Media and Communication
2024 • Volume 12 • Article 7462
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.7462

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

The Value of News: Aligning Economic and Social Value From an Institutional Perspective

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Submitted: 31 July 2023 Accepted: 10 October 2023 Published: 6 February 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Examining New Models in Journalism Funding" edited by Merja Myllylahti (Auckland University of Technology) and James Meese (RMIT University), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i398

Abstract

Journalism is considered essential to a functioning democracy. However, the continued viability of commercial news production is uncertain. News producers continue to lose advertising revenue to platform businesses dominating digital advertising markets, and alternate consumer direct revenue streams are not yet meeting the financial shortfall. This has led to questions of who should pay for news, the role of governments in maintaining news production viability, and whether digital platforms have social or economic responsibilities to pay news publishers. In this article, we seek to make explicit what is often implicit in such debates, which is the value of news. This is hard to know in advance as news is an experience good whose value and quality are only known after consuming it, and a credence good, whose perceived qualities may not be observable even after it is consumed. As such, preparedness to pay for news can be hard to ascertain, accentuated by the large amount of free news available online. This article seeks to use a value perspective to consider the relationship between individual consumer choices and questions of news's value to society. Applying a new institutional economic perspective, it is observed that the value of news as a consumer product needs to be examined in relation to its value as a social good in democratic societies as both a media product and part of the institutional environment in which other social actors operate. We consider news's social and economic value within a context of platformed news distribution and declining advertising revenues that appear to be structural and not cyclical.

Keywords

digital platforms; media economics; media regulation; news business; platformisation; social value; value of news

1. Introduction: Why the Value of News Now?

The question of value has arisen sporadically in debates about the economics of news media. Elsewhere, as within journalism studies, there is a long history of research into news values, or the implicit criteria used by journalists and other news media professionals to identify what stories are selected as "newsworthy" and how they are reported (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Mast & Temmerman, 2021). Work on news values underpins the concept of news quality, particularly as to how it connects the brand identity of news publications, the subjective values of journalists, and assumptions about audiences (Costera Meijer & Bijleveld, 2016; Urban & Schweiger, 2014). The supply-side focus on how news producers identify what their audiences want has been complemented by scholarship with a demand-side focus on what audiences value in news and how this differs by location and changes over time (Hollifield, 2019; Olsen, 2021; Park et al., 2021). The demand-side focus on news media consumers can raise issues around whether readers' comments are seen as a source of value-adding for news consumers (Ziegele et al., 2020) and the more general literature on preparedness to pay for news (O'Brien et al., 2020).

Strategic management theory draws upon the proposition that "managing for value is concerned with maximising the long-term cash-generating capability of an organisation" (Johnson et al., 2005, p. 468), framing value as how news media managers are adding value to their product for consumers in order to build new value for shareholders (Kung, 2017, pp. 22–24). Such work is recognised by organisations such as the International News Media Association which has a series of global media awards which recognise achievements such as Best New Digital Product and Best Product Iteration (International News Media Association, n.d.), as well as ways in which news publishers use digital data tools such as dashboards to identify audience engagement as a proxy for news quality (de Corniere & Sarvany, 2023). We would argue that while such media management initiatives are applications of measures to enhance consumer value, the underlying questions that surround the value of news remain ones that have a theoretical and conceptual underpinning which is not in itself resolved through such measures.

The challenge is to connect these differing accounts of the value of news. This article raises the question of how news as a commodity is valued socially and economically—a question that has recently acquired greater importance as there has been a growth in news subsidy schemes around the world (De Rosa & Burgess, 2019; Murschetz, 2020; Pickard, 2020). Historically, commercially financed news media have been able to rely upon the nature of dual media markets, meaning that the value of such media from the perspective of advertisers has been only loosely connected to the value of news as experienced by consumers (Albarran, 2010; Picard, 2011). As a result, questions about the value of news have featured less prominently than value debates in other fields—Historically, there has not been a pressing external need to pose such questions. But as economist Joseph Stiglitz has observed, "Historically, the production of news has been a joint product with advertising...and so those ads have supported the production of the news that we all depend on....But if advertising is going down, there won't be the production of news" (Stiglitz, quoted in Mason, 2020). As the crisis of advertiser-funded news means that questions of the future viability and sustainability of news publishers is increasingly becoming a public policy question, the value that is attached to news is increasingly going to be tied to questions of public subvention. As a consequence, questions of public value become increasingly significant.

