the entries described in the diaries. The interviews were designed to revisit topics and questions from the first interview round but also included questions about informants' interest in converting their subsidized trial subscriptions into permanent paid ones and how they assessed aspects of having access to subscription content.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and potentially identifying data were stored on a secure university server. The interviews and media diaries were de-identified, and informants were given pseudonyms. The study was registered with the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), and informed consent was obtained from all informants.

We analyzed the data through a qualitative thematic analysis with a predominantly inductive approach. The transcribed interviews and diary notes were categorized according to two prominent themes: first, dimensions of experiences with news subscriptions, and second, managing strategies to access subscription content. By using an empirical-based mixed method approach, drawing on informants' experienced encounters with for-pay content, we argue that we produced dependable and valid findings (Mason 2017).

A general limitation of the study is that we subsidized and made the informants "undergo" a subscription period. As such, their motivations for using the subscriptions might have felt unnatural or forced compared to users choosing to start paying for their own subscriptions. As noted, two of the informants reported not having made use of their subscriptions, despite the weekly diary reminders. This indicates that four weeks is a short period to establish new media habits. Rather than being a null result, we found this interesting to probe further during the second interview, to understand obstacles and considerations behind such non-use. On this basis, we now turn to the analysis.

Analysis

At the outset, there is a need to contextualize our informants' experiences of subscription-based news, expressed through their *overall news use, strategies for accessing information from subscription-based news, and views on the legitimacy of charging for news.*

First, our interviews and media diaries revealed that our informants actively sought out news on a regular basis, ranging from a couple of times per week to several times per day. Their *news use* was characterized by flexible and shifting news repertoires (Hasebrink and Popp 2006). Several explained that they in recent years had altered their repertoires towards free options as an increasing share of online news providers had implemented subscriptions. In addition to accessing news through podcasts, TV, and radio, the informants primarily relied on free national news sites. Particularly the Norwegian public service broadcaster *NRK's* news site was frequently mentioned as a prime source, valued as a free, high-quality, trustworthy news provision.

Second, many informants reported that they regularly checked subscription-based providers, varying from local newspapers to *The New York Times*—all of whose news stories they did not have access to. Lacking access, they relied on a myriad of *strategies to get information* from these stories: They searched for coverage of the same issue on free news sites or governmental websites; borrowed others' login; borrowed print newspapers; got shared screenshots from others; read social media comments to get an impression; or relied on friends and family trusted to be more updated on the news agenda. A shared tendency here is that such strategies were mobilized for specific stories or issues, not as a general habit.

Informants explained how these strategies required quite an effort. Their various and sometimes resource-intensive strategies to access subscription content illustrate that far from being "avoiders", non-subscribers can be both willing and interested in orienting themselves toward the public through news. Many informants expressed interest in public affairs ranging from local politics to pandemic measures and also talked about the importance of making up their own opinion. Most informants expressed a general interest and a sense of duty to follow the news. With their extensive news repertoires,

many communicated a comprehensive overview of the current news agenda. Absence of payment practices does, then, not necessarily mean lower interest in news or even lacking access to subscription-based content.

As a third contextual point, we did not find a correlation between lacking payment practices and an overall opposition towards news providers charging for online content (cf. Kammer et al. 2015, 117). On the contrary, informants expressed awareness of declining advertising revenues and decreasing print readership, and recognized news providers' need to charge for content. Their objections rather appeared to concern *what kind* of news that required payment: Instead of seeing news as a public good that should be free (Goyanes, Demeter, and de Grado 2020), the informants were positive to the idea of charging for certain types of content, including feature stories or trivia, particularly in local newspapers. In contrast, they were frustrated when encountering for-pay content concerning topics such as Covid-19, accidents, or elections. Such issues were seen as crucial information everyone should be able to access. Some even explained that this consideration became a matter of principle, linked to the journalistic remit:

News of great importance and general interest should be free, while news of special interest could be paywalled [...] after all, journalism should serve as a watchdog, and it loses its role if people need to seek information elsewhere that could turn out to be less relevant or less trustworthy. It loses a bit of its function if they hide it behind a paywall most people don't access. (Thomas, 29, financial advisor)

In the eyes of the informants, the perceived public value outweighed the legitimacy of charging for such content.

