

# The Debating Group



A Parliamentary forum for Media and Marketing Debate

**“No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money”**

**This quotation from Samuel Johnson was the motion for the Debating Group debate held at the House of Commons on 24 October 2011. The debate was sponsored by the Professional Publishers Association. In the absence of Mike Weatherley MP for Hove & Portslade, it was chaired by David Hanger, Chairman of the Debating Group.**

Proposing the motion **David Hepworth, Editorial Director, Development Hell Ltd**, pointed out that in 1746 Samuel Johnson was paid five hundred guineas for writing the first English dictionary. It took him nine years to finish but he still got there years ahead of the French who had assigned 40 academics to compile their first French dictionary. David Hepworth put it: “One hack working for the money versus 40 men with tenure. It was never going to be a fair contest”.

David Hepworth went on to suggest that this debate begins with Samuel Johnson because he was the first professional writer. Before Johnson, writing was the preserve of those who could afford to subsidise themselves. Since Johnson writers have always made their money in unconventional ways. Dickens performed his work live to make up for the fact that the Americans pirated it. Trollope had his manservant wake him at four every morning so that he could write for a few hours before going off to run the Post Office.

There has never been a time when the economic model of publishing has not been under challenge. It has changed perpetually, but even in the most difficult times nobody has pretended that it simply did not matter whether journalists and editors were paid or not. Until now. David Hepworth did not believe that anyone would argue that writers should not be paid. Their money may be provided by the readers via the cover price or in the case of the free model by the advertisers, but they have to be paid. He argued that it would be wrong to suggest that in the future all writing would be subsidised by highly targeted advertising. The more places there are to advertise, the quicker the price goes down. David Hepworth also questioned the argument ‘information wants to be free’. The same people also argue that people are no longer happy to pay for books, newspapers or magazines. The media have only themselves to blame for this mistaken belief that ‘information should be free’. Over the last fifteen years major media organisations have built a fool’s paradise out of providing their material for free. They have done this in the belief that if they built it the advertisers would come. There aren’t many people who believe this any more and those who do so are foreseeing a future in which only three national newspapers survive.

Since the web became part of our lives it has been the beneficiary of a massive information subsidy paid for by the big newspapers. The news sites provided by those publishers are the only thing that stops the web collapsing. News means writers, paid to do boring jobs as well as exciting ones, dangerous ones as well as cushy ones, anonymous ones as well as high profile ones, to provide tiresome detailed stats as well as airy opinions pieces with their pictures on top.

David Hepworth did not argue that journalists should be any different from any other threatened group of workers. But he did expect people to take into consideration the extent to which they rely on fact, opinion and entertainment which had been produced and edited professionally.

Underneath everything else there is a financial transaction. Where there is money involved both parties take things far more seriously than otherwise. Money introduces a note of rigour into even the fluffiest magazine. If the publication is being purchased, you are not just writing off the top of your head. You are representing a brand.

The argument against paying writers is often subsumed into a wider argument about the future of other so-called creative works e.g. the music business, where people no longer tend to pay for recorded music. But the cost of live music has gone up five-fold to make up for the shortfall. Similarly the cinema: the cheaper DVDs become, the more expensive a night at the cinema. Their models are like balloons. If you squeeze at one end, they swell up at the other. If you keep squeezing they eventually pop.

The blogosphere is a wonderful thing, but it is underpinned by a small number of facts, nearly all of which are provided for it by news organisations with paid employees.

David Hepworth confessed that he blogged himself “But I never confuse it with work”. He suggested that people only read it to supplement the diet of professionally sourced, edited and produced material upon which we all depend, material provided by people who are paid to provide it because people want to read it.

The delusion that things can be free has been built on the back of three things: the economic boom of the '90s which provided people with the money to spend on the not-free products of Silicon Valley, the insane sums of money spent by the media companies in the hope that this would bring them new audiences and revenues and the sudden appearance of a whole new army of content creators who are so desperate to get in the game that they will provide their labour for free.

The boom is over: the media companies have turned off the tap and the third group are getting tired of working for nothing. There is a growing realisation that much of what's given away for free is because it could never command a price.

If we seriously want what the media provide, we had better get used to the fact that advertisers are not going to pay for it, the government is not going to pay for it, a license fee is not going to pay for it. We are going to have to pay for it ourselves.

It may mean that the writers of the future will be paid less than the writers of the past. The important thing is that they are paid something. It is for our benefit as well as theirs.