Value can be interpreted as a primarily economic concept, in any combination of "natural," cost-based, or market price where a monetary value is placed on the news product as a commodity. At the same time, value can be interpreted as social or political, where the existence of a product or service benefits society or the democratic institutions within it. The field of cultural economics provides insights in this regard, as the relationship between cultural value and economic value is one of the framing principles underlying the field (Throsby, 2001, 2010; Towse, 2010). As Towse observes, there is a history of thinking about the distinctive economic characteristics of the arts and culture that includes Adam Smith, W. S. Jevons, John Maynard Keynes, John Kenneth Galbraith, Lionel Robbins, and William Baumol, that precedes the emergence of cultural economics and the economics of the arts as a distinctive disciplinary field (Towse, 2010, pp. 12–15). Concepts that have proven to be of enduring relevance include the notion of public or collective goods, positive externalities, the balance between public and private sector support for the arts, the arts as a source of innovation and novelty, and the challenges in increasing productivity in the creative and performing arts.

Questions of value become particularly prominent when public subsidy is required to maintain the financial sustainability of particular activities. This arises out of perennial issues as to whether governments, and by implication citizens as taxpayers, are getting value for money from the various forms of public support, and whether public policy instruments need to be refined to get better public policy outcomes (Flew, 2019a; Throsby, 2015, 2017). Similarly, publicly funded media is required through the political process to demonstrate that it is using such funds effectively in the pursuit of the various goals and principles that underpin its obligations under the legislative charters and other acts of parliament through which it is established. In such debates numbers matter, and various proxy measures are established to demonstrate forms of value that are outside of the remit of conventional market economics (Flew, 2019a; Throsby, 2017).

Media economics has extensive literature on the value of public service media and the value of entertainment media. Indeed, some of the founding works of what we refer to today as new institutional economics were about the economics of broadcasting regulation and justifications for funding the BBC and other public service broadcasters (Coase, 1950, 1966). The mechanisms and processes through which value is created, distributed, preserved, and destroyed over time have also been a central concern of entertainment industry economics, and not simply in an economic sense. Vogel (2020, pp. 38–39), arguably the founder of modern entertainment industry economics, makes the case for the wider social significance of the entertainment industries:

> Entertainment in all its forms has also always provided otherwise unavailable experiences to consumers and participants. Unlike many consumer products and services—which are intermediaries demanded as a means to reach another end (e.g., an airplane trip to visit customers)—entertainment is directly desired and consumed for the experiences and enjoyment that it inherently provides. As such, entertainment provides unique value as it reflects the interests and motivations, career trajectories, language, and political discourses of society at large.

News and journalism also provide similar sources of value but with the added significance of their importance to the functioning of democratic societies. Schudson (2013, p. 12) has provided a useful summary of the six contributions that independent journalism makes to effective democracies and well-functioning civil societies:

1. Information: The news media can provide fair and full information so citizens can make sound political choices.
2. Investigation: The news media can investigate concentrated sources of power, particularly governmental power.

3. Analysis: The news media can provide coherent frameworks of interpretation to help citizens comprehend a complex world.
4. Social empathy: Journalism can tell people about others in their society and their world so that they can come to appreciate the viewpoints and lives of other people, especially those less advantaged than themselves.
5. Public forum: Journalism can provide a forum for dialogue among citizens and serve as a common carrier of the perspectives of varied groups in society.
6. Mobilization: The news media can serve as advocates for particular political programs and perspectives and mobilize people to act in support of these programs.

