



The unconscious agenda for those “deeply confused” by New Media.

WRITTEN BY **Paulina Borsook**

**F**rom Euripides to Erich Maria Remarque, Sister Mary Corita to Cindy Sheehan, it's been pointed out that war is bad. At a much higher level of abstraction, and with dire consequences only to livelihood and not to life and limb, it's also worth pointing out how bad a different kind of war, a virtual war, is.

Like many wars, this war is one of attrition and has its roots in economics, the overthrow of established order, and the clash of cultures. A historian examining the roots of conflict for this Internet war would see that the Internet in most cases does not provide markets for creators; operates too often as a great leveler; and, without malice or in most cases even intent, is as destructive to the creative class as the 100 Years War was to the farmers and merchants of Normandy and Brittany.

It's not like this unhappy state of affairs is anything new. More than 10 years ago, I attended a fancy schmancy, invite-only conference on the topic of art, intellectual property, and the Internet at USC's Annenberg School. There, among other folks, I met MacArthur-winning photojournalist Susan Meiselas. It was perversely gratifying that someone as accomplished and well-situated in the culture production biz had many of the same gripes and anxieties and depression about where the culture and media environment were going: the fears about the loss of the idea of authorship, the endless reproduction without attribution or compensation, the rise of the cult of the amateur.

Although neither she nor I could have anticipated the specifics of Flickr, I suspect its existence might line up with her mid-1990s concerns about the end of days for photojournalists. Most people are capable of observing by inspection the contrast between two different kinds of photographs taken during the great Northern California summer firestorm of 2008. One kind of photograph was taken on cellphones and by homebodies in Big Sur and Santa Barbara; the other kind was taken by Associated Press and *Los Angeles Times* staffers. Yet it's increasingly in doubt if most people will continue to pay for the difference between the two.

The culturally supported loss of the ability to much mark the difference between the shot taken by the Magnum photographer and the cellphone snap

taken by the Twitter mom is an example of what I call the Deep Confusion. Those overcome with Deep Confusion possess sense-organs that have become sadly vestigial, and the afflicted often make a virtue out of a disability. Egalitarians all, they see no problem with the loss of the ability to distinguish between something created with formal rigor to something, well, not like that.

### **The Deep Confusion**

Stupid me: I remember back in 1995 when a geek who had liked my various efforts in *Wired* handed me a 500-page printout of his entire annual diary (what he + his gf had for dinner; what he thought of a movie; etc. etc.) and asked me to get *Wired* to publish it. I was stunned that he couldn't tell the difference between the kind of work I had been doing and his journal. Little did I understand that what I was seeing was the coming of the Deep Confusion.

I have continued to run into the Deep Confusion for years, where someone in its grip cannot *not* differentiate among the posting online of her aunt Fanny's recipe for shortbread, the writing of genius food writers like MFK Fisher or Margaret Visser on shortbread, what the divine nature-and-science writer Susan McCarthy might have to say on the health benefits (or lack thereof) of butter, and what our boy M. Proust thought about madeleines.

Content is so *not* king. And to extend the shortbread metaphor even further, Web content is all about “Miley's shortbread addiction” or “Vote for America's best shortbread” or “watch videos here of baby's first shortbread upchuck.” It is not about an exclusive-to-the-Web video dramatization of *Cakes and Ale*.

Part of what might contribute to Deep Confusion is the suspicion many people in high-tech hold about what this art thing is and how much of a con is it. They are uneasy about how or why writing an original screenplay or work of fiction should be given special societal status elevated above fixing a leaky faucet, writing an e-commerce API, or creating an elaborate Ponzi scheme such as a synthetic CDO. Recall that high-tech and its Slashdot culture have largely set the tone for the rest of us on the uses and practices of the Internet.

This suspicion is not always present, of course, and it's a suspicion that is understandable, especially if



you know anything about the art world or have taken a look recently at many of what the *New Yorker* chose as its best short stories 50 years ago. So what exactly makes that piece of writing/art/music so special? Says who? Why should any piece of writing be valorized and paid for when I can participate in an open-mike poetry slam for free? The Burning Man ethos enters in here too. The Bay Area is as much ground zero for Burners as it is for Silicon Valley, and there is huge overlap between the two communities.

But sometimes this suspiciousness veers into hostility. Cult hacker Virgil Griffith figured out a way to discover which organizations edit which Wikipedia entries (useful for exposing political shenanigans and business scandals, for sure), but he also considers *Wuthering Heights* among his “books which make you dumb.” You do the math.

