

Hole in the (Pay)Wall: Monetized Access, Content Leaks, and Community Responsibility

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Digital paywalls are jointly sustained by platform interfaces that block content from nonpaying users and by paying users who do not share the content they pay for. However, paywalls often fail when users circumvent interfaces and deliberately circulate material to nonpaying audiences. This paper focuses on the latter instance, providing two case studies of online communities sharing material beyond their paywalls. In examining user discourse surrounding content leaks, this article answers the following questions: Why do users breach paywalls and how do they justify such practices? Who or what is to “blame” for a paywall’s penetrability, and whose responsibility is it to resolve this “failure”? This study thus examines attitudes surrounding monetized access and highlights the precarity of risk and failure within online communities.

Keywords: paywalls, fandom, community, content leaks, capitalism and anticapitalism

Paywalls are ubiquitous across the Internet. From the *New York Times* and JSTOR to Netflix and Patreon, paywall gatekeeping generates profit by controlling content accessibility. As sociotechnical systems, digital paywalls rely on two primary agents for their functionality: the platform’s interface that blocks content from nonpaying users and paying users who do not share the content they pay for. With such strong reliance on user discretion, however, paywalls often fail. PDFs are sent through private messages, videos are pirated on illegal streaming websites, and links to content leaks are uploaded to social media. Put simply, paywalls regularly “fail” through technical subversion and user noncompliance.

In contrast to unintentional breakdowns that must be acknowledged and potentially patched to satisfy disgruntled consumers—such as PR blunders, data leaks, and video game glitches—paywall breaches are often celebrated and deliberately coordinated. This is especially true of online fandom communities, who are notorious for sharing private and copyrighted celebrity-related content, from unreleased music leaks to personal candid photos (Harvey, 2013). This is not to say, however, that all users endorse the practice. Digital users continuously debate the moral and ethical implications of such breaches, negotiating between sharing content out of care for a community’s information needs, and respecting the wishes of those who create and protect content.

This paper traces these negotiations across two case studies of paywalled celebrity-made content—mass text messages and livestreamed concerts—by examining fan discourse around content leakage. It answers the questions: Why do users breach paywalls? How is this practice justified? Who or what is to “blame” for the paywall’s penetrability? And whose responsibility is it to resolve this “failure”?

Answers to these questions illustrate attitudes toward monetizing information access and understandings of risk and failure within online communities.

Breaching the Wall: Anti-Paywall Sentiment

Online communities and fandoms have particular approaches regarding paywalls and monetization. Besides the gratification of personal access to private materials, users generally circumvent paywalls for two reasons: anticapitalist alignment and community care.

Within academic literature, paywalls are regarded as mechanisms within information capitalism. Originally stemming from the theories outlined by Karl Marx (1867/1976), information capitalism is characterized by the transformation of information—or variously, data, knowledge, and content—into a commodity that can be bought and sold (Webster, 2000). Because information is abstract and not necessarily exhaustible, “information capitalists have to develop an artificial scarcity in information markets in order to increase exchange values” (Ellenwood, 2020, para. 33), which drives the implementation of copyrights and paywalls. As instruments for blocking content, paywalls create information divides across populations, excluding those without certain forms of economic capital.

In opposition to these oppressive structures, online communities have traditionally subverted information capitalism through logics of care. Karen Hellekson (2009) writes that fandoms operate off gift economies in which “gifts” are given, received, and reciprocated to create anticommercial community (p. 114). Fans digitally produce and disseminate work for free as symbolic gifts, and in return receive gifts of “reaction” in the form of praise, thanks, and recognition. Such gift giving is a gratification system that helps maintain social solidarity and community care. The gift economy was “designed to create and cement a social structure” in lieu of a financially based economy, partly to subvert capitalist industries and corporations that pose a threat to fan activities (pp. 114–115). This framework creates a dichotomy between fans and the entertainment industry, wherein fans view themselves as championing values that are antithetical to industry—including anticapitalism, which in turn shapes their behaviors regarding money.

Within the aforementioned framework, breaching paywalls and distributing leaked content can be characterized as “gift giving.” Fan communities undermine corporate capital building and resist practices linked with the “dominant capitalist society” that they oppose (Hills, 2002, pp. 4–5). They illustrate Lothian’s (2015) argument that fandom is an “undercommons” (p. 139), wherein fans “steal” from official media sources to deconstruct dominant cultural forms and disrupt capital flows. This frame posits that fans spread information through unofficial channels because they believe that “lacking the resources to buy fannish things . . . is no barrier to sharing the love” (Lothian, 2015, p. 143). Within this system, anticapitalist attitudes and notions of community care are inextricably linked.

However, despite the values of free enjoyment and consumption being core to fandom, these communities are not havens of economic equality. As the following case studies show, although anticapitalist sentiment is prevalent, paywall breaching is still controversial among fans with competing interpretations of fairness within capitalist structures.

