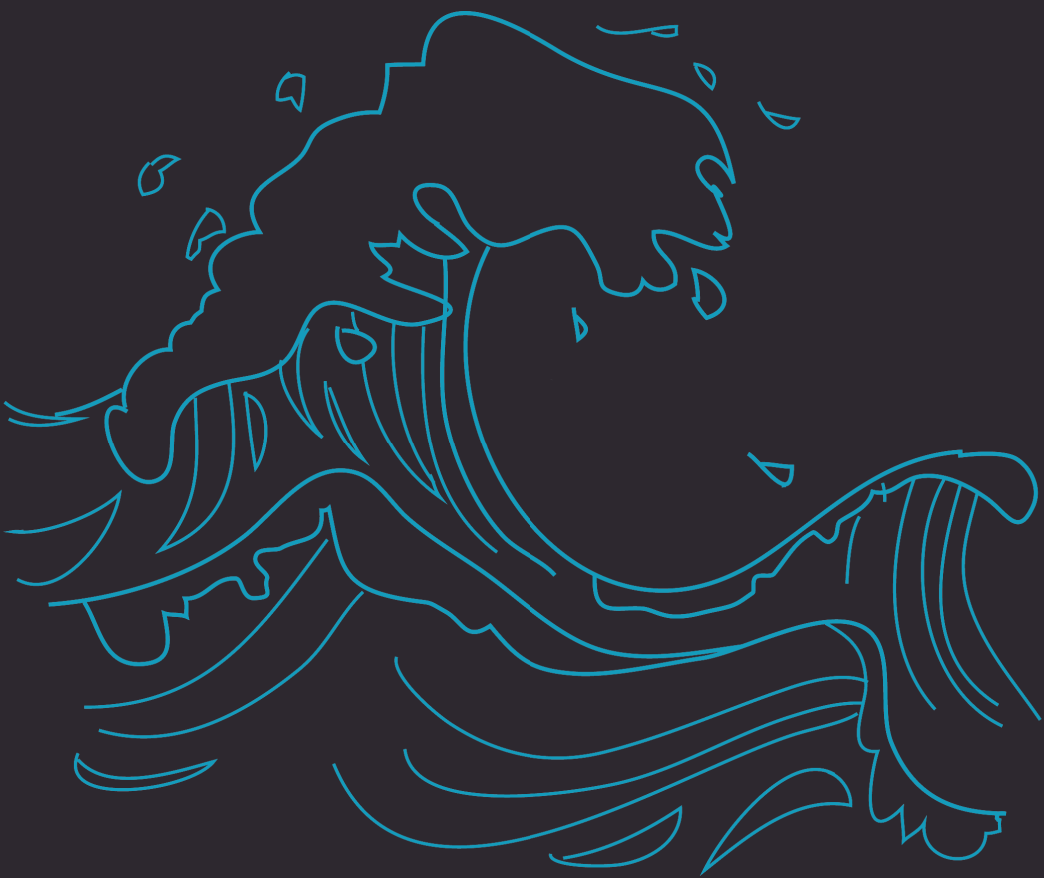


TALES FROM THE GREAT DISRUPTION
INSIGHTS AND LESSONS FROM
JOURNALISM'S TECHNOLOGICAL
TRANSFORMATION

MICHAEL SHAPIRO, ANNA HIATT,
AND MIKE HOYT



SO...WHAT JUST HAPPENED?

The people who fuel our civic conversation—reporters, writers, storytellers—have been asking each other that question a lot lately. So have people who consume their work. Both agree: Waves of technological change have greatly altered the news. How, exactly? Hard to say.

But it is time to begin figuring it out. This much is known: What adds up to what we are calling The Great Disruption upended certainties, assumptions, and behavior in media institutions, as well as the lives of the men and women who occupied those institutions. The Disruption is changing what journalists do and thus how we think as citizens. What just happened?

Media gurus often speak with the confidence of con men. We are not them. *Tales from the Great Disruption* has no grand theory. Instead, it presents original reporting about what did happen when the waves of change struck and what came in their wake. The first half of the book, “The Gathering Storm,” looks back for insight while its second half, “All the Space in the World,” explores the new context.

These are stories of people, and as such they are about conflict, joy, terror, disappointment, betrayal, loss, and discovery. They illuminate a complex period still in motion. Taken together, they offer lessons on how journalism can better face its Great Disruption.



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**TALES FROM THE
GREAT DISRUPTION**

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*Insights and Lessons from Journalism's
Technological Transformation*

**MICHAEL SHAPIRO
& ANNA HIATT**

Edited by **MIKE HOYT**



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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

- 1 **THE EVE OF DESTRUCTION** *by Michael Shapiro*

PART ONE

- 7 **A GATHERING STORM** *by Michael Shapiro*
9 Looking for the Light
41 The Newspaper That Almost Seized the Future
85 Six Degrees of Aggregation

PART TWO

- 125 **ALL THE SPACE IN THE WORLD** *by Anna Hiatt*
127 The New Gate: *Playboy's* Dilemma
143 The City Section: Narratively
155 'Snow Fall' Lite: *The Commercial Appeal*
171 The Amplifiers: #Longreads and Longform.org
185 A New Day: Pocket

CONCLUSION

- 197 **THE VALUE OF NEWS** *by Michael Shapiro*

- 217 **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

PART TWO
ALL THE SPACE
IN THE WORLD

In the beginning was the word, a.k.a. the story, and somewhere along the way, as one decade slipped into the next, the word lost out to the machine, which could make its users believe that the word was not enough. And so story was pushed aside in favor of platform—blogs and content management systems and a few minutes here and there on social media, which grew into large tranches of time as more platforms proliferated. The platform became the selling point, while content appeared to be an afterthought. And then another king, the device, took the throne, because suddenly, the platform was not enough. The tablet and the smartphone became the new paper, which might have been OK had the shiny glass not seduced content producers into believing that because a different kind of design was possible, they should flex all their aesthetic muscles and unleash story “experiences” on readers who thought they were getting a story.

And here we are, the journalists, at a crossroads, puzzled by questions about widgets and programming languages, or device optimizations, or how many is too many video embeds. What follows are snapshots from the last five years of fabulous and accelerated technical evolution. First came the iPhone, then the App Store. A year and change later came the iPad, and soon longform start-ups began blossoming. And this was only the beginning. Since then responsive design has become the mode of the day. And all the while, journalism struggled and journalists have wondered if we’d be OK.

Since we are talking about stories, here are five of them—narratives about five journalistic entities whose principals have confronted technology’s wonders and made choices, for better and for worse. We’re not in the business of trying to predict the future. It would be a fool’s errand. In that spirit, the stories that follow are snapshots of journalists like us, who have been trying to anticipate technology’s next step while also working to stay afloat. And trying to honor the word.

THE NEW GATE

Playboy's *Dilemma*

The Internet is not Playboy's only problem. Apple has pounced on publishing, and today, the industry is controlled as much by the tech company as it is by content producers. By the fall of 2013, the App Store had reached one million applications with sixty billion total downloads. Playboy got there, but only after struggling with Apple's rules and restrictions and compromising its brand. Playboy's story is a cautionary tale for all of us.

Behind the receptionists in *Playboy's* office suite hangs a large black-and-white photograph of a nude woman. Deeper into the lobby there's a bar that looks like it was built for a 1970s Bond movie and the office just never remembered to update its design. The countertops are made of gold-flecked laminate and the bottles of booze, most of them opened, are not just for decoration. The top shelf is lined with Campari and Hennessy, Maker's Mark and Absolut Citron. I take a seat on the white velvet, dimpled couch. In the corner stand two mannequins wearing *Playboy* gear and sporting terrifying bunny ears that make them look rather like the killer rabbit from *Donnie Darko*. This is probably not the kind of teenage nostalgia that Hugh Hefner wants to inspire.

Hefner waxes nostalgic about his own high school years more than an eighty-something man probably should. It seems, from what he's said in profiles and interviews and op-eds over the years, that high school was the happiest time in his life, a time before war, and before his loss of innocence. He's likened his magazine to a high school yearbook, and said that the experience of flipping through the pages of *Playboy* should be akin to looking back at class photos and thinking, Yeah, I could have had that girl if I wanted her.

On the table in *Playboy's* lobby lies a book of centerfolds and a crystal ashtray big enough to contain my entire hand. As I soak in my surroundings, wondering what possible insights I could glean from the leather flasks and a leather chaise lounge, one receptionist warns the other not to sign anything, just in case a process server is trying to serve *Playboy* papers. Sometimes, she said, they get angry and throw things; if they do, she says, just call security. And then Josh Schollmeyer comes down the stairs to usher me into the magazine's offices. Up the stairs, past a print of *Playboy's* first issue, showcasing Marilyn Monroe and signed by Hef, Schollmeyer drops me off in the Centerfold Room and dips out for a second to get his things.

Like so many of *Playboy's* editorial gurus, past and present, Schollmeyer is from Chicago, where he worked for *Chicago* magazine and *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. In 2012, he did a longform oral history of Siskel and Ebert for *The Chicagoan* magazine, which The Atlantic lauded as one of the best of its kind for that year. As an executive editor and the director of digital content for the magazine, it's his duty to see that each platform embodies the *Playboy* brand and that the move from one product to another is a "soft sell." In a world of touchscreens and tablets and voice-controlled gadgets, he's the magazine's envoy.

Schollmeyer returns to the Centerfold Room with the sexiest devices of our day—an iPhone, iPad, and MacBook—and puts them on the table. He pops open the laptop for a tour of some of

the magazine's digital properties, stopping first at *Playboy's* Tumblr, which Schollmeyer calls the magazine's "artbook" and their "mood board." The page, on infinity scroll, is an endless stream of naked women. Playmates fill the frame. Were their physical stats listed like they are in the magazine (bust, waist, hips, etc.), the tiles would resemble baseball cards with breasts. "It's not just girl focused," Schollmeyer says, turning the laptop away from me, and then a bit more, making it hard to see.

Tumblr is *Playboy's* id, and on it the editors have the freedom to do exactly what they want, and they are beholden to no one but themselves. A while back, *Playboy* commissioned a local artist who creates ironic neon installations, like a sign for organic produce with Doritos all over it, and then gave the artist curatorial control over the Tumblr for a week. One of the neon pieces said, "Non-nude girls girls girls," about which, Schollmeyer said, "It actually started because I wanted to do a 'fuck you.' I was trying to be caustic about the fact that I couldn't get nudity into the App Store, which people complain about."

Today, despite Schollmeyer's strong point of view, *Playboy* is struggling to figure out its digital identity, due in no small part to Apple. The fact that Apple provides not only the hardware but the software that designers love and love to design for, and that consumers seem to really want, means that publications are becoming increasingly tied to Apple. But Apple says "no" to porn and anything resembling it in their App Store. And so if Apple continues to dominate the device world, and *Playboy* doesn't figure out a non-native app solution, its articles might stop being the punchline and start being the one thing that *Playboy* has to offer.

THE MAKING OF A LEGACY

Before Hugh Hefner was the King of Classy Smut, he was an American soldier in World War II. He was honorably discharged in 1946 after two years of service and went back to Chicago, where,

according to every book and article under the sun about Hef, he tried to reclaim his high school glory days. He went to college; married his first wife, Millie; began having children; and got his career underway with a copywriting job at *Esquire's* Chicago office. When *Esquire* moved its operations to New York, in 1952, Hef asked for a \$5 raise, and, when he was denied, refused to move with the company to the Big Apple. In late December of 1952, Hugh Hefner found himself unhappily married, without a job, and on a career path he didn't want anyway. And that's when the idea for *Playboy* struck.

Over the next year, Hef planned and built *Playboy*, laying out the first issue, as the story famously goes, on a card table in his Hyde Park apartment. In that year, Hef created a myth around the magazine to sell advertising and get sponsors on board. He'd say that members of *Esquire's* editorial staff who had stayed in Chicago were putting together a new men's magazine. It was only him, but in those days you could get away with a lie like that. He bought pictures of Marilyn Monroe taken for a calendar company in 1949, before she was famous, when she needed the cash, and he promised prospective business partners her body in exchange for their business. In December 1953, the first issue hit the stands.

Playboy was born out of Hef's post-war yearning for something more than marriage and a job. Army men, he knew, had lusted after pinups, like the ones drawn by Alberto Vargas and George Petty for *Esquire*. They had traveled the world. They had traveled the world and, Hef thought, dissatisfied with the lives they'd led before the war. The post-World War II era had seen the birth of a cavalcade of men's magazines that focused on manliness as exhibited through hunting and outdoor activities. But Hef, a veteran himself, wasn't that type of man. In *Playboy's* first issue, he set his magazine apart: "We don't mind telling you in advance—we plan on spending most of our time inside. We like our apartment. We enjoy mixing up cocktails and an hors d'oeuvre or two, putting a little mood music on the phonograph, and inviting in a

female acquaintance for a quiet discussion on Picasso, Nietzsche, jazz, sex.”

Though he fancied his magazine at the front line of the sexual revolution, Hef didn't embrace all women, just the rigid and rather narrow idea of the girls he fancied, a type he described in an interview with Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci:

The “rabbit, the bunny, in America has a sexual meaning, and I chose it because it's a fresh animal, shy, vivacious, jumping—sexy. First it smells you, then it escapes, then it comes back, and you feel like caressing it, playing with it. A girl resembles a bunny. Joyful, joking. Consider the girl we made popular: the Playmate of the Month. She is never sophisticated, a girl you cannot really have. She is a young, healthy, simple girl—the girl next door ... we are not interested in the mysterious, difficult woman, the femme fatale, who wears elegant underwear, with lace, and she is sad, and somehow mentally filthy. The *Playboy* girl has no lace, no underwear, she is naked, well-washed with soap and water, and she is happy.”

Whether or not Hef's taste in women mimicked that of the rest of the world, the magazine and its pictorials quickly made a splash. When *Playboy* began printing photographed pictorials with fully naked girls, *Esquire* responded by eliminating its illustrated pin-ups, which had been a staple of the magazine since its launch in 1933. Clay Felker, *Esquire*'s editor at the time, put it simply: “*Playboy* out-titted us.”

In 1965, *Playboy* got its first real competition when the raunchy *Penthouse* launched. Over the next years, the two magazines pushed their boundaries in what Hef dubbed the Pubic Wars; as a result *Playboy* began publishing photographs of women with pubic hair while *Penthouse* was photographing not just women's curves but up-close shots of their most intimate anatomy.

Playboy was already starting to see a decline in subscriptions when Hef, leaving the editorial office to fend for itself in Chicago, moved the mansion to Los Angeles in 1975. The magazine's hold on the smut market continued to slip in the eighties, as the world

embraced women like Gloria Steinem and Cyndi Lauper, and its Playmates, who, for the most part, had cherubic faces, often looked as though they were in the throes of adolescence.

Then, in the nineties, when the Internet began to creep into every household, everything went to hell. Suddenly the magazine for the burgeoning pubescent boy had a rival: online porn. It was free and free from embarrassment. At your fingertips, there was more than you could watch in a lifetime. Hef and the gang quickly saw their revenue take a hit. In 1999, *Playboy's* stock price was \$36. A decade later, it had fallen to \$3.

Looking back on those years nearly gives you vertigo. In October 2001, the iPod was released. Six years later, in June 2007, came the iPhone. The next year, the economy tanked, the App Store launched, and the first working draft of HTML5 was made public, signaling a new era of website design. In 2009, news that Apple was working on a tablet leaked.

In 2007, *Playboy*, which had been trying and failing, to get its app approved by Apple, released a website designed specifically for viewing on mobile devices. That same year, *Playboy* got into the App Store an app that was, in essence, a PDF reader loaded with the magazine—but without the naked girls. “You would see a Jenny McCarthy cover, but because of Apple’s standards we couldn’t include any of the photography from that. I felt like it was a classic bait and switch,” Schollmeyer said. Without nudity and without any additional content specific to the app, there was no value added.

Less than a year later, in January 2010, Steve Jobs released the iPad.

iPlayboy

When the App Store launched in 2008, developers, eager to be in Apple’s new marketplace, had flooded in, overwhelming reviewers who took more and more time to respond. And while that was obviously frustrating, what irked developers more was that

Apple didn't release guidelines for how to get approved, and that the reasons Apple cited for rejecting apps often seemed arbitrary. One developer for a gaming company named BlunderMove wrote a blog post titled, "Pass the lubricant as we're getting fucked by Apple too," in which he ranted about how the company's slow and seemingly arbitrary review process meant that BlunderMove wasn't getting bug fixes to their consumers quickly, and that, in turn, had resulted in a flood of one-star ratings. If you've ever gotten a C, D, or F on your report card and struggled to get your GPA back up, you know the anxiety developers felt. Why work hard to build an app just to wait for weeks to hear news that it had been rejected, or that your bug fixes weren't going to go through quickly? Apple had them in a chokehold. Developers felt as if Apple were telling them: Code to our specs, or don't code an app for us; we don't care. Try to make it on your own.

One thing was crystal clear: nudity was not allowed, which meant that *Playboy* was stuck between a rock and a hard place. It saw users flocking to the App Store, downloading apps for magazines and other content distributors. *Playboy* knew that not being in the App Store was like not being on the newsstand, and they needed to get there fast.

Back then, responsive design wasn't yet the mode of the day, and designing specifically for a mobile experience was still a rather new concept. To get around Apple's regulations, *Playboy* set about designing a website to be viewed specifically on mobile devices. Called iPlayboy, the site is a digital archive of the magazine's sixty-year history, including its pictorials, feature articles, and interviews. A monthly subscription gets you access to the magazine's five-decade history, but not to its other products, like the paper magazine or its premium content on *Playboy's* main website. Hemmed in by Apple, seemingly fearful of losing further ground, *Playboy* had begun cannibalizing itself.

