Preserving America's Thought Leader Magazines

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Author

Heidi Legg

HARVARD Kennedy School
SHORENSTEIN CENTER
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The beloved Out of Town Newsstand that has long been part of Harvard Square's heritage is going out of business. The display of magazine titles from around the world is giving way first to a six-month popup and then to a tourist information bureau, yet another reminder of the fading magazine industry. But new business models are emerging that, if not proven, are at least promising and important to study. This paper explores two questions: How does brand affinity affect revenue models? What leads the digital reader to subscribe to a thought leader magazine?

In exploring these questions, the paper starts with a brief history of the thought leader magazine with an emphasis on how they built trust, which is key to attracting loyal readers. The discussion then turns to brand affinity, as it relates to trust and affects revenue streams. Finally, the paper examines how six leading thought leader magazines – *New York Magazine, Mother Jones, Wired, The Information, The Atlantic,* and *Rolling Stone* – are all responding to changing public demand and delivery.

Looking Back

From Nast, Luce, Hearst, and Newhouse to Benioff and Powell Jobs

America's "general interest" magazine originated in Boston. Founded in 1857, *The Atlantic* was created as a "journal of literature, politics, science, and the arts." Its founders included Francis H. Underwood and prominent writers Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and John Greenleaf Whittier, with James Russell Lowell as the first editor. Lowell's model became the norm. As *The Atlantic* described it, "Lowell unswervingly trained his attention on American writers, providing a home both for the younger American talents, whom he cultivated, and for the established ones."[1]

(Nast) helped create an industry that traded on collaboration and talent and pages and pages of ads. He saw talent as the link to driving readership and selling ads. He gave them the world stage, and paid them a living wage.

The dawn of the 20th century was a transformative period for American magazines. A *Vanity Fair* article captured the moment, "The dominant journals of earlier decades—such as *Harper's Monthly*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The Century*—were written explicitly for educated Protestant elites and usually expressed their readers' provincial literary tastes and their class and ethnic prejudices. But the newer magazines (among them *McClure's*, *Collier's*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *Munsey's*) sought, as one publisher put it, to convey the 'whirlpool of real life,' and to do so in a more vivid way than the reserved publications of the past. Some charged only a dime, and many had more accessible writing and engaged the concerns of the emerging middle class. The result was a dramatic increase in magazine circulation, which more than doubled between 1890 and 1905—four times the corresponding growth rate of newspaper readership."

Standing over this period was Condé Montrose Nast. Nast was introduced to the industry at Georgetown University when he befriended publishing scion Robert J.

Collier, who needed to reboot *Collier's Weekly*, a general interest magazine in New York. With 250,000 readers, Nast was charged with selling more ads. Over the next decade, he increased *Collier's* ad revenue a hundredfold. He then left the magazine and purchased *Vogue* in 1909, transforming what was a small weekly society magazine into a leading fashion magazine, and then doing the same with *Vanity Fair* (originally named *Dress* when Nast bought it, then *Dress and Vanity Fair*) and turning it into a general-interest magazine.

At first focused on professional associations, such as groups of farmers, lawyers, or nurses, American magazines expanded to bring together social and, then, economic groups.

The magazine market was profitable, and Nast put a priority on paying and nurturing writers, photographers, graphic designers, fact-checkers, and editors, elevating them to an aspirational class. The promotion of Edna Woolman Chase from gopher to top management by Nast signified a seismic shift in showing what this industry could and would do for many women and an entire class of writers, photographers, thinkers, and artists, and then in turn for American promise. He helped create an industry that traded on collaboration and talent and pages and pages of ads. Nast saw talent as the link to driving readership and selling ads.

When Nast found talent, he not only gave them the world stage, he paid them a living wage. Susan Ronald, author of *Condé Nast, The Man and His Empire* noted, "Soon enough (Nast) would be credited with creating café society; throwing the most awesome parties; finding young talent from the international arena who would change the way we think; and becoming one of the foremost Americans influencing the export of the country's can-do attitude, know-how, products, fashion, and style to the world. He wrote the first paycheck ever for the British playwright Noel Coward. Aldus Huxley, Compton Mackenzie and P.G. Plum Wodehouse were on his staff. He was the first to publish Edna St. Vincent Millay (writing as Nancy Boyd), Donald Ogden Steward, Robert Benchley, Dorothy Parker, e.e. cummings, and many more in any magazine. Condé was also a high-tech pioneer-promoting cutting-edge technology in photography and printing, making his publications a byword for all that was modern."[2]

Nast's selling ability was rewarded by an industry that was flourishing. As a reviewer noted, "The aftermath of the Gilded Age brought social upheaval: More of the economy was industrializing, more immigrants were arriving in the United States, and women were taking on more public roles..." Magazines offered readers a form of community, as people across the breadth of the country read the same articles, followed the same fashions, bought the same advertised products, and to some extent communicated with one another through letters to the editor. At first focused on professional associations, such as groups of farmers, lawyers, or nurses, American magazines expanded to bring together social and, then, economic groups, as Nast noticed." Nast's belief in talent was conveyed to Frank Crowninshield, who as editor-in-chief of *Vanity Fair* launched stars like Dorothy Parker, Aldous Huxley, T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and Djuna Barnes. Ronald describes Nast "as the first great connoisseur of editorial talent on an industrial scale. He was a curator of publications, editors, writers, photographers, and illustrators, picking up one creative after another and adding them to his collection, keeping them satisfied with promotions and ostentatious perks, which included paying off one editor's mortgage."

It is an interesting comparison between today's tech barons and yesterday's media barons, especially when we look at the current technology giants and their refusal to be called publishers, protected under Section 230 from any responsibility for third-party content. While both the tech giants of today and the media barons of the 20th century fueled their empire-building with ad sales, media moguls in the last century invested in narrative talent. In a stark departure, today's tech giants don't fund writers and photographers, instead they encourage and convert free user-generated content into the fuel that drives traffic gains, micro-targeting and data mining.

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Henry Luce arrived on the scene soon after, creating his *Time-Life* empire, following in the footsteps not only of Nast but also William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. Although Pulitzer confined himself to newspapers, Hearst expanded into magazines, including *Town and Country, Harper's Bazaar, Cosmopolitan,* and *Good Housekeeping*.

Luce and his Yale classmate Briton Hadden founded *Time* as a weekly news magazine in 1923. It offered readers a condensed account of the week's most important events. In 1929, as they prepared to launch Fortune magazine, Hadden died of streptococcus, leaving Luce to be both editor and publisher of *Time* Inc. Luce was paternal, responsible, level-headed, and budget-minded, traits he shared with Nast.[3]

Then in 1936, Luce launched *Life* magazine to enable Americans "to see life; to see the world; to eyewitness great events; to watch the faces of the poor and the gestures of the proud." *Life* was the apex of photojournalism with a heavily pictorialized editorial called "The American Purpose." Luce created *Life* with his second wife Clare Boothe Brokaw Luce, an early advocate of photojournalism, purchasing the title for $85,000 on their honeymoon. Boothe Luce today could be said to be prescient about the power of photography as a leading form of narrative as we see today with the rise of Instagram.

Henry and Clare Boothe Luce published photographs of statesmen living their lives in unguarded moments, soldiers fighting to the death, babies being born, policemen clubbing strikers, and models posing in the almost-nude. Later, there were essays and memoirs, heavily pictorialized, and editorials on what was called "the American Purpose." In the early days, subscription outpaced advertising in revenue for *Life* and it took the magazine until 1969 to be in the black. Luce launched *House & Home* in 1952, which he later sold it to McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, Inc., and *Sports Illustrated*, a weekly sports magazine, in 1954.

Luce's greatest passion was political news of national interest and he's remembered for his version of truth-telling. As *The New York Times* notes in his obituary, Luce's motto was "'We tell the truth as we see it,' Mr. Luce once explained when his magazine took sides on controversies." And he urged his editors to make judgments. "He believed that objectivity was impossible. 'Show me a man who claims he is objective,' he told an interviewer, 'and I'll show you a man with illusions.'"

Opinion and editorial judgment at *Time, Fortune, Life,* and *Sports Illustrated* reflected the views of Luce and covered a wide range of topics held out to reflect America at that moment in time. Luce was a staunch Republican who backed every candidate from the party during his tenure as editor, except in 1928 when he backed Alfred E. Smith. Three years before his death, he also voted for Barry Goldwater, whereas *Life* published an editorial critical of Goldwater.[4]

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Luce saw the 20th century as the American Century, and he had an agenda. Said *The New York Times*, "One of the nation's wealthiest men rose to a position of vast and pervasive economic, political and social influence and helped shape the reading habits, political attitudes and cultural tastes of millions. He was a staunch Republican, a defender of big business and free enterprise, a foe of big labor, a steadfast supporter of Chiang Kai-shek, an advocate of aggressive opposition to world Communism." For him, thought leader magazines had become the tent poles in society that allowed for rigorous debate around ideas. "Mr. Luce created the modern news magazine, fostered the development of group journalism, restyled pictorial reporting, encouraged a crisp and adjective-studded style of writing and initiated the concept of covering business as a continuing magazine story."

When Luce retired in 1964, his publishing empire had annual revenue of $503 million. It launched in 1923 on an $86,000 investment. At retirement, Luce was the principal owner with 16.2 percent of the holdings in *Time* Inc. The market value of his holdings in 1964 was $42 million and his annual dividend income was $1.3 million with a world circulation of 13 million copies an issue. Adjusted for inflation, Luce's holdings would be worth $349 million today, implying a total value for *Time* of $2.1 billion. Marc Benioff bought a decimated *Time* earlier this year for $190 million in cash.

