HuffPo Bloggers Raise Status and Pay Concerns: Responses to the AOL-Huffington Post Merger

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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 flammers. 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.
Introduction

On February 7, 2011 the Huffington Post (HuffPo) made headlines by agreeing to a merger with AOL for $315 million. AOL acquired HuffPo in an ongoing effort to diversify its ensemble of Internet properties. According to Staci D. Kramer of PaidContent.com, HuffPo’s paid journalists, editors, and curators all received part of the profits from the AOL merger, but its unpaid bloggers—nearly 9,000 contributors—were left out in the cold.¹ For some bloggers, surprise quickly turned to outrage as it became clear that they would not receive any portion of the profits. In her exit letter, former HuffPo blogger Molly Secours noted contradictions between Arianna Huffington’s present actions and her admonitions against corporate greed. Secours said HuffPo leadership missed an opportunity to “walk the talk” and “share the wealth.”² A Facebook group known as “Arianna Can You Spare a Dime?” emerged to protest the perceived injustice.³ The Newspaper Guild joined the protest, calling on its 26,000 U.S. media workers to boycott HuffPo.⁴ A month later, labor activist and writer Jonathan Tasini filed a class-action lawsuit against AOL/HuffPo under the legal theory of “unjust enrichment,” claiming that companies cannot financially benefit from the “value” created by uncompensated labor.⁵

The outrage over the merger has renewed debate over the value of blogger contributions and provided an opportunity to explore the experiences of digital laborers and investigate conflicting claims over who creates value in digital environments. It furthermore offers an opportunity to explore the public discourse around what it means to work online. In order to examine these issues we surveyed HuffPo bloggers who post frequently and some would say prolifically. The survey investigates conditions of digital labor as well as the bloggers’ perceptions of their own work in light of the recent HuffPo/AOL merger.

Background Research

In a preliminary study available on the MIP website, we compared newspaper and blog headlines regarding the merger between February 7, 2011 and April 19, 2011. This analysis revealed a range of press and blogosphere coverage, and it gave our research team insights as to how we could further explore and analyze blogger responses to the merger. Figures 1. and 2. below show key words in both newspaper and blogosphere coverage. The clusters identified in the boxes are statistically significant.

Timeline of the Controversy

Feb 7, 2011: Merger Announced
February 10 - Facebook Protest Begins
March 17 - Newspaper Guild Boycott
April 12 - Lawsuit Filed
Central clusters of concepts in newspaper headlines included 1) the new entity AOL-Huffington Post, 2) Arianna Huffington’s role in orchestrating the deal, and 3) negative consequences arising from the merger, including layoffs and lawsuits. In blog coverage, two clusters of concepts included 1) a focus on AOL’s role as purchaser and its reorganization following the merger, and 2) an emphasis on compensation, lawsuit, and the new entity AOL-Huffington Post. Compared to news headlines, the blog headlines placed greater significance on AOL’s role as an employer, and greater emphasis on the recent lawsuit.

In a close reading of news articles and blog posts themselves, we found bloggers were often described in colorful language. Tim Rutten’s op-ed in the Los Angeles Times compared them to “a galley full of slaves” while David Carr of the New York Times called them dupes willing to paint Tom Sawyer’s fence. According to Nate Silver’s FiveThirtyEight blog for NYTimes.com, the “digital feudalism” these articles describe is an unfortunate reality of the digital media business. Carr argues that journalism itself is struggling as reporters are increasingly being laid off from traditional news services and turning toward blogs to gain distribution and readership in the hopes of becoming a sought after commodity. Although many HuffPo bloggers had their eyes on the promotional prospects of their work, others were drawn to the site for political reasons. Some bloggers, such as Douglas Rushkoff, contributed to HuffPo as a way of
participating in a liberal public forum and in hopes of supporting an alternative journalistic endeavor, but Huffington’s decision to merge with AOL made these bloggers question the website’s dedication to progressive political causes. Although we collected data on media and blogosphere characterizations of the merger, we found little about the ways in which bloggers characterized their own contributions to the site. Thus, we set out to discover if and how HuffPo’s $315 million payday caused bloggers to reconsider the value of their work.