In 2010, Apple finally released its app guidelines, many of which were vague and still open to wildly different interpretations,

a move not uncharacteristic of Apple, a notoriously well-edited company whose bold and definite statements are its products. Apple's users are evangelists who often see the company's choosiness as curation rather than censorship. In any event, porn was explicitly prohibited: "Apps containing pornographic material defined by *Webster's Dictionary* as 'explicit descriptions or displays of sexual organs or activities intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic or emotional feelings' will be rejected." Despite building the *iPlayboy* site as a serviceable workaround, the question of whether and how *Playboy* could get into the App Store hung in the air at the magazine.

Not being able to get into Apple's marketplace was bad for business, but that was just the beginning; Apple was about to introduce a product that changed how people read, particularly books and particularly magazines. "Last time there was this much excitement about a tablet, it had some commandments written on it," Martin Peers wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* on December 30, 2009. The next month, Jobs took the stage at the Apple Worldwide Developers Conference in San Francisco, wearing his usual black turtleneck, light-washed jeans, and white sneakers, to announce the iPad. Before the main event, he made a few other announcements: Released eighteen months before, the App Store had just had its three billionth download. Revenue for Q1 2010 was \$15.9 billion. He also pitched Apple in a new light. Counting iPods, iPhones, and laptops, Jobs said, "Apple is a mobile device company. That's what we do ... Apple is the number one mobile device company in the world."

Between the phone and the computer, he said, there was room for another mobile device—something that was better than both the iPhone and the laptop at email, video, web browsing, and among other things, eBooks. Then he held up the iPad, and someone in the audience wolf-whistled. The iPad, he said, was more intimate than a laptop and more capable than a smartphone. Sitting in his armchair on stage, Jobs demonstrated the product. And of

everything he said that day, it's what came next that signaled where digital design was going. Flipping it horizontally, then vertically, he said, "It adapts to the way I want to use it."

It was a screen perfect for looking at pictures and reading long stories, for flipping through magazines and discovering content. And the trend in mobile and tablet design was still trending toward coding native apps, which are proprietary apps sold in marketplaces like the App Store for use on those devices only. Companies like Flipboard, which helps you discover content through an app, began adapting their iPhone applications to the iPad. It wasn't hard for Jobs to seduce media outlets to code apps for the iPad: The device is beautiful, and it makes content look beautiful, too. Like the kid who doesn't get picked for kickball, *Playboy* sat on the outside looking in.

APPLE BEATS UP ADOBE—THE WAR OVER WEB CODE

Before all this, before the evolution of the ecosystem of iDevices and Apple's booming success, there had been a detour for Steve Jobs. It had begun with his exile from the company he had helped to found. In 1985, Apple fired him. He struck out on his own and started another company, called NeXT, which Jobs intended to be the first Unix desktop for the mass market. Coded in Objective C, a programming language based on C, and in the same family as C++, the operating system was called NeXTStep, and it was "object oriented," which meant that users could interact with and move individual objects, customizing their placement on a desktop. Click an icon, drag, and drop it anywhere on your desktop. That and the click-to-open are two hallmarks of object-oriented programming. In 1997, Apple bought NeXT, specifically for its operating system, which became the foundation for what we know today as Mac OS, Apple's operating system. Later that year, Jobs was back at Apple's helm.

It's no company secret that Jobs wanted control, and when he returned to Apple, he was determined to run the company his way.

Objective C not only laid the groundwork for the company's operating system, it became the only language Apple allowed for app programming when its App Store launched in 2008.

That was bad news for Adobe Flash.

There's rampant speculation as to why Jobs chose to exclude Flash from Apple's mobile devices. In an open letter called "Thoughts on Flash," which Apple released in April 2010, Jobs gave six reasons why he wouldn't allow Flash. First, Flash wasn't open software; it was a proprietary language, which Adobe could change at its discretion. In the second point was a mere mention of an allegation that Apple products couldn't access the "full web" because a majority of content online utilized Flash programming in some way. Without contesting the claim, Jobs moved on to point three: He slammed Flash for poor security and poor performance on smartphones, which have a lower computing capacity than laptops. Flash drains battery life (point number four) and was designed for a world of "PCs and mice" (point number five), but most of all—and here he highlighted problem one again—the software was proprietary. In the closing paragraph, Jobs sassily advocated that Adobe take up HTML5 and focus "less on criticizing Apple for leaving the past behind."

He signed the letter without a salutation.

For years, Flash had been the dominant multimedia platform used for managing and embedding videos online. In July 2010, three months after Jobs's "Thoughts on Flash," Google began allowing HTML5 embeds of YouTube videos. Flash's principal utility was being challenged, but not by Apple or another company; it was being challenged by a language called HTML5.

PLAYBOY FINALLY GETS IN THE APP STORE, BUT THINGS DON'T GO SO WELL

When Schollmeyer and crew set about designing the iPhone app, they had a clear mission in mind for it: "I wanted to create

short-form *Playboy*, so that commuters could look at beautiful things: beautiful women, beautiful dishes, beautiful places, beautiful cars. Very, very information-based, short hit, like, ‘Oh, I like that drink. Here’s how I make it.’” The iPad, on the other hand, would be for longer-form pieces, from the written word to mini documentaries.

The App Store guidelines would still apply to any iPad app: Apple had created its marketplace and it was going to control that marketplace. There was a workaround: *Playboy* could use HTML5 to build a responsive website that adjusts to whichever device it’s being loaded on. Or, it could build a web app, a website that you can bookmark on your smartphone’s homescreen that has the look of an app, but needs the Internet for any action. You can still have a great user experience on mobile and tablet devices with such workarounds. But choosing not to be in the App Store would also mean choosing not to be an-impulse-buy-away from every one of the 250 million people whose credit cards are plugged into iTunes as of 2014.

But as it happened, *Playboy* didn’t have this choice. Control of *Playboy.com* is shopped out to a third-party company called Manwin, to whom the magazine feeds editorial content.

Deciding to code a native app is a choice you have to make consciously. Because a native app means no breasts or nether regions. A native app means that Apple and Google, which hosts Google Play, the application marketplace for Android, get to dictate the kind of content you can and cannot publish. And ultimately, no nudity in Apple’s store meant that the app was *Playboy* in name only.

For a time, *Playboy* tried to have it both ways. Since releasing *iPlayboy* in 2009 and the first version of their native app without nudity or any user experience, the powers that be at the magazine have been trying to find a way into the App Store that satisfies both sides. Schollmeyer’s been up to Cupertino a couple times, and the folks from Apple have been down to Los Angeles. In the end, the red line is the red line, though, and smut just wouldn’t be allowed.

So the brand pivoted. “This was basically a rudimentary attempt at trying to get a relationship going with Apple, and to try to start up a non-nude aspect to our business.”

He says it, and I think, Wait. What? *Playboy* is focusing on its non-nude business? Does this mean they’ve done the calculus and don’t think there’s a viable business in pictorials anymore? Or does it mean that the magazine is conceding, and that the moral powers that be on the Internet have won this battle for our souls?

In one of its recent moves, in April 2013, Apple released *Playboy* for iPhone, an app that is all about short hits, snippets to consume when you’re on the go. Only thing was, the women still weren’t naked. “We shoot everything originally now for the iPhone that’s all to Apple’s standards. We’ve spent a considerable amount of money creating a non-nude aspect of our business,” Schollmeyer said. *Playboy* has added a whole new type of photography, too. Because the aspect ratio, or dimensions, of the iPhone are different from the magazine’s classic pictorials and what the other online domains demand, and because Schollmeyer wants the iPhone app to have movement and life, shooting for the smartphone has become a task unto itself. Before photo shoots, he and his team cordon off the space in which the model can move. In the acting biz they call it blocking. A little too far to the right or the left, up or down, and the framing will be off. Be sexy within that box, the edict goes.

Schollmeyer concedes: “Clearly it’s an encumbrance, right? We were told that Apple was not going to go for nudity and stuff like that, and yet it’s fundamental to our brand.” But Schollmeyer makes sure to also say that *Playboy* will obviously never violate, or try to violate, the standards set by Apple, or by Google Play. Because pissing off those guys would be like pissing off the person who rented you your spot in the farmers’ market. “You can’t not be on the coolest platforms in the world where there are 250 million credits logged in, ready for impulse buys,” he says.

PLAYBOY EVERYWHERE

Schollmeyer has a philosophy for every one of the magazine's digital properties.

"Instagram is our BTS channel," he says. (I had to look up BTS, which according to Urban Dictionary means "behind the scenes," but also, to my dismay, "bang that slut.") But the pictures are only of mostly-naked women. "Twitter is like our wisdom, where we communicate with fans. Tumblr is our artbook. The safe-for-work blog is like the twenty-first-century version of reading it for the articles," Schollmeyer said.

He thinks differently about different devices, embracing the distinctions between the iPhone and the iPad, which he calls cousins. The former is for information, he says, the latter is for knowledge. And his treatment of the magazine on each device starts with an evaluation of what that device does best. If the iPhone is good for quick hits and information gathering, then that's the content *Playboy* needs to give you—short form: a flash of a girl, a picture of a beautiful car, a recipe maybe. The iPad, the knowledge device, is for more contemplative reading, a—dare I say it—"lean back" experience.

As thoughtful as Schollmeyer seems to be about his platforms, it's clear that one has failed, or at least isn't working as it should.

"U thieves just stole 1.99 \$ from me," an iTunes user named Arshiaa wrote, giving the *Playboy* app a one-star rating.

"No nudity. Recurring subscriptions. Glitchy p.o.s. Apple and Hugh Hefner just stole from me," Tatro88 wrote.

Remember Jobs's mantra about the iPad? "It just works." Well, *Playboy's* app doesn't work for the user, and it's not just because there's no nudity. It's glitchy and slow, and the design and user experience tries to do too much. It did not, in short, obey lean start-up principles, which prioritize rapid ideation, frequent testing, and quick pivots if a product isn't doing well. And if the App Store reviews tell you anything, it's that the app's not working.

PAPER ISN'T A COMPANY—APPLE IS

If the iPad is unlimited in its ability, as Jobs promised at the Apple Worldwide Developers Conference in 2010, then, when an app like the one developed by *The New York Times* fails to do its job, it's the media company that messed up, not Apple. The problem with that situation is obvious. Apple is a technology company that spends its days thinking about, designing, and testing the newest software and hardware. News organizations spend their days reporting, writing, and editing the news. They haven't, until recently, had any semblance of a product team. Even now, in 2014, such teams are mostly tiny, with nowhere remotely near the power of Apple to develop products. Media are playing catch-up. They're doing it too slowly, but they're also doing it as fast as they can.

All this presents a tangled problem: Journalists and their outlets are designing for a medium, not for their content. What would happen if—and this is a big if—tomorrow Apple were overtaken by a company that blows the iPad out of the water? All the time and money spent learning to code and then coding in Objective C to Apple's specifications could be, effectively, obsolete. Media companies are developing a bad habit: looking to hardware companies for cues as to where they should be going.

Steve Jobs's initial declaration against Adobe Flash was spot-on: proprietary programming languages, ones that aren't open source and thus dependent on the health and wealth of a particular company, are a dangerous choice to make. Imagine what might happen if we were to wholly embrace Flash in web design, and then the company went through a financial crisis. If the software didn't break, then it at least wouldn't be updated. Sites would need to be re-coded so they didn't use Flash. The same logic applies to designing for the App Store. If the next big technology arrives and it's not Apple, we'll have to start again.

Kind of like Steve Jobs, Hugh Hefner likes to run his own show. He's not quite as fanatical about it, of course, but the magazine is

his magazine, and the girls are his girls, and the vision has been his since late 1952 when he stood looking at the Chicago River, wondering where his life had gone wrong. Given that the vision for the magazine has always been Hef's and has never strayed, it's odd that *Playboy* now has to take not just cues, but outright direction from someone else. Apple has, slyly and with great market force, positioned itself as a publishing tastemaker.

We have given ourselves over not just to shiny glass touchscreens, but to closed marketplaces and proprietary languages. The decisions were understandable, at the moment and in retrospect. We were scared. "Print is dead," rang loud in the halls of newsrooms and publishing houses everywhere, and there stood Steve Jobs with beautiful Apple products and open arms. Apple's decision to ban naked women, a decision which they could have easily not made, handicapped *Playboy*. It's a move that shows just how powerful Apple has become.

Thankfully, we're now seeing the approach of a richer ecosystem of digital design. Native apps still abound, of course. Apple's market share has reached that "too big to fail" point. But, in early 2014, with the imminent approval of HTML5, as long as browsers are fully literate, then designers will only have to design a single responsive site, instead of a specific app for each device, in addition to a website. The W3C, or the World Wide Web Consortium, which creates standards for the web, has given its stamp of approval to web coding languages with which we're familiar, like HTML and CSS, and HTML5 is on the docket.

There are other potential issues with HTML5, however. Currently, the W3C is considering the addition of the Encrypted Media Extension (EME), which would build into the fabric of the web a version of digital rights management capabilities that will allow content producers more control over who can download and appropriate their work. It's an effort encouraged and spurred on by Hollywood. It sounds like a plus for artists and content creators, but it's a real blow to the open web.

Designing responsively and using HTML5, web designers don't need Apple to present their content beautifully on the iPhone or iPad. It's not the only answer, but it is an answer, and a better one than getting caught in Apple's closed system. And because HTML5 is an interactive web language, and an open one, too, it means that responsive sites can have the pop and pizzazz that apps coded in Objective C do. The App Store might still be the newsstand, but it's going to become less important as designers spread their wings with responsive design and web apps. A full published draft of the language was released in October 2014.

THE CITY SECTION

Narratively

It was 2009 when the City Section of The New York Times closed. The economy was crashing and newspapers were hurting, and Noah Rosenberg was just starting his journalism career. Fearful that ambitious, empathetic feature stories would go the way of the City Section, or be neglected in favor of quick hits, and equipped with the skills to tell a story in whichever medium he chose, Rosenberg let his idea for a digital feature publication begin to percolate. He launched Narratively, where the story dictates the medium, in 2012, becoming one in a long line of longform start-ups that have sprung up in recent years and hope to alter the publishing game.

The idea came to him in the middle of the night in late 2008, early 2009. He can't remember now. He rolled over, pulled out the notebook where he kept his ideas, and began scribbling down what he thought his dream site might look like. There'd be feature stories, ones that were timeless, and though they would be stories specifically about life in New York City, they'd also be universal. Each story would be told as it should be, in the medium the story demanded, and at the length the story needed (and had earned). A story shouldn't have to beg to be told at 5,000 words but only get

300, he thought. Or vice versa. If a story needed to be heard, then the publication could use audio. And then he saw how the project could scale. Each big city would have its own site. First New York, of course. Then maybe Paris, Los Angeles, San Francisco...

It was 3 a.m. and Narratively was beginning to take shape.

NOAH'S ARC

Noah Rosenberg has dabbled in every medium, yet seems to know well that medium is just a tool. He gets the bigger picture. He began building his storytelling toolkit back at Tufts University, where he went to undergrad. Rosenberg wrote a handful of feature and human-interest stories for the school paper, but he was never on staff. He was too busy playing soccer and writing for the campus poetry journal. Still, he did dabble in journalism, and when senior year rolled around, in 2004, Rosenberg got the idea to pitch a weekly hour-long news show, kind of like 60 Minutes, for the campus TV station, called TUTV.

The goal was ambitious and, in retrospect, unrealistic. The project didn't pan out quite as Rosenberg had envisioned. That year, though, he learned how to dive into a subject. The 2004 campaign cycle was coming to a head and things were heating up in New England, so Rosenberg and his team started heading up to New Hampshire to shoot rallies and other political goings-on. In the process of producing what became a thirty five-minute documentary about the 2004 election cycle, Rosenberg became hooked on visual storytelling.

After graduating from Tufts, he moved to New York, where he started work at CBS News Productions in the documentary division. There Rosenberg worked at transcribing and logging tape, doing basic post-production stuff on documentaries about, among other things, the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war. It was nothing glamorous, but he did learn a lot, mostly about video production and the network's video workflow. Near the end of his two years with

CBS, Rosenberg was shooting and writing scripts for CBS properties like Food Network.

But Rosenberg was ever the reporter, and in his free time he found himself going out and exploring New York, riding his bike across the city and back, swimming with the Coney Island Polar Bear Club on New Year's Day, meeting real New Yorkers, asking questions, and hearing stories about life in the Big Apple—and pitching some of them. He loved it more than his day job, and decided to make a go at being a reporter. Rosenberg quit CBS and in September 2007, became digital director for *The Queens Courier*, a weekly that had little-to-no online presence when he arrived. He calls the next three years with the *Courier* his journalism school. Quickly he found himself heading out on stories, shooting video, and producing segments for the website, all the while building his digital chops. However the story begged to be told, that's how Rosenberg wanted to tell it. "Because I was this trans-media, multimedia guy, I was able to pursue the stories I wanted to pursue. Of course I did some politics and breaking news and all that kind of stuff, but I could pitch them any feature I wanted to do, or any series and go out and do it," Rosenberg said.

In 2008, the financial markets crashed and some newspapers that had been hanging on by a thread, succumbed. The *Seattle Post Intelligencer* stopped printing and moved to online-only, and in 2009, *Rocky Mountain News*, one of the best papers west of the Mississippi, shuttered operations. Breaking news, arts and entertainment, and sports would be fine, Rosenberg believed. Those had always been the big draw anyway. It was features—human interest stories and the like—that he worried would suffer.

