

# What happens when the business of news expands beyond the fight for facts?

***Today, with social media and web sites catering to every imaginable interest, we're back in a kind of echo chamber***

By David Hayes, The National Post, February 2, 2019

In 1989, I signed a contract to write a book that would use *The Globe and Mail* as a vehicle to explore changes to journalism and the media landscape in Canada since the introduction of TV. My model was Gay Talese's 1969 book, *The Kingdom and the Power*, about *The New York Times*, but my most important reference was the late David Halberstam's 700-page *The Powers That Be*, published six years later. Halberstam focused on four media properties — *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Time* magazine and the CBS network — at a time when there was no need for an entry in its index for "computer."

Halberstam's reach was sweeping because he focused on the rising power of media, both owners and journalists, and the significance of changes that were rocking society at that time. He documented how reporting became more aggressive — for example, the Post's dogged pursuit of a break-in at Washington's Watergate Hotel brought down a president, while the print and broadcast media's gritty coverage of the Vietnam War undermined the federal government's optimistic claims and eventually ended the war. He showed how social and cultural change — baby boomers who still read newspapers but also worshipped TV and were keen to challenge authority — worked in the media's favour.

For her new book, *Merchants of Truth: The Business of News and The Fight for Facts*, Jill Abramson has openly copied Halberstam's model. But times have changed, and now the traditional (often called "legacy") print media fights for survival while new media outlets struggle with success. To this end, Abramson, a career journalist and former executive editor of *The New York Times*, has chosen her subjects wisely. She focuses on two print newspapers — *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* (now owned by an internet pioneer, Amazon's Jeff Bezos) — and two disrupters — BuzzFeed and Vice Media, both generating huge web traffic and appealing to a young generation grafted to their screens.

When Jonah Peretti founded BuzzFeed in 2006, he created a sticky tech company — one that attracts readers with its content, tends to keep them on the site and entices them to return. But make no mistake, Abramson notes, in the beginning, BuzzFeed was committed to repurposing existing online content, not to news-gathering. Peretti could see that online users loved emotional experiences, so he figured out that news stories like the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin, a key moment in the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement, were emotional gold. BuzzFeed continued to repackage stories published by others until half a dozen years ago when it began creating its own news coverage. While not considered as reliable as old-school outlets like the Times and the Post, it was a runner-up last year for the Pulitzer Prize in international reporting. A couple of weeks ago, it broke

a sensational story alleging that U.S. President Donald Trump instructed his former lawyer, Michael Cohen, to lie to Congress about the president's involvement with a real estate project in Moscow. (Robert Mueller, the special counsel leading the inquiry into Russian interference in the 2016 election, later said the report was partly inaccurate but provided no further details. So far, BuzzFeed is standing by its story.)

Vice is another digital darling, the raucous fratboy of the internet, thumbing its nose at political correctness, flirting with the alt-right, what Abramson calls "a shameless assertion of the masculine id." Among the first online sites to embrace the power of video, Vice, unlike BuzzFeed, diversified — it operates the Viceland cable channel and owns magazines; produces news shows, documentaries and feature films, and has an in-house ad agency.

But digital properties aren't immune to challenges. The behemoths, Google and Facebook, attract so much advertising that they've been crushing all competitors. BuzzFeed's lustre among investors has been tarnished; in fact, last week the company began reducing staff by 15 per cent, a move that has eliminated its new National News desk and affected several other journalistic positions. Vice, too, has been struggling. Between expansion and the ad crunch, it lost \$100-million-plus last year.

Meanwhile the *Times* and the *Post* are arguably the strongest print outlets in North America, both finding their footing online (measured both by the quality of news coverage and growing digital subscriptions), and still regularly producing the kind of enterprising — and expensive — journalism that makes veterans like me, who were adults in the mid-'70s when Halberstam's *The Powers That Be* was published, feel there's hope.

Abramson, like most media pundits, attributes their success in large part to the so-called "Trump Bump" — the boost journalism has been given by the Trump presidency's mendacity, divisiveness and war on journalism. Trump's enmity has led to reporters being threatened by angry mobs of supporters at rallies in Tampa last August and in Iowa in October. But it's also led to record subscription sign-ups for multiple news organizations following his election in 2016.

As for the quality of journalism, digital enterprises, like both BuzzFeed and Vice, understood that the more they posted outrageous, odd, or sentimental content, the more they attracted traffic to their sites. The print and broadcast media has always liked this type of stuff, too, but as an *amuse-bouche* to the serious news and current affairs in which they specialized. So, when digital outlets decided to venture into the world of journalism, they often stumbled.

In the pre-internet world, journalism and advertising were strictly separated. (The term "church and state" was often invoked). Digital sites, however, grew rich through the use of "native" advertising — paid ads that were indistinguishable from the rest of the content. Abramson does a fine job of detailing how messy things became for both BuzzFeed and Vice as they tried to claim journalistic integrity

while, behind the scenes, they killed legitimate stories that might offend advertisers.

