



Understanding paid subscription news: Audience perspectives on Readers' experiences and challenges

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ABSTRACT

Economic disruption in the digital media industry has encouraged news organizations to adopt subscription-based schemes as a sustainability strategy; however, within an ecosystem dominated by advertising-driven platforms and algorithmic personalization, news consumers are increasingly exposed to declining journalistic quality, widespread misinformation, reduced information diversity, and the reinforcement of filter bubbles. Against this backdrop, this study aims to examine the consumption of subscription-based news in Indonesia by analyzing readers' acceptance of this model and their capacity to address issues of information quality, misinformation, diversity of sources, and polarization. This research employs a phenomenological approach, collecting data through in-depth interviews with three participants from the millennial and Generation Z cohorts who had accessed paid news services in Indonesia, which were subsequently analyzed using descriptive qualitative techniques. The findings indicate that subscription schemes contribute to improved quality and depth of news consumption, as subscribers tend to be more selective and place greater value on journalistic standards, whereas non-subscribers rely more heavily on free sources that are often less comprehensive. Nevertheless, paid access also carries the potential to restrict information availability and narrow the range of perspectives encountered. This study finds no conclusive evidence that subscription-based consumption mitigates polarization or significantly reduces the filter bubble effect. Therefore, this research demonstrates that subscription-based journalism can enhance information quality and limit exposure to misinformation, yet simultaneously risks fostering information exclusivity, underscoring the need for news organizations to balance monetization strategies with broader commitments to accessibility, diversity, and informational inclusivity.

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1. Introduction

The development of artificial intelligence (AI) is closely intertwined with the emergence of Industry 4.0, which is characterized by the integration of digital systems, data, and automation across various sectors of society (Asif, 2024; Gao, 2024; Qin, 2024). Although Industry 4.0 encompasses a wide range of technological domains, from biotechnology to renewable energy, AI serves as the key infrastructure that enables large-scale data processing and automated decision-making. In the field of journalism, AI functions not only as a technical tool but also as a



transformative force that reshapes the entire media value chain, from news production and distribution to the ways in which audiences consume information.

This transformation is occurring alongside a broader crisis in the media business model. Long-standing dependence on advertising revenue has driven news organizations to adopt data-driven logics and automated systems, which require substantial technological investment while simultaneously shifting the orientation of journalistic labor (Simon & Isaza-Ibarra, 2023). Within the framework of digital capitalism, news is increasingly positioned not merely as a social product but as an economic commodity designed to capture attention and sell audiences to advertisers (Agarwal, 2025; Nieborg et al., 2025). In Indonesia, this shift is evident in the dominance of online media platforms that prioritize speed, click-based metrics, and sensationalism, thereby blurring the boundaries between editorial considerations and business interests (Ruiz, 2025).

These developments are technologically manifested in AI-based personalization systems. Since the early 2000s, digital technologies have enabled media organizations to construct detailed user profiles through the analysis of click trails, geographic location, and patterns of content consumption (Bodó, 2019). This practice has subsequently been institutionalized through the adoption of news recommender systems by the news industry as a strategy to sustain audience engagement. In the Indonesian context, personalization has been widely implemented by mainstream media outlets and is closely linked to strategies aimed at increasing web traffic. However, this orientation tends to reinforce the logic of the attention economy, whereby the pursuit of clicks and engagement often marginalizes the quality, depth, and diversity of information (Suciati & Fauziah, 2020).

A growing body of research suggests that algorithmic personalization is not a neutral process. Rather than merely facilitating access to information, these systems have the potential to limit exposure to diverse perspectives, reinforce existing biases, and create filter bubbles that contribute to social fragmentation, political polarization, and the deterioration of public discourse (Bodó et al., 2019; Haim et al., 2018; Makhortykh & Wijermars, 2023; Sehl & Eder, 2023). In the context of Indonesia's pluralistic society, these implications are particularly significant because they directly affect the relationship between media, democracy, and social cohesion. However, most studies on this topic originate from Western contexts and tend to position audiences primarily as objects of algorithmic exposure, rather than as subjects who actively and reflectively interpret their news consumption practices.