**Academic Literature**

Academic research about blogging tends to focus on its similarities to and differences from traditional journalism. Some of this research optimistically describes blogging as a new form of citizen journalism in which traditional biases and institutional filters are erased and news is produced from a wider array of perspectives. Others have expressed concerns that blogging floods society with news and information, eroding journalistic practices, ethics and business models. Compton and Benedetti have shown that blog content often relies on news gathering by traditional media, arguing:

sites such as Huffington Post in the United States or rabble.ca in Canada, are aggregative sites that provide opinion, but little, if any, original reporting. And more complicating, the very existence of these sites is, to some extent, predicated upon mainstream media which provides the news reports upon which the opinions are based, and, in some cases, pay for the commentary and opinion columns that are then repurposed and republished on these sites without fees. This, along with the unpaid work of contributors eager for exposure, constitutes, we would argue, an unsustainable model.

The authors’ argument reflects the tendency of the academic community to separate blogging from journalism by claiming that journalism is a professional activity and blogging an amateur practice. This research also implies professional journalism produces content worthy of payment while amateur bloggers receive compensation for their contributions in other ways. Huang, Lin, and Chang (2007) describe five personal reasons that motivate bloggers to contribute content to websites (self-expression, life documenting, commenting, community forum participation and information seeking). Interestingly, financial gain is not one of the motivations the researchers considered. Until recently, blogs have not generally proven to be financially profitable which may explain the focus on personal gratification within the academic literature. The status of blogs has begun to change as bloggers are now issued credentials to press events and
their work is incorporated into mainstream online newspapers. The academic literature
does not yet account for this shift in status, however. The HuffPo payday shows that
blogging is financially valuable which in turn could change both public and marketplace
perceptions of it.

Method

Instrument
Our survey included 26 questions designed to explore how the $315 million payday
affected the HuffPo blogging community. These questions ranged from demographic
information about blogging activity to attitudes toward the HuffPo merger. A complete
copy of the survey is attached as an appendix to this report.

Participants
Our survey sample was comprised of frequent HuffPo bloggers. At the time that we
assessed which participants should be included, HuffPo listed its most popular bloggers
(top 10) based on most e-mailed posts among readers and most reader comments for a
particular week as well as for all time. Significantly, the site does not rank bloggers
based on frequency of posts, but does have an alphabetical index of its bloggers
(www.huffingtonpost.com/theblog/index). We used Xenu (http://home.snafu.de/tilman/
xenulink.html), a free link-checking software program, to index the site.

Based on our indexing of the site, we identified 60 bloggers who had the most post/
links. Once these bloggers were identified, we searched for their public e-mail
addresses, and sent a message inviting them to take the survey. Only one of the
bloggers we identified was previously known to the research team. Of the 61 who were
invited, 26 completed the survey, and 1 partially completed the survey, for a 44%
response rate. The survey opened on March 21, 2011 and closed on April 15, 2011.

Results

Description of Sample

Sex and age. Of the 61 bloggers we reached out to, 44 were male and 17 were
female. Our respondents included 17 men and 9 women, and ranged in age from 26 to
69 years (mean = 49.42; standard deviation = 12.33 years; median = 52).

Education. The level of education of participants included those who have
attained their bachelor’s degree (n=16), a master’s or professional degree (n=6), and a
doctoral degree (n=4).
Prior journalism experience. Half of the participants reported working previously for a traditional journalism outlet (n=13) prior to working for HuffPo. The majority of those with journalism experience prior to HuffPo have continued to work as journalists for a variety of outlets (n=10).

Blogging experience. More than half of the sample (n=14) reported blogging experience of more than four years (n=14), followed by 2-3 years (n=6), 3-4 years (n=4), and 1-2 years (n=2).

Huffington Post tenure. As for their tenure with HuffPo, most bloggers reported writing 2-3 years (n=8), followed by 1-2 years (n=7), 4 or more years (n=5), 3-4 years (n=4), and 7-12 months (n=2).

Blog topics. The bloggers indicated the topic they wrote about most often, selecting from a list that included entertainment (n=7), politics (n=5), other (n=4), religion (n=2), technology (n=2), business (n=1), education (n=1), sports (n=1), and travel (n=1).

