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Why Drop a Paywall?
Mapping Industry Accounts of Online News Decommodification

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Why is news sometimes free? Although the commercial press's history is, in part, the search for new forms of commodification, journalism sometimes *distances* itself from commerce and economically *decommodifies* its work. We investigate one such moment in the form of "paywall exceptions": instances when online news organizations drop or temporarily reconfigure their paywalls to let news circulate unmetered among subscribers and nonsubscribers alike. We document 69 exceptions from 1999 to 2015, categorize publishers' publicly stated rationales, and reflect on what they reveal about the networked press's negotiations between democratic and commercial logics.

Keywords: digital journalism economics, networked press, online news, paywalls

Why do publishers sometimes *decommodify* news? Recalling the morning of September 11, 2001, U.S. press secretary Ari Fleischer wrote that, in the midst of the attacks, "a commercial popped up on the TV for a hair removal product. Seemed a little out of place" (Fleischer, 2014). Indeed, major U.S. television networks agreed that 9/11 and advertising should not mix: CBS, NBC, ABC, and FOX aired "four straight days of commercial-free, round-the-clock news, [losing] about $200 million while advertising was suspended" (Cosgrove-Mather, 2002, para. 13). In planning its anniversary coverage a year later, "some major advertisers . . . decided to sit out Sept. 11 altogether" (Cosgrove-Mather, 2002, para. 5), with Pepsi-Cola deciding "not to advertise on that day, just out of respect for what happened" (para. 7). Ten years later, anniversary coverage still had little or no advertising and few sponsors (Steinberg, 2011). Such suspensions are not without precedent. For four days following President Kennedy's assassination, U.S. television networks "went live with wall-to-wall coverage" (Herskovitch, 2013, para. 3) and no commercials, "costing them an estimated $100 million in lost advertising revenue"—countering critics who called 1960s television a "vast wasteland" with little public value (Edgerton, 2009, p. 203).

Broadcasters have also waived advertising during nonbreaking news. FOX went commercial-free during its hour-long interview with Warren Buffett in 2009 (Kapsinow, 2009) and again in the midst of a major stock market sell-off in 2014 (Kondolojy, 2014). ESPN covered LeBron James's trade for two advertising-free hours (Poggi, 2014), and the National Football League contractually obligated

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broadcasters to show games through overtime after NBC infamously cut away from the last 42 seconds of a Jets-Raiders game to air the previously scheduled TV movie *Heidi* (Garlett, 2009).

Fleischer's remembrance, 9/11 coverage, Kennedy's assassination, and high-stakes sports events suggest that advertising's "habit of interruption" (Williams, 1989, p. 25) is sometimes distasteful, undesirable, distracting, or somehow un-civic. They reveal fault lines in media landscapes presumably built on commodification suggesting that a *public* value of news is sometimes incompatible with its *market* value.

Today's press—comprised of content producers, professional journalists, social media platforms, advertising metrics, algorithmic filters, and paywalls—continues to experiment with news commodification. Amid these experiments, though, are there also moments when public and market valuations of news misalign—when publishers commodify news differently or not at all? When and why do publishers circulate news "freely" and what do such moments suggest about the forces governing the commercial and democratic valuation of digital news?

In this article, we focus on moments when free press ideals seem incompatible with the free market, "paywall exceptions": when news organizations lower, suspend, or otherwise reconfigure their payment systems to let content circulate unmetered. Unlike broadcast-era examples, paywall exceptions do not completely decommodify news—advertising persists—but they make it free to *access*. We develop the article in three parts: first, contextualizing paywall exceptions within a history and sociology of press economics, as sociotechnical negotiations between democratic and commercial logics; second, following Carlson's (2015b) call for critical studies of metajournalistic discourse—"how utterances *about* journalism shape news practices and the meanings attached to these practices" (p. 2, emphasis added)—we present a typology of rationales news organizations publicly give for paywall exceptions; and third, we reflect on the typology's significance to the networked press's intertwined economic, normative, and sociotechnical dynamics, arguing for exceptions as ways to see competitive forces during rapid institutional change.

Funding the Free Press

The U.S. news media has always been motivated by both market forces and public missions. As advertising overtook circulation revenue, the idea of "public" began to simultaneously connote audiences with preferences to please; rationales for journalism's constitutional privileges; and potential consumers of advertisers' products (Schudson, 1978). The press became a *two-sided* institution serving customers and advertisers—a hybrid entity trying to simultaneously support civics, entertainment, and commerce. Broadcasters even claimed that journalism was so important to their public missions that they routinely—but unverifiably—let news divisions *lose* money (Socolow, 2010).

