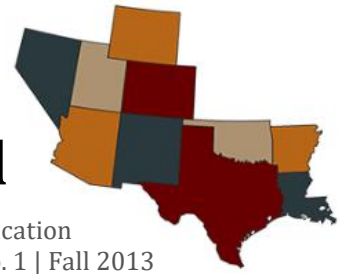


Southwestern Mass Communication Journal



A journal of the Southwest Education Council for Journalism & Mass Communication
ISSN 0891-9186 | Vol. 29, No. 1 | Fall 2013

A study of college students' attitudes toward a paid news content system

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Keywords: attitude, college student, news copyright, online news, paywall

Suggested citation:

Sang, Y. (2013). A study of college students' attitudes toward a paid news content system. *Southwestern Mass Communication Journal*, 29(1). Retrieved from <http://swecjmc.wp.txstate.edu>.

A study of college students' attitudes toward a paid news content system

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Abstract

This study investigated college students' attitudes toward a paid news content system. It sought to identify factors that may predict such attitudes. To deepen our understanding of news copyright issues, this study also analyzed responses to open-ended questions and identified patterns in such responses. Among the predictor variables, perceiving news as a commodity was the only significant predictor of college students' attitudes toward a paid news model. The results suggest that respondents' perception that news is free and easily available from the Internet may be the biggest barrier to implementing a paid news model. Relatively few respondents considered news to be a commodity, though most respondents thought that news is a kind of public service that informs the public and benefits our society. Policy implications, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research were discussed in the context of news copyright and online news economics.

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A study of college students' attitudes toward a paid news content system

It has been a difficult time for newspapers to make ends meet due to a continuous decrease in readership. According to a 2010 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, 26% of respondents reported that they read a print newspaper yesterday, compared to 38% in 2006, with most of the decrease in readership coming from offline newspapers (Pew Research Center, 2010a). The survey showed that “The internet has surpassed newspapers and radio in popularity as a news platform on a typical day and now ranks just behind TV.” Not surprisingly, the same survey also showed that search engines play a vital role in society by providing people with news—33% of respondents regularly use search engines to get news, up from 19% in 2008.

In an age of declining revenues for traditional news media, newspapers have criticized news aggregators such as Google for copyright infringement. For instance, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Associated Press*, and many other companies have claimed that their copyright of news has been infringed by web portals' deep-linking activities, which allow readers to bypass the news content creators' home page and go directly to the corresponding news articles. They argue that if the copyrighting of news is not allowed, then the creators of news content will suffer economic difficulties and, ultimately, the quantity and quality of the information available to society will be diminished.

Google and other news aggregators, however, have argued that their use of news lies in the realm of “fair use.” According to Easton (2004), news is different from usual copyrighted works in that it “benefits least from the incentive to produce afforded by

copyright protection” (p. 513). News is closely related to the public interest in that it allows citizens to access information that is essential for many aspects of their daily lives. In particular, news plays a critical role in democratic politics. Thus, news can be considered a public good that contributes to the development of our society. The clash between these opposing viewpoints—news as public good versus news as a private commodity— raises the question of who, in fact, owns the news. Despite long-standing concern and controversy regarding news copyright, however, there is still no agreement about the extent to which news is the protected property of the individual or the company that made it.

Notably, almost all newspapers have offered their news to Internet users for free since the Internet was invented. The way in which newspapers have provided their news on the Internet has reinforced people’s perceptions of online news content as free information. According to a 2010 Harris poll, 77% of respondents responded that they would not pay anything to read a news article on the Internet. Given the seriousness of newspapers’ economic difficulties, they are aggressively exploring how they can earn money from their news content. Naturally, they are devoting more attention to a paid news content model on the Internet.

Ultimately, public policy may reflect people’s attitudes toward the object of controversy. Thus, it is important to identify factors that affect people’s attitudes toward a paid news content system and their attitudes toward paywall specifics such as a metered paywall approach (allowing readers to access a small number of articles before they are required to pay for content). A greater understanding of people’s attitude formation

process with regard to these issues can help decision makers plan and implement effective policies that evoke positive responses among the public. From a theoretical point, with this in mind, this study will gather empirical data to provide a foundation for further discussions of a paid news content system.

