

SUBSCRIPTION SUBJECTS, IN THE NAME OF DEMOCRACY, LET US ALL UNITE! A NEW POINT OF DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATION FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

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There are many approaches and ideas to democratically transform social media. These perspectives range from better and more sophisticated regulation, reforming the design of social media platforms, better education of users and social ownership of social media platforms themselves. Following in this tradition, this article offers a novel point of democratic transformation of social media platforms: the subscription user. The introduction of subscription packages by Meta and Snapchat indicates a changing economic logic within social media platforms that situates subscription users with a newfound economic and political power to leverage against social media platforms. Through the works of Erik Olin Wright and Bonnie Honig, subscription users embody a point of democratic transformation as the fee (or the willingness to pay the fee) can be utilised as a collective form of social power, which enables public oversight of social media platforms.

KEYWORDS social media; users; subscriptions; fee; democratisation

Meta and Snapchat announced that paying members on their platform can have an ad-free experience, without their data being processed for advertising (Meta 2024; Lomas 2023). Due to this seemingly slight economic shift, this article argues that EU-subscription-users embody a new source of democratic transformation for social media. Subscription users possess influential economic and political power, since the subscription fee becomes the main source of economic valorisation, instead of data extraction. Consequently, subscription users have newfound economic, political and social opportunities to pressure social media companies. This article advances subscription users as a new source of *social power* and democratic transformation by reconsidering the subscription fee as a potential *public thing* and a point of collectivisation.

Section One explores earlier attempts to democratically transform social media through state regulations, better education, ownership of social media, the structural interactions of platforms (interoperable), and public resistance to the exploitative data-extracting practices of big tech companies. The aim of this section is to show the range of thought

for conceptualising different ways of democratically transforming social media and to highlight that subscription users, as a form of democratic transformation, is a new direction in these debates.

Section Two develops the theoretical framework of this democratic potential. The theoretical arguments are derived from Erik Olin Wright's 'socialist hybrid' and Bonnie Honig's 'public things'. Wright's socialist hybrid offers a framework of utilising social power to bend capitalist apparatus to the demands of the social. I argue that EU-subscription social media users can exploit this socialist hybrid logic as they occupy a position in the subscription economic sphere that allows them to apply this newfound social power. Crucially, Wright's approach allows for capitalist frameworks to remain but reconstitutes power relations towards a social power. Bonnie Honig's use of public things argues that objects or concepts in society can interpellate people into democratic subjects (parks, schools, public transportation etc). This idea will be applied to the subscription fee in order to demonstrate that it can be transformed into a public thing experience. Currently, the paying of the fee is an individual experience; whereas, through Honig's public things perspective the fee can be seen as public thing because it enables public oversight.

Section Three develops the case study of *Watcher*, a YouTube channel, as an example of this newfound power/potential of democratic transformation. *Watcher* attempted to shift to a subscription model and stop all free content being produced on YouTube. This caused outrage amongst their community and the YouTube community in general. The *Watcher* community acted in concert to pressure *Watcher* into changing their model and keeping content available on their YouTube channel. This case, I argue, acts as a representative one of the potential power of subscribers: the fee, or the willingness to pay the fee, became a political question. The *Watcher* community also became more influential, in an economic sense because it was the users' willingness to pay the fee that was the foundation of the economic model. Whilst there are limitations (discussed in the following section), the *Watcher* example is a useful reference point to demonstrate the potential power EU subscription users possess.

Section Four explores the tensions that arises from utilising subscription users as a form of democratic transformation. First, is it reasonable to compare the mobilisation of a single YouTube channel to the complexity of mobilising users across the EU? Second, the *Watcher* audience rejected the subscription package; therefore, is it not contradictory for the article to persist with advocating for the democratic potential of subscription users? Third, does the fee not contradict Honig's idea of a Public Thing? Fourth, what about the role of users who do not pay or cannot pay, are these users not excluded from this democratic transformation? These tensions and questions will be examined to contextualise the potential power and role of the subscription users.

