

Top Leaders

Fuel a Surge

In Falsehoods

A Traditional Restraint

on Rumors Fades

By STEVEN LEE MYERS

Rumors flew in the hours after a shooting at Brown University killed two students on Dec. 13. One falsehood had it that one of the victims, a leader of the college Republican Club, was “targeted for her conservative beliefs, hunted, and killed in cold blood.”

Another was that it had been a terrorist attack, a claim that made the rounds when a Palestinian student was identified as a possible suspect two days later and hounded on the internet.

A churn of disinformation after a major news event is hardly a surprise anymore, but its spread after the Brown killings was not limited to the dark fringes of the internet. It was fueled by prominent figures in business and government whose false statements or politically charged innuendo compounded public anger and anxiety.

That has raised new alarms about the nature and quality of public discourse — and whether there is any consequence for those who degrade it or for the social media platforms that reward it.

Renee DiResta, an associate research professor at Georgetown University, referred to the attacks on the falsely accused student as “an internet witch hunt,” where the rumor mill intersected with a political propaganda machine.

“Political leaders, statesmen, who once served as a firebreak against baser instincts increasingly see an opportunity to look receptive to the base — so they add kindling instead,” she wrote in a newsletter on Substack on Tuesday.

Those who spread rumors about the motives behind the shooting included at least two members of Congress, Senator Tommy Tuberville of Alabama and Representative Anna Paulina Luna of Florida, both Republicans. The assistant attorney general for civil rights at the Justice Department, Harmeet Dhillon, called the falsely accused student’s political activism “concerning.”

Bill Ackman, the billionaire owner of the Pershing Square hedge fund, amplified that narrative, as did Shaun Maguire, a partner at Sequoia Capital who has drawn attention recently for public statements about Islam.

“Our elite universities have become terror breeding grounds,” Mr. Maguire wrote, only days before the state police identified the attacker not as a terrorist but as a disgruntled scientist from Portugal. He was found dead on Dec. 18 in a storage unit in New Hampshire, according to the authorities.

The fevered, baseless speculation became so intense that police officials warned that it was disrupting their work.

“The endless barrage of misinformation, disinformation, rumors, leaks and clickbait were not helpful in this investigation,” the superintendent of the Rhode Island State Police, Colonel Darnell S. Weaver, said after the student’s name spread online. “Distractions and unfounded criticisms do not

Continued on Page A12



New Yorkers and visitors have purchased 3.2 billion MetroCards over the past three decades. In 2026, they will be phased out.

It Was Lighter

Than a Token.

Now It’s Litter.

By DODAI STEWART

It was January 1994 and a local ABC News team was broadcasting live from inside the Whitehall Street subway station in Manhattan with substantial breaking news. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority had not run out of subway tokens, the newscaster assured viewers, but it was replacing them with “something called a MetroCard.”

On Day 1, early reviews were positive.

“It’s a lot lighter than carrying a lot of tokens,” one commuter noted. “I think it’s a great idea.”

“More convenient,” another said. “Less holes in my pocket.”

Still, unlike with tokens or coins, the M.T.A., which oversees the subway and buses, had to patiently teach people how to purchase and use the MetroCard. And riders were slow to adapt. In 1996, two years after its debut, only 8 percent of the transit system’s five million daily riders were using the card.

Three decades and 3.2 billion MetroCards after it was first issued, what once felt like cutting-edge technology has become outdated. Dec. 31 is the last day the MetroCard will be sold in New York.

New York City’s transit system is in the final stages of transitioning to OMNY, a tap-and-go payment system. The MetroCard will still function for part of 2026, but its days are numbered.

The truth is, the MetroCard has felt old-fashioned for years, a relic of a predigital era. The first OMNY readers were installed in 2019, and by the end of 2020, the

Continued on Page A10

Path to New Life Started in Locked Psych Ward

By ANDY NEWMAN

Lamar Brown was one of the people some New Yorkers instinctively flinch from on the subway.

