

Digital Journalism

Is news quality better or worse online?

More and more people in the United States and around the world are getting their news online instead of in print or via radio or television — the so-called legacy media. Digital news sites allow news to be continually updated, with few if any of the space or other constraints that apply to print publications or radio and television newscasts. With lower upfront costs, journalism entrepreneurs can start businesses more readily than in the past: Witness the new digital-only news sites just started by high-profile journalists who left prestigious traditional newspaper companies. Yet some observers complain about the increased partisanship seen in digital publications and the increased risk of error with less careful editing than in traditional news media. And the business plans for the new digital sites are works in progress, with uncertain long-term prospects. Meanwhile, traditional news organizations are reinventing themselves to remain relevant and profitable in the digital age.



Electronic tablets and other digital devices are increasingly being used to access news, rather than print publications or television and radio. But some observers say that new digital sites are more partisan than traditional news media, and less carefully edited.

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Digital Journalism

BY KENNETH JOST

THE ISSUES

Many news junkies who logged onto their computers Sunday night, April 6, went straight to a site with a full-screen image of the U.S. Capitol under ominously gray clouds. A headline superimposed over the scene declared: "How politics makes us stupid."

The foreboding tableau marked the eagerly awaited launch of the newest of a growing number of digital-only news sites: *Vox*, the brainchild of journalistic wunderkind Ezra Klein, who turned 30 on May 9. For the debut, Klein wrote a 4,000-word essay built around research suggesting that political partisanship makes people impervious to new information contradictory to their views.¹

Klein had launched *Vox* after a storied, five-year run at *The Washington Post* as the founder and main writer for the newspaper's political site, *Wonkblog*. After *The Post* refused Klein's request for a multimillion-dollar expansion of the must-read site, he left in January to practice what he calls a new kind of journalism. Its mission would be "to explain the news" and to move readers "from curiosity to understanding."

In years past, would-be Clark Kents and Lois Lanes aspired to work at nationally recognized newspapers such as *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times*. Today, however, newspapers are often dismissed as "legacy media," and stars such as Klein are jumping ship to explore new frontiers in digital journalism. Their sites are drawing mixed reviews for design, even as



Getty Images/Alex Wong

Former Washington Post star reporter Ezra Klein is one of several top journalists who have jumped from traditional print publications to explore new frontiers in digital journalism. Klein, who launched the Post's popular site *Wonkblog*, started *Vox* – "a general news site for the 21st century" – with the main goal of explaining the news.

they attract attention and traffic for their content and their role as experiments in how to present news and run a successful news business today. They join other digital-only general news sites that over the past decade have been luring news consumers onto the Web.

"The vast majority of Americans now get news in some digital format," the Pew Research Center's Journalism Project notes in its most recent report "State of the News Media 2014."² (See chart, p. 460.)

Others, who like Klein are making closely watched transitions, include Nate Silver, who built a name for him-

self as a data-crunching political handicapper at *The New York Times*' blog *FiveThirtyEight*, and veteran technology reporters Walt Mossberg and Kara Swisher, who founded the closely watched tech blog *AllThingsD* at Dow Jones, publisher of *The Wall Street Journal*. Silver left *The Times* last year and launched a data-journalism site, also called *FiveThirtyEight*, on March 17 under sponsorship of the sports network ESPN. Mossberg and Swisher launched their technology news site *Re/code* on Jan. 2 with financial backing from NBCUniversal and the investment operation of former Yahoo chief executive Terry Semel.

In another high-profile start-up, Glenn Greenwald is editor of *The Intercept*, launched on Feb. 2 and funded by Pierre Omidyar, the billionaire founder of eBay, the Internet auction site. Greenwald, who previously worked with the U.S. website of the British newspaper *The Guardian*, made international headlines over the

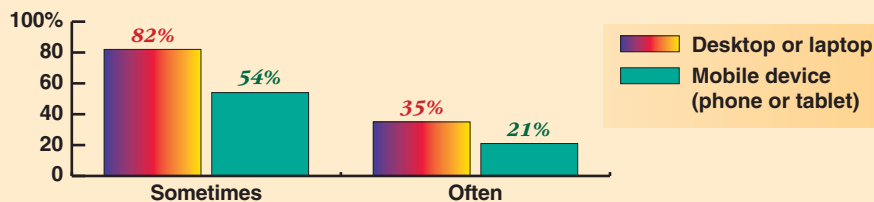
past year with Pulitzer Prize-winning disclosures of U.S. and British global surveillance based on documents leaked by former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden.

"It seems like not a week goes by without an announcement of a new project online headed by a prominent journalist," says Jim Romanesko, a veteran newspaperman who tracks media on the eponymous website *jimromanesko.com*. "A lot of legacy journalists want to try something new, something that's maybe a little bit edgy and experimental."

Among the best known of the older so-called digital natives, *The Huffington Post* mimics conventional news-

Most Americans Get Their News Online

Percentage who say they get their news sometimes or often from a digital source.



Source: Kenneth Olmstead, "5 key findings about digital news audiences," Pew Research Center, March 17, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/lr7tqb9>.

papers in format and tone, while the virally popular *BuzzFeed* traffics in irreverent entertainment even while adding serious journalism. Other popular sites include what are known as news aggregators — sites that republish stories from other news media. Two of the most widely viewed are maintained by the established Internet search engine companies, *Google News* and *Yahoo News*. By contrast, two newer aggregators — *Mashable* and *Flipboard* — are the built-from-scratch creations of entrepreneurially minded techies, both tied to the explosion in social media. *Mashable* says it "covers top social media news," meaning both news about social media and news popular on social media; *Flipboard* self-identifies as "Your social magazine for iPad, iPhone and Android."³

Meanwhile, traditional print and broadcast media are putting more energy, effort and resources into their websites amid declining news readership and viewership.⁴ "There's no stopping the migration from print to digital," says Tom Rosenstiel, executive director of the newspaper industry-affiliated American Press Institute and a former reporter with the *Los Angeles Times* and *Newsweek*.

These trends amount to "a virtual digital revolution," according to Tim McGuire, a longtime newspaperman and now a professor at Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism in

Phoenix. "There is no choice," he explains. "It's the set of tools we have today. We didn't keep driving horses and buggies when cars came along."

The digital revolution has changed the economics of the newspaper, magazine and television industries. Classified advertising in print newspapers has shriveled, while retail and national advertising have shrunk as well, though less dramatically. Newspapers and other media have shed thousands of jobs, but the losses have not been offset by employment at digital publications.

The developments have prompted alarmed hand-wringing. The total number of newspaper reporters, editors and other journalists fell to 38,000 in 2012 — down nearly one-third from a peak of 56,400 in 2000, according to the American Society of News Editors' annual census.⁵ Nearly 60 percent of journalists surveyed recently by Indiana University's School of Journalism say journalism is headed in the wrong direction. Slightly more than 60 percent say their newsrooms have shrunk in the past few years. Those interviewed worked for online media as well as traditional print, television, radio and news services.⁶

Some journalism experts see a bright side even while acknowledging the wrenching changes. "News for the most part is in fine shape," writes Mitchell Stephens, a professor at New York University's Arthur L. Carter Journal-

ism Institute, in his new book *Beyond News*.⁷

Technology has been "a boon for news," Stephens explains in his book. Despite the job losses, he writes, technology has allowed fewer hands to gather more information on "an extraordinarily wide variety of events" from "an extraordinarily wide variety of sources" and to disseminate the information "in a wide variety of formats fast and far."

Others agree. "Digital has made it possible for people to do different things that they were not able to do before," says Pablo Boczkowski, director of the Program in Media, Technology and Society at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill. Among other changes, Boczkowski notes that people can now access news around the clock — at work, at home or on the go — and can comment on articles without being filtered by editors. Digital "has broadened the possibility of public engagement," he says.

At the same time, some experts and critics say the new digital-only news sites have some less attractive features — in particular, a higher degree of political partisanship. Mark Jurkowitz, associate director of the Pew Research Center's Journalism Project and a former ombudsman for *The Boston Globe*, complains of the "proliferation of argumentative ideological media" in the digital world.

For instance, *The Huffington Post* is widely seen as having a left-liberal tilt, although founder Arianna Huffington minimizes the importance of any political slant.⁸ Other sites, however, are overtly partisan, such as the progressive *Think Progress Memo* or its conservative counterpart *Red State*.

McGuire agrees on the increase in partisanship, but sees market demand as driving the trend. "You've got people seeking affirmation, not information," he says.

As traditional news organizations still strive to find their place in the new digital world, some of the older

digital-only publications have shown signs of health. *The Huffington Post* was acquired by the Internet service provider AOL in February 2011 in a \$315 million deal. AOL chief executive Tim Armstrong has said the publication may be profitable in 2014, taking into account the conferences it organizes and other associated businesses.⁹ *BuzzFeed* has expanded its editorial staff to 170 since hiring the rising journalistic star Ben Smith as editor late in 2011. Jurkowitz says he asked Smith in a telephone interview to explain the phenomenal growth. Smith's answer: "The business staff has overperformed."