Such observations draw attention to the social and political value of news, which also manifests themselves in debates about the public sphere, active citizenship, and propaganda and misinformation (Benkler et al., 2018; Bennett et al., 2007; Bennett & Livingston, 2018, 2021; Dahlgren, 2009; Garnham, 1990; Habermas, 1974, 2006; Pickard, 2020). But these accounts of the social importance of news do not map onto accounts of how and why news is valued by individual consumers nor, for the most part, upon its conditions of industrial production. Insofar as news value does emerge in the scholarly literature, it largely does so through the concept of news values, or the ways in which "in their gatekeeping role…journalists are constantly deciding what counts as valuable news" (Undurraga, 2017, p. 510).

The study of news values, or the institutional, discursive, and professional conditions around which decisions about news are made, provides an important bridge between macro-social accounts of the value of news and its institutional conditions of production and distribution (Reese, 2021), and those between the news organisations that produce news and the "brands" through which it is distributed and individual consumption choices. But what is missing is an integrative framework that can link the macro questions of news and journalism's social value, the meso-level framework of news media institutions and brands, and the micro level of production and consumption decisions and choices. Through an analysis of the types of value that commercial news media provides to its various stakeholders within the news media economy, this article examines how government interventions such as direct subsidy and bargaining codes attempt to align social and economic valuations of news within platformed media ecosystems.

2. Value Theories, Media Economics, and New Institutionalism

The concept of value has a significant status in the history of economic thought (Dobb, 1973; Roncaglia, 2005). It is a concept that is both highly central and highly contentious. In *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776 (Smith, 1776/1991), Adam Smith observed that the value of commodities could not be taken to be synonymous with their price, as money is itself subject to changes in its value, so the "natural price" or "real price" of commodities therefore needed to be measured by a standard that was different to that of monetary price. For Smith, the "natural price" of commodities was primarily determined by two factors: the techniques of production and the productivity of labour, which typically reduce the natural price over time; and the returns to the land, labour, and capital required for its production, which includes the average rate of profit expected by capitalists in order to undertake production, and the real wages of the workforce (Dobb, 1973; Sinha, 2018).

From Smith's work, we can see that the process of determining "real prices" is complex, and Ricardo (2001) sought to place the theory of value on a sounder conceptual ground by differentiating the use-value of a commodity (i.e., its usefulness to those who consume it) from its exchange-value, or the value at which it is exchanged for other commodities through the medium of money. Retaining Smith's distinction between market price and "natural price," Ricardo proposed that the latter was determined through a mix of factors that included the ratios of labour to machinery and other capital, the level of real wages, the average rate of profit, the productivity of labour, and the general level of technological development. The work of both Smith and Ricardo forms the basis of the "labour theory of value," a concept that would be radicalised by Karl Marx (Marx & Engels, 1973). Marx extended Smith and Ricardo's conceptual insight, arguing that value is ultimately derived from labour. Marx also forwarded the political proposition that the full value of the social product should thus be returned to labour and that the share that went to the owners of capital was the surplus value produced by labour—yet appropriated on the basis of unequal ownership of the means of social production. For Marx and his successors, this could only occur in a society and a polity that was no longer based on the capitalist mode of production (Elster, 1985; Harvey, 1983).

From Smith, Ricardo, and Marx we have what can be broadly termed the "objectivist" approach to value, where the absolute value of commodities—as distinct from their relative value, or market prices—is broadly determined by their costs of production at a given average rate of profit (Eatwell, 2018). At the same time, there are other traditions within economics that have largely rejected this production-centred approach to value. Most notably, the Austrian school of economists have consistently argued that the notion of objective value is misconceived, and that value is "subjectivist" in nature: It derives from the subjective preferences of individuals, that are at root unknowable as they will vary from one person to another. The virtue of the market system from the perspective of the Austrian school of economics is that there is no requirement for value to be knowable or measurable, as it is through the system of relative prices that such preferences manifest themselves through consumer demand that is in turn met by entrepreneurs who supply the goods and services that meet such demand (Adair-Toteff, 2022).

The production-centred and subjective preference-based theories of value would be brought together in what came to be known as neoclassical or marginalist economics, or the theory of supply and demand, which placed the primary source of value in ultimately unknowable consumer preferences, or the marginal utility derived by individuals from the consumption of goods and services (Henry, 1990; Stilwell, 2002). It is the intersection of supply and demand that generates consumer prices, and neoclassical economics is less concerned with an ultimate measure of value—with national and international economic growth and development taken to be the concern of macroeconomics—than with the movement of relative prices in light of changes in consumer demand, costs, consumer incomes, and technology. For the most part, neoclassical economics as extended to the field of media has constituted the field that is known as media economics (Albarran, 2002, 2010; Picard, 1989).

