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Robert Kaiser, then-managing editor of the Washington Post, visited Japan for a conference in 1992. One of the presentations he heard there concerned technology and the news business. Digital communications, the speaker said, would make journalism unrecognizable. Kaiser was shocked. He spent the trip home writing a memo for Post executives on what he had learned. “None of this is science fiction,” he urged, “it’s just around the corner.”

Nothing significant came of the memo. Such was the case throughout the news industry, where editors and publishers ignored similar warnings. They were content with revenues generated by classified ads, coupon inserts, and department store notices. By the turn of the century, they had grown so complacent that when the industry began to change just as the speaker had predicted, they promptly hit a brick wall.

The total circulation of weekday newspapers in the United States was 60 million when Kaiser went to Japan. In 2017 it was an estimated 31 million. In 1992 the total advertising revenue of U.S. newspapers was $31 billion. In 2017 it was an estimated $16 billion. It’s as if Thanos from the Avengers movies had snapped his fingers and eliminated half of print journalism.

Merchants of Truth by Jill Abramson, who edited the New York Times from 2011 to 2014, is a study of the impact of this digital revolution on four news outlets: BuzzFeed, Vice, the Times, and the Post. Her story does not have a happy ending. The news industry is experiencing interlocking crises of sustainability, credibility, and identity. Print and digital outlets have no reliable financial base. The public has less confidence in media institutions, and deservedly so. Journalists routinely ignore or violate the norms and canons that once defined their profession.

The reader finishes this book with an overwhelming sense of the power of technology to upend politics, society, culture, and business, including the business of news. Classified ads migrated to Craigslist. Google search decimated subscriptions—why pay when you can get stories free online? Facebook privileged clickbait and sharable content over investigations and foreign coverage. The iPhone displaced print as the go-to medium for news. Twitter, at its best, is a free, global, crowdsourced newswire; at its worst, it is a platform for sanctimony, rumor, insults, and hatred.

Technology changed more than the way we read. It also changed what we read. The websites created by Jonah Peretti—HuffPo and BuzzFeed—provide readers not so much with information as with sensation. With its “LOL,” “OMG,” “Trashy,” “WTF,” and “Fail” tags, BuzzFeed categorizes posts not by subject matter but by emotional response. Sensationalism did not begin with the internet, of course. But technological innovations have altered the way many publishers view their audience. The old conception was...
that the reader was a democratic citizen who needed to be informed. The new conception is that the reader is a bundle of preferences, desires, and affinities ripe for manipulation. “BuzzFeed’s technologists,” Abramson writes, “knew how to use mind tricks and pressure points, how to twist arms, dangle carrots, and use reverse psychology. They had it down to a science: blend one part tough love into two parts obsequious flattery, filter that through nostalgia, and glaze it with scot-free optimism.” Whatever that is, it is not shoe-leather reporting.

The internet is a great leveler. Print institutions used to observe certain boundaries between the newsgathering and business departments, and between editorial and advertising content. Abramson describes the process by which publishers transgressed those boundaries. They did so out of necessity. They had to find alternative sources of revenue once print advertising disappeared. Programmatic online ads did not cover losses. The answer, according to BuzzFeed’s Peretti, was so-called “native advertising.” This was a euphemism for marketing pitches that read like news or feature articles.

“The digital era had enshrined a new business model as the industry standard,” explains Abramson.

[P]laces like Vice and BuzzFeed would give away their journalistic content for free to win adherents to the publisher’s brand identity, then use this leverage to present sales pitches for their sponsors’ sales pitches, soft-pedaling them to the same unsuspecting readers whose loyalty they had won. Their unsponsored editorial work sold readers on how awesome and uncompromising they were. And the depth of that connection with readers was what they sold to advertisers, charging them for the opportunity to compromise it.

The Post and the Times were reluctant to adopt a model that collapsed the distinction between news and business. Then they succumbed. As the line between reporting and advertising dissolved, so too did the line between fact and opinion. BuzzFeed eschewed detachment and dispassion for advocacy and commitment to minority, women’s, and LGBT rights. Later, a front-page article in the August 7, 2016, New York Times reported that “Trump Is Testing the Norms of Objectivity in Journalism,” norms most reporters were more than happy to abandon if it cost Donald Trump the presidency.