Paid to blog. Half of the sample (n=13) indicated they had been paid by other companies at various times to blog. Six of those respondents had a traditional journalism background.

The survey concentrated on four areas of inquiry:

1. The Value of Blog Contributions
2. The Experience of Contributing to HuffPo
3. The Importance of Branding
4. The Effects of the Merger

The Value of Blog Contributions

We asked the bloggers to reflect on their reasons for blogging and to compare the value of their contributions to the other work that goes into creating the HuffPo website. We intended for these questions to demonstrate the personal motivations for blogging and the perceived value of this content. Like previous reporting on blogger motivations, we found that a significant portion of HuffPo bloggers are drawn to blogging by a desire to comment on current events (n=7), to inform (n=4), to influence debate (n=3) and to express themselves (n=2). We also found a portion of bloggers viewed contributing to HuffPo as a stepping-stone to other paid opportunities (n=5).
The majority of bloggers felt that the content they produced provided substantial value to HuffPo. We asked them to compare the value of their contributions to the work of the paid editors/curators of the website: 25 of 26 claimed their posts were of equal or greater value. This finding highlights what might be a fundamental disconnect between the way bloggers value their content and the way Internet business leaders do. For HuffPo to earn advertising revenue its content must generate web traffic. According to Claire Cain Miller of the New York Times, the financial success of HuffPo is due largely to search engine optimization (SEO) tactics. The editors and curators of HuffPo drive online audiences to the website’s content by using often-searched phrases and keywords in HuffPo headlines and opening paragraphs. These tactics capitalize on search engine algorithms making content that appears on HuffPo more likely to appear higher-up on pages of search results, driving audiences to the Huffington Post. Since HuffPo executives compensate editors and curators but not their bloggers, it suggests that they value those who manage the SEO over those who create content. In contrast, we found that bloggers share a journalistic ethic that values efforts to shape public debate as much as SEO tactics. The HuffPo brand tries to embrace both of these perspectives, but its paid workforce is comprised largely of those that focus on the latter.

If you were to compare the value added by bloggers and by Huffington Post curators/editors, would you say:

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<tr>
<th>Contributions are EQUAL</th>
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<tr>
<td>Contributions are GREATER</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributions are LESS</td>
<td>1</td>
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The Experience of Contributing to HuffPo

We asked bloggers to describe their experience contributing to HuffPo, and to compare it to other blogging and journalistic work they have done. The majority of the respondents (n=11) claimed that HuffPo was comparable to other uncompensated blogging. Seven respondents felt HuffPo was a worse environment than other blogging websites while only two felt their experience with HuffPo was better than other websites. One respondent who said blogging at HuffPo was better noted the HuffPo interface was better than other sites but the overall experience has declined. Bloggers complained about impersonal and inconsistent interactions with editors, citing this as their main frustration. Bloggers also cited favoritism and censorship as negative aspects of working with HuffPo. One blogger described their experience as follows:
At HuffPo, you are a [cog in a] wheel, no matter how good your stuff is. Only celebs get preference. Google Mayhill Fowler to read how she thinks she was treated by Ms. Huffington.

Another blogger put it this way:

The blogs no longer compete for notice. It used to be that a blogger who got up, got dressed, and did actual deeds of journalism could expect to at least post at 7 a.m. on the East Coast and get at least a chance at grabbing attention in ‘the sphere.’ But look who gets to post whenever and whatever he wants, and stay on the front page for two days with just 18 comments: Andrew Breitbart. I actually did get web traffic from posting at HuffPo, but not anymore. It's the HuffPoof.

Despite the complaints, the majority of bloggers describe working for HuffPo as an important channel for reaching readers. We asked the bloggers about the value of Internet distribution and found that 12 agreed that distribution was an important aspect of blogging for HuffPo, 8 disagreed, and 6 remained neutral.

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<th>In the last 12 months, Internet distribution has benefited me:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Agree or strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree or strongly disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
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</table>

Those who disagreed explained that digital exposure has not yet led to other financial opportunities. One wrote:

Regardless of how widely the content I’ve created has been distributed (and in the case of Huffington Post, the distribution has been extensive), I have never been paid for my contributions [by HuffPo or others].

