

THE **N**ation.

DEC. 25, 2023 / JAN. 1, 2024

THE ART OF
EVERYDAY
BLACK LIFE
OMARI WEEKES

EST. 1865

MEDIA SPECIAL ISSUE

SQUEEZE PLAY

Crushed between corporate behemoths and the tyrannical metrics of the attention economy, independent media is in the fight of its life.

Siva
Vaidhyanathan
Zephyr Teachout
Colleen Tighe
Thomas Schatz
Vilissa Thompson
Gene Seymour
Bryce Covert
John Nichols
Kelsey McKinney &
Aleksander Chan

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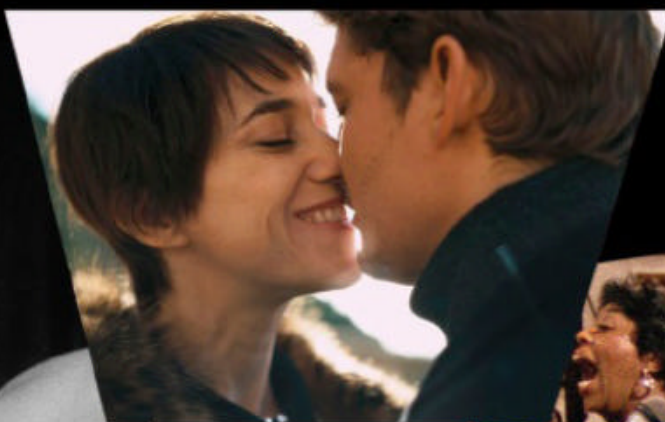
WHEN LIFE NEEDS A DIFFERENT LENS



**"A HAVEN FOR
INDIE GEMS."**
—THE NEW YORK TIMES

**"WATCH, AND FEEL
YOUR HEART AND
MIND EXPAND."**
—SLASHFILM

**"A CORNUCOPIA OF INTERNATIONAL
MOVIES AND DOCUMENTARIES."**
—THE NEW YORKER



**"A NETFLIX FOR
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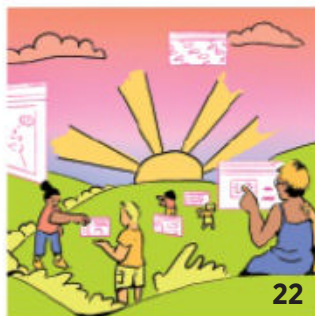
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EDITORIAL / D. D. GUTTENPLAN FOR THE NATION

Squeeze Play



IN 1960, WHEN *THE NEW YORKER*'S PRESS CRITIC A.J. LIEBLING FAMOUSLY OBSERVED that “freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one,” New Yorkers had seven daily newspapers to choose from. And that was just in English. The city also boasted dailies in Arabic, Chinese, Italian, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish—and two in Yiddish. By the time *The Nation* first surveyed the publishing industry in 1996, New York was down to four English-language dailies and seven publishing houses. Our anatomy that year of what we dubbed “the national entertainment state” focused on the four corporations that, between them, controlled what Americans saw on television. Thanks to the rise of the Internet, when we revisited the topic in 2002, our chart of the “Big Ten” media companies spanned four pages. Yet when we returned four years later, the roster had shrunk to six: Disney (which owned ABC), CBS, General Electric (NBC), News Corp (Fox), Time Warner (CNN), and Viacom (MTV, Paramount, and DreamWorks).

Consolidation has only accelerated since then, with book publishing now down to a Big Five. After Simon & Schuster found its sale to Penguin Random House blocked on antitrust grounds, the private equity firm KKR snatched it up for \$1.6 billion earlier this year. Given KKR's overall portfolio of \$86 billion, publishing is a minuscule part of its business. And as Tom Schatz, a historian of Hollywood's Golden Age, reports in this issue, the fabled Big Six movie studios have been whittled down to two: Disney (with a market capitalization of \$169 billion) and Netflix (\$198 billion) now dominate film and TV production. But, Schatz explains, thanks to the rise of cord-cutting and the continuing decline of both film studios and cable, those two—along with competitors like Comcast and Sony—find themselves fighting over a shrinking portion of a media landscape dominated by Apple (\$2.9 trillion) and Amazon (\$1.5 trillion). Now that these behemoths have the corporate muscle to influence not just what gets made but also how it gets distributed and marketed, and—given Jeff Bezos's ownership of *The Washington Post*—even how (or whether) it gets reviewed, we felt that a return to the scene of the crime was long overdue.

Because this time the big squeeze on independent voices isn't just a result of corporate mergers involving the means of production. Elon Musk may be widely known—and justly reviled—for what he's done to Twitter. However, as Siva Vaidhyanathan reports, the reason Musk really matters is that, thanks to the satellite Internet company Starlink—a side project of his aerospace company SpaceX—he controls the digital access of a substantial portion of Earth's inhabitants. Vaidhyanathan's three-tiered analysis of the current media landscape—infrastructure, applications (like Google

and Facebook), and content—also explains why the underlying corporate structures have become so big that we've had to give up trying to capture everything in one neat graphic.

Instead, in the pages that follow, we offer a multitude of perspectives, from Zephyr Teachout's rogues' gallery of “Big Unfriendly Tech Giants” to Gene Seymour's personal history of the rise, decline, and enduring relevance of Black media. The brilliant graphic journalist Colleen Tighe offers an illustrated Internet pilgrim's progress from the utopian hopes of the early information age to the brutal exigencies of the attention economy, while Vilissa Thompson laments the toll our incredible shrinking industry has taken on efforts to increase diversity and to include marginalized voices.

And this wouldn't be a *Nation* special issue without some common-sense radical solutions. Starting at the grass roots, Kelsey McKinney of Defector Media and Aleksander

Chan of *Discourse Blog* offer founders'-eye-view advice on how to start your own media company. John Nichols, who has a fair claim to being Liebling's successor in covering the carnage of local newspapers—and who notes in these pages that the term “news desert” now applies to some of our biggest cities—outlines an ambitious Marshall Plan for journalistic renewal. Not to mention Bryce Covert's compelling close-up portrait of FTC chair Lina Khan—a woman with the power to actually do something to break up media monopolies. But then we think of this entire special issue of *The Nation* as a call to action.

Corporate behemoths have the muscle to influence not just what gets made but even whether it gets reviewed.

COMMENT / JEET HEER

End the Bear Hug

President Biden's strategy of holding Netanyahu close as a way to try to contain Israel's wrath has been a disaster.

THE SO-CALLED HUMANITARIAN PAUSE BETWEEN Israel and Hamas, which was always fragile, is now over. Even during the brief break, Israel continued to kill Palestinian civilians, albeit in smaller numbers than before the hostage exchange with Hamas started. On December 1, the Israeli government cited a Hamas rocket attack as one of the reasons for ending the pause. As of this writing, more than 700 civilians have been killed since Israel resumed its bombardment, adding to a death toll of more than 15,000—the vast majority of whom have been civilians.

The high civilian death rate brings to the fore the fundamental policy contradiction that has bedeviled the Biden administration since the start of the conflict: how to reconcile its stated desire to minimize civilian deaths with the full-throttle support of Israel that the administration is committed to in practice.

Speaking on December 2 at the Reagan Foundation's annual National Defense Forum, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin added to the chorus of public rebukes the Biden administration has recently begun making of Israel's treatment of civilians in the current conflict. "I have personally pushed Israeli leaders to avoid civilian casualties, and to shun irresponsible rhetoric, and to prevent violence by settlers in the West Bank," Austin told the audience.

As befits his position as the cabinet official overseeing the Pentagon, Austin's criticism of Israel focused not just on its violation of international law through its indiscriminate killing of civilians, but also on the fundamental incoherence of its military strategy. "In this kind of a fight, the center of gravity is the civilian population. And if you drive them into the arms of the enemy, you replace a tactical victory with a strategic defeat," he noted.

Austin's caution is sober and compelling, but it ignores the fact that Israel's incoherent policy is paralleled by the Biden administration's equally incoherent handling of Israel. Since the Hamas massacre of October 7, Joe Biden has followed what has been called a "bear hug" strategy of holding tight to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a way to contain and channel Israel's response. As Stephen Wertheim, a senior fellow in the American Statecraft Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, sums up the strategy: "Bear-hugging America's ally, [Biden] apparently figured, was the surest way to restrain it—or the only way he was willing to try."

In recent days, that bear hug has been accompanied by louder public criticism of Israel's disregard for civilian life—sharp words that previously had been uttered only in private. At a press conference in Tel Aviv just hours before Israel broke the humanitarian pause, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that, during a meeting with Netanyahu, "I underscored the imperative of the United States that the massive loss of civilian life and displacement of the scale that we saw in northern Gaza not be repeated in the south."

But this rhetorical emphasis on civilian life amounts to little in practice, because on a policy level the Biden administration refuses to put any conditions on aid to Israel. There is absolutely no incentive for Netanyahu's government to heed the pleadings of Austin, Blinken, or even Vice President Kamala Harris, who has spoken in similar terms. On December 2, Harris said, "Too many innocent Palestinians have been killed. As Israel pursues its military objectives in Gaza, we believe Israel must do more to protect innocent civilians."

The true nature of the Biden administration's approach to Israel was caught in the subhead of a *Wall Street Journal* article: "After sending massive bombs, artillery shells, U.S. also urges Israel to limit civilian casualties." This is Biden's bear-hug strategy in its essence: Send bigger bombs, leavened with humanitarian platitudes.

The bear-hug strategy has failed in the most direct way possible. Far from being restrained, Israel is fighting one of the most ferociously murderous wars of the 21st century. It's a war that, as Austin notes, makes little strategic sense. And far from defeating Hamas, it will radicalize a new generation of Palestinians. In apparent acknowledgment of this reality, Netanyahu is now shopping around a proposal to "thin out" Gaza's population and expel the surviving residents into neighboring countries—a proposal that he is pitching to the leaders of both parties in Congress.

This policy, amounting to a second Nakba, would not only be a moral atrocity; it would destroy the reputation of Israel and the United States around the world for decades to come. The consequences, in terms of future terrorism and also the loss of international credibility and fraying of alliances, would be incalculable.

Politically, Biden is also undermining his own chances for reelection. Public support for Israel continues to sink, particularly among key demographics that make up the Democratic coalition: the young, people of color, and women. If these voters remain demoralized a year from now, Biden's chances for a second term are bleak.

The only way for Biden to stop this catastrophe is to reject the bear-hug strategy and openly set forth the consequences to Netanyahu of pursuing ethnic cleansing. Such consequences would include cutting off US military aid and diplomatic protection in the United Nations. Unless Biden does this, there will be no change in Israel's actions.

The Biden administration is now becoming more vocal in criticizing Israel. That's a welcome shift. But it also needs to start criticizing its own failed strategy.

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Class Notes

Adolph Reed Jr.



Hollywood Ending

The new biopic about Bayard Rustin stops at the March on Washington. What is it leaving out?

WHEN I LEARNED THAT BARACK AND MICHELLE Obama had announced a biopic on the socialist organizer Bayard Rustin through their production company Higher Ground, I shuddered a bit. Rustin was committed to a vision of egalitarian social transformation and sought to alter the terms of political debate toward that end; Barack Obama is not and never has been. After the movie's release, the reports were no more promising. "It's far worse than even you could imagine," a friend told me, while another bemoaned its "malicious presentism." Yet another friend, who was a politically active adult through the period the film covers, said, "The trailer was enough for me, and I couldn't get through that." But in the interest of service to my readers, I subjected myself to the whole thing. After it ended, I had to put on *The Battle of Algiers* as a purgative.

Rustin opens during the high period of activism in the Southern civil rights movement, with a montage of staged reconstructions of what the *New York Times* critic Manohla Dargis aptly describes as "stocic protesters surrounded by screaming racists." This historical kitsch goes so far as to include a live-action version of Norman Rockwell's painting of Ruby Bridges, surrounded by US marshals, walking to school in 1960. What follows, Dargis observes, "seeks to put its subject front and center in the history he helped to make and from which he has, at times, been elided, partly because, as an openly gay man, he challenged both convention and the law." That's the film in a nutshell. Rustin's politics and his role in the crucial debates over ways forward from the legislative victories of 1964 and '65 don't come up in this story, which conveniently ends with the 1963 March on Washington.

In its effort to establish Rustin's importance, the film falsely attributes to him the principal responsibility for proposing and executing the march, which actually originated with A. Philip Randolph and was largely organized by his Negro American Labor Council. It also downplays the role of the labor movement in organizing the march, treating the unions offhandedly as obstructionist and instead attributing their initiative to smart, energetic young people. Yet two months before the march, the United Auto Workers were central in organizing a 125,000-strong Detroit Walk to Freedom, essentially a trial run for the later event. Randolph and Rustin originally conceived the march's focus

as a demand for jobs and then broadened it to accommodate the Southern movement's concern with Jim Crow. But the economic motive remained at the fore of the planning, Dargis notes, quoting Rustin himself: "The dynamic that has motivated Negroes to withstand with courage and dignity the intimidation and violence they have endured in their own struggle against racism may now be the catalyst which mobilizes all workers behind demands for a broad and fundamental program for economic justice."

Ending the film at the march sidesteps Randolph and Rustin's prime commitment to full employment and a social wage policy, which three years later they crafted and agitated for in the Freedom Budget for All Americans. Some of Rustin's most significant political interventions occurred after the march, in particular his *Commentary* essays of 1965 ("From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement") and 1966 ("'Black Power' and Coalition Politics"). The first argued that, with the legislative victories of the mid-'60s, the Black movement had crossed a threshold that called for collaboration with labor and liberals to advance a broadly social-democratic agenda. In the second, contrasting the Black Power sensibility to the Freedom Budget, Rustin noted that "advocates of 'black power' have no such programs in mind; what they are in fact arguing for (perhaps unconsciously) is the creation of a *new black establishment*." It might hit too close to home for the Obama vehicle to reflect on that assessment nearly 60 years down the road.

Those elisions reflect the film's "malicious presentism" in its desire to create an exalted Rustin more amenable to contemporary neoliberal sensibilities. This line of criticism is certainly the tack readers would expect me to take. There never was any reason to believe that a production with the Obamas' nihil obstat would come within a zip code of Rustin's own working-class-based, social-democratic politics. But the movie's problems run deeper, baked into its Oscar-bait formula. Standard-issue Hollywood biopics perpetually fail to capture how movements are reproduced as mass projects, from the bottom up and top down, in a constantly improvised trajectory plotted in response to and in anticipation of layers of internal and external pressures. But that's not their point. *Rustin* isn't interested in illuminating the intricacies of the civil rights movement; it wants us to recognize his place in a pantheon of Black American Greats. Toward that end, it keeps telling us—over and over—

Ending the film at the march sidesteps Randolph and Rustin's prime commitment to full employment and a social wage policy.

how close Rustin was personally to Martin Luther King Jr., as though propinquity to Universally Recognized Greatness cements his place in the pantheon.

Rustin was a brilliant organizer and strategist, not least because he was motivated by a practical utopian vision of the society he wanted to realize. That vision, and his recognition of the path toward it, helped him to parse in a distinctively clear way the tensions and contradictions within the movement, particularly as it faced major crossroads in the mid-1960s. Rustin was probably not, as the movie has Randolph say to Roy Wilkins when discussing the march, the “one person who can orga-

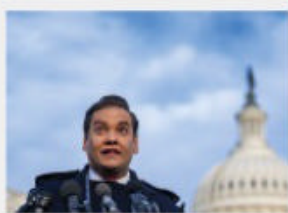
Rustin's vision helped him to parse the tensions and contradictions within the movement.

nize an event of this scale.” He was instrumental in organizing it, though, as well as in other important initiatives in the period. He was also the consummate staff person, who understood his role as executing collectively defined objectives. That's typically not the kind of role that

leads to an assignment in the pantheon of larger-than-life greats. Unfortunately, in the hegemony of a culture that looks for The One—from John Galt to Neo to Martin Luther King Jr. to DeRay McKesson—an appreciation of Bayard Rustin requires attempting to shoehorn him into the Justice League, not grappling with him as an agent within the history he lived. **N**



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The Front Burner Kali Holloway



Invisible Victims

Anti-Black policing is also deadly for Black women and girls—a reality that is far too often ignored or dismissed.



IMBERLÉ CRENSHAW COINED THE TERM “INTERSECTIONALITY” in 1989 to describe how intertwined anti-Blackness and misogyny consign Black women to the social, political, and economic margins, often erasing their existence altogether. When Crenshaw was marching against deadly anti-Black policing more than two decades later, in 2014—as she recounts in her most recent book,

#SayHerName: Black Women's Stories of Police Violence and Public Silence—she witnessed how racial patriarchy renders even Black women's deaths invisible. Along with the chanted names of Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, and Mike Brown, Crenshaw shouted the lesser-known names of Black women killed by police or in police custody—women like Tanisha Anderson, Shelly Frey, and Ahjah Dixon. “Several people were enraged,” Crenshaw told me. “There was the sense that we were being interlopers.”

In response, Crenshaw launched the #SayHerName campaign in 2014, seeking to honor and recognize Black women, girls, and femmes whose lives have been stolen by racist policing and to protest their state-backed killings. The need for the campaign, which includes the #SayHerName Mothers Network of surviving sisters, mothers, and other loved ones, reflects the failure of the anti-racist and feminist movements “to grasp that Black women, like Black men, are subjects of anti-Black state violence,” Crenshaw writes. *#SayHerName* documents how even at the 2017 Women's March on Washington, which rightly included as speakers the mothers of sons killed by anti-Black police violence, the murders of Black women all too often remained an afterthought.

“They ignored our daughters and they pushed forward the names of the men. And this is in the middle of a Women's March,” Gina Best, whose daughter India Kager was killed by police, said in a 2020 interview on Crenshaw's podcast, *Intersectionality Matters*. “We didn't even get an invitation.”

“We had been fighting all day to get to that stage to hear our babies' names being uplifted and remembered in front of hundreds of thousands of people,” Vicky Coles-McAdory, the aunt of India Beatty, who was killed in 2016 by Virginia police, recalls in *#SayHerName*. “So that left us to feel like our babies were sacrificed.”

#SayHerName, written in partnership with the African American Policy Forum, the social justice think tank that Crenshaw cofounded and leads, offers nine intimate portraits of Black women, girls, and femmes who were killed by police, each painted through the words of their loved ones. These surviving narrators, all members of the #SayHerName Mothers Network, have borne what Crenshaw calls “the loss of the loss”—an immense grief

1920s Style for a 1920s Price

It was a warm summer afternoon and my wife and I were mingling with the best of them. The occasion was a 1920s-themed party, and everyone was dressed to the nines. Parked on the manse's circular driveway was a beautiful classic convertible. It was here that I got the idea for our new 1920s Retrograde Watch.

Never ones to miss an opportunity, we carefully steadied our glasses of bubbly and climbed into the car's long front seat. Among the many opulent features on display was a series of dashboard dials that accentuated the car's lavish aura. One of those dials inspired our 1920s Retrograde Watch, a genuinely unique timepiece that marries timeless style with modern technology.

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compounded by the lack of attention given to cases in which Black women lose their lives because of police violence. Best's daughter, a violinist and visual artist, was unarmed when Virginia Beach police put her and her 4-month-old son in the line of fire to get their intended suspect, leaving her dead as collateral damage and her son deaf in one ear. "It feels almost as if [Black men's and boys'] murders were more important, because...their names are spoken," Best says. "I have to be sensitive to the other mothers, again cognizant of how they feel, because that was their son. But that was my daughter, [and] I want them to say her name too."

Crenshaw's book makes clear that anti-Blackness carries the same risk of violence and death for Black women as it does for their brothers, fathers, and sons. Motherhood and womanhood, which offer white women protection, provide no sanctuary in gender for Black women; the damsel-in-distress trope is racially nontransferable. Nor does age protect the victims—police killed 93-year-old Pearlie Golden and 7-year-old Aiyana Stanley-Jones. The families that Crenshaw interviews tell us who these Black women, girls, and femmes truly were, upending the dehumanizing stereotypes used to justify their murders and, as Crenshaw writes, "relegate

The book's narrators have suffered the "loss of the loss"—grief compounded by a lack of acknowledgment.

to obscurity the lives of Black women killed by the state." Women such as Korryn Gaines, whose fatal shooting by police—as she made a sandwich for her 5-year-old son—was such a miscarriage of justice that a jury awarded the family \$38 million in a civil suit. "I've heard all kinds of evil things, mean things, said about my daughter," Rhanda Dormeus, Gaines's mother, states in *#SayHerName*. "It's a nightmare that we will never wake up from. We have grandchildren that won't know how wonderful she was, and family that will forever be broken because of someone else's split-second decision. It's life-

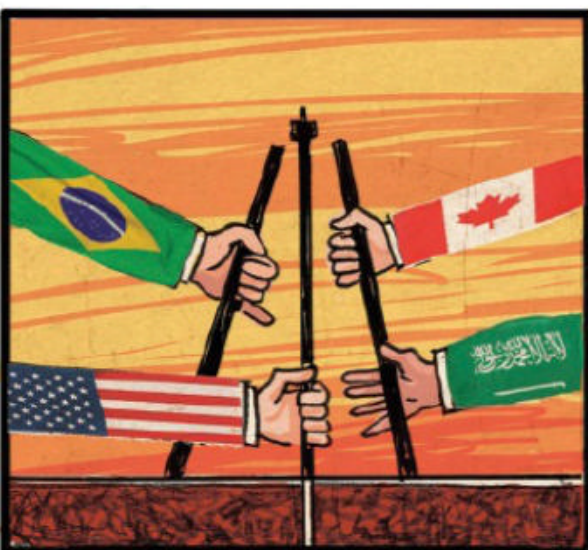
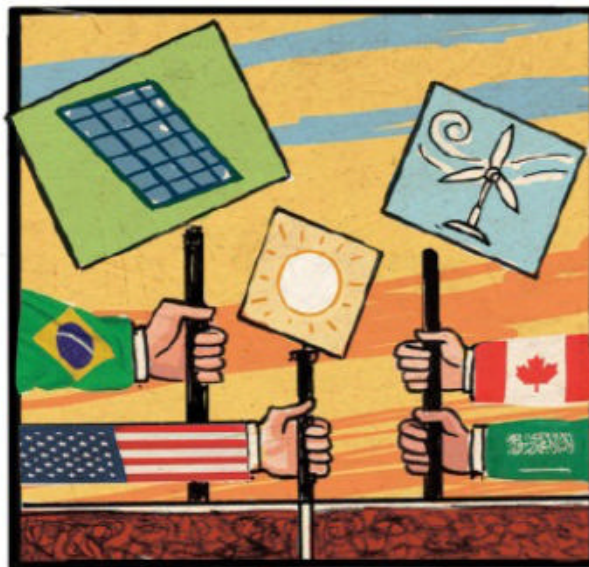
altering, shattering. I know all the moms feel like this.... I don't know whether I'm coming or going sometimes, and I just gotta get a grip, because I have responsibilities."

In between the family testimonies, Crenshaw offers historical and cultural analyses of police and societal violence against Black women. She notes that Black women make up one-third of all unarmed women killed by law enforcement, despite being just 10 percent of women in the US. What's more, Black women are the only race-gender group in which the majority of its members killed by police are unarmed.

Including stories of state violence against Black women, girls, and femmes, Crenshaw writes, is the only way to "confront, contest, and dismantle the interlocking systems of state power that continue to routinize and normalize these killings." In other words, feminist and anti-racism organizing and advocacy requires intersectionality, a term that right-wingers have assailed. In Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis has sought to ban the term from library stacks and AP curricula. The latter effort has apparently led the College Board to remove nearly every mention of the word from its AP African American studies framework.

Crenshaw argues that it's difficult to imagine solutions to the systemic problems she outlines without the concept of intersectionality. "The College Board [commented] that it's no longer a useful concept because it's been so 'politicized,'" Crenshaw told me. "When the right wing goes after intersectionality, we understand it's because the concept illuminates aspects of social inequality that demand remediation—changes they don't think should be taken up. It's certainly still useful to those of us who care deeply about understanding what happens to those who fall in the margins. And *#SayHerName* shows intersectionality as people experience it." **N**

OPPART / PETER KUPER



Subject to Debate

Katha Pollitt



Look for the Helpers

It's been a turbulent year. If you can lend a hand, these causes need—and deserve—your assistance.

IT'S HARD TO THINK ABOUT THE HOLIDAYS THIS year, with so many terrible things happening around the world. Still, Mr. Rogers's mother told him to look for the helpers, and she was right. There are always helpers. Here's my annual list of groups that are doing their best to bring help in a dark time.

1. American Near East Refugee Aid. So many groups are asking for donations to alleviate the appalling humanitarian crisis in Gaza, it's hard to know which ones are effective or even legit. I'm going with a recommendation from my friend, the award-winning Gazan poet Mosab Abu Toha. ANERA, which says it has no religious or political affiliations—a definite plus in my book—works on relief and development in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Jordan. Right now, it is seeking donations to support blood banks in Gaza and to provide displaced families with nourishing meals and hygiene kits, with more help to come as the needs evolve. anera.org

2. The Brigid Alliance and WRRAP. Right after *Dobbs*, outraged pro-choicers rained gold on abortion funds, those energetic local groups that help low-income women and others arrange and pay for their procedures. Now many donors have moved on, but you can help fill the pot by giving to the Brigid Alliance, which helps people in abortion-ban states travel to clinics, and the Women's Reproductive Rights Assistance Project, which helps women all over the country. brigidalliance.org; wrrap.org

3. Secular Rescue. There are some 14 countries in which apostasy or blasphemy is a capital crime, and more in which open atheists risk violence and persecution from families, neighbors, and community. Secular Rescue arranges and funds their escape—to another country or a safer place in their own land. A lot of them are Afghans under threat from the Taliban. You remember Afghanistan, don't you? secular-rescue.org

4. Afghan Women's Fund. I put this small but effective group on the list every year. With the Taliban in power, AWF's work is harder, more dangerous, and more necessary. Now that girls are banned from school after the sixth grade, AWF has developed "school on a thumb drive," an entire self-guided curriculum that can be accessed on a computer or smartphone. (Most Afghan girls don't have these devices, but AWF has ways of getting

the contents to them.) It's a big project, so please give generously. afghanwomensfund.org

5. Wisconsin Democrats. You probably know that many state Democratic parties are barely functional, but that's not true in Wisconsin. In that crucial battleground state, the Dems have scored big wins. In April, they elected liberal Janet Protasiewicz to the state Supreme Court, tipping the balance, and subsequently forced Republicans to abandon attempts to impeach her on spurious grounds as soon as she took her seat. The secret: relentless year-round organizing. Help them keep it up in 2024, when Trump may be back on the presidential ballot. He won Wisconsin in 2016—don't let it happen again. wisdems.org

6. Black Voters Matter. Black voters led the charge in defeating Trump in 2020, and the same will hold true this time around. But Republican state officials are making it harder for people in Black communities to access the polls. Black Voters Matter does the long-term deep grassroots organizing needed to register, engage, and support Black voters—not just on Election Day, but every day, and in every election up and down the ticket. blackvotersmatterfund.org

7. Health in Harmony. Global heating is driving us toward irreversible disaster, and the world isn't doing nearly enough about it. HIH works with Indigenous communities in Indonesia, Brazil, and Madagascar to end illegal logging, provide greatly needed healthcare, and generate sustainable ways of earning a living. They do this by listening to the communities themselves—their deep local knowledge, their histories, their needs and desires. It's called "radical listening"—the opposite of the top-down approach of so many NGOs. HIH projects are mostly women-led, which is also great. This is the crucial decade to stop global heating, so don't wait—give now. healthinharmony.org

8. Canadian Harambee Education Society. This secular-humanist volunteer project funds school fees and support for girls in rural Kenya and Tanzania who have passed the admissions test for high school but cannot afford to go. You can sponsor a girl for \$40 a month, follow her progress via letters, and change her life forever. You can also make a donation of any size, which will be combined with others. canadianharambee.ca

9. Alice's Kids. So many children today don't have the basics—decent shoes and clothes, a warm coat, a backpack—let

Many groups are asking for donations to alleviate the appalling humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

alone fees for sports uniforms, after-school activities, and other “extras.” Alice’s Kids works with teachers, social workers, and others to provide the things that let kids feel like they belong, in a way that is discreet and respectful. You’d be surprised what a difference even a \$50 to \$100 donation can make in a child’s life. aliceskids.org

10. The print magazines you love. Even if you don’t read every article (I promise I won’t tell), keep them going by donating and sending gift subscriptions (a holiday gift that arrives throughout the year and costs less than the Cheese of the Month Club).