The newer sites — *Vox*, *FiveThirtyEight* and others — are works in progress at this point. Experts differ on their financial prospects. "Some will win, and some will lose," Arizona State's McGuire says. In the meantime, however, news and information consumers are able to choose from among an ever-expanding number of news sources. "The more, the merrier," says media tracker Romenesko.

As the news industry continues to adapt to change, here are some of the questions being debated:

Do digital-only publications benefit readers?

The digital media site *Mashable* scored a coup of sorts last fall by hiring Jim Roberts, a longtime editor at *The New York Times*, as executive editor and chief content officer. Roberts announced his arrival in an open letter posted on *Mashable* on Oct. 30 that extolled the benefits of digital technology in reporting news faster, combining text and video and allowing the site's users to help tell and spread stories via interactions with the site and social media.

"In other words," Roberts wrote, "as disruptive as certain technologies have been to the news business, they have created much greater benefits for those of us who make a living as communicators — and for our audience."¹⁰

Digital Sites Debut to Mixed Reviews

New digital-only news sites include several launched by prominent journalists that debuted with great fanfare and high expectations for their content. But the sites drew mixed reviews from design experts surveyed by Digiday, a site for digital media, marketing and advertising professionals.

Name	Founder(s)	Review of Design
Vox	Ezra Klein	"Accessible;" "best job" of creating brand identity
FiveThirtyEight	Nate Silver	"Straightforward" look, but "a lot of scrolling" required
The Intercept	Glenn Greenwald	"Looks . . . like a bare-bones blog"
Re/code	Walt Mossberg, Kara Swisher	"Hard to read," but good information

Source: Lucia Moses, "Which new digital news publisher designed it best?" Digiday, April 9, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/om2r5ms>.

Mashable's "community" — as Roberts termed the site's users — are greeted daily by a kaleidoscopic display of changing headlines and images on stories both weighty and light. The home page sorts stories under conventional headings such as U.S. & World, Tech, Business and Entertainment and newer usages such as Must Reads and Water Cooler.

The home pages of other digital sites offer users similarly wide arrays of options. *The Huffington Post* divides topics into 44 general news and nine local categories, or "verticals" — to use the current news jargon. Users who click on "Sports," for example, find not just daily scores, standings and highlights, but also a wealth of features, commentaries and the like — many with reader comments numbering into the hundreds or beyond. In contrast to print newspapers or magazines, digital readers can never really "finish" exploring a site because there is always more to read, view, link to or share.

"There are obviously some real advantages to producing content in the digital space, which is infinite," says Pew's Jurkowitz. "It allows

news consumers to do a much deeper dive into news content than they could in traditional platforms. You can click on links that can take you to original documents, links to everything that's been written about on that subject for the last three to four years, links to related issues or timelines."

Other veterans of print media also wax ecstatic. "Digital news is richer, more convenient," says Rosenstiel at the American Press Institute. "It's in my pocket when I want it. It's not confined to one medium."

At the same time, the wealth of news, information and commentary threatens overload, according to Jurkowitz. "It's obviously more difficult to be a news consumer in this digital age because there are so many choices," he explains.

"There are so many outlets now, so many information gatherers and distributors," says Jane McDonnell, executive director of the Online News Association, an organization for online journalists founded in 1999. "How do you know where your accurate journalism is coming from?"

The change reduces the agenda-setting and educational roles that news

Magazine Industry Tries to Adjust to Digital Age

Going all-digital is “like life support — before we pull the plug.”

For millions of African-Americans, *Jet* has been essential reading for the past six decades — a weekly chronicle of events and issues that were barely covered, if at all, in the nation's predominantly white news media. Starting in July, however, *Jet* will no longer be delivered in the mail or available at newsstands and grocery store checkout lines.

Instead, *Jet* will switch from print to an all-digital format. In announcing the move on May 7, Johnson Publishing Co., which also publishes the black-oriented magazine *Ebony*, called the step a “proactive decision to adapt to the changing needs of its readers” as they increasingly want information quickly and easily.¹

Jet, launched in 1951, was an invaluable source of information for black Americans during the most tumultuous decades of the civil rights revolution. The pocket-sized magazine was a weekly until it cut back to every three weeks last year.

Jet's move is evidence that the magazine industry, like the newspaper industry, is trying to adjust to the digital age. The magazine industry's trade association changed its name in 2010 to recognize the change: the Magazine Publishers Association became instead MPA — the Association of Magazine Media.

“The industry can no longer be judged by print alone,” says Meredith Wagner, the association's executive vice president for communications. “Magazine media is an evolving industry that is not tied to any one single format or medium.”

Jet's move does not sit as well, however, with one expert on the industry. “It's very bad news,” says Samir Husni, director of the Magazine Innovation Center at the University of Mississippi in Oxford and a consultant to magazine companies. “Instead of investing in the magazine, they say, ‘We are going to be cutting the magazine.’”

For Husni, print remains an essential part of what he calls the “total experience” of subscribing to a magazine, even as readers also want immediate access to continually updated content online. The digital-only route, he says, “has been like life support — before we pull the plug.”

Like newspapers, magazines have been in a challenging environment for decades. The weekly editions of such general-interest magazines as *Saturday Evening Post* and *Life* are distant memories from the 1960s and '70s. *Time* is a shrunken relic of its former self; *Newsweek*, which once had a circulation of 3.3 million, dropped its print edition at the end of 2012, only to return in March with a limited print run of only about 70,000 copies.² Monthly titles have also churned, with launch-

es and closures as publishers feel out the changing environment.

Overall industry figures show that magazine circulation revenue peaked at \$10.5 billion in 2005 and declined to \$8.3 billion in 2011.³ Total ad pages have fallen for the past two years, according to an MPA press release, but the decline slowed in 2013 to 4 percent from an 8 percent drop in 2012. Print ad revenue overall rose 1 percent, to \$19.7 billion — presumably thanks to rate increases. But the trade association called 2013 a “growth year,” primarily because of a 16 percent increase in tablet advertising revenue.⁴



Courtesy Johnson Publishing Co.

The pocket-size print version of Jet was once a staple for millions of African-American readers, but starting in July the magazine will switch from print to an all-digital format.

Despite economic uncertainties, Husni says the magazine industry overall has a positive future, but only if it takes care of its print legacy. “The future of digital begins with print,” he says. “The rumors of our demise,” he adds, “have been greatly exaggerated.”

— Kenneth Jost

¹ “Johnson Publishing Company Announces Transition of JET Magazine to Digital Magazine,” press release, Johnson Publishing, May 7, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/q2xtuwb>; and Rem Reider, “‘Jet’ comes in for a digital landing,” *USA Today*, May 8, 2014, p. 2B, <http://tinyurl.com/nqgweh2>.

² Leslie Kaufman, “Newsweek to Restart Printing Process,” *The New York Times*, March 3, 2014, p. B1, <http://tinyurl.com/k6y28up>.

³ “Top Statistics about Magazine Industry in the U.S. — Statista Dossier 2013,” Statista, <http://tinyurl.com/ms9f978>.

⁴ “2013 a Growth Year for Magazine Media Across Platforms,” MPA — The Association of Magazine Media, Jan. 9, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/q737v3v>.

media have played for decades. “People consume more of what they’re interested in and less of what they’re not interested in,” says Northwestern professor Boczkowski. “That exacer-

bates the gap between what the public wants to know and what the media considers they should know about.”

McGuire, the Arizona State professor, agrees. “You are no longer talking about

the kind of mass publications that you and I are familiar with,” he says. “The idea of mass has largely evaporated.”

Social media tools contribute to the phenomenon. Computer-generated al-

gorithms funnel stories on particular subjects or from particular viewpoints to users based on profiles developed from stories they followed in the past. Increasingly, people are referred to news via their friends on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or other services rather than seeking out news sites on their own.¹¹ “Another question looming over developments in social media,” the Pew report says, “is whether the self-selective process combined with algorithmic feeds are narrowing the kinds of information Americans are exposed to.”¹²

Roberts voiced none of these concerns, however, as he assumed his new post at *Mashable*, where news is inextricably linked to social media. In his vision, the site’s users are an essential part of newsgathering and reporting in the 21st century.

“[T]he *Mashable* community is not just a bunch of passive consumers, but are also active and thoughtful participants in the conversation, creators and contributors of unique content, and an essential part of the distribution chain,” Roberts wrote. “The members of *Mashable*’s community are smart and voracious; they like to share, and it’s *Mashable*’s mission to create smart material for them to do so.”

Do digital-only publications have drawbacks for readers?