It was around that time that Rosenberg came up with Narratively. Like most brilliant schemes you write down in notebooks or scribble on restaurant napkins, Rosenberg kept the idea for Narratively tucked away, wishing he could make it happen but unsure he was able. Then, in early 2009, *The New York Times'* City Section, where Rosenberg had dreamed of reporting, closed. He saw that

moment as a real loss for the city. No other publication had treated the individual lives of New Yorkers with such curiosity and narrative flair. His dream publication would be a perfect fit, he thought. There was a vacuum. But he didn't have the resources to launch his publication, and so he waited.

After two years with *The Queens Courier*, the paper tapped him to launch an arts, feature, and culture magazine about Long Island City. "I was editor in chief, and I was doing everything for the magazine. Ran that for about eight months while I continued to do all the video and website management. I started the *Queens Courier's* bloggers. I was writing four to five articles a week, doing a video or two a week, running the whole website, managing the website, editing and managing the bloggers, editing a magazine."

So you're a little bit of an insane person.

He laughs and keeps going.

Three years earlier, the digital director position had looked like a dream job. But by the time he'd gotten the magazine off the ground, while continuing to blog and do other work for the paper, some of his other colleagues at the *Courier* began calling it "a suicide mission." In the middle of his third year with the company, Rosenberg decided to switch things up. He'd always loved soccer; he'd played in college, and his favorite sports team is the U.S. men's soccer team. The 2010 World Cup in South Africa was coming up, so he began planning a reporting trip.

Rosenberg started contacting publications, asking if they would accept his writing from South Africa, and he quickly built up a portfolio of publications who said, "Sure, pitch us when you're there." And then he hit paydirt: *The Wall Street Journal* contacted Rosenberg and asked if he could be their World Cup video correspondent. Feeling he'd caught his break, Rosenberg doubled down, using the *Journal's* name to get into GQ. He told the men's magazine he'd be down in South Africa for the *Journal*, and asked if he could also submit some stuff to them? They said yes, and he packed his gear and headed south.

Rosenberg's story is exceptional in that his journalism start-up is exceptional, but the toolkit he wields isn't. The young generation of journalists today grew up hearing, "You have to be a one-man band" and "Learn to do it all, or forget about having a career," and, from the even more cynical, "Learn to love 18-cent ramen noodles, and forget about healthcare." It always sounded like a threat.

But Rosenberg is the optimist's version of a one-man band. He uses a medium not just because he can, but because the story calls for that treatment. "What if we're able to tell these stories in whatever format is most appropriate and not be constrained by having to do a thirty-second broadcast spot, or an 800-word newspaper piece," Rosenberg said. "I never really liked turning on the local news and seeing some newscaster doing a story in a minute that really deserves to be told in 5,000 words, or vice versa. Or someone doing a newspaper article that really begged for audio, or visual treatment."

The vision for Narratively stayed with him, but he didn't get the management chops until 2010 after he came back from South Africa and began working at Univision as a product manager, a position that operates as the liaison between teams, which helps articulate the vision for a company's products and set roadmaps for development. All the while he kept freelancing and talking about Narratively over drinks with friends in Brooklyn bars and dreaming about changing publishing and ensuring that features had a future. When the iPad hit the market, he began to see its possibilities.

HERE THEY COME

For journalism start-ups at least, Kickstarter has begun to replace the friends-and-family round of funding, which gives a start-up the resources to start testing its idea and the questions: How does the public react to your idea? Which parts are confusing? Which parts work best? What do you need to scrap entirely?—that sort

of thing. It's like what Hugh Hefner did in 1953 when he sold most of his furniture, begged his family for a little cash—his father refused; his mother said yes—and devoted the \$8,000 he collected to putting together his first magazine. From there, bit-by-bit, he built an empire.

Narratively is one in a long line of longform journalism start-ups to use Kickstarter over the past few years. All were aiming, the headlines about them said, to save longform journalism. And the list is impressive: *The Classical* campaigned in 2011, *Matter* (2012), *Narratively* (2012), *Guernica* (2013), *Acuedro* (2013), and *The Big Roundtable* (2013; note: I'm its publisher). The campaigns were successful. *Matter's* founders, Jim Giles and Bobbie Johnson, reached their \$50,000 goal within the first thirty-six hours, and by the end of thirty days, 2,566 donors had together given more than \$140,000. In forty-five days, 1,070 backers gave *The Classical* \$55,598 toward its goal of \$50,000. *Guernica*, which had been around awhile, asked for \$25,000 to relaunch their magazine and got \$27,456 in sixteen days from 536 donors. *The Big Roundtable* asked for \$5,000 and 220 people donated a total of \$19,219.

In August 2012, Rosenberg and his team launched a Kickstarter campaign with the same fundraising goal as *Matter* and *The Classical*—\$50,000—and thirty-three days later, they'd raised \$53,739 from 802 donors. The campaign was ongoing when Rosenberg and his co-founder and editorial director, Brendan Spiegel, launched the site on September 7, 2012. "Beyond just the funding, which, of course, was helpful, more importantly was this publicity engine that it generated for us. It was market research too," Spiegel said.

And those are just the longform start-ups launched by Kickstarter. There's also *The Awl*, *BKLYNR*, *Grantland*, and a slew of others. Not all of them publish just longform, but they do make long, in-depth stories a central part of their business. In addition, many established publications which mostly publish quicker hits started adding a longform component to their newsrooms, including *Business Insider*, *Buzzfeed*, and *Politico*. Even Andrew Sullivan

announced that the Dish would launch a longform magazine. At the same time, *The New York Times* was, according to Capital New York, working on a new digital magazine headed by Sam Sifton, whom then-executive editor Jill Abramson dubbed the paper's "Snowfall in Chief," after the widely noted story "Snow Fall." The field was diverse and growing quickly.

If Kickstarter is about helping projects get started, but not sustaining an organization, then what happens when the initial money runs out? One possibility is to seek venture capital. But venture's goal is to make money, and right now that's hard to do in journalism. We've seen billionaires, like Amazon's founder, Jeff Bezos, buying publications. To some it looks like a vanity acquisition. To others, a charity. (One headline read, "Bezos Could Give *Washington Post* The Gift Of Time.") Others speculate that for those who have already made their billions, a newspaper is the final challenge, like the hardest level in a video game. If you can make money here, you really do deserve to be rich.

Knowing about how to start a business isn't, on the whole, what journalists do well, and it seems absurd that they should be in the position of trying to say, This or That is the future. The more they wonder aloud about business models, the more sure of themselves they begin to sound, said Max Linsky, founder of Longform.org. "Almost everyone who's doing this right now, myself included, is not a business person," he said. "And I have been involved in several conversations, both publicly and privately, with people who don't know anything about business who have been put in the position of opining about business. And it's not a good look for anyone."

Still, of all the new longform sites, Narratively comes the closest to one that is finding a business plan, at least to sustain the machine, if not yet the journalists. Rosenberg was fortunate: Kickstarter got Narratively going, and he had a cadre of friends who were talented freelance journalists, craving an outlet for stories like those that had been published in the lamented City Section. Unlike some publications, like The Huffington Post, Rosenberg

is actively seeking ways to find a business model and direct paying work toward his journalists, as well as some money for Narratively. He began taking a bit of advertising, allowing one advertiser on the site per week. And he is also building a content agency, which will help connect his list of freelancers—writers, photographers, illustrators, etc.—with high-paying corporate work with companies like General Electric. At the beginning of 2014, more than 650 journalists around the world—although they’re mostly based in New York—were on Rosenberg’s freelancers list. So far the agency has been doing well, pulling in a majority of Narratively’s revenue. “People sometimes ask me, ‘If the agency is going so well, why don’t you guys just do that?’” he said. “At the end of the day it all comes back to great storytelling, and that’s what we’re all about.”

It’s a distressing but commonly accepted belief that you can’t pay the bills with important stories. Rosenberg seems to refuse to accept that fate. He’s embracing “slow journalism,” with a strict editorial calendar: one theme a week with one story each day on that theme, like “When War Comes Home” or “Red State NYC.” There’s something comforting in knowing exactly what you can expect from a publication. The only rabbit hole is Narratively’s archive, but it’s a manageable experience.

THE QUESTION OF IMPACT

Noah Rosenberg speaks at a million miles a minute, but somehow every word is relevant and sounds unrehearsed. He’s overflowing with ideas about how Narratively can scale up—and out to other cities, maybe even globally—while making its journalists money. His enthusiasm is infectious. I leave our first interview wanting to go home and write a book—no, not just one book, all the books. If Narratively can’t pay its journalists even as well as *The New York Times* can—and the *Times* pays freelancers pretty poorly—then it has to give something in return. And it does: Rosenberg’s boundless

passion for beautifully presented, well-reported, and well-edited stories—and his team of similarly minded editors.

The New York Times and other big-name papers could if they chose to do so, hire or reallocate personnel, including developers, product managers, and journalists, to work on projects that would set new standards for longform digital storytelling. And they do, sometimes. “Snow Fall,” the digitally immersive longform story by John Branch about an avalanche that occurred in Washington State in February 2012 killing three professional skiers, is a great example of that. Though other publications were experimenting with digitally immersive design before the *Times*, it was the Gray Lady and that single story that got people using “Snow Fall” as a verb.

But though legacy publications still act as tastemakers, it’s entrepreneurs like Rosenberg and other longform start-up evangelists who own the zeitgeist. The evangelists’ passion for their work and their firm belief that in-depth storytelling is necessary and that more publications doing good work is better for everyone are essential to keeping their start-ups, their co-workers, and themselves going.

As I got to know Rosenberg better, it became apparent that he is a big reason Narratively is successful. Start-ups are hard, and journalists need to make money like everybody else, but Rosenberg and his co-founder Spiegel are a breath of fresh air. Rosenberg really does want Narratively’s stories to be the best they can be, whatever form or medium they come in—and he gives his journalists the freedom to stretch their wings.

At Narratively, the content is manageable and restrained. But that doesn’t mean its stories haven’t been in-depth and deserving of attention. Trying to measure their impact, of course, is difficult. Trying to derive a sense of the impact a story has had from the number of readers on the analytics report can be perilous. Higher traffic increases the odds that your story will reach the people for whom it resonates most, of course, but traffic is not, in itself, the

goal—unless you have to deliver numbers to advertisers and beg for their pennies to keep you afloat. Rosenberg does not.

HARMONIES

Consider Rosenberg's relationship with Marquee, the storytelling platform that Narratively uses for its website. Normally after finishing up a client project, Marquee, like most companies, doesn't need to stick around, but with Rosenberg, its principals wanted to keep talking and working together. Marquee launched in South Beach with an office above a gym, which, in turn, was above Mansion, one of South Beach's more bumping clubs, and stayed there until 2011, when it was accepted into the New York digital incubator TechStars.

For a tech start-up to be successful, solid engineering is a must-have—and Narratively has that in Marquee. Both Rosenberg and Marquee think about publishing similarly: they want to break out of static templates, to present the story as it should be told, and to take the necessary time to produce good work. Rosenberg championed “slow journalism,” and Marquee cheered. Their conversations were like mind melds. The teams are similar in other respects: both are small and tight-knit, and like Rosenberg and his group, Marquee's founders believe their product is important and needs to exist. The platform company's philosophy, which is in perfect harmony with Rosenberg's, goes a little something like this: Let writers be writers. Let editors be editors. (And, Rosenberg's corollary:) Let the story, not the medium, be the story.

Meanwhile, legacy publications like the *Times* and *The Guardian* continue to produce beautiful longform stories. Piece by piece they're exploring what digital storytelling can look like online. “Snow Fall” was one of the first of many digitally immersive pieces by the *Times*, as we now know. At the same time, Pitchfork Media is regularly publishing highly designed, deeply immersive stories about musicians like Daft Punk and Bat for Lashes. The world of

more established media is going strong, and Narratively and the rest of the longform start-ups are adding their own sensibilities.

RENAISSANCE? WHAT RENAISSANCE?

Noah Rosenberg and I met for mid-morning coffee at Smooch in Fort Greene, Brooklyn on one of the hottest days of the summer, and, near our table, a big fan, the only one in the restaurant, droned on. Beautiful people were having their artisanal coffee, just blocks away from where Jay-Z and Biggie grew up, chatting quietly in Rosenberg's coffee-house office. As always, his hair was tied back in a tight bun and, like one of the California start-up wunderkind, he was in relaxed clothing. He had just come from home where he was on a phone meeting, with another scheduled just before noon. Tireless.

We launch into talking, and after a few minutes I pause the conversation, asking if he wanted to order coffee. He does, but leaves and comes back to the table without it. We talk more and time passes, and the coffee doesn't arrive. At some point, well into the conversation, I ask if he wants to check on his order, so he leaves for a second, but comes back with a glass of water instead. He is moving on.

Before Narratively launched, press coverage began flooding in. Capital New York's Joe Pompeo wrote about the sudden attention being paid to longform; "It's a bit early to tell where this trend is going, but it's definitely a trend. And Narratively is poised to capitalize on it."

In retrospect, though, it's easy to see that the longform boom isn't a renaissance. Longform never disappeared, and storytelling was never gone. The recent disaggregation of news into specialized sites like Pitchfork Media (music) and ESPN (sports) and Talking Points Memo (politics) probably meant it was only a matter of time before longform followed suit. The people who only ever read a few sections, like sports or the funnies, would now search

specifically for that content online. Their dollars wouldn't go to fund the collective, just the selective. It was the unbundling of news, and longform was just the next specialty in the line.

Since its launch, Narratively has built a list of more than 650 freelancers, many of whom also work for legacy publications like *The New York Times*. In October 2013, the site clocked in at over 250,000 unique visitors. As October 2013 drew to a close, Erika Hayasaki, a journalism professor at the University of California Irvine and a connoisseur of longform narrative nonfiction (as well as a writer for *The Big Roundtable*), mentioned that she was helping Rosenberg to launch a Los Angeles branch of Narratively. It's a city much like New York, with a personality so flame retardant you could throw a Molotov cocktail at it, and still Los Angeles would be unphased—the city of angels, the land of madness brought on by the Santa Anas, where movie stars search for a “there” that supposedly isn't there. But there are many, many sides of Los Angeles, including, for example, the storied streets of Compton and the ever-warring gangs. If ever there were a city primed for an offshoot of Narratively, it'd be Los Angeles, and, if I had my druthers, Detroit.

“SNOW FALL” LITE

The Commercial Appeal

Inspired by The New York Times’ “Snow Fall” and ESPN’s “The Long, Strange Trip of Dock Ellis,” a mid-size Memphis newspaper with little to no extra room in the budget, an already strapped staff, and a design team a few states away, tried to do its own ambitious digitally enhanced piece. This is the story of how they did it and what they learned.

It’s been a decade since the staff purge and still *The Commercial Appeal* hasn’t consolidated the offices. Maybe it’s in the slight hope that one day the staff will be back up to its pre-Craigslist size, or maybe it’s just institutional inertia. Whatever the reason, the newsroom is half empty, and has been since 2003. Like most newsrooms, there’s a light dusting of clutter—stacks of old newspapers, archival pictures, framed front pages, and books—that spills from occupied desks over into uninhabited cubicles. And, in the back—near the managing editor’s office, a now-empty glass cage posted with a “For Rent” sign—cluster the reporters. The familiar newsroom din swells from there.

Seven weeks before I arrived in Memphis, Louis Graham had moved from the glass cage to the editor’s office down the hall and around the corner, into a quiet room nestled between the mostly empty bullpen and the analog photo archives, with wooden doors and some privacy. To his recollection, Graham is the only person

to have become top editor of *The Commercial Appeal* after having climbed through the ranks as a reporter, then an editor, then managing editor—at least in his time there. Graham is an old-school newsman with an admiration for, but unwedded to, the medium of yore. The product, he says, has just got to be good.

Graham has been with the paper since the good old days when *The Commercial Appeal* could run ten to twelve longform projects a year. Back then they'd get ambitious early on in the year and have to rush to finish everything up by the end of December so that their stories could qualify for awards. A sleek dedicated section was not a rarity for *The Commercial Appeal* then. Now the paper puts out three, four, maybe five special sections per year, and even after such a drastic reduction, Graham still has to pinch pennies and save up newshole so that when a story that merits an in-depth telling comes along, the mid-size Memphis paper can tell it that way.

In the past few years *The Commercial Appeal* has published a number of longform projects it's proud of, like "10 Seconds of Terror," about a tornado that ripped through a small town 300 miles east of Memphis in April 2011. With winds up to 200 mph, the storm flattened much of Smithville, Miss., population 942, destroying 150 homes and, among other things, the police station, four churches, and a post office. *The Commercial Appeal* reporter found a network of people whose lives had somehow been connected on that day—one person saw another, who knew another, who was looking for another—and recreated the terrifying seconds in which the EF-5 tornado swept through Smithville, killing thirteen people.

As it nearly always happens, the world easily forgot the story that had briefly gripped them. But Graham, sure that the story was worth the resources, freed them up, giving his reporters the leeway to do their jobs and do them well, and then stepped back. In print, the story ran in a dedicated special section, which, Graham says matter of factly, are still always ads free. It's just how he and *The*

Commercial Appeal roll, which other publications may find enviable, if not financially foolhardy.

But even if *The Commercial Appeal* had the money to produce more than five projects a year, it wouldn't have the manpower because, like so many other newsrooms around the country, the staff cuts in 2003 were akin to a bloodbath. It's a narrative not unfamiliar to the general public, and certainly not unfamiliar to newsmen like those of Memphis' oldest newspaper: Craigslist and Monster.com launched and consumed newspapers' classified traffic—slowly at first, then faster and faster until all that was left to sustain papers were display advertisements and subscriptions, neither of which could make up for lost classified revenue. The days of big profits and bar bills on the company disappeared almost overnight, and *The Commercial Appeal*, like every traditional paper around the country, was hit hard. But as much as big-name newspapers were hit hard, it was nothing compared to the impact felt in mid-sized newsrooms.

