

In the Trump Era, a Family's Fight With Google and Facebook Over Disinformation

The man behind “Willie Horton” and Citizens United built a potent online disinformation mill with his son. Then Big Tech changed the rules.

By Nicholas Confessore and Justin Bank

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Each day, in an office outside Phoenix, a team of young writers and editors curates reality.

In the America presented on their news and opinion website, WesternJournal.com, tradition-minded patriots face ceaseless assault by anti-Christian bigots, diseased migrants and race hustlers concocting hate crimes. Danger and outrages loom. A Mexican politician threatens the “takeover” of several American states. Police officers are kicked out of an Arizona Starbucks. Kamala Harris, the Democratic presidential candidate, proposes a “\$100 billion handout” for black families.

The Western Journal is not quite a household name. Until recently, some of its most prolific writers used pseudonyms. Though it publishes scores of stories each week about national politics, the company has no Washington bureau, or any other bureaus. Indeed, it rarely dispatches reporters into the world to gather news firsthand.

In the parallel universe of Facebook, though, The Western Journal has been among the most popular and influential publications in America, shaping the political beliefs of more than 36 million deeply loyal readers and followers. In the three years ending in March, according to a New York Times analysis, Western Journal’s Facebook posts earned three-quarters of a billion shares, likes and comments, almost as many as the combined tally of 10 leading American news organizations that together employ thousands of reporters and editors.

But in the last year, as Facebook and Google tried to rein in their own freewheeling, largely unregulated information ecosystems, The Western Journal’s publishers have been thrust into a high-stakes clash between the tech industry and Washington.

[Here are three takeaways from The Times’s investigation into The Western Journal.]

The Western Journal rose on the forces that have remade — and warped — American politics, as activists, publishers and politicians harnessed social media’s power and reach to serve fine-tuned ideological content to an ever-agitated audience. Founded by the veteran conservative provocateur Floyd G. Brown, who began his career with the race-baiting “Willie Horton” ad during the 1988 presidential campaign, and run by his younger son, Patrick, The Western Journal used misleading headlines and sensationalized stories to attract partisans, then profit from their anger.

But Silicon Valley’s efforts to crack down on clickbait and disinformation have pummeled traffic to The Western Journal and other partisan news sites. Some leading far-right figures have been kicked off social media platforms entirely, after violating rules against hate speech and incitement. Republican politicians and activists have alleged that the tech companies are unfairly censoring the right, threatening conservatives’ ability to sway public opinion and win elections.

Those attacks have been led by President Trump. While he and his aides once credited his 2016 upset victory to the power of Facebook and Twitter, they now routinely accuse the same companies of bias.

In July, Mr. Trump hosted a “social media summit” featuring conservative activists who claim to have been censored online. His administration is drafting an executive order that would impose federal oversight of the platforms’ content-moderation policies, a startling departure from decades of deregulatory orthodoxy on the right.

Now The Western Journal — like Mr. Trump — is battling the very technology firms that enabled its rise. Its Facebook traffic has declined sharply. Google News blacklisted the publication last year for what Google ruled were deceptive business practices. Apple News followed suit in June, saying one or more Western Journal stories had advocated “views overwhelmingly rejected by the scientific community.”

“Facebook has determined to put The Western Journal out of business,” Floyd Brown wrote in a June email to many of the site’s 1.6 million newsletter subscribers.



The offices of Liftable Media, Patrick Brown's company, which originally focused on feel-good Facebook clickbait. Conor E. Ralph for The New York Times

The Western Journal's parent company has hired a Washington lobbyist to push back against digital censorship, and the website has published a series of stories and in-house studies claiming that Silicon Valley's new rules have discriminated against conservative publishers and politicians. The Browns have also sought to join Mr. Trump's anti-Silicon Valley crusade, dispatching Herman Cain, the onetime presidential candidate and a prominent Western Journal contributor, to represent it at the White House summit in July.