Different from other commercial products, news is often seen as a public good, and independent journalism is considered essential for democracies. News is nonrivalrous; nonexcludable among subscribers (or nonsubscribers with access); creates positive externalities for nonconsumners; has widely shared production costs; and reflects not only consumers' current preferences but *imagined* preferences (Baker, 2002). Put differently: reading news does not prevent *others* from reading the same news;

subscribers usually have unrestricted access to all news content and determined nonsubscribers can often access news without paying for it; even if people do not consume news, they benefit from living in a society where others do; readers and advertisers share the costs of making and distributing news; and consuming news shapes people's *future* decisions—they learn information and develop preferences *through* news. Even though some people resist new perspectives and avoid ideas they find disagreeable (Downs, 1957), publics still form and function because there is a *collective* ability to encounter, judge, act on, and self-govern through news (Hamilton, 2006). The press is a *public* institution to the extent that it makes, circulates, and signifies nonrivalrous, nonexcludable information for those who both seek *and* avoid news—enabling consumers and nonconsumers alike to manage the inextricable consequences of associational living.

In the United States, modern tensions between the press's public mission and commercial dynamics most recently peaked with the 1947 Hutchins Commission. It saw the primary threats to press freedom coming, not from government, but from owners and advertisers "direct[ing] the economic structure of the press" (Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947, pp. 2–5). This was an active period of institutional soul searching as "political elites, social movement groups, and communication industries grappled over defining media's role in a democratic society" (Pickard, 2014, p. 2). While the debate ideally aimed to create a particularly *American* free press that was both accountable and profitable, a form of corporate libertarianism focused on "defeating all forms of public interest regulation" (Pickard, 2013, p. 344) emerged as "the dominant policy paradigm, allowing commercial interests to consolidate their control" (p. 348). Indeed, U.S. journalism became increasingly commercially motivated as private, family ownership gave way to public trading. Journalists had to worry, not only about publishers' priorities, audience preferences, and advertising pressures, but also about shareholder and stock market expectations (Cohen, 2002).

Today's journalistic crisis echoes many of that era's normative and financial tensions. Economists see the potential for a new type of press in *networked* information markets creating "truth" through optimized competition (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2008); sociologists worry that focused pursuits of online revenues will only make journalism "more partisan and less financially secure" (Starr, 2012, p. 234); and the news industry itself struggles to regain lost advertising and circulation revenue, struggling for financial independence by experimenting with new payment schemes and business models (Arrese, 2015).

These tensions are complicated not only by converging media *forms*—news that was once sequestered within newspapers and airwaves now travels among websites, apps, social media platforms—but also by shifting distribution regimes. As Braun (2015) shows, the very *idea* of "distribution"—something that "media sociology has tended to skip [over] from production practices to audience effects" (p. 6)—is upended as news producers and consumers encounter each other through dynamic and invisible sociotechnical intermediaries. These systems—software suites, metering systems, cable agreements, streaming services, audience analytics—are a distributed network of actors governing which content is made, which producers have power, and which audiences are valued.

Acknowledging the complex history of why and how media systems are valued, we focus here on how the journalism industry itself describes a particular shift away from scarcity and limited distribution toward infrastructures that temporarily let content freely circulate—the paywall exception. Paywall *drops* leave hints about how publishers understand and intervene within today's mix of market economics, democratic ideals, technological innovations, and audience models.

Paywalls as Experiments in Online Revenue

A paywall is a virtual "barrier between an internet user and a news organization's online content," (Pickard & Williams, 2014, p. 195) giving access only to those who pay a onetime or ongoing fee. Over 500 of 1,400 daily papers surveyed by the Newspaper Association of America (Edmonds, 2014) have either "hard" paywalls, which give access only to paid subscribers, or "soft" paywalls, which meter out a few free articles before charging (Carson, 2015). There is little consensus on how or why to implement them:

- *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *Slate*, the *Toronto Star*, and *The Missourian* implemented—and then abandoned or altered—paywalls after they failed to increase print advertising revenue or harmed online traffic (Batey, 2013; Benton, 2014a; Ellis, 2013; Kaufman, 2014; Mullin, 2015; Warhover, 2014);

- *The Globe and Mail* uses a complex color-coded paywall labeling free content green, metered content yellow, niche and sometimes metered content blue, and subscriber-only content red (Benton, 2013)

- *The Washington Post* lowered its paywall for online subscribers of strategically selected local newspapers (Lichterman, 2014);

- The *Winnipeg Free Press* dropped its paywall to charge readers for individual articles (Lichterman, 2015), while *The Guardian* (Bartlett, 2014) and Hearst (Moses, 2014) reject paywalls altogether in favor of foundations, advertising, or memberships.