As the effectiveness of advertising-based revenue models continues to decline, the news industry has increasingly developed subscription schemes as a long-term alternative. These schemes are not only framed as economic solutions but are also presented as efforts to restore the values of quality, credibility, and trust in journalism. Unlike advertising-based personalization, subscription models seek to establish more direct relationships with readers and tend to limit the exploitation of user data in order to foster trust (Bodó et al., 2019). Nevertheless, this transition raises new concerns, including the potential for information exclusivity, unequal access to news, and questions about whether paid news systems are truly capable of mitigating problems such as hoaxes, filter bubbles, and political polarization.

Within the broader research landscape, studies on AI-driven news personalization have predominantly focused on the technical dimensions of algorithmic systems, the political economy of media, and their structural impact on the information ecosystem. Meanwhile, research on subscription-based journalism generally emphasizes issues related to business sustainability, customer loyalty, and monetization strategies. Relatively little attention has been given to the intersection of these two domains, particularly in examining how subscription models relate to

algorithmic personalization from the perspective of audiences. This gap is especially evident in the context of the Global South, including Indonesia, where the media ecosystem, patterns of news consumption, and social structures differ significantly from those in Western contexts.

In response to this gap, this study positions itself at the intersection of AI studies in journalism, the political economy of digital media, and audience studies. Specifically, this article seeks to phenomenologically explore how Indonesian readers interpret the practice of paid news consumption: how they evaluate the quality, exclusivity, and credibility of subscription-based journalism; how they negotiate the influence of algorithmic personalization; and the extent to which they perceive subscription models as a potential alternative to challenges such as hoaxes, filter bubbles, and polarization. In doing so, this research contributes to enriching the scholarly literature by providing an empirical perspective from the Indonesian context while offering a critical examination of normative claims that position subscription-based journalism as a solution to the crisis of digital journalism.

2. Theoretical Framework

The transformation of the digital media industry has prompted news organizations to seek alternative business models in response to declining advertising revenues, increasing platform dominance, and shifting audience consumption patterns. One of the primary responses to this situation has been the development of paid news subscription models, which position readers both as the main source of revenue and as the central focus of content distribution strategies. In this context, technology cannot be understood as a neutral entity but rather as a product of social, economic, and cultural relations. The perspective of the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) emphasizes that technology is shaped through the interaction of various social actors, including media organizations, journalists, platform developers, and audiences, each bringing distinct interests, values, and expectations (Douglas, 2012). Accordingly, paid subscription news in this study is understood as a socio-technological artifact constructed through industry pressures, ideologies of innovation, and user consumption practices, rather than merely as a technical innovation.

In line with this perspective, recent literature identifies innovation as a key factor in the sustainability of digital journalism, particularly in the face of audience fragmentation, the crisis of traditional business models, and increasing competition from global technology platforms (De-Lara et al., 2023; Hermida & Young, 2021; Koivula et al., 2023). The integration of paywalls, data analytics, and algorithmic curation systems has become a central strategy for media organizations to maintain revenue streams while fostering user loyalty. However, from a SCOT perspective, such innovations do not operate in isolation but are closely intertwined with the professional values of journalism, market demands, and audience expectations. Therefore, this study conceptualizes paid subscription news as a site of negotiation between economic interests, editorial quality, and user experience.

Within this ecosystem, the News Recommender System (NRS) plays a crucial role in shaping patterns of news consumption. NRS employs algorithmic personalization to filter, prioritize, and recommend content based on user behavioral data, thereby functioning not only as a distribution mechanism but also as a tool for monetization and audience retention (Spyridou et al., 2022). Several studies suggest that NRS assists users in navigating information overload while enabling media organizations to optimize audience engagement and loyalty. At the same time, other research indicates that personalization can potentially narrow users' exposure to information, reduce the diversity of perspectives, and reinforce the filter bubble effect (Bodó, 2019; Sehl & Eder, 2023).