"We are committed to the truth," said Patrick Brown. "We are real people. We are a digital media company," he continued. "We are not disinformation."

Both Facebook and Google have denied that they systematically censor conservative views. Many instances of alleged censorship have been traced to user behavior that triggered the platforms' automated safeguards against spam and impersonation.

"We enforce our policies vigorously, consistently and without consideration of any perceived political leanings of any site," said Maggie Shiels, a Google spokeswoman.

On Tuesday, Facebook released preliminary findings from an outside review of censorship complaints. Although the report provided no new evidence to support the allegations, Facebook said it would make its content-moderation policies more transparent, a sign of the pressure from Washington.

Lauren Svensson, a Facebook spokeswoman, said the company had worked aggressively to cut back on false news, but that suppressing content on the basis of political viewpoint "would be directly contrary to our mission."

The censorship debate underscores the vast power tech platforms have amassed, and the sometimes unnerving opacity with which they exercise it. Silicon Valley's ever-evolving rule books and secretive enforcement procedures determine how news flows to billions of people. The industry's efforts at reform have disrupted political strategies and business models alike, particularly on the right.

Highly partisan news sites on the right far outnumber those on the left, according to a tally published last fall by NewsWhip, an analytics company. Conservative readers rely significantly more on hyperpartisan sites for news than liberal ones, and Facebook itself remains a major source of news for older Americans, who will be central to Republicans' electoral fortunes next year.

“These are tactics that some people have been using for a long time,” said Camille François, a former disinformation researcher at Google who is now chief innovation officer at Graphika, a social media data firm. “This is how they structured their campaigns. This is how they built their businesses.”

The Browns did both: For decades, the family’s enterprises have blended political campaigns and partisan journalism, helping reshape American politics and earning tens of millions of dollars along the way. Mr. Trump’s movement was the family’s most lucrative opportunity yet. Now, it may save the Browns — or ruin them.

A Platform Unlike Any Other

Patrick Brown presents as an unlikely merchant of outrage. He is 6-foot-6, but stoop-shouldered and soft-spoken. When expressing a thought that might draw dispute, he often shrugs uncomfortably and spreads his hands, as if to cushion the blow. Mr. Brown attended a small Christian college in Pennsylvania, and his first company, a site called Liftable.com, featured viral, often religious-themed stories meant to inspire readers rather than enrage them: Good Samaritans who saved the life of an accident victim, for example, or the actor Johnny Depp visiting a children’s hospital.

“I grew up not liking politics,” Mr. Brown said in an interview. “I grew up seeing just people being jerks to each other.”

Floyd Brown promoted conspiracy theories about Bill Clinton during the 1992 presidential campaign. Barry Thumma/Associated Press

His exposure to politics came through his father, a larger-than-life veteran of Washington’s partisan wars. Floyd G. Brown reveled in the infamy surrounding his successful Horton ads, which featured mug shots of a black convicted murderer to stoke fears that the Democratic candidate, Michael Dukakis, was soft on crime. Over the following decades, Mr. Brown would start political organizations employing the same basic formula: Apocalyptic direct-mail appeals to raise money, innuendo-laden ads to thrash Democrats and outrageous claims to draw mainstream news interest.

During the 1990s, Mr. Brown ran a tax-exempt group, Citizens United, and a subscription newsletter, Clintonwatch, that peddled opposition research and outright conspiracy theories about Bill Clinton. When Barack Obama first ran for president, Mr. Brown helped form a network of political action committees that made anti-Obama attack ads, including one questioning whether Mr. Obama might

secretly be Muslim. (The PACs raised millions of dollars — and paid out hundreds of thousands to companies controlled by Mr. Brown or his associates.)

After Mr. Obama won, Mr. Brown revived a defunct conservative journalism nonprofit, now called the Western Center for Journalism.

“I’m essentially a political activist,” he said in an interview. He focused on writing, he said, after realizing that “the safest venue for the advocacy of ideas in the United States of America was as a publisher and writer.”