An important conceptual framework that both informs and cuts across the neoclassical approach is that of institutional economics. Institutional economics has a history going back to the early 20th century, with a distinction sometimes being made between "old" institutionalism associated with critics of corporate power such as Thorstein Veblen and J. K. Galbraith, and the "new" institutionalism associated with economists such as Douglass North, Oliver Williamson, and Elinor Ostrom. The latter focuses on "the rules of the games in a society" (North, 1990, p. 3), and how these rules shape both economic behaviour and market conduct. Institutions constitute a meso level between society as a whole (macro) and individual buyers and sellers in markets (micro; Dopfer et al., 2004). Institutions are both formal entities that include organisations such as media companies, but also the legal-political framework in which they operate, as well as informal institutions, or historically and culturally embedded customs, traditions, norms, values, beliefs, etc. Media in this sense are both the organisations that produce news and other informational and entertainment content for distribution and sale, and a core element through which citizens understand and engage with other social institutions, providing public forums that enable debate and deliberation that informs political decision-making. As they play a primary role in providing such "mental maps" to individuals and groups in society (Denzau & North, 1994), it is common for governments to seek to regulate the conduct of media forums and to be prepared to undertake measures to ensure their sustainability over time.

3. Complexities of Value in the Economics of News

There are several levels of complexity associated with the economics of news media markets. There are three key concerns from the perspective of neoclassical microeconomics. Firstly, media markets have historically been two-sided markets. For commercial media organisations, this has meant that they have been engaged in simultaneously reaching audiences and advertisers. In a "pure" advertiser-financed service, such as broadcast television or free online services, the primary financial transaction is with advertisers, who pay media companies for access to their audiences. For media companies that rely upon a mix of direct payment for access and advertising, the media company is simultaneously selling its product to the audience and its audience to the advertisers. The centrality of advertisers to the financing of news underpins the Canadian political economist Dallas Smythe's famous observation that, in commercial mass media, it is the audience rather than the product that is the commodity (Smythe, 1977). Secondly, where consumers are directly or indirectly paying for news, there is ambiguity as to the nature of the news commodity that consumers are purchasing. As they are paying for a news "bundle" (a newspaper or magazine, access to a broadcasting or online service, etc.), it is uncommon for consumers or providers to value any individual item of news content. Moreover, consumers are characteristically paying for large amounts of content they do not want or need (e.g., classified advertising in newspapers, and sports content for people not interested in sports). While news organisations can use digital data tools to identify what news items attract the most attention, this typically informs subsequent content decisions rather than leading to direct pricing of stories (de Corniere & Sarvany, 2023). Consumers are as likely to be committing to the purchase of a news "brand" rather than individual content items, as with subscriptions. Thirdly, news media are expected to have non-economic or societal forms of value, as noted in Section 2. How to develop a measure of economic and non-economic sources of value, and how to relate these to questions such as financing, price, and distribution, constitute ongoing challenges.

With regards to the nature of the news product and its market, it possesses attributes of information goods. This includes high first-copy costs and low costs of reproduction, public good attributes in that the availability is not depleted by consumption, requiring time to produce to a high quality, and externalities that impact upon society in ways that are intrinsically difficult for producers to capture through price (Hollifield, 2019; Mierzejewska & Kolo, 2019).

Moreover, news is also a credence good, whose value and quality are hard to ascertain even after consuming it (Dulleck et al., 2011), as well as a talent good, "whose quality depends on the knowledge, experience and talent of the individual or groups of individuals who produce them" (Hollifield, 2019, p. 126). All of these attributes indicate that news is expensive to produce but inexpensive to copy, is reliant upon the quality, experience, talent, and ethics of the journalists and news organisations that produce it and has significant non-economic as well as economic value. For consumers, the most reliable means of ensuring that they have news which delivers upon such values is through subscription, and news media subscriptions have grown significantly worldwide in recent years. A number of news and magazine publishers have successfully applied subscription-based models for financial sustainability. Prominent English-language examples include *The Guardian*, *Financial Times*, *The New York Times*, *The Times* (UK), and *The Washington Post*.

