THE NEW YORKER

DOES JOURNALISM HAVE A FUTURE?

In an era of social media and fake news, journalists who have survived the print plunge have new foes to face.

By Jill Lepore

The more desperately the press chases readers, the more it resembles our politics. Illustration by Erik Carter

The wood-panelled tailgate of the 1972 Oldsmobile station wagon dangled open like a broken jaw, making a wobbly bench on which four kids could sit, eight legs swinging. Every Sunday morning, long before dawn, we'd get yanked out of bed to stuff the car's way-back with stacks of twine-tied newspapers, clamber onto the tailgate, cut the twine with my mother's sewing scissors, and ride around town, bouncing along on that bench, while my father shouted out orders from the driver's seat. "Watch out for the dog!" he'd holler between draws on his pipe. "Inside the screen door!" "Mailbox!" As the car crept along, never stopping, we'd each grab a paper and dash in the dark across icy driveways or dew-drunk grass, crashing, seasonally, into unexpected snowmen. "Back porch!" "Money under the mat!" He kept a list, scrawled on the back of an envelope, taped to the dashboard: the Accounts. "They owe three weeks!" He didn't need to remind us. We knew each Doberman and every debt. We'd deliver our papers—Worcester *Sunday Telegrams*—and then run back to the car and scramble onto the tailgate, dropping the coins we'd collected into empty Briggs tobacco tins as we bumped along to the next turn, the newspaper route our Sabbath.

The Worcester *Sunday Telegram* was founded in 1884, when a telegram meant something fast. Two years later, it became a daily. It was never a great paper but it was always a pretty good paper: useful, gossipy, and resolute. It cultivated talent. The poet Stanley Kunitz was a staff writer for the *Telegram* in the nineteen-twenties. The New York *Times* reporter Douglas Kneeland, who covered Kent State and Charles Manson, began his career there in the nineteen-fifties. Joe McGinniss reported for the *Telegram* in the nineteen-sixties before writing "The Selling of the President." From bushy-bearded nineteenth-century politicians to baby-faced George W. Bush, the paper was steadfastly Republican, if mainly concerned with scandals and mustachioed villains close to home: overdue repairs to the main branch of the public library, police raids on illegal betting establishments—"WORCESTER DOG CHASES WORCESTER CAT OVER WORCESTER FENCE," as the old Washington press-corps joke about a typical headline in a local paper goes. Its pages rolled off giant, thrumming presses in a four-story building that overlooked City Hall the way every city paper used to look out over every city hall, the Bat-Signal over Gotham.

Most newspapers like that haven't lasted. Between 1970 and 2016, the year the American Society of News Editors quit counting, five hundred or so dailies went out of business; the rest cut news coverage, or shrank the paper's size, or stopped producing a print edition, or did all of that, and it still wasn't enough. The newspaper mortality rate is old news, and nostalgia for dead papers is itself pitiful at this point, even though, I still say, there's a principle involved. "I wouldn't weep about a shoe factory or a branch-line railroad shutting down," Heywood Broun, the founder of the American Newspaper Guild, said when the New York *World* went out of business, in 1931. "But newspapers are different." And the bleeding hasn't stopped. Between January, 2017, and April, 2018, a third of the nation's largest newspapers, including the Denver *Post* and the San Jose *Mercury News*, reported layoffs. In a newer trend, so did about a quarter of digital-native news sites. BuzzFeed News laid off a hundred people in 2017; speculation is that BuzzFeed is trying to dump it. The Huffington Post paid most of its writers nothing for years, upping that recently to just above nothing, and yet, despite taking in tens of millions of dollars in advertising revenue in 2018, it failed to turn a profit.

Even veterans of august and still thriving papers are worried, especially about the fake news that's risen from the ashes of the dead news. "We are, for the first time in modern history, facing the prospect of how societies would exist without reliable news," Alan Rusbridger, for twenty years the editor-in-chief of the *Guardian*, writes in "Breaking News: The Remaking of Journalism and Why It Matters Now." "There are not that many places left that do quality news well or even aim to do it at all," Jill Abramson, a former executive editor of the New York *Times*, writes in "Merchants of Truth: The Business of News and the Fight for Facts." Like most big-paper reporters and editors who write about the crisis of journalism, Rusbridger and Abramson are interested in national and international news organizations. The local story is worse.

