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The rise, fall and resurrection of Flickr



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Introduction

Earlier this week, a [new chapter](#) was added to the rocky history of Flickr, one that quickly escalated out of control, as per usual on ragenet.

To sum up some recent events: on April 2018, [SmugMug acquired Flickr](#) for an

undisclosed amount. My understanding is that it was a do-or-die deal, had they not acquired it, Flickr would be shutdown by now. It was a **rescue operation**.

A **titanic** rescue operation. Years earlier, it would be unthinkable for a giant like Flickr to be acquired by the relatively small and little known SmugMug. But it happened. Above all, it shows the dire state Flickr was in.

For a company like SmugMug to take on the rescue of one of the largest photography communities on the planet, is a monumental task. Imagine being a small company and inheriting **tens of billions** of photos, a **hundred million users**, **tens of millions in yearly loss**, and surely, some ancient legacy code base. Taming this beast will inevitably require some unpopular decisions.

Such as the decision made on November 1, 2018, where free tier users would be limited to a 1,000 photo maximum, any surplus deleted, unless the user upgrades to a Pro account. The outrage was large, as expected.

This week's outrage is the CEO of SmugMug publicly asking people for help to boost the Pro (paid) subscription, as the current state of Flickr still is not financially sustainable, despite the earlier measures.

This article

Watching this new outrage unfold, I could not help but feel annoyed. A lot of harsh conclusions were dropped on this move that lacked context or fairness. Which may make the situation worse, not better. I get annoyed about 50 times per day on the internet, but this time too many injustice buttons were pushed.

In this article, I want to voice my opinion on Flickr's history, rescue operation and future, as well as comment on competing services and modern challenges of today's photographers.

Why? Because I care about photography, photographers, healthy communities and the preservation of valuable content.

For the sake of transparency: I have no personal stake in either SmugMug or Flickr. Today, I'm not even an active user of either service.

I'm just an amateur photographer with an opinion. My opinion is to make a case for the long term preservation of Flickr. I'll be spending the rest of this article explaining why.

Note that this is a very lengthy article. It is preferably read in one piece, as one chapter builds on the other. However, hopefully the following Table of Contents help you grasp whether this is worth your time. Unfortunately, I cannot get internal article links to work, so consider this a non-interactive outline of what is ahead of you.

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- **Photo sharing explained**
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- **Flickr's history**
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Photo sharing

In discussions regarding Flickr's relevance and competition, things quickly get very confusing as different services focus on different needs and soon we're comparing apples to oranges. The term *photo sharing site* is highly ambiguous. Here's my attempt at breaking these needs into different tiers. I'm assuming an audience ranging from photography enthusiasts to pros.

Tier 0: Personal local storage

At this very beginning of a photographer's workflow, you want to take care of the long term storage of your *originals*. Which usually means your RAW files, but they could also be JPEGs. This set will typically include photos you may never post process or publish, yet still want to keep. This is your *source material*.

I'm explicitly calling this local storage because I strongly believe it should be solved locally. It is possible to outsource this kind of dumb storage to an online service

provider, but I think you shouldn't. Whilst it is unlikely for anything to happen to your photos on a trustworthy storage provider, you're still giving away control of your source material.

Be paranoid regarding source material. You cannot retake a photo that is lost. There's a lot of ways to solve local storage but clearly this tier is not the domain of Flickr. It's not the domain of any online service. Hence the word *local*.

Tier 1: Personal online storage

This tier is about storing your photos online for personal and family usage only. Typical services in this space would be Google Drive/Photos, Microsoft OneDrive, Dropbox and iCloud.

These services have multiple purposes:

- Backup (as primary storage or on top of local storage)
- Making your photos available online to yourself, across devices
- On-demand sharing with family and friends

The key characteristic of this tier is that your photos are not public. They are hidden from the world, cannot be discovered, searched for or be engaged with.

This tier is not the domain of Flickr either. Because Flickr is about *public* photo sharing. It's technically possible to mark photos on Flickr as private. You *can* use the service this way, but that's not its main purpose.

Tier 2: Public online sharing

Here we come to the most important tier, that lies at the heart of what this article is about.

At this tier, you publish (a selection of) your photos for the world to see. Your photos are discoverable. Within the service, you can browse and search to find your photos. It may also be possible to stumble upon your photos via Google Search. You can link to your photos. Followers see your updates. You *want* this to happen. You want your photos to be seen beyond the scope of just yourself and your family. This is the

entire point of photo sharing.

This tier is your public online photography home. This is where Flickr operates, and where its main relevance is. If you're a serious photographer, the bare minimum needs of such a home I imagine to be:

- **Longevity.** The service should be stable. Your photos should still be there a decade from now. The effort you put into curating the set should not be lost, ever. The service should be as boring as it possibly can be.
- **Quality.** The service should display your photos in the quality you intended. There's no point in investing in your skill, gear and post processing if said service cannot even display a photo properly. You may think this is a very obvious requirement, but some services score very poorly in this area (such as Facebook and Twitter).
- **Built with photographers in mind.** With this I mean license management, preventing image theft, etc.

You may have a laundry list of additional requirements for your online photography home, but it starts with the above basics. At face value, this tier seems crowded with many players in which Flickr has lost its way. But upon a closer look, many are struggling to make the business model work. Flickr included.

Tier 3: Exposure and community

Here we come to an inconvenient truth. Ideally, the place you call your home for online photography (tier 2), is also the place where you get your exposure (views) as well as community interaction.

That's not the reality on the ground for many photographers. A lot of them have some permanent home for their photos, yet then feel the need to cross post to separate services known for their high engagement, such as Instagram. I'll go deeper into this *exposure problem* in a later section.

The same goes for community. Ideally, community interaction takes place at tier 2, yet in reality photographers may find more community feedback at other services.

Tier 4: Portfolio

The last tier is reserved for true pros. Pros put food on the table using their photography, which means they have unique needs. Monetizing photography is very challenging these days, therefore a pro typically uses a myriad of ways to not starve:

- Polished portfolio with ability to buy prints or hire them
- Stock photography
- Photo shoots
- Workshops
- ...getting attention to all of the above using various exposure platforms.

Pros tend to have a few cabinets at home to store their exposure. Its right next to the drawer full of *thank yous* and *great jobs*.

Services like SmugMug and Zenfolio operate in this space. Flickr has some functionality in this tier, but it does not seem optimized for it. I frankly have no experience with it, so I can't judge how well it works.

Why these tiers?

I've spent considerable time laying out the above tiers because it may help bring structure to a very complicated discussion.

Let's address an easy one. I'm seeing quite a few people arguing that there's no need for a service like Flickr because they use Google Photos or iCloud.

The tier model illustrates that this comparison makes no sense. These services do completely different things. If you keep your photos private and do not share them with the world, Flickr is not for you, nor is any photo sharing service. Likewise, storage and price comparisons between personal storage and public photo sharing services make no sense either.

Unless...wait for it...you actually do use Flickr for storage (either privately or publicly). I lied about this being an easy one. **Misusing Flickr as a dumping ground**

for unfiltered big sets of photos happens. Combined with not paying a cent for this capability.

This is not on Flickr users, quite the opposite. They were actively invited to do so. Let's rewind how this came to be.

Golden years (2005–2010)

Flickr was acquired by Yahoo as far back as 2005. During the first 5 or so years, it was not completely ruined, which is the most positive outcome imaginable of anything under Yahoo control. In fact, an optimist may call these the **golden years of Flickr**. It's the period where Flickr established itself as part of the fabric of the internet. The Wikipedia of photography, so to speak.

This period aligns with a period in time where smartphones weren't really much of a thing yet. Photos would be taken using anything from compact cams to DSLRs, attracting an audience relatively serious about photography. Likewise, said photos would be consumed from desktops, with big screens to fully appreciate quality. And, desktops allow for deep engagement as they have usable keyboards.

All of these factors have created Flickr's legacy of being the go-to place for photo sharing (tier 2) and during that time, also exposure and community (tier 3).

Revolution years (2010–2016)

This period in time roughly aligns with two major tech revolutions: **the smartphone revolution and the rise of social networks**. Both have eaten the world. Not just photography services, every website. And not just websites, even our political system.

