

Disruptive Labor or the Monetization of Mass Amateurization

Below is the text from my talk at the #DigitalSociology mini conference at this year's Eastern Sociological Society annual conference. We got a relatively inopportune 8:30 am time slot so I thought I'd let more than the 4 people who showed up and my co-panelists bear witness to it. This is a sliver of my dissertation research on the feedback loop between the American sports industry and its fans and the profit this feedback loop has birthed with the help of the Internet. I should make it clear that Bleacher Report is clearly not the only Internet outlet involved in the kind of practices I outline here, they just happen to be the case study I've worked on the most. In addition, part of my argument in this talk is directly related to the previous work I've presented at the 2014 Digital Labor conference and at the 2014 Cultural Studies Association conference on disruption theory, a portion of which you read [here](#). Thanks for reading:

[Bleacher Report](#), from its origins as a small San Francisco based start-up to its \$200 million acquisition by Turner Sports in 2012 to its current status as the [fourth most popular sports website on the Internet](#), has continued to utilize two interlocking narratives about itself. First, its founders and boosters proclaim it as a “disruptive” force in sports media and media in general because it harnesses the passion of fans to unseat the incumbent, professional class of sports media producers. Second, it has sold itself as a place where aspiring writers and sports media professionals could get a foot in the door, building a resume while getting the exposure the site afforded. Both of these narratives have been actively challenged by major competitors, independent sports journalists, and former writers. Today, I'll argue that these interlocking narratives served to justify a kind of primitive accumulation of value from exuberance in desperation wherein fans with aspirations toward making their passions their living became the digitized raw material of a content production empire.

Bleacher Report was until very recently the most reviled site in the sports media world. Founded in 2006 by four college friends (3 of which are from Palo Alto, the heart of Silicon Valley), it was primarily a crowd-sourced content farm before being bought out by Turner Broadcasting (a division of Time Warner) in August of 2012 for an undisclosed sum around \$200 million. Bleacher Report's primary business model in that era was the kind of slideshow, aggregated content, and #hottake journalism that we've come to expect from born digital outlets like the Huffington Post and BuzzFeed. Boasting a monthly unique visitor number above 14 million before the buyout, its explosive growth was met with accusations of SEO gaming and open hostility towards the its content. And with good reason. The rampant misogyny present in such popular slideshows as 20 Most Boobtastic Athletes (which as of a [2012 San Francisco Weekly hit piece](#) on the site tallied 1.4 million views) and the generally low quality of writing in non-slideshow content was worthy of derision.

After the buyout, the tenor of critique began to shift away from quality and onto its institutional structure as their disruptive model had filtered up into the mainstream media, making millions of dollars for its founders while it continued to pay only 1% of its 7000 contributors. The anger at their labor practices stems not just from a lack of payment (payment for writing on the Internet in general is in a deeply degraded state) but because Bleacher Report had positioned (and

sometimes still does) itself as a gateway to the world of sports journalism. It maintains a "[Writer's Program](#)" that seeks to be an "An [amplified outlet](#) for writers whose unique voices were routinely drowned out by cookie-cutter analysts and celebrity "experts." The writer's program is primarily a vetting system for new writers, a way to place you into its system of measurement draped in the language of pedagogy. Once "graduated," each writer has his own [profile](#) that keeps a running tally of his or her (mainly his) popularity vis a vis other writers on the site and their total pageview count. As a writer gets further up the chain they can attain "Featured Columnist" status. In an article published on Deadspin entitled "[The 200 Ways Bleacher Report Screwed Me Over](#)", former Bleacher Report Featured Columnist Tom Schreier explained how the Featured Columnists themselves are tiered: "you were a FCI, FCII, FCIII, or FCIV. On a page titled "Writer Rankings," Bleacher Report wrote that the Featured Columnist I got "Featured placement on B/R Team pages; Eligibility for media interviews and credentials for major events." At FCII, writers got "a free B/R Featured Columnist hooded sweatshirt." Level III Featured Columnists got "an interview for a B/R staff job," and FCIVs received "access to a custom-built, author-specific publishing template for all articles." In this gamified system, note that missing entirely from here is any mention of payment. Schreier detailed the manner in which BR's business model systematically worked to short writers on pay while keeping the carrot of possible full time employment in play until the very end. Comments on the article were predictably harsh, but [a comment from a fellow former BR writer](#) posting as "mets31" mirrored Schreier's experience. Of note was his very clear distillation of the young writer's lack of expectation for payment and the importance of attention: "I was getting big read counts. I had several articles top the 50,000 mark and a couple over 100,000. I could go tell my friends, "Yeah 100,000 people just read what I wrote today." That was almost, in my eyes, as good as being paid, and it would assuredly lead to me getting a job."