First came conglomeration. Worcester, Massachusetts, the second-largest city in New England, used to have four dailies: the *Telegram*, in the morning, and the *Gazette*, in the evening (under the same ownership), the *Spy*, and the *Post*. Now it has one. The last great laying waste to American newspapers came in the early decades of the twentieth century, mainly owing to (a) radio and (b) the Depression; the number of dailies fell from 2,042 in 1920 to 1,754 in 1944, leaving 1,103 cities with only one paper. Newspaper circulation rose between 1940 and 1990, but likely only because more people were reading fewer papers, and, as A. J. Liebling once observed, nothing is crummier than a one-paper town. In 1949, after yet another New York

daily closed its doors, Liebling predicted, "If the trend continues, New York will be a one- or two-paper town by about 1975." He wasn't that far off. In the nineteen-eighties and nineties, as Christopher B. Daly reports in "Covering America: A Narrative History of the Nation's Journalism," "the big kept getting bigger." Conglomeration can be good for business, but it has generally been bad for journalism. Media companies that want to get bigger tend to swallow up other media companies, suppressing competition and taking on debt, which makes publishers cowards. In 1986, the publisher of the San Francisco *Chronicle* bought the Worcester *Telegram* and the *Evening Gazette*, and, three years later, right about when Time and Warner became Time Warner, the *Telegram* and the *Gazette* became the *Telegram & Gazette*, or the *T&G*, smaller fries but the same potato.

Next came the dot-coms. Craigslist went online in the Bay Area in 1996 and spread across the continent like a weed, choking off local newspapers' most reliable source of revenue: classified ads. The *T&G* tried to hold on to its classified-advertising section by wading into the shallow waters of the Internet, at telegram.com, where it was called, acronymically, and not a little desperately, "TANGO!" Then began yet another round of corporate buyouts, deeply leveraged deals conducted by executives answerable to stockholders seeking higher dividends, not better papers. In 1999, the New York Times Company bought the *T&G* for nearly three hundred million dollars. By 2000, only three hundred and fifty of the fifteen hundred daily newspapers left in the United States were independently owned. And only one out of every hundred American cities that had a daily newspaper was anything other than a one-paper town.

Then came the fall, when papers all over the country, shackled to mammoth corporations and a lumbering, century-old business model, found themselves unable to compete with the upstarts—online news aggregators like the Huffington Post (est. 2005) and Breitbart News (est. 2007), which were, to readers, free. News aggregators also drew display advertisers away from print; Facebook and Google swallowed advertising accounts whole. Big papers found ways to adapt; smaller papers mainly folded. Between 1994 and 2016, years when the population of Worcester County rose by more than a hundred thousand, daily home delivery of the *T&G* declined from more than a hundred and twenty thousand to barely thirty thousand. In one year alone, circulation fell by twenty-nine per cent. In 2012, after another round of layoffs, the *T&G* left its building, its much reduced staff small enough to fit into two floors of an office building nearby. The next year, the owner of the Boston Red Sox bought the newspaper, along with the Boston *Globe*, from the New York Times

Company for seventy million dollars, only to unload the *T&G* less than a year later, for seventeen million dollars, to Halifax Media Group, which held it for only half a year before Halifax itself was bought, flea-market style, by an entity that calls itself, unironically, the New Media Investment Group.

The numbers mask an uglier story. In the past half century, and especially in the past two decades, journalism itself—the way news is covered, reported, written, and edited—has changed, including in ways that have made possible the rise of fake news, and not only because of mergers and acquisitions, and corporate ownership, and job losses, and Google Search, and Facebook and BuzzFeed. There's no shortage of amazing journalists at work, clear-eyed and courageous, broad-minded and brilliant, and no end of fascinating innovation in matters of form, especially in visual storytelling. Still, journalism, as a field, is as addled as an addict, gaunt, wasted, and twitchy, its pockets as empty as its nights are sleepless. It's faster than it used to be, so fast. It's also edgier, and needier, and angrier. It wants and it wants and it wants. But what does it need?