Section One: Democratic Transformation within Social Media Literature

The surveillance or data-collection model of social media is worth describing as it helps frame a key point of democratic transformation, the regulation of data collection. The collection of data is vital for surveillance capitalism (or social media in this article's case) (van Dijck, Poell, and Waal 2018, 9). Data is produced by almost any interaction with the internet, smartphone, app or digital sphere (van Dijck, Poell, and Waal 2018; Zuboff 2019; Srnicek 2017). Google was the first company to process users' data towards surveillance capitalist logic (Zuboff 2019). Through the collection of users' data, Google would collect, analyse and repackage data so that it could be sold to advertisers. This technological development helped create targeted advertisement, which was a breakthrough in advertisement because

"It was now possible to target consumers whose users' data had already revealed them to be interested. This was undeniably a way of making advertising more relevant for those it targeted" (Briggs and Burke 2020, 342). This logic of collecting users' data, processing data and selling it as targeted-adverts is the foundation for the economic functions of surveillance/platform capitalism (Fuchs 2021; Zuboff 2019; Srnicek 2017; van Dijck, Poell, and Waal 2018; Mejias and Couldry 2024). This context provides a useful viewpoint for the role of regulating data-collection of social media (Mejias and Couldry 2024, 222; Zuboff 2019; van Dijck, Poell, and Waal 2018, 156-159; Fuchs 2018).

Contemporary examples of regulations can be seen as the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Digital Service Act (DSA) and Digital Makers Act (DMA). At the time, the GDPR was considered "the toughest privacy and security law in the world. Though it was drafted and passed by the European Union (EU), it imposes obligations onto organizations anywhere, so long as they target or collect data related to people in the EU" (Wolford, NP). Recently, Apple and Meta were fined (500 million euros for Apple and 200 million euros for Meta) by the EU for violating the DSA (Satariano 2025). Another example of regulations is the US Federal Trade Commission fining Facebook for "violating users' privacy in the context of the Cambridge Analytica scandal" (Fuchs 2021, 151). Another proposed idea of regulation is to tax the profits of the advertising industry since the profits derive from users' labour, or the data created comes from users' engagement with the platform; therefore, a tax should be imposed on platforms (social media companies) (Fuchs 2018). Zuboff, in an online discussion/debate, places the law and regulations as the key factor in limiting capitalism: "[...] in the history of capitalism, there is only one thing that curbs the drive for more, more, more [...] That one thing, is Law" (UCL 2021).

Jürgen Habermas argues that although there is great democratic potential within the digital public sphere of social media, there has not been enough time to adapt or educate users on how to grapple with the new digital terrain (Habermas 2023). Shifting away from the vertical structure (such as chief editors, editors, broadcasters, producers etc) of older forms of media, social media users now "encounter each other as participants who are in principle equal and self-responsible" (Habermas 2023, 37). Social media users engage with one another on an equal footing; they are active participants within this horizontal media environment. This new relationship is not harmful in and of itself; the harm arises through the content that users produce: the content lacks professional and ethical standards (Habermas 2023, 37). Social media companies, legally speaking, lack ethical and professional standards of content that older forms of media are required to follow by regulations (Habermas 2023, 58-59).¹ Social media companies are not held to account in the same way for fake news or misinformation as traditional media. A useful comparison is Alex Jones, the conspiracy theorist and host of Infowars, was fined almost a billion dollars for exploiting the Sandy Hook school shooting (Slater 2022). However, YouTube, the platform where Jones and InfoWars operated, has not faced legal challenges based upon Jones' use of YouTube.

Habermas also argues that the speed of technological change on social media platforms leaves users with a limited skillset to deal with the digital public sphere. Habermas brings up the technological development of the printing press as a liberating moment for the world since it allowed everyone the capacity to become a reader; yet "how long did it take until everyone was able to read?" (Habermas 2023, 40). This point becomes even more pressing when considering the rapid speed of technological change and development of the social media landscape. For example, the rapid rise of deepfakes, AI, algorithmic mechanism, the complexities of mis-and-disinformation plus the economic model of extracting data has these problems built into the structural design of social media.

More radically, Christian Fuchs and Klaus Unterberg argue for public ownership of the media and the internet (Fuchs and Unterberger 2021). Fuchs and Unterberg (with help from respondents) ruminate on what the possibility of a public service media may look like. One example given in the manifesto is that “Facebook’ no longer exists, having been transferred to public ownership by popular demand[...] ‘Social media’ as a term means what it says: it refers to publicly owned media driven by democratically determined social needs [...]” (Fuchs and Unterberger 2021, 59). This is a classic Marxist idea of public ownership over important institutions within society in order to transform the means of production and wider society.

