

STUDY HALL

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Zombie media brands popping up like daisies, Naomi leaves the tournament, and more.

BY JAMES FACTORA

*This week's Study Hall Digest feature has been handed over to **James Factora**, a freelance writer who covers LGBTQ news and is otherwise still trying to figure out what a "beat" is. They will gladly diversify your publication for money.*

THE YEAR OF ZOMBIE MEDIA COMPANIES

As America emerges from a year that lasted decades and seconds at the same time, I have an uncanny impression that we've been transported into the media landscape of the very recent, yet somehow distant, past. Some of the most cultishly beloved media properties of the 2010s — *Rookie Magazine*, Grindr's *Into* and *Gawker* — have been revived this year: *Gawker* as a much-hyped revival years in the making, *Into* with a rebrand under the LGBTQ-owned media company Q.Digital, and *Rookie* as... an Audible original podcast.

These publications met somewhat similar ends in the 2010s, suffering their downfalls for refusing to capitulate to the super rich. *Gawker* was steamrolled by a Peter Thiel-backed lawsuit. Grindr's pivot-to-video directive conveniently came after *Into* published a story on then-company president Scott Chen's allegedly homophobic remarks. *Rookie* technically also folded because of an incompatibility with corporate interests — an increasingly unprofitable digital landscape, an unwillingness to take VC money, to sell to different owners or to transition to a subscription-based model — but it was ultimately founder Tavi Gevinson's decision to close the site down. It was a bittersweet, but fitting, end for a site built on modern riot grrrl feminism and DIY ethics, which makes its revival as an Amazon-backed podcast all the more strange.

All of these cash-laden rebirths point to the uncomfortable fact that the media industry is not immune to the reboot phenomenon that has so thoroughly cannibalized popular culture. Now you can get all your old favorite media properties

canibalized popular culture. Now, you can get all your old favorite media properties with all new players; the rights to your nostalgia for a simpler, less AdSense-driven time held captive forever by literally just Some Guy. Much like the live action Disney Remake Industrial Complex, it's unclear who exactly asked for these reboots, or how they bear any relation to their predecessors other than the branding. The one clear underlying motivation, to me, is that of extracting as much profit from consumers' "brand loyalty" as possible, if Bustle Digital Group founder (and *Gawker* owner) Bryan Goldberg's comments that he wants to "buy a lot of media companies" are any indication.

The *Gawker* nostalgia is of particular interest to me, mostly because I'm too young to have been a voracious *Gawker* reader in its heyday; *Rookie*, a much more twee/teenager-centric endeavor, was more my speed. As a relative outsider, I wonder why exactly *Gawker* garners such misty-eyed reflection on the supposed halcyon days of digital media, especially in light of how women experienced it as a workplace. And as much as I think it's horrible that a billionaire can single handedly axe an entire publication, I also think it is bad to forcibly out people and/or post people's sex tapes on the Internet without their consent. But even that kind of viciousness and exploitation is hardly probable, considering that *Gawker* is now owned by Bustle Digital Group, which plans on going public sometime in the future, and will therefore be more subservient to shareholder and advertiser interests than ever before. An anonymous former *Gawker* staffer told *the Guardian* in April that the acquisition was "a terrible idea" and that there is "no way to capture the old anarchic spirit under the control of venture capitalists."

There was, however, an anarchic quality to the absolute garbage fire that was the attempted *Gawker* relaunch in 2019. What exactly is different internally this time around, considering that Bryan Goldberg still owns BDG, and BDG still owns *Gawker*, remains to be seen. The stakes are also particularly dicey considering that BDG shut down the *Outline* after only a year of owning it. While it seems like BDG is investing pretty heavily in New *Gawker*'s success, who's to say it won't go the same way as *The Outline* in a year's time if the powers that be determine that the site is no longer worth having around? It's even got the same editor at the helm.

As long as media moguls keep insisting that digital media can be "profitable" based on ads and branded content alone, we're doomed to keep repeating this cycle. *Me! Magazine*, for example, was one of the most refreshing new publications of the past decade, filling a void not just in "men's media" but media in general. Also, for some reason, it was owned by Dollar Shave Club, the subscription-based razor delivery service.

This also means DSC had the power to decide one day that the publication would shutter and nearly two dozen media workers would lose their jobs, despite the fact that it allegedly was raking in more pageviews than ever before, with nearly four million visitors a month in 2020. In the publication's goodbye statement, co-founder and editor in chief Josh Schollmeyer stated that the immediate next steps would be to find a new owner, while acknowledging the inherent absurdity of corporate ownership by adding that the publication could now "create all of the razor content we've been

by adding that the publication could now “create all of the razor content we’ve been dying to explore.” It’s only a matter of time before *Mel* gets the reboot treatment, and the cycle repeats yet again.

I genuinely do want these reboots to enjoy extended, sustainable success (other than Rookie; sorry, I’m just not a podcast person). New *Gawker*’s editorial team is looking to be a powerhouse, with former *Outline* editor Brandy Jensen announcing earlier today in a tweet that she’ll be editing features there, following other recent exciting staff announcements. I’ve also really enjoyed *Into*’s relaunch thus far, and I’m of the opinion that the wider the queer media landscape, the better, especially when that media dares to interrogate beloved hallmarks of “gay culture.”

