

The Media Are Broken. Here's What Could Be Next



DO YOU REMEMBER the episode of *Sex and the City* when Carrie brings her new boyfriend, Berger, to meet her friends for the first time? As they sip cocktails at some chic restaurant, Miranda tells everyone about a date she recently went on. She thinks it went well, though she isn't sure:

He couldn't stay over because he had an early-morning meeting, but he said he had a terrific time and that he'd call her soon. After the ladies offer supportive oohs and aaahs, Miranda asks Berger what he thinks, and she gets a shockingly unvarnished verdict.

BERGER: He's just not that into you.

[*The table explodes.*]

CARRIE: That is ludicrous! What about extenuating circumstances? What about, you're stressed out? You're on deadline? You have a migraine?

CHARLOTTE: Or a lot of guys are afraid of getting their feelings hurt! And they don't want to ruin a friendship...

MIRANDA: Or they're freaked out by their own feelings? There's a lot of push-pull out there, a lot of mixed messages...

BERGER: There are no mixed messages.

MIRANDA: But I've spent my whole life deciphering mixed messages.

CARRIE: I've made a whole *career* of it.



This is what flashed in my mind when I received the prompt that led to this essay: *We were thinking that you might offer thoughts on how to fix our broken media, specifically in ways that make it less relentlessly hostile to Israel and the Jews.*

There is no way to “fix” our current general-interest media landscape. The *New York Times* does not care about you or your concerns. You cannot change it, because the people who run it want it to work the way it does, and, no, it is not because there are two or three or seven bad apples on the masthead or because no one has written a powerful enough takedown that shows them the error of their ways. It is also not because the Sulzbergers are secretly self-hating Jews. There is, in fact, no push-pull out there; there are no mixed messages. They're just not that into you.

In their glory days, which are long past anyway, newspapers were mirrors; in front of each one stood a group of readers, receiving a desired reflection. For decades, American Jews were a vital cohort in the group standing before general-interest titles—a small crowd over there in the back, but colorful, noisy, important. The other people in the shot weren't surprised to see us in the shared reflection, nor we them.

But we aren't, in any communal way, in that crowd anymore. Our fault? Someone else's? It's the Left! It's the Right! It's Big Tech! Please, *yidn*, please stop. The next time you get angry about what the *New York Times* or some other outlet says about Jews or Judaism or Israel, I want you to imagine yourself in the fitting room at

Loehmann's, yelling about how you can't see yourself because all the other women are crowding the mirror. The whole scene is just embarrassing.

Okay. So what now?



For roughly a century, American journalism was a pyramid.

At the very bottom was a layer of hyper-local outfits: neighborhood papers, supermarket circulars, county weeklies. Above them were the metro dailies, or major metros if you lived in or around an urban environment with one of them: Chicago, Atlanta, Detroit, et al. Above those were the big nationals — the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, etc.—the fancy journalism brands standing for Truth and Integrity and Civic Expression that people love to make corny movies about. Above them were newsweeklies, *Time* and *Life* and *Reader's Digest* and so on. And at the very tippity-top were the thought-leader magazines — *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, et al. Whatever level you found yourself in, you read that layer and every layer underneath it. Some people read only their county weekly, but no one who read *Harper's* didn't also read a local daily and a national newspaper and probably more in between.

It's important to understand that newspapers and magazines were profoundly, even genetically, different. Newspaper journalism turned on *closeness* — on offering readers naturalistic reflections of their daily existence, which could be created only from what may be metaphorically referred to as street-level details. This was true whether the beat in question was geographic or topical. In either case, the work consisted of intimate and long-term — to the point of gritty — contact with the people, places, and atmospherics that made a specific universe run.

As a result, newspapers were what you could call a hot medium. Readers were supposed to read them, slam down their

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coffee mugs, throw their paper on their kitchen table with loud "thwacks!" and exclaim something about the state of their elected officials, neighbors, bank accounts, weather, etc. If it was a really good story, they would also then feel the urgency to do something about it — at the local school, on their lawns, at the ballot box.

By contrast, magazines — especially the thought-leader titles — were a cool medium. They turned not on closeness but on the benefits of *distance* — on decidedly *not* being of a specific place or community, a distance that enabled their editors and writers to offer readers the very different vista of a wider mirror. Great magazines were framing devices, each of which offered a unique posture, an attitude, a perspective. If the job of the newspaper's mirror was to give readers a clear reflection of their lives — how their realities looked in their current clothing and makeup and hangovers and whatever else — it was in the magazine's mirror that they could learn how to strike a pose.

Now go all the way down, down, down to the very bottom of the pyramid. It is that layer — the layer of the local, down-market, and utilitarian — that infused the whole system with trust and credibility.

How could that be? Those rags didn't win any awards! They almost never broke news interesting beyond their ZIP code.

True. But the reporters and editors putting out these stories were, more often than not, your neighbor, your kid's best friend's parent, the guy you regularly sat next to at the local bar. More important, they published things that people could, with their

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own eyes, see were true: The stoplight at the intersection had in fact been fixed. Orange juice is indeed on sale with this coupon, which I know because I just used it myself and paid the lower price. The school-board president was definitely ousted, and in fact I might even know whether the article about this story was right or wrong because I was present at the meeting where it happened.

For millions of Americans, for decades, “journalists” as a class were trustworthy because the particular journalists *they knew* were trustworthy, which made them instinctively trust other people with the same job description, all the way up the pyramid. In other words: The national elite outlets didn’t give credibility to everyone in the layers below them. It was the other way around.