The daily newspaper is the taproot of modern journalism. Dailies mainly date to the eighteen-thirties, the decade in which the word "journalism" was coined, meaning daily reporting, the *jour* in journalism. Early dailies depended on

subscribers to pay the bills. The press was partisan, readers were voters, and the news was meant to persuade (and voter turnout was high). But by 1900 advertising made up more than two-thirds of the revenue at most of the nation's eighteen thousand newspapers, and readers were consumers (and voter turnout began its long fall). "The newspaper is not a missionary or a charitable institution, but a business that collects and publishes news which the people want and are willing to buy," one Missouri editor said in 1892. Newspapers stopped rousing the rabble so much because businesses wanted readers, no matter their politics. "There is a sentiment gaining ground to the effect that the public wants its politics 'straight,' " a journalist wrote the following year. Reporters pledged themselves to "facts, facts, and more facts," and, as the press got less partisan and more ad-based, newspapers sorted themselves out not by their readers' political leanings but by their incomes. If you had a lot of money to spend, you read the St. Paul *Pioneer Press;* if you didn't have very much, you read the St. Paul *Dispatch*.

Unsurprisingly, critics soon began writing big books, usually indictments, about the relationship between business and journalism. "When you read your daily paper, are you reading facts or propaganda?" Upton Sinclair asked on the jacket of "The Brass Check," in 1919. In "The Disappearing Daily," in 1944, Oswald Garrison Villard mourned "what was once a profession but is now a business." The big book that inspired Jill Abramson to become a journalist was David Halberstam's "The Powers That Be," from 1979, a history of the rise of the modern, corporate-based media in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Halberstam, who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1964 for his reporting from Vietnam for the New York *Times*, took up his story more or less where Villard left off. He began with F.D.R. and CBS radio; added the Los Angeles *Times*, Time Inc., and CBS television; and reached his story's climax with the Washington *Post* and the New York *Times* and the publication of the Pentagon Papers, in 1971.

Halberstam argued that between the nineteen-thirties and the nineteen-seventies radio and television brought a new immediacy to reporting, while the resources provided by corporate owners and the demands made by an increasingly sophisticated national audience led to harder-hitting, investigative, adversarial reporting, the kind that could end a war and bring down a President. Richard Rovere summed it up best: "What The Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, Time and CBS have in common is that, under pressures generated internally and externally, they moved from venality or parochialism or mediocrity or all three to something approaching journalistic excellence and responsibility." That move came

at a price. "Watergate, like Vietnam, had obscured one of the central new facts about the role of journalism in America," Halberstam wrote. "Only very rich, very powerful corporate institutions like these had the impact, the reach, and above all the resources to challenge the President of the United States."

There's reach, and then there's reach. When I was growing up, in the nineteen-seventies, nobody I knew read the New York *Times*, the Washington *Post*, or the *Wall Street Journal*. Nobody I knew even read the Boston *Globe*, a paper that used to have a rule that no piece should ever be so critical of anyone that its "writer could not shake hands the next day with the man about whom he had written." After journalism put up its dukes, my father only ever referred to the *Globe* as "that Communist rag," not least because, in 1967, it became the first major paper in the United States to come out against the Vietnam War.

The view of the new journalism held by people like my father escaped Halberstam's notice. In 1969, Nixon's Vice-President, Spiro Agnew, delivered a speech drafted by the Nixon aide Pat Buchanan accusing the press of liberal bias. It's "good politics for us to kick the press around," Nixon is said to have told his staff. The press, Agnew said, represents "a concentration of power over American public opinion unknown in history," consisting of men who "read the same newspapers" and "talk constantly to one another." How dare they. Halberstam waved this aside as so much P.R. hooey, but, as has since become clear, Agnew reached a ready audience, especially in houses like mine.

Spiro who? "The press regarded Agnew with uncontrolled hilarity," Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., observed in 1970, but "no one can question the force of Spiro T. Agnew's personality, nor the impact of his speeches." No scholar of journalism can afford to ignore Agnew anymore. In "On Press: The Liberal Values That Shaped the News," the historian Matthew Pressman argues that any understanding of the crisis of journalism in the twenty-first century has to begin by vanquishing the ghost of Spiro T. Agnew.

For Pressman, the pivotal period for the modern newsroom is what Abramson calls "Halberstam's Golden Age," between 1960 and 1980, and its signal feature was the adoption not of a liberal bias but of liberal values: "Interpretation replaced transmission, and adversarialism replaced deference." In 1960, nine out of every ten articles in the *Times* about the Presidential election were descriptive; by 1976, more than half were interpretative. This turn was partly a consequence of television—

people who simply wanted to find out what happened could watch television, so newspapers had to offer something else—and partly a consequence of McCarthyism. "The rise of McCarthy has compelled newspapers of integrity to develop a form of reporting which puts into context what men like McCarthy have to say," the radio commentator Elmer Davis said in 1953. Five years later, the *Times* added "News Analysis" as a story category. "Once upon a time, news stories were like tape recorders," the *Bulletin of the American Society of Newspaper Editors* commented in 1963. "No more. A whole generation of events had taught us better—Hitler and Goebbels, Stalin and McCarthy, automation and analog computers and missiles."

