

STUDY HALL

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The Pride Industrial Complex, a prestigious magazine's union problems, and more.

BY CHRIS ERIK THOMAS

*Today's Digest has been handed over to Chris Erik Thomas, the long-suffering queer media veteran who also helms Study Hall's weekly **Opportunities newsletter**. Chris reported on publications shouting "GAY RIGHTS" with their Pride Month pandering and an update on The New Yorker Union's fight to unionize their workplace.*

CURSED BY THE PRIDE INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

It has been two full weeks since Pride Month began, and I've already had at least eight years shaved off my life expectancy by rainbow capitalism. I have watched dozens of corporations put rainbow filters on their social media icons as they hit the pause button on millions of dollars worth of donations to politicians who sponsor anti-LGBTQ legislation at a state and federal level. My eyes have been seared by the so-bad-it's-camp "Let's Grab Beers Tonight, Queens" (LGBTQ) ad by Bud Light.

There is no escape from the rainbow-hued pandering. Every year, like clockwork, the month of June marks the rollout for "Pride packages." These editorial packages are (often) high budget, and deliver glossy stories championing and uplifting LGBTQ people. It is, as *Xtra Magazine's* editor-at-large Tre'vell Anderson referred to it during a phone interview with *Study Hall*, the Pride Industrial Complex.

This year, some publications couldn't even wait until June 1 to start yelling "gay rights." On May 19, after pretzeling themselves into their favorite position, Both Sidesism, the *New York Times* hit publish on their editorial board's simping of LGBTQ police officers who want to march in uniform at an event whose origin story is literally a direct result of police violence. Days later, as I scoured Twitter for opportunities to put in the Opps newsletter, the calls for LGBTQ writers to get paid low wages to write about their identities began appearing like zombies. These pitch calls aren't new, and they aren't even an issue exclusive to Pride Month. In the weeks (and, more often, the days)

even an issue exclusive to Pride Month. In the weeks (and, more often, the days) leading up to Black History Month, Asian Pacific American Heritage Month, National Hispanic Heritage Month, and other months commemorating communities that have been marginalized, editors scramble to hire freelance writers from these groups to create content.

These quick-turnaround, personal narrative pieces for specialty months may help some writers cash in, but the pressure to produce as much content as possible in a one-month span is stressful and impacts writers' mental health. "You want me to shit out a story in 72 hours? Don't get me wrong, there are girls who can do that, and I can do that, but I'm not interested in doing that," said Anderson. "Especially not for the pennies that you're interested in paying me." For freelance LGBTQ writers, one quick fix that Anderson has witnessed to ease the hustle is a "little fag tax." Adding an extra fee to your rates is smart because, as Anderson notes, "we know that they try to pay us pennies, but they're getting big dollars on their end," but it's a band-aid on a bullet wound. For *INTO* editor Henry Giardina, specialty month packages are emblematic of outdated industry standards. "There's a lot of laziness we need to break out of by prioritizing queer and POC writers all the time, not just during special months. If we just keep going by the PR calendar, queer folks and POC are getting the message that they're an afterthought and not the norm."

Specialty month packages also divert the gaze away from systemic diversity issues. It's easy to throw some cash at a wide array of freelance writers, but if the staff you have on salary isn't diverse, it's just lip service. "Don't get me wrong, I love the white, gay, cis men, but they be overrepresented in these publications," Anderson told *Study Hall*. "That affects the types of storytelling that you feel like you're doing throughout the year." We've all seen what a lack of on-staff diversity can do to Pride Month packages. "No shade, but I'm tired," said Anderson. "Jonathan Van Ness is not the only non-binary person that you can feature for Pride Month. Who else? Gus Kenworthy and Todrick Hall and even Billy Porter."

Even when publications put in some effort and try to reach out to people not associated with *Pose* or *Queer Eye* for their LGBTQ content, they often end up falling back on trauma or identity politics as clickbait. "There's this feeling that if it's not political it's not important, but marginalized folks care about stupid fun shit too and that's also important," Giardina told me over text. As a freelance writer who happens to be a trans, non-binary person, they recalled wanting to write about how weird the chef Gordon Ramsay is, and then having editors respond by saying, "Don't you want to write about trans joy or suffering?" As we've seen from the rise of online activism on issues of systemic racism, sexism, xenophobia, and so many other topics, outrage drives traffic, but "if you're trans, you're already hearing about how people like you are being killed and fucked over by laws all the time."