A comment along these lines that enrages me still was made by one of my geek friends during the writers’ strike. I was delighted in general by the writer-generated videos and looked forward to seeing the latest. Yes, some were puerile, but many, many of them were sharp, funny, pointed, moving—just Well Done, as people with craft and talent can do.

After I pointed said geek friend to these videos, he made a remark that went something like, “I don’t see what the big deal is. Society would be better off if they taught high-school English instead.” Given what is felt in high-tech about teaching in general and teaching English in particular, he was saying, “Your talents have no value and you should do the poorly paid societal pooperscooper work that I wouldn’t want to be bothered with—unlike me and my cohort, who deservedly are well-paid.” At best, let’s assume he was insensitive to the difference between the typical writers’ strike video and the typical mashup on YouTube and was thus suffering from a well-developed case of Deep Confusion.

At worst, I’d rather not think about it.

### It’s the Economics, Stupid

Sometimes, when the promise of Way New Kewl Media is discussed, I am reminded of when I lived in Manhattan during the ’80s, a time when architecture and design (and not routers, browsers, and click-throughs) were the rage. Philip Johnson’s twee AT&T building had just gone up and was much discussed as a sign of the future having arrived. (There might be something to be learned in how we regard yesterday’s tomorrows.) Many Bright Young Things were drawn to this domain and some of my friends were among them. I remember being told stories of sparky designers a few years out of architecture school. Equipped with great portfolios, these young men and women would snag interviews at prestige boutique architecture firms. These interviews would go well until, at the end of the interviews, the interlocutors would inquire, “You don’t expect to get paid, do you?”

Even Microsoft’s Thomas C. Rubin, the Evil Empire’s chief counsel for Intellectual Property Strategy, in a talk given at something called the 2008 Leadership in Media Forum at the

Harmonie Club in New York City, admitted to worries about what he called the lack of stewardship in the New Media environment. In other words, as a former newspaper reporter, he is concerned that people in the technology industry just don’t care about creating an environment where creators are compensated. In fact, almost nobody else cares either.

Rubin cited everything from the cut in pay of bloggers for Valleywag (a Silicon Valley industry gossip site, which, coincidentally, recently laid off 60 percent of its staff. What’s that you were saying about New Economic Models?), to the fact that the creator of a 2 million-views YouTube video got paid a big honking \$1,600 for his troubles, to the fact that Radiohead will not be repeating its “pay what you feel like it” Internet download experiment.

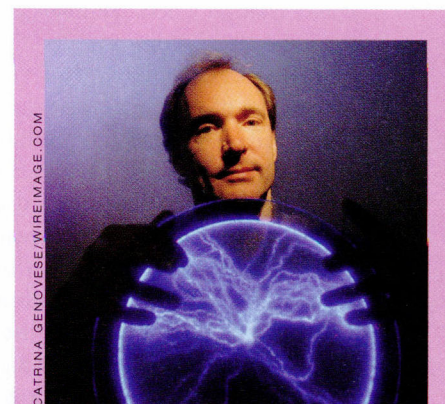
As for YouTube itself, you hear that staffers within Google are beginning to wonder why the company paid fortyhundredzillionmillion dollars for the acquisition when there’s no clear revenue path in sight.

And the Huffington Post, one of the most successful destinations on the Web (where people compete to be published, and no, no contributor gets paid), loses money.

Timothy Egan, writing in the *New York Times*, points out that although newspapers actually have adapted to the Web and actual readership is up—the money (in advertising dollars) hasn’t followed. Google earns a couple hundred million dollars per year as a news aggregator, but newspapers themselves are dying. And people gleefully like to recount how they save money by canceling their subscriptions to newspapers and magazines so that they can read them for free on the Web.

A network of computers, communications gear, and ontologies assembled decades ago for information-sharing among a bunch of sweet smart researchers (and where commercial transactions were expressly forbidden) doesn’t bring with it ways and means to compensate creators. The Internet was never designed to do so and doesn’t to this day. I know. I was involved in some early attempts at the Internet equivalent of HBO. iTunes might be the one major exception, but ask any musician if iTunes has meant that the download-for-free Internet culture has gone away.

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CATRINA GENOVESE/WIREIMAGE.COM

**SIR TIMOTHY JOHN BERNERS-LEE** is credited with creating the World Wide Web in 1989, connecting hypertext with TCP and DNS. He is the author of *Weaving the Web*, on the the past, present, and future of the Web.