These changes weren't ideologically driven, Pressman insists, but they had ideological consequences. At the start, leading conservatives approved. "To keep a reporter's prejudices out of a story is commendable," Irving Kristol wrote in 1967. "To keep his judgment out of a story is to guarantee that the truth will be emasculated." After the *Times* and the *Post* published the Pentagon Papers, Kristol changed his spots. Journalists, he complained in 1972, were now "engaged in a perpetual confrontation with the social and political order (the 'establishment,' as they say)." By 1975, after Watergate, Kristol was insisting that "most journalists today . . . are 'liberals.' " With that, the conservative attack on the press was off and running, all the way to Trumpism—"the failing New York Times," "CNN is fake news," the press is "the true enemy of the people"—and, in a revolution-devouring-its-elders sort of way, the shutting down of William Kristol's *Weekly Standard*, in December. "The pathetic and dishonest Weekly Standard . . . is flat broke and out of business," Trump tweeted. "May it rest in peace!"

What McCarthy and television were for journalism in the nineteen-fifties, Trump and social media would be in the twenty-tens: license to change the rules. Halberstam's Golden Age, or what he called "journalism's high-water mark," ended about 1980. Abramson's analysis in "Merchants of Truth" begins with journalism's low-water mark, in 2007, the year after Facebook launched its News Feed, "the year everything began to fall apart."

"Merchants of Truth" isn't just inspired by "The Powers That Be"; it's modelled on it. Abramson's book follows Halberstam's structure and mimics its style, chronicling the history of a handful of nationally prominent media organizations—in her case, BuzzFeed, Vice, the *Times*, and the Washington *Post*—in alternating chapters that are driven by character sketches and reported scenes. The book is saturated with a lot of gossip and glitz, including details about the restaurants the powers that be

frequent, and what they wear ("Sulzberger"—the *Times*' publisher—"dressed in suits from Bloomingdale's, stylish without being ostentatiously bespoke, and wore suspenders before they went out of fashion"), alongside crucial insights about structural transformations, like how Web and social-media publishing "unbundled" the newspaper, so that readers who used to find a fat newspaper on their front porch could, on their phones, look, instead, at only one story. "Each individual article now lived on its own page, where it had a unique URL and could be shared, and spread virally," Abramson observes. "This put stories, rather than papers, in competition with one another."

This history is a chronicle of missed opportunities, missteps, and lessons learned the hard way. As long ago as 1992, an internal report at the Washington *Post* urged the mounting of an "electronic product": "The *Post* ought to be in the forefront of this." Early on, the *Guardian* started a New Media lab, which struck a lot of people as frivolous, Rusbridger writes, because, at the time, "only 3 per cent of households owned a PC and a modem," a situation not unlike that at the *Guardian's* own offices, where "it was rumored that downstairs a bloke called Paul in IT had a Mac connected to the internet." A 1996 business plan for the *Guardian* concluded that the priority was print, and the London *Times* editor Simon Jenkins predicted, "The Internet will strut an hour upon the stage, and then take its place in the ranks of the lesser media." In 2005, the *Post* lost a chance at a ten-per-cent investment in Facebook, whose returns, as Abramson points out, would have floated the newspaper for decades. The C.E.O. of the Washington Post Company, Don Graham, and Mark Zuckerberg shook hands over the deal, making a verbal contract, but, when Zuckerberg weaseled out of it to take a better offer, Graham, out of kindness to a young fella just starting out, simply let him walk away. The next year, the *Post* shrugged off a proposal from two of its star political reporters to start a spinoff Web site; they went on to found Politico. The *Times*, Abramson writes, declined an early chance to invest in Google, and was left to throw the kitchen sink at its failing business model, including adding a Thursday Style section to attract more high-end advertising revenue. Bill Keller, then the newspaper's editor, said, "If luxury porn is what saves the Baghdad bureau, so be it."

More alarming than what the *Times* and the *Post* failed to do was how so much of what they did do was determined less by their own editors than by executives at Facebook and BuzzFeed. If journalism has been reinvented during the past two decades, it has, in the main, been reinvented not by reporters and editors but by tech

companies, in a sequence of events that, in Abramson's harrowing telling, resemble a series of puerile stunts more than acts of public service.