During these years, Yahoo was asleep and showed little sign of adjusting to this new reality. Which doesn't necessarily mean incompetence. A lot of companies struggle to this day to stay relevant in the new tech world order.

To Flickr and its users specifically, the net effect of these revolutions are a reduced inflow of new content (as some photography moves to smartphones/other services), reduced exposure (moved to social networks), and reduced community (also moved to social networks).

In other words, tier 3 took a heavy hit. Not just at Flickr. Everywhere.

Disaster years (2016–2018)

About 8 years into the smartphone era and with social network monopolies established, Yahoo management figured that these things may be here to last, and perhaps require some type of response.

We're now in the Marissa Mayer reign of Yahoo in its very last phase. Flickr was to be revitalized into relevance by means of two drastic actions:

A Shitty Redesign

(correction: the redesign discussed below was in 2013, my bad)

Flickr looked old so it had to be upgraded to a modern look. They used the battle-tested method of *Modern Design* to be absolutely sure that every single user hates it:

- Giant wasteful inspirational images
- Performance so bad it crashes browsers
- Destroying basic usability: breaking scrollbars and back buttons
- Removing several existing features people depended on

I could make that list a lot longer but the point stands, it was not well received. They did try to fix some of these issues later.

Free storage for all

Here we come to the nail in the coffin. The absurd decision was made to grant the free tier users of Flickr a whopping 1 TB(!) of storage. This is not some witty in hindsight remark, it's an absolute bad idea in a timeless sense. It makes no sense in any universe, ever.

First, it upsets and alienates existing Pro users. They paid for extra value that includes generous storage, and now see this value reduced. Some moved to the free tier as a result. Some stayed on Pro yet lost trust. Some simply left. Not only are Pro users a source of steady cash-flow, they are also ambassadors of your service. The

passionate, loyal group that also tend to contribute some of the best content. Upsetting Pros is an incredibly bad idea.

Second, it's an open invitation for anyone to use Flickr in a way it really should not be used: as a backup service. As explained in the tier model, your non-curated source material should be stored in tier 0 and tier 1: storage services. Flickr is not a storage service, it's a photo sharing site with community features. Encouraging the dumping of giant quantities of unfiltered content is bad for community, but also not financially sustainable.

Third, the math simply cannot work. Storage cost money, it never ever is free. Let's explore a few services to prove this point.

Apple. After selling a kidney to afford an Apple device, Apple grants you a "generous" 5 GB of free iCloud space. 1/200th of what Flickr was giving away **for free**. Apple has no 1 TB plan yet if we half the price of the 2 TB plan, we arrive at 5€ per month, or 60€ per year.

This doesn't get you a photo sharing site, it's personal storage only. Flickr's Pro plan currently cost 53.88€ per year. Less than Apple's offering which doesn't even include a photo community, but there's another stark difference: Flickr Pro does not offer 1 TB, it offers **unlimited** storage.

Google. This comparison is more complex. Google's free tier is 15 GB of free space. Three times more than Apple, yet still only 1/66th of what Flickr was giving away **for free**.

Google Photos is very generous to offer unlimited storage of reduced quality photos, yet it is no fair comparison to full quality storage as seen at Flickr. To store higher quality photos, the price for 1 TB is confusing to determine. In my country (Netherlands), it seems to be 9,99€ per month. Which is very costly, twice as expensive as Apple. However, there's also Google One, which shows 5€ per month.

So I'll leave it at that. It costs at least 5€ per month. Same situation. More expensive than Flickr Pro, which has no storage limitation at all. Also, you'll be at Google's mercy which means they will likely track the crap out of you and will probably shut

down or change terms twice in the time it takes you to read this article.

Microsoft. Even more complex as their OneDrive product is often bundled with Office. The free tier is 5 GB, equally tiny as Apple. 100 GB costs 5€ per month. After that, you're kind of forced to purchase Office 365. The 1 TB plan costs 7€ per month or 69€ per year.

A fitting lapse in judgement was when Microsoft announced in October 2014 that Office users would get **unlimited** storage as part of an Office subscription. It took them a year to learn how huge of a mistake this was, after which they brought back the 1 TB cap.

Did Yahoo take Microsoft's *lessons learned* into account? You know the answer.

Let's conclude this part. Some of the richest companies in the world do not go beyond giving away a mere 5 to 15 GB of free storage. For 1 TB of storage, they charge roughly 50–70€ per year.

These prices are normal, healthy market prices that I expect to approach the true cost of the service. If you think it's expensive, consider running such a service. Let's explore that fantasy:

Buy a 1 TB disk. Next buy at least one more, but probably 2 or 3 more for the sake of redundancy. Buy or rent multiple physical properties to place the disks. Next, lease the biggest network pipe you can afford to connect the locations. Write the management and fault recovery software to maintain integrity. Pay for an army of 100K+engineers to keep it working 24/7. Pay for energy, pay taxes. Finally, do all of the above dozens of times across the world to realize a global storage service. Next, produce documentation in every language, hire local accountants, marketeers and staff help desks.

Storage is expensive for good reasons, and naturally, lots of storage is lots of expensive. Flickr was giving away an insane amount of value for free, value that has very real world costs associated with them.

I suppose the theory at the time was that these costs could be recovered from ads. It

didn't work out, which is pretty much the story of Yahoo in general. The redesign and generous free tier was a desperate attempt to play with the big boys. Facebook, Instagram, Youtube and the like. It failed.

Barking and Trees

Some of you may be wondering if I'm ever going to make a point in this article. Yes, this would be where I make my first point. I needed to set up all of the above context and history to properly make it.

There's a lot of outrage from Flickr's user base regarding moves made by SmugMug since acquiring Flickr:

- Limiting the free tier to a 1,000 photos, actively deleting the surplus
- Sharply raising prices for Pro (which was a Yahoo action, for the record)
- This week's call for action

All of this user outrage is understandable. When somebody offers something for free and then retracts it, that's a very lame move. Deleting content is an internet sin. When somebody out of the blue doubles a price, it would usually be an instant cancel for me. There's reasons to be upset when a service is not trustworthy and constantly changing terms and conditions.

So the outrage is OK. It is as expected. My point, however, is that the outrage is targeted at exactly the wrong company, and often in unfair ways.

Without SmugMug, Flickr would no longer exist today. It would simply have been shutdown. So the reason we're even talking about Flickr at all here, is SmugMug. Remember that.

The user-hostile measures now being taken by SmugMug are to undo the damage done by Yahoo management. SmugMug inherited all of Flickr's problems, all its past poor decisions, and above all...a dysfunctional business model. Reportedly, it was losing **tens of millions** of dollars per year post acquisition.

So yes, measures are going to be painful to users. But as a user, which scenario do

you prefer:

- Instant and complete death (Verizon shutting down Flickr)
- Slow death (unsustainable business model)
- Taking measures to at least break-even

The only viable option is #3. Which is no fun option. But it is needed. At a personal level, you can decide to not accept these changes for whichever reason, but that doesn't counter the point that these measures are at least understandable, not optional, and largely the result of mismanagement by the **previous owner**.

Even if you would leave Flickr, there's still important reasons for Flickr to continue to exist without you using it. As said, it's part of the fabric of the internet. A lot of things would break and be lost without Flickr.

Yet the anger is there, and we need some place to direct it to. It's internet justice. So let's be very unproductive here and spend a moment to do just that.

The end of the Yahoo era was marked by the sale of all its assets, including Flickr, to Verizon. Marissa Mayer, and surely a few other executives in her team, landed a sweet deal by means of a golden parachute the size of which is **\$260 million**. Supplemented by a **\$23 million** severance payment, because when you fuck the world, it's best to do it properly.

Think about this amount of money. A fraction of it could turn around Flickr. It could be spent on talented engineers to build the next phase, fix bugs and work out a business model that does work.

Whilst it would be unfair to blame the failing of Yahoo products on its last management generation only, the exit phase is a good old money grab. An insane amount of money was rewarded to a tiny group of people. A group of people that ran failing products further into the ground, and got insanely rich as a reward.