First on your list should be *The Nation*, of course. If you’re reading this, you know what a valuable resource the magazine is, and how much we need your dollars as the price of postage and everything else goes up and up. But I also want to put in a word for the *Texas Observer*, which nearly went under some months ago but was saved by a fierce GoFundMe campaign that raised over \$270,000. Now it needs to be put on a stronger footing going forward. It’s a great magazine, even for non-Texans like me, so please send them some financial holiday cheer. thenation.com; texasobserver.org **N**

NATION NEWS / D.D. GUTTENPLAN

Reimagining The Nation in Print

AS THE LAST FEW WEEKS HAVE MADE BRUTALLY clear, the gap between what is actually happening in the world and the terms allowed for discussion in the corporate media has never been wider. It’s no accident that Edward Said first became visible outside the academy in our pages, or that James Baldwin’s “Report From Occupied Territory,” Toni Morrison’s reminder that in moments of crisis “there is no time for despair...no room for fear,” and Tony Kushner’s “Socialism of the Skin” first appeared in *The Nation*. Or that we’re the first—and sadly, so far the only—US magazine to have a Palestine correspondent, Mohammed El-Kurd. The need for a publication dedicated to the radical possibility of “what might happen if you tell people the truth” has never been more urgent.

But as this special issue underlines, the current moment holds unprecedented peril for independent media. With newsstand

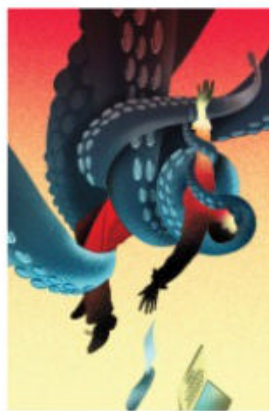
space relentlessly shrinking and the casualty list of extinct titles growing with every passing month, *The Nation* faces the same imperatives as anyone else in this business.

As a magazine in continuous existence since 1865, from the invention of the telegraph to the arrival of TikTok, we have a proud legacy of evolution and reinvention. Now is no different. That’s why, both to survive in this industry and to give the subscribers and donors who support us more of what they say they want, we are reimagining our print edition.

Each new issue will be much longer—with more room for hard-hitting investigative pieces, reporting that challenges corporate power and conventional wisdom, and reviews and commentary on culture that aim to provoke active thought rather than solicit passive agreement. Space for open, civil debate on the left. Delivered at a monthly frequency that allows readers more time to enjoy what we publish in print, while at TheNation.com we continue to post the same nimble, responsive, authoritative reporting and analysis we already provide to millions of readers each month.

This shift will allow us to be more journalistically ambitious, creating space for both longer reads and a wider range of voices. We’re excited about the changes—which will start with our January issue. We hope you are, too! **N**

By the Numbers



20k

The number of media jobs eliminated in 2023

500%

The increase from the number of media jobs eliminated in 2022

2.5

The average number of local newspaper closures per week in 2023

11/9

The date that pioneering feminist website *Jezebel* was shut down by owner G/O Media

11/29

The date that pioneering feminist website *Jezebel* was resurrected by new owner *Paste Magazine*

100+

The number of *Vice* staffers who were laid off on April 27

\$1M+

The total value of the bonuses *Vice* executives received on April 28

CALVIN TRILLIN DeadlinePoet

The Death of Henry Kissinger

When somebody dies it is said
One shouldn’t speak ill of the dead.
To that I have tried to stay true.
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Rating of A+



Exquisite walking sticks not shown actual size.

THE MUSK

How the attention-starved CEO took over our communications infrastructure.

Siva Vaidhyathan

BRAND OF MEDIA DOMINANCE



LON MUSK USED TO BE A CAR GUY—AN ECCENTRIC VISIONARY, SORT of quirky and absurd, but mostly entertaining. For some reason, a key group of people in and around Silicon Valley took him seriously, but he rarely exhibited the kind of depth or power that would concern anyone outside his core businesses.

Now Musk is a media mogul whose decisions cost lives and affect the world. He seems more absurd than ever, yet we can no longer afford to dismiss or ridicule him.

Musk is not a media mogul because he owns Twitter—now called X after Musk’s favorite letter. On the day he bought it in 2022, the platform had hardly ever cracked the top 10 most-used social media services in the world and was never able to make a significant profit. Yet Musk believed it was worth \$44 billion.

Since then, Musk has clumsily and angrily dismantled the service, which once hosted many influential conversations among elites and served as a site for activism like #BlackLivesMatter and as an early-warning system that could flag breaking news and emergencies. For all the limitations and virtues of pre-Musk Twitter, almost none of its value remains after he drove away its most talented staff and the most valuable advertisers.

Musk is also not a media mogul because of his appeal to a corps of angry young men who wish that they, too, could sire progeny in the double digits without commitment or consequence and command the attention of a fawning and gullible business and celebrity press.

No, Musk is a central figure in the 21st century because he exercises an unusual new form of power over one of the most important resources in the communications ecosystem: satellite Internet connectivity. He can turn the digital tap on and off at will for millions of people. He can monitor the nature of Internet activity in sensitive places around the world if he chooses to—and has begun experimenting with that power in a host of troubling ways. And no one seems willing or able to hold him accountable.

Musk’s media power flows mainly from an early side project in his privately owned (but largely publicly funded) rocket-and-satellite company, SpaceX. That project, Starlink, fills a wide gap

in online access for much of the world.

We’ve seen a sobering real-time demonstration of Starlink’s power and reach over the past few years, especially in Ukraine. Since the war began in February 2022, Starlink has been a crucial service for both civilians and the military. Musk had agreed to load up the skies over Ukraine with satellites at Starlink’s expense, while NATO governments and private donors supplied most of the receivers on the ground. But by failing to engage seriously with the nature and course of the conflict, Musk has generated some dangerous situations—most notably when he refused to extend Internet service beyond Starlink’s geofence limits into the Russian-occupied territories, stating that he wanted to avoid participating “in a major act of war and conflict escalation.” As Russia has illegally been taking pieces of Ukraine since 2014, this was a de facto acceptance of Russian claims to these territories, such as Crimea and the Donbas, without regard for Ukrainian sovereignty, human rights concerns, or international law.

This is a dangerous, unaccountable move to privatize the basic foundations of global conflict. Past media moguls like William Randolph Hearst have hyped up wars and helped change

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maps, and financiers like J.P. Morgan propped up major powers during two world wars. But none of these first-wave media-and-money barons possessed, as Musk does, the direct capacity to shape the outcome of a major war on the basis of nothing more than personal caprice.

The geofence scandal underscores a deeply worrying development: Musk's unparalleled control over global com-

munications can serve as a tipping point in global conflicts. His mood swings can influence how an entire sovereign nation manages its digital life, how its government and businesses operate, and how its media systems work.

While the Ukraine episode has absorbed most of the attention surrounding Musk's new media power, it is just part of a far broader,

lower-profile bid to reengineer the entire grid of digital communications in his own image. As countries around the world struggle to establish digital sovereignty in the face of US-based behemoths like Meta and Alphabet, they have been boxed into the Musk-branded connectivity racket. Even before they gained access to the monopoly platforms that can severely limit their own ability to participate in public discourse, many countries had come to rely on Musk's Starlink empire to support high-speed Internet in newly connected and low-population-density regions.

Starlink's stranglehold on the global Internet gives Musk a market desperate for what he offers—much more so than with any of his other ventures. Much of the world lacks the under-

Blunt bro: Musk lights up on Joe Rogan's podcast.

ground fiber or cables that carry high-speed Internet to American cities. In the vast areas of the world that are sparsely inhabited, Starlink's low-orbit satellites offer very good Internet service for an accessible price, by US standards. So for anyone who lives between the two coasts of Australia or Canada (or in remote stretches of the United States, for that matter), or is struggling to run a business or a military unit in a war zone, Starlink seems essential.

Starlink had the first-mover advantage, flooding the skies with small, relatively inexpensive satellites that connect with battery-powered mobile receivers on the ground (or on a ship, a plane, or a drone) as early as 2019. Since then, it has launched more than 5,000 satellites that serve more than 60 countries; Musk plans to have a total of 42,000 in orbit.



SINCE ADDITIONAL SPACE SATELLITE lines can't be summoned out of nowhere, Musk has profitably exploited the classic "tragedy of the commons": He's enclosed a shared social good and forced everyone who relies on it into a position of permanent market subservience.

Musk's actions have made it clear why this unprecedented accumulation of power is so dangerous. Because he controls global connectivity from a position of zero public accountability, his "mogul's whim" is the sole basis on which this essential service is distributed in emerging tech markets. Over and over, Musk has deployed this power clumsily, incoherently, and dangerously.

Of course, Musk didn't become the Lex Luthor of the high-speed digital age simply by virtue of his own grit and determination: The role was massaged into

being by early negotiations over the reach and architecture of the World Wide Web. Back in the 1990s, the United States used trade-negotiation pressure and persuasion to ensure that private operators built most of the world's digital infrastructure. This meant that US-based companies like Cisco, Qualcomm, Microsoft, and Google would end up dominating all the layers of the global communications ecosystem.

This has been a colossal mistake. By acting swiftly to enable the mogul class to control the pipelines and practices of global digital communications, the United States rendered important public policy concerns such as privacy, security, and diversity of viewpoint as afterthoughts, trailing the mad rush for innovation and expansion. This left countries struggling to retrofit the public interest into a system already rigged against it. Meanwhile, illiberal regimes such as Russia and China rapidly adapted the mogul-driven model of Net connectivity to the dictates of state suppression.

Much like Donald Trump, Musk craves attention and revels in controversy. He's a pugilist and a bully who has no convictions other than that of his own moral rectitude. But unlike Trump, Musk possesses a storehouse of wealth that's real and spectacular. With the exception of his four years as president, Trump had never run anything that mattered much in the world. He rarely had the ability to affect others' lives—except for his unfortunate business partners and former allies, whom he regularly stiffed and betrayed.

Musk currently controls six companies.

Some, like the civic infrastructure firm the Boring Company, do little more than sell vaporware. Others, like Neuralink and xAI, are moon-shot vanity projects, unlikely to achieve market viability in the near term—if ever.

Twitter, or X, was a publicly traded company until Musk took it private, drawing on the largesse of morally compromised investors such as the Saudi royal family. The only good thing about Musk's ransacking of Twitter and other

properties is that he has largely managed to make his investments, debts, and decisions a subject of comedy rather than a relevant factor in the world; after his first year as owner, Twitter has shed 16 percent of its user base and seen app downloads decline by 38 percent, while ad revenue has cratered. Still, there are baleful—and rapidly multiplying—liabilities from Musk's reign when it comes to the site's utility as an aggregator of breaking news, as the response to Hamas's attack on Israel made clear: In no



time, Musk's all-but-unmoderated platform was overrun with disinformation, fake reports, old videos, and vituperative speech from all sides.

TESLA IS MUSK'S LUCKY BREAK AND THE source of most of his wealth—though here, too, he didn't so much disrupt the electric-vehicle market with radical innovation as buy his way into it. In 2004, he acquired the largest stake in Tesla from the company's engineer-founders, Martin Eberhard and Marc Tarpenning. As the largest shareholder, Musk took over the company board. Later, he installed himself as CEO, lending his face and voice to the mission of promoting a new kind of car company that would liberate individual transportation from its dependence on petroleum and organized labor.

Tesla is the only publicly traded company in Musk's portfolio, and the one operating under the most complex lattices of regulatory influence around the world. As a result, it's been the subject of many of his messy face-offs with regulators and plaintiffs' attorneys. The disclosure and transparency requirements that come with the ownership of a publicly traded company have sparked some of Musk's trademark fits of rage. His public statements and tweets seeking more executive impunity have repeatedly landed him in hot water with the Securities and Exchange Commission. Indeed, he nearly lost his leadership role at Tesla after he tweeted a phony threat to take the company private in order to loose it from the surly bonds of regulatory oversight.

Which means that SpaceX is the only true Musk-generated success story. It may also well be his only consistently profitable company. Most of its revenue comes from public contracts with various national governments. SpaceX builds and launches rockets and satellites, but it has a track record of launch failures and other operational embarrassments that have sparked widespread criticism and calls for robust regulatory scrutiny of its actions.

Much as the failed search engine Yahoo bumbled its way into its role as the Web's premier news site in the early aughts, SpaceX appears to have backed into its own role as the owner of a consumer utility. As it has scaled up into a global Internet service provider, Starlink has demonstrated an ability to reliably fulfill a widespread demand at a reasonable price point. But if it continues to be one of the only viable products on Musk's rapidly overpopulating

island of misfit tech toys, he probably won't resist the temptation to break it in new and unexpected ways, as the geofence episode in Ukraine made all too clear.

Again, the key mismatch here is the consignment of a critical social good—affordable Internet access—to the hands of a privately held company. Too often, the critics of privately controlled media resources skate over the distinction between public and private ownership, and thus misunderstand the incentives bred by the latter form of corporate control. To cite one decisive political illustration of these differences, it was a hallmark of Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and subsequent term in office that nearly all of his marquee funders and advisers came from the world of private capital. Much of Trump's lead economic and trade initiatives followed the path laid by such dubious sources.

The same real-world consequences can be traced in the contrast between Musk and the tech titans presiding over publicly held corporations. Figures like Comcast CEO Brian Roberts and Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg exert massive influence over what Americans see, read, and believe. But because the companies they run are publicly traded, they must answer to the disciplinary force of shareholders as well as the mandates of regulators.

Of course, shareholders aren't a monolithic force for the good—far from it, in a corporate managerial regime driven by the mandate to maximize stock returns above all else. However, certain blocs of shareholders, such as pension funds and university endowments, can exert pressure on company managers to evince concern about issues like workplace diversity, environmental damage, and harms to democracy. If CEOs face enough of this sort of pressure, they may feel obliged to deliver reforms to address any corporate behavior



that could damage the reputation of the company and thus its bottom line. In addition to these big players in securities markets, short sellers and activist investors also help discipline firms and markets, often forcing corporate boards to address issues they'd otherwise ignore, such as insupportable growth projections or shady accounting practices.

Activist investors and short sellers have already aired important criticisms of how Tesla is run and demanded that the company be held accountable for its many legal and fiscal failures—investor Jim Chanos cautions that Tesla is “ridiculously overvalued,” with a market capitalization 75 times higher than its revenue. As a result, it's safe to say that Musk hates short sellers more than anyone else on his rapidly expanding enemies' list. (Earlier this year, Musk settled a defamation suit brought by a Tesla short seller.) That antipathy is likely one reason why Musk immediately took Twitter private after he acquired the company, and has harbored the same plans for Tesla.

Musk's remarkable ability to avoid accountability through private ownership has distinguished him from almost every other major media mogul and corporate titan on the scene today. Even former Fox News CEO and chairman Rupert Murdoch, for all his excesses, egomania, and bald power plays, ruled over publicly traded

Machine dreams:
Musk at the Tesla factory in Grünheide, Germany.

Musk can monitor the nature of Internet activity in sensitive places around the world—and he's begun experimenting with that power in a host of troubling ways.

companies. When he faced friction, fines from regulators, or losses from litigation, Murdoch just took the write-offs and forged ahead, knowing that his public holdings were a ready source of capital and credit access.



USK'S OUTSIZE ROLE AS A PRIVATE-CAPITAL COMMUNICATIONS BARON also presents a shift in how we approach the problem of media consolidation. Traditional critics of trends in media ownership typically focused on the "networks"—the original Big Three television broadcasters and their allied print, radio, and book-publishing fiefdoms, all ruled by a shareholding oligarchy. Detractors of the former media order properly called out these conglomerates for the inordinate power they wielded over editorial decision-making and the disbursal of information along the traditional grids of profit-making and (not incidentally) advertiser appeasement. Tracking the 20th-century journalistic failures of CBS, ABC, and NBC alongside the market interests of their owners—General Electric, Disney, and Gulf and Western—the traditional critique of media consolidation focused on the means of information production and distribution. Expanding on the speculations of the media theorist Marshall McLuhan, critics reasoned that if the medium was not entirely the message, at least the medium and message were inextricably bound together via the forces of vertical integration.

We still have such leviathans, as the success of Disney (which, in addition to ABC, now controls ESPN, Marvel Studios, and many other sources of content) and Murdoch's News Corporation show us. In other words, media concentration remains a genuine problem—but it's now a different problem. The nature of the corporation matters more than ever, and so does the sanity and stability of its owner and CEO.

In sorting out this new media landscape, it's helpful to think of our media systems as being aligned along three layers, in three dimensions.

Tomorrow, the heavens: A SpaceX rocket takes flight.



The base layer is the infrastructure: all that metal and fiberglass, all those satellites and routers. Today, a small handful of cable and telecommunications companies, such as Comcast, AT&T, T-Mobile, and Verizon, control most of our information grid.

The second layer is what we might call the "application" component of the mass assimilation of information. Here,

Google and Facebook—or rather, Alphabet and Meta—form a duopoly that manages what we consider important, interesting, and "relevant." (And thanks to the algorithmic symbiosis that these gateway platforms have formed with their users, they harvest data that predetermines access and consumer choices on those users' behalf.) We might be approaching an inflection point at which a new international player, such as the Chinese company

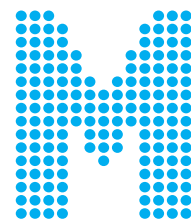
Bytedance, the owner of TikTok, could shake up this duopoly—but we're not there yet.

The final layer is the one media consumers know best: the content. It's the focus of the hypothetical ideal reader (or scroller or viewer or listener), who represents the aspirational

quest for reliable information to fuel public deliberation in a democracy. It's also, of course, the delivery point of the sprawling digital attention economy. Therefore, every major player at this level of media activity must pay heed to the algorithmic power possessed by the monopoly platforms arrayed across the second layer: Google, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. These platforms guide readers and viewers toward one piece of content over another—which means, in turn, that each producer of content must pander to the algorithms, at the potential cost of their market existence.

This final layer is also the only one that continues to foster some degree of actual competition among market players. At the same time, it's also the principal focus of regulatory scrutiny, as demonstrated most recently by the Federal Trade Commission's antitrust suit against Google and its recent rejection of the proposed merger between Penguin Random House and Simon & Schuster. That regulatory mismatch is a legacy of the old model of media concentration.

Public concern over the concentrated power of Google and Facebook is only about a decade old, which means that efforts to limit the power of those companies remain largely theoretical.



MEANWHILE, THE EXPANSIVE AND unprecedented reach of privately held communications companies means that control over the infrastructure level is the most

consequential issue in the realigned digital media landscape: According to a recent McKinsey study, private equity controlled \$675 billion of the global tech market in 2022—up from \$100 billion in 2012. It is also, as we have seen, why Elon Musk is a problem. Surveillance of users, strategic targeting of companies and states, and throttling of content can happen above the infrastructure layer, to be sure, but these sinister forces are far more powerful and effective when instituted there. People can usually choose the applications they use and the content conveyed through them. But when it comes to the underlying data grid, they are rarely able to make a meaningful choice beyond the market leader, because of either network economies of scale or simple market inertia.

As a dominant player in the infrastructure domain, Musk has adapted well to these
(continued on page 29)



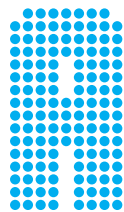
Musk's remarkable ability to avoid accountability through private ownership has distinguished him from almost every other major media mogul and corporate titan on the scene today.



THE BIG UNFRIENDLY TECH GIANTS

We must ensure that corporations aren't able to pick and choose winners and losers in journalism.

Zephyr Teachout



TINY GROUP OF TECH COMPANIES MAY BE THE MOST DANGEROUS threat to democracy in US history. Google, TikTok, Facebook, Amazon, Twitter, and a few others have seized control of the country's media infrastructure. And they have decimated the resources of news organizations while reaping profits from their work. A recent blockbuster white paper by four researchers at the Initiative

for Policy Dialogue showed that if publishers had the power to negotiate for the value they provide to the platforms, news organizations would get nearly \$14 billion from them.

While we have never faced an information crisis of this scale before, we have faced gatekeepers accumulating political power by exploiting their advantages to control producers. In the past, we've responded by reaching for the anti-monopoly toolkit: corporate breakups, nondiscrimination rules, and limits on unfair business practices.

These tools—sharpened for the 21st century—still provide some of the most effective ways to dismantle concentrated power. We see one mechanism in the efforts by the Justice Department and the Federal Trade Commission to break the grip of Big Tech over smaller businesses by splitting up tech conglomerates. But there is another, equally important tool: nondiscrimination. Along with breaking up Big Tech, we should ensure that the companies aren't able to wield their power to choose the winners and losers in journalism.

Nondiscrimination laws are the broad bucket of laws that contain prohibitions on treating different counterparties differently. Network neutrality is a nondiscrimination tool; so too are state laws that require shopping centers to allow political pamphleteers. The Journalism Competition and Preservation Act, recently introduced by Senator Amy Klobuchar (D.-Minn.), is the big nondiscrimination bill that could help save local reporting. The act, which has bipartisan support in the Senate, would forbid platforms from discriminating in negotiations with news organizations based on their size or on the views expressed in their content. Passing this bill is crucial to saving the journalism industry.



TO UNDERSTAND THE CURRENT CRISIS, LET'S GO BACK TO 1833, WHEN THE seeds of the popular press that defined American journalism for most of the country's life were sown. A newspaper called *The Sun* started showing up on the streets of New York City. It cost a penny (at a time when other papers cost more than a nickel) and covered a wide range of topics—but unlike the fancy financial papers, whose operating expenses were paid for by subscribers, its primary revenue source was ads. As *The Sun's* motto put it:



As tech companies extended their reach, they went from being relatively neutral platforms to choke points.

Zephyr Teachout, a member of The Nation's editorial board, is a law professor at Fordham University and the author of Break 'Em Up.

The object of this paper is to lay before the public, at a price within the means of every one, all the news of the day, and at the same time offer an advantageous medium for advertisements.

In essence, the newspaper managed the relationship between readers and merchants, merchants and reporters, and reporters and the public. The dual revenue source—merchants and readers—shaped the

content. While subscriber-funded papers tended to cover financial news and elite gossip, *The Sun* and its variants covered scandals, schools, sports, crime, and accidents. They printed poems, short stories, and commentary, and they covered local political meetings. They hired reporters to watch, dig, and engage. For 180 years, a press offering this mix of cheap news and cheap ads popped up in different incarnations across the country.

These newspapers helped stores sell sewing machines, services, and shampoo—and they connected people through classified ads. (It's hard for many today to understand how central classified advertising was to American economic life through the 1980s; I'm 51 years old, and I got five jobs, two cars, and

four apartments through ads in six different newspapers.) When the Internet came along, Craigslist and a few similar sites made the classifieds irrelevant: Instead of paying a newspaper to list a used car, people listed it for free online. But Craigslist didn't try to control newspapers, and the basic source of revenue—ads—remained.

Even after Craigslist, advertisers and publishers had direct relationships with local publications and radio stations. Some publishers had greater power than others, and readers of magazines like *The Nation* would rightly protest when publishers

gave individual advertisers favorable coverage. But it would be ludicrous to look at any individual publisher in the 1990s and claim that it exercised significant influence over more than its own corner of the country—at most. While the big TV news shows could lay claim to a national reach, they had no control over what



showed up in local papers or on local television, let alone on the multiple local radio stations.

At the same time, the Internet was democratizing news, allowing people to publish and connect with one another and providing unheard-of access to news from all over the world and across the political spectrum. If you didn't find what you were looking for in your local paper, you could always read the *Chicago Tribune* or the BBC's website or, for that matter, *Drudge Report* or *Salon*.

And then, in the aughts, social media companies, led by Facebook and Google, began buying up tech firms—by 2010, Google was acquiring companies at a rate of about one business per week. They made themselves essential digital infrastructure for anyone looking to communicate with friends, find jobs, or follow the news. While they called their various components “social media” or “messaging” or “search” or “video sharing,” these features were subsidiary to their core business: digital advertising.

In 2017, Google's parent company, Alphabet, made \$95 billion from selling digital advertising and maintained profit margins above 20 percent, and Facebook made almost \$40 billion from digital ads. That year, the two companies accounted for 99 percent of new digital ad sales. Not coincidentally, 2020 also saw 16,160 newsroom jobs disappear.

The more these companies made themselves indispensable as the distributors of news, the more they could charge advertisers. At least a third of American adults regularly get their news from Facebook, a quarter from



YouTube (owned by Google), 16 percent from Instagram (owned by Facebook), and 12 percent from X (formerly Twitter).

We're all familiar with how this works: You'll see a headline and maybe a sentence of text. The headline links to another site, but few people click on the link to read the actual article. Instead, they will see the headline or pronouncement as part of their news diet, and in this way, ad dollars flow from the headlines and brief descriptions straight to Facebook, Google, and X.

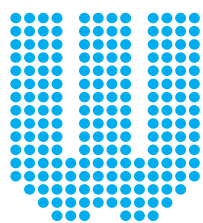
Think of it like a milk distributor. The farmer used to get a significant share of every dollar spent on milk, but now, because only a few distributors control access to the market, the farmers' cut has shrunk, and they lose their incomes and eventually their farms.

As tech companies extended their reach, they went from being relatively neutral platforms, on which the discovery and sharing of news was possible, to choke points—and then used those choke points for profit. They sorted and delivered the news that was most profitable for them, meaning items that were most likely to generate emotional engagement. And during a 10-year period, they changed strategies constantly, from prioritizing local news to degrading it in favor of family updates. When Facebook turned up the dial on video, many news organizations laid off print journalists and invested in video reporting, only to have Facebook shift strategies again.

For a while, many people thought that the problem wasn't caused by these platforms; the issue was that the legacy newsprint organizations weren't nimble enough. Time has given the lie to that story. Even once-fashionable digital outlets like *BuzzFeed News*, which were created during the era of a more open Internet, have now shuttered.

Communities need political news. They need school-board news and traffic news; they need reporters who understand local budgets and the impacts of federal spending on local life. Democracy cannot survive without local news—and yet we have enabled a business model that destroys it.

While the local "rags" cared about ad revenue, they remained, at heart, news organizations funded by ads—not ad organizations that happened to make money off news. For TikTok and Instagram, journalism is just "content"—one of many ways to keep people online.



WHAT CAN WE DO? SINCE THIS is a problem of both concentrated power and a predatory business model, we should make sure that any strategic response speaks to both.

One thing we can learn from the 19th-

century anti-monopolists is that we should start thinking about these problems in part through a discrimination lens. As the turn-of-the-century journalist Ida Tarbell reported, you couldn't go anywhere without hearing debate about how railroads gave different users different rights of access. Tarbell described the public outcry over railroad pricing discrimination this way:

Nothing was commoner, indeed, on the trains which ran the length of the region and were its real forums, than to hear a man explaining that the railways derived their existence and power from the people, that their charters were contracts with the people, that a fundamental provision of these contracts was that there should be no discriminating in favour of one person or one town, that such a discrimination was a violation of charter.

