



When Silicon Valley Took Over Journalism

The pursuit of digital readership broke the *New Republic*—and an entire industry.

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- [Franklin Foer](#)
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Chris Hughes was a mythical savior—boyishly innocent, fantastically rich, intellectually curious, unexpectedly humble, and proudly idealistic.

My entire career at the *New Republic* had been spent dreaming of such a benefactor. For years, my colleagues and I had sputtered our way through the internet era, drifting from one ownership group to the next, each eager to save the magazine and its historic mission as the intellectual organ for hard-nosed liberalism. But these investors either lacked the resources to invest in our future or didn't have quite enough faith to fully commit. The unending search for patronage exhausted me, and in 2010, I resigned as editor.

Then, in 2012, Chris walked through the door. Chris wasn't just a savior; he was a face of the zeitgeist. At Harvard, he had roomed with Mark Zuckerberg, and he had gone on to become one of the co-founders of Facebook. Chris gave our fusty old magazine a Millennial imprimatur, a bigger budget, and an insider's knowledge of social media. We felt as if we carried the hopes of journalism, which was

yearning for a dignified solution to all that ailed it. The effort was so grand as to be intoxicating. We blithely dismissed anyone who warned of how our little experiment might collapse onto itself—how instead of providing a model of a technologist rescuing journalism, we could become an object lesson in the dangers of journalism’s ever greater reliance on Silicon Valley.

When Chris first invited me for a chat one jacketless day in earliest spring, we wandered aimlessly across downtown Washington, paper coffee cups in hand. During those first weeks of his ownership, Chris had booked himself an endless listening tour. He seemed eager to speak with anyone who had worked at the magazine, or who might have a strong opinion about it. But as we talked, I wondered whether he wanted something more than my advice. I began to suspect that he wanted to rehire me as the *New Republic*’s editor. Before long he offered me the job, and I accepted.

In my experience, owners of the *New Republic* were older men who had already settled into their wealth and opinions. Chris was intriguingly different. He was 28, and his enthusiasm for learning made him seem even younger. During his honeymoon, he read *War and Peace*; the ottoman in his SoHo apartment was topped with seemingly every literary journal published in the English language. “When I first heard the *New Republic* was for sale,” he told me, “I went to the New York Public Library and began to read.” As he plowed through microfiche, the romance of the magazine’s history—and its storied writers, among them Rebecca West, Virginia Woolf, Edmund Wilson, Ralph Ellison, and James Wood—helped loosen his hold on his wallet.

Even after Facebook went public, leaving Chris with hundreds of millions of dollars in stock, he seemed indifferent to his wealth, or at least conflicted by it. He would get red-faced when people pointed out that he owned two estates and a spacious loft; he was apt to wear the same blazer every day. The source of his fortune didn’t define him—indeed, he always spoke of Facebook with an endearing detachment. He didn’t even use it that much, he once confessed to me at dinner. It was an admission that I found both disarming and hugely compelling. We soon began to remake the magazine, setting out to fulfill our own impossibly high expectations.

Over the past generation, journalism has been slowly swallowed. The ascendant media companies of our era don’t think of themselves as heirs to a great ink-stained tradition. Some like to compare themselves to technology firms. This redefinition isn’t just a bit of fashionable branding. As Silicon Valley has infiltrated the profession, journalism has come to unhealthily depend on the big tech companies, which now supply journalism with an enormous percentage of its audience—and, therefore, a big chunk of its revenue.

Dependence generates desperation—a mad, shameless chase to gain clicks through Facebook, a relentless effort to game Google’s algorithms. It leads media outlets to sign terrible deals that look like self-preserving necessities: granting Facebook the right to sell their advertising, or giving Google permission to publish articles directly on its fast-loading server. In the end, such arrangements simply allow Facebook and Google to hold these companies ever tighter.

What makes these deals so terrible is the capriciousness of the tech companies. Quickly moving in a radically different direction may be great for their bottom line, but it is detrimental to the media

companies that rely on the platforms. Facebook will decide that its users prefer video to words, or ideologically pleasing propaganda to more-objective accounts of events—and so it will de-emphasize the written word or hard news in its users’ feeds. When it makes shifts like this, or when Google tweaks its algorithm, the web traffic flowing to a given media outlet may plummet, with rippling revenue ramifications. The problem isn’t just financial vulnerability, however. It’s also the way tech companies dictate the patterns of work; the way their influence can affect the ethos of an entire profession, lowering standards of quality and eroding ethical protections.

I never imagined that our magazine would go down that path. My first days working with Chris were exhilarating. As an outsider, he had no interest in blindly adhering to received wisdom. When we set out to rebuild the *New Republic*’s website, we talked ourselves into striking a reactionary stance. We would resist the impulse to chase traffic, to clutter our home page with an endless stream of clicky content. Our digital pages would prize beauty and finitude; they would brashly announce the import of our project—which he described as nothing less than the preservation of long-form journalism and cultural seriousness.