Although paywalls are relatively new and diverse, emerging scholarship and trade press commentary suggests tensions between economic efficacy and normative concerns. Paywalls generate only a small fraction of industry revenue, with estimates ranging from 1% within the United States (Newspaper Association of America, 2013) to 10% internationally (Myllylahti, 2014). Most sites use "soft" paywalls offering a limited number of free stories before charging for subsequent access, with mostly niche publishers using "hard" paywalls to target wealthy and elite audiences. Further, online-only subscribers are less willing to purchase print versions, making it hard to convert online audiences into more lucrative print readers (Carson, 2015). Additionally, paywalls can devastate traffic: one study saw a 51% drop in site visits—a 99% drop among 18–24-year-olds—after paywalls were introduced (Chiou & Tucker, 2013). Other studies, though, find some people willing to pay for online news, including young people interested in news (Chyi & Lee, 2013); people who pay for other digital content and use social media heavily (Goyanes, 2014); and readers who think a news organization might go bankrupt without a paywall (Cook & Attari, 2012). Overall, people are far less likely to pay for online versus print news; and those who *are* willing will only pay far less than for print news (Chyi, 2012). Most people avoid paying for online news because they assume others will (Chyi, Lee, & Holton, 2015).

Evidence also suggests that paywalls divide online audiences into those with financial and technological means to access high-quality stories and those who are left with lower quality, less substantive free news (Pickard & Williams, 2014). Paywalled stories—often in-depth features on local concerns, politics, social issues, culture, and the economy—usually require more time and investment to produce, while wire stories, syndicated news, and short videos are often free (Sjøvaag, 2015). People also seem to be less willing to pay for news that challenges their opinions (Geidner & D'Arcy, 2015), and technologically savvy readers easily subvert paywalls to enjoy unlimited free content (Myllylahti, 2014).

Studying Exceptions: When Do Paywalls Drop and Why Do Drops Matter?

Paywalls are "boundary infrastructures": systems used by "multiple communities of practice simultaneously within a single organization or distributed across multiple organizations" (Bowker & Star, 1999, p. 13). The network of actors competing to configure paywalls include software designers, journalists, and advertisers, as well as technology companies like Tinypass, Piano Media, Press+, Apple, and Google competing to make their paywall platforms the industry standard (Owen, 2015).

This diversity and competition make paywalls contestable. They can mean more than one thing, appear in more than one form, be influenced by multiple actors because they have not yet achieved the "closure and stabilization" (Bijker, 1995, p. 279) characteristic of more mature sociotechnical systems. Paywalls are *simultaneously*: transaction systems connecting customers with financially strapped news organizations; symbols of the press's ongoing search for revenue and financial security; and evidence of how market- and metrics-driven sites value news, journalists, and audiences. Paywalls—and the absence thereof—offer insights into the sociotechnical, symbolic, and normative dimensions of the networked press precisely because "social interactions between and within relevant social groups" have not yet made paywalls "less and less ambiguous" (Bijker, 1995, pp. 270–271) and harder to change.

This why we focus on paywall "exceptions." When paywalls are temporarily dropped, reconfigured, or subverted they reveal debates about when and why news should circulate freely. There is not a great deal of research on exceptions to organizational rules and policies. Indeed, rules are usually strictly adhered to as visible demonstrations of an organization's—albeit sometimes aspirational and mythological—rationality, legitimacy, and stability. They show to workers and competitors alike an organization's ability to predict outcomes, manage uncertainty, isolate novelties, survive threats, and apply learning (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Schulz, 1998). Rules are usually made and revised through both top-down directives from leaders trying to tame complex environments (March, Schulz, & Zhou, 2000, pp. 159–160) and "bottom-up, relational processes" among workers aiming to "anticipate and preempte" forces affecting their power and autonomy (Colyvas & Maroulis, 2015, p. 601).

Both top-down and bottom-up rules are "occasions of interpretation" (Schauer, 1991, p. 207): people parse a rule's language, consider its applicability, evaluate its justifications, imagine rule makers' intentions, draw analogies to earlier exceptions, openly challenge rules, or simply decide that it is more ethical to break a rule than follow it. Anticipating interpretations and evasions, some policymakers even create "meta-rules" to rationalize exceptions (Brady, 1987). Indeed, some professionals—such as journalists, engineers, teachers, lawyers, and doctors—argue that their obligations to higher ethical principles sometimes *require* them to break the very rules they agreed to follow in order to join the profession (Abbott, 1988). Even judges ignore "ostensibly clear rules of law" (Aman, 1982, p. 277) when they think that sentencing guidelines have "costs that greatly outweigh the social benefits of compliance" (p. 278).

