

# 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?

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.

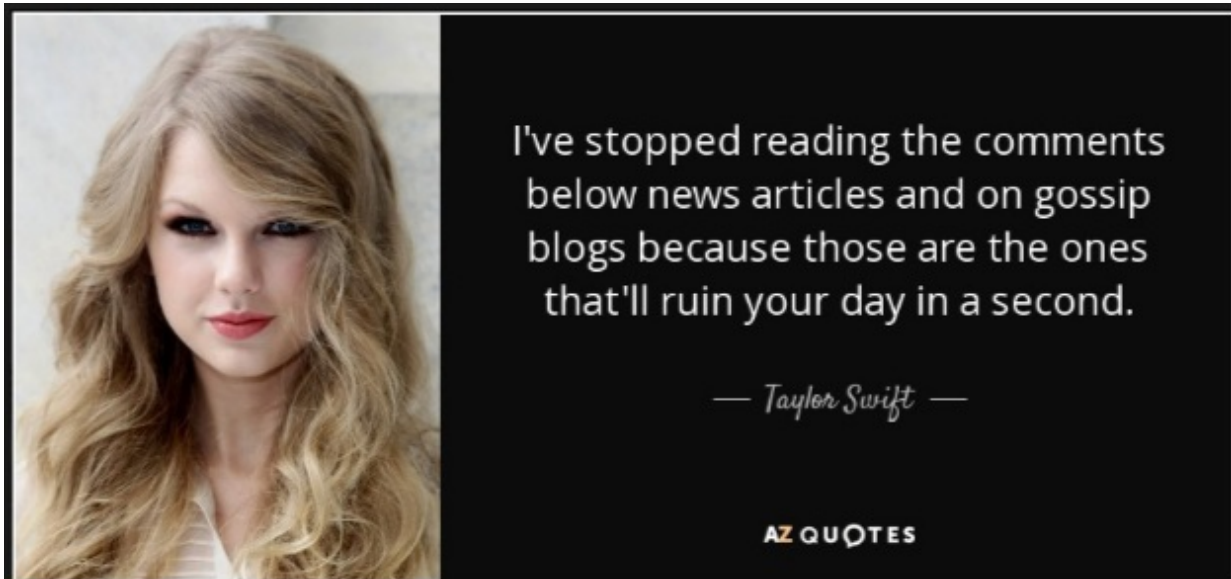
Again, for years I have been [arguing for a networked journalism](#) that builds a relationship with the audience throughout the process of production: news gathering from social media, interactive sharing and moderation. But the final stage eluded me as a business model. How to get people to pay for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





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.

*This article by Polis director, Professor Charlie Beckett @CharlieBeckett, Department of Media and Communications, LSE*

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