



The culture of free: Construct explication and democratic ramifications for readers' willingness to pay for public affairs news

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Abstract

The homogenization and commoditization of news have risen since the emergence of the Internet, but have sharply increased in recent years due to economic constraints on news organizations and journalists' labor conditions. This article explores readers' perceptions and attitudes toward the economic and informative value of online news in particular, and toward the Internet as a means of news dissemination in general. Drawing upon 50 in-depth interviews with respondents from Spain aged 18–65 years, we conceptualize the lack of readers' inclinations to pay for digital news as a *culture of free* and explore its main dimensions. Specifically, the culture of free is a strong orientation to considering news as a public good that must be free of charge, rooted in customs/habits of free consumption on the Internet over decades, fueled by free competition, subtended by advertising, and a lack of interest in the news more generally. Despite the fact that the digital versions might be theoretically considered as inferior, we argue that both products (print vs online) are equally

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valuable (economically and informatively) and the only divergence lies in their format and thus in their price.

Keywords

Business model, culture of free, free competition, free news consumption, online news, public good

Introduction

The emergence of the Internet has transformed the news production process of journalists, the news consumption habits of audiences, as well as the flux, presence, and reach of news itself (Antunovic et al., 2018; Hermida, 2010). Journalists, audiences, and news corporations are trying to adapt their skills, preferences, and organizational structures to respond to the myriad of digital challenges that have affected their core activities (Aitamurto and Lewis, 2013). Online news, increasingly omnipresent, ambient, and commoditized, has largely lost its value, something that directly affects the revenue models of most news organizations (Cawley, 2018). In this context, there is a growing concern among media managers about audiences' perceptions and attitudes toward the pecuniary and journalistic evaluations of digital news providers. Readers' understanding and attitudes toward online news in a context of commoditized offer are thus the focus of this study.

This article explores how news audiences respond to the increasing commoditization and homogenization of online news, and how their willingness to pay for media commodities is shaped in an economic culture of free consumption. Specifically, through 50 in-depth interviews with Spanish news consumers, we try to elucidate audience attitudes toward online news consumption, the role of the Internet as a means of news dissemination and audiences' economic and journalistic evaluations of digital information. Our findings reveal a general inclination to perceive online news as a product and news organizations as a service with limited or no economic value. We conceptualize this lack of value as the manifestation of a *culture of free* and explore its main dimensions: news as a public good, customs/habits of free consumption, free competition supported by advertising revenue models, and lack of interest in news more generally.

It is important to note that we have carefully differentiated our conceptualization from earlier studies on culture and free consumption, typically referred as free culture (Lessig, 2006). Our theorization lays on both conceptual distinctions *vis-à-vis* the culture of free and empirical data, suggesting that the culture of free is unambiguously related to readers' economic value perceptions of news in a context of commoditization and homogenization of the range of options available online. From a theoretical perspective, we use the concept of the culture of free in its most basic meaning: the view held by an ever broader segment of the population that the consumption of news should be free. Therefore, the culture of free is not portrayed here from an economic or legal point of view. We understand the culture of free as a sociological construct unambiguously related to the position of news consumption in contemporary society, along with the journalistic and pecuniary

value ascribed to it by audiences. This study contributes to a growing body of scholarships on how readers make sense of online news (Costera-Meijer and Groot-Kormelink, 2015), considering its impact on economic value assessments.

The homogenization and commoditization of online news and their impact on readers' willingness to pay

This study aims to understand readers' attitudes and economic value perceptions of online news in a commoditized and homogenized context. In particular, we argue that both the homogenization and the commoditization of news play a fundamental role in explaining why online news has lost its economic and informative value in the eyes of audiences, in combination with the new opportunities and challenges brought by the Internet and digital platforms. We define news commoditization as the process whereby news services are transformed from 'products which meet individual and social needs into products whose value is set by what they can bring into marketplace' (Mosco, 2009: 132). In market terms, to commoditize something is simply to turn it into an object for sale, to place a monetary value on it.