Exceptions are moments when people exercise power, assert autonomy, and enact ethics. A paywall drop or reconfiguration is an exceptional moment in press economics because it shows how news organizations' desires to disseminate content freely overtakes an audience's normal obligation to pay. Paywall exceptions temporarily remove the paywall as an "obligatory point of passage" (Law & Bijker, 1992, p. 294), creating an absence (Ananny, forthcoming) that serves as a conspicuous, normatively charged alternative—showing how the networked press *could* be governed and how logics *other* than commodification might apply. When something that previously cost money becomes free, it begs questions: what made it unfree to *begin with*, why is it free *now*, and why isn't it *always* free?

The sociology of media cannot be explained by one dynamic (Schudson, 2000), and online journalism increasingly involves multiple actors navigating and contesting fuzzy professional boundaries (Carlson, 2015a)—but paywall exceptions offer a unique view into the intertwined normative and economic forces governing contemporary public media. If news organizations put *up* paywalls in an effort to be economically viable in uncertain times, what could be so important to make them—even temporarily—*drop* paywalls and suspend a revenue stream? What kind of "occasions of interpretation" do paywall drops represent? Why do publishers publicly say they drop them? And how might public media advocates learn from news organizations' self-descriptions of decommodification to argue for more freely circulating media—to use the press's *own* accounts "to imagine support systems for quality journalism that are not entirely dependent on market-based approaches?" (Pickard & Williams, 2014, p. 14).

Inspired by historical examples of news decommodification, cognizant of exceptions as markers of institutional power dynamics, and motivated by an opportunity to intervene into nascent debates about the sociotechnical dynamics of networked news systems, we typologize instances of paywall exceptions in order to create an account of rationales for decommodification. As Carlson (2015b) argued, metajournalistic discourse about how and why news functions is a "site in which actors publicly engage in processes of establishing definitions, setting boundaries, and rendering judgments about journalism's legitimacy" (p. 2).

Study Design

To find cases of media organizations dropping their paywalls, either permanently or temporarily, we employed several search strategies. First, we searched via a general search engine (Google) using keywords such as "paywall drop," "dropped paywall," and "paywall down." From there, we found many articles in mainstream media and journalism-specific media regarding instances of paywall drops at international, national and regional media organizations. Within the articles discussing the dropped paywalls, the reporters sometimes discussed other instances of paywall drops at other media organizations to either compare their case of interest or generalize their story, among other reasons. Because of this, we were able to do a snowball-type search from the articles found through the first round of searching. We also searched journalism-specific sources such as the Poynter Institute and the Nieman Lab, doing the same snowball searching after finding instances at these journalism-industry related sources. We searched for cases from April 2014 through May 2015, finding articles from 2002–2015 describing paywall drops or exceptions that occurred from 1999 to 2015. Our complete data corpus of paywall drop instances includes 69 cases of paywall drops at 39 different news organizations. Within this corpus, we examined 89 articles, tweets, and other websites for relevant information describing the rationales that these organizations gave regarding why they dropped their paywalls.

Typology of Paywall Exceptions

From April 2014 and May 2015 we searched for instances of paywall drops, finding descriptions of 69 instances in that occurred between 1999 and 2015. Of these, 41 were temporary (ranging from a few hours to several months) and 28 were permanent. After reading articles several times and independently and collaboratively analyzing the similarities and differences among their rationales and contexts, we iteratively classified each drop into one or more of the following six categories:[1]

Public Emergencies

Twenty-one drops were explained as responses to what news organizations identified as public emergencies. When hurricanes, snow storms, and floods hit their primary publishing regions, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Seattle Times*, *Newsday*, *Pocono Record*, *Cape Cod Times*, *SeacostOnline*, and *The Day* temporarily dropped their paywalls, making either all content or disaster-related information entirely free. Paywalls were also dropped for human-made crises: *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The Wall Street Journal* fully or partially suspended their paywalls during the Boston Marathon bombings and DC Navy Yard shootings, and *Kyiv Post* made all of its content free once the EuroMaidan protests began.