Case Studies: Bubble and Beyond LIVE

The following case studies of online fan discourse demonstrate different attitudes toward paywall breaches.¹ The first case study centers Bubble, a paid mass texting service enabling celebrities to send messages to fans. To opt-in, users pay a monthly subscription fee of approximately \$4 USD per individual celebrity, per month. Once they subscribe, they gain access to a chat room where they receive the celebrity's texts and may send messages in reply. Although users are not permitted to spread content from within the chat rooms outside of the app, they frequently still upload to social media screenshots of text messages, photos, videos, and voice memo files sourced from the chats. In fact, countless social media accounts are dedicated solely to posting content from Bubble.

Despite the ubiquity of these posts, not all Bubble users see such leaks as acceptable, with users actively disagreeing over the value and importance of paywall integrity. The posts in Table 1 give a sense of the varied perspectives.

Table 1. Pro-Paywall and Anti-Paywall Comments Regarding Bubble

| Pro-Paywall | Anti-Paywall |
|---|---|
| "All profit goes directly to the artist is the main reason I love Bubble... and also the reason I don't like those people who never purchased bubble and only follow free bubble content on Twitter... like y'all just rob the artists" | "I love [celebrity] but ever since bubble [I know] its all been a capitalistic trap" |
| "Stop leaking bubble guys... You pay for bubble and the bands you stan can earn money for themselves, doesn't it a good thing?" | "it's not like [celebrities] lose money when people tweet [reposts from bubble] (<i>shrug emoji</i>)" |
| "Fans who don't pay for the bubble get the same benefit with fans who actually lose their money because of your [repost] . . . being poor is not an excuse [to not pay]" | "rich [fans] be saying that others should pay for bubble and stop spreading contents from there illegally is literally just their way of indirectly saying they hate the poor and they preach capitalism lol" |

Both sides' responses include a mix of critiques: some are directed at the paywall system itself (and the act of transgressing it), while some are targeted at the behaviors and beliefs of individuals. Similar patterns emerge in the second case study that centers Beyond LIVE, a livestreaming service allowing fans to watch concerts online. Users purchase tickets to individual concerts for approximately \$40–60 USD per ticket. After gaining access, they may livestream the concert while logged into their account and can purchase the official recording to rewatch afterward. However, users frequently use screen share and third-party applications to broadcast the livestreams from their own devices. Such livestreams often host hundreds, if not thousands of viewers who have not paid Beyond LIVE for access. Other users share their passwords, maximizing the amount of people who can watch from a single

¹ The following user posts are sourced from fan-exclusive social platforms such as Lysn, and public social platforms such as X. The posts themselves date back to as early as 2020 and are not cited to maintain the privacy of users.

account. It is also not uncommon for users to record and distribute their own videos of the concert for free on social media, instead of purchasing the official recording.

Like Bubble, users variously frown upon or support sharing concert videos (see Table 2).

Table 2. Pro-Paywall and Anti-Paywall Comments Regarding Beyond LIVE

| Pro-Paywall | Anti-Paywall |
|--|--|
| "Everyone must watch it legally bc the [celebrity] put so much efforts and hard work on this." | "I'm sorry for being broke?" |
| "[Illegal streaming] equals... cheating and discrediting [a celebrity's] effort in exchange for my own benefit." | "Classism" |
| "If people continue to consume things for free because companies "make enough money" [there] will come the time that they will not have enough to pay salaries and people will lose their jobs. Illegal streaming is indeed stealing." | "The [artists] are millionaires, it doesn't really matter" |
| "To wilfully not recompense artists and their teams for their efforts and hard work is unjust and tantamount to stealing. [Celebrities] have endured hell on earth for their art and fans. They deserve to have their commitment and dedication honoured in every way. Those who encourage not paying for tickets despite being able to afford it are horribly misguided." | "If rich [fans] are really that concerned about [illegal] streaming and how there's not going to be enough tickets bought and it's going to embarrass the [celebrities] or whatever is going on in their heads how about you buy tickets for broke [fans] instead of being classist" |
| "This whole "fck capitalism" when it comes to illegal streaming of paid content is nonsensical. it reinforces the belief that artists don't deserve to be paid for their labour and that people are entitled to that art for free, which is an inherently capitalist idea... you don't believe an artist should be paid for their labour . . . you think youre being anti-capitalist but youre just furthering and reinforcing the capitalist structure of wage theft" | "if you're against illegal streaming then pay for everyone who can't afford it" |
| | "All I'm saying is that if you report or have an issue with streaming accounts then you're a classist." |
| | "Why do u hate poor ppl" |

Diverging foci emerge on both sides: while pro-paywall fans argue for the necessity of paying for labor, anti-paywall fans, instead of arguing the opposite, tend to voice their disapproval of pro-paywall fans directly. And although both case studies cover different types of paid celebrity content, they show common patterns found among users supporting or opposing paywall breaching. Most salient is a thread of (anti)capitalist tensions, which will be explored in the next section.