Doctorow argues for a decentralised form of social media (and the tech world in general) via a vision of an interoperable structure (Doctorow 2023). Currently, social media and Tech giants run on a centralised system. To give a simple example of this centralising ethos, Apple products will “block third-party app stores [...], as well as third-party parts needed to repair Apple devices” (Doctorow 2023, 92). Another way of thinking of this centralised logic is that users can only see content if they have signed up to the social media platform. For example, Instagram will only let non-registered users access a limited amount of content before being blocked access. Doctorow’s interoperable response to this centralised system is to consider a way of having access to Meta, without actually doing *business* with them (Doctorow 2023, 97–98). This solution demands an interoperable improvement: social media services should develop in such a manner that even if one was not signed up to Facebook, they could still be in contact with members “who haven’t left Facebook (yet) [and] would be able to see them and reply to them” (Doctorow 2023, 99). This is done by servers and networks being created that are able to host these networks that are moderated by the community themselves (Doctorow 2023, 99). Doctorov’s key point is to reduce the influence and power of these social media giants, the system of social media needs to be decentralised and dispersed. Users still have access to similar features of exchange, communication, socialisation, enjoyment – but are not tied to a centralised social media giant (Doctorow 2023, 134).

Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias’ *Data Grab* assesses big tech from a colonial perspective (Mejias and Couldry 2024). They offer an overview of resistance and democratic transformation. More specifically, the authors utilise a resistance and transformation “Pobladoes en Lucha (residents in struggle) playbook developed during the movement in Chile”, which offers three key steps: “working within the system of data colonialism, by working against the system, and by working beyond the system” (Mejias and Couldry 2024, 222).

Working within the system is to demand better regulations and advance one’s rights (Mejias and Couldry 2024, 222). They list eight examples of how people can resist and democratise the system from within (such as electing officials with more appropriate agendas to curtail the power of social media and tech giants, and working with organisations within one’s community) (Mejias and Couldry 2024, 226–228). The importance of engaging within the system is to protect the people from the system itself. If people forget to engage within the system it leaves open the possibility of exploitation from companies and governments (Mejias and Couldry 2024, 222).

Working against the system ensures radical change or creative ideas (Mejias and Couldry 2024, 229). To fundamentally change the status quo, the authors provide three steps: first, is to form principles of resistance around commonality; second, is to create spaces of solidarity; and third, is to engage and “create a political, ecological and economic literacy” (Mejias and Couldry 2024, 232–233). Examples of these three steps in-action are supporting gig workers, attempting to change an academic curriculum to be more reflective and work with and alongside practical research networks that are “working on issues

including online privacy, consumer rights, digital justice, technology and democracy, platform cooperativism, internet governance, and so on" (Mejias and Couldry 2024, 235).

Working beyond the system, is a critical step because it pushes our imagination: it is a vital step in creating "a different worldview altogether" (Mejias and Couldry 2024, 236). Projects such as GeoComunes in Mexico which is a "data journalism collective [...] that helps small communities use cartographic data to map the ways in which environmental degradation and privatisation impacts them", or, InfoAmazonia which is a Brazilian, independent organisation that utilises geolocalised data to enable reports about the harm done to the Amazon rainforest (Mejias and Couldry 2024, 236). The key to working beyond the system is to "reject the norms of data colonialism and insist instead that data can be collected, processed and analysed in accordance with community principles, not commercial ones" (Mejias and Couldry 2024, 237). A principle developed within this step is to "help each other become less depend on data-extracting platforms in our daily lives" (Mejias and Couldry 2024, 238). Whilst the authors admits this is a difficult step, they give the example of the mass exodus of twitter users who then joined Mastodon which allowed people to experience a "non-extractive alternative" (Mejias and Couldry 2024, 238).

There are many ideas of how to democratically transform the social media (or big tech in general) paradigm. The examples stated above often overlap, whether it be an improvement of regulations, support for workers and organisations fighting back against social media, placing the ownership of social media companies into public ownership or, additionally, using the tools of social media against itself. This article adds to the literature another actor that can be utilised from within. EU-subscription users have yet to be theorised as possessing this potential of democratic transformation of social media. EU-subscription users can apply their newfound political and economic weight due to the change in the economic logic of subscription fees.

Section Two: Wright and Honig

Wright conceptualises real utopias by balancing the tension between pragmatism and creativity (Wright 2010, 6). For Wright, real utopias are to be developed within social institutions in order "to create social institutions free of oppression [...] [and] a political will for radical social changes to reduces oppression" (Wright 2010, 6). These ideas need to not stray too much into the realm of fantasies as to lose their potential (Wright 2010, 6). Instead, real utopias must be fixed in possibilities within humanity's capacity, and must have an achievable roadmap (Wright 2010, 6). Conceiving of ways that social institutions eradicate or remove oppression that limits people's potential is the "central task of emancipatory politics" (Wright 2010, 6).