[1] Although this article's theoretical framework centers on the United States and we only considered English-language texts, we did not only consider drops at U.S. news organizations. This lets us report on English-language discussions of non-U.S. drops, but it limits our analysis of these drops within a U.S.-centric conceptual framework. This limitation suggests the need for future studies contextualizing non-U.S. drops in terms of non-U.S. news economics. Similarly, our consideration of the types of content and publications that the journalism trade press considers relevant to *itself* means that, in several instances, we describe paywall drops and changes focused on sports broadcasts and, in the case of Getty Images, stock photography content. Even though sports broadcasts and stock photography may not be considered traditional *news* content, we include them in our analysis (a) because the trade press depicts them as relevant, and (b) shifts in the commodification of these secondary media suggest how the valuation of news content may be related to the valuation of media that news organizations use to derive or supplement reporting.

The New York Times' Assistant Managing Editor of Digital Content Jim Roberts explained that its obligation to provide "service information . . . somehow transcended journalism" (Sonderman, 2011, para. 17) and demanded a dropped paywall. Other publishers disagreed. *The Press Enterprise* only briefly suspended its paywall in response to complaints from print subscribers whose homes were underwater; its publisher said: "If it's important to people, they can go out and pick up a newspaper. They can go to the library and get it for free, or they can go to their neighbor who has it" (Sonderman, 2011, para. 10). Similarly, when mudslides hit northern Washington, *The Seattle Times* put "content that was most directly about making resources available to victims" (Kirkland, 2014, para. 6) outside its paywall while simultaneously reminding readers that the hotel costs, overtime pay, and helicopter rentals required for emergency reporting make it "expensive to cover these stories" (para. 5).

Two tensions emerged when paywalls dropped during emergencies. First, paywall drops suggest that news organizations differentiate emergencies: some trigger partial drops (for information judged specifically emergency-relevant) while others prompt site-wide drops (to offer greater context and potentially convert to paid subscribers the new readers brought by the emergency traffic). During the Boston bombings, *The Wall Street Journal* placed only *Boston*-related stories outside its paywall; and, although *The Times* dropped its paywall when it thought a storm put its audience "in danger of death, injury or major property damage" and in need of "actionable information," it still required readers to pay for stories it saw as irrelevant to imminent danger (Sonderman, 2011, para. 18). Some news organizations seem to consider it their duty to help readers survive the *effects* of public emergencies, but not necessarily understand causes after immediate danger has subsided.

The second tension centered on deciding when paywalls should be reinstated, when emergencies had ended. Most news organizations gave no reasons why they thought an emergency had ended, or they relied on government organizations to declare that danger had sufficiently subsided. *Kyiv Post*, though, acknowledged in February 2014 that although the crisis triggering its paywall drop had not ended—public protests and military action continued—it stated that it "needs to operate as a business to sustain its brand of independent and trustworthy journalism" and reinstated its paywall (*Kyiv Post*, 2014, para. 4). Such drops and reinstatements are significant because, when news organizations change their paywalls in response to public emergencies and natural disasters, they leave clues about who they think their publishing impacts, what they assume their audiences need, how they see themselves as public services, and when they judge one set of circumstances as sufficiently different from another to warrant a change in news commodification.

Planned Special Events

Eight of the paywall drops were made as part of pre-planned coverage. *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *Financial Times* all dropped the paywalls around some or all of their content for parts of the 2012 U.S. presidential election. Their approaches varied. *The Wall Street Journal* made all of its online content free on election day only; *The New York Times* dropped its paywall when both the "newsroom and the business side" agreed that it was "necessary to pass along critical [campaign] information" (Beaujon, 2012, para. 3); and *Financial Times* published a "read for free" section for the campaign's entire duration to give "a close look at the campaign journey and the impact it will have on future elections" according to an *FT* spokesperson (Bazilian, 2012, para. 4).

Other paywalls were dropped for planned sports and entertainment events, suggesting not decommodifications for public purposes but *changes* in commodification from subscription to advertising revenue. *The Times* and *Sunday Times* dropped their paywalls to cover Queen Elizabeth's diamond jubilee celebration; NBC temporarily made its 2012 Olympic online stream free for a swimming competition between Michael Phelps and Ryan Lochte; and CBS lowered its paywall to freely stream its 2010 March Madness basketball coverage, stating that it preferred to forego subscription fees in favor of advertising revenue.