Theoretical Background and Research Questions

Is News a Public Service? Is it a Commodity?

Throughout history, “it had been taken for granted that news was in the public domain; even today copyright histories take a similar view and pay little attention to the question” (Cloud, 1996, p. 144). Several scholars have approached the question of whether newspapers or news could be protected by copyright laws by exploring the historical development of the effort to secure news copyright (Bugbee, 1960; Cloud, 1996; Easton, 2004; Patterson & Lindberg, 1991; Swindler, 1955). Given the growing commercial value of news, major publishers developed wide-ranging news-gathering networks and telegraph services (Cloud, 1996). Consequently, they wanted to protect their efforts to publish timely news through copyright (Cloud, 1996). However, efforts to include news as a subject of the copyright law were unsuccessful until 1909 in the United States. In the end, the Copyright Act of 1909 explicitly included news as being eligible for copyright protection (Easton, 2004).

Relatively few studies have focused on the issue of news copyright in a global context. Independently of one another, Hudson (1928) and Bjork (1996) dealt with the international endeavor of protection of property in news. Their studies demonstrated

that there has been international controversy concerning whether news can be copyrightable and if so, to what extent.

Different points of view regarding news have made it difficult to reach an agreement regarding the news copyright issue (Cloud, 1996). One current debate surrounding the “property in news” issue involves the legal judgment of the practice of deep-linking, whereas previous discussions have solely concentrated on the question of whether news could be copyrightable.

The one thing that seems clear is that more understanding of the tension between the original news creators and the organizations that want to use this news for various reasons is needed to formulate reasonable solutions for the problem. Furthermore, technological developments have altered the terrain of the debate.

The Growing Discussion of a Paid News Content System

According to a report released by the Newspaper Association of America, newspaper advertising revenue for both print and online newspaper totaled \$25.8 billion in 2010, which marks the lowest ad-based annual revenue for the newspaper industry since 1985 (Parker, 2011). Also, the continuous decline in newspaper readership has become a problem for news companies for which there is no clear answer. According to the State of the News Media 2011 report conducted by the Pew Research Center, newspaper newsrooms are now 30% smaller than in 2000 (Pew Research Center, 2011). The current crisis newspapers face is a pressing matter that needs to be addressed because quality journalism is essential for democracy. Newspapers still provide most of the

content people need and consume in their daily lives (Pew Research Center, 2010d). As mentioned earlier, almost all newspapers have offered their news to Internet users for free on their own websites since the Internet was invented. Internet users now consider news content to be freely accessible and might not be willing to pay for it. In addition, newspapers increasingly “depend on aggregators and social networks, such as Google and Facebook, respectively, to bring them a substantial portion of their audience” (Grotticelli, 2011, para. 4).

In order to solve the current crisis, many news organizations have been paying more attention to a paid-content model. In March 2011, *The New York Times* adopted a paywall approach. Not surprisingly, in September 2010, Arthur Sulzberger Jr., the chairman of *The New York Times*, publicly stated that the paper version of the newspaper would soon cease to exist (Blodget, 2010, para. 1). Several major newspapers, including *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, have recently been challenging the seemingly unbreakable orthodoxy that people will not pay for online news (Clark, 2010, para. 1).

Johnston (2012) notes that the newspaper industry holds positive attitudes toward a paywall approach and will increasingly adopt a paywall. Meanwhile, in order to provide a practical guide for a sustainable paid subscription model, Friedman (2003) suggested 10 steps for charging content quite a long time ago, introducing a few business models in use. Market reports, however, have cast doubt on whether the subscription model can work. According to a 2002 consumer survey conducted by Jupiter Media Matrix, 70% of online adult respondents reported that they could not understand why anyone would pay for

content online. Another market report showed that if asked to pay for online news, 71% of news site users would use another site to get news because there are so many ways to use available free sites (Borrell & Associates, 2001). More recently, a report released by the Pew Internet Project showed that only 35% of online news consumers have a favorite site, and only 19% of these loyal news consumers would be willing to pay for online news if asked to do so (Pew Research Center, 2010d). Similarly, a Harris Interactive survey (2009) found that only 5% of Internet users who visited a free news site at least once a month would choose to pay if asked to do so.

