

## Newsie

By Agata Antonow

This is what working for an AI farm is like: I arrive at 6:00 to a stone building at the edge of downtown, dodging past the protesters. A woman with red hair and a sign saying “Freedom and Truth” stands in my way, but I dodge her and the doors swing open once they scan my retinas. As the elevator raises me above the street, I see the protesters scan the free newsfeeds on their phones and I feel a breath of relief that I can afford a basic subscription—one that gets me more than celebrity news.

On the sixth floor, the elevators swing open and I walk into the AI room, filled with cubicles and forty computers. Of those computers, 20 are on and working with the latest chatbots, scouring the Internet for stories to repurpose and AI write. The other 20 computers are staffed by people. There’s Larry, who’s sixty and used to work in the bullpen at the *Chicago Tribune* when that was still a newspaper. There’s Lance, who drinks coffee after coffee and always wears the same grey cardigan. He used to work for one of the sports networks, before it was bought up and closed. None of us speak much, outside of the company-mandated socializing activities, so there are at least seven writers who I don’t know the names of. If they stick around longer than a month—most don’t—I may get to know them.

I slide into my ergonomic chair, and the computer scans my irises as I blink at the bright light. I make a note to use my savings to get my company-required but not company-paid yearly eye exam soon.

The screen winks to life and starts scrolling. I have 50 content briefs developed by the AI bots, meaning I’m expected to rewrite 50 articles that were developed by AI

but were flagged for not passing quality checks. It's going to be a long day, I think, as I scan the first brief. The article was flagged because it didn't promote the X Party hard enough ahead of the upcoming election. This article is headed for a local paper, and the brief points out that with dropping literacy levels I need to keep the reading level no higher than grade three and the headline needs to stay the same: Why Your Favorite Musicians Believe in Voting.

So, this is what I do: I create the content that the world reads for free online. Sometimes, I see my headlines in the subway, and I notice some poor bastard scanning the QR code to read for free. Every click helps me keep my job, and people seem to like the headlines AI creates, designed by algorithms to generate maximum anger. Sometimes, I see a reader shake their head. I hear mutterings, see reddened faces as I turn my face away to watch the shiny buildings race by.

But that's not all I do. As I type and swipe coffee after coffee from the AI-powered snack cart weaving its way through the office, I keep an eye on the elevator. Our elevator is one of those old-fashioned glass ones that is on the outside of the building, a relic from the times when people in business suits wanted the world to see them heading higher and higher in the sky, all the way to their corner office. Now, the glass is bullet-proof, one-way glass facing the street and clear glass facing the building, so that when it slides past the sixth floor, I can see newsies laughing and talking as they're taken up to the tenth floor.

The newsies never look into our office. Why should they? These are the writers who have made it. The former Pulitzer Prize winners and war correspondents with war

wounds under their Armani jackets, back from the Middle East and Asia. They don't work with briefs or AI.

I've never seen what they write, of course. On my AI writer salary, I can barely afford a studio on the edge of town, a one-hour commute from work. I eat most of my calories for free in the office and always show up for work scared that my iris scan won't work. Our office has shrunk by 10% every year, so I know my ticket will be up. There's no way I could justify a bespoke news subscription.

I might not even qualify, anyway. I've only heard rumors in bars, and those were three years ago, from Wilson, who used to live in my building. He claimed to have almost gotten a newsie job. I wasn't sure I believed him. But about three years ago, I was still getting AI briefs asking me to "correct" news stories that mentioned "newsies." The very existence of them was always flagged as misinformation, but according to Wilson, there was an exclusive, invitation-only new service for the very rich.

"Those bastards," Wilson had slurred into his stale beer, looking around and lowering his voice. "Those bastards pay more per month than I earn in two years to get real news. Written by the best of the best. Nobel prize writers. The writers you'd once see at the top magazines and newspapers. They pay the newsies to go out and investigate. No AI. All real writing, by humans."

"I could have been a newsie," Wilson told me, though I wasn't so sure. He'd written a bestseller ten years ago, that got optioned for a movie that was never made. As far as I knew, Wilson had written nothing besides his number on napkins ever since.

But I listened. And I watched the elevator. And I imagined. What would it like to work on the tenth floor, to earn enough for nice suits and the cars I saw newsies drive?

What would it be like to get assignments from the rich, hop on private planes, and write real stories?

Wilson stopped coming to the bar about six months ago, but I still go. Mostly, I look around, waste a few hard-earned dollars on warmish beer and then leave, cursing myself.