Those who believed they benefited from Internet distribution pointed to other jobs and promotional benefits their contributions brought them.

I have constructed my business model to translate the currencies of awareness and fame directly into wealth. Larger audiences equal greater wealth.

Another respondent shared this belief in the entrepreneurial possibilities of blogging:
First of all, I quit posting at HuffPo and did piecework. I did fundraising. I monetized. Now I have paid gigs and people who pass my name [around] for paid gigs. My hits are in demand; Arianna can share armpit-cooties with Newt Gingrich. She doesn't need my hits, comments, or conversation. I haven't posted in...nine months? I've just about stopped commenting [too].

In general, bloggers described contributing to HuffPo as an unpleasant experience but an effective outlet for reaching a wide audience and promoting their own personal brand.

**The Importance of Branding**

Given the reality that most blogging is unpaid we asked the participants about the importance of branding to their blogging experience. Developing a personal brand is one of the ways uncompensated blogging can be turned into financial gain. We asked the participants to describe their feelings about their personal brand, the HuffPo brand, and whether or not they felt the HuffPo’s brand had changed in any way following the merger with AOL. We found that bloggers were typically concerned with the effect HuffPo’s brand could have on their own reputation. The respondents were split 10-16 between those who they felt that HuffPo’s brand had changed after merger and those who did not.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Does the Huffington Post political brand matter to you?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>7</td>
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</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Do you feel your personal brand is affected by your affiliate with sites like the Huffington Post?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Those who claimed they would stop blogging for HuffPo also believed the brand of the website had changed (n=2). During the survey period, a few survey respondents contacted MIP to elaborate on their survey responses. These respondents explained that the brand change was a major problem for them and part of the reason they would be leaving the website. They specifically cited the changing political direction and editorial policies of HuffPo. For example they objected to featured articles by conservative writer Andrew Breitbart appearing on the front page of HuffPo and remaining on the front page despite little interest from readers (as gauged by the few published comments to the post). In the past, HuffPo editorial policy would feature articles on the front page that garnered the greatest audience interest. Though two surveyed bloggers found this change in policy and political brand to be worthy of cutting ties with Huffpo, we do not mean to overstate the importance of branding to retention. A number of bloggers (n=8) believed HuffPo’s brand had changed but indicated that they would continue to contribute to the website. We believe that these bloggers valued HuffPo’s distribution platform and were less concerned about the site’s brand identity. Still, whether or not they have decided to leave HuffPo, the surveyed bloggers appear cognizant of branding and do consider it a factor when deciding to contribute to a website.

### The Effects of the Merger

The majority (18 of 26) of bloggers surveyed argued that they should receive part of the merger windfall. The most senior bloggers (those who report contributing to HuffPo for more than 3 years) and newest bloggers (those who report contribution to the HuffPo for less than a year) particularly agreed (9 of 11) that they should receive a share of the profits. Despite feeling they are owed some of the profits, most bloggers indicated the merger had not changed their blogging behavior. The majority (17 of 26) of bloggers claimed they would continue blogging at the same rate as before the merger. These bloggers still see HuffPo as an important platform for distributing their work. Some expressed dissatisfaction with the merger, claiming the editorial process has changed and more of their content is now being rejected. Many expressed outrage that their contributions to the development of the website were being ignored financially. Others

| Do you feel the Huffington Post’s brand has changed since the merger with AOL? |
|-----------------|----------|
| Yes             | 16       |
| No              | 10       |
felt that the merger brought new opportunities and a bigger readership to HuffPo, yielding more benefits. Those that were not outraged explained that they never expected blogging to translate to financial gain. Examples of the range of responses include:

My friend Arianna translated the value of my IP into wealth. I was a willing participant, foolish in the extreme.

More of my articles are being rejected.

By not sharing with its founding contributors part of the very large payout by AOL, HuffPo has indicated that it does not appropriately value some of the content that helped to make it a success in the first place; and to continue posting blogs would only serve to perpetuate that dynamic (as well as be financially foolhardy).

