

A Farewell to Free Journalism | The Washington Post

By Megan McArdle

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Megan McArdle isn't surprised that free online journalism is increasingly moving behind paywalls, and she says that you shouldn't be either. From a journalist's perspective, she explores why the industry is changing, how it might continue to change, and why there's probably nothing that you can do about it.

Providing the rope with which someone else will hang you is obviously not a very good business model. And in the words of economist Herb Stein, "If something can't go on forever, it will stop." Either we will find someone else to pay for the news and opinion and cartoons you consume, or we will go out of business.

That someone doesn't have to be the reader. Some journalism can function as a sort of a loss leader for a conference business, or another associated product, like books or package tours. Some opinion writing can be produced by people who use it as a personal loss leader for their brand as a "thought leader" or "public intellectual" —or simply use it as a hobby to blow off steam. Outside of the "loss leader model," there are a few other options: Some reporting can be financed by donors as a philanthropic project; some consumer product journalism can support itself through affiliate programs that provide rewards for selling merchandise; and some writing can be supported by "native advertising" sprinkled among the journalism so that it's hard to tell them apart. All of those business models can produce good journalism.

[...]

But if you don't like those options, then you, dear reader, are going to have to step up to the plate. Unfortunately, many of you have gotten used to the idea that news ought to be free, and resent being asked to pay for it.

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