

Photojournalism is dying - readers rejoice -

Written by Andrew Orlowski



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Letters Recently, we invited top UK photojournalist Sion Touhig to describe the grim economics facing photo journalists. His passionate essay: How the anti-copyright lobby makes big business richer prompted dozens of emails over the holidays.

Sion's piece described the concentration of power in the photo business over the past twenty years, but it was unusual in one important way - it broke a taboo.

When discussing "new media", and new technologies, it's easy to find eulogies to transformation and "empowerment". But it's very rare to find a discussion of the consequences - especially when the consequence means we're worse off than before. The result of all this individual empowerment, suggested Sion, is that big business ends up getting richer and more powerful.

Perhaps as many as two thirds of the emails we received strongly objected to the very idea. Many of these reflected a grim fatalism - there was nothing we could do, and photo journalists should just face it. And get another job.

(A very small subsection of these objected to points he hadn't made, or organisations he didn't refer to - which may or may not be significant).

Here's a selection, culled from a postbag that could fill a pamphlet.

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Very cool article, which does highlight a massive problem with the so-called "online community". Let's forget about the public who will take anything for free given half a chance and let's have a look at the self-proclaimed protectors of the internet who, it seems, have the same inability to see past black and white as any of the unwashed plebs who think installing a program is what we mean by programming.

The issue that we have with copyright isn't bad in itself, it is the blatant land grab by business. I don't mind paying £13 for a DVD but what I do mind is being told I have to pay another £19 for a UMD for my PSP and paying for a second licence.

The fault is with stupid people who are so mindlessly screaming "copyright is bad" that they are killing the little guy and destroying their own argument in court and losing battle after battle after battle in court against the pigopolists.

Vishal Vashisht

Welcome to the world of globalization. Didn't you think you'd be invited? Photographers are no different than factory workers, telephone operators, or for that matter once-highly-paid software engineers. They're competing in a much bigger world suddenly, where there's plenty of content and prices and wages are falling accordingly.

How many stock photographs does the world need? If I have one million stock photos, do I need another thousand? What if I have ten million? Photographers' traditional jobs came from inefficiency; editors didn't have other choices than to send a photographer out to take pictures. Now they have choices. It's very efficient for them. Bad for you, though.

I think the internet, by its intrinsic nature and not by machinations of the multinationals, is going to be very hard on journalists and creators of throwaway content like news and fiction. If we ever learn to read books electronically, expect authors to lose out big time too.

I remember watching all the factory jobs going to Asia in the '80s and thinking, "At least they can't export my fancy-pants engineering job." If you're old enough, you perhaps covered this news. Did you also think you were bullet proof? Well, in 2001 I went from the most employable guy I knew to chronically unemployed. It was quite a wake-up call.

We expect our cell phones and computers to get cheaper every year. We expect our cars and appliances and food to stay cheap. We all go to the warehouse stores to get a deal. Yeah the quality isn't as good as the domestically made products we used to buy, but they're **so** cheap. What right do we then have to whine when we get the sack because our work went to Calcutta or Taiwan? What right to complain about Frankenfoods or low quality goods? It's what we are asking for, and what corporations will work hard to provide.

This fact won't change unless consumers change. Figure out a way to get consumers to pay more for quality, and you've got a cure for what ails your job.

If I want to stay employed, I have to find ways to be better than the software folks in Beijing or St. Petersburg. I have to be so much more productive that my fat American salary is justifiable. I suppose it's true for photographers too, if your output is really special, you can still get work. If it's just good, I doubt that's good enough anymore.

Sigh.

Kurt Guntheroth

Weirdly, a small number of readers imagined Sion's piece to be an attack on the Free Software Foundation - which wasn't even mentioned, directly or indirectly. A couple also accused Sion of asking for extended, or permanent copyright periods. Which also wasn't mentioned.