The social economy plays a crucial role in advancing these visions of empowerment (Wright 2010, 140). Wright defines the social economy as "economic activity that is directly organized and controlled through the exercise of some form of social power" (Wright 2010, 193). Social power in this sense, is a voluntary association of people who have the organisational capacity of collective force (Wright 2010, 193). Importantly, the social economy can contain capitalistic elements and not all non-profit elements are developing the social economy (Wright 2010, 193). This will become important below to highlight the hybrid nature of economies in our contemporary world, and for the potential power of these Subscription Subjects. To summarise, the social economy helps to distribute material resources and services, which is "organized directly through the use of social power" (Wright 2010, 194).

Wright also raises two key lessons for advancing real utopias.² The first lesson is that "Economic structures are always hybrid" (Wright 2010, 367). In contemporary society, much

of the makeup of economic institutions are built upon a combination of elements. For example, a capitalist company can engage with a powerful workers' union (Wright 2010, 367). The transformative power, for Wright, is not to shift from one system to another (from capitalism to socialism); but instead to orchestrate "a shift in the configuration of the power relations that constitute a hybrid" (Wright 2010, 367). This point of the hybrid nature lays the important foundation for the next lesson: "The socialist hybrid" (Wright 2010, 367)

The socialist hybrid stresses the importance of "social empowerment over the economy" (Wright 2010, 367). In order, to achieve democratic, social and political justice, the social empowerment must play a key role in the economy (Wright 2010, 367). This is firstly done by having a strong social presence, ensuring that the functions of the state bends to the social power that is located within civil society (Wright 2010, 367). Most relevant for this article, is that social empowerment must supersede the role of economic power (Wright 2010, 368) and further democratise civil society (Wright 2010, 368). Ideas and real utopias should be able to inspire civil society with "both narrow and encompassing associations organized on democratic egalitarian principles" (Wright 2010, 368). Wright's lessons of social economy and social empowerment enable a new space for transformation in the social media sphere, as EU-social media subscription users embody both important economy functions (social media companies are dependent on their renewing fees), and can channel this newfound power as a political pressure point through their social power.

Honig develops her public things concept from two thinkers: Douglas Winnicott and Hannah Ardent. Honig utilises Winnicott's idea of object-relations to build her argument of the democratic importance of objects (Honig 2017, 16). For Winnicott, objects play a centralising role in an infant's development with reality (Honig 2017, 16). Objects help an infant/baby to grasp reality as a "kind of objectivity, or realness" (Honig 2017, 16). The infant learns about the external world through interactions with objects; more specifically, the infant experiences a learning process through "destroy[ing]/disavow[ing] the object and the object surviv[ing]" (Honig 2017, 16). Through the object surviving destruction or disavowal, the baby's "infantile omnipotence gives way, in the face of the object's permanence, to the reality of subjectivity, finitude, survival" (Honig 2017, 16). Through this process the baby learns how to engage with their more aggressive emotions safely (Honig 2017, 16-17). Crucially, the baby also develops its subjectivity and through this engagement with objects begins to understand "itself as a unit" (Honig 2017: 17). In essence, this intrasubjective struggle between the individual and the object is how one "learns to act in concert.; people "learn[] about cohesion and unitariness from the object world [...]" (Honig 2017, 17). Through the relationship with objects, people experience an educational process of grounding oneself in reality and develop psychological tools/skills (through objects) to deal with the external world. In other words, "Winnicott [...] sees humans as constituted in their liveness by relations to things as such" (Honig 2017, 16). From this position, Honig then begins to develop this logic into a political/democratic question. Honig asks what if societies as such conceive of this object relationship/dynamic in order, "to collect diverse citizens into self-governing publics divested (like Winnicott's maturing infants) of fantasies of omnipotence and invested with a sense of integrated subjectivity, responsibility, agency, and concern?" (Honig 2017, 17)

Ardent's contribution is to democratise the object-relationship experience from Winnicott's perspective (Honig 2017, 38). The crossover between Ardent and Winnicott, is Honig's use of Winnicott's "holding environment" as a point of Ardent's phenomenological concept of Work³ (Honig 2017, 42). For simplicity, the holding environment is a "site of care, handling, and holding" (Honig 2017, 54). In essence, the holding environment is a form of safe space for an individual to develop and learn how to interact with others (Honig 2017,

