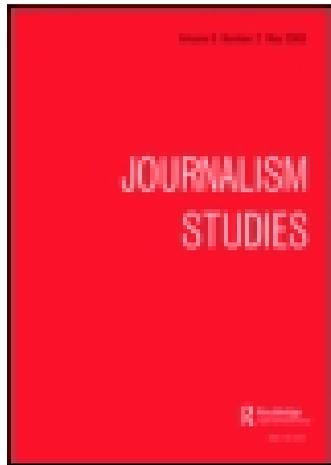


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# FROM GRATIS TO PAYWALLS

## A brief history of a retro-innovation in the press's business

Ángel Arrese 

*To make readers pay for news content has always been a fundamental way to generate revenues for the press and an essential part of its business model. However, the arrival of the internet in the mid-1990s changed this business logic for many newspapers, as they delivered their content on the internet for free, waiting for a return based almost exclusively on advertising revenues. For more than a decade, most publishers adopted the new logic of gratis online news for readers. But this started to change, especially after the 2008 financial crisis. This article analyses the history of this change in the business strategy of the press, reflecting the introduction of different payment systems, and finally paywalls, to generate revenues for online newspapers. The study distinguishes four stages in the evolution of journalistic paywalls and points out the interest in considering the process of paywall adoption as a retro-innovation. This brief history of paywalls also shows how some prestigious brands, certain business leaders and a few specialized fields of journalistic activity—such as the economic and business press—have made a considerable contribution to the growing popularity of new payment systems among media companies.*

KEYWORDS business models; free news; gratis; media economics; newspapers; paywall

### Introduction

Every 24 December since 1949, as part of its introduction to Christmas, *The Wall Street Journal* has published “In Hoc Anno Domini”, an editorial written by one of its most famous journalists, Vermont C. Royster. “In Hoc Anno Domini”, an allusion to the world-liberating power of Jesus Christ’s birth, recalls the conversion of Paul of Tarsus to Christianity and his famous “fall from the horse” on the road to Damascus. That story, in that newspaper, could well serve as a metaphor for a much more prosaic “conversion”. Namely the conversion experienced by Rupert Murdoch shortly after his purchase of Dow Jones, the publisher of *The Wall Street Journal*, an experience which turned him on to the “religion” of *paid* content, after years of experimentation with the “doctrine” of free internet content.

This article explains how this shift from a free to a pay mentality around the commercialization of online news, symbolized by Murdoch’s change of mind, has taken place in the last two decades, as a consequence of technological, economic and industry factors, but highlighting the central role played by certain media companies and business leaders. In order to unravel this recent media history, I have identified certain media decisions that could be considered as major milestones on the timeline of the as yet unfinished transition from gratis to paywall in the world of newspapers, especially, but not only, in Europe and America.

## Paywall Adoption as a Kind of Retro-innovation

The diffusion of innovations theory (Rogers 1995) has provided a robust model that a number of social science disciplines have used to explain the spread of new ideas, practices and goods. It has also been used on many occasions to explain processes of innovation in the media world, both in reference to technological as well as organizational and professional issues (Garrison 2001; Micó, Masip, and Domingo 2013; Singer 2004). According to Rogers (1995, 11), “an innovation is an idea, practice, or project that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption”. For its part, the diffusion makes reference to the “process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system” (5). The successful adoption of an innovation often follows the model of an S-form curve which accumulates the successive groups of adopters of the innovation: innovators (2.5 per cent), early adopters (13.5 per cent), early majority (34 per cent), late majority (34 per cent) and laggards (16 per cent) (Rogers 1995).

The adoption of paywalls by the online press has been analysed in recent years from very different perspectives, including those studying its possible effect on the spread of quality information in society (Collins 2011; Pickard and Williams 2014), its present and foreseeable impact on media business models (Duprey 2012; MacNamara 2010; Myllylahti 2014; Vara and Díaz 2012), and its relationship with the demand for news and with the willingness to pay that exists in the market (Chiou and Tucker 2013; Chyi 2012; Cook and Attari 2012; Wang 2011). However, this phenomenon has not been examined within the context of innovation theory, in the sense that, by using Rogers’ terminology, it can be understood as “a practice perceived as new”, which has been incorporated as a central element in new business models of the digital press. In fact, since 2010 there have been a number of reports that have argued that we are in “The year of the paywall” (*Businessweek*, November 18, 2013; Georgakopoulos 2013; *The Economist*, January 5, 2010). From today’s perspective, the evolution of paywalls can be drawn as a process of innovation diffusion, with its different types of adopters—innovators, early adopters and early majority, by now—and its opinion leaders and media champions who lead the process. It should not be seen as a surprise that in December 2013 the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers devoted its “Innovation Day”, held in Sweden, to the technological solutions necessary to implement news paywalls successfully.

