



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.

I already hear you telling me to stop crying into my beer as the world doesn't owe me a living, and that expanding imagery on the Web has democratised the medium. I'd partially agree with both arguments, as in my work of newspaper and magazine photojournalism you're only as good as your last picture, and photojournalism in recent years has become infected with an unhealthy sense of elitism and entitlement which could do with a good kick up the arse.

So what's the problem? Well, lets look at one trend which would appear to suggest more "democracy" in the media - but actually doesn't - and that's 'User Contributed Content', or 'Citizen Journalism'.

The mainstream media has propagandized hard for Citizen Journalism ever since the mobile phone images of the July 7th London bombings, but sadly, this enthusiasm has little to do with journalism or democratising the media.

User Contributed Content should be more accurately termed 'Audience Stolen Content', because media groups rarely pay for Citizen Journalism images and more often than not, either claim the copyright or an all-encompassing license from contributors, when they send their pictures in. That's a copyright grab in all but name.

Only a fraction of the savings or additional income derived from publishing and syndicating user-contributed images is then actually reinvested in journalism. Most of it simply helps pay the media company's shareholder dividend. Massive newspaper job losses and wage cuts have cut a swathe through newsrooms this year and the slack is often taken up by stolen content, stolen from their own readers.

So much for media "democracy". Some newspapers and magazines are enthusiastically accepting such "content", simply because it's cheap or free, and the quality of the content largely reflects that.

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.

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

increase the quality of public knowledge of events, or the overall 'creative commons' escapes me at present, because despite the ongoing commodification of images, not all images are equal.

You won't see any mobile phone images from Darfur any time soon for example, and as one contributor put it, to a recent Center of Citizen Media weblog entry predicting the 'Decline of the Professional Photojournalist':

"9/11 generated a tremendous amount of citizen content, but it is very obvious to me that professionals ruled that event without question. Citizens in general do not have the stomach, the dedication or the brains to stick with it"

True 'citizen journalists' are people like Iraqi news journalists working where western photographers dare not go, to document the destruction of their homeland. Despite putting themselves and their families in peril 24 hours a day, most if not all of them earn a pittance and many relinquish their copyright on images and stories which make the front pages of the worlds newspapers. Just this year alone, 32 have died.

Baghdad has a mobile phone network, but mobile phone image gathering is virtually unknown (unless it's execution footage), as it would be tantamount to a death sentence for most residents. Instead, another form of journalism keeps us passively 'informed' from only one perspective - embedding.

How the Anti-©opyright Lobby Makes Big Business Richer

Written by Sion Touhig

In November 2001, I photographed a protracted gun battle in Kunduz, Afghanistan alongside a notable French war photographer. After transmitting his images for the day, he received an email from his photo-agency, telling him that financial support to cover stories would no longer be provided, and his relationship with them was being 'restructured', because it had been acquired by a corporation.

A report last year in the New York Review of Books pointed out that weakening investigative journalism has far more profound implications for democracy.

OK, never mind the citizens, what about me? Well, I, and people like me are being robbed too.

Probably by you.

Copyright? It's already dead

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".

Share cropping revisited

Amateurism isn't intrinsically harmful, but it's now a factor in penalizing and impoverishing creatives who choose to pursue authorship as their sole, full time, economic function. Instead, we're expected to work for charity.

"Crowdsourcing" is the latest buzzword, but under our present economic system its simply globalisation in practice - being the same force which drove 19th Century artisans into factories to sell their labour power to the factory boss. In this case, the lowest cost producer – the amateur photographer throwing their images onto the Web, to be 'content mined' - is also the consumer. The amateur will buy a newspaper or magazine simply for the thrill of being in print. It's the same model that mine owners used when they paid their workers in 'company money'.

So the upshot is, a copyright-free environment has simply enriched large businesses at the direct expense of individual authors. But shouldn't the little guy enjoy the same protection of copyright law that the big corporations do?

We can't afford to. Suing for multiple copyright theft is simply not feasible for individuals. There have been some signs of collective policing. For example, photo agencies in the US recently ganging up to sue the celebrity blogger 'Perez Hilton' for hundreds of thousands of dollars for

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unauthorized usage for their pictures placed on their websites, and software companies like PicScout have spotted a market for software which tracks illegal photo uses.

(Perez Hilton generates lots of advertising revenue which isn't passed on to the photographers whose images have been stolen, and are used on the blog.)

Only the big money corporations have the means to enforce their ownership rights, so the widespread theft of individual authors rights benefits them the most, and this has a chilling effect, as it discourages authors from placing their work on the Web.

Instead of fighting the big corporations, the technology utopians have decided to fight the law that protects the little guy.

The Orphan Works Bill that the US Congress almost passed earlier this year had clauses that would have devastated individual artists, weakening their ability to pursue fine violators of 'their' content. If it goes into law, it will much make all content on the web easier to steal and much harder to pursue and stop.

So in practice, it discourages professionals putting high quality images on the web and creates the very cultural barrier which Copyleft and Creative Commons advocates seek to abolish.

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Advocates who put out material under a "copy me" license or in the public domain usually have a day job. I don't. My photography is my job. Authors who do this it's usually a publicity gimmick or a loss-leader.

To throw the baby out with the bathwater and abolish copyright altogether, or to behave like it doesn't exist is equally short-sighted, and brings us the very cultural atrophy that anti-copyright advocates claim to be against.

Most anti-copyright arguments are based on a distaste for unfairly held "property". But for individual authors, it's not, and never really has been a property issue - it's our labour we're talking about. Copyright exists to allow us to earn a living, but routine flouting of this law simply strengthens the ability of large companies to seize that labour and sit on it for profit – as their property.

In reality, what is happening on the web is the transfer of the authors' labour to large corporations for nothing. Anti-copyright lobbyists have become either unwitting allies, or shills, for big business. ®

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