Around the same time that Luce and Nast were nearing the end of their lives, a new generation of media entrepreneurs arose. They included Missouri-born Clay Felker, whose mother was an editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Felker became interested in journalism as the editor of the Duke University newspaper and was initially hired as *Life*'s sports editor. He eventually became *Esquire*'s features editor, where he hired Gloria Steinem to write what she calls her first "serious" story on contraception, which he published on September 1, 1962, under the title "The Moral Disarmament of Betty Coed." When Felker was passed up as editor of *Esquire* under founder Arnold Gingrich, he left the magazine to co-found *New York Magazine* which was then a Sunday supplement of the *New York Herald Tribune*. Felker, in the spirit of Nast, nurtured and brought large numbers of great writers and journalists into the field. His most enduring trio was Jimmy Breslin, Gloria Steinem, and Tom Wolfe. *The New York Times* wrote in 1995, "Few journalists have left a more enduring imprint on the late 20th-century journalism — an imprint that was unabashedly mimicked even as it was being mocked — than Clay Felker."

Felker ensured a generation of women were heard, helping to bring the feminist movement to a national audience. On March 19, 1970, a few blocks away from *New York Magazine*, "about a hundred women stormed into the male editor's office of *Ladies' Home Journal* and staged a sit-in for eleven hours, demanding that the magazine hire a female editor-in-chief." Over at *New York*'s offices, meanwhile, Felker had Steinem in his inner circle and recognized how society was changing. At the end of 1970, he gave Steinem the funding she needed to reach women who were craving a publication that reflected their will to be liberated. He provided her national distribution by publishing the inaugural *Ms. Magazine* as a supplement in *New York Magazine*'s December 20, 1971 issue. *The New York Times* noted that Felker "edited *The Village Voice, Esquire, Adweek* and *Manhattan inc*. But it was as founding editor of *New York*, until he lost control to Rupert Murdoch in 1977, that he shaped his public persona."

Graydon Carter's retirement from *Vanity Fair* signaled the end of the froth of the 1990s, "when glossy monthlies soaked up millions of dollars in advertising revenue, and editors in chauffeured town cars told the nation what to wear, what to watch and who to read."

Sam Newhouse purchased the Condé empire in 1959. "Condé was a money-loser, and the deal was dubbed 'Sam's folly,' but his son, S.I., helped turn it into America's second-largest magazine publisher after *Time* Inc. (an empire that has now crumbled)," reported *Intelligencer*. "At its peak in the aughts, Condé published 29 magazines: *Gourmet, Allure, Self, Wired, Architectural Digest, Details*, and on and on."

After Sam Newhouse's death in 1979, his son S.I. took over and launched *Self*, bought *GQ*, and relaunched *Vanity Fair* under British journalist Tina Brown, who over a decade turned it into one of the most visible magazines in the world. During his thirty-year run, he also bought and revamped *The New Yorker*, remade *Details*, and purchased *Wired*. Like Nast and Felker, S.I. Newhouse was regarded as a nurturer of talent. As reported in *New York Magazine*, editors of Nast titles noted, that Newhouse believed in talent and gave them the freedom to display it. "The magazine is yours, S.I. has always let me know," *New Yorker* editor David Remnick said.

But by 2009, as S.I. Newhouse shuttered his newest creation, *Portfolio* — which was losing $15 million a year — he knew his magazines were on the decline. "*Wired*'s ad pages are down almost 60 percent in the first three months of this year versus last; *The New Yorker*'s are down 36, *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* both around 30 percent. His own personal wealth has declined by half, to some $2 billion, but personal wealth was never the point," reported *New York Magazine*. The industry that had once financed a $30 million cafeteria in Times Square designed by Frank Geary was leaving for Silicon Valley and everyone knew it.

In 2017, Brown described the palace intrigue and talent inside the Conde Nast empire in her book *The Vanity Fair Diaries: 1983–1992*, comparing it to "'ancient Rome with all the politics and secrets, everything revolving around S.I. as Emperor Augustus,' the tastemaker-in-chief." The same year Brown's tell-all published, Condé Nast lost $120 million — more than it made in profit in 2003 — Graydon Carter retired from *Vanity Fair* after 25 years as editor, and S.I. Newhouse died at the age of 89.

Graydon Carter's retirement from *Vanity Fair* signaled the end of the froth of the 1990s, "when glossy monthlies soaked up millions of dollars in advertising revenue, and editors in chauffeured town cars told the nation what to wear, what to watch and who to read," reminisced *The New York Times*. The golden era was over. *The New Republic* explained the collision: "it ran squarely into the internet in the 2000s and, even worse, played catch-up to image-heavy social media in the 2010s.

National Review, Mother Jones, and *The New Republic* contributed to the national debate and its politics, served as a temperature gauge of what Americans were thinking and feeling, and uncovered what the intellectual class was lobbying to get done.

Suddenly print magazines and editors-in-chief were no longer the arbiters of aspirational taste nor of class-based advertising. Google's algorithms took over the latter and Instagram influencers the former."

Even later-20th-century barons can't compare to today's tech companies. S.I. Newhouse purchased his 22nd American daily, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, for around $54 million in March 1967 bringing his entire newspaper ownership valued to around $200 million and his television and magazines together valued at $100 million. If Newhouse's holdings were worth $300 million in total in 1967, adjusted for inflation they would be worth only $2.2 billion in today's market.[5]

Tech outperforms the largest older legacy publishing brands. Hearst revenue in 2018 was $11.4 billion, a fifth of Facebook's revenue. Many of Hearst's earnings came from credit ratings and financial data company Fitch Group, the medical information and software companies that makeup Hearst Health, aviation-safety data company CAMP, and Hearst Television, which has 33 stations across the nation.

In the last quarter of the 20th-century owners turned around darlings or launched new titles, many of which had a political stake. In 1974, Marty Peretz, who was married to Anne Devereux (Labouisse) Farnsworth, used his wife's inheritance from the Singer Sewing Machine Company to buy *The New Republic*, which had published George Orwell, Virginia Woolf, and Philip Roth. At the time of the purchase, Peretz was an assistant professor at Harvard University. He also started the financial news site TheStreet.com with Jim Cramer. Never able to create a solid profit for *The New Republic*, Peretz sold two-thirds of his shares in the magazine in 2002 to financiers and his remaining rights in 2007 to CanWest Global Communications, only to return in 2009 to repurchase the magazine with ex-Lazard investment banker Laurence Grafstein.

William Buckley created *National Review*, a bimonthly Republican-leaning editorial magazine, in 1955 to focus on both news and commentary related to political, social, and cultural affairs. And in 1976, Richard Parker co-founded *Mother Jones*, a left-leaning progressive magazine. Parker explained in a 2010 interview: "The country was divided, exhausted, and confused, not sure where it was going, but there was a large body of people—millions of people—who considered themselves progressive. Many of them had worked in the antiwar or civil rights or environmental or feminist movements and were still determined to change America. We launched the magazine and within a year and a half, we had a quarter-million paid circulation. So I think that is some evidence that you could have a politically progressive voice, find an audience, and be heard." He clarified that making the magazine a nonprofit was not an ideological decision, but a practical one — nonprofit mailings were discounted by the U.S. Postal Service.

National Review, Mother Jones, and *The New Republic* contributed to the national debate and its politics, served as a temperature gauge of what Americans were thinking and feeling, and uncovered what the intellectual class was lobbying to get done. They were different in tone from Condé Nast and Clay Felker's aspirational magazines, but influencers nonetheless.

The magazines that turned Nast, Hearst, and Luce into financial giants were enabled by the robust and sustained revenue model found in advertising. None of the relaunched or new magazines that arrived post-1960 realized the same financial success. By this time, advertising money was turning towards television and digital media. Michael Bloomberg, Rupert Murdoch, and Ted Turner were pioneering a new era for news consumption.

In the last decades of the 20th century, America witnessed the emergence of media moguls who had made their fortunes in other industries. A wealthy class was buying up old titles and dusting them off for relaunch. Brand affinity was emergent. David Bradley, who had made his wealth as the founder of The Advisory Board Company and the Corporate Executive Board (now Gartner), bought *The Atlantic* in 1999 for $10 million from Mortimer Zuckerman. Bruce Wasserstein, the co-founder of the investment bank Wasserstein Perella & Co. and chairman of the investment bank Lazard Frères, purchased *New York Magazine* in 2004 for $55 million. His daughter Pamela Wasserstein joined the company full time a few years after her father's death and for over 15 years has produced a renewed and more national magazine under the creative brilliance of former editor-in-chief Adam Moss, whom she and her father brought over from *The New York Times Magazine*. Moss transformed the place. On the sale of *New York Magazine* to Wasserstein, Moss said, "Primedia saw *New York* very much as a provincial magazine of New York City, not dissimilar from other regional and city magazines. That's not how I understood it, and I made no secret of the fact that I wanted to rethink this thing from the beginning, and no one had any idea of what that would end up as, including me."[6] New York Media is now home to *The Cut* (style and culture), *Grub Street* (food), *Intelligencer* (politics), *The Strategist* (shopping), and *Vulture* (pop culture). This fall New York Media merged with Vox Media.

Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes purchased *The New Republic* in 2012 only to sell it four years later after a slew of resignations followed his announcement that he would replace longtime editor Franklin Foer. He sold in 2016 to Win McCormack, a publisher, and editor who founded the literary quarterly *Tin House*. *The New York Times* reported, "Mr. Hughes said that he had spent more than $20 million on the magazine, but had 'underestimated the difficulty of transitioning an old and traditional institution into a digital media company in today's quickly evolving climate.'"

Walter Isaacson, the former editor of *Time*, had long called for media properties to become publicly traded corporations in order to prevent the meddling by wealthy owners. He changed his mind as he then watched *Time* be destroyed by speculators shorting its stock. "I have come to the belief that a sole proprietor, especially a benevolent and public-spirited one, is a good thing in troubled times," he said.