Chyi (2005) examined the general public's aversion to fee-based online news services by using a random-sample telephone survey of 853 Hong Kong residents. After analyzing the relationships between demographic variables (gender, age, education), media (TV, newspaper, Internet) use, preference for online news, and income, on the one hand, and paying intent, on the other hand, the author found that only age and newspaper use were related to paying intent for online news. By examining various factors that might influence people's willingness to pay for online news, Chyi's study advanced our understanding of the economics of online news. In order to get a better understanding of the underlying factors influencing people's attitudes toward a paid news model, however, it would be useful to examine a wider range of variables. To that end, this study explores value predispositions such as regarding news as a public service and regarding news as a commodity.

Research questions

The primary goal of this exploratory study is to explain how college students

form their attitudes toward a paid news content system. Given that college students are among the most active users of the Internet and that they largely consume news content on the Internet (Pew Research Center, 2012), studying their attitudes can shed light on issues of a paid news content system.

This study uses data from a survey to examine the influence of value predispositions, Internet usage, and Internet news usage on these attitudes. The initial step in understanding attitude formation regarding a controversial policy is to identify value predispositions associated with the controversy (Brossard & Nisbet, 2007). The question of whether news should be protected by copyright laws has been a controversial issue because different people have different points of view with regard to whether news is a public service or a commodity. Thus, respondents' predispositions on this issue may be related to their attitudes toward a paid news system. This study tests whether this is the case. This study also examines the relationships between respondents' levels of general Internet usage and Internet newspaper usage, on the one hand, and their support for a paid news system, on the other hand. Finally, this study seeks to better understand how college students think about news copyright issues by analyzing their responses to open-ended questions. Thus, this study considers the following research questions:

RQ1: What are college students' attitudes toward a paid news content system?

RQ2: What factors predict college students' attitudes toward a paid news content system?

RQ3: How do college students discuss news copyright issues in their own words?

RQ3a: How do they discuss whether news stories should be treated differently from other materials such as music or film in terms of copyright protection?

RQ3b: How do they discuss the idea of media organizations charging readers access for their stories?

Methods

Data Collection Procedures

As noted above, the main purpose of this exploratory study is not to draw generalizations about the broader public but to develop a better understanding of college students' attitudes toward the paid news content model. Given the aim of this study, a convenience sampling method was adopted. Participants were undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at a Midwestern university.

This study used an online survey distributed via email. Participants were recruited in classes by their instructors and through email. All responses were saved automatically for subsequent analysis. Participants were given extra credit toward their course grades for taking part in this study.

Three hundred and fifty three people participated in this study. Respondents who had not read a newspaper on the Internet were screened from the analysis. Of the 353 respondents, 10 were eliminated from the data set because they answered "No" to the following question: "Do you ever read news stories on the Internet?" Additional 30 were eliminated from the data set because they did not answer subsequent survey

questions. The sample was 54.0% female and 44.1% male, with a mean age of 22.27 ($SD = 5.17$). In terms of year in school, 15.7% were freshmen, 28.8% were sophomores, 20.8% were juniors, 22.7% were seniors, and 10.2% were graduate students. When asked whether they plan to pursue a career in the field of journalism, 13.4% of respondents responded “*Yes*.” Another 27.8% respondents answered “*Maybe*.” More than half (58.8%) of respondents, however, reported that they have no plans to work in the field of journalism.

Measures

General Internet usage

Respondents were asked the following question: “On average, how much time per day do you spend on the Internet?” This measure was used to capture respondents’ self-reported Internet usage. Answer categories were drawn from the Biennial Media Consumption Survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press in 2010. Responses were coded as 1 for *Less than half an hour*, 2 for *30 minutes to less than an hour*, 3 for *about an hour*, 4 for *more than 1 hour to less than two hours*, 5 for *two hours to less than three hours*, 6 for *three hours to less than four hours*, and 7 for *four hours or more*.