Visitors to *BuzzFeed* are greeted on the home page’s left side by such conventional section headings as “News,” “Entertainment” and “Life.” On the right side, however, are headings such as “cute,” “trashy” and “fail.” Others are acronyms — “OMG” (for “Oh, my God”), “LOL” (for “laughing out loud”) and “WTF,” which uses a common obscenity to express surprise and disappointment.

The headings hark to *BuzzFeed*’s birth in 2006 as a social media site specializing in creating posts that would go viral and leave “buzz” in their wake. *BuzzFeed*’s most distinctive contribution to 21st-century journalism is the creation

of the “listicle” — numbered combinations of images and text such as “43 Things That Will Make You Feel Old.” But even as *BuzzFeed* has increased its editorial staff and moved into serious reporting and analysis, editor-in-chief Smith makes no apologies for relying on the whimsical to draw traffic.

“The fabric of politics has always been gossip and jokes and crazy personality stuff and memes,” Smith, who came to *BuzzFeed* from the hyperpolitical website *Politico*, snapped at a *New York Times* interviewer in February 2013. “Political coverage that wants to be solely high-minded,” he continued, “is missing huge chunks of the actual interplay of personality and power that is what actually drives things.”¹³

The approach produces mixed reactions from media watchers. “Cat videos don’t do anything for me,” Pew’s Jurkowitz remarks, referring to another common *BuzzFeed* feature. But he adds that traditional newspapers also offered less-than-serious fare, including comics, crossword puzzles and horoscopes. “There’s always been part of American media that’s been trivial and light,” he says. “There’s enough substantive content out there.”

Arizona State’s McGuire agrees. “*BuzzFeed* does some things that make journalistic traditionalists squint a lot, but they are talking about doing more serious journalism,” he says. “Us [sic] grand poo-h-bahs have worried about the trivialization of the news for the past 30 years,” he adds. “With every tool you can do bad things.”

Media watchers raise concerns about more serious downsides of digital journalism — most notably, inaccuracies and ideological biases. As Jurkowitz notes, digital journalism’s emphasis on speed increases the possibility that some information will prove inaccurate.

“The newspaper newsroom, the television newsroom — editors had time to think about what they had, what they didn’t have, what they needed to fill holes,” Jurkowitz says. With digital

publications, “there’s a built-in error rate,” he says.

McDonnell, with the Online News Association, acknowledges the increased risk of errors in digital journalism’s emphasis on speed. But she notes that some of the mistakes are spread online by nonjournalists. “It’s a journalist’s job to figure out what’s real and what’s not,” she says. Digital also has an offsetting advantage: the possibility of instantaneous corrections, unlike in print publications or scheduled radio or television newscasts.

Jurkowitz also complains about what he calls “the hybrid mix of fact and opinion” found in some digital sites. “You get a lot of ideology in digital news,” he says. News sites on both sides of the ideological spectrum “play loose with the facts because they are in service to a particular idea.”

Stephens, the NYU professor, also sees more ideology in digital journalism, but views the trend more favorably. “There’s great opinionated analysis that appears all over in this news ecology,” he says. In his book, Stephens argues that journalism in the 20th century became too wedded to “the religion of objectivity.” He calls instead for “wisdom journalism” — journalism that “includes and even emphasizes informed, interpretive, explanatory, even opinionated takes on current events.”¹⁴

Stephens is also untroubled by the cat videos and the like. “Newsstands were and are still filled with a lot of very dumb magazines which are mostly concerned with celebrities and other trivialities,” he says. “Obviously, we’re going to get a lot of that on line.”

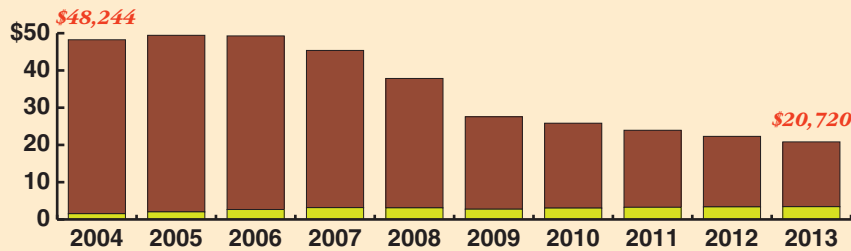
For his part, *BuzzFeed*’s Smith believes that humor, done well, is one of the keys to the success of digital journalism. To reach people these days, he wrote in an essay in *Playboy*, “you have to write an article so funny, so revelatory or so trenchant that they will actively share it with their friends. To go viral, you have to do something excellent.”¹⁵

Newspaper Ad Revenue Plummeted

Revenue for newspaper print and online advertising fell 57 percent from 2004 to 2013.

Newspaper Advertising Revenue

Total revenue (in \$ millions)



Source: Newspaper Association of America, "Archived Advertising & Circulation Revenue Data," undated, <http://tinyurl.com/d83po24>; 2013 figures from "Business Model Evolving, Circulation Revenue Rising," Newspaper Association of America, April 18, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/kljkoj7>.

Will the new digital news sites succeed financially?

Swisher and Mossberg created a money-making business under Dow Jones's auspices with their "All Things Digital" technology conferences, which began in 2003 and gave birth to the *AllThingsD* blog four years later. Now that they have gone out on their own with a digital tech news site, *Re/code*, Swisher acknowledges that the financial prospects are uncertain.

In every year they were with Dow Jones, "*AllThingsD* was profitable," Swisher told an interviewer with *San Francisco* magazine in April. "We'll probably lose money this year, and that will be upsetting. I'm focused on getting to a place where we can prove that journalism can make good money on the web. So we'll see about that." ¹⁶

Klein was similarly reluctant to make financial predictions one week after the launch of his brainchild *Vox*. "You've gotta give this stuff some time to play out," he told an interviewer for *New York* magazine. "People are just constantly pronouncing on business strategies or content strategies. We're all going

to be different organizations a year from now than we are today." ¹⁷

The four most buzz-producing new sites — *Vox*, *FiveThirtyEight*, *Re/code* and the *Intercept* — all start with solid financial backing, but most media watchers are hesitating to make specific forecasts about their long-term viability. "Some will win, some will lose," says McGuire, the Arizona State professor. "You're at a high stage of experimentation."

Among those more skeptical is media watcher Michael Wolff, who writes for, among other publications, *GQ*. In a chat with Hearst Magazines president David Carey in early April just as *Vox* was being launched, Wolff was openly contemptuous of the likely fortunes of journalists-turned-entrepreneurs such as Klein and others.

"There is not a chance in the world," said Wolff, who wrote a 1998 book, *Burn Rate*, about the failure of his own Internet media company. "It's just preposterous. I don't know what they're thinking, what they're smoking. Nobody knows anything about selling an ad, nobody knows anything about aggregating an audience. So I think this is, to put it kindly, a bubble." ¹⁸

Fellow media watcher Romanesko, for one, dismisses Wolff's forecast. "I think he's a kind of negative Nancy," Romanesko says. "They're smart people. I don't think they're going to throw buckets of money out the window."

The new sites follow in the steps of older publications that have made money with digital journalism. "*Buzz Feed* says they're profitable now," Romanesko notes. "The secret is to stay lean and be cautious."

Boczkowski, the Northwestern professor, also emphasizes the need to be cautious and keep expectations low. "Sure, there is a way to make money — the question is how much money," he says. "Making money involves having costs less than the income. The question is how to keep the costs low and how to get revenue."

Vox, *FiveThirtyEight*, *Re/code* and *The Intercept* are all starting out as free sites seeking revenue from advertising and other sources. An exception to that pattern is *The Information*, a tech industry news site launched in December by former *Wall Street Journal* reporter Jessica Lessin, with an annual subscription cost of \$399. "Instead of chasing the highest number of eyeballs," Lessin explained in a blog post, "we will chase and deliver the most valuable news." ¹⁹

Digital advertising revenue could prove disappointing for digital sites, as it has so far for legacy media. A recent survey notes that companies are spending a relatively small portion of their digital marketing budgets — only 12.5 percent — on digital advertising. A much bigger portion — around 40 percent — was spent on social networks, email marketing, mobile marketing and company websites and blogs. ²⁰

Romanesko notes, however, that digital sites do not need to rely solely on advertising. "The conference business is very lucrative for them, too," he notes, citing All Things Digital as an example. "They're finding ways to get revenue beyond advertising."