## **Free press**

Opposing the motion, **Phil Hilton, Editorial Director, *ShortList Media***, looked at the pros and cons of free journalism. He argued that whereas journalists should be a moral centre, there had been a downturn in their public reputation because of paid journalism. His contention was that it was the pressure to sell journalism – the hunger for bigger and bigger pay – that brings out the worst in journalists as a breed. Such journalists are working in the airless, enclosed and driven offices where cash and fear dominate – cultures squeezed tight by commercial interest, an underlying desperation to shift copies to beat the opposition not to entertain, not to inform, but to part the public from their cash.

When a true writer sees injustice, sees tragedy, sees hypocrisy, sees a bad play or hears a poorly conceived piece of music, he will feel the emotional drive that has created so many fine pieces over the years – he feels the need to show off. “Never has there been a more shallow and attention-seeking band of human beings than we writers, we bye-line-seeking, online-comment-hungry, twitter follower, pleasing bunch than a writer. Here I include the flak-jacketed war correspondent along with the restaurant reviewer. We are hunting glory, we crave awards, we want to appear on TV list shows for a nominal fee – we want to be heroes – what we do not want is to be rich”.

“What happens to these people when they are tempted by wealth or threatened by those seeking wealth for themselves?”, asked Phil Hilton. He suggested that they are compromised, they lose touch with the dreams and values they started with; they lose touch with the way ordinary people are thinking and they end up hounding the victims of tragedy to shore up flagging circulation figures. Writers are all bloggers. What do all our leading national newspapers columnists do after a hard day sharing opinions and observations with their readers? They go on Twitter and do it all again for nothing.

Discussing content, Phil Hilton argued that free-to-consumer content is morally and ethically better than paid-for content. He criticised the tabloids and celebrity sector media which invented stories about celebrities and fed on people’s insecurities. In the real life sector, he suggested, journalists take the estate social workers case book and turn the troubled lives of our poorest and most unfortunate citizens into tragedy for the sentimental and Victorian freak shows for the curious. The press prey on people’s insecurities and make them feel bad.

Phil Hilton stressed that he was not contemptuous of magazines. He has an all-consuming passionate love affair with them. At their best they are visually astonishing and able to discuss issues with depth and wit. They took him into the unimaginable world of glamour. But he sees the sunny uplands of the free press which is immune to the pressures of paid journalism. People now want a free press.

The creative scope to play to people’s better instincts is refreshing and real in free media and is saving the habit of reading magazines. They invoke the spirit of the ’60s. Features on Shakespeare, poetry, depression etc have found hundreds of thousands of readers thanks to two free magazines launched at *ShortList* Media. These magazines are not printed and left to rot on the streets of Britain. Sit on the tube on the morning of their distribution and see ordinary men and women reading stimulating varied material free of the destructive carping, faux scandal and naked flesh that dominate so much of the newsstand. Moreover, in the free press facts are checked. The free press is innovative and stimulating and enriching the cultural life of the nation in a way that the bulk of the newsstand has failed to do for many years. The colossal decline of the biggest selling consumer magazines is a permanent historical shift but not the end of these loveable ephemeral collections of words and pictures.

There are those who wish the Internet had never happened, who want to be able to charge people for the privilege of reading ads, who want to be able to raise their cover prices and squeeze their most loyal readers for ever, people who deny reality. Just because a recipe is next to an advertisement for an ingredient, it does not mean it is not good.

### Curators of quality information

Seconding the motion, **Gill Hudson, UK Editor in Chief, *Reader’s Digest***, suggested that ‘comment’ is not journalism and in the debate about ‘free’ we were in danger of confusing the two. She was concerned about a number of issues:

- *The quality of journalism.* *Reader’s Digest* had commissioned an investigation into the overuse of prescription drugs. This took weeks of research, lots of checking and there was a huge response to an issue of real social importance. People trust the *Reader’s Digest* – it publishes award-winning health journalism. Gill Hudson asked, “Who are we going to choose to write this? A heavyweight health journalist with a proven track record prepared to spend time fulfilling the brief? Or a rookie blogger, who’d do it for free, looking to build up a portfolio to ‘showcase’ his or her talent? Clearly the former. We entered into a contract with clear deliveries on both sides, held accountable to each other and to our readers. “How come”, she went on, “despite all the ‘free’ listings out there, *Reader’s Digest* remains Britain’s most profitable magazine? Because it is the best. The one the others use to check they’ve got things right. We pay a large team of people to check our listings meticulously and get the best writers to come up with scoops every week. The more crowded and confusing the media market, the more important trusted brands become: they are curators of quality information”. She was not saying that there isn’t any good ‘free’ journalism, but ultimately very little of it can exist without properly funded journalism to underpin it.
- *The independence of journalism.* Gill Hudson looked at the world of blogging. She cited the case of Susie Bubble, one of the UK’s top fashion bloggers. Since she started four years ago, the world is awash with fashion bloggers. Susie Bubble reported that at first people expected blogs to be written

for the love of it and felt cheated when marketing started. But reality had to kick in. “I couldn’t go on doing it for free without earning anything from it”. The issue for those who want to be professional, credible bloggers is how to make it pay while retaining the integrity of the individual and an independent voice. At a recent conference of International Fashion Bloggers, the discussion was not who was wearing what, but how to make blogging pay. The organiser said “You could make a living if you sell four sponsored t-shirts a day. I don’t know if it’s selling out – we’re just trying to reach a sustainable business model”. Gill Hudson commented that a lot of people would call that kind of journalism PR.

