Thousands of College Kids Are Powering a Clickbait Empire

How a 29-year-old built Odyssey, a vast network of college students happy to fuel multi-million dollar marketing campaigns for peanuts.

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In the spring of 2015, the internet briefly became obsessed with the virility of the “dadbod.” For a moment, the merits of the pudgy-middled male physique seemed to outweigh a six pack or chiseled biceps. That year, the Collins English Dictionary added the term “dadbod” to its list of new words. “Hail to the average man,” the fad seemed to suggest. Like all short-lived, much-loved internet phenomenon, the dadbod had to start somewhere, and in this case, it started as a story published by a 19-year-old college student, posted to an online platform called Odyssey.

Odyssey began as a 16-page tabloid-sized weekly, distributed at fraternities and sororities—first at Indiana State University, then at a handful of Greek houses across college campuses. It was first conceived in 2010 by Evan Burns and Adrian France—then Indiana State seniors—as a newspaper covering Greek life. By 2014, Burns was at the helm as CEO and Odyssey’s ambitions had shifted: It was now a sprawling online repository of writing. Today, Odyssey is an expansive platform with 15,000 creators, most of them college students across US campuses. Since its launch, it’s raised $32 million of backing by investors. Burns believes Odyssey could become the Facebook or Instagram of user-generated stories. “We’ve thought about our growth strategy as creating communities rather than building a blog platform,” he says.

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For a website most people have never heard of, Odyssey has managed to rank up a substantial following, averaging 30 million unique views a month. More impressively, those views result from people—many of them Odyssey contributors—posting and sharing Odyssey stories across social media, unprompted by the site. That traffic is fueled by a massive amount of content. According to Odyssey, most stories average between 1,750 and 2,500 reads per month, a figure that lumps together those few pieces that go viral with the majority, which sometimes get only a handful of shares.

Of the half dozen former and current Odyssey contributors Backchannel spoke with, perceptions of the site’s reputation varied. “Some people
feel it’s all clickbait and copy-paste articles, and others feel they can really express themselves there,” says Tyler Hoskins, a sophomore at Providence College who has been writing for Odyssey since the start of the school year.

Yet when Burns and France launched Odyssey as a newspaper back in 2010, they had big ideas. They wanted to scale what they were doing into a social network for “fully formed ideas.” Those ideas would be written by contributors and curated on a grand scale. For three years, the small team they’d assembled tried to build an algorithm that would streamline the workflow of such an undertaking. By 2014, they’d launched one and given it the Orwellian name of the “Invisible Hand.” Odyssey was counting on the Invisible Hand to allow it to succeed where others like it had failed. By passing pieces seamlessly through an edit desk, they hoped to create a sustainable business model that would churn out high-volume content for free.

Step into Odyssey’s brand new, sprawling office in Manhattan’s NoHo neighborhood, and you feel a college-chic vibe. Metal lockers line the wall from floor to ceiling. A bar adorned in silver cushions and topped with a faux crystal chandelier stands in one corner, waiting to be stocked and put to use by the decidedly young, bearded bunch of employees. Every two weeks as part of a “hot-desk plan,” employees swap desks, wheeling their individual metal filing cabinets to a new spot in the high-ceilinged workspace. That includes Burns, now a thin, fast-talking 29-year-old. It also includes a cadre of more than 60 content strategists, busy editing the 15,000 writers who each contribute at least one story per week—a task that would be dizzying for even the most prolific of newsrooms.

Handling this kind of volume has tripped up companies like Odyssey in the past. User-generated content sites, like Odyssey, rely mostly on unpaid users to fill their coffers of material—which is a boom for volume, but tends to mean the quality is lacking. Finding a way to stay relevant, keep users engaged, and scale a business model has proven to be a real challenge for UGC platforms over the years. AOL’s attempt, a hyper-local vertical of platforms called Patch that was edited by professional writers, fizzled out of existence—advertisers weren’t
willing to pay for ad space, and traffic was abysmal. Turner media’s sports platform, Bleacher Report, lost credibility because of shoddy writing. Eventually, the site hired professional writers. Other sites—such as the Huffington Post, which launched with unpaid contributors and now employs a full staff of reporters—have followed suit. “These types of networks have petered out because it is resource intensive to work with contributors,” says Claire Wardle, research director at Columbia University’s Tow Center for Digital Journalism.

That’s where Odyssey believes it has developed a secret sauce with its Invisible Hand. Despite the ominous name, it’s a workflow tool that organizes stories by subject matter and content, ranking their newsworthiness, topic, and popularity. Stories that come in are ordered and organized from most relevant to least depending on a range of factors, and then funneled to the editor focused on the pertinent topic, such as sports or politics.

First, the algorithm feeds stories to community editors—locally based individuals who are not paid for their job—to be edited. Then they’re sent off to content strategists—the company’s name for its in-house editors, who are all responsible for managing 20 communities each comprised of around 12 to 25 writers. That means a content strategist is editing anywhere between 240 to 500 stories per week. The Invisible Hand is what keeps these editors from losing their minds, managing their workflow so they don’t waste time sifting through stories to determine what their priority should be.