Under this theoretical conceptualization, the news is generally a subsidized commodity (in online newspapers especially), given that readers generally pay little or nothing directly. In turn, third parties (mostly advertisers) are a crucial source of income, meaning that the definition of quality is 'based on popularity more profitable than one based on less widely shared professional or craft standards' (McManus, 1992: 790). This holds true especially for online news, but not for print newspaper subscriptions, which are still substantial. In fact, for most news organizations, readers' print payments are the most important source of revenue. Despite this, it can still be assumed that the production of high-quality and valuable news that is only consumed by a small number of readers is highly inefficient for news organizations, as advertisement rates are also rather low for such services. The commoditization of news has therefore important implications for the practice and economics of journalism that can be reflected, especially, in commercial pressures, journalists' reporting on societal inequalities (McManus, 1992), and loss of its pecuniary value (Goyanes, 2014).

Relatedly, the burgeoning literature on news homogenization mainly addresses the effects that non-unique – and thus potentially substitutable (online news) – products might have on demand when the price is above zero (Chyi, 2005; Goyanes, 2015; Picard, 2009). According to Picard (2009), both online and print news are homogeneous products and thus non-unique. This means that, in a context of growing competition in the news business, the online product is fully and easily substitutable (Chyi, 2005), which inevitably decreases the value (economic and also journalistic) that readers assign to the news offer.

The commoditization and homogenization of news are also situated in the context of the Internet, a technology that substantially contributes to the economic devaluation of news production, due to the supposedly free market of communication commodities. The history of the Internet is a well-known, unified, and extensively studied area of research with two opposing 'champs' related to its social consequences. The first was held by the

so-called technology-utopists like Negroponte (1995) or Gilder (1994). They considered the Internet as a source of digital democracy, an anti-authoritarian phenomenon of the technology of freedom. For them, the Internet allowed for the emergence of a less centralized, less controlled world with extensive civil participation through free and open access. However, other, more dystopian visions assumed that the Internet is and will be dominated by business interests, in which 'a handful of giant multimedia corporations extended their reach over a market-driven, privatized, e-commerce and advertiser-financed system' (Hardy, 2014: 109).

It appears that historical facts are more likely to support the second, dystopian vision. Indeed, radical critics of the neoliberal attitude claim that 'with the extensive commercialization of the Internet in the 90s, this medium has become a state-sponsored commercial system' (Curran and Seaton, 2010: 258). The Internet has also produced serious changes in the assessment of the economic value of products in general, and on the economic value of media content and news production in particular. Companies involved in the production chain (Van der Wurff, 2012) became extremely differentiated with many separate fields of activities, ranging from production to marketing. A vertical disintegration also occurs whereby even consumers (the audience) are involved, as they can modify, share, and comment on news products via their own social networks (Benton, 2011). In this context, as suggested by Van der Wurff (2012), it is extremely difficult to ascertain the true economic value of any given news content.

Another important effect of the Internet is that, besides the significant production costs of news content, an extremely high number of customers could share the initial costs by minimal expenditure. Considering millions of customers in the case of an online platform, audiences might think that their share in the costs of production converges to zero (Van der Wurff, 2012). Moreover, it is almost impossible or at least difficult to exclude non-payers from consuming news products. This does not only mean that exclusion appears to run contrary to the general ethos of the Internet (Anderson, 2009): where publishers implement paywalls, original subscribers would share the content on different platforms where news content becomes accessible to non-subscribers as well (Bakker and Scholten, 2009). Finally, it is generally held that

news is not scarce and therefore cannot be sold on markets like standard economic goods. Together, these characteristics imply that it is difficult for firms to produce news as a commercial product that is sold at a profitable price to users. (Van der Wurff, 2012: 236)

In a Marxist framework, both audiences and news content become commodities, meaning that their use value has been transformed into exchange value, that is, 'things valued for their use into marketable products that are valued for what they can bring in exchange' (Mosco, 2009: 2). Once commodities circulate with a price, they attain exchange value, with money serving as their universal equivalent (Marx, 1983 [1867]: 93). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, commoditization went hand in hand with the homogenization of news content. According to Anderson (2009), despite an abundance of different perspectives, sources, and representations, audiences are flooded with the very same ready-made news product. Of course, there is a variety of choices of information and news content, but to get unique or at least alternative media content, audiences

have to make additional efforts, which generally leads to the consumption of mainstream news (Van der Wurff, 2012).