I'm sorry your chosen career is experiencing a "downturn" like the buggy whip industry of yore. That is not the fault of either the Creative Commons or the FSF. Your self-serving, Luddite

diatribe against those organisations won't change that. Maybe it's time you started working for an hourly wage like the rest of us and give up on your dream of money floating back to you in perpetuity for work that is over and done.

John Frey

It is not people who use copyleft who have created such disregard for copyright; the main contenders seem to be the personal greed of the common person, followed shortly by the less personal greed of the media corporations who wish to stop the greed of the first and feed their own appetites.

This in itself is breeding contempt for copyright, the idea that an individual can take a piece of media and use it creatively has never been in doubt and was always allowed in law (depending on country), it's not a surprise that business seek to use works for free and that they mostly assume the copyrights don't exist that because the work is on the Internet or sent via email that it is public domain.

I only hope that the creative world can find its FSF, normally a small programmer or team spread around the world does not have the power to take a company to court. but the FSF will take companies to court who violate the GPL or LGPL software licenses; this would at least help your current situation.

Martin Owens

"Such a move dishonestly offers a false 'interactivity' between the publisher and audience, shows contempt for readers by assuming they'll accept rubbish, and adds insult to injury by encouraging them to produce the very stuff they'll be seeing - and paying for nothing."

If the readership accepts the the rubbish - and historically, all too often, people have done just that (how else can you explain the success of the Weekly World News, for example?) - then publishing quality journalism is business suicide, since quality always costs more than rubbish.

Don't misunderstand; I hate crap journalism. I also recognize that John Q. Public has an IQ of about 75 of a really good day, has no taste whatsoever, and couldn't distinguish between Paris Hilton and Betty Ford without subtitles. Who do you think buys the garbage advertised in spam?

A small amount of quality goods and services will always have a niche market, but as long as the majority of people are essentially nothing more than breeding machines with disposable

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incomes, the vast majority of everything sold will remain crap.

Morely Dotes

But wait, it gets grimmer...

My question revolves around one of the central concepts in your article: that you were more concerned about being paid for your "labor" rather than the work itself. That got me thinking...

There used to be a lot of labor in photography. Often freelancers had to have their own darkrooms. In addition, cameras were bulky and film - at least good film - was extremely expensive. After development, the transportation of the work was also non-trivial, as it involved protective packaging of either film or finished prints.

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Now the manufacture and distribution of the finished work - the prints - is unbelievably cheap. Digital cameras technically never run out of film (because you can always dump the pictures into a computer), and distribution is as easy as sending an email or uploading.

If photographers are expecting to be paid for the labor of making pictures now, well, there's just not much money in it. Furthermore, the tools of the trade are now accessible to just about anyone, and the specialization is gone.

But you correctly single out the societal affects of citizen journalism or other forms of news rubbish. Unfortunately, that's not just a photographic phenomenon ... all media are affected by a bunch of amateurs who think they can write/photograph/chronicle something better than the professionals. The loss of an authoritative Fourth Estate is the result of this activity, and that is a detriment to all of us.

Matt

I have no idea of your age, but I'll bet hard-earned cash you're younger than I. When television first came along, the immediate reaction was it was going to utterly destroy radio. It did have a devastating effect, but radio survived. Radio did so by reinventing itself. Many stations did close, but many did survive. You need to take a lesson from this and reinvent yourself. How? No idea;

not my problem. But you'll never win if all you do is fight and complain. Or explain maybe.

Albert Einstein once said something on the order of, "If you keep doing the same thing expecting a different result, you might be insane".

You can't do the same thing in the face of a changing world and expect to survive. Think typewriters, color film labs and Swiss watches.

I know, I know, but they're breaking the law or screwing with the law or enforcing it selectively. My friend, the law is the law only when people believe it's the law ... and enforce it. The law can be changed in an instant and often is. And those with deep pockets will always hold the advantage.

Nobody forced you into the business you're in ... that was your choice. If your business no longer serves you, well, you again need to reinvent yourself.

David P.