People understood that giving discounts—a mode of discrimination—was a betrayal of the obligations that flowed from the corporate charters granted by states. The anger at discrimination led to the creation of several state and federal laws that limited how railroads and other companies that ran essential infrastructure could treat customers differently.

Six years ago, just before he was hit with a scandal and retired, Senator Al Franken introduced the idea that the media infrastructure problem was a discrimination problem. "As tech giants become a new kind of Internet gatekeeper," Franken argued, "I believe the same basic principles of...neutrality should apply here: No one company should have the power to pick and choose which content reaches consumers and which doesn't."

(continued on page 45)

Democracy cannot survive without local news—and yet we have enabled a business model that destroys it.

Newspaper Employment: 2005 and 2022

Total newspaper employment has decreased by more than 70% in the past fifteen years.

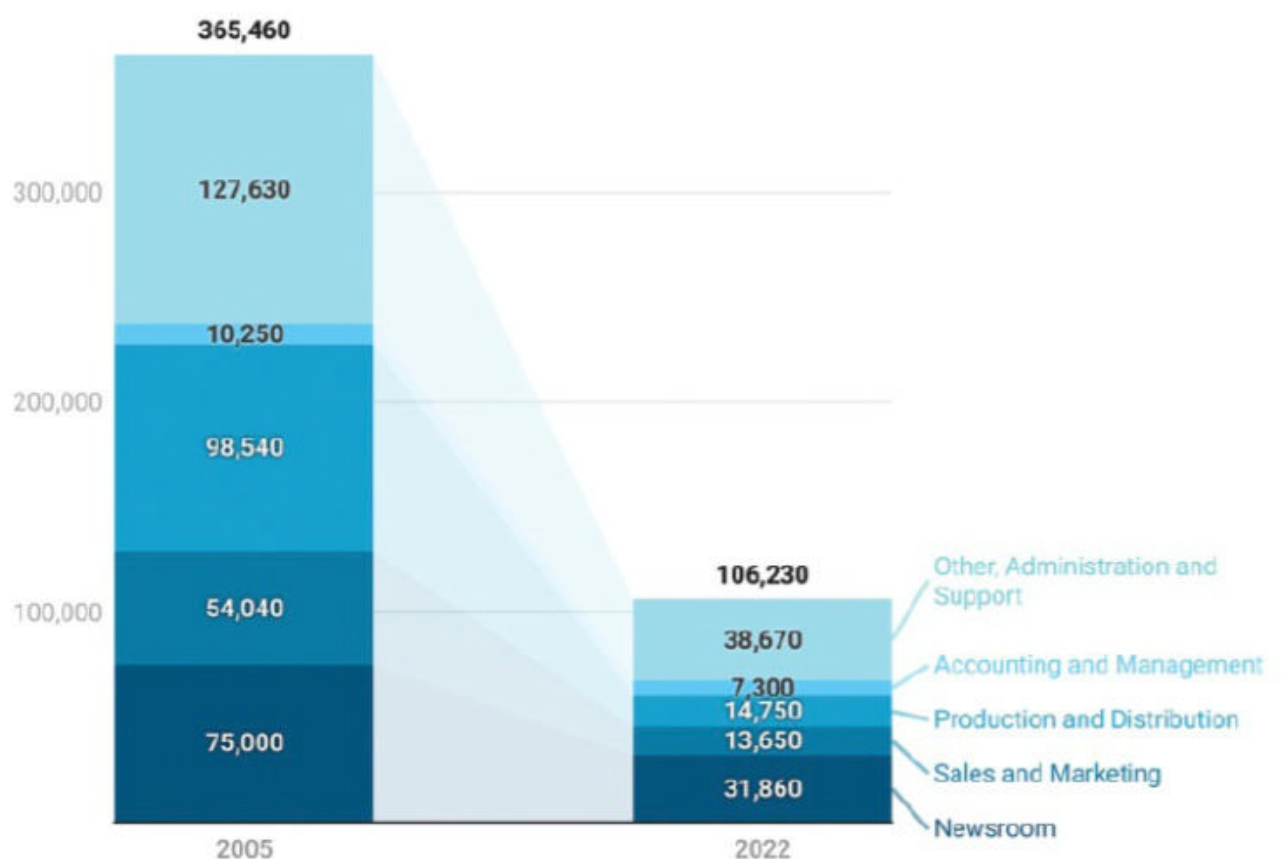


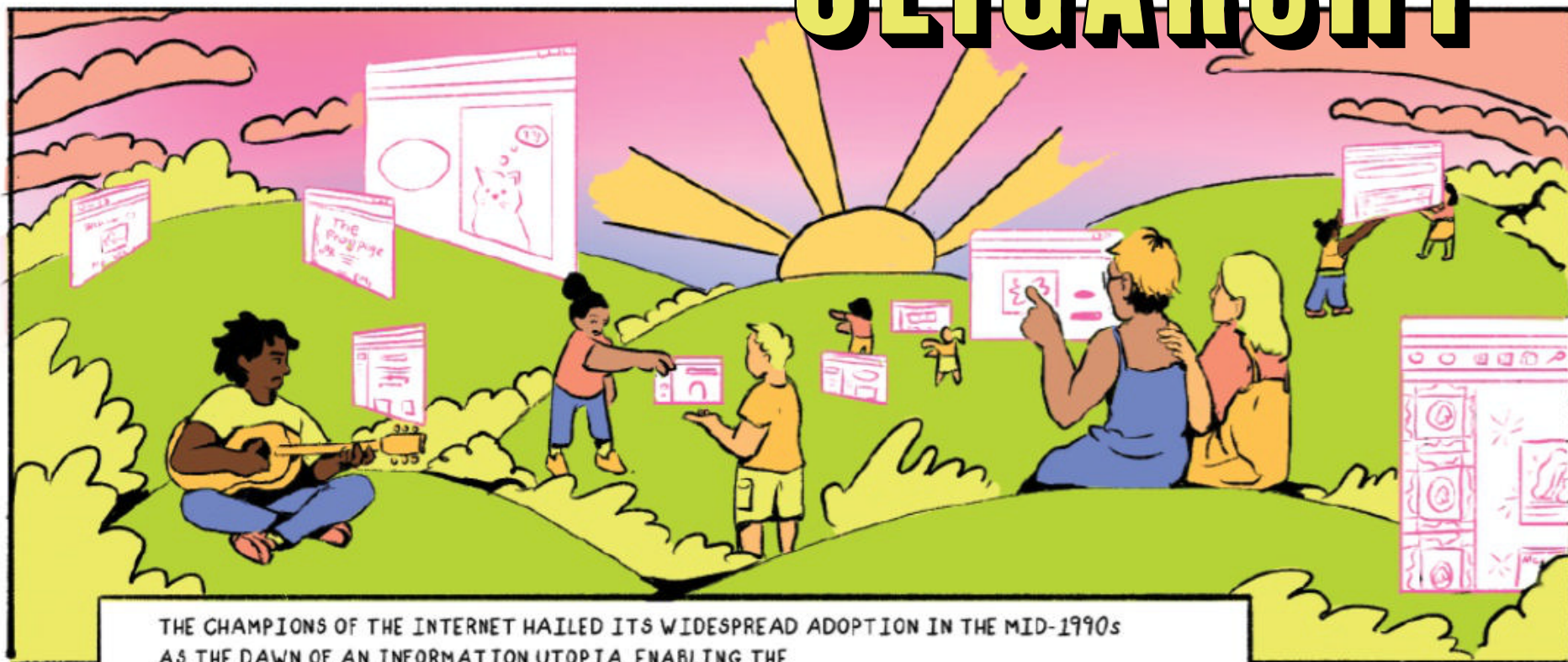
Chart: Medill Local News Initiative • Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics • Created with Datawrapper

THE ALGORITHM

Colleen Tighe

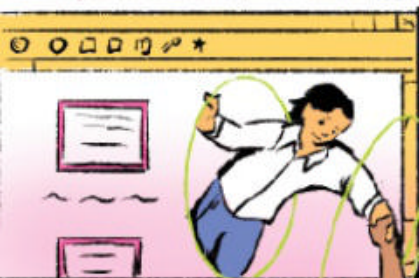
How the Internet produced the age of monopoly platforms.

OLIGARCHY

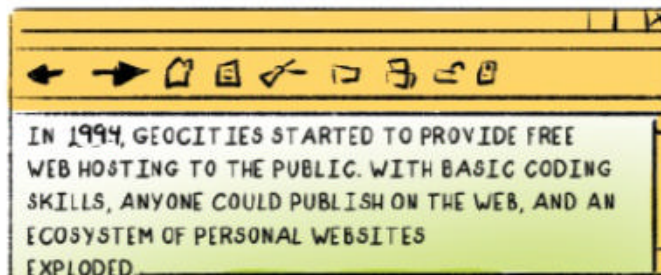


THE CHAMPIONS OF THE INTERNET HAILED ITS WIDESPREAD ADOPTION IN THE MID-1990s AS THE DAWN OF AN INFORMATION UTOPIA, ENABLING THE FREE SPREAD OF KNOWLEDGE.

A NEW, WIDE-OPEN, DIGITAL WORLD WAS COMING INTO BEING.



IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE PUBLIC INTERNET, USERS WOULD FIND WEBSITES VIA RECOMMENDATIONS FROM FRIENDS, DIRECTORIES, AND PERSONAL BOOKMARKS.



IN 1994, GEOCITIES STARTED TO PROVIDE FREE WEB HOSTING TO THE PUBLIC. WITH BASIC CODING SKILLS, ANYONE COULD PUBLISH ON THE WEB, AND AN ECOSYSTEM OF PERSONAL WEBSITES EXPLODED.



WEB 1.0 WAS TACTILE, REQUIRING MANUAL CLICKING, CODING, AND THE CONSTANT REMINDER THAT THE WEBSITE WAS A CONSTRUCTION, SOMETHING USERS PARTICIPATED IN CREATING.



WEB FORUMS, MODERATED BY COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS AND USUALLY CENTERED ON A SINGLE INTEREST, TOOK OFF IN THE MID-'90s, CREATING NEW AND TREASURED MODES OF BELONGING IN THE FLEDGLING NET, AIDED BY THE ABILITY OF POSTERS TO REMAIN ANONYMOUS.



BANNER ADS, POP-UPS, AND BROADBAND COMPANIES ALL PROFITED OFF OF THE NEW INTERNET, BUT THIS WAS ALL MANAGEABLE BY USER CHOICE.





WHEN FACEBOOK LAUNCHED IN 2004, IT BECAME THE FIRST SITE TO EFFECTIVELY IDENTIFY AND CONQUER THE LUCRATIVE POSSIBILITIES OF "SOCIAL MEDIA."



FACEBOOK'S ORGANIZING DEVICE WAS SIMPLE: A "FEED," POPULATED BY THE COMMENTARY, TASTE PREFERENCES, AND MOST CRUCIALLY, THE PERSONAL DATA OF YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS. ITS DESIGN WAS ASCETIC, WITH ZERO ABILITY FOR USERS TO EDIT AND PERSONALIZE THEIR PROFILE.

WEB 2.0 WAS BORN.



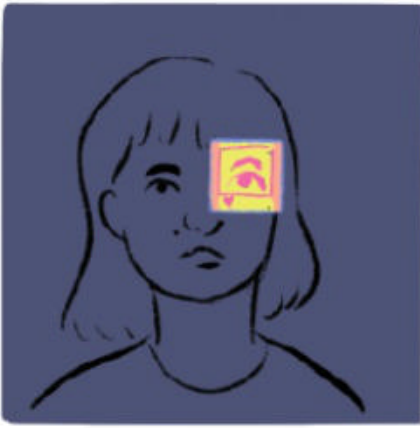
WEB 2.0 CURATES A SEAMLESS EXPERIENCE, WITH PRE-MADE PROFILES READY TO BE POPULATED WITH USER CONTENT, AND LITTLE CONSUMER INPUT INTO THE CREATION, MANAGEMENT, OR DIRECTION OF THE PLATFORM.



AS SMARTPHONES BECAME A UBIQUITOUS POINT OF ENTRY INTO THE WEB AND KEPT US STUCK TO IT AROUND THE CLOCK, THE CREATION OF APPS ERASED EVEN THE IDEA OF A BROWSER.

THE ONLY INTERNET WE INTERACTED WITH NOW WAS THE FEED.

IN STARK CONTRAST TO THE SELF-MOTIVATED AMATEUR EXPRESSION OF WEB 1.0, USERS NOW FACE RELENTLESS PRESSURE TO TURN EVERY SCRAP OF THEIR LIVES INTO CONTENT, MOLDING PERSONAL EXPRESSION TO THE ALGORITHM. THIS STATE OF DEPENDENCE WORKS LIKE OTHER ADDICTIONS, NARROWING THE USER EXPERIENCE TO A DEHUMANIZED AND INSTRUMENTAL VANISHING POINT.



VIRALITY EXISTS NOT TO REWARD THE USER'S INNATE TALENT OR PASSIONS BUT TO CONTINUE TO ENTICE OTHERS TO USE AN APP AND GENERATE MASSIVE PROFIT.



YOUTUBE, A PINNACLE OF THIS STRATEGY, GENERATED \$15 BILLION IN AD REVENUE IN 2019.



THERE ARE REAL LIFE RAMIFICATIONS OF VIRALITY. IN A DEEPLY PRECARIOUS ATTENTION ECONOMY, MANY JOBS ARE TETHERED TO THE EXPECTATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA VISIBILITY.

THE ONLINE WORLD NOW OPERATES LIKE A SLOT MACHINE, DISPENSING THE PROMISE OF FAME AND FORTUNE, OR JUST AN OKAY LIFE, VIA A SERENDIPITOUS ALIGNMENT OF GOOD LUCK, VIRAL RENOWN, AND MARKETING SAVVY.

THE RISE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AS THE NEW MODEL FOR ONLINE CONTENT NEATLY CONNECTS THE ALGORITHM'S EXPLOITATION OF USERS AND THE SYSTEM OF MONOPOLY INTERNET GATEKEEPING.

AI PROMISES TO PROGRAM ALL ORIGINAL CONTENT FOR YOU, DEVOID OF HISTORY, CONTEXT, OR HUMAN RELATIONS, WHILE UTILIZING A MODEL OF DATA HARVESTING TO CREATE THE CRUDE ALL-PURPOSE SIMULACRUM OF A HUMAN VOICE.

IN 2021 AMAZON, ALPHABET, AND MICROSOFT ANNOUNCED MORE MERGERS AND ACQUISITIONS THAN ANY OTHER YEAR IN THE PREVIOUS DECADE. GOOGLE SEARCH ALONE GENERATED \$98.1 BILLION OF PROFIT IN 2019.

WITH THE RISE OF THE CONTENT FEED, WHATEVER REMAINED OF INTERNET 1.0 ROTTED AWAY OR WAS CANNIBALIZED BY CORPORATIONS. THE FTC FOUND THAT FROM 2010 TO 2019 APPLE, ALPHABET, MICROSOFT, AMAZON, AND META COLLECTIVELY ACQUIRED 616 COMPANIES THAT WENT UNREPORTED.





IN TODAY'S HYPER-CORPORATE, ALGORITHMICALLY STRANGLING INTERNET, WHERE HATRED IS ROUTINELY PROMOTED

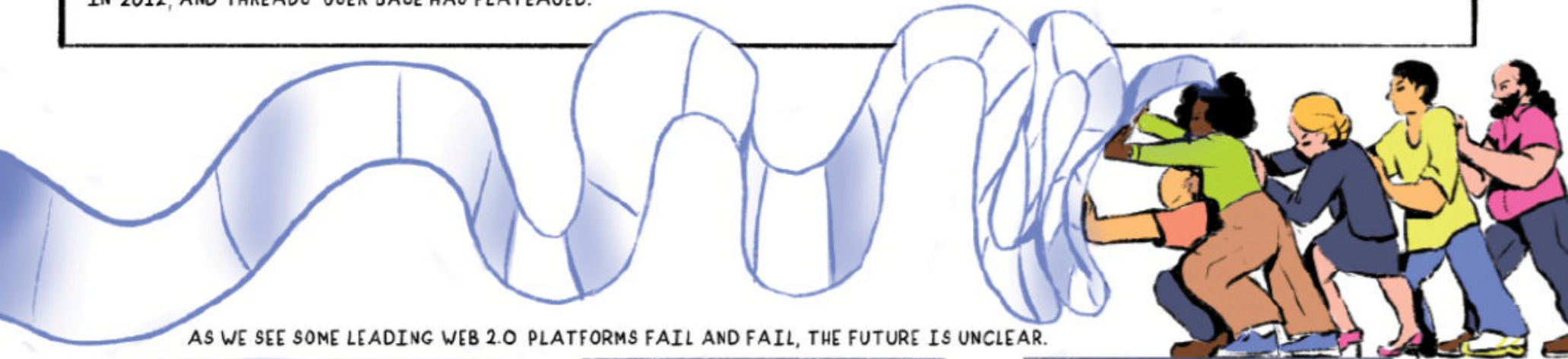


AND INFORMATION BEYOND THE SANITIZED CORPORATE FILTER IS BLOCKED,

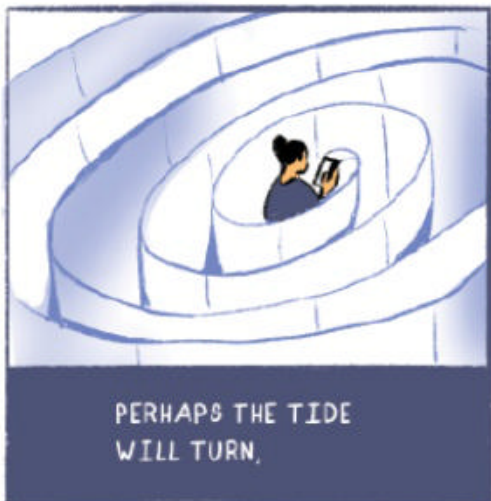


WHERE DATA ON PEOPLE'S LIVES ARE SOLD TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER, IT IS DIFFICULT TO EVEN IMAGINE AN INTERNET THAT WORKS FOR THE PEOPLE USING IT.

COUNTRIES LIKE CANADA AND AUSTRALIA HAVE TRIED TO CURB THE PROFIT-GENERATING MILL OF SOCIAL MEDIA. THEY HAVE PASSED LEGISLATION REQUIRING META TO PAY FOR NEWS CONTENT SHARED ON ITS SITE THAT GENERATES PROFITS, AND DISSEMINATE THE PROFITS TO STRUGGLING NEWS ORGANIZATIONS. THE LAUNCH OF META'S NEW X RIVAL, THREADS, HAS BEEN DELAYED DUE TO THE EXTENSIVE AND INVASIVE DATA MINING IT DOES ON ITS USERS. IN 2022 META'S REVENUE GROWTH WAS THE SLOWEST SINCE ITS STOCK MARKET DEBUT IN 2012, AND THREADS' USER BASE HAS PLATEAUED.



AS WE SEE SOME LEADING WEB 2.0 PLATFORMS FAIL AND FAIL, THE FUTURE IS UNCLEAR.



PERHAPS THE TIDE WILL TURN,



AND WE WILL MOVE TOWARDS DECENTRALIZATION AND DISSEMINATION BASED ON TRUE HUMAN RELATIONS.



MAYBE THE GREATER FORCES OF CAPITAL WILL FORCE US TO LIVE IN THE METAVERSE,



CREATING CONTENT UNTIL WE DIE.



MAYBE THE ONSET OF CLIMATE CHANGE WILL RAVAGE OUR ELECTRICITY GRIDS AND SUPERCOMPUTERS,



AND THE AGE OF THE INTERNET AS WE KNOW IT WILL BE LOST.



AND THEN THERE WERE TWO

Thomas Schatz

Once upon a time, six companies controlled the media. That, it turns out, was the good old days.



ALTHOUGH IT SEEMS LIKE AN ETERNITY NOW, IT WASN'T SO LONG AGO that the traditional film and television business was thriving. The Big Six media conglomerates—General Electric, Time Warner, Sony, Disney, News Corporation, and Viacom—ruled the industry. But the double whammy of streaming and the pandemic toppled the old-media oligopoly, which, with the singular exception of Disney, was woefully—if not fatally—slow to respond to the radically changing conditions. So most of the legacy media giants now are struggling simply to survive, while a new breed of digital-age behemoths, led by Amazon and Apple, gauge their film and television prospects, and Disney and Netflix lead the way into an uncharted online landscape.

The failure of the conglomerates to adapt is none too surprising, considering the unrivaled success they had enjoyed for decades. Spurred by Reagan-era economic policies and the FCC's deregulation campaign, the media industries converged in a series of M&A waves that began in the 1980s with the News Corp-Fox, Time-Warner, and Sony-Columbia mergers and culminated in the acquisition of Universal by GE, NBC's owner, and the launch of NBC Universal in 2004. At that point, the Big Six owned all the major film studios, all the broadcast networks, and most of the top cable networks. They dominated other media industries as well, but their key assets were their film and television holdings.

The NBC-Universal union also marked a decisive reset in the old guard's response to new media. In 2000, Time Warner merged with the Internet colossus AOL (in a shocking deal valued at \$165 billion), and Universal was acquired by the French conglomerate Vivendi (for \$35 billion). The architects of both deals were betting on high-speed Internet delivery, then referred to as "broadband," which was ramping up but not yet widely available. The rollout of broadband, however, proved to be disastrously slow, which was a key factor in the dot-com bust of the early aughts and the collapse of both the AOL-Time Warner and Vivendi-Universal deals in 2002.

In the wake of that dot-com bust and the consolidation of the Big Six, the film studios re-trenched, doubling down on their traditional theater-driven business and blockbuster franchises. They also fixated on the exploding overseas markets, which couldn't get enough of Hollywood's franchise fare. Foreign revenues had started to climb in the 1990s, pulling even with the

domestic returns and edging ahead in the early 2000s. Then, in 2004, foreign releases took off, leaping more than 50 percent ahead of the domestic returns. The gap became an abyss, with the foreign market doubling the domestic take by 2010 and nearly tripling it in 2019. At that point, 83 of the top 100 all-time worldwide hits had been released since 2004, and every one of them was a franchise film. The conservative turn paid off, as the studios reaped record profits and relied more and more heavily on high-cost, low-risk series spectacles. That put the squeeze on midrange and prestige pictures as well as on "Indiewood," a formidable bloc of conglomerate-owned independent studios that was decimated after 2004.

The M&A action also stalled. The only significant deal over the next decade involved NBCUniversal, which GE sold to Comcast in a buyout that closed in 2013. Then, five years later, came the first inklings of another wave: AT&T's buyout of Time Warner, an \$85.4 billion deal that closed in June 2018, and Disney's buyout of 21st Century Fox in a \$71.3 billion deal approved by the feds that same month. More than simply a realignment of

the old-media giants, the deals signaled the conglomerates' first real response to streaming—the technology itself and the growing threat of Netflix and Amazon, two fast-rising media powerhouses. Both companies were launched during the digital revolution—Amazon by Jeff Bezos in 1994 and Netflix by Reed Hastings and Marc Randolph in 1997—and parlayed the new DVD technology into early success in the booming home-video sector. Both also shrewdly used the Internet, initially to market their inventory and, by the mid-2000s, to deliver films and TV series via streaming.

As digital delivery began overtaking DVDs in the early 2010s, Netflix revamped its business model. Hastings and his chief content officer (and eventual co-CEO), Ted Sarandos, increasingly built Netflix's library around long-form TV series and moved aggressively into original programming to ensure a steady supply. Netflix premiered its first original series in 2012, the Nordic noir *Lilyhammer*, followed by a run of homegrown hits in 2013 that included *House of Cards* and *Orange Is the New Black*. Those cues Netflix's swing to original programming, as its stockpile grew from 73 hours in 2013 to over 1,500 hours in 2018 and the company matured into a streaming-era TV network. In fact, Netflix nabbed 112 Emmy nominations in 2018, the first year since 2001 that any network outpaced HBO. Its subscriber count grew from 40 million to 140 million during that explosive five-year span, while its market value soared from \$22 billion to \$130 billion. Amazon followed suit, but at a more modest pace, building a massive film library on its Amazon Prime service and easing into original series programming, producing its first hit, *Transparent*, in 2014.

As their series production caught on, both streamers inevitably chal-

Streaming and the pandemic toppled the old-media oligopoly, which was slow to respond to changing conditions.

Media mogul: Reed Hastings, the executive chairman of Netflix, at an event in Madrid in 2019.

Thomas Schatz is a professor in the Department of Radio-Television-Film at the University of Texas at Austin.

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN STAUFFER



JUAN NAHARRO GIMENEZ / GETTY IMAGES

lenged Hollywood, and Amazon scored the first movie hit with *Manchester by the Sea* in 2016. But again, Netflix was more aggressive, releasing more than 50 feature films per annum by 2017, far outpacing Amazon and any of the studios, and edging into the theatrical arena with Oscar-qualifying limited releases of prestige pictures like Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* (2018). In fact, *Roma* provided one of two clear signals in early 2019 that Netflix had arrived as a Hollywood player. On the morning of January 22, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences showered the film with 10 Oscar nominations, including Best Picture and Best Director. Later that same day, the Motion Picture Association designated Netflix a major Hollywood studio.

That was obviously a watershed moment for the streaming and movie industries, although Netflix would be overshadowed on both fronts in 2019, when multiple high-risk acquisitions by Disney CEO Bob Iger paid off in truly historic fashion. Three involved motion-picture companies: Disney's buyout of Pixar (in 2006, for \$7.4 billion), Marvel Entertainment (in 2009, for \$4 billion), and Lucasfilm, the creator of the *Star Wars* franchise (in 2012, for \$4.05 billion). Those new assets, along with Disney's animation division, recast the company as a coalition of franchise-driven micro-studios. Disney released fewer features and relied more heavily on presold IP than the other major studios, and that strategy carried it to phenomenal heights. It led the industry four straight years in the late 2010s, peaking in 2019 with a 33 percent domestic market share on just 10 theatrical releases, nine of which were franchise blockbusters.

Disney's foray into streaming in 2019 was also keyed to earlier acquisitions. In 2017, the company secured control of BAMTech, a streaming service owned by Major League Baseball, and later that year Iger announced the buyout of 21st Century Fox, which increased Disney's heft in the media sector while giving it a controlling interest in Hulu, then the No. 2 streamer behind Netflix. The Fox buyout officially closed in March 2019, at which point Iger and company began gearing up for the November 12 debut of Disney+. The launch faced stiff competition from Apple, which rolled out its much-hyped streaming service Apple TV+ on November 1. But the latter's meager lineup of nine original series and its lack of a library attracted few new subscribers, and the rollout was a bust.

Mouse in the house: Disney steamrolled into the streaming market in 2019 with the launch of Disney+.

Disney+, on the other hand, was a runaway hit, enrolling more than 10 million subscribers on day one and more than 25 million by late December. Its success was fueled by several factors: an ad-free, low-cost service (\$6.99 per month, versus \$12.99 for Netflix); the momentum of its theatrical hits; its small but incomparable library; and a slate of 25 original series and 10 new features, most of them tied to Disney IP—including a hit *Star Wars* series, *The Mandalorian*, that established the prototype for subsequent franchise offshoots.



pressuring the legacy companies that were betting on streaming to stay in the game, despite the crippling start-up and content costs. Netflix was the only profitable streaming service coming out of the pandemic, netting over \$5 billion in 2021 and again in 2022, while the legacy companies lost billions.

