

Writers' unions bring digital contract work closer to trade work

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A coworking space in Hanoi, Vietnam. Many digital contractors do not have offices and utilize public workspaces to stay productive.

There's a well-known bit from the comedy podcast "My Brother, My Brother and Me" in which the podcast's titular three brothers discuss how the question "what do you do for a living?" tends to be answered nowadays: "At a party, if someone says 'what do you do?' and you say 'online publishing', the response is

going to be ‘we’re *all* in online publishing!’” One of the other brothers laughs then chimes in.

“Of course you are! Of course you’re in online publishing, who isn’t?!” The subject quickly changes to the importance of skilled trades, but the point sticks in your head. Through the beginning of the 21st century, now on into the 2020s, content has become big business. Journalists, copy writers, graphic designers, and a wide array of other media-based vocations that would previously have found homes in newsrooms, magazine headquarters, or marketing offices are now gathered under the broad umbrella of online publishing or digital content. The lucrative nature of digital advertising has generated plenty of writing jobs producing high volumes of easily-digestible articles and blog posts to be shared on social media.

The changes that have happened in the traditional publishing industry go well beyond content and job titles. Digital contributors are increasingly employed as independent contractors: members of the “gig economy” and the modern incarnation of freelancers. Claire Lower, a senior editor, food writer, and union representative for the

Gizmodo Media Group publication *Lifehacker* estimates that half of Lifehacker's core staff are "permalancers", writers who have a working relationship with a publication's editor and an agreed-upon rate but still work on a contract basis. A large proportion of contributors are strict freelancers, writing for Lifehacker intermittently.

The rise of freelance work in publishing has encouraged digital content workers to unionize, following in the footsteps of the skilled trade workers they've jokingly been cast as antithetical to. The now-disbanded Gawker Media was the first all-digital publication to unionize, and has since been followed by many others, including Vox Media Group and Gizmodo itself.

Lifehacker, the publication Lower contributes to, requires all staff to be union members. Full-time employees at union publications now have access to health care, a guaranteed salary, and severance pay, conditions that were not possible only a few years ago. Lower illustrated this by describing her departure from a previous publication which shut down, *xo Jane*:

"When *xo Jane* folded, I was getting like half of my income from them, and it all disappeared in a day. I went

from writing seven posts for them a week to one a week, and they could only pay me a quarter of what they had previously been paying me.” Lower considers herself fortunate that she was able to take on more consistent work for *Lifehacker* before *xo Jane* “shuttered completely”, as many writers deal with financial instability and job loss when publications are bought, sold, or closed down. She made it clear that the benefits she received upon joining *Lifehacker* full-time were a significant change: “To move from that to having eleven weeks of guaranteed severance, it’s a huge difference. And to have health insurance, and paid time off, which was unheard of as a freelancer...”

It's important to note that not all contract writers are eligible for these benefits, even at union workspaces. Contributors who are published infrequently or who work for multiple publications can often still fall into the “independent contractor” category and do not qualify as full-time or essential staff. Writers’ unions have made deliberate efforts to prevent these freelancers from being left out in the cold. While unions are not allowed to negotiate with a business on behalf of workers who aren’t part of their contract, many local chapters create funds for

freelancers, pooling a portion of their bonuses to thank freelancers for acting in solidarity with them during negotiations.



A Writers' Guild of America strike. Many digital content unions, such as Vox Union and GMG Union, are extensions of the WGA.

Solidarity for writing professionals extends beyond working conditions, as Lower explained when discussing why she appreciates the rise of writers' unions.

“I think one of the key things about this, with writing or with any kind of creative work in general,

there's always been this sense that it's not real labor, that you should be happy to be published anywhere – “dying of exposure” – the idea that just having your work seen

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should be enough. It’s petit bourgeois labor, but it’s still labor.” She added that writers and other creative professionals are frequently sold that narrative, but it loses power when the recipient is part of a union. “It’s very easy to gaslight creative types, which is why it’s so important to unionize. The more places that are unionized, and the more work that’s unionized, it’s harder for people to devalue your work, because you’re all working together with the same goal and telling each other they’re valuable. It helps shift your mindset.”

Writing can often be an isolating job. Many writers work remotely, never going into an office or encountering coworkers outside of the occasional event or conference. The nature of creative work, as well, lends itself to exploitation, as the income a publication generates

from a writer's piece is often opaque, making fair compensation a challenge. However, as digital publication has exploded, those working in online media have begun to band together to demand the same benefits as any other worker, and to support one another where institutions fail. Through their efforts, the "wild west of the internet" is gradually becoming a much more stable place to earn a living.