In the absence of a real competition where a plural market provides different products with different economic values, audiences are facing an oligopolistic market (Wasko et al., 2014) where the same products are offered for minimal prices and, ultimately, for free (Shapiro and Varian, 1999). However, the old saying that there is no such thing as a free lunch applies just as inexorably to the 'free' consumption of media content in the network economy. Consumers pay a great amount of money for related services like Internet access or devices like smartphones and notebooks which they can use to consume media content (Anderson, 2009; Chasney, 2015). As a consequence, audiences might assume that, through buying access to the Internet and the corresponding apparatus, they have already paid for the content as well. Thus, the oligopolistic nature of the market that entails homogenization, commoditization, and the absence of real competition results in a situation where the attributed economic value of media content in general, and news media in particular, is ever decreasing, converging toward zero.

Previous studies on news consumption in the culture of free

Our conception of the culture of free has been preceded and supported by economic analyses dealing with 'freeconomics' (Anderson, 2009: 13), 'information economy', 'new economy', or 'network economy' (Shapiro and Varian, 1999). These economic theories are built on the idea that, in the digital age, information inevitably becomes free after the first production in both cost and price. In other words, the production of information goods involves high fixed costs but low marginal costs (Shapiro and Varian, 1999: 10). The fixed costs include the creation, the packaging, the reproduction and the distribution of news, plus the marketing, and sales costs (Van der Wurff, 2012: 232), while the further distribution of news content via audience sharing is virtually costless. Moreover, 'bits economy' (Anderson, 2009), as opposed to the economy of the classical material world, is deflationary, meaning that products become cheaper and cheaper and, supposedly, prices ultimately converge to zero. Thus, in a free culture (Lessig, 2006), consumers, including media consumers formerly known as audiences (Garnham, 2000), expect to get free goods in many forms like free samples, free trials, free complementary goods, free media content, and all the free products of a 'gift economy' (Anderson, 2009).

Media economists have also observed that there are many reasons why, in digital economies, there is no use in fighting against the culture of free. First, in classical economic terms, there is an extremely fast-growing supply while demand remains largely stable. Second, consumers tend not to value digital content since it is immaterial. Third, ubiquitous access to digital content, including digital news, makes it easier to download and share than to buy it in any material form. Finally,

the generation that has grown up with broadband has digital economics somehow wired into their DNA. Whether they've ever heard of near-zero marginal cost or not, they intuitively

understand it. That's why they're either indifferent or hostile to copyright. They just don't see the point. (Anderson, 2009: 115)

Reception studies that are part of media audience studies analyze how media consumption itself could be related to different patterns of social action or identity formation (Garnham, 2000). In this regard, the Internet is generally considered as a medium propagating a democratic ideal. Thus, media consumption trends are closely interwoven with the structure of the predominant medium (the Internet) and the corresponding ethos (democracy) that could lead to a distinct culture (the culture of free). Accordingly, while most traditional media analyses concentrate on the effects of media on audiences, ethnographical studies, and gratification or demand models have begun to consider the audience as an active, embedded community of consumers that view media content as a commodity (Garnham, 2000).

In this context, media products and especially news media could be considered as a public good that must be provided in the same amount to all affected consumers (Varian, 2014: 714). Perfect non-rivalry in consumption and perfect non-excludability of non-paying customers are the defining characteristics of a pure public good (Van der Wurff, 2012), just like the feature of media content that it is not used up in consumption. As many analysts have demonstrated, 'the economic implications of the public good aspect of media content are far-reaching, affecting the budgeting decisions, distribution strategies, and pricing policies of media companies' (Napoli, 2003: 2). In most cases, a public good is sponsored or fully financed by the government. Arguments in favor of state-sponsored news production refer to the fact that news is a merit good, meaning that consumers might systematically underestimate the value of news and thus be less willing to pay for it since they are not aware of its true value. 'In common parlance, these are products that are "good" for you, even though we might not particularly like them. Education is a frequently mentioned example of a merit good' (Van der Wurff, 2012: 235). This conceptualization of news as a public good could also help us to understand why audiences in a culture of free avoid paying for media productions.

Method

The Spanish case

The Spanish media landscape has several features that make it a clear example of the implementation of a media culture conceptualized in this paper as the culture of free. First, compared with other European countries, Spain has always had a relatively small newspaper readership, while news media moved relatively quickly online. The fact that Spanish news consumers were not used to paying (low number of subscriptions/capita) for print news might also impact their perception of (online) news as free. In addition, the printed newspaper readership was traditionally very low, while the free press had remarkable commercial strength (Salaverria, 2007).

