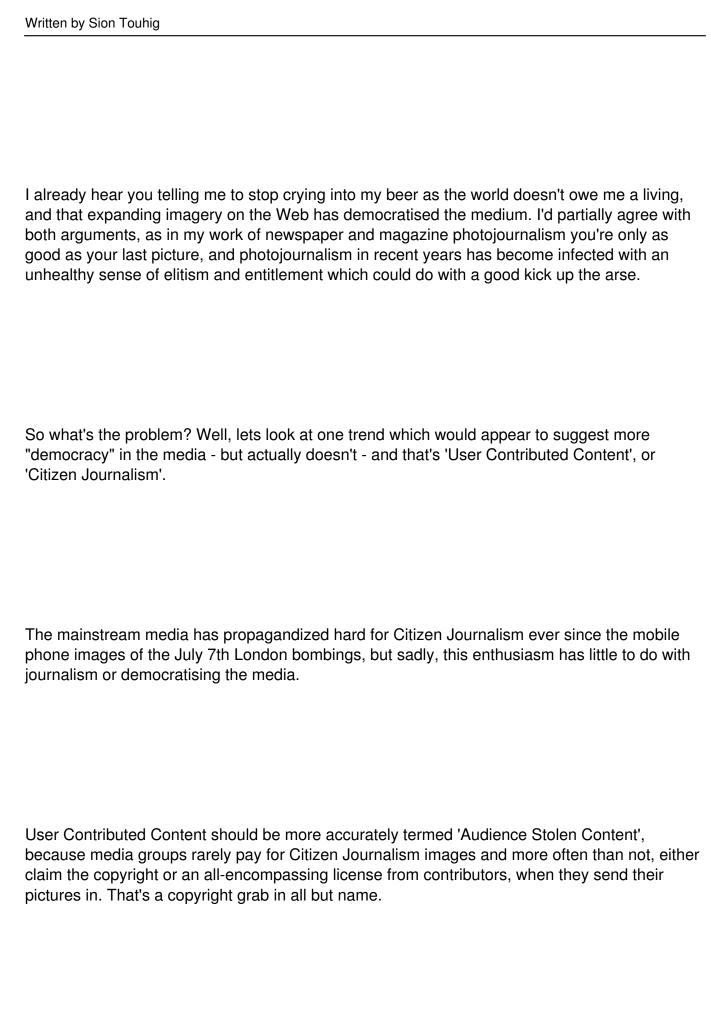
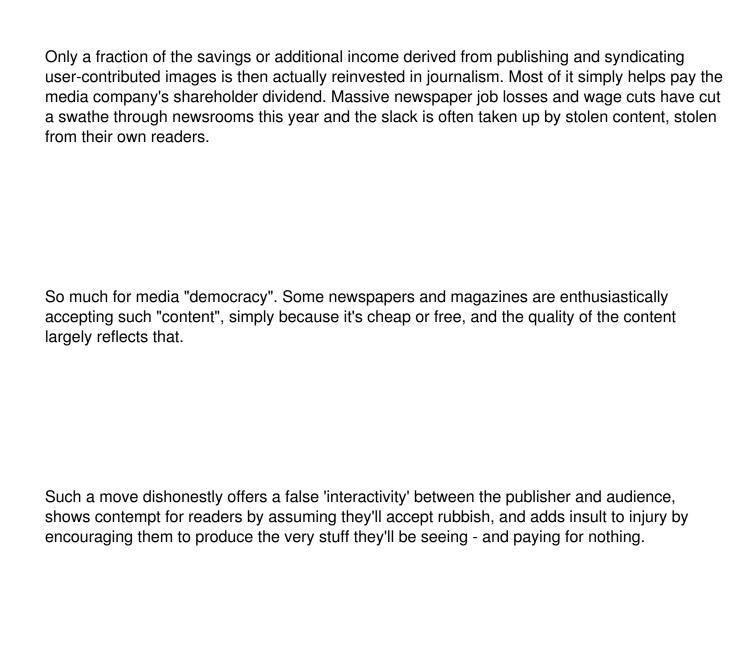


Comment: We're continually being told the Internet empowers the individual. But speaking as an individual creative worker myself, I'd argue that all this Utopian revolution has achieved so far in my sector is to disempower individuals, strengthen the hand of multinational businesses, and decrease the pool of information available to audiences. All things that the technology utopians say they wanted to avoid.