54-55). Further, echoing Arendt, Honig argues that “Things provide us with a world in which to move, and they provide the friction of finitude [...] We invest Things with meaning, but Things also do the same for us: they anchor, limit, and orient us” (Honig 2016, 310). In other words, combining these two perspectives, objects and things can have the capacity to transform or develop individuals. Honig borrows the holding environment and applies a democratic lens to it with her “democratic holding environment” which acts as a place for people to engage amongst one another and develop the skillset of public things (Honig 2017, 54). This development of public things may go beyond what Winnicott may conceive of the holding environment; however, what is important is “object relations can be extended in this direction if we think of the interpellative powers of the public things that fold subjects into citizenship as properties of transitional objects” (Honig 2017, 54).

Honig does not give a singular definition of public things but rather offers a plethora of examples to highlight what public things offer to democratic life (Honig 2017: 4-5). Honig lists examples of public things, such as “universities, local, state and national parks, prisons, schools, roads and others transportation systems, the military, governments, electricity and power sources [...], airwaves, radio and television broadcast networks, libraries, airport security and more” (Honig 2017: 4). Importantly, a public thing need not be fully publicly owned; however, it “is public insofar as it is subject to public oversight or secured for public use” (Honig 2017, 4). These public things are the base for democratic expression; public things help to avoid democracy falling into a purely procedural system of government: “Without public things, action in concert is undone and the signs and symbols of democratic life are devitalized” (Honig 2017, 4). Public things become points of action and discussion for people to rally around (Honig 2017, 5). Public things are part of the holding environment and “They constitute us, complement us, limit us, thwart us, and interpellate us into democratic citizenships” (Honig 2017, 5).

The utility of combining Wright’s and Honig’s thought is that it helps create a new point of social pressure/transformation for the newfound power of EU-subscription social media users. As noted, the role of subscription users has been underdeveloped, but by combining the use of Honig and Wright, a new point of democratic transformation can be established. Wright’s thoughts allow for capitalistic logic (the subscription fee) to remain within social media companies, yet the social relations can be altered to strengthen subscribers’ social power. This new social power is generated by the shift of the economic logic of subscription-users, away from data-collection to user’s willingness to pay the fee. The fee itself, using Honig’s thoughts, becomes a political collectivisation point, because the fee changes the economic logic of social media. From this shift, the fee enables a *public things experience* for users; whereby users can assert their social power and public oversight over social media companies. In essence, the fee has a potential to embody a public essence for users to utilise and confront social media platforms. Whilst the fee is an economic barrier (this tension will be discussed more in Section Four), it contradictorily allows for democratic questions/presure points to be used by subscription users to utilise their newfound social power.

Section Three: Subscription User’s Fee as a Public Thing & Watcher

As mentioned in the introduction, Meta and Snapchat have stated that they will not collect data for personalised advertisement for subscription members (within the EU). As mentioned throughout, this change poses a subtle but powerful change in the economic logic of social media. On the one hand, this shift diminishes the sphere of influence of advertisers, as data will not be processed for advertising and enables the EU-subscription users on Meta and Snapchat to become much more economically and politically important.

From Wright's perspective, the EU-subscription users embody more social power than previous social media users, as users' willingness to pay the fee becomes a critical point of economic valorisation for social media companies. Therefore, this willingness becomes a vital component of economic logic of the subscription side; but it also facilitates the users' collectivisation and social power. For example, Facebook (from the period of 1st of April till 30th September 2024) had "approximately 260.6 million average monthly active users on Facebook in the EU" (Meta 2025). If half of these active users became paying members, without the capacity of processing data for advertisement, the potential for political, economic and social power becomes clear. As the economic dependency on subscription users increases, so does their potential social power. Crucially, there need not be a total dismantling of capitalistic structures; maintaining part of the capitalistic structure does not (according to Wright) deter or limit the radical social power of these subscription users. The focus for EU-subscription users of Meta and Snapchat is to reconfigure power relations and changed them to benefit their new social power. How this is to be done is beyond the scope of this article, but I will offer a potential point of mobilisation in the final section of this article.