Meanwhile, the theatrical market began to recover in 2021 and climbed to roughly two-thirds of its pre-pandemic levels in 2022. Franchise fever ran higher than ever, with the top 10 hits that year—all of them big-budget sequels or franchise films—accounting for over half the ticket sales in the United States. The M&A action also resumed, highlighted by two landmark deals announced in May 2021. One was Amazon's \$8.45 billion acquisition of MGM, giving it a legendary Hollywood brand and adding some 4,000 film titles to its massive library. The other saw AT&T, struggling with the move to streaming and with mounting debt, unload

WarnerMedia in a deal with Discovery, a second-tier cable company that paid \$43 billion for a minority stake and complete control of the stumbling media giant, which it rebranded Warner Bros. Discovery.

This was a stunning setback for the once-mighty Warner, but the Disney-Warner duopoly that had ruled since the early 1990s was history. Disney's main rival now was Netflix—a vastly different adversary that continued to expand at a staggering rate. Netflix released more than 450 titles in 2021 and over 700 in 2022, with far more feature films and series (in all formats) than its competitors as well as far more international productions. And Netflix accomplished this as a pure-play media company that was not conglomerate-owned and was not itself a conglomerate. Disney, conversely, was the consummate media-and-entertainment combine, a global juggernaut whose portfolio now included three streaming services and a total subscriber count of roughly 235 million—just surpassing Netflix's 230 million and far ahead of the other legacy company streamers.

Netflix and Disney were thus a study in contrasts, although a few recent developments did bring them into closer accord. Brutal "market corrections" hit the industry in 2022, with the streamers' stock value increasingly gauged in terms of profitability as well as subscriber growth. Disney and Netflix saw the steepest drops, as their market caps plunged more than \$100 billion that year—Netflix down to \$130 billion, about where it stood before the pandem-



The Disney-Warner duopoly that had ruled since the early 1990s was history. Disney's main rival now was Netflix.



THE DISNEY+ LAUNCH WAS A tipping point in the streaming era, prompting the ramp-up of Warner's HBO Max, NBCU's Peacock and ViacomCBS's Paramount+. It also came just before the outbreak of Covid-19, which accelerated the global move to streaming. The world learned to live online during the pandemic, rendering Netflix, Amazon, and Apple stronger than ever while



ic, and Disney down to the \$170 billion range. Netflix tumbled when its decade-long growth suddenly slowed in early 2022, although its revenues and profits held up thanks to high subscription fees. Meanwhile, Disney struggled as a result of low fees and enormous content costs.

Despite the different reasons for their Wall Street woes, Disney and Netflix turned to the same remedy: TV commercials. Both launched ad-supported tiers in late 2022 to attract new subscribers and generate new revenues. This was hardly a novel strategy; all of the other major streamers already offered ad-supported plans. And the adjustment came easily enough for Disney, given its experience with commercial television and with Hulu's ad-supported platform. It was a bitter pill for Reed Hastings, however, who had vowed never to sully Netflix with ads. But there was no stopping the online migration of commercial television, and an added benefit for Netflix was its alliance with Microsoft, which took sole responsibility for building and managing the streamer's advertising business.

"Consolidation" was the industry buzzword in early 2023, with the Disney-Fox, Warner-Discovery, and Amazon-MGM mergers seen as mere previews in a Darwinian struggle to adapt and survive. But the major players stood

pat, waiting for the recent disruptions—and the writers' and actors' strikes—to play out. More M&A action is inevitable, though, with Amazon and Apple increasingly invested in their media operations, and the tech giants Microsoft and Alphabet (the parent company of Google, which owns YouTube) ready to pounce. And the weaker legacy companies—Warner Bros. Discovery, Paramount Global, and what's left of Fox—cannot possibly hold on without deep-pocketed digital-age allies (or owners).

The most intriguing M&A prospects are Disney and Netflix. Both have the capacity to survive and thrive on their own, but they are unlikely to sit still for long. Indeed, the question for both is whether they can afford not to attach themselves to a tech giant. Rumors have been swirling for years about a partnership between Apple and Disney, due largely to Iger's penchant for high-stakes dealmaking and a long-standing rapport with Apple dating back to his close friendship with the late Steve Jobs, who sold Pixar to Disney. Netflix's likeliest partner is Microsoft, which already handles its ad business and recently acquired the gaming superpower Activision Blizzard. Netflix has been quietly expanding into gaming for a few years, and together the two could rule the online gaming realm—and introduce yet another vital subindustry into the digital entertainment ecosystem.

The question for both Disney and Netflix is whether they can afford not to partner with a tech giant.

(Vaidyanathan, continued from page 18) conditions. Far from an apostle of competitive capitalism, he's steeped in the same monopoly vision advanced by his former Paypal colleague Peter Thiel. And like that early Facebook investor, Musk recoils at the thought that market pressures, labor, investors, or the public interest might play some legitimate role in determining the best way to run his businesses.

This affinity speaks to another critical element of Musk's corporate biography. More than serving as an ideological vessel of his upbringing in apartheid South Africa, or hewing to his later tutelage in the rarefied precincts of the Ivy League, Musk truly came of age during Silicon Valley's belle époque of venture capital. Because venture capital investors seek to create new markets and business models largely out of thin air, they often make decisions based on their market crushes and storied gut instincts. Their job is to push piles of money into the laps



of unproven entrepreneurs, without the usual benefits of testing their hypotheses against data or track records to arrive at reasoned decisions.

If the classical models of market capitalism can be said to contain any traditional virtues, they are principally those of Greek tragedy: the slow-rolling punishment of hubris, imperial ambition, and vanity. Companies that simply amass VC backing on glorified elevator pitches while blowing past any market warnings about their overriding folly usually meet a bigger market nemesis in the end, by misdirecting capital that could otherwise be used productively to satisfy real needs. For two lurid recent illustrations of this principle, see the collapse of Elizabeth Holmes's scam blood-testing company, Theranos, and Samuel Bankman-Fried's cryptocurrency empire, FTX, and their eventual reckonings with the federal justice system.

Elon Musk is the poster CEO for the combined fecklessness of venture capital

investing and private capital ownership. He's melded the hubris-rewarding ethos of the VC world with a cult following seemingly designed to feed his titanic ego and his desire to make himself the wealthiest human ever. And he did all this without ever employing that many people, without selling many products on the open market, and without even turning a profit very often.

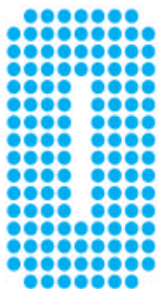
Musk's success in defying so many traditional laws of market gravity means, among other things, that we have missed the moment to create Internet service as a public utility. Now we have to begin reckoning with the legacy of that failure as it wreaks havoc across the globe. One place to start would be a serious effort to work through the costs and benefits of nationalizing satellite Internet delivery systems like Starlink. It's true that a slapdash or jingoistic model for such an endeavor runs the risk of extending the same sort of American market hegemony that created Musk's rise to the summit of the global communications order in the first place. But it's equally true that the specter of having Elon Musk as the de facto arbiter of global struggles over national sovereignty and information access means that we no longer have a choice.



THE MEDIA, DISABILITY, AND

Working in media has always been an uphill battle for disabled writers, but an ever-shrinking industry gives "hard" a whole new meaning.

Vilissa Thompson



OVER THE PAST DECADE, I THOUGHT I HAD FINALLY FIGURED OUT HOW TO EARN a living as a disabled person. I work as a speaker, a consultant, and an activist, but writing was always my first love. I started writing professionally in my late 20s, and since then my work has been published on blogs, in magazines, and in books. I have taken tremendous strides in this aspect of my career.

But in 2020, when the pandemic shook all of our lives, progressive news sites began shutting down in droves. It has been devastating to witness over the past three years. While the 2010s might not have been the heyday of the business-class-flying, glossy-magazine reporter, that decade's media allowed many of us—disabled and non-disabled writers alike—to write and be paid for it. It's disheartening to know that many aspiring journalists and journalism school graduates are having to give up before they start, given the dwindling opportunities for writers, editors, and fact-checkers.

As a disabled writer, I'm no stranger to working hard and getting creative to pursue a dream no matter the circumstances. Indeed, the obstacles for people like me are endless: workplace discrimination; inaccessible job sites for people who are wheelchair-bound, as I am; poverty wages (also known as "subminimum wages," where it is still legal for employers to pay a disabled person less than the minimum wage, and some workers are paid pennies on the dollar); and income restrictions for public benefits that make it nearly impossible to earn enough to live comfortably.

Despite the barriers that the journalism industry has raised for disabled writers, writers of color, and LGBTQ+ writers, members of those marginalized groups have led the way toward a more inclusive approach to the coverage of disability and disability justice. Historically, news outlets have treated disability and related

topics as "special interests" rather than as facets of the way our society operates. The way in which disability has been consigned to niche coverage, along with the tiny number of staff roles filled by disabled folks in an industry where jobs are already scarce, has made it difficult for multiply marginalized writers to cover disability or to branch out and cover other stories from our perspective. Squeezing out disabled writers who have so much insight to offer, especially into the injustices, biases, and discrimination they face, is an obstacle that the media industry should not only acknowledge but actively address.



MY JOURNEY TO BECOMING a writer started after I graduated with a master's degree in social work in 2012. I knew that my options were limited. Many of the jobs available to social workers at that time required them to do home visits and to drive, which presented a problem

Vilissa Thompson is a social worker, freelance writer, speaker, and the founder of the organization Ramp Your Voice!

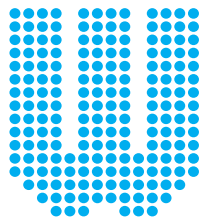
for me since most homes aren't wheelchair-accessible and I don't drive, because of the cost of accessible vehicles. Given such limitations, it made more sense for me to seek work that I could do from home. I decided to start blogging for a social work outlet that needed someone to write about the societal issues that disabled people face in the United States. I wrote about everything from the school-to-prison pipeline and how it affects disabled students to how social media helps disabled people find community. A year later, I founded an organization called Ramp Your Voice! and began blogging about the intersection of disability rights, social work, and race. After three years, I was able to turn the recognition I had received through my writing at Ramp Your Voice! into freelance gigs at digital outlets. By the fall of 2020, I had become a regular contributor to the independent news outlet *Prism*.

While the business of freelance writing has evolved over the past decade for all writers, disabled writers—particularly those who are multiply marginalized like me

(along with being disabled, I am also a Black woman)—face a unique set of issues. In addition to being shut out of most full-time roles, we must consider the outlets we write for deliberately; in particular, we need to know to what extent their editors know or are open to learning about disability, and whether we will be able to tell our full story without it being edited down to fit a narrative people are more comfortable with.

Ableism—the social prejudice against disabled people—is a barrier disabled people have faced since the beginning of time. It is prevalent in journalism primarily because storytellers often ignore lived realities in favor of stereotypes and simplified sketches. This distortion is concerning for disabled journalists, because people read news for “the truth” and often take specious narratives as accurate. Magazines, newspapers, and blogs often make missteps that contribute to the public's misunderstanding of disabled people, including by emphasizing inspiration porn (such as an ambulatory wheelchair user who is able to stand or walk for the first time); downplaying mercy killings by highlighting the elimination of the “burden” on caregivers; disregarding the societal barriers we face in experiencing violence and discrimination in public spaces; and allowing parents and caregivers to be the voice for a disabled person without engaging with that person directly.

In addition to handling these stories recklessly, many outlets continue to resist updating the language they use to describe disabled people, which has been a major point of focus for us, especially with the media's increased reliance on automation. The preferred language used by many in the disabled community is identity-first language, which puts the disability first in describing a person—“disabled person” rather than “person with a disability,” for example. News organizations don't often adhere to this, and their failure to do so will keep the industry behind, while continuing to frustrate those who have worked hard to push language forward.



WHILE WRITING FOR MONEY IS HARD FOR EVERYONE IN MEDIA TODAY to pull off, the financial realities for disabled writers are particularly distressing. Because of the outlets' own budget crunches, freelance writers often have to press them to pay and to do so on time. In general, disabled workers, including disabled writers, have historically been paid lower rates. We need jobs that not only pay well but that can also support the medical requirements we may have to cover out of pocket in order to sustain our quality of life.

What I'm describing is what we call the “crip tax”—all the extra costs that disabled folks have to take on, in the form of services and tools, in order to live more accessibly. A household with a disabled adult needs an average of 28 percent more income—an extra \$17,690 per year for a typical US household—in order to achieve the same standard of living as a comparable household without a disabled member. Earning a livable wage for me means making enough money to repair my wheelchair and save for new hearing aids, to name just a few of my needs. I came off the rolls of Social Security seven years ago; catching up on saving and having the means to take care of myself without significant limits is a new concept to me. Like many of my disabled peers, I am financially behind my non-disabled counterparts. Earning a wage looks different when the wage has to sustain a different kind of life.

Being paid a livable wage should not be an exception but the reality for everyone in the workforce. However, for freelancers who are writing for outlets that may pay as little as \$100 a story, chasing stories and money is often the hard reality. Too often, writers are scrambling to pitch to multiple outlets to find the one that will give them rates they can live with. And often, they can't. As s.e. smith, a California-based freelance journalist, put it recently, as a disabled writer, “I watch outgoing expenses exceed my income.”

Such financial barriers are making those of us who remain in this industry wonder how much longer we can last. For disabled writers, who are already forced to spend more money day-to-day to survive, the outcome is particularly crushing. “Freelancing built my career as a disabled journalist by allowing me to work on my own schedule,” smith told me. “It may also be the thing that drives me out after more than 15 years.” For freelance journalists, who have always had to prove themselves through tireless, poorly compensated efforts, work has gotten much harder. And when you start at the bottom of the rung, “hard” takes on a whole new meaning.

The current political environment has been an additional hurdle.

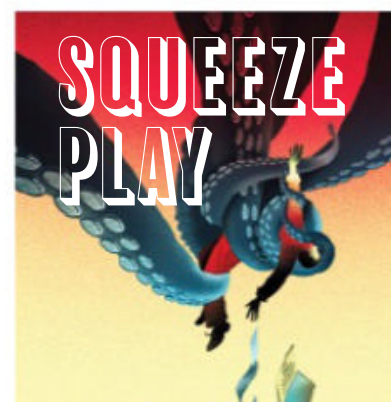
As we stare down another presidential election, conservatives are more emboldened than ever, creating a dangerous environment for multiply marginalized writers who share their stories. Pieces about disability may be deemed by those on the right as “too woke” and not in line with their agenda to “return” to an America where such stories and individuals



Historically, news outlets have treated disability as a “special interest” rather than as a facet of how our society operates.

Bitch: The feminist magazine, founded in 1996, closed its doors for good in 2022.

(continued on page 35)



ME



Days of yore: Workers at *The Chicago Defender* in the 1960s. The paper chronicled the Jim Crow era and the civil rights movement.

ONE BIG COOKOUT

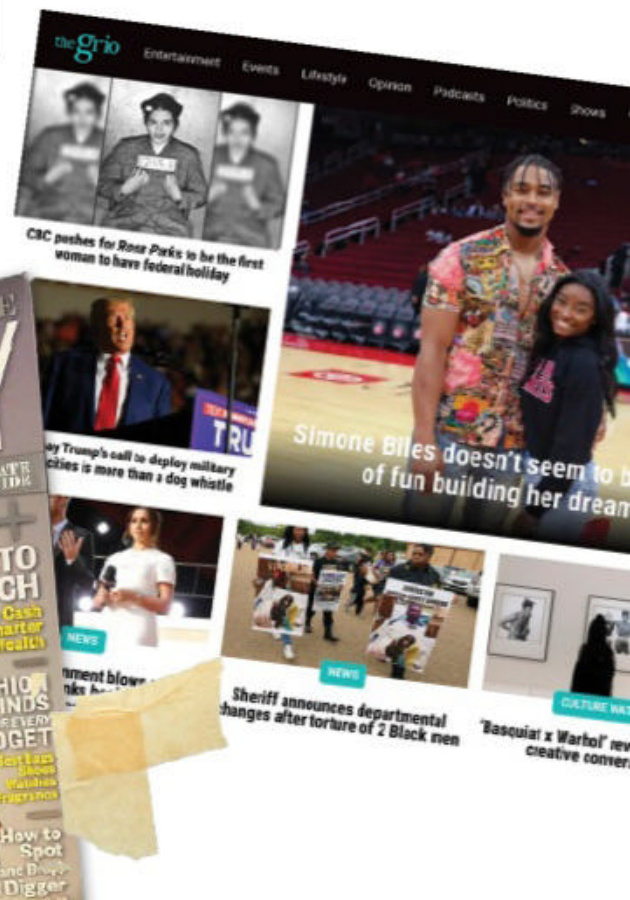


Fourth-estate titan: Ida B. Wells documented the brutality of lynching at the turn of the last century.



From the "Negro press" to Black media to Black Twitter.

Gene Seymour





MY FATHER'S FAMILY TREE HAS A CAPT. CHARLES L. MITCHELL, BORN in my hometown of Hartford, Conn., who took what he learned during what was later described as a "relatively brief tenure at that city's venerable *Courant*" to establish a Black-oriented newspaper, also called the *Courant*, in his adopted city of Boston in the late 19th century. On my mother's side of the family, there was, most notably, my uncle C. Sumner "Chuck" Stone Jr., who was at various times in the 1950s and '60s editor of *The New York Age*, *The Washington Afro-American*, and *The Chicago Defender*—all before his 18-year run as a columnist, political gadfly, go-between for law enforcement and Black suspects, and senior editor at the *Philadelphia Daily News*. Scrolling recently through old copies of the *Age*, which closed in 1960 after 73 years, I was astonished to find that Chuck's sister (and my mother) Madalene contributed a column covering Hartford's Black social calendar. I suppose, despite the roughly 110 miles separating them, Hartford and Harlem were still close enough to require the kind of society updates that Black newspapers were renowned for providing. But as both Chuck and Mom are gone now, I doubt I'll ever get the whole story.

The more pertinent point is that, although it wasn't exactly the family business, journalism was viewed in my Black household, as in others, as crucial to our collective advancement and identity. In the racial tumult and upheaval of the 1960s, our devoted consumption of Black news outlets—not just newspapers, but also magazines such as *Ebony*, *Jet*, and the lesser-known but still fondly remembered *Sepia*—was vital because we always suspected that whatever magazines and newspapers for white folks weren't telling us, Black newspapers and magazines would.



BONY IS STILL AROUND, AS ARE BLACK-OWNED-AND-OPERATED NEWS OUTLETS following the centuries-old mandate of making Black people feel less invisible and more connected to one another. But the once-mighty flagship of Johnson Publishing has had to retool and rebrand itself for a digital age that has all but forgotten what it was like to have living-room end tables bulging with glossy journals and newsprint. What was once known and cherished as the "Negro press" has become "Black media," which in its larger, more sprawling manifestation still tries to reflect what the Black diaspora is thinking and talking about.

Better still to imagine Black media as One Big Cookout—"cookout" being the go-to metaphor for African American consensus. The analogy may be unwieldy, given the many contemporary variants and offshoots of Black media. It fits nicely, however, when you're talking about Black Twitter. Want to know how the latest revelation concerning the fraught marriage of Will and Jada Pinkett Smith registers with the Black boomers, Gen-Xers, and millennials who once avidly watched *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*? Consult Black Twitter. How's the newly styled hair of basketball star Jimmy Butler going over? Black Twitter will be happy to let you know. Was another unarmed Black person killed by police or assaulted by white bigots? Black Twitter gives you a seismic reading on the level of outrage.

But as with Twitter—or X, or whatever Elon Musk calls it these days—Black Twitter reacts (and then riffs on those reactions) far more often than it reports what it's reacting to. Black Twitter will not be the first to tell you, for instance, what the unemployment rate is among Black Americans (currently 5.8 percent) or what that means for parents, children, and their respective needs. Nor will it be the first—or maybe even the second—to tell you what elected officials plan to do about affordable housing, student loan debt, union organizing, or effective neighborhood policing, or whether charter schools are really a better option for your kids than public education. And Twitter, Black or white, isn't going to tell you the impact that changing the street where you live from two-way to one-way will have on your walk to the grocery store two blocks away.

And as to how all these issues might directly affect African

Americans, the mainstream (read "white") press will hardly ever go long or deep. Which is why the metaphorical cookout that is Black media today encompasses everything from the more than 200 Black-owned-and-operated newspapers that make up the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA) to online platforms like *The Root*, the digital reincarnations of *Ebony* and *Jet*, and *TheGrio*, whose website, with its formidable array of news, opinion, features, investigative stories, and political commentary, is a key component of a multi-platform media network owned by Byron Allen, the stand-up comedian turned media mogul. *TheGrio's* own Twitter page proclaims itself as simply "Black Culture Amplified."

But as with Twitter, Black Twitter reacts far more often than it reports what it's reacting to.

"We cover social justice, entertainment, lifestyle," says Geraldine Moriba, an award-winning documentary producer and filmmaker who is now *TheGrio's* senior vice president. "Whatever the Black community is talking about today or should be talking about today, we're trying to cover it."

Allen, whose ever-expanding conglomerate comprises television stations and programming, podcasts, and live sports, sees Black media as a means of economic empowerment for the Black community—and a vehicle for broadening America's vision of itself.

"You have to have a seat at the table," Allen says. "You have to control your image and your likeness and how you're depicted around the world.... Media is so powerful—it can be weaponized to the point where you had people on January 6 so wound up and angry, they're trying to overthrow a country that they already control." But, he adds, "media can be used to unite us. Media can be used to introduce ourselves to each other."

Gene Seymour worked 18 years at Newsday as a film critic and jazz columnist. He has written for Bookforum, CNN.com, and The Washington Post.

Allen's vision eagerly broadens and steadfastly reinforces the centuries-old mission of the Negro press, which, from its beginnings in 1827—when John Russwurm and Samuel Cornish founded *Freedom's Journal*—sought to make visible people whose dimensions, possibilities, and achievements were made imperceptible even to themselves. The fusion of ink, newsprint, and eventually photographs bore magical, transformative properties for Black America through the brave work of word ninjas like Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, William Monroe Trotter, and Walter White, who stalked and often subdued superstition, injustice, and legally sanctioned barbarism against people of color.



IN THE BAD OLD DAYS OF JIM CROW, BLACK-OWNED NEWSPAPERS LIKE *THE NEW York Age*, *Chicago Defender*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, and *Baltimore Afro-American* exposed lynching, helped facilitate the Great Migration of Blacks from the rural South to the urban North, exposed discriminatory practices in housing, employment, and courtrooms, and reinforced African Americans' collective identity and self-worth.

Such impulses still drive Black media—even as NNPA-member news outlets have had to make the same adjustments to digital demands that mainstream publications have. “A lot of us have become revived because of digital transformation,” says Denise Rolark Barnes, the publisher of *The Washington Informer*, a family-owned newspaper that has served the D.C. Black community for 59 years. “It has taken a while not just to get on that train, but to even find a seat. There’s something about what we do and have done historically that I think has saved our publication and those like it. The question is: How do we generate enough revenue to continue to not just survive but thrive?”

Barnes's publication and others like it also have to compete in a media market that is at once broader and narrower in scope than it was in the mid- to late 20th century. Among the findings in a September Pew Research Center report on Black Americans' relationship with the news is that about a quarter of the African American adults surveyed—24 percent—say they get news from Black media outlets, while a third say they get news from a mélange of sources, including local and national outlets, social media sites, friends, and family acquaintances. This rough profile seems aligned with how most Americans piece together their regular news diet.



In the bad old days of Jim Crow, Black-owned newspapers reinforced African Americans' collective identity and self-worth.

The Pew report also notes, however, that nearly 63 percent of those polled believe news coverage of Black people is more negative than news about other racial and ethnic groups. And at least half the people surveyed say the news they see and hear about Black people is limited to “certain segments” of their communities and misses important information that could bring balance and perspective to their stories. Which sounds a lot like the same complaints that cemented Black readers' age-old loyalty

to Black-owned-and-operated news outlets.

Those perceptions may not be as deeply embedded as they once were. But Geraldine Moriba, who worked for CNN, PBS, NBC, and other television networks before moving to digital media, says there is still a need for Black outlets such as *TheGrio* to convey the full and diverse voice of her community.

“My biggest challenge was the daily editorial call at places like CNN,” Moriba says. “Most of the time, I was the only one at the meeting pitching stories about people of color, defending the value of those stories, sometimes even explaining why they're stories. Even though I knew my own experience was unique, I was still trying to explain the experiences of other Black people in a way that would get them picked up

[by the network]. Now that I'm senior vice president at *TheGrio*, I look forward to those daily calls, because I know we're not going to end up defending the value of those stories or whether we should be reporting them. We're going to debate the angles, discuss the layers in a story, and then decide the 'how' more than the 'whether.'”

Still, the Pew report suggests that Black consumers' expectations about who should cover such stories are changing: While 45 percent of the respondents say Black journalists do a better job covering issues related to race and inequality, only 14 percent said it is important that any news they get, regardless of topic, comes from Black journalists.

Gauging who turns up at the cookout, in other words, is trickier than it seems. As is figuring out where Black-owned outlets fit into the era of electronic media.

“The newspaper has gone away,” Allen says. “But that has more to do with technology, not behavior. No one woke up and said, ‘I don't want news from my community.’ They woke up and said, ‘I want it from a digital platform.’ Our digital platforms, our local TV stations, are growing in terms of engagement and revenue, which means the platforms are the new newspaper. They may not want the paper, but they want the news. And the Black press is needed more than ever, and it has more power than ever before, because the Black press now, for the first time, has global distribution through technology.”

But Richard Prince, a veteran African American journalist who since 2002 has run *Journal-isms*, a website that monitors diversity issues in the news industry, says much of Black media is struggling to keep up with the demand for faster, better news coverage of their communities.

“Historically, Black news outlets have talked about emphasizing positive images on their pages,” Prince says. “It goes back to this idea that we shouldn't put all this bad stuff out there, because mainstream papers are always emphasizing things in our community like crime, guns, and unemployment. But your main task isn't to be positive. Your task is to deliver the news. And there are ways to engage these so-called 'negative' issues in a positive, proactive way that lets your readers, the community, know you're serving their interests.”

Denise Barnes remembers her father, Calvin Rolark, the founding publisher of *The Washington Informer*, insisting to her that the paper publish positive news. “I've thought about it,” she says. “And I say to myself, ‘We're a weekly newspaper, and especially in a time like today, if we were to put out on the front page of our paper on Thursday that someone was killed, or five people were shot, people are going to want to know by



next Thursday, ‘Well, which people were shot, and who was the killer?’ Well, we can’t keep up with that news. But what we can keep up with is the work the community is doing to engage the problem of violence in our neighborhoods, which is the kind of thing that doesn’t get reported [in mainstream papers]. We’ve talked about and covered marches and demonstrations against police violence in our community years before George Floyd. That may not be a ‘positive’ story per se, but it is a reflection of our community actively seeking solutions to the problems that lead to violence. Which makes the story ‘positive,’ but it doesn’t ignore the ‘negative’ that exists, because we live it.”

As another example of this impulse, Prince cited “Beyond the Barrel of the Gun,” an ongoing series of articles in the *New York Amsterdam News* investigating the root causes of gun violence in communities of color. Backed by the Google News Initiative Equity Fund, the series exemplifies what Prince characterizes as a “bright spot” of foundation grants made available to Black news outlets.

“Everybody knows there are news deserts everywhere, not just in the Black community,” Prince says. “But the problem for me isn’t that [Black outlets] don’t have the money to do this work. The problem is that, overall, the standards for the Black press aren’t the same as they are in the mainstream press. For instance, when a Black newspaper reported that Tyler Perry had bought BET, it was portrayed as a done deal. And then it turned out it wasn’t a done deal and they embarrassed themselves. You’ve got to have editors around to flag these things down.”

Linn Washington Jr., who served as executive editor of the historically Black *Philadelphia Tribune* between 1993 and 1995 and still works as a correspondent there, has found other frustrations in trying to do the basics of community news gathering.

