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BY MARC FISHER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SEAN HEMMERLEK

BuzzFeed, as much as any newsroom, is the antithesis of traditional. A neon sign celebrates the Hot List, BuzzFeed’s signature form. The receptionist hands new employees sweats— a sweatshirt and a canvas bag decorated with a classic BuzzFeed headline: “84 Things That Aren’t on an Everything Bagel.” The conference rooms ringed the newsroom are named for viral cats: “Shironoko,” “Princess Monster Truck,” “Winston Bananas.” Old newspaper ways of doing things are scoffed at here. At a morning meeting, discussion of how to cover the president’s State of the Union address focuses on two aspects only: getting Vine video “of when stupid stuff happens” and putting together a piece about how no one cares about the State of the Union.

The editor in chief, Ben Smith, the only person among the 29 in the meeting who wears a jacket, urges his lieutenants to tell more stories as quizzes. “People are going to be making fun of us as the website that only does quizzes,” he says. “But we’ve only just begun to scratch the surface of quizzes.”

BuzzFeed is no scrappy little start-up anymore. It’s a big, profitable, influential news organization. The viral videos it publishes—generally without vetting—occur variously turn out to be hoaxes, the kind of mistake that delights old print journalists eager to assert their ethical superiority. But as BuzzFeed continues to grow—four new employees checked in at the front desk in the 10 minutes I spent waiting there one morning—they’re not just adding brilliant headline writers and producers who get the genius of cat lovers. BuzzFeed has decided it’s no longer good enough to fix errors after publication, at least not on its most popular posts. They’ve decided it makes good journalism and business sense to ensure readers that their posts are true. So BuzzFeed is embracing the ultimate symbol of the overstuffed print newsrooms of the pre-digital past: BuzzFeed is hiring copy editors.

For nearly two decades, a culture war has divided journalists. The gap seemed mostly generational, but it always boiled down to a battle over the very purpose of what we do. All the dismissive sniping and straight-out antagonism between the old-school defenders of the print craft and the young digital braves propelling start-ups came down to a debate over values. The old guard argued that they were driven by the quest for truth, and by their sense of what citizens need to know to be informed participants in democracy. Reporting was all about looking down the facts and presenting them to readers, who would know best how to take advantage of the light we shined. Digital journalists countered that their way was more honest and democratic—and quicker. If that meant presenting stories before they had been thoroughly vetted, that was okay, because the internet would correct itself. Truth would emerge through open trial and error.

With the collapse of old business models, the debate over values turned into a death match. Print chauvinists still must wear mock horror when a few news sites run with wholly unconfirmed reports that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un’s uncle, apparently fallen from favor, was stripped, caged and eaten by 120 ravens. Dogs. And more than a few digital evangelists find a proud identity in the distance they keep from stooges, superflines, layered editing structures that persist at many newspapers and magazines.

But consider a new possibility. What if reconciliation is at hand? As the lines between old and new increasingly blur, are the two schools of journalism’s core values blending into a hybrid? Increasingly, in newsrooms both print-centric and all-digital, the imperative for speed in the journalism of tweets and Vine’s has triumphed over traditional ways. What’s news is what’s out there, whether or not it’s been checked and verified. Rare is the news organization that doesn’t occasionally jump on Twitter with half-baked facts, and rare still is the one that refuses to up content about the day’s major trending topics.

As I discovered in visits to newsrooms with varying histories and roles, what’s new is what’s always worked. In the minute-by-minute struggle for audience and advertising, old-fashioned notions about credibility and turn out to be as essential as speed. Despite unapologetic rhetoric about the Web as a self-correcting mechanism, getting things right from the start turns out to have considerable value.

“The sheer impact of doing the wrong thing has grown tremendously because of the speed and reach of the new media, and that is leading a lot of these new brands to show a lot of traditional values,” says Eric Newton, senior advisor to the president at the Knight Foundation and former managing editor of the Newseum.

“it’s about finding the right middle point. Some degree of perfectionism turns out to be good for business, and absolute perfectionism can prevent great journalism from ever happening at all. Journalists haven’t found a magic answer—the Knight Foundation just issued a $350,000 grant to support development of software that determines if viral videos are real. And the audience remains uncertain about what standards to apply.

Twitter addicts are far more forgiving of mistakes than, say, subscribers to print newspapers, or readers of The New York Times, in every newsroom I visited, The New York Times’ iconic fact-checking system was mentioned, not so much as an ideal, but more like an impossible standard that no newspaper could reach. Despite the difficult advertising climate, The New York Times employs full-time staff to verify every assertion in each piece. For an article I wrote last year, the magazine assigned two checkers who devoted much of their time to the story for more than five months. Each set of checks opened new avenues for reporting, immensely strengthening the story. From the perspective of a newspaper, the experience seemed to take place on a different planet from where I ordinarily live.