So if putting out the paper every day can feel like a Herculean feat without the staff of the late nineties, then doing anything more than the daily norm—say, producing a digitally augmented piece—feels nigh Sisyphean. This is the story of why *The Commercial Appeal*, a mid-size newspaper with a taxed staff and an empty wallet, dared to attempt a digitally robust longform piece against the odds.

A STORY IS A STORY

Even more than his birthday, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s death day is poignant for Memphis. Downtown there, on April 4, 1968, Dr. King was shot and killed on the second floor balcony of the Lorraine Motel. His assassination is a legacy the city seems unable, or maybe even unwilling, to escape. The motel was turned into the Civil Rights Museum and a recording of Mahalia Jackson singing "Precious Lord," which plays on loop, floats out over Memphis. For

the last forty-five years, *The Commercial Appeal* has commemorated Dr. King's life on the day of his death, consistently marking the big anniversaries with long, in-depth features and even, in 1993, on the twenty-fifth anniversary, a photo book. As Memphis' paper of record, Dr. King's assassination was its story. But after nearly five decades, *The Commercial Appeal* was running out of ways to tell it.

The forty-fifth anniversary piece was supposed to publish on April 4, 2013, and Marc Perrusquia, a longtime projects reporter for *The Commercial Appeal*, would write it. Over the past five or so years, Perrusquia had been chasing a story about a Civil Rights photographer-turned-FBI-informant, named Ernest Withers, whom he thought might have informed on Civil Rights leaders, including Dr. King. But the FBI stonewalled the reporter, and as summer 2012 gave way to fall and the story he'd hoped would come through in time looked less and less promising, Perrusquia began to worry.

For a couple years, he'd been chasing a story about a photographer named Ernest Withers who, an FBI source in the nineties had told him privately, was an informant for the bureau during the Civil Rights era. He had hoped that the FBI would turn over Withers' informant files in time to search for references to Dr. King, but as the forty-fifth anniversary approached, it became clear that wasn't going to happen in time for Perrusquia to find, report, and write the feature. So he called a proverbial audible.

AND THEN CAME "SNOW FALL"...

In a world of parallax scrolling and embeddable everything, where souped-up design and user experience are the new normal, it's easy to forget that longform journalism begins and ends with deep reporting. In 2011, a year before "Snow Fall," the same journalist who wrote it had also written brilliantly about traumatic brain injuries in the National Hockey League. The reporting was deep; the story was important; and the telling was emotional. "Punched Out" was around the same length as "Snow Fall," too.

But it's "Snow Fall" that everyone remembers, and it's not because it's a story about an avalanche. "Snow Fall" became a household name because of its design, plain and simple. The day the *Times* published it, on December 20, 2012, Reddit went crazy: "They're mixing the traditional print techniques while incorporating the good from modern interactive techniques. It's perfect and honestly—I haven't seen anything that renewed my interest in just design quite like this has since university," *tommyschoolbruh* wrote.

"When I first opened this page and noticed the large background photo-animation, I expected the story to be contaminated with gratuitous use of multimedia elements that would distract from the flow of the content. My experience was quite the opposite," *challengepower* wrote. The effusive praise piled up, and that was only on the subreddit "Web Design."

"Snow Fall" became a verb, and, in July 2013, Jill Abramson appointed Sam Sifton to be the *Times*' "Snowfaller in Chief," which may have been a funny turn of phrase, but gave us an illuminating look at where the *Times* thinks storytelling is going. Still, just because the *Times* says it doesn't make it so—and the haters flooded in. PandoDaily called "Snow Fall" and "The Jockey," another digitally impressive effort by the Gray Lady, "multimedia orgies." Slate seemed to revel in posting "A Whole Lot of Bells, Way Too Many Whistles." Bobbie Johnson from Matter, the longform science and technology site wrote, "Yet almost every example of snowfalling that I've seen in action puts reading second to the razzle-dazzle. Can you even remember what happens in Snowfall?" *@AdamWestbrook* commented on the piece, "It's very interesting to read the comments at the bottom of pieces like this (Snowfall and some essays by The Verge in particular): all of them positive, none of them about the story, just how nice the parallax scrolling is." And this is but a small sampling of the people who hated on "Snow Fall."

At one point, after Slate published its takedown of all things "Snow Fall," Jay Rosen tweeted that he was "mystified" by

the backlash against the story. In another Tweet he explained: “I don’t think journalists should be dismissing things that get readers excited about online journalism EVEN if there is excess.” But Rosen, who knows how to pick a side, may have picked too soon.

“Snow Fall” was eye opening, but not the definitive word on where longform digital storytelling is going. In the end, the “Snow Fall” conversation is about walking the line between user fatigue and ensuring an enjoyable reading experience. Newsrooms have begun to adopt best practices from the tech world, but they seem to be doing so selectively. Everything’s all about lean start-up and quick iteration. But something that seems to have gotten lost in the mix is the number-one rule of product development: Don’t fatigue your users. Because if you don’t have them, the best product in the world is nothing. So how do you not fatigue your users? Don’t perform user tests on actual users, unless you have to, and even then, do it sparingly. Don’t roll out new features just because you can. And don’t make users re-learn how to interact with your product unless it’s absolutely necessary. Was “Snow Fall,” with its moving maps, parallax, and digital adornments, absolutely necessary? Or had ESPN done it with “The Long Strange Trip of Dock Ellis” and made the *Times* think, “We’re slipping behind.”

Well into the next year, *The New York Times* was still being praised and pummeled for the design. Haters are going to hate, and lovers are going to love. But the simple fact is, if the story is good—and if your readers can, well, read—then you’re likely to strike gold. Maybe a better question is, were “Snow Fall” and “The Jockey” good enough stories to warrant an extra-special treatment?

For now, longform digital is a testing ground. If you don’t like “Snow Fall” as it was presented on the web, then you can read it in the paper or on your read-for-later service, stripped of CSS and formatting. The future is not set in stone, and “Snow Fall” is simply one more experiment. So was *The Commercial Appeal’s* effort about Dr. King, called “Six:01.” Sit back and enjoy the ride.

THE DR. KING TICK TOCK

Back in Memphis, the specter of the story that could have been, the one that would have chronicled Ernest Wither's relationship with the FBI, was still hanging in the air when "Snow Fall" landed on December 20, 2013. Perrusquia was entranced, and he immediately wanted *The Commercial Appeal* to package and present the forty-fifth-anniversary story that way.

But it wasn't the cool and, some might argue, distracting clicking and swooping of "Snow Fall" that entranced Perrusquia. It was the total immersion of video interviews and bountiful source material that got him thinking about what digitally enhanced design could do for his story. The tick tock would come alive, he thought, if the reader could hear the Civil Rights activists and leaders talk about their old friend and remember with such clarity all these years later those last few days of his life. Perrusquia took the idea to Louis Graham, who was still managing editor then and who still resided in the glass cage bordering Perrusquia's workspace, which, like any respectable reporter's, is overrun with clippings and books, a headset, and more research than he will ever get to.

King had arrived in Memphis on April 3, which marked the third time in just a handful of weeks that he'd visited the city to support the sanitation workers in their ongoing strike. He'd also come to soothe tempers that had flared at a protest that had turned violent a week before, and to preach nonviolence. When King's plane arrived on April 3, the *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, *The Commercial Appeal's* afternoon sister, was there to photograph King walking through the airport. Thirty-two hours later, he lay dying on the second-floor balcony of the Lorraine Motel. In between, King fought with one of his confidantes, Dorothy Cotton, and gave his famous Mountaintop speech, in which he said:

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've

seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

It's an oft-quoted and eerie passage. And all the more reason why Perrusquia needed to know about Dr. King's last days.

Dr. King's whereabouts on his last day have been well-chronicled, but Perrusquia wanted to give readers a sense of what he was thinking and feeling. He envisioned a parallel chronology—Dr. King's last day and the assassin's route to Memphis. But those two stories, for someone particularly interested in the Civil Rights movement, were nothing new. He wanted more intimacy, and in late 2012, as he set about interviewing everyone who had been close to Dr. King and was still alive, Perrusquia was still looking for something to set his telling apart.

At the paper, there's no one more intimately familiar with Civil Rights archives than Jeff McAdory. For years, decades now, McAdory, *The Commercial Appeal's* night photo editor and a veritable photo index for mid-South blues music and the Memphis-based Civil Rights movement, was passionately dedicated to finding, scanning, and archiving images from that era. During his spare time McAdory takes his negative and flatbed scanners to area libraries and archives to look for undiscovered photographic gems. He's been doing it for decades, searching through filed and unfiled negatives, ones that have been scanned and ones that haven't, prints without negatives, every possible image of the Civil Rights movement in Memphis. Before newspapers were digital, McAdory would scan only the best six or eight, but now, because the Internet always wants more, always demands movement, he scans every possible picture, so he can create sequences.

As a longtime photo editor and photo historian, McAdory wasn't used to shooting in the field much anymore, and the pressures of shooting video—thinking about sound and the quality and color of light, making sure subjects didn't bob around and move out of the range of focus, or, God forbid, the frame—were a lot to take on. He'd shot and edited a video once, but that had

been years ago. But though there were *Commercial Appeal* photographers who were better at shooting video, McAdory was the obvious choice.

McAdory began traveling with Perrusquia to make videos of people who had surrounded Dr. King. At first he shot with his iPhone, but the image quality wasn't where he wanted it. So he upgraded to the newspaper's Canon 5D, a digital SLR that shoots video. As with the whole "Six:01" team, he was learning as he went along.

CORPORATE BUY-IN

Graham is a traditional newsman who's devoted most of his career to a single company, but, contrary to how some traditional newsmen think, Graham knows that, at this moment more than ever before, stasis means death. It's hard enough for Graham to ensure that *The Commercial Appeal* continues to publish longform pieces and he's the one who controls the newshole. But a digital piece? The Memphis paper doesn't even have the digital team that can pull off such a story, let alone the time to do it. "Snow Falling" this story, it was clear, would be impossible without the help of headquarters.

But Graham, a powerful advocate for his reporters, was intrigued, and when UC Berkeley's Knight Digital Center, which has been working closely with E.W. Scripps to help train reporters in digital, held a company workshop in Memphis, Graham jumped at the chance to pitch his bosses on the "Snow Fall" idea.

As a way to convince his bosses, he cited the company's Four Platform strategy, which dictates that newspapers need to think about content differently for the browser, tablets, mobile devices, and print. This type of digitally immersive storytelling, he told them, is the future of longform online, and it's a great way for E.W. Scripps to demonstrate what it is capable of. It wasn't a hard pitch to make. The bosses "instantly saw the value," Graham said.

Perrusquia's story had universal appeal; it was timeless, a feature that every paper in the chain could republish both online and in the newspaper, if they chose. Even though the project would originate out of just one of its thirteen newspapers, that experimentation in digital design would only help the company.

The timing wasn't great for E.W. Scripps' digital team. The story needed to be done while they were already up against the wall rolling out and implementing the company-wide paywall and focusing on mobile and tablet presentations. But though they were already taxed, the designers were eager to get creative. They were further excited by conference calls with *The Commercial Appeal's* editorial team. A good thing, too: because their days were so packed, a lot of the work that went into building the template happened at night and on the weekend. It was, Perrusquia says admiringly, a labor of love.

THE INSPIRATION

The team in Memphis got going, trying to figure out what was possible and what would work best to tell their story. "Snow Fall" got the creative juices going, but it was ESPN's groundbreaking design on "The Long, Strange Trip of Dock Ellis"—its groundbreaking use of parallax scrolling, or the so-called "curtain effect," and various types of embedded content, that served as the team's ultimate inspiration for what came to be called "Six:01," after the moment of Dr. King's death.

Released in August 2012, four months before the *Times'* "Snow Fall," "The Long Strange Trip of Dock Ellis" was the first to employ parallax design, which gave the story a three dimensional feel. Nicknamed "the curtain effect," parallax is becoming increasingly popular in digital design. Parallax describes the spatial relationship between objects, using an interstitial object as a reference point. Try this classic example: Close one eye, hold your hand in front of your face. Now switch eyes. The background seems to

shift, when, of course, it hasn't actually. Or think about this: You're riding in a car and you look out the window. The objects in the foreground, the side of the road, the guardrail, appear to move faster than the objects in the distance, like mountains, trees, or even, for an extreme example, the moon. "The Long Strange Trip of Dock Ellis," "Snow Fall," and Pitchfork's dynamic "Cover Stories" are just a few examples of online design that employ parallax.

A free web service called Scroll Kit, launched in 2012 by a recent NYU graduate, Cody Brown, enabled easier parallax design. Since then Brown has gotten into a bit of hot water with *The New York Times*. After the paper published "Snow Fall," Brown recreated the piece using his software, and posted the demo video on his website. Pretty quickly *Times* lawyers told him to take it down. He did, but left reference to the *Times*' story on his product's site. Again, the lawyers jumped and told him to take down any reference to the paper.

Still, Brown showed that, with a good grasp on his software, the average person could quickly assemble an uber-designed piece, once the story had been written, the materials collected, the editorial designs made, and the layout decided. But note: That's a lot of work you have to do in advance, and it's partly why only big outfits like *The New York Times*, which have the money to experiment and personnel who excel in their fields, have been able to extensively experiment.

Yet, while it's cool to swipe and scroll, we as users haven't yet found our proverbial sea legs, and, to continue the metaphor, digital designers haven't yet figured out how to control the ship. Depending on the user, the intended design might not translate. Using a slower Internet connection? You're out of luck. Have an older computer? You're not going to get the full effect.

Browser compatibility matters. If we can't address that challenge, we can't argue that a piece of journalism really was meant for everyone, but only for those with the technology necessary to view it.

LOOKING BACK

“Six:01” went live on April 4, 2013, the forty-fifth anniversary of Dr. King’s assassination. The page, which started with a portrait of Dr. King looking down over the text, rather mimicked a vertical timeline. Along the sides were video interviews the team had done with Dr. King’s friends, and the text was punctuated with photographs from the Civil Rights movement in Memphis and from Dr. King’s last thirty-six hours.

Without Michael Erskine, the paper’s digital director who acted as the project manager on “Six:01,” the project might not have come together. Every digital project like “Six:01” needs a project manager. Sitting in Erskine’s office in the early afternoon of a random Thursday in July, the traffic on any given story across the E.W. Scripps chain was, at most, in the couple of hundreds. Chartbeat, which tracks real-time analytics, and sat open on Erskine’s second screen, revealed that the average story across the company’s properties at any given moment was gathering somewhere around 100 uniques.

Erskine is apologetic when he talks about the analytics for “Six:01.” They aren’t accurate, for one thing. Because “Six:01” wasn’t created in the paper’s content management system, the developers had to input a line of code to allow their analytics program to track and return data, but either he or one of the developers in Cincinnati forgot, so the crucial first day of numbers is lost.

The company made the decision not to put “Six:01” behind a paywall because not all the newspapers in the chain had rolled out their paywalls yet, and E.W. Scripps wanted to allow the other papers to syndicate “Six:01,” making it free to spread across the web. And though most of the papers did digitally syndicate the story, the traffic never climbed as high as the editors would have wished. And, like media outlets around the country, when it comes to traffic, they don’t really know the reason why.

But, unlike many companies, *The Commercial Appeal* didn’t really seem to mind. The story was worth telling, Erskine reasoned, and they told it. It’ll live forever online, or at least until the

web breaks down. It was a challenging experiment at a time when the paper needed to shake things up in the newsroom.

Erskine articulated two problems with the way newspapers have published projects in the past. First, they live on the homepage for as long as they can—which usually isn’t very long before they’re overtaken by blog churn. The second problem is that, at least before “Snow Fall,” project pages were just link farms. You’d have a landing page, and on it would be links to the main text and to other elements of the story. Readers had to remember to go back to the landing page to finish looking at the project, and that’s behavior you can never expect. Today, instead of just listing story elements, more newspapers are building out single story pages with those elements embedded in the page.

As for low traffic, Erskine understands the problem this way: “At the end of the day, it’s a headline on your website. People do know—once they read the story and realize how great it is, I think they appreciate it. At the same time it’s hard to train your readers to know when something is really special.”

Like nearly every staff person at *The Commercial Appeal* who’s been there for a more than a year or so, Michael Erskine trained himself to code and work in multimedia mostly by scouring the web, watching YouTube videos, and reading tutorials. In fact, the whole digital venture was scrappy. When the team members didn’t know something, they taught themselves. And, to bring the team together, Erskine, *The Commercial Appeal*’s digital director, worked as a project manager, ensuring that expectations were set and clearly understood, and that the editorial team in Memphis and the digital team in Cincy were hitting their deadlines.

The question du jour at *The Commercial Appeal*, as at many outlets, is: Can we produce high-quality reportage, fund it as it needs to be funded, produce it as it needs to be produced, and still pay everyone involved a living wage? Annoyingly, there isn’t a single easy answer, but thankfully, there seem to be answers. By scrimping throughout the year, Graham makes sure *The Commercial*

Appeal can afford longform projects. It's a solution not without sacrifice, both financial and with regard to staff morale. "Even internally, there is not unanimous support for this in the newsroom. If I'm a middle manager and I'm struggling to get stories assigned, to find people to cover the flow of daily news, and these guys are off galavanting around the world..." Graham says. "There has been dissent, but I haven't been moved to say, you're right. Let's quit doing all this. I just can't do that."

But looking back on the project, there's not much the Memphis folks would change about the process. John Sale, the assistant managing editor of visuals, said there had been some tension between himself and the designers in Cincinnati, but it wasn't anything that didn't pass. And ultimately it happened because roles weren't as clearly delineated as they found out they needed to be. Something to fix for next time.