Michael Bloomberg is one of the few media moguls to have survived the digital transformation, entering the market through a side door — his digital trading terminals. He founded U.S. Bloomberg LP, a privately held financial, software, data, and media company in 1981 with Merrill Lynch as a 30 percent owner. In 1990 he launched Bloomberg News, an international news agency and a division of Bloomberg L.P., with a newsroom of six people under its first editor, *Wall Street Journal* writer Matthew Winkler. His early goal anticipated the attention economy: offer his terminal users a reason to stay. Content produced by Bloomberg News is disseminated through Bloomberg Terminal, Bloomberg Television, Bloomberg Radio, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, Bloomberg Markets, and Bloomberg.com. By 2010, Bloomberg News included more than 2,300 editors and reporters in 72 countries and 146 bureaus worldwide.[7] Bloomberg's is a rare vertical integration with newsrooms, distribution platforms, and media forms all focused on the financial and business world.

Internet wealth has arrived to revive what is left... How will they bring these titles into the 21st century?

David Bradley, former owner of *The Atlantic* also recognized the digital transformation and acquired digital players. Bradley sought out the very early and prolific blogger Andrew Sullivan who had a loyal, passionate, and deep following online. Sullivan had begun to blog in 2000, before Facebook or Twitter were invented and when internet penetration in the U.S. was only at 60 percent. Within an hour of Sullivan's blog, *The Dish*, going live on *The Atlantic*'s website, unique visitors to the magazine's fledgling website skyrocketed. Bradley also understood branding. He transformed the 162-year-old monthly magazine, founded by Ralph Waldo Emerson four years before the Civil War, into a profitable digital journalism and live events company with global reach. "Against the odds, *The Atlantic* is prospering," Bradley wrote in his memo in 2017. In 2018, Bradley sold a majority share (70 percent for over $100 million according to the *Wall Street Journal*) to entrepreneur Laurene Powell Jobs, founder, and president of the social change organization Emerson Collective and wife of the late Steve Jobs. Bradley wrote, "While I will stay at the helm some years, the most consequential decision of my career now is behind me: Who next will take stewardship of this 160-year-old national treasure? To me, the answer, in the form of Laurene, feels incomparably right." In November 2019, an internal memo to staff confirmed that Powell-Jobs's Emerson Collective has solidified control of the magazine's direction as Bradley steps back and relinquishes control without any direct reports, while continuing to hold his minority share.

In the waning years of the 20th century, Bill Gates explained the internet on David Letterman's late-night show. "What about this internet thing? What the hell is that exactly?" asked Letterman in 1995. "It's become a place where people are publishing information," replied Gates. "Everybody can have their own home page, companies are there, the latest information. It's wild what is going on. You can send electronic mail to people. It is the big new thing."

Internet wealth has arrived to revive what is left. Roger Lynch, the former CEO of the music-streaming service Pandora, which he sold to SiriusXM in February, will be Condé's first outside CEO in its 110-year history. Benioff and his wife Lynne now own *Time*, which the Meredith Corporation was seeking to offload along with *Sports Illustrated* and *Fortune*. How will they bring these titles into the 21st century? Will they nurture the talent as Felker, Luce, and Nast did? How will they view objectivity? Will they approach it as Luce did with a belief that "we tell the truth as we see it" and advocate for political causes?

Internet giants, namely Facebook and Google and smaller digital platforms have taken the ad profits from the publishing industry to achieve dominance in data, analytics, and fintech.

These tech giants that pervade our everyday lives have at least 13 times annual revenue compared to the height of the magazine publishing stronghold in the 20th century.

Publications determined to survive the decimation are selling and merging digital and legacy titles. In September 2019, Wasserstein announced that privately held Vox Media will acquire her New York Media, with Wasserstein as president of Vox Media and retaining a board seat. According to *The New York Times*, "Vox has raised more than $300 million in funding, including $200 million from NBCUniversal. The company was valued at $1 billion in 2015." Jim Bankoff will retain his role as chairman and CEO of Vox Media. *The Times* added that two sources familiar with the deal report that Vox Media expects to exceed $300 million in revenue by the end of 2020 to be on par with Buzzfeed. While these titles look more to sponsored emails and content, others are focused on subscription. *The New Yorker* claims that 70 percent of its revenue is now from subscription and it is in the black. Jay Penske of the Penske Truck Leasing fortune has bought *Rolling Stone* and plans to add a paywall; membership for *Mother Jones*, a left-leaning publication, is at an all-time high.

It is only natural for industries to rise and fall — that is not new. But what has been lost in this tech transfer — where the distribution and curation of content is dominated by platforms such as Google, Twitter, and Facebook — is a respect for the fourth estate, the keepers of a national narrative free of disinformation and hate, and the talent builders for a generation of storytellers, journalists, photographers, and illustrators. The creative class has been democratized to a cacophonic mosh pit. Without a way to recognize and hone this talent or pay journalists and editors a livable wage, we have lost a generation of journalists and the future of public affairs information is uncertain.

"The 1920s to the 2020s was kind of the century of the magazine," Kurt Andersen, a former editor of New York Media said. Today, he added, the industry was in "more of a dusk, a slow dusk, and we're closer to sunset."

In comparison, the new media entertainment industry has given birth to global tech giants worth billions. Adjusted for inflation, *Time* Inc.'s $503 million annual revenue in 1966 would be worth $4 billion today. Compare that to Facebook's $55.8 billion in revenue in 2018, and Google's $136.8 billion. These tech giants that pervade our everyday lives have at least 13 times annual revenue compared to the height of the magazine publishing stronghold in the 20th century. Any fear that this bygone era had a unique hold on the national and global narrative, which it indeed did, seems paltry in terms of controlling the messaging next to the pervasive size of tech giants of today.

While writing this paper, I read an article in the *London Times* by Matthew Goodwin, author of National Populism, a London Times bestseller, and Professor of Politics at Rutherford College, Kent University, eleven days before the United Kingdom's December 2019 election around Brexit. Goodwin was writing about "cultural insecurity" and making an argument that two of the primary lessons that can be taken from voters in the world's most advanced democracies is that they have lost what tethers them to place and that cultural security matters to them as much as economic security. It resonated with me after weeks of reading about the influence of respected thought leader magazines on our culture. Trump, Brexit, and the rise of populism call to a sense of loss over a national community, especially from those in rural areas, where there is a nostalgia for common identity and traditions or glue that binds us together. Goodwin went on to argue that cultural insecurity is something that many on the left have never understood, refused to accept, or reduced these to racism and ignorance. He claimed that as "left-wing academic Thomas Pinketty has argued, a fundamental problem for many parties on the left, including [UK] Labour, is that they have been taken over by social and cultural elites who have weaker roots in the blue-collar communities that their parties were founded to represent." His Op-ed caused me to wonder if there is a correlation between the demise of public affairs magazines and this sense of lost identity. At the height of its notoriety in the 1930 and 1940s following World War II, "*Time* could sell more than 400,000 copies in a week even with some little-known Italian general on the cover," reports *The Atlantic*. It kept on growing after that. At its zenith the brand could reach more than 20 million people around the world each week. *Time* practically defined what it meant to be mass media." By 2005 when the world was turning digital, *Time*'s circulation was just under 4 million, a similar size to the digital subscription today of *The New York Times* and the number of views of a singular Ted Talk.

In This Digital Age, How Does Brand Trust Intersect with Revenue?

For decades Sam Dolnick and millions of Americans looked forward to the blue plastic sleeve at the end of their walkway, but now it's the chime of *The New York Times* Podcast "The Daily" that greets them every morning instead.

If only it were all in the delivery. Instead, the tech transfer of this century also includes the capturing of all our data, private habits, and behavior resulting in a surveillance landscape dominated by tech giants, along with the absorption of all ad dollars. If only the profits were going back into the shepherding of talent and building of newsrooms — long the exchange in media empire building — our fourth estate would not be at risk of disappearing.

Dolnick is a good example of the trend we are seeing in digital transformation. He is an assistant managing editor of *The New York Times* who oversees its audio report, work in film and television, and other digital projects, a relatively new role in media organizations that have become invaluable. He helped launch "The Daily," one of the top podcasts, as well as "The Weekly," the Times's television show on FX and Hulu, where he's an executive producer.

Delivery is expanding from websites and newsletters to social media channels, video streaming, and podcasts. It is no surprise that brand is emerging as the most important asset. Yet, trust is not as simple as brand awareness. For news, it is in brand integrity. Sam Gill, senior vice president and chief program officer for the Knight Foundation said it best in a recent policy discussion on the future of local news: "The Internet has disabled our sense of truth."

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A thirst for trusted sources has led to the emergence of direct-to-reader newsletter subscriptions. Conservative writer David French, *Boston Globe* columnist John Ellis (cousin to President George W. Bush and nephew of the late President George H.W. Bush), and former *Vanity Fair* editor Graydon Carter have all launched paid subscription email newsletters. French is the senior editor of *The Dispatch* with its $1,500 founding membership fee and bonus French Press newsletter, while Graydon Carter looks to be part of your weekend with his *AirMail* for the tastemakers, at a $50 yearly or $15 monthly subscription. Ellis offers an abridged version of his newsletter, *News Item*, for free with an annual subscription of $90 a year or $10 a month. Maggie Haberman of *The New York Times* tweeted this past July about Ellis' *News Item*, "I get a lot of newsletters, and this one remains one of the most comprehensive and informative." I would argue that the list of those able to build their own paid subscription-based newsletters is proof again of how much brand intersects with paid subscription models and thought leadership online.