Consequently, digital technology exhibits a fundamental ambivalence: on the one hand, it promises efficiency and relevance; on the other, it raises epistemic and democratic concerns.

The influence of personalized algorithms on audiences has therefore become a central concern in contemporary digital journalism studies. Recent scholarship links recommendation systems to public fragmentation, political polarization, declining discourse quality, and increased vulnerability to misinformation and disinformation (Evans et al., 2023; Magin et al., 2022; Makhortykh & Wijermars, 2023). These conditions suggest that discussions surrounding paid subscription news cannot be separated from broader issues of digital literacy, public trust in the media, and audiences' capacity to evaluate the credibility of information. Nevertheless, most existing studies continue to focus on Western contexts and emphasize either system performance or structural impacts. Research examining how users subjectively interpret and negotiate their subscription experiences remains relatively limited, particularly within the context of the Global South.

Addressing this gap, the present study positions audiences as active agents who not only consume technology but also interpret, evaluate, and negotiate its meanings and implications. Drawing on perspectives from audience studies and digital literacy, this research seeks to understand how users assess the quality and exclusivity of paid news, how they respond to algorithmic curation, and how they interpret the potential risks of information homogenization. Within this framework, user experience becomes a crucial lens for examining the power relations between media institutions, technological systems, and the public.

Conceptually, this study integrates the SCOT framework, research on News Recommender Systems, and the active audience perspective to analyze paid subscription news as a socio-technological construct. The primary focus lies on the experiences of Indonesian users in consuming subscription-based news, with the aim of revealing how business models, algorithmic personalization, and digital literacy intersect in shaping practices, perceptions, and negotiations of meaning within contemporary digital journalism.

3. Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach with a phenomenological perspective to understand and interpret the subjective meanings of individual experiences as paid news readers. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore how participants interpret subscription practices, information quality, and their relationship with algorithmic personalization in their daily lives (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, 2018; Smith, 2019). This method is considered relevant for revealing affective, reflective, and interpretive dimensions that cannot be adequately explained through a quantitative approach.

Informants were selected through purposive sampling, with the following criteria: (1) have subscribed to or are currently subscribing to paid news in Indonesian media, (2) belong to the millennial or Generation Z generation, and (3) actively consume digital news. This age group was chosen because it is assumed to be the generation most intensely exposed to digital media and personalization systems. This study involved three informants, consisting of a freelance writer, a private sector worker and musician, and a researcher, aged 21–34 years. This variation in background was intended to enrich perspectives and capture the diversity of practices and motivations for subscribing.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interview guide was developed based on a theoretical framework (SCOT, NRS, and audience studies) and covered topics such as motivations for subscribing, perceptions of news quality and credibility, experiences with content personalization, and views on information diversity and the potential for

filter bubbles. Each interview lasted approximately 45–90 minutes, was recorded with the informant's consent, and was transcribed verbatim to maintain data completeness and accuracy.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis with manual coding, referring to Braun and Clarke's stages: data familiarization, initial coding, theme searching, theme review, theme definition and naming, and interpretation writing. This process was carried out iteratively by comparing transcripts to find patterns of meaning, similarities, and differences in experiences. The validity of the research was maintained through source triangulation (comparison between informants), peer debriefing, and limited member checking, by confirming the summary of findings with several informants. Reliability was strengthened through audit trail documentation that documented the coding process and theme development.

The ethical aspects of the research were maintained by explaining the purpose of the study, obtaining informed consent, ensuring anonymity, and giving informants the right to withdraw from participation at any time. Reflectively, the phenomenological approach was a strength of this study because it was able to reveal the depth of meaning and complexity of user experiences. However, its limitation lies in the relatively small number of participants, so the findings are not intended to be generalized, but rather to provide contextual and conceptual understanding.

4. Result and Discussion

Informant Profiles

The three informants had diverse occupational backgrounds and ages, but were relatively homogeneous in terms of education (minimum bachelor's degree).