The Commercial Appeal staff learned that reporting and writing is only the first step in putting together a digitally augmented story. They learned that, in the future, they need more time. They also learned what type of digital projects headquarters in Cincinnati would approve. And, the paper learned something that excited them: This summer, when the *Appeal* posted a job listing, they received a far greater number of applications from very well qualified journalists and editorial producers than they had seen in a long long time. And the applicants cited "Six:01" as the reason they had applied.

The staff was still fatigued by the effort when I met with them, because, at the end of the day, *The Commercial Appeal* couldn't hire their way to "Snow Fall." They had to learn everything themselves, and outsource to their corporate office. Until the last minute, they weren't even sure that the digital version would come together. Erskine says that if everything had fallen apart and the story didn't look the way they wanted it to, they'd just throw it in the regular content management system, with the same old template, and hit publish. The company eked out the story, and it was well-received

because, for a mid-size paper, it really was an extraordinary effort. Would it be worth it to do it again? E.W. Scripps also doesn't have the resources to do a story like "Six:01" except on rare and special occasions. Unlike *The New York Times*, which, compared to *The Commercial Appeal*, has more money than God, the Memphis paper can't hire a team. Whenever an editorial team undertakes a project like "Six:01," editors have to rethink shift work. For several months while McAdory, the night photo editor, was working on the videos for "Six:01," the assistant managing editor for visuals, John Sale, took up his shift and brought in a photographer to do some editing too. It was taxing. When I visited Memphis, Graham was thinking how to make sure copyediting was covered while one of his editors went off to report a story for six weeks.

And then there's another reality: When special becomes regular, it stops being special. So it wasn't particularly surprising that, eight months after "Snow Fall" was released, when the *Times* published "The Jockey," another digitally enhanced story, the reaction was tepid, at best. The relatively little press the story did get compared it to "Snow Fall" and left it at that.

"I would assume in the years ahead this is going to get to be a lot easier to do, but then it starts to lose its unique qualities and everybody's going to be looking for the next thing," Graham said.

THE AMPLIFIERS

#Longreads and Longform.org

New tag: #longreads Let's collect stories (non-fiction & fiction) for commuters using @instapaper or other offline tools RT!

— @markarms, April 17, 2009, 10:27 a.m.

LONGREADS IS BORN

Mark Armstrong was living in New York City and working at Bundle, a personal finance startup, in 2008, when he first had the idea for Longreads. During his commute between Brooklyn and Manhattan he liked to read on his phone, and in preparation for a long subway ride without an Internet connection, he'd scour the web for good longform stories—the type that he didn't have time to read during the workday—and save them to his Instapaper. He would read pieces by the usual suspects, like *New York Magazine* and *The New Yorker*, but his web searches weren't satiating his appetite. He wanted to read stories that, though good, might go unnoticed in the daily blog churn. In late 2008, Armstrong purchased the web domain Longreads.com and began thinking about starting a curation site, but it took another few months for anything to come of the project.

His fretting continued until mid-April 2009 when, at 10:27 a.m. on just another morning, on the seventeenth, Armstrong tweeted: “New tag: #longreads Let's collect stories (non-fiction & fiction) for commuters using @instapaper or other offline tools

RT!” Within the hour, Instapaper tweeted back at him, “I love this idea,” and a few people who had caught wind of the hashtag began sending Armstrong suggestions.

The next day he egged on the conversation and asked for #longreads recommendations, suggesting that readers could save the stories they were suggesting to Instapaper for later reading on phones and Kindles. And while #longreads quickly solved Armstrong’s problem of finding more to read on his commute, the hashtag’s success highlighted something else: that there were people like him online who loved longform, knew there was great reading material out there, didn’t want to miss it, wanted to save it for later reading, and needed help finding those longform stories.

Quickly, #longreads took on a life of its own, and users began suggesting stories to the stream. Armstrong, too, would pick out a few links here and there and tweet about them on his official Longreads Twitter. And that was the extent of the project, at first. When Armstrong began to see a critical mass collecting around the hashtag, he started going to editors and publishers, asking if, when they published a longform story, which he defined as any fiction or nonfiction piece longer than 1,500 words, they would use #longreads. Some editors took to it; others didn’t.

But it was the writers whom Armstrong really got to. “I would go talk to a writer for some magazine site,” Armstrong said. “And they would say, ‘our features are being buried on our homepage because everybody’s introducing all of these blogs to keep things moving on the site, so all these big features disappear off the site within a day.’” As Armstrong began to see it, he wasn’t just curating longform stories, he was also helping to surface stories that might otherwise be forgotten in the flood of quick hits, and to give those stories a second and third life, and maybe even a bigger audience. Longform’s long tail began to evolve.

LONGFORM'S LONGTAIL

@markarms I love this idea.

— *@Instapaper, April 17, 2009, 10:46 a.m.*

In 2004, Chris Anderson, then editor-in-chief for *Wired*, wrote a now-famous piece called “The Long Tail,” in which he explained the growing trend toward what he called “selling less of more.” Part of his argument was about how, in a digital universe, the problem of shelf space had all but gone away. And as a result, the expiration date of digital products had been greatly extended. “The main problem, if that’s the word,” Anderson wrote, “is that we live in the physical world and, until recently, most of our entertainment media did, too.”

Yet while we know that space online isn’t unlimited, for all practical purposes, when we’re talking about text pages, we can work on the assumption that it is. And it’s cheap, and it’s easy to distribute information. Thus, we can sell them for a very long time—the Long Tail.

But there is a downside. With access to every magazine published this week, not to mention the growing archives of every magazine on the stand, and more content being published by the day, it can feel to the eager reader a little like standing under a dam, watching the cement begin to crack and waiting for the water to sweep you away. The flood of content is overwhelming.

It’s a feeling Max Linsky knows well, though, he seems to welcome the flood. In February 2010, ten months after Mark Armstrong had launched #Longreads, a month after Steve Jobs released the iPad and two months before it went on sale, Linsky and his business partner and college friend Aaron Lammer were on a trip with their girlfriends. They decided on the trip that they wanted to try one of two things: either to write a TV pilot or to build a site for curating longform fiction and nonfiction. They went with the latter, and Lammer, a developer, who was

then twenty-eight, threw together a site and pressed publish. They called it Longform.org.

On the third or fourth day that they were live, Jack Shafer, who was then with Slate and was a friend of the new business partners, wrote a piece for the online magazine titled “Linsky and Lammer Love Long-Form,” in which he quoted Lammer as saying, “Everyone has that one standout piece that gets seared into their skull, so it was exciting, when someone mentioned one, to actually be able to track it down and pass it around. For me, the process echoed the early days of MP3s, when out-of-print and ultra-rare recordings that had been stuck in record-industry purgatory all started making the rounds.”

Like Longreads.com, Longform.org posts both fiction and nonfiction. Longform’s goal, however, is different: It was to be an archive of great longform stories, both new and old, categorized by topic, like sex, war, crime, media, and politics, among others. Longreads, intentionally or not, seems to be more for immediate consumption. Longform.org seems to be an anthology you can dip in or out of. Longform’s Twitter account is a stream of all the stories it has posted on the website—at most four a day. But Longform doesn’t hog the traffic; it simply pushes readers on over to the host site. And because Linsky knows how annoying it can be to click next... next... next... particularly for an article as long as a feature you’d find in *The New York Times Magazine*, Longform prefers to refer users to the “Single Page,” or printer view to make it even easier to save for later reading.

When Linsky and Lammer first started the site, they would each write an executive summary of a piece, but quickly decided against doing that in the future. It took too long and, frankly, they didn’t want Longform.org to be about their reviews. It was supposed to be about utility, not about their own perspectives. So they simplified the captions, eliminating adjectives, cliff-hangers, and every type of writerly frill, hoping to encourage people to read based on the merit of the story, not the hilarity of their caption.

Longform and Longreads both have been lauded for highlighting good, in-depth reads. But it's important to note that what they're doing isn't altogether new. It just happens to be in the digital space. Consider the anthology series Best American this or that—Best American Crime Reporting, Best American Sports Writing, and so forth. Or any anthology of short stories, fiction or otherwise, by *The New Yorker*, or, for that matter, any anthology of journalism. So while it's tempting to keep our fingers crossed and think, maybe we've found a way to combat blog churn and give all longform a longer life, via Longreads and Longform, frankly, they're just an archive, a recommendation system, a reading list. They are one way that longform pieces find a second life. What if your piece isn't chosen? Then your writing suffers the same fate that these guys set out to fix. Ultimately, they're just another gatekeeper, a tastemaker, and if your taste isn't theirs, you're out of luck.

A necessary part of curating is choosing, and it should come as no surprise that with that comes a certain level, whether conscious or unconscious, of bias. As of November 20, 2013 at 11:15 a.m., the Longform.org archive had in it 6,123 pieces. Of those pieces, 23.8% come out of five top commercial magazines. They are *The New Yorker* (455), *The New York Times Magazine* (306), *Vanity Fair* (240), *GQ* (232), and *New York* (226). Bearing in mind that Longform.org picks not just current content, but great archived pieces, it stands to reason that these magazines, known for their excellent longform, are the top five. But, what of the longform start-ups? Narratively has been featured once, and so has BKLYNR. The Atavist, which shares an office with Longform, has been picked once. The Classical, a longform sports magazine, has been picked six times. In total, more than 825 publications have been picked once. Longreads, which doesn't have a list of its picks on its website, is more of a mystery. It does rank the top five pieces of the week, but doesn't post them in a comprehensive list, like Longform does. The two curators do represent very different sensibilities: Longreads is about surfacing great new content, with an occasional nod to

writing of the past. Longform is about creating an archive of great content, new and old, for later reading.

When Longreads highlighted a Big Roundtable story called “Something More Wrong” by Katherine B. Olson as a Member Pick, we were thrilled, because two things happened: Longreads paid our writer \$300 for a one-week advance peek for its users. Also, we were mentioned on the Longreads site. And I can’t tell you which was more valuable, because it seems in this game that mentions beget mentions. After Longreads mentioned us, traffic began pouring in, and then came donations. Longform soon tweeted about us too, and added us to its website, and that’s when things took off.

As of November 20, the Longreads-specific url for “Something More Wrong”—the one with `?src=longreads` at the end—has gotten 5,898 unique pageviews. According to Google Analytics, 5,602 unique users came to our site from Longform, and 1,579 came from Longreads. So which is more potent? For referrals, it would seem Longform. But our sample size is small, so take The Big Roundtable’s data as you will.

THE OTHER CURATORS

Longform and Longreads aren’t the only organizations curating longform. There’s another, a different breed altogether, and it’s run out of Harvard University.

It was 2009 when Paige Williams first heard about Dolly Freed, and she quickly found herself enthralled by the story of the woman who, when she was a teenager, pseudonymously published *Possum Living: How to Live Well Without a Job and with (Almost) No Money*. Williams set about reporting and writing the story. Her piece was accepted by *The New York Times* but, at the last minute, the paper pulled the story. They made using Dolly Freed’s real name a condition of running the piece, and Williams, adamant about protecting her source, who still wanted privacy, said no. The January

1 anniversary of the release of *Possum Living* was fast approaching, and so Williams decided to publish the story herself, on a website that she set up with the help of friends. She placed a donation button next to the story, hoping to recoup the costs, and dubbed the experiment “Radiohead journalism.”

Today she’s the editor of Nieman Storyboard, based out of Harvard University’s Nieman Foundation. Storyboard’s mission is to understand and dissect, teach and celebrate, great narrative nonfiction. Among the regular features it publishes is one called Annotation Tuesday! in which someone from Storyboard and an author known for a piece of journalism, like Gay Talese and “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold,” annotate the piece and then do a Q&A. Storyboard makes recommendations for great narrative nonfiction, and its focus is solely on journalism.

While Storyboard is also a curator of longform stories, it’s an organization not often talked about in the long tail discussion. This might be because Storyboard is aimed at the craftsman who wants to understand the anatomy of a story, whereas Longreads and Longform are for starving readers who need to know that when they go to one of those sites, they’re guaranteed to find something good to read. They’re for the readers who were trained on Twitter and Facebook to expect a stream of links and never a dull moment—and they do that job well.

THE DECIDERS

Boiled down, Longreads is two guys—with a few helpful part-time editors here and there—and a lot of recommendations from Twitter. Armstrong is based in California, and Mike Dang, a graduate of Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism and Longread’s managing editor, is based in New York, where he works at The Billfold, The Awl’s finance site. He and Armstrong met back before #longreads was a thing, back in the days when they both worked at Bundle.

On a Thursday night in early October 2013, I meet Mike Dang in midtown Manhattan. He's coming from The Billfold's office where, earlier in the evening, he and Armstrong had chosen—over Instant Messenger—the top five Longreads stories of the week. Eager to know which stories they've chosen to be Number One and Number Two tomorrow, I ply Dang to let me in on the secret. He laughs and tells me that Armstrong really advocated for one from *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and that he really loved one from *GQ*. They each choose five stories and then meet on Instant Messenger to discuss them, narrowing the selection down from there. Sometimes they pick stories because they believe they're important, but they also look for breadth and topic, whether the writer is new, and they even consider gender. The newsletter is an art in itself. "Sometimes we'll have weeks that are just so dark," Dang says, laughing. "Like, school shootings, gangs, teens being bullied.... We definitely don't want them to each be like murders and suicides and wrongful imprisonments. We also try to make the topics a little bit more diverse." Mostly, they just try to figure out a ranking, and they usually get the whole thing done pretty quickly. "It's pretty clear what are going to be the front-runners early on. It's not too difficult a decision. There's not really a secret formula," Dang said.

We've heard the refrain ad nauseam, ad infinitum: News outlets have less money and fewer people, all of whom are needed to feed an ever-expanding beast born out of a cancerous growth of online publication. Each outlet seems to believe that if it loses the battle for traffic, it has lost its reason to be. Not only do news organizations feel they need editorial minions to produce their own version of each news story (whether it's reported or not), but they need people to get that content out to the world.

Enter the modern day newspaper boy, or maybe the kid rehawking discarded newspapers—what was once called the "barrel edition." In the beginning of the longform revival, that role was played by social media networks, including Facebook pages

and Twitter streams; then came RSS feeds optimized for Flipboard and content licensed to Longreads. Today, if you're a publication not getting your stories out on at least a few social media networks, or on distribution engines like Longreads or Longform, then your stories probably aren't being read. But it is important to remember: Those engines have taste and sensibilities. The two dominant curators in this space are run by white men in their thirties who are married and live in urban areas. And the identity of the decider makes a big difference in the pieces that he picks. I've lived on the two coasts only and I am white. But I am also female, and though I enjoy reading what the two curators promote, there is a better algorithm for me—let alone for millions of readers in the United States and abroad who are not young, male, white, married, bicoastal, or even American. This is to say that people are choosing for us, and who they are matters.

And invariably some great stories get lost in the dark recesses of the Internet, posted once or twice on Twitter, maybe on Reddit, and never picked up again. And that's not the fault of the story. Clearly, we have a flawed system, one that continues to operate if only because there is no other mechanism at the moment to reliably surface the best content, and get it to its appropriate audience. Even *The New York Times*, with its brain trust on 9th Avenue and West 40th Street, hasn't yet figured out how to guarantee that its stories find an appropriate audience. Readers are becoming ever more stateless, devoted to great storytelling, less so to a certain publication.

Longreads has a couple of other people who help aggregate longform content—occasional editors, coordinators for the college picks, etc.—but the Longreads tastemakers, the people with the power to vote, are Mark Armstrong and Mike Dang, meeting over instant messenger every Thursday night, picking between the pieces that they believe to be the best of the week. And ranking them. And if they didn't have the time to read your piece? Well, you're out of luck.

MEASURING SUCCESS

Before newspaper subscriptions were digital, the only way to tell whether or not a story you'd written had had impact was to see if change had occurred because the story was published. Unless you were Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein covering Watergate, or somewhere along that continuum, you could usually forget hearing about the impact. Had a particular story affected individual readers? You'd likely never know unless you got a letter to the editor. The only way to get even a close approximation of who was reading the paper was to look at subscription numbers. If your stories were talked about at parties or made waves with the powers that be, then you were succeeding.

Then, enter, digital, and our current impulse to measure everything. Numbers, numbers, numbers. Do we have a better sense of impact?

For a time, traffic came to be the gold standard. We seem to be thinking more critically about metrics now, knowing that pageviews only mean so much. The metrics for success are evolving; newsrooms are beginning to focus on the user experience, responding to how users read. We are asking better question. For example, is there a better layout to present this story so that our readers leave the site with a deeper understanding of what happened? Or, When do people who reliably consume this type of content go online looking for it? Say, for example, that the majority of people who love reading about baseball log online at 9:34 a.m. looking for baseball stories. And say the *Times* has a new deeply reported longform feature about baseball that they publish at 1:30 p.m.? Those readers would miss the piece about baseball, and might never know it had run. How can the *Times*, or any other organization for that matter, ensure the piece gets seen by those baseball fanatics?

It's a very different world than it was even ten years ago, when the audience—who it is and how, or if, it is engaged—was an afterthought. Though social media networks like Twitter and Facebook

serve to amplify a story's reach, and are the best tool for outlet-audience engagement, they're a far cry from a relationship, and they don't come close to guaranteeing that your story will find its audience. Today, instead of selling the morning paper, journalists are hawking single stories on Twitter and Facebook. And in the battle of seconds, to better their chances that a user will click on, say, *The New York Times* story versus *The Washington Post* story, publications—and evermore, journalists—are constantly under the gun to bring it.

And who is that audience? We know more about that, but we're still like an awkward teenager, unsure of ourselves. We don't exactly know what to do with the new information we have, all the numbers. A single story—and here I'm talking specifically about longform content, although the same logic applies to all types of content—can have a multitude of audiences.