Internet news usage

The following question was used to measure respondents’ self-reported internet news usage: “On average, how much time per day do you spend on the

Internet reading news stories?” Again, answer categories were drawn from the Biennial Media Consumption Survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press in 2010. Responses were coded as 1 for *Less than 15 minutes*, 2 for *15 minutes to less than 29 minutes*, 3 for *30 minutes to less than 59 minutes*, and 4 for *more than 1 hour*.

Value predispositions regarding news as a commodity or public service

Two single 7-point Likert items ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* were used to measure the respondents’ predispositions regarding news as a public service and news as a commodity. The item for the former was “News coverage should be considered a public service that benefits society,” and the item for the latter was “News coverage should be considered a commodity that benefits the media organization that produces it.”

Attitudes toward a paid news content system

Three 7-point Likert items ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* were used to measure respondents’ attitudes toward a paid news content system. The three items were combined into an index for subsequent analyses. The three items were as follows: 1) “A paid news content model should be applied more widely to online newspapers.” 2) “People should pay for news stories they read on the Internet.” and 3) “Reading news stories without paying for them should be stopped by the courts.” The Cronbach’s alpha for an index constructed from the three items was .81

($M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.29$). Thus, the three items reliably measured one underlying construct.

Open-ended questions

Two open-ended questions were asked to provide richer insights into college students' attitudes toward a paid news model and news copyright issues. The questions were as follows: 1) "When you think about whether news stories should be treated differently from other materials such as music or film in terms of copyright protection, what comes to mind?" 2) "When you think about media organizations charging readers for access to their news stories, what comes to mind?"

Findings

General Internet Use

With respect to the frequency of Internet use, the most common response was four hours or more each day (28.8%). The second most common answer was two hours to less than three hours each day (24.0%), followed by three hours to less than four hours (22.0%), more than one hour to less than two hours (18.2%), and about one hour (5.4%). Almost nobody said that they spent 30 minutes to less than an hour (1.3%) or less than half an hour (.3%).

Online News Usage

When asked how much time per day they spend on the Internet reading news

stories, the most common response was 15 minutes to 29 minutes (37.7%), followed by less than 15 minutes (33.9%), 30 minutes to 59 minutes (19.5%), and more than 1 hour (8.9%). As expected, the Internet (70.0%) was the most popular platform for news consumption among the participants. Another 23.3% of respondents reported that they mostly use TV for news. Neither radio (3.8%) nor the newspaper (2.9%) was a popular source for news among the participants.

Value Predispositions regarding News as a Commodity and Public Service

Of the respondents, 46.3% agreed with the statement “News coverage should be considered a public service that benefits society.” Another 29.1% of the respondents chose “strongly agree,” followed by “somewhat agree” (17.9%), “neither agree nor disagree” (3.8%), “somewhat disagree” (1.9%), “strongly disagree” (.6%), and “disagree” (.3%). Thus, almost all respondents (93.3%) thought that news should be considered as public service ($M = 5.93$, $SD = 1.00$).

By contrast, responses were more evenly distributed for the statement “News coverage should be considered a commodity that benefits the media organization that produces it” ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.62$). The breakdown was as follows: “somewhat agree” (24.9%), “neither agree nor disagree” (19.8%), “agree” (17.3%), “disagree” (12.5%), “somewhat disagree” (13.4%), “strongly disagree” (6.4%), “strongly agree” (5.8%).

Intent to Work in the Field of Journalism

When asked are you planning to work in the field of journalism, the most

common answer was “No” (58.8%). 27.8% of the respondents answered “Maybe,” followed by “Yes” (13.4%).

Attitudes toward a Paid News Content System

To examine respondents’ attitudes toward a paid news content system, three 7-point Likert items were used: “A paid news content model should be applied more widely to online newspapers” ($M = 3.15, SD = 1.61$), “People should pay for news stories they read on the Internet” ($M = 2.56, SD = 1.52$), and “Reading news stories without paying for them should be stopped by the courts” ($M = 2.18, SD = 1.41$).

