

THE QUARRY

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Free love: The death of the Artist

My finger presses once more against the refresh button. Yep, still there. Wow, who would have thought that my writing would lead me to the big leagues? I continue staring, attempting to digest the fact that at a mere twenty years old, my dreams have finally been realised. My name has been immortalised beneath the heading of an online article. I have become a literary god.

I make myself a celebratory coffee, pull my curtains back and sit down again in front of the computer, keen to see the world through my newly-acquired eyes of a published writer. Sure, I'd run my own blog before, and wrote for some Facebook pages, but this was different. This was an established website. I had written about the issue of political correctness in today's hyper-sensitive age, and to my surprise, people agreed.

As I soak in my own glory, the mouse beneath my fingertips makes its way onto my Facebook, where I can publicly announce the news of my latest advent into

stardom. Ah, these poor plebs, I think to myself whilst scrolling through the lives of my acquaintances; stuck in their nine-to-fives, no accolades, no articles publish-... wait, what's this? Another girl on my Facebook, the same age as myself, has just shared news of her own published article! The nerve! Doesn't she know that I am the only writer in town?

I click on the link, and to my dismay the girl has not one, not two, but five published articles on the site. My overwhelming feelings of glory and self-satisfaction begin to dissipate. Here I was, thinking I'd made a name for myself, all the while some other shmuck had beaten me to the punch, and five times at that.

Wait a minute Louis, let's not be selfish. There's room aplenty in the world of writing, we can all get along, can't we?

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My answer to that question becomes less certain as the days go by. As I continue to look, I find that several times a week - if not daily - another person on my Facebook or Instagram will start a blog, or have an article published somewhere. Now admittedly, I don't think anyone I'd come across was actually being paid for their work. And there was also the little known fact that I wasn't either. But the worst part? I had to accept this wasn't just happening near me. This was happening worldwide.

Though such is to be expected. Pretty much everyone has access to a computer with Internet now, and these are seemingly the only prerequisites needed to become a writer. Perhaps not a good writer, but a writer nonetheless. Well to that I say, power to them! No... to us! Writing is a beautiful thing, it's only fair that everyone should have the capacity for their writing to be seen and heard. But what exactly does this mean for people who wish to make themselves a career from writing? More importantly, what does this mean for me? More writers creates more competition doesn't it?

First one must distinguish from those who write as hobby, and those who write to pursue longevity. While Facebook has more users than there are people in China, and thousands of new blogs enter the ether daily, very few of these mediums actually lead to consistent, established writers.¹ Blogging is often used recreationally by

teenagers as a form of expression, usually only temporarily, and often with no intention or aspiration towards financial gain. Though there are of course exceptions to the rule, with a wide array of occupational blogging seen in the public sphere, from 'blawgs' for lawyers, to blogs run by school library teachers, who explain that their use of blogging leads to a more 'refined audience.'ⁱⁱⁱ Blogging is an accessible medium for both writers and readers, and so undoubtedly they will come in handy for aspiring writers won't they? Well, yes and no. In the search for hope, I interviewed Graham Young, owner of Online Opinion, a contribution-based news and opinion website, seeking direction in this new world of writing.

Graham somewhat confirmed my doubts by saying that while marketing methods such as blogging, Facebook and smaller contribution-based websites do assist in creating a 'sense of collective identity' for the author, they are largely a 'secondary way of making a name for yourself outside of getting into one of the popular, more established forums.'ⁱⁱⁱ Blogging and other similar pathways to publication are primarily forms of advertisement, rather than an actual endpoint or financially viable career. And even when using a blog for promotional purposes, Max van Balgooy of the National Trust says that 'maintaining a blog requires continuous activity,' warning that 'many blogs eventually fail when the owner stops posting frequently, most often due to time constraints,' or 'lack of personnel.'^{iv} The Internet has pried open the floodgates of information, and as a result, both writers and media companies alike have to produce at superhuman rates just to stay in the race for readership and attention.

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These newly opened avenues of media have led to a deterioration of previous business models, specifically in the print journalism industry which has been forced to make its way into the online arena. To their credit, this has been somewhat of a success. The readership of online journalism now exceeds that of its print predecessor, leaving newer generations wondering why anyone ever bothered with those impractical, ink-covered newspapers of the past. Though while ink-free it may be, the shift to online journalism has not been without its blemishes.

Newer generations not only expect to read the news with the touch of a fingertip, but they largely have no intentions of paying for this information. Online publications have been forced to lower their subscription costs, often ranging from between a few dollars a month, to flat-out providing their articles for free. An egregious example of this is the decision of eighty-year old Newsweek magazine to stop publishing its print edition, substituted with an online-only digital subscription. Tina Brown, editor-in chief of Newsweek, explains how the Internet affected her work. 'When I returned to print with Newsweek, it did very quickly begin to feel to me an outmoded medium. While I still had a great romance for it, nonetheless I feel this is not the right medium any more to produce journalism.'^v Brown continued to say that 'Clearly, the digital revolution is fundamentally transforming news as business. So much so that while the old model is breaking down, there is no clear alternative in sight.'