Celebrities discovered how to tap into this appetite for trusted sources with direct-to-reader emails early on. Judging from sales and open rates, Gwyneth Paltrow's GOOP has become a trusted source of health and lifestyle content over the past 8 years and has a valuation of $250 million. GOOP is free to read to lure the reader to buy expensive facial oils, designer clothes, and weekends with Paltrow and her tribe. Paltrow perfected the sense of belonging to something online, creating a habit and ritual with her weekly email. She is one of many trusted names that have become direct purveyors of information, without a proper newsroom. David French may not relish being placed next to a newsletter for "woke" women, but they are both using the same approach — a trusted individual going directly to their base to fund their enterprise. The president of the United States with his 72 million Twitter followers is case in point.

So where is the play for digital thought leader magazines? Powell-Jobs, Benioff, and Jeff Bezos may understand it best: A trusted legacy brand in a digital age, if fully digital in its approach, will achieve deeper market penetration, faster and more globally, than a new or unknown brand. Jessica Lessin and her digital-native brainchild, *The Information*, may be the exception.

Venture-backed outlets have been less focused on subscription. Sites like BuzzFeed, Vice, Bustle, Refinery29, and Group Nine are harder to define, fueled by a mix of "clicky" news and quizzes, with up to 50 percent of their output as sponsored content rather than actual news, further muddying the lines between journalism and sponsored PR. Many of these digital-native sites have sought mergers in the last year to consolidate costs and scale as they feel the pinch, given that Google and Facebook continue to absorb the majority of digital advertising dollars. More than 1,000 employees lost their jobs this year in layoffs at BuzzFeed, AOL, Yahoo, *HuffPost*, and Vice Media combined. Vox Media reported it is working to "rely less on digital advertising, and after expanding its video and podcast businesses, the company had a modest profit on $185 million in revenue last year." The sponsored content has led them to feel more like shopping malls than thought pieces. This leaves an even starker absence of quality news for thought leader magazines to fill.

The New Yorker's David Remnick has focused on subscribers and their precise needs.

The New Yorker's David Remnick has focused on subscribers and their precise needs. Remnick told Preet Bharara on a recent podcast that he sees value in quality, long-form journalism and, if done well, believes it has a coveted spot in the subscription path. "There's no question that life is faster and more frenetic and distracted now than it was, and I think the phone and all that comes with it, not to be too dramatic about this, has engendered a change in consciousness… but I also think that there is an absolute human hunger to know and know more deeply your world."

Remnick relies on long-form storytelling that can spark a narrative on issues like climate change. "Now, to understand how that happened scientifically, ecologically, politically, what it means for us, what it means for our futures and our children's, and grandchildren's future, that is an enormously complex topic. If you were reading *The New Yorker* beginning in the late '80s, very soon after James Hansen made his famous Senate testimony – for really the first time talking about global warming as a problem – within a year *The New Yorker* had published a very, very long article, their first real deep article on global warming by Bill McKibben called 'The End of Nature.' And some years after Elizabeth Kolbert wrote a three-part series called 'The Climate of Man,' expanding upon and deepening our knowledge of this thing that we are facing as human beings on this common earth, and there have been many, many, many such articles since and we will continue to do that. You cannot learn about your world sufficiently whether it's the world of foreign affairs or the cultural world in little snippets," Remnick added. "When I first started going to meetings and conferences and sessions on this thing called the Internet, there were things that people said that turned out to be right about the future and things that turned out to be nonsense. One of the nonsense things is that no one will read anything long on the Internet."

Powell-Jobs may also have long understood the power of brand integrity and high-quality content. According to Frederic Filloux, high-quality content was precisely Steve Jobs' mantra back in 2010: "I don't want to see us descend into a nation of bloggers myself. I think we need editorial more than ever…What we have to do is figure out a way to get people to start paying for this hard-earned content…Price it aggressively and go for volume." Jobs saw the value in strong editorial content and, like Bloomberg, had the means to distribute it, this time in everyone's pocket.[8]

The emergence of aggregators has further clarified the power of brand as users choose titles for their custom news feeds. With both Facebook News and Apple News+ already on the market and talks of CNN and NewsCorp entering the aggregation space, established titles and upstarts are sharing their content with aggregators for a fee. I wrote on CNN.com, “Facebook will pay some publishers millions of dollars a year for access to their journalism. It will include an all-star lineup of what Facebook referred to as trusted sources, including CNN, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, BuzzFeed News, Bloomberg, Fox Business, *Business Insider*, NPR, *The Boston Globe* and *The LA Times*, to name a few.

Will the emergence of tech giants and their arrival as paying aggregators finally put a financial value on quality news?

The bet for Apple News+ is that a billion iPhone users worldwide will provide a revenue boost through the publications hosted on the platform. Apple News+ promises to be an immersive magazine and new reading experience, and titles are lining up to join it. Facebook counts over 2.45 billion monthly active users and as the biggest social network worldwide, sees a similar market opportunity for trusted news.

But as these social media and tech giants see exponential growth across the world in access and delivery, local news is dying. Though local news remains more trusted than national news, the Knight Foundation’s Sam Gill reported that there are only 38,000 employees left in local newsrooms across the country, down by half from 2005.

Will the emergence of tech giants and their arrival as paying aggregators finally put a financial value on quality news? Are consumers using aggregators like Apple News+ more likely to click on a brand they trust and add it to their apps? Or are they more likely to go directly to the magazine or newspaper where the content originated and its trusted brand app or website to get their news? In short, how will “brand affinity” affect subscribers? Will the convenience of aggregators win out or will readers continue to hold multiple subscriptions to beloved brands they trust?

During *The Information*’s “2020 Prediction” conference call, tech reporter Alex Heath said that Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg had predicted he would have 20-30 million users of Facebook News after its first year, which is only a small fraction of the platform’s total users. He also said that Apple News+ and Facebook News may not be moving fast enough to help journalism. Heath noted that Facebook still needs the human editor element for Facebook News and as they roll it out globally, that can be a challenge. Creating the backbone vehicle for an informed society in America remains urgent.

The relevance and survival of leading thought leader magazines in our national conversation are dependent upon a successful subscription model and brand-adjacent revenue. A preference for trusted brands should favor legacy magazines and newspapers who have over 100 years of proven high-quality news. An example of this is growth at *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* who were both early to the digital subscription model. *The New York Times* reports that in 2019, it “added 1 million new digital-only subscribers and ended the year with a total of 5.25 million total subscriptions across all of their digital and print products. Both were new records for the paper.”

A recent study by Digital Content Next (DCN), an industry nonprofit launched in 2001 that counts the biggest media and entertainment companies amongst its membership, offered a useful series of statistics on brand and trust.[9]

"From our benchmark report last year, we saw more than a 35 percent growth rate in non-ad revenue. Once you peel out *The New York Times, Wall Street Journal* and *The Financial Times*, the growth rate is still more than 30 percent," says Jason Kint, CEO at DCN. He also notes that brand is a proxy for trust. Kint and his DCN members asked: How do we better understand the news consumer mindset in regard to trust in premium news content today? Does brand trust drive consumption and subscription?

In the 2018 Pew Research survey, respondents were asked what they like about the news experience on social media. More Americans mentioned ease of use than they mentioned content.

In October 2017, a DCN survey found that more people went to Facebook for news overall than other sources of news, with 84 percent of respondents listing Facebook as their primary source for digital access to information. However, 73 percent of these users also go directly to a media outlet's website for premium content. Millennials (aged 21-40) were 10 percent more likely to directly visit the websites where the story originated via their mobile phones and 6 percent more likely to access information via a media brand's digital app. Aggregation was emergent in 2017, with 18 percent of millennials sourcing information from Apple News in 2017, while only and only 6 percent of boomers (aged 53-64) used Apple News.

Brand sites scored a full 20 percent higher than YouTube or social media on trust. Across all ages, 81 percent of respondents said they trusted the premium brands' websites or apps while only 60 percent trust information on YouTube and 55 percent on social media.

Even as their user numbers rise, social media outlets lack credibility, according to the survey. Overall, 71 percent of respondents choose online and mobile sources mostly on the quality of brand and 70 percent prefer the overall experience on individual brand websites and apps over social media pages and feeds. A 2018 Pew Research poll found that two-thirds of Americans get their news on social media, even though 57 percent say that they expect this news to be largely inaccurate.

In the 2018 Pew Research survey, respondents were asked what they like about the news experience on social media. More Americans mentioned ease of use than they mentioned content. Convenience was mentioned by 21 percent and 8 percent said that they most enjoy interactions with other people. Only 3 percent said that they most like the diversity of available sources, and only 2 percent said they liked the ability to tailor the content they see."[10]

Trust is the focus of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation's Trust, Media and Democracy initiative. The Knight Foundation has partnered with Gallup to examine the state of Americans' trust in the media and implications for the present and future of our democracy. The Knight Foundation recently asked a representative sample of U.S. adults to discuss key factors that lead them to trust or not trust news media. The study found that while most U.S. adults say they have lost trust in the news media (including nine out of 10 Republicans), 69 percent of those who have lost trust say that trust can be restored. "Asked to describe in their own words why they trust or do not trust certain news organizations, Americans' responses largely center on matters of accuracy or bias. Relatively few mentioned a news organization's partisan or ideological leaning as a factor," the report said.

Whether leading thought leader magazines focus on bringing the consumer directly to their app or site or decide to experiment in the aggregation approach for a share in the profits, increasing subscription is still the key. Given the shift from advertising to subscription models in digital magazines, will it be more or less important to have a specific focus or a distinct lens?

Whether leading thought leader magazines focus on bringing the consumer directly to their app or site or decide to experiment in the aggregation approach for a share in the profits, increasing subscription is still the key.

