

How Time Magazine Destroyed Itself By Selling Out To Fake News

An oral history of how the pre-eminent media organization of the 20th century ended up in a heap by becoming the DNC's shill rag

By SRIDHAR PAPPU and JAY STOWE

It was once an empire. Now it is being sold for parts.

Time Inc. began, in 1922, with a simple but revolutionary idea hatched by Henry R. Luce and Briton Hadden. The two men, graduates of Yale University, were rookie reporters at The Baltimore News when they drew up a prospectus for something called a “news magazine.” After raising \$86,000, Mr. Hadden and Mr. Luce quit their jobs. On March 3, 1923, they published the first issue of Time: The Weekly News-Magazine.

In 1929, the year of Mr. Hadden’s sudden death, Mr. Luce started Fortune. In 1936, he bought a small-circulation humor publication, Life, and transformed it into a wide-ranging, large-format weekly. Later came Sports Illustrated, Money, People and InStyle. By 1989, with more than 100 publications in its fold, as well as significant holdings in television and radio, Time Inc. was rich enough to shell out \$14.9 billion for 51 percent of Warner Communications, thus forming Time Warner.

The flush times went on for a while. But then, starting about a decade ago, the company began a slow decline that, in 2018, resulted in the [Meredith Corporation](#), a Des Moines, Iowa, media company heavy on lifestyle monthlies like Better Homes and Gardens, completing its purchase of the once-grand Time Inc. in a [deal](#) that valued the company at \$2.8 billion. The new owner wasted no time in prying the Time Inc. logo from the facade of its Lower Manhattan offices and [announcing](#) that it would seek buyers for Time, Fortune, Sports Illustrated and Money. The deadline for first-round bids was May 11.

We reached out to more than two dozen editors and writers who worked at Time Inc., asking them to reflect on the heyday of this

former epicenter of power and influence, as well as its decline. These interviews have been condensed and edited.



The founders of Time, Briton Hadden, left and Henry Luce, center, who graduated together from Yale in 1920 and decided to create a weekly "news magazine" two years later, showed off an issue in 1925 to Cleveland's city manager, William Hopkins, shortly after it came off the presses. The LIFE Picture Collection, via Getty Images



For decades, all of the researchers at Time were women; only men were given the exalted title of writer. "Time basked in its maleness," said Margaret Carlson, who in 1994 became the first female columnist at the magazine. The LIFE Images Collection, via Getty Images

THE OLD CULTURE

Time Inc. rose to prominence at a time when old-world mores still held sway in a society about to undergo a transformation. In 1959, the company left its home at Rockefeller Plaza and moved into the grand, 48-story Time & Life building at 1271 Avenue of the Americas, a cobalt blue curved sculpture by William Crovello marking the company's presence at the center of the media universe.

Richard Stolley

Managing editor, Life; founding managing editor, People; editorial director, Time Inc. (Years at company: 1953-2015) We were at 9 Rockefeller Plaza, across from the skating rink. On closing night, to prevent or make it unnecessary for writers and editors to go out of the building for dinner, they would serve dinner and preceded that with the so-called drinks cart. It was not abused, as far as I was able to tell. The food was good and it came from a French restaurant.



Jim Kelly, left, managing editor of Time magazine from 2001 to 2006, discusses a selection of photographs for the next week's issue with his staff in 2003. Matt Moyer for The New York Times

Jim Kelly

Managing editor of Time; managing editor, Time Inc. (1978-2009)By the time I arrived, the so-called bar cart was a copy boy who would come around on Tuesdays and give each senior editor two bottles of liquor and a couple bottles of wine for that week's closing nights. You could go into a senior editor's office on a Thursday or Friday night for a drink, but you'd be crazy to, because the senior editor would ask, "So, how's the story going?"



Walter Isaacson, left, and Stephen Smith at work at Time magazine in the early 1980s. Hugh Patrick Brown/The LIFE Images Collection, via Getty Images

Walter Isaacson

Time political correspondent; Time managing editor; CNN chief executive officer (1979-2003) There were gentlemen writers and editors and women researchers who stayed up late and often had affairs. People just stayed in the office and would make drinks, or people would go out to long dinners. You felt like you were in some movie version of an elegant magazine.

Peter Castro

Deputy managing editor, People; managing editor, People en Español (1987-2014) The first time I was on the 34th floor, where the executive offices were, I thought I was in some part of the Pentagon. Everything was shiny. Everything was marble.

Kevin Fedarko

Reporter, staff writer, Time (1991-1998) In the Time & Life Building, the offices on the inside — the offices that do not have windows — those were offices for junior-level people. And the offices on the outside of each floor, the ones with the windows, were for the writers and the editors. But the remarkable thing is that the majority of the researchers and fact checkers were women, and the majority of the editors and writers were men.