Forcing social media companies to bend more to social power without removing all capitalistic elements is not only practical in the current political climate, but it also ensures a hybrid flexibility, but more important it clearly alters the power relations (power to the subscribers instead of advertisers), which is the main lesson of the hybrid approach. These EU-users have, through the fee, a potential new form of social power to create a more collective and democratic ethos. Importantly, the fee should not be seen as an individual, consumeristic expression; the fee should be pushed into a democratic experience to transform this social power into a democratic, public force. To give an example of this potential, public thing, we can highlight the YouTube channel *Watcher*.⁴

Watcher is a YouTube channel that amassed over two million subscribers, but in early 2024 they made a critical decision: they created their own platform that would be funded by subscription fees and would be ad-free experience. On April 19, 2024 they uploaded a video, "Goodbye YouTube", to their YouTube channel, in which they claimed that they needed to switch to their own platform to maintain the survival of the channel, the cost would be \$5.99 a month to avoid the role of advertisers, keep a high quality of content, and pay staff sufficiently but, they would not be offering any free content on YouTube (Watcher 2024a). This decision caused a mass reaction from their audience and the YouTube community at large. So much so that on April 22, 2024, the very next video uploaded to *Watcher*'s YouTube channel was an apology video title "An Update". They had changed their policy to that of a mixed model. People paying for the platform would get the videos a month early, but they would still upload their videos for free on YouTube, and they apologised for not taking into account their fanbase when making their decisions (Watcher 2024b). In their apology video, the presenters of *Watcher* apologise directly to the audience and said they did not take into account the role of the audience, and wanted to state how important they were to the success of their YouTube channel (Watcher 2024b).

This example reveals the potential power of subscription users. First, it demonstrates the importance of the mass reaction of the audience. After the initial video of *Watcher* shifting to a subscription model, many Youtubers created "response videos" to *Watcher*'s decision. These videos criticised and attacked *Watcher*'s decision and gained millions of views (Penguinz0 2024; voidzilla 2024). Within these videos, the comment section neatly expressed the outrage and frustration of the wider audience. For example, one comment highlighted the contradiction in their community and the business decision taken: "When you cultivate an audience that embraces "Eat the Rich" you can't be shocked or mad when your audience starts to cannibalize you for making a greedy business decision." (Bryan-gy2zu

2024). Another comment highlighted the betrayal the community felt: “the watcher community would’ve supported shane and ryan until the fucking wheels fell off, we just didn’t expect them to shove us out of the car moving full speed” (m.bellelove7397 2024).⁵ Another commenter expressed their frustration about the community *Watcher* cultivated and how they turn their back on:

“Also something to remember: *Watcher*’s fanbase tends to skew on younger side (a la broke college student), and one of the members, Shane, has been very vocal on his disdain for like major companies and a very much “eat the rich” mentality. This whole thing just feels like a slap to the face of a majority of their audience (a lot of whom are struggling to make ends meet) and complete hypocrisy.” (gerald957 2024).⁶

A different comment noted that the *Watcher*’s community provides free labour for the channel, but this free labour is now behind a paywall: “[...] they have two shows that are entirely dependent on fans submitting stories for them to read for free. They put out a call for one of them just last month and have paywalled fans from seeing their own work without any prior warning” (oeurydice 2024). These comments and the high engagement denote the collective mass response from the community. The decision to become a fully subscription model changed the economic positioning of the audience. This galvanised the members to become much more vocal. Therefore, when the outrage and frustration reached a tipping point, *Watcher* quickly changed paths.

What was once free content now feels like a betrayal: “As an OG Unsolved fan, this felt like a major betrayal. I know they don’t owe anyone anything, but there is a weird consumer phenomenon where people tend to react negatively when people suddenly charge money for something that has been provided for free for literal YEARS [...] (chrundlethegreat2251 2024).⁷ The content that was once provided for free (unless subscribing to their Patreon), was to be placed behind a paywall. The fee has transformed this public, accessible content to all into an exclusive club. The fee in this case has taken away its publicness. Another commentator challenged the affordability for all: ““Anyone can afford it!” My disability check disagrees. I don’t have/can’t afford Netflix [or any similar service] or even cable.” (KeiFlox 2024). Another brought up what in fact six dollars can buy them: “Things I, a broke college student, can buy for six dollars: Six-twelve (depending on where I go) bags of microwave Mexican rice. SIX TO TWELVE MEALS. A printing pass good for 60 copies. A small box of pads. twelve packs of notecards. my shampoo and conditioner [...] Six dollars is not “nothing” for a lot of people, especially those who are part of their viewer base.” (altynaytherussianspy 2024).⁸ Finally, another commenter brought up the point of other countries that six US dollars a day may in fact be a lot of money: “And that 5.99 is in US Dollars...in some currencies that’s a shit ton of money to spend for ONE SINGLE CHANNEL. A total slap in the face for their supporters from other countries” (AP-yt4oo 2024).⁹