Rather than opposing paying for online news content per se, then, our informants, all non-subscribers, explained their lacking payment practices through what we identify as three key experiences: *lack of exclusivity*, *subscriptions as too time-consuming*, and *unattractive payment models*. With this providing structure in the following, we detail how experiences of subscription-based news can shed light on their practices of not paying for news.

Lack of Exclusivity

Our analysis suggests that distinctiveness (or lack thereof) is a significant factor in understanding why young adults withhold from paying for online news. The way the informants pinpointed distinctiveness was neither in relation to style or format nor concerning the journalists, but in terms of content: whether the same information could be accessed for free elsewhere, much in line with the perception of a zero-reference price (Punj 2015). As such, the issue was not whether a news provider offered a distinct perspective or more or less comprehensive coverage but more simply whether the same information could be found from other sources.

We identify this experience as a *lack of exclusivity*, where exclusivity pertains to the content (as in "exclusive stories" or "scoops"), not the recipient (as in "exclusive access"). The considered lack of exclusivity appears in two somewhat contradictory forms of expressions in our data.

In the first expression, lack of exclusivity is presented in relation to the diversity of Norwegian news media, which enables extensive consumption through various news sites,

including free, high-quality alternatives. As a truck driver, Erik listened to the radio for several hours a day, including national and international news radio stations (*BBC World Service* and *NRK News*). He also described a specific checking-cycle of various news sites on his smartphone, free as well as for-pay, and explained that he seldom came across news he could not access elsewhere. He especially highlighted NRK when reflecting on the subscription: “I feel like I can find the same news for free elsewhere, for instance, at nrk.no. If there is something that interests me in [a regional newspaper], I can often go to nrk.no and read the same story for free.”

Adding to the findings of Ross, Lester, and Konkes (2021) and Groot Kormelink (2022), our non-subscribers were often left with the impression that the same information could easily be accessed for free elsewhere, including high-quality options. However, contrasting Goyanes, Demeter, and de Grado (2020), the preferred alternatives were not ad-funded commercial outlets but publicly funded sites such as *NRK*, municipality websites, and, during the Covid-19 pandemic, public health information sites. Quantitative analyzes in previous studies have found no correlation between use of public broadcasters’ online news and people’s payment practices (Fletcher and Nielsen 2017; Sjøvaag, Pedersen, and Owren 2019). Our study identifies free content, including from nrk.no but also outside journalistic news sites, as an alternative that for some contribute to lower the perceived exclusivity of subscription-based news.

More generally, the extensiveness of the news coverage served as an indicator of how important the audience experienced the news. If a story received wide media coverage, the informants described a sense of duty to learn more. An example of such a prominent news story was an escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in May 2021. The conflict received widespread coverage across Norwegian online news sites, social media, TV, podcasts, and radio. Ten of our informants mentioned the story in the interviews or the media diaries. Mari, a 27-year-old IT-systems developer, explained that the massive coverage caught her interest: “When there are so many people [in the media] talking about the same thing, I feel like it’s something you at least should try to learn more about”. In such situations, however, the non-subscribers were often able to access the same information for free elsewhere—also offline. The widespread coverage and lack of distinctive content thus indicated that free alternatives would sufficiently cover their information needs.

As a second contrasting expression of lack of exclusivity, news content should not appear *too* exclusive, in the sense of narrow. Stories only covered on one news site, typically in a local or regional one, were valued as less important or even unnecessary by the informants: they felt less obligated to read about it and refrained from paying. In this sense, exclusivity had a potentially negative effect on how they experienced subscription-based content, contrary to well-established professional journalistic beliefs (Schultz 2007; Strömbäck, Karlsson, and Nicolas Hopmann 2012), where distinctive content is highlighted as a quality expected to attract customers. Knowing the news was not mentioned elsewhere also made it easier for informants to come to terms with the fact that they could not access articles without paying. Iselin, a 28-year-old construction engineer, described how she reasoned in these situations: “I just think, ‘yeah, then I cannot read it, and then it’s probably not so important”.

A final finding related to exclusivity is that the majority did not experience any noteworthy differences after receiving access to subscription content. In the second interview, after their subscription period ended, many struggled to distinguish between what kind

of content required payment or not. This unawareness could partly be explained by the fact that the informants used their subscriptions to varying degrees, in addition to other free news sources. Having automatic and full access may also have made them less aware of what content required payment. Still, getting a sense of the product you are paying for is essential to keep paying. In this context, consumer economics characterizes news as “experience” goods: something that consumers do not have prior knowledge of and, therefore, must consume in order to assess (Hamilton 2004).

