

In 2011, The Huffington Post, after being purchased by AOL for \$315 million, accelerated a hiring spree that was already underway aimed at luring many big-name print-based writers and editors with generous contracts to help improve the quality of its journalism; from the Times alone came Peter Goodman, Tim O'Brien, Tom Zeller, and Lisa Belkin. The experiment went bust; most of those hires have long since departed. In a parting memo, Goodman (who had served as executive business editor) wrote of "a widespread sense" at his team "that the HuffPost is no longer fully committed to original reporting; that in a system governed largely by metrics, deep reporting and quality writing weigh in as a lack of productivity." (He's now editor in chief of the International Business Times, an online news publication.)

Huffington Post editors claim that these print-based imports proved a poor fit in an all-digital operation. Perhaps so, but the AOL deal seems to have been a Faustian bargain for the organization; in return for a huge pot of cash, it came under relentless pressure to turn a profit. The only way to do that was by increasing ad revenues, which in turn meant drawing more readers. That explains the site's perpetual motion, nonstop expansion, and proliferation of sections. In its early years, The Huffington Post seemed on its way to defining a new type of digital journalism. Ten years on, it seems stuck in place, struggling to recapture the innovative spirit that had once defined it.

The same seems true of the first generation of digital news sites in general. After an initial burst of daring and creativity, they have entered a middle-aged lethargy. Take Talking Points Memo. When it began, in 2000, as a blog by Josh Marshall, it offered an outsider's take on inside Washington, with much profitable burrowing into documents and records. In 2002, Marshall called attention to Trent Lott's racist-tinged comments about Strom Thurmond, thus helping to precipitate Lott's resignation as Senate majority leader. As TPM's readership grew, Marshall attracted advertisers, which allowed him to hire staff. Tips from readers offered information about what was going on around the country and, drawing on them, Marshall in 2007 broke the story about the Bush administration's partisan-inspired firing of US attorneys.\*

Eight years later, TPM offers roughly the same mix of blogging, aggregation (reworking content from elsewhere), news, and opinion that it did back then. The site (which is supported by a mix of ads and \$50 annual subscriptions for access to extra features) does run regular "longform" pieces; a recent one offered a revealing look at the International House of Prayer, a charismatic Christian movement with ties to the Republican right. But TPM's primary mission remains the minute parsing of national politics. When President Obama ad-libbed his zinger at the Republicans during his 2015 State of the Union address, for instance—Republicans applauded him for saying, "I have no more campaigns to run," and he shot back, "I know, because I won both of them"—the site analyzed it from every which way. But everybody's doing that these days, and what once seemed distinctive now seems just another voice in the instant-analysis-and-commentary crowd. Accordingly, TPM has had a hard time reproducing the kind of splash it had once made.

Then there's the smart-opinion-with-some-reporting-mixed-in set, led by Slate, Salon, and The Daily Beast. Here you can find edge, cheek, confession, and contrarianism, all served up in crisp, thousand-word packages. "Why Staples' Terrible Sales Might Be a Godsend for the Company," went a recent Slate headline, with the counterintuitive dash that has been its trademark since its launch in 1996. (Slate's contrariness has become so renowned that there's a hashtag, #slatepitch, that parodies it. Sample: "Manischewitz Gefilte Fish Is Actually Kind of Delicious.")

These sites, which all seem to blend into one another, rarely break news or cause a commotion. After the Charlie Hebdo attacks, I was hoping to see one of them grab hold of the event and provide a forum for the many pressing questions raised—free speech versus hate speech, anti-Semitism and anti-Islamism, the state of religious tolerance and religious fanaticism in Europe. Most of all, I hoped to hear from a range of voices that extended beyond the usual American commentators to include some Muslim ones, who, with their distinctive backgrounds and experiences, could add a different dimension to the discussion. The Internet is an ideal vehicle for mixing things up in this way, yet none of the sites seemed to have the inclination—or inspiration—to take advantage.

No one better illustrates the travails of the pioneering digital generation than Andrew Sullivan. When he began blogging in 2000, his highly confessional Tory-Catholic-gay-libertarian stream of consciousness seemed fresh and original, and it inspired many others to try their hand at this exciting new form. For years, Sullivan relied on institutional backing, parking his blog (called The Dish) first at Time, then at The Atlantic, then at The Daily Beast. Encouraged by the amount of attention and traffic he was receiving, he decided in 2013 to strike out on his own.

In a rousing declaration, he announced that he was forswearing all advertising. Given the revenue that advertising can provide, he wrote, this was a difficult decision, but he felt that ads were not only distracting but also "created incentives for pageviews over quality content." Getting readers to pay a small amount for content seemed "the only truly solid future for online journalism," and in this way he hoped "to forge a path other smaller blogs and sites can follow."