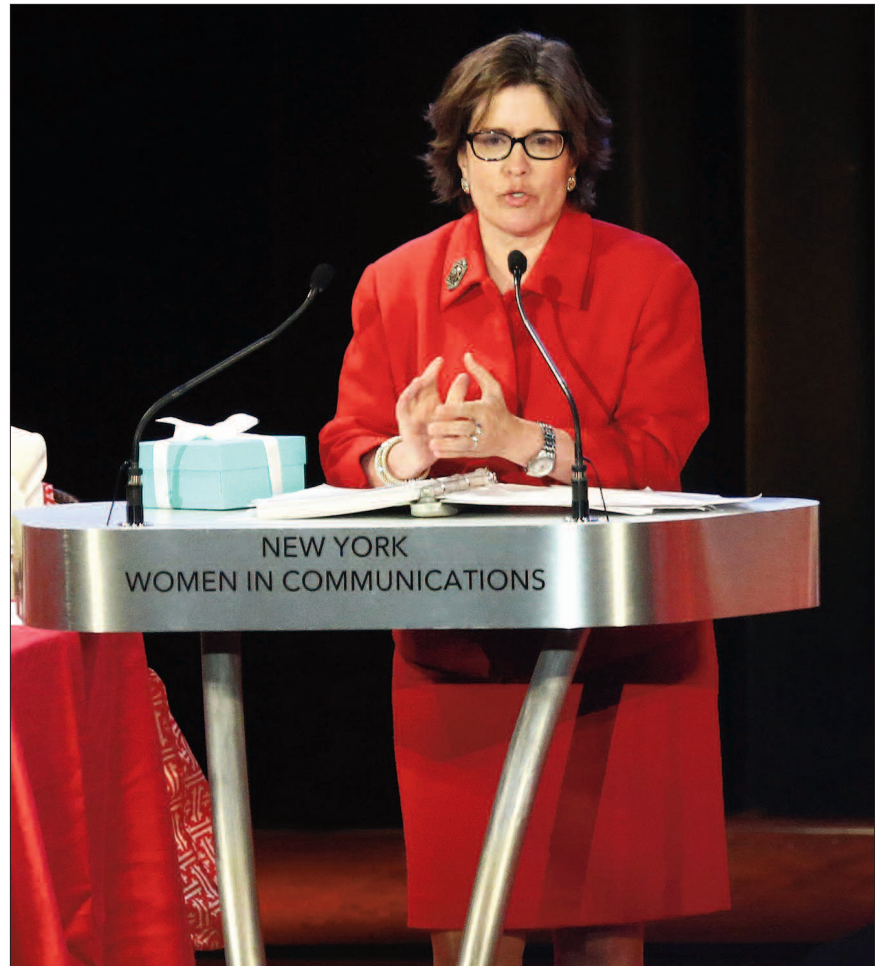
The new sites are not alone in trying to figure out the new economics of the journalism business, according to the experts. “All of these startups — have they figured out some kind of business model?” Jurkowitz asks rhetorically. “Frankly, the consensus is no. They have not figured out what the legacy organizations haven’t figured out either.” ■

BACKGROUND

Changing Technologies

The technology now transforming journalism may seem revolutionary, but it is only the latest in a succession of innovations since the invention of the printing press that have helped disseminate news ever faster and ever wider. Newspapers became a daily, household commodity in the United States by the turn of the 20th century thanks to the steam-powered cylindrical press. Radio brought the sound of history into the living room by the 1920s and ’30s; television added pictures in the 1940s and ’50s. And with the launch of the World Wide Web in 1990, people around the world gained a tool for nearly instantaneous access to the events of the day.²¹

The German blacksmith Johannes Gutenberg made handwritten manuscripts and woodblock prints obsolete when, sometime around 1439, he combined the essential elements of what was once “modern” printing: movable type, oil-based inks and a screw-driven press. The printers of 18th-century colonial America, such as Benjamin Franklin and John Peter Zenger, used much the same technology to print the often highly partisan newspapers that played an important part in unifying colonists around the cause of independence.



Getty Images/Neilson Barnard

Kara Swisher is among the print journalists making closely watched transitions to digital news. Along with Walt Mossberg, also a veteran technology reporter at The Wall Street Journal, she founded the much-heralded tech blog AllThingsD at Dow Jones, publisher of The Journal. Swisher and Mossberg left Dow Jones to start tech news site Re/code.

The 19th-century invention of the steam-driven cylindrical press made newspapers widely accessible and the newspaper business reliably profitable, according to NYU professor Stephens. Printer Benjamin Day, in 1835, was first in the United States to use a steam-driven press to mass-produce his newspaper, the *New York Sun*, and sell copies for a penny each. The great turn-of-the-century publishers — William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, among others — showed that the so-called penny press could bring news to the masses at a healthy profit. Those newspapers depended on another 19th-century advance, the tele-

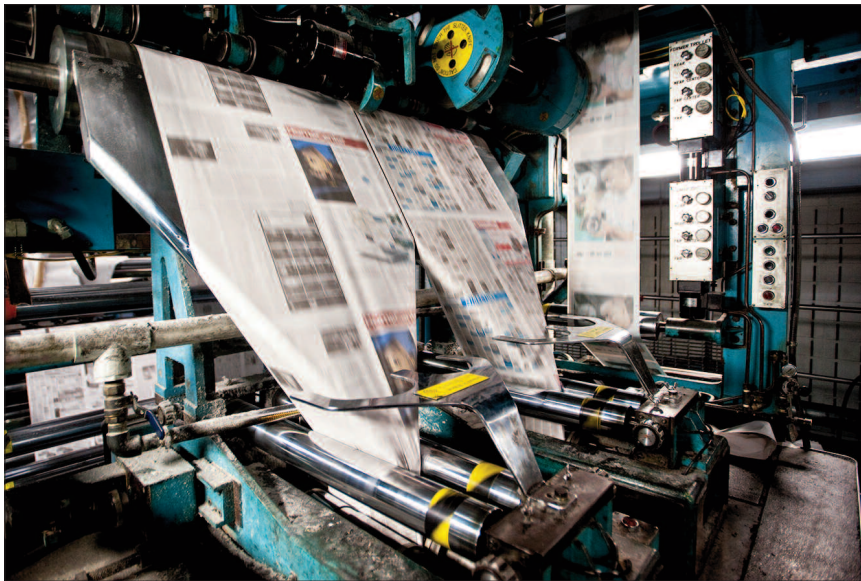
graph, for news accounts written by far-flung reporters and published not after months, weeks or even days, but the very next day.

In the 20th century, radio and then television erased even that delay. Americans listened in their living rooms to President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s fire-side chats delivered from the White House in the 1930s. Beginning with Harry S. Truman in 1949, Americans grew accustomed to watching their president take the oath of office via live television — first in black and white and then, in the 1960s, in “living color.” In 1969, millions around the world viewed the first man to step

onto the moon via televised images delayed only by the time required for radio waves to travel 240,000 miles across space.

Newspapers and the news divisions of what were then the three commercial TV networks built profitable businesses by selling news written and edited for mass audiences. Americans had more information about

independent contractor at the European Organization for Nuclear Research, known as CERN, Berners-Lee developed the now-familiar hypertext transfer protocol (HTTP), hypertext markup language (HTML) and Web browser to facilitate communication among the center's dispersed facilities. The first site outside CERN was brought online in January 1991.²²



Getty Images/Bloomberg/Matt Nager

Traditional newspapers, such as The Dallas Morning News, above, have seen their popularity dwindle as digital media have become increasingly popular. "There's no stopping the migration from print to digital," says Tom Rosenstiel, executive director of the American Press Institute. As a result, so-called "legacy media" are putting more effort and resources into developing their websites.

events of the day than ever before, but Stephens rues what was missing. "They're mostly recounting the facts," he says of mid- and late 20th-century U.S. journalists. "They didn't provide anywhere near the ability to understand the facts."

The World Wide Web, which allows users to link easily to information via the global network of computer systems, created new opportunities for journalists to disseminate news farther and faster. The transformation now so apparent materialized only slowly. Credit for inventing the Web goes to the British computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee, now Sir Timothy. Working as an

The "handful" of newspapers publishing on the Web before 1995 grew to 175 that year and more than quadrupled to 702 by mid-1997, according to Northwestern professor Boczkowski.²³ *USA Today* boasted 2.5 million Web visitors in December 1998 — pitifully small in comparison to the newspaper's current figure of 35 million unique visitors a month. And the "online newspapers" of the period differed little from the print editions.

"They had not really figured out what was native to the digital space," Pew's Jurkowitz recalls. "They weren't doing any special thinking about the digital world."

Exploiting the Web

Within a few years of its launch, the World Wide Web was drawing interest from a growing array of companies, organizations and computer-savvy individuals. Over time, the number of websites worldwide grew into the hundreds of millions and the number of users to more than 2 billion by 2010.²⁴ The growing popularity of the Web hurt other media, especially newspapers, by diverting both advertising revenue and readers' time and attention.

The economic impact of Web advertising on newspapers began to materialize early in the 21st century. Print retail advertising peaked at \$22.2 billion in 2005 and fell by nearly half by 2011, according to the Newspaper Association of America, while print national advertising crested at \$8.1 billion in 2004 and fell by more than half by 2011. Classified ad revenue was siphoned off by Web innovations such as Craigslist, a free online marketplace, and the Web auction site eBay. Print revenue from classifieds, which peaked at \$19.6 billion in 2000, had plummeted by more than 70 percent by 2011. Online ad revenue gains offset less than 10 percent of the print revenue losses.²⁵ At the same time, to attract as many viewers as possible to those ads, almost all sites offered their news content for free.

