

STUDY HALL

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Online gossip comes for journalists, BuzzFeed embraces its roots, and more.

BY KATE LINDSAY

Today's Digest has been handed over to Kate Lindsay, the excellent writer and reporter behind Embedded, a newsletter about influencer culture. Kate reported on journalists becoming the targets of malicious gossip and BuzzFeed's pivot to good news.

MEDIA GOSSIP HAS GONE MAINSTREAM

On Monday, Moya Lothian-Mclean, the London-based politics editor at *gal-dem* magazine, tweeted a thread about how she unmasked a gossip forum user through Colleen Rooney-esque Instagram Story tactics to confront them about the vitriolic statements they were making about her online. In a forum mainly dedicated to an influencer with whom Lothian-Mclean associates (which Lothian-Mclean declined to name as to not draw attention to it), this user harshly speculated about things like Lothian-Mclean's romantic relationships and asked about the possibility of the writer warranting her own dedicated gossip thread.

In Lothian-Mclean's unmasking of the gossipier, she explores what kind of person participates in these mean-spirited pseudo-anonymous online conversations. But the question I ask is this: What kind of person cares about a journalist's dating life at all?

Well, to be fair, the people reading this newsletter. But that makes sense. We're presumably all in media in some capacity and are therefore allowed a petty, sordid interest in the personal lives of our industry colleagues. But despite the teacher/social worker/artist friends in my life whose eyes tend to glaze over when I explain why I've been refreshing the same media subtweet all night, the incestual social dynamics of key players in the New York media scene have recently become subjects of broad online speculation alongside — kind of like if they were actual celebrities.

“I think it’s because there’s been a flattening of ‘public profile’ into ‘digital fame’ and ‘influence,’” Lothian-Mclean says over email after I inquired about the thread. She points to Allegra Hobbs’ 2019 *Study Hall* essay on the writer as influencer. “Anyone who has followers and a ‘platform’ on social media is considered through the prism of the influencer.”

The Trump-era obsession with media, Twitter’s persistence as a place for normies as well as writers, and the general boredom of online life have contributed to turning journalists into gossip targets. The kind of industry back-biting that *Gawker* used to publish has spilled over into other online spaces, where anyone is fair game as long as anyone else wants to gossip about them.

Similarly, last month, Blogsnark, the subreddit normally home to threads about Instagram bloggers and YouTubers, debuted a new weekly thread titled “Twitter Blue Check Snark,” which hosts speculation about writers like the *New Yorker*’s Jia Tolentino, high profile freelancer Yashar Ali, and the *New York Times*’ Taylor Lorenz — the latter of whom is no stranger to having her personal life discussed online.

“In the past year and a half, the Substack pivot and a lot of other things contributed to journalists building independent brands, and these people view me as a character in their little online plays,” Lorenz tells me over the phone. “Because every one of us is forced to be a brand online, we’re suddenly getting the scrutiny that comes along with brands and big creators and this obsession with highly personal details of our lives.”

For instance, Lorenz recalls moving to Los Angeles last year and posting a picture of her view of the sunset.

“Immediately there’s a thread on the internet trying to determine what house I live in and how much my house is,” she says. “It’s made me rethink my job because the one thing that I loved about being a reporter is being behind the scenes.”

Gossip is one thing. But as Lothian-Mclean points out, these forums get bleak very quickly.

“It feels much darker than [gossip],” she says. “These messaging boards, where you can sit and talk smack for hours with total strangers, do not seem like somewhere happy or healthy people go. They suck you into a spiral of hatred and give you validation via the approval of others for being increasingly cruel.”

This is where we veer into territory journalists are, in fact, familiar with: online harassment. If media companies have yet to sufficiently handle harassment campaigns when they happen to their writers on Twitter — like the recent targeting of Emily Wilder at the *AP* — I’m not confident they can be tasked with taking on Reddit, too.

BUZZFEED, MEDIA SISYPHUS

Hidden in the depth of *BuzzFeed*’s job openings on Greenhouse sits a seemingly innocuous new listing. However, a closer look at “The Upside Editor” reveals a quiet announcement regarding a new brand the publication intends to launch with a focus

announcement regarding a new brand the publication intends to launch with a focus on “uplifting news” called, tentatively, *The Upside*.

Through some on-background conversations with a couple people at *BuzzFeed*, I learned this is based on the positive response they received to their “Good News” page, constructed during the depressing depths of the early pandemic. I also confirmed with a rep that it’s a fixed-term role with full benefits and salary — not, as the Indeed listing initially erroneously claimed, \$12/hr.

Anyways, I’ve heard too many BuzzFeeders lament the pub’s dated reputation as a place for cat memes to not immediately be wary that this is about to be a place for cat memes. But that cynicism is more based on digital media’s reliable knack of eventually repeating itself (see: new new *Gawker*, everything Medium’s ever done, etc.). More broadly this is just *BuzzFeed* coming full circle after 15 years, the past few of which were spent gutting its own newsroom through layoffs and burning out its workers.

If you’re not looking back, you’re plowing forward into the sci-fi realm of cryptocurrency. Mirror.xyz, a Medium-esque blogging platform, was just valued at \$100 million based largely on its idea to allow users to crowdfund their projects through NFTs. Which, just to narrowly prove my thesis, *Civil* already kinda tried first (that didn’t work out well either, as *Study Hall* reported).