The media's free-for-all for attention has become just that: free, for all. Emerging writers now depend upon unpaid contribution work as a means for getting their foot in the door, but as late songwriter Elliott Smith once sang, 'Got a foot in the door, god knows what for.'

Jane Singer in her essay 'Journalism ethics amid structural change' states that with the shift online, 'staff cut backs mean fewer - perhaps far fewer people, with some newspapers losing half their journalists – available to handle all the tasks necessary to sustain multiple news products.'^{vi} There are more avenues for writers and artists than ever before, and yet the room upon the stage seems to be dwindling.

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This technological tidal wave has not only hit journalism, but too the industries of music, movies and literature, who are quickly losing their place upon shelves and within physical stores. Downloads and e-books have come to the fore, which may save on production costs for companies, but raise new challenges. The biggest of which, is piracy. While piracy has been possible essentially as long as print has been alive, new online programs such as BitTorrent, uTorrent, and websites like 'The Pirate Bay' make this process almost too easy. Users can now share and download music,

videos and novels for free, instantly. Granted this process is illegal, it still remains difficult for industries to clamp down such a widespread phenomenon. An example of this is television company NBC, who upon complaints about Apple's one-size-fits-all pricing methods, removed their products from iTunes. This attempt to reclaim profits only backfired on the company however, as piracy then increased 27% since their detachment. NBC subsequently returned to using Apple's iTunes for their distribution.^{vii}

These results provide news and media outlets with a clear message: provide a high-quality product for a few dollars, or watch as your users and consumers happily turn to pirated versions for free. From the perspective of an aspiring writer, reading things such as this can be disheartening. But from another perspective, the increasingly free media industry can be seen as a good thing.

When analysing this increase of piracy within the music industry, Professors Felix Oberholzer-Gee of Harvard Business School and Koleman S. Strumpf of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have found their way to less pessimistic outcomes. The professors remarked that 'While [illegal] downloads occur on a vast scale, most users are likely individuals who would not have bought the album even in the absence of file sharing.'^{viii} This brings up an interesting point. Whilst artists may see their products pirated more frequently, or be forced to release their work for next-to-nothing, they are also able to reach audiences who would otherwise have not paid to access it at all. Producing and consuming art is now more accessible than ever, and this can definitely be seen as a good thing. No longer are individuals limited by their paycheck when satisfying their appetite for the latest song, movie or novel.

Though free art and literature can be seen as a win for society, there remains a big decline in profit margins within creative fields. Despite their praise-worthy adaptability, these industries and artists are continually forced to innovate in order to survive in the constantly changing online marketplace. The journalism industry for example is forced to make up the lost profits of reduced physical sales and prices through advertisement, which Graham Young argues threatens the ability for news companies to maintain an objective and honest approach. 'Advertising gives [news companies] an incentive to gravitate towards those articles that have the most views. This has led to a sensationalisation of the news with click bait tending to be much more frequent.' These are fears commonly echoed in regards to the oligopoly of

Australian media, largely held by the Murdoch press, in which concerns of corporate interests and monetary biases arise. This ethical resistance to financial intervention means that news businesses must address their own challenges, namely those brought on by the Internet. And as C.P. Chandrasekhar writes in his essay entitled 'The Business of News in the Age of the Internet, 'providing online content for free is not only difficult, but evidently “not viable”, and so if a company wishes to charge for content, they must 'not only be unique but of high quality.'^{ix}

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The demands placed upon media and creative companies have never been so high, in that they must not only produce higher quality, more unique products in an industry awash with more competition than ever, but they must also do so with dwindling profit margins. The big question now is whether or not these industries can withstand such pressures. A report written by Pew research states that 31 per cent of readers have stopped turning to a news outlet because it no longer provided them with the news they were 'accustomed to getting,' as lower profits have led to fewer reporting resources and a compromised level of journalistic expertise and content as a result.^x

Every industry has felt the effects of the Internet, for better or for worse. For musicians, releasing records has now become simply a means of promotion, kick-starting a new tour in order to garner interest in that particular musician so that their live performances can gain bigger crowds, with live performances being one of the few elements of music which eludes piracy. Likewise within film, despite having a similar experience to concerts that cannot be captured in MP4 form, film companies have also been forced to shorten the time between their release in cinemas and in digital form, in order to keep up with ever-awaiting pirates.

The Internet has afforded everyone access to media and new means of self-expression, but this has come at a cost. Creative industries are met with an array of new challenges that at this point have largely yet to be overcome, much to the detriment of those working in the field. The clock is ticking on whether or not traditional forms of media can adapt to these changes in time to preserve themselves, or if we may be seeing the death of such industries as we've come to know them. As

an aspiring writer myself, I have no solutions to give, being as^{xi} much in the quagmire of uncertainty as anyone else. All I can do is urge those who pirate programs, songs, and literature to think for a moment about what effects this has upon the hard-working creators of our society. And if you enjoy a free subscription to a magazine with writers who spend hours of their time producing content, spare yourself the extra coffee, and instead donate those few dollars. As one day in the distant future, I might be living off them.

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