

Forbes

Whining About Unpaid Writing Gigs Isn't Going To Increase Writers' Incomes

By: Timothy Lee – March 6, 2013

Nate Thayer's whiny post about the *Atlantic* asking for permission to run one of his articles for free has attracted a lot of online attention. As usual, I agree with Matt Yglesias's take. And like Matt my career as a professional writer was made possible because I wrote for free for a number of years before people started paying me. I contributed daily to a group blog called the Technology Liberation Front for more than two years before I started getting paid opportunities to write about tech policy. And this blog (for which I get paid based on the traffic I generate) began its life as a personal blog in 2009. It took almost 2 years before Forbes approached me about moving it to their site.

The thing that struck me about Thayer's post is the amount of unjustified vitriol it has directed at Olga Khazan, the poor *Atlantic* editor who politely asked for permission to use his work. The *Atlantic* is a for-profit enterprise. If it thought it could make a profit by paying all of its freelancers, it would do so. The reality is that even with a lot of low-paid and unpaid content, it's hard for media organizations to turn a profit.

Maybe you agree with Thayer that the modest compensation of writers is deplorable. But if so, you should be looking for ways to make structural changes to the news business to address this market failure. Maybe you should encourage people to give more money to investigative news outlets like *Pro Publica*. Maybe you should lobby your member of Congress to increase funding for public media (though that's not something I personally support). Maybe you should invent a new business model that can generate more revenue for high-quality journalism.

But it's counterproductive to moralize and personalize the issue. No specific person, and certainly not Khazan, is to blame for the decline of Thayer's earning power. Shaming the *Atlantic* into no longer soliciting unpaid contributions isn't going to increase the magazine's freelancing budget. It's just going to deprive some up-and-coming writers of opportunities to showcase their work.