Both Anderson and Giardina are what I would call "long-suffering queer media veterans," a category I also fall into as the former digital managing editor/survivor of *Out Magazine*, and a current queer, non-binary freelance writer who wants to write about both LGBTQ issues and dumb shit like *Shrek* and the Chuck E. Cheese franchise. They have also trudged through the industry as both freelancers and staff

franchise. They have also trudged through the industry as both freelancers and staff members, and have witnessed the collapse of many, many LGBTQ publications. Anderson served as the director of culture and entertainment during *Out's* short-lived renaissance under Condé Nast golden child Philip Picardi's tenure as editor-in-chief (before most of the staff jumped ship over the company's systemic payment issues). Even Giardina's current gig at *INTO* shows the precarity of trying to focus on LGBTQ media in an industry whose foundation is rotting. Like *Gawker* and *Rookie*, *INTO* is a zombie publication brought back from the dead after its original owner, Grindr, laid off the entire editorial staff in 2019, six weeks after their staff writer, Mathew Rodriguez, reported that Grindr's heterosexual president, Scott Chen, believed "marriage is a holy matrimony between a man and a woman." Now, *INTO* has been revived by a media company called Q.Digital, which also owns *GayCities*, *Queerty*, and *LGBTQ Nation*, and seems to actually care about the community they profit from.

The issues around Pride Month I discussed with both Anderson and Giardina are not new. Complaints about the Pride Industrial Complex feel like being trapped in a media industry adaptation of *Russian Doll* without the fun of hanging out with Natasha Lyonne. We'll be talking the same talk next year, and the year after, until leadership roles become as diverse as the bylines boosted by Pride Month freelance content. Until that happens, the Pride Industry Complex will continue to churn, the "fag tax" will continue to increase, and publications will continue to throw LGBTQ writers back in the closet when July 1 rolls around, opening the door and dusting us off for a fresh round of content on June 1, 2022.

THE NEW YORKER UNION EDGES CLOSER TO A FAIR CONTRACT

In less-gay-but-still-quite-camp news, a crowd of about 100 media workers could be seen chanting "Bosses wear Prada, workers get nada" outside of Anna Wintour's home in the West Village last Tuesday evening. The protest march from New York University to her house was the latest escalation in *The New Yorker* Union's struggle to secure higher pay and better job security, and came a day after union employees unveiled a website that lists their full demands for a contract.

The group's one-two punch of a website and protest added a fresh round of publicity to a union representation fight that began three years ago when *The New Yorker* staffers formed a union. In the time since, they have been locked in contract negotiations with management, including over issues of "just cause" firing, an issue that led to a picket in September 2020 of the *New Yorker Festival*.

Last week's picket was again organized by the NewsGuild of New York, which is representing staffers of three Condé Nast publications — *The New Yorker*, *Pitchfork*, and *Ars Technica* — who are fighting to unionize. Despite attempts by Condé Nast representatives to point out that although Anna Wintour is Condé Nast's global chief content officer, she does not oversee *The New Yorker* and it is editor David Remnick who reports directly to Condé's CEO, the high-visibility event did what it was intended to do. It applied pressure and garnered coverage from *The New York Times*, *HuffPost*, *The Cut*, *NPR*, and other publications in the days afterward, and prompted a more

fleshed-out report by Ben Smith yesterday for his Sunday-night media column at the *Times*.

It's worth noting that as the editor-in-chief of *BuzzFeed News* when that newsroom unionized, Smith "doubted" his employees would be able to "make real gains where profits are scarce" and, at the *Times*, has written with fascination about how unions apparently help employees while chafing at how "political" it is that young people tend to lead unionization efforts for better workplace protections (it's almost as if we... reject how fucked up the industry is for those not in prestige positions like Smith).

In his latest piece on *The New Yorker* union, among details that made me want a cold shower — like writers referring to Remnick as "dad" — Smith constantly refers to the fact checkers, copy editors, web producers, and social media editors who are the face of the unionization as "junior employees," even while reporting that some of these "junior employees" have been at the company for over 20 years. And like clockwork, Smith also found a way to devote some time to the "political tensions" caused by a "younger generation of employees [that are] to the left of [their] elders on issues of substance," before citing a since-deleted tweet about Palestine that "some interpret as threatening violence" without clarifying why it doesn't actually threaten violence.

Lainna Fader, director of audience at *The New Yorker* and vice chair of The New Yorker Union, criticized the "baseless poor reporting" in Smith's piece, noting that writers for *The New Yorker* weren't asked to show up for the protest outside of Wintour's apartment, and correctly pointed out that "if you interfered with your own workers' union," as Smith had, "that seems like a major conflict of interest when writing about another union's contract fight."

