Subscription Redux: the news as a service

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As the news business seeks a model to maximise its revenue and make its content production super efficient, could a new conception of subscription be the answer?

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For years I have been arguing that journalism is moving from being a manufacturing to a service industry. It used to be about creating packages of content like a newspaper that people (or the late lamented advertisers) paid for at a one-off cover price. That's largely gone. People now get their news through a variety of sources, increasingly (free) via social networks or apps.

Again, for years I have been arguing for a networked journalism that builds a relationship with the audience throughout the process of production: news gathering from social media, interactive sharing and moderation. But the final stage eluded me as a business model. How to get people to pay for this stream of connected content creation?

The old kind of subscription was a discount sales pitch: "£12 for 12 months", "£6 for students" etc. It was just a pricing deal not an offer that respected the customer's interest in your product or a way of adding real value to their experience.

We are now seeing a more committed form of subscription. In the UK the Economist, Times and Financial Times, to name just three, are working much harder at using audience data to underpin a continuous process of engagement. It could be all those reader's offers in The Times of holidays, cinema tickets etc. Or much more interestingly, the way that the FT and Economist (and others) are working on personalisation. They are producing fewer stories but making them work harder by adapting to different platforms, deepening the vertical extent of their coverage with more opportunities for the reader to tailor their experience and more attention to what the subscriber wants.

Have a look at how Trinity Mirror in the UK is diving deeper into its audience behaviour analytics to show its journalists the different ways that their users are experiencing their content creation. Can this also be used to help shape a new form of subscription relationship between newsroom and audience/customer?



As this excellent article explains other industries have thought along similar lines. For years car manufacturers have made more profit from servicing the cars than the initial sale. The music industry has also shifted from manufacturing over-priced CDs to a blend of downloads, concerts and t-shirts. Spotify exemplifies the appetite of even the native digital millennials to pay a subscription at the right price-point for convenience, choice and a good UX.

Journalism could do this.

This kind of continuous engagement is also a Good Thing for that vital purpose of journalism: to be a forum, a space that contains highly relevant content that can act as focus for collective debate as well as personal development and satisfaction. Audience data combined with personalisation and interactivity with a community of subscribers is a sustainable structure for doing this.

The membership model of the Guardian is not (yet) good enough. Asking people to pay to be part of a community that supports good journalism is a charity model and although there has been great innovation at Kings Place on engagement, it's not been linked properly into a subscription-style monetisation model. The Wall Street Journal appears to have a much more worked out approach to reinventing and expanding its subscription strategy.

Likewise, the idea that any kind of comment from readers is a Good Thing is also not enough. Too often the people who post their thoughts 'below the line' are a tiny (male) and rather trollish minority of your customer base. There are much better ways to foster real engagement than spending scarce resources on managing madness. That's why some news organsiations like NPR in the US are abandoning simple comments and moderation in favour of other forms of engagement. It pays to pay attention to valuable readers. Make them subscribe.



I've stopped reading the comments below news articles and on gossip blogs because those are the ones that'll ruin your day in a second.

- Taylor Swift

AZQUOTES

Again, for years I've been saying that journalism must move from production to curation. But that has to be defined and refined in line with a clear relationship with people who will pay for the privilege of you doing the work. Not just to create the content but to shape it via imagery, data visualisation, video, etc in ways that give the user an experience that makes them pay attention beyond a click. Content is only the centre of the brand.

So it's not just about achieving volume or scale. The era of duplication or universality (even perhaps at places like the BBC) is over. This is all about making the most of what you have got that is special and, as Jeff Jarvis said many years ago, link to the rest. But link cleverly because that curation service is as important as your own work in an era when people are swimming in streams of algorithmically-driven content decided by the bots/humans of Zuckerberg Towers. If journalists can't do better than them then they don't deserve their subscriber's hard-earned cash.

Or you can leave it to the aggregators such as Sonder, a soon to be launched app that targets intelligent UK millennials with an offer of quality content from a range of publishers curated in themes and 'moods' to suit their target audience of students and aspirational but time-poor young professionals. They are seeking to monetise the relationship gap between journalism and the audience via a carefully priced 'Spotify for news' subscription service. Everyone benefits, including the publisher.

There are dangers with the subscription model. Paywalls, apps, and subscriptions are all part of the closing of the net and the erection of those garden walls around fertile content. The worry is that the best journalism and the enhanced news service I am talking about are only available to those who can pay. There is also the worry that it helps underpin the drift towards filter bubbles of self-referential communities.

These are real problems. But gosh, we need some solutions and they are not going to be perfect. Perhaps careful curation that builds in serendipity can help. The stats show that people like diversity and surprise as well as self-affirmation. Clever subscription models that provide varying entry points and reward actively engaged readers might be part of an editorial and economic solution for journalism.

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