But, although the adoption of paywalls can be analysed as a process of innovation adoption, it should indeed be understood as a case of “retro-innovation” (Leberecht 2013) or as a group of managerial decisions that could be framed in the logic of “retro-marketing” (Brown 2001). In fact, what in recent years has been perceived as a novelty was historically the most common way to co-finance, in a fairly balanced mix with advertising, the production and dissemination of news. Castellano et al. (2013) have explained that, when studying industries where retro-innovation is common, the most characteristic feature of them is the desire to bring to the present elements of the past to project them into the future.

Thus, the adoption of paywalls can be interpreted as the rediscovery of the historical practice of charging for news—the usual way to do business in most newspaper markets, except in some special types of the so-called gratis press (Nieto 1984)—a practice which became obsolete or very marginal for digital news content as a result of the arrival of the internet. As noted by Nakashima (2012), newspapers are returning to a business strategy that served them well in the heyday of street-corner newsboys shouting the front-page

news. They are enticing people with a little free online content before asking them to pay up. Such a return to basics or rediscovery of the value of news, seen as a retro-innovation, has been the result of many decisions and experiments carried out by publications all over the world during the last two decades, in many cases as a response to the multiple economic and technological threats that have affected the business of news.

To carry out the analysis, a review of news articles was conducted using primarily the electronic databases Factiva and LexisNexis, and applying a search strategy based on keywords related to the research's subject. "Paywall", "gratis AND news", "paid AND news", "non-paid AND news" and "newspaper AND business" were used as keywords and combinations of keywords (with their translations to French, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish) to identify and select news stories from newspapers in 17 countries (Argentina, Austria, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom and United States). Apart from the references cited in the text, almost 300 news stories about paywalls and other systems of charging for online information were retrieved for study during the period 1994–2014. Whilst neither the sample of articles nor the selection of countries was completely exhaustive, they were more than enough to outline the key events and trends in the evolution of paid content strategies for news websites around the world.

### Stages in the Evolution of Paywalls

In a well-known phrase, Alan Mutter, an expert in media economics and management, stated that "the Original Sin among most (but not all) publishers was permitting their content be consumed for free on the web" (Mutter 2009). While it is difficult to establish the precise moment at which that original sin was committed, all indicators suggest that it was in the mid-1990s, when the internet, after many years of technological development, became available to a growing sector of the population, and when large sums of money were allocated to it. This was the period when the majority of the media had to decide on the more or less free character of their online content and when they finally opted for *gratis* over *paid* digital news.

Taking as a starting point the mid-1990s, the following paragraphs describe and analyse the principal milestones in the evolution of paywalls, from the perspective of their adoption as retro-innovations in the business models of the digital press. At the same time, it is proposed that the short history of paywalls could be divided into four phases: experimenters and pioneers (1994–2000), failed trials (2001–2007), Murdoch's crusade (2008–2010) and the example of the big players (2011–2014).

#### *Experimenters and Pioneers (1994–2000)*

Since the early 1990s, many newspapers in the United States experimented with electronic formats, which were available in platforms such as America Online or CompuServe, among others. At the end of 1994, coinciding with the emergence of the World Wide Web and the launch of the first Netscape browser, the *San Jose Mercury News* introduced its pioneer online offering by creating the Mercury Center. By 1995 there were already about 30 electronic editions of newspapers on the internet in the United States. Most of them were launched with a monthly subscription fee that ranged between \$5 and \$12. From then on, the development of newspapers' online editions would be frantic, and

not only in the United States. As Brown (1999) pointed out, in 1994 there were around 20 newspapers online worldwide; by 1999 the figure was close to 5000, with 2800 alone in the United States.

After this experimental and explosive phase the majority of the newspapers opted for business models based on free content, since the online payment schemes, mainly monthly subscription fees, did not work as expected and failed to attract reasonable numbers of subscribers. By the end of the decade, almost all those who had tried to charge for news—among others, the *San Jose Mercury News*—had ceased to do so. In 1999, Brown commented that he only had news of two newspapers that were still charging, *The Wall Street Journal* and the *Champaign News Gazette* (Illinois), the latter with a fee of \$4.50 per month (Brown 1999). Among the dailies that had decided not to charge there were also major publications like *The New York Times* or the landing page of Time Inc., Pathfinder, which had been testing with certain subscription formulas for part of its content, but ended up asking for a fee just for its archive articles. In 1998, *The New York Times* even discontinued its subscription strategy of \$35 for readers outside the United States. Martin Nisenholtz, president of The New York Times Electronic Media and architect of the newspaper's website, had already stated in 1996 that, "Once people become accustomed to get something for free, it is difficult to get them start paying again" (as quoted in Reilly 1996, B2).

This perception spread quickly in other countries. In Spain, Juan Luis Cebrián, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Prisa, the leading Spanish media group and publisher of *El País*, stated that the attempt to make newspapers profitable on the internet by means of traditional payment systems seemed to be doomed to failure (*El País*, December 2, 1998). The *Financial Times*, for its part, concluded that a growing number of people have taken to reading their favourite papers online, free of charge on the internet (*Financial Times*, October 19, 1998).