Not that Abramson ignores her legacy media examples. The *Times*, she writes, ended up with an internal ad agency, just like BuzzFeed and Vice, and allowed companies to sponsor specific kinds of content. In one case, the paper's online site failed to clearly label sponsored content by a division of a multinational. The *Post*, she notes, also crossed the church-state line. "Where did advertising end and news begin and where was the line separating financial interests from journalism goals? It was harder and harder to tell."

It wasn't hard to tell in the 19th century, when Canada was home to a lot of small, scrappy newspapers mostly published by political parties. Referred to as the "Partisan Period," whatever your political persuasion, there was a paper for you that reinforced your worldview. As the population grew, though, publishers were aware of economies of scale; they became more and more dependent on advertising that could reach a mass audience so it made business sense to adopt a more "objective" approach to news that would offend the fewest number of readers. Since the 1960s, the idea of "objectivity" seemed increasingly unrealistic, but the goal was still to provide fair and balanced coverage.

The internet upended that model. Today, with social media and web sites catering to every imaginable interest, we're back in a kind of echo chamber where many of us mainly receive information that supports our perspective.

Abramson's point is that the *Times* and the *Post* come closest to providing the crusading journalism of yore while embracing — at first too slowly, sometimes clumsily — the speed and multimedia potential of the online world. While without the historical culture of a news organization and beholden to venture capital, BuzzFeed and Vice are feeling their way into the world of serious journalism. But the weakness of the journalism model is that enterprising reporting is labour-intensive, time-consuming and costly, while readers are accustomed to everything being free.

The depth and breadth of Abramson's reporting is impressive and rich in revealing this aspect. She follows the trail of one editor dedicated to investigative journalism, Marilyn Thompson, as she hops from job to job trying to find a home for her passion. She documents how local news sources continue to disappear — a crisis for which no one has found a solution — and portrays BuzzFeed Canada's Craig Silverman as "contending with so many last-minute fake news stories he felt like he was playing Whack-a-Mole." And lest anyone think Vice shed its bro culture as it grew in value and reputation, Abramson also recounts the story of a Vice intern returning from lunch to find the company's three founders sitting "in diapers sucking on baby bottles." The woman told Abramson: "This was just the culture of the place and since they were the bosses, there was no one to complain to."

In some ways, *Merchants of Truth* didn't just use Halberstam's 44-year-old *The Powers That Be* for structural inspiration. The message, slightly updated, is more or

less the same: rigorous, in-depth, non-partisan investigative reporting, incorporating the best tools of both old-school and digital journalism, is the winning strategy for news organizations — and, by extension, democracy.

Although she makes this point well, sometimes Abramson is her own worst enemy. A non-fiction book, like *Merchants of Truth*, is normally thought to represent the kind of thorough journalism she advocates; yet her thoroughness is sometimes her weakness. How many readers needed to be reminded of the history of Facebook's News Feed and "like" button, or read a mind-numbingly inside-baseball account of management machinations at the *Times* (culminating in Abramson's firing in 2014)?

And the pre-publication buzz around her book has been overshadowed by controversy. Early media coverage has focused on the book being a "tell-all" exposé of her being fired from her job at the *Times* — to call her a loyal careerist is an understatement; she has a T in the *Times* font tattooed on her back — and for being anti-Trump, a reference to a spot where she refers to the *Times'* news coverage as "unmistakably anti-Trump." (Leading to Trump's tweet: "Ms. Abramson is 100 per cent correct. Horrible and totally dishonest reporting on almost everything they write. Hence the term Fake News, Enemy of the People and Opposition Party!")

But the section on her firing is only a few pages out of more than 400, and the reference to the *Times* being anti-Trump occurs within a couple of paragraphs. Far more space is devoted to a critical analysis of the *Times'* treatment of Hillary Clinton—concluding it had "made bad judgement calls and blew its Clinton coverage out of proportion"— and praise for many scoops, both online and in print, of the *Times* and the *Post*, as well as some of the coverage being done by BuzzFeed and Vice.

There was also a late-breaking scandal about fact-checking. Some journalists who obtained advance copies of the book publicly complained that Abramson had made many errors, notably involving young digital journalists, a species she seems to regard with both grudging admiration and condescension.

What *Merchants of Truth* doesn't address is the truly revolutionary direction the world is heading. Smartphones replaced by smart wearables and various devices people will command using voice and touch. Artificial intelligence as a new era of computing. Blockchain technology making information both permanent and visible and its algorithms used for fact-checking. Pop-up newsrooms (a cheaper and more efficient way to use resources to cover specific events, like elections or hurricanes or a terrorist attack). Digital frailty (the vulnerability of a news organization's online database to disappear if it's not maintained). These and more are covered in the Future Today Institute's 2019 Trend Report for Journalism, Media, and Technology. Reading it is a reminder of how the technological world as depicted in Abramson's book will soon seem very old indeed.