I am looking to be paid for what I write, but HuffPost is the best soapbox out there to get my writing out, and to build my “brand.” It’s kind of a Catch-22 situation.

I still think it benefits me [as a] platform, so I will continue submitting, but will be looking for other new places to write for that do pay as well and hope that HP will eventually find some way to compensate bloggers.

**Do you feel you should receive part of the $315 million AOL used to purchase the Huffington Post?**

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<tr>
<td><strong>Yes</strong></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
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</table>

**Since the announcement of the AOL-Huffington Post merger, would you say you are likely:**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To contribute about the SAME</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To contribute LESS</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To contribute NOT AT ALL</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Our survey asked bloggers their preferences for payment should a payment structure be put in place. They primarily (14 of 26) expressed a desire for a “flat rate” payment structure. We also asked the respondents to choose from a variety of actions for addressing digital labor issues in the future. Their choices included doing nothing, online protest, unionization, labor strikes and other. Most (14 of 26) bloggers chose one of the forms of labor action (unionization, online organizing, withholding contributions). Many (11 of 26) chose the “other” option and used the comment box to describe their feelings about a possible labor movement. Below are examples of the range of responses we received:

*All of the first four! [publicity campaign, organize online, form a union, withhold labor]*

*I don’t know what the best answer is, but I’d consider joining any of these efforts. [publicity campaign, organize online, form a union, withhold labor]*

*Variations of the first four answers all seem appropriate. [publicity campaign, organize online, form a union, withhold labor]*

*Hopefully HuffPo will hear the concerns that are being raised and do something on their own.*

*In this new digital landscape, everyone is having trouble figuring out how to monetize, including the NYTimes. Not all “bloggers” are created equal. What is a blogger? The free-for-all is over. It’s time to figure out how to compensate people who are filling a need.*
No blogger is asked to contribute a single item to Huffington Post. If it’s not to their advantage, they shouldn’t do so. If Huffington Post wants and needs original content, it will start paying for it. This has nothing to do with the thousands of bloggers who are free to post something if they want which may or may not get highlighted. They’re being silly but few people realize this and I waste considerable time and energy explaining how HuffPo began and why I’m not a fool for contributing to it for free and no, there is no check from Arianna in the mail for me.

Which of the following would you consider to be the most fair form of compensation for your contributions?

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<th>Choice</th>
<th>Count</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flat rate</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salary</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web traffic</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What do you think is the best way for bloggers to address the issue of compensation for digital labor?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bloggers should organize online</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bloggers should unionize</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bloggers should withhold their labor</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bloggers should do nothing</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

Our survey reveals several ways the AOL/HuffPo merger has caused bloggers to re-evaluate their labor. Specifically, we identified four ways bloggers are defining the value of blogging: 1) bloggers believe that their contributions entitle them to payment when significant profits are earned, 2) bloggers believe their contributions are as valuable as the work of paid HuffPo editors, 3) bloggers recognize there is value in contributing to a
widely read website, and 4) bloggers believe HuffPo’s brand contributes to the value of their work.

**Definition 1: Bloggers believe that their contributions entitle them to payment when significant profits are earned. They propose a flat fee payment scheme and some form of labor organization.**

After reading the press coverage of the HuffPo/AOL merger it was not surprising to find that the bloggers we surveyed felt they deserved a portion of the merger profits regardless of the original terms of their agreement to write for HuffPo. More interesting was the opinion of the bloggers about how labor and compensation practices should change. The majority of respondents said a flat fee would be the fairest form of compensation for their contributions, with each blog post earning the author a predetermined standard payment. Surveyed bloggers also favored some kind of concerted action that would increase their bargaining power with websites that earn significant revenues, such as HuffPo. However, respondents had mixed opinions on the best way to organize a collective action. These results, the recent lawsuit, and calls for a HuffPo boycott demonstrate that bloggers are reassessing the monetary value of their content. It remains to be seen whether and how this unrest will translate into action.