Did any of them ever consider the cultural, educational and artistic value of Flickr? Its important role on the web? What would happen to employees? Did they spend

one second thinking about the impact on the user base?

No. Zero shits were given. They took everything for themselves, and the rest of us get nothing. Employees, users and the entirety of the internet can simply go fuck themselves.

Soon after, Verizon realized they bought junk and had to write off billions in the books. Verizon is an extraordinarily rich company. They rake in **10+ billion dollar of profit** in a single quarter. A single drop of that money (say 50 million) could revamp a service like Flickr. They wouldn't even notice, financially.

Did they show any interest in such a recovery? No, obviously. Verizon doesn't give a shit about Flickr, any of its employees, or any photographer. They don't even know what a photographer is. Similar to Yahoo, they too would have no problem destroying something part of the fabric of the internet.

Where am I going with this? The point here is that if you're outraged regarding Flickr's trajectory, it should be aimed at the responsible people and companies who really did the vast majority of the screwing of Flickr's service, user base and employees. Blaming SmugMug for this is not only unfair, it's also simply wrong. Be angry, but not at SmugMug.

For the record, targeting your outrage correctly at greedy corporate executives is equally pointless. They don't care. Nothing will be undone.

In defense of SmugMug

It's clear by now that I'm appearing as overly defensive of SmugMug or even explicitly pro-SmugMug (no pun intended). Yes I am, and this is strange given that:

- I don't use their service nor am I affiliated in any way
- I'm cynical enough to distrust most companies

So when I assume good intent of SmugMug, there's reasons for it. Let's explore those reasons.

It's a photography company

Yahoo was not a photography company. Yahoo was a disconnected portfolio of mediocre products existing for the sole purpose of milking ad revenue. They don't care what the product doing the milking is, for as long as it milks. Not even that was a requirement, how else can you explain Tumblr? Verizon clearly had even less interest in photographers.

SmugMug is a photography business. They exist since 2002. As a company exclusively focusing on photography and photographers. They pioneered reliable photo storage and sharing online. They know print. They know portfolios. They know photographers and they know what they need. They make money from photographers, not ads.

Stark difference. Flickr is now owned by a photography company. It has had clueless, greedy owners since 2005. No more. It is now owned by the most reputable photography business who has been in this game since 2002. That has to be a win. Flickr has been returned to photographers.

It's not part of the Tech Bubble

SmugMug is vastly different from the typical tech startup company. Startups generally follow this cycle:

- Founder has an idea or fever dream, based on imagined life experience that really came from video games and very sugary breakfasts.
- Venture capitalist has money like water. Nobody knows why in particular these 5 mammals sit on a 100 billion dollar pile of cash, whilst another pretty cool mammal, me, has nothing. I imagine they have dozens of taps in the office constantly pouring cash. The taps have been pouring for so long now, that nobody remembers where it really comes from. All they know is that the rooms constantly overflow, so they have no choice but to randomly give it away. Preferably to something that doesn't bring back even more money. That would make the situation worse. A thankless job. The heroes of our age.
- Founder manages to raise enough money to buy a country, solve world hunger or build one penis-shaped space ship. Balls were already secured during the seed round. Thus helping with the overflowing rooms of cash.

- Fund raising involves wearing a suit and saying the following words, in no particular order: *disrupt. block chain. reinvent. at scale. machine learning. AR.* And be in your 20s. Old farts be gone, go play Tetris.

- Example sales pitch:

Are you as frustrated as I am with tables? They don't scale. Bring extra friends to a party...they don't fucking fit. They were, like, where will we sit, bro? I don't know. It's, like, a table. Old tech. Have lots of mysterious items on a table and want to play a board game? No go. Doesn't fit.

We will disrupt and reinvent tables. By decentralizing them into the block chain, everybody will have their own table. You will sit at a table when you want. There's always room. With the power of machine learning, new tables will pop up as needed. It will also learn your preference for a round or square table. Using the AR Table Helmet™, users can see where their tables are, to prevent injury. Tables are subscription based, you can pause it should you want to stand for a while. We will never sell your table usage statistics to 3rd parties, because we care about you.

It usually doesn't have to be this long. They were already nodding along at *mysterious items on a table*. Everybody has that problem. Like, what are all these random things doing on my table? What is their purpose? Who the fuck bought all this shit? And why, when I clear them, do they reappear the next day?

- Another way to raise funding is to bring a pickup truck to the back door entrance of the VC office, on Thursday nights, around 10 PM. This is when the sweeping crew finishes clearing out the excess cash. They will even help to load it in. Be on time, otherwise it ends in the trash. That would be a waste. You'd have to wait another week.
- Founder builds Minimal Viable Product, an optimistic term for something barely working created from a fusion of smell, pizza and 20 hour work days.
- Hyper growth phase where the service is pushed at a loss.
- Large user base established (because it was free anyway).
- One or more additional funding rounds to repeat growth. Growth hackers are hired. Which never made sense to me. If something is growing, you don't want

to hack it. You want to leave it alone.

- Enormous user base established.
- Founder sells out.
- New owner is to figure out how to actually pay the bills and in the process will kill or corrupt the service, which may take years.
- Founder feels guilty about selling out and the service being corrupted. Founder is sad.
- Founder continues rest of life as a progressive beacon of supreme morality, a very rich one. Founder publishes book. You should buy this book to learn how you too can be a great human being.

The above cycle has an end game that we've seen play out in awful ways many times now. It turns users and customers into the product. Tracking will be added. Ads and business content will be added. Popular content will no longer be community controlled, it will be algorithm controlled. You won't even see most content anymore. You will hardly see feature improvements, new features or bug fixes because that's not what the engineers are working on. They are working on the algorithms. Endlessly refining and tuning it to optimize clicks, views, bounce rates and other measures of engagement.

Not just for this single service. An entire generation of engineering talent is wasted on getting you to click on things and to show ads. So that you can buy stupid shit that you don't need. By exploiting psychological weaknesses in the human mind. Poisoning our mind at planetary scale.

The model is exploitative and damaging in ways we don't even fully understand yet. Its impact goes far beyond mere commerce, it leaks into politics and the mindset of young people in very damaging ways.

Some may feel inspired by users who managed to bend this model into enormous personal success, the **influencers**. These users had a first mover advantage, luck, are great at sales, have a lot of friends, or simply do have great content. Likely a

combination of these factors.

However they came to power, they are not your ally. They are exactly the same as the parent company. They want you to subscribe to **their** content, to maximize views. After which they can push products you didn't ask for. They are the human version of the algorithm.

This is how you get the situation where for every single influencer having millions of subscribers, you may have ten thousand photographers of equal skill having almost none at all. Because these ten thousand photographers don't know how to play the game, are too late to the party, or are unwilling to play it. The game of exposure is seized by ad-optimizing algorithms and influencers snowballing into power, the rest can fight for crumbs.

All of the horror described above can be summed up as **the cost of free**. It's the attention economy. You do not get a seat at the attention table, you get to lick boots.

Where was I going with this? Oh yes. SmugMug is the exact opposite of all of the above. It does not have crazy founders seeking world domination. Their product is paid with money, in the same way you pay a bakery for bread. It is profitable and has been profitable, stable and healthy during its entire existence.

I don't know about you, but I have a thousand times more trust in the local bakery in town compared to the Big Tech scam. Or, to put it in other words: SmugMug is not evil. It has **proven** to not be evil for 17 years in a row. They are the good guys in photography.

So that is what has upset me most, users and media shitting all over SmugMug as if they are evil, clueless, and greedy. They are none of these things, all of these accusations apply to the previous owners of Flickr and most of Big Tech in general.

But I get it. Outrage is emotional. It's not necessarily accurate or just. That's why I'm writing this article, to try and paint a more complete and fair picture of the situation. I don't know if it matters.

They are courageous and competent

SmugMug is very good at what they do. It's what tends to happen when you focus on building a service for 17 years. Competence is yet another reason to have confidence. Competence matters.

Competence will be essential in mastering the gigantic task of revitalizing Flickr. I don't think people appreciate the scale and complexity of this task. In particular for a smallish company to take this on.