Who even are these people? "Merchants of Truth" has been charged with factual errors, including by people Abramson interviewed, especially younger journalists. She can also be maddeningly condescending. She doffs her cap at Sulzberger, with his natty suspenders, but dismisses younger reporters at places like Vice as notable mainly for being "impossibly hip, with interesting hair." This is distracting, and too bad, because there is a changing of the guard worth noting, and it's not incidental: it's critical. All the way through to the nineteen-eighties, all sorts of journalists, including magazine, radio, and television reporters, got their start working on daily papers, learning the ropes and the rules. Rusbridger started out in 1976 as a reporter at the Cambridge *Evening News*, which covered stories that included a petition about a pedestrian crossing and a root vegetable that looked like Winston Churchill. In the U.K., a reporter who wanted to go to Fleet Street had first to work for three years on a provincial newspaper, pounding the pavement. Much the same applied in the U.S., where a cub reporter did time at the Des Moines *Register*, or the Worcester *Telegram*, before moving up to the New York *Times* or the *Herald Tribune.* Beat

reporting, however, is not the backstory of the people who, beginning in the nineteen-nineties, built the New Media.

Jonah Peretti started out soaking up postmodern theory at U.C. Santa Cruz in the mid-nineteen-nineties, and later published a scholarly journal article about the scrambled, disjointed, and incoherent way of thinking produced by accelerated visual experiences under late capitalism. Or something like that. Imagine an article written by that American Studies professor in Don DeLillo's "White Noise." Peretti thought that watching a lot of MTV can mess with your head—"The rapid fire succession of signifiers in MTV style media erodes the viewer's sense of temporal continuity"—leaving you confused, stupid, and lonely. "Capitalism needs schizophrenia, but it also needs egos," Peretti wrote. "The contradiction is resolved through the acceleration of the temporal rhythm of late capitalist visual culture. This type of acceleration encourages weak egos that are easily formed, and fade away just as easily." Voilà, a business plan!

Peretti's career in viral content began in 2001, with a prank involving e-mail and Nike sneakers while he was a graduate student at the M.I.T. Media Lab. (Peretti ordered custom sneakers embroidered with the word "sweatshop" and then circulated Nike's reply.) In 2005, a year the New York Times Company laid off five hundred employees and the *Post* began paying people to retire early, Peretti joined Andrew Breitbart, a Matt Drudge acolyte, and Ken Lerer, a former P.R. guy at AOL Time Warner, in helping Arianna Huffington, a millionaire and a former anti-feminist polemicist, launch the Huffington Post. Peretti was in charge of innovations that included a click-o-meter. Within a couple of years, the Huffington Post had more Web traffic than the Los Angeles *Times*, the Washington *Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. Its business was banditry. Abramson writes that when the *Times* published a deeply reported exclusive story about WikiLeaks, which took months of investigative work and a great deal of money, the Huffington Post published its own version of the story, using the same headline—and beat out the *Times* story in Google rankings. "We were learning that the internet behaved like a clattering of jackdaws," Rusbridger writes. "Nothing remained exclusive for more than two minutes."

Pretty soon, there were jackdaws all over the place, with their schizophrenic late-capitalist accelerated signifiers. Breitbart left the Huffington Post and started Breitbart News around the same time that Peretti left to focus on his own company, Contagious Media, from which he launched BuzzFeed, where he tested the limits of virality with offerings like the seven best links about gay penguins and "YouTube

Porn Hacks." He explained his methods in a pitch to venture capitalists: "Raw buzz is automatically published the moment it is detected by our algorithm," and "the future of the industry is advertising as content."

Facebook launched its News Feed in 2006. In 2008, Peretti mused on Facebook, "Thinking about the economics of the news business." The company added its Like button in 2009. Peretti set likability as BuzzFeed's goal, and, to perfect the instruments for measuring it, he enlisted partners, including the *Times* and the *Guardian*, to share their data with him in exchange for his reports on their metrics. Lists were liked. Hating people was liked. And it turned out that news, which is full of people who hate other people, can be crammed into lists.

Chartbeat, a "content intelligence" company founded in 2009, launched a feature called Newsbeat in 2011. Chartbeat offers real-time Web analytics, displaying a constantly updated report on Web traffic that tells editors what stories people are reading and what stories they're skipping. The *Post* winnowed out reporters based on their Chartbeat numbers. At the offices of Gawker, the Chartbeat dashboard was displayed on a giant screen.