I'm a freelance professional photographer, and in recent years, the internet 'economy' has devastated my sector. It's now difficult to make a viable living due to widespread copyright theft from newspapers, media groups, individuals and a glut of images freely or cheaply available on the Web. These have combined to crash the unit cost of images across the board, regardless of category or intrinsic worth. For example, the introduction of Royalty Free 'microstock', which means you can now buy an image for \$1.00, is just one factor that has dragged down professional fees.

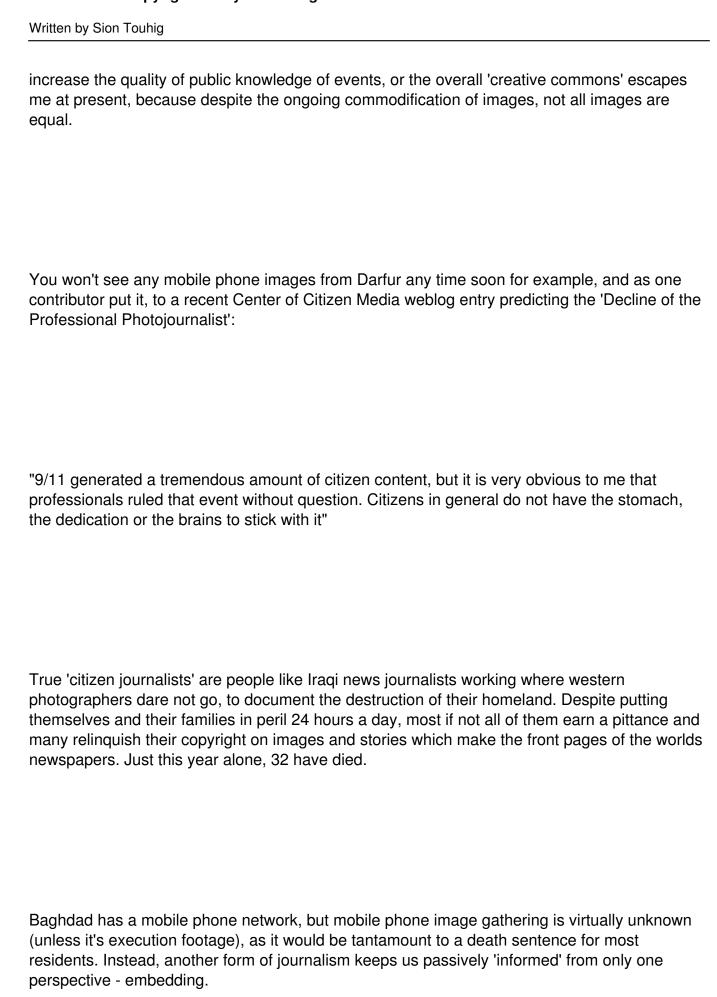


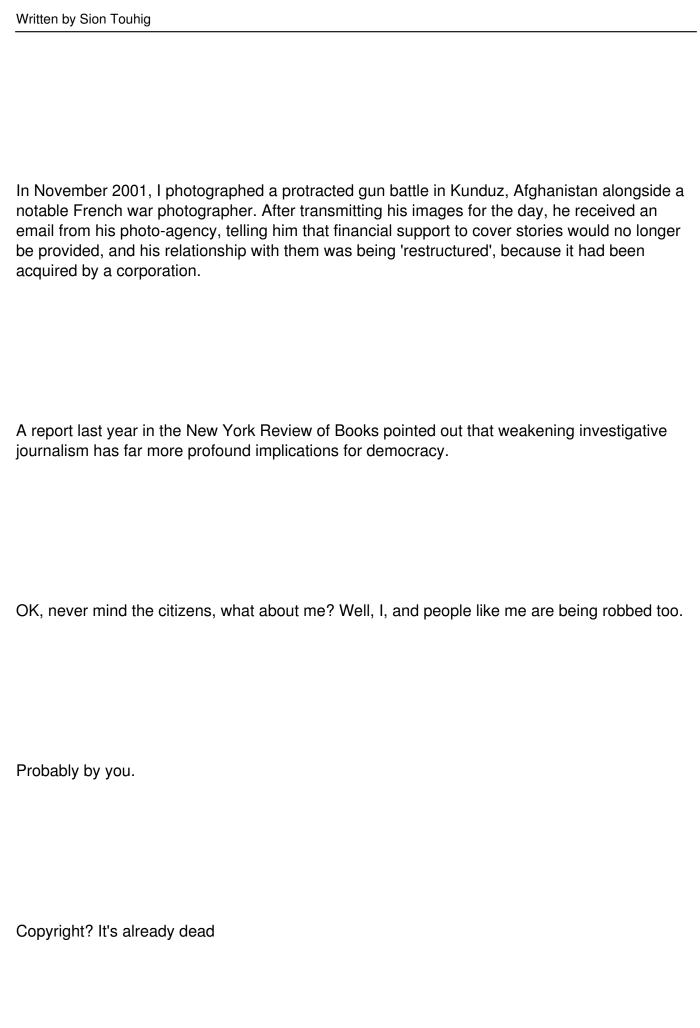




It's a race to the bottom, and is a fundamental failure by publishers to invest in their businesses for their readers benefit. It has consequently put massive pressure on professional photographers, who have to reduce their rates, or submit to copyright grabs themselves in order to get work, which is drying up and being replaced by stolen audience content.

Quite how putting professional photographers and journalists on the dole is supposed to







It's ironic that internet campaigners spend so much time complaining about the injustices of copyright, and extolling the virtues of a copyright free economy - because copyright is already dead. This is true both as perception and reality.