According to Newman et al. (2019), only 10 percent of the Spanish audience is willing to pay for online news, slightly below the global average (11%). Eighty-five percent of the audience consumes online news (including news offered through social media sites).

Table 1. Sample description.

Participants	Gender	Age cohorts	Education	Type of interview
50	50% male (<i>n</i> = 25)	20–30 (<i>n</i> = 7)	Less than high school graduate (<i>n</i> = 25)	Skype (<i>N</i> = 20)
	50% female (<i>n</i> = 25)	30–40 (<i>n</i> = 8)	High school graduate (<i>n</i> = 10)	Telephone (<i>N</i> = 20)
		30–40 (<i>n</i> = 15)	Some college, college and postgraduate studies (<i>n</i> = 15)	Face-to-face (<i>N</i> = 10)
		40–50 (<i>n</i> = 15)		
		40–50 (<i>n</i> = 5)		

In general, the perceived extent of poor journalism is much higher (68%) than the global average (55%) and the highest in Europe. Seventy-seven percent of news consumers in Spain are worried about news bias (compared with the global average of 59%), while 53 percent of news consumers regularly encounter advertisements that look like news. In short, the Spanish media landscape is a relatively open market of media goods where the audience prefers free content, and also perceives serious biases regarding the accuracy and legitimacy of news content.

Participants, interview guide, and data analysis

We conducted in-depth interviews with 50 Spanish digital news consumers. The semi-structured interviews were carried out between December 2018 and May 2019. We used purposive sampling; specifically, maximum variety sampling. Following Patton (2002), participants were chosen to reflect a large diversity in information-rich cases relevant to the research interest: different genders, ages, political orientations, incomes, and level of education. As a consequence, our interviewees represent a great heterogeneity in their profiles (see Table 1), both in the use of digital technologies for news consumption and in their attitudes toward and perceptions of the value of online information. Men and women were equally represented in the sample, 50 percent each. The age of participants ranged from 22 to 55, although most were between 30 and 40 years old. Participants' level of education included high school graduate or less (*n* = 16), college career (*n* = 16), and postgraduate studies (*n* = 18).

Given the regional diversity of selected participants, some interviews were conducted via Skype (*n* = 20) and telephone (*n* = 20), including participants from Galicia, Murcia, Basque Country, Andalusia, Valencia, and Catalonia. The rest of the participants (*n* = 10) were from Madrid and were interviewed face to face. The evidence gathered from Skype, telephone, and face-to-face interviews did not differ much in their clarity, originality, depth, and duration. In general, interviews lasted between 50 and 70 minutes, and they were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim (120 pages) by the third author and eventually codified and analyzed by the first one.

The interview guide addressed three topic areas. The first part concerned participants' use, types, and means to access digital news. Questions addressed how participants consume

digital news, the main platforms for news access and consumption, their perception about their knowledge of current affairs and politics, and their daily media diet. This initial part of the interview was oriented to introduce and familiarize participants with the aim of the study. Therefore, we aimed to understand how readers consume news contents and how the process of news consumption shapes both their perspectives on the informative value of news and their opinions toward the main platforms for news access. By problematizing how respondents obtain digital information about current events and politics, we aim to get empirical evidence on how news consumers value the relevance and significance of news in the digital environment.

The second part of the interview guide specifically concentrated on descriptions of participants' attitudes toward digital news and their perceptions about the informative value of online content: questions addressed how news users frame the journalistic value of online news, their perceptions about the features that make a news piece distinctive, and their views on the similarity/difference (and thus homogenization) of news available online. Finally, the third part focused on the role of the Internet in framing participants' understandings of the economic value of news, respondents' perceptions on the informative value of news depending on the distribution channel (print vs online), and the reasons for paying for digital information or not. Specifically, this final section asked respondents for their views on the economic price of news on the Internet, their willingness to pay for digital news, and how they are affected by the Internet to economically value digital information.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. We then conducted a thematic analysis, which posits 'a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 79). The analytic procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) – comprising six phases that allow for the systematization and transparency of the coding and analysis process – was followed. Codes and thematic maps were discussed with two independent researchers, which then informed the refinement of themes, their definition, and naming. The thematic analysis allowed us to identify shared patterns across the statements of various interviewees centered around our three research interests, while leaving us the flexibility to identify other emerging themes. The next section discusses the key findings.

