Student 1 Question.

Should users seek to start or support social platforms that require a fee to enter?

I've personally held onto the idea that if users want to have more say and authority over how a platform is run while also helping maintain operation costs then users should expect to start paying to be online. A simple example I go to is the costs for running something like YouTube, especially when more creators are now uploading media in 4K without restraint, anyone can create a channel and start posting any amount of media they want without any cap to how large the file is or how often the post or anything and when you apply that in mass scale for a prolonged period of time the platform is going to continue to find ways to cover the costs of running that infrastructure on top of paying its creators. Now when it comes to other social media, users often express grievances in how algorithms are designed to keep them addicted so they stay on an app longer and be presented more advertisements in hopes that they'll buy something. Users would be more entitled to demanding that no algorithms be implemented to hold their attention if users are expected to cover the costs of operating a platform where they can post media in varying file sizes and at any frequency, that cost could even vary from user to user through different privileges or based off of what resources they utilize, someone who just likes posts and comments occasionally is going to engage with the platform differently from someone who posts multiple temporary stories or permanent videos and photos in HD. This idea I present is already existing in some capacity though its largely meant to remove ads from the user's experience and doesn't grant much else when it comes to demanding certain change be made

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My Response to His Question

Fee-based platforms solve surveillance capitalism's misaligned incentives but create digital divides. A hybrid model - free tier with regulatory protections, premium ad-free, and cooperative governance, balances access equity with accountability.

Your analysis raises a critical ethical question that maps directly onto **social contract theory** from our Ch1 readings: what implicit agreement exists between platforms and users, and should that contract be made explicit through fee-based models?

Currently, the "free" social media business model operates on what Shoshana Zuboff (2019) calls **"surveillance capitalism"**, platforms extract behavioral data as the price of admission, monetizing user attention and personal information through targeted advertising. This creates a fundamental **misalignment of incentives**: platforms profit by maximizing engagement (often through algorithmically-induced addiction), not by serving user interests. Your proposal to make users into paying customers would realign these incentives by making platforms directly accountable to users as economic stakeholders rather than treating users as the product being sold to advertisers.

However, applying **Moor's policy vacuum framework**, we face a conceptual challenge: what governance rights should payment confer? YouTube Premium removes ads but grants no decision-making authority over content moderation policies, algorithm design, or platform governance. A more radical model exists in **platform cooperatives**, user-owned social networks where members collectively govern through democratic structures (Scholz, 2016). Examples like Mastodon demonstrate federated, community-governed alternatives to corporate platforms, though they struggle with scale and sustainability.

The **consequentialist concern** with mandatory fees is the creation of a **digital divide**: low-income users, already disadvantaged in accessing information and social capital, would be excluded from essential communication networks. The European Union's Digital Services Act (2022) attempts a middle path, requiring platforms to offer ad-free versions while mandating transparency in algorithmic systems and giving users more control over their data, regardless of payment status.

Follow-up question: Could a **tiered hybrid model** balance these concerns, offering a free tier with strong privacy protections and algorithmic transparency (funded by ethical advertising), a premium tier removing ads entirely, and a cooperative governance tier where paying members vote on platform policies? Would this address both the digital divide and the governance accountability gap you've identified?

References

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power* [Book summary/Faculty profile]. Harvard Business School. https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=56791

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