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As told to Max Freedman, 2579 words.

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On fostering creative community

Writer and editor Maria Bustillos on the power of intentional online collaboration for starting something new and creating your own opportunities.

I perceive *Flaming Hydra* as a community of writers working on their own things, but at the same time as they get the space to pursue their own interests, they get the opportunity to tap into the creative energy of others. To you, how does intentionally carving out community spaces help artists be more creative, and what does it do for your own creativity?

We started a cooperative, *Brick House*, in 2020, and what I have been trying to preserve in a community of artists is a way to be for each other, rather than each person going after his own career, his own Substack, his own staff job. This is for everybody to do for each other, to share audiences, resources, a publishing space, and editorial skills and ideas.

We have a place where we all hang out to talk. Recent years in the media world have diminished those spaces. The main thing we're trying to do, in addition to creating a really awesome publication that's fun to read, is a space that is for, about, and populated by writers and artists, and there's nobody else involved in it. It's not like you have bosses that you have to obey or sensitivities like you aren't allowed to publicize your own stuff. This is the opposite of that. If you have a Substack or a piece coming up in another publication, this is a place for you to talk about that. This is a place for us to tell each other and tell readers, and it's really an artist's space.

As far as my own creativity, putting this scene together has been phenomenally stimulating and filled with insight and excitement. Everybody really wants to do this, because most of us in this group have experienced the demise of publications that we really love—all the weeklies, *Gawker*, *The Awl*, all these places that were very writer-forward, artist-forward places that were somehow done in or didn't succeed financially.

The thing that's been really challenging for *Brick House* to run multiple publications on a really small budget is that we don't have enough money to offer people a good salary. If you want to run a publication at *Brick House*—and everybody can find his own money and is encouraged to do that—that's a lot. Asking somebody to run a publication, find the money for it, pay the mortgage, look after all that stuff, it's really hard.

I realized what we needed to do is have the contribution from each person be a light lift. At *Flaming Hydra*, each person is asked to contribute a little bit of work. That's basically it. For the first year, *Brick House* will run it. I'll edit it. We'll see what happens, how we like the division of labor, how we like the editing [and] what we would want to change, and then, we'll tweak the organization as we build it. Everybody in it is familiar enough with running our own things that we feel pretty confident it'll work.

You mentioned requiring minimal work from everybody, and that reminds me of the Kickstarter page emphasizing both that and moving slow. I'm curious how all this intentionality around pacing and labor ties into creativity for you and *Flaming Hydra*, or just your philosophy on this.

Sometimes, you'll want to write a piece because you're getting paid a lot or it's really good for your reputation—you'll get a lot of readership—and sometimes, you just want to write it so badly you would do it for free. Most people in my position, your work is some balance of those things, because if you have to bring in a certain amount of money to pay the bills, then you have to chase a certain kind of publication that has a big enough budget to support paying you a lot. That's always in tension with your desire to grow and advance your creativity, your metier, your skill, and being a professional means keeping those things in balance and learning how to finance those things. It means learning how to do business, and it's

all important.

[*Flaming Hydra*] is an opportunity for some of us who are older and more experienced to help the younger ones through those hurdles and give people a chance to try writing about stuff they may not be well-known for writing. Maybe somebody is an art critic and they want to write about cooking or politics. We want everybody to feel free and that they're among friends so that they can do those things.

It sounds less like *Flaming Hydra* is a publication, even though it's dropping a newsletter every weekday, and it's more a space for creative people to just be. Does that sound right to you?

Yes. It's both of those things equally. I started my career at *The Awl* in 2009. The thing that made those publications so good, the early *Gawker* and *The Awl*, and *The Toast*—it was a bunch of writers doing stuff they thought was cool, and so that made for a fantastic reading experience. At the same time [as] we want to provide this cooperative space [with *Flaming Hydra*], we also feel like what makes a publication awesome to read is that [its writers] are passionate.

I interviewed the musician Dawn Richard last year, and she told me, "I really believe that you are not your truest or best artist if you're not bringing people along with you." This feels like the ethos of Brick House and *Flaming Hydra*. Why does this matter to you, and how does it benefit your own creative processes to create these spaces?

This is, like, my fifth career. I used to be a designer of overpriced tchotchkes for the home, and I had all these other gigs, but I always wanted to do this. I was telling Leila Brillson about this the other day because she mentioned she had seen a piece that I wrote about the movie *Avatar*. I had gone and seen the movie, and I became in a monumental rage about it, and I was not a publishing writer then, but I came home and I sent this thing to my favorite blog, *The Awl*, and I thought, "Well, what can they say? They can say no." Choire Sicha did not say no, and he published it the next day, and my whole life changed. I never looked back. I had all these other things I did for a living, and I just never did any of them again. I was brought into the fold by one of the most creative editors in the world, and I went to Awl School, Choire Sicha journalism school. Because I was invited with such generosity into this community, all I want is to reproduce that for other people.

The other really important thing to me is to ensure that we have spaces that are 100 percent free from commercial constraints. This is a vulnerability I saw take down a lot of the blogs of the mid-to-late aughts. There were these huge opportunities to get advertising money or affiliate money, and then, that became this poisoned chalice. I would much rather have a smaller organization that's completely free and self-sufficient and doesn't have those kinds of vulnerabilities so that we're able to grow from a small seed and create a lasting organization that can't just be taken down.

With the devaluing of journalism, critical media, and the critical voice, I suppose it becomes somewhat the onus of the people creating the work to create ecosystems where it can't just be taken away.