Virtually all news reports in those years make reference to the peculiar case of *The Wall Street Journal*, a major world newspaper that since the end of 1996 had opted for a clear paid strategy. Peter Kann, who was at that time the CEO of the *Journal's* parent company and the person ultimately responsible for the paid strategy, would explain years later his decision with these words: "I made the site paid because I was ignorant. I didn't know any better. I just thought people should pay for content" (Grueskin 2009). In fact, the decision was a bit more complex. The first experiments with the online *Journal* started with a free Web version of its "Money and Investing Update" section in July 1995. As a response to its positive reception among readers, *The Interactive Journal* was launched in April 1996. It was the online full-text version of the newspaper, free of charge for a few months, but with the commitment to become a paid website after that summer. When that happened, in September 1996, the *Journal* had around 50,000 regular readers, for a total of 650,000 registered users. In the first month of its paid strategy, the daily achieved 30,000 subscribers. From the first of January 1997, it revised the subscription fees—\$49 a year for new subscribers and \$29 for subscribers of the print edition—and the number of subscribers continued to grow, up to 250,000 in 1998 and 450,000 in 1999 (Steinbock 2000).

Even though the case of *The Wall Street Journal* was the most exceptional, there were in the second half of the 1990s more examples of publications, above all magazines, that decided to charge for their content, among others *National Business Review* (in 1996), *Consumer Reports*, *Businessweek* and *The Economist* (in 1998) (Sandberg 1998). Likewise,

some new journalistic online-only projects, such as *The Street.com* or the online magazine promoted by Microsoft, *Slate.com*, tested with different payment systems. There were also in those years, in many other countries, attempts to establish partial payment formulas, at least for access to certain special content, including archive articles—in the case of the Swiss *Le Temps* (in 1998)—or for the delivery of customized editions on platforms such as infoPager—in the case of the project launched in 1999 by *The Jerusalem Post* (*Financial Times*, April 26, 1999).

By the end of the decade, the general consensus in the world of the press was that free online news content would attract massive readerships, whose accumulated attention could be sold efficiently to advertisers. The fascination with internet, the booming expectations for business focused on the Information Economy and the fear that paper would eventually be rendered obsolete by more efficient news media (Alves 2001) justified an almost naïve approach to the business model for online news and to the future returns on Web investments. The advertising model would constitute the basic—almost exclusive—business model for the digital news business. Only some specialized outlets and brands, focused on news beats such as business or finance, seemed to be compatible with the idea of payment for information, as happened with two other types of content: sex and sports (Compaigne and Gomery 2000, 451). Since then, the *dictum* that only the economic and financial press could adopt a paid news model has been repeated time and again all over the world (see, among others, Feitz 2011; Pfanner and Crampton 2005; Schuler 1998). By remaining as the exceptions, this small group of titles could be characterized as the first “retro-innovators”. Using Rogers (1995, 26) words, when describing the very first innovators in the diffusion process, they were perceived during many years “as a deviant” from the new digital media system.

Given that state of opinion, and with *The Wall Street Journal* as an isolated but illustrious model for those who were thinking of charging for online news, the news media approached the end of the twentieth century. It was precisely around the turn of the century when an unexpected event, the dot.com crisis, would define a new momentum in the attempt of news media to charge for its online content.

### *The Frenzy of Failed Trials (2001–2007)*

The so-called dot.com bubble that broke in 2000 was not only a real earthquake for companies and investors who were exposed to internet businesses, but a tremendous setback for the growing expectations around the promises of the New Economy (Cassidy 2002). Media companies, which had trusted in the expansion of the “attention economy” as a basis for business development, began to revise their assumptions (Goldhaber 1997). That was especially true for newspapers, whose traditional offline business was in decline and who suffered a great deal from the collapse of the advertising market, aggravated by the crash of technology and financial advertising.

After the dot.com burst, the idea of charging again for online content was on everyone’s mind. In the academic world, some experts asked for a revision of the conventional business models of digital news on the internet (Mings and White 2000; Picard 2000). At the same time, news headlines such as “Hay que pagar [We Have to Pay]” (*ABC*, March 22, 2001), “Leaping from Free to Fee” (*The Daily Telegraph*, July 26, 2001) or “Online-Archive wollen Gebühren kassieren [Online Archives Want to Collect Fees]” (*Berliner Zeitung*, August 14, 2001) were repeated once and again all over the world,

reflecting the fact that various newspapers had taken concrete steps to increase their income by asking the readers for money. Between 2001 and 2003, new charging strategies and pricing initiatives were tested.