All of the paywall drops associated with planned events—elections, sports, entertainment—suggest an ontology of journalistic events revealed by news decommodifications. The different paywall drops associated with election coverage suggest that news organizations do not necessarily agree what defines an "election," and which aspects of its coverage should be free: news *before* casting a ballot (suggesting an informational press focused on long-term citizen learning), campaign moments like debates or news conferences (suggesting a sporadic press organized around media events), or final results naming winners and describing voting patterns (suggesting a record-keeping press concerned with describing outcomes). When news organizations drop their election paywalls, they leave clues about what kind of public service they think they *should* be during elections—what types of coverage are publicly significant enough to be free. And when news organizations drop paywalls for some sports coverage but not others, they reveal which audiences they value, and which events they see as entertaining enough to potentially earn them more advertising over subscription revenue.

Wider Access

Outside of any emergency or special event, twelve drops were described as a desire to give *all* audiences access to coverage considered too civically valuable to commodify financially, at least for a particular period of time. In contrast to drops trigged by exogenous crises or occasions, these drops give insight into news organizations' *own* endogenous rationales and reveal a diverse set of motivations for offering free access if the choice was entirely theirs to make.

Some motivations are driven by a desire to encourage audience engagement with news. In 2014, *The New York Times* offered one week of unrestricted access to its "NYTNow" content in support of "National News Engagement Day," an initiative of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication to encourage people "to read, watch, tweet, like, share and talk about news" (AEJMC, 2014, para. 5). The free content was described as valuable, but secondary to the goal of encouraging people to circulate and use news. In 2007 and 2009, HBO (n.d., para. 4) offered its documentaries "Addiction" and "The Alzheimer's Project" for free, it said, "to raise new awareness and understanding" of these conditions. And, in an effort to "support collaborative research" using its content, *Nature* (2014) announced that—if a subscriber shared a link to an article—it would make a "read-only, non-downloadable and non-printable" (para. 4) version of the story freely available to recipients, even if they are not subscribers. The *San Francisco Chronicle* similarly lets nonsubscribers access stories that subscribers share with them.

Other accounts centered on news organizations' desires to make content *genres* free. When its traffic dropped by 97% in 2004 after putting its "Calendar Live" section behind a paywall, the *Los Angeles Times* quickly reversed course and made the entire calendar sub-site free (Windsor, 2009). And, suspecting that its video content attracted audiences, in 2013, *The New York Times* announced that watching a video would no longer count as one of a nonsubscriber's 10 free articles per month.

These examples suggest a class of paywall exceptions when news organizations *themselves* decided to offer free content, and offered reasons for doing so—stating the kind of public services they see themselves providing, and the cross-subsidies they see among their content.

Advertising and Promotion

Other paywalls were dropped as part of strategic partnerships with advertisers and promoters. In six instances, advertisers essentially sponsored whole news organizations, making some or all of their online content freely available for a short period of time. In one of the earliest such examples (Neal, 2008), *The Atlantic* dropped its entire paywall in exchange for giving Goldman Sachs exclusive advertising rights. *Newsday* was free for a month because its parent company Cablevision dropped the paywall in exchange for advertising its "Radio City Christmas Spectacular," another arm of Cablevision (Greenslade, 2010). And, as part of promoting its redesigned site, the *Los Angeles Times* partnered with Etihad Airways to make all content free for three days and only showed the airline's advertisements (Sebastian, 2014).

A different kind of short-term exception comes in the form of long-term partnerships that strategically provide ongoing partial access. For example, in 2013, Starbucks announced that patrons using its store Wifi networks could select 15 free *New York Times* articles per day from a subset of *The Times*'s full online site—instead of the standard ten free articles per month for nonsubscribers on non-Starbucks networks (Chaey, 2013). The partnership was later expanded to give members of the "My Starbucks Reward Program" 12 weeks of free access to *The Times*'s NYT Now mobile app (Ellis, 2014).

Such paywall exceptions suggest two emerging strategies: an advertiser's short-term wholesale sponsorship of a news site; and long-term strategic partnerships between news and nonnews organizations. The significance for press freedom of these sponsorship and partnership paywall exceptions lies in their details, since research finds that journalists and editors are mindful of their organization's patrons as they work (Baker, 2007; Bezanson, 2003; Murdock, 1977). The press freedom implications of such partnerships could be traced, for example, in a study of which editorial policies would have guided the *Los Angeles Times* if an Etihad Airways executive had been charged with corruption during its three-day sponsorship. Sponsorships and promotions may be effective and mutually beneficial way of providing audiences with free news, but their long-term significance for press freedom needs further research.

Audience Development

In 17 instances, news organizations made exceptions to their paywalls as part of strategies to enlarge their audiences. For example, to meet anticipated interest, *Automotive News* coincided a one-week paywall drop with the 2014 North American International Auto Show (Hebbard, 2014); to generate interest in its new "International" edition, *The New York Times* made all its online properties free for a week (Sulzberger, 2013); and, to meet potential readers' interest in the latest news, in 2012 the *New Republic* increased the number of "recent" stories that could be accessed for free (without defining "recent") (Bennett, 2012).

