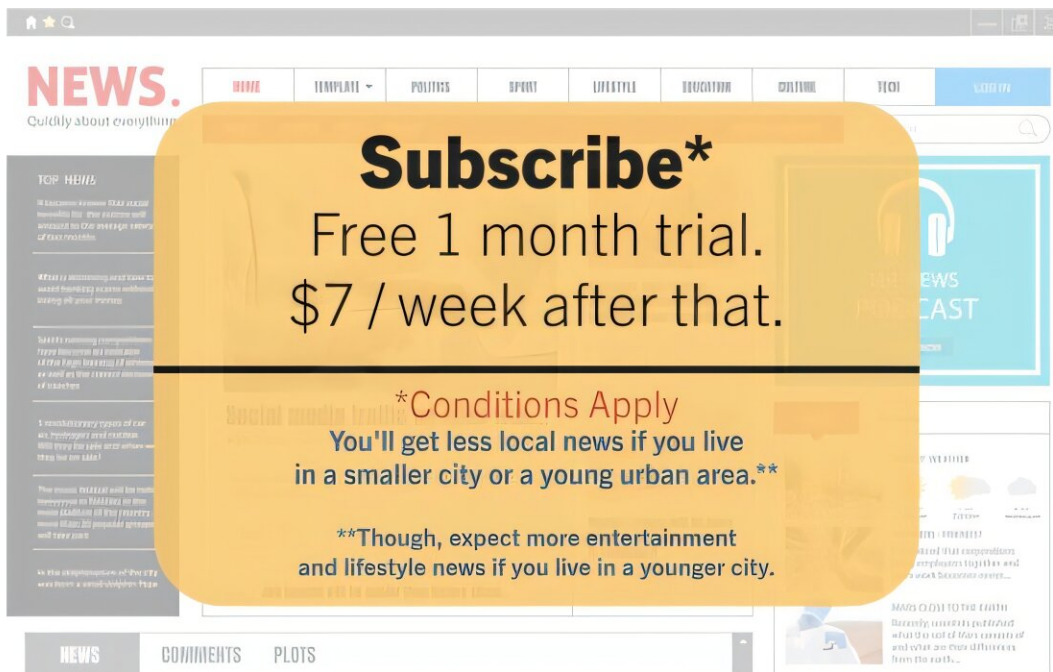


How newspaper coverage is being shaped by paywalls

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An infographic summarizes the study results. Credit: Dhillon et al.

Adopting paywalls subtly shapes newspaper coverage, according to a study. Online journalism is increasingly found behind paywalls, as outlets pivot from funding their operations by selling ads to relying on subscriptions for revenue. This shift has raised questions about how newspapers might adjust their coverage to cater to paid subscribers' desires for popular news and soft news—entertainment, lifestyle, sports,

and human-interest stories—at the expense of providing local news and maintaining democratic accountability.

In their research [published](#) in *PNAS Nexus*, Paramveer S. Dhillon and colleagues quantified how coverage shifted after 17 major regional newspapers in the US adopted paywalls between 2006 and 2022. On average, papers published 5.1% less local news after adopting paywalls, which the authors interpret as a strategic shift toward more popular content.

Perhaps surprisingly, many papers published less soft news after adopting paywalls, though the average decline—just 2.2%—was modest. Other effects were variable depending on market, reflecting newspapers' strategic adaptations to different urban contexts and demographics.

Smaller cities (population below 500,000) saw a steeper decline in local news than average, suggesting a more pronounced realignment of content priorities under the new monetization strategy. Urban areas experiencing an influx of younger residents (below 40 years) saw a substantial, 19.1%, decline in [local news](#), indicating newspapers' adaptive response to younger, digitally-oriented demographics.

Notably, these same cities with younger readers increased their soft news coverage by 3.5%, reflecting newspapers' strategic efforts to cater to the content preferences of a younger, digital-savvy audience. According to the authors, the results reflect the difficult balancing act faced by newspapers attempting to achieve both financial sustainability and journalistic integrity. The authors argue that making the news appealing to paying customers could threaten the media's democratic responsibilities.

More information: Paramveer S Dhillon et al, How digital paywalls shape news coverage, *PNAS Nexus* (2025). [DOI](#):

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