On the one hand, taking advantage of the development of micropayment systems (Geidner and D'Arcy 2015; Shirky 2003; Smith 2003), a large number of publications promoted quite aggressively the sale of online archive articles. Virtually all the major newspapers, from *The New York Times* up to *Le Monde*, gave a big impulse to that activity from 2001. It was a business practice especially popular in Central Europe. In Germany, between 2001 and 2002 all the big journalistic brands (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Spiegel*, *Die Welt*, etc.) had developed attractive offerings of that type, similar to those of Swiss titles such as the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* or the publications of Tamedia (*Facts*, *Sonntags Zeitung*, *Tages-Anzeiger* and *Finanz und Wirtschaft*).

Another way of selling electronic content that was popularized in those years was the e-paper, a complete version of the print newspaper distributed in pdf format. Between 2002 and 2003, this type of sale was common among large Latin American newspapers (*Clarín* and *La Nación* in Argentina, *El Tiempo* in Colombia and *El Nacional* in Venezuela, for example). In Spain, this was the modality chosen by *El Mundo*, who launched an afternoon edition e-paper in 2001. By 2004, there were between 30 and 40 newspapers in Germany that were sold in an e-paper format. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, for instance, offered this service through a monthly subscription of €25.

A third approach to charging for online news, more similar to the *The Wall Street Journal* system, was to create a premium content Web space only for subscribers. The Mexican newspaper *Reforma* and the Spanish *El Mundo* in 2002, *Le Monde* in 2003 and the Canadian *Globe and Mail* in 2005 were significant examples of this option. In the United States, some newspapers such as the metropolitans *Rochester-Post Bulletin*, *Tulsa World*, *The Albuquerque Journal* and *The Columbus Dispatch* were pioneers of the Web subscriptions to premium news content. Finally, a large number of economic journals also adopted this model in those years, with levels of access to free content more restricted than those of general newspapers. Some examples of these were the Argentinian *Ámbito Financiero* (2001), the Australian *Financial Review* (2006) and the German *Handelsblatt* (2001). It was also in 2002 that the *Financial Times* decided to put much of its website behind a wall, establishing an annual subscription fee of \$140 for full access to the contents of the paper.

Along with these three ways of pricing certain online news content, which sometimes could be complementary to each other, in those early years of the new century other experiments were tested. For instance, there were some initiatives to charge for special products (from *The New York Times* crosswords to the Calendar Live section of the *Los Angeles Times*, or the special coverage of the Green Bay Packers football team in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*). In other cases, the practice of asking for an online subscription from non-national readers was maintained, although also in this period some well-known journalistic brands, like the British *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*, ceased this practice after many years of doing so. Certain newspapers also continued to take advantage of the potential income derived from their presence in big electronic platforms, such as *Folha de Sao Paulo* and Editora Abril magazines in the Brazilian Universo Online (UOL), or many Russian newspapers in the e-papers web E-Russland. However, it can be said that the cornerstone of these efforts of digital news monetization would be the

launch of two unsuccessful experiences, much more ambitious than the ones already mentioned, that took place in Europe and the United States.

*El País*, the leading Spanish quality newspaper, announced in late 2002 that its Web edition, completely free till then, would only be accessible to print subscribers or to new online readers, after paying a rate of €80 (annual) or €50 (six months). The newspaper had chosen the more radical way to “close” its website, following the model of *The Wall Street Journal*, something that no other big European daily had dared to try before. In two and a half years *El País* achieved 45,000 subscribers to its paid online edition, but that was not enough to convince its managers that the model could have a future. What they perceived was that the newspaper had lost much visibility on the internet versus its closest competitors. Shortly before celebrating its third birthday, the adventure ended in June 2005.

While different in many aspects, Times Select, a paid service of *The New York Times*, shared the experimental approach of the Spanish project. The new service tried to charge for the contents of its influential and popular opinion columns with a scheme of \$7.95 per month or \$49.95 annually. Although Times Select achieved 300,000 subscribers in almost two years, it was discontinued in 2007. That decision was motivated by the fact that additional subscription revenues from the online subscribers did not compensate for the loss of advertising revenues that could be expected from a decline in internet traffic, in an online landscape significantly altered (*The New York Times*, September 18, 2007).

The disappointing experiences of *El País* and *The New York Times* brought to an end, at least in regard to general-interest publications, the renewed interest in online paid strategies that had followed the crisis of the dot.com frenzy. Even though some of the systems of payment already mentioned in previous paragraphs remained active in certain publications, by the end of 2007 a general consensus existed that free content would remain the standard way of commercial exploitation of digital news. Just some very special brands like *The Wall Street Journal* or the *Financial Times* seemed to be able by then to capitalize in a rentable way on the revenue potential of online information. What would be a legacy for the future from this period was the concept of “paywall”, which had begun to be used in these years, especially as a result of the launch of Times Select (Sullivan 2003; Outing 2005).

After almost one decade of trial and error, and without clear and tested models of charging for online news—apart from those of the “special” financial press—the news market was not even conscious that payments by end-users could be perceived as a real innovation for the commercialization of online news in the near future.