Such differences are okay, Newton says, because different audiences are drawn to the media that fit their pace and interests. “We get the media we deserve,” he says. But over time, “we all come to see that people want to know something that is true.”

In the newsrooms of this moment, with growing agreement that audiences want information that is true, journalists are coming together around the same basic questions: When is information sufficiently baked to be served up as accurate? Who decides? Should there be rules, or just ideas? Is it enough merely to try to be right eventually?
ON THE SNOWY EVENING BEFORE I DROVE UP TO SOUTH central Pennsylvania to visit the York Daily Record, its editors suggested I check out the liveblog they had created to cover the first significant storm of the year. The blog featured video snippets from staff reporters showing where slick roads were snarling traffic. There were feeds from the National Weather Service and tweets from reporters and competing media outlets. The editors were proud that their blog gave equal treatment to reader-generated content—pictures and tweets with the hashtag "snowy holidays." Reader Dan Solkin said roads were "slippery but passable slowly." JuleeTrendy posted: "What better way to spend a snowy day than by drinking a couple beers." Erin Kiesel added: "Winter Storm Advisory: The state liquor stores are closed. This is bullshit!"

No one edits the storm blog at night, says Jim McClure, the Record's editor. But there's nothing on the blog he'd have taken out. The bees line "captures the feelings of the community," and the profanity is fine because "we're looser online."

Three days at the Record—which has 19 reporters on a staff of 35 journalists, down from 80 at its peak a decade ago—every blog, shoots video, and posts on social media, as well as reports and writes. Reporters and photographers post directly to the site, "so it's incumbent more and more on the reporter to get it right," says metro editor Susan Martin. "Editors fix things after they're online, as soon as we can."

I chose to visit the Record because its parent company, Digital First Media, a chain of 75 papers, has turned its newsrooms into a whirl of do-it-all journalists no longer divided by digital and print. The Record's reporters and producers are all over social media now, as well as on their own site and in print. But does that new multi-platform saturation require the Record to be more of a mirror of its community and less of a watchdog? Does the pace and approach of digital journalism detract from being the community's referee of truth? The Record's restructuring was designed to "keep the same number of people on the street," says McClure, who has been at the paper for 25 years. A new Design Center—basically a copy desk—designs and produces four regional newspapers from the Record now, freeing journalists in Chambersburg, Hanover, and Lebanon to focus solely on generating local content. Record managing editor Randy Parker wants journalists to see their work in thirds: aggregation of competitors' work, curation of users' content, and original reporting. When applicants say their passion is to write stories, "I say, 'We don't have that job available,' Parker says. "We try to get away from confusing words like 'reporter' or 'editor'!"

One day each week, known as Mojo Wednesdays, Record reporters are instructed not to come into the newsroom, but to station themselves out among the people they cover. Lauren Boyer, 25, sets up at a different McDonald's every week and calls out on social media to let readers know she's available. Some weeks no one comes, some weeks she gets a story or meets a source. "This wasn't what she'd envisioned coming out of college," "I just wanted to tell stories and see my name in print," she recalls. Now, though, she's fascinated by the challenge of blending traditional reporting with the dose of personality the adds when live-tweeting a heated public hearing.

She tries to keep the same standards on all platforms—if people make defamatory comments at a hearing, she won't tweet them, just as she wouldn't put them in print. But she's more friendly on social media than in the Record, more herself, and she likes that. It's not lowering standards, just using a different voice, she says. But she adds: "Working like we do, you have to be so much more careful because you can make a mistake so easily on the internet."

In the Record newsroom, veterans and newcomers alike care a great deal about truth and standards, but the Record's ambition is diminished, its daily coverage less comprehensive. The editors proudly showed me the stellar project work they've done of late—a series on diabetics, an admirable, long-term commitment to chronicling the travails of returning war veterans—but any notion of full, regular coverage of the region is gone, once the Record's core function has fallen away.

Journalists scurry to file on several platforms on multiple stories each day: they have the time to see it as high. The increased demands inevitably grind away at standards, says Paul Poulis, a staff photographer since 1984. On this day, he's posted video of a murder-suicide, the weather, and a local dog sled. He'll produce stills on stories too. "We say our top priority is accuracy, but you're a human being and everyone's doing 20 jobs now," he says.