At particular risk if you don’t pay anything is investigative/news reporting. A recent OECD report stated that despite all the new revenue models being looked at, “no business and/or revenue-sharing models have been found to finance in-depth independent news production. Which is why this raises questions about the supply of high-quality journalism in the longer term”.

- *The diversity of journalism.* It’s all very well writing for free about films, or fashion or gadgets or lipsticks. At least you can have a bit of fun while earning nothing. But who’s going to sit in court for free, all day, every day, in the hope that a good story comes up? What about the writer currently working on another investigation for *Reader’s Digest*? This is taking forever and might not in the end deliver. Gill Hudson asked, “If I’m not prepared to invest in some hunches and some leads, how can I uncover really good important stories? And for all those who think an ad-funded model is the answer, can I ask what sponsor is going to fund a no-show? Or who was going to hang around Tripoli, under sniper fire, and file me the brilliant piece we recently ran about the horrors of daily life in Libya, for nothing? Who’d sponsor that?”.
- *The diversity of journalists themselves.* Gill Hudson discussed the basis on which people blog for the *Huffington Post*. The whole point is that they can ‘showcase’ their work when they might not have previously had a platform. To what end do you want to ‘showcase’ your work? So that eventually someone else ends up paying you. And it did rather stick in the throat of more than a few bloggers when Arianna Huffington recently sold the *Huffington Post* for \$315m to AOL. Not such a brave new world after all, but the same old profit-driven one in disguise. One regular Huffington blogger felt that the *Post* was just taking advantage of its position to capitalise further on the unpaid work of thousands. In April the *Huffington Post* was the target of a multimillion-dollar lawsuit filed on behalf of 9,000 bloggers. Gill Hudson compared this with the scandal of unpaid interns, whereby young people are encouraged to work for nothing for extended periods of time to ‘showcase’ their talents in the hope that eventually they will get paid work. Thus people who are better off, with parental support, can intern at top companies. If we want a press that is genuinely representative of all the voices in this increasingly diverse country, the last thing we need is to send journalism back into the arms of a tiny monied elite whose parents can afford to support their unpaid internships and unpaid writing. If we are to have a *truly* free press, we really do have to pay for it.

## Burning ideas

Seconding the opposition, **Patrick Hayes, Political Commentator, *Spiked***, took the discussion back to first principles, querying why people write. What is the reason for writing in the first place? What Samuel Johnson was implying is that someone who didn’t write for money was being an idiot. But what does this say about someone who would not write, who would refuse to put pen to paper unless they were getting sufficient remuneration for it? Such an attitude implies that their ideas, the content they wish to communicate to an audience are insufficiently important. A journalist who puts away his pen, folds away his laptop, because no one is willing to pay him for his words, evidently has no ideas that are burning enough for them to want to be expressed.

Many of the greatest writers throughout history have written not for pay, but to get their ideas out there. The revolutionary Tom Paine, for example, published his tremendously influential *Common Sense* anonymously and never received a penny from the profits of his work, turning over his share to the cause of the revolution in America.

Patrick Hayes stressed that he was not arguing that there is something inherently problematic about receiving money for writing. *Spiked* doesn't pay its contributors simply because it cannot afford to, not because the organ is purist and idealises impoverished writers living on the breadline. If writing is of sufficient quality he was all in favour of being paid for it. However, he argued that if moneymaking was the primary goal for a journalist, he would urge him to consider another career.

This is an issue lurking amid the discussion about the best financial model of publishing nowadays. In prioritising how to monetise a publication over the content of a publication, magazines can lose their way – there is nothing more likely to turn an audience off than a lack of fresh, original ideas and perspectives on issues. Now, more than ever before, there are opportunities for ideas to surface. The Internet has produced countless millions of writers trying their hand at producing copy. It has been a great democratic force where pretty much anyone with some ideas can launch their own publication online. *Spiked* was one of the pioneers, producing one of the first online-only current affairs and culture publications in the UK in 2000. There are now countless such publications. It allows many perspectives to be put across that wouldn't have been heard before and for these perspectives, if of interest, to be heard and shared with a large audience. This is not the privilege of an elite. Everybody has time to write and put ideas on the Internet. Of course, most of it is of deeply questionable quality and people certainly place a value on trustworthy sites producing high quality content. But now, more than ever, complacency could be the death of a publication.