Table 1. background information

Informant	Occupation	Education	Age
Informant I	Freelance writer	Bachelor	25
Informant D	Private sector worker and musician	Bachelor	28
Informant M	Researcher	Master's Degree	34

The homogeneity of education is important because it influences media literacy capacity, preference for in-depth news, and acceptance of subscription news models. Theoretically, these findings are in line with the political economy of media approach, which views digitalization as encouraging media to submit to market logic and quantitative metrics (clicks, views, engagement) rather than public interest values (Aslan Ozgul & Veneti, 2021; Suciati & Fauziah, 2020). In this context, audiences are not only consumers but also commodities.

As seen in Table 1, Informant M (34, researcher) highlighted the problem of media independence and its relationship with power. Concerns about the dominance of media elites indicate an awareness of the economic-political structure of the media, where conglomerate ownership influences discourse production (Ross Tapsell, 2015). These findings show that informants have a critical level of media literacy, namely the ability to see news not merely as text, but as a product of power relations.

General View

Broadly speaking, both informants felt that the current state of journalism in Indonesia is not in good condition, as evidenced by the poor quality of news coverage, failure to follow applicable journalistic principles, and the constant repetition of information by most media outlets in

Indonesia. This is also in line with research [Suciati & Fauziah \(2020\)](#) which reveals that the value of news is no longer oriented inclusively towards the public interest but has shifted to the quantity of news value based on views and clicks. Most online media outlets are obsessed with getting as many readers as possible to increase profits rather than considering the quality of the news. Based on this logic, news organizations ultimately focus on news that tends to be timely, concise, flexible, popular, and profitable for the organization ([Makhortykh & Wijermars, 2023](#); [Suciati & Fauziah, 2020](#)).

In addition, other informants expressed concern about the decline in journalistic independence, which threatens the sustainability of democracy because the current media narrative is controlled by the ruling regime. This finding is supported by research stating that the media in Indonesia adheres to a free market ideology, where the audience and readers largely determine what and how news is produced, and capital owners will continue to dominate the country's political economy ([Ross Tapsell, 2015](#)). Media owners or practitioners, most of whom are privately owned conglomerates, have their own strategic objectives that may reinforce or conflict with their goals, making elite relationships contingent, complex, and dynamic ([Andres, 2016](#)).

"Many are bad, some don't follow journalistic principles. So, on average, many use clickbait methods, many stories are written in a repetitive manner. Maybe because it's free too." (Informant I).

"Now, the big media outlets control the narrative of political democracy in Indonesia. Small media outlets just follow along and take advantage of that, and I personally have concerns about the future with the current government regime regarding the independence of journalistic news in Indonesia." (Informant M).

Audience Experience Accessing *Subscription News Models That Show Improved News Quality*

Audience experiences in accessing paid subscription news models are influenced by the platforms they subscribe to and the duration of their consumption. These factors provide an important context for understanding how informants perceive improvements in news quality. [Table 2](#) presents the paid news platforms accessed by the informants and the length of their engagement with subscription-based news.

Table 2. Paid News Models and Duration of Consumption by Informants

Informant	Media	Duration
I	Kumparanplus	1 year
D	Kumparanplus	3 months
M	Tempo and Project Multatuli	Sustainable

Based on [Table 2](#), it can be seen that two informants subscribe to Kumparanplus media in the short term and one informant subscribes to Tempo and Project Multatuli media on a sustainable basis. Although there are differences in the consumption of subscription news media among audiences. The audience's experience when accessing subscription news is seen as a breath of fresh air because they lack access to credible news information, amid the prevalence of hoaxes and filter bubbles for readers, which leads to a decline in the quality of the news itself. Moreover, with the presence of personalized news that narrows their interests in information consumption, the presence of a subscription news model with information that is far more analytical and in-depth is seen as efficient. Audiences feel other benefits when accessing paid subscription news models compared to ad-based news models.