Why should any  
piece of writing  
be valorized and  
paid for when I can  
participate in an  
open-mike poetry  
slam for free?

longtime advocate for civil liberties in cyberspace, Godwin is the originator of Godwin's Law, which more or less follows that "as online discussion grows longer, the probability of invoking Nazis or Hitler approaches 1." Godwin, himself a published writer (articles, book), invited me to lunch along with the executive director of the Foundation. It was a convivial, collegial lunch, and my 2000 book [*Cyberselfish*] was proudly displayed on the one bookshelf in the office. Yet (warning: direct homage to Godwin's Law homing in!), I had the weird sensation afterward that this was what lunch at the 1942 Wannsee "Final Solution" Conference might have been like. That is, nice, civilized folks were cheerfully advocating the extermination of a whole class of people—in this

case, people who get paid to write. When I gently brought up the issue of "how are people going to survive in the New Media economy?," I was cheerfully informed, "Well, the new financial models haven't been worked out yet."

Phrasing up there with *mistakes were made*.

### It's the New Economic Models, Stupid

One of the proffered New Economic Models is The Long Tail, famously articulated in a book and magazine article (and now, a blog!) by former *Wired* editor-in-chief Chris Anderson. Its gestalt is one much beloved by technoutopians in general, for it is part of their long-standing romance with the pipes. This technophilic narrative is the one that earlier had storylines where, for example, things like government would change when members of Congress acquired email because copper wiring and fiberoptic cabling ineluctably lead to new works of genius and an enlightened polis. In the Long Tail version of this love story, the thinking is that because of broadband, endless easy reproduction, and frictionless capitalism, artists wouldn't have to deal with the Man and they would in turn flourish in their disintermediated, comfy, and remunerative hobbit-hole niches and all will be well—all because of the technological structures of the Internet.

Former *Wired* executive editor and book author Kevin Kelly has a similar "wouldn't it be pretty to think so" meme, that of the 1,000 True Fans (i.e., on the Internet, not only does no one care if you are a dog, all musicians need to survive is 1,000 True Fans). As is usual in the thinking of this crowd, the old ways are bad and gatekeepers are worse and the on-beyond-zebra wonders of the Internet would mean that everyone would get the audience—and income—she or he deserved.

Lee Gomes, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, described a

fine debunking of the Long Tail in a 2008 study published in the *Harvard Business Review*. Long story short, the Web will not make us all rich and famous; people do seem to prefer tentpoles, blockbusters, and platinum titles and do not look to the Internet for undiscovered indie wonders. The Web made the founders of eBay rich and the subject of Lonely-girl15 momentarily famous, but arbitrage in Pez dispensers and the successful machinations of a starlet to get attention don't map onto new ways for creators to get paid.

Kelly, in addition, remains a longtime proponent of hive mind and collective intelligence (both notions much embraced by high-tech), and his current vision for what is to be viewed on screens, as published in a *New York Times Magazine* feature (funny, isn't it, how these New Media guys want the heft and gravitas of old media working for them), is one where every image, line of text, screenshot, and character is database-searchable and re-hashable by everyone. And it will be great! And it's the future! Maybe.

But it doesn't sound supportive of authorship to me.

People who love these out-with-the-old-in-with-the-new models remind me of the young protagonist in the Graham Greene short story "The Destructors." Set in postwar London, the story depicts, in that chilled grim tone that Greene takes from time to time, the determination with which the young son of an architect carries out the destruction of a Christopher Wren house only partly destroyed by the Blitz. I am all for parricide in its place, but echoing James Agee, what has old-media culture done to the new such that New Media partisans want to do such destruction to the practitioners in the old?

Interestingly, it's usually people who have dayjobs elsewhere, or who make a living by being some sort of Subject Matter Expert (SME), who often fall back on the, "It's a brave new paradigm shift and you just don't get it and the new economic models just haven't developed yet." Even our favorite liberal economist, Nobelist, and columnist, Paul Krugman, holds with this view. Weirdly, there is suggestive evidence that Princeton pays a living wage, and it might even be conjectured that Krugman derives income from consulting and speaking and his *New York Times* gig. From the luxury of his perch (SME; full-time employment with benefits; revenue not strictly dependent on work product-as-content), it's all going to be okay.

For those worried about paid outlets for work created, Krugman's attitude is hard to credit.

