Executive Summary

The recent merger of AOL and the Huffington Post focused public attention on the important role unpaid contributors play in the success of many Internet businesses. Although the Huffington Post is staffed in part by paid editors and curators, much of the content is generated by unpaid, individual bloggers, many of whom are prolific and popular with readers. Consequently, at the time of the merger, some critics wondered whether a portion of the $315 million in proceeds should be shared with HuffPo bloggers. And among the bloggers themselves, heated discussions ensued about compensation and conditions of labor. The Media Industries Project (MIP) of the Carsey-Wolf Center at UC Santa Barbara analyzed more than five hundred press reports and blog postings about the merger, and surveyed a select sample of HuffPo’s most frequent bloggers.

This study provides the first systematic exploration of HuffPo bloggers’ opinions about this merger and the value of their contributions to online journalism. Responses from the survey provide crucial insights regarding the current status and future prospects of creative workers in the online world. MIP’s major findings include:

- Ninety-six percent of those surveyed believe that their postings are equal to or more valuable than contributions made by paid editors and curators at HuffPo.
- Sixty-nine percent believe bloggers should share in the $315 million payday.
- A majority (54%) say HuffPo should develop a flat-rate payment schedule for contributors (based on words per post, for example).
- Most respondents (54%) say HuffPo bloggers should press their case through some form of concerted action, such as online organizing or unionization.
- Despite mixed feelings about the merger, the majority (92%) of our sample indicates it will continue writing for HuffPo after the merger.
- Almost half (46%) of our respondents say they will contribute because they benefit from the exposure their work receives at HuffPo, which in turn generates ancillary opportunities, such as book sales or consulting jobs.
The implications from these findings are:

i) *This study adds nuance to our understanding of what it means to be a “blogger” as opposed to a traditional journalist.* Since the early years of the Internet, most online content has been contributed voluntarily by authors with a passion for their subject areas. This passion evokes stereotypical images of nerds, fans, and flamers. Our survey demonstrates, however, that many of the most read bloggers on HuffPo are former journalists who embrace the Fourth Estate’s mission to represent truthfully and inquire thoughtfully into the pressing news and issues of the day. The majority of bloggers we surveyed takes pride in their work and consider it part of their professional identity. These bloggers contend that even though they believe most online businesses do not generate enough revenue to compensate them adequately, they also believe their work has genuine value and they should be paid as websites become profitable.

ii) *The relationship between online publishers and content creators is complex and evolving.* HuffPo began as a politically motivated endeavor, but has grown into a glitzy and popular destination on the Internet that has attracted the interest of advertisers and investors. As it formalizes its position in the Internet economy, HuffPo’s ownership has been forced to consider its role and responsibility as a major Internet employer. The AOL merger has also transformed the consciousness of HuffPo’s unpaid workforce, bringing to light some of the fundamental contradictions of the “Web 2.0” era and raising issues about online labor and the rights of contributors. As one blogger commented, “The free-for-all is over.”

iii) *Despite their expressed reservations, most of our respondents say they will continue to write for HuffPo, largely because of the promotional opportunities it affords.* Accordingly, employers such as HuffPo might wish to design compensation models that include a range of monetary and promotional payments. Furthermore, it seems important for such employers to develop technologies that can discriminate between regular contributors who can build and generate a following and therefore add substantial value to their sites, and those that only post occasionally.

This report and supplemental materials can be found online at http://carseywolf.ucsb.edu/mip/huffpo

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