

The Times Pay-Wall: A Golden Ghetto or Desert Island Risk?

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From the Garden of Eden to [Jonestown](#), humans have dreamed of ideal walled communities. If only we can shelter from the winds of reality, so goes the myth-makers, we can create a space to live our lives the way that we want. In that sense, The Times' pay-wall plans are positively utopian.

I have nothing in principle against pay-walls. To get a price you have to define the good for which you are charging. Subscription has a long and honourable tradition in journalism of providing a relatively secure and stable source of cash to pay hacks. Alongside advertising it worked a treat. Although the success of the latter meant we in the UK neglected the former in favour of casual sales.

Now Lebedev has gone off in one direction turning the Standard (and perhaps the Independent) free, while Murdoch has gone the other way. Anyone would be reluctant to bet against him. But by putting up a pay-wall he will surely reduce the value of his advertising and the sheer fuff of signing up will probably lose many regular readers alongside the casual online browser. I am sure he has done his sums and it might yet work. However, I suspect this has more to do with his desire to re-shape the market and set the fox amongst his chicken competitors.

But what interests me is what this means for networked journalism.

Take Sky News where all types of social media are being integrated into their journalism. They regularly news-gather via Twitter and Facebook, while reader tips flow in through email. You can watch the channel live online and enjoy a feast of blogs and user generated content on the website. All for 'free'. It's supported by advertising and the cross-subsidy of Sky subscriptions. Are they going to put up a pay-wall around that? Of course not. And so the product just keeps getting better as it becomes more networked.

But for The Times the danger is that it's journalists will get cut off along with some potential readers.

When The Times goes behind its pay-wall how will it attract new readers/subscribers? Will it's journalists be reliant for interactivity and participation from their own (smaller) subscription community? Of course, there's nothing to stop Times hacks tapping into the rest of the Internet, but if it's not connected to the outside world then their output will become increasingly 'irrelevant'.

This lack of 'relevance' is something [Emily Bell pointed out in the Guardian](#):

"...the challenge for the Times, and the rest of us, in a world of fragmented media is not principally to make journalism pay, but to keep it relevant. .. The paywall may address the issue of newspaper circulation decline, but it does not begin to tackle the far greater challenge of telling effective stories and creating activities and audiences in a constantly changing digital landscape...To stimulate a market for news, you need an engaged population, so perhaps the news business needs to think harder about creating engagement rather than merely encouraging consumption. I am happy to be proved wrong, but I still find it hard to understand how deliberately downsizing your audience is ever going to help with the broader problem."

I would agree with that, and I think that journalism becomes 'relevant' in the sense that Emily Bell means through what I call Networked Journalism. This is how I describe it in a paper to be published in June:

“Relevance is perhaps the most radical aspect of networked journalism. It means much more than simply having a direct bearing upon a matter or simply providing ‘what the public wants’. In networked journalism relevance is conditioned by public participation and connectivity to produce journalism that is editorially much more material or germane to the issues. In its distribution it is also much more proximate to the public. It seeks to be where public discourse happens rather than creating a discrete space called news...But relevance is a strategic imperative as well. It means creating structures that are genuinely open and engaged. That means allowing for transparency and accountability as part of the editorial system rather than as a regulatory addition. It means turning news into social media.”

I find that hard to reconcile with what The Times is doing. Of course, The Times may create a golden ghetto. The Financial Times is already busily creating its own little clubs of readers who have their own networks and social media within FT.com. It's making money out of this. However, the FT is a specialist, upmarket publication with very wealthy readers who make money out of reading the FT. I am not sure that creating little communities will work with a more general publication like The Times. But even if it does succeed in the short-term I fear that the kind of journalism that it will sustain will be more narrow. Instead of discovering a Brave New World, they may simply have washed up on a desert island.

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