“It’s a fact that we in the community don’t always respect our media,” Washington says. “I’ve found Black people who’ll believe the *Inquirer* [Philadelphia’s major news outlet] before they’d believe the *Tribune*.”

Despite such frustrations—and the failure of mainstream networks like MSNBC to routinely include representatives from Black media on their programs—Washington values papers like the *Tribune* that manage to survive despite the obstacles. Barnes, whose *Informant* has nine full-time employees and 11 freelancers, likewise believes there will always be a place for Black news outlets.

“It’s a matter of trust,” she says. “It’s like being home. Sometimes we don’t always value home, but it’s that place where the people who are writing about us, photographing us, editorializing about our issues—they know us. Because they are us.” **N**

(Thompson, continued from page 31)

did not gain widespread reach. (Look no further than Fox News to confirm that any company or person who discusses or depicts disabled identities in a positive light is at risk of being lambasted.) As a result, outlets that give space to disabled voices may face more resistance from the public. The prospect of an outlet being pressured to reduce, shift, and/or abandon inclusive storytelling is a scary one.

There is also the safety of the writers. The risk of being targeted for harassment as a disabled individual remains high. Keah Brown, a disabled Black woman who’s a freelance journalist, told me recently that after she wrote an essay for *Inverse* about how superhero stories have a disability problem, she “received actual death threats and slews of e-mails calling me all sorts of ableist and racist slurs.” I, like many disabled people with Internet footprints, have been similarly harassed. Magazines, newspapers, and media websites that remain silent and unprepared for this will face consequences when it comes to acquiring and retaining multiply marginalized writers.

THROUGHOUT MY CAREER, I have been lucky to work with outlets that have transformed the freelancing experience for disabled writers by recognizing that they can offer an undeniable value to journalism. Some of those websites include *Teen Vogue* and *Prism*. But the one that feels closest to my heart is *Bitch* magazine, the first website that gave me an opportunity to interview one of my favorite celebrities, Rachel True. It was my first celebrity interview and unrelated to the disability writing I am typically given a lane for.

Writing about something other than disability rights—one of the few topics editors often trust disabled writers to cover—has become a privilege when it shouldn’t be. Ableism has put the onus on disabled writers to correct the record about our lived realities. *Bitch* did that for so many of us before it ceased operating in June of 2022, and its loss continues to be felt. The closures of progressive outlets in the past few years have been difficult for everyone in journalism, but for multiply marginalized people, the few opportunities we started with are now even fewer. Many of us have been left wondering where we can receive editorial care.

For those of us in the industry, the questions about where journalism will be in five or 10 years are ever-present. And given the ableism and misguidance from uninformed editors who handle disability-centered content, the cesspool of comment sections, and the possibility of being doxxed, many of us are weighing whether it is actually worth it. Amid the revival of interest in blogging with tools like Substack and Tiny Letter, the choice of writing for oneself as many of us did a decade ago is looking more appealing, despite the financial risk it poses.

As a social worker, I have always been motivated to support not only myself but others. My vision for my future as a Black disabled writer includes working with newsroom leaders to address the lack of stories about and by disabled folks, while still writing for outlets that respect my voice—and, importantly, using my contacts to support and leverage the work of disabled writer colleagues.

This is a critical moment for journalism that will determine not only its fate in terms of legitimacy and relevance, but also in regard to who is afforded the chance to tell their stories. Prioritizing free speech, facts, and ethics in our narratives and revitalizing an industry in a ghastly era are the responsibilities not only of disabled people like me, but of all of us—writers, editors, outlets, donors, and readers.



"I received actual death threats and slews of e-mails calling me all sorts of ableist and racist slurs."

—Keah Brown, disabled freelance journalist and author

ANTI-MONOPOLY POWER

Bryce Covert

Beginning in the 1970s, the Federal Trade Commission gave up on its mission to protect consumers and competition. Then Lina Khan took charge of the agency and turned it on its head.



THE INAUGURAL ANTI-MONOPOLY SUMMIT, CONVENED IN MAY IN WASHINGTON, D.C., by the left-leaning nonprofit American Economic Liberties Project, was sold out; latecomers had to stand along the walls. The video that kicked off the event was the stuff of political campaign rallies. Loud, upbeat music played over footage of President Joe Biden signing executive orders aimed at promoting competition. Other members of his administration appeared too; prominently featured among them was Lina Khan, the Federal Trade Commission's youngest-ever chair. Just six years earlier, Khan was a law school student writing controversial papers that took on corporate behemoths.

The members of what has been called the neo-Brandeisian movement—named for Louis Brandeis, the ardent anti-monopolist Supreme Court justice—were feeling victorious. In the span of just a handful of years, their arguments about the urgent need to revive antitrust enforcement to ensure a fairer and more robust economy had worked their way up from the

pages of law journals and lefty publications to the halls of federal power. And there is perhaps no more striking example of that movement's meteoric rise than Khan's appointment shortly after Biden took office. "If everybody in the anti-monopoly group had had to pick someone to lead the FTC, we would have picked Lina," says Stacy Mitchell, a co-executive director of the advocacy group the Institute for Local Self-Reliance. "To the surprise of everyone, especially reformers, one of the converts [to

their movement] was Joe Biden."

Khan was both a member of the audience and a keynote speaker at the summit. Wearing the kelly green blazer she often dons for public events, with little makeup and her dark hair pulled back haphazardly, she appeared relaxed onstage as she talked about her work at the FTC. One of her priorities, she said, was to ensure that antitrust policies are pursued "in a way that's benefiting everybody." That doesn't just mean concern for whether consumers face higher prices, which has

been the sole focus of antitrust enforcers for the past 50 years, she said, but also whether entrepreneurs can start new businesses and whether workers are receiving good wages and benefits.

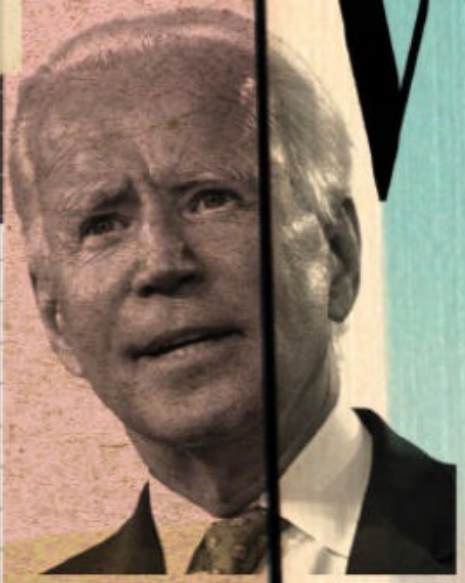
Biden's decision to elevate Khan to the chair of the FTC "put her in a very unique position to propel this agenda forward in ways that no one else could," says Darren Bush, an antitrust expert and professor at the University of Houston Law Center. From her current post, Khan has reclaimed the agency's existing powers to propose new rules that could net workers hundreds of billions of dollars in increased wages; revamped its scrutiny of mergers with the aim of unleashing a crackdown; and even gone after Amazon. But she has also become the movement's lightning rod. As of May, *The Wall Street Journal* had run 76 editorials, op-eds, and letters to the editor criticizing Khan during her two-year tenure; other Biden officials who have pushed similar policies, such as former special assistant to the president for competition and tech policy Tim Wu and Department of Justice Antitrust Division Assistant Attorney General Jonathan Kanter, have not received the same treatment. And Khan's time is limited: Her term expires next September, and although she can continue to serve until someone is confirmed to take her spot, under a Republican president she stands little chance of remaining as chair.

Senator Amy Klobuchar, who spoke at the May conference, rattled off a list of anti-monopoly bills she has

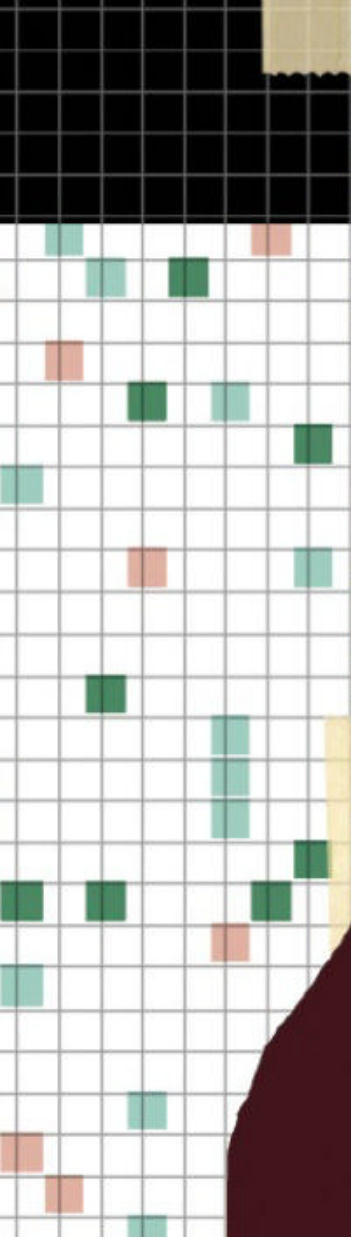
"If everybody in the anti-monopoly group had to pick someone to lead the FTC, we would have picked Lina."

—Stacy Mitchell, Institute for Local Self-Reliance

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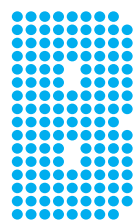


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pending. “We have to stop admiring the problem,” she implored. Despite the sense of triumph, there was also a question hanging over the conference: Can this movement generate enough concrete change to permanently reanimate an agency—and a political agenda—that has been moribund for decades?



BORN IN LONDON, LINA KHAN MOVED TO THE UNITED STATES WITH HER family when she was 11, and she retains no trace of a British accent. Her parents are from Pakistan; her father works as a consultant, at one point for a large Indian online gaming company, and her mother worked in healthcare and information services. Khan and her two brothers went to public school in a suburb of New York City. At age 15, she wrote a story for her school’s paper about a nearby Starbucks that wasn’t allowing students to sit down, which got picked up by *The New York Times*.

When I sit down on a plush, blue leather couch across from her in her cavernous FTC office in October, Khan tells me she was radicalized by the 2008 financial crisis. At the time, she was a sophomore at Williams College, studying political theory. It “struck me as a very sharp illustration of how policymaking gone awry can really be catastrophic for people’s lives,” she says. She graduated in 2010 into an economy still mired in the aftereffects of the Great Recession.

Listening in: Khan, seen here with Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General Doha Mekki (right), held a series of listening sessions to hear from ordinary people about the impact of mergers on their lives.

Khan got hooked on antitrust “accidentally,” she tells me. Drawn to journalism, she landed at New America, a D.C. think tank, joining a group that was working on industry consolidation and antitrust enforcement well before those issues were on the national agenda. “My job was really to document the consolidation and document what the effects of it had been,” she says. So she dove deep into specific markets, including book publishing, commodities like grain and silver, and the airline industry. Her work instilled in her a deep sense of not only how much consolidation had occurred in the economy over the past 40 years, but also how policy choices had allowed it to happen.

After her stint at New America, Khan chose to attend Yale

Law School rather than take a job as a commodities reporter at *The Wall Street Journal*. “It was a close call,” she says. But she worried that beat reporting would force her to stray from antitrust. She “already had her own voice and her own commitments in law school,” David Singh Grewal, a professor at the UC Berkeley School of Law who taught Khan at Yale, said in a statement he shared with reporters.

It was during Khan’s time at Yale that the revived antitrust movement started gaining traction. Americans’ wages were barely growing despite low unemployment, and scholars made the case that “monopsony” power was one reason why. Monopsony—in contrast to its cousin, monopoly—impacts workers rather than consumers: A company has monopsony power when it squeezes out competitors and leaves so few other employment opportunities that workers get locked into their jobs and can’t demand better treatment. Then, in 2016, Senator Elizabeth Warren gave energy to the movement with a keynote speech on antitrust at a New America conference. She would later make it a core part of her 2020 presidential campaign.

It was also during her time at Yale that Khan became famous, or infamous, depending on whom you ask. At age 27, she published “Amazon’s Antitrust Paradox,” an unusually digestible law school paper that argued that even though Amazon held prices down, it was still engaging in monopolistic behavior by elbowing out competitors and swallowing up market share. It “quickly and somewhat unexpectedly became about as famous as any [student academic paper] has ever become,” Grewal said in his statement. The inspiration for the paper had come to Khan while she was at New America. As part of her research into consolidation in different industries, she talked to small and medium-size businesses that sold their products on Amazon, as well as to investors, analysts, and others. It was “hundreds and hundreds of hours of those conversations,” Khan says, that showed her how Amazon “was walking headfirst into the shortcomings of our current antitrust regime.”

Rohit Chopra, now the director of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, was also a speaker at the anti-monopoly summit. In 2018, he had come to the FTC with three other new commissioners and found an agency that “had fallen into deep decay and disarray over four decades,” Chopra said in his remarks. “The agency had largely lost its credibility as a regulator and enforcer.” He soon hired Khan to work with him at the FTC as a legal fellow to uncover the agency’s past and “lay out a new vision.” With her help, Chopra published an official comment that September describing how to restore the agency’s enforcement authority simply by reasserting the powers Congress originally vested in it—powers that had been ignored for decades.

In 2019, after leaving the FTC to teach at Columbia Law School, Khan was hired by David Cicilline, then a member of Congress from Rhode Island and the chair of the House subcommittee on antitrust, to work with him on what would become a landmark investigation into Big Tech. Khan contributed to a 400-page report laying out how large technology



“Khan understood deep in her bones that what she was doing was not some theoretical, esoteric argument.”

—Former representative David Cicilline



companies like Google, Amazon, Apple, and Facebook had crushed their competitors, which led to a bipartisan package of bills. “She understood deep in her bones that what she was doing was not just some sort of theoretical, esoteric argument,” Cicilline says.

The FTC’s headquarters in D.C.’s Federal Triangle is a majestic building adorned with enormous columns, in view of both the Capitol and the Washington Monument. Its location in the center of power is a vestige of the cachet Congress intended for the agency. “The FTC, as originally designed, was supposed to be the overseer of policy,” says Bush, the antitrust expert. It was created in 1914, although its predecessor, the Bureau of Corporations, was formed in 1903, at a time when antitrust issues were very much in the public consciousness. Brandeis was on the Supreme Court; Theodore Roosevelt, famous for busting corporate “trusts,” was in the White House, followed by Woodrow Wilson, who continued that mission. A look around Khan’s office confirms that public sentiment. The walls are lined with anti-monopoly political cartoons from the early 20th century; the one hanging over the couch she sat on when we spoke depicts trusts as pirates forcing Uncle Sam to walk the plank. An early version of Monopoly—a game developed by the feminist and anti-capitalist Elizabeth Magie Phillips in the early 1900s to demonstrate the evils of concentrated wealth—sat on the coffee table between us.

“Monopoly was part of the everyday political discourse of Americans,” says Mitchell. But starting in the 1970s, the concept got less notice from politicians and the press. Mitchell suggests that, paradoxically, the success of the antitrust movement meant monopolies became less of a problem for the public; she also faults the FTC for “reced[ing] into the bureaucratic shadows” as its enforcement actions became more technical. The growing public apathy allowed President Ronald Reagan’s administration to put out policies reflecting the views of the conservative legal scholar Robert Bork, who argued that mergers and acquisitions would benefit the economy so long as they didn’t lead to higher prices for consumers.

Khan is determined to throw the FTC’s doors back open and reclaim the tools it once employed, and she now has the power to do so. The other commissioners vote on which cases to bring and which rules to propagate, but the chair has “tremendous influence” on the

agency’s policies and priorities, says Spencer Weber Waller, the director of the Institute for Consumer Antitrust Studies at Loyola University Chicago School of Law.

Khan is unlike any of the chairs who have preceded her at the FTC, at least in recent history. At 34, she is not only the youngest person to chair the agency but also the first person of South Asian descent. She’s the fourth woman to hold the position on a non-acting basis. She also represents an ideological break with the recent past. Previous heads came from private law firms and expected to return to private practice afterward. “That revolving door creates a lot of incentives to not disrupt” how things work, Bush says. Under both Republican and Democratic administrations, the FTC frequently waved big mergers through, allowing American industries to become more and more concentrated. In 2015, under President Barack Obama, the FTC announced that it was going to essentially kneecap its own enforcement actions against unfair competition by narrowly employing the stand-alone authority that Congress had granted it to act outside of specific antitrust laws. Khan and her fellow commissioners rescinded that statement a few weeks into her tenure.



NOT ONLY IS KHAN REVIVING THE FTC’S POWERS, BUT she is working hard to shed the agency’s technocratic past and invite the public in. She regularly holds open commission meetings in which anyone can speak directly to the commissioners and has opened public dockets that allow Americans to submit comments about the unfair business practices they’re experiencing. She has also held a series of listening sessions, something that was infrequent under many previous chairs. At a recent session in Colorado about the proposed merger between the Kroger and Albertsons grocery chains, she heard from workers who had suffered under other such deals.

“They promised us we would keep our jobs. That we would have better benefits, a pension for retirement,” said Christine Martinez, who worked at a grocery store that was sold as part of the Safeway-Albertsons merger. Two months later, she said, “I was told our stores were closing.” When Khan asked the audience if anyone there supported the merger and wanted to speak, the only response was laughter.

“We hear from everybody, from gig drivers to hotel franchise owners to parents who have lost their children because they had to ration insulin,” Khan says. She joined striking Hollywood workers in July, connecting their complaints to consolidation in the industry.

Meanwhile, there has been an equally energetic backlash. *The Wall Street Journal* has run an average of one piece against her every 10 days. In January, it said she had gone from “aspiring renegade to establishment phony” emblematic of D.C.’s “nonstop mendacity and cynicism.” In February, it accused her of abusing her power and engaging in “bias and lack of transparency,” concluding that “the deck is stacked against business under Ms. Khan.” In March, it called her “a Machiavellian who muddies transparent processes and trashes precedent.” Many people I spoke with said it’s hard not to tie the relentless attack to who Khan is—a woman,

As of May, *The Wall Street Journal* had run 76 editorials, op-eds, and letters to the editor criticizing Khan during her two-year tenure.

Movement makers: Rohit Chopra, now head of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, recruited Khan to the FTC to “lay out a new vision” for the agency.

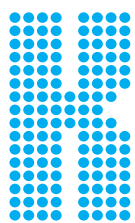




especially a young woman of color. One of the things fueling the criticism of her, Bush says, “is the unspoken fact that she is a minority woman.” Jonathan Kanter, the assistant AG, doesn’t attract the same level of vitriol, even though the two frequently appear together at events and speak from the same playbook.

It’s hard to square the venom hurled at Khan with what she’s like in person. Elizabeth Warren first met her when she invited Khan and others to dinner in her Senate office while Khan was still a law student who had just published her paper on Amazon. “The conversation was terrific,” Warren recalls: Khan was the first person to explain to her “how something could appear to be free to the consumer and yet cause significant injury both to the consumer and to competition.” Despite the waves she is

making, Spencer Weber Waller says, Khan “is a conservative person in terms of her decision-making style. She’s deliberate, she’s very precise, she wants a lot of information.”



KHAN INSISTS THAT SHE’S NOT INVENTING NEW POWERS for the FTC; instead, she’s “adhering to the rule of law.” In addition to the Sherman Act (1890), which cracks down on monopolies and anticompetitive interstate trade practices, and the Clayton Act (1914), which prohibits anticompetitive mergers and acquisitions, the FTC enforces the Federal Trade Commission Act (1914), which gives the agency broad authority to go after companies that engage in “unfair methods of competition.” While the agency is limited in the remedies it can

health aide, signed a contract with an agency that had a six-month noncompete clause because she needed the work. If she were to get an offer of better pay at another agency, she is “barred from moving to the higher paying company,” Ramsey wrote in a comment. It’s “unfair. It stacks the system even more against working people.”

Khan didn’t stop there. The FTC and the Department of Justice have long maintained a document, known as the “merger guidelines,” that gives companies a road map of sorts regarding what kinds of deals will be blocked or approved. In the 1960s, the guidelines created “these bright lines,” Mitchell says—for example, an acquisition by a company with a certain level of market share would routinely be blocked. In the 1980s, under Reagan, the agency did a 180 and issued new guidelines that reflected the assumption that mergers would be denied only if they were likely to raise prices. Subsequent revisions, even under Democrats, went further down that road.

In July, Khan and Kanter released a proposed update outlining the ways they plan to crack down on consolidation and anticompetitive mergers. It lays out 13 ways that the FTC and the Justice Department could determine whether a merger violates existing laws about economic competition, and it names not just consumers as possible victims of an anticompetitive merger but workers too. If an employer is so big that it can “reduce or freeze wages” or “cut benefits [or make schedules] much less predictable” through market share, Khan said at a webinar shortly after the guidelines were released, that would make it anticompetitive. The revision highlights the ways

that technology companies try to squash rivals by buying up potential future competitors and using their scale to overwhelm competition. It also calls out vertical mergers of companies that don’t compete directly but operate in the same supply chain as well as companies that engage in multiple acquisitions. The changes are meant to discourage companies from pursuing these kinds of deals while shifting the

way future FTC commissioners, as well as judges, view what kinds of mergers are permissible.

The FTC has targeted a variety of mergers under Khan. In a recent case against an anesthesiology practice in Texas, it took the unusual step of suing a private equity firm that employed what it called a “roll-up scheme” by buying other practices in the state, alleging that they were working together to consolidate the industry and drive up prices. The FTC has also attempted to block a



"We're not going back to the pre-Lina status quo. Full stop."

—Senator Elizabeth Warren

Comrade in arms: Assistant Attorney General Jonathan Kanter, another member of the “neo-Brandeisians,” has attracted less vitriol than Khan.

seek—it can issue cease-and-desist orders, but not fines or criminal penalties—it has “a broad range of powers” to regulate corporations, Waller says, including the ability to make rules that give enforcement more teeth. “The FTC should have quite strong powers to enforce against unfair methods of competition and to call them illegal,” says Eleanor Fox, a professor emerita at New York University School of Law. Yet the FTC’s focus since the 1970s has been on “efficiency” and consumer welfare, neither of which is based in the laws governing the agency.

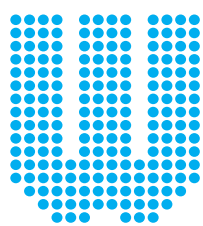
Khan is looking back to what those earlier laws actually say. “We are fully activating the tools and the laws that Congress charged us with administering,” she told the audience at the anti-monopoly summit. That’s been true throughout the past year, which has seen the agency take a series of significant actions. The first was a rule proposed in January that would ban noncompete clauses, which prohibit workers from taking jobs at similar businesses. In proposing the new rule, the FTC employed the stand-alone power that Khan’s predecessors swore off in 2015. The agency estimates that if the rule were enacted, it would raise wages by nearly \$300 billion a year by allowing workers to move more freely between jobs for better pay and benefits.

The proposed rule, which is relatively easy to read, has gotten over 26,000 comments, many of them from workers who have been stifled by an inability to switch jobs. John Ludlow, a urologist working under a noncompete clause, wrote: “If I left my practice I would have to take my children out of their school, move them away from their friends and established extracurricular activities, solely due to the restrictive covenant in place that is remarkably onerous.” Eve Ramsey, a home

number of mergers, such as the ones proposed between the pharmaceutical companies Amgen and Horizon Therapeutics as well as the medical technology companies Illumina and Grail.

In September, Khan took aim at her white whale: Amazon. The FTC, along with 17 state attorneys general, charged the company with breaking antitrust laws by using its monopoly power to “inflate prices, degrade quality, and stifle innovation for consumers and businesses.” Rather than claim that Amazon is breaking laws by unfairly holding prices down, as Khan argued in her law school article, the suit contends that the company uses its size to increase prices and keep competitors out of the market. The argument is based on “a framework that’s more traditional than radical,” says Fox. That’s a benefit, she adds: “If they prove the allegations, they should win, even under our very conservative law.”

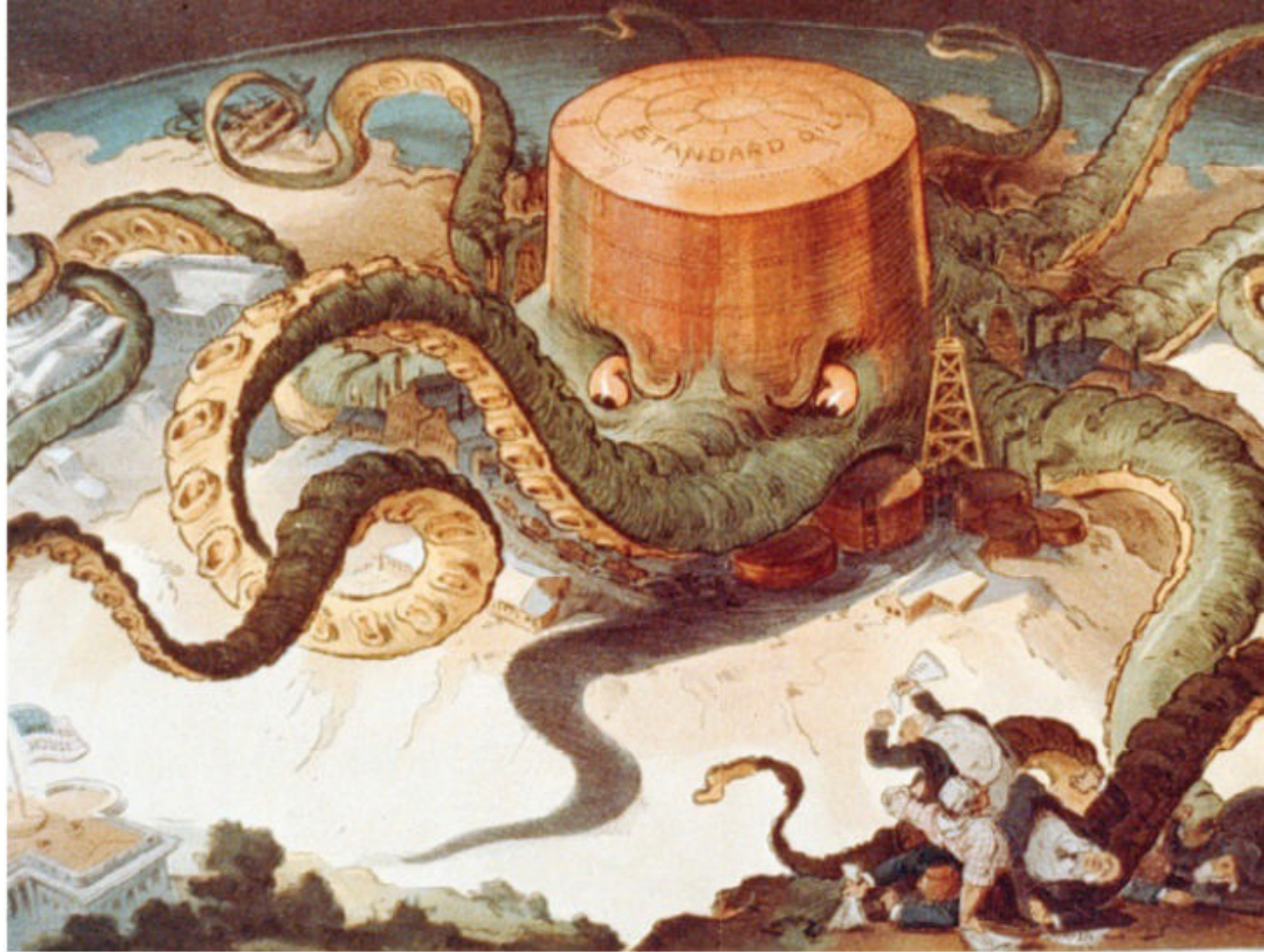
Some have criticized this approach. But Khan says that writing a paper as a student is very different from bringing a lawsuit as a government official. At the FTC, she was able to issue subpoenas to peek under Amazon’s hood. She also notes that monopolies go through “a life cycle.” A new company trying to gain market share rapidly may use different tactics to squash competition than the ones it deploys as a full-blown monopoly. Had the agency brought a lawsuit against Amazon earlier, she argues, it would have probably looked very different. Regardless, the FTC’s job is to “ensure that markets are working fairly and competitively,” Khan tells me, especially when it comes to companies that have “become too big to care.”



