

Exclusive: New York Times Internal Report Painted Dire Digital Picture

"Our journalism advantage is shrinking," a committee led by the publisher's son warned. A call to get rid of the metaphor of "Church and State."



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A 96-page internal *New York Times* report, sent to top executives last month by a committee led by the publisher's son and obtained by BuzzFeed, paints a dark picture of a newsroom struggling more dramatically than is immediately visible to adjust to the digital world, a newsroom that is hampered primarily by its own storied culture. The *Times* report was finalized March 24 by a committee of digitally oriented staffers led by reporter A.G. Sulzberger. His father, *Times* Publisher Arthur Sulzberger, fired Executive Editor Jill Abramson Tuesday, a decision that doesn't appear immediately related to the paper's digital weaknesses.

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The report largely ignores legacy competitors and focuses on the new wave of digital companies, including *First Look Media*, *Vox*, *Huffington Post*, *Business Insider*, and BuzzFeed.

"They are ahead of us in building impressive support systems for digital journalists, and that gap will grow unless we quickly improve our capabilities," the report warns.

"Meanwhile, our journalism advantage is shrinking as more of these upstarts expand their newsrooms."

"We are not moving with enough urgency," it says.

A *New York Times* spokesperson Danielle Rhoades Ha says that this copy of the report is a draft and "not the final version" of the report presented to newsroom management.

The deep problems, the report says, are cultural, including a sense that the *Times* will simply serve as a destination — leading to a neglect of social promotion. One factor is an obsessive focus on the front page of the print paper, with reporters evaluated in their annual reviews on how many times they've made A1.

"The newsroom is unanimous: we are focusing too much time and energy on Page One," the report says.

Another problem: Most content is published online around evening print deadlines.

Also a central issue is "a cadre of editors who remain unfamiliar with the web."

"Many desks lack editors who even know how to evaluate digital work," the report says. (The copy obtained by BuzzFeed, which is missing five pages, can be read in full below this story.)

The report also details technical weaknesses in the paper's backend: The lack of an organized system of tags to organize stories' metadata, and the fact that it took "manual labor" for reporter Libby Rosenthal to obtain the email addresses of readers interested in a series she'd written.

And it says the paper is unwilling to kill new digital features, like its international home page and "Scoop" app, that simply aren't working.

The first person quoted in the report, ironically, is Janine Gibson, the *Guardian* editor who Abramson reportedly approached about a top newsroom job, angering Sulzberger and the deputy who he would make her successor, Dean Baquet.

The report also calls for a profound rethinking of the newsroom's independence from the rest of the company, in order to involve editorial leaders more deeply in technological decisions.

"The very first step ... should be a deliberate push to abandon our current metaphors of choice — 'The Wall' and 'Church and State' — which project an enduring need for division. Increased collaboration, done right, does not present any threat to our values of journalistic independence," the report says.

The NYT Now app and new Cooking subsite are described as successful collaborations.

"It's the old world where the publisher and the editor work together," senior editor Sam Sifton, who worked on the cooking project, told the report's authors. "It's not lions lying down with lambs. It's a mutually beneficial, symbiotic relationship."

Upshot Editor David Leonhardt, by contrast, said that his section launch was hampered by its isolation from technology.

"I had no idea who to reach out to and it never would have occurred to me to do it," Leonhardt is quoted as saying.

Another issue: The paper's Twitter account is run by the newsroom. Its Facebook account is run by the paper's business side.

More broadly, the newsroom has "abdicated completely the role of strategy," a masthead editor is quoted, speaking of their digital strategy.

The report has some specific suggestions around, for instance, more extensive promotion plans for big stories; one experiment described as a success led to Ashton Kutcher tweeting a Nicholas Kristof column on sex trafficking.

It also suggests a TED talks–style event series and an expanded op-ed platform, as well as location-based local news and information.

But its overwhelming tone is one of alarm.

"While we receive accolades for our digital efforts like 'Snowfall,' we nevertheless are at risk of becoming known as a place that does not fully understand, reward, and celebrate digital skills," the report warns.

As a result, the report says, the paper has been losing talented staffers and been unable to recruit others. Upworthy's former head of promotion, Michael Wertheim, turned down a job at *Times*, the report says.

"For anyone in that role to succeed, the newsroom had to be fully committed to working with the business side," Wertheim told the report's authors.

It also includes an unusually frank exchange with a competitor, an executive at *Huffington Post* who is described as contrasting that site's facility with search engine optimization with the *Times*' failures in that area.

"An executive there described watching the aggregation outperform our original content after Nelson Mandela's death," the report says. "'You guys got crushed,' he said. 'I was queasy watching the numbers. I'm not proud of this. But this is your competition. You should defend the digital pickpockets from stealing your stuff with better headlines, better social.'"

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The task force's existence first became public in a memo to sent to staff last July, where Abramson first mentioned the digital task force that she said would "function as the newsroom's version of a skunk-works team, a creative team that will think up and propose new ways to expand our news offerings digitally."

The committee was comprised of other *Times* journalists and took six months to complete its findings; Abramson and Baquet outlined its findings — but not its dire tone — in a memo released last week to *Times* staffers. The memo contained the names of the members of the committee: Adam Bryant, Charles Duhigg, Adam Ellick, Elena Gianni,

Amy O'Leary, Andrew Phelps, Louise Story and A.G. Sulzberger, Ben Peskoe and Jonathan Galinsky.

A spokeswoman for the *Times*, Eileen Murphy, emailed the following statement:

The full report was an internal document, meant for newsroom management as a candid assessment of where the The Times newsroom was in its digital transformation. The key findings were distilled into a shorter report and released publicly last week. That report reflected the findings and recommendations of the task force accurately, and as we have said publicly, we have embraced it and promised to act on many of its recommendations.

As Arthur said in his remarks to the newsroom yesterday, there was no disagreement between him, Jill or Dean on the findings of this task force and their conclusions played no role in Jill's departure from The Times.

May 16, 2014 at 3:08 AM

This report has been updated with additional comment from The *New York Times*.

May 17, 2014 at 4:50 AM

Mashable has posted a complete version of the report in color.