The media that emerged from the technological whirlwind were digital-first platforms that integrated marketing with an outlet’s brand. BuzzFeed produced ads indistinguishable from its lists of “15 Hedgehogs With Things That Look Like Hedgehogs.” Vice’s in-house creative agency, dubbed “Virtue,” commodified dissent by infusing promotions from corporations and banks with its punk sensibility. The Times promoted trips to Iran and Cuba with the paper’s foreign correspondents, flacked wine clubs, and sold tickets to events featuring notable bylines. The Post got into trouble when its plans for “salons,” where lobbyists would pay to mingle with reporters, leaked to a competitor. Both the Times and the Post sold inserts to foreign governments who used the space, barely distinguishable from the rest of the paper, to extol the achievements of authoritarian regimes. Toward the end of the book, Abramson writes of her former paper: “The ever-growing T Studio had created 235 native ad campaigns for more than 100 clients, with branches in London and Hong Kong. With a staff of 130, it was bigger than the newsroom of Connecticut’s Hartford Courant.”

Such drastic measures are unlikely to make journalism any more sustainable. Last April, Warren Buffett said the newspaper business was “toast” because the readers of most publications do not actually subscribe for the writing and editing. “They want to know what supermarket’s having the bargain on Coke or Pepsi this weekend and so on,” Buffett said. “I mean, it upsets the people in the newsroom to talk that way, but the ads were the most important editorial content from the standpoint of the reader.” Buffett stepped down from the board of the Washington Post in 2011, two years before the paper was sold to Jeff Bezos.

If readers are not particularly interested in reporting, then money-losing publications have two choices. One is patronage, i.e., find a rich donor. Another is somehow to monetize the prestige associated with certain titles. Editors of the Economist would like subscribers to finish an issue of the magazine feeling internationally aware and financially savvy. The editor of the New Yorker produces a magazine for his readers that he hopes comes across as progressive and urbane. Subscribe to the New York Times and you can help resist Donald Trump. People will pay for status, though not very much. And status is elusive. Only a few brands can offer it.

Digital challengers such as HuffPo and Vice paid little attention to quality control. “The Huffington Post held itself accountable
not to journalistic rules but to readers’ enthusiasm,” Abramson writes.

It did not purport to dictate the terms of the national conversation but rather to reflect it. It aimed not to change hearts and minds but to resonate with them. Company leadership was notably void of anyone with editing experience.

When incumbents such as the Times and the Post cut costs, editors were the first to go. By June 2017, the Times had terminated its 100 copy editors. “They were the editors who never got the glory, but they kept opinion from seeping into the news and saved the paper from misspellings, wrong titles, grammatical errors, and more serious mistakes,” she notes.

The digital upheaval removed experienced professionals from newsrooms and replaced them with novice activists working for paltry wages. It was former Obama adviser Ben Rhodes who best summarized the new reality. “The average reporter we talk to is 27 years old, and their only reporting experience consists of being around political campaigns,” he told the New York Times Magazine in 2016. “That’s a sea change. They literally know nothing.”

The removal of editorial safeguards coincided with the collapse of public trust in media. Abramson mentions journalistic scandals such as Dan Rather’s use of forged memos in a story on George W. Bush’s time in the Texas Air National Guard and the New York Times’s promotion of fabulist Jayson Blair. Her account barely scratches the surface. The past year has seen the media indulge in flights of speculation and hearsay regarding the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court as well as the content and consequences of Robert Mueller’s report on Russian interference in the 2016 election.

Indeed, Merchants of Truth exemplifies the very problems it describes. Abramson needs an editor, too. Her narrative is repetitive, contains factual errors, and loses momentum near the end. She acknowledges the Times’s liberal bias but is not to journalistic rules but to readers’ enthusiasm,

Abramson is the perfect representative of an industry in terminal decline.

Moynihan found that Abramson had without attribution used work from the Columbia Journalism Review, Time Out Chicago, the New Yorker, and a master’s thesis.

She reacted clumsily, saying she had been “sloppy.” Later, in a statement, she admitted, The notes don’t match up with the right pages in a few cases and this was unintentional and will be promptly corrected. The language is too close in some cases and should have been cited as quotations in the text. This, too, will be fixed.

An admission of guilt.

Clumsy, sloppy, scandal-prone, reflexively liberal, and unable to live up to her own standards, Jill Abramson is the perfect representative of an industry in terminal decline.

Matthew Continetti is editor-in-chief of the Washington Free Beacon.
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