Regression Analysis

A regression analysis was performed to provide a rigorous test of whether the independent variables predicted the dependent variable. All the variables were entered simultaneously. In the subsequent analysis, which captured the influences of the independent variables on support for a paid news content system, perceiving news as a commodity was the only significant predictor ($\beta = .23, p < .001$). While the respondents’ average support for a paid news content system is low, the more respondents perceive news as a commodity, the more they supported. This model explained about 5.8% of the total variance.

Table 1. Predicting support for a paid news content system ($N = 307$)

Dependent variable	Independent variable	β	t	Sig
Support for a paid news content system	Internet use	-.06	-.92	.359
	Online news use	.04	.59	.554
	News as a public service	-.05	-.85	.398
	News as a commodity	.23***	4.04***	.000
	Sex	.04	.69	.490
	Intent to work in the journalism	-.00	-.06	.950
R^2		.058		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Responses to the Open-ended Questions

The chief objective of analyzing responses to the open-ended questions was to understand in more depth what college students think about news copyright issues, particularly in association with a paid news model.¹ When asked about their thoughts on whether news stories should be treated differently from other materials such as music or film in terms of copyright protection, respondents were largely divided into two groups.

¹ The following selected responses were presented without correcting grammatical mistakes.

A few respondents said that news should be treated like music and film in terms of copyright protection. In most cases, these respondents did not provide their rationale. In a few cases, they mentioned that publishing news stories involves time, effort, and money. The following responses illustrate the theme:

I think that they should all have equal copyright protection.

If you have to pay an artist to listen to their music, you should also have to pay a writer to read what they write. A writer is putting effort into something that has a benefit to you....

News stories involve investigation and research. Music and films are creative outlets. Both require a specific mental capacity that should be protected and not ripped off by another source.

In contrast, a majority of respondents thought that news should be treated differently in terms of copyright protection. Several patterns emerged in their comments. In particular, two common, recurring themes dominated most of these responses.

First, a substantial number of respondents considered “creation” a key criterion for determining the appropriateness of copyright protection. The following responses illustrate the theme:

News is factual information; no organization should be able to solely control the distribution of this type of information. You might be able to own the rights to your own works, but you can't own the right to information regarding events in our society...

I think news stories are not a product that someone has worked on and deserves to be paid for, they are accounts of what is happening in our world and there is no reason we should be restricted from viewing them.

News stories that include only facts about a public event should not be covered under any copyright protection. Opinions and editorials can be copyrighted....

Second, many respondents assumed the right to be informed by news. In other words, they thought that news is a public good that benefits society. Typical responses addressing the theme were as follows:

I see news as a right for people to be informed about what is going on in the world around them.

Fair use rights should be expanded more greatly for news stories.

I feel that being informed about what's going on in the world should be a right that is not made for people to pay for. It is important for us to know what is happening in our world and it should not be difficult or impossible for some people to be informed.

Some respondents addressed other points. One respondent mentioned “Righthaven” lawsuits, arguing that publishers should concentrate on quality journalism rather than file lawsuits against news aggregators and other websites under the name of copyright infringement. The respondent pointed out that publishers have not paid attention to creating quality content, instead devoting much effort to protecting existing content. Another respondent argued that digital media companies can generate more revenue from advertisements than from the subscription fees. The respondent also mentioned that attracting more readers through special features or content would be a key to success for online publishers.

When asked what they think about the idea of charging readers for access to online news stories, respondents expressed a range of opinions. Broadly, their responses could be categorized as follows: 1) positive positions on a paid news model, 2) negative positions on a paid news model, and 3) neutral positions on a paid news model.

The following are typical examples of positive responses to a paid news model:

I don't have a problem with that. News organizations such as the New York Times for example have every right to charge viewers to read their news... I have a subscription to New York Times for my Android smart phone. I pay something like 6 dollars a month to get great, in-depth articles sent directly to my phone before I even wake up. I can read them on the bus, waiting around for class, etc. I think in today's market, with today's technology, it is simply good business for news organizations to have online subscriptions to their news.

News is a commodity the owner can do whatever they feel is right with their publications.

Media organizations should be able to charge users for news stories much like conventional publisher of newspapers do....

