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“The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep somewhere another else stops. The same is true of the laugh. Let us not then speak ill of our generation; it is not any unhappier than its predecessors. Let us not speak well of it either. Let us not speak of it at all.”

– Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

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On a balmy June midnight in 1972, a quiet break-in at the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee in Washington D.C. set in motion not only the scandal that would topple a presidency, but that would cement a new paradigm in journalism. Two brazen Washington Post reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, famously investigated the break-in and followed it all the way to the White House. Over the next two years, the pair uncovered a series of political scandals conducted by members of President Richard Nixon’s Committee for the Re-Election of the President, and reported on sabotage endorsed by Nixon himself. In 1974, the president resigned, and the journalistic doggedness of Woodward and Bernstein inspired a new generation of intrepid reporters nationwide, who saw the allure of holding truth to power and hoped to duplicate it themselves. Those in the profession at the time referred to the post-Watergate years as the golden age of journalism, as newsrooms across the country began to fill with investigators unafraid to dig deep for the next big story. However, over their two tumultuous years reporting the Watergate scandal, Woodward and Bernstein learned better than anyone that it wasn’t enough to write a sensational, bulletproof exposé and bask in Pulitzers and national acclaim. Any aspiring journalist had to make it past one hurdle first: their editor.

Until the mid-2000s, after the advent of widespread social media and Internet news, editors at major publications were the world's arbiters of truth and gatekeepers of mass-circulated information. Editors – who occupied many levels and specialties at each publication – were almost always highly-trained veteran journalists themselves, assigned to oversee stories and approve them for publication, changing their scope and direction whenever they deemed fit. Editors were the bane of most reporters' existence – the better the editor, the more frustrated the reporter. Woodward and Bernstein described their editor at the Washington Post, the venerable Benjamin Bradlee, as “hard-charging and obstreperous” during their Watergate years. Before publishing any of the pair's stories in the Post, Bradlee vetted each countless times, ordering changes and fact-checks at a dizzying pace. This was common practice – papers could not afford to publish false information, especially when the news was breaking and the stakes were high. A miniscule oversight could cost a paper its hard-fought reputation, not to mention a pile of libel suits. Editors were cautious and meticulous gatekeepers, and in this “golden age” of journalism, truth was held to the highest possible standard.

In the three decades following Watergate, little changed in the world of journalism. Reporters fought to break news, and gathered as much information as possible in hopes of making their stories matter. Editors watched over them, ensuring that their charges followed the rules and printed the truth. The journalistic profession seemed as though it might go on this way indefinitely, until in the mid-2000s, the Internet metastasized and changed the paradigm of journalism that Woodward and Bernstein had set in place almost thirty years before.

The Internet was newly accessible for virtually every inhabitant of every developed country. Social media sites like MySpace, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter made it easy for users not only to share personal information with their friends, but to share any information they chose with the entire population of the Internet. Further, individuals could now publish their own

content – blogs, news, features, opinions – on their own websites, immediately and without restriction. The digital age had begun. It may have been too early to predict the ramifications of such a paradigm shift just a decade ago, but the information gates had fallen, and they had taken the gatekeepers with them.

After their fledgling stages, social media sites like Facebook began using artificial intelligence and algorithms to determine what news and content to promote to its users. This way, Facebook is able to quantifiably optimize content to generate the widest audience, the most interaction, and the highest revenue. Established publications – including titans like the Washington Post, the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal – now had to compete with individuals running blogs, YouTube channels and small independent news sites. At first, the mainstream papers' reputations as objective, investigative sources proved advantageous, as most Internet users already trusted such publications' track records for truthful reporting. Soon, however, niche media and fake news began catching up to the real stuff – readers flocked to sensational sites peddling fake scandals because such stories were tailor-made to tell their target audience what they wanted to hear. Fake news companies knew that in the Internet age, a bigger audience results in more revenue. To build the biggest audience possible, such companies needed to produce headlines and stories that readers couldn't resist clicking on. Millions of readers stopped caring whether the information they were reading online was true or false, as long as it fed their confirmation bias and verified what they wanted to be true. The popularity algorithms of Facebook and Google did exactly what they were programmed to do – push the popular stories to the top, make them more revenue, enable them to keep on being popular. Now, instead of editors with decades of journalistic training, the gatekeepers of the world's information are a series of algorithms with no regard for truth or fiction. Page space goes to the highest bidder.

