LOLA DUPRE

15 Million First Drafts of History

175

A series exploring 175 years of eyewitness journalism from The New York Times.

A.G. Sulzberger
The publisher of The New York Times and the chairman of The New York Times Company.

ABOVE my desk hangs an engraving of an island. It depicts a still-young city in a still-young nation. Its cobblestone streets are lined with squat buildings, none taller than a church spire. No bridges or tunnels in sight, schooners and paddle-steam ferries crowd a shoreline bustling with working piers. This is New York City in 1851.

On Sept. 18 of that year, at the south end of the island, on Nassau Street, the newspaper we know today as The New York Times published its first issue. Put together in unfinished lofts by candlelight, it consisted of four dense, colorless pages of text. It sold for a penny.

On Friday, The New York Times turns 175. Over the past several months, I've found myself drawn to that engraving on my office wall. How unlikely it is that a newspaper born before indoor electricity — let alone cars, radio, telephones, planes and computers — is still here. And how fortunate The Times is to have witnessed and chronicled and interrogated so much history in all those years.

At The Times, we believe the job of a newspaper is to seek the truth, to help people understand the world and to hold the powerful to account. This means equipping people with the information they need to make decisions. It means bonding our diverse communities with a fuller understanding of the lives, hopes and concerns of our neighbors. It means asking tough questions of government and business leaders on the public's behalf. It means doing all this with an ironclad commitment to fairness, accuracy and independence — delivering the news, as our longstanding credo puts it, "impartially, without fear or favor."

It's fitting therefore that the 175th anniversary of The Times arrives as we celebrate a bigger milestone: America's 250th. Truth, understanding and accountability are essential to a strong nation and a healthy democracy.

THROUGH 61,011 EDITIONS and some 15 million articles, the pages of The Times tell the story of America's remarkable growth from an upstart nation of 24 million people to a global superpower of nearly 350 million. The pages announce the arrival of new technologies and track the upheavals that followed. They chronicle battles for equal rights and the expansion of who is recognized as an American. They reveal the damage inflicted by wars, economic busts and moments of tragedy — and document the triumphs, economic booms and can-do resilience of a country that usually emerges stronger.

Taken together, they're the first draft of American history. A new volume is added daily, a report so robust and wide-ranging that, on average, it could fill a 1,000-page book. The primary authors of this work are the reporters we've sent out to witness the world and to share what they have seen — not just establishing the facts but also wrapping them in context and explaining why they matter.

We were there when the first shots of the Civil War rang out at Fort Sumter — our correspondent was promptly arrested as a Union spy — and then through the years of battles that followed, some of which President Abraham Lincoln's war secretary read about in our pages before the generals could send word of them.

In the Roaring Twenties, our Wall Street reporting warned of recklessness in the markets, upsetting powerful financiers. After the country toppled into the Great Depression, a leading banker declared, "Our American community would have been better off today if it could have heeded that voice."

Our correspondents braved the battlefields of World War II; some lost their lives and others were taken prisoner in Germany, Italy and Japan. The Times, in turn, used its scarce government-rationed paper supplies to ensure all these reports reached the American public, turning away advertisements in the process.

In one of the darkest moments of the civil rights movement, one of our reporters was in Memphis at the Lorraine Motel when an assassin shot Martin Luther King Jr. "Write. Write, write down everything you see," he told himself as he took in the scene. "Get it all down."

And 25 years ago this month, when others fled the collapse of the twin towers, our reporters charged toward the burning rubble. Over the next two decades, our journalists lived in Afghanistan and Iraq full time to tell the stories of the wars that followed. We continue to report from both countries today. If we don't document the lessons and consequences of America's longest wars, how will the country learn from them?

Although our commitment to the highest journalistic standards is unsurpassed,

How a newspaper's anniversary rhymes with America's birthday.

we've also made mistakes, both big and small, along the way. When we err, we strive to be transparent with our audience about what went wrong and push ourselves to do better.

This is what it means to be the country's paper of record: a great and imperfect newspaper steadfastly chronicling a great and imperfect nation.

The Times, and the model of independent reporting we have championed, would not have endured were it not for the abiding commitment of the United States to free inquiry and free expression. America's bold experiment with democracy, likewise, would have stumbled long ago were it not for news organizations exercising their rights under the First Amendment. Self-governance requires citizens to have access to reliable sources of information to make informed choices and know when their leaders aren't acting in their best interests. This is why the press is the only profession explicitly protected in the Constitution. It is, as the founders believed, "one of the great bulwarks of liberty."