"In a market-driven by advertising, it can be hard for general interest magazines and websites," said Bob Cohn, former president of *The Atlantic* and newly announced president and managing director of *The Economist*, in an email interview. "While you can build a large audience, you may have a harder time proving that your readers are passionate about whatever core topic appeals to advertisers. An advertiser selling enterprise software may gravitate to a tech-biz publication like *Wired* or *Forbes*; an advertiser selling sports cars may gravitate to men's publications like *Esquire* or *GQ*. A general interest publication can sell its audience (well-educated influencers, for example), but by definition, the subject matter is all over the map and therefore can be a hard sell to many advertisers. These general interest brands tend to go for audience scale, so they can say that, within its 100 million monthly digital readers, or 1 million print subscribers, there are enough in any one category to satisfy the needs of the software or automaker."

In the shift to a market driven by subscriptions, Cohn says that brand loyalty matters more than scale. "The key is to be essential to your readers – so essential that they'll pay for your journalism. One way to be essential is, again, to go deep into one vertical. For example, *The Information* or *The Athletic*, are two brands doing well with a subscription model. But you don't have to have specific appeal. Another way to succeed in a subscription ecosystem is to be essential by providing the smartest and most urgent journalism on a wide range of things, to be the ultimate general interest destination. Two successful brands here are *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*."

Of the thousand "social media skeptics" in the DCN study who said they prefer premium content over social media content, 61 percent are under 40. Of this group, 44 percent currently pay for a subscription to a brand website or app, 71 percent frequently visit brand sites or apps in the average week and 68 percent purchased a product based on an ad they saw online in the last 30 days.

When survey respondents were asked about "fake news," 82 percent agreed that there was a lot of fake news on social media platforms. A noteworthy finding was that false stories on a brand site or app can erode the trust of more than half of consumers if a story turns out to be false and 67 percent if a headline is misleading, but only 16 percent say that they lose trust if a story is opinionated but claims to be objective. Serving up too many ads, asking for a subscription to read the content, and a scandal involving the person associated with the brand all diminish trust for about 15 percent of content consumers. The DCN "Trust as a Proxy" study found

that brand sites and apps for premium content are held to higher expectations and must be trustworthy, credible, accurate, and current.
The DCN study revealed that the drivers for millennials were somewhat different than those of other respondents. Millennials deemed "respected brand", "up-to-date", "current", "entertaining", "authentic", "easy to use", "trustworthy" and "in-depth" as *vital* drivers whereas "popular" was the greatest *hidden* driver for millennials followed by "transparency" and "objective."

Rebuilding trust is frustrating for brands who long thought they had delivered on the promise of responsible reporting, and who are being dragged down by skeptics of social media.

Rebuilding trust is frustrating for brands who long thought they had delivered on the promise of responsible reporting, and who are being dragged down by skeptics of social media. Given this reality, trust is a key conversion tool for revenue and if leading magazines wish to thrive, rebuilding trust is key.

The key takeaways from the DCN study can be summarized in the four drivers that accounted for most of the trust relationship: prediction based on experience, navigation ease, attribution-confirming multiple sources, and reputation-brand authority. In the case of millennials particularly, trust also rests on transparency, objectivity, and entertainment value.

With information overload, trusted brands have a comparative advantage. There appears to be a higher trust level for digital content within a brand's website and app compared with channels such as YouTube or social media and this higher trust can have a halo effect for advertisers. Trust for content on a trusted website, app, and search engine was around 80 percent, with a trust knock-on-effect for advertisers on those channels averaging 67 to 69 percent. Meanwhile, trust of information on YouTube and social media averages 55 to 60 percent and trust in the advertisers on those channels is similar, averaging 55 percent.

In its conclusion, the DCN study points to a "social-media-skeptic mindset" that has emerged, encouraging premium content brands to focus on building trust and to monitor distributed content relationships. Publishers will have to set strict boundaries on how their premium news is presented and shared. This DCN study showed how trust is a unique competitive advantage for premium publishers in the attention economy and any demise of this trust could have a serious impact on the bottom line with both advertisers and potential or current subscribers. In an email response, Rande Price research director at DCN said, "Social media has a trust problem. Understand that social media could be harming long-term brand trust and reputation. Be mindful of your content on social media. Find ways to own your relationship with the consumer. It directly impacts your brand health, acquisition, and retention."

The shift to subscription where the consumer becomes the main source of revenue is reshaping digital magazines and Cohn points out that "habit" is another strategy: "As advertising becomes more difficult as a revenue source, and more brands look to digital subscriptions, I think you'll find habit replacing scale as a strategy for publishers. The focus will be to build reader habit, breaking down the barrier to payment because you need this publication so much. This should take the focus away from social media as the driver of success because one-and-done fly-by visitors are less valuable because they are nearly impossible to convert."

Cohn's time transforming *The Atlantic* into the digital age and his creation of a successful events business that gathered both sponsors and ticket buyers around *The Atlantic*'s brand is something he sees continuing. "It's tempting to say that brand doesn't matter in a world driven by social media and aggregation platforms," he said. "But I think it matters more than ever. There's a blizzard of activity in your feed. You're drowning in choice. Which story in Apple News+ or in the Facebook News do you click on? The one that comes from a brand you trust." It will be interesting to see what he does as President of *The Economist*.

The Rapid Move to Subscription

In February 2019, more than 1,250 employees were laid off at BuzzFeed, AOL, Yahoo, *HuffPost*, and Vice Media. Mergers have surfaced between Vox Media and New York Media. Author, journalist and MSNBC anchor Chris Hayes tweeted, "What if there is literally no profitable model for digital news?"

Paywalls are the new reality for premium news

It is a new era. The days of a deep thought piece next to an ad for Tennessee Bourbon are over. It is said that Roy Thomson, a Canadian newspaper proprietor who sailed to London to build an empire in newspapers and became the first Baron of Fleet Street (his grandson, the current chairman of the company that owns Thomson Reuters is now the third) would get out his ruler and measure how many inches of advertising space were on every single page of a publication to determine whether he should buy it or not. Said the BBC, "This overt preoccupation with the commerce of newspapers was scorned by superior journalistic types, but it was he, not they, who got a barony named after Fleet Street, where his newspapers never had offices." If the fourth estate is to survive, what should the owner of a high-quality newsroom measure today? The third section of this paper explores the shift to subscription and brand-adjacent revenue streams.

Legacy titles with trusted brands such as *The Washington Post, The Atlantic, The New Yorker,* and *The New York Times* have experienced significant digital growth as they move towards the needs and desires of online audiences and focus on the end consumer with the goal of conversion and retention. They have also added tightly monitored paywalls. Paywall strategy has been bandied around by media strategists over the past few years to determine if two, five, or 10 free reads a month can secure traffic and revenue. According to a recent Shorenstein paper by Nicco Mele, subscribers across all news organizations are five to ten times more likely to subscribe if they receive the outlet's email news product and four to six times more likely to subscribe if they follow the publisher's brand on social media.

"There are no 'hard and fast' rules for paywalls," writes Mele. "Instead, 'intelligent access' evaluates data continuously to create different access control rules for different behaviors. Among publishers studied, targeted intelligent access control rules allow a news organization to optimize its stop rate, or increase the percentage of users who receive a monthly payment ask before they can continue to read. The paper reports there is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution." But there are best practices which include engagement that is customized to the consumer and their reading history and digital strategies that are tailored to a well-defined market. Most of all, publishers should focus on establishing their brand as a unique and essential source of news in their defined market.

In 2011, *The New York Times* created a paywall and the criticism began almost immediately. Today, it has over 5 million subscribers, outperforming every other news outlet in the U.S. While this figure still represents barely one percent of Americans, it has enabled the paper to thrive. *The Financial Post, Wall Street Journal* and *The Economist* have rigid paywalls that only allow one free read a month. Condé Nast announced in January 2019 that all titles would be behind a paywall by year-end. Three Condé Nast titles — *The New Yorker, Vanity Fair,* and *Wired* — are already behind metered paywalls. Paywalls are the new reality for premium news. "Sentimentality is probably the biggest enemy for the magazine business," David Carey, the president of Hearst Magazines, said in a *New York Times* interview. "You have to embrace the future."

The movement to a paid subscription model, often based on a monthly fee, has been readily adopted this past year among platforms ranging from Netflix to Spotify, *The New Yorker* to *The Washington Post*.[11] New York Media's Daniel Hallac echoes a fear of many of the industry's leaders: How many subscriptions can consumers afford before fatigue sets in? A DCN study on the "media subscription economy" puts the average number at five, reporting that "value has not been compromised despite consumers subscribing to more than four unique digital media subscriptions on average." A focus on digital subscription has gripped the industry with *The Atlantic, Rolling Stone*, and Condé Nast playing catch up to the early adopters of this revenue stream.

Experimentation takes time. In late 2017, *The New York Times* reported that a "try-anything" approach was emerging in the magazine industry to new sources of revenue alongside subscription. *Time* Inc. had "a new streaming TV show, 'Paws & Claws,' that features viral videos of animals. Hearst started a magazine with the online rental service Airbnb. Increasingly, the longtime core of the business — the print product — is joined by investments in live events, podcasts, video, and partnerships with outside brands." Today, new experiments veer towards audio, video, and live streaming. The DCN study found that the popularity of audio and video streaming on the Internet has become a standard for much of the population and more and more consumers have adopted streaming which has led to a "desire for control" as the main driver for consumer purchases of digital media subscriptions.

It's hard to gauge how these experiments are faring economically given that Condé Nast, *The Atlantic, The Information*, and Hearst are all privately held. A recent *Intelligencer* article about Condé Nast claims that the company made 80 percent of its revenue from print advertising revenue five years ago but today makes 60 percent from other sources. "'It's weird what we're doing for money,' one GQ employee said. Condé Nast is currently in a month-long stretch of events that includes *Vogue*'s Forces of Fashion, *The New Yorker* Festival, *Bon Appétit*'s Hot 10 Party, *Vanity Fair*'s New Establishment Summit, *Condé Nast Traveler*'s annual summit, and a four-day Wired event in San Francisco. The company's employees were getting so many offers to post sponsored content on their Instagram pages that this year Condé held a meeting in which it told employees that it needed to broker such deals and would keep a cut."