Other paywall drops were explained as ways to fix poorly designed trade-offs between paid circulation revenue and advertising that decreased audience size. In 2007, *The New York Times* suspended parts of its subscription plan after "our projections for growth on that paid subscriber base were low, compared to the growth of online advertising" (Pérez-Peña, 2007, para. 5). *Salon* similarly removed both its paywall and the "day pass" readers earned in exchange for watching a 30-second advertisement after they learned that such barriers harmed their potential to attract and retain audiences. As its former managing editor explained, "Once web users get it in their head that your site is 'closed' to them, if you ever change your mind and want them to come back, it's extremely difficult to get that word out" (Rosenberg, 2009, para. 4).

Similarly, others use paywall exceptions to convert visitors into subscribers. The *Financial Times* introduced a temporary "paid trial" providing unlimited access for a month in the hopes that "within that they can build a habit, and then become a subscriber" (Jackson & Plunkett, 2015, para. 6). *The New York Times* (2015) followed a similar strategy when it made its "NYT Now" app free in the hopes of attracting "a younger, mobile-first audience" (para. 3) that would later subscribe to the full *Times* site.

Other paywall drops attempted to enlarge audiences by stealing readers from competitors. Less than two hours after nytimes.com failed during a "scheduled maintenance update," *The Wall Street Journal* lowered its paywall for 2 hours (Lazaroff, 2013); and two weeks later, when hackers brought down nytimes.com, the *Journal* again lowered its paywall and promoted the drop as a way for *Times* subscribers to sample a competitor (Krebs, 2013).

The free content resulting from these strategies is a boon to nonsubscribers but—distinct from those driven by emergencies, planned events, access, or advertising—such exceptions use novel content, audience data, and competitor weakness to attract new readers with the aim of eventually converting them into paid subscribers.

Experimentation

Finally, in eleven instances, news organizations dropped paywalls as part of experiments in how to use paywalls. The *Toronto Star* (2015) lowered its paywall as part of a test to see if it could instead earn revenue through its new tablet app. The *Valley Morning Star* ended its eight-month test of a site-wide paywall after observing which sections of the site garnered the most traffic and gathering audience metrics; it instead decided to charge for a tablet-based version of the print paper (Valle, 2010).

The Dallas Morning News has experimented with several versions of paid and free content: in 2011 the paper instituted a strict paywall with no free samples (Ellis, 2011); in 2013 it became a free site with a "premium" version with better navigation, personalization, less advertising, and subscriber discounts (Ellis, 2013); and in 2014 it ended this premium site as a "nine month experiment that didn't work" and kept its all-free main site (Jean, 2014, para. 2). Getty Images ended its paywall experiment because it proved to be an unworkable way of charging for content that circulated freely anyway (Long, 2014). In an effort to bring back readers, *Variety* dropped its paywall, calling it simply "an interesting experiment that didn't work" (Ingram, 2013, para. 2); and the U.K.'s Johnston Press dropped paywalls at all of its 300 sites after finding that, across its online network, "paid subscribers numbered in the low double-digits" (Jaffe, 2010, para. 5).

These experiments—their design, success criteria, and the reasons they ended—suggest an ongoing rationale for many paywall drops: learning how and why to configure paywalls in ways that align with an organization's mission, strategic plans, and audience dynamics. Experimentation is nothing new to news organizations: they have always used "habits of illustration, genres of reportage, and schemes of departmentalization" to create "the persisting visible structure of the newspaper" (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001, p. 3), and continue to create new ways of responding to and shaping broader media systems (Benton, 2014b). Raising and lowering paywalls is another step in this experimentation—moves revealing what news organizations think they offer, who they see as constituents, and what they define as success.

Conclusion

Our aim here has been threefold: first, to give historical and theoretical context for why news is sometimes offered freely; second, to propose paywall *exceptions* as objects of study—moments when news commodification entails negotiating commercial and public logics; and, finally, to show how metajournalistic discourse explain these drops, offering a preliminary typology of factors motivating paywall drops and sketching a set of questions that might guide future research on paywall drops.