In 2011, Peretti launched BuzzFeed News, hiring a thirty-five-year-old Politico journalist, Ben Smith, as its editor-in-chief. Smith asked for a "scoop-a-day" from his reporters, who, he told Abramson, had little interest in the rules of journalism: "They didn't even know what rules they were breaking." In 2012, BuzzFeed introduced three new one-click ways for readers to respond to stories, beyond "liking" them—LOL, OMG, and WTF—and ran lists like "10 Reasons Everyone Should Be Furious About Trayvon Martin's Murder," in which, as Abramson explains, BuzzFeed "simply lifted what it needed from reports published elsewhere, repackaged the information, and presented it in a way that emphasized sentiment and celebrity." BuzzFeed makes a distinction between BuzzFeed and BuzzFeed News, just as newspapers and magazines draw distinctions between their print and their digital editions. These distinctions are lost on most readers. BuzzFeed News covered the Trayvon Martin story, but its information, like BuzzFeed's, came from Reuters and the Associated Press.

Even as news organizations were pruning reporters and editors, Facebook was pruning its users' news, with the commercially appealing but ethically indefensible idea that people should see only the news they want to see. In 2013, Silicon Valley began reading its own online newspaper, the Information, its high-priced

subscription peddled to the information élite, following the motto "Quality stories breed quality subscribers." Facebook's goal, Zuckerberg explained in 2014, was to "build the perfect personalized newspaper for every person in the world." Ripples at Facebook create tsunamis in newsrooms. The ambitious news site Mic relied on Facebook to reach an audience through a video program called Mic Dispatch, on Facebook Watch; last fall, after Facebook suggested that it would drop the program, Mic collapsed. Every time Facebook News tweaks its algorithm—tweaks made for commercial, not editorial, reasons—news organizations drown in the undertow. An automated Facebook feature called Trending Topics, introduced in 2014, turned out to mainly identify junk as trends, and so "news curators," who tended to be recent college graduates, were given a new, manual mandate, "massage the algorithm," which meant deciding, themselves, which stories mattered. The fake news that roiled the 2016 election? A lot of that was stuff on Trending Topics. (Last year, Facebook discontinued the feature.)

BuzzFeed surpassed the *Times* Web site in reader traffic in 2013. BuzzFeed News is subsidized by BuzzFeed, which, like many Web sites—including, at this point, those of most major news organizations—makes money by way of "native advertising," ads that look like articles. In some publications, these fake stories are easy to spot; in others, they're not. At BuzzFeed, they're in the same font as every other story. BuzzFeed's native-advertising bounty meant that BuzzFeed News had money to pay reporters and editors, and it began producing some very good and very serious reporting, real news having become something of a luxury good. By 2014, BuzzFeed employed a hundred and fifty journalists, including many foreign correspondents. It was obsessed with Donald Trump's rumored Presidential bid, and followed him on what it called the "fake campaign trail" as early as January, 2014. "It used to be the New York *Times*, now it's BuzzFeed," Trump said, wistfully. "The world has changed." At the time, Steve Bannon was stumping for Trump on Breitbart. Left or right, a Trump Presidency was just the sort of story that could rack up the LOLs, OMGs, and WTFs. It still is.

In March, 2014, the *Times* produced an Innovation Report, announcing that the newspaper had fallen behind in "the art and science of getting our journalism to readers," a field led by BuzzFeed. That May, Sulzberger fired Abramson, who had been less than all-in about the *Times* doing things like running native ads. Meanwhile, BuzzFeed purged from its Web site more than four thousand of its early stories. "It's stuff made at a time when people were really not thinking of themselves as doing journalism," Ben Smith explained. Not long afterward, the *Times* began

running more lists, from book recommendations to fitness tips to takeaways from Presidential debates.

The *Times* remains unrivalled. It staffs bureaus all over the globe and sends reporters to some of the world's most dangerous places. It has more than a dozen reporters in China alone. Nevertheless, BuzzFeed News became more like the *Times*, and the *Times* became more like BuzzFeed, because readers, as Chartbeat announced on its endlessly flickering dashboards, wanted lists, and luxury porn, and people to hate.