And what does it mean to succeed? If a particularly foul story, like *Vice's* "My First Double Blowjob," doesn't get many social shares, but it gets a ton of reads, has it succeeded? What if the opposite happens? Or is a story only a success if it gets the magical combination of social shares and views? What if only one person reads a story, but then decides against going on a homicidal rampage? Or to leave Wall Street for social work? Or to be meaner, or kinder? That's certainly impact, but you can't measure it. This is all to say, there is no standard definition of success.

Maybe there's another approach. Start first with the question, What do you as a publication aspire to do? At The Big Roundtable, for example, our goal is to "Make Writers Happy," which means that their stories are read and that readers liked them enough to pay something for them (voluntarily). The core team doesn't decide what success looks like, that's for the individual writer to decide, really. A story has succeeded if our writer is happier for having published with us. Whether or not that story has had an impact we try to measure in terms of feedback: responses from readers, the comments in social streams. Whether or not the story has had an

impact, on one reader or many, is our second metric for success, though elusive. And there are certainly other models.

How do you make sure your story gets read? It's the question that's mystified publishers since time immemorial. News organizations have delivered news digests. And tweeted ad nauseum. They've created verticals about everything from minimalist cooking to surviving cancer, giving a topical home to all content, so that readers don't have to go searching. But what about that magical something that makes a story really worth sharing? The one thing that makes people stop and say, Huh, maybe I'll post that. Story serendipity, that pleasant surprise you get at finding or being recommended a story you end up loving, is impossible to engineer. We may inch closer, with the help of algorithms and machines that collect our behavior. Google may one day be able to recommend to us what it thinks we'll like based on its years of data about us. But will it ever be able to engineer that moment, Oh! Huh, maybe... ?

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? THE PIVOT

@jeffdegeorgia Excellent. My commute is already looking better. Keep the #longreads coming, people.

— *@markarms, April 17, 2009, 11:30 a.m.*

I meet Mark Armstrong in an airy café in Oakland, California with a polished concrete and bamboo look, and where the cappuccinos are perfectly made. In the corner, the café sells artisan bowls and other trinkets that I'm sure would increase the feng shui in my apartment. Armstrong moved his family back out here from New York a couple years ago, to the land of bountiful sun and backyards with citrus trees, where he could raise his kids in a house with a garden jungle. He'd been out of town for a wedding recently and just got back on a red-eye—living the New York-style life out West: tired but tireless.

Armstrong is relentlessly positive, and often described by people in the longform space as the nicest guy you'll ever meet. He's young, with salt-and-pepper hair and an easy California vibe. And, like the other longform entrepreneurs, like Narratively's Rosenberg and Epic Magazine's Joshua Bearman, bursting with ideas. He wants stories to be read. When you talk with him, it's clear how passionate Armstrong is about helping as many writers as he can. But he's only one person, and as the ecosystem grows, he's getting stretched thin.

Since that day in September 2013 at that cafe in Oakland, Armstrong's moved on from Pocket, where he was the editorial director. Today he's devoted solely to Longreads. And on October 14, 2013, Armstrong launched a Member Drive, much like NPR's, asking those who wanted to keep the curation site going to become a member for \$3 a month, or \$30 a year. According to a blog post on Longreads, on the first day of the drive, 400 new people signed up. The start-up's goal is 5,000. As of early March 2014, Longreads has 2,500 members.

On October 17, three days after the drive launched, Longreads posted a quote from a member: "I just renewed my subscription, because Mark Armstrong does EVERYTHING he can to support the best work of writers and publishers. Longreads is my favorite magazine and it must succeed. \$30 a year is a bargain. Pony up!" Note: Magazine, not curator. And though that wording suggests that the content is owned, at least in some part, by Longreads, Armstrong says that publishers seem to like his start-up. Longreads doesn't steal content, like some aggregators. Or post excerpts, like some blogs. Instead, Longreads (and Longform, too) act as link farms—referrers, really.

But after becoming the master of referral—at least to the extent you can without BuzzFeed's data scientists and *The New York Times'* engineers—what's next for Longreads and Longform? Original content? To add an original content component to a curatorial website, Longform's Linsky said, would be to violate the pact that their company has with its users. His content wouldn't be as good

as the stories Longform is trying to surface, he says. And he doesn't want to take his users for granted, or abuse their trust.

Linsky sees Longform's mission to be recommending amazing stories and making them easy to read, wherever you'd like to read them. "The fact that we have not done original stories is evidence of how focused we are on that mission, because we could probably get some pretty great people to write for us at this point if we wanted to," he says. "And it would be so much fun for me to do that kind of work because that's what I love doing. But it's off that mission."

A NEW DAY

Pocket

Nate Weiner is neither a journalist nor a publisher. He's a developer bent on changing publishing, and he's built the platform to do it. With ten million users, Pocket is the largest save-for-later service on the market. But more than market share, what sets Pocket apart is its ability to measure how readers read and its devotion to learning from its users.

It's Pocket's first event, in November 2013, and Nate Weiner seems surprised he has an audience. After six years, a name change, a decision to take venture capital, and a move to San Francisco, Pocket 5.0 was a version that, unlike previous versions, finally deserved an event launch. "It is amazing to see how many people actually showed up," Weiner says, chuckling. He's got the San Francisco business outfit down pat: nice jeans and an untucked green shirt atop a dark T-shirt.

As he begins to present, Weiner starts to pace. He seems to be making an effort to speak slowly. It's not the seamless presentation we're used to from Apple at the annual Apple Worldwide Developers Conference, particularly when that event was headlined by Steve Jobs. But of course, Pocket's first event is a much smaller affair, for a project with far fewer evangelical customers, and Weiner is a much younger man. As the presentation gets underway, Weiner's voice begins to strengthen. He begins to speak with authority about the product that he's been building since 2007.

And then he hits his stride: "There's been this explosion of screens that we now have to deal with where content is coming

to us. We have phones. We have tablets. We have e-readers. We have TVs. We now have watches and glasses. All of these things are broadcasting content at you.” He punctuates his sentences with Jobs-like pauses and, as he realizes that his audience is listening, he becomes more assured. He tells us what he’s going to teach us, teaches us, and then tells us what he taught us: There’s no simple answer for how people discover and consume content. Which means that Pocket can’t just list content you’ve saved. Weiner paints a picture of an ecosystem brimming with content producers: Sort through the mess on your own? Are you kidding? His description of the content cacophony leaves me wanting to trade my smartphone for an old-school flip phone. But, wait, Pocket is meant for just my type. “Because,” he says, “if you can’t keep up, then you tune out.” And I don’t want to tune it all out.

As he speaks, I hear Weiner making the same points as he did during our first conversation back in September 2013, when we met in San Francisco. As Pocket’s CEO, Weiner has to be the company’s number one evangelist, to be able to sell it in his sleep, and that seems to be what he was practicing when we sat down together. He talked about the direction in which he wanted to take Pocket: compatibility with all platforms on all devices; not just a place to save content, but also a reader, a place to consume content. Pocket 5.0, which Weiner is rolling out today—November 13—aims to do that.

The new version of the app automatically categorizes your content in two ways, one of which customizes according to your habits. There are three types of default categories—long versus quick reads (length); “trending” content, algorithmically determined by the content that other people are saving and reading (popularity); and “best of” content, determined by Pocket algorithms to surface the content that you’re most likely to engage with, based on what the app knows about you.

Second, the new app builds categories based on your personal “interests” which adjust dynamically based on the type of content

you've been saving to Pocket (say, baseball, weddings, comedy). On whatever device, in whatever browser you open Pocket, your saved content will be sorted in the same way.

FROM WHENCE WE CAME

Had you asked Nate Weiner six years ago where he thought the paid app called Read It Later would take him, he wouldn't have told you San Francisco with a staff of fifteen. Back in 2007, before Read It Later was renamed Pocket, Weiner was living in Minneapolis, holding down a forty-hour-a-week job designing websites for lawyers who all seemed to want the same thing: bald eagles and American flags. He'd come home to work on passion projects, including Read It Later, originally a Firefox extension which Weiner released in 2007. (Extensions allow users to further personalize their browsers; examples include "Send to Kindle" and, today, "Send to Pocket.") It was just one in a portfolio of projects he was working on, but this particular one satisfied a personal need: He was tired of emailing himself links, then losing them in his inbox or just deleting the message without even looking at them again. Read It Later made it easier to save links he ran across for later reading.

It's good for journalism that Pocket allows you to save more than just articles. Instead of being an app you access only when you want to read journalism that you've saved, a very specific desire, Pocket is for rediscovery of content in myriad media. Weiner described Pocket as the interstitial step between discovery and consumption. He envisions that users will find content using a service like Flipboard (or Twitter or Facebook), after which they'll save it to Pocket for later. After having consumed the content initially in Pocket, Weiner imagines people using a service like Evernote for archiving, or more permanent storage of content. There are other apps similar to Pocket that allow users to save for later, including Instapaper and Readability. And in 2012, with the release of Mac

OS X Lion, Apple tried its own built-in reading list for Safari. If you use that service, you can read stories only in a Safari-controlled environment. But Safari's mission is to give you the best web browsing experience, and the reading list doesn't really build toward that mission.

A few years ago, "platform agnostic" was the term of the day. It meant that a piece of software could operate on any device and any platform. The new wisdom is to be platform conscious. It might seem like a semantic difference, but it's more than that, and the move away from "agnostic" has been an important turning point for tech. Agnostic implies that the software doesn't know on what platform, which device, and in what circumstances it's being used. Conscious, on the other hand, implies an intent, and it's central to the mission behind responsive design. Pocket seems driven to achieve a high level of platform consciousness.

Back in July 2008, the Apple App Store launched, and before long, Read It Later had been approved and was selling for \$2.99. Pretty soon the profits Weiner was making from the App Store were bringing in enough of a salary that he could justify making Read It Later his full-time job. In 2010, in the same year that Steve Jobs introduced the iPad, Weiner and his girlfriend, now his wife, began to be alarmed that their friends were getting married and beginning to have children, buying houses and settling into adulthood. They decided to escape, to move away from Minnesota. "We were like, 'No, no, no, this is not happening yet. Let's go to Peter Pan land.'" And so they left for San Francisco.

Even working out of his apartment Weiner, soon began to see what a big difference being in San Francisco made for a tech company. Everyone he met wanted to help, or could help, or at least wanted to hear all about his company. "Even in competitive areas, people are just pumped to help move stuff forward. It's what we're all here to do," Weiner said. Looking back on his path from 2007 until moving to San Francisco, Weiner says that he now gets why things took so long. For the first three or four years, he wasn't talking

about his product with other people who build products. He wasn't surrounded by people who wanted to move products forward.

So when he was approached with an acquisition offer from Evernote, he entertained the idea. It had a lot of money and good people; maybe trading autonomy for the extra support would be worthwhile. But then came a moment of clarity: He had plans for Read It Later; he believed that saving for later was a next big step for publishing. He had a mission and he wanted to see it through, not risk what it meant to be folded into another company.

So he turned Evernote down and made a choice: He'd pursue venture capital. And in April 2012, Read It Later went through a transformation—from paid to free, and from Read It Later to Pocket. The name fit the product better. After all, people didn't just want to read later; they wanted to consume later—videos, recipes, Wikipedia pages, and more. Whatever content users wanted to save, Weiner wanted to be their hub.

Because of his decision to take venture capital, Weiner has an office on Market Street in San Francisco and a team of fifteen. He also has the means to make Pocket the product he envisions, which sounds typical, but isn't. What started as an extension has, six years later, become a product with more than ten million users and more than a million and a half saves to Pocket every day. Because of the decision to take VC and his success since then, Weiner will change publishing.

I ring the doorbell for the San Francisco office and Nate Weiner's twin brother, Max, answers. Unsure if this is the person I've come to meet, I ask for Nate. And the other Weiner—who could be Nate if he didn't have glasses—directs me inside to a cluster of modern-looking red chairs, a de facto lobby. I peek over the room divider separating me and the lobby from the rest of the office, which is small, colorful, and very hip, and which, the next day, Mark Armstrong of Longreads and the former editorial director for Pocket tells me might have been inhabited by *Mother Jones* back in the day. I push around a copy of a photo magazine called *UNseeN* on the lobby table and begin pondering the bowl of little

chocolates, when Nate comes up. The individual rooms bordering the bullpen are painted the colors of the Pocket app, and Nate leads me into the yellow one with whiteboard paint on the wall. Scribbled on it are notes about user personas, which, Weiner later tells me, with a grin on his face, aren't yet final.

What a surreal experience, being the CEO of a start-up! Decked out in sneakers and jeans, and a dark gray Pocket sweatshirt, Weiner sits down in a chair that looks back on the desks in his office. Behind him, on the wall of the yellow-painted workspace, are modern takes on *Star Wars* posters. (The original three—of course.) As he talks, he laughs and curls in a bit on himself, like a shy kid. One day a developer, the next, an employer.

Weiner's twin brother, Max, and Nate's wife, Nikki, were the first employees of Pocket back when the now-CEO first began to see the program's potential. In January 2011, Weiner says, he was finally able to convince his wife to come work for Pocket full time. "She's the best designer I know," he says matter-of-factly. Max has been a developer with Pocket, at the time Read It Later, for a bit longer, since 2010. He works on the Android version. In addition to the design team and the data guys, there are a number of other developers, because, of course, every app needs to be programmed specifically to the specifications of the device on which it will be sold. Because Pocket is an app, you don't need an Internet connection to access the data. The app, which acts like a container, stores not only the data you've downloaded to your phone, but your reading behavior, which, when you connect to the Internet again, is transmitted back to Pocket. The data, after all, is what makes Pocket a truly exciting company.

HOW WE READ

According to Pocket, people are saving more content to them than to all the other services—Facebook, Twitter, Instapaper, Evernote, and Readability—combined.

And according to Pocket, based on the user behavior the company has observed, there are a couple of ways its users usually interact with saved content: People look for their most recently saved items, or people know exactly what they're looking for and search specifically for it. But what of the content that doesn't fall in either of those categories? According to Weiner, items not in the thirty most recently saved spots are reopened later less than five percent of the time. Pocket 5.0, with its highlights and automatically categorized content, set out to solve that problem—a problem that Pocket's own data had highlighted.

According to Pocket, there's "no single source of truth." Weiner says that means there's no dominant piece of content that people save. About 55 percent of what's saved to Pocket are articles and 45 percent are videos and what the company calls "pages," meaning recipes, Wikipedia pages, and the like. Pocket wants to be the glue that holds it all together and makes the experience of discovering and consuming content less chaotic, and more manageable.

According to Pocket, *Vanity Fair's* "The Money Shot," by Kara Swisher, was one of the most popular profiles this year. Outside of Pocket, Weiner said, Swisher's piece had a shelf life of about three days, which takes into account social sharing and the resulting big burst of traffic. But inside of Pocket, once users had saved the article, its high-volume life was extended some thirty days. "There's no place for content like this to thrive today, because everything is so real time. Everything is constantly pushed out for what's new," Weiner said. "We want to build a place where this content can thrive, and that is what we built."

Get used to hearing the phrase: "According to Pocket..." Because Pocket is an app, and thus is a tightly controlled universe, it's measuring user behavior in what is essentially a controlled environment. And thus gathering amazing data.

For example, when the average user connects his computer to an iPad with Pocket, Weiner says, his reading behavior changes. Instead of reading throughout the day on his computer, nearly all

of that reading takes place in the evening, during the peak reading time for the iPad—between 8 p.m. and 11 p.m. According to Pocket, more than 800 million items have been saved to its app to date, with nearly one and a half million saved every day; and there's a 50 percent return rate to that content, meaning half of the material is opened later.

Better digital data about reading habits will, in time, I hope, push out less credible data. For instance, time on page, for all intents and purposes, is a bullshit analytic. I'm sorry. Let me rephrase: Time on page is a liar. It begins measuring from the time you open a link until either you leave the page or the clock times out. But say you're the type of person who, like me, leaves way too many tabs open, even though you are not longer looking at them. You're ruining website analytics right now. You shouldn't worry about it, because if that's how you behave, then that's how you behave, and the analytics programs have got to get better at measuring real human behavior online.

And even if time on page were to measure the time you spent engaging with a page, it wouldn't accurately measure what parts of the page you were engaging. Chartbeat, a company that services more than 600 media outlets, measures real-time user behavior. Its goal is to help publishers better understand how users are interacting with their sites at any given moment. Unlike other analytics software, like Google Analytics or Omniture, Chartbeat doesn't archive behavior, and that's deliberate. It was a product decision: The moment you start archiving data, people start to ask why don't you archive this or that, or produce reports, and that isn't, at its heart, what Chartbeat is about.

So beware the article that cites "Time on Page." And keep an eye on Pocket. The app is becoming central to the world of publishing—like Apple, but not as damaging.

POCKETING LONGFORM

Until the release of Pocket 5.0 in mid-November 2014, the app was an undifferentiated list of links you'd saved. Helpful, to a point. Still, items on that list befell the same fate as links you emailed yourself: They're pushed to the bottom and forgotten. But Weiner looked at the problem a different way. "When you open up Pocket you have some intent around what you want," Weiner said. "You have some kind of mood. You're either like, 'I'm opening up Pocket because I saved that thing about Javascript and I want to look it up,' or, 'I feel like reading something,'" Weiner said. Which is to say that when you open up Pocket, you know the type of content you're looking for. You're not undecided about whether or not you want to read a longform story or a recipe.

So Weiner and his team set out to make it easier to rediscover content in your Pocket based on a couple of criteria. The idea was that, if you have help making sense of the content that you've saved, it makes the act of digging through it less time-consuming and less intimidating. For example, long versus quick reads prioritizes the parameter of time. Automatically categorizing saved content means that you won't waste time manually tagging stories, nor will you have to sort through each piece for recommendations. Save-for-later applications, like Pocket, are increasing the longtail of longform, and a lot of other content too.