ILL THE CHANGES KHAN HAS MADE at the FTC endure beyond her term as chair? “We’re not going back to the pre-Lina status quo,” Warren says with a laugh.

“Full stop. Lina has reminded everyone that the emperor has no clothes in antitrust law.” Everyday people can see themselves in what she’s doing: She’s taken on “real-life stuff that makes a difference,” Waller says. Mitchell notes that a number of trade associations, from farmers to pharmacists, are now spending time and resources lobbying on antitrust issues. Some of the people watching what Khan is doing will also be inspired to go to law school and pursue her way of thinking on antitrust; once low in terms of enrollment, such courses are now filling up.

But even if the public has changed its mind, the judiciary hasn’t yet. In January, a judge ruled against the FTC in its lawsuit to prevent Meta, the owner of Facebook, from buying the virtual-reality app maker Within, and in July a judge barred the agency from delaying Microsoft’s acquisition of the video game maker Activision Blizzard. “Anything the Federal Trade Commission does, if it’s an order or a judgment, can be



appealed to the courts,” Fox says. And while judges will typically heed the merger guidelines that Khan and Kanter updated, it will take time for them to be fully embraced; some judges may resist them completely. Biden has been nominating new judges at a rapid clip, but the Senate hasn’t been able to confirm them at the same pace. Then there’s the current Supreme Court, the most pro-business court in the country’s history. Any of Khan’s reforms that end up there stand little chance.

In a functioning system, the FTC’s court losses would prompt lawmakers to act. That’s what happened after the Justice Department lost a case to block a steel merger in 1948; two years later, Congress passed an amendment to the Clayton Act that applied it to vertical as well as horizontal mergers. Lawmakers could clarify that antitrust laws aren’t focused solely on consumer prices and that market efficiency alone isn’t grounds for a legal merger. They could set some thresholds for industry concentration and empower agencies to go after new forms of monopoly behavior.

One reason some in the movement remain optimistic is that antitrust is not championed only by Democrats. Khan received 21 Republican votes when she was confirmed to the FTC. Antitrust legislation aimed at consolidation in tech was introduced in 2021 on a bipartisan basis. Republican senators Josh Hawley and J.D. Vance have embraced the antitrust cause. Still, on the right and the left, the number of lawmakers committed to these issues is small. Warren lambasted Republicans as “terrible” on the issue, even if a “handful” have gotten on board. Equally as troubling, she notes, “Democrats are only somewhat better.”

Khan herself is thinking about what the FTC’s future will be once she is no longer chair. One part of ensuring things are done differently, she says, is the work she’s overseen to update the agency’s enforcement mechanisms. Another is ensuring that the public understands how much economic consolidation affects their lives. “People are recognizing the ways in which outsized, unchecked corporate private power can harm not just our economy but also our liberty,” she says. “That means that whoever has the fortune and privilege to be in these positions going forward will also be held accountable.” ■

Power of the press:

In this political cartoon published in 1904, Standard Oil wraps its many tentacles around industries, the US Capitol, and the White House.

In a functioning system, the FTC's court losses would prompt Congress to update antitrust law for new forms of monopoly power.

Local news has
been destroyed.
Here's how we
can revive it.

BUILD BACK BETTER

John Nichols





VER THE PAST DECADE, THE MOST USEFUL CONSTRUCT FOR EXPLAINING the crisis that is playing out at the intersection of American media and democracy has been that of the “news desert.” Popularized through the groundbreaking work of researchers like those at the University of North Carolina’s Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, the idea was instantly recognizable to people living in small towns like the one where I grew up, in rural southeastern Wisconsin: As old-media outlets collapsed and new media failed to fill the void, news in vast stretches of the United States was going uncovered. Over time, the definition was expanded to recognize the decline of newspapers and other forms of media in metropolitan areas, where—just as in rural America—people were being deprived of “the sort of credible and comprehensive news and information that feeds democracy at the grassroots level,” the center warns.

The “news desert” framing has proved to be enormously valuable, not just for journalists and media reform activists but also for political writers trying to explain why former president Donald Trump—despite 91 criminal charges and ever more fascistic rhetoric—currently leads most recent 2024 general election polls. When people get all their information from Fox News, right-wing talk radio, and Elon Musk’s X—with no tempering by a local outlet that offers some variety of reporting and opinion—is it any wonder that Trump’s strongest support has come from news deserts?

Yet, despite all that it has added to the national conversation, the concept of the news desert as it’s currently understood is due for retirement. That’s because

the idea can no longer adequately describe what has happened in the United States. The term “news desert” implies that, somewhere, there is a news oasis—some pocket of the country where local journalism is thriving. But while some places are better off than others, the process of desertification has spread across the whole country. This is not an isolated, or an isolatable, phenomenon. America has become a coast-to-coast news desert.

It is neither wise nor accurate to think of the death of local news as a phenomenon associated with the most neglected corners of America, be they rural or urban. “People think news deserts are only in flyover country,” says Samuel Freedman, a veteran newspaper reporter and former *New York Times* columnist. “Local news, local journalism, is disappearing everywhere.”

THE CRISIS IS BECOMING EVERY BIT AS REAL IN PROSPEROUS urban centers as it is in the abandoned factory towns of the Rust Belt or the dusty county seats of the Dakotas. Just ask Congressman Greg Casar, a Texas Democrat who represents two of the most dynamic metropolitan areas in the United States: Austin and San Antonio.

In 2014, when he was elected to the Austin City Council, Casar found a robust media spotlight trained on him. “We usually had two people from the *Statesman* at most council meetings,” he says, referring to the *Austin American-*

Statesman, a traditional daily print and digital newspaper. “We usually had a reporter from the *Chronicle*, our alternative weekly, and another from NPR, some television people. It was a crowd.” But that was then. “By the time I was leaving [in 2022], there were a lot of meetings where the media table was empty,” Casar tells me.

Casar talks about the decay of local media in Austin, a university town and state capital at the heart of one of America’s most rapidly growing regions, with the same sense of loss as the residents of areas such as Hemphill County, Tex., where the local weekly newspaper stopped publishing in March, or Union Grove, Wis., where I grew up and started working for the now-defunct *Union Grove Sun*. “It’s one of the saddest things I’ve seen in my time in politics,” Casar says of the hollowing out of journalism in Austin. “It’s a huge issue for this city and, I’d say, for the whole country.”

The great mesh of local media that underpinned our civic life—made up of thousands of newsrooms that tried, however imperfectly, however insufficiently, to tell the story of the United States—has been torn so violently that it no longer functions. Our democratic safety net, which was spread over the long history of the republic, often with massive federal government support, is now too tattered to provide anything more than a vague and increasingly unreliable promise of protection against propaganda and autocracy.

Unless media advocates and policymakers focus on addressing this existential reality, there will never be a response to the crisis of journalism that is sufficient in vision and scope to address the void that is swallowing up civil society. Yet the depth of this crisis is still too frequently neglected in the discussion about saving what’s left of journalism.

WHILE THERE IS CONSIDERABLE recognition that the old, pre-Internet models for funding journalism, which relied on advertising and mass low-cost subscriptions, are bankrupt, there is still

The current concept of the news desert can no longer adequately describe what has happened to journalism in the United States.

John Nichols is a national affairs correspondent for The Nation.

What's needed is nothing less than a Marshall Plan for journalism. That requires massive public investment.



Only a start: Curbing the power of strip miners like Dean Singleton and zillionaire tycoons like Jeff Bezos is good—but it's not enough.

an air of unreality to the proposals for finding new sources of support. Even now, the discussion defers to wishful thinking about multiplying the number of ego-driven billionaire buyers for prestige papers like *The Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*; about philanthropic interventions; and about Congress providing tax benefits for ailing newspapers—even those owned by the hedge funds that have gobbled up local media outlets in search of a

quick buck. While there's merit in trying some of these ideas, none of them can begin to solve the problem.

The same goes for other worthy suggestions. Breaking up existing media conglomerates is a great idea. So, too, are regulatory interventions that address the damage done by social media giants such as Facebook, which grab up local journalism without fair compensation. And, yes, tax credits for hiring journalists will help a bit in some markets. But these steps will never establish a local and regional journalism that is strong enough to give Americans the information and insights they need to govern their own affairs.

What's needed is nothing less than a Marshall Plan for journalism. That requires massive public investment in not-for-profit news outlets—primarily but not exclusively public media—so that it rivals what's seen in countries that rank well above the United States in the Economist Group's Democracy Index, such as Germany and Norway. Or, if you're looking for an American model, to levels not seen since content-neutral postal subsidies led to a proliferation of local news outlets in the first decades of the republic.

Unfortunately, the chances of that happening in our polarized political environment will remain nonexistent until there is a much deeper recognition of the crisis—and the need for urgent action.

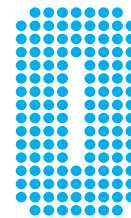
The argument for hitting the panic button is based not on speculation but on data. Newspapers that still maintain the largest—and sometimes the only—newsrooms of consequence in communities across the country are disappearing at an exponential rate. And the prospects for their replacement by online experiments remain dim.

The United States is now losing an average of 2.5 newspapers every week on a trajectory that has seen the shuttering of just under one-third of local print publications—many of which had at least tried to develop a digital presence—since 2005. During the same period, according to a new study written by Penelope Muse Abernathy for Northwestern University's State of Local News Project, 43,000 journalists lost their jobs, most of them reporters and editors for daily publications.

No area in the United States is immune. "In terms of local news, New York City really is a news desert," says Freedman, noting not just the national focus of *The New York Times* but the decline of the *Daily News*, which historically kept a close watch on local issues, and the weekly *Village Voice*. This is no slight on the stellar independent news start-ups that have worked hard to fill the void. But, Freedman adds, "the online efforts haven't gotten the penetration, even remotely. They're for insiders."



They're also struggling. "Many digital start-ups have trouble gaining enough subscribers and funding to achieve long-term sustainability," Abernathy explains. "Since 2018, the number of new local news digital start-ups established annually has roughly equaled the number that go dark." The same goes for other alternatives to the traditional daily newspaper. "Most ethnic and minority-owned media have suffered from the same dramatic decline in advertising revenue as mainstream newspapers. As a result, more than 150 longstanding ethnic news operations closed during the pandemic," Abernathy says. "And public broadcasting outlets—especially local NPR news stations—are underfunded...many metro areas have not been able to replace the missing newspapers with digital or broadcast alternatives, and most suburban and rural communities that lose a local newspaper do not get a replacement."



OF COURSE, THERE ARE STILL WAYS FOR wealthy and powerful people to get information. But for the vast majority of Americans, says Craig Aaron, the co-CEO of the media reform group Free Press, "even in urban centers with multiple news outlets, there's a dearth of local news coverage. There have been so many cuts to newsrooms. There are so few journalists working to provide local coverage, to provide a local perspective, that the national conversation is overwhelming the local conversation."

That local conversation involves not just reports from Main Street but coverage of many of the great issues of the day. Think of how many battles over book banning, LGBTQI+ rights, and control of school boards have taken place in small towns and suburbs in recent years. When there is robust local journalism that is easily accessible and widely distributed, it brings a sense of perspective and respect to the discourse. "When people get their news primarily from national sources, they are much more likely to see [journalists they] disagree with in a negative light," says Freedman. Just as our elections are warped by congressional gerrymandering, so our news is warped by the nationalization of political debate by old- and new-media corporations that profit by pushing Americans into camps that fear and, in many cases, literally hate one another.

Yet most of those discussions miss the full reality of the concern that James Madison, the

essential author of the First Amendment protection for freedom of the press, outlined 200 years ago: “A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both.”

What’s at stake is not just the loss in coverage of city council hearings and school board meetings. Without a lot more journalism in a lot more places, the nationalization of the discourse will accelerate, the divisions will deepen, and the journalistic void will continue to be filled with political attack ads, lies, and propaganda.

TURNING THE TIDE WILL REQUIRE A LEVEL OF INVESTMENT that billionaires and philanthropies are never going to make. There was much excitement in late 2023 over the announcement by Press Forward, a consortium of the MacArthur Foundation and 21 other donors, that it would invest \$500 million over the next five years to revitalize local journalism. That sounds good, until you remember that back in 1985, when the *Des Moines Register* was fully staffed and covering Iowa with a seriousness that had won the paper 15 Pulitzer Prizes, the newspaper sold for \$165 million. While \$100

million a year for the next five years certainly sounds impressive, it’s a drop in the bucket.

What’s needed is spending on a whole other level. Germany, for instance, funds public media at a rate of \$142.42 per person. The United States, by comparison, spends \$3.16 per person, per year, on public broadcasting. Content-neutral, journalism-focused investment in existing public and community media is not the only fix for collapsing local news. New media outlets of all kinds need to be developed, suggests Aaron, especially in communities, rural and urban, “that never had enough coverage.”

There’s no need to limit the vision of what might work. But there is a need for an honest understanding of the scope of the crisis—and the size of the investment that will be needed to address it. The challenge is to create a political movement sufficient to advance solutions that are bold enough to ensure, as Freedman puts it, that “journalism is no longer an abstraction” for the vast majority of Americans. To do that, we’ve got to recognize that the news desert is now nationwide. Providing the resources that are needed to make it blossom anew is essential for saving democracy. **N**

(Teachout, continued from page 21)

He never drafted a bill along those lines, but with these same principles, we could.

In fact, laws requiring that centralized infrastructure treat all people equally are among the oldest regulations in human society. In the Roman Empire, “just price” laws prevented sellers from charging more based on demand, regardless of how much buyers would pay when the conditions allowed it. (Ferryman, according to legend, could not enact surge pricing on the Tiber!)

These kinds of regulations have been especially important in communications infrastructure. Nondiscrimination rules are at the center of the early laws governing the post office. Since the Postal Service Act of 1792, the post office has had a core obligation of equal access. The Atlantic Cable Act, passed by Congress in March 1857, required Great Britain to agree on the “equality of rights among the citizens of the United States in the use of said communication and the lines of telegraph.” The Mann-Elkins Act of 1910 extended the basic premise of nondiscrimination to the telegraph, telephone, and wireless industries.

Antidiscrimination rules have governed each new revolutionary technology to protect the public from corporations seeking to use these technologies to become despotic gatekeepers. The principle of equal access came to define and then govern all the developments in information infrastructure—until now.

I’m sure we’ll hear that antidiscrimina-

tion rules will hurt innovation, but history suggests the opposite: Antidiscrimination enabled a thriving communications ecosystem free of centralized power, general dependency, and fear.

A nondiscrimination rule, as applied to platforms, could take several forms. It could mean a rule that companies cannot discriminate based on the viewpoints of the content they’re required to carry. There is no law prohibiting tech firms from manipulating their platforms for their owner’s ideological or political ends—say, right before an election or during a critical moment of political debate. Google and Facebook, for example, can suppress debates on corporate taxes, and publishers will take note and generate fewer articles on such policies.

TikTok—owned by a Chinese company over which the Chinese state has veto power—can easily amplify voices that serve the interests of the Chinese government and hide those that are more critical.

In today’s climate, a nondiscrimination principle for speech on tech platforms is often seen as a right-wing idea. But Democrats and progressives have a chilling example of what the right to freely discriminate means: Elon Musk. When Musk bought Twitter, he made more users see his favorite projects (and his own tweets) and suppressed voices with which he disagreed. He turned the platform into his megaphone.



What would such a nondiscrimination law look like in practice? The America Online Choice and Innovation Act, another bill by Klobuchar, would ban platforms like Google, Amazon, and Apple from discriminating “in the application or enforcement of the terms of service...among similarly situated business users in a manner that would materially harm competition.” They can still engage in content moderation, but they can’t use discrimination to exploit their dominant position.

To be clear, nondiscrimination is insufficient. We should still separate the ownership of social media from other components like messaging and slow down the merger mania so that Big Tech can’t keep buying empires through acquisitions. There’s also the

other part of the problem that needs to be solved: a predatory business model. Klobuchar’s Journalism Competition and Preservation Act—which made it through committee with bipartisan support but never saw a floor vote—would give small news organizations (those with less than 1,500 employees) the right to collectively bargain and negotiate with Big Tech, thereby allowing local news organizations to stand up to the technological bullies.

In other words, to protect democracy for the rest of us, we need a lot more anti-trust actions against the Goliaths—and an antitrust exemption for the Davids. **N**



START THE PRESSES!

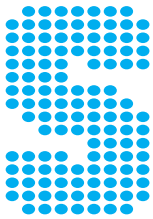
How to throw off the corporate shackles and launch your own media company.

Kelsey McKinney & Aleksander Chan



This, but better: Goodbye, bad corporate thing that you don't run. Hello, good indie thing that you *do* run. (Details of thing TBD.)

PLEASE DO NOT DO THIS



DO YOU WANT TO START YOUR OWN MEDIA COMPANY.

This is a bad idea. We are qualified to say this because we have done it. As founding members of two new, worker-owned media companies (*Discourse Blog* and *Defector Media*), we are begging you not to do this. Maybe open a bakery, or open a dog sanctuary, or even go back to law school! If it is too late for you—if you (like us) did not heed this warning and stuck by your silly little dreams of making the media ecosystem a healthier, more interesting place—then at least don't repeat the mistakes others have made before you.

You might have noticed that very few of the upstart publishers of the social media age have survived: Just in the past few years, companies like *Bustle Digital Group* have either closed entire publications (RIP again, *Gawker*) or, like *HuffPost*, merged into the holdings of *BuzzFeed* (which itself has shuttered its news division). Things aren't much better in legacy media: *The Washington Post* is owned by one of the richest men in the world. Yet even though the paper's operating costs amount to pocket change for Jeff Bezos, reporters at the *Post* still face near-annual rounds of layoffs and buyouts.

In all likelihood, you're among the thousands of journalists who have been canned in the past couple of decades as the Googles, Apples, and Facebooks of the world ate everyone's lunch (and then some). The insane idea of starting, running, and, God help you, living off the money you make from the media company you built yourself has its own appeal when the typical routes to a livelihood keep disappearing. Is it really a saner option to get back in line for one of the 12 jobs left in journalism—only to get laid off two years later?

Or maybe you've survived the layoffs and are making ends meet in your incredibly shrinking newsroom, with dwindling resources to do the work of two (or three or four or 16) people,

and have reached your breaking point. Perhaps you've been toiling for far too long as a permalancer, subsisting on contracts from a publisher who never seems to be able to bring you on full-time. Or you're freelancing, watching all the places you used to pitch die slow and painful deaths, taking with them the trickle of income you had left.

We started our own media companies after our newsroom was sold to private equity—chop shops for businesses, but the suits wear \$800

down vests—and the workers were either let go or forced to endure a torrent of bullshit that eventually compels you to quit. We're here to tell you that what we did might have seemed insane—but it was worth taking the leap. Here's what we learned.

TO BEGIN, YOU MUST FIRST BECOME CURSED

THE REAL KEY TO STARTING YOUR OWN MEDIA COMPANY IS to become as traumatized as possible by the media. Our journey with the evils and dangers of the industry began before either of us could legally drink. In the early 2010s, we worked together at a college newspaper that (in retrospect) projected a metaphorical blinking red sign that read "Do not go into journalism" on every wall of the basement we worked

in. The college newspaper did not have enough money. The pages of the print edition were chopped every quarter. We paid our staff writers nothing. We worked full-time, many of us piling up personal debt just to work there in between classes. This, we thought, was "paying our dues." It turned out to be the perfect preparation for the burgeoning new-media industry!

After graduation, we made our way to New York. We worked and wrote for various blogs—from *Gothamist* to *The Awl* to *Fusion.net*—that are now dead or mere husks. We lived through the pivot to Facebook, the pivot to video, the pivot to uniques, the pivot to Google News. None of these pivots made our writing any better or our mental health any stronger. The pivots themselves were bad business—for journalism, if not for the platforms. The companies we worked for lost money. We were laid off (more than once). Every single workplace we have ever shared has gone down in flames. The last jobs that we held at the same company were at *Gizmodo Media Group* (later *G/O Media*) in 2019: Aleks at *Splinter* and Kelsey at *Deadspin*. We made a joke about how we'd be lucky if it lasted a year. Within six months, both of our sites were dead—*Splinter* after being bled dry, stripped of resources, and thrown off a cliff overnight, and *Deadspin* after C-suite editorial interference so egregious that the entire staff quit en masse.

We recommend this process. Not only will it cost you thousands of dollars in therapy bills, but it's a great crash course in how not to run a media company. Who needs an MBA when you can watch a lot of doofuses with MBAs drive perfectly profitable companies into the ground? You can't buy that kind of experience, but you will in fact pay for it.

BE A POPULAR GENIUS

YOU WILL NEED SO MANY MORE things than you'll realize, but to get started, you really only need two things: (1) an idea for what you want your company to be, and (2) friends.

We're here to tell you that what we did might have seemed insane, but it was worth taking the leap. Here's what we learned.

Kelsey McKinney is a writer and co-owner at *Defector* and the host of the *Normal Gossip* podcast. Aleksander Chan is the publisher and co-owner of *Discourse Blog* and the former editor in chief of *Splinter*.



Does the idea need to be “good”? Hopefully! Would it help if you had a distinctive approach or point of view to differentiate yourself? Sure. Mostly, though, it has to be a framework you can see yourself living with for (ideally) a long time. How do you get an idea for what your company should

be? Please return to step one. The terror of working in the industry (or even reading anything from a major newspaper or one of the few blogs that still exist) will show you how many holes there are in the media ecosystem. Surely one of them is interesting enough for you to try and fill. *Defector* chose sports, and *Discourse Blog* chose politics and birds, but we are sure there’s an audience of readers out there for any topic, be it books or fine art or pickleball or brain surgery.

Now about those “friends”: They should be people you are comfortable owning a company with. We chose to form our companies with the coworkers we knew well from having worked together for years, almost all of whom we are trauma-bonded to. That’s beautiful.

When you know everyone’s deal, it can be easier to reach consensus on difficult decisions. You do not have to do it this way. But think hard about who you want to put your name next to on official documents that say: “WE OWN THIS BUSINESS AND ITS PROBLEMS TOGETHER.” Don’t just think about who you want to be a part of the big party you want to throw for surviving five years—think about who

Over to you: Sit at your fancy news desk, or, more likely, cramped home laptop area, and start thinking about what this thing will be.

is going to make you feel comfortable and secure when you’re forced, in your first few years of existence, to survive both a pandemic and a global recession, too.

BUILD A FOUNDATION

NOW THAT YOU HAVE YOUR IDEA AND YOUR PALS, GET EVERYONE TOGETHER and start talking. Take notes. You don’t have to figure everything out to get started, but you should talk about the big-picture items: What is our media company called? What do we stand for? Who does what? When do we want to launch, and how?

As you make your plans, figure out your timeline and decide who is responsible for doing what and when. Focus on the truly structural elements, to start with, and resist getting bogged down in the day-to-day details like posting schedules or headline conventions. That all comes in due time. For now, concentrate on the big picture.

This will involve more discussion than you realize, and there will be disagreements. It could take a few weeks or even months to reach a consensus.

Something we’ve found helpful is trying to make decisions from a place of active solidarity, where everyone can be OK with an option even if it isn’t their first choice. But getting to that point requires some amount of fighting and debate. You might be seeing friends in a new light (business owners), and that might be very different from how you already know them (weirdo journalists). Some people might decide this isn’t for them.

But everyone should try and be honest about what their limits are. This is when you get everything out in the open.



LEARN ABOUT MONEY

UK, SO YOU HAVE AN IDEA, AND YOU HAVE friends. You’re an innovator, even. You are the future of the media business! Good start, but famously, businesses need money. How are you going to pay for all this? How will you turn a profit? Subscriptions? Ads? Car washes?

Should you find yourself in the enviable position of being able to start your own company free of conflict and rich in capital, then by all means, go ahead. But if you are not the progeny of the elite, then you may have noticed: Writers and editors aren’t usually paid particularly well, at least not compared with the people who laid them off. To choose to work in media is to trade the ability to buy a new couch for the knowledge of what every single meme means.

So you’re likely not flush with cash. There’s a good chance you’ll have to work evenings and weekends launching your new company, probably without any money at first. This could be prohibitive for many people, and it certainly wasn’t easy for us. We helped build *Discourse Blog* and *Defector Media* between freelance assignments and day jobs. In short, we still have to make ends meet, silly dreams and all. For a lot of us, these sites are not yet our only source of income. You need to be prepared for the fact that even if you do manage to get your company going, it might not make enough for you to live off its revenue alone. Only you can decide whether the risk is worth it.

PLEASE, FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, DO NOT TRY TO DO THE BUSINESS YOURSELF

AFTER WATCHING A TON OF DREARY MEN IN gingham shirts and khakis destroy the companies you love, it is easy to believe that businesspeople don’t do anything and aren’t helpful. This idea has a lot of potential, until you begin asking your fellow writers and editors if they know how to look up how much they have in their 401(k), or even if they know how to navigate a spreadsheet. One major

decision you have to make as a company is whether you are going to file your taxes as W-2 employees or W-9 employees or K-1 employees. If you don’t know what those terms mean, you can’t do this on your own. You need to pay some businesspeople to help you. Not everyone with an MBA is so bad!

One option is to try and persuade someone who knows anything about money (fundraising, tax codes, business

shit) to join your janky pirate ship full-time. This may work, but it may not. It is worth a shot, because one businessperson is worth 82 bloggers. Do not tell them this. They will get a big head. Also, you can't afford to pay them that difference.

But at the absolute minimum, you will need a lawyer, to prevent you from getting sued; an accountant, to prevent you from getting sued and keep you from giving the government every single dollar you make; and someone who understands how things like paychecks and invoices work.

Unfortunately, finding this person will also require you to do something called “decision-making matrices.” Don't worry—the MBA-havers will know what this means. It's just a framework that will help you decide what powers people have within the company and what checks exist on them.

It is important not to repeat the mistakes of the rich dudes who came before you. Do not take money from venture capitalists. Do not seek riches beyond your wildest expectations. This is journalism, after all! No businessperson (or team) can do magic. No media company can scale itself to infinite profit forever. At their absolute best, profitable media companies will make ends meet. The ideal situation here is enough stability to allow everyone to quit their second job. That's the best-case scenario.

THE PART YOU KNOW HOW TO DO: GET POSTING

IT IS A MEDIA WORKER'S DREAM TO HAVE FULL power over what your website looks like. There's no one imposing restrictions on your work! There's no dude who just bought the company asking you if you've considered posting about the start time of the Super Bowl! No, Josh, we hadn't considered doing the exact same thing as every other company!

There is no Josh here at your own media company. There is only you.

Still, the power to post what you want is daunting: The website becomes an empty document, taunting you, reminding you how much opportunity and beauty could exist if you just stopped being so scared. It is helpful, we have found, to set boundaries to work within. The infinite space of the blank page is too intimidating. You have to figure out what you want your main focus to be, what tone you want that coverage to carry, how often you want to publish, what time of day (or night) you want to publish, and what you think readers will want.

Writing, editing, planning, publishing—you know, those tasks everyone always complains about doing—is the easiest part of this process. This step (the second-to-last on this long list) is the easiest because you already know how to do it. This is the part of your job that's second nature, which is why it comes so late in this handy guide. It is easy to get bogged down in these fun questions instead of doing the active work to set up your company to succeed. But don't worry: You can fight about what to post, and when, and with what frequency for the rest of your company's existence! How lucky!