Whilst this is a small sample size of commentators, it is still a useful indicator of the audience’s reaction and of their *democratic power*, exemplified by *Watcher* reversing their business decision within three days. *Watcher*’s decision to move the content behind a paywall removed the public-thing-nature of their content. But they also invoked the public-thing essence of the fee. Should there be a paywall between their community and the content? In a sense, they further privatised the content. *Watcher* may have had genuine business reasons for doing so. Yet, this decision caused a reaction; it caused a concert of action within the public sphere of the YouTube community and more importantly within the community of *Watcher*’s fan base. The introduction of the fee induced a reaction from the audience, which fermented their community space to funnel their frustration towards *Watcher*. They acted in

concert and thrust public oversight into the business decision of *Watcher*. In other words, the *Watcher* community created a place for users to express solidarity, combine their anger, disappointment and frustration into concert, but crucially, this democratic concert was thrust forward by the role of the fee and the new economic positioning of the *Watcher* community (as potential subscribers). The fee became a public-thing because the viewers' willingness to pay the fee became the economic motor for the subscription model and a catalyst in enabling *public oversight*, which for Honig is critical for public things. The fee enabled the *Watcher* community to coordinate, push back against a private company, discuss, voice their frustration, anger and solidarity. In essence, it facilitated a public thing experience of action, which forced the content produced by *Watcher* to remain accessible to all.

Section Four: Tensions and Limitations

Four questions arise in relation to this early theoretical work. First, is the *Watcher* example a useful case study to compare to the complexity of trying to coordinate an online social movement across the EU, against social media companies, and how can this "newfound" social power be mobilised? Second, the *Watcher* community resisted the subscription model, whereas this article argues that subscription users are a new point of transformation? Third, does the fee itself contradict Honig's conception of public things since it is an exclusive and private experience? Fourth, are users who are not able or willing to pay a subscription fee excluded from this movement?

To respond to the first question, the *Watcher* example demonstrates the unexplored social power that has yet to be developed within the literature and shows the important role that subscription users can play within transforming or democratising social media. It also denotes a singular case of (potential) subscribers' resistance and collective action. Nonetheless, the mobilisation of subscription users is still problematic. Members of the *Watcher* community had years of shared communitive experiences which developed into an "anti-establishment" and "eat the rich" culture. This case study is limited in relation to the substantially larger and vastly more complex Facebook and Snapchat communities. A detailed exploration of the potential to mobilise these communities is beyond the scope of this article. However, Ireland could be a potential starting point of mobilisation of this newfound social power, due to its recent usage of Citizens Assemblies and that social media companies already have their headquarters there.

Ireland for a little over a decade has been using citizens assemblies for a variety of political decision/debates such as abortion and equal marriage ("About Citizens' Assemblies"). The assemblies are a group of randomly selected people who come together over a period of time and discuss and debate the topic ("About Citizens' Assemblies"). These citizens' assemblies have played a powerful and useful role in informing debate and impacting policy within the Irish government ("About Citizens' Assemblies"). Ireland has some exposure and engagement with these communitive, deliberative process of discussing big political topics. Furthermore, the Irish government has engagement and experience with the process itself, so there is already structural and institutional experience with this form of democratic action. Plus, social media companies such as Facebook (Meta) have their European headquarters based in Dublin. The crucial hurdle would be how to engage social media companies in this process? This is a difficult and fraught political, legal and bureaucratic question, that is beyond the scope of this article. However, the Irish case clearly has potential for the mobilisation for EU-subscription users.

The second question, can subscribers lead a significant transformation of social media despite the rejection of the subscription model by the *Watcher* community? First,

the rejection by the *Watcher* community does not negate the argument that the fee itself could become a political/public point of tension. Through the introduction of the fee, users and members of the *Watcher* community were able to voice their frustration, engage in collectivization and mobilisation; in essence, the fee became a political point and catalyst of action. One could argue that access to the *Watcher* channel itself was the public thing and that the fee itself was actually a source of privatisation. Whilst this perspective has value and poses limitations for the article's claim, it is important to restate Honig's point that a public thing need not be fully public (Honig 2017, 4). What is more crucial is that the public thing is "public insofar as it is subject to public oversight or secured for public use" (Honig 2017, 4). Due to the new economic position, the *Watcher* community became agents of oversight, forcing the content of *Watcher* to remain free to all. Whereas, in the context of social media, subscription users should occupy this position and form a political collective and another point of democratic pressure. This is the role that the *fee* can help facilitate.