The rapidly multiplying number of websites also contributed to the continuing decline in newspaper circulation and readership, which had begun in the 1970s. Free Web-based news aggregators — such as *Yahoo News*, launched in 2001, and *Google News*, launched in 2002 — gave audiences continually updated access to multiple news sources with no need for print copies. Government websites provided official information at the federal, state and local levels. Professional sports

Continued on p. 468

Chronology

Early 1990s

The World Wide Web is invented; online news publications are born.

1990-1991

British computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee develops World Wide Web so his colleagues can collaborate; first site outside his institution comes online January 1991.

Mid-1990s

Newspapers with online editions grow from 175 in 1995 to more than 700 by mid-1997. . . . Professional sports leagues establish websites for fans.

1999

Online News Association is founded.

2000s *More news goes online. . . . Classified ad revenue for print newspapers reaches peak and then declines by more than 70 percent over the decade.*

2001

Yahoo launches *Yahoo News* as news aggregator. . . . Annual classified ad revenue for print newspapers peaks at \$19.6 billion and begins to decline; retail, national advertising begin less drastic declines in 2004, 2005.

2002

Google launches *Google News* as news aggregator. . . . *How Appealing* and *SCOTUSblog* launched as legal news websites.

2003

Gawker.com launches as Manhattan-based celebrity gossip site (January).

2005

Huffington Post launches as digital-only, national news source (May 9). . . . *Mashable* is founded as social media news aggregator (July).

2006

BuzzFeed launches as site to chronicle events, trends “on the rise and worth your time” (Nov. 17).

2007

Walt Mossberg and Kara Swisher launch *AllThingsD* blog at *The Wall Street Journal* (April 18).

2008

The Wall Street Journal adds reader comment section; *The New York Times* allows users to share stories from site (September).

2009

Ezra Klein hired as economics and domestic policy blogger at *The Washington Post* (June); develops *Wonkblog*. . . . Kaiser Family Foundation launches online health news website.

2010s *Star journalists launch online news sites.*

2010

Nate Silver moves political forecasting blog *FiveThirtyEight.com* to *The New York Times* under three-year licensing agreement (June 3). . . . *Flipboard* debuts as news aggregator app for iPad (July 21).

2011

AOL acquires *Huffington Post* for \$315 million (Feb. 7). . . . Sports-writer Bill Simmons launches sports website *Grantland* (June 8). . . . *BuzzFeed* hires political reporter Ben Smith as editor; news staff begins expansion (Dec. 11).

2012

Upworthy launches as website for viral content (March). . . . *Huffington Post*'s military correspondent David Wood wins Pulitzer Prize for national reporting (April 16). . . . *Newsweek* announces plan to end print edition at end of year (Oct. 18).

2013

Gadfly journalist Glenn Greenwald breaks news of U.S., U.K. global surveillance with leaked documents from National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden (June 5). . . . Silver's plan to leave *The New York Times* becomes public (July 19). . . . eBay founder Pierre Omidyar announces plans to bankroll Greenwald, others in new online publication, eventually named *The Intercept* (Oct. 17). . . . Veteran newspaperman Jim Roberts hired as *Mashable* executive editor (Oct. 31). . . . Mossberg, Swisher leave Dow Jones (Dec. 31).

2014

Mossberg and Swisher launch *Re/code* (Jan. 2). . . . Klein's departure from *The Washington Post* is announced (Jan. 21). . . . Greenwald's team launches *The Intercept* (Feb. 10). . . . *Newsweek* announces plan to resume print edition, with limited run (March 3). . . . Silver launches *FiveThirtyEight* (March 17). . . . Study finds vast majority of news consumers get news in digital format “sometimes,” roughly one-third “often” (March 26). . . . Klein launches *Vox.com* (March 9). . . . Newspaper industry group releases figures showing revenue losses are slowing, digital-only subscription revenue is up (April 18). . . . Poll by Indiana University finds 60 percent of journalists say profession is headed “in wrong direction” (May 5). . . . *Jet* magazine announces it will end print edition (May 7).

Hyperlocal News Sites Cover What Others Don't

"Mark every death. Remember every victim. Follow every case."

Laura Amico broke into journalism in her home state of California and put in two years on the crime beat at the *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*. But when she moved to Washington, D.C., in 2009 with her husband, Chris, for his new job at PBS's "NewsHour," she could not find a journalism position that she wanted.

Five years later, however, Amico is founder and publisher of an award-winning local digital news site that covers every homicide in the District of Columbia from the killing through the end of legal proceedings. *Homicide Watch D.C.* greets visitors with a promise of unrelenting thoroughness: "Mark every death. Remember every victim. Follow every case."¹

The combined effects of electronic commerce and online journalism have been hard on coverage of local news. Advertisers and readers alike have been drawn away from local newspapers that previously were the principal source for coverage of local news, whether it be crime and justice, business and real estate or local government.²

At the same time, however, technology reduces the barriers to entry for start-up local news operations, like the one Amico and her web-developer husband began in 2010 and relaunched in 2011. The site provides coverage and a searchable database of D.C. homicides based on original reporting, court documents and social media.

Start-up operations practicing what has come to be called "hyperlocal journalism" are an antidote to the long-term decline in local reporting that has concerned journalists, com-

munity activists and others who follow local government. "Many of them are covering statehouses, city halls or local neighborhoods at a very granular level, compensating for the decline in reporting from legacy media," says Mark Jurkowitz, associate director of the Pew Research Center's Journalism Project.

Columbia Journalism Review's Guide to Online News Startups lists around 60 "hyperlocal" sites from *ARLNow.com* (Arlington, Va.) to *West Seattle Blog*. That number does not count *Homicide Watch* and affiliated sites in Chicago and Trenton, N.J., which are listed in other categories, as are most of the numerous sites devoted to local high school sports.³

Two dozen of the hyperlocal listings are state entries for *Patch*, described in Feb. 24, 2012, postings as "AOL's fast-growing hyperlocal network." AOL sold the financially troubled operation in January to Hale Global, an investment firm that specializes in turning around ailing businesses. Hundreds of *Patch* employees were laid off, but those who remained were told that all 900 *Patch* sites would be continued.⁴

Community newspapers have long provided some of the hyperlocal coverage of neighborhoods, schools, zoning boards and the like that metropolitan dailies do not cover. But most of the community papers are weekly and have limited space, at least in their print editions. Digital sites offer the advantage of continual updating and unlimited space.

The Amicos had been financing *Homicide Watch* themselves, but they raised \$47,450 in 2012 through a Kickstarter online crowd-funding campaign, allowing the site to hire student in-

Continued from p. 466

leagues created websites — such as *NFL.com* and *MLB.com* — as early as the mid-1990s for fans to follow games in real time and keep track of standings, scores, statistics and much more than any sports section could provide.

Special-interest blogs became essential reading for specific audiences. For example, two legal blogs launched in 2002 — *SCOTUSblog* on the Supreme Court and *How Appealing* on appellate litigation — provide news and analysis that judges, lawyers and legal affairs journalists depend upon today. For health policy news, the Kaiser Family Foundation launched a free health-news site in 2009 that is similarly invaluable for people in and around the nation's largest industry sector.

Gawker was founded in 2003 as a Manhattan-oriented celebrity gossip site; Gawker Media developed seven other blogs, including the sports site *Deadspin*. Another popular sports site is *Grantland*, created by sports journalist Bill Simmons in 2011 and named in honor of one of the great sportswriters of the print era, Grantland Rice, whose daily column was syndicated across the country. For business audiences, the *Business Insider* is now a popular site with some original content after having been launched in 2009 as a blog and financial and tech news aggregator.

Newspapers were challenged more directly by new digital-only general news publications even as they tried to innovate online and simultaneously

tend to the print editions that yielded roughly 80 percent of their revenue. In the clearest head-to-head matchup, the author and syndicated columnist Arianna Huffington launched *The Huffington Post* in May 2005 with financial backing from venture capitalist Kenneth Lehrer. The site's design mimicked to some extent the various sections of print newspapers. The site grew to become a 24/7 operation, with local and international editions, before the legacy Internet service provider AOL bought it in 2011 for \$315 million.²⁶

Within a year after *HuffPost's* debut, two more of today's most popular sites were launched, both more as social media than the general news sites that they were to become. *Mash-*

terms to take over some of the reporting.⁵ Amico prides herself on thoroughness. In a recent story on a mistrial in a homicide case, she noted that local news media had covered the killing but only *Homicide Watch* reported on the no-verdict trial.

The site's home page also makes an unmistakable allusion to the widespread feeling in Washington's African-American and Latino communities that the District's major news media devote more time, attention and space to homicides in predominantly white neighborhoods than in their communities. "If we are to understand violent crime in our community, the losses of every family, in every neighborhood must be recognized," the introductory statement reads.