NOW YOU HAVE TO DO IT!!! AND NOT JUST THE WRITING PART. ALL OF THE PARTS



PLANNING IS IMPORTANT, BUT planning past the point of productivity is procrastination. No amount of planning can save you from launching your website with a typo in a headline, or only realizing later that no one knows how to obtain health insurance.

There are so many steps before this one that it could be easy to

never get here. You must roam through the terrible halls of your brain for weeks, maybe months or years, to find your good ideas. Your friends might be busy. Your money problems might feel insurmountable. But at some point, you must declare it good enough. No starting position will be so good that it can prevent failure. You must face the terror of being seen. You must launch your website and try. No more dilly-dallying.

Very quickly, you will realize the true benefit of working for a major media company that could lay you off at any time: isolation from tiny problems. Sure, the big companies will restrict your freedom of speech, refuse to give you cost-of-living raises, try to police what you do in your personal time, edit your work into a bland shell of what it started off as, and one day at random kick you out of Slack as a signal that you've been laid off before they even call you—but at least when you work for a corporation, it is someone else's problem when the homepage isn't working on your smartphone, or a button doesn't work, or the entire site is suddenly taken over by a pop-up ad without any warning. Unfortunately, all those problems are your problems now. You are the one who has to help your colleagues find health insurance. You are the one who has to figure out how to get people to subscribe, troubleshoot when not enough do, and make plans to try and reduce the dreaded “churn.” Everything is your job now: the blogs and the backlash and the W-9s or W-2s or K-1s or whatever.

We tried to warn you at the start. We tried to tell you that this would be miserable and difficult and suck up every single minute of your free time. But if you've gotten this far, you may be a lost cause like us. You may have a silly little dream, and all you want to know is: Is it worth it?

Of course it is.

Genie, you're free: You don't have to be like this sad-looking khaki news guy! You don't have to be a corporate drone! The sky's the limit... fly!



You must face the terror of being seen. You must launch your website and try. No more dilly-dallying.

N



More Than a Natural Function

The politics of birth

BY MOIRA DONEGAN

PREGNANT WOMEN ARE EVERYWHERE, but in a way it's hard to see them. The pregnant woman's body is shrouded in a veil of symbolism, made an object of our anxieties and hopes in a way that's distinct and intense even when compared with the various other ways we objectify woman. When people look at a pregnant person, they often don't see a human being so much as a series of abstractions related to pregnancy: "maternity," "nature," and "creation" in all their gauzy allure. They see a vision, colored by ideology, of what has long been presumed to be women's destiny. In some tellings, childbirth is the act by which the mother comes as close as a human can be to a god; in others, it's the moment where she is revealed to be an animal after all. But most understandings of childbirth depict it as somehow fated, the fulfillment of an ancient and

even sacred human function. Childbirth, we are given to understand, is the culmination of the mother's humanity, the moment in which she fulfills her highest biological and social purpose. These are not necessarily bad beliefs—at least, they do not appear ill-intentioned. But they have the unfortunate effect of obscuring what might be the most important aspect of pregnancy and childbirth: that they are done by real human beings—women, mostly—with minds and needs of their own.

Allison Yarrow's new book, *Birth Control: The Insidious Power of Men Over Motherhood*, seeks to correct some of our misconceptions about the process of birth. Offering an account of labor and delivery practices in contemporary America, the book is also something of a manifesto for the natural childbirth movement.

Yarrow points to a crisis in American childbirth. C-sections are common; pregnant women fear pain or even death during delivery and so seek out medical intervention. Our biology has been misunderstood, Yarrow says, often for misogynistic reasons, and women's bodies are often blamed for difficult pregnancies or birth complications. Sometimes, doctors impose their own judgments about what is best in childbirth, and for the scared and vulnerable woman in the maternity ward, this can be painful, violating, confusing, even degrading.

How has American childbirth gone so wrong? Yarrow asks. How have hospitals, doctors, and the obstetrics field more generally acted on a set of reductive assumptions and misogynistic myths about women, pregnancy, and childbirth in ways that make the act of bringing a child into the world more dangerous, painful, and frightening than it should be? Yarrow embarks on a mission to uncover the ways that the medical system fails the people she refers to as "birthers": scaring them, curtailing their options, and, in Yarrow's view, imposing unnecessary medical interventions. Yarrow is appalled by the terror and pain that many women feel during childbirth; she wants labor and delivery to be a peaceful, joyous experience, and she is determined to find out why it isn't. In this project, Yarrow is often lucid, righteously angry, compassionate, and moving.

But after *Birth Control's* inquiry into the sexist failures of the medical system, Yarrow eventually moves on to a broader condemnation of the field of obstetrics itself and espouses a near-absolute faith in the ability of the female body to deliver safely on its own. Ultimately, she comes to oppose just about every medical intervention related to childbirth. Her vision precludes the use of epidurals, looks down on hormonal birth control, and decries everything from induced labor and C-sections (including in cases of breech) to the hospital setting and, ultimately, the involvement of doctors itself. Her solution instead is unmedicated home birth with the assistance of a midwife. Taking its

cues from the nearly century-old natural childbirth movement, Yarrow's book advances a vision that downplays the complications of pregnancy, waves away the high rates of maternal mortality in the pre-medicalization era, insists that the pain and fear felt by women in labor are psychosomatic or are caused by the very medical interventions meant to help them, and claims that childbirth is hardly ever complicated or dangerous enough to warrant the presence of a doctor.

These are the book's empirical claims, but *Birth Control* also makes a set of moral ones. Not only is childbirth low-risk, Yarrow argues, but it is, for women, a natural fulfillment of their biological destiny—an opportunity to become their truest, most fully realized selves. "Childbirth is the most powerful moment of a woman's life," Yarrow writes, approvingly citing the British birth advocate Sheila Kitzinger. "A woman meets herself in childbirth." It follows that such a spiritually significant event is too important to be mediated by things like birth control pills, medical expertise, and pain medication. Giving birth isn't dangerous, Yarrow tells us, and you don't need a doctor to help you do it. If you're scared, it's because you've been brainwashed; if it hurts, it's because you're rushing things and don't trust your own body. Your body knows what to do—not your mind. In this way, *Birth Control* not only offers a critique of the troubling history of sexism in the medical profession; it also partakes of the subtler and more insidious mythology of biological destiny advanced by the natural childbirth movement—one in which the story of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood carries with it clear prescriptions about what women and their bodies should do and be.

Birth Control comes out swinging against the medical profession, and it advances the arguments of the natural childbirth movement in what is perhaps a uniquely inconvenient political moment. Although the medical risks of pregnancy can be a tangential concern for the vast swaths of the public who are not currently pregnant themselves, law and reality have now merged to make the very real dangers of pregnancy and birth newly visible. In 2023, one year after the Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, the rapid proliferation of abortion bans with no practicable exception for the life or health of the mother has made the difficulty and danger of pregnancy and birth brutally clear. Maternal and infant mortality rates are rising. Women are being denied abortions even as their miscarriages give them sepsis; they are also being forced to develop preeclampsia, or gestational diabetes, and subjected to births that lead to life-altering injuries.

Though Yarrow points to an excess of medical intervention as the cause of the sorry state of American childbirth, these catastrophes have been caused by too little access to care—too little respect for women, too little freedom for doctors, and too little choice. Pregnancy and birth, it turns out, are very dangerous, made more so by the misogyny and inequality that cut off access to the effective treatments that save lives. In this context, the natural childbirth movement's assertions that pregnancy and birth are safe, and that their medicalization is nothing more than the nefarious project of what Yarrow calls "a profession founded on fear of the generative power of the birthing body," are a bit difficult to swallow. If birth were so safe, and medical care so unnecessary, then the removal of that care—its prohibition and constraint under misogynistic laws—would not have resulted in so much human pain and loss. Every day, another tragedy emerges in the news to prove this fact again.

This is not to say that the natural childbirth movement is entirely wrong in its critique of medical providers. Indeed, Yarrow takes her cues from a long feminist tradition of challenges to medical authority, one best exemplified by the collaborations of Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English. Their 1972 pamphlet *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses*, one of the most influential

texts of feminism's second wave, describes how delivering infants had traditionally been women's work—that is, until the 19th century, when the practice of medicine became professionalized and the emerging male-dominated field of obstetrics took a dim view of its competition. Yarrow tells a similar story in *Birth Control*: Two parallel tracks of childbirth care developed with the stigmatization of midwifery in the 19th century—one of credentialed, professional doctors, mostly men, and the other of uncredentialed, nonprofessional midwives, mostly women. Sensing competition, doctors embarked on a years-long lobbying campaign to penalize, stigmatize, and ultimately outlaw much of midwifery. And it worked: By the 20th century, births were increasingly being conducted under the care of male doctors, not female midwives, and more and more of them took place in hospitals. But obstetricians did not learn from the experience and expertise of midwives; instead, they looked to standardize and innovate in childbirth care and set about reinventing the wheel. Women in labor tended to suffer because of it.

This history is real, and in terms of the human suffering involved, it is also chilling. Medicine, like every site of institutional authority, has a long and horrible history of enforcing gender hierarchy through violent means. So when the natural childbirth movement asserts that medicine has frequently been used as a legitimating pretext for women's violent oppression, it has history on its side.

But the righteousness of the natural childbirth movement's complaints about exploitation and callous disregard by doctors can obscure the sometimes dubious empirical claims it makes about medical outcomes, or the essentialist and unsupported assumptions about women that motivate its reasoning. For one thing, the obstetrics field has changed dramatically since medicine was professionalized, and many of those changes have made obstetric practice and maternal care kinder and more skilled. For example, Yarrow spends a good deal of time decrying the use of episiotomies—surgical cuts made to the perineum during birth to create a larger opening for the baby to pass through. These cuts were painful and often conducted without the woman's consent; sometimes, they were used to hasten birth when a bit more time and patience would have allowed a successful delivery without the

painful and invasive genital incisions. But for all the horror of the episiotomy, the reality is that the procedure is only rarely practiced now. Its use began to decline in the 1980s, as a growing body of data showed that the incisions did not yield the beneficial outcomes they were believed to have, and in 2005, a definitive study disproving the supposed benefits of episiotomies led to a dramatic drop. Hospitals and ob-gyn departments respond quite well to empirical evidence, even if they do not respond as well as one would like to women's own testimony.

Demographic changes in the field also make the natural childbirth movement's narrative of male doctors exploiting female bodies—or, as the subtitle of Yarrow's book puts it, “The Insidious Power of Men Over Motherhood”—not quite as straightforward as its advocates insist. Throughout *Birth Control*, Yarrow uses the word “men” as a stand-in for “doctors,” a move meant to contrast the so-called masculine empiricism of medicine with the supposedly feminine realms of intuition, tradition, and superstition that are favored by the natural childbirth movement. It's a rhetorical move that obfuscates reality in more ways than one. For starters, the obstetrics field is now dominated by women. Perhaps no field of medicine has been transformed so quickly and completely in its gender composition: In 1970, just 7 percent of gynecologists were women; in 2018, 59 percent were. The field is likely to become even more female in the future. According to a 2015 report by the Association of American Medical Colleges, about 85 percent of obstetrics residents are women, a trend that is due in no small part to patient demand: Women tend to prefer female obstetricians and increasingly have the power to request them.

The term “natural childbirth” itself is nearly a century old. It was likely coined by the British obstetrician and World War I veteran Grantly Dick-Read in his 1933 book of the same name. Dick-Read believed that childbirth was not an inherently painful process; instead, the pain was caused only by women's fear—an anxiety

that caused them to clench their muscles—which Yarrow calls the “fear-tension-pain theory.” Dick-Read set out to change British childbirth, encouraging women to abandon medical interventions in order to achieve a supposedly more authentic birth process. For him, this primarily meant forbidding pain medication for women in labor. This point—the rejection of pain relief—is still the natural childbirth movement's main tenet, the factor that separates a “natural” birth from an “unnatural” one.

Yarrow quotes Dick-Read at length, and any account of the natural childbirth movement's history would be incomplete without him. But she is ambivalent about him, making it clear that she can find him off-putting. Dick-Read's book “can feel pejorative and coddling,” she writes. “[He thinks] women's purpose is to give birth.” (An odd complaint, given that Yarrow's book makes similar claims, but *Birth Control* is not a work of great consistency.)

It likely doesn't help that Dick-Read came to advocate natural childbirth for the purpose of eugenics: He believed that the “over-civilized” women of Britain's upper classes—those he found most genetically desirable—were not breeding enough be-

cause they had developed a pathological fear of pain during labor. He compared these women unfavorably with the “primitive” women of other countries, who allegedly did not fear childbirth; he praised, too, the poor and ignorant women of the London slums, who he said gave birth without medical assistance, complaint, or even basic hygiene. “There was no soap or towel; Dick-Read brought his own,” Yarrow writes of a delivery he performed in one such slum. “There was ‘no fuss or noise,’” she adds, quoting the doctor himself.

But Dick-Read's solution for the upper-class women he hoped would breed more was not to give them pain meds so they would stop suffering in labor and hence stop fearing it. Instead, his solution was to inform them that natural childbirth would not hurt and that the pain they had felt was only because they were doing it wrong. “Fear of birth pain produces the real thing,” Yarrow explains. If pain is psychosomatic—merely the product of a woman who doesn't trust her body

When people look at a pregnant person, they often don't see a human but a set of abstractions.

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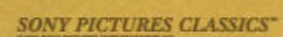
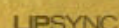
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enough—then the answer is not to treat the pain, but to fix the woman. “The solution to the syndrome, Dick-Read proposes, is to ‘relieve tension and to overcome fear in order to eliminate pain,’” Yarrow writes. “In other words, the work of eliminating labor pain is in the mind.”

What is the natural childbirth movement’s approach to labor pain? Judging by the most prominent movement leaders cited in Yarrow’s book, the approach is simply to deny it. People like Dick-Read argued that labor pain was only the result of women’s “over-civilization.” Yarrow herself maintains that most labor pain is caused by Pitocin, a labor-inducing drug, rather than by the contractions of the uterus, the dilation of the cervix, or the descent of an infant through the vaginal canal. Others in the movement seek to sentimentalize labor pain by describing it in cloying, mystical, or schmaltzy terms. “The power of birth is like the strength of water cascading down the hillside, the power of seas and tides, and of mountains moving,” Yarrow quotes the British midwife Sheila Kitzinger as saying, which I guess is one way to put it. Yarrow also reports that “*painful* isn’t the word I use

to describe my three natural childbirths.” Good for her.

In *Birth Control*, Yarrow justifies the natural childbirth movement’s opposition to pain relief for women in labor by alternately claiming that the use of pain medication leads to C-sections (although it does not) and that unmedicated labor pain is mostly psychosomatic, all in a woman’s head. In this sense, the movement resembles nothing so much as the medical misogynists it decries: gaslighting women by insisting that their pain is nothing more than the product of their own anxiety. Yarrow also denounces those religious traditions that have depicted labor pain as a punishment for the sins of Eve. But from the very start, the natural childbirth movement has also framed labor pain as a result of women’s inadequacy, their unwillingness to just get over it. Labor pain, the movement suggests, is something that happens only if you’re scared of what your body is meant to be doing naturally. If you’re not thinking of your labor in sufficiently optimistic terms, or if you don’t love your baby enough, or if you’re simply not enlightened enough, you feel pain. But if you’re good, kind, loving, and

wise—someone who trusts nature and her body and is not too civilized to resist them—then you don’t.



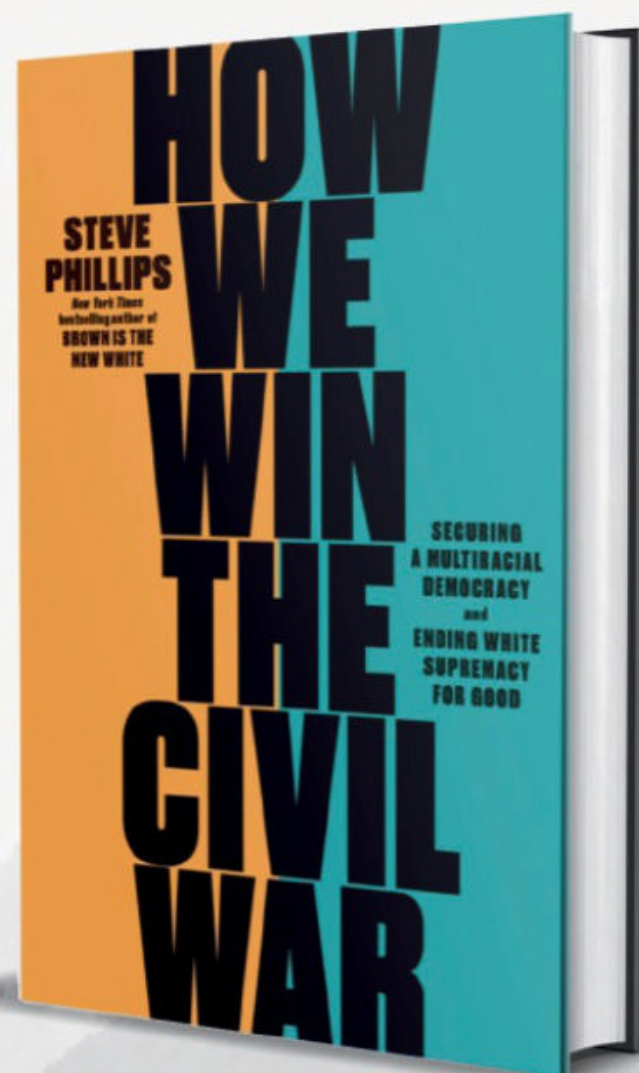
decade after Dick-Read’s death, the natural childbirth mantle was taken up by the woman who can be called the true founder of the modern American movement: Ina May Gaskin. Now 83, Gaskin is a midwife whose first book, *Spiritual Midwifery*, became a sensation when it was published in 1975. Other books followed: Yarrow calls Gaskin’s 2003 book, *Guide to Childbirth*, “perinatal required reading.”

Gaskin was the countercultural matriarch of a rural Tennessee commune called the Farm, which was founded in 1971 by a group of some 300 hippies who had left San Francisco in a caravan of school buses to seek a promised land. The Farm was the kind of spiritual community that leads outsiders into debates about whether it was technically a cult. The group was led by Stephen Gaskin, Ina May’s husband, who wanted to build a community based in part on the revelations that he’d experienced while high on LSD. The Farm

A NATIONAL BESTSELLER

“Reading this book is the first time I felt a sense of hope in a very long time.”

— Sara Blanchard, co-host, “Dear White Women” podcast



was generally suspicious of law, science, medicine, and authorities other than Stephen. To join, members had to accept him as their leader and hand over all their money. They practiced plural marriage and collective breastfeeding; Stephen prohibited divorce, abortion, and birth control. The Farm produced a small commercial crop of soybeans—and a lot of babies.

Under these conditions, Ina May became a skilled midwife, even though she never studied nursing or had any formal medical training. Gaskin opened a birthing center on the Farm, where members and nonmembers alike could deliver their babies. What Yarrow does not disclose is that, in order to discourage abortion, the birthing center advertised that the Farm would, if asked, take in and raise the babies of women who gave birth there. Ina May used no painkillers during delivery; over time, she became famous for the “Gaskin maneuver,” a method of positioning a laboring woman on her hands and knees with one leg bent forward, like a runner’s stretch, which has become widely used to correct shoulder dystocia without resorting to C-sections. (Gaskin claimed that she learned the move from Indigenous Guatemalan women.)

Like Dick-Read, Gaskin decries pain relief as insufficiently “natural” and suggests that labor pain can be alleviated by a woman’s efforts to change her state of mind. Unlike Dick-Read, however, Gaskin did not tell women to just grit their teeth and bear it, but instead invited fathers into the birthing process, encouraging them to, among other things, French-kiss their partners during labor and to issue encouraging platitudes. “At one birth she attended, a husband repeatedly told his wife she was ‘marvelous,’” Yarrow writes of Gaskin’s midwifery practice. “The woman believed that the words opened her cervix and invited the baby out.”

It is lovely that the mother believed this. But should we? Yarrow seems to think so. The natural childbirth movement is perhaps aptly summarized by this little vignette, with the laboring woman virtuously forgoing painkillers and proving her worthiness, femininity, and proximity to nature by delivering a child without any help other than assurances from the man who impregnated her that she is “marvelous.” Yarrow and the rest of the movement routinely insist that they only want to fulfill women’s own desires regarding childbirth. But this is a polite fiction. The truth is that the natural childbirth movement is prescriptive and highly judgmental: It posits an ideal birth and then imagines the kind of woman who achieves it. Yet if a birth involves painkillers, or fear, or a need for medical intervention, or even an acknowledgment that it hurts, then that birth, and the woman who goes through it, are neces-

sarily less than ideal—i.e., flawed. In that sense, the natural childbirth movement, which so nobly seeks to free women from the degradation and hurt that they endure at the hands of doctors, often begins to look less freeing than cruel.



It is curious that Yarrow, for all her praise of Gaskin, does not mention the midwife’s most distinctive contribution to the philosophy of natural childbirth: the theory popularized in a 2008 documentary, *Organismic Birth: The Best-Kept Secret*. Gaskin claims that if childbirth is done correctly, with sufficient stimulation from the father and an appropriately enlightened state of mind in the mother, women will climax as they deliver. Patriarchy’s various demands on women—to be caring, self-sacrificing, sexy—are thus distilled into one gruesome image. Compelled to be simultaneously earth mother and sexpot, the laboring woman is not relieved of sexual responsibility even when giving birth: She is expected to achieve an orgasm—or, at least, to perform one—even as the infant tears its way out of her. There’s a word for this, but it is not “liberation.”

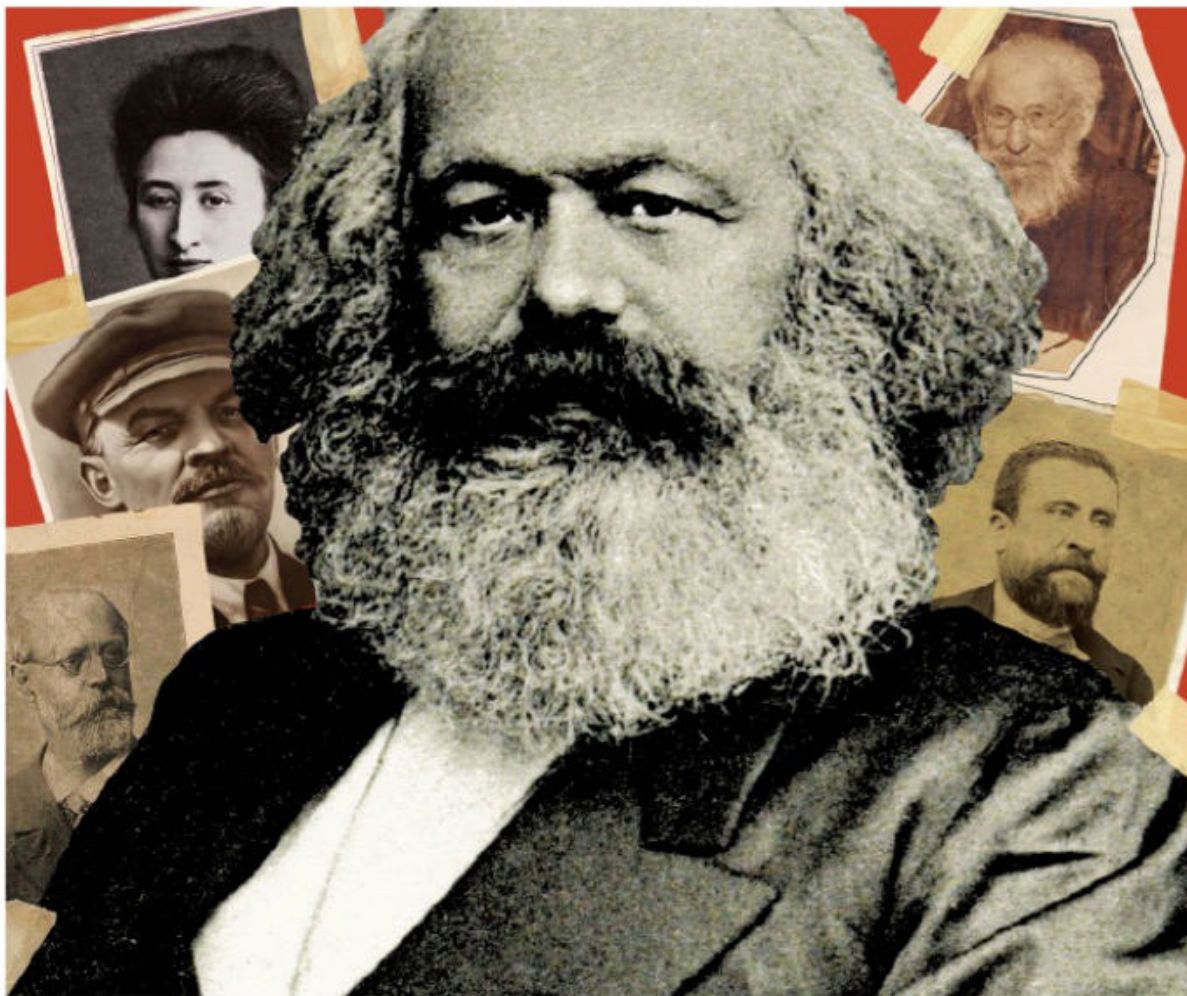
The truth about childbirth—that it is dangerous; that it is complicated; that things can go very wrong without warning; that it really, really hurts—are things that the natural childbirth movement’s most ardent proponents must talk around and deny in order to have their worldview make sense. “There is no physiological function in the body which gives rise to pain in the normal course of health,” Dick-Read asserts, as if that settles the matter. Yarrow agrees: She frequently speaks of the “design” of women’s bodies—though without saying who designed it—and insists that this design cannot be flawed and should not be tampered with.

This brings us to the most troubling suggestion made by the natural childbirth movement: that giving birth is what wom-

en are for—their bodily destiny, their logical purpose, and in some sense their highest reason for being. It is here, in its rapturous faith in women’s reproductive role, that the movement begins to sound like the anti-choice zealots whose regressive and sexist ideas about pregnancy and childbirth now carry the force of law. As Yarrow asserts in a chapter called “Child-bearing Hips,” women “[need] more stories that acknowledge the truth: we were born to birth.” Although Yarrow is pro-choice, how different is this contention from the one offered by the anti-choice extremist Laura Strietmann, who argued that pregnancy is not really dangerous even for little girls impregnated as the result of rape, because “a woman’s body is designed to carry life”?

Women are not “designed” objects; they are not mere vessels for the reproduction of humanity or animals marching toward their natural destiny. They are people—thinking, feeling, and intelligent human beings, even while they give birth. The natural childbirth movement is responding to a real concern: the justified distrust of the medical establishment by women and their reasonable discomfort with many of the ways that labor and delivery are—and historically have been—mismanaged and misunderstood. But practitioners like Dick-Read and Gaskin do not alleviate the suffering of women in labor. They simply deny it, burying it under layers of romanticizing naturalization, like so many paisley scarves.

None of this really helps the people it intends to help; it only adds yet another unreasonable expectation that women will fail to live up to. It is Yarrow’s great virtue that she feels immense loyalty to women in labor. She has been as vulnerable as they are—scared and uncertain, navigating disrespect from doctors and the morass of postpartum life; her empathy for them, her desire to protect them, is searingly evident on the page. She wants to save laboring mothers, to show them a better way. But the natural childbirth movement, with its embrace of regressive myths about women and its insistence on the nonreality of their pain, is not the better way Yarrow seeks. Women—mothers—deserve better than its patronizing sentimentalization of their physical pain. They deserve competent medical attention. They deserve sensitivity and respect. And they deserve the good drugs.