It is important not to take a reactionary stance. Patrick Hayes suggested that the paywall is an example of this online. The contents of *The Times* are now behind a paywall and many PR people have reconsidered going to them with exclusives. A paywall means that you immediately shut yourself off from the buzzing hive of debate online which is increasingly becoming one of the most important and influential spheres for debate and discussion.

Now is the time for being quickfooted, experimenting with new models of generating revenue – and fundamentally, keeping sight of what the publication stands for.

Patrick Hayes admitted that he provided free copy for the *Huffington Post*. The great benefit he finds as a writer is that it gives you the freedom to experiment – you don't need to pitch articles to an editor. It's up to you to write something that generates interest. You are not writing to satisfy a paymaster, but the audience that the publication attracts. As an organiser of the Young Journalists' Academy, Patrick Hayes knows a lot of aspiring journalists who use the *Huffington Post* and other similar blogs, to build up a portfolio of published articles, get feedback and hone their craft. What the best of these students have in common is that they have something to say. They have a writer's mentality. They have an eye for a story and gain great pleasure in clearly communicating what they see to the public. Are these young people blockheads because they choose to write for free, in order to get their voices heard? Only a blockhead would think so.

Paywalls such as *The Times*, shut people up. Patrick Hayes concluded, "to paraphrase Wittgenstein, whereof one will not speak except for money, thereof one should remain silent".

### **Discussion from the floor**

Contributors made the following points:

For the motion

- The contributor had been a freelance journalist. When he wrote for PR he was paid by the client. When he did research he wanted to be paid. Good journalists are worth paying.
- Payment to journalists does not always ensure independence. You get quality rather than independence. Writing for free does not guarantee independence either, nor does it guarantee quality. Not to be paid encourages economic illiteracy.
- Good journalists are worth their weight in gold. You can get brilliant photo-journalism in places like Libya from amateurs, but if you don't pay someone well you won't get professional quality. The contributor added that he abhorred the trend of media owners who expected interns to work for nothing.
- The contributor cited Chris Anderson, the guru of the free business model, who charged large sums for speaking in public.

## Against the motion

- The contributor believed the motion was unsupportable. The motion was confused about paying people to write and paying for content. People write part-time; they write for passion, for vanity, for fame. Are these people blockheads? Patently not.
- Whilst the contributor was in favour of the motion in respect of journalists, he pointed out that there are lots of creative people outside journalism who write poetry, novels etc without being paid who are clearly not blockheads.
- The contributor quoted Boswell to refute the suggestion that Johnson was only interested in money. He asked only £200 for his Introduction to the Poets. He preferred to align himself to writers who wrote to stay alive, but in reality, the contributor suggested, Johnson paid less attention to remuneration than many other writers.
- The contributor cited people with a mission e.g. academics, scientists etc who have something to say, irrespective of payment. Many writers are prepared to write articles or papers in order to promote their philosophy. People need to be informed and many people are concerned, not with money, but with a mission.

## Summing-up

Summing-up for the opposition **Phil Hilton** refuted the idea that a true hack is a paragon of virtue. He suggested rather that he or she chucked out as many words as they could, saying anything for payday. As far as ‘showcasing’ was concerned he believes that if you can build a brand, there will be money at the end.

He used to write for the popular press and claimed that copy was more accurate in the free press.

Summing-up for the motion **David Hepworth** pointed out that we expect journalists to behave well because we have a contractual relationship with them. Can this relationship continue? Boswell interpreted Samuel Johnson’s meaning: we are better off having professional writers than wealthy aristocrats who write for free. There is very little diversity in a business which relies on better-off people who can afford to write for no remuneration.

There is often an advantage in writing for free. He added that he had been approached by the *Daily Telegraph* to join its list of free bloggers. He had turned this down, believing that even £25 would have enabled him to have a certain professional relationship.

He stressed the importance of having something to say, but most professional journalists can write about lemon drizzle cake or what’s going on in Libya. Facts are checked and edited by professionals.

As an analogy, David Hepworth commented that MPs should be paid enough so that we don’t question their motives: they owe us something and they have to deliver.

## The result

The motion was carried.

## Next debate

The next debate will take place on **Monday 28<sup>th</sup> November 2011** sponsored by the International Advertising Association (UK Chapter). For more details contact Doreen Blythe, Debating Group Secretary, on 020 8202 5854, e-mail: [doreen.blythe22@btinternet.com](mailto:doreen.blythe22@btinternet.com).