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BuzzFeed News Is Dead

Who is really to blame?

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Founder and CEO of BuzzFeed Jonah H. Peretti speaks during BuzzFeed Inc.'s listing day at Nasdaq on Dec. 6, 2021. Bennett Raglin/Getty Images

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OK

news brand of BuzzFeed Inc. It is always hard, and I hated it every time. But it also makes me crazy when the grenades start being lobbed on Twitter and in blog posts at the failures of top management and what a bunch of idiots must be running a place for layoffs to happen. I am certainly not saying there are no idiots in this business. (I worked for some of them I shall not name, but you are welcome to go [look at my LinkedIn](#) and hazard a guess or two.) But I'm not ready to put Jonah Peretti alone on the stake here, and I think it's important for anyone who cares about the endeavor of journalism to understand why.

Back in 2010, I was the managing editor of Adweek. I knew nothing about advertising, but Michael Wolff (yep, that Michael Wolff) had been hired to overhaul the trade magazine into more of a consumer-facing publication, and he hired me on the spot over a glass of wine at Il Buco. At the time, I was at Politico, and miserable. I woke up at 5:30 every morning and moved copy all day, from stupid little posts about what was in a congresswoman's purse to smarter assignments, like interviewing Jonathan Franzen about why he hated D.C. so much in his novel *Freedom*. Traffic was all that mattered, and I berated my reporters to file, file, file. And we won. In my last two months at Politico, my little gossip section had the best traffic at the site.

Readers came to Politico's homepage, and they even read it in print in Congress. This is why Politico is still here today: It arrived before Facebook, and so it had to establish itself as a destination in its own right, a homepage to return to, instead of being lifted up on the sails that gave false hope to so many other upstart brands, from Fusion to Upworthy to Vocativ. (Politico was also pioneering in newsletters, events, and niche subscription products, crucial to the brand's staying power and an inspiration to the legacy brands who have followed suit to great success.) I did not enjoy my time at Politico, but I learned a lot about what can happen if you pump a bunch of stuff into the universe with clicky headlines on a homepage crammed with them.

In 2011, Ben Smith called me. We had been at Politico at the same time, and were both veterans of the New York Observer. He was going to start a new thing and was cautiously feeling me out about potentially joining. (I hope he remembers this the same way.) It was still early in my Adweek days, and there I had the opportunity to redesign a print magazine

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because I liked to manage newsrooms, unlike 95 percent of the people who manage newsrooms. I saw BuzzFeed News apply the lessons learned about virality from the mothership of BuzzFeed to capital-J journalism. Jonah and Ben and BuzzFeed seemed to know the secrets of the internet—how to “meet people where they are.” At the time, this meant Facebook and other “distributed platforms,” as we called them, and to me it seemed as if they were pulling something off: They were using the lessons of silly virality for good. Later, as I watched NBC Universal pour money into BuzzFeed and not NBC News, where I’d worked on the digital side, I wondered how I had gone so wrong.

But by the mid-2010s, the secrets of the internet became less secret. Platforms like Facebook were paying news organizations to make things they said they wanted (i.e., video) in exchange for promises to send people to watch not just the videos but the valuable pre-roll advertising that came with it. This resulted in expensive teams of talented people essentially working for Facebook, even though their jobs were actually being spun up by media companies everywhere trying to get “views”—or clicks or impressions or whatever you wanted to call it. Facebook was predictable in this stage—on a bad day, you could write a certain kind of story, and KAPOW! You’d have a million new page views to report. Startups like Fusion, where I worked for a bit, founded their entire business models on the promise of Facebook and, later, things like Snapchat Discover. (Don’t know what that even was? LOL, me neither, honestly.)

This is where the execs *can* be blamed. With VC and investment money freely flying around (hello, Vice), results had to be delivered quickly. Overpromises, predicated on belief in the whims of Mark Zuckerberg and other tech bros, were made. Those of us with experience manning the ships of these newsrooms brought cautious enthusiasm and basic compliance to each new request. An expert video team would be funded and hired to create “shows” ... only to be told to make two-minute text-on-screen news summaries six months later, because that’s what Facebook wanted. How about a “good news” vertical? Facebook says people are tired of politics. Wait, it’s an election season again, get back on politics. Relaunch shows. Maybe as audio this time?

The whiplash was never-ending, and the collateral damage was always the journalists and

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internet. When it wasn't going great, he subsidized that news division with money from his other properties. Eventually, he moved to an acquisition strategy, with HuffPost and Complex, to diversify the revenue streams. I'm not saying that everything he did was right—the SPAC seemed like a bad idea even to an unsophisticated finance person like myself. But he kept BuzzFeed News going, and its core DNA intact as much as possible, a lot longer than lots of the other men (and yes, they were all men!) I've worked for would have.

I understand the anger directed at Peretti, from his employees and reporters and writers and editors who once looked on BuzzFeed News with wonder. They had it all—the coolness of the tech world, the chops of the best newspapers, the know-how of the internet. They did great work that mattered and won awards. They raised up a generation of journalists that have made our industry better and smarter. It is crushing that it's going away for good. I believe that it's bad for journalism, and even democracy.

But I think it's worth taking just a moment to appreciate his innovation and audacity. He invested in the work of newsgathering, investigation, and reporting trained on accountability, and then he spread that news and information, those investigations and perspectives, far and wide with the magic powers of the internet. BuzzFeed News brought new talent, and diversity, to the legacy news business. It pushed the boundaries of what journalism could and can be. Yes, that is all credit to the writers, editors, and reporters who worked there. But someone did have to start the damn thing.

Just as it is worth it to state outright what Jonah did right, I think it's worthwhile to state outright what caused his creation's downfall: Social media's—most specifically Facebook's—pivot away from news. There is a reason why the New York Times is thriving, and places like HuffPost, Slate, and New York Magazine are still around. We're legacy; we have homepages and loyal audiences. And while, yes, we always want to grow, we have fans who have grown up with us and rely on us, or love us, or enjoy us—and are willing to pay to support our work. Loyalty like that was built through homepages and curation, not distribution on Facebook or Twitter, even though we all counted those drive-by clicks as something real once upon a time.

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