Now, with the dust firmly settled in the West Village, negotiations have made headway, especially on the issue of base salaries. For the union, a base salary of \$60,000 for its members was the goal. While nobody from *The New Yorker* Union responded to requests for comment, a Condé Nast spokesperson told *Study Hall* on Saturday: "Our brands have made tremendous progress on our potential contract terms with the NewsGuild recently. We hope to have a contract soon so that real wage increases find their way to our union employees." A day later, Smith reported that the company and union have "agreed on a \$55,000 starting salary and are hashing out issues like caps on potential health care cost increases."

With both sides now "optimistic they would reach an agreement this week," the years-long effort by *The New Yorker* Union seems set for a happy-ish ending, both for the staff and for the industry. *The New Yorker* and Condé Nast are massive entities in the media industry. By establishing better protections for their workers, the union is sending an important message, reminding us that as workers in an industry constantly on the verge of collapse, struggling for some sense of stability in our jobs never comes without a fight.

a simmering mystery, namely who is Yashar Ali and why? The avatar for the journalist-as-influencer, Yashar Ali seems to spend more time dealing in influence (literally: he helped a billionaire Democratic Party donor sell her art, pocketing a \$\$\$ commission on the way) than he does purportedly doing journalism. *Los Angeles Mag's* Peter Kiefer interviewed Ali's ex-friends and current friends, including *CNN* Anchor Jake Tapper who sees Ali as a friend and a rigorous journalist, but also, um, they haven't ever met? The grift may be up, but then again, Shaun King is still running around, thriving. I blocked Yashar Ali many many months ago for reasons of Seems Not Great and it's just nice to be validated. – *Vicky Mochama*

COMINGS AND GOINGS

—Jeannie Choi is taking over as managing editor of *NYT Magazine* and Sabrina Imbler takes a seat at the *NYT Science* desk.

—*The Cut* editor Stella Bugbee is going to the *New York Times* as the new Chaire Sicha; meanwhile, the original Chaire Sicha is becoming the new Stella Bugbee-at-large as *New York Magazine's* editor-at-large. Update your flashcards appropriately.

—Safiya Charles starts out as a fellow for *The Counter* looking into the stories and lives of Black farmers.

—Michelle Kim has become an editor at *Them*.

EVERYTHING ELSE

*[written, ever-so-humbly, by the great and powerful **Vicky Mochama**, editor-at-large in all our hearts.]*

—Journalists dealing with harassment, especially the online kind that tips over into real life, haven't always been able to count on their newsrooms; they still can't really but there are encouraging signs, like the *Washington Post's* national editor defending a reporter's work against bad faith attacks, that senior leaders are starting to take the issue seriously. BUT this story about the issue comes from the AP, where a reporter was recently fired for tweets about Israel dating from before her employment at the news service. So who can really say?

—Dow Jones, the company that owns the *Wall Street Journal*, is putting its hands in the pockets of employees who want to write books, be part of podcasts, and I think I see the Substack-sized problem now — write newsletters.

—A podcasting hype house (ugh) turned into a “perplexing world of cocaine, dog poo, and unpaid bills” after a rogue executive lowkey conned a pile of money from a China-based audio company.

—Last week's internet outage that hit sites like Amazon and the UK government's website also took down *The Verge*. Being a tech news publication, they shifted to reporting in Google Docs, but forgot (despite being a tech publication) to lock the editing permissions. For 20 minutes, *The Verge* was a radical non-hierarchical crowd-

editing permission for 20 minutes, The Verge was a radical non-hierarchical crowd edited publication where anyone could be an anonymous writer. “**hello I am a verge writer bye**, i love this we’re all besties,” wrote one or more newly minted *Verge* writer(s).

—In other tech snafus, the *New York Times* accidentally published a mock article that, while fake, also accurately portrayed how much journalists should trust what police say.

—Darnella Frazier, the Black teenager, who filmed the murder of George Floyd by police has been awarded a Pulitzer special citation. I think it’s supposed to be good news but it reminded me of George Holliday, the man who recorded the Rodney King beating, who was still working as a plumber nearly thirty years after the event and had decided to sell the camera he’d used then so he could finally buy a home.

—For two months starting tomorrow, *Buzzfeed’s* readers can contribute articles for which they’ll be paid based on a sliding scale tied to views: 150K views gets you \$150, 500K views gets \$500, 1 million nets \$2,000, and 4 million wins \$10,000. This could only improve if they put a bunch of writers in some kind of hype house/Hunger Games-ian island. May the odds be ever in your favor.