### *Murdoch's Crusade (2008–2010)*

In February 2008, Chris Anderson, the editor of *Wired*, wrote a cover story for his magazine with the title “Freeconomics”. He argued that the time had come for an economy where gratis would be a special and important type of price, and that one of the most powerful manifestations of that was free content on the internet. Anderson commented literally: “A decade and a half into the great online experiment, the last debates over free versus pay online are ending. In 2007 *The New York Times* went free; this year, so will much of *The Wall Street Journal*” (Anderson 2008).

Anderson was correct when he identified a possible conversion of *The Wall Street Journal* into a free website as a keystone in the road to “freeconomics”, and he might well

think that this conversion would happen considering the public declarations of the daily's new owner, Rupert Murdoch, who was until then a champion of free content. But Murdoch's initial intention of freeing the *Journal*, expressed as soon as his interest in Dow Jones was known, in May 2007, did not finally become a reality. As the new owner of the only major world newspaper under a paywall and after analysing the evolution of its business model, the Australian tycoon changed his mind. It could be said that he was converted to the cause of paid digital news almost at the same time as Anderson spoke about the end of the debates over free versus pay online (Lowry 2008). This decision of Murdoch and his company, News Corporation, finally materialized in a freemium strategy for the *Journal's* content—a few news stories completely open and the bulk of them under a payment wall, at even higher prices than before.

News Corporation's strategy for *The Wall Street Journal* can be framed in the context of the contrasting decisions taken at the end of 2007 by two of its main competitors. On the one hand, as already discussed, *The New York Times* was returning to its strategy of a free news service after the failure of the Times Select project; on the other hand, the *Financial Times*, the other big international financial journal, took a further step towards a full subscription model for online users, introducing in October 2007 an innovative payment system, which was activated if the reader wanted to read more than 30 free articles per month (*The Guardian*, October 1, 2007). It was the birth of the so-called "metered model", perhaps the online news subscription scheme with a higher impact on the development of online paid strategies in the following years (Duprey 2012).

The next strategic move by Rupert Murdoch was completed in the summer of 2009, when he announced the future adoption of paid strategies for the online content of many other News Corporation publications, among them *The Times* and *The Sun*, the group's leading newspapers in the United Kingdom. This plan, and its effective implementation in May 2010, caused a tremendous media hype. It was no longer a question of more cases of economic and financial publications that were charging for their websites, but of major newspapers, included a big popular one like *The Sun* (*The Daily Telegraph*, August 6, 2009). Perhaps a year before, Murdoch's declaration of a move like this might have seemed completely insane, but in 2009 too many circumstances had changed which directly affected media businesses, especially after the explosion of the 2008 economic and financial crisis, whose dramatic effects on the press spread quickly throughout the world (Schaffar and Körber 2013).

In February 2009, the American edition of *Time* magazine devoted its front page to reflect on the critical situation of newspaper businesses confronted with huge economic and technological threats. In "How to Save Your Newspaper? A Modest Proposal", Walter Isaacson wrote:

During the past few months, the crisis in journalism has reached meltdown proportions. It is now possible to contemplate a time when some major cities will no longer have a newspaper and when magazines and network-news operations will employ no more than a handful of reporters. (Isaacson 2009, 31)

But more surprising, commented Isaacson, was that this happened when some of those news brands had more readers and more read content than ever before. The problem, he concluded, was that there were very few consumers willing to pay for them; and gratis was not the basis for a business model that made sense. Still more clearly, Murdoch himself wrote in a *Wall Street Journal* column:

Quality content is not free. In the future, good journalism will depend on the ability of a news organization to attract customers by providing news and information they are willing to pay for. The old business model based mainly on advertising is dead. (Murdoch 2009, A21)

Throughout 2009 and 2010, the economic downturn exacerbated the crisis in the newspaper industry, and made its adaptation to the changing technological environment more difficult; an environment dominated by the smartphone revolution and the emergence of tablets, since the introduction of the iPad in May 2010. At the same time, journalism continued to suffer from a profound identity crisis, forged since the introduction of new technologies. In this context, it is understandable that considerable attention was devoted to Murdoch's crusade, which gained many followers. Some of them were small but very symbolic, such as *The Economist*, which had ceased to charge for their content on the Web in 2006 and would return to the practice from 2009 onwards. Other media players would eventually have a big influence, as in the case of the largest European newspaper publisher Springer AG, led by its CEO Mathias Döpfner. The German group announced in December 2009 a change of strategy, adopting a paywall model for its two most legendary brands, *Die Welt* and *Bild* (*The Wall Street Journal Deutschland*, May 28, 2013). In fact, already at the beginning of 2010 paywalls had been rolled out for some newspapers from the group, such as the *Berliner Morgenpost* and the *Hamburger Abendblatt*. As in the case of Döpfner and Springer, other managers and publishers from around the world announced in these years their intention to adopt pay strategies in the near future.