More than ten million people have used Pocket, and Weiner's company has been amassing data from all of them. During the presentation, he talks about some of that data: 42% of saves to Pocket come from browsers; 26% come from news apps, which include Flipboard, Feedly, and Zite, among others; 15% come from Twitter; and 17% from other apps. Weiner makes the argument that there is no single dominant place where people are finding content they want to save, and, for that reason, Pocket needs to be as flexible as possible—usable on every browser, platform, and device. It's seamless integration with a number of apps means that users don't

have to copy and paste URLs, usually. They can save content with a click of the “Send to Pocket” button.

WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE US?

When Google Reader shut down in July 2013, diehards mourned. The RSS reader, Google said, was meant to help you “discover and keep tabs on your favorite sites,” and for a time it seemed to have solved that problem. But over the years, usage declined, and Google decided the product wasn’t worth the effort to keep up. Freaked out that they wouldn’t know how to read anymore, people began searching for tools they could use in place of Google Reader. A few months after Google Reader closed, however, it didn’t seem to be greatly missed. We seem to be moving toward curating our own streams, thus better controlling the flow.

After all, we are our own best curators. We know what we want to read and consume better than anyone else. We have public personas and we have private personas. There are topics we’re willing to post about on social networks, ones we only feel comfortable writing about via email, and ones we don’t want anyone to ever know about. Algorithms deliver search results based on explicitly stated parameters. They do not, however, make choices, like humans do, and they will never be able to make the choices that are best for you, as an individual. Today, the move is more toward curating in your streams of content, and save-for-later applications make it easier to do that, and to return for later reading. We’ve been doing it for years: Save for later can be a bookmark, or the print button. Or you’re saving for later when you email yourself links. Someone else is saving for later for you when they compile an anthology, or an archive, like Max Linsky and his Longform.org. In short, it’s a behavior we’re used to. The only thing that’s different about Pocket versus, say, an anthology, is how often it changes—and that is constantly, unless your interests are static, which I doubt.

All the space in the world is both a blessing and a curse. We are challenged to see more, learn more, consume more, which is both thrilling and exhausting. But we are neither infinite in our time on this planet, nor in our ability to mentally process everything that passes across our screens during the course of the day. Eventually, we have to make choices, knowing full well that we cannot read every piece that comes out.

Start-ups like Longreads and Longform serve to surface the longform stories that everyone's talking about—whether they come from legacy publications or the new ones that are coming on now—and Pocket helps to make sure that, if you didn't have time to read it when you ran across the link, you won't forget to read it later. But, in the end, just like the digital enhancements on a piece like "Snow Fall," these are tools—a means to an end, not an end in itself. After all, it's great storytelling that makes you miss your bus stop—and shouldn't that be our goal?

CONCLUSION

THE VALUE OF NEWS

In March of 2011, *The New York Times* announced that it would start charging readers for its digital content. The announcement came from the *Times*' publisher, Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., who wrote that the shift away from offering all the *Times*' online content at no cost was “an important step that we hope you will see as an investment in The Times....”

The decision to erect a paywall had come after long and sometimes difficult debate within the *Times*, one that was taking place in news organizations around the world. There were, of course, the business considerations: Charging for access meant an inevitable drop in traffic. And with that drop would come a loss in interest by advertisers, who had by then become accustomed to being able to reach tens of millions of potential customers, and at a fraction of the cost of a print ad. But beyond the debate about the potentially catastrophic loss of digital ad dollars, something else was at play: an existential debate about journalism's future.

In one camp stood those who argued, passionately, that The Great Disruption had ushered in a new and exciting age in which information could be sent hurtling around the world at remarkable speed, reaching audiences never imagined in the days, not long before, when information came on the printed page, or through a radio or television signals of finite reach. Now everyone with a computer—or cell phone—could, in theory, read or hear anything, anywhere.

And if information was the life's blood of an engaged citizenry, the implications for democracies around the world, and for people striving to achieve democracy, were thrilling. Twitter, for instance, had emerged as a powerful tool for disseminating information during the demonstrations and brutal crackdown that followed the disputed 2009 Iranian presidential election—a dramatic leap in reach, scale, and speed from what had taken place in Poland, a generation earlier, when the only way to spread word of the rise of the Solidarity movement was through secretly printed handbills.

But what of the news provided not through Facebook and Twitter by activists and citizens, but gathered and crafted and distilled by working journalists? Those journalists, went the countervailing argument, do not work as volunteers. They take risks and possess skills that, the argument went, separate professionals from “citizen journalists.” They find out what others do not, have time or inclination or skills to learn things those in authority do not want them to know, testing its veracity and communicating it effectively. Journalists, the argument concluded, possess valuable skills that served the very citizens the advocates of free and open information are committed to reaching.

The operative word is *valuable*. Because, the reasoning went, if news was valued, then people could pay for it, the way they paid for all the things in their lives they valued.

Therein, however, lay a problem. Cars, toaster ovens, wallpaper, steaks, and milk had never been free. Nor had printed newspaper and magazines. But news in digital form had. In the early days of the disruption, news organizations happily loaded their content onto websites that they made available for free. They were confident that while it was important to have a “digital presence”—good for promotion, as well as some modest digital ad revenue—print was where the real money was, and always would be. Newsprint, ink, binding, and shipping may have represented a significant cost but print was where the advertisers had always come and spent their money.

Until they didn't. Or, more precisely, until they began directing more of their display advertising away from print and network television, and more toward digital, where the rates were perhaps a seventh the cost and were measured in CPMs, or impressions per thousand. Which, in turn, made it imperative to have as many people as possible visiting a website, which meant doing nothing to impede that rush of digital traffic. Like imposing a paywall.

The loss of that display and, with the coming of Craigslist, classified advertising—as felt at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *San Jose Mercury News*, and at newspapers around the world—meant a drop in revenue, which meant growing impatience among investors who had bought shares in the belief that news organizations would continue showing steady growth and profit margins approaching 30 percent. Angering investors meant risking the sort of rebellion that Bruce Sherman had launched against Knight Ridder, one that led to that once celebrated chain's demise. The only apparent solution that so many newspaper publishers and so many others in the news business could envision was to lower costs, quickly and dramatically, by cutting into the biggest share of the budget—payroll—through buyouts and, if the buyout numbers were insufficient, layoffs.

That strategy, of course, changed the nature of the products news organizations were generating. For all that editors like Anne Gordon at the *Inquirer* talked about doing “more with less,” this mantra—heard often in the early days of the disruption—flew in the face of the laws of physics. Less does not equal more; less equals less. If customers grow accustomed to a product that arrives meeting certain expectations—in the case of a newspaper, a product that contains a predictable number of familiar elements—and that product begins to feel like something less, the customer may well stop valuing that product, be it a dishwasher, a take-out dinner, or a newspaper and its website.

Yet publishers and owners—beset, as Knight-Ridder's Tony Ridder was, by the relentless demands of their shareholders—believed

they had no choice but to give readers less in the hope that it really wasn't less, and even if it was, those readers might not notice, or if they did, might forgive. No amount of warning about "not eating your seed corn" could dissuade so many publishers from doing just that, all the while diminishing the value of what they were trying so hard to keep selling, and which readers, in distressingly growing numbers, were not buying.

So it was that by March of 2011, the *Times* signaled that it would take the considerable risk of altering the unwritten compact with its readers and charge them for access. The *Times* was by no means the first news organization to do this. Nor, strictly speaking, was this to be the first time the *Times* itself would charge for online access: In 2005 the *Times* had launched a premium online service, TimesSelect, which offered access to, among other features, op-ed columnists, blogs, and archives for \$49.95 (though free for print subscribers), only to drop the service two years later, in 2007, confident that the loss of the \$10 million in revenue TimesSelect generated would be more than offset by digital advertising.

Because it remained the nation's premier newspaper, the implications of the *Times* decision to erect a paywall were enormous. The earlier decision, to drop TimesSelect, was a blip in comparison. Several publications had, like the *Times*, established early paywalls only to take them down. Back in 1999, Slate charged for access for about a year, only to reverse itself. The *Los Angeles Times* had charged for CalenderLive, but dropped the fee in 2005, after twenty-one months of declining page views and modest revenue. *Variety* and Salon took down their paywalls, as did many of the handful of small newspapers that had charged—among them the *Creston News Advertiser* and the *Newton Daily News*, both in Iowa, and the *Aiken Standard* in North Carolina, whose page views tripled after its wall came down in 2007.

The Wall Street Journal, on the other hand, had been charging for access since 1996—a decision that opened its publisher, Peter Kann, to no end of in-house eye-rolling from his young, digitally oriented colleagues who thought him hopelessly un-webby. Still, it was one thing for the *Journal* to charge because the *Journal*, great as it was, was regarded as a special interest publication whose core readership—the business and political elite—could afford the subscription (and, often enough, could put it on an expense account). The *Times*, elite as many of its readers were, was still an omnibus, all-purpose newspaper.

By the winter of 2009, a particularly dark time in the news business—a period when part of every journalist’s workday was spent checking Jim Romenesko’s blog to see where the latest round of layoffs had struck—the debate took on extra urgency when *Time* published on its cover an essay by its former managing editor, Walter Isaacson, arguing in favor of instituting fees for access. While the advocates of free and open information insisted that paywalls were a losing proposition, and that the print newspaper was doomed, there was growing evidence that while a hard paywall was not necessarily wise, a hybrid model might work—say, give away 80 percent, and charge for 20 percent; or perhaps institute a “metered model,” where readers could read, say, twenty stories a month at no cost but would be charged for each subsequent piece.

The metered model was built on an intriguing conceit: that readers would so enjoy or admire those free-of-charge stories that they’d willingly hand over their credit card information and allow themselves to be charged, again and again, month in, month out, for more. The paradigm, after all, had worked at, among others, Netflix and Hulu, to say nothing of premium cable TV, where the mere promise of watching a good movie was enough to keep the monthly fees deducted with nary a squawk, even if, as many discovered, weeks went by without anybody watching one.

This suggested a certain irrationality on the part of consumers, an argument endorsed by Peter Fader, a professor of marketing at

the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. Economists, Fader believed, often make the mistake of building projections upon the supposition that people are rational beings. But people, he explained, will commit the irrational act of paying for all kinds of things that they can otherwise get for nothing. Like, say, iTunes, in favor of a bootleg, free download. Why? Because for 99 cents Apple made the experience a nice one, easy and convenient (and yes, legal), qualities, he argued, that superceded price. Fader said he had been such a fan of TimesSelect that had the price doubled he would gladly have paid it. TimesSelect represented value for Fader, a quality, he said, that always eclipses price when a purchase is being considered. Why is it, after all, that people hesitate to buy the cheapest wine on the menu, even if it means choosing one only slightly more expensive? Because how good can the cheapest wine be? Surely, the irrational if understandable reasoning goes, something more expensive must be better, more valuable.

Passionate as was the argument for free content, there was growing evidence to support the idea that people not only would pay, but already did. They paid for the *Journal*. But they also paid a lot of money—as much as \$10,000 a year—for access to *Congressional Quarterly's* bill tracking databases. They paid for *Cook's Illustrated*. They paid for...Orangebloods.com.

Orangebloods was a website that covered all known thought about the University of Texas football team, and in 2009 some 8,000 subscribers paid \$100 a year *not* for game coverage—which they could find lots of places, at no cost—but for access to behind-the-scenes news (scouting, spring practices, *everything*) as well as to something perhaps even more important: membership in a network of kindred spirits. Orangebloods' success was predicated on never being beaten on a story (which is why it employed professional journalists) and maintained its position as a gathering point for all those fans who saw value in what Orangebloods.com offered.

Like Orangebloods, all those other examples of walled-off destinations had one of two things in common: either they were

the only source of information around—for instance, the *Arizona Republic*, that state’s dominant news source; or they were built to satisfy the needs of an engaged and specific community, be they investors, amateur chefs, lobbyists, or college football fans.

In reversing the decision it had made four years earlier, the *Times* was essentially telling its readers, and advertisers: We believe what we produce is valuable; if you value it, too, it is yours at a cost. As Arthur Sulzberger, the paper’s publisher, put it in his letter to readers, the hope was that they would see the new compact “*as an investment in The Times.*”

Publishers held their breath, wondering what this would mean for everyone else? *What if the plan failed and readers so used to free balked at paying? What might this portend for the future of a business desperate to find new ways to support itself?*

The news business had never been forced to confront so directly the question of its value. Journalism had long enjoyed Thomas Jefferson’s blessings and the First Amendment’s protection. The industry, once populated by men who had not graduated from high school, had become a discipline taught in graduate programs. Journalists saved lives, and gave voice to the voiceless and toppled heads of state, and though people may not necessarily have liked how reporters nosily went about their business, they nonetheless found them useful when problems arose and were reminded, once again, of journalism’s societal value.

Of course, there had always been a lot of bad journalism—sleazy, conniving, dishonest, manipulative, tawdry journalism. And while those sorts of publications were deemed of little social or journalistic value they nonetheless possessed what in business school is called a “value proposition.” People paid for them. They may not have admitted it—“*I swear I found that rag on the subway...*”—but enough of them bought and read them.

As disruption unmoored the basic operating tenets of the news business—simply put: that advertising, not readers, pays most of the bills—editors and publishers were confronted with a question

few, if any, of their predecessors had ever felt compelled to ask, let alone answer: Is what we produce and sell still valuable? Not “important.” Not “worthy.” Valuable.

The question brought to mind my conversation in December of 2005 at the media analysts gathering in New York with Eugene Gardner, Jr. Gardner was the analyst who lived and worked in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, on the far reaches of the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* circulation zone. We spoke about the newspapers he read—the *Journal*, the *Times*, two Lancaster dailies—and the one he did not, the *Inquirer*, which, he explained, offered him little. I asked what the *Inquirer* might do to lure him. The answer did not come quickly. Perhaps, he finally suggested, the *Inquirer* might project what in his view it lacked: a voice.

He raised an intriguing point. All publications, of course, believe they possess a voice, just as all people believe they have a personality. But not all voices and personalities are compelling. The sense in talking with Eugene Gardner was that, as a man who read four daily newspapers and spent his days thinking about the financial state of the industry, the competition for his attention was stiff. Still, those other four papers—two big ones, and two small—had succeeded. Why couldn't the *Inquirer*?

Some people spend a lot of time and a lot of money working to become someone new and thereby more pleasing in the eyes of more people. Sometimes this works, for a little while. It does not feel too much of a stretch to suggest that news organizations, like men and women saddled with self-doubt, had spent a lot of time in recent years asking people what they wanted. As the *Inquirer* learned through its focus group research, readers typically will say they want *everything*, which led to such decisions as doubling down on local coverage because a slightly higher percentage of readers preferred local stories over stories from overseas. This was a rational decision.

But perhaps a bit *too* rational. It assumed that if the *Inquirer* could meet enough of its readers stated desires it could please them. But, as it is with a failing relationship, an accumulation of admirable personal qualities do not a love match make.

So it is that a defining “voice” does not, by its nature, reflect a consensus. It reflects risk—the risk that that voice will fail to be heard, or appreciated. The risk of failure, of course, can be diminished by eschewing boldness for safety, by asking, “What do you want?” The act of asking—in matters of business as well as of the heart—is safe and prudent, but it is not compelling. A voice—the quality in a person or a story that evokes not bluster but authority—comes from acting, and risking failure, learning from that failure and risking again. A “voice” does not ask, “Does this work?” It dares to say, “I know.”

In the spring of 2005, several months before that conversation about “voice” with Eugene Gardner, I went in search of a newspaper that possessed just such a voice. I found one in a journalism backwater, Virginia, Minnesota, where Bill Hanna ran the *Mesabi Daily News*.

I had flown to Duluth and then driven an hour north in the hope of finding a newspaper that people felt *compelled* to read, edited by someone who insisted that the romance and excitement that brought him—and me, back in 1976—into this business was not dead. For weeks, I had asked everyone I knew whether such a place existed. Then someone from an East Coast newspaper association sent me a note from someone from a Minnesota newspaper association who said she had heard of, but knew little about, a small paper in the middle of nowhere that was said to do good things.

I went to the paper’s website and suddenly found myself in the middle of the contretemps surrounding the firing, after seventeen years, of the director of the town’s animal shelter. The more I read—and there was a lot to read—the more my heart soared. The

Mesabi Daily News had decided to *own* this story. Or, rather, Bill Hanna, the paper's editor, had decided it would. If the coverage made readers angry, they were free to complain—after ten days of relentless coverage he published their letters. Then he replied:

“It does no good for any of us in this business to urge readers, ‘Hey, don’t shoot the messenger.’ It comes with the territory,” he wrote in a column. We will, “continue to be the messenger on the issue when warranted—in other words when there is something new to report. And I’m sure there will also continue to be more firing directed at the messenger. That’s fine, we can take it.”

Bill Hanna was from Northeast Minneapolis, and in the region known as the Mesabi Iron Range this made him an outsider. No matter that he had been in town for twenty years. He was fifty-four, divorced, lived in a rented apartment in downtown Virginia, and spent so much time in the office that it was pointless for any of his staff of four reporters, two editors, two sports writers, and one photographer to try to arrive before or leave after him. His office was too small to be anything but a mess. The paper had won so many national and state journalism awards that the crowded walls of the claustrophobic newsroom could fit only the first-place citations. The *Daily News*' circulation had been falling by one to two percent a year but still hovered at about 10,000, which was remarkable when you considered that the population of Virginia, Minnesota was 9,000. The paper had its daily and weekly competitors, and yet the circulation statistics suggested, loudly, that the *Daily News* was the paper read in a region where the average voter turnout was 75 percent.