Analysis: (Anti)Capitalist Tensions

The discourse around paywalls largely reveals interpretations of capitalism. Anticorporate and anticapitalist attitudes pervade among those who oppose the paywall; because large companies have created the paywall, many users view it as a byproduct of capitalism, thereby rendering paywall breaching an anticapitalist practice. Those who enforce or support the paywall are in turn seen as classist and elitist, enabling the gatekeeping structures of corporations and discriminating against poor people by blocking those who are unable or unwilling to pay a subscription fee. By spotlighting the dichotomy between individuals and corporations, these users reflect traditional anticapitalist attitudes associated with fandom.

Conversely, those who support the paywall and disapprove of leaked content invoke notions of worker exploitation and the value of labor. They argue that because celebrities and other workers have invested their labor into producing goods, they must be compensated, and consuming and spreading leaked content effectively steals their wages. To paywall supporters, wanting to consume goods for free—effectively benefiting from others' free labor—is exploitation and entitlement. These users shift the focus away from celebrities and media industries as wealthy and powerful agents, instead recognizing celebrities and the working-class as individuals in the production process. These users often cite concern for the economic well-being of laborers and the disproportionate harms they suffer from not being paid. Thus, while these users support paywalls, they do not consider such support to be procapitalist; rather, they use anticapitalist logic to make their claims.

Notably, the significance of the arguments on both sides is not located in whether they are true to Marxist interpretations of capitalist systems, nor if they are even correct in their assessments and applications of capital theory. Rather, their rhetoric suggests that the primary conflict is not between self-identified procapitalist and anticapitalist forces, but instead competing interpretations of and priorities within (anti)capitalist ideologies. Users who breach paywalls prioritize the desires of consumers who are positioned against dominant industries, while paywall supporters prioritize labor compensation for all (regardless of where those people fall within capitalist structures). Fan debates about whether it is appropriate to breach paywalls show not wholly diverging ideologies but different interpretations of whose interests should take precedence.

Whose Failure Is It?

When a system breaks down, blame for its failure is often placed *somewhere*—onto some mechanism or person, or a combination thereof (Jones-Jang & Park, 2022). While noncomplying users are one source of paywall failure, paywall infrastructure itself is part of the complex story of breakdown.

On the industry side, there are measures in place to prevent—and punish—paywall circumventions. Bubble's (2024) official terms of service state that "all contents such as messages, photos, videos, audio from artists is . . . exclusively for members. Transmitting outside or posting the contents shall be prohibited, and disclosure of these contents may be punishable by law" (para. 1). Similarly, Beyond LIVE prevents direct screen sharing and limits the number of devices that may simultaneously stream from a single account. Its terms and conditions also state that the following are prohibited: "infringing or threatening to infringe any

copyright,” and “developing, distributing and/or using any unjust tool . . . for the purpose of . . . pirate copy and/or cheating,” in which it holds users liable “for all and any consequences” (Beyond LIVE, n.d., para. 9). Sharing content from these two platforms is officially prohibited.

However, despite the proliferation of illegally distributed content, Bubble and Beyond LIVE rarely take action against users. Such inaction suggests a “failure” on the part of companies to actively curb paywall breaching through their vigilance and judicial exercise, or a failure to employ enough staff to handle such matters. Further, one could point to their failure to institute stricter antidistribution methods such as antiscreenshot technology and geoblocking on password sharing. Yet there is an absence of calls for such measures even in the pro-paywall discourse—in fact, companies are not addressed nor mentioned at all.

Hence, users indicate that the responsibility for preventing paywall failures is their own, rather than that of the companies that establish them. The failure is not mechanical, corporate, or judicial—it is moral and ethical, and an individual’s responsibility. It is up to the individual to follow rules, act in good faith, exercise restraint and judgment, not exploit weak paywall designs, and ensure fairness for all. If one fails in any of these respects, it may call their character into question. This movement from the systemic into the personal ascribes a level of intimacy to failure, as individuals hold each other accountable via shame and recenter the role of community in establishing norms. Such community dynamics are not exclusive to fandom and instead highlight the complexities in how users conceive of their relationships with technological interfaces and one another—ultimately locating both normalcy and breakdown in the sociotechnical.

Conclusion

The case studies of paywall breach discourse demonstrate how “failure” is a process of negotiating “appropriate” behavior. With both sides arguing from seemingly anticapitalist standpoints yet unable to reach a consensus, it is unlikely that paywall failures will ever be “resolved,” either technically or discursively. There is one point of agreement among the discord, however: The responsibility for mitigating failure, however defined, falls on individual community members. Despite design and interface weaknesses that make paywalls vulnerable to breakdown, the *individual’s* failure supersedes all, communicating a lack of responsibility and care through both gatekeeping *and* consuming leaked content.

Although this article focuses on celebrity content, the discourse it features illustrates larger patterns of information capitalism across the Internet more broadly. Rather than being conceptualized as a top-down process in which large industries control vital access to data, we must also consider how users perpetuate structures of gatekeeping, stratification, and digital divide in the information age (Parayil, 2005). As platform commodification continues to accelerate, grappling with the consequences of monetized access and class division will be crucial to understanding shifting digital power dynamics.

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