Results

General news consumption patterns and perceptions of digital news quality

Most of our respondents were digital news consumers who rely on a myriad of news outlets and social media platforms to be informed about current events and politics. The most frequently cited digital news outlets were national newspapers like *El País.es*, *El Mundo.es*, or local news organizations such as *La Vanguardia* or *El Periódico* in Catalonia, *La Voz de Galicia* in Galicia, or *El Correo* in the Basque Country. In relation to social media platforms, most of our participants consume or read digital news on platforms, primarily Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Some of our interviewees also emphasized that despite the fact that they do not consider social media as information

platforms, they ‘encounter’ or ‘find’ news there as a by-product of using these platforms, as the following quotes illustrate:

I don’t usually search for the news in any newspaper, I find them in my social networks. (P4)

I don’t need to search for news because they already appear on Facebook; on Instagram, everyone posts them. And if something important happens, they send me messages. I don’t look for news unless I see something very important. (P48)

By directly consuming news both online and offline, most of our participants held the perception that they were generally well-informed about current events and politics. However, many others acknowledged that they were not fully informed: ‘I’m not really well informed, so I should research much more’, lamented Xavier, a college sophomore. The key reason for not being fully informed is because many participants are not ‘interested’ in news or more simply because they are ‘busy’, as Magdalena, a factory worker, explained: ‘I spend a lot of time working and I have other activities’. Moreover, some of our respondents said that they consume digital news while doing other activities. Thus, they do not dedicate a specific, exclusive time to finding out about the latest news, but take advantage of ‘free’ moments in their daily routine. Hector, a university sophomore, explained it as follows: ‘I usually search for news with my phone, and it’s usually on the underground’. While eating breakfast, eating lunch, riding on the underground or in class, many of our respondents consume or are accidentally exposed to digital news, emphasizing the myriad of circumstances and conditions that whereby they can find information about public affairs and politics.

Generally, participants consume written news or opinion articles, followed by online videos and reports. In addition, they generally hold a positive perception about the journalistic value, in terms of quality, of Spanish news outlets: ‘The truth is that I value digital news very highly’, explained Toni, a public-sector employee. Echoing this perception, Rosa, a senior lawyer, claimed that: ‘digital news is good, very good’. However, at the same time, many participants were concerned about the potential damage caused to democratic societies by ‘fake news’, as the following quotes illustrate:

There are a lot of unfounded rumors and you don’t know if a lot of information is wrong. We’ve got more information than before, but a lot is false. (P3)

There is a lot of fake information. It’s really quick to get to information and that makes us to get inform badly and to believe everything we read. (P50)

The culture of free

To problematize the lack of economic value of news for readers, we developed the culture of free conceptualization. The culture of free is the theoretical transformation, based on an empirical examination, of users’ limited inclination to pay for digital news. This is underpinned by the perception that news is a public good that must be free of charge, rooted in customs/habits of free digital consumption over decades. Other factors driving this tendency are free competition subtended by advertising revenue models and a lack

of interest in news more generally. These four tacit assumptions about digital news' lack of economic value are, however, nuanced by participant perceptions of the economics of online news and journalists' salary needs.

Although our respondents generally emphasized their lack of willingness to pay for online news, they fully understood news organizations' legitimate economic demands and thus their potential inclination to implement paywalls in the future. Therefore, interviewees were aware of the economic challenges of news organizations in monetizing digital contents, but the mechanisms to implement this and potential payment are both unknown and neglected. Sergio, a professional musician, reflected on the challenges of news organizations in monetizing digital contents in the following terms: 'Digital news has an economic value, but what I don't know is how newspapers will get their benefits if they make them free' (P17). Echoing Sergio, Paulo, an industrial worker, suggested that despite the fact that he is not willing to pay for news, journalists need to get paid: 'I don't give news economic value, I suppose it has value because the people who make it have to get paid, but not much' (P48).

In this regard, almost none of our respondents had a digital subscription to an online newspaper and openly disclosed their reluctance to do so in the future. 'The truth is that I don't pay for digital news, nor do I think I'll ever pay', exclaimed David, an experienced plumber. This attitude of considering news as a product and news organizations as a service with limited or no economic value was held by most of our respondents, and we conceptualize this orientation as the manifestation of a culture of free. The culture of free integrates four main dimensions, the first one being a general inclination to consider news a *public good* which must hence be free of charge when accessed digitally.

