

Informing readers about journalism's societal importance could boost subscription revenues

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A new study, led by Professor Neil Thurman, Honorary Senior Research Fellow at City University of London along with Dr. Bartosz Wilczek and Ina Schulte-Uentrop from Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU), and published in the *International Journal of Communication*, reveals how a sales pitch mentioning both the financial pressures faced by news outlets and how subscribers support independent journalism

significantly enhances a reader's willingness to pay for content.

The growth of social media and new forms of online information sharing have led to fears about the financial sustainability of independent, high quality journalism. Leading publications such as The Times, Financial Times and The Telegraph already rely on revenues from digital subscribers, but they—and other publications—face challenges in growing their online [subscription](#) bases.

Although revenues from online paywalls are becoming more and more important, the willingness to pay for an online newspaper subscription remains low. According to the Reuters Institute, only 9% of Britons paid for online news in the last year.

In this new study, Professor Thurman conducted an experiment with 815 participants from the United Kingdom, who were assigned one of 16 different versions of an online subscription pitch with varied wording and emphasis on key messages. Four different advertising messages were presented both alone and in combination: support of a newspaper's independent, inclusive, and watchdog journalism (the "normative" message); the difficult financial situation of the news industry (the "price transparency" message); personalization and online exclusivity; and the offer of being part of a community.

Out of all the online subscription pitches, the one that contained both the normative and price transparency [messages](#) was revealed as the most effective in increasing a reader's willingness to pay for content.

Professor Thurman said, "In a highly competitive environment that is increasingly digital, newspapers need to move away from traditional ways of funding their high quality, independent journalism.

"A key source of funding will be online subscribers. However, in a cost

of living crisis people may not see an online newspaper subscription as strictly necessary, or decide that cheaper alternatives are available.

"This study provides new insights that could help newspapers to boost online subscription revenue, and shows just how important it is to make readers aware of the value of paid-for content."

More information: Bartosz Wilczek, Ina Schulte-Uentrop, Neil Thurman, *Subscribe Now: On the Effectiveness of Advertising Messages in Promoting Newspapers' Online Subscriptions*, *International Journal of Communication* (2023). ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/19984

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