Imagine inheriting a 2005 code base, and tens of billions of photos. I'm amazed that they can even keep it online. Flickr users may take it for granted but surely it's an enormous headache. Not just that, in a single year they managed to implement dramatically complicated changes, such as moving this entire container ship to the cloud, and removing the Yahoo login dependency. Which did lead to a lot of issues, but some omelettes have to be broken I guess.

Let's also pause to think that the company took on the risk of footing the financial bill for as long as Flickr is making a loss. They could have not done that. They could have not acquired it, or just shut it down. You can't draw the greed card on SmugMug when Flickr makes a loss, it's an idiotic claim.

So to sum up this lengthy section, yes, I assume good intent of SmugMug, because:

- They are a photography company
- They are a sane and stable business, the opposite of Big Tech
- They are courageous and competent
- They rescued Flickr

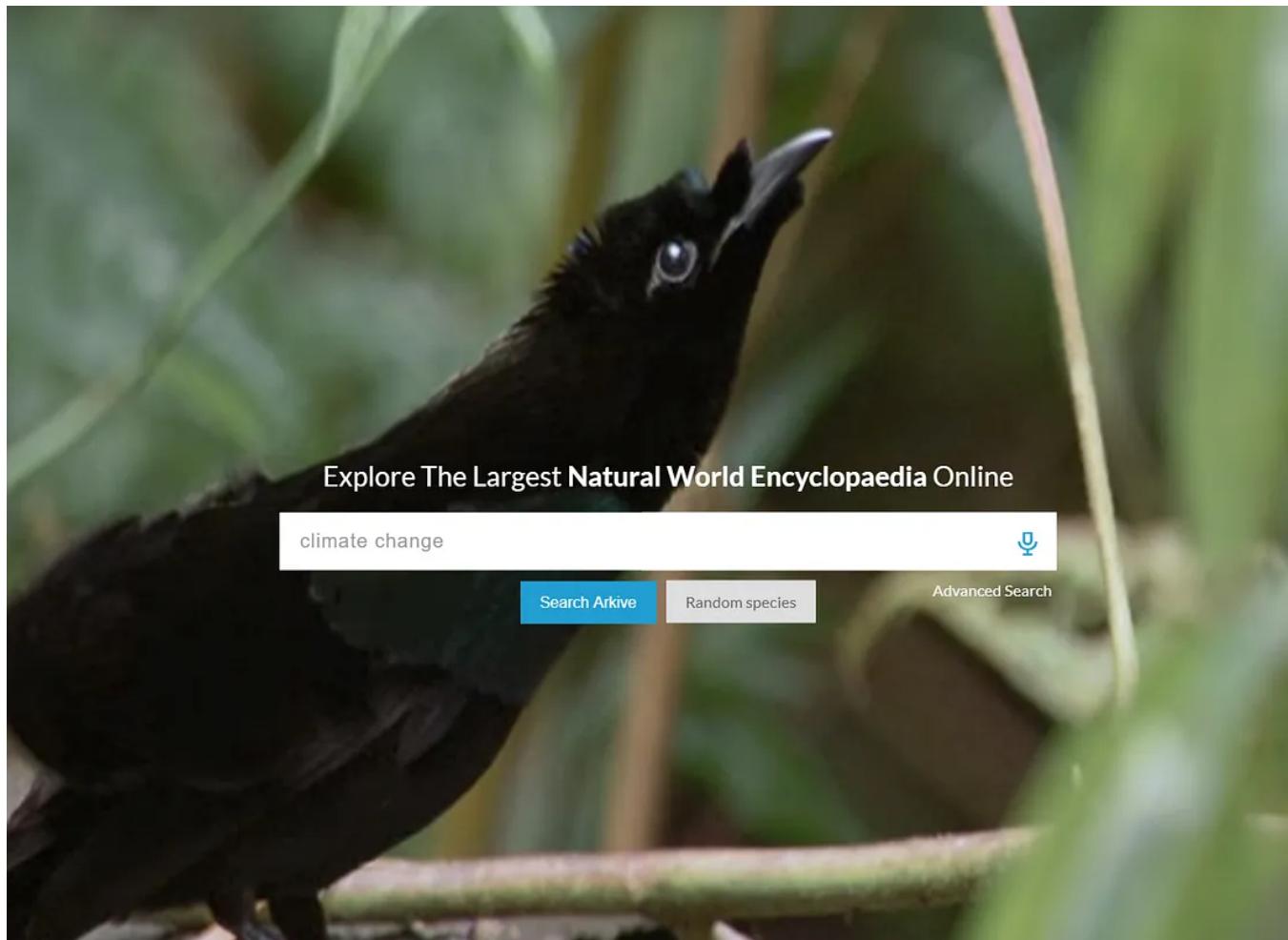
This is why I come to the defense of SmugMug. There are strong reasons to give them the benefit of the doubt. There are no reasons I know of to assume greed, incompetence or evil intent. When you make an accusation, you have to back it up. So do educate me if I'm overlooking something here.

Why does it matter anyway?

If you think we're done here, quite far from it. At a personal level, you may not care

much about the fate of Flickr, even more so if you're not a user or have left the community. It may have no personal value to you or not anymore.

In this section I will make an attempt to change your mind. The death of a community you don't even use seems like a very abstract concept. So let's discuss a very real example to understand what it looks like. I'll use the example of [Arkive.org](#).



Have a good look at the above screenshot where it proudly declares itself the largest Natural World Encyclopedia. It was taken one month before its complete shutdown, in February 2019.

Arkive.org had a collection of 100,000+ images spanning 16,000 species. Not just snapshots, no, material produced by professional wildlife photographers and film makers. It also had a lot of extra educational material, and the entire thing was backed morally by wildlife legend Sir David Attenborough himself.

It is now dead. Gone. Wiped from existence. You can access none of its content and all effort hundreds of people spent on curating it for years, is wasted.

What happened? No business plan. Access was free and there were no ads. They tried donations. Check out this stat: **85 out of 5.6 million donated**. That's **0.0015%**. Take this to heart as another brutal lesson why free does not scale, is unsustainable, and donations don't work either.

Even if you don't specifically care for this topic (wildlife) yourself, I hope you agree that this is a bad thing. A very bad thing. The world has lost an amazing resource of high quality content hundreds of people have expertly produced and curated. The joy, educational value and scientific value of this content has been lost like it never happened.

With this uncomfortable up-close encounter of a community's death in mind, realize that the situation is even more sad when you consider that 100,000 images is absolute peanuts.

On Instagram, on any given day, a **100 million+** new images are uploaded. A mind blowing stat. The entirety of former Arkive.org is uploaded **one thousand times per day. Every day.**

On Flickr, this single group has over 6 million images. Arguably an extreme example, yet this single group has 60 times more images than all of former Arkive.org combined.

So no, 100K images is not big. It's small. Yet just losing this set already is a big loss. You can see where I'm going with this. We're now going to scale up the potential loss to Flickr's size. Which is **tens of billions** of images. If we take the very conservative number of 20 billion images, this amounts to a maximum potential loss of **200,000 times** the size of Arkive.org. It could be twice more. I don't know what tens of billions means. Who talks like that anyway?

"Honey, when you're at the store, can you bring tens of bananas?"

"Tens? How much is that? 20? 90? How many should I get?"

"I already said TENS! Why won't you ever listen to me???"

You could make some counter points here. Not all images are of equal value or worth preserving. You can also point out that a portion of this giant legacy could move to another service, and be preserved that way. Fair points, but it doesn't take away the fact that the potential loss is giant. And with loss I mean a loss of cultural, inspirational, educational and entertainment value. Not for you personally, for **all of us.**

Arkive.org was a loss, I hope you agree. A loss 100,000 times that is a **catastrophe**. And no, there really isn't any other service to move billions of images to. I challenge you to name one.

As it's hard to grasp giant numbers, let's once again dig into an example of the type of hidden jewels Flickr's legacy contains.

The example I will use is of a personal role model, legendary macro photographer [Andreas Kay](#). Much to my horror, he passed away earlier this year. Which is not my reason to use this example, it quite simply is the best example I know of to demonstrate Flickr's value.