In France, the leaders of the national press (*Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *Libération* and *Les Echos*) launched new plans to charge for their online news content in 2009 and 2010. Some of them—such as *Le Monde* and *Les Echos*—had already been pioneers in this field, but with rather timid initiatives till then. *La Repubblica* in Italy and *El Mundo* in Spain were the main drivers of this new trend in their respective countries, fostered by the introduction of their digital editions for tablets. In the case of Spain, *El Mundo's* publishing house introduced on to the market in 2010 the digital kiosk Orbyt, which worked in a similar way to applications developed by several publishers in other places, like the German iKiosk or the Piano platform (in Slovakia, and later also in Poland). In other very different latitudes some media groups and particular newspapers followed the wave of converts to the new subscription-based strategy for online news commercialization. Fairfax Group in Australia, or titles such as the Canadian *The Globe and Mail* and *The Toronto Star* were good examples.

Of course, in this period, most of the economic and financial newspapers that did not yet have a clear strategy of charging for news decided to adopt one, whether the freemium option of *The Wall Street Journal* or the metered model of the *Financial Times*. Without any doubt the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (*Nikkei*) was the most important of them, since the Japanese financial daily was really the highest circulation economic newspaper in the world. The *Nikkei* not only established a paywall for its website in April 2010, but even erected a system to avoid unauthorized links from other online media to their pages. A year later the Russian economic newspaper *Vedomosti*, which had in the past experimented with multiple modalities of charging fees for certain content, including an e-paper version, also opted for a paywall. Finally, in 2010 the *Financial Mail*, in South Africa, would be the first economic newspaper of that continent to announce plans to begin charging readers for access to its website content.

Murdoch and Döpfner acted in some way as the “opinion leaders” (Rogers 1995) who exerted their influence and enabled the market to move towards a phase of early adoption. Whatever the case, and in spite of the considerable number of titles that adopted some kind of paywall, resistance to pay strategies remained large. There were influential voices—leaders who opposed the changes, very actively in this early period of innovation diffusion (Rogers 1995, 27)—that had very strong positions in favour of free access to digital news. Arianna Huffington stated in 2010: “Unless you’re offering very special content or weird porn, people are not used to paying for news and opinion” (as quoted in Clark 2010, 17). In Europe, it was the editor of *The Guardian*, Alan Rusbridger, who played in some way the role of champion for free access to news, the counterpart of Murdoch, as explained by the *International Herald Tribune* in “Free vs. Paid, Murdoch vs. Rusbridger” on February 8, 2010. Also if scepticism about the future of payment was high among leading journalists, so was it also among the majority of media managers. In the United States, where more progress had been made in the field of pay models, hardly 15 per cent of media companies’ managers thought that charging for digital news content would be a significant source of income, according to a study carried out in 2010 by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism (Pew 2010). The daily which, paradoxically, gave the definitive impulse to Murdoch’s crusade in favour of paywalls was *The New York Times*, whose plans for the adoption of a metered model, similar to the *Financial Times*, were made public in 2010.

#### *The New York Times’ Success and the Popularization of Paywalls (2011–2014)*

After nearly a year of speculation, in March 2011, *The New York Times* explained its new plan to its readers, a plan that would be implemented at the end of that month. The newspaper had decided to introduce a metered model, with a maximum of 20 free articles per month before asking for a subscription and then a monthly fee between \$15 and \$35, depending on the mix of devices used by the reader to access the news—print, computer, smartphone and/or tablet. From that moment on, the experience of the *The New York Times* would be an indispensable reference for professionals, business people and media experts interested in the evaluation and results of paywall systems. In fact, the New York daily was the worldwide market and opinion leader, in Rogers’ (1995) terminology, that triggered the process of wider adoption of payment models. For many, it was the medium to check with before using the new idea.

The launching of the *The New York Times* paywall (or fence, meter or porous paywall, as it was renamed in the media) coincided with that of another great American newspaper, *The Dallas Morning News*, and was the prelude to a cascade of decisions in the same direction by a good part of the press in the United States, especially after knowing that in three months the New York daily had achieved 100,000 subscribers online. In the second half of 2011, major newspapers such as *The Baltimore Sun* and *The Chicago Tribune* adopted the meter model. The big newspaper chain Gannett made public its idea to start charging for online news in 2012, a measure that would be applied to its 80 newspapers, with the exception of the group’s flagship, *USA Today*. Gannett would be joined by other publishers like McClatchy, Lee Enterprises, Scripps and Tribune.

But not only big newspaper brands were convinced by *The New York Times’* move. In December 2012, nearly 350 publications in the United States and Canada worked with

Press+, a service that specialized in designing and implementing payment systems for news websites of small publications. Press+ was born in 2009, as part of Online Journalism, a company founded by Steven Brill, Leo Hindery and Gordon Crovitz—the latter, a former managing editor of *The Wall Street Journal*. Practically until 2011 Press+ did not make any contract, but as of that date, its customers and the systems installed multiplied exponentially. By the end of 2013, the company worked with 447 affiliates, and it had extended its services to Europe, particularly to the United Kingdom.