Unfortunately, that's the case... I was in the courtroom when *Gawker* went down, and I was covering it for *Death and Taxes*, which also went down. We didn't know what we were looking at. We saw this Hulk Hogan thing, and it just seemed like a circus and a spectacle, but it was actually a really concerted effort to shut down a press outlet that this rich guy felt was unfriendly to his interests. It was an education to realize what could happen.

If we could have spaces that are—it doesn't have to be huge—a place for freedom, to be able to say what people think, try stuff out, be free of pressure, a place to just do your thing, your art, that's what we want.

Every example you're giving speaks to that, and *Jezebel* just got shut down this past Friday. It's very timely.

And Leah Finnegan's *Gawker*, *The Outline*—there are so many of these publications that I loved, and I don't pretend that, automatically, we're going to hit the ground [running] in such a way that everybody can quit their jobs and just write for *Flaming Hydra*. That's not going to happen. But what is going to happen is we're going to have a place that is exciting, fun, and free [that] belongs to the people who work there. In my ideal world, it would grow to the point where it can become a self-sufficient livelihood for some group of people.

I think you have the right idea of starting it off paid for by the reader, not by ads, because you could theoretically grow that into something like *Defector*.

There's nothing stopping us, and I'm a huge fan of *Defector*. One of the people who cooked this idea up with me was David Roth [*Defector* co-owner], whom I've written with a lot of times. At *The Awl*, we used to do movie reviews together. A couple of people in *Flaming Hydra* work [at *Defector*], and I'm getting every bit of advice and help that we can from them. They've done such a beautiful job of creating a worker-owned publication.

The *Flaming Hydra* campaign page mentions there will be surprises every weekday, and there's an emphasis on freedom of expression too. I'm curious how you would advise a creative person to build an environment where they can achieve this limitlessness and spontaneity.

It would not be possible without the huge pool of talent that we've been able to put together here. I

started talking about it with different people, and then I started thinking, "Wow, this is going to be a big thing." I mean, the years of skill and work that have gone into these careers—we've got academics, journalism stars, people in the library world. They're very powerful intellects. I'm lucky we have this caliber of people doing this because it would be really hard otherwise to gather up the professional discipline and focus, the intellectual focus, the track record, the groups of audiences we're going to be able to put together in this thing.

I don't think it would be possible to just, from thin air, make something like this. It's a really lucky set of circumstances that has the stars aligned to create this group of professionals who are willing to put some time and effort into something absolutely new.

A recurring theme of this conversation is, yes, you're giving space for creative people to pursue what they want and try new things, but also, this kind of work, which we often perceive as solitary, goes so much better in community with other people, because other people and intentional spaces are creative resources.

Yeah. One thing I would say helps a huge amount is to open your mind to think of talented people as having a lot more strings to their bow than you would suspect. A lot of times, somebody who's a really great writer, you don't realize they are also an organizational genius. One of our members, Yemisi Aribisala, who's an amazing essayist, I had absolutely no idea that she paints. I completely went after her asking, "Please do some art for us."

We want to offer more and more ability for people to come together and grow and share their stuff. A big part of the potential success of this thing is that open structure.

You're slated to be *Flaming Hydra*'s editor for a year. To me, this implies that, maybe after that, you won't be the editor. Is that coming from a place of, "I want to try something new" or "I want to give space to somebody else to try editing"? Where is that coming from?

Because this is such a new organization and there are so many talented people involved in it, I anticipate that it's going to evolve a lot from where it starts. Once we start and people get a chance to try things, it's altogether likely that the structure of it will morph into something way bigger than what I've started out doing.

To get the thing off the ground, we created the organizational structure. We're using the existing Brick House board and governance to keep things moving and under control and have bylaws, all this stuff that was already made so we wouldn't have to invest resources in lawyers or making new work. We have this structure that goes for a year or less. If the group should decide they want to change things earlier on than a year, we can all vote to do that. I have agreed to do up to a year, and what I am anticipating is, it's going to turn into this huge thing and somebody better and smarter than me will take over. I'm getting ready to create the runway for something a lot bigger than what I've started.

Your primary reporting interests are digital ownership and library rights. How, through Brick House, *Popula*, and *Flaming Hydra*, have you generated more creative space or opportunities to explore these interests?

I have just one set of values, and it's all egalitarianism and freedom of expression, so my career has led me through covering stories like the *Gawker* trial and the Internet Archive lawsuit that I covered at *The Nation* for a long time. A lot of things have led me to this position where different things I've covered and different projects I've had kind of all feed into each other.

As far as digital ownership rights are concerned—which I think is the big emergency media story of our times, because if libraries can't own their own books, and the ownership of books is in the hands of publishers who have an on/off switch, at the times we're living in with book bannings—this has become a very big deal to me to cover. I work every possible way I can, write pieces in the biggest publications I can find, write op-eds. If writers and artists are able to own their platforms and publishing spaces, that is a bulwark to protect freedom of expression.

Maria Bustillos recommends these worthwhile things you can no longer read in their original locations, preserved through the offices of the Internet Archive:

Tokyo Plastic, a beautiful Flash drum machine

September 22nd puff piece on Sam Bankman-Fried from Sequoia Capital

"Revisiting a Visit to a Weird Planet Revisited," an SFF.net short story in which the actors of *Star Trek: TNG* end up on the real Enterprise-D

Interactive Timeline of the events of Jan 6th, 2021 attack on the US Capitol

My in-person daily coverage of the *Gawker* trial, and of first Bill Cosby trial, at the late lamented Death and Taxes

Name

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Vocation


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