Andreas Kay

[Edit description](#)

www.flickr.com

Andreas spent years of his life in one of the most bio-diverse regions on the planet (Ecuador) to document the absurdly gorgeous, weird and diverse arthropods found there. And he has done so at a technical quality level very few people can match, if any.

The resulting giant set is so overwhelmingly gorgeous and intriguing that even common folks and insect haters pause and just sit in wonder. The alien world of Avatar seems pretty lame when gazing at these very real tropical insects. The set is as powerful as to inspire young people to be interested in this field. When searching for these little-documented species, you end up at Andreas' place. Because he

pioneered it. It has tremendous scientific value.

Flickr is full of these gems. Surely it's also full of photos of lesser value. Nobody can comprehend tens of billions of images, so nobody will have any idea how much of it is valuable, and how much of it is not. But I'd say it's safe to conclude that a lot of value is locked up in Flickr's enormous content base. Which is at risk in the worst case scenario.

I'd like to take a moment to discuss Andreas' strategy, as it's very educational. To him, Flickr was his photography home. Meaning, the place to publicly share his entire curated set, and to do so in optimal quality. This is tier 2, discussed earlier.

As his followers count suggests (3.8K), Flickr failed to deliver tier 3 (exposure and community). He found community and exposure lacking at Flickr. 3.8K followers for a man of his skill and potential is obscenely low. I've seen wildlife photographers at Instagram with 1M+ followers where their content may be good, yet several levels below Andreas' work.

I am deeply disturbed by this reality. It effectively means that exposure is not awarded by means of quality, skill, talent, or original content. It's not based on merit. Because the content isn't seen. The content did not compete and then lost against better content. No, the content **wasn't seen at all**.

Realizing this, Andreas took the strategy of cross posting. He continued to call Flickr his home base yet posted highlights of his content across services known for higher engagement, such as Facebook groups, Youtube, and Twitter. Content posted there was typically of a lower technical quality as most of these services treat photos very poorly, but one has little choice in the matter.

Let this situation sink in for a moment. A photographer with unique pioneering content of supreme quality, almost universally interesting and intriguing...struggled to get healthy and fair levels of exposure and community value. What does that mean for photographers of lesser talent, which is pretty much everybody?

It means you're competing for crumbs.

Anyway, the bottom line of this section was to convince you that a loss of content is very sad. And that a Flickr-sized shutdown would be a catastrophic loss. Even if it doesn't affect you directly and personally.

When you never read a book in your life, you should not opt for the destruction of all libraries. Personal value and community value (or even humanity value) should not be confused.

Let's just go somewhere else

In this section, we're going to explore a few alternatives to Flickr. There's no shortage of places to share photos so this section will not even try to be complete. It's very well possible that you've found an awesome place not covered here. I'm just going to discuss a few candidate that come to mind.

Instagram

Let's get to the heart of the matter. We've established that tier 2 services like Flickr are great at publishing photos, making them available long term and in optimal quality. Next, many photographers cross post to high engagement platforms to get their exposure and community value.

Knowing this, why can't we just move to such a high engagement platform altogether, getting both tier 2 and tier 3 value from a single service?

You most certainly can, and you can't argue with stats. Well, you can. That's exactly what I'll do.

First, Instagram is not a photography community, it's a social network where photographers also happen to post. This means you're in the same space as people posting photos of their meals. Which doesn't have to be an issue, but it's a difference compared to a dedicated photography community. The reason that Instagram has such mind blowing stats is not because every photographer in the world has moved there and is constantly posting quality content. A 100M+ images are posted every day because millions of people are sharing their smartphone camera roll, documenting everything happening to them, which usually is nothing. It's a sea of social snap sharing where photographers may also participate.

Second, Instagram is a very poor tier 2 service. It's a mobile-only walled garden. It has almost zero features. Above all, it doesn't even support feature #1: displaying a photo. Their web UI that was added as an afterthought displays a photo at about 500 pixels. *What is this, a photography site for ants!?* You can't even upload a photo from the web, unless you use a hack.

This is intentional, and by design. Instagram is a mobile app. Its brilliance is in its minimalist design and feature set. Smartphones are poor engagement devices, therefore things have to be extremely simple, and thus limited, in order to make it work for a large audience.

Smartphone-only photographers will be fine with this. To them, the smartphone is the primary device. They use it end-to-end. They create, consume, and engage on smartphones only.

So you can use a high engagement platform like Instagram as both tier 2 and tier 3, but I'd argue tier 2 functionality is extremely lacking.

Third, we come to the depressing topic of hollow success. Overestimating the value of engagement metrics. Photographers may try to work the numbers to gain exposure. Let's imagine some mediocre success where we managed to secure 5,000 followers, which was once the entire human population.

A big piece of your first set of followers is due to Facebook owning the social graph. Regardless of your photography, Instagram will push your account into the faces of your existing network. This is how you can get a few hundred followers without posting anything at all. This is also how a typical Instagram user gets to follow hundreds of users. They didn't search or discover anything. Other accounts are recommended by means of the social graph and surely some very complicated algorithm.

But anyway, you have 5K followers. You post something. How many of your 5K followers will actually see what you posted is now anyone's guess. The algorithm decides. The process is also time sensitive. Timelines are like rivers, they flow by.

Nobody but Facebook knows how many people see your post. My estimate is that 1K people will see it. I expect it is far less, but this article is already depressing enough.

Well, no. Sorry, but it gets worse. 1K people will see your post. Let's visualize the physical process of what this means. They are on their smartphone, scrolling through Instagram. Perhaps at home on the couch with the TV in the background, distracted whilst waiting for the bus and trying to kill some time, or the ultimate smartphone use case: whilst taking a giant dump.

Scrolling through an endless timeline like a conveyor belt, they are dodging noise. Until a gem passes by: **your photo**. After spending about 1 sec looking at it, the user will now engage in the physical process of lifting a finger and tapping. **Like!** We're not sure whether they really like the photo or why, or whether they just like you. We will never know. A like is a like. They may like 50 other things in a single session. A like feels nice. It's better than no like. Perhaps out of the 1K people seeing your photo, a 100 like it. Which is probably optimistic.

In fact, it could also have been a bot. Or one of those users randomly liking things baiting you to follow them. You don't know if it's a genuine like, you don't know if its real. If its true that we likely live in a simulation, I don't even know if **you** are real. I know I'm real, I'm sure of it. But what about you?

Just what I thought...silence. *Typical.*

Out of the 100 liking your photo, some may like it so much as to bother actually commenting on it:

- Nice pic!
- Nice click! (Indian version of Nice pic)
- +1
- +10
- +17 (?)

-  (redundant like in comment)
- You have such a great camera (the perfect insult)
- Россия отличная (Russia is great)
- 中国更好 (China better)
- Nice photo, but it looks like you need SEO help. I know a company...
- Hey hottie. Wink.

Out of a 100 liking a photo, let's imagine 10 people doing this. The point of this imaginative scenario is to demonstrate the inflated perceived value of having 5K followers:

- Most will not see your content
- Those that see it, see it as part of a very crowded timeline
- Engagement is thin: likes and shallow comments

You can think of it as a funnel. You start with a wide point (5K) and at the end you got...nothing, really. In particular the thing you want, meaning and deep engagement, is a rarity.

This is nobody's fault. It's a result of information overload and smartphones not being suitable for deep engagement. It's not an Instagram-only problem, it's a problem in every crowded space.

My point: whilst Instagram is much better at exposure and engagement compared to Flickr, you should not overestimate this engagement value. It's pretty thin and shallow. Unless you make it big and go beyond some tipping point.

I'd like to add a personal example from another platform. This platform. Medium. My blog is incredibly unsuccessful. And rightfully so. I barely blog anymore and don't find it very important. I do absolutely nothing to promote it. I'm fine by all of this. The rare article that I publish will get almost no readers at all, I'm talking

dozens. I'm pretty much talking to myself here. On the upside, I tend to agree with a lot of things written here.

Imagine my surprise when last year I accidentally produced a hit article that got 100K+ views. It got this readership because it got linked to from Twitter. Why? Because it was an outrage article that heavily criticized Big Tech. Twitter is optimized for outrage. Outrage creates engagement.