Although with a certain delay, and with different levels of intensity in every country, the expansion of paywalls around the world with the meter model as a kind of standard took place in 2012 and 2013. In fact, many of the plans that had already been postponed several times in previous years were finally implemented. In other cases, those papers that had developed timid paid strategies opted for more ambitious ones. Only by way of example, the following cases of well-known publications can illustrate this fact: *The Daily Telegraph* in the United Kingdom, *The Irish Times* in Ireland, *Die Welt* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in Germany, *L'Osservatore Romano* in Italy, *Le Temps* and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* in Switzerland, *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* in France, *Politiken* and *Jyllandposten* in Denmark, *Rzeczpospolita* in Poland, *Svenska Dagbladet* in Sweden, *Helsingin Sanomat* in Finland, *Asahi Shimbun* in Japan, *The Straits Times* in Singapore, *The Globe and Mail* and *The Toronto Star* in Canada, *Folha de Sao Paulo* and *Zero Hora* in Brazil, *Diario de Noticias* in Portugal or *Haaretz* in Israel. Finally, the few economic and financial newspapers that still did not have a clear business model also in this period decided to establish a pay model. This was the case with the French *Les Echos* (2012), the Finnish *Kaupparehti* (2012) and the Italian *Il Sole 24 Ore* (2013).

At the beginning of 2013, different types of paywalls and meters were fairly widespread among the quality press—financial, national and some local newspapers—but still had to be pushed forward in the popular press. Murdoch and Döpfner had announced in 2010 that they would apply them to the two largest sensationalist newspapers in Europe, *The Sun* and *Bild*, respectively, but perhaps the economic crisis had delayed their release—only the popular *New York Post*, also owned by News Corporation, had begun to charge for its iPad edition in 2011 (Bercovici 2011). Finally, the plans to put the websites of the two biggest European tabloids behind a paywall were carried out during the summer of 2013. *BildPlus* was launched in June, with a freemium model with subscription fees that ranged from 99 cents to €14.99 per month, depending on the level of access to content and services. By the end of the year, the new digital edition had achieved 150,000 subscribers (*Die Zeit*, May 26, 2013). For its part, *The Sun* erected its paywall in August. *The Sun+* followed in the same fashion as News Corporation's other national newspaper *The Times*, with a strict paywall that offered not only full access to the online site but also provided subscribers with unique content such as football highlights. In this case, the doubts about its viability were widespread from the beginning, although in four months it had already achieved more than 100,000 subscribers (*The Independent*, December 9, 2013). Another historic European tabloid, the Swiss *Blick*, launched its paid digital edition in the autumn, as well as the Danish *Ekstra Bladet*.

It is difficult to give an overview of the whole phenomenon of paywalls, but it could be said that by the end of 2013 many major markets had reached the phase of early adoption or early majority, which, according to Rogers (1995), occurs when the penetration level of an innovation is between 16 and 50 per cent. Obviously, different types of markets—from the economic press at one extreme, to the popular papers at the

other—showed different degrees of development, but, on the whole, that statement does not seem unreasonable. In the United States, for example, according to the *State of the News Media 2013*, early in that year 450 of the 1380 US newspapers had erected some type of paywall or had plans to do so (Pew 2013). Ken Doctor, an expert in this field, noted that by November 2013 approximately 40 per cent of American newspapers would already be part of that category (Doctor 2013).

Studies conducted in other countries showed mixed results. In Canada, for example, at the end of 2013 it was estimated that 80 per cent of the daily newspapers had either raised paywalls, or they would do so in a short time (Toughill 2013). In Australia, more than half of the large newspapers charged for access to their digital content (Carson 2013), and in Germany the German Federation of Newspaper Publishers had registered 76 paywalls out of a total of 660 publications with an internet presence (BDZV 2013). In this case, two-thirds of them followed the freemium model, and the rest some kind of metered model. In addition, there were publications such as the Berliner *die tageszeitung* that integrated different forms of payment, old and new, including a voluntary paywall (Schneider and Unruh 2013). To sum up, it could be said that the practice of paying for news content was growing in the majority of countries, something that was also manifested in the rise of the willingness of readers to pay, as demonstrated by some recent studies such as the last report by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, *Digital News Report 2013* (Newman and Levy 2013).

As a matter of fact, there were still many places where the introduction of these pay models was very weak, like Italy or Spain. In these countries, however, the sale of applications on mobile devices and tablets was growing steadily (Newman and Levy 2013). Of course, there still remained big journalistic brands that were reluctant to sacrifice the high visibility offered by free online services, among others *Il Corriere della Sera* in Italy, *El País* in Spain, *The Guardian* in Britain, *USA Today* in the United States or large German publications, with *Der Spiegel* at the head. All of them had at some point considered putting their websites behind a paywall, but were hesitant to take the step. There were also those who after an open resistance to charging, ended up surrendering. Particularly significant in the United States were the cases of the *Washington Post* and, above all, of the 75 newspapers of First Digital Media, whose leader, John Paton, had been a true evangelist of open and free news websites (Preston 2013).