The pay was lousy—reporters made between \$17,000 and \$30,000 a year. But in return Hanna gave them the freedom to report on most anything they wanted. He did not have story quotas. He did not send them to night meetings, or remand them to take obits—he took some himself. He wanted big stories, and if his reporters wanted to write columns he encouraged them. The *Daily News* was nothing if not inconsistent; it would devote a quarter of

the front page and half an inside page to a four-part, two story-a-day series on drugs and violence on the Iron Range, only to be followed by stories sorely in need of a copy editor. It could be, at turns, bold and goofy. People loved the paper and hated the paper, their opinions often depending on their politics. The Iron Range was working to reinvent its economy after the decline of the iron mines, and this led to considerable tension between the proponents of development and those who saw the future in preserving the bounty of the vast outdoors. Bill Hanna called the most strident among them “eco-terrorists.” He was friendly with politicians who shared this view.

Hanna was easy to find. He might be at Popper’s, one of the sixteen *remaining* bars on Virginia’s main street, where people were free to come by and tell him what they thought of his paper, good and bad. He had a feel for his adopted town. His editorial approach was decidedly old school: strictly by the gut. The animal-shelter firing had everything he could ask for in a story: animals, a sympathetic character, and an unresponsive bureaucracy. It also, in Hanna’s view, represented a wrong, and part of editing a newspaper meant correcting what he believed was wrong. Bill Hanna had his favorites, and those who were not among them had unkind things to say about him. He had, for instance, missed arguably the biggest story to hit the Iron Range in years—the sexual harassment lawsuit brought by women miners that became the basis for the book *Class Action*, which was adapted into the Charlize Theron movie *North Country*. He had let that story go; he knew it and regretted it. But that did not alter his approach of making the editing of a newspaper a personal matter, which in turn allowed him to violate the received wisdom of what a local paper should be.

The *Daily News* was filled with political stories—Hanna loved politics, and not only local politics, but dispatches from stringers in Saint Paul and from the wires in Washington. Hanna believed that limiting the scope of stories he offered his readers was insulting. His view was confirmed by the paper’s marketing director, a

lifelong “Iron Ranger,” Shelly Lindberg, who told me that, “In a lot of ways readers don’t know what they want. They think they want all local news. But that’s not what they want. That’s what people *think* they want. They’re looking for information. They’re looking for a story. It’s a subconscious thing. They *think* they want local, local, local. But they don’t feel good about buying it. They’d say it was a hick, marginal paper.”

Her view, heretical in the newspaper business of 2005, was echoed by a local advertiser, the marketing director of a local bank, Rhoda Steblay, who said that as someone competing for business with larger banks she did not want to advertise in a paper that was small-town in its thinking. She wanted her ads to be in a paper that offered stories from overseas and Washington, but which also captured the mood of her town. “If you don’t read the paper,” she said, “you don’t know what’s going on.”

By contrast, nearby Hibbing had a population of 18,000 and a daily paper with a circulation far below that of the *Daily News*. The *Hibbing Daily Tribune* was not a bad paper when I read it in 2005. It was safe. The experience of reading it was akin to a first date, one that was not going to lead to a second; no spark. Bill Hanna—cluttered, contentious Bill Hanna—offered a paper that was anything but safe. It dared to engage and inform and offend. “I know I’m a lightning rod and I don’t like being that,” he said. “I don’t wake up in the morning asking, ‘Who can I piss off?’ If you’re going to be a strong paper up here, the peril is that you’re going to be a target sometimes.”

In spring of 2005 the *Mesabi Daily News*’ profit margin exceeded 25 percent. In the view of its 10,000 readers, it was fair to say, the paper Bill Hanna gave them offered value.

The Great Disruption is not the first time journalism has been upended. Granted, the technologies, to borrow from Clayton

Christensen, are not sustaining of the business that existed before the wave hit. But the emotional impact of change, the terror and excitement and uncertainty, has its precedent, and it is worth pausing in the midst of this ongoing disruption to look back at what happened before, and what lessons and knowledge emerged.

The last great disruption in the news business began in 1918, with the debut of the New York *Daily News*, the nation's first tabloid. The *Daily News* redefined news and the way people consumed it. Its founders, Joseph Patterson, and his cousin, Robert McCormick, the publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*, had modeled the *Daily News* after Lord Northcliffe's London *Daily Mirror*, the world's first tabloid (the word "tabloid" derived from medicine that now came not in powered form, but in little tablets). At the *Daily News*, news meant lots of photos. It meant "society news" on page six, five-dollar "stranger than fiction" stories from readers ("no attention will be paid to literary style"), advice columns ("Keep Kids Well"), and all sorts of contests—"Bright Sayings," "My Funniest Motor Experience" (neither of which proved a keeper), and "Most Beautiful Girl," which did.

The idea was to make the experience fun, and easier. Gone was the broadsheet. In its place came a newspaper half the size. But something far more significant was taking place than merely choosing "Gasoline Alley" as a comic strip. The business side of the *News* had dispatched to Manhattan's Lower East Side a scout. Enter into the journalistic Hall of Fame the name Sinclair Dakin, who returned from her scouting with news akin to the true discovery of the Lost City of Gold: a vast and untapped market of readers. The neighborhood, she reported, was no longer the downtrodden immigrant district of the past. There were, by dint of more restrictive laws, fewer immigrants. But those immigrants who remained had, over the past twenty years, steadily made their ways up the income ladder. They had money to spend. And they had children who had emulated them in the race to assimilate. They worked. And they read.

They read at home and they read on the subway—where the tabloid was far easier to negotiate than a broadsheet—and when they were done, they left the paper on their seats for another reader to pick up. Word of mouth: the marketer’s dream.

That reader was given a name: Sweeney. And at the paper, a guiding maxim evolved: “Tell It to Sweeney.” In its early years, the *Daily News* tried all sorts of ways to please Sweeney. It made stories shorter. It covered stories of interest to Sweeney, like organized labor and a lot of sports, too. It gave him newsier photos. It provided him with “Help Wanted” ads. And, perhaps most importantly, it gave him a voice—from the “Vox Pop” column to the Love Story Plot Contest.

Six years after the *Daily News* launched, Bernarr MacFadden, the eccentric magazine publisher and health fanatic, decided that he too wanted to publish a tabloid. MacFadden, who was famous both for espousing such practices as never wearing hats and publishing true romance magazines, hired as his editor the recently fired managing editor of the venerable *Hartford Courant*, Emile Gauvreau. MacFadden made the decision impulsively; Gauvreau had come to New York to look for work at *The New York Times* and stopped by MacFadden’s office to cadge a few freelance assignments. He walked out with a job that would, years later, inspire a memoir, *My Last Million Readers*. MacFadden wanted a million readers and Gauvreau, who could never seem to spend enough time in the office, was going to get them for him.

Gauvreau was a terrific reporter and elegant writer. He was also a restless soul, for his own career and for his profession. He had worked for men who in his view did not appreciate that journalism was changing. He saw his publisher at the *Courant*, a man who celebrated Connecticut as a “land of steady habits,” as the centurion standing in the path of change.

“The age of personal, rugged journalism was dying,” Gauvreau wrote. “The streamlined march of newspaper progress, as it was called, was merciless and we had to keep up with it.”

By 1924, when MacFadden and Gauvreau launched the tabloid they had named the *Evening Graphic*, they were not so much competing for readers, as they were intruding on a relationship six years in the making between the *News* and its readers. They were, in essence, trying to lure readers away with the promise of even more fun, and sensation. But as Gauvreau was to learn, gimmicks can seduce for a day, or so. But they do not necessarily buy loyalty, and translate into value.

The lesson was slow in coming.

Perhaps they might have had a chance had the *Evening Graphic* been competing against only one tab; MacFadden, after all, had a loyal core of fitness buffs, who presumably found a reassuring voice in the paper's screeds against physicians and high-heel shoes and hats. But three months before the *Graphic's* maiden edition, William Randolph Hearst, uncustomarily late to the game, had launched the New York *Daily Mirror*. The tabloid war was on and it would not be long before Gauvreau began hearing of stacks of *Graphics* dumped in the East River.

By his fifth year at the *Graphic*, Gauvreau could look back and, while not necessarily wincing at what he had done in service of MacFadden's dream, could certainly mark the toll chasing the *Daily News* had taken on his system. He was only in his mid-thirties, he wrote, but "Five years of tabloidia turned my hair iron gray." Hewing to MacFadden's proven magazine formula of letting real people tell real stories, the *Graphic's* early pages featured such headlines as "I Murdered My Wife Because She Cooked Fishballs For Dinner." Readers' early curiosity, however, gave way to a quick drop in sales, which only spurred Gauvreau on.

He borrowed—okay, stole—like mad. The *Graphic* offered contests, reader confessionals, and the odd scandal, but was still panting in its pursuit of the *News*. The paper might enjoy a bump of 200,000 readers vying for the \$5,000 first prize in its crossword puzzle contest. But the numbers faded with the end of the contest,

and the *Graphic* had no choice but to raise the stakes to \$25,000, which Hearst then bested with a prize of \$30,000.

Much as he would have loved a big story—the sort of story that had made his name in Connecticut—Gauvreau now saw that he could no longer rely on events alone to draw readers. “Circulation,” he wrote, “had to be kept up by making news.”

He searched for scandal; he was sure the Miss America contest was rigged and the ensuing expose got him sued. In fact, he ran so many stories sure to draw legal attention that, in time, the *Graphic*'s various libel suits totaled \$12 million. So fevered was Gauvreau in pursuit of readers that when the aggrieved subject of a *Graphic* story threatened to sue for \$500,000, Gauvreau advised him that he wouldn't pay him attention unless he doubled the damages to a million. MacFadden would call with ideas at all hours, once phoning at 3 a.m. with an idea he was sure would lure 30,000 readers: “Some convict was executed at Sing Sing last night,” he told Gauvreau. “Run a full-page picture of his face on the front page and over it use a two-word headline, two inches high: ‘ROASTED ALIVE.’”

Nice try. But the *Daily News*, always a step ahead, did them one better with its page-one photo of the hooded murderer, Ruth Snyder, sitting in the electric chair.

The headline: DEAD.

“We could no longer wait for calamities to happen,” Gauvreau wrote. “Characters were built up and paraded. Hot news became the wild, blazing delirious symptom of the time.” One of his tools was, as he put it, “the pictorial creation known as the ‘composograph,’” a precursor of Photoshop. It represented, in literally the most graphic way, the distance Gauvreau had traveled since he made his way from Hartford to New York, in the hope of landing at the *Times*.

The composograph combined images in a way that suggested fact where none existed. The *Graphic* was publishing Rudolph Valentino's biography, and what better to draw readers to the tale of the late heartthrob than to capture him entering the spirit

word, greeting other departed celebrities. Circulation jumped by 100,000. It did not last.

MacFadden began looking for a buyer. Worn out, Gauvreau cashed in his *Graphic* shares and quit, leaving behind men and women “who knew how much harder it was to hold the attention of hundreds of thousands of lowbrows than to please 30,000 highbrows.”

Gauvreau wanted his million readers, and there is no shame in that—only a fool, or an aging editor in Connecticut, would not value circulation. His mistake came by trying to lure those readers with a louder, sillier, more vulgar version of what they had. Gauvreau had made his name as a young reporter chasing *his* stories. Then he came to New York and became, with rare exceptions, remarkably unoriginal.

He was hardly alone. His epoch was an era of great redundancy, with everyone trying his cut at variations of the same stories—albeit with a different gangster, maybe, or a different showgirl—as everyone else. And how could they not, when the only world that seemed to matter was the one limited to people very much like themselves, and where the relentless pace of the news meant time measured not in days or hours, but in minutes. A world populated by people who measure time a deadline at a time.

Only when he at last walked away could he fully appreciate the absence of value in what he produced—in the content, and in the reaction of those elusive million readers to what he was selling.

“I was part of that strange race of people,” he wrote, “aptly described as spending their lives doing things they detest, to make money they don’t want, to buy things they don’t need, to impress people they don’t like.”

There is a hero in this story, or rather, a heroine: Sidney Lakin, the woman who discovered a market for the *Daily News*—the Sweeneys, who read her paper, and who in turn drew the advertisers who made the *Daily News* fat and profitable, even as the *Graphic*

founded. In time, the *Daily News* became the most widely read newspaper in the country. It had a host of competitors, tabloids, and broadsheets, and it clobbered them all. It offered them new things and if those proved unpopular they tried something else until it stuck.

The *Daily News* lives on as a diminished version of its once big, proud self. Its world, like the world of so many of its competitors has been upended. As it was for the *News* almost one hundred years ago, new publications have discovered new markets where people see value in what's being produced. There are still newspaper men and women of a certain generation—read: mine—who see nothing less than the devil in Craig Newmark for having created a business that eviscerated newspaper's monopoly on classified ads. They decry the rise of BuzzFeed, and all its many cat photos and “listicles.” They forget that in 1990 the behemoth that would become Bloomberg News consisted of six employees who thought that there might well be a business in selling exclusive financial news to wealthy clients through \$20,000 terminals.

The mistake in trying to make sense of the seemingly relentless waves of disruption is in looking only at the technology itself. The technology is the means, not the end. The end, now as it ever was, is understanding that which never changes, and never will: appreciating the subtleties of human nature. The Great Disruption did not change people. It gave them new ways to do what they had always done. To read faster. To learn things more quickly. To tell their friends. To speak their minds. Before it was said that Apple produced products that people did not know they needed, the same was said of Sony. It might well have been said of IBM and before that General Electric.

To that end, I can think of no better distillation of what exists at the heart of the relationship between journalism and its

audiences than the phrase that Lisa Gubernick, a wonderful journalist at *Forbes* and at the *Journal*, used to open *every single conversation*, professional and personal. She would ask, “What’s new and interesting?”

In a way, it really is that simple. We, the readers, listeners, and viewers, want both. We will settle for one: new for what we *need* to know right now; interesting for the delight we experience in surprise, in discovery, in knowing. The question that plagued Emile Gauvreau, which Bill Hanna is forever trying to answer, and which, at its core, every news organization is trying to resolve most every day is: What can we offer our audience that they will value because it is new and/or interesting?

The Great Disruption has not created a new species. It simply allows people to act in ways they may not have thought possible, but which, when presented with the opportunity, make all the sense in the world. One of the overlooked truths of new technologies is that they seldom replace existing technologies; rather they take their place alongside what already exists, offering people a new way to do what they have always done. So it is that e-mail did not end the telephone call, any more than the telephone call ended letter writing. Do fewer people write letters when they can Skype? Perhaps. Does that mean that people communicate differently? It does. The new technologies merely provide a new—and judging by their growing ubiquity—convenient way of allowing people to do what they have always done, which is connecting with one another.

Craig Newmark started a listing service for his friends and discovered that other people wanted to use it, too. Jonah Peretti discovered the “bored at work” network, which was a market waiting for someone to come along and offer endless fun things to share. Michael Bloomberg reasoned that rich people and companies were willing to pay a lot of money to have exclusive access to information that would make them richer than those who did not.

None of these discoveries appears startling in retrospect. They seem, in fact, painfully obvious—“*Why didn’t I think of that?*”

Their creators thought of them. They tested. They looked for a market that valued what they valued. They failed and failed and failed and learned.

In the spring of 2015, four years after it imposed its “metered model” paywall, *The New York Times* had more than 900,000 digital subscribers, and seemed on the road to a million of them. *The Los Angeles Times* has a paywall now. So, too, do *The Dallas Morning News*, *Newsday*, the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Orange County Register*, the *Star Tribune* of Minneapolis, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Four hundred news organizations now have some kind of paywall.

But this is not to conclude that paywalls are the answer to what ails the still ailing and reeling news business. They are, however, a way of thinking in the face of cataclysmic change. They are a statement, a marker thrown. They say: We are committed to producing a publication of value and if you value it, it comes at a cost.

Sadly, but perhaps inevitably, it took the pain of The Great Disruption to see that. Or, perhaps, to be reminded.

—Michael Shapiro

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

MICHAEL SHAPIRO, founder of The Big Roundtable, is the author of six nonfiction books, only two of which are about baseball—*The Last Good Season* and *Bottom of the Ninth*. His work has appeared in such publications as *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Esquire*, *Sports Illustrated*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *GQ*. He is a professor of journalism at Columbia University.

ANNA HIATT is the publisher of The Big Roundtable and a digital journalist whose work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Times*, and on Freakonomics Radio, among others. She also serves as videographer and editor for a National Science Foundation-funded documentary project called The Truth About Trees. Before migrating to New York, she was a photographer with the Oakland Athletics.

MIKE HOYT is the editor of The Big Roundtable and an adjunct professor at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism. He spent twenty-seven years at the *Columbia Journalism Review*, ten of them as its editor. Before that he worked for two newspapers and *Business Week*. He has written for several magazines and is the co-editor of *Reporting Iraq: an Oral History of the War by the Journalists Who Covered It*. He is a native of Kansas City, a Mets fan, and a father of three, though not in that order.

ABOUT THE BIG ROUNDTABLE

The Big Roundtable has published deeply reported and gracefully crafted nonfiction narratives every two weeks since June 2013, as well as spirited audio versions when we can. Our aim is to maintain an environment where these true and original stories thrive, and to build a community of readers hungry for passion and illumination. Our stories span the globe and our writers range from veterans to novices. Our editorial methods range from the traditional to the experimental, all centered on helping writers find their voice for stories they need to tell. Our secret mission is to renew the promise of the New Journalism revolution that started and then sputtered a few decades ago, connecting techniques of great fiction with the discipline and the thrill of serious reporting. We also give readers a chance to support this kind of work. Michael Shapiro, Anna Hiatt, and Mike Hoyt are, respectively, The Big Roundtable's founder, publisher, and editor.



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