Tonight, my arms are still tingling from the hours of typing and writing, the 50 briefs and articles jumbled in my mind.

Like always, I ask the bartender “Wilson been here recently?”

But this time, instead of shaking his head “no” and turning away, he nods. “Left you a note. He said you’d ask.” Then he slides a folded-over piece of paper to me and turns away.

I put the paper in my pocket until I get back home. The paper feels luxurious and thick, a roughened texture that Wilson had once showed me in his notebook. “Made with fabric,” he’d told me. “Cotton. They used to make good quality paper like this, before your time.”

When I flip open the paper, I see a phone number and I squint to read Wilson’s writing: “They’re hiring newsies. Might as well text them. What have you got to lose? Text the word *Applying*.”

I don’t feel excitement, especially. I’m not sure if Wilson is just joking or delusional. And even if the number is real, where is Wilson and why is he writing in this old-fashioned way? Why not text me the number? And even if I apply, what chance do I have?

I pace my studio for an hour before I type on my phone, double-check each digit and letter, and hit “send.” My phone stays stubbornly silent all night. *Wilson, you asshole*, I think.

The next morning, though, when I walk past the protesters, who have signs up with more vague nonsense—*Action, Not Words* and *We’re Not Going Anywhere*—my iris scan fails. I blink once and the “error” message flashes green again.

A man with a pot belly and yellow teeth leers at me from the picket line. “Uh-oh, baby got fired.”

He takes a step towards me and I shrink towards the building’s door, feeling trapped, seeing an older woman heading towards us. That’s when the door slides open silently and I tumble into the elevator. Inside, a man in a cashmere grey suit nods at me and as the elevator slides upward, we look out at the protestors. The pot-bellied man is looking up at us, his mouth open in a shout.

The man inside the elevator clears his throat. “We’re happy you applied for the position. Wilson recommended you especially.”

I turn around for a closer look. The man is in his forties, with grey at the temples and pale grey eyes. His every word is unrushed and articulated with precision, as though he’s used to being listened to and doesn’t want anything as crass as a misunderstanding to happen now.

“We’ve been looking for younger candidates, and your background in AI writing is interesting to us.”

We slide past the sixth floor. Larry is sitting at my desk—one of only three human writers in the office now—and his hand is reaching for a blueberry muffin on the snack card. He looks up at me and then his eyes instantly slide down.

The tenth floor is also open concept, but here there are only old-fashioned laptops and no cubicles. Everyone is hunched together at flat wood tables, leaning over screens and stacks of old-fashioned books. My fingers twitch. I haven't seen one since the libraries were closed by government decree a year ago. A printer in the background is spitting out paper and at the bar in the back people are picking up lattes and salads. A big neon sign hangs over it all: Accurate News.

The man leads me to a glass-enclosed office where a woman in a red suit is waiting. "I see you found Susan well enough. Good work, Andy."

With that, Andy ambles over to one of the wood tables and pulls a laptop towards him. A few people at the tables are looking over, but most are busy scribbling or typing. The woman extends her hand as soon as the glass door closes, and my focus returns to her.

"Cherene," she says by way of introduction, and then frowns at the papers in front of her. "Let's see..."

As far as interviews go, this isn't the worst one I've been on, though it is maybe the strangest. Cherene doesn't ask what I'm willing to write about or about my analytics or click-through rate. She asks me about what I want to write about, what my interests are, and what I'm afraid of.

She tells me very little about the writing, too. “You’ll work with Andy to learn the ropes. Essentially, we offer a high-value product for high-net-worth individuals who rely on knowing everything—including both sides of the story—so they can make the best possible decisions in their financial, personal, and business lives. Accurate, interesting pieces are the most important thing here.”

There’s no formal job offer, but then who would turn this down? When I walk up to Andy, he’s all smiles and he introduces me to everyone else at the table. “Donna, Carlos, Milla.”

The work itself is simple enough. The laptops show what paying clients want. Some want general information about the stock market or the current value of a humanities education. Others have more specific requests: tell me about the giant redfin and its current endangerment status. And every week I get to choose a story that’s not in the requests— “something you think our clients should know about or would want to know about but haven’t thought to ask for.”

The deadlines are tight, but not as tight as AI work. With some pieces, I have a week to write the article. And I have resources here. There’s a private plane that can fly me around the world to investigate a news story, vetted sources with names and numbers beside them. Some are university professors, surgeons, presidents of countries. I notice Wilson’s number and text him a quick “thank you.”