Whatever the motivations and mechanisms, when news organizations drop, suspend, or otherwise open up their paywalls, they change the commodification of online news. Content that was previously considered valuable enough to charge for becomes free because, for the different reasons described here, news organizations think it *should* circulate freely. The commercial press sometimes, briefly, looks similar to a public service broadcaster, providing access to all (albeit still with advertising). Our analysis finds that news organizations publicly state a variety of overlapping rationales: informing the public during crises and emergencies; increasing exposure to planned events and special occasions; providing wider access to nonemergency content seen as publicly valuable; using advertisers as short-term site-wide sponsors; enlarging audiences; and experimenting with what a paywall means and how it should be configured. To be sure, our analysis is limited in several key ways—*e.g.*, we only studied trade press and news organizations' own public accounts of paywall exceptions, we relied on snowball sampling to find publicized instances of drops, are only working with one type of data (trade press publications), are not able to comment on the internal dynamics motivating paywall exceptions, and have little insight into why paywalls are sometimes raised again—but propose three ways in which these findings are significant.

First, such drops offer insight into the priorities of particular news organizations and emerging patterns in the networked press as a whole. Each time a news site explains why it drops a paywall—or fails to—it leaves clues about how its values intersect with its commodification strategy, its technology design, and its brand identity. When news organizations drop paywalls—or decide not to—for only *some* parts of election campaigns, *certain* emergencies, *particular* geographies, *specific* content, or *select* advertising partners, it shows how the power to selectively decommodify news reflects the power to define the scope, duration, and significance of events and constituencies—a power that only organizations with economic reserves, cultural standing, or risk affinity may possess.

Conversely, when *several* sites drop their paywalls, we see resemblances *among* news organizations—how forces of institutional isomorphism shape the field of online journalism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), create new types of organizations and markets (Padgett & Powell, 2012), and beg new questions: When are paywall drops shared, field-level news rituals? What makes some paywalls rise again while others stay down? Which news organizations make and follow paywall exceptions? What risks are associated with paywall exceptions, which news organizations have the economic and cultural resources to run these risks, and how does this risk distribution correlate with a power to experiment or take normative stances? As news organizations drop paywalls and readers subvert them, different parts of the press are more or less accessible, more or less intertwined with commodification. Distinguishing an "elite press" for paying customers, from a "free press" independent of market forces, or a "public press" sustained by government funding becomes an exercise in reading the *state* of a press network—a state that depends, in part, on which paywalls are raised or lowered at any given time. Paywall drops are part of what Colyvas and Maroulis (2015) call "emergence-based institutionalization": moments when "local actions that begin as exceptions become self-reproducing, field-level structures themselves" (p. 601).

Second, we find that paywalls have "interpretive flexibility": The "wider social-cultural milieu" of online journalism has not agreed on dominant norms for which news should circulate freely and when. Since paywalls still have "more than one interpretation" (Pinch & Bijker, 1984, p. 409), they offer ways to see potentially diverse news commodification logics unfold. Indeed, news organizations mix mechanisms and rationales in explaining exceptions: *e.g.*, the ability to make only one part of a site free is not just a technical feature, but a potential power to enact a normative vision of *why* only some news is commodified. The ability to charge readers who access more than 10 articles per month while not at Starbucks is not just a default setting or a marketing partnership, but evidence of how much free news is considered enough, over what time, for which types of consumers. Such intertwined technical and normative moments exist because paywalls are still largely *local* creations; since individual news organizations can control *how* they charge for news they can simultaneously experiment with *why* they might charge for news. But, as payment infrastructure companies like Piano, Press+, Apple, and Google *standardize* paywall platforms (Owen, 2015) across seemingly independent news organizations (Braun, 2014), experimentations in how and why to charge for news may become rarer, more formalized, or less able to generate alternative valuations of online journalism. Studies of mature sociotechnical systems find that when "closure mechanisms" (technical standards, dominant actors, predictable interpretations) force the "stabilization of artifacts" (Pinch & Bijker, 1984, p. 419), they are far less useful as ways to imagine or realize alternative social arrangements.

Finally, these findings suggest openings for reformers aiming to create the next generations of public, freely circulating media. They might use this typology of exceptions as evidence that, sometimes, news online organizations *are* willing and able to distribute free news; these exceptions may be starting points for arguing for more unmetered content. As the field of online journalism continues to change, scholars, publishers, platform designers, and activists alike might ask: when *should* online news be free and how might the networked press's sociotechnical infrastructures make these moments possible? And what forces govern a news platform's "conversion" from a marketplace to a distributor of public goods, and what do paywall drops teach us about news as a hybrid product? We find here that it is a mistake to consider a paywall as mature systems that are either present or absent. In fact, most paywalls are dynamic, sociotechnical systems that reveal institutional patterns, journalistic rituals, and news values.

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