> A DNC study found that success with subscriptions and consulting are both dependent on strong, respected, and trusted brands that have mastered the digital landscape.

The Newhouse family's net worth is more than $18 billion but it too seems to be diversifying away from media, investing in Stealth Space Co. and low-orbit satellites and putting $1.7 billion into the anti-plagiarism software Turnitin. This may not be surprising given its purchase of Reddit in 2006 for $20 million, a digital platform most recently valued at $3 billion. Big gains in digital media products are less obvious today. But former Pandora CEO Roger Lynch, who is now leading Condé Nast, sees an opportunity. In a recent restructuring announcement of a new global leadership team, Lynch said, "We're bringing added focus to our direct-to-consumer efforts and will build a new consumer marketing function that will be charged with developing best-in-class subscription and membership capabilities and maintaining the authenticity of our iconic global brands."

As more and more news outlets experiment with paywalls and subscriptions, they have found paths to profitability. *The Financial Times* announced recently that it has surpassed the million paid readers mark with digital subscribers accounting for more than 75 percent of its circulation. It has learned something valuable from this transition and is now adding a consulting arm to its business, FT Strategies, through which it will advise other companies on how to acquire subscribers. Vox Media and *The Washington Post* are also diversifying revenue streams as "the digitally converted" and will license their content management systems. The DNC study found that success with subscriptions and consulting are both dependent on strong, respected, and trusted brands that have mastered the digital landscape. It also reports that subscribers receive, on average, 4.3 different digital media subscriptions. Of 1000 people surveyed, 99 percent subscribe to television, 98 percent to movies, 41 percent to one music or podcast platform and only 21 percent to newspaper and 14 percent to magazines. While subscription is a solid, reliable stream, thought leader magazines will require more revenue paths.

Brand-adjacent revenue through partnerships and products lends more easily to fashion and lifestyle magazines: think GOOP's designer gym pants, *GQ*'s boxes of socks and grooming products for $49.99, and *Bon Appétit*'s test kitchens on YouTube. The product is less obvious for leading magazines beyond a *New Yorker* tote bag or *Wired* webcam cover. Even titles that tried to merge glam with thought leadership struggled. "*Teen Vogue*, which went online-only in 2017, has refocused on fashion; a post-Trump foray into 'wokeness' was hard to monetize," wrote *The Intelligencer*.

Creative experimentation around new revenue models will need to be thoughtful to rise above the noise. It may even go as far as *Wired, The Atlantic*, or New York

Media, who understand their subscribers, offering a "glamping event" à la Justin Trudeau – perhaps even with a canoe trip in rustic northern Canada.

The Numbers: Six Leading Thought Leader Titles

According to a recent Comscore graph in the *Wall Street Journal*, monthly unique visitors for the first six months of 2019 included: *The Washington Post* with 84.8 million, *Vox* with 29 million, *Politico* with 27.3 million, *The Atlantic* with 24.6 million, *The New Yorker* with 11.4 million, and *Axios* with 8.4 million. However, information on paid digital subscribers proved harder to obtain. When I interviewed outlets last summer for a paper on Emerging Local News Models, many newspapers were willing to share their paid digital subscriber counts. Magazines were less willing.

For the purpose of this paper, I interviewed and researched six thought leader magazines with strong brands: *New York Magazine*, *Wired*, *The Atlantic*, *The Information*, *Mother Jones*, and *Rolling Stone*.

For the purpose of this paper, I interviewed and researched six thought leader magazines with strong brands: *New York Magazine, Wired, The Atlantic, The Information, Mother Jones,* and *Rolling Stone*. I asked them or researched subscription, conversion, brand-adjacent revenue streams, and future opportunities. These six titles are world-renowned brands in the general interest sector — and more specifically in the thought leader space — and domestic pillars in the news publishing world. Though some began as print outlets while others were born digital, they also all have leadership committed to innovation. The question is, once a trusted brand is established, what do loyalty to and affinity for a brand deliver in terms of business opportunities? What do these look like when the physical or digital magazine is no longer a daily or weekly habit but a lifestyle choice?

The Atlantic was early to the events business and is now leading the way for general interest magazines, capitalizing on its unique offering of thought leadership with Atlantic Live bringing in over 12 percent of total revenue. Meanwhile, Jessica Lessin's *The Information* is a powerhouse of digital brand building, modeling how to tailor engagement to the consumer's personal interests by examining their past reading history and focusing on a very tight and well-defined market — Silicon Valley. *The New Yorker*, the surprise financial bright spot among Condé Nast's legacy brands, was first to double down on the paywall approach and is now profitable with 1.3 million paid subscribers, some paying as much as $149 a year. As *Intelligencer* reported, "Over the years, the magazine has often been a venerable money pit, but thanks to a concerted effort to boost its subscription price, a loyal readership, a Trump bump, and investment in its digital offering — plus the tote bag — the magazine was now making more than 70 percent of its revenue from subscriptions. Condé Nast says *The New Yorker* is profitable." The September issue of *The New Yorker* had only three full-page ads.

In a recent review of the new Condé Nast biography, *The New Republic* wrote, "It might be Remnick's *New Yorker* that is now closest to the original Condé Nast vision. With a fast-paced website and a weekly radio show, it projects a new image of aspiration that has less to do with material consumption than with cultural or social cachet."

Below are snapshots of how six thought leader magazines are transforming and using brand affinity to grow revenue streams.

New York Media

In September 2019, New York Media merged with Vox Media. I interviewed Daniel Hallac on behalf of New York Media, who defined *New York*'s longtime mission as this: "New York Media ignites important conversations with a cosmopolitan point of view and provides the map to shrewdly navigate a fast-moving culture. We are obsessive, sharp, serious fun and essential." *New York*'s paywall went live in late November 2018. While Hallac was unable to share subscription numbers, he said that revenue splits include multiple streams with 70 percent of revenue still coming from advertising, 18 percent from eCommerce (affiliate marketing), 8 percent from subscriptions, 3 percent from events, and 1 percent from miscellaneous sources like brand and tech licensing. When asked if he could study the data to see a clear link to paywall conversion, Hallac offered, "Our subscription product is a dynamic meter paywall on content. You have to consume a certain amount of content in order to be presented with an offering, so it is story-driven (access to content is what we are selling) and brand loyalty in that you need to be a regular reader in order for the dynamic meter paywall to make sense." When asked about proprietary content as a driver for subscription, a story unique to *New York*, Hallac shared, "We are not really a breaking news site. Nor do we syndicate any 3rd party content on our site, so all content is proprietary to the organization. We do have some generic 'news' but the best conversion rates tend to come from our enterprise original feature content." He also noted that all content types play a role. Shorter popular content helps to fill up the meter while deeper longer pieces more often lead to conversion.

Hallac says he does not believe that joining aggregators reduces conversions, instead he views it as a way to reach a new audience that doesn't necessarily come to *New York* directly.

New York Media is part of both Facebook News and Apple News, as Hallac says he does not believe that joining aggregators reduces conversions, instead he views it as a way to reach a new audience that doesn't necessarily come to *New York* directly. He says audiences coming directly to *New York* are likely different from those coming from the aggregators.

Hallac says that his biggest concern for the magazine industry is subscription fatigue. "We are not just competing with other publications but with products such as Netflix, Spotify, and even your gym membership. We have to keep fighting for our place by providing as much value as possible." As for where he sees promise: "The demand for content has never been greater in the history of the world. This creates great opportunity."

The Atlantic

The Atlantic launched a digital subscription service in September, and the signs appear positive. As Laura Hazard Owen wrote in Nieman Lab, "*The Atlantic* (re)joins the metered paywall club, with digital subscriptions starting at $49.99/year. Five free stories a month, after that, you'll be asked to pay up." *The Atlantic* was actually early to the paywall experiment but dropped it in 2008. Now a few months into its second effort, *The Atlantic* reports that the number of subscriptions and revenue originally forecast has doubled. Subscribers receive "Today," a curated daily digest exclusively available in the iOS app, and ad-free articles. They can also save articles and download more than 150 archived magazine issues. The app includes *The Atlantic* Crossword.

In 2014, *The Atlantic*'s events business was said to account for almost one-fifth of the publisher's total revenue. The magazine began hosting events in 2006 and by 2014 was holding over 100 events a year and bringing in close to $10 million annually.

In December, *The Atlantic* launched a complete redesign of the print magazine and an iOS app that it claims, "offers a more curated, visual, and personal way to navigate *The Atlantic*'s journalism." Readers may purchase a premium subscription for $100 which includes print and digital access, ad-free web browsing, a free digital gift subscription, and other benefits such as access to writers and editors and discounts to *Atlantic* events and products. Two years ago, *The Atlantic* launched a membership program called "The Masthead" that will be folded into the new premium package.

Upon the announcement, earlier this year of Bob Cohn's departure as president of *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Chairman David Bradley wrote, "In Bob's tenure as president, we've grown from 180 staff to 440, from 15 million readers to 30+ million, from halting revenue growth to 60 percent growth over five years. And, just because the work is so hard, let me mention that, under Bob and then Margaret [Low Smith, now president of WBUR Boston], *Atlantic*Live has doubled its revenues and now produces over 100 events a year." In January, Cohn was named president/managing director for *The Economist*.

*Atlantic*Live has been profitable for the publisher. In 2014, *The Atlantic*'s events business was said to account for almost one-fifth of the publisher's total revenue. The magazine began hosting events in 2006 and by 2014 was holding over 100 events a year and bringing in close to $10 million annually. Event passes can cost anywhere from $200 for a general admission ticket to the Washington Ideas Forum, the magazine's marquee event now named *The Atlantic* Festival, to $3,000 for a four-day pass to the Aspen Ideas Festival.