We don’t need to do an autopsy over how this journalistic model was vaporized—the bottom layers first by Craigslist and then by Facebook, etc., etc.—to know that this pyramid of trust no longer exists. For those interested in addressing the problem, though, there are two options.

One is to ignore everything I just wrote. Keep the faith! Hold on to the *New York Times* like Kate Winslet’s character does with that slab of icy wood in *Titanic*! Throw a bunch of resources at “swaying”

or “responding to” or “fighting” the prestige general-interest outlets. This is expensive but easy, since all it really requires of you is to sit back and watch as everything gets worse.

The other option is to rebuild the pyramid—or *a* pyramid, in this case a Jewish pyramid—from the bottom up, reconnecting high-grade Jewish intellectual, cultural, and political content to actual people... to *amcha*, your people, the Jewish people.

In the past, a system like the one I described connected communities that were geographically diverse. In our case, it gives us the power to coherently join together cohorts of American Jews that may seem distinct, but that appear to be in the process of creating an emerging new American Jewish community.

The best description of this phenomenon was laid out by Liel Leibovitz in *Tablet* last May, where he noted an increasing split in broader American society between what he called team A and team B:

People on team A sometimes identify as woke. Many of them believe, or accept when others say, that America is a problematic country that [sprang] from the soil of slavery and therefore can never make any claims to goodness, let alone greatness. The same goes for the West at large. Members of team A are inherently suspicious of institutions, whether broad ones like synagogues and churches or narrow ones like the nuclear family, which they see as nothing more than tools for the powerful to subdue the powerless. They curb religion by casting all faith as a cynical ploy to keep down women, gays, transgendered folks, and people of color. They target the family by having fewer children than any other generation in American history, and arguing, as the Black Lives Matter movement bluntly does in its manifesto, that true justice can’t come until people learn

to reject the nuclear family and instead embrace egalitarian groups of peers. They couch some of this argument in economic terms, because people on team A also tend to be deeply uncomfortable with the accumulation of capital, and support a whole host of policies that come down to redistributing wealth in one form or another.

Like any, most, or all of this? Team A is for you.

Members of team B are driven by a different set of beliefs: That private property is personally rewarding and socially generative; that capitalism and invention fuel growth and happiness; that there's absolutely no substitute to raising and being part of a family; that nation-states, flawed as they may be, are the best expression of some unique, mysterious, and indelible collective character (which means that Israel—which combines population with religion, ethnicity, and culture in the form of a state—is not some “unprincipled exception” but actually a superior example of what all countries should aspire to); that the West, however flawed, remains committed to expanding freedoms, however slowly it may proceed; that universal kinship can only come if and when people are first tethered to one specific tradition that teaches them the basics of living with others; that there's some sort of divine force guiding the storm, whatever you choose to call it and whatever you think it demands of your life. If the above feels more or less right to you, you're on team B.

Leibovitz went on to argue that the same split is mapping on to Jewish life as well, where only one of these camps will be friendly to Zionists and Zionism. Just as in the broader American context, all of the old labels (Reform/Conservative/Orthodox, left-wing/right-wing) are increasingly irrelevant, with people reshuffling themselves in new and unexpected ways, dividing

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themselves from institutions and people with whom they once reflexively associated and finding themselves drawn to strange places and surprisingly bedfellows.

Team B seems to include traditional political right-wingers and the Orthodox, but joined by majorities in the ethnic and recent immigrant communities of former Soviet Jews, Mizrahi Jews, and Persian Jews, as well as a cohort of stunned college kids and a swath of normie American Jews newly aware of how their old-line definitions of liberalism and even soft lefty Zionism are turning them into outsiders.

It is team B that I want to focus on here, since in its fundamental newness and diversity it feels both compelling and also generative for the creation of a new communication system. What I'm proposing here is to see in these people the potential to close the democracy deficit in Jewish communal life, by giving some portion of philanthropic power over to them.

The inspiration here are DAOs, or decentralized autonomous organizations, which are digital platforms controlled by members. In DAOs, the rules are embedded into code, so no managers

are needed, thus removing any bureaucracy or hierarchy. We'd do something a bit different, as in our entity there would be a top layer, but — like with any good government — it would not control the voting below; it would provide only whatever it was the people voted *for*.

Let's call this the American Zionist DAO, with specific founding members defining the goals and purpose of the collective. Anyone can become a member if they invest a small amount — say \$18 a year — though moderators retain the right to eject any member who violates any foundational term of the group. In exchange for that, members are granted the ability to vote each year on an intramural contest of communal priorities. In the first round, ideas can come from any member and can be anything — a day school, a soup kitchen, a health-insurance co-op, trips to Israel for a certain cohort, a fund to help students at a local campus fight BDS, whatever. Only the ideas with X amount of votes advance — and so on for several rounds, until the entire DAO membership is, at the end of each year, voting on the final set of projects to be funded. Grants should be numerous and individually large enough to command attention and inspire mass participation (say 20 to 25 \$1 million ideas each year.)

In seeking votes, nominators are forced to find and lasso allies who may be from different communities but are kindred thinkers — thereby creating connections between the “citizens” of this new Jewish community. And we address a gnawing disconnect between *amcha* and the Jewish philanthropic and communal leadership who believe they are using their resources to serve them.

By creating a way to see and hear what's going on in their bottom layers, and to filter it up into the ideas-generation, policymaking, and national trendsetting of the uppermost layers, we'd re-create the best of what the former media pyramid did for communal and civic life. And we would have done so by doing what Jews have always done best: capitalize on the burden of outsidership by innovating

in ways that soon become not just the envy of but a model for other communities around us.

Forget Harvard, forget Goldman Sachs, forget the *New York Times*. Remember our opening scene? He'll regret having let you get away. *