The *Guardian*, founded as the Manchester *Guardian* in 1821, has been held by a philanthropic trust since 1936, which somewhat insulates it from market forces, just as Jeff Bezos's ownership now does something similar for the *Post*. By investing in digital-readership research from the time Rusbridger took charge, in 1995, the *Guardian* became, for a while, the online market leader in the U.K. By 2006, two-thirds of its digital readers were outside the U.K. In 2007, the *Guardian* undertook what Rusbridger calls "the Great Integration," pulling its Web and print parts together into a single news organization, with the same editorial management. It also developed a theory about the relationship between print and digital, deciding, in 2011, to be a "digital-first organization" and to "make print a slower, more reflective read which would not aspire to cover the entire waterfront in news."

Rusbridger explains, with a palpable grief, his dawning realization that the rise of social media meant that "chaotic information was free: good information was expensive," which meant, in turn, that "good information was increasingly for smaller elites" and that "it was harder for good information to compete on equal terms with bad." He takes these circumstances as something of a dare: "Our generation had been handed the challenge of rethinking almost everything societies had, for centuries, taken for granted about journalism."

Has that challenge been met? The *Guardian's* own success is mixed. As of 2018, it was in the black, partly by relying on philanthropy, especially in the U.S. "Reader revenue," in the form of donations marked not as subscriptions but as voluntary "memberships," is expected to overtake advertising revenue before long. Raising money from people who care about journalism has allowed the *Guardian* to keep the Web site free. It's also broken some big stories, from the Murdoch-papers phone-hacking scoop to the saga of Edward Snowden, and provided riveting coverage of ongoing and urgent stories, especially climate change. But, for all its fine reporting and substantive "Long Reads," the paper consists disproportionately of ideologically

unvarying opinion essays. By some measures, journalism entered a new, Trumpian, gold-plated age during the 2016 campaign, with the Trump bump, when news organizations found that the more they featured Trump the better their Chartbeat numbers, which, arguably, is a lot of what got him elected. The bump swelled into a lump and, later, a malignant tumor, a carcinoma the size of Cleveland. Within three weeks of the election, the *Times* added a hundred and thirty-two thousand new subscribers. (This effect hasn't extended to local papers.) News organizations all over the world now advertise their services as the remedy to Trumpism, and to fake news; fighting Voldemort and his Dark Arts is a good way to rake in readers. And scrutiny of the Administration has produced excellent work, the very best of journalism. "How President Trump Is Saving Journalism," a 2017 post on Forbes.com, marked Trump as the Nixon to today's rising generation of Woodwards and Bernsteins. Superb investigative reporting is published every day, by news organizations both old and new, including BuzzFeed News.

By the what-doesn't-kill-you line of argument, the more forcefully Trump attacks the press, the stronger the press becomes. Unfortunately, that's not the full story. All kinds of editorial decisions are now outsourced to Facebook's News Feed, Chartbeat, or other forms of editorial automation, while the hands of many flesh-and-blood editors are tied to so many algorithms. For one reason and another, including twenty-first-century journalism's breakneck pace, stories now routinely appear that might not have been published a generation ago, prompting contention within the reportorial ranks. In 2016, when BuzzFeed News released the Steele dossier, many journalists disapproved, including CNN's Jake Tapper, who got his start as a reporter for the Washington *City Paper*. "It is irresponsible to put uncorroborated information on the Internet," Tapper said. "It's why we did not publish it, and why we did not detail any specifics from it, because it was uncorroborated, and that's not what we do." The *Times* veered from its normal practices when it published an anonymous opinion essay by a senior official in the Trump Administration. And *The New Yorker* posted a story online about Brett Kavanaugh's behavior when he was an undergraduate at Yale, which Republicans in the Senate pointed to as evidence of a liberal conspiracy against the nominee.

There's plenty of room to argue over these matters of editorial judgment. Reasonable people disagree. Occasionally, those disagreements fall along a generational divide. Younger journalists often chafe against editorial restraint, not least because their cohort is far more likely than senior newsroom staff to include people from groups that have been explicitly and viciously targeted by Trump and the policies of his

Administration, a long and growing list that includes people of color, women, immigrants, Muslims, members of the L.G.B.T.Q. community, and anyone with family in Haiti or any of the other countries Trump deems "shitholes." Sometimes younger people are courageous and sometimes they are heedless and sometimes those two things are the same. "The more 'woke' staff thought that urgent times called for urgent measures," Abramson writes, and that "the dangers of Trump's presidency obviated the old standards." Still, by no means is the divide always or even usually generational. Abramson, for instance, sided with BuzzFeed News about the Steele dossier, just as she approves of the use of the word "lie" to refer to Trump's lies, which, by the *Post's* reckoning, came at the rate of more than a dozen a day in 2018.