**Definition 2: Bloggers believe their contributions are as valuable as the work of paid HuffPo editors**

Our survey demonstrated that the majority of our sample of HuffPo bloggers felt their contributions to the site were as valuable as the work of the editors and website curators who received a portion of the $315 million payday. According to Nate Silver, unpaid bloggers generate fewer comments and page views than paid journalists or content that is aggregated from other news sites, and therefore he contends that bloggers are less financially valuable.\(^\text{15}\) Silver measures value through page views and derives his conclusions from an analysis of the “Politics” section of HuffPo. As previously discussed, search engine optimization techniques drive traffic to the website and HuffPo pays those that are assigned to generate this traffic. The emphasis on bringing audiences to the website suggests that HuffPo values its ability to capture audiences over its ability to inform and shape public debate. HuffPo political reporter Jason Linkins has argued that “the most important stuff” on the site is created by the paid journalists who are assigned stories and are expected to contribute on a regular basis.\(^\text{16}\)

The paid journalists certainly produce content that helps inform public debate but the unpaid bloggers provide HuffPo with a diversity of perspectives and in-depth analysis of niche content on subjects such as health, education, religion, and travel. These
bloggers, particularly those we surveyed, contribute regularly. The depth of commentary provided by unpaid bloggers is one of the factors that makes HuffPo more than just a content aggregation site or an ordinary news outlet. Most of the surveyed bloggers that provide this depth writing indicated that they were motivated to contribute by a desire to participate in the national conversation and not by financial gain. HuffPo considers access to their website to be the appropriate compensation for these bloggers and does not yet financially recognize the value this content has for the website. Yet this content is often touted as a distinctive part of the HuffPo brand and therefore management could find itself susceptible to organized pressure from disgruntled bloggers.

**Definition 3)** Bloggers recognize there is value in contributing to a widely read website.

Bloggers want their contributions recognized as valuable content but they also understand that access to HuffPo’s audience has its own value. Several of those surveyed indicated they had benefited from blogging for HuffPo. Even those who feel they have struggled to translate their exposure on HuffPo into financial opportunities are not planning to end their association with the website. HuffPo executives claim that bloggers are compensated via access to this distribution channel, but to many bloggers that is not enough. They want financial remuneration as well. The disagreement over the value of distribution is a key factor in the current dispute. For most blogs, the only possible compensation for blogging is distribution and promotion, because websites rarely provide substantial financial returns. Yet as websites start generating significant revenue, bloggers seem likely to reevaluate the arrangement.

**Definition 4): Bloggers believe branding contributes to the value of their work**

Like distribution, bloggers benefit from association with the brand of a website and have typically accepted this cachet as a form of payment for their contributions (Internet distribution being another). The majority of surveyed bloggers indicated that branding—both their own brand and the brand of the website they contribute to—is an important consideration for them when deciding to participate on a website. Those bloggers that claimed they were leaving HuffPo stated that the brand of the website had changed even though most respondents felt the HuffPo brand had maintained its integrity following the merger. If HuffPo’s brand were to change significantly as a part of AOL, it would be interesting to see if more bloggers leave the site or begin to demand additional compensation. Brands, like distribution networks, are non-monetary forms of compensation, but the value can change significantly at the time of a merger, acquisition, or reorganization.
Conclusion

The results of our survey suggest that the HuffPo merger provides an opportunity to re-evaluate the social and commercial value of blogging. In part, the future value of blogs on commercial websites will be determined by litigation, labor actions, and by the changing structure and practices of the Huffington Post. We also believe non-monetary issues such as the value of the Fourth Estate, the value of distribution, and the value of branding are likely to become important aspects of future debates about blogger compensation models. As for payment, it seems likely that companies such as HuffPo will be pressed to develop formulas for tracking and assessing contributions. Such formulas might be based on a combination of total page views and “quality” responses by readers: If a blogger’s posting generates traffic and lengthy discussion, it could trigger a payout. Such a system is viable given the technologies that already exist. Google, for example, has developed formulas for compensating niche content creators and one imagines that similar technologies could be applied to sites such as HuffPo. We do not expect such measures to be implemented any time soon, but based on our survey results we believe that bloggers will continue to press their case for remuneration and that management will need to take these claims seriously if they are to maintain and further cultivate the network of bloggers that comprises a distinctive part of the HuffPo brand.
Notes


9 Carr


15 Silver


17 Rovzar
Survey

This survey is part of a study about digital labor and user-generated content. It should take between 15 and 20 minutes to complete. Data collected from this study and used for research purposes will be anonymous, and will not be identifiable by individual names.