The perception is "if it's on the web, it's either free, or I'm gonna nick it anyway because, hey, 'they' can afford it". The reality is that there are now more copyright-free or near-free images on the web than copyright images. Most of them will be on Flickr (owned by Yahoo!), MySpace (owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation) or the major corporate image portals. Neither Flickr nor MySpace exist to commercially leverage images, but clients now go there trawling for free content, so they don't have to pay a photographer for it. It has caused a crash in the unit cost of any images which aren't given away and which are licensed for profit.

So as a consequence, the only entities that are now able to make decent profits from photography are large corporations - because only those corporations have the infrastructure to aggregate images into massive hubs.

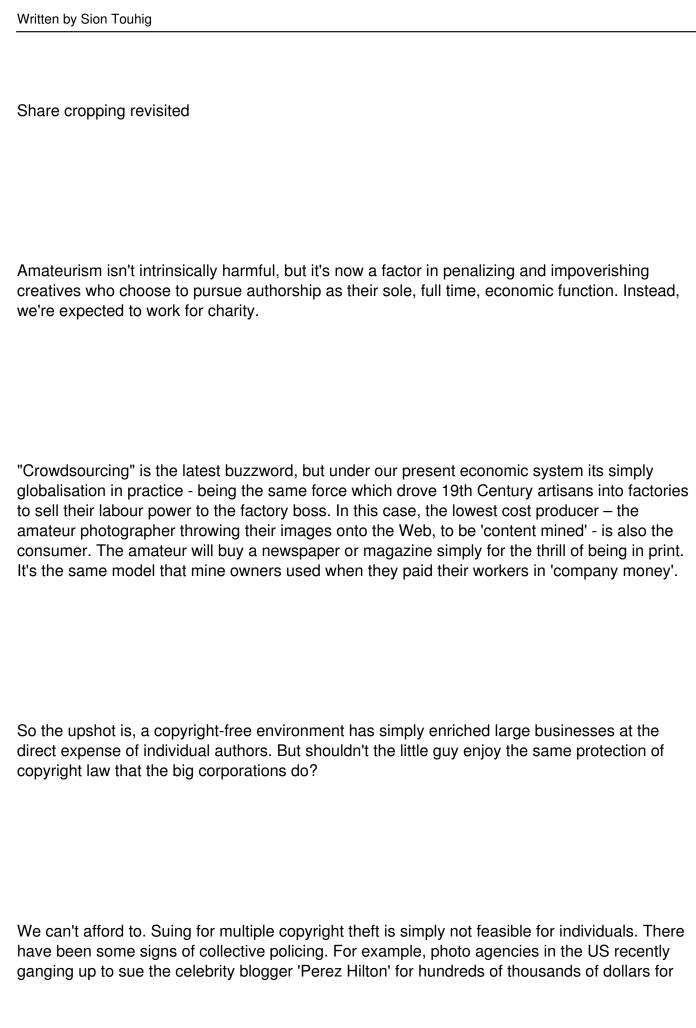
Fifteen years ago my sector had over a dozen photo-agencies which worked with freelance photographers, providing images to newspapers and magazines. Some specialized in sport, some in long-term documentary projects, some in hard news. Some were co-ops run by their members, some were big, some were small. In other words, the 'photo-eco-system' was reasonably diverse and a wide variety of imagery was produced by professional photographers earning decent fees.