Digital technology is what makes the operation work, as Laura and Chris Amico explained to an interviewer in 2013.⁶ "Having the platform speeds up my workflow by creating a pattern out of my work," Laura Amico said. By checking the database regularly, she continued, she is able to fill in holes as new information becomes available.

"Some of what makes the site work is really fundamental to the web," Chris Amico added. The site allows links to profile pages, he explained, eliminating the need to include background in each story. He also built a database application that creates maps showing where each homicide occurred.

Laura Amico saw a concrete advantage to that database recently when the District recorded three homicides in one night. With a quick check, she determined that it had been the deadliest week of the year for Washington. "I haven't seen any other



The hyperlocal news site Homicide Watch D.C. covers every homicide in the city from the killing through the end of legal proceedings.

reporter with a database robust and agile enough to do that," she said.

— Kenneth Jost

¹ *Homicide Watch D.C.*, <http://homicidewatch.org>.

² Some background drawn from Paul Farhi, "Is local reporting in a death spiral?" *The Washington Post*, March 27, 2014, p. C1, <http://tinyurl.com/mmx8zcg>.

³ "CJR's Guide to Online News Startups," accessed May 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/7oebz3d>.

⁴ Leslie Kaufman, "New Owner of Patch Lays Off Hundreds," *The New York Times*, Jan. 30, 2014, p. B7, <http://tinyurl.com/mqpywdb>.

⁵ "A One-Year Student Reporting Lab within Homicide Watch DC," Kickstarter, <http://tinyurl.com/kg72l6q>.

⁶ Erin Kissane, "Homicide Watch: An Interview," *Contents*, Issue 4 (2013), <http://tinyurl.com/kbpcqem>.

able was the brainchild of Pete Cashmore, a college dropout in Aberdeen, Scotland. Three months shy of his 20th birthday, Cashmore launched *Mashable* in July 2005 as a tool for collecting news about social media and about what users were sharing. By 2009, *The Huffington Post* hailed Cashmore as one of the globe's "top game changers," crediting him with taking social media mainstream and "translating geek-speak for the curious and converted."²⁷

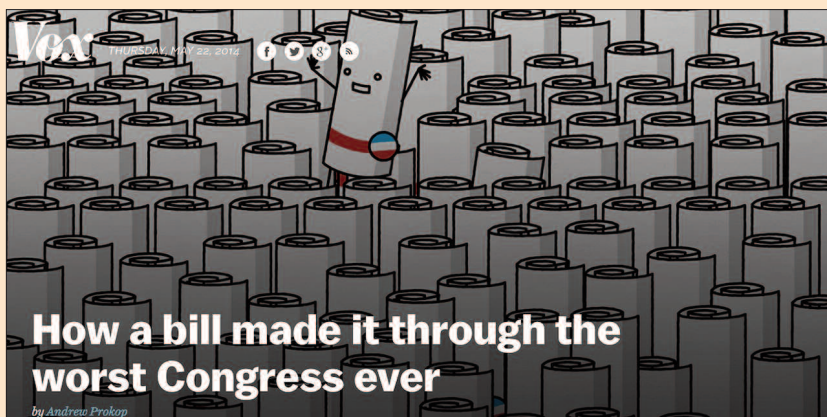
BuzzFeed debuted in November 2006, created as "the Internet popularity contest" by Jonah Peretti, a graduate of the MIT Media Lab and co-founder of *The Huffington Post* along with Huffington and Lehrer. Peretti developed technologies for searching out

items being posted and shared — creating "buzz," that is. He left *The Huffington Post* after the AOL purchase in 2011 to devote full time to *BuzzFeed*. His decision to hire political journalist Smith as editor in December 2011 marked the site's evolution into a serious news site with its buzz-creating features still intact.²⁸

Flipboard came along in 2010, designed by creators Mike McCue and Evan Doll to bring magazine-like graphics to a social media aggregator, which pulls together feeds from a user's various social networks.²⁹ McCue had been head of a voice-recognition company, Tell Me, which was acquired by Microsoft in 2007; Doll was an Apple iPhone engineer McCue met after leaving Microsoft in 2009. Their app was

released first for Apple's iPad in 2010 and then for iPhone late in 2011. *The New York Times* marked the iPhone debut of the app with a headline describing it as useful "for killing time standing in line."³⁰

Yet another entrant in the attention-grabbing competition was born in 2012: *Upworthy*, launched by Eli Pariser, a liberal political activist, and Peter Koehley, former managing editor of the satirical newspaper *The Onion*. With financial backing from one of Facebook's founders, Chris Hughes, the site announced its mission of becoming "the place to find awesome, meaningful, visual things to share." By deft use of virally appealing headlines, it grew with phenomenal speed.³¹



Digital Newcomers

New digital news sites such as Re/code, Vox and FiveThirtyEight were launched by high-profile print reporters with high expectations for their content, but they have drawn mixed reviews from design experts. FiveThirtyEight is the brainchild of Nate Silver, who built a name for himself as a data-crunching political handicapper at The New York Times. The Washington Post's Ezra Klein started Vox when The Post refused his request to invest more in Wonkblog, his Post digital site. Wall Street Journal tech reporters Kara Swisher and Walt Mossberg started Re/code on Jan. 2 with backing from NBCUniversal and the investment operation of former Yahoo chief executive Terry Semel. How they will do financially remains to be seen.

Gaining Respect

Digital publications such as *The Huffington Post* and *BuzzFeed* slowly gained respect and proved their worth, editorially and financially, as the 21st century moved into its second decade. Meanwhile, major newspapers discovered that they could increase their audience by expanding their digital products, including some digital-only content. Meanwhile, some journalists who had become stars on the newspapers' platforms outgrew their employers and decided to venture into the digital world on their own.

In their early years, *The Huffington Post* and *BuzzFeed* were held in low regard by some in the traditional media. In retrospective pieces, leading media writers have recalled *The Huffington Post* in its early days as "a viral aggregation factory and unpaid-blogger's paradise" and *BuzzFeed* as "something like *The Huffington Post* without the pretension of producing news and commentary."³²

Not long after *BuzzFeed* got a new editor and a \$15.5 million infusion of new capital late in 2011, it turned heads in the world of political journalism with a good scoop: Arizona Republican Sen. John McCain's endorsement of Mitt Romney for the GOP presidential nomination. A few months later, *The Huffington Post* gained new stature when its senior military correspondent David Wood won the Pulitzer Prize — the first ever for work by a for-profit, digital-only publication. The prize, for national reporting, was for a 10-part series on the plight of wounded veterans from the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

In the meantime, major U.S. newspapers were expanding their digital presence, adding some features and content that appeared only online and not in their print editions. At Dow Jones, Mossberg and Swisher launched the *AllThingsD* blog on April 18, 2007,

CQ Press/Screenshots (All)

as an extension of the tech conferences that they had begun hosting in 2003.³³ Klein, who had blogged for the liberal magazine *The American Prospect*, came on board at *The Washington Post* in 2009. He was introduced to *The Post's* readers in June as writing a blog about domestic and economic policy.³⁴ A year later, *The New York Times* announced plans to host the political blog that statistician Silver had created in 2008, *FiveThirtyEight.com*. *The Times* announcement on June 3, 2010, noted that under a three-year licensing agreement, Silver will retain all rights to the blog and will run it himself.³⁵

Greenwald, a political gadfly blogger and columnist for the British-based newspaper *The Guardian*, made worldwide headlines beginning in June 2013 with sensational disclosures about U.S. and British global surveillance. Greenwald and his colleague documentary filmmaker Laura Poitras were recipients — along with *The Washington Post's* Barton Gellman — of classified documents leaked by Snowden, the whistle-blowing onetime NSA contractor. Four months after the first of the stories was published, eBay founder Omidyar announced that he would bankroll Greenwald and others, to the tune of \$250 million, in a new digital-only venture into serious journalism.³⁶

Silver's plan to leave *The Times* leaked on July 19, 2013, in the form of a post by its then-media reporter Brian Stelter on another of the newspaper's branded blogs, *Media Decoder*.³⁷ Stelter, who later left the newspaper for CNN, noted that Silver's affiliation with ESPN would allow him to return to sports and statistics, the area where he had first gained prominence, and to cover politics in election years for ABC. ESPN and ABC are both owned by the Disney Company.

Mossberg and Swisher left Dow Jones at the end of the year. In a final jointly bylined post on *AllThingsD* on



Getty Images/Andrew Burton

One of the newest entrants into the digital news field is Glenn Greenwald, an investigative reporter for *The Guardian* who won a Pulitzer Prize for his disclosures of U.S. and British global surveillance, based on documents leaked by former National Security Agency consultant Edward Snowden. Greenwald, here with colleague Laura Poitras, a documentary filmmaker, launched *The Intercept* on Feb. 2. The national security publication was funded by the billionaire founder of eBay, Pierre Omidyar.

