



The Truth Is Paywalled But The Lies Are Free

James Joyner

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Nathan J. Robinson, editor of *Current Affairs*, argues that the information economy greatly enables the purveyors of bullshit while frustrating those who wish to read the best, most rigorously tested, work.

His premise is unassailable:

. . . *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, the *Washington Post*, the *New Republic*, *New York, Harper's*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *Financial Times*, and the *London Times* all have paywalls. *Breitbart*, *Fox News*, the *Daily Wire*, the *Federalist*, the *Washington Examiner*, *InfoWars*: free! You want “**Portland Protesters Burn Bibles, American Flags In The Streets,**” “**The Moral Case Against Mask Mandates And Other COVID Restrictions,**” or an article **suggesting the National Institutes of Health has admitted 5G phones cause coronavirus**—they’re yours. You want the detailed *Times* reports on **neo-Nazis infiltrating German institutions**, the **reasons contact tracing is failing in U.S. states**, or the **Trump administration’s undercutting of the USPS’s effectiveness**—well, if you’ve clicked around the website a bit you’ll run straight into the paywall. This doesn’t mean the paywall shouldn’t be there. But it does mean that it costs time and money to access a lot of true and important information, while a lot of bullshit is completely free.

[...]

his means that a lot of the most vital information will end up locked behind the paywall. And while I am not much of a *New Yorker* fan either, it’s concerning that the Hoover Institute will freely give you Richard Epstein’s infamous article **downplaying the threat of coronavirus**, but Isaac Chotiner’s **interview demolishing Epstein** requires a monthly subscription, meaning that the lie is more accessible than its refutation. **Eric Levitz** of *New York* is one of the best and most prolific left political commentators we have. But unless you’re a subscriber of *New York*, you won’t get to hear much of what he has to say each month.

Possibly even worse is the fact that so much academic writing is kept behind vastly more costly paywalls. A white supremacist on YouTube will **tell you all about race and IQ** but if you want to read a careful scholarly refutation, obtaining a legal PDF **from the journal publisher would cost you \$14.95**, a price nobody in their right mind would pay for one article if they can’t get institutional access. (I recently gave up on trying to access a scholarly article because I could not find a way to get it for less than \$39.95, though in that case the article was **garbage rather than gold.**) Academic publishing is a nightmarish patchwork, with lots of articles advertised at

exorbitant fees on one site, and then for free on another, or accessible only through certain databases, which your university or public library may or may not have access to.

(Libraries **have to budget carefully** because subscription prices are often nuts. A library subscription to the *Journal of Coordination Chemistry*, **for instance**, costs **\$11,367** annually.)

He goes at great length to point out that there are workarounds to paywalls, but that most of them are illegal and/or cumbersome.

I have quibbles with his analysis of the problem. He lumps together the likes of Breitbart and the Daily Caller with Cato and the American Enterprise Institute. While they all have agendas, the latter are much more likely to contain well-done research. But he's writing for from a far-left perspective, and thinks the New York Times and the New Yorker are rather suspect as well.

His solution is to massively expand the concept of the public library:

Let's imagine that instead of having to use privatized research services like Google Scholar and EBSCO, there was a single public search database containing every newspaper article, every magazine article, every academic journal article, every court record, every government document, every website, every piece of software, every film, song, photograph, television show, and video clip, and every book in existence. The content of the Wayback Machine, all of the **newspaper archives**, Google Books, Getty Images, Project Gutenberg, Spotify, the Library of Congress, everything in WestLaw and Lexis, all of it, every piece of it accessible instantly in full, and with a search function designed to be as simple as possible and allow you to quickly narrow down what you are looking for. (e.g. "Give me: all Massachusetts newspaper articles, books published in Boston, and government documents that mention William Lloyd Garrison and were published from 1860 to 1865.") The true *universal search*, **uncorrupted by paid advertising**. Within a second, you could bring up an entire PDF of any book. Within two seconds, you could search the full contents of that book.

Let us imagine just how much time would be saved in this informational utopia. Do I want minute 15 of the 1962 Czechoslovak film *Man In Outer Space*? Four seconds from my thought until it begins. Do I want page 17 of the *Daily Mirror* from 1985? Even less time. Every public Defense Department document concerning Vietnam from the Eisenhower administration? Page 150 of Frank Capra's autobiography? Page 400 of an economics textbook from 1995? All in front of me, in full, in less than the length of time it takes to type this sentence. How much faster would research be in such a situation? How much more could be accomplished if knowledge were not fragmented and in the possession of a thousand private gatekeepers?

What's amazing is that the difficulty of creating this situation of "fully democratized information" is entirely economic rather than technological. What I describe with books is close to what Google Books and Amazon already have. But of course, universal free access to full content **horrifies publishers**, so we are prohibited from using these systems to their full potential. The problem is ownership: nobody is *allowed* to build a giant free database of everything human beings have ever produced.

I'm an academic with free access to dozens of databases. And I live in one of the wealthier counties in the country, so I have decent access to a lot of content even via their website. Still, I would love a system like this just for the convenience.

But, obviously, such a system would be incredibly expensive if we're going to justly compensate content creators. And, while I'm amenable to the idea, this would very much be a system wherein the masses are subsidizing the elites. It's people like Robinson and me—and the sort of the people who read our musings—who would be the primary beneficiaries of such a system.

Further, that means that the problem Robinson describes—that bullshit is easier to access than truth—is only tangentially ameliorated by the socialization of content. It's absurd to think that people who are currently getting their information from Breitbart and Fox News are doing so mostly because they don't have access to the New York Times, much less EBSCOHost's peer-reviewed journals.

Beyond that, Robinson has a blinkered view of human nature. He believes that a universal basic income—in idea about which I'm intrigued, but not sold—would solve most of the current arguments for copyright protection. But, while there are those of us who would indeed continue to create content for the sheer intellectual stimulation, one doubts our own Michael Reynolds would be as prodigious in cranking out books if he weren't being additionally compensated.

Similarly, the notion that copyrights should die with the author frustrates me. The brilliant creator who earns ten million dollars a year from his works can give his children and grandchildren incredible advantages. We can debate whether that's how we wish to organize society. But, surely, there's no argument for allowing him to do so while impoverishing the children of a peer who dies young.

Robinson goes back and forth between arguing for a taxpayer-supported system in which authors continue to receive something like their present compensation and hoping some developing country simply steals all the content and starts the system on its own. The former is an interesting idea that raises a lot of questions; the latter is a nightmare for those whose livelihood depends on producing art or argument.