Subscriptions as Too Time-consuming

The second dimension we would like to highlight concerns how informants experienced the subscriptions in relation to time. Some expressed a commitment to read more thoroughly if they were to pay for a news service. Reflecting on his subsidized subscription period, Thomas expressed that “now that I’ve had access, I’ve felt that everything [in the newspaper] should be read”. Adding to the same impression, Iselin stated that if she had to pay for the subscription herself, she would have used it a lot more to make sure to get value for her money. The point here was not the feeling of “sunk cost” in financial terms but rather that subscriptions were perceived as too time-consuming. This is a key tendency of the experiences expressed across the sample (also Palmer and Toff 2020).

Rather than viewing subscriptions as a replacement, many used them as an addition to their already existing news habits (Wadbring and Bergström 2021). In this context, some described the experience of keeping up with their subscriptions as a draining chore:

[...] you have to get your phone, open the browser, type in vg.no ... I mean, I didn’t have to log in or anything, I was already logged in because of my subscription. But then I had to start scrolling and look for something interesting [...]. It just felt like another thing I had to do. (Elise, 27, medical doctor)

Their experiences of news subscriptions as a time-consuming, additional chore were discordant with a busy life. In this context, many implicitly described a time budget, where their news use made up a certain share. During this “news reading time”, the informants wanted to choose freely from a range of news providers instead of feeling tied or committed to a specific subscription. Because the subscriptions were experienced as an addition that would take up time on account of other activities, many seemed reluctant to spend more time on news, especially working parents like Elise. Instead, they underlined the need to focus on friends and family and take breaks from the news, particularly in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic and the constant news flow. In fact, many highlighted the pandemic news reporting as exhausting and expressed that the massive coverage had made them less willing to pay for news. This resonates with previous studies, where people have been found to limit their news use as a strategy to shield themselves against information overload during the pandemic (Mannell and Meese 2022; Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021). To some, the idea of implementing additional news habits to their existing time budget thus seemed exhausting.

Unattractive Payment Models

As we have seen, many informants felt tied down by the subscriptions. The final dimension we would like to highlight concerns another aspect of that same feeling but in

relation to financial experiences of the subscription models. To the extent that their choice of not paying was rationalized through financial considerations, the informants presented it as a result of their overall media repertoires rather than based on the individual subscription price. When asked about the price, Adrian had to check the subscription deals (cf. Groot Kormelink 2022) and found that a digital subscription to *Aftenposten* costs approximately €28 a month. He was not critical of the price as such but assessed the fee based on his overall news consumption:

... it's okay if we just look at this one separately. But considering what I would *like* to have, I mean, input from several sources [...], then you need at least three [different subscriptions], and if the price is the same elsewhere ... Then you have to pay [€100] a month. So if everything requires premium subscriptions and I need a login everywhere, it's just too much. (Adrian, 28, sales representative)

As noted, most Norwegian subscription newspapers use metered or premium models, where the minimum subscription fee typically grants full access for a month. In many ways, however, such payment models seem incompatible with news habits of young adults. Previous studies have indicated that young people appear to be less loyal to one individual news provider, as subscriptions typically are perceived as “only one extra source of information” (Wadbring and Bergström 2021). As such, capturing users' attention and loyalty in a digital, multi-platform media landscape goes beyond monetary considerations (Himma-Kadakas and Kõuts 2015). Our informants often expressed interest in just one or two articles from each news site, making it unattractive to commit for a full month. In fact, committing to subscriptions was perceived as restrictive and limiting:

My experience was that I picked up news from many other sources than the subscription I had access to [...] It's not easy for me to log in to a news site and find news there when I'm somehow locked to that specific newspaper. It's more like a hassle, something I have to do in order to have a clear conscience about the subscription in a way [...] Paying monthly and being tied to just the one ... Just one or two news sites or something like that, it's not very tempting to me. (Elise, 27, medical doctor)

Some also expressed *subscription fatigue* (Fletcher 2019, 35) due to registration, login, and the creation of new passwords for each news provider, adding to previous findings on subscription saturation and non-payment (Groot Kormelink 2022). Interestingly, their replies implied a contradiction between the freedom of choosing between several (and free) news sites and the burden of having a subscription. The freedom of not being *tied* to a subscription was thus recognized as an affordance many seemed to prefer.