Living with schizoaffective disorder, talking to himself and surrounded by trash bags full of his possessions, he would ride the trains for hours. He spent years living in the subway system and on the streets.

Early last year, he was spotted on a train in Midtown Manhattan, yelling and muttering, and paramedics took him to a hospital psychiatric ward. It was a trip he had made before, one that mentally ill, homeless New Yorkers made involuntarily more than

1,500 times last year.

Typically, hospitals treat and medicate people like Mr. Brown, 40, for a few days or weeks, until they are temporarily stable enough to be discharged. Then they are released to a shelter, a safe haven (a shelter with fewer restrictions) or back onto the street. They often stop taking their medication and quickly lose the ground they gained at the hos-



TOM JAMIESON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



GEORDIE WOOD FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Pictures That Defined the Year in Arts

A coastal path between Margate and Broadstairs in Kent, the United Kingdom. Right, Liam Neeson in New York. Photographers offer impressions from some of their favorite shoots.. Pages C1-4.

An All-Nighter in the Dorm Yields a Voting Map

By EDUARDO MEDINA

The laptop was cracked open well after midnight, as was a bottle of Sprite. Then, Daniel DiDonato, a college freshman, got to work.

But he wasn’t pulling an all-nighter to complete his assignments at the University of Alabama. Instead, fueled by soda and an unusual teenage interest in the wonky workings of redistricting,

College Wonk Redraws Lines in Alabama City

he set out to create new legislative maps for State Senate Districts 25 and 26 in Alabama.

A legal fight over those districts in Montgomery, Ala., had been brewing since 2021, when plaintiffs filed a lawsuit arguing that

state officials had violated Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act and created maps that effectively diluted the power of Black voters. In October, a federal judge ordered that those districts be redrawn and invited the public to submit maps for consideration. It was widely expected that the selected map would come from the team that had redrawn the state’s congressional districts in 2023, which in-

Continued on Page A10

From Olympian to Fugitive on Most Wanted List

Snowboarder Accused of Being Drug Lord

of the body, the authorities said. He reshared it widely — boasting that he had killed “the rat.” The man behind the killing, they said, was Ryan Wedding, a Canadian who rose to fame as an Olympic snowboarder two decades ago,

only to become what the authorities describe as one of the world’s biggest drug lords. “El Jefe,” as he was known, ran a drug-trafficking empire out of Mexico and was now one of the most wanted fugitives in the world.

The killing in Medellín in January of this year — detailed in a grand jury indictment in the United States, a State Department reward offer and two court docu-

Continued on Page A7



BUSINESS B1-5

Sears’s Hopes Fell Short

Only five stores remain, with the end likely near for what was once the mightiest American retailer. PAGE B1

Data Center Surge in India

Megacities in southern India are attracting enormous investments to help build A.I. infrastructure. PAGE B1

INTERNATIONAL A4-7

Zelensky to Meet With Trump

President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine said a “broad agenda” would be on the table this weekend with President Trump in Florida. PAGE A7

Targeting the Scam Industry

Thai warplanes have bombed Cambodian compounds where people are forced to defraud others online. PAGE A4

SPORTS B6-9

For the Love of a Place

After having a baby, the N.W.S.L. star Sophia Wilson is staying in Portland, her comfort zone. PAGE B6



TRAVEL C9-10

Fresh Glimpse of California

With miles of beaches and scenic views, San Luis Obispo County emerges as a destination in its own right. PAGE C10

Bayous and Beaches by Train

The new Mardi Gras Service lets visitors explore the Gulf Coast’s waterfront towns without a car. PAGE C9

NATIONAL A8-12

New York Mayor No. 111 or 112?

An arcane numbering system and the misplacement of a centuries-old official record have caused confusion on exactly where the next leader of America’s largest city falls in its history. PAGE A8

Schmoozing on the Stoop

New York City Mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani’s campaign encouraged door-knockers to ditch prepared scripts and instead engage voters in conversation. Democrats are taking note. PAGE A9

OPINION A14-15

Gail Collins PAGE A15

MAGAZINE

THIS WEEKEND

0 354613 9