At the same time, this capacity to leverage subscriptions from a strong brand identity has not been an option for most news publishers. Moreover, the 2023 *Digital News Report* suggested that subscriptions may have peaked across the 20 countries they surveyed at an average of less than 20% (Newman et al., 2023, p. 18). The concern with subscriptions remains that "a large proportion of digital subscriptions go to just a few upmarket national brands—reinforcing the winner takes most dynamics that are often associated with digital media" (Newman et al., 2023, p. 11), and that they are not affordable in their current forms for significant parts of national populations.

At the same time, that value is very hard to capture through price, and it is not difficult for consumers to access the value associated with quality or original news since, "if news organisations use professional standards in covering hard or breaking news, the facts reported will be nearly identical regardless of which news organisation or reporter produced the story. This makes product differentiation and branding difficult" (Hollifield, 2019, p. 125).

Various mechanisms have been applied by news organisations to deal with such vagaries. With regards to the credence of good elements of news, mechanisms that signal quality are adopted to reduce uncertainty and enhance consumer trust, such as brand reputation, brand trust, legal liability, and government regulation (Dulleck et al., 2011). More generally, the two-sided nature of media markets, and the joint commodity attributes of news, mean that advertising (including classified advertising) has met many of the costs of producing news. This is not without its own risks. The risk that advertisers may come to influence news content is one reason why many public service media organisations around the world prohibit commercial advertising and sponsorship. But it has until recently been a good enough mechanism for commercial news publishers to be able to balance business sustainability and corporate profitability with the capacity to produce news of sufficient quality, originality, and trustworthiness on an ongoing basis.

The question of how to pay for news production by means other than advertising has been addressed differently in various countries and across media systems. In some countries, there is a long history of government subsidies to support news diversity and information quality, most notably in the Nordic states of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Iceland (Syvertsen et al., 2014). In these countries, media subsidies have existed as a form of cultural policy since the 1970s, have been relatively uncontentious politically, and have coexisted with high degrees of media freedom (Syvertsen et al., 2014, pp. 53–56)—although this regime is challenged by the rise of digital platforms as a primary source of news (Enli et al., 2019). Press subsidies have also been a feature of those European media systems that Hallin and Mancini (2004, pp. 161–163) classified as "democratic corporatist," including the Nordic states, Belgium, Austria, France, and Italy. It is a distinctive feature of the current period that news media subsidies are being discussed in countries with what Hallin and Mancini termed a "liberal" media system, such as Australia, Canada, and Ireland, where there has been scepticism about whether they were compatible with press freedom.

4. Platformisation of the Internet and News Distribution

The platformisation of the internet has caused significant changes to how, and what, news is produced both commercially and through public service media. In his classic account of how value is distributed among stakeholders in the news media industry, Picard (2010) argued that changes in news distribution entail shifts in the distribution of value, particularly given that news has both individual and social value. Picard identified five key stakeholders in the production and distribution of news:

1. Investors in news, including the publishers, owners, and shareholders who invest in commercial news businesses.
2. Audiences, who rely on news media for accurate and timely information alongside entertainment and diverse views on topical issues.
3. Advertisers, who aim to reach potential customers through news audiences.
4. Journalists and content creators, who seek to pursue a fulfilling and stable career in news media.
5. Society, which benefits from a well-informed citizenry and public debate, as well as news media's watchdog role as the fourth estate.