Quality does not. I have articles that are deeper, better, more constructive, more useful. They get no readers. It's not that people don't like these articles. We don't know if they do, because they don't see them.

Anyway, for somebody not even trying, a 100K views is a major win, right? Let's see what I have to show for this success:

- Only 25% actually bothered to read it. I can tell, so keep reading friend!
- Not a single insightful comment was posted. Most missed the point entirely. Because they didn't read it.
- It did not lead to an influx of new followers

In other words, I have nothing of value to show for 100K views. I'm not bitter about it at all, like I said, I don't care about my blog. I'm glad I experienced this deception, it has been very educational. It cements my opinion that a lot of this exposure value is very hollow, thin and lacking meaning.

Know who else discovered this? Businesses. During *Peak Facebook*, many considered that if all the people are at Facebook, let's just set up camp there. And soon found out that real world fan page reach is low and continuously getting lower, unless you go for the paid *boost* option. Not only is reach low, so are conversions.

Conclusion: exposure is not what you think it is.

What to do with this reality check? It depends. If photography is your business, you probably should keep trying, you can't afford not to. If you're an enthusiast, you can decide for yourself whether it is worthwhile.

500px

A few years ago, I was happily surprised with the arrival of 500px. It looked like Flickr with a more modern UI. Another exciting thing in new and fresh communities is the *first mover effect*. Photographers usually locked out of exposure suddenly have an awesome experience: people are actually seeing your photos, liking it, and commenting on it. For a brief moment in time, the community mechanism seems healthy, it seems to actually work.

Yet time marches on. As the place gets more crowded an inevitable elite emerges that dominates exposure. A clever dpreview forum user called it the **Snowy Owl effect**. The guy was fuming that if he ever sees a Snowy Owl on the homepage again, he'd have a mental breakdown.

He's referring to a narrow type of content continuously dominating the top spots:

- As said, the Snowy Owl itself.
- Nudity. From the same 3 photographers. There's worse things in life than to look at naked women, but I'm not seeing anybody ask questions about the lighting setup or make-up strategy, so I think it's safe to say that 50% of the homepage is hormone-driven.
- Landscape paintings. This is the phenomenon where a landscape photographer captures a great scene (say the Northern lights). Next, a 100 luminosity masking layers are added in Photoshop to fine-tune shadows and highlights using a paint brush. The result is arguably gorgeous, and perfect. Also, none of it actually happened.

So, this type of content consistently wins at 500px. **Do they though?** It's easy to check. Photos winning these popular spots pretty consistently get about 20K views. I find that shockingly low. 20K views only for "winning" from the entire community? It seems to me that 500px isn't better at exposure and community compared to Flickr.

It's easy to see why. **Exposure is down across the web.** Exposure (user attention) is

monopolized by Big Tech. Every other service gets the remaining crumbs. It doesn't matter where you flee to. It's everywhere.

There's more. Just like Flickr, 500px struggles with the free tier. Today, you can only upload 7 photos per week as a free user. A pretty tight restriction. Perhaps they do this because they rightfully conclude that there is no such thing as free storage. Also, it's a push to their paid memberships. This push is so aggressive and all over the UX that you can no longer consider this an open community for photography in a way that Flickr is. 500px is about selling and sub licensing your photos.

There's far deeper concerns. 500px is now under Chinese ownership, and this new reign has resulted in strange things happening:

- Tariff changes (taking a 70% cut of sales instead of 30%)
- The deletion of 1M+ Creative Commons photos (miraculously saved by the awesome people of archive.org)
- Reliability problems, the entire service simply being unavailable
- Mysterious jumps and falls in likes and followers

I don't know how much of this is true, I largely base this on public news articles and forum users. From the outside, it doesn't look good. Maybe it's a good platform to sell photos, but probably not, given this epic comment:

"I got 0.25\$ for my photo...almost enough to buy a rope".

Unsplash

Unsplash doesn't really belong in this list. For the simple reason that Unsplash is about Creative Commons photos only. Most photographers will want to keep their copyright.

Well, not really Creative Commons. Unsplash realized after a while that Creative Commons means anybody could simply scrape or download every single photo from their service, and then host it somewhere else. So they invented their own license that won't allow this. You can get photos free of most rights, but when you do, you're

supposed to get them from Unsplash.

The mental gymnastics involved are hilarious. Psychobabble about setting free photographers and photos only to realize later that you don't really like free if it doesn't serve you. It's like quantum theory. Being in multiple states at once.

Another oversight is privacy. When you make a photo of another human being and then share it free of rights for anybody to use as they see fit, you can't actually do that. It requires consent of the model, called a Model Release, at least in Europe.

Which is not to dismiss Unsplash as a whole. It's a spectacular success seemingly coming out of nowhere. It is the go-to platform for free high quality images, and their UX is great.

For photographers, it can be a great exposure tool. It won't be your photography home (tier 2), yet you can give away a subset of your images to gain exposure. As to whether this actually works, I don't know.

My final thought regarding Unsplash concerns their business model. My understanding is that they used to fund Unsplash for it bringing valuable referrals to their parent company, Crew. Which no longer exists.

The latest news on their business model is almost 2 years old. A whole lot of words that can be summed up as: they raised \$7 million, and something with block chain. It's all very confusing:

“...to build a novel way to derive value for photography while retaining the open, free-to-use principles that make Unsplash what it is.”

The simple question as to who pays what and whom is left unanswered. The partner is equally vague. He promised to do follow-up posts about the specifics. Two years ago. There are no follow-up posts.

So I guess they're still working on it. Perhaps we truly are moments away from a revolution in photography. I don't know, there's no way to tell. But I do know this: when users do not have to pay, they generally won't. They won't donate and they

won't push some micro payment button if they don't have to. Not at scale.

I hope I'm very wrong. Post revolution, I want you to come here and comment on how wrong I was. I'd like that. Because I like to be wrong about this one.

In any case, a lot is at stake in the world of free photos. In particular the cover photo of many PowerPoint decks.

Others

As said, there's many other places to share photos that I did not mention. In general though, I would like to generalize that the grass does not seem that much greener on the other side. In particular, every photo sharing community faces the same challenges:

- Failing at tier 3 (exposure). It seems that no matter where you go, any non-social network photo community struggles. As said earlier, this is because of Big Tech monopolizing user attention, the rest gets crumbs. Even if you win, you don't win much. If you think that Flickr fails at this, know that every other community is in the same boat. It's not a Flickr problem, it's worldwide problem spanning the entire internet.
- Struggling with the free tier. Most alternatives have caps on free usage. It's not uniquely a Flickr limitation. Alternatives that do have free unlimited usage are not sustainable in the long run.
- The Pro value proposition. Although I did not cover this extensively in this article, alternatives to Flickr and SmugMug are equally priced or more expensive. They aren't better or cheaper.

Which brings me to this conclusion: where seemingly there's an endless array of Flickr alternatives to flee to, I openly question as to whether that is true, or whether they are structurally better in the long run.

What to do as a photographer?

A complicated question, to which I'll give just my opinion.

If you're a professional photographer that needs to get paid, you're stuck with all of

the above. You will need to play the exposure game across services, because you can't afford not to. Or maybe not. Maybe you don't need online exposure because you monetized in other ways, by means of photo shoots, workshops, the like.

For amateurs and enthusiasts, my personal advise is as follows. Forget about all of the above and first and foremost return to enjoy your hobby. Enjoy photography itself as well as your topics, be they a landscape, a model or a freaky insect. Or even a Snowy Owl. This is your hobby and you should learn to enjoy it even if not a single other human being notices. Start with this. Your joy and self worth should not depend on others.

I'm serious. Look at people having other hobbies. Reading, hiking, tennis, wood crafts, brewing beer, collecting stamps, watching movies or playing Tetris...none of these people spend hours per day seeking validation as to whether their hobby is worthwhile or has meaning. It has meaning because it is your time and you enjoy doing it. None of them determine meaning based on others as if they are monitoring a stock market of self worth.

If it requires constant validation for you to enjoy photography or your topics, you do not enjoy photography in itself. Wrong hobby. I enjoy photography for the sake of photography. I enjoy my topics even more.

Yet, I'm only human. I like it when people appreciate the result of my hobby. I prefer 100 likes over 0 likes. But I do not **require** it.