It's no wonder that sites like Bleacher Report either publicly report their writer's analytics or give them to their writers so as to fully cement the notion that the recognition that a writer receives is in fact "something." The quantitative nature of this "something" allows for the hope after accumulating enough of this "something" a tipping point will be reached that leads to paying, full time employment. The speculative nature of this labor is akin to what Gina Neff has referred to as [venture labor](#) in her ethnography of late 90s Silicon Alley, only in the intervening 10 years of start-up culture, the stakes have changed. Crowdsourced labor, or what Trebor Scholz has [evocatively referred to as crowd-milking](#), combined with the declining prospects for entry level positions in the fields best suited to crowdsourcing (journalism, publishing in general, media production in general), has created a massive surplus army of venture laborers. Bleacher Report built a structure to scoop up this labor. They benefitted from a saturated labor market and squeezed it like a sponge. Young people raised on lowered expectations, both from the medium and the economic reality were utilized in order to run a "lean" start-up. BR's content production model utilized an ideological atmosphere that normalizes the radical extraction of value from workers in exchange for the opportunity to be recognized as doing work. BR successfully applied this model to sports fandom by further capitalizing on the devaluation of writing about objects of fandom and by selling itself as a platform where fans had a voice to rise above the "cookie cutter takes" of mainstream sports columnists. Scheier notes that he wrote for BR initially since it positioned itself as locally focused in a way that other large sites wouldn't or couldn't. Again, the reward here is recognition, not just for you but for the relevance of your team. In addition, BR leveraged a sense of "community" in these fandoms. This community

rhetoric folded into the recognition system, allowing writers to build prominence within their own niches. This is a publisher scraping off the top of an excess of desiring subjects whose desire is for recognition, a recognition that works as a credit system (an IOU) for a eventual payment, a desire that makes their labor particularly easy to exploit.

That the featured writer's in-house recognition does not culminate in payment is illustrative of this situation. There, in a seeming paradox, the taint of having written for Bleacher Report (of having helped build the brand), decreases your ability to be paid for writing at Bleacher Report. The Bleacher Report stigma must be overcome by both the writers *and* BR's management strategically moved towards outside hires and a rebranding made possible by the buyout. However, daily uniques and page views could not maintain their steady growth without a consistent influx of new content. Hence, some kind of work force had to be retained that could cover local teams and produce the slideshow page view juggernauts like the aforementioned 20 most Boobtastic Athletes article. The community centered Newsletter that beat writers like Schreir manually assembled was replaced by Teamstream, a mobile app that aggregates AP, ESPN and major newspaper beat writer content. The Writer's Program continues to exist, though, as does its rhetoric of uplift and resume building without an increase in paid positions.

BR representatives have made numerous attempts to address the issues of payment and in house promotion. The founders generally argue that Bleacher Report's model has been adjusted numerous times. Founder and now [Bustle.com](#) founder of [ill repute](#) Bryan Goldberg [theorized one such adjustment](#): "At launch, it was an open platform. Today, it functions much more as a true media company, while still opening the door to some talented contributors." Following the internal logic the term "open platform" is elucidating. By using the terminology of "open" and "platform," Goldberg means to describe a website and CMS that is owned privately and funded by venture capital with the aim to monetize the content (platform) but takes submission from unpaid (and possibly unvetted) content producers (open). Goldberg's use of "open" is akin to what [Evgeny Morozov](#) has identified as the Trojan horse of a neoliberal regime on the internet. By claiming "openness" as a value, the radical accumulation of wealth from the activity of unpaid labor appears as the fostering of opportunity, the "open platform" is the space from which a career can be launched. Beginning as an "open platform" was necessary because the funds were not available to pay writers. The money that they had was spent on things like the platform itself and on putting together an ad sales team. That is, on an infrastructure that allowed for the "openness" of the platform.

The "open" platform stage of BR is the first stage of the disruptive technology model, one constantly evolving and slowing only when a stable, paid workforce emerges. In this first, disruptive phase, Bleacher Report built a "product" that allowed for the publication of "content" without the need for the official employment of the "content producer." This element of the CMS (the product) is a very common issue in contemporary media organizations as they adjust to the dominant employment policy of precarious freelance contracts. The New York Times, legacy print company of all legacy print companies, has said as much about its new [CMS, Scoop](#), that it rolled out in mid 2014. Bleacher Report's platform, like a lot of CMSs with strong role control and user friendly interfaces that restrict access to only the most basic of functions, can swiftly collect a mass of content that can be pushed out continuously, again and again, without having to have every author in office or have any direct contact with the editorial staff. However, one of

the primary indicators of a “disruptive technology” in the literature is a certain lower quality of the technology itself. It offers fewer features or services, and is, at least at first, of far less quality than the product it seeks to disrupt. Often the technology could be described as aiming down market, at a group of consumers who do not offer enough profitability to warrant attention and R&D outlays from the larger incumbent firms in the industry. The lower-quality, down market character that disruption theory’s founding father Clayton Christensen outlines as the necessary marker of the disruptive technology (more on that [here](#)) in this instance is less the platform itself (the product) but both the type of content it allows for and the type of writer who produces that content. This is what could be called “disruptive labor” or the marshaling of lower quality workers who can produce a lower quality product that will appeal to a nascent audience. This is the monetization of mass amateurization built upon this formula: enough people who produce out of “hobby” or “passionate interest” would be enticed into by an “open platform” that the open platform itself can be the site of monetization.