Mr. Brown relocated his family to Anthem, an exurb of Phoenix, and began blogging at WesternJournalism.com, a precursor to today’s Western Journal site. At the height of the Tea Party movement, he worked the right-wing conference circuit. (“Obama hates Christianity,” Mr. Brown declared at a 2010 event, according to a recording published by Media Matters, the liberal watchdog group. “He is a Muslim.”) WesternJournalism.com ran stories exploring whether Eric Holder, then the United States attorney general, had covered up a murder, and promoting the lie that Mr. Obama was not an American citizen. One direct-mail piece accused Mr. Obama of pledging to ban criticism of Islam to “please his jihadist ‘masters.’”

But social media provided Mr. Brown with a platform unlike any other. He discovered he could use Facebook ads to find alienated, angry conservative users. “I really built Western Journalism with one really unique ad,” he said at a 2016 conference in Las Vegas, speaking on a panel titled “How to Change the World and Get Rich Through Social Media.” As Mr. Brown recounted: “I went in and I wrote an ad that just said, ‘Click “like” if you think Barack Obama should be impeached.’”

By May 2014, over four million people a month were visiting the Western Journalism site, which delivered steady attacks on the mainstream media and Democrats, and headlines like “Florida Democrats Just Voted to Impose Sharia Law on Women.” WesternJournalism.com took in \$1.9 million that year, almost three-quarters of the center’s revenue.

At first, Floyd Brown’s son worked behind the scenes. During summers home from college, Patrick Brown built websites for his father’s PACs, like ExposeObama.com, and taught himself coding and social media marketing. After graduating, he ran the Western Center’s marketing department, posting its stories on Facebook and studying what made people click the “like” button.

While Floyd Brown credits his son with WesternJournalism.com’s rapid growth — “it was his technology,” he said — Patrick Brown described the period with some misgiving. He disliked working on the PACs, he said in a recent interview, and did not share his father’s views about Mr. Obama’s faith. (“My perspective is that if he says he’s a Christian, he’s a Christian.”) In 2012, Patrick and his wife moved to Vietnam to help start an elementary school. When they returned, he worked again briefly at the Western Center, then quit. In summer 2014, with financial backing from his parents, he started Lifiable Media, working the sunny end of the Facebook clickbait spectrum.

In an interview, Patrick Brown described his motivation as “wanting to be in charge of my own company, wanting to do something my way that I can really feel at the end of the day very proud of.”

But within months, he returned to the family business. In January 2015, Liftable acquired WesternJournalism.com from the tax-exempt nonprofit run by his father. The transaction was highly favorable to the Browns: Liftable paid \$626,157, according to federal tax records, a fraction of the site’s annual advertising revenue. The sale effectively stripped the Western Center of its most valuable asset, built with tax-exempt contributions, and transferred it to a for-profit company owned by the Browns. Not long after, according to corporate records, Mr. Brown’s parents joined Liftable’s board.

“I came to the realization that politics is not in and of itself a bad thing,” Patrick Brown said.

Over the next two years, he built one of the most influential political sites in America. With Floyd Brown as chairman, Liftable bought up a slew of rival publishers, such as Conservative Tribune and Liberty Alliance. The acquisitions brought the Browns millions of email addresses and increased to close to 60 their stable of popular conservative Facebook pages with names like Saving Our Future and Trump Truck.

To expand their reach, the Browns struck deals with dozens of conservative politicians and celebrities, including Joe Arpaio, the anti-immigrant Arizona sheriff. The politicians posted Western Journalism and Conservative Tribune stories to their own widely followed Facebook pages in return for a cut of the ad revenue. (Facebook has since banned this practice, which violates Federal Trade Commission rules against undisclosed sponsorships.)