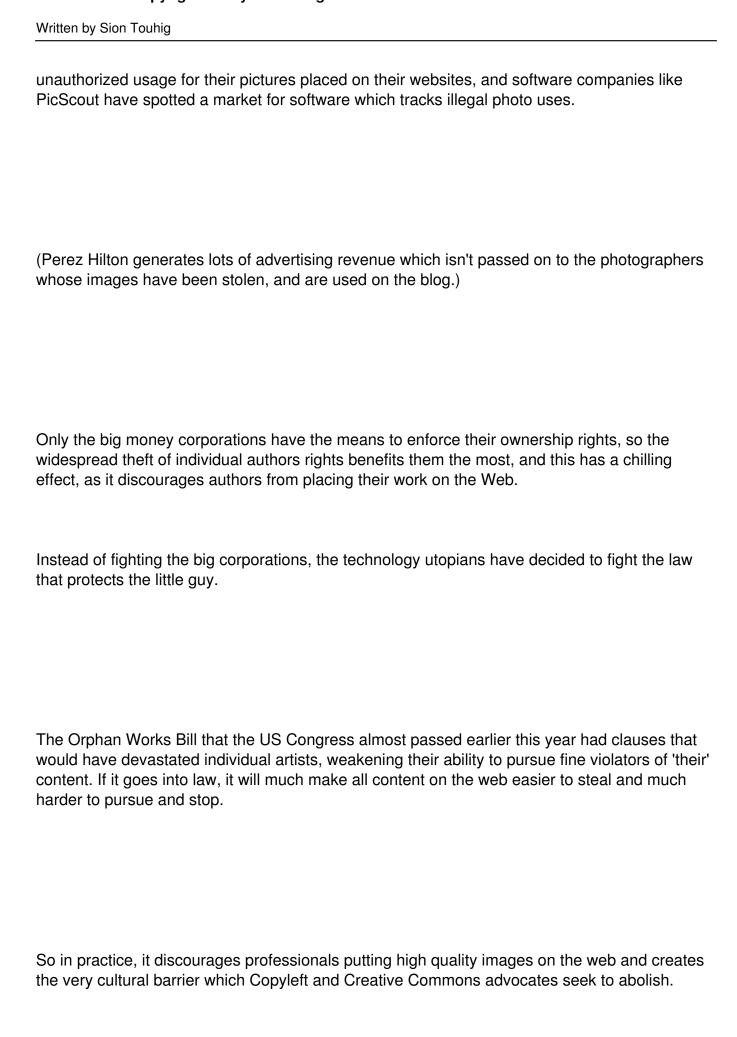
Nearly all those agencies are out of business and now only a few major image corporations like Getty Images, Corbis - owned by Bill Gates - and Jupiter Images dominate the market and produce 'wholly owned' work - the corporation owns the copyright - either from staff or contract photographers. The work varies across the board, from high-end stock photography to news images.