LONGREAD OF THE WEEK In early February, Joshua Wolf Shenk, now former editor-in-chief of *The Believer*, joined a cadre of overpaid white male media figures when he, intentionally or unintentionally, exposed his penis during a work meeting on Zoom. Like Jeffrey Toobin before him, Shenk’s behavior drew public scrutiny, especially after the *Los Angeles Times* published a story detailing the incident on April 30.

Fast forward to last week, when *Vice* released its own investigation of the dick incident, which recounted how its records request inadvertently complicated the affair. To satisfy a public records request *Vice* submitted to the university on May 4, UNLV argued that it must access the personal communications of the staff and contractors — including contributors — affiliated with *The Believer* and the Black Mountain Institute, the two organs of the university’s literary programs that Shenk oversaw, citing the broad, and perhaps subjective, nature of Nevada’s records request laws. Said differently, UNLV higher-ups used the records request as a pretense to intimidate staffers into turning over irrelevant personal communications.

The university later rescinded those demands, when it recognized an updated request *Vice* filed on May 20. But the damage had already been done. One staffer, Maxwell Neely-Cohen, former editor-at-large at *The Believer*, resigned after penning a fiery critique of Shenk and UNLV in which he offered his *Believer* email login credentials and summarily canceled all fundraising efforts he had conducted on the magazine’s behalf.

Reviewing the various accounts of the fallout Shenk triggered, what becomes clear is that the UNLV staffers who emphatically did not expose their genitals during a work-related meeting continue to suffer the consequences of Shenk’s behavior. While

Shenk largely communicates through his representative Ira Silverberg at this point, these affected persons must rebuild what they characterized as an already mismanaged, hellish workplace while reckoning with the fact that money and institutional clout easily outpace any efforts toward repair. I cannot imagine what it is like, for example, to learn that your disorganized, absentee supervisor at a literary magazine makes over \$200,000 a year only after you briefly see his penis on Zoom.

More bothersome and difficult to parse is the evermore confounding relationship between state-run colleges and universities, the nonprofit organizations they spawn, and the people those institutions employ or contract — especially vulnerable student workers — who must stomach institutional inertia when, say, a toothless Title IX investigation ignores obvious problems within their department, or be subject to sudden and invasive demands for compliance.

That an entire generation of literary magazines formed around state and nonprofit organizations have had so many overlapping issues with mismanagement, sexual harassment, and pay inequity suggests that maybe we ought to recognize Shenk's penis interlude is but one small example of a widespread structural issue. I personally will be ignoring all pushback I receive from philanthropy-driven publications when they say their status as a state or nonprofit entity means they cannot pay market rates. As Shenk's penis has taught us, the money is there, it's just used to support people who frequently lack foresight and self-awareness. – *Evan Kleekamp*

COMINGS AND GOINGS

— Karen Yuan is joining *Bon Appetit* as an Editor at the Lifestyle Desk, leaving her role as Newsletters Editor at *Fortune*.

— Alex Emmons is departing *The Intercept* after five and a half years to attend Yale Law School this fall.

— Daysia Tolentino will be leading weekend coverage as an editor at *The Daily Dot*.

— Op-ed editor Jessica Goodman is leaving *Cosmopolitan* after four years to be a full-time author and freelancer.

— Astrid Galván joined the *AP* as national race writer with a focus on Latinos in the U.S.

— Brian Feldman closed the book on his BNet newsletter after a little over a year, citing a desire to end the project on his own terms and disenchantment with internet reporting.

— Jocelyn Silver is going to be the managing editor at what is increasingly often being called “Leah Finnegan’s *Gawker*” instead of “Bryan Goldberg’s Second *Gawker*.”

— *GQ* contributor and magazine writer Julia Ioffe is starting a DC newsletter with “Puck”, which seems to be the name of the subscription-driven digital media company started by *Vanity Fair* and *The Athletic* alumni.

— Chloë Sicha is leaving the *New York Times* after helming its Style section (and

Chen is leaving the *New York Times* after running its style section (and briefly being in charge of newsletters). Sicha is **heading to *New York Magazine*** where he will be editor-at-large.

EVERYTHING ELSE

— A bunch of well-paid *New York Times* employees like Maggie Haberman, Jodi Kantor, and Wesley Morris are voting “no” to paying a fraction more of their salary in dues to their union that would help their (likely) lesser-paid colleagues and comrades organize and advocate for better working conditions in their own roles, going as far as to meet with labor attorney Arthur Schwartz for guidance on their opposition, according to a new report in *The Daily Beast*.

— A *Vice* inquiry into the latest Zoom dick incident, this one at *The Believer*, ended up creating a brand new scandal when *Believer* employees claimed *Vice*’s records request was used by higher-ups to intimidate staffers into turning over irrelevant personal communications.

— Matthew Yglesias, while professing his love of working on an iPad, tweeted out a picture that (unknowingly?) included a glimpse of his Substack and Slack dashboards. The photo features stats for his latest newsletter, drafts titled things like “Obama” and “Aliens,” and the names of Slack channels he’s in like “partisan-media” and “lumber.” There’s also a nail clipper in repose on the table, meaning there’s a not-zero chance that the unidentifiable fragment next to it is toenail.