Coursing through the Browns’ Facebook empire was a torrent of sensationalized, misleading, or entirely made-up stories, often aimed at Muslims and immigrants, and pumped out through dozens of seemingly unconnected Facebook pages that in practice functioned as part of a single publication. Liftable’s sites were cited more than a dozen times by fact-checking watchdogs like Snopes.com and FactCheck.org. In a report titled “Bloodlust,” The Anti-Defamation League, a civil rights group, charged WesternJournalism and other fringe web publishers with engaging in “the monetizing of digital mobs.”

Liftable’s political content lived alongside more lighthearted fare — a sports website; stories about cancer survivors; “Dancing with the Stars” recaps — in a full-spectrum assault on the viral news market. Liftable soared. Its sites reached nearly a billion page views in the run-up to the 2016 election, according to SimilarWeb, an analytics company. By the time Mr. Trump was sworn in, more than 12 million people were arriving on the sites each month through Facebook or other social media, driving a torrent of advertising revenue. In 2016, the company took in more than \$16 million. Instead of leaving the family business, Mr. Brown had supercharged it.

“It’s as if these publishers discovered — or created, or radicalized — a huge market niche that simply had not been tapped before,” said Paul Quigley, the chief executive of NewsWhip.

Blacklisted, Then Resurrected

But by 2017, tech companies were coming under enormous pressure from regulators and lawmakers. Media and government investigations had revealed how Russian agents used Facebook and Twitter to help Mr. Trump get elected, in part by targeting voters with divisive or misleading stories.

A President Trump bobblehead, center, flanked by figures of John Wayne and President Ronald Reagan, in Liftable's recording studio. Conor E. Ralph for The New York Times

Facebook had begun incorporating fact-checking ratings into its algorithm, eventually down-ranking content flagged as misleading or false. Both Twitter and Facebook began rooting out networks of secretly coordinated social accounts and web domains, aiming at both state actors, like Russia, and publishers of spam. Facebook also began asking users which publications they trusted most, and ranked content accordingly.

The cumulative changes slowed Facebook traffic to media outlets across the publishing industry. But for some, including The Western Journal, it was devastating. The accumulation of “false” ratings from fact-checking sites meant that Western Journal and Conservative Tribune stories were less likely to pop up in users’ feeds. The company — hidden behind its own blizzard of Facebook pages, little-known as a news brand in its own right — ranked poorly on Facebook’s trust surveys, hurting their reach still more.

In fall 2017, Facebook traffic to Liftable’s properties began to drop. By early last year, it was nearly zero.

Patrick Brown’s team scrambled. In 2018, Mr. Brown resurrected his site as WesternJournal.com, a new domain that had never been blacklisted by advertising networks or flagged by fact checkers. He began working with Facebook to rename most of his company’s stable of Facebook pages to tie them more closely to The Western Journal. (A page once called Donald Trump Is the Man, for example, is now called Donald Trump News by WJ.) Others were shut down.

Mr. Brown also introduced a corrections page and published editorial standards that stated, among other things, that The Western Journal’s “first value as a company is truth.” Thousands of old WesternJournalism.com stories, including most of Floyd Brown’s columns, were removed.

In February, Patrick Brown greeted two reporters at the Liftable offices in Anthem, wearing jeans and a faded T-shirt. “I’d say we’re backing into something that looks more like a traditional media company,” he said in his small office with sweeping views of the Sonoran Desert.

Over a series of conversations, Mr. Brown answered detailed questions about his business and Liftable’s efforts to navigate social media’s fast-changing landscape. “Our goal is to show you who we are and be transparent,” he said. “We haven’t done this before, so we’re nervous.”

While Facebook’s algorithm changes had knocked around his business, Mr. Brown acknowledged, most of them were about “protecting the user — and you know, we support that.”

His father had little involvement with the company day to day, Mr. Brown said, and served mostly as a sounding board on business and management issues. When asked whether Liftable had anything in common with his father’s PACs, Mr. Brown demurred.

“I would never want to do what he did,” Mr. Brown said. “When you make an ad or something, you are — your whole goal is to just convince someone of something, right? I mean, our goal is not that. Our No. 1 goal is to inform — truthfully.”