Picard proposed that the key value shift associated with the internet was from a world of limited news sources, which meant that particular news titles could acquire monopoly or oligopoly status in geographically defined media markets, to a near-infinite proliferation of news sources available online from throughout the world. While the previous situation enabled what became known as the "golden age" of journalism from the 1970s to the 1990s, it was premised upon the high profitability of news publishers enabling high salaries to be paid to journalists, and significant resources to be invested in all forms and genres of journalism, from the investigative to the tabloid. The rise of the internet empowered consumers, who now had access to a much wider range of news and information sources, as well as advertisers, who had not only more outlets to choose from but also more precise data matching and demographic targeting of prospective viewers of their content. At the same time, by shifting value away from publishers and news content creators, there was a crisis of journalism as investors responded to declining revenues and profitability by reducing their employment levels in newsrooms (Picard, 2022). While this may have generated some benefits through "lean" innovation, it has also generated adverse phenomena such as "news deserts" in many places, as well as a decline in particular forms of journalism such as "public interest" and investigative journalism, and coverage of local civic and political affairs (Abernathy, 2023; Australian Competition and Consumer Commission [ACCC], 2019; Cairncross, 2019).

Digitisation should in principle mean greater competition among news publishers and greater content innovation. Picard (2022) has argued that three key features of the digital economy all promote competition and innovation: (a) lower production and distribution costs associated with digital content, (b) network economies of scale arising from the capacity of users to cheaply access common digital infrastructure, and (c) reduced time and labour involved in information searching and consumer research (Picard, 2022, pp. 453–455). A counterpoint to these features has been the platformisation of the internet and the dominance of digital distribution among a small number of mega-tech companies over key markets such as search, news aggregation, and social media. Digital platforms greatly reduce search costs for news consumers by directing them to relevant content, making it easier for audiences to find relevant news and information on digital platforms without having to access the original news website in the first instance. The quid pro quo is that these platforms become increasingly central to the distribution of news content without themselves being news producers, generating significant news publisher dependency upon the platforms and their opaque algorithms (Neilsen & Ganter, 2022). Moreover, these digital platform giants are direct competitors for advertising revenue with traditional news media publishers and possess considerable competitive advantage due to their size and access to a diverse and large-scale set of data sources (ACCC, 2019; Sims, 2022), contributing to the overall decline in revenue to news businesses.

The Covid-19 pandemic has illustrated how vulnerable the advertiser-led business model now is; even as consumer demand for news content increased during the height of the pandemic, it triggered a sharp decline in advertising revenues (Flew, 2021; Tracy, 2020). We would argue that an update to Picard's stakeholder analysis of value creation is warranted that incorporates digital platforms as a sixth stakeholder, as they derive value from the distribution of news content. However, they also compete with news businesses for advertising revenue and are frequently the owners of programmatic advertising systems on theirs and other third-party sites (ACCC, 2019; Faustino & Noam, 2019; Flew & Wilding, 2021). By including platforms as a sixth stakeholder within the value matrix it becomes clearer that the distribution of economic value derived from news production increasingly accumulates toward platforms, who benefit from advertising revenue associated with news content available on their sites without bearing any of the associated costs of production.

5. Platformisation, Advertising, and News Distribution

Global advertising markets have changed significantly during the 2000s, with businesses diverting an increasingly large proportion of their marketing budgets to online digital advertising (ACCC, 2019) where news competes with other online media content and services for revenue, including blogs, search, and social media platforms. Within this online landscape, advertising space is increasingly sold, purchased, and distributed through programmatic advertising systems (Braun, 2023), including real-time bidding systems that target individual users based on data profiles created from their online and offline activity. This is a space that rewards the attention economy (Lanham, 2006), and where news media organisations lack the technical infrastructure and expertise to compete effectively with in-house ad-tech systems developed by digital tech giants such as Google. The platformisation of online advertising has accelerated the fall in revenue that flows to news producers, resulting in a growing sense of urgency to address the ongoing economic sustainability of news as a consumer product.

Direct consumer payment through subscription and donation has been taken up by several commercial news organisations with mixed success (Chyi & Ng, 2020), reflecting differences in global markets (Newman et al., 2023) and consumer's willingness to pay for a consumer product where a highly comparable alternative can be readily found online (Hollifield, 2019; O'Brien et al., 2020). Audiences are increasingly able to access a range of news stories from a variety of news brands through search and social media platforms, representing the platformisation of news distribution (Flew, 2019b; Helmond, 2015). Initially celebrated as an effective means by which to reach new audiences, the platformisation of news distribution has created a number of problems for news producers in their relationships with digital platforms, which are coming to eclipse the value derived from increased visibility online (Flew, 2021; Meese & Hurcombe, 2021). With hindsight, these issues can now be seen as the consequences news producers must face for their earlier eagerness to exchange control over how their content is distributed on these platforms for the promise of audience growth, as well as a superficial understanding of the audience attention economy and how it is monetised on the web.