In a study conducted in the United States on individual and public perceptions of paid subscription news, it was found that the public supports news organizations financially because they are motivated to protect press freedom. As it is generally accepted that informative and independent press is very important for achieving democratic goals, the survival of these organizations can be important from a social and democratic perspective (Chen & Thorson, 2021).

"Oh yes, definitely far. I mean, if you want to pay, there must be benefits. At that time, I subscribed to Kumparanplus from 2020 to 2021. On Kumparanplus, for the first time, I found short stories, tips, and serial stories." (Informant I).

"It was good, more in-depth, descriptive, long, and high quality, right? The platform at that time was Kumparanplus. At that time, Kumparan made a video series, if I'm not mistaken, it was called Criminal Minds. So it was like uncovering difficult criminal news." (Informant D).

In addition, the three informants also agreed that the paid news model shows more depth in the content, produces more exclusive, in-depth, and descriptive news, and minimizes conflict of interest. Furthermore, the informants believed that the news presented was more reputable, structured, curated, and filtered, making it easier to read.

"So, paid news is more credible, reputable, trusted, and has more taste. Although taste is also a matter of class. So, people from certain social classes, let's say the middle class and above, demand that, compared to the lower classes whose language use tends to be oral, so that it can be accepted by people in their class." (Informant M).

Two informants had subscribed to KumparanPlus, while one informant subscribed to Tempo and Project Multatuli on an ongoing basis. Informants I and D described paid content as "longer," "in-depth," and "different from free news." This quote shows that audiences do not only assess quality based on accuracy, but also on the depth of the narrative and editorial curation. Theoretically, this experience reflects the concept of quality journalism, where subscription news is positioned as a premium product that sells analysis, investigation, and long narratives, not just speed. Interestingly, Informant M mentioned "taste" and social class. This statement can be interpreted using the concept of cultural capital, that subscription news not only functions as a source of information, but also as a marker of class identity and cultural preferences. Thus, paid news operates not only economically, but also symbolically.

Acceptance of Paid Subscription News as Quality Journalism

The findings show that all three informants view the consumption of quality news as an important necessity in daily life and generally accept the presence of the paid subscription news model. Informant M (34 years old, researcher, master's degree) assessed that the paid model guarantees quality and reputation.

"Paid news is more credible, reputable, trusted, and has better taste." (Informant M, 34 years old).

This statement can be interpreted through Schmidt (2007) framework, particularly the dimensions of quality of content and exclusivity of offer. Paid news is perceived as fulfilling the completeness, depth, and complexity of content, while also providing an exclusive experience that distinguishes it from free news. This awareness then becomes the background for the audience's need to consume quality news. Departing from the urgency of the importance of news consumption for informants in their daily lives and awareness of algorithmic personalized news itself, the three informants are open and accepting of the presence of the subscription news model as an alternative

to reducing economic disruption due to digitalization. Although in reality, both informants are known not to regularly subscribe.

However, the informants felt that the paid news model was a legitimate thing to do. It is known that this subscription news model has begun to be adopted by several news media outlets, both abroad and in Indonesia, to become a new opportunity for the economic growth of the news industry itself. The decline in advertising-based revenue has led news organizations to seek alternative sources of revenue through the subscription news model (Bodó, 2019).

"Yes, it's legitimate because they are fundraising, and this fundraising is from the community collectively. They are not bound by the interests of other parties to minimize conflict of interest, so I think it's legitimate." (Informant M, 34 years old).

This finding is in line with research by Bodó et al. (2019) and Chen & Thorson (2021), which shows that subscription news is perceived by audiences as a form of quality journalism that is more independent because it does not rely entirely on advertising. Thus, paid subscription news in this study is not only understood as a business model but also as a symbol of quality journalism and media consumption practices that have cultural value.

The three informants consume news for cognitive, professional, and reflective needs. They emphasize the importance of news to understand social patterns and predict developments in the situation. When viewed through Uses and Gratifications Theory, the consumption of subscription news fulfills cognitive needs (in-depth information), personal integrative needs (trust in credibility), and instrumental needs (work support and knowledge production).