This is the conundrum of our time: whether to trust human editors in their fallibility and sensitivity to tell the truth to their fellow people, or whether to trust artificial gatekeepers in their clinical attempts at objectivity. As it stands today, traditional journalism as a profession still beats on, but remains in jeopardy as publications have to compete for revenue with fake news, which, by definition, is infinitely more sensational and “clickable” than that which is true. Good reporting is losing to punditry, as readers increasingly dismiss truth-seeking in favor of the entertaining and inflammatory. As Bernstein himself put it, “We are in the process of creating what deserves to be called the idiot culture. Not an idiot sub-culture, which every society has bubbling beneath the surface and which can provide harmless fun; but the culture itself. For the first time, the weird and the stupid and the coarse are becoming our cultural norm, even our cultural ideal.”

All, though, is not lost. Despite the apparent demise of journalism’s golden age at the hands of fake news and misplaced artificial intelligence, technology is not the enemy. In fact, it could be the key to reviving journalism and ushering in a new generation of intrepid reporters who still hope to hold truth to power, just like the generation before them.

Contrary to what so many analysts and experts predicted at the turn of the millennium, social media itself never filled the role that news organizations once did. Despite individuals’ ability to post their own status updates and media, there still proves a need for cohesive storytelling which can best be done by experienced journalists. Although disparate individual tweets, updates, snapshots and video clips can be sources of information, they are not a “news story” in their own regard; someone, whether a journalist or an independent blogger, must pull the sources together into a single narrative and add context or analysis for the story to draw interest and inform readers. Tips come from Twitter and Facebook more than by wire service now, but the need for compiling and pulling stories out of tidbits of information still remains.

Today's unprecedented access to primary sources, witnesses, interviewees and media by way of the Internet makes it easier than ever to investigate a story in profound depth. The modern journalistic dilemma lies not, then, in the quality of or access to news, but in whether a contemporary readership cares about the veracity of news at all, when stories that are untrue but simple and appealing are abundant and legitimized by AI gatekeepers.

News editors, in the traditional sense, cannot be relegated to the past and replaced entirely by AI if we are to weather the world's thirst for fake news, and navigate the ensuing disarray and malignant ignorance it causes. We still need human guardians of the fourth estate – we are all humans, after all, and if we cannot trust our own professionally-trained editors to vet the truth, how can we trust news-promotion algorithms programmed by similarly fallible humans, but humans who strive for revenue and popularity instead of integrity and veracity?

The modern cult of anti-intellectualism and mistrust of “mainstream media” has contributed in large part to the declining influence of established publications. Our journalists, like our politicians, should always be monitored and held to a high standard by the public, but if we lose complete faith in the institution of journalism, as we would if we denounced politics entirely, we would descend into chaos. This dawn of informational anarchy can be quelled by a citizenry which begins again to value truth, to use the bounty of primary information available on the Internet to do their own research and come to well-reasoned conclusions about their politics, philosophy and worldview. The role of experienced editors, in promoting journalistic excellence rather than sensationalism, cannot be understated in this new age. AI technologies are expanding, and social media executives at the helm of such technologies must recognize the power of AI to shape global consciousness. With the help of editors and journalistic professionals, news-based AI developers must recognize and prioritize the values of journalism and humanity – truth,

clarity and depth – above ad revenue and page views. Their ensuing loss of income is the price to pay for the maintenance of integrity in society, and the valuation of truth above anarchy.

If our societal paradigm can shift again to one which celebrates facts, the best days of journalism are not behind us. Just five years ago, veteran journalist David Carr asserted, with the same conviction of Woodward and Bernstein before him, that “We are entering a golden age of journalism.” Carr noted the “horrible frictional costs” of the transition to the digital age, but remained ebullient at the prospect of new vistas of information opening to reporters. “I look at my backpack that is sitting here,” he said, “and it contains more journalistic firepower than the entire newsroom that I walked into 30 to 40 years ago.”

This generation of journalists and media-consumers faces no dearth of challenges, nor any dearth of resources. The advent of news-based AI in social media presents us with a daunting task, in determining how to confront society’s growing taste for false truth packaged as reality, but the means we have of confronting such an issue are vast. Good journalism will always be golden. It is our job, as a society, to optimize AI which promotes such work instead of denigrating it. It is our job to ensure that this generation’s Woodwards and Bernsteins and Carrs are given the chance to carry the torch of truth.