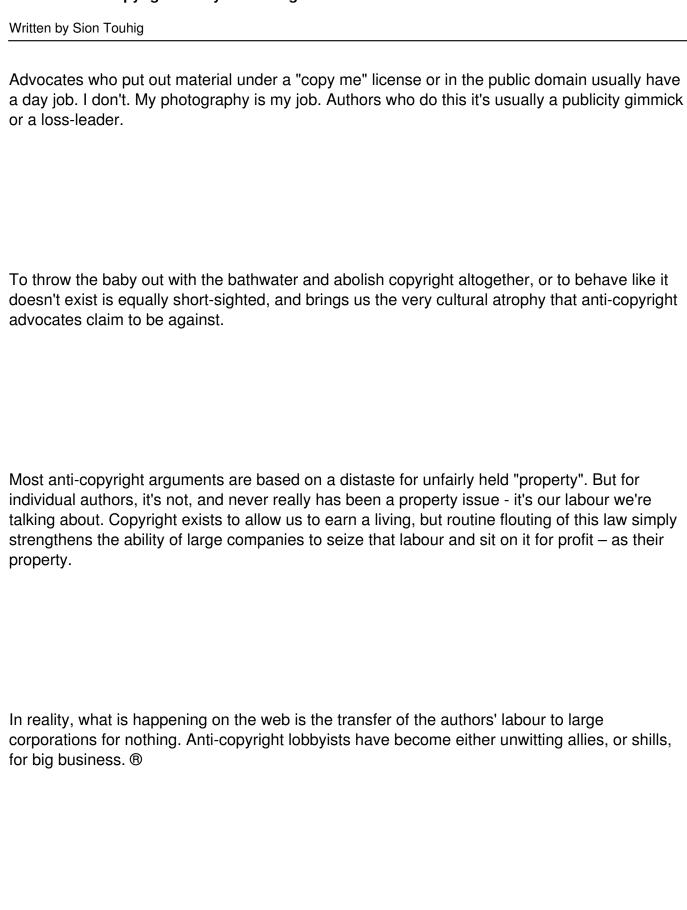
If wholly-owned or virtually copyright-free (more commonly known as Royalty Free) content can be aggregated into a hub, and the economies of scale means the hub drives out smaller competitors, then huge profits be made.

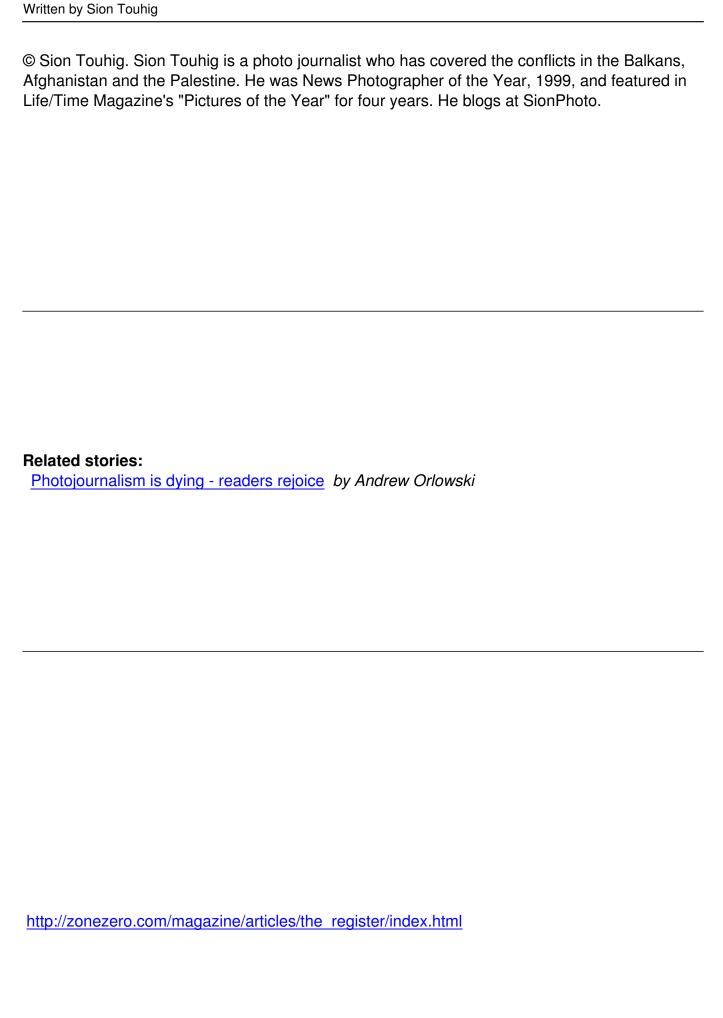
It's a volume and service business now to such an extent that you could argue that the individual image has been rendered almost worthless. People either won't pay for images, or will only pay a small fee - as little as 50 pence a time for images offered by iStockphoto, an image library owned by Getty Images. All this commodified 'off the peg' stock imagery has infected the attitudes of editors commissioning 'live' photography. These commissioning editors now see photographers as widget makers, and the cheaper the widget, the better.

With mass rip-offs on the Web and the unit value of images crashing, photographers can no longer make a living independently from their work, and so are driven towards working for these corporations to earn a living. As digital content becomes more commodified, the more certain it is that only big business can profit from it, thanks to their economies of scale. And to put the final nail in the coffin, along comes "citizens journalism".









Written by Sion Touhig