

The new slavery

No wonder so much digital media is rubbish
— the writers are not paid

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The fact that, right now, you're reading something I wrote is a strong sign that the publication in question has its act together. That is, it has enough of an audience due to its unique, thoughtful and entertaining content to be able to properly compensate those who create it. As obvious as that sounds, it's becoming increasingly rare, which is why so much of today's media is crap.

As a media professional, I refuse to give it away, whether it's an article or a broadcast analysis. But you'd be surprised how many outlets — particularly in the 'digital age' — expect creators to put out for free. And worse, how many media professionals are keen to be exploited in exchange for their friends being able to point to them in the newspaper or on the TV. A real media professional gets over the whole public aspect of the work rather quickly. Our job just happens to be executed in front of an audience, but the idea of doing it strictly for that reason — or worse, foregoing a pay cheque because people can see us while we work — wears thin quickly. At least it does for those of us without personality disorders, mental illness, or trust funds, and who consider productivity-for-attention an illegitimate exchange in a world where rent isn't free.

If I asked my dentist to fix my teeth for free in exchange for having the procedure broadcast on TV or the internet, chances are he'd tell me to shove off. If he did agree, I'd probably think twice about his professionalism. If a plastic surgeon agreed, I'd probably have to brace myself and expect to emerge looking like Donald Duck.

The same holds true for media professionals willing to work for free — even when they're asked increasingly often to do so. The ones who know their worth is zero will work for nothing. The internet has only been around for a couple of decades now, and traditional media has had more than ample time to figure out how to adapt to a new business model. But why bother paying people when the traditional-to-digital transition has professionals so accustomed to not being paid?

Even your average prostitute isn't expected to offer up her talents gratis, and it's not like any great creativity or intelligence is expected in that job. Turn a video camera on her and she'll not only refuse to do it for free, but may even up the price. Then again, some might argue that these women

aren't paid for their output or production quality, but rather to quietly leave afterwards. Since some media outlets weren't even wise enough to adopt that same position and treat me as decently as a common prostitute before trying to scam free labour out of me and my media colleagues, I have no qualms about calling them out on it.

The issue affects professionals on all continents because the press no longer has any geographical boundaries. For example, I'm a Canadian-born journalist based in France and working for media outlets in the UK, the US, France, Australia and elsewhere. The phenomenon of media outlets cheaping out is universal.

It can be a lucrative business for some who can get away with it. It all started on the internet, as most scams do.

The Huffington Post, an American website known mainly for linking to content produced by other websites and news services, just sold to AOL for a reported US\$315 million. Dan Lyons, technology reporter at *Newsweek* magazine and the *Daily Beast*, recalls being approached to contribute to HuffPo, only to be told, 'As you know, we famously don't pay our bloggers.'

This, dear readers, is how you exploit naiveté and vanity for profit. A slave isn't a slave in the 21st century if he's slaving in front of an audience. In fact, he should be thrilled about it, or else he's an ingrate. And if you get enough slaves in one place all showing off for each other, tweeting, Facebooking, emailing their works of slavery — you can spin that into gold.

Mainstream traditional media have tried adopting similar models, only it looks sleazy coming from an adult in an expensive suit



'And this is where we add the natural goodness.'

who works in a giant corporate tower and not in his pyjamas. One French TV outlet recently told me that, 'as with the American model', they don't pay for on-air analysis.

Nice try. The 'American model' pays a lot of money to people they want badly enough. Having made a career in America, I would know. But they'll also gladly exploit anyone willing to be exploited. Corporate America has a hard time exploiting anyone unwilling to be. At least they won't do it within their borders — that's why sweatshops are outsourced. Even sweatshop workers make three cents an hour for mindless labour, but only because they can't be on TV. Otherwise they'd get nothing.

There are two types of people who undercut media professionals: amateur bloggers (or 'citizen journalists') and professionals who are experts in some other field. Bloggers will usually do anything for free for any real media outlet because they're just thrilled that someone takes them seriously. The fact that they're willing to put out without any compensation for their efforts suggests that they know the true value of their work. Often they hope that in giving it away, they will ultimately land a paid gig. But where's the incentive on the part of the media outlet to pay someone like this when they're so willing to engage in a neverending audition for a position that may never arise?

Every newsroom fax machine and email inbox is flooded with press releases from experts who consider their own publicity efforts compelling news. One international TV network explained to me that they have '45 guest slots' to fill in every broadcast day, and prefer to load the programming with people looking for free exposure than professional journalists they would have to compensate.

A successful commercial radio network asked me, in the wake of a lengthy meeting with its director, if I could come on-air for three hours so they could 'get to know me'. Sorry, I do that over coffee, much like Nicole Kidman doesn't 'get to know' a film director by starring in his movie.

But who really wins? Does anyone?

The news network is getting what they're paying for: people shilling for free under the guise of 'news commentary' — think the ABC's *The Drum* or News Limited's *The Punch* — but how many of them are of any real interest to the audience? There's more to television and radio than just showing up and talking. Style, provocation, seduction, strategy, delivery all matter for professional communicators. How many are sufficiently skilled in these elements of media professionalism to capture the audience required for selling the adverts in between?

If the system changes for the better, it will only be because market forces drive all involved to better evaluate the relationship between productivity, value and compensation.