The problems created by the platformisation of news distribution are manifold. Firstly, dominant search and social media platforms have proven unreliable business partners, reluctant to notify news organisations of changes made to their algorithmic logic that affect content distribution and visibility (ACCC, 2019; Martin, 2019), or to contribute to the economic sustainability of news production (Lee & Molitorisz, 2021; Royal & Napoli, 2022). Secondly, as discussed in Section 4, platforms are not only direct competitors to news organisations for online advertising revenue but also frequently control the programmatic systems that manage advertising content elsewhere on the internet (ACCC, 2019; Braun, 2023). Thirdly, as platforms are increasingly facing regulatory mechanisms that compel them to pay for news content, it is becoming more evident that they not only value news content on their platforms differently but that they do not place an intrinsic value on news.

The responses from Google and Meta to the Australian News Media and Digital Platforms Bargaining Code (Bossio et al., 2022; Heylen, 2023; Leaver, 2021), their approach and willingness to bargain with news media companies when the code was introduced into law (Royal & Napoli, 2022; Treasury, 2022), and their changing commitments to their own internal news initiatives (Bell, 2021; Papaevangelou, 2023) all suggest that the attitude of the major digital platforms to news sustainability is highly fluid. Canada's introduction of the Online News Act 2023 (Robertson, 2023) and California's proposed California Journalism Preservation Act (Paul, 2023) have led to threats from Meta to cease to carry news, as was the case with the Australian Code proposal, giving further credence to the argument that such platforms do not value news content on their platforms. Left within the current state of unchecked platform power, the evidence suggests that platforms would continue to draw disproportionately more economic value from news content than they provide to news production and entrench themselves further within the digital advertising economy (Enli et al., 2019; Flew & Gillett, 2021; Flew et al., 2021). Whether news producers are able to maintain economic feasibility without platform, advertiser, or government subsidy, and importantly, whether they should have to, underpins many of the current debates about the relationship between the sustainability of commercial news businesses and the societal value of news as informational products.

6. Conclusion

It has been argued in this article that the question of the value of news—as distinct from news values—has acquired particular salience as the shift of advertising revenues from news publishers to digital platforms has generated a crisis of sustainability for news organisations. As news publishers provide the primary institutional infrastructure (Steininger, 2020) for the flow of fair and full information in democratic societies, as well as a public forum for debate, contestation, and interpretation of ideas, governments have increasingly sought to support these meso-level institutions through a range of news subsidy schemes, whether directly through payments, or indirectly, such as obligating digital platforms to contribute financially to the production of news.

As governments are increasingly engaged in financially supporting the production of news, questions of value become more central. In this article, we have argued that determining whether there is "value for money" in supporting news is a reminder of the vexed nature of the concept of value itself, where there are not only distinctions between economic and social value, but between notions of value that see it as measurable (e.g., costs of producing news) and those which see it as essentially subjective and fundamentally differing among individuals. News organisations have struggled to capture the value of their output through price-based measures such as subscriptions, and the need to identify alternative sources of finance to advertising has generated new debates about the distribution of news value among different stakeholders, including advertisers, digital platforms, consumers, journalists, and society as a whole. We have argued that questions of value will become more pressing to the degree that governments seek to support commercial news publishing, whether directly through news subsidies or indirectly through laws requiring digital platforms to contribute to the costs of producing news.

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the feedback provided by the thematic issue editors, James Meese and Merja Myllylahti, and the anonymous reviewers on an earlier draft of this article. A version of this article was presented to the 2023 Australian and New Zealand Communications Association (ANZCA) conference in Wellington, New Zealand, on 22–24 November 2023.

Funding

This research was funded by the Australian Research Council through Discovery-Projects DP220100589 Valuing News: Aligning Individual, Institutional and Societal Perspectives.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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