News as a public good. Many of our respondents seemed to believe that to establish a healthy democracy, people 'must be informed', which they generally took to mean, in the words of Pablo, a store employee, that 'we, as a society, have to have free access to digital news'. Corroborating Pablo's perspective, Juliana reflected on the capital importance of free news as a right to be fully informed:

News on the Internet should be free because everyone should be informed of what is happening around us. The fact of being educated and informed is something really important and everyone needs to do that throughout his life. I think paying for news does not help in establishing a democratic society. (P8)

In short, news as a public good, for many of our participants, means that free access and consumption is crucial to maintain a democratic society, and thus, as any constitutional right, it should be protected and if possible, provided for free.

Related to the consideration of news as a public good, many of our respondents seemed to link free news consumption online to the opportunity to reduce societal inequalities. Rosa María, a bus driver, believed that 'news on the Internet should be available to everyone. Whether you have more money or less, you could have more information' (P40). In addition, some respondents introduced the idea that they already pay 'for Internet access' and 'many other digital things' and thus assumed that their economic contribution to sustain the business of news is indirectly met. Therefore, news as a public

good also includes a public attitude that free news access reduces societal inequalities, in a context where the payment for Internet services is seen as an indirect contribution to maintaining a flow of free news.

Customs/habits of free consumption. The second dimension of the culture of free is related to newsreaders' customs and habits of free digital consumption. Specifically, many of our interviewees cited 'the difficulties', 'challenges', and 'nonsense' of inviting readers to pay for digital news after decades of free and unlimited access to online information. Therefore, the rationale behind users' unwillingness to pay for digital news is the ingrained habit of free consumption. Based on a customary belief/tradition, respondents assume that news is a free product and therefore take for granted and normalize its lack of economic value, as expressed by the following interviewees:

People don't pay for digital news because they are free, it's a habit. (P2)

We are so used to get free digital information that now is pointless to ask us to pay. (P31)

As they always have been free [news], for what reason are you going to pay? (P47)

Free competition supported by advertising revenue models. Heavily linked to users' customs and habits of free access and consumption is the growing journalistic competition of news organizations that base their revenue models on advertising support. In this regard, the reluctance of many participants to pay for digital news is due to the myriad of 'free digital alternatives' that provide a reliable supply of news that does not compel readers to make an economic transaction and which is thus supported by advertising income.

Most of our interviewees believed that this business model is a 'good idea' or 'very much adapted to their news needs and wants' (P1), as it allows them to be fully informed of current events and politics without them having to make any economic transaction. Eduardo, a school teacher, reflected on the multiple free media choices to be digitally informed, including 'main TV channels' in a direct way: 'People don't want to pay for digital information because we have many free alternatives' (P7). Likewise, Alba, a bartender, mentioned the interchangeability of digital newspapers and thus her lack of loyalty: 'I don't care which newspaper I read, I'm sure there's always another one that will inform me for free' (P24).

Despite this reluctance to pay for digital information due to the free alternatives on the Internet and traditional media, our respondents were aware that news organizations' source of income is based on selling their audiences to potential advertisers. 'Well, you don't have to pay but you have to close many ads sometimes', Mario, a young hairdresser, ironized. In addition, many respondents believed that the free business model-based advertising support allows a good equilibrium between news organizations' economic needs and audiences' information requirements. In general, respondents framed these contrary objectives as a fair trade-off: 'I believe that with advertising, a reasonable balance is achieved', explained Rocio, an experienced architect.

Lack of interest in news. Finally, many respondents' reluctance to pay for digital news is the ultimate consequence of their lack of interest in current events and politics or, more

generally, in news. They generally justify this lack of interest with the argument that news, despite having an intrinsic economic value, is a fully dispensable product. Therefore, willingness to pay for online news is only triggered when respondents use of digital outlets very intensively or when they need news contents for a specific and relevant purpose (to be thoroughly informed, for work-related issues, to have access to relevant and reliable information that they might not get otherwise, etc.). However, this disposition to pay for online news is, to a great extent, moderated by economic constraints/daily budget and the prices of digital newspapers. These issues were raised by two of our respondents: ‘Currently, I have a limited budget and I wouldn’t invest it in one of the newspapers I read’ (P17), ‘I would pay if the information interested me and it also depends on the price’ (P28). Therefore, the final dimension of the free culture is derived from users’ interest in and use of news, as the following respondents acknowledged:

I wouldn’t pay anything now because I don’t have great use. But maybe in the future, if I think it’s a thing I need, I would pay for it. (P5)

Maybe I wouldn’t always pay, but I would do it when I would need to find out about a specific topic. (P14)

I wouldn’t pay at the moment, but if it was information that I need for sure, for job issues or a very specific topic, then, maybe yes. (P26)

Economic value perceptions between the print and online news

Our participants held a variety of perceptions regarding the potential economic value of print versus digital news. Thus, our evidence reflects the multiple – and sometimes contradictory – views that readers might have when evaluating the print and online news options, both separately and in combination. In general, most of our participants seemed to believe that both the print and online products were the same or very similar and drew conclusions on their economic perceptions accordingly. Our evidence suggests that respondents assumed that there is a little divergence between the two products, and that the only difference lies in the format for news dissemination itself (paper vs online). As a result, the economic value for news remains the same, regardless how it is published, as the following quotes illustrate:

The value for me is the same, although right now I read a digital newspaper or an already printed one, for me, they will say the same and the value is going to be the same. But yes, I prefer not paying, so I will read the digital one. (P15)

My opinion doesn’t change. It seems to me just as true one thing and the other. (P19)

Internet doesn’t affect me; I value it in the same way as the printed one. (P21)

The same, it doesn’t change. I prefer it on paper because it’s more comfortable for me, but it’s the same. (P23)

I believe that the value doesn't change, I don't perceive it as having less value because of the simple fact of being free or easy to access. (P28)

However, other participants' perceptions favored online news because they are 'free of charge' with respect to the offline product or simply because they are 'constantly updated'. However, this divergence in the nature of the online and print products does not imply a change in its informative and economic value, since the product remains the same, despite the difference in format, as the following respondent acknowledges: 'In terms of informative value, I think they are the same, but the difference is that digital news can be updated and, moreover, it is free'. In fact, for some respondents, this constant updating of online content was a decisive factor in justifying their belief that digital news is a more valuable product than news in print. Two of our respondents put it in the following terms:

For me it has a lot of value, even sometimes more than the news on television or the press. You have to think that many things suddenly happen and if being a digital medium, you can edit and update. On television, if at midday something happens or in the afternoon, you don't find out until the night or if it's press just the same, until the next day you don't find out. I think it's a way to be updated at the moment. (P30)

I think it's the fastest way to get the information, so I value that, it saves me time. (P39)

However, for others, the print product still remains the more credible and serious format for news consumption. Therefore, despite the proliferation of free digital competitors, for some of our interviewees, print newspapers still maintain some of their aura of credibility and veracity, especially compared with the non-filtered digital space. Roberto, a senior secretary of a multinational company, explained it in the following terms: 'Unconsciously, I give more credibility to print newspapers. I don't know why, it's automatic. If you think about it, maybe they don't have it, but unconsciously it's like that' (P41). Likewise, Florinda, a dressmaker enthusiast, emphasized the non-filtered nature of digital news and thus the possibility of encountering low-quality content:

It is true that as it is on paper, you already think that it is more serious, it's like it goes through a filter, not like on the Internet. On the Internet, there is no filter, and you can find nonsense. (P46)

Discussion

The homogenization and commoditization of the information business have triggered deep changes in the economics of online news and journalists' labor conditions (Picard, 2009). The similarity and non-unique nature of most of the news services challenge readers' value assessments of digital contents, diminishing, and neglecting future economic transactions for such services (Goyanes et al., 2018). In a context of ambient journalism (Hermida, 2010), growing competition in the industry, and free digital news services, readers' have a broad palette of choices to design their media repertoires and

be informed about current affairs and politics. Earlier studies on the culture of free (Anderson, 2009; Lessig, 2006) concentrate mostly on either the deflationary nature of the Internet economy or the public good approach to news content. In both cases, the tendencies toward free news consumption derive from the features of the so-called free economics where the audience is well aware of the fact that they have to pay for the content in different ways (i.e. Internet subscription fee, ads, etc.). Drawing upon 50 in-depth interviews with Spanish news readers, our findings provide several interrelated contributions on this line of inquiry.