Here's somebody sharing this mindset, but with actual skill:

Galleries

[Edit description](#)

rainforests.smugmug.com

You should probably take an hour or so to appreciate the above work. It beats anything you were going to watch on Netflix. There are very few zoologists who also are pro-level photographers. This man is best-in-class. The very best in his field.

There's a good chance you have never heard of him. If there was any justice in "exposure", this man would dominate every single photography community. Instead, he is nowhere to be found. Why? Because he's sleeping in his hammock in some far away jungle. He doesn't need your validation.

Should you want to appreciate this man though, buy his prints. I recommend to spend 100\$, if you can afford to. You'd have awesome prints. And it comes with priceless smug potential. When friends come over, they will be like: WOW! What the hell is that!?

"Well...*puts on coffee pot*...have a seat".

It will also sustain him for **one month**. Yes, really. He spends one month in a jungle based on a 100\$ budget. Marissa Mayer types wouldn't even pick up a 100\$ from the streets. It would sustain them for 3 seconds. You pick whom to support. When you support **free**, you support billionaires. When you pay, you support sane businesses and real creators. **Start paying for things that cost money**. If you can't afford to, use fewer things, which generally make you happier anyway.

Anyway, you may still want to share your work and find some community. Not to validate yourself, instead to enjoy your hobby even more by connecting with peers. Find a place that is small yet deep, and intimate. Find peers that really do care about your work. Focus on meaning and deep engagement, not quantity and shallow engagement.

Even if you're a great photographer, most people do not care about your photography or about photography in general. I have a cousin. He devotes his life to fishing. I don't give a shit about fishing. He doesn't give a shit about photography. He cannot get me to care about fishing. I cannot get him to care about photography. **That's fine.**

By competing in a giant open space (social networks), you compete in a space where for the most part, people don't care about photography in particular. You're simply in the wrong place for deep engagement and meaning.

Go to a place where people **do** care. Go to your true peers. Go there.

What should SmugMug do?

Hard to believe, but we're now in the final section of this article. In this final part, I'm going to share some thoughts on the resurrection part of Flickr, the painful phase it currently is in. Which I don't think is painful at all, instead exciting.

This section is probably needless because I believe SmugMug is competent and level-headed. They have data I don't have, and will have a far better idea as to what its next steps should be.

However, this is my blog and I can write whatever I want. Example: China is the best country. See? No censorship.

Here goes...

Stop the bleeding

I believe that this week's warning that Flickr is currently not financially sustainable has been grossly misinterpreted. It has been interpreted as if the very end of Flickr as a whole is near, possibly triggering an exodus in itself.

I believe this to be false, and not the intention of the message. I believe I saw in some Twitter reply the CEO claiming that no such scenario will happen. **Flickr will not be shutdown.** Not ever. Additional measures may be needed, some painful, but it will not be shutdown. Fake news.

Clear up this confusion. Commit and say it aloud. Say on the record that Flickr will not shut down and put SmugMug's reputation behind it. Flickr's existence will be as stable as the 17 years of SmugMug.

Compete in the right space

You cannot compete against social networks and mobile apps like Instagram. You don't have the cash, social graph, or ad tech. Focus on a photographers audience, not a mainstream audience. No mainstream audience will regularly check Flickr, that boat has sailed.

Focus on what nobody thinks is cool: desktops. Leverage these users. Make it the best desktop experience of any photography website. Make it high quality, smooth and advanced. Forget mobile minimalism, it sucks on desktops. Let them call you a Boomer and wear it with pride.

You **can** compete with Big Tech. Big Tech is about quantity, noise, speed, cheap and meaningless. **Human tech** is about quality, depth, meaning and deep community.

The big cleanup

Clean up bots and spam. But also, clean up inactive areas and low value content. Put it on low cost storage, keep it yet hide it from view, or in the worst case...delete. But probably archive.

Not only a cost saving, also a signal that the community is still there. It's a variant of the Empty Restaurant effect. When a new restaurant opens, nobody will eat there if it's empty. So restaurant owners seat their family and friends and strategically place them near the window as if regular customers. You'd see them from the street, consider that this new place is booming, and go eat there.

The opposite can also happen. A restaurant full of corpses. You could consider eating there due to reduced wait times, but it's not great. Stiff atmosphere. So, hide the corpses. Put them in the freezer or something. Be careful about which freezer, given the still living dining guests.

After the cleanup, things may have scaled down, yet not really. At Flickr's size, if 80% of groups are dead, the remaining 20% are still too many for any single user to comprehend. It will not look small, it will still look huge. Make the place appear alive by hiding things that are not.

Unlock the gems

As demonstrated earlier, Flickr is full of gems of artistic, cultural and educational value. Yet it's currently very hard to discover them. This is arguably a difficult problem to solve, but worthwhile to improve upon. Showcasing hidden value may require a combination of algorithm, curation and moderation. Likewise, the uneven distribution problem (Snowy Owl) is worthwhile to address.

I have advanced ideas in this space, which I'll share in return for 1 billion dollar. A backup plan in case my table startup fails.

Leverage Loyalists

Every (photo) community seems to have a specific distribution of user types:

- Loyalists (powerful minority)
- Middle class (larger group of regular contributors)
- Everyone else (lurkers and infrequent contributors)

The percentages may vary per community, but this section is about the **Loyalists**. Loyalists are a small hardcore group that make an unnaturally large contribution to the place. They may be Pro users or very active enthusiasts. Loyalists may visit and contribute every day, some even for hours on end.

Communities live by this group. Very brutally put, they can almost be considered unpaid labor. They are living evidence of the most powerful alliance known to mankind: the perfect alignment of personal and shared interests. Which achieves miracles.

Loyalists have made your place their home. They moved in. They have invested (time, money, both) and therefore have a vested interest in the continued existence and health of the place. They've also made friends with other loyalists, a spontaneous social network formed. Together, they pretty much run the place.

Loyalists are a power to leverage. They contribute with money, time, and do dirty work for free that is hard to scale yourself: removing spam, guiding new users, building connections, enforcing rules, curating content and even recruiting new members.

Therefore treat them like they are your employees. Listen to them, praise them and take them serious. They are the key to a healthy community. When they ask for 5 features, give them 1, and explain why the other 4 cannot be done. They will understand and even appreciate such honest dialogue. Share your road map with

them. Treat them as insiders.

Some companies treat their loyalists like shit. An example of that is StackOverflow. They either ignore loyalists or directly spit them in the face (I'm referring to the unjust firing of a moderator and then to sell her out to the press).

There was a revolt, and as a result, some left. But most did not. In the radio silence that followed, those that stayed were practically begging for some more spit, it would be better than this radio silence.

The psychology of this is absolutely fascinating. They are essentially doing free work for a company that actively mistreats them. And not the type of work that is fun, it's more like cleaning toilets. Why would you possibly continue to do that? Why not just stop, and leave?

Because of several reasons:

- Because they truly care a lot about the community, even if the company behind it does not.
- Because this is their home, and their daily routine
- Because their friends are there
- Because they don't know where else to go
- For some...because they achieved status and recognition, and they don't want to lose it.

This just shows how powerful loyalty can be. But everything has its limits, so don't do this. Treat them like gold, and magic will happen.

Tiered pricing

This is an idea to combat the steep difference between a free account and a paid account. Perhaps more tiers can be added in between.

To show you how effective this can be: I care very little about the contents of my smartphone. So as I was hitting my GB limit, approaching the paid tier, my initial

plan was to just clean up stuff, or to move it elsewhere.

But then I noticed that the next tier of storage was only 1\$ per month. My willingness to pay spiked because this way I could avoid doing work. And paying was so easy, so I did.

I wouldn't have paid if the next tier was 5\$ or 10\$ per month. I think there's a lesson to be learned here.

Feature pricing

I borrowed this idea from games. Recently, I was playing Battlefield V. Upon starting the game, they advertised a new uniform. It looked like a half-burned uniform, glowing from fire.

I don't care what my character looks like in the game, so no way I'm buying it. In fact, I was cringing about the whole thing. Who would possibly pay for such a thing?