Dec. 31, they took credit for writing more than 40,000 posts, testing “hundreds” of new products and services and drawing “millions” of readers. But they closed — “taking a page from the industry we cover” — by saying, “It’s once again time to refresh, reimagine, remake and reinvent.” They launched *Re/code* on Jan. 2, as principal owners of the newly formed company Revere Digital, and took all of the *AllThingsD* staff along with them.³⁸

Klein's departure from *The Post* was confirmed on Jan. 21, 2014, in a memo distributed to the newspaper's staff and reported in *The New York Times* and elsewhere.³⁹ Klein was quoted as expressing gratitude to *The Post*, but it was later disclosed that he had unsuccessfully pitched to the newspaper's

editors and its new owner, Amazon.com founder Jeffrey Bezos, a plan for an expanded *Wonkblog* that he would run as a stand-alone site still with *The Post*. Instead, Klein started his new policy-oriented site under the aegis of Vox Media, parent of digital-only sports site *SB Nation* and tech site *The Verge*.⁴⁰

“We are just at the beginning of how journalism should be done on the web,” Klein told *New York Times* media writer David Carr. “We really wanted to build something from the ground up that helps people understand the news better. We are not just trying to scale *Wonkblog*, we want to improve the technology of news, and Vox has a vision of how to solve some of that.”⁴¹

CURRENT SITUATION

Starting Up

The new stars of digital news are filling their sites with lots of content, but keeping mum on how much traffic they are getting and generally steering clear of broad pronouncements about how they are doing.

Of the high-profile sites that launched this year — *Re/code*, *The Intercept*,

itorial staff of roughly 20 reporters who write stories or conduct interviews that could just as easily appear in a conventional newspaper or news website.⁴² But in the interest of what he calls “persistent explanatory journalism,” Klein has created two distinctive features: numbered yellow “card stacks” that explain a subject step-by-step, in primer-like terms; and Vox-Explains videos, such as a two-minute piece on income inequality narrated by Klein.

One week after launch, Klein told an interviewer he was “really, really happy with week one,” but hoped that week two would be better and week

cal analysis” but also in “data visualization, computer programming and data-literate reporting.” Silver said the site would apply data-journalism techniques to five areas: politics, economics, science, life and sports.⁴⁴

In the two months since, *FiveThirtyEight* has explored such issues as whether white Republicans are more racist than white Democrats (yes, but only a little); whether children born to older fathers are at greater risk of attention deficit disorder (unclear); and whether cheerleading is unsafe compared with other high school and college sports (in the middle).⁴⁵

Mossberg says he and Swisher named their new product *Re/code* to combine an abstract word with tech connotations and the importance of “reinvention,” which he says characterizes the tech and media industries the site covers. “We’re off to an excellent start,” Mossberg says four-and-a-half months after launch. Mossberg and Swisher have majority control of the new company, Revere Digital, but financing from NBC and Semel’s company, Windsor Media, has allowed an expanded editorial staff. Reporters cover such beats as Washington tech policy and tech and society. The total staff count, including Web developers, is 30.

Along with *Re/code*, Revere will be sponsoring what Mossberg says will be “lucrative” conferences about tech issues. The first is being held at the end of May in Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif. “The conference sold out in hours,” Mossberg says. Advertising, however, is slow so far. “We haven’t built out the business staff,” he explains.

At *The Intercept*, Greenwald and his co-founders — documentary filmmaker Poitras and investigative reporter Jeremy Scahill — have assembled a team of 13 others to carry on what the trio described at launch as a “central mission . . . to hold the most powerful governmental and corporate factions accountable.” Two months after the

Continued on p. 474



Getty Images/Bloomberg/David Paul Morris

Nate Silver, 36, who ran his political data blog *FiveThirtyEight* at The New York Times, left the paper to relaunch the site in March under the same name at the sports network ESPN.

FiveThirtyEight and *Vox.com* — none responded to requests for figures on visitors to the sites. Mossberg, co-founder of *Re/code*, was the only one of the principals to agree to an interview to discuss the post-launch output and impact. And media watchers appear to be slow so far in offering detailed reviews of the sites.

At *Vox.com*, the most recent of the four to launch, Klein oversees an ed-

itorial staff of roughly 20 reporters who write stories or conduct interviews that could just as easily appear in a conventional newspaper or news website.⁴² But in the interest of what he calls “persistent explanatory journalism,” Klein has created two distinctive features: numbered yellow “card stacks” that explain a subject step-by-step, in primer-like terms; and Vox-Explains videos, such as a two-minute piece on income inequality narrated by Klein.

One week after launch, Klein told an interviewer he was “really, really happy with week one,” but hoped that week two would be better and week

At Issue:

Are print publications adapting to online journalism?



CAROLINE LITTLE
PRESIDENT AND CEO, NEWSPAPER
ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

WRITTEN FOR *CQ RESEARCHER*, MAY 2014

When I joined the Newspaper Association of America in 2011, I said that newspapers were going to transform. As we survey the industry in 2014, it is clear that this transformation has taken place, and the numbers bear this out.

According to comScore, a company that measures Internet use, digital newspaper content was accessed by 161 million Americans in March 2014. That is an increase of 19 percent from April 2013. It shows that print publications have put an emphasis on digital content, and that emphasis is being rewarded with growing audiences.

When you look at newspaper financials, you see that circulation revenue has increased the past two years and that this was driven largely by digital subscriptions. This is another example of print publications adapting to a changing landscape and how it is paying off.

Our members are no longer looking at their newspapers as “print publications,” because that is now just one part of the larger business model. That is why I like to discuss “newspaper media” instead of simply “newspapers” because a successful newspaper media company will focus on both print and digital, which includes the website, social media channels and mobile capability.

The younger generation remains engaged with newspaper content; they are simply doing so in a different way. We see that a majority of young adults, ages 18 to 24, access newspaper content exclusively through mobile devices. This is obviously a drastic change from how content was accessed even five years ago, when it was all on the desktop.

There are now more than 450 newspapers that offer digital subscriptions, and that number is increasing every day. We are seeing that readers will pay for good, trusted content, which is exactly what newspapers deliver.

Additionally, digital platforms have provided newspapers a better way to tell stories. When I look at the future of journalism, I see journalists who have an eye for telling stories in the best possible manner. That can be a written article and a video. Or it can be in a long-form package with accompanying infographics. At the Newspaper Association of America, our members no longer focus solely on print. To continue our recent success, print publications must continue to balance between print, digital and mobile. So far, so good — and I expect even more good things in the future.



MITCHELL STEPHENS
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Newspapers and magazines have two problems as they attempt to survive in a world where information can move fast and far digitally.

The first and least interesting is practical. These publications are going to have to complete their “migration,” to use the jargon, to the new “platform.” It is hard to imagine much justification for continuing to go to the expense and trouble of printing on and schlepping around paper, when it is possible to distribute equally attractive publications more or less for free, more or less instantly, online.

As the printing press was first being used in Europe, there were those who insisted that there would always be a place in libraries for handwritten books. They were wrong. Those who — succumbing to a similar nostalgia — think there will always be a place for journalism in print are similarly wrong.

The more interesting question is how journalism originally designed for print will change as it completes this inevitable journey into a new form. Here the issue is mindset, not technology. And mindsets usually change more slowly than technologies.

For a century after the arrival of the printing press in Europe, books were still being printed with typefaces that imitated the thick, black letters of handwritten manuscripts and with illuminations that were hand painted on each page. Online journalism sites are similarly stuck. Their “pages,” story formats and “headlines” haven’t changed much — even in magazines, where more creativity might be expected. They make little use of the fluidity of the Web. The content of their articles has stayed mostly true to the print model, too.

Newspapers today, even online, still announce the day’s events as if there weren’t numerous other places — Twitter, Facebook, blogs, dozens of other easily available websites — that are announcing those events at the same time. They persist in the assumption that they are selling news, although in a world where information is available fast and free that is about as good a business as selling encyclopedias. They are figuring out only slowly that they need to sell something else — interpretations of the news, what I call “wisdom journalism.”

New forms — the novel, the newspaper — were eventually invented to take best advantage of the printing press, but it took a century and a half. New approaches to journalism will have to be invented to take best advantage of digital communication. That process is just getting started.

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launch, however, the newly appointed editor-in-chief John Cook acknowledged the site had been slow to gear up and so far had published only more material from Snowden's leaked documents.⁴⁶

Cook, former *Gawker* editor in chief, acknowledged organizational start-up problems in his message, published the same day the liberal blog *Daily Kos* suggested the site was "stalled."⁴⁷ The site had published three dozen

reporting an increase in digital revenue that is helping to slow the bottom-line slide of the past decade.