In 2018, Cohn reported that print circulation and online audience both had hit all-time highs, and TheAtlantic.com grew 25 percent in 2017 over the previous year. That same year, brand-adjacent products expanded with two new podcasts and documentaries in four countries that nearly doubled *The Atlantic*'s YouTube streams. Last year, the company turned a profit for the eighth consecutive year. Cohn wrote, "Our strategy to nurture a diverse set of revenue sources continued to pay off, with sales at *Atlantic*Live, *Atlantic 57*, and CityLab.com hitting new highs, and Re:think was three times named Best Content Studio. Smart redesigns of the CityLab and *Atlantic* sites positioned both for further growth."

With the transformation this fall to a metered paywall, a new design, and a highly stylized IOS app, the editorial team used the December 2019 issue to swing around its heft as a national thought leader with a provocative cover and remarkable editorial lineup under the headline "How to Stop a Civil War." Touted as a "singular special edition devoted to explaining this particularly dispiriting moment in America, with essays confronting the question of eroding national unity" by writers including Yoni Appelbaum, Andrew Ferguson, Caitlin Flanagan, Megan Garber, Tom Junod, former Secretary of State James Mattis, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Adam Serwer, and Tara Westover. "We don't believe that the conditions in the United States today resemble those of 1850s America," editor Jeffrey Goldberg wrote in the introduction. "But we worry that the ties that bind us are fraying at an alarming speed—we are becoming contemptuous of each other in ways that are both dire and possibly irreversible."

Politico reported in late November that Powell Jobs has solidified control of *The Atlantic* and her Emerson Collective has been expanding her media portfolio. "Emerson has invested in media start-ups such as Axios and OZY Media and film and TV production company Anonymous Content. It has also provided grants to nonprofit newsrooms, such *ProPublica* and *The Marshall Project*, and advocacy groups like the Committee to Protect Journalists."[12]

Circulation numbers for *The Atlantic* are hard to find. The Audit Bureau of Circulation listed *The Atlantic* as one of the top ten national magazines with the most growth in audience in 2017 with a total paid and verified circulation of 565,968. *The Atlantic* reported in 2017, "In the past decade, the company's annual revenue has quadrupled, to nearly $80 million."

Wired

Nick Thompson, *Wired*'s editor-in-chief, notes that since the early days of Silicon Valley, *Wired* has told the story of how technology is changing the world. At the magazine's inception in 1993, that story consisted mostly of celebrating technology and the possibilities it presented. More recently, that's often meant taking a close, critical look at the intended and unintended consequences of technology and holding the powerful companies accountable. Today *Wired* counts close to a million subscribers: nearly 877,000 paying $10 a year, with another 10,416 single-copy sales, bringing circulation close to 900,000. *Wired* launched a metered paywall two years ago but has yet to release digital-only subscription numbers. While slightly behind fellow Condé Nast title *The New Yorker* with its 1.3 million subscribers at a higher price point, Wired has still had significant growth.

When it comes to conversion, *Wired* gives every story a "subscription score" which measures how many subscriptions it thinks the story created.

Thompson says new revenue streams include podcasts and off-site sponsored content, while growing revenue streams include events, with its *Wired25* as the marquee event. When it comes to conversion, *Wired* gives every story a "subscription score" which measures how many subscriptions it thinks the story created. The subscription score also allows *Wired* to see if people are most likely to convert after reading content that they think is proprietary to *Wired* or after reading a deeper, longer piece. While *Wired* is one of the newsstand titles available on Facebook News and Apple News+, Thompson is not alone in his worry that joining news aggregators could have a negative impact on individual magazine conversion rate.

When asked what keeps him up at night for the industry, Thompson concurred with Hallac, saying that he worries most about subscription fatigue. He also added, "I'm worried that aggregators will take all the potential revenue out of the subscription market. And I'm worried that it's easier to get subscribers in year one and year two of a paywall than in year five."

The Information

Jessica Lessin's native digital brand, *The Information*, has emerged as a source of information for those following the tech market. A former *Wall Street Journal* tech reporter with deep enough pockets to launch her own newsroom in 2013, she has literally cornered the Palo Alto tech market using an old-fashioned business model. Lessin boldly opened her doors on day one with a $399 yearly subscription, quickly securing a B2B clientele that makes up 60 percent of her circulation. At her recent Annual Media Summit in NYC, she said that she is well on her way to tens of thousands of subscribers. Should she hit 100,000 subscribers, she would have a $40 million revenue stream before adding in the gains from her events business and premium membership category of $749/year that includes access to all *The Information* events.

"Journalism has been paid for since its early days," Lessin said in an interview. "We just forgot. We all went online and threw that out."

"Journalism has been paid for since its early days," Lessin said in an interview. "We just forgot. We all went online and threw that out."

The digital-only product is user-friendly, beautiful, immediate in its reporting, and feels special — after all, at $399 a pop, luxury is expected. Lessin offers a mix of revenue streams and says that the predictability of subscription revenue has allowed her to expand her coverage. The staff doubled last year to 26 journalists. This past month The Information launched its own app.

To build brand trust and membership, Lessin stays in contact with her subscribers: Daily stories, invites to conversations, and talks with leading reporters and CEOs of tech companies are part of the effort.

Mother Jones

Mother Jones, founded in 1976 and based in San Francisco, is a nonprofit that relies primarily on membership donations and funding from foundations. Its mission is defined by the stories it covers: deep gun control reporting by Mark Follman, climate change and energy policy research by Rebecca Leber, immigration stories by Noah Lanard, an investigation into the opioid crisis by Julia Lurie. In the May/June 2001 issue, Elliot J. Gorn quotes Upton Sinclair: "Stories were *Mother Jones*' weapons, stories 'about strikes she had led and speeches she had made; about interviews with presidents and governors and captains of industry; about jails and convict camps.' She berated the miners for their cowardice, telling them if they were afraid to fight, then she would continue on alone. 'All over the country she had roamed,' Sinclair concluded, 'and wherever she went, the flame of protest had leaped up in the hearts of men; her story was a veritable Odyssey of revolt.' *Mother Jones* CEO Monika Bauerlein says that today the magazine continues that mission. "We focus on in-depth, investigative, and immersive journalism on topics from politics to culture, science, and the environment, guided by a focus on justice and fairness."

Bauerlein says the vast majority of revenue (65 percent) is reader support, which comes in the form of both subscriptions and donations.

Mother Jones counts approximately 180,000 paying subscribers (this accounts for print and digital editions of the magazine — the website itself has no paywall.) Bauerlein says the vast majority of revenue (65 percent) is reader support, which comes in the form of both subscriptions and donations. Foundation support is another 15 percent. Advertising (print, web, email, and podcasts) is about 14 percent, with event sponsorships making up the rest. When asked how she tracks which stories covert subscribers (donors), Bauerlein said she has not seen specific articles prompt spikes in donations with the exception of major scoops. These include David Corn's exclusive coverage of Mitt Romney's "47 percent" video and a 2016 private prison investigation.

Bauerlein points out that engaging with *Mother Jones* is not a "club" type membership with benefits. "We think of membership as anyone who parts with some of their money to support the work of the organization, including subscribers and donors," she said. *Mother Jones* has also sporadically sold merchandise to promote subscriptions without much result.

As a source of revenue, *Mother Jones* has joined Facebook News and Apple News+, with no plans for additional aggregators at this moment. Bauerlein adds, "We're always open to new ways of serving our audiences on the platforms where they are. For the record, Apple News has been good for us in terms of reach, but very poor on monetization (both regular AN and AN+); with NewsTab it's too soon to say, but it's worth noting that only a very small number of publishers have been offered revenue from Facebook as part of NewsTab—a consistent problem across their various products—and *Mother Jones* is not one."

Like Thompson at *Wired* and Hallac at New York Media, Bauerlein worries about reader support as the sole source of revenue. "If reader support (transactional or philanthropic) is the only reliable primary source of revenue for quality news (as advertising fades and other revenue streams are too small to sustain most newsrooms), how large is the overall pool of money for that? Is it already tapped out?" she asks. "Also, can we come up with better models to incentivize readers to support our work (as a transaction, membership, subscription, or simply donation) than the paywall, which doesn't work for an org like *Mother Jones* anyway?"

She goes on to define the landscape: "More broadly, simply being a publisher (and a midsize, independent publisher at that) is terrifying in an environment of elephants (especially the platform duopoly). However, I like to think that it also gives us nimbleness that makes it less likely to be trampled." When I asked Bauerlein what excited her about the industry, she said, "Being more engaged with our audiences as they become our sustainers and, in a very real sense, bosses. It's better to be accountable to readers than to shareholders!"

Rolling Stone (Penske Media Corporation)

Jay Penske, heir to the Penske Truck Leasing fortune, has bought up West Coast titles over the past decade to create Penske Media Corporation (PMC). It has 22 titles including *Rolling Stone, Variety, WWD, Deadline, SHEMedia, IndieWire,* and *The Robb Report*. Across its titles, PMC has 179 million active users, 101 million video views, and 12 million average daily views.

"We're committed to serving our readers with integrity and independent coverage, so they are in-the-know no matter what media platform they engage with, a long tradition that demands editorial get the story right and that they also get it first."

PMC bought *Rolling Stone* at the beginning of 2018 and has since focused on resizing and revitalizing the print product. *Rolling Stone* currently has 500,000 subscribers: 410,000 subscribe to the print issue while the remaining fifth are digital-only. In an email interview, PMC shared that revenue for the brand breaks out as follows: print ads (19 percent), subscriptions (20 percent), digital ads (39 percent), live media (10 percent), and licensing/other (12 percent). While digital content is still free for now, the company expects to introduce a paywall for the magazine over the next couple of years. Whether it ends up being a simple paywall, premium content behind a paywall or a mixture of both has yet to be determined.