Informant M considers subscriptions to be a more legitimate mechanism because they reduce conflicts of interest. This statement is not merely normative, but reflects a shift in the audience's position from "advertising targets" to "direct supporters of journalism." In this framework, the audience is not only seeking gratification from content, but also ideological gratification, namely the feeling of contributing to the sustainability of independent press (Chen & Thorson, 2021).

Long-Term vs. Short-Term Consumption: Needs, Profession, and Cultural Capital

Although all three informants accepted paid subscription news, there were significant differences in their subscription practices. Only one informant subscribed continuously, while the other two only subscribed in the short term. Informant M associated subscriptions with professional needs and knowledge production. In contrast, Informants I and D viewed subscriptions as a recreational and temporary need. Informant I (25 years old, freelance writer) said.

"At that time, I subscribed because I was curious... but I didn't read it consistently, so I eventually stopped." (Informant I, 25 years old)

From the perspective of Uses and Gratifications Theory, subscription news fulfills cognitive and professional needs for Informant M, but only fulfills exploratory and entertainment needs for the other two informants. These findings reinforce the argument that paid subscription news is not a primary need, but is highly determined by work needs, reading habits, and educational capital.

This is also in line with the Reuters Institute (2023) report, which shows that online news consumption in Indonesia is still dominated by free media such as Detik and Kompas, indicating that access to quality news is still highly dependent on the socio-economic structure of the audience. Thus, paid subscription news has the potential to widen the gap between audiences who have the capacity to subscribe and those who do not (Behre et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2024).

Hoaxes, Distinctions, and Access Inequality

All three informants agreed that subscription news produces more analytical, structured, curated, and hoax-free news. Informant D (28 years old, private sector employee & musician) emphasized the aspect of curation.

"If it's paid, the writers are clear, the editorial team is strict, so there are fewer hoaxes."
(Informant D).

Theoretically, these findings support the argument of media literacy, that audience trust is built through perceptions of the news production process (curation, reputation, and professional authority). However, these findings also raise critical reflections. If quality news with minimal hoaxes is behind a paywall, then questions arise about the democratization of information. Who can access quality journalism, and who is left behind in a free news ecosystem that is more vulnerable to disinformation? At this point, paid subscription news presents a paradox. It strengthens the quality of journalism, but at the same time has the potential to reproduce information inequality.

The Ambivalence of the Subscription Model

Some informants believe that paid subscription news opens up space for more diverse coverage, including regional and marginal issues. However, Informant M emphasized the risk of thickening the filter bubble.

"It doesn't reduce the bubble, but subscription can actually thicken the bubble itself."
(Informant M).

This contradiction shows that paid subscription news does not work in isolation. From the perspective of SCOT (Social Construction of Technology), the meaning of subscription news is shaped by the social experiences of its users. For some audiences, it is a tool for diversifying information. For others, it is a mechanism for discourse exclusivity. This finding is in line with [Bodó et al. \(2019\)](#), who states that many subscription platforms continue to operate within the logic of algorithmic personalization, thereby potentially narrowing the audience's information horizon. Thus, paid subscription news improves quality, but does not automatically broaden the spectrum of discourse.

Structural Problems Unresolved by Subscription

All three informants doubted the ability of paid subscription news to break down polarization. Informant I cited the lack of empirical evidence, while Informant M saw polarization as a matter of political stance and social structure. These findings confirm that polarization is not merely a matter of media business models, but is rooted in power relations, ideology, and information distribution algorithms. Within the framework of democratic theory of the press, subscription news may strengthen the quality of news production, but it is not enough to intervene in structural public fragmentation. Overall, paid subscription news in this study appears as an ambivalent phenomenon. It improves the quality, credibility, and curation of news, but at the same time has the potential to thicken the filter bubble, narrow the audience reach, and fail to address the problem of polarization. Thus, paid subscription news is not a single solution to the crisis of digital journalism, but part of a new negotiation between quality, access, technology, and social inequality ([Aharoni, 2025](#); [Bahar & Hasan, 2025](#)).