Bookworms and Fieldworkers

How did Marxism become Marxism?

BY PETER E. GORDON

IN THE YEARS LEADING UP TO THE OUTBREAK OF THE 1905 revolution in Russia, Eduard Bernstein—the spirited German advocate of socialist revisionism—warned his Marxist colleagues about the dangers of an “almost mythical faith in the nameless masses.” More skeptic than firebrand, Bernstein worried that Karl Kautsky and other leaders of the international socialist movement placed too much confidence in the spontaneous emergence of an organized and disciplined working class: “The mob, the assembled crowd, the ‘people on the street’...is a power that can be everything—revolutionary and reactionary, heroic and cowardly, human and bestial.” Just as the French Revolution had descended into terror, the masses could once again combust into a violent flame. “We should pay them heed,” Bernstein warned, “but if we are supposed to idolize them, we must just as well become fire worshippers.”

Among the votaries of European socialism, Bernstein has seldom enjoyed much acclaim, not

least because he symbolized the spirit of pragmatism and parliamentary reform that ended up on the losing side of the debates that roiled the socialist movement in the decades preceding the Bolsheviks’ victory in 1917. For historians who are less partisan, however, the time may well seem ripe for a new appraisal—a revision of revisionism—that casts Bernstein and his reformist wing in a more favorable light.

This is the ambition of Christina Morina in *The Invention of Marxism*, recently translated into English by Elizabeth Janik. A study of Bernstein, Kautsky, Lenin,

Jean Jaurès, Rosa Luxemburg, and other early Marxist luminaries, the book bears a rather breathless subtitle—“How an Idea Changed Everything”—that is far too ambitious for any author, but it is nonetheless a searching account of Marxism’s early days. Although it offers no certain answers as to what the “idea” of Marxism really consists in, it does provide a welter of personal and biographical detail that enriches our sense of Marxism’s varied history and the lives of its party leaders.

How should we write the history of Marxism? Over the past century, when political opinion has been sharply divided on the meaning and legacy of the socialist tradition, historians have felt compelled to choose one of two modes of narrative: either triumphant or tragic. Both of these approaches are freighted by ideology, yet neither has permitted a truly honest reckoning with the political realities of the Marxist past.

Morina, a scholar whose training reflects the methods of social and political history associated with the University of Bielefeld in Germany, where she now works as a professor, has set out to write a history that avoids strong ideological verdicts and places a greater emphasis on the sociology of intellectuals and the details of the Marxists’ personal lives, a method that also draws inspiration from the new trend in the history of emotions pioneered by scholars such as Ute Frevert. No doubt the book also reflects her own experiences as a child in East Germany, where she witnessed the “absurdities and inhumanity” of an authoritarian state that was arguably socialist in name only.

The fruit of her efforts is a group biography that explores the fate of nine “protagonists” from the first generation of the European socialist movement following the death of Karl Marx in 1883. Morina weaves together their personal and party histories with unusual skill, though without quite telling us “how an idea changed everything.” Perhaps the key difficulty is the method of prosopography itself, which fractures the book into individual life stories and leaves little room for a continuous political narrative. Those who are not already familiar with the broader history of European socialism will find it difficult to understand how the various national parties (in France, Germany,

Austria, and Russia) all participated in a common struggle. But there is a case for her approach nonetheless, as it leads to some unique insights. By examining how personality and emotion shape one's political commitments, Morina paints a portrait of Marxism less as a specific theory than as a shared language and a set of informal dispositions that spawned a variety of competing interpretations. Her nine protagonists were not, she explains, gifted with a sudden revelation of the truth. Each underwent a slow and emotional process through which the ideas of Marx became a common framework for explaining and evaluating political events.

While we now take this framework for granted as Marxist doctrine, Morina notes that the creation of Marxism was itself “a vast political project” that developed only gradually. The term gained “ideological meaning and political heft” only in the 1870s and 1880s, as works by Marx and Engels spread across the world in various editions and translations. For Morina, this means that the task of the social historian is to understand how those works were received, often on a case-by-case basis. The result is a book that tells us a great deal about these early Marxists as individuals, though much less about Marxism as a comprehensive theory or idea.



Historians tend to emphasize the social and biographical settings of an idea, a method that is unlikely to satisfy philosophers or social theorists, who are concerned chiefly with the intrinsic validity of arguments. But given Marxism's own interest in materialism, these contexts are something that historians cannot afford to ignore. They also point to an irony within the tradition, for if Marxism is an idea, it's only because of the intellectuals who carried it forward and helped ensure its longevity—and many (though, of course, not all) of these intellectuals were by origin and education members of the bourgeoisie, not members of the working class lionized in Marxist theory.

Morina is acutely aware of this irony, and it informs all of her judgments in the book, some of them subtle, others overt. Running through *The Invention of Marxism* is a powerful current of unease about the “abstraction” of theory and the great distance that separated some of Marxism's most esteemed theorists from the world they wished to understand. Although they were passionate in their principled commitment to the working classes, they often knew little about the workers' actual lives, and at times they responded with revulsion—or at least discomfort—when exposed to the real suffering of the proletariat for whom they claimed to speak.

Morina takes special care to note that many of the party theorists in her tale enjoyed the rare privilege of a univer-

sity education at a time when less than 1 percent of secondary school students in Western Europe went on to study at university. Karl Kautsky, a leading member of the German Social Democratic Party, was born into a home of writers and artists, and his parents were highly committed to his schooling. Victor Adler, a leader of the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Austria, was a practicing physician as well as a publisher—he founded *Gleichheit* (Equality), the first socialist party newspaper in the Hapsburg Empire. Rosa Luxemburg studied at the University of Zurich and was by all reports an exceptionally precocious child whose parents grew prosperous thanks to her father's success as a timber merchant; her theoretical acumen and political passion elevated her to prominent seats, first in the German Social Democratic Party and later in the Independent Social Democrats, the Spartacus League, and the Communist Party. Jean Jaurès, born in the South of France, rose to the top of his class and attended the *École Normale Supérieure*, where his classmates included Émile Durkheim and Henri Bergson, before he emerged as the most influential leader in the French Socialist Party.

The other protagonists in Morina's tale enjoyed equal or even greater advantages. Vladimir Ulyanov (later Lenin) was born into a prosperous Russian family that owned estates; his father, a liberal teacher elevated to the post of school inspector, was eventually granted a title of nobility, while his mother came from a family of landowners with German, Swedish, and Russian origins and spoke several languages. Georgi Plekhanov, the “father of Russian Marxism,” had parents who owned serfs and belonged to the Tatar nobility; following the Emancipation Edict of 1861, Plekhanov's family fell into financial decline, but thanks in part to his mother, he enjoyed a very strong education. Only two figures in Morina's book were not the

beneficiaries of wealth and education: Jules Guesde (born Bazile), later a major figure in French Marxism and socialism and an opponent of Jaurès; and Eduard Bernstein, whose father was a plumber and who never attended university and worked as a bank employee to support his activities in the German Social Democratic Party.

These protagonists, most of them members of the middle class, belonged to what Morina calls a “voluntary elite.” Her group study, though often engaging, remains poised in an uncertain space between intellectual history and party chronicle, without ever truly resolving itself into a satisfactory version of either. Needless to say, this ambivalence may be baked into the topic itself, since Marxism is perhaps distinctive in its contempt for mere theorizing and its constant refrain that we must bridge the gap between theory and practice. After all, has there ever been a Marxist who did not insist that their ideas were not correlated with material events? Morina, though hardly a Marxist in her methods, suggests that her study exemplifies the genre of *Erfahrungsgeschichte*, or the “history of lived experience.” Experience, however, is itself a concept of some controversy, since it hints at some bedrock of individual reality beyond interpretation and deeper than mere ideas. And this would seem to be Morina's point: By turning our attention to the biographical and emotional history of the European socialist tradition, she hopes to remind us that Marxist intellectuals were not bloodless theoreticians but human beings caught up in the same world of passions and interests they wished to explain.

Her group portrait comes alive most of all at moments when its protagonists encounter one another in friendship or debate. Before theoretical disagreements drove them apart, Bernstein and Kautsky sustained a close friendship: They went swimming together in Zurich and enjoyed the outdoors with “a text by Marx at our side.” In 1881, Kautsky sought the guidance of both Marx and Engels and even wrote to his mother about Marx's daughters, who (in Morina's words) “unfortunately were already married.” Marx dismissed Kautsky as an intellectual mediocrity who was little more than “a born pedant and hair-splitter in whose hands complex questions are not made simple, but simple ones complex.” This did not deter Kautsky from forging a close personal bond with

Engels that eventually established him as the official legatee for the papers of both men when Engels died in 1895.

Though Kautsky would acknowledge that *Capital* was “more powerful” than anything that Engels had managed to write, his relationship with Engels would continue to inspire and shape many of his own insights into Marxism. Kautsky’s 1887 book *The Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx* in fact concludes with a bracing line from Engels that communism will mark “humanity’s leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom.”

Engels’s influence on Kautsky and the “orthodox” Marxism avowed by the Second International can be found not just in citations. A theme that Morina returns to throughout her book is how many of these socialists sought to interpret Marxism as an objective science. “The co-opting of ‘science’ by Marxist social analysis,” she writes, “may have been the most effective political idea of social critics on the left in the nineteenth century. It turned Marx’s theses into Marxism, and an intellectual worldview into a political truth.”

The idea of a “scientific Marxism” grew in popularity among theorists like Engels, who praised Marx at his friend’s graveside as the Darwin of the social world. But it also became a common view among Marx and Engels’s heirs. In the era of electrification and rampant technological expansion, a vague kind of positivism gained in authority among socialists, moving many Marxist theoreticians to claim that Marxism, too, could enjoy the prestige of a science no less than that of the natural sciences such as physics and biology. Morina does not examine this view in much depth, and today very few Marxists would wish to defend the notion that Marxism is a strict science that discovers unbending or universal laws. All the same, she recognizes that the ambition to portray Marxism as scientific can help us to appreciate why it caught fire as a cultural and political ideology. In this respect, she treats Marxism no differently than a social historian might treat other systems of belief: To explain its ascendancy, she looks at its motivational power, not its claims to truth.

Readers who are invested even marginally in the truth claims of Marxism will find much to value in Morina’s narrative, but it may also leave them confused. The difficulty is due to her sociological method, which on the one hand seeks to explain Marxism chiefly as an affective framework for political mobilization but on the other hand frequently refers to social “reality” as if it were the unproblematic and decisive factor when it comes to categorizing and judging the book’s protagonists. She proposes that we divide her nine Marxists into three types: “fieldworkers,” “adventurers,” and “bookworms.” The fieldworkers, such as Adler, Bernstein, and Jaurès, base their knowledge on “firsthand experiences,” she tells

us, and because they are “on site, in the middle of things,” they tend to understand Marxism more as a “moral principle” than as a “dogma.” The adventurers, like Lenin and Luxemburg, live as “activists and agitators,” even if their efforts land them in exile, where they nourish “outrage more than empathy” and where Marxism becomes an “emotional and intellectual home.” Meanwhile, the bookworms like Kautsky form their worldviews far from the scene of action; their workplace is the “desk, office, or library.” In affect, they tend to be “sober and matter-of-fact, or even cold and calculating.” For them, Marxism is not a matter of lived experience but a “theoretical structure.”

Such broad characterizations may remind the reader of Isaiah Berlin’s well-known distinction (borrowed from the Greek poet Archilochus) between hedgehogs and foxes. According to this zoological schema, a fox knows many things, while a hedgehog knows one big thing. Morina’s typology, like Berlin’s, comes freighted with strong judgments and implies a preference for what Berlin once called a “sense of reality.” Morina, too, disdains the hedgehogs and admires the foxes, the worldly fieldworkers who shape their ideas based on lived experiences rather than single ideas.

To be sure, Morina’s distinctions are themselves a set of abstractions: They carve up the intellectual sphere into simplified types that hardly capture the complexity of social reality. But it is when she turns to her adventurers and bookworms that this becomes particularly clear, especially when she examines the lives and personae of Luxemburg and Lenin, neither of whom appears in a favorable light. Luxemburg, in Morina’s estimation, was an ideologue who loved humanity from afar but disdained the poor and the suffering when they pressed too close. Lenin, she tells us, was no less

distant from the working class; his politics came from his hatred for bourgeois society. Only the fieldworkers—Adler, Bernstein, and Jaurès—emerge from her analysis with their reputations intact.

The portrait of Bernstein, in particular, may arouse the most interest today. A pragmatist at heart, Bernstein gradually lost his taste for violent struggle and came to believe that participation in parliamentary democracy was the best means for socialists to improve the lives of the working class. Hence his famous slogan (as he restated it in his 1899 essay on the tasks of socialism): “The movement means everything for me and...what is usually called ‘the final aim of socialism’ is nothing.”

Luxemburg, like Kautsky and many others, found this sentiment intolerable, and she thus denounced Bernstein’s position as “opportunism.” In her 1900 pamphlet “Social Reform or Revolution,” Luxemburg chastised Bernstein for abandoning the movement’s very purpose:

But since the final goal of socialism constitutes the only decisive factor distinguishing the Social-Democratic movement from bourgeois democracy and from bourgeois radicalism, the only factor transforming the entire labor movement from a vain effort to repair the capitalist order into a class struggle *against* this order...the question: “Reform or Revolution?” as it is posed by Bernstein, equals for Social-Democracy the question: “To be or not to be?”

Morina typically takes care to maintain the neutral posture of a historian who is more interested in understanding than in moral judgment. But when we come to the debate over socialist revisionism that shattered the socialist parties in the years preceding the First World War, she expresses a subtle preference for Bernstein over Luxemburg. Some readers may feel that her judgments about Luxemburg depend rather too much on personal detail. Luxemburg is often eulogized as the tragic martyr of European communism, not least because she died a brutal death at the hands of the Freikorps in 1919. But Morina mines facts from her life and her private correspondence to paint a picture of Luxemburg that is far less appealing: The cofounder of the Spartacus League appears here not as a heroine

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but as a somewhat cold individual who regarded the suffering of others with “striking ambivalence.”

Whether or not one agrees with Morina’s characterization of Luxemburg, it does feel in these passages as though she is putting her finger on the scale a bit—and in Bernstein’s favor. It is hardly obvious that an individual’s persona should play a role in our judgment of their ideas and their contribution to major political events. What matters, after all, is not whether we happen to find Luxemburg personally appealing, but whether her stance in party debates over theory and policy was one we consider sound. Unpleasant people can have good ideas, just as pleasant people can have bad ones.

Notwithstanding these occasional quarrels with Luxemburg and some of her other protagonists, Morina offers an original portrait of Marxism’s invention, one that encourages us to reconsider the role of the “moderates” in the history of European socialism. Even if Morina

were not as sympathetic to Bernstein as she is here, he would still stand out as one of socialism’s unsung and unlikely heroes. Although his proposals earned him only derision among the more orthodox theorists and officials in the communist movement, it was Bernstein’s somewhat drab and reformist style of social democracy that survived as the model for parties on the European left well into the mid-20th century, when more militant groups had dwindled in power and influence. As it turned out, the idea of a socialist state governed by a single party was a recipe for dictatorship, not democracy. The various socialist parties in Europe that swelled in membership did so only when they abandoned their militant rhetoric and took their place as parliamentary-style organizations that competed with other parties in free elections. This pragmatic strategy may not have realized the utopia of socialism’s dreams, but it contributed to robust social democracies and welfare states that vastly improved the lives of everyday people, and it also avoided the massive waves of violence and murderous reprisal that ensued whenever the forces of revolution and counterrevolution confronted each other in civil war.

Marxist orthodoxy, meanwhile, ended up a victim of its own absolutism. Even after Stalinism and the suppression of democratic movements in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, many exponents of communism refused to denounce the Soviet bloc on the dubious grounds that it was still necessary to choose between “real existing socialism” and the capitalist West. Meanwhile, the record of human rights violations and the torture and harassment of dissidents only grew more obvious to anyone who was not blinded by ideology. All of this has done far more harm to the legacy of Marxism than any of the theorists who strayed from the orthodox path.

To be sure, in recent years those socialist and social democratic parties that have moved to the political center have lost much of their prestige. Both the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and the Parti socialiste (PS) in France have hemorrhaged votes as their members have shifted to the political center or to new parties on the left that are either more “green” in their policy aims or more militant in their calls for class struggle.

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orina does not extend her narrative into more recent times: She confines *The Invention of Marxism* chiefly to the “golden age” of European socialism that preceded the Bolshevik revolution. Of the three “fieldworkers” in her analysis, two were dead by the end of the First World War. Jaurès was assassinated in 1914, and Adler died in Vienna in 1918, on the very last day of the war. Only Bernstein survived through the 1920s; he died in Berlin in late 1932, at a time when the communists and the Nazis were fighting each other in the streets. By that point, however, Bernstein was hardly an active participant in the socialist movement.

Already by 1903, Bernstein had been pushed aside, and at the party conference in Dresden that year, he was denounced for revisionism. Later, in an essay on his role in the revisionism debate, Bernstein admitted that he had not fully grasped the “spiritual” meaning of his dissent or the emotional significance of the word “revolutionary.” Although the SPD was not in fact a revolutionary party, for many years its revolutionary ideal continued to shine as an inspiring beacon, for the working class and especially for the SPD’s membership. Revolution “marked the line that distinguished the party they esteemed from all other parties” and gave the SPD its “distinctive worldview.”

Perhaps Bernstein was right, but if so, he may not have grasped the deeper and more ambivalent implications of his own discovery. The ideas that vault us into collective action need not have the status of truth; the primary value of the ideologies that inspire us in our political life is often not their descriptive accuracy but how they move us and the feelings they arouse.

Is this an insight we should welcome? Yes and no. Ideology, to be sure, is always volatile, and this is what makes it powerful—but also dangerous. In the 20th century, while Marxist theorists in the West were busying themselves with intricate debates over the nature of class consciousness and cultural hegemony, it was the fascists who came to understand the sobering truth that what binds the mass into a cohesive group is not reason but passion, not the language that helps us see the world as it really is but the far more atavistic language of symbolism and myth. In this way, Morina’s history of Marxism as a history of emotion may reveal rather more about the nature of political life than we care to admit. **N**



What About Black Life?

The art of everyday Black experience

BY OMARI WEEKES

DAYS AFTER TYRE NICHOLS WAS KILLED BY FIVE MEMPHIS police officers earlier this year, the city's police department released footage of his murder. The videos sparked protests in Tennessee and across the country, demonstrating once again that depictions of state violence and Black death can spur national action and bring bodies into the streets. But seeing this sequence of events play out yet again raises a different question: What about Black life? Can it also spur people into action? Nichols, an amateur photographer of the urban and rural South, would not have wanted his legacy to endure through the lenses of police body cams or local surveillance cameras. His portfolio of photographs includes experiments with color and perspective that revel in the beauty, love, and charm that constitute the Black aesthetic of the everyday. What would happen, what actions would be sparked, if we disseminated these images invested with the vibrancy of Black life and subjectivity as well?

In her new book, *Ordinary Notes*, which was a finalist for this year's National Book Award for Nonfiction, Christina Sharpe explores this question without providing any easy answers. A lush enmeshment of photographs and other images with notes on various subjects—some as short as a phrase, others as long as a few pages—the book invites its readers to engage with the multitudes of Black life, to think about and work through them without expecting this engagement to necessarily

repair the injustices of the past or the present. Sharpe's brilliant collage of materials probes how "Black people make a life in beauty and in struggle" in the face of structural racism and precarity. In close and provocative readings of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Dawoud Bey's black-and-white landscapes, Black Lives Matter protest video stills, Torkwase Dyson's multimedia installations, and other notable public projects, Sharpe considers Black culture "in all of its shade and depth and glow." But she also notes that while the images of everyday Black life are valuable counterweights to the numerous images of everyday Black death that circulate, they too will not be enough to abolish anti-Blackness.

In many ways, *Ordinary Notes* extends from Sharpe's previous work, which has showcased how the typical, the commonplace, and much of what has been naturalized as such have contributed to the experi-

ence of being Black in the United States today. In *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*, Sharpe—a professor of Black studies at York University in Canada—examined how the sexual and physical violence inflicted on the enslaved continues to haunt the formation of Black subjectivity in the present. With *In the Wake*, she combined meditations from her own life, analyses of the historical record, and close readings of works of contemporary Black art to consider the kinds of Black lives and aesthetic practices that emerge out of what she calls "being in [slavery's] wake." To live knowing that the effects of slavery persist into the present, Sharpe argues, profoundly affects not just public life but our private lives as well; to study the afterlife of slavery therefore requires an approach to history and culture that looks beyond the formal disciplinary constraints of the academy and into the realm of the felt, the subjunctive, the conjectural. One must turn to poetry as well as to sociology, art as well as economics, culture as well as politics.

Along the lines of these previous endeavors, *Ordinary Notes* breaks out of the reductive conventions of academic scholarship in the pursuit of Black study. Just as *In the Wake* braided together personal biography and critical theory, disclosing how a series of deaths in Sharpe's family deeply affected her and how these lives lost illustrate the extent to which slavery's insistence on Black inferiority continues to guide the modus operandi of various American institutions, *Ordinary Notes* brings together a variety of media—ephemeral, historical, social, and otherwise—in order to tell a personal and individual story that contributes to and is shaped by a larger structural one.

For Sharpe, photographs are particularly useful tools for telling these stories. Drawing from photographs in her own personal library as well as those found in various archives, she shows how each picture—especially those featuring Black subjects—always documents a negotiation of power among the people in the photographs, those taking them, and those viewing them. An old photo of the writer's mother and grandmother leaning gently into each other, the former dressed in a Halloween costume made from scratch by the latter, displays a tenderness that would have been lost in the official paperwork, "those archives that suspend and defer Black life

in ways that would make our living tangential to some other living, not ours.” A well-known photograph of Elizabeth Eckford being harangued by an angry white mob as she desegregates Little Rock Central High School is juxtaposed with a recent image of white nationalists in Charlottesville, Va., chanting anxiously about their replacement. Sometimes Sharpe presents us with pictures that are more opaque—at one point, photos of the condensation and frost on her window panes serve to illustrate how important it is “to notice or observe with care.” Each photograph, Sharpe reminds us, gathers so much within it: the depths of intimacy between a mother and a daughter, the racist vitriol that can be found even in a white supremacist’s spittle, the calm of routine weather.

In poring over these images, Sharpe threads a needle between Roland Barthes’s ruminations on photography, which insist that the medium is often haunted by a sense of death, and those put forward by, for instance, Frederick Douglass, which argue for the positive political work that photographs can do, especially when it is Black photographers working against the rampant proliferation of anti-Black caricatures. Sharpe does not entirely disagree with Barthes or Douglass, but she does think that neither school of theory accounts well enough for the filters that photographs are viewed and understood through. While Douglass had grandly claimed in a speech titled “Pictures and Progress” that photography could help usher in a social advancement for Black Americans that would “dissolve the granite barriers of arbitrary power, bring the world into peace and unity, and at last crown the world with justice, liberty, and brotherly kindness,” Sharpe contends that this might place too much faith in the observer’s ability to transcend their own negative preconceptions of Black life.

One example, in fact, is provided in Sharpe’s discussion of Barthes’s writing. For Barthes, a portrait taken by the African American photographer James Van Der Zee of a Black family in Harlem dressed in formal attire signifies the unfortunate (because it is impossible) desire “to assume the White Man’s attributes,” a “spectacle” that stirs “almost a kind of tenderness” within him. But as Sharpe notes, Barthes’s reading of the photograph is itself “a gaze and not a look,” as it projects the desires of whiteness onto the picture’s Black subjects.

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ho are photographs for, anyway? More specifically, what purpose do memorials to the victims of slavery and racism—which often employ images of Black suffering—serve, and who are they for? Throughout *Ordinary Notes*, Sharpe directs our attention to the ways in which we choose to memorialize as well as to the memorializations themselves. Such memorials, she suggests, cannot always “be” for everyone, but so few seem to be for Black people. When Sharpe visits the Whitney Plantation, a former plantation site about an hour west of New Orleans that has been restored as a center for education on the history of chattel slavery, the founder of the museum goes out of his way to assure white visitors that none of them were responsible for the atrocities that once occurred there. For Sharpe, such an assurance not only sanctions whatever feelings are aroused in the white guests as they peruse the plantation; it also obscures how much the “peculiar institution” continues to echo in the culture, structures, and interpersonal relations that shape our lives today. Bronze sculptures of enslaved children dressed in overalls and work aprons are displayed throughout the plantation, intended to galvanize white visitors into anti-racist action by highlighting the innocence that was lost on that site, even as Black innocence is lost all around us in the here and now, every day. Sharpe knows why the plantation doesn’t have any sculptures of Black adults on display: They tend to play a different role in the white imaginary, often forcing white audiences to reckon with “the culpability, the debt, the entanglements, and the ongoing brutality of slavery’s afterlives.”

Sharpe does not restrict her critique to memorials founded and funded by white patrons and institutions: At one point in *Ordinary Notes*, she narrates her experience at a screening of a short film produced by Claudia Rankine that stitched together recordings of interactions between Black people and the police, many of which depict excessive violence by law enforcement. She then reproduces a letter written by Rachel Zellars, a Black professor who had attended a similar event, that asks and elaborates on a single question that Sharpe directs at Rankine: “Do you consider the impact your film will have on Black people in the room before you show it?”

Elsewhere in the book, Sharpe describes a visit to the National Memorial

for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Ala., which was created by the Equal Justice Initiative. While she’s there, a weeping white woman interrupts Sharpe’s walk through a graveyard built to commemorate the thousands of African Americans who had been murdered by lynch mobs. The woman approaches Sharpe with an expression of regret and offers an apology, but Sharpe doesn’t respond: “With her apology, she tries to hand me her sorrow and whatever else she is carrying, to super-add her burden on my own.”

Often, Sharpe notes, museums, art galleries, and monuments dedicated to the Black experience purport to do a service for Black audiences, but at best it is one limited by the service they also provide for white audiences. Many of these memorials are designed, above all else, to remind those who need reminding of a history that others know all too well. As Sharpe adds, they also usually have another problem: By framing their memorializations as studies of something totally relegated to the past, they offer a model of history that erroneously stresses discontinuity between yesterday and today and misses how much of American history has already repeated itself. Slavery and Jim Crow may have formally ended, but their legacies—mass incarceration, redlining, police brutality, Black maternal mortality rates, environmental racism, and many others—all continue to manifest themselves today. The damage that has been done continues to be done.

Perhaps we will never finish reckoning with our incomplete past and will have to accept that fact. We will never fully know history, much the way we will never fully know one another. At a certain point, a little more than halfway through *Ordinary Notes*, Sharpe wonders if this unknowability is itself something that history and memorialization should try to preserve. Writing movingly about her mother, Sharpe pauses and expresses an uncertainty about how candid she has been: “Maybe I ought to return my mother to her own opacity; allow some description to fall away.”

Ordinary Notes is a large book full of ideas, both ephemeral and enduring; in it, Sharpe offers much piercing analysis but also, in other cases, respects the mysteries of the everyday and the beauty that comes from them. Sometimes the images of Black life should prompt us to action; at other times, they should simply remind us that if we surrender to our own beauty, perhaps we can ride it. **N**

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WITH BILL MILLER



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Bill Miller is an accredited journalist at the UN for the Washington International and has written extensively on UN issues.

He is the Principal of Miller and Associates International Media Consultants, which created the Global Connection Television concept.

Bill developed an interest in international issues and the UN when he served as a US Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic. In his first year he worked as a community developer in a remote rural area; his second year he was Professor of Social Work at the Madre y Maestra University in Santiago, the country's second largest city.

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