Today, the future of America's free press is uncertain. As the advertising-based business model that long supported original reporting has collapsed, the country has lost nearly 3,500 newspapers and a vast majority of local journalism jobs in just two decades. This erosion appears poised to continue as the journalism produced at great cost by news organizations is stolen and repurposed at unprecedented scale by the tech giants behind artificial intelligence. And in this financially weakened state, the press is simultaneously confronting, and sometimes buckling in the face of, the most direct political attacks on its rights and legitimacy in more than a century. All this has left fewer reporters backed by the institutional resources and institutional courage needed to do this difficult work — to witness events that might otherwise go unseen, to uncover abuses of power that have never been easier to obscure.

Over 175 years, The Times has become well practiced in working in the face of intense pressure. My colleagues have been kidnapped, arrested and shot at in the course of their work. One survived a land mine detonating underfoot, and another survived a helicopter crash. Some have been surveilled and expelled by foreign nations. Others have been protested, investigated and dragged into court.

In the 1870s, New York's William "Boss" Tweed, whose political machine controlled just about every corner of city and state government, worked to block a Times exposé that would trigger his downfall. His associates started with threats and eventually offered a bribe worth well over $100 million today, which The Times's publisher quickly rejected. Almost a century later, when fists, billy clubs and bullets didn't discourage our reporters from covering the civil rights movement, segregationists weaponized the courts by filing a wave of lawsuits intended to bankrupt The Times.

Presidents of both parties have done their best to pressure the press and discourage reporting they haven't liked. John F. Kennedy spied on one of our reporters. Richard Nixon tried to block the publication of the Pentagon Papers. George W. Bush and Barack Obama both used the courts to try to force Times reporters to reveal confidential sources. No president in modern history has been more hostile than Donald Trump to a press he's dubbed "the enemy of the people." He accuses reporters of treason, a crime punishable by death. He personally sues news organizations when their coverage displeases him. He directs his administration to use the levers of government power to investigate, subpoena and prosecute journalists for doing their jobs. But in a reminder of the press's lasting importance, Mr. Trump, like his predecessors, still reads The Times. He still relies on us, still takes questions from us and still quotes us when convenient. Indeed, during a visit to The Times, he told my colleagues and me that he thinks of us as "a great, great American jewel, a world jewel."

THE MOUNTING PRESSURE on the free press makes this an especially opportune time to remind ourselves that our country depends on trustworthy sources of information, context and accountability as much as it ever has. Indeed perhaps more so, as the remaining news outlets committed to original, independent reporting in the public interest are overtaken by the surge of social media influencers, partisan propagandists and A.I. bots peddling fear, outrage and misinformation.

Reporters are very often how we know what we know. They have not just chronicled our country's first 250 years; they've also empowered the public and kept its officials honest. The current period of democratic erosion around the world offers a clear warning that when a free press is undermined, other freedoms will soon fall as well. If this sounds overstated, I challenge anyone to find a country where people are free but the press isn't.

The confluence of America's and The Times's anniversaries is a welcome reminder of this enduring connection. It contains an implicit promise of continuity: Our nation has been through a lot and will find a way through whatever comes next. But these anniversaries also remind us that our history must be recorded to be learned from. Is our moment really unprecedented? How did similar events unfold the last time? What worked? What didn't? What comes next? As always, the lessons of our shared past and hopes for our shared future can be found in the pages of The New York Times.

LETTERS

Anxieties and Advice on the A.I. Crisis

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Snooze Button on A.I. Alarm," by David E. Sanger and Dustin Volz (news analysis, front page, Sept. 14):

A rare consensus has emerged. Rivals in the A.I. industry agree that development must be paced and that no company or country can do it alone.

Washington sleeps because no one dares to slow the race alone. The article recalls how nuclear-age-built institutions kept their own race — the nuclear one — from running off a cliff. The most important step taken was global: forming the International Atomic Energy Agency, proposed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower. A.I. needs an equivalent.

Yet legitimacy cannot come from governments and companies alone. Democracy's ancient tool — citizens chosen by lottery, as in Athens 2,500 years ago — may be the answer to our newest problem. In modern Ireland, that tool broke decades of deadlock on marriage equality and abortion.

The scaffolding exists at the United Nations in its A.I. scientific panel and Global Dialogue on A.I. Governance. To these we can add a citizens' chamber, a group of everyday people to help set guardrails. Because A.I. is built on generations of human knowledge, the public has a claim on the goals it pursues and the benefits it creates. Experts would translate the assembly's decisions into standards; governments would make them binding.

If A.I. shapes all our lives, all of us deserve a say in shaping its future.

AARON TANAKA, BOSTON

The writer is the chief executive of the nonprofit One Project, which focuses on redesigning A.I. and the economy.

TO THE EDITOR:

Twenty-six years ago, the respected computer architect and co-founder of Sun Microsystems, Bill Joy, warned of dangers lurking in rarefied regions of unregulated high tech.