You correctly class "User Contributed Content" as theft (I saw it as such the first time I saw it solicited, it amazes me that so many people don't see it) and a danger to the professionals in the field, but this is in fact nothing to do with the "anti-copyright" lobby.

The organisations involved in "User Contributed Content" could have done the same with chemical photographs (and some did), the advent of cheap digital cameras and communications has simply made it economically feasible, at least until the readers get fed up with the poor content. This would have happened without any "anti-copyright" groups, because the person who took the picture generally owns the copyright.

People have a tendency to assume that anything not chained down is 'free' for their use. Yes, there are some people who want to get rid of copyright altogether and say that anything anyone produces 'should' be free for everyone, but they are in a (admittedly vocal) minority, the vast majority have no problem with a creative person being able to profit from their work, what they are against are the abuses of copyright (like extending it to more than a lifetime after the author's death). And they are also against large organisations which steal or trick copyright assignments from creative people (like the big music companies, who do things like signing up a musician or group for 5 albums and then only producing 4 of them, thus preventing them from producing any more themselves).

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Indeed, many "anti-copyright" people would be in favour of the author retaining copyright but organisations being forbidden to acquire it (the copyright owner can, of course, say that anyone can use their work freely if they want).

Chris C.

I sympathize with your plight. I'm a "pro-am" photographer myself. What you do has value and is being demeaned by the masses, but -

Copyright is dead. Its death is attributable to technology and started with the first printing press, accelerated with the Xerox copy machine and has been finished off by digital copying and character recognition. Technology can not be legislated away. Your plight is truly helpless.

What your industry is experiencing has hit industries since the buggy whip and the Industrial Revolution. You are a craftsman in an age of mass produced product. It is only a matter of time until all "craft" is dead except a handful catering to the very rich.

I've seen the newspapers dying since the 1960s. They are too slow and too cumbersome. Radio and then TV butchered the newspapers. Now the internet is finishing them off. My reason for cancelling the newspaper wasn't even related to the technology issues. They changed ink or

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paper adding something that started causing me severe toxic reaction. My computer monitor doesn't make me ill and allows me to target my news interests.

When the Tsunami hit a few years back I knew about it and had identified and made contribution to relief agencies a day before the newspapers had the story. Magazines are even worse. With live video feed possible from anywhere in the world photojournalism just doesn't cut it anymore as a competing medium.

I'd suggest wedding photography. My niece just got robbed blind (\$2k for a three-hour shoot with the poorest quality photos I've ever seen, washed out highlights, poor composition, etc.) and seemed fine with the situation. The \$2k did not even include a standard bride and groom print package! The wedding photography industry could use some fresh talent and seems willing to pay for it.

Good luck.

Lee

So who takes pictures of the wars? They'll emerge spontaneously, no doubt.

Fascinating article, thanks kindly for taking the time to write it up and present it in such an understandable way.

That said, I think that at least part of the problem, as you see it, is based in the simple fact that images are no longer a scarce resource. Along with willy-nilly image lifting, we also have good and cheap digital cameras that vastly simplify 'webbing' images without bothering with all that bother that we all so loved in the days of kodachrome and cibachrome.

Images are now abundant. The living to be earned by exploiting the economics of scarcity is gone. The living to be earned by providing the service still exists, and if anything, is just as lucrative and rich as it ever was. Some wedding photographers are gone with the wind sure, but many others are exploiting all the new media to great market advantages. I'm just using wedding photography as an easy example.

Keep up the good work, things most certainly have changed, but are not all bad. At the end of the day, if you are trying to restrict access to things that are readily available, you will lose. So don't do that.

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Chip Mefford

And that's the best many readers can offer. There was little in the way of economic innovation, or policy innovation, that might help photojournalists. Just a sense that anyone who obstructs the mechanics of the networks, or the economics of big business, is really being impertinent.

It's a Brave New World. Be Happy. ®

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[How the anti-copyright lobby makes big business richer](#) *by Sion Touhig*

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http://zonezero.com/magazine/articles/the_register/03.html