### Editing and Face Cream

One of the less obvious yet still unsavory symptoms of the Deep Confusion is the devaluation of editing. Editing makes for better quality—whether it's the choices of an underground FM radio DJ of the '60s, or a VJ at a Brooklyn rave in 2007, the selection of what goes into good anthologies, or footage chosen to create a film. Ask any musician how important the audio engineer is to a recording: This is editing of the high-



est order. There is good reason why most people would indeed prefer to both read books—or have published books—with traditional publishers (even with their ever-growing list of dysfunctions), rather than read books put out by vanity presses or self-publishers. And most writers know how much better their work becomes when subjected to the scrutiny of someone endowed with ear, eye, and *sprachgefühl*.

Yet the importance of editing seems to have been forgotten. The goodness such gatekeepers and refiners bring to the construction of art is never brought up in discussions of how the Web might work for arts and letters. The New Media infrastructure provides even less opportunity for these necessary, talented people to get paid; their special gifts have been even more slighted than those of creators. And the Internet's cult of the amateur says these people should not need to exist.

An odd demonstration of these laments came to me in the guise of one of the catalogs I receive because I am a woman of a certain age. The catalog sells stuff like visualization crystals and self-realization housecoats and self-affirmation hormone-rich face cream. Anyway, said catalog also offers a couple of pages' worth of music CDs (of the empowerment/mellowing/new-age variety). A huge sidebar on the pages listing these CDs said, "If you our customers continue to order CDs, record the music from them, and then send them back for a refund, we can't afford to offer CDs any more. Your engaging in these practices means we don't get paid for our merchandising costs or our editorial search + judgment and the musicians, by extension, aren't getting paid either."

So it's not just the youth of today who don't feel there is much reason to support the acts of editing and creating. It seems just about everyone is making economic and cultural war on the creative class, even if those acts of war are blithely unconscious.

### A Different Kind of Culture War

I cannot even recall how often, back in my microstar days of the '90s, I'd get email from a kid saying, "I liked your article/essay/feature/humor piece/cartoon, so would you please send me everything you have and know on the subject?" I'd reply, "I get paid to research/analyze/synthesize/create. So, no." These young people perceived value in what I had done, but somehow it wasn't valuable enough to be paid for. These email were one of the first signs of a new kind of cultural war, or perhaps, more accurately, a cultural insurrection.

Fast forward to 2008, where I reluctantly accommodated the editor of a blog who asked me to write about a subject I am known for, although the subject is no longer of interest to me.

Both the commissioning editor of the blog and the bloggers who commented on what I had command-performance

written linked back to material from my past. But the work they linked to was work for which I had gotten paid.

The unconscious hypocrisy a la *Fahrenheit 451* is startling: If you don't support a mediasphere where people can get paid for what they create, certain kinds of work just won't get created. Even in the blogosphere there is some recognition that the previously published bought-and-paid-for does matter (one blogger even remarked that XYZ thing I wrote 10 years ago was one of his favorite humor pieces of all time). Yet, it's highly unlikely anything these blogreaders would like as much as XYZ is going to get created online any time soon—XYZ was written for a publication that paid me a fair wage for the effort. By contrast, I can just about guarantee that no one will link back to—or remember—my commissioned guest blog post. In that sense, it was worth just about what I was paid for it.

Which leads to another aspect of this peculiar overthrow of the established cultural order: work that takes time to do isn't what's on in the new media landscape. ADHD-positive, Google-addled brains and groupmind do not support the creation of stuff of lasting value, nor is it particularly supportive of individual creativity.

If veteran radio producers are supposed to shift their focus from the creation of 30-minute segments for a 10-part

series to the creation of 140-character Facebook-enhanced blogposts to be sent to cellphones, what future does this hold out for writers? Is the best hope to become creators of Blackberry photo-novelas?

On a funny Onion-esque website, there's a page of



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utopian headlines (where peace broke out, the Chinese withdrew from Tibet, and the U.S. government signed into law a universal healthcare plan). One of the happy headlines was, "Entire Beatles catalog now avail for free; DRM goes away except in the case of egregious offenders." Although it is true most DRM is the work of the devil, no one seems to want to take on the work of the angels—the task figuring out how creators are going to survive in the New Media environment. Alas, "Writers, artists, journos score on the Internet" isn't going to be a headline anywhere anytime soon, whether or not that headline exists in fancy or in fact. **WB**

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