The informants who had paid for news in the past described a feeling of obligation to use their subscriptions quite extensively to get value for their money. This was experienced as a duty rather than something they enjoyed. When asked to reflect on their subsidized subscription period in the second interview round, many informants expressed that they did not use their subscription *enough* to justify paying for it. They thus seemed to be weighing expected individual use against cost (Berthelsen and Hameleers 2021; Groot Kormelink 2022).

In search of attractive alternatives, the informants called for novel subscription models better adapted to their various media repertoires. Some preferred micropayments and wanted access to individual articles. Others called for a “Spotify model” and the possibility to pick and choose across different providers through a joint subscription. Here, our

findings resonate with previous studies where young audiences expressed interest in selecting and personalizing their news in a portfolio (Kammer et al. 2015, 117).

Discussion and Conclusion

Following concerns about a widening knowledge gap between subscribers and non-subscribers (Benson 2019; Olsen and Solvoll 2018a), this article explored how young non-paying news users in Norway experience digital news subscriptions. To better understand why they refrain from paying, we have analyzed people's lived *experiences* grounded in their everyday encounters with news, free as well as for-pay. With this approach, our analysis identifies three key experiences grounding non-payment: News subscriptions are perceived to be lacking exclusivity, to be too time-consuming as they are added to existing news habits, and to have unattractive payment models. These experiences simultaneously demonstrate established strategies for accessing information from subscription-based news, where informants searched for coverage of the same news stories in free high-quality alternatives, governmental websites, or by borrowing others' logins. Consequently, our findings indicate extensive knowledge of how equivalent information can be found. Our informants were not opposed to the idea of paying for news but had critical views on the legitimacy of charging for certain types of news linked to the journalistic remit.

The informants' complex and sometimes resource-intensive strategies to access subscription-based content also illustrate that far from being "avoiders", non-subscribers can be both willing and interested in orienting themselves towards the public through news. This was also apparent across the media diaries and the interviews, which indicated overall awareness of the same dominant news stories, where they learned about the news regardless of their use of subscriptions. Having access to subscription content did thus not appear as a prerequisite to a public orientation through news. In this sense, our findings seem reassuring for previous fears of widening knowledge gaps between subscribers and non-subscribers, at least in a Norwegian context where strong free alternatives exist.

Their widespread and shifting use of various news sources simultaneously indicates less loyalty to the various news providers. An overall observation based on our analysis is that these young non-subscribers expressed a strong preference for "multi-perspectivism" in their news use. They included a myriad of both national and international sources, they were tech-savvy and knew how to maneuver around payment models in search of information, and were pragmatic but not naïve when searching for accessible information. A key overarching preference was the freedom of not being tied to a subscription. As such, it seemed unthinkable to "commit" to one or two providers. Subscriptions were rather experienced as supplementary and restrictive burdens to their already existing news repertoires.

This indicates a clear need for new subscription models but also increased awareness of recently introduced models that do allow users to access several newspapers through one joint subscription. The informants' preference for multi-perspectivism also underlines how news serves a distinct role in the everyday lives of these young adults, where they, to a lesser extent, seem to identify with the individual provider. Such preferences pose a challenge for providers in search of loyal paying customers. As the informants were left with a vague impression of the subscription they received, their low experienced worth

simultaneously indicates a great potential to clarify and communicate benefits of subscribing.

We have highlighted how implementation of new habits is an important factor for use in this context. It takes time to establish habits, and as such, four weeks is a short period for introducing new aspects to already existing and established media diets. This entails a potential limitation, which may be taken into consideration in the design of future research. As we have seen, our informants' generally comprehensive overview of the current news agenda can partly be explained by the Norwegian media system, characterized by highly trusted public service broadcasters and free commercial alternatives. This reminds us that Norwegian news media are in a unique position and further underlines that this is a qualitative case study with no ambition to make an empirical generalization. We do, however, hold that the analytical and theoretical contributions may be transferable, and future research could further study similar groups to explore comparable experiences across different countries and media systems. A final point concerns our limited sample, with women overrepresented. Further research should explore how potential gender differences or distribution of caregiving tasks may influence news consumption and experiences of news payment. With this in mind, we argue there still is a need for further qualitative studies to better understand the value people ascribe to news in everyday life.

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