Proud of his work, Kuhnel describes exactly how many people have watched his video about the murder—1,064 in the first six hours. Plus 753 views on the video of a spinout in the snow. And 106 of the digitalizing video, in the first 25 minutes alone. "That's a lot," he says, "and that's satisfying, especially for crappy videos."

ONE REASON THE RECORD CAN DEVOTE ITSELF ENTIRELY TO local news is because its parent company operates something called Thunderdomes. In 2012, Digital First opened a newsroom on the 30th floor of a Wall Street office building where about 90 journalists produce most of the non-local content for each of its newspapers. They create national and foreign reports; package videos that populate each paper's site; write food, health, and tech features; and jump on big breaking stories. Unlike a traditional chain's national bureau, Thunderdomes doesn't have beat reporters covering major news events. Thunderdomes is an artifact of the digital definition of journalism. It mainly aggregates and repackages material from wires, other content partners, and local papers. "If we've got a story from The Washington Post, we're not re-typing it," says Mike Topel, the news editor. "We're looking for what digital enhancements we can do." Thunderdomes producers also jump on breaking stories and memos so all of Digital First's sites around the country can reflect what's happening in the moment.

Digital First's editor in chief, Jim Buzby, who built Thunderdomes in part to help his newsrooms reframe themselves as places where the face-off between print and digital could become irrelevant. The room is populated largely with veterans of print newspapers and Brady's plan is for them to marry print traditions of completeness, verification, and authority with the digital imperatives for speed and connection with the audience's interests. "The battles are still there," he says, "but they're veered as, digital people have moved into leadership roles, and as everyone learned that aggregation can only take you so far, and as people from both backgrounds learn that it's better to be second than to be wrong." When Twitter is ablaze with images of a riot, revolution, or raging fire, Thunderdomes leans on Storyful—the social media verification startup. Storyful's staff of 18 monitors social media, YouTube, and other video sources to see what images and stories are trending; then they try to verify if the video is what it purports to be and pass along the results to their clients in newspapers. "If there's nothing on the wire and we've seen Storyful is investigating the image, we can find a verified reporter who's tweeted the image, we'll go with it," says Karen Workman, Thunderdomes' deputy breaking news editor.

But even as Thunderdomes finds ways to create familiarities of the vetting process it and other news operations can no longer afford, a stark fact remains: Most of what they're gathering is what someone else reported originally. Thunderdomes has but one reporter, Bianca Pirooz, who came from the Orlando Sentinel. She relishes being a tradition buster, which is a good thing, because she's learned that she often has to be the editor on her own work. So she improvises: "When I finish a story, it's, like, print out my story, get my

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red pen and go through it again. Then I'll get it peer-edited—skype a message. They can come as a look.

On the Friday I spent at Thunderdome, I had a story back at my own paper that was being edited for that Sunday’s Washington Post. After I spoke to Priess, I checked my messages to find that five levels of editors had questions or thoughts about my story—my assignment editor, a copy editor, the section editor, another section editor, and the Sunday editor. That multi-layered approach—unusually dense because this piece was going AI on Sunday—comforted the writer, but is no guarantee of perfection. Within four hours

Vine, 10-second spots for Snapchats, 15-second versions for Instagram, and longform work (30 seconds to a minute) for Facebook and the Web. When New Jersey Gov. Chris Chris-
tie says during a two-hour news conference that he’s not a bully, NowThis takes a few seconds of that clip, marries it to three or four snippets showing him being a bully and posts the 15 seconds on Instagram within an hour.

“Everything we do is irreverent, but not glib,” says the editor in chief, Ed O’Keefe, 36, a veteran of ABC News. “We remove all ornamentation, anything that distances. The YouTube generation understands that stories evolve. It’s dirty and it’s not always right, but it’s instantaneous.”

There it is, the red-hot core of the difference between old school and new. I’ve never had a print editor who said anything like that out loud. But I have heard any number of editors who are struggling to figure out how to com-
pete digitally embrace the idea that putting something up can take precedence over checking it out fully. This is no expression of tabloid amorality; O’Keefe is a serious jour-
nalist who is trying to find a standard that works in the new world. He doesn’t want to deliver inaccuracies to his audience. Rather, he wants to give them the closest version of the truth he can while still meeting them where they are, which is on their phone, right now. Wait a few minutes, and they won’t be there anymore; they’ll have moved on to the next story.