The broader problem is that the depravity, mendacity, vulgarity, and menace of the Trump Administration have put a lot of people, including reporters and editors, off their stride. The present crisis, which is nothing less than a derangement of American life, has caused many people in journalism to make decisions they regret, or might yet. In the age of Facebook, Chartbeat, and Trump, legacy news organizations, hardly less than startups, have violated or changed their editorial standards in ways that have contributed to political chaos and epistemological mayhem. Do editors sit in a room on Monday morning, twirl the globe, and decide what stories are most important? Or do they watch Trump's Twitter feed and let him decide? It often feels like the latter. Sometimes what doesn't kill you doesn't make you stronger; it makes everyone sick. The more adversarial the press, the more loyal Trump's followers, the more broken American public life. The more desperately the press chases readers, the more our press resembles our politics.

The problems are well understood, the solutions harder to see. Good reporting is expensive, but readers don't want to pay for it. The donation-funded ProPublica, "an independent, nonprofit newsroom that produces investigative journalism with moral force," employs more than seventy-five journalists. Good reporting is slow, good stories unfold, and most stories that need telling don't involve the White House. The Correspondent, an English-language version of the Dutch Web site De Correspondent, is trying to "unbreak the news." It won't run ads. It won't collect data (or, at least, not much). It won't have subscribers. Like NPR, it will be free for everyone, supported by members, who pay what they can. "We want to radically change what news is about, how it is made, and how it is funded," its founders state. Push-notifications-on news is bad for you, they say, "because it pays more attention to the sensational, exceptional, negative, recent, and incidental, thereby losing sight

of the ordinary, usual, positive, historical, and systematic." What will the Correspondent look like? It will stay above the fray. It might sometimes be funny. It's slated to début sometime in 2019. Aside from the thing about ads, it sounds a lot like a magazine, when magazines came in the mail.

After we'd shoved the last, fat Worcester *Sunday Telegram* inside the last, unlatched screen door, we'd head home, my father taking turns a little too fast, so that we'd have to clutch at one another and at the lip of the tailgate, to keep from falling off. "Dad, slow down!" we'd squeal, not meaning it. Then he'd make breakfast, hot chocolate with marshmallows in the winter, orange juice from a can of frozen concentrate in the summer, and on my plate I'd make wedges of cantaloupe into Viking ships sailing across a sea of maple syrup from the Coast of Bacon to Pancake Island. After breakfast, we'd dump the money from the tobacco tins onto the kitchen table and count coins, stacking quarters and nickels and dimes into wrappers from the Worcester County Institution for Savings, while my father updated the Accounts, and made the Collection List.

Going collecting was a drag. You had to knock on people's doors and ask your neighbors for money—"*Telegram!* Collecting!"—and it was embarrassing, and, half the time, they'd ask you in, and before you knew it you'd be helping out, and it would take all day. "So long as you're here, could you hold the baby while I take a quick shower?" "Honey, after this, could you bring my mail down to the post office on that cute little bike of yours?" I came to understand that the people who didn't leave the money under the mat hadn't forgotten to. They just liked having a kid visit on Sunday afternoon.

The death of a newspaper is sometimes like other deaths. The Mrs. and the Miss, a very, very old woman and her very old daughter, lived in a crooked green house on top of a rise and wore matching housecoats and slippers. The Miss followed the Mrs. around like a puppy, and, if you found them in the parlor reading the paper, the Mrs. would be poring over the opinion pages while the Miss cut pictures out of the funnies. "The Miss can't think straight," my father said. "Her head's scrambled. So be gentle with her. Nothing to be afraid of. Be sure to help them out." Once when I biked over there, the Miss was standing, keening, noise without words, sound without sense. The Mrs. wasn't moving, and she wasn't ever going to move again. I called for help and held the Miss's hand, waiting for the wail of sirens. I didn't know what else to do. ♦

An earlier version of this story misstated the subtitle of Christopher B. Daly's book "Covering America." It also misstated the Huffington Post's advertising revenue.

This article appears in the print edition of the January 28, 2019, issue, with the headline "Hard News."

Jill Lepore is a staff writer at The New Yorker and a professor of history at Harvard University. Her latest book, "These Truths: A History of the United States," came out in September.