The Vanity Press Economy: From Subsidized Publication to Monetized Uselessness

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October 2025

Abstract

This article traces a genealogy of the modern AI-driven information economy through the lens of Mario Biagioli's "royal vanity press," arguing that contemporary platforms have transformed subsidized knowledge into a self-funding engine of monetized uselessness. Drawing on Ed Zitron and Cory Doctorow's critiques of platform economics, Jürgen Schmidhuber's epistemology of compression, and the Relativistic Scalar–Vector Plenum (RSVP) framework, we analyze how users pay—through data, fees, or cognitive labor—to sustain systems that prioritize computational throughput over semantic value. Historical analogies, empirical cases (Gmail, GitHub, Reddit), and field-theoretic formalizations reveal a new political economy where noise is commodified, and genuine compression is expropriated. We propose a Deccelerationist ethics of entropy-respecting governance to restore value to novelty and agency.

Keywords: vanity press, AI economy, data compression, entropy, Deccelerationism, RSVP framework, platform feudalism, computational seigniorage

1 Introduction

The information economy of the twenty-first century has inverted the logic of knowledge production. Where early modern scientific journals, subsidized by royal patronage, pro-

jected epistemic authority through print, today's AI platforms extract value by monetizing user-generated noise. This article synthesizes three intellectual threads: the political economy of AI, as critiqued by **?** and **?**; the epistemology of compression, as formalized by **?**; and a thermodynamic governance perspective rooted in the Relativistic Scalar–Vector Plenum (RSVP) framework. Moving from historical analogy to infrastructural analysis, entropic formalism, and normative reconstruction, we argue that the "vanity press economy" transforms the informational commons into a self-funding engine of uselessness, necessitating policies that reward semantic novelty over redundant circulation.

2 Royal Vanity Presses and the Birth of Subsidized Knowledge

In the seventeenth century, scientific journals like the *Mémoires* and *Philosophical Transactions* served as state-sanctioned prestige machines. Subsidized by royal or institutional patronage, these publications were less commercial ventures than demonstrations of epistemic control. As **?** observes, they "could not have survived as for-profit ventures," relying instead on the court's largesse to project authority through print (**?**). The emergence of peer review formalized this control, acting as a state-mediated filter that balanced censorship with the curation of rationality. Print's materiality—its cost and scarcity—signaled abundance and sovereignty, aligning knowledge production with political power.

2.1 Censorship, Prestige, and Subsidized Rationality

This system was dual-faced: censorship suppressed dissent, while patronage elevated approved voices. Biagioli's analysis reveals that early journals were less about disseminating truth than constructing a legible epistemic order. The royal vanity press subsidized rationality itself, transforming ink and paper into symbols of state legitimacy. This historical precedent sets the stage for understanding modern platforms, where computational subsidies serve analogous ends.

3 Subsidy Becomes Surplus: The Algorithmic Inversion

Today's AI platforms invert the seventeenth-century model. Instead of patrons subsidizing knowledge, users and venture capital subsidize computational throughput. Platforms like Google and GitHub operate as digital chokepoints, extracting rent through what **?** calls "platform feudalism." The sovereign is now data accumulation: every user interaction—prompts, posts, or synthetic outputs—bolsters metrics of engagement, compute consumption, and valuation. Unlike the royal court, which paid to project prestige, platforms charge users (via data, fees, or labor) to sustain their infrastructural dominance.

Table 1: Contrasting Subsidy Regimes

Epoch	**Subsidizer**	**Medium**	**Value Signal**	**Beneficiary**
17th Century	Royal Court	Print	Prestige	State
21st Century	User + VC	Compute	Engagement	Platform

This inversion marks a shift from a commons-oriented subsidy to a rentier economy, where value accrues not from shared knowledge but from privatized circulation.

4 The Paper-Mill Logic of AI

Modern AI systems operate as planetary paper mills, producing tokens as units of computational prestige. Floods of generative-AI spam—on platforms like arXiv, Amazon Kindle, or fake scientific journals—mirror academic paper mills that inflate citation metrics with spurious content (**?**). Every low-grade output consumes compute cycles, fills storage, and refines model compression, making noise a primary commodity. We term this profit mechanism *computational seigniorage*: the value extracted from issuing new tokens of meaning, regardless of their epistemic worth.

This logic ties directly to energy economics. Compute cycles, like early modern printing presses, are energetically expensive, yet their cost is offset by user contributions.

A single AI-generated article may be useless, but it still travels through proprietary pipelines, reinforcing platform control over storage and computation chokepoints.