Chris said he believed that he could turn the *New Republic* into a profitable enterprise. But his rhetoric about profit never seemed entirely sincere. “I hate selling ads,” he would tell me over and over. “It makes me feel seedy.” And for more than a year, he was willing to spend with abandon. With the benefit of hindsight, I might have been more disciplined about the checks we, I mean *he*, wrote. But he had a weakness for leasing offices in prime locations and hiring top-shelf consultants. I had a weakness for handsomely paying writers to travel the globe. I moved quickly to hire a large staff, which included experienced writers and editors, who didn’t come cheap. Chris didn’t seem to mind. “I’ve never been so happy or fulfilled,” he would tell me. “I’m working with friends.”

Eventually, though, the numbers caught up with Chris. Money needed to come from somewhere—and that somewhere was the web. A dramatic increase in traffic would bring needed revenue. And so we found ourselves suddenly reliving recent media history, but in a time-compressed sequence that collapsed a decade of painful transition into a few tense months.

At the beginning of this century, journalism was in extremis. Recessions, coupled with readers’ changing habits, prodded media companies to gamble on a digital future unencumbered by the clunky apparatus of publishing on paper. Over a decade, the number of newspaper employees dropped by 38 percent. As journalism shriveled, its prestige plummeted. One report ranked newspaper reporter as the worst job in America. The profession found itself forced to reconsider its very reasons for existing. All the old nostrums about independence suddenly seemed like unaffordable luxuries.

Growing traffic required a new mentality. Unlike television, print journalism had previously shunned the strategic pursuit of audience as a dirty, somewhat corrupting enterprise. The *New Republic* held an extreme version of this belief. An invention of Progressive-era intellectuals, the magazine had, over the decades, become something close to a cult, catering to a loyal group that wanted to read insider writing about politics and highbrow meditations on culture. For stretches of its long history, however, this readership couldn’t fill the University of Mississippi’s football stadium.

A larger readership was clearly within reach. The rest of journalism was already absorbing this lesson, which Jonah Peretti, the founder of *BuzzFeed*, had put this way: $R = \beta z$. (In epidemiology, β represents the probability of transmission; z is the number of people exposed to a contagious individual.) The equation supposedly illustrates how a piece of content could go viral. But although Peretti got the idea for his formula from epidemiology, the emerging science of traffic was really a branch of behavioral science: People clicked so quickly, they didn't always fully understand why. These decisions were made in a semiconscious state, influenced by cognitive biases. Enticing a reader entailed a little manipulation, a little hidden persuasion.

Chris not only felt urgency about the necessity of traffic, he knew the tricks to make it grow. He was a fixture at panels on digital media, and he had learned about virality from Upworthy, a site he had supplied with money to help launch. Upworthy plucked videos and graphics from across the web, usually obscure stuff, then methodically injected elements that made them go viral. As psychologists know, humans are comfortable with ignorance, but they hate feeling deprived of information. Upworthy used this insight to pioneer a style of headline that explicitly teased readers, withholding just enough information to titillate them into reading further. For every item posted, Upworthy would write 25 different headlines, test all of them, and determine the most clickable of the bunch. Based on these results, it uncovered syntactical patterns that almost ensured hits. Classic examples: "9 out of 10 Americans Are Completely Wrong About This Mind-Blowing Fact" and "You Won't Believe What Happened Next." These formulas became commonplace on the web, until readers grew wise to them.

The core insight of Upworthy, *BuzzFeed*, Vox Media, and other emerging internet behemoths was that editorial success could be engineered, if you listened to the data. This insight was embraced across the industry and wormed its way into the *New Republic*. Chris installed a data guru on our staff to increase our odds of producing viral hits. The guru kept a careful eye on Facebook's trending topics and on what the public had craved at the same time the year before. "Super Bowl ads are big," he told the staff at one of our weekly meetings. "What can we create to hit that moment?" Questions like these were usually greeted by hostile silence.

While I didn't care for the tactics, I didn't strenuously resist them either. Chris still encouraged us to publish long essays and deeply reported pieces. What's more, he asked a perfectly reasonable question: Did we really think we were better than sober places like *Time* or *The Washington Post*? Clicks would rain down upon us if only we could get over ourselves and write about the same outrage as everyone else. Everyone else was doing this because it worked. We needed things to work.

One of the emblems of the new era in journalism haunted my life at the *New Republic*. Every time I sat down to work, I surreptitiously peeked at it—as I did when I woke up in the morning, and a few minutes later when I brushed my teeth, and again later in the day as I stood at the urinal. Sometimes, I would just stare at its gyrations, neglecting the article I was editing or ignoring the person seated across from me.

My master was Chartbeat, a site that provides writers, editors, and their bosses with a real-time accounting of web traffic, showing the flickering readership of each and every article. Chartbeat and its competitors have taken hold at virtually every magazine, newspaper, and blog. With these meters, no

piece has sufficient traffic—it can always be improved with a better headline, a better approach to social media, a better subject, a better argument. Like a manager standing over the assembly line with a stopwatch, Chartbeat and its ilk now hover over the newsroom.