More respondents, however, expressed negative positions on a paid news model. They held their opinions for various reasons, but several patterns emerged from their responses. First, some suggested that it seems unlikely that online news users will pay for content as long as free alternatives are easily available online. The following responses illustrate the theme:

You can charge for the news stories, but there is so much out there online for free that people are going to go to instead. No one wants to pay for news because it's already free on TV and the Internet. It seems pointless.

The alternatives are government subsidies, advertising, or volunteer journalism. I typically do not pay for digital content in any form, so I would get my news elsewhere online.

...it doesn't appear to be a viable model for media organizations, given the high number of free sources available. The downside is that such a high loss of revenue may end up leading to a decline in quality in terms of content.

Second, many respondents worried about declining readership due to the implementation of a paywall. The following responses illustrate their concerns:

I don't think it's necessary. If people are charged, they might be less likely to want to access it.

I dislike this new trend, and think that it's only going to discourage readers from accessing convenient news.

That will significantly drop their viewers if require pay to read stories.

Third, a substantial number of respondents addressed the issue of a potential divide between the information rich and poor due to the implementation of a paywall.

The following responses illustrate their concerns:

I would be concerned that news that is beneficial to the public may not reach the intended audience if the only way to receive the news was by paying for it. I think people who need help the most are the ones who could benefit from free and beneficial news. This news also needs to be easily accessible and free of advertisements and corporate sponsorship.

I believe that news stories are used to inform and educate the public, widening the lens in which we view the world. This access should be free and not limited. Sources such as NPR should not charge users because it will diminish the ways in which people are able to be informed about what's happening....

If you want to let people know what is going on in the world it should be cheap or free. How is someone with very little money suppose to know what is going on in the world if they cannot access news because it costs money?

Lastly, the ease of payment was also an issue for some respondents. For example, one said, "Less people are going to read online news stories, due to inconvenience of having to pay to view the content."

Some respondents expressed mixed feelings about a paid news content model. They admitted that publishers need to adopt a paid news content model to some extent, but largely expressed concerns about its impact on the public. The following responses illustrate respondents' mixed feelings:

I think they have every right to do it. But, I don't think it will work. I think once you set your price at zero, that train has left the station. It's going to be difficult to undo what they've done by starting out with free content and now trying to charge for it. And more importantly, to make a comparison, subscriptions for the print edition never fully supported the newspaper. It was retail ads and classified ads that supported the print side. Subscriptions were the smallest of the three revenue generators. So, why do they think subscriptions will save the operation when it's online?

I stand in the middle on this one. I know that media organizations need to find alternative ways to make money for their news stories because newspapers are slowly dying. However, personally, I don't like the idea of having to pay for news stories online....

I understand the need to make money, but I think that it is unfair to charge for access- just by charging money the organization is automatically taking away the ability for some people to read the news. The news should serve the public; whether or not someone can be informed should not be based on their ability to pay.

For some respondents who admitted the necessity of adopting a paid news content model, price and quality of content were important factors. The following responses illustrate their concerns and expectations about a paid news content system:

I'm uncertain that it would work. When so much of the information floating around the internet is free, you'd really have to give the consumer something special in order to warrant paying for it....

It really depends on which news story I was looking for but I would expect good quality of contents or special features of some kind if I have to pay for the news.

I have a feeling that if I had to pay for the news, then I would be more selective of what I choose to pay for and read. Plus, people who look for quality news will not mind paying a very small amount of money to read it.

Conclusion

Summary of the Results

This study was designed to investigate college students' attitudes toward a paid news content system. In addition, it tried to identify factors that may predict their attitudes. Specifically, this study examined whether attitudes toward a paid news content system reflected college students' perceptions of news as a public service and as a commodity, their frequency of Internet use, and their frequency of reading news stories on the Internet. Finally, to deepen our understanding of news copyright issues, this study analyzed responses to open-ended questions and identified patterns in such responses.

With regard to respondents' attitudes toward a paid news model, they generally held an unfavorable position (RQ1). The findings of this study support previous research indicating that people are not willing to pay for online news. There was no significant relationship between perceiving news as a public service and support for a paid news model, but perceiving news as a commodity was a significant

and positive predictor of college students' attitudes toward a paid news content model (RQ2). Neither the frequency of Internet use nor the frequency of reading news online was related to respondents' attitudes toward a paid news content model (RQ2).