But I also wish that the media landscape allowed for these publications to exist independently of the fact that they’re running under a domain name owned by Some Guy, and that their existences did not hinge entirely on the whims of said guy, especially when he’s sociopathically rich and totally disconnected from what the average reader actually wants. While I hold a certain fondness for some publications, I don’t care about Brands for the Sake of Brands. I care about the people behind those media brands, both the contributors and the community. That goes for these reboots too — again, *Into* and *Gawker* are looking promising, but imagine if the people behind them were given the chance to launch their own publications, free from the spectres of overt bigotry and harassment, and free from the perpetual looming fear of being abruptly axed by Some Guy.

That’s the approach that publications like *Discourse Blog* and *Defector* understand. They’re owned and operated by the former staffers of *Splinter* and *Deadspin*, and they’re both worker-owned, subscription-based publications. Media reboots may be a “trend,” but it’s becoming increasingly clear that the co-op model is a necessity in an increasingly precarious economy. The existence of the media co-ops of 2020, including the Brick House Cooperative, gives me, dare I say, a tiny shrivel of hope for the future of media. The reboots of zombie brands, I’m sad to say, do not. -*James Factora*

LONGREAD OF THE WEEK *Pitchfork* Reviews Reviews was a Tumblr where some NYC literary scenester in the early 2010s posted long, rambling meditations putatively about the reviews that *Pitchfork* published but also the writer’s attempts to be a DJ, blah blah. It might have turned into a column on *The Awl* or something, and every post ended with the signature sign-off: “Sent via BlackBerry,” a signal that the post had been dashed off on some subway platform — whether it actually was, who knows. The author became a little bit of an alt-lit celebrity, published a novel and a book about Supreme, and then went to law school. He’s socially linked to some highly placed music journalists.

That bit of *Gawker*-era media history came back to me as *Pitchfork* published a literal review of its own reviews, a meta-longread. The collection is kind of a history of criticism during the rise of digital media: *Pitchfork* was the most influential music publication online for more than a decade as the bible of indie rock. Then it became a

highly profitable music festival and got bought by Condé Nast in 2015. Though it feels something like a eulogy — a record of the peak *Pitchfork* era — many of the reviews are landmarks: highlighting Broken Social Scene in 2003, Arcade Fire in 2004, chillwave in 2009, Frank Ocean in 2012. Oh yeah, and one review of the band Jet consisted solely of a YouTube video of a monkey peeing in its own mouth. What can I say: iconic. — *Kyle Chayka*

COMINGS AND GOINGS

- Writer Tammie Teclemariam is joining Leah Finnegan's *Gawker* as "the food critic (or something)" as is Brandy Jensen who will be editing features.
 - *The Cut* writer Amanda Arnold has begun freelancing.
 - Trump Inc. podcast co-host Andrea Bernstein is leaving WNYC for a new investigative project with Pineapple Studios.
 - Former *This Week* editor Ashley Brown is leaving ABC to return to NPR as a senior editor at *All Things Considered*.
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EVERYTHING ELSE

— The *New York Times* is apparently in talks to buy *The Athletic*, a subscription-driven online publication that's kind of like *HuffPo* for sports: massive scale, lots of hires, middlebrow content. *The Athletic* already has quite high subscriber numbers, 1 million+, which would fit NYT's goals of growing their booming digital subscriptions even further. But the two newsroom cultures seem quite different: could the NYT really incorporate a hard-knock sports tabloid, or would it just stay an ancillary business? — *Kyle Chayka*

— A 2019 video of much of New York City's press corps singing about socialism has resurfaced. It shows the group doing a very cringe parody of the rise of the DSA, AOC and socialism in general. In it, they make fun of the Green New Deal, Bernie Sanders, and the very idea of building a better world, singing (terribly) that socialism is a form of narcissism that will raise all our taxes. Though the idea of a bunch of reporters getting together to make fun of current events sounds fun (kind of, not really, now that I think about it), this video is mostly a very sad exposé of the cynicism of people who work in the media. Publicly, the press touts their unbiasedness, framing themselves as neutral arbiters of the truth. Privately, as this video shows, they think anyone committed to betterment of our terrible country is a huge loser. This video will stay in my mind every time I see a headline about how student debt forgiveness is unrealistic, or combating global warming will cost too much money. — *P.E. Moskowitz*

— In what has become an unfortunate rite of passage for many Black women athletes, who face increased media scrutiny for their demeanor on and off the court, Naomi Osaka withdrew from the 2021 French Open after facing backlash for abstaining from contractually required press interviews.

Over the weekend, the French Tennis Organization fined Osaka \$15,000, issued a slew of public comments chastising Osaka's behavior, and even threatened to suspend her from the tournament. The four-time Grand Slam singles champion released a statement saying that her decision was meant to prioritize her mental health, and announced her withdrawal from the tournament. Apparently this makes her unruly.

Osaka's decision to take the L and depart from the tournament altogether (an immaculate flex in my opinion) has left many media and sports figures thinking their opinion on the matter, well, mattered, triggering some expected skirmishes online as Osaka's supporters pointed out that Black athletes are not publicly owned commodities. History tends to repeat itself, so I doubt the lesson will stick, but maybe Osaka has set a new precedent. Maybe, too, people will stop pitting her against Serena Williams in their civility politics tennis fantasy. – *Evan Kleekamp*

— Substack announced an impressive list of recipients of their Substack Local initiative, an effort to provide \$1 million to local news journalists/laundry their reputation as supporters of rigorous journalism. You can have it all. -*Vicky Mochama*

(This newsletter was updated with the correct spelling of Andrea Bernstein's name. No shade intended.)