This is a dangerous turn. Journalism may never have been as public-spirited an enterprise as editors and writers liked to think it was. Yet the myth mattered. It pushed journalism to challenge power; it made journalists loath to bend to the whims of their audience; it provided a crucial sense of detachment. The new generation of media giants has no patience for the old ethos of detachment. It's not that these companies don't have aspirations toward journalistic greatness. *BuzzFeed*, *Vice*, and the *Huffington Post* invest in excellent reporting and employ first-rate journalists—and they have produced some of the most memorable pieces of investigative journalism in this century. But the pursuit of audience is their central mission. They have allowed the endless feedback loop of the web to shape their editorial sensibility, to determine their editorial investments.

Once a story grabs attention, the media write about the topic with repetitive fury, milking the subject for clicks until the public loses interest. A memorable yet utterly forgettable example: A story about a Minnesota hunter killing a lion named Cecil generated some 3.2 million stories. Virtually every news organization—even *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*—attempted to scrape some traffic from Cecil. This required finding a novel angle, or a just novel enough angle. [Vox](#): “Eating Chicken Is Morally Worse Than Killing Cecil the Lion.” [BuzzFeed](#): “A Psychic Says She Spoke With Cecil the Lion After His Death.” [TheAtlantic.com](#): “From Cecil the Lion to Climate Change: A Perfect Storm of Outrage One-upmanship.”

In some ways, this is just a digitally enhanced version of an old-fashioned media pile-on. But social media amplify the financial incentive to join the herd. The results are highly derivative. Joshua Topolsky, a founder of *The Verge*, has bemoaned this creeping homogenization: “Everything looks the same, reads the same, and seems to be competing for the same eyeballs.”

Donald Trump is the culmination of the era. He understood how, more than at any other moment in recent history, the media need to give the public the circus that it desires. Even if the media disdained Trump's outrages, they built him up as a plausible candidate, at which point they had no choice but to cover him. Stories about Trump yielded the sort of traffic that pleased the data gods and benefited the bottom line. Trump began as Cecil the lion and ended up president of the United States.

Chris and I once sat at the breakfast table of an august Washington hotel, pondering the core qualities of the *New Republic*—the *New Republic* that we would re-create together. We didn't say so explicitly, but we were searching for a piece of common ground, an adjective that could unite us. If there had been a whiteboard—and Chris loved whiteboards—it would have been filled with discarded terms. “We're *idealistic*,” he said finally. “It ties together our storied past and our optimism about solutions.” *Idealism* was a word that melted my heart, and I felt uncontainable joy at the prospect of agreement. “Boom. That's it.”

We were idealistic about our shared idealism. But my vision of the world was moralistic and romantic; his was essentially technocratic. He had faith in systems—rules, efficiencies, organizational charts,

productivity tools. Around the second anniversary of Chris's ownership, he shared a revised vision of the magazine's future with me. As the months had slipped by, he had gotten antsy. Results, by which he meant greater web traffic and greater revenue, needed to come faster. "To save the magazine, we need to change the magazine," he said. Engineers and marketers were going to begin playing a central role in the editorial process. They would give our journalism the cool, innovative features that would help it stand out in the marketplace. Of course, this required money, and that money would come from the budget that funded long-form journalism. We were now a technology company, he told me. (Hughes denies saying this.) To which I responded, "That doesn't sound like the type of company that I'm qualified to run." He assured me that I was.

Two months later, I learned from a colleague that Chris had hired my replacement—and that my replacement was lurching around New York, offering jobs at the *New Republic*. Before Chris had the chance to fire me, I resigned, and most members of the magazine's editorial staff quit too. Their idealism dictated that they resist his idealism. They didn't want to work for a publication whose ethos more clearly aligned with Silicon Valley than with journalism. They were willing to pay careful attention to Facebook, but they didn't want their jobs defined by it. The bust-up received its fair share of attention and then the story faded—a bump on Silicon Valley's route to engulfing journalism.

Data have turned journalism into a commodity, something to be marketed, tested, calibrated. Perhaps people in the media have always thought this way. But if that impulse existed, it was at least buffered. Journalism's leaders were vigilant about separating the church of editorial from the secular concerns of business. We can now see the cause for fanaticism about building such a thick wall between the two.

Makers of magazines and newspapers used to think of their product as a coherent package—an issue, an edition, an institution. They did not see themselves as the publishers of dozens of discrete pieces to be trafficked each day on Facebook, Twitter, and Google. Thinking about bundling articles into something larger was intellectually liberating. Editors justified high-minded and quixotic articles as essential for "the mix." If readers didn't want a report on child poverty or a dispatch from South Sudan, they wouldn't judge you for providing one. In fact, they might be flattered that you thought they would like to read such articles.

Journalism has performed so admirably in the aftermath of Trump's victory that it has grown harder to see the profession's underlying rot. Now each assignment is subjected to a cost-benefit analysis—will the article earn enough traffic to justify the investment? Sometimes the analysis is explicit and conscious, though in most cases it's subconscious and embedded in euphemism. Either way, it's this train of thought that leads editors to declare an idea "not worth the effort" or to worry about whether an article will "sink." The audience for journalism may be larger than it was before, but the mind-set is smaller.