5 The New Political Economy of Uselessness

The AI economy transforms uselessness into a productive asset. With platforms like ChatGPT processing billions of tokens daily, and data centers consuming megawatts of energy, the scale of this enterprise is staggering (**?**). Useless content—redundant posts, synthetic essays—fuels model updates and engagement metrics, converting user attention into platform coherence:

$$\Phi_{\text{user}} \to S_{\text{model}} \to \Phi^*_{\text{platform}}.$$

Intuitively, this equation describes a process where human creativity (semantic density, Φ) is dissipated into noise (entropy, S), which platforms compress into proprietary order. Platforms act as low-entropy attractors ($\nabla \cdot \mathbf{v} < 0$), absorbing high-entropy content and emitting curated outputs, depleting user agency while enriching corporate control.

5.1 Entropy Farming as Business Model

This dynamic constitutes entropy farming: a business model that commodifies informational disorder. By monetizing user interactions as billable "usage," platforms incentivize volume over value, ensuring a self-funding loop of noise production.

6 Entropic Interpretation and the RSVP Triad

The Relativistic Scalar–Vector Plenum (RSVP) models cognition and economy as fields exchanging order and disorder under constraint. Semantic density (Φ), attention flow ($\mathbf{v}$), and entropy (S) evolve via:

$$\frac{\partial \Phi}{\partial t} + \nabla \cdot (\Phi \mathbf{v}) = -\lambda_{\Phi S} S,$$

$$\frac{\partial \mathbf{v}}{\partial t} + (\mathbf{v} \cdot \nabla)\mathbf{v} = -\nabla\Phi + \eta_{vS}\nabla S,$$

$$\frac{\partial S}{\partial t} = \alpha\nabla^2 S + \beta(\nabla \cdot \mathbf{v})^2 - \gamma\Phi.$$

Intuitively, these equations mirror feedback, storage, and dissipation in social systems: ideas spread, attention flows, and disorder accumulates. Under platform consolidation, negative divergence ($\nabla \cdot \mathbf{v} \to -\delta(\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{x}_c)$) concentrates agency in corporate attractors. The Lagrangian density,

$$\mathcal{L} = \frac{1}{2}|\nabla\Phi|^2 + \frac{1}{2}|\mathbf{v}|^2 - V(\Phi, S) - \kappa(\nabla \cdot \mathbf{v})S,$$

reveals coercive bias ($\kappa > 0$) favoring infrastructural bottlenecks. Deccelerationist governance introduces corrective terms ($\mu(\nabla S)^2 - \nu|\mathbf{v}|^4$) to restore plural agency.

7 The Return of the Subsidy: Demonstrations in Platform Ecology

Early platforms like Gmail (2004) advertised collective expansion, with storage counters dramatizing shared growth. By 2020, fixed quotas (15 GB) and subscriptions signaled scarcity (**?**). GitHub's SHA-1 hashing charges for reference, not resource, monetizing redundancy. Reddit's 2023 API paywall further exemplifies this shift, restricting access to data once freely shared. These cases mark the end of the digital commons, converting abundance into metered stasis.

Quantitatively, Gmail's free storage per user dropped from dynamic growth to a fixed cap, while subscription costs rose (e.g., $1.99/month for 100 GB via Google One). This inversion reflects an entropic dam:

$$\nabla \cdot \mathbf{v} \approx 0, \quad \frac{dS}{dt} > 0.$$

Compression, once a public good, becomes a rentier mechanism.

8 Compression and the Theft of Novelty

Jürgen Schmidhuber's theory of compression progress posits that discovery reduces description length: Beauty $= L_{\text{old}} - L_{\text{new}}$ (**?**). A new ontology or algorithm shrinks the manifold of error, yet platforms treat it as mere tokens, absorbing its value without compensation. This mirrors intellectual-property law, where patents and copyrights protect expression length, not compression efficiency (**?**). The token economy mistakes repetition for creativity because it meters flow, not form. In RSVP terms, this mis-signing ($\lambda_{\Phi S} < 0, \kappa > 0$) dissipates user negentropy into corporate coherence.

Epilogue: Toward an Entropy-Respecting Aesthetics

Drawing on Norbert Wiener's view of communication as negentropy and Gregory Bateson's "difference that makes a difference," we situate compression progress in a cybernetic lineage (**?**; **?**). A civilization oriented around elegance would reward creators of new mappings—those who reduce redundancy for all—while penalizing synthetic inflation. Deccelerationism advocates a policy triad:

1. Reward compression: Compensate novel ontologies and taxonomies.

2. Penalize inflation: Tax redundant outputs to deter noise.

3. Preserve reversibility: Ensure user agency through transparent, portable interfaces.

> The future of knowledge lies not in larger models but in shorter descriptions. To pay for tokens without rewarding compression is to tax intelligence itself.