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Emi Gutgold, a recent graduate from Penn State who majored in advertising, served as editor-in-chief of Penn State’s Odyssey community for the past year. Odyssey is particularly robust on her campus, with what Gutgold calls “a powerhouse community” of 60 writers. Gutgold first heard about Odyssey two years ago in an email from her sorority, Kappa Delta, describing the chance to write about Greek life on campus for a new publication. At the time, Odyssey was
still a tabloid-style print newspaper delivered weekly to fraternity and sorority houses at a handful of schools. As far as Gutgold knew, it was the first publication targeted to the Greek community, which intrigued her. She started writing a story a week, and “it snowballed from there,” she says. “I grew a name for myself at Penn State as the cool girl who writes about Greek life.”

But though there’s no shortage of stories on the Greek scene, Gutgold—who interned at the company’s New York office last summer and is starting a paid job as a content strategist this month—also insists that the platform creates space for perspectives that might otherwise get overlooked by mainstream media. Take for example the Jerry Sandusky Penn State child sex abuse scandal. “A lot of the media outlets were really missing the opinion of students and how they felt,” Gutgold says. On Odyssey you could find those stories. But scan down a sampling of her story headlines—“Everything You Need to Know to Hack The HUB Salad Line,” “The Only Outfit You Need For The Rose Bowl,” “Make Up Tips For A Flawless Sorority Recruitment”—and there seems to be far more puffery than hard-hitting ideas.

**Investors have been charmed** by the Odyssey model. In 2015, around the time of the dadbod story, Odyssey began touting that piece as an example of how far the platform’s reach could span. It earned hundreds of thousands of shares and racked up thousands of comments in a few days. Soon, the company announced a $3 million seed round of funding, and to date VCs have invested a total of $32 million in the company. The latest of that came in a $25 million investment round this spring, led by Columbus Nova Managing Partner Jason Epstein and Michael Lazerow, who’s called Odyssey “the most exciting company I’ve seen since Buzzfeed.”

What most impressed Lazerow, and what investors see as Odyssey’s boon, is that the platform’s 30 million monthly views come predominantly through user and reader shares, as opposed to traffic driven by Odyssey’s own social media accounts. The Odyssey Facebook account, for example, takes credit for just .16 percent of the site’s traffic, while social media shares by users and readers account for 81 percent of traffic overall, according to company metrics. The Odyssey
website isn’t designed as a place people visit to find stories, and its social media feeds aren’t steering readers—its 15,000 contributors are. Lazerow views Odyssey as combining “the best of social networking” and “the best of publishing,” with writers across the country writing and sharing stories while editors at a New York office tighten up the pieces before they go live.

Every UGC business faces the hurdle of finding a way to not just make money, but keep making money. At Odyssey, that’s where Lauri Baker, SVP of sales and marketing, comes in. In 2016, Baker left the Huffington Post—where she’d served as vice president of brand strategy and sales, building out Huffington Post’s native publishing platform—to join Burns’ team. Since arriving at Odyssey last March, she’s helped create a strategy that uses Odyssey’s coffers of contributor data to pinpoint which of its writers might serve as the best ambassadors for specific brands. “We’re connecting brands with real consumers,” says Baker. “We are shifting the focus from reach to relevance.”

Particularly relevant contributors are brought in for focus groups, given incentives from Odyssey’s advertisers, and then paid by Odyssey to write pieces of sponsored content. Brands such as Victoria Secret, Starbucks, and Red Bull have already invested in the strategy. Though sponsored content makes up just 3 percent of Odyssey’s stories, nearly all of the company’s revenue comes from this targeted sponsored content. According to Burns, Odyssey is aiming to have 10 to 15 companies each pay between $2 to $5 million dollars per campaign for the privilege of tapping into this network of young content creators.

And, by using primarily college students, the strategy is supremely cost-effective. Gutgold, for example, was paid $20 by Odyssey to write a sponsored story for the dating app Bumble called “The Hottest Players In The Bumble Game,” which included a mashup of photos alongside her cheeky commentary. These low rates allow companies to get a ton of advertising for their dollar. “We can produce 100 pieces of content for a brand for how much it costs them to get three pieces elsewhere,” says Baker.
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Baker’s marketing strategy rests on a marketing truth that’s resulted in a boom for user-generated content. “[Brands have] recognized that [working with users] was a way of appearing authentic and getting potential consumers involved in a marketing campaign (and ultimately not having to pay anything or very much for that authentic content),” Wardle wrote in an email. Yet contributors like Gutgold, who starts her new job at the Odyssey New York office this month, don’t seem to mind. “It’s really fun to mix the editorial and business side of sales,” she says.

Odyssey is planning to take this strategy one step further, using the data it’s gathered on its many contributors to tailor targeted ads to readers based on their reading history and interests. “If we know you’ve read this many articles about a certain topic like American sports cars, we can go to a brand like Ford and say, ‘Hey Ford, we know this person loves American sports cars,’” says Burns. In this way, Odyssey plans to offer what Burns calls a “relevance product” that gives brands a chance to microtarget their ads to user interests. That sales product is currently in the works, and Burns believes that down the line, it will be Odyssey’s key to generating the bulk of its revenue.

