HuffPo Bloggers Raise Status and Pay Concerns, according to survey by Carsey-Wolf Center at UC Santa Barbara

(Santa Barbara, CA – May 10, 2011) in the wake of the $315 million sale of the Huffington Post to AOL, a majority of the blog’s main contributors believe their role in HuffPo’s success has been overlooked, according to the results of a study released today by the Carsey-Wolf Center at UC Santa Barbara. Researchers at the Center’s Media Industries Project analyzed more than five hundred press reports and blog postings about the merger, and surveyed sixty of the most frequent blog contributors to the Huffington Post. They found that bloggers are concerned about much more than the AOL payout.

The Carsey-Wolf research was sparked by the stormy debates that broke out in the wake of AOL’s February 7 acquisition of HuffPo. Paid staff were given a share of the sale proceeds, but freelance bloggers were not. “A key feature of the HuffPo brand is the range of perspectives it offers, a diversity that comes largely from its 9,000 unpaid bloggers,” says Professor Michael Curtin, Co-director of Media Industries Project. “Most bloggers contribute only occasionally, but some post regularly and what they contribute is of very high quality. In fact, many of them are experts in their areas. These are the bloggers we surveyed and what we found is that it’s not just about the money, it’s about professional pride, and about their commitment to provide alternative perspectives on important issues.”

At the time of the merger, some critics wondered whether a portion of the $315 million should be shared with HuffPo bloggers, and the bloggers themselves had heated discussions about compensation and conditions of labor. “You could say that the actual value of HuffPo is in part derived from the contributions of its bloggers,” notes Curtin. “How big a part is debatable, but regardless, these folks felt they were left out in the cold. Some want a share of the AOL payday, but we found that many are simply asking HuffPo to develop an equitable pay formula for the future.”

The Carsey-Wolf study, the first systematic exploration of blogger opinions about the merger and the nature of their contributions to online journalism, provides crucial insights on the current status and future prospects of creative workers in the online world.
Other 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 say HuffPo should develop a flat-rate payment schedule for contributors (based on words per post, for example).
- Most respondents 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 indicates it will continue writing for HuffPo after the merger.
- Almost half of 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 study adds to the understanding of what it means to be a “blogger” as opposed to a traditional journalist, and finds that the relationship between online publishers and content creators is complex and evolving. Despite their expressed reservations, most respondents say they will continue to write for HuffPo, largely because of the promotional possibilities it affords.

“This is a classic Web 2.0 labor dispute and our survey results indicate that disputes such as this are likely to increase as companies continue to mine the creativity of the informal digital workforce,” says Curtin. “It seems time for HuffPo to come up with a compensation model that acknowledges the labor of those bloggers that add substantial value to its brand.”

The complete survey report, executive summary of the main findings, and supplemental research is available at http://www.carseywolf.ucsb.edu/mip/huffpo.

The Carsey-Wolf Center at UC Santa Barbara supports research, teaching, and public programming about media. The Media Industries Project examines the rapid and dramatic changes affecting media industries worldwide.

For further information or comment, contact:
Michael Curtin: 805-403-5226
mcurtin@filmandmedia.ucsb.edu