

Journalism crisis leads to shameful compromises at Google

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Journalism crisis leads to shameful compromises at Google and Vox

As publications go bust, Vox hires commerce editor in attempt to save journalism by destroying it

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by [Chris Lehmann @lehmannchris](#)

No one needs to remind regular readers of Al Jazeera America that journalism is in crisis. The website you're now reading will be going dark (at least as far as fresh content is concerned) by the end of this month, and the television channel will follow by mid-April. The shutdown will take several hundred editorial jobs with it.

Al Jazeera America's pending closure is but one dismal entry in a long-running journalistic dance of the dead. In the U.K., The Guardian is poised to [enact major cutbacks](#) to its editorial shop; the rival Independent has just announced plans to shutter its print operations. Across the pond, U.S. newspapers continue to hemorrhage revenue and circulation at [an appalling clip](#). If "Spotlight," the movie dramatizing The Boston Globe's landmark investigation into the Catholic Church's sexual abuse scandal, wins a best picture Oscar and inspires a generation of idealistic kids to pursue a career in daily journalism, as was famously the case with "All the President's Men," those enterprising souls will likely land on the dole — or, worse, toil at SEO factories like The Huffington Post or BuzzFeed.

The world of magazines isn't faring much better. The New Republic, sold amid great fanfare to baby-faced Facebook call-center titan Chris Hughes in 2012, is now back on the auction block, after he essentially leveled the magazine's legacy value amid a riot of imbecilic Silicon Valley sloganeering. In an abashed announcement of the opinion journal's latest prospective sale (published, for some reason, [on Medium](#)), Hughes proclaimed that after sinking more than \$20 million into The New Republic, he had failed to cobble together anything resembling a viable business model for the magazine, known in headier days as the in-flight reading on Air Force One.

Amid all this glum news about the news business, it's easy to overlook a no-less-alarming trend: the ways in which the news operations surviving the wretched digital-age shakeout are effectively adapting to new market conditions. These ambitious shops are steadily blurring the protocols of honest newsgathering and the considerably sneakier ones of data-driven commerce to the point of functional identity. In the face of such developments, we should all probably be grateful that Hughes failed to find a viable business model for his vanity media acquisition. (Though this cock-up clearly didn't occur for lack of trying on his and his lackeys' part; the company recently announced the launch of a premium advertorial operation, which at least sports [the truth-in-advertising moniker Novel](#).) Had the Hughes makeover succeeded, The New Republic would have likely become a long-form version of Politico campaign hack Mike Allen's Playbook — i.e., an [open-air bazaar](#) for business-partner osculation masquerading as buzzworthy editorial content (when, that is, it's not serving as an outright platform for the [thuggish political apparatus](#) whom Allen tirelessly romances).

The polite euphemism for such rampant self-prostitution in our brave new digital media world is "sponsored content" — i.e., writing that's made to look, feel and read like actual journalism while promoting a paid-for commercial agenda. It's true that traditional print publications also engage in their own version of this subterfuge, but it's very difficult to mistake a plainly marked special advertising supplement in your daily paper that is overstuffed with propaganda ginned up by the Chinese or Russian government for real news. Meanwhile, blandly corrupt listicles and feature pieces gleefully swamp actual journalistic offerings in all manner of online news portals, from [Buzzfeed](#) to [The Atlantic](#).