NowThis produces little original reporting; virtually all
the video comes from the networks, wires, and viral con-
tent. So NowThis’s value comes from its distinctive brand of visual storytelling. NowThis adds bold graphics and conversational narration that blend opinion and reporting in a style intriguing enough that NBC in January took a 10 percent stake in the business and agreed to use its video.

“Speed is part of the brand,” says Ashish Patel, the vice president for social media. “It’s what we sell. So our verifi-
cation is hyperfast, using third-party verifiers.” That means “that if the Times is reporting something, it’s already verified.”

That kind of statement would have caused a furor back at the Washington Post, where Katherine Zaleski was executive producer before joining NowThis as its first managing editor. Zaleski was a lightning rod in the culture wars at the Post, an evangelist for changing a print-
centric newsroom into one that moved at the speed of the Web. Some Post reporters and editors equated her work with lower standards. Looking back, Zaleski doesn’t blame them. “When you’re losing circulation, money, and friends, you focus on the intangibles—your reputation and standards. That was the thing they could hold onto.” On the other hand, she says, “Old-line organizations really do have to be more cautious. I learned at the Post how much patience it takes to get really great journalism. At new organizations, you just don’t have the budget for that yet. Patience requires revenue.”

NowThis plans to do more original reporting, and then
work harder at verifying the accuracy of their videos. Mean-
while, they make due with an old news standby, the question

dodge: When NowThis producers considered posting viral video of a bear breaking into a convenience store and taking

a cup of yogurt, the production values looked too crisp to
be from a random user. Rather than report out the story, NowThis asked the audience to decide real or hoax? (The bear bit turned out to be a clip from an ad for ChowdaHus.)

In September, NowThis went with video of the twerking
girl who falls down and sets herself aflame—a too-incred-
ible-to-be-true viral hit that turned out to be a bit by late-
night comedian Jimmy Kimmel. “We thought it was real,” says producer Sarah Frank. When the truth emerged, “we did a piece saying we’d been duped.” NowThis executives
say viewers are fine with that kind of transparency, but they also say they’d like to find a way to assure that those mistakes don’t get made in the first place.

Frank, at 31 a veteran of Newsweek and New York Maga-
azine, finds it refreshing to be at a place that explores the boundaries of making the news funny and personal without running up against the defensiveness she recalls from older colleagues at Newsweek. “You’re going to tarnish the brand” in which Frank is coordinating the evolving relationship with NBC, and says everyones understands that for NowThis to retain its creativity, it has to steer clear of hard rules and multi-layered systems that could slow production.

NowThis’s new president, Sean Mills, just arrived in December from The Onion, where he learned that young audiences now dismiss many conventions of storytelling—anchormen, pyramidal news writing, and cautious neutrality now seem like, well, an Onion parody. But Mills says the credibility that attaches to old-line media brands reaches start-ups a powerful lesson. It’s still all about the truth. There may not be a direct line between getting the story wrong and losing audience, but Mills believes getting it right is essential to building the brand. What he hasn’t found yet is the right mix of opinion and straight reporting, original work and aggregation, verification and letting the audience sort it out.

It’s about building trust, he says. There aren’t the resources to check everything, but the answer lies in trans-
parency. “If you don’t know, just say you couldn’t verify it,” says Mills. “The new news consumer likes being let in on that process.”

In many short-staffed newsrooms, transparency is the buzzword—just tell readers what you can’t afford to do (such as verifying videos). But as start-ups grow, they may find that success helps solve some of their problems.

Shani Hilson, 28, came to BuzzFeed from NBC’s DC affili-
ate and Washington City Paper with a mission: “I charged myself with bringing more old-school dna to this place,” she says. As deputy editor in chief, Hilson has built the copy desk from one to three editors, with more to come. She tells

BuzzFeed editors say their audience used to see their site as a place you could find really cool stuff, but not a place you could trust. They’re trying to change that.
skeptical producers that content can be checked and polished without unduly slowing the machine. “They have to feel like they’re not being held up or we won’t succeed,” she says.

Copy editors now review anything on BuzzFeed’s top 10 list—a palpable sign that larger audiences create more responsibility and caution. “If something’s going viral, we want it to be correct,” Hilton says. “But there are people here who don’t think of themselves as journalists, so it’s a learning process.”

Hilton presses producers to reach out to creators of the viral material they post. “Make that call,” she says. “Think about influencing the conversation more than just getting the traffic.”

“People used to see BuzzFeed as a place where you could find really fun stuff,” says Ben Smith, Hilton’s boss, “but not really a place you could trust. Now they’re seeing it as a place where you can get your news,” which requires changing the culture.