This bold experiment in digital independence was closely watched in the journalistic world. The subscription price was set at \$19.99 a year for unrestricted access to the site. The initial results were encouraging, with more than 30,000 signing up in the first year (and some chipping in more), for a total take of just under the \$900,000 that Sullivan said he needed to support him and his staff. But feeding the beast on a daily basis proved too taxing, and in late January, Sullivan, citing fatigue and health concerns, announced he was calling it quits.

The demise of The Dish was widely seen as the end of the era of the blogger. As Dylan Byers, a media reporter for Politico, observed in 2014:

The appeal of “the blog,” in Sullivan’s heyday, was that if you were smart enough or provocative enough, you could cover whatever you wanted. The truth is, people want breaking news from well-sourced reporters or smart analysis from experts who know what they’re talking about. Sensibility is cheap.

Today, many who once blogged now compress their thoughts into Twitter’s 140 characters. Others have headed in the opposite direction and converted their observations into well-crafted pieces of reporting and analysis as exemplified by the columns posted at [newyorker.com](http://newyorker.com) and the mini-essays featured on this publication’s NYRblog.

Nonetheless, there are many thousands of knowledgeable people blogging in their areas of expertise. Paul Krugman, for one, has saluted the contributions of the “econoblogs” that constantly check and assess work in the field. “As far as real, insightful, useful discussion of matters economic is concerned,” he has written, “this is actually a golden age.” When I checked some of those blogs, however, I found that most of the discussion on them is quite specialized. More generally, blogs have become niche-ified. Gone are the days when a Michigan-based scholar like Juan Cole could single-handedly challenge the Bush administration’s narrative on Iraq or the blogging collective Firedoglake could gain national attention for “liveblogging” the Scooter Libby trial.

Sullivan himself, in explaining his decision to shut down The Dish, acknowledged his own frustrations with blogging. “Although it’s been a joy and a privilege to have helped pioneer a genuinely new form of writing,” he wrote, “I yearn for other, older forms.” He wanted to “have an idea and let it slowly take shape, rather than be instantly blogged,” and to “write long essays that can answer more deeply and subtly the many questions that the Dish years have presented to me.”

It’s strange that Sullivan did not convert his blog into this type of podium, with more regular contributors, reporting, and analysis. Over the years, he did publish other writers on his site and featured some longer pieces, but in the end The Dish remained essentially one man’s riffs. Even on the business side, his experiment seemed oblivious to the current realities of the Internet, where most publishers recognize the need for multiple sources of revenue and even nonprofit sites avidly seek advertisers trying to reach their particular audience. For all of the boldness of Sullivan’s experiment, he ultimately seemed unable to adapt..

One member of the pioneering digital generation who has thrived despite stubbornly refusing to change is Matt Drudge. The Drudge Report today looks just as drab and skeletal as it did when it went online in 1996, and it continues to deal almost exclusively in aggregation. Yet it remains highly influential, with three quarters of a billion pageviews a month. To cite just one example, the attention that Drudge (along with National Review) lavished on the virtually unknown Ben Sasse helped propel him to victory in the 2014 Republican primary for senator in Nebraska and then in the general election itself. According to Chris Cillizza of The Washington Post, the 2016 presidential race is shaping up as one in which Drudge “will have as much—and, likely, more—influence than he has ever had before.”

His power derives, in part, from the angry popular appeal of the conservative online world in general. It includes The Daily Caller (a forty-person staff led by Tucker Carlson), RedState (Erick Erickson), TheBlaze (Glenn Beck), Breitbart, and The Washington Free Beacon, along with the websites of The Weekly Standard, National Review, and Fox News. This alternative information universe is driven by a continuing sense of rage at being shut out by the “lamestream media” (in Sarah Palin’s phrase). Neil Patel, the publisher of The Daily Caller (and a former top policy adviser to Dick Cheney), says that the site (which relies mainly on advertising) has taken advantage of the “massive audience” of “disgruntled conservatives” out there who distrust traditional news outlets: “That drives us, for sure.” In March, Tucker Carlson removed a column that one of his bloggers, Mickey Kaus (a pioneer of the form), had posted that was critical of Fox News. Kaus resigned, and Carlson later acknowledged that he would not allow The Daily Caller to run anything critical of Fox (where he’s also an anchor). Such enforced conformity has enabled these sites to pursue their paramount mission: delegitimizing the Obama presidency and obstructing Hillary Clinton’s chances of succeeding him.

In my tour of digital sites, I did find one pioneer that has evolved: Politico. Like many outside-the-Beltway readers, I initially considered it too beholden to Washington conventions to feel much need to read it regularly. I was also put off by its incessant boasting about its “fast metabolism,” which it liked to contrast with the sluggish Washington Post. In the last few years, however, Politico has become more and more like the Post—in a good way. It now has a 160-person editorial staff covering not just horse races and insider baseball but also public policy, national news, and foreign policy. In 2011, it launched Politico Pro, a subscription-based news service with more than one hundred journalists assigned to a dozen policy areas, from agriculture and defense to health care and transportation. (A single subscription can run more than \$3,000. The revenue thus generated is complemented by events to which admission is charged and by ads that run both on its website and in a print edition published daily when Congress is in session.)