There is a long way to go until the full adoption of paywalls, and many media experts believe that they are still in a stage of experimentation, in a trial and error process. As commented by Alan Mutter, paywalls still are “scary” (Mutter 2013). Many news outlets continue adjusting the use of these tools, until they find the most appropriate way for news monetization (Mickey 2013). There have also been notorious failures, among others, and paradoxically, Rupert Murdoch’s project of a global and subscription-based iPad newspaper, *The Daily*, which survived for only two years and incurred estimated losses of \$30 million (Williams 2012). More recently, two important American newspapers, *The San Francisco Chronicle* and *The Dallas Morning News*, have practically renounced continuing with their commitment to pay strategies (Chittum 2013). Many critics not only express their doubts about the economic feasibility of these strategies, but also about their negative impact on the spread of quality news in society and, therefore, on the role of media in a healthy democratic system (Collins 2011; Pickard and Williams 2014).

At the same time, and while keeping a certain spirit of experimentation, it is a fact that some brands that have adopted the paid content strategy with more consistency and

conviction have achieved important progress (Starkman 2014). In 2013, for example, both *The New York Times* and the *Financial Times* managed to balance their revenue structures—50 per cent readers, 50 per cent advertising—after many years of high advertising dependency. The latter, moreover, saw its digital subscribers exceed its print customers in 2012. These and other successful formulas for charging for quality news content have not been reserved for traditional publications with strong brands—as most of those mentioned in this article. Some new journalistic projects, online-only news sites like *Mediapart* in France or *De Correspondent* in the Netherlands, have adopted that strategy with quite good results.

## Conclusions

To make readers pay for news content has always been a fundamental way to generate revenues for the press and an essential part of its business model. However, the arrival of the internet in the mid-1990s changed the business logic of many newspapers, as they delivered their content for free on the internet, waiting for a return based almost exclusively on advertising revenues. For more than a decade, almost all publishers adopted the new logic of gratis online news for readers. However, that started to change, especially after the world economic crisis that began in 2008, and a good number of media companies experimented with different types of paywalls and other ways to charge again for news.

This article has tried to explain the process by which many newspapers have recovered the practice of thinking about how to price their best digital content, or all of it. Focusing on the evolution of paywalls, a popular concept which reflects those pricing practices in recent years, I consider that they can be interpreted as retro-innovation practices, in the sense that they go back to the time, before the advent of internet technologies, when almost no one had doubts about the fact that valuable news should be paid for. As such, the adoption of paywalls can be analysed as a process of diffusion of an innovation, following Rogers' (1995) theory. This process started in the mid-1990s and nowadays we could be observing the phases of early adoption or early majorities, depending on the markets considered.

This work also proposes that there are four stages in the evolution of paywall adoption: experimenters and pioneers (1994–2000); the frenzy of failed trials (2001–2007); Murdoch's crusade (2008–2010) and *The New York Times'* success and the popularization of paywalls (2011–2014). At the same time, it shows the relevance of certain prestigious news brands, a few media leaders and some specialized publications—above all, business and financial ones—to understand the whole process. *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, *The New York Times*, *The Times*, *Die Welt*, *The Sun* or *Bild* could be some of those influential brands that helped the process to move forward and accelerate; Rupert Murdoch and Mathias Döpfner, among others, have played the role of champions of the paywalls; and the economic and financial newspapers in general, but with special attention to the cases of *The Wall Street Journal* and the *Financial Times*, acted as pioneers and references for successful practices in many markets.

The retro-innovation process described in this article needs to be connected to the technological and economic events which have conditioned the development of media business in the last decades. Four of them are briefly highlighted in this paper: the first popularization of internet, in the mid-1990s; the dot.com crisis around the turn of the

century; the financial and economic crisis of 2008; and a new mobile revolution, especially after the introduction and first expansion of tablets, from the end of 2010 onwards. All these events have contributed to make possible a change of mentality about the ways to monetize digital news products, with paywalls playing an important role when thinking about how to make profitable, in an integrated approach, the value of news brands' content.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that during this period of changes in the business models of news there has also been a lively debate on the future of journalism, in the context of a nearly infinite availability of information, mostly free. This debate has contributed to strive to achieve market differentiation based on additional journalistic value, and has helped many newspaper publishers to focus on activities and functions that really create that value, the only base on which new pay strategies can really be built.

The "Free vs. Paid" dilemma is not resolved. In fact, it seems that this dilemma has been overcome by market circumstances and by readers' behaviour (Doctor 2015). When markets are seen from the point of view of brands, the technological dimensions could be second place. The link between readers and the different types of news brands have many other dimensions that help to better understand the phenomenon of news pricing. From this perspective, Wilkinson (2013) calls for a better understanding of media businesses in an environment where the majority of brands tend to be "hybrid brands"—free and paid—multi-channel and platform-version agnostic.

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