Not that Smith, who came from Politico, will slow BuzzFeed’s metabolism. “If your readers are swimming in this stuff, it’s an abdication of responsibility to wait,” he says. He’s thought about why his site named the wrong bomber in the rush to post after the Boston attack. His conclusion: “Bad mistake, but big breaking stories have always been a total shitstorm. The solution is more, better reporters, so we don’t have to rely on CNN.”

BuzzFeed will still reflect what users see on the internet, but not blindly. To reach an audience that accepts anonymity but is suspicious of motives and sources, Smith believes the bigger BuzzFeed needs a more nuanced approach to editing. Producers still directly post routine, non-controversial pieces. If a story makes serious allegations, “we want it to be bulletproof,” it will get one close edit and informal looks from other editors. And BuzzFeed’s narrative features and investigations will be edited, copyedited, and fact-checked by contract checkers.

But Smith rejects “formalistic rules like ‘you have to have two sources to go with something.’ It’s easy to get nine sources to say the same thing and still get it wrong. I prefer to rely on smart reporters and on Twitter,” fixing stories as they develop.

The iterative approach, while capturing the spirit of the Web, still grates against many older journalists, in a critique of “The Truthfulness of BuzzFeed,” Andrew Sullivan said the post-first ethic undermines the compact between journalists and readers. It was irresponsible for BuzzFeed to publish the phony Thanksgiving-week tale of a Hollywood TV producer’s wild confrontation with a complaining woman on his delayed flight, Sullivan said, arguing that entertainment and journalism belong in “clearly separate spaces.”

After that hoax became clear, BuzzFeed added a note saying the Hollywood producer “might have pulled one over on all of us.” That struck some critics as too cute a retreat. Lisa Tozzi, a former New York Times editor who runs BuzzFeed’s news team of 15, concedes the original post should have been more skeptical, but says accuracy is as important here as it was in her former newsroom. It’s certainly vital to people like Smith, Hilton, and Tozzi, but as those refugees from more traditional newsrooms found when they arrived at BuzzFeed, not everyone there is grounded in the old ways of doing things.

Summer Anne Burton came to BuzzFeed like many of its producers did—without much journalism experience or ambition. As a waitress and blogger in Austin, she was all about finding cool stuff on the internet and sharing it with friends. The notion that anyone would pay her to do that was just fabulous. Now, as managing editorial director—she oversees the BuzzFeed team, the 35 people who, as Burton puts it, “do the stuff that old-school BuzzFeed is known for, the lists, quizzes, animals...”—she is starting to see herself as a journalist.

“A lot of us thought of this as a tech company,” she says, recalling the early days two years ago. “Since Ben came in, we’re learning how to raise standards while keeping our experimental attitude.” Burton’s team used to operate under a simple standard: “If something was a big deal on the internet, we were going to publish it.”

Then Smith arrived, bringing with him a Politico editor’s passion for the news of the moment, a New York kid’s love of the tabloids, and a powerful sense of himself as serious journalist as well as grand entertainer.

As BuzzFeed’s audience, staff, and revenue blossomed, the company’s purpose has shifted somewhat, from amassing eyeballs with cool stuff, toward an old-fashioned desire to make a difference. Mark Schoofs, a longtime investigative reporter for the Wall Street Journal and then ProPublica, has come aboard to launch an investigative unit. BuzzFeed’s investigative and foreign coverage remain small boutiques within a big room of list-makers and quizzers, but having Schoofs around helps people like Burton think of themselves not just as aggregators, but as debunkers.

That new mindset has led to other changes: “We started doing corrections a couple of months ago,” Burton says. And she’s moved away from trick headlines. “There was a time when everything was gaming to get on top of Google search results. But trick headlines that disappoint people are counterproductive.”

Burton still thinks of her work as entertainment, “but the lines are blurring,” she says. Reja Jha, 22, six months out of Columbia University, became a BuzzFeed team star with her legendary “29 Struggles That Only People With Big Butts Will Understand,” which drew a gargantuan 4.8 million views in its first week. But although she loves making lists, her favorite story has been a 4,000-word piece on sexual abuse in India—a story that took two months to produce and went through 20 rounds of edits by several BuzzFeed editors. It drew 200,000 views, “a lot more than it would have gotten at a newspaper or magazine that doesn’t understand the internet,” Jha says.

Ideally, she says, she’d like to write both “28 Things That People With Big Boobs Can Simply Never Do” (another of her smash hits) and reported pieces on social justice—tough, serious work, but in the BuzzFeed way: “The goal is the same whether you’re writing about big butts or Bill Gates. You have to write what people want to read.”

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