The *Los Angeles Times* is touting a website redesign announced on May 6 that promises to be user-friendly on all devices: desktop, tablet or smartphone. Meanwhile, top editors at *The New York Times* are studying a specially commissioned internal report that sets out a five-step plan to what the report's authors call a "digital-first transition" — a report that surfaced only

in circulation revenue. That increase came mostly from digital-only subscriptions as more newspapers instituted so-called "paywall plans" that require users to pay for access to websites.⁴⁸

Instead of bemoaning the demise of print, industry spokesman Jim Conaghan touts the revenue potential from digital and the benefits to newspapers' audiences. "We are really a multiplatform business," says Conaghan, the Newspaper Association of America's vice president for industry research and analysis. "The distribution system has gotten much wider for newspaper media companies, which certainly is an advantage to the public."

Digital-only advertising for the industry — that is, ads that are not sold in combination with print advertising — now accounts for about one-fourth of digital advertising. Conaghan acknowledges that digital advertising growth has been "slower than we would like." A new challenge, he says, is "how to monetize the growing mobile audience." The statistics show a growing reliance on mobile devices to read newspaper content: Among online readers age 34 or younger, the number who rely exclusively on mobile devices more than doubled over the past year.⁴⁹

The *Los Angeles Times*, the fourth-largest U.S. newspaper by circulation, had the mobile device readership in mind as it redesigned its website. Visitors touring the site are greeted by the slogan, "designed to fit your life > as it happens," and later are promised that the website is "smart enough for all your devices." A laptop, tablet and smart phone are used to illustrate. The site tour shows that users can "share effortlessly," "explore further," "join the conversation" and "find news near you." The result is described as "a completely reinvented latimes.com."

The redesign draws warm praise from Mario García, a renowned newspaper designer who is president of a Tampa-based media consulting company, as "clean" and "easy to navigate."



Getty Images/Chris Keane

Former New York Times executive editor Jill Abramson makes the commencement address at Wake Forest University on May 19, 2014, in Winston-Salem, N.C. Days earlier, Times Publisher Arthur Sulzberger fired Abramson, the paper's first female executive editor, and replaced her with Dean Baquet, who became the first African-American to hold the post. Sulzberger attributed the firing to "newsroom management issues," but one source of friction between Abramson and Baquet was said to be Abramson's attempt to recruit a new managing editor for digital content who would have equal standing with Baquet.

stories as of mid-April and also cached a trove of national security-related documents. A month later, only three new stories had appeared.

days before the tumultuous firing of executive editor Jill Abramson and the appointment of her deputy, Dean Baquet, to succeed her.

The latest figures from the Newspaper Association of America show a 2.6 percent decrease in total revenue in 2013 — the smallest decrease since 2006. Even though advertising fell by 6.5 percent, the decrease was offset somewhat by a 3.7 percent increase

Going Mobile

Major newspapers are redesigning their websites to tailor them for mobile devices, just as the industry is

Newspapers need to “stop regretting print,” he says, and instead “learn to cope with storytelling.”⁵⁰

Closer to home, however, a writer for *L.A. Weekly* was less impressed with the redesign. Denis Romero complained of what he called the residue of “print DNA,” pointing to the list of newspaper-style sections on the left side of the desktop version of the home page. He called the redesign “formulaic.”⁵¹

The Los Angeles newspaper’s online redesign comes about 20 months after a similar revamping by *USA Today*, another of the nation’s biggest newspapers. In announcing the change on Sept. 18, publisher Larry Kramer said the “bold redesign” amounted to “an evolution” of the newspaper’s brand “in print and across all our digital platforms.”⁵² Today, the newspaper says it has reclaimed its status as the nation’s largest-circulation newspaper, based on a new industry standard of including digital-only readers in subscription figures.⁵³

The New York Times, third-largest in circulation after *USA Today* and *The Wall Street Journal*, needs to do more to transition to the digital world, according to the 11-page internal report submitted by a team of editors and reporters in early May. The task force was headed by Arthur Gregg Sulzberger, a metro reporter and son of publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr.⁵⁴

The report recalls that *The Times* print and digital news staffs were once housed in separate buildings but have since been partly consolidated. But it calls for a more complete transition and a determined focus on spreading its journalistic content through social media with the creation of, among others, a “newsroom audience development team.”

In a jointly signed memo to the staff, executive editor Abramson and managing editor Baquet said the report represented “another milestone in our digital transformation. They indicated changes were likely, but set no timetable.

Only a few days later, however, publisher Sulzberger summarily fired Abramson, the newspaper’s first female executive editor, and replaced her with Baquet, who became the first African-American to hold the post. Sulzberger attributed the dismissal to a “newsroom management issue,” but news accounts said that one source of friction between Abramson and Baquet was the attempted recruitment of a new managing editor for digital content, who was to have equal standing with Baquet.⁵⁵ ■

OUTLOOK

“Golden Age”?

Many baby boomer journalists are known to recall their days as youngsters delivering newspapers by saying that they “started out in circulation.” Today, millions of newspaper readers still pick up a print edition. But the vast majority also read the news sometimes on screens: laptop, tablet or smartphone. And a growing number of younger news readers are “mobile-exclusive” — weaned completely off print and accustomed to news and information in their pockets.

Print-era veterans acknowledge or even embrace the change. “I’ve pretty much abandoned print,” says media watcher Romanesko. At NYU, Stephens says, “I teach journalism students. I’ve stopped asking them whether they read the print version of *The New York Times*.”

Stephens professes not to be discouraged. “There’s tremendous hope for journalism,” he says. Another print veteran agrees that news is faring well in the digital age. “People are consuming news differently,” says the American Press Institute’s Rosenstiel, “but consuming more.”

For much of the second half of the 20th century, news audiences were in

fact disadvantaged by consolidation in the newspaper industry — the fading away of the two-newspaper town — and by the limited number of radio and television outlets until the rise of cable in the 1980s and ’90s.

In the digital age, however, the barriers to entry have come down. A digital news organization needs no printing press, warehouse or fleet of delivery trucks, only a computer infrastructure and a team of good Web developers to work with so-called content producers. “The news ecosystem has increased,” says the Pew Center’s Jurkowitz. “There are a lot of new players.”

“The largest legacy media have the advantage of having a brand,” says Boczkowski, the Northwestern professor. “They have the disadvantage of being associated with traditional ideas and the disadvantage of having very high fixed costs.”

With lower fixed costs, *The Huffington Post* has eclipsed *The New York Times* in total readership “in just a few years,” according to *The Times* innovation study completed in April. The report warns that all of *The Times*’ competitors — traditional newspaper rivals, social media such as Facebook and LinkedIn and start-ups such as *Vox* and *First Look Media* — are becoming more “digitally sophisticated.”

The impact on legacy media of the newest digital-only news sites — *Vox*, *FiveThirtyEight*, *Re/code* and *The Intercept* — has yet to be seen. Nate Silver’s prediction in March that Republicans were favorites to gain control of the Senate in the November elections — a reversal of his previous forecast — created instantaneous waves among politicians and political junkies.⁵⁶ Otherwise, however, none of the four new sites appears to have launched a story yet that went on to become a major item of water-cooler conversations or public policy debate.

“All of these things are young and still in experimental form,” says Stephens. “It’s going to take a while.”

With the digital age barely in its third decade, news organizations that invested time, energy and resources in websites are already being forced to adapt to the new formatting requirements of mobile devices. "Certainly mobile is going to present a whole new set of challenges," says McGuire, the Arizona State professor. "With that smaller screen, there is so much going on. We need to develop mobile-only designs that communicate with audiences more effectively." And Conaghan, of the newspaper industry association, acknowledges that advertisers are yet to be persuaded that mobile is such a great venue for their messages.

Of the new ventures, Boczkowski thinks most will fail — just as most business startups do. Jurkowitz, too, thinks the odds of survival for any particular one are not necessarily high. "There's going to be churn," he says. For his part, though, McGuire shies away from a bearish forecast. "People are trying new things," he says.

"It's a golden age of media experimentation," McGuire concludes. "I think that's cool."

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About the Author



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News & Social Media

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Journalists are using social media to gather information, check for breaking news, stay on top of recent developments in stories, promote their work and check on what the competition is reporting, among other things, according to a report from the Indiana University school of journalism.

Somaiya, Ravi, and Leslie Kaufman, "If a Story Is Viral, Truth May Be Taking a Beating," *The New York Times*, Dec. 9, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/nq6qc5z>.

To gain more audience views, digital news sites are increasingly reporting viral social media stories without fact-checking them first.

CITING CQ RESEARCHER

Sample formats for citing these reports in a bibliography include the ones listed below. Preferred styles and formats vary, so please check with your instructor or professor.

MLA STYLE

Jost, Kenneth. "Remembering 9/11." *CQ Researcher* 2 Sept. 2011: 701-732.

APA STYLE

Jost, K. (2011, September 2). Remembering 9/11. *CQ Researcher*, 9, 701-732.

CHICAGO STYLE

Jost, Kenneth. "Remembering 9/11." *CQ Researcher*, September 2, 2011, 701-732.

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