Information Diversity, Filter Bubbles, and Algorithmic Ambivalence

Some informants believe that paid subscription news provides access to regional coverage and marginal issues. This shows how subscription technology is perceived as a solution to discourse

centralization. However, Informant M sees subscription as having the potential to reinforce bubbles because audiences confine themselves to certain media discourses. From the perspective of the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT), subscription news is not neutral. Its meaning is shaped by users; for some, it is a tool for diversifying information. For others, it is a mechanism for discourse exclusivity. This ambivalence shows that paid news technology does not automatically break the filter bubble, as it still operates within an algorithmic ecosystem that personalizes content (Bodó, 2019).

Polarization and Hoaxes: Between Normative Expectations and Structural Reality

All three informants doubted the ability of subscription news to break down polarization. Polarization is understood as a structural and political problem, not merely a problem with the media business model. This view reinforces the argument that the economic transformation of the media does not automatically correlate with the transformation of the public discourse ecology. However, all informants agreed that subscription news is relatively more capable of minimizing hoaxes. Trust in editorial curation demonstrates the importance of professional authority in the era of disinformation.

In the framework of media literacy, this trust is not naive, but rather based on an evaluation of the news production process. Thus, subscription news is positioned as a more controlled space for knowledge production, although it is not entirely free from bias. Analytically, the findings show that subscription news for audiences not only functions as an alternative economic model, but also as a space for cultural distinction, due to the negotiation of media literacy, as well as a symbol of resistance to the logic of clickbait. However, its effectiveness in overcoming filter bubbles and polarization remains limited because these problems are rooted in the algorithmic and political structures of the media, not solely in the subscription scheme.

5. Conclusion

Based on the results and discussion, this study shows that audiences perceive the paid subscription news model as a mechanism that is relatively capable of guaranteeing journalistic quality, particularly in terms of content depth, editorial curation, and source credibility, and is therefore perceived as capable of minimizing hoaxes. However, the findings also reveal an important ambivalence: despite improving quality, this model is not consistently seen as capable of creating information diversity, reducing filter bubbles, or breaking polarization. This study contributes to digital media and audience studies by showing that paid subscription news operates not only as an economic model but also as a cultural practice that shapes how audiences interpret journalistic quality, exclusivity, and authority. By placing audience experience at the center of analysis, this research enriches our understanding of how Indonesian audiences negotiate news quality, trust, and access to information within the paid media ecosystem. Practically, these findings confirm the main paradox of subscription news: on the one hand, it strengthens the quality of journalism, but on the other hand, it has the potential to narrow public access and reinforce the boundaries of the information bubble. Therefore, this model cannot yet be positioned as a single solution to the problems of disinformation, audience fragmentation, and polarization in the digital public sphere. This study has limitations in terms of the relatively small number of informants and the homogeneity of their educational backgrounds, so the findings are not intended to be generalized. In addition, this study focuses on the subjective experiences of the audience and has not empirically compared the behavior of subscribing and non-subscribing audiences.

Further research is recommended to involve a wider demographic variation and use a mixed (qualitative-quantitative) approach to measure the relationship between paid subscription news,

information diversity, filter bubbles, and polarization. Further studies could also examine how the algorithmic design and editorial strategies of paid media influence audience news consumption practices. For news organizations, these findings emphasize the importance of formulating business models that are not only oriented towards economic sustainability but also towards inclusivity of access and democratic accountability. In the context of the mixed model (free and paid) that is now widely implemented, the media needs to evaluate its content curation, distribution, and personalization strategies so that improvements in the quality of journalism do not simultaneously narrow its public reach. Thus, paid subscription news should be positioned not only as a monetization scheme but also as part of ethical and editorial efforts to maintain quality, diversity of perspectives, and public trust in journalism.

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