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-Like The Onion, but shittier!

IT'S
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DAYS UNTIL TAX
DAY!

Intuit TurboTax: A Tragedy

DJ Benjamin

Most individuals, when the months of March and April roll around, groan that tax season is upon them once again. The complex labyrinth of bureaucratic forms labeled with every number and letter under the sun, along with enough TLAs to make an Electrical Engineer feel at home, is imposing to even those with very simple returns. Heaven forbid you actually own a house, are self-employed, have investments, travel between multiple states and have to think about “use tax”, or one of the bajillion other tax situations you have to consider. The complexity and confusion created by the ridiculous system probably has a measurable negative impact on the GDP of the United States for the month of April, which is likely offset by the fact it’s created an entire market for tax attorneys and preparation services.

Just as American residents are assailed with constant barrages of political ads come the fall, so too are they assailed with advertisements for tax preparation services, such as, say Intuit TurboTax. Such services often offer the promise of simple, easy, and most importantly, free filing with the IRS for “simple” tax situations. However, those ads aren’t paying for themselves, so the astute observer may ask: how is that Intuit (whose largest shareholder is The Vanguard Group, incidentally) makes a profit by advertising free filing services?

The answer to this real head-scratcher is



pretty obvious when one actually attempts to use Intuit TurboTax free edition. After you spend twice as long as TurboTax’s estimated time to complete putting in all your information, sorting through your W-2s and 1099s and 1098-ABCs and 590s and 1040s and last year’s 1040s, you reach a page at the end that tells you that, due to one possible tax credit you might qualify for, your tax situation is no longer “simple”. Therefore, there’s simply no other choice than to pay most of what your return is worth to finish filing with TurboTax.

They’ve waited until you’ve gone through the irksome process of data entry, baiting you with the promise of

Intuit TurboTax: A Tragedy (cont.)

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“we’ll get you your max return!” before pulling the switch and saying that, in order to complete the process, they actually need you to pay. It really is a classic scam structure, doubly-dubious considering people who are even considering filing for free in the first place are people with relatively simple tax situations like W-2s, meaning hourly pay and who’s time is almost directly corresponding to money. These folks often don’t have the time to start the process all over again, and so naturally will sunk-cost fallacy their way into just sucking it up and paying the money to TurboTax, letting them make off like a bandit each tax season.

Now, any patriotic, rootn’-tootn’, firework shootn’ tax-paying American is fine with paying taxes in general, even if the practical process sucks. But they shouldn’t be fine with getting scammed out of their money by a parasitic tax-preparation service that uses the dubiously-siphoned money to lobby politicians to make the system even worse, contributing next to nothing useful to society. Those very same red-blooded Americans should delight in the existence of the IRS Free File service, which should have existed literally since the inception of tax filing but actually has existed for the last 22 years, and is getting better year after year. It matches you with actually free trusted services online that will tell you up front if you don’t qualify to file for free.

Sometimes, tragedy unites a people in shared unity and patriotism. Collective mourning and grief can bring people together to support one another and find common ground, banding together under one banner, one identity. It fosters patriotism and pride in one’s country. Let me tell you, dear reader: TurboTax is a tragedy, and never before have I felt more patriotic than after rebounding from said tragedy via the use of the IRS Free File system.

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