We appreciate your time, and will share with you the outcomes of this research upon completion.

Please feel free to contact Joshua Green, MIP's Project Manager (joshgreeen@carseywolf.ucsb.edu / 805-893-3107) if you have any queries about this research.

1. Please enter your sex
   - Male
   - Female

2. Please enter your age

3. What is your highest level of education attained?
   - High school
   - College/university
   - Masters/professional degree
   - Doctorate

4. Prior to writing for the Huffington Post, did you work for a traditional media outlet?
   - Yes
   - No

5. Are you still working for a traditional media outlet?
   - Yes
   - No

6. How long have you been blogging?
   - 1-6 months
   - 7-12 months
   - 1-2 years
   - 2-3 years
7. How long have you been blogging for the Huffington Post?
   - 1-6 months
   - 7-12 months
   - 1-2 years
   - 2-3 years
   - 3-4 years
   - More than 4 years

8. Which of the following topics do you write about most often for the Huffington Post?
   - Business
   - Entertainment
   - Education
   - Food
   - Health
   - Media
   - Politics
   - Sports
   - Religion
   - Technology
   - Travel
   - Other (please specify)

9. Which of the following best describes why you blog?
   - To express my thoughts and feelings
   - To provide information
   - To provide commentary
   - To entertain others
   - To influence others to take action
   - To gain other paid opportunities [e.g. consulting or publishing] Other (please specify)

10. Have you ever been paid to blog?
    - Yes
    - No
11. Which of the following options would you consider to be the most fair form of compensation for your contributions?
   - Flat rate [e.g. per post, or per word]
   - Web traffic [e.g. page views, emails, comments, fans, links]
   - Salary
   - Other (please specify)

12. If you were to compare the value added by bloggers and by Huffington Post curators/editors, would you say:
   - My contributions are EQUAL in value to the contributions of paid editors
   - My contributions are MORE valuable than the contributions of paid editors
   - My contributions are LESS valuable than the contributions of paid editors

13. How would you compare the conditions at the Huffington Post to other sites you have blogged for
   - The conditions at the Huffington Post are BETTER compared to other places I've blogged
   - The conditions at the Huffington Post are EQUAL compared to other places I've blogged
   - The conditions at the Huffington Post are WORSE compared to other places I've blogged
   - I've not blogged anywhere else

14. You indicated that the conditions at the Huffington Post are better than conditions at other places you've contributed (please say a little more about how and why)

15. You indicated that the conditions at the Huffington Post are worse than conditions at other places you've contributed (please say a little more about how and why)

16. INDICATE THE EXTENT TO WHICH YOU AGREE WITH THE STATEMENT: In the last 12 months, Internet distribution has helped me financially
   - Strongly Agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree
17. You indicated that Internet distribution has helped you financially (please say a little more about why)

18. You indicated that Internet distribution has not helped you financially (please say a little more about why not)

19. Do you feel you should receive part of the $315 million AOL used to purchase the Huffington Post?
   - Yes
   - No

20. Since the announcement of the AOL-Huffington Post merger, would you say you are likely
   - To contribute more frequently
   - To contribute about the same
   - To contribute less
   - To not contribute at all

21. You said you would contribute even more or about the same (please say a little more about why)

22. You said you would contribute even less or not at all (please say a little more about why)

23. Does The Huffington Post’s political brand matter to you?
   - Yes
   - No

24. Do you feel that the Huffington Post’s brand has changed since the merger with AOL?
   - Yes
   - No

25. Do you feel your personal brand is affected by affiliation with distribution outlets like Huffington Post?
   - Yes
   - No
26. Some have raised concerns about the labor arrangement bloggers have with The Huffington Post. In your opinion, what do you think is the best way for bloggers to address the issue of compensation for digital labor?

- Bloggers should launch a publicity campaign
- Bloggers should organize online
- Bloggers should form a union
- Bloggers should withhold their labor
- Bloggers should do nothing
- Other (please specify)
-