The third question, does the fee contradict the use of Honig's public thing approach? Whilst it is reasonable to argue that the fee contradicts Honig's idea of public things, such as acting as an exclusionary barrier. However, the actions of fee-paying subscribers may have public benefits for all. For example, trade union dues have a similar logic. Many organisations will have some form of union, and often these unions will have dues that help sustain their organisations. Those who pay the dues are part of the unions, those who do not pay will be excluded from the union itself; but may benefit from the work and efforts of a union. For example, a teachers' union which negotiates for higher salaries do so on behalf of all teachers, not only their members. Hence, the fee in this union example is exclusionary, but does not stop the union acting in a public manner for all teachers. This gets closer to the public thing experience. How to transform this fee-paying experience from an individual, consumeristic expression to a collective union experience requires much more research than the current article can provide. Still, there is democratic potential through the subscription fee being a collectivisation point.

The fourth question, are users who do not pay excluded from this form of democratic transformation? To some degree, this is an unavoidable problem. Those who do not pay the fee, are excluded. Yet, the role of the non-paying users is dynamic and important. For example, refereeing back Couldry and Mejias' playbook of approaches, the non-paying users could be able to help inform paying-members. Focusing on the Dublin example, subscription members who are part of a citizens' assemblies, to some degree are working within the system, whereas the non-paying users have more room for creative freedom. For example, they could deploy different forms of democratic resistance or develop new methods for transformation (see the literature above for example) that may not be available for the paying-members (assuming this Dublin cooperative experiment). This exclusion between the two groups allows for freedom for non-paying users, which can then be translated into new point of creative, democratic, pressure that can be funnelled to the subscription members. The point is both the non-paying and the paying actors should be seen as a collective with different capacities that can be utilised to inform each other's political tactic.

Conclusion

This article has theorised another point of democratic transformation within the social media sphere. As seen in the first section of the article, there are many ideas, concepts and points of democratic transformation argued by a multitude of authors and thinkers, ranging from workers resistance, creative organisations that use data for non-commercial reasons, and unionising. Yet, the potential of subscription users' for democratic transformation

has yet to be explored. Through the works of Wright and Honig and the subtle shift in the economic logic within the subscription realm of social media (that social media need not rely on the extraction of data for advertising), subscription users occupy a new point of democratic transformation and collectivisation through the public experience of the fee. The example of *Watcher* highlights the power of subscribers on a small scale. Within three days, the audience and the YouTube community at large were able to engage in concert and express their frustration towards this new barrier of the fee causing a shift in the business. This example is on a smaller scale than dealing with social media companies, but it indicates the powerful potential of users engaging in a democratic manner with the capacity to influence companies or platform who depend on subscribers to survive. Future research on how to develop and organise this collective ethos is critical. Empirical investigations amongst users could potentially provide rich resources on how users feel about this potential. Finally, engaging with users could provide useful tactics on how different subscription platforms enable this democratic ethos to develop amongst subscription users. Yet, before any of this is possible, it is necessary to theorise and recognise the potential democratic power of subscription users.

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NOTES

1. Zuboff makes a similar point about Section 230 from the Telecommunications Act of 1996.
2. Wright articulates seven lessons (Wright 2010, 366–373). The other five lessons are beyond the scope of this article.
3. Work acts as a stabiliser between the Labour and Action because they both rely on Work to “offset the vicissitudes of their unique temporalities” (Honig 2017, 41). Work offsets Labour by creating and conceiving of ideas to relieve the “ceaseless eternality of bio-reproduction” (Honig 2017, 41). One can think of tools that ease the toil of labour as an example of Work reducing this eternal problem. Work can rein in Action by creating “poems, memorials, sculptures, and histories that shelter the memories created by Action” (Honig 2017, 41). In other words, the products of Work help to “reify and extend the vital renown of the political actor and stabilize the web of meaning in which we live and into which we may act.” (Honig 2017, 41–42).
4. Thank you to Charlotte Cruthers for her suggestion of *Watcher*.
5. This comment collected over forty thousand “likes”.
6. This comment collected over one 1.5 thousand “likes”.
7. This comment collected 1.2 thousand “likes”.
8. This comment collected 3.6 thousand “likes”.
9. This comment collected 102 “likes”.

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