First, a raw interpretation of results might point to challenging findings in relation to readers' quality assessments of online news and willingness to pay. As a consequence of the culture of free, audiences' evaluations of news production do not correlate with their willingness to pay for them. This is the first meaning of 'free' in our culture of free conceptualization. As opposed with the claims of classical economic theories, high-quality assessment does not go hand in hand with an increased need since, in the case of online news, the products can be endlessly reproduced and shared. The fact that most participants were reluctant to pay for news suggests that the economic value of news is not aligned with readers' journalistic value perceptions. However, our findings should be framed in a market situation in which most of online news is offered for free, and thus, it is rational that readers hold positive evaluations when they receive a good range of choices for no charge.

Second, our conception of the culture of free combines both economic (Anderson, 2009; Shapiro and Varian, 1999) and cultural elements (Lessig, 2006), and is built on a thorough empirical analysis on audience attitudes toward the economic value of online information and the Internet as a means of news dissemination. In the culture of free, audiences are conscious of both the features of free economics on the media market and are socialized to take the free consumption of media goods for granted, meaning that they cannot be easily replaced by subscription-based models. Hence, our theoretical contribution emphasizes that besides standard marketing strategies (free trial, free complementary goods, etc.) that are parts of freeconomics (Anderson, 2009), audiences assume online news to be a public good that should be provided for free, something which they believe reduces societal inequalities. In the culture of free, media news is similar to clean air or street lighting: goods from which everyone can benefit regardless of the extent to which they participated in financing them.

Moreover, the culture of free has a third aspect that is not formally considered in earlier approaches to free culture (Lessig, 2006), namely, that news consumption, instead of being a conscious process of information gathering, becomes a 'free' time activity, conducted typically during commutes or other empty phases of the day, generally aimed at passing the time. Interviewees tend to consider news as a means for enjoying their free time, generally viewing news consumption as a leisure time activity rather than something connected with their political or civic engagement. In addition, the ubiquitous nature of news, especially through social media, enables readers to access news 'incidentally', that is, a by-product of using these platforms (Boczkowski et al., 2018). As a result, in the culture of free, news production is valued in the way air is: citizens both appreciate and consume it without consciously considering its economic value until it is really sold. This devaluation of news from being a serious pursuit to mere entertainment,

an alternative to boredom, or something that is accidentally consumed, leads also to the significant devaluation of its economic value and the manifestation of the culture of free on the Internet.

Finally, we have also found that in the culture of free, audiences are aware of commercialization and they know that there is no such a thing as a free lunch (Anderson, 2009). In many cases, audiences in a culture of free feel that they are contributing to maintaining the news business through direct advertisements, by providing data or even by paying for the Internet service itself. It is noteworthy, however, that the low economic value does not necessarily align with low journalistic or information value: audiences may simultaneously hold the views that, on one hand, news is a public good and should be provided free of charge (especially on the Internet), while also maintaining, on the other hand, that the news content they actually consume is quality journalism.

In short, we define the culture of free as a strong orientation to consider news as a public good that must be free of charge. This is due to customs/habits of free consumption on the Internet over decades, a model which is fueled by free competition, advertising revenue models, or a general lack of interest in the news. The culture of free thus comprises four dimensions that seek to capture readers' perceptions on the economic value of news in a context of commoditization and homogenization of online news services (Mosco, 2009); in brief, these four dimensions are as follows: (1) online news as a public good, (2) readers' habits of consuming news for free, (3) free competition, and (4) a lack of interest in news combined with the assumption that consuming news is an activity to be pursued in one's free time.

In addition, with the concept of the culture of free, we contribute to a better understanding of the economics of online news, suggesting that beyond the homogenization and commoditization of online content, readers' perception of digital news as a public good challenges the rational theorizations of media economists. Therefore, what really matters in shaping readers' value assessments of news – more than the increasing uniformity of online news – is their strong orientation to considering news as a public good that must be free of charge. That is the main factor in explaining readers' lack of willingness to pay in combination with their habits and free news alternatives. Unfortunately, in most studies on willingness (or rather unwillingness) to pay, this explanatory variable has not been introduced in the analysis or discussed further.

Similarly, despite the many reasons discussed that frame online news as an inferior good (Chyi and Yang, 2009), such as the supposedly unpleasant experience associated with reading texts online, online newspaper design, and quality assessments, our findings suggest that readers rate print and online products as being of equal or very similar value. According to the responses we have collected, most participants seem to believe that both products offer the same content and the only difference lies in their publication format and – especially – price. In some cases, readers may even consider online news to be a more valuable product than print news (as the former is constantly updated), while for a minority, print newspapers remain more credible.

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