'Merchants of Truth' : A former top NYT editor dissects the news industry in engaging book

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By Glenn Altschuler

“There’s a battle for attention going on, for attention to news and politics,” BuzzFeed’s Jane Lytvynenko recently observed. “In that battle, virality often wins, and that really warps the truth.” Data demonstrating that fake news arouses emotions and mobilizes people to act gives Ms. Lytvynenko — and lots of other folks — nightmares.

In “Merchants of Truth: The Business of News and the Fight for Facts,” Jill Abramson, the former Washington bureau chief, managing editor and executive editor of The New York Times, provides a richly detailed and compelling analysis of the current battle for attention, credibility, and authority. Ms. Abramson focuses on four “news organizations” — The New York Times, The Washington Post, and two new players, Vice Media, which originated as a countercultural magazine, and BuzzFeed, a social media company committed to web sharing — as they search for new business models in an environment transformed by Google and Facebook.

The broad contours of Ms. Abramson’s analysis of the news business will be familiar to most of her readers. “Merchants of Truth,” alas, is also repetitious, and awash in gossipy details about drinking, drugs and misogyny.

That said, the book is a tour de force of investigative journalism. Jill Abramson knows her subject — and many of her subjects. Her deep dive provides chapters and verses on the threat to “quality news,” defined as original reporting from places near and far that supply the story behind the story, that is not commoditized. Ms. Abramson’s plea that reliable, trusted sources of information, be they in print or digital, must remain an essential part of our country’s cultural, social and political fabric could not be more timely.

Journalists, editors and publishers, Ms. Abramson demonstrates, now operate in a context of measurement. They receive reports on page views, visits, time spent by readers, and recirculation. The data is used to place ads near or in stories attractive to potential customers. Over time, Ms. Abramson writes, it produces editing based on popularity and the premise that the customer is always right; stories
with high human interest and “clickbait” leapfrog over more important pieces, laden with background
and context.

Ms. Abramson shows how the analytics filtering readers based on interests, demographics and
geography has transformed American politics. “Persuasion works differently when it relies on sharing,”
a new media mogul told Ms. Abramson. “People are most likely to believe what their friends and
neighbors tell them.” They gravitate toward spontaneity, raw emotions and dystopian conspiracies.
Whether or not they coordinated their efforts, the Trump campaign and the Russians, it is now clear,
perfected appeals to politically polarized constituencies, and disseminated them through social media
rather than traditional ad buys.

Fueled by President Trump’s daily references to “fake news” and characterizations of journalists as
“enemies of the people,” and competition from highly partisan talk radio, cable TV and online outlets,
Ms. Abramson reminds us, confidence in the objectivity of the mainstream press has plummeted. With
circulation and advertising revenue in free fall, many newspapers around the country have folded.

Even the fabled New York Times and Washington Post have been forced to cut back on staff (and
investigative reporting, which is often quite expensive). The Graham family sold The Post to Jeff Bezos,
the founder and CEO of Amazon. The Sulzbergers have held onto The Times but only after they secured
a loan from Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim. At both papers, moreover, the wall that separated the
business and news divisions has been breached. Ironically, Ms. Abramson reports, The Times and The
Post got a “Trump bump” in 2017 and 2018. Nonetheless, “the terrain is still so rocky that no one in the
news business could have sure footing.”

Ms. Abramson acknowledges that claims by BuzzFeed, Vice, and other upstarts to be purveyors of
quality journalism deserve to be taken seriously. After all, BuzzFeed’s coverage of the deaths of Russians
in Britain was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize; a Freedom of Information Act request by a Vice journalist
led to revelations about Hillary Clinton’s private email server. Ms. Abramson’s head and her heart,
however, are with legacy newspapers, as well they should be. Although the Washington Post’s new
slogan “Democracy Dies in Darkness,” has been derided for sounding like a Batman movie, Ms.
Abramson concludes it expresses a fundamental principle: reputable journalism, an endangered
species, protects and promotes our freedom.

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