About half the players in the next round of conquest, it turned out. Burning uniforms everywhere. This is pretty much how most modern games are funded.

A similar thing can be experimented with at Flickr. Charge 1\$ for access to dark mode. 2\$ for a special type of avatar or profile. Prices have to be low to trigger an impulse buy. Charges are one-time, lowering the barrier even more.

Not only a potential source of income, it also creates new loyalists. They will want to stay, given their investments.

Flickr 2020-2030

It is time to wrap this up. You cannot achieve if you cannot dream, so let's envision the future:

Big Tech scum is in jail or has escaped to Mars, busy ruining a ruined planet.

Back on Earth, Flickr is mankind's greatest source of imagery. It is and always will be, it's as reliable as the sun rising and setting.

Upon opening its homepage, any world citizen gets a fantastic dose of inspiration

and thrill. Unlike the news or social networks, a visit makes one happy and hopeful. Refreshed, not depressed.

There is no end to this source of joy. Advanced mechanisms reliably deliver an endless supply of diverse greatness in fair and democratic ways.

There are no ads, tracking or distractions and everybody gets a chance to participate. Amateurs, pros, researchers, scientists and artists see Flickr as the photography backbone of the internet.

No government can block it, no bad actor can ruin it.

There are awesome communities for every niche, where friendly peers welcome and guide you. They do not compete with you, they want you to collaborate with them. There are no likes, there are no status hoarders. There is meaning.

Flickr employees are so proud that they get teary, being at the steering wheel of greatness at planetary scale.

Rise once more.



Photography



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Web guy. Amateur wildlife photographer. Founder of jungledragon.com.



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Jean-Christophe Yacono

Dec 31, 2019



"When you support free, you support billionaires. When you pay, you support sane businesses and real creators."

That's my sentence of the day ;) Thank you for your article and voice.



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Christine Young

Dec 26, 2019



Thanks so much for sharing your knowledge and thoughts on this subject, Ferdy. You have educated and inspired me!



8



1 reply

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Stephen Coles

Dec 28, 2019



This is so beautiful, Ferdy. Thank you! As a Flickr user for over 15 years, and one of the loyalists you describe above, so much of what you wrote strikes directly at the heart. In particular, the points about deep

engagement and community ring very... [more](#)

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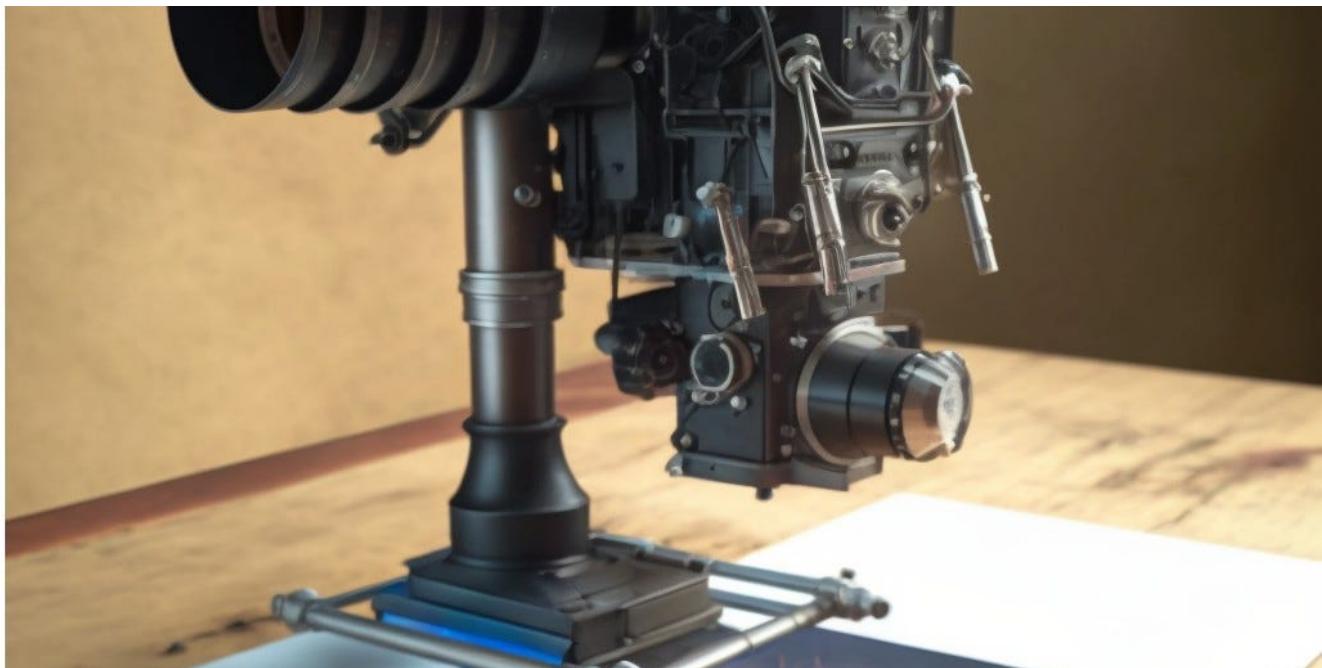
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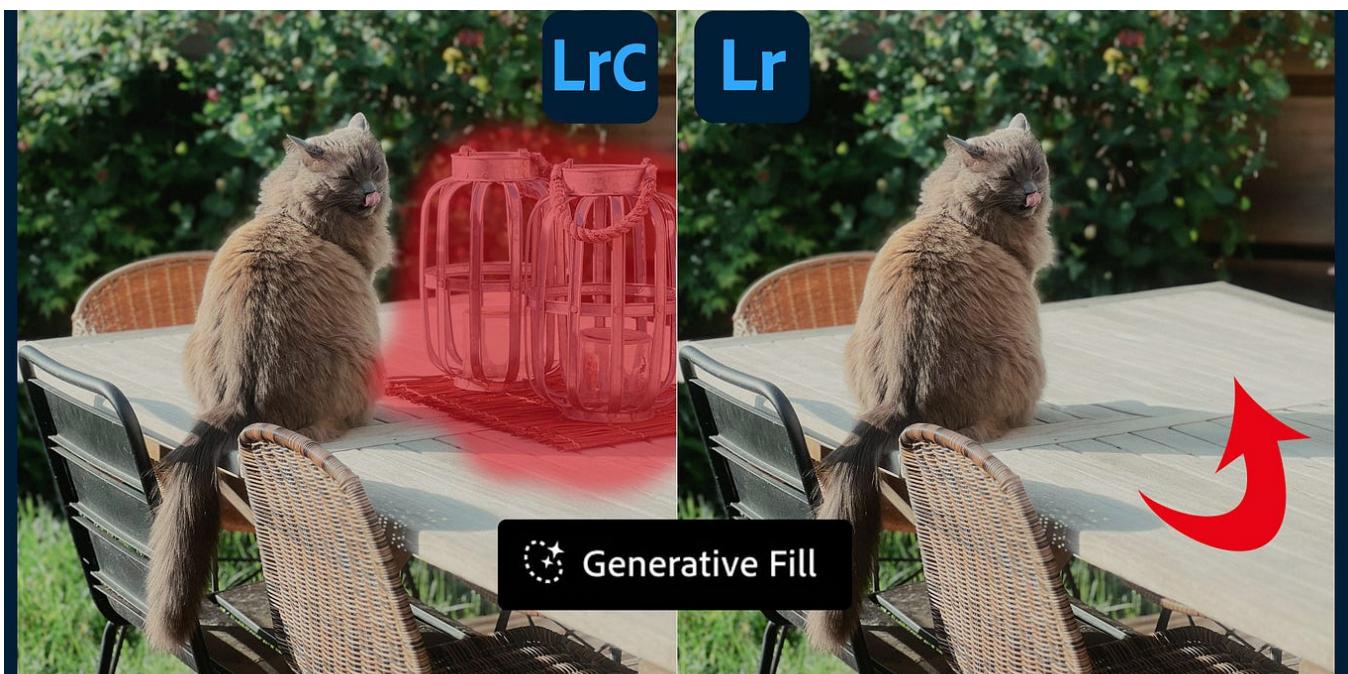
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