Yet the reborn Western Journal functions almost like a news outlet in reverse. In interviews, the website’s editors spoke often about narratives — narratives in the mainstream media, narratives they wanted to counter, narratives they were seeking. Each workday, a small team of editors, known as “story finders,” scours social media data and newswires. “They’re looking for information, narratives that will inform and equip and motivate our audience,” said Shaun Hair, a former litigator who is The Western Journal’s executive editor.

The message comes first, then facts carefully selected to support it. Only after editors decide the framing of a story, and write the headline, is it handed off to a pool of contract writers, most working remotely. Deadlines are tight: Most articles are filed within an hour or two, and some breaking-news stories are written in as little as 30 minutes.

Western Journal editors stressed that headlines and frames were often adjusted later to ensure accuracy, and that writers were encouraged to pitch ideas. But as with stories from some other ideological media outlets, those from Western Journal often feel tailored to the daily political needs of one faction. Mr. Brown describes the intended audience as the “forgotten people” of heartland America — a staple of Mr. Trump’s speeches — and The Western Journal’s narratives often echo and amplify those spun by the president.

Mr. Trump's targets, too, reliably become The Western Journal's: the CNN reporter Jim Acosta, Joy Behar of "The View," Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Last fall, when Mr. Trump sought to mobilize Republican voters by campaigning against the caravan of Central Americans headed toward the United States, The Western Journal published more than 150 stories about the migrants. Most complemented Mr. Trump's message, for example by likening the caravan to a "mob" or "an army," and emphasizing instances of violence.

Mr. Brown and his colleagues argue that, unlike mainstream outlets, they are at least transparent about the values that color their content.

"We're conservative," Mr. Hair said. "And our news is both curated and approached from a conservative reality."

As Big Tech cracked down, the Browns promoted another emerging narrative: that platforms like Google and Facebook were biased against the right.

In March 2018, Floyd Brown declared on Fox News that Facebook had been "optimized to the thought police." The same month, The Western Journal published an in-house study concluding that Facebook's algorithm changes disproportionately favored liberal news outlets. (Cameron Hickey, a disinformation researcher at Harvard, told The Times he considered the study's methodology flawed, since it did not assess the quality or reliability of the news sources, merely their purported ideological tilt.)

A few months later, another Western Journal study asserted that the changes had cost Republican members of Congress more Facebook reach than their Democratic counterparts. The company also hired a Republican lobbyist in Washington, Alex Shively, to arrange meetings with lawmakers.

The claim of censorship was not only a political battle cry. It was a business imperative. As Liftable's Facebook traffic declined, it had moved more aggressively into direct marketing, pitching its reader data and email lists as tool for conservative politicians and political organizations to reach voters. In spring 2018, Liftable hired Gabriel S. Joseph III, a Washington-based operative and a longtime friend of Floyd Brown, to spearhead the business. It was later spun off into a company called Firefly Engagement. Like the elder Mr. Brown, Mr. Joseph has a knack for brass-knuckle political marketing. He is currently appealing a \$32 million judgment for a class-action claim that his company illegally spammed millions of people to promote a video about the so-called War on Christmas.

The new business was critical for Liftable. Even after The Western Journal's reinvention, the site drew only about half the traffic it had during the 2016 campaign. Although it still had some of the highest Facebook engagement rates of any publication, total traffic referred from the social media network had declined catastrophically, according to SimilarWeb data. By the end of 2018, only about two million readers a month were coming to the website from Facebook. After Google News blacklisted the site, the publication lost two-thirds of its traffic from Google's search engine — and with it, ad revenue.

Correspondence that Patrick Brown shared with The Times shows that, at first, a Google representative blamed the drop on a technical error.

In a later email, a Google representative offered Mr. Brown a new, different reason: The Western Journal had engaged in practices that “can be reasonably construed by users as deceptive behavior.”

