

The modern day 'starving artist' is likely on food stamps

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Artists and writers need more public support. Photograph: Christopher Furlong/Getty Images

I am a freelance writer and I'm entitled to food stamps. By that, I simply mean that I qualify for food stamps, and lately, I've chosen to use them. In my neighborhood in Chicago, I'm not the only writer, journalist or artist using my college education to do what I love and yet still depending on public assistance as I try to gain a foothold.

I guess that makes me part of a demographic that the libertarian magazine Reason called "people who need to be punched". Ouch.

I wish it didn't have to be this way. It's not my endgame to argue that every writer quit one of their day jobs as waiters or retail workers and get on the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program. But I do think the US will need to fund the arts and media directly if we want to save them. At the moment, food stamps aren't given due credit for propping up a sector of society that might otherwise collapse in our market economy (or only be left for the wealthy to pursue).

The first article I ever "sold", to use the common parlance, I wrote over the course of a jobless summer (not for lack of trying to get employment). About three times a week, my co-writer and I would prepare "food stamp brunches", put in a few hours of shoe-leather reporting, then write at night. When our story was published as the feature in a major weekly newspaper, we made \$215 each, or about \$25 a week for part-time work.

Journalists starting out are expected to consider this kind of project an investment (and I suppose getting something was better than the many unpaid internships in the field), but it's not feasible if you can't eat. I'll admit that with food expenses demanding only 11% of US household budgets these days, it's rare that a starving artist is literally starving. Still, a poor diet is the quickest austerity to impose on yourself when you're trying to make rent, and this leads to food insecurity.

Guaranteed food security provides a basic freedom that a society needs to remain dynamic. I'm talking about risk-taking. At a distance, the myth of risk-taking as the mother of invention seems to support entrepreneurial capitalism – picture Google's founders in a Silicon Valley garage. And yet, when you don't have \$1m in venture capital and a hot tub, as they did, the prospect of failure is a little more prohibitive. A safety net makes some level of risk-taking accessible to the underprivileged, which greatly broadens the perspectives of creative projects.

There's a stereotype of the bohemian on food stamps, who, at once shiftless and privileged, lives off the State and his parents' pity. I'm not prepared to defend my peer who fibs about how much he pockets from his parents so that he can qualify for full SNAP benefits. But that stereotype is inaccurate. For one thing, food stamp fraud is at a historic low. According to the USDA, less than three percent of recipients were overpaid in 2012. Consider, too, that public support for the arts fell to a record low in 2011 (only 0.28% of the federal non-military budget) from which recovery is only speculative.

There's not much money in writing these days either. The US lost 2,600 newsroom jobs in 2012. Just to throw their hat in the ring for the dwindling jobs, novice journalists might find themselves working two, sometimes three unpaid internships in a row. Plus, freelancers tend to work pro bono until they've established the clout to ask for a fee. And poets – every dollar they make is a trophy of its own, something they might frame rather than spend.

No, I think the reason the so-called creative class is learning to depend on food stamps is because more and more, art and writing are among those livelihoods that don't benefit from any supposed trickle-down effect of the wealth that circulates at the top, among art dealers and media corporations. Creative skills are in high demand and the work is steady, but the income is not.

True, the internet has factored into the collapse of funding for journalism by convincing us that information should be free. But that's no more of a problem than our demand for free primary education. One solution is obvious: the US should greatly increase its public support for the arts and journalism.

Critics of public funding for the arts, like David Boaz of the Cato Institute, argue that there ought to be a "separation of art and state." I agree. Congress should make no law establishing what is good and bad art, but that doesn't mean they can't subsidize creativity. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which funds public radio across the country, is evidence that culture can remain separate from the state that supports it: the federal government foots the bill and a network of independent organizations decides what to do with the resources. It may not be the best model, but to suggest that a society is incapable of intentionally nurturing its creative side is insulting to our grasp of democracy.

In the meantime, working artists and writers living on public assistance shouldn't be accused of exploiting the system when, in fact, it's the other way around.