In an essay, "Why the Future Doesn't Need Us," published in Wired magazine, Mr. Joy called for "relinquishment"— a pause to collectively reflect on societal implications of astounding developments in genetic engineering, robotics and artificial intelligence. The essay sparked conversations, but the moratorium he sought never materialized.

Many in the world's developed economies continue to engage in patterns of consumerism and pleasure seeking even as the world gets hotter and pollution spreads. And now, the lust for power and money is motivating a headlong A.I. rush into an increasingly precarious future. An intelligent and immediate response to the peril facing humanity demands government regulation and international cooperation.

There is no time to lose.

JOE MARTIN, SEATTLE

TO THE EDITOR:

In "As A.I. Fears Rise, Experts Suggest Focusing on the Humans in Charge" (news article, nytimes.com, Sept. 14), your reporters wisely raise the need to have "nuanced conversations about how to govern technology companies — and what responsibility their human leaders owe the public."

Top executives at A.I. companies warning us about the potentially devastating consequences of their own products are not acting in service of society. Naming a risk is not the same as taking responsibility for it.

As the public policy professor quoted in the article notes, the current conversation "diverts attention away from human agency" and "pretends that the machine itself is going to cause the problems." For executives at A.I. companies, this truth will be the hardest to reckon with.

If executives believe that A.I. might go rogue, gain unprecedented power, misuse that power and disrupt the global order, what are they willing to do differently? Revise unsafe practices? Slow development? Sacrifice market share? Support regulatory constraints on their own companies?

Taking responsibility is meaningful only when it changes what an organization and its leaders do. The real test of their leadership isn't what they say when responsibility and profit align. It is how they use the power of their businesses when they do not.

JENNIFER KAPLAN
BERKELEY, CALIF.

The writer is an adjunct professor at the Presidio Center for Sustainable Studies at the University of Redlands.

TO THE EDITOR:

In their classic 1848 monograph "The Dodo and Its Kindred," the naturalists Hugh Edwin Strickland and Alexander Gordon Melville identified the dodo's disappearance as one of the first clearly documented extinctions through human agency.

Modern evidence has further dispelled the caricature of the dodo as an evolutionary failure. It was well adapted to its ecosystem but proved vulnerable when human colonization — and the nonnative species it brought — abruptly transformed the environment.

The warning remains pertinent. Humanity may currently dominate the planet ecologically and geologically, but advances in A.I. nevertheless carry the potential for profound upheaval — and even extinction.

Perhaps not every invasive force need be biological. Addressing the catastrophic risks posed by A.I. is therefore entirely prudent, lest we go the way of the dodo.

VINCENT PESTRITTO
WEST CHESTER, PA.

Head Start's Benefits

TO THE EDITOR:

"We Know How to Help America's Poorest Kids. Don't Throw That Away," by Zayn Siddique (Opinion guest essay, nytimes.com, Sept. 1), makes the right argument.

As a pediatrician (now retired), I found that my patients enrolled in Head Start received services beyond what was routinely recommended, including vision and hearing screening at younger ages and lead testing regardless of where they lived. They got to attend preschool, which most of their peers did not.

These children overall did better than their peers who lacked quality preschool, appropriate nutrition and parenting support. Those families who had just missed the opportunity to enroll in Head Start were devastated, and their children were deprived of the benefits of early education.

Children are the future. There are many studies documenting the benefits of early education, good nutrition and screening for sensory deficits. We do not need another policy experiment to document this. The loss of regulatory standards, enabling states to decide what Head Start provides, will knowingly commit a generation of children to unnecessary harm and lost potential.

Kids throughout the country deserve the same standards of care. They should not be disadvantaged because of their ZIP code.

LESLYE HEILIG
GREAT BARRINGTON, MASS.

The writer is a volunteer group leader and mentor for the Massachusetts chapter of RESULTS.org, an organization that supports antipoverty programs.

Gifts to Trump Jr.

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Ally of Kremlin Feted Trump Jr. and Footed Bill" (front page, Sept. 16):

I don't get it.

You report, "A Russian businessman with ties to the Kremlin paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to help finance Donald Trump Jr.'s wedding after-party in the Bahamas this year, according to two people with knowledge of the matter."

The Trump family has made more than $2 billion in cryptocurrency ventures. That wouldn't have covered the bill?

And if the Russian businessman was intent on sending a wedding gift, wouldn't a set of dishes have been enough?

FRED LIEF, NEW YORK

'Conservative'?

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Two Conservative Justices Would Have Allowed Trump's Mail-In Ballot Rules" (news article, nytimes.com, Sept. 14):

The term "conservative" seems to have changed over the years, at least from this reader's perspective. As I recall, it used to mean maintaining the status quo, not following a deranged president wherever he may wander.

JOHN LAMONT
PENN VALLEY, CALIF.