I only work on one piece at a time, and while I’m nervous submitting my first few pieces, Andy says they’re good. When I submit the first one, the whole bullpen holds up their various drinks—margaritas and lattes and black, black coffees—in a salute. I’m one of the gang and sometimes they ask me for drinks after work. I go but stay mostly

silent as they talk about working for CNN years ago or writing speeches for a Prime Minister. What can I say about AI farms?

Sometimes I still feel like I'd be more at home with the snack cart and the cubicles, though now when I pass the sixth floor, I no longer see Larry. Pretty soon, none of the faces are familiar. Slowly, my wardrobe changes from cheap pants and sweaters to silk suits and heels. I start getting my hair blown out at the celebrity hair stylist down the block. I move into a nicer studio, with a view of the city and a door man who says "ma'am" and nods every time I walk in or out of my building. Slowly, I start to look and move like someone who can interview important people, for important people.

More and more, I'm allowed to take on stories I want. "Go with what interests you," Andy suggests. I write about a scandal at Wall Street, new research on gene edits. When I interview people, I show them my phone pass and assistants usher me into the offices of business leaders and stockbrokers and these people put aside what they're doing, look me in the eye, and smile. They're willing to talk to me, at length, to explain things patiently.

And I can write. No briefs, so I can create a lead, a hook, an interesting story. I can quote sources, add in statistics. My pieces grow and expand with photos, charts, interactive elements. I think about turns of phrase and just the right word. I feel a little fizzle of excitement when the words click into place.

Today, I'm starting on a new piece, just in on my laptop: Find out about the protests downtown. I've always been curious, and here is my chance to find out. I get dressed in jeans and a t-shirt and hop in my new car. There's valet parking right next to city hall.



The usual group are downtown—a medley of young kids with bright shirts and tattoos and old people with shabby clothes and a shuffling walk. The signs are the usual vague jumble. “We Count.” “Listen to Us.” “Freedom.”

Here, there are no open doors with a phone press pass, but eventually a middle-aged woman agrees to speak to me, though she’s clearly suspicious. Her hand movements are nervous, bird-line, and there is a fine line of dirt under each nail.

“The rich people live in their penthouses,” she tells me, pitching her voice low, as though afraid of being overheard. “I work three jobs and can’t afford an apartment. Are you telling me that some CEO works harder than me?” She points at herself, eyebrows raised.

I ask her about the signs. “Why ‘we count?’”

She gestures all around us, as though taking in the whole city, all the big towers and the little stores and the dumpsters and streams of people. “Why not? There’s too much to say in one sign. But that’s the basic of it, isn’t it? We can’t read. We can’t get healthcare when we’re sick. And I know people like you. You write the garbage that we read, the news that tells us there are plenty of jobs and things are getting better. I know it’s not getting better. I live it every day.”

A man of about 20 wanders up to us and listens in. “Yeah, the point is that we do matter. People look down on those signs, but rich people like you, driving by. Do you really think we matter? Don’t you think you need the reminder?”

At the bullpen, I use my press pass to get access to the library databases, university databases, all paid for by the same people who pay for my suits. I take a peek

at the subscription costs for each—more than my fancy new apartment. I read the statistics—more than 50% of the city functionally illiterate, one in four getting less than the recommended calorie intake each day.

I start to type out of the quotes from the protestors, remembering the news stories my father would read at the kitchen table. “Like to this,” he’d say, the pockets around his eyes wrinkled from hours on sunny construction sites. “You need to know what corrupt politicians sound like.” I want to write a story like that—one that gets people talking. Above me, Accurate News is a neon halo.

My fingers hover over the keyboard for a long time and I breathe in the smell of French Roast, my toes dig into plush carpet. I can hear the murmur of Andy and Milla as they review edits. I slowly hit the delete button, again and again, faster and faster.

I put in the quotes from the woman and then present the other side of the story—government facts about unemployment reduced, a quote from a tech giant about how AI is creating jobs and leading to better educational outcomes. I describe the woman’s paranoid movements. Is this accurate? The truth twists in my hands like a sliver fish, the words streaming in front of me, forming and re-forming. A headache blooms above my eyes. I think about the woman and her dirty fingers, the way her eyes met mine. “People like you,” she’d said.

I read over what I have written. In my article, the woman from the protest seems small and faded. She can’t stand up to the weight of government statistics—the ones that say that average per capita wealth is up, the ones that say thousands of jobs are created by AI every day. Is this the truth? I glance around the posh office. I’m not any

more sure than I was a year ago. There are many ways to be crushed, many ways to weave together a life, a narrative.

Today, as I take the elevator downstairs, I decide I'll stop by the bar. Maybe Wilson will be there.