Politico offers thorough day-to-day coverage of lobbying, campaign finance, and legislative affairs. It also now has an online magazine with a daily mix of reports, analysis, and opinion—some of it quite hard-hitting. One piece, for instance, described the “hell” to which then Florida Governor Jeb Bush subjected Michael Schiavo, the husband of the brain-dead Terri Schiavo, with Schiavo wanting her feeding tube removed and Bush ordering it reinserted; the story was cast as a cautionary tale of “what Jeb Bush can do with executive power.”

Politico Magazine was created in November 2013 by Susan Glasser, a former editor at The Washington Post and Foreign Policy, and it was considered such a success that last September she was named Politico’s editor in chief. Meanwhile, the site has continued to expand. “We are pouring millions into adding deep-dive, original reporting to the arsenal,” Jim VandeHei, Politico’s co-founder and CEO, recently informed his staff. “We not only want to be the dominant publication covering politics and policy in Washington—we want to be the dominant media player in this space nationally AND globally.” This year, Politico is introducing or expanding state operations in New

York, New Jersey, and Florida—part of a “cascading series” aimed at finding “a template for saving coverage of state government.” In April, Politico (together with Axel Springer) rolled out a new European edition based in Brussels, and by the end of the year it expects to have more reporters and editors covering European politics and policy than any other organization on that continent.

The growth has not come without pain. In 2014, about a quarter of its staff left—an extraordinary level of turnover that reflects the burnout caused by the grueling pace in the Politico newsroom as well as the effort to convert it into a more in-depth operation. (A request for comment from Politico went unanswered.) In plugging those holes, Politico has snapped up so many state and local reporters that there have been complaints about poaching. In March, it scored a coup by showing that Congressman Aaron Schock of Illinois had inflated the mileage on his car to pad his expense accounts, leading to his resignation.

Yet that feat was also a measure of Politico’s limitations. Catching a congressman fiddling with his finances lies squarely in the tradition of American scoop-making. With its fine-grained approach to Washington politics and its emphasis on being first, Politico rarely mounts sustained investigations into more systemic problems, like the way corporations have captured think tanks, or the hold that AIPAC and other lobbies have on Mideast policy, or the array of conservative groups working to kill a nuclear deal with Iran. The Internet, with its capacity for offering regular posts and updates and for chronicling links and collaborations, would seem ideally suited to exploring such matters and exposing the hidden wellsprings of power in Washington. Heading down that path, however, would require a radical rethinking of how to use the Web. Recently, Politico formed a new money-and-politics investigative team; will it be able to make the leap?

A similar question could be asked of ProPublica. Since being launched in 2008, this site (which is supported almost entirely by philanthropic contributions) has established itself as the premier investigative Web-based unit. It has tackled such worthy subjects as the environmental hazards of fracking and the lax oversight of nurses, the erosion of workers’ comp and mismanagement at the Red Cross. For an investigation into financial ties between medical institutions and drug companies, ProPublica compiled a list of payments those companies made to doctors and from it built a searchable database that patients could use to look up their own physicians. ProPublica has been a leader in such creative uses of data—a boom area on the Internet.

Yet it could, I think, do far more. Imagine, for instance, if ProPublica set up a database documenting the links between money, power, and ideas in America and beyond. One could enter the name of a mogul—say, hedge fund billionaire Paul Tudor Jones, or BlackRock CEO Laurence Fink, or Carlyle Group cofounder David Rubenstein—and find out at once the assets he controls, the boards he sits on, the philanthropies he supports, the politicians he contributes to, the lawyers and lobbies that represent him. Clicking on each link would take one to a new page showing all the pertinent information about the company, board, or philanthropy in question. Proceeding through the labyrinth could help lay bare the composition, shape, and reach of the global oligarchy—the one

percent of the one percent. That data could in turn provide the basis for countless follow-up investigations by not only ProPublica but also other journalists as well as activists and scholars.

To its credit, ProPublica has done much good work on the flow of political “dark money” and on Wall Street’s cooptation of federal regulators, but overall the organization seems too wed to a traditional newspaper-based approach, with its separate, siloed investigations, to try something so radical. As a result, it has not had the type of disruptive impact one might expect from an organization with an annual budget of nearly \$13 million.

And so it goes for the first generation of digital sites as a whole. They helped lead journalism out of the kingdom of traditional print and broadcasting into the liberating land of the Internet, only to become stranded. Meanwhile, a new generation of high-profile ventures has emerged. Have they made it to the promised land of true digital innovation? To find out, I set off on the second leg of my tour, beginning with a visit to the most-talked-about site of them all, BuzzFeed.