When asked whether news stories should be treated differently from other copyrighted materials such as music or film in terms of copyright protection, respondents were largely divided into two groups. A majority of respondents thought that news should be treated differently in terms of copyright protection (RQ3a). For those who said news is different from other copyrighted materials, "creation" was an important factor in determining copyrightability. In general, they thought that news does not meet this requirement and took for granted that news should be free and available to the public. When asked what they think about the idea of charging readers for access to online news, there were three broad types of responses (RQ3b). Some respondents held positive positions on a paid news content model and argued that publishers must find a way to acquire sufficient revenue to support their dying business. A majority of respondents, however, expressed negative or mixed opinions with regard to a paid news content model. A sizable number of respondents noted that free alternatives are available online. Respondents who held negative positions were concerned about declining readership or an information divide that may result from a paid news content model. Also, some respondents suggested that quality content and ease of payment would be key components in implementing a paid news content model.

Implications of the Study

The findings may carry implications for our understanding of news copyright issues and online news economics. As discussed above, a number of researchers have suggested that conflicting points of view regarding “property in news” will make it difficult to reach an agreement on copyright protection for news. Moreover, there is no doubt that public support (or lack thereof) for a paid news model is important for news organizations struggling to survive in today’s financial climate. Without changing people’s perception of freely available online news, adopting the fee-based online news service model seems not to generate reliable revenue streams. Thus, understanding people’s attitudes toward this issue is a key step in implementing any kind of successful policy. This study provides new empirical evidence on the subject. Most importantly, it addressed the questions of whether people perceive news as a commodity, whether they see it as a public service, and whether these two factors predict relevant attitudes. In doing so, it advanced beyond previous research that examined the roles of some factors (i.e., demographic variables, media use, and preference for online news) in explaining people’s attitudes but did not take into account the potential role of value predispositions.

Taken together, the results of the quantitative analyses and the analysis of responses to the open-ended questions suggest that respondents’ perception that news is free and easily available from the Internet may be the biggest barrier to implementing a paid news model. Relatively few respondents considered news to be a commodity, though most respondents thought that news is a kind of public service that

inform the public and benefit our society.

In practical terms, the results from this study suggest that promulgating the idea that news is a copyrightable commodity may be an effective way for a news organization to elicit positive responses from college-aged online readers and possibly from the general public. In particular, the finding that respondents who perceived news as a commodity were more supportive of paying for news online suggests that value predispositions regarding news can influence support for a paid news content system. The same result also implies that college-aged online news users may be susceptible to messages intended to inform and persuade them with regard to the “property in news.”

It is also worth noting that many respondents did not know whether news stories can be protected by copyright law. Thus, the potential effect of making the general public more familiar with news copyright issue should be examined in detail. Given that respondents had little knowledge about news copyright issues in general, publishers planning to implement a paid news content model need to make this issue more visible and foster a better understanding among the public regarding news copyright issue.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

One limitation of this study was the sampling method. Given that this study used a convenience sampling method, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to broader populations. Also, the respondents who participated in this research may

not be representative of all college students. The results, therefore, should be interpreted with caution.

Another limitation is that some of the variables were measured with a single item. Measuring the variables of interest with multiple items may increase reliability. Having said this, single-item measures are often used by researchers. Given that this was an exploratory study exploring an undeveloped area, using single-item indicators with straightforward and easy-to-understand wording was sufficient for the purpose of the study. Future research, however, could develop and adopt multiple sets of items. Furthermore, the roles of value predispositions in the acceptance or rejection of competing arguments with regard to a paid news content model should be examined in more depth, perhaps through experimental research and/or focus group research.

Subsequent studies of attitudes toward a paid news content model could also examine other potential predictors such as copyright knowledge, issue familiarity through media exposure, income, and ease of payment (i.e., micropayment systems). Further investigation of perceptions regarding copyrighting news or paying for news content would be helpful in fully understanding their influence on attitudes.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Professor Paul Brewer and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

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