Free Culture Benefits Everyone But the Middle Man

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18 August 2016

At Techdirt, Mike Masnick reports ("Photographer Learns to Embrace the Public Domain — And is Better Off For It," Aug. 5) that that Swiss photographer Samuel Zeller has discovered the benefits — to his livelihood! — of putting his work in the public domain. He's put a lot of his work into the public domain via Creative Commons CC0 licenses, and published it on the Unsplash hosting site. The resulting 63 million views and 613,000 downloads have driven enormous traffic to his online portfolio and given him all the new business he can handle. In short, "giving away" your past work for free amounts to free advertising for your paid services.

That's a fairly common — and successful — strategy: giving away free content, but bundling it with other paid services. Phish allowed free recording at concerts and free sharing of their music, using it as advertising to make money from concert tickets and concessions like T-shirts and bumper stickers. Linux software is free and open source, but distributors make money giving the software away free and then selling tech support and customization services.

I make a modest amount of money in royalties on a handful of books I've published, which are marketed online. I honestly doubt if I'd be selling any at all if I relied on a conventional proprietary model of making people pay before they could look at them. I'm a relatively unknown writer, even in the libertarian mainstream, and write for a niche market. Nobody would shell out the cost of a dead tree book if they couldn't, at least metaphorically, pick it up and leaf through it. I strongly believe that the free pdfs of my books I post online actually generate more purchases of hard copies than would be the case if I didn't. People who just look at the pdf and don't buy a hard copy are people who almost certainly wouldn't have bought a hard copy anyway, sight-unseen. On the other hand a lot of people look through the pdf and decide they want it in a format that's handier to carry around, dogear and underline.

Trying to make money by paywalling your content and punishing those who share it is a guaranteed strategy for reducing sales. I personally encountered a sad example a few years back. The original cover of my second book, Organization Theory, bore a viral online image called "Head up *ss" — a picture, as the name suggests, of a guy in a necktie with his head stuck up his own posterior. It appears in thousands of places all over the Web, almost none of them with any attribution or indication of who might have created the image. About nine months after I published the book, I got an email from the graphic designer who originally created "Head up

*ss," asking that I take it down and hinting at legal action if I didn't. I offered to pay for its use, once I realized there was a publicly identified creator who took credit for it, but he refused — he wasn't interested in selling it. Think about that: The image had proliferated all over the web, and was virally popular and well recognized, but with no indication of who had created it. Had the creator let me use it, I would have gladly credited the image in the book and done my best to send design business his way. His identity as the creator of that famous image would have been wonderful advertising for his services as a graphic artist — and any business at all he got from exposure on my book cover would have been that much more than the image was getting him at the time, which I'm guessing was probably none. But his sense of "property" wouldn't let him do that.

Paywalling content is basically like criminalizing someone for giving people directions to your store. The stupidest example of this phenomenon I can think of is Rupert Murdoch's attempt to stop Google from showing articles in Murdoch publications in its search results. "Old Man Yells at Internet."

I think Zeller's experience, and mine, are fairly typical. For example, file-sharing has destroyed an enormous amount of total music industry revenue. But the revenue losses have come entirely at the expense of the record companies and their profits. The artists themselves have suffered no significant loss, and in fact have probably increased sales because of file-sharing.

Free culture benefits consumers, it benefits artists, and it benefits the general culture. The only people who don't benefit are the parastic corporations of Big Content. Good riddance.

The Anarchist Library
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