To keep creating such content, of course, Odyssey must continue attracting contributors. If it doesn’t, it will fail. But retaining contributors over time is another big challenge for UGC platforms. “If I can build my platform on Odyssey, do I have to continue using it as my platform if I’m not getting paid when I can go elsewhere and my following will come with me?” says David Schweidel, associate professor of marketing at Emory University’s business school. The sustainability of such a business model is uncertain. “When platforms are dependent on the content from individuals, if you want to keep those individuals contributing content to you, you need to make it worth it for them,” he says. Otherwise, “you are constantly refilling the ranks with new content creators.”
Of course, rewarding contributors for their traffic numbers is another strategy to keep writers from leaving, and it’s one Odyssey has tried and continues to use. Recently, for instance, one of Gutgold's writers at Penn State was paid $1,500 after a story she wrote about a drinking game went viral. Today, Odyssey has a rewards system that pays content creators based on total monthly page views, ranging from $20 a month for 15,000+ views to $1,500 for more than a million views.

In Odyssey’s early days, the financial incentives differed. Mackenzie Pearson, the author of the dadbod story, says she would receive $10 if her story got the most page views on the site in a given week. And most Odyssey contributors aren’t in it for the money at all. “I think it’s a great experience for someone who’s trying to test the waters and thinking about becoming a writer,” says Hoskins. But does the editorial feedback and exposure—things Odyssey argues it gives its writers—actually help its participants build something of value?

With such a vast conglomerate of contributors, there’s bound to be a difference of opinion. Take Pearson, for example, who wrote that viral dadbod story. Pearson was a sophomore at Clemson University when she wrote that story. She began writing for Odyssey because it seemed like a fun and easy way to make a few extra bucks as a college student. The dadbod idea was an inside joke she’d had with a group of girlfriends, and after she sent it off to Odyssey, she didn’t think much about it.

Not long after the piece went viral, Odyssey asked Pearson to write an encore piece. But when Pearson turned in a more serious story, this time about the “mombod” and the pressures women face after having children, she was encouraged to write something more lighthearted.
The story wasn’t published for weeks. “I was kept very much out of the loop,” she says. “I was told what I needed to be told, when I needed to be told.” Soon after, Odyssey reached out to ask Pearson to do some marketing and recruiting for the company. When she asked how much she’d be paid, she was told: nothing. “I started realizing that what they were doing was exploitation,” says Pearson, now a senior at Clemson planning to study copyright infringement in law school as a result of the experience she had with Odyssey.

She’s not the only contributor to feel exploited. The summer before her junior year at the University of Rochester, Dominique Noriega, now a senior, learned about Odyssey through a Facebook post by a friend scouting new contributors for the platform. Excited by the opportunity to write, Noriega signed up. In the beginning she enjoyed it, but soon it became a slog. “The weekly [requirement] was a little dreadful because it really is such a cranking machine,” she says. “You don’t always have the time to make something that’s good. You just have to make something.”

In the fall of her junior year, Noriega’s community editor-in-chief stepped down and she took on the role. She started aggressively recruiting writers across campus to balance the ratio of “fluff pieces” her group was producing. Once her community had grown larger than 20 writers, Odyssey decided to split the group into two chapters—a strategy that helps in maximizing the number of communities overall.

But the division meant Noriega had lost half her team and was now competing with them for readers. “It was just really transparent how much they wanted to get bigger. It took the individualism out of it,” she says. What’s more, she and the other student editors were flooded with emails from their content strategist checking in and urging them to turn around more stories, faster. “We were so drained by this man’s persistent emails and demands. We couldn’t do it any more,” Noriega says. Last September, she and two other editors resigned in a published letter.

Burns attributes any glitches contributors like Pearson and Noriega might have experienced to the growing pains of a young platform. Keeping up with the particular complaints and challenges of every writer and community is not something he as CEO can feasibly manage, of course. He said that Odyssey is still in the process of revamping and building out new creator tools to give writers more say
in how and when Odyssey reaches out to them. Burns says writers and community editors are never required to do marketing or recruiting. And splitting a single university community like Rochester’s in half, he says, is “an unusual thing.”

Burns is adamant that as a company, Odyssey doesn’t want to tell people what to create. “From a top-down level we try not to dictate: ‘Write this topic. Write this stuff.’ It might happen here and there with an individual editor, but we don’t want to create an echo chamber,” he says. “With over a thousand communities, we are never going to guarantee exact uniformity around how that’s going to happen.”

Adding to the complexity is the inherent tension for a site that’s not trying to be a publisher, but rather a community—an invisible distinction that platforms draw when trying to make money off their content. As Burns puts it. “Who are we to decide what’s relevant?”

Inviting as he wants the community to be, Burns says the platform also vets contributors before taking them on, only accepting five to six percent of all people signing on to become contributors. “We are looking at their socials. When you speak, do people listen online, and are you a leader in your community?” asks Burns.

Because if you are, Odyssey could stand to make a penny off of your opinion.

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