Ms. Shiels, the Google spokeswoman, said that Google News, which includes roughly 80,000 news sources, had blocked about 800 sites for policy violations. She declined to name the sites, but said they spanned the political spectrum.

Google's decision to blacklist The Western Journal was informed in part by the work of an outside security firm, CounterAction, according to a person briefed on the matter. The person, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of contractual agreements around CounterAction's work, said the firm was one of several that Google worked with to detect and deter disinformation campaigns.

But Patrick viewed the blacklisting as further evidence of bias. His staff spent weeks vetting their content and procedures against Google News's rules for publishers, even hiring a consultant to audit their practices. “There was no reason that he could see why we would be removed, except for political bias,” Mr. Brown said. The financial crunch became so severe, he said, that he and his father temporarily gave up their salaries.

“What is happening to Liftable Media isn't important in and of itself,” Mr. Brown added. “Except in the way that it's reflecting a clampdown on speech in general in America.”

‘Who Controls the Microphones’

A few months ago, Floyd Brown and Mr. Joseph helped organize a new group, the Coalition for Standardized Digital Media and IT, to call attention to supposed tech censorship.

In May, Mr. Joseph oversaw the coalition's launch event at the National Press Club in Washington. The gathering featured Laura Loomer, an anti-Muslim activist whom Facebook banned for posts inciting violence against the Minnesota congresswoman Ilhan Omar as well as more credentialed conservatives with Trump ties, such as Mr. Cain and Kenneth T. Cuccinelli II, now acting director of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services.

“There are a lot of folks who depended on Facebook and Google,” Mr. Cain said in an interview. “And then, all of a sudden, they begin trying to decide what is ‘appropriate.’” He emphasized the last word skeptically, with air quotes.

Independent experts have largely dismissed the claim that platforms are systematically discriminating against conservative content. (The most successful publisher on Facebook in 2019 is FoxNews.com.) But the complaints echo longstanding conservative attacks on the mainstream media, a onetime gatekeeper whose powers have long since been diminished by openly ideological outlets.

“This is an argument that is very familiar through history — the idea of one faction being shut out from public debate because of who controls the microphones,” said Ms. François, the former Google disinformation researcher.

To prevent publishers from gaming their rules, platforms like Facebook and Google News typically do not identify precisely what content or action will result in a penalty.

But a review of Liftable's operations showed a range of potential violations of Google's policies against spam, misrepresentation and overreliance on other outlets' content — activities that, taken together, would help explain the company's suspension.

Almost none of The Western Journal's news coverage arises from original reporting, for example. Almost all of it is “aggregated” — borrowed and rewritten, with attribution — from stories on other sites, ranging from Breitbart and Daily Caller to traditional news organizations like the The Times and The Washington Post. For much of this year, The Western Journal's home page was dominated by headlines that linked to other media outlets, such as Fox News or CNN, without clearly indicating that the stories had not originated on The Western Journal.

Senator Mazie Hirono, Democrat of Hawaii, criticized Republicans in April for convening a hearing to discuss “claims of anti-conservative bias that have been disproven time and again.” Sarah Silbiger/The New York Times

Western Journal authors do not always use their real names, another violation of Google News policies. In late 2018, when Western Journal was suspended, a search for some of the site’s most prominent bylines yielded no digital fingerprints beyond Lifiable. A few of the writers, Mr. Brown explained at the time, used pseudonyms or middle names. After The Times asked about the practice, those authors began using their real names. But some Western Journal bylines are still pseudonyms, like an author named C. O. Jones (i.e., “Cojones.”)

Mr. Brown also appears to have used frowned-upon techniques to game Google’s algorithms. At The Times’s request, Matthew Hindman, a professor at George Washington University and author of “The Internet Trap,” found at least 50 domains linked to the Browns that appeared to be promoting The Western Journal.