The nauseating creep of the sponsored-content revolution was something I witnessed firsthand during my mercifully abortive tenure as a senior manager [at Yahoo News](#). Yahoo is the most popular news destination on the Web, and the company elected to spearhead its coverage of the 2012 presidential cycle with a series of pseudo-documentary videos (each with a premium content sponsor) purportedly chronicling the political deliberations of ordinary Americans on their pending primary votes. The project, which bore the heroic name Remake America (sponsored-content hacks are nothing if not ambitious) thankfully sputtered into oblivion, but the site remains awash in commercially compromised phony news content. There's a beauty-and-fashion vertical "edited" by cosmetics mogul Bobbi Brown, and an endless pageant of gee-whiz hosannas for the tech industry rushed through the site by former New York Times Silicon Valley tout David Pogue — a man so completely in the tank for the industry he allegedly covered for the paper of record that he married a Silicon Valley PR flak. Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer has largely staked her flailing bid to revive the earnings-starved Yahoo on a series of internally produced digital magazines — which turn out, on closer inspection, to be yet more [glorified ad copy](#). (As with the Hughes-branded New Republic, though, Mayer's roster of magazines — or verticals, as they're known in subcoherent Silicon Valleyese — have earned negative verdicts from the market, with Yahoo announcing last week that it will [shutter a slew of them](#), though, tellingly, not the lame brand extensions captained by Pogue and Brown.)

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There's a certain elegant symmetry, then, in the recent job listing by the explainer-journalism empire Vox Media for the company's [first-ever commerce editor](#). Vox has been diligently compromising journalistic values all on its own, whether via its [rankly disingenuous assaults](#) on Bernie Sanders' health care proposals or its comically baroque [protocols of archive scrubbing](#). (The practice was far less laughworthy in last week's trespass, in which the Vox-owned sports network SB Nation briefly ran and then rapidly [deleted](#) a [monstrous long-form apology](#) for convicted cop-rapist and erstwhile college footballer Daniel Holtzclaw. At the end of the week, the company announced that it would put long-form articles on ice while it conducts a review.)

It only stands to reason, then, that a site so resolutely light on integrity and forthrightness should be positioning itself on the vanguard of the coming sponsored-content singularity. To read through the particulars of this pioneering post is to see journalism's obituary take shape before your eyes, in a relentless onslaught of nonsignifying buzzwords.

Begin with the self-hymning company profile, which states that Vox is "redefining the modern media company by empowering the smartest creative voices" (though not so as to have the superlative comparative modifier point to an antecedent: Smartest compared with whom? Rick Perry? Homer Simpson? The Bundy gang?) in a curiously opaque quest "to create and distribute premium content that connects with an audience of 165 million people who look to us for intelligent content experiences." The weird conditional phrasing of this lumbering thought — that delivering content to content seekers isn't somehow just writing for readers but an epic re-creation of the modern media company and a mind-blowing recalibration of readerly experience unto their innermost parts — has to leave aspiring commerce editors wondering whether Vox is meeting or thwarting a demand for content experiences by connecting with mere premium content. Or then again, does a content experience signify here a happy experience, like petting a puppy or savoring a milkshake? Or, reverting to the clunky nominative interpretation of "content," is there some crucial added value that readers bring to Vox content that turns it magically into an experience?

But we're doubtless neither smart nor creative enough to plumb such recondite mysteries. Surely the conduct of the commerce in question will restore some firmer cognitive ground beneath our feet. Here's what falls under Vox's explainerish heading of "What you'll do":

- Research content for Vox Media's eight editorial brands that helps our audience discover great products
- Research products in various categories and remain abreast of consumer trends
- Optimize editorial content for affiliate partners
- Work closely with editorial teams on curating products and producing content
- Work with SEO teams to create an effective editorial calendar for commerce
- Closely track and analyze successes and failures

OK, then: In practical terms, this has to mean the usual cynical bid to massage ad copy into something resembling a news dispatch — or to become the Bobbi Brown of the editing world. But note that, in a job posting for a commerce editor, zero editing appears to be involved. You will research, remain abreast, optimize, curate, produce and work closely — and closely track and analyze after all that numbing content plumping is finished. But you won't be charged, evidently, with working through the basic structure and sense of a piece, sharpening its diction or shortening its sentences. There's no place for editing and even less, it would seem, for independent thought and writing, in Vox's grand new agora of search-optimized product and content.

In other words, Vox has redefined the media company by curating the journalism right out of it. And so we who are about to die here at Al Jazeera America salute you, our enterprising Vox masters, with one last upward thrust of our expiring middle finger.

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The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.