In lieu of digital subscription data on *Rolling Stone*, Julie Zhu, vice president of PMC's Audience Marketing and Subscriptions, offered insights into the digital transformation of *Women's Wear Daily* (WWD), one of the few titles owned by PMC with a paywall. "We're currently working towards putting more premium content behind paywalls across other titles," she said.

While a fashion industry magazine rather than a thought leader magazine, WWD.com was very early to the digital paywall structure and serves as a worthy comparison. WWD.com launched over 20 years ago as one of the first paid websites. It is an authoritative voice of the global fashion, retail, and beauty communities, and delivers exclusive news, in-depth analysis, and market insight for industry leaders. Zhu says, "We're committed to serving our readers with integrity and independent coverage, so they are in-the-know no matter what media platform they engage with, a long tradition that demands editorial get the story right and that they also get it first." According to the most recent Alliance for Audited Media filing, WWD total circulation, which includes its Digital Daily e-reader platform and website, is 81,700. Digital Daily, formerly its print edition, has 50,400 subscribers and WWD.com has 31,300. Given the journal's long history with paywalls, we asked about churn. "We don't disclose churn rate, but we can disclose that content and price dictate churn behavior to a greater extent than the medium of delivery," Zhu said. "We believe that you'll find similar subscriber churn behavior at most publishers."

Today a breakdown of revenue sources for WWD is 30 percent media (video, podcasts, and digital advertising), 30 percent subscriptions, 30 percent summits, and 10 percent other activities like licensing. PMC editorial content offers more than 100 annual summits, conferences, and events worldwide and drives networking among global thought leaders and tastemakers at the forefront of entertainment, fashion and lifestyle industries.

Zhu said: "The entire publishing (magazine or newspaper) industry is evolving every day because of demanding readers. Simply providing the website (or print) is no longer dynamic enough to satisfy our readers. Some publishers have already started paid podcasts or paid videos that are organically produced by editorial staff. And sometimes, they use those as incentives to entice subscriptions. WWD does not currently use either brand-related products, editorial or other, in the subscription sales process."

Zhu noted that "PMC will continue to explore tactics that increase conversion to paid; however, in a digital world, these tactics are becoming less and less about physical premiums and more and more about enhancing the subscription/membership experience." As for *Rolling Stone*'s transformation to digital, Zhu says, "At this point, the majority of *Rolling Stone* revenue is still from print, but we expect that to change in the near future."

PMC defines its three key measurements of conversion as a proportion of users hitting the site and purchasing a subscription, proportion of users hitting paid content and purchasing a subscription, and proportion of users directly hitting its Subscription Shop and purchasing a subscription.

According to Zhu, WWD is continually improving data capture to better understand which readers choose to convert to paid subscribers, and why they make that choice. PMC has a proprietary performance-based dashboard called Omnilytics to capture real-time digital media data. "We are currently working on improving how we connect user engagement with their propensity to subscribe so we can determine the most efficient way to target each user, all in real-time. In general, we see that users are more likely to convert when we share intelligence, unique perspective/coverage and exclusive information as opposed to the news that might be covered elsewhere. People convert because they see the content that is worth paying for and unique content that they cannot find anywhere else." Zhu added that readers tend to convert to paid subscribers with longer-form articles. Like the other titles covered in this paper, WWD does not sell its conversion data to third parties.

Zhu also said that PMC will make judgment calls about joining aggregators independently for each brand. PMC has global distribution partnerships with Facebook, Google, *Reuters, The New York Times,* and *The Los Angeles Times*. It also has a content brand studio much like Buzzfeed. According to Zhu, "It all comes down to subscription revenue – whether we think the aggregators would cannibalize subscription we generate from our native website/app, or whether they will help to generate incremental revenue."

Penske looks to WWD as a flagship case study on how to build a successful digital brand. A yearly subscription to the unlimited offerings at WWD costs $199. Users can also purchase the Digital Daily industry briefing newsletter only for $159/year or unlimited website and app access for the same price WWD also charges for archive access (articles older than one year) and event attendance. Penske is also currently looking to add new membership tiers to better engage and monetize users with a lower propensity to subscribe (i.e. a registration wall).

When asked which opportunity is most exciting today for the digital magazine market, Zhu said, "There couldn't be a better time to be in the publishing and media industry with ever-evolving technology and the business model, also evolving based on readers' needs. Whoever comes up with a dynamic model that engages both paid subscribers and at the same time, satisfies advertising needs...will be a winner."

Additional Data from Other Native Digital Players

There are also digital players that are neither newspapers nor general interest magazines relying on a combination of subscriptions and brand-affinity revenue such as events and membership that are worth a quick glance. They have emerged in the form of digital news websites with highly-stylized newsletter campaigns or simply as branded newsletters around a single journalist or brand with no website.

Website + Newsletter

Axios, founded by *Politico* co-founder Jim VandeHei and his colleagues Mike Allen and Roy Schwartz, is more of a news service with newsletters focused on brevity, and summed up by the tagline, "smart, efficient news worthy of your time, attention, and trust." VandeHei recently claimed that media companies need to be more innovative to make it in this cutthroat digital media environment. "I think media is still a great business if you run it like a damn business," he wrote in an email to *The New York Times*, where he listed a number of issues for digital media properties, everything from venture capitalists expecting big returns in a short time to an overreliance on platforms like Facebook for audience growth.

Relying on subscription and sponsored newsletters, *Axios* generated more than $24 million in revenue last year while incurring an overall loss of $56,000, according to *The New York Times*, and expects to see a slight profit in 2019. It raised $30 million through two rounds of VC funding, according to Crunchbase. *The Information* reported that *Axios* still has the $20 million from its most recent round of funding and continues to raise "opportunistically" when approached by investors. *Axios*' previous investors include venture firms Lerer Hippeau and Greycroft, as well as NBCUniversal.

"The audience for high-quality content is huge and voracious and growing," said VandeHei. He adds that the company's focus on newsletters means it is unaffected by the whims of Facebook. Not sure how that plays out with aggregation. *Axios* is also planning to sell its newsletter software to help companies reach employees and investors. *The Information* reported in August that the company has begun beta testing the software.

As we watched consolidation in the native media online space this fall with Vice acquiring Refinery29, GroupNine acquiring Popsugar, and Vox acquiring New York Media, we see investors looking for outlets to share resources. However, Vox Media found a creative revenue stream in video.

Vox Media has new revenue streams from a production agreement with Netflix, in which Vox will continue its series of explanatory journalism called "Explained." Jim Bankoff, CEO of Vox Media, has also generated revenue from its conference business, podcasts, and licensing of Chorus, its proprietary content management system. Vox saw a 20 percent increase in revenue to $185 million with a modest profit. "We don't see ourselves as a digital media company." Bankoff told the NYT. "I mean, is anybody only just that now? We're a modern media company."

"We don't see ourselves as a digital media company." Bankoff told the NYT. "I mean, is anybody only just that now? We're a modern media company."

And while video may be the mantra of many "media entertainment" companies, Oren Katzeff, head of Condé Nast Entertainment (CNE) urges caution. In a recent interview with *Intelligencer*, Katzeff joked about the slim margins: "I tell my team, 'Guys, I went to the bank the other day and tried to deposit some views, but they told me they only take revenue.'" His path to success for CNE? "Practicing extreme business discipline."

Extreme business discipline has allowed a limited number of traditional newspapers to thrive online with paywalled hard news and investigative reporting. *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* have larger newsrooms than ever before. Smaller city newspapers such as *The Boston Globe* and *The Minneapolis Star Tribune* are also gaining digital subscribers due to large investments from billionaire owners who were able to help these titles transform digitally. My paper on Emerging Models in Local News offers a deep insight into the local and digital news market in America.

Conclusion

Whether it is through the Paul Manafort story in *The Atlantic* in March 2018 or the early and lengthy 1980s article "The End of Nature" by Bill McKibben on global warming or Ronan Farrow's #MeToo investigative piece in *The New Yorker* or a new emerging voice on the national scene, trusted thought leader magazines have long helped to frame our political narrative. Today, *The New York Times*, *The Washington*

Post, CNN, and Fox News attract the largest audiences as national bullhorns, but I agree with Remnick that the long-format original reporting published by thought leader magazines set the conversation. At a tumultuous time like this, their existence matters and innovating for their survival is urgent.

What struck me most while writing this paper is the time afforded to these leading public affairs magazines. We expect a perspective from *The Atlantic, Vanity Fair, Rolling Stone, Mother Jones, New York, Reason, The New Yorker*, and Buckley's *National Review*. They are old friends. In a time of disinformation campaigns, unregulated platforms, and a president who attacks the press, magazines have the space and time to inform us. Most magazines have an angle, a niche, a lens with which the reader is already comfortable, even seeks out, as a quiet refuge. They offer thoughtful reading without the shouting. As I researched this paper, I came across a commentary that captures their contribution to our understanding of thought leader magazines:

> The world is not better without the beautiful, informative, brilliant content that CNP (Condé Nast Publishing) produced for decades. A bunch of bloggers don't hold a candle to the expertise editors learned and curated on a variety of subjects and then crafted over a period of weeks in the magazines. It is a loss for our culture. It's all about topline and sound bites now. No depth of knowledge and expertise. Information is quick and disposable. But … elegance and style need to be studied over time.

The promise of the future is that subscription revenue, aggregator revenue, events revenue, and brand-adjacent products will provide enough revenue to fund newsrooms where editorial, reporting, and directorial talent can be encouraged, thought leadership valued, and the national conversation fostered. Membership around brand loyalty, for both nonprofit and for-profit magazines, is the key now. Our intellectual rigor and the spreading of innovative ideas, cultural security, a sense of belonging, and democracy depend on a thriving magazine sector.

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