Those domains, which included ExposeObama.com, the former website of Floyd Brown’s anti-Obama PAC, have posted nearly 150,000 links to Western Journal articles since 2017, a technique known as “spammy backlinking.” Some are still configured as “doorway sites,” with little more than a rotating collection of Western Journal headlines and links, a tactic to create the appearance of popularity but explicitly banned by Google.

“This is not a new technique,” Mr. Hindman said. “And they can’t have been surprised that Google thought it was cheating.”

Most striking, the Browns’ company also has unusually close ties with a pro-Trump PAC, America Fighting Back. The PAC was co-founded last September by Mr. Cain, shortly before The Western Journal absorbed his personal website and began hosting his internet radio show. The PAC’s chief strategist, Todd Ceferrati, is also a consultant to Lifiable. Floyd Brown is the PAC’s chairman.

Almost every post on the PAC’s Facebook page is a link to a Western Journal story or commentary. Most of the PAC’s email solicitations are sent out over Lifiable-owned domains, according to a Times review, and feature Western Journal stories. A welcome message on the America Fighting Back site celebrates the PAC’s “amazing group of marketing and social media and grass-roots experts dedicated to our nation, President Trump and his agenda.”

Lifiable appears to have shut down its backlinking network sometime this year; most of the sites now merely direct readers to WesternJournal.com. Executives said this summer that they had made further changes to the site to hew more closely to Google’s public policies, and appealed the suspension.

But the PAC appears to be a sticking point: In July, shortly after the White House summit, a Google representative told Mr. Brown’s team that The Western Journal was not adequately disclosing to readers its relationship with the political organization. It was hard to tell, the representative seemed to suggest, where The Western Journal ended and the PAC began.

Lifiable editors said it had no formal connection to the PAC; the group simply employed Lifiable and Firefly as vendors. In an email to The Times, Mr. Brown accused Google of a double standard.

“I challenge Google to remove The Washington Post from Google News because of the political contributions and political activities of Jeff Bezos,” Mr. Brown said. “Americans of all political persuasions used to be allowed their personal political beliefs, but Google punishes our entire company because of my personal giving and activities. All we have ever asked for is to be treated with equality.”

A Direct Line

In mid-August, Patrick Brown told Liftable's staff he was stepping down as chief executive to take a medical leave. The elder Mr. Brown now runs the family business once again, right as Liftable is fighting for its life. The company has parted ways with some freelancers and left some openings unfilled. Today, according to Floyd Brown, Liftable Media is half its former size.

As Liftable's Facebook traffic declined, it shifted to email and digital marketing. [Conor E. Ralph for The New York Times](#)

But the Browns have always adapted. Later this year, a new company started by the Browns and Mr. Ceferrati will release a smartphone app called Feedme. Created by Patrick Brown, the app is designed to neuter Silicon Valley's control over its own platforms. Feedme will allow users to import public content from Facebook, Twitter and other social platforms, but decide which of the content they see, instead of letting those companies' algorithms decide. In theory, it could allow the Browns to broadcast anything to their Facebook followers, without interference.

A marketing email sent to Western Journal readers in July presented Feedme as a solution to "Silicon Valley's theft of the First Amendment." The message — political and commercial — will be bolstered by Floyd Brown's next book, due out in September: "Big Tech Tyrants: How Silicon Valley's Stealth Practices Addict Teens, Silence Speech, and Steal Your Privacy."

Correction: Aug. 22, 2019

An earlier version of this article misstated the length of time that Western Journal writers have to file a story. It is typically one to two hours, and in some cases as little as 30 minutes; it is not typically 30 minutes. The article also erroneously stated that Western Journal hired experienced copy editors in 2018; it hired experienced editors in prior years, not in 2018. And an earlier version misstated Patrick Brown's height; he is 6-foot-6, not 6-foot-3.

Millie Tran and Rachel Shorey contributed reporting. Research was contributed by Susan C. Beachy, Alain Delaquerière, Kitty Bennett and Aaron Krolik.

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