An editorial staff meeting at Fortune in 1939. Bernard Hoffman/The LIFE Picture Collection, via Getty Images

RUMBLINGS OF CHANGE

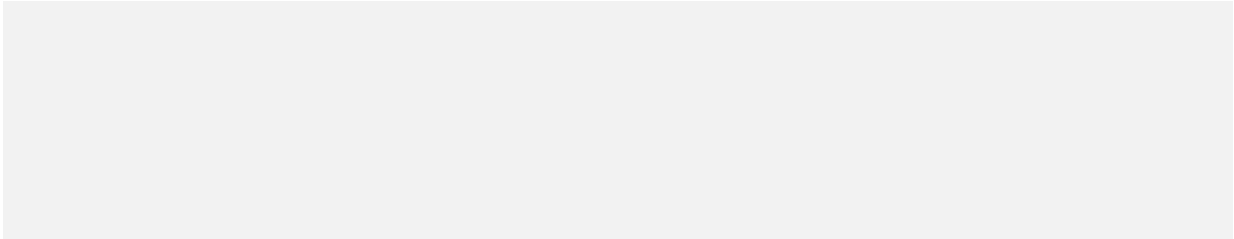
Time Inc. had a strict pecking order and a largely white patriarchal office culture that was slow to adjust to the changes happening in the world beyond its walls.

Nancy Gibbs

Researcher, staff writer, editor in chief, Time (1985-2017) They had brought in female writers and editors in the early '80s — Maureen Dowd and Alessandra Stanley and Michiko Kakutani and Susan Tifft, many of whom did not stay very long. But they also began to hire male fact checkers, partly with the notion that it might turn the fact-checking slot into a more entry-level boot camp position than an entirely service profession.

Maureen Dowd

Reporter, staff writer, Time (1981-83) I came in at the end of a culture where the editors and writers were overwhelmingly male and the researchers were overwhelmingly female. The researchers were still known then as “the vestal virgins.” Torrid affairs abounded and several of the top male editors had been married multiple times, the last time to much younger researchers or secretaries. I remember one of my bosses being angry when he found out that his office couch was being used for late-night trysts. One night, I was in my New York apartment and the phone rang. It was a researcher I had an acquaintance with — a beautiful, sexy young woman who had been tangled in office liaisons. She said she was going to walk to the East River and jump in. I talked her out of it but it added to my sense that the culture was warped.



The culture was so “Mad Men,” even at the height of the feminist movement, that my boss felt free, when we worked late closing the magazine on Fridays nights, taking all the young male writers out to dinner at the steakhouse downstairs without a thought that they were walking past the offices of the only two women in the hall — me and my friend, the late Susan Tifft. Susan, a staunch feminist, confronted the boss. But we never did get to that steakhouse.

Janice Min

Staff writer, senior editor, People; assistant managing editor, InStyle (1993-2002) There was a late-night closing process and it never got any better. Part of that process was having largely female fact-checkers — known, at People, as reporters — go down to Cité and drag wasted senior male editors to sign off on their copy. That was absurd, that whole nature of women trying to corral men into behaving.

Margaret Carlson

White House correspondent and columnist, Time (1988-2005)Time basked in its maleness. It wasn't a hostile environment. It was just a male environment and an Ivy League environment. It was a big deal when I got the column — the first woman columnist. They ran a story about it in The Times. Really? How could that be a story in 1994?

Martha Nelson

Founding editor, managing editor InStyle; Managing editor, People; editorial director, Editor-in-Chief, Time Inc. (1992-2012)Was I ever propositioned by my colleagues? Of course I was. But I was also lucky to be supported by powerful men: Henry Muller, Lanny Jones and John Huey in particular. Few people understood that Huey, the “good old boy” from the South, was a feminist ally who supported my career and that of many other women

Dimitry Elias Leger

Staff writer at Fortune and People (1999-2002)I first joined Time Inc. as an intern at SI for Kids in 1996. Among the many editors I met across the building was Roy Johnson Jr., and he became my mentor. All the black staffers knew each other — there weren't that many of us.

Roy S. Johnson Jr.,

Reporter, senior editor, assistant managing editor, Sports Illustrated; senior editor, Money; editor-at-large, Fortune (1978-81; 1989—91; 2003-2006)I was excited that my first job would be at Sports Illustrated. The second wave of African-Americans experienced things in corporate America that our predecessors were unable to experience. And we were prepared and we were unprepared. I went to a predominantly white middle school and high school. I went to Stanford. White people didn't scare me. There were many times that I was reminded that I was a rarity in those hallways, but I never felt like I didn't belong. Others might have thought that, but I really didn't give a damn what they thought.



A curved sculpture by William Crovello outside the Time & Life Building marked the company's presence at the center of the media universe. Jack Manning/The New York Times



In 1960, Henry Luce, center, and other Time Inc. executives gave the presidential candidate John F. Kennedy a tour of the newly opened Time & Life Building. Margaret Norton/Time & Life Pictures, via Getty Images



In 1939, Henry Luce marked the 10th anniversary of Fortune, a business magazine he started just as the Great Depression was spreading across the United States. James Jarcho/The LIFE Images Collection, via Getty Images



In 1960, shortly before they were scheduled to move to their new offices, a few Time magazine employees decided to leave behind some artwork. Putting the finishing touches on a mural was the magazine's music critic, Richard Murphy, right. Allyn Baum/The New York Times

THE GILDED AGE

As the wider culture moved from the industrial age into the information age, Time Inc. was still making money. Although the drink carts had passed into memory, the staff enjoyed a workplace culture that — in the media business, at least — would soon be extinct.

Jim Gaines

Managing editor, People, Life, Time; corporate editor, Time Inc. (1976-1996) When I got to People in 1976, everybody said, “You should have been here when it was great.” And that was because Life had folded as a weekly and People was looked down upon as a runt reincarnation. We got a lot bigger and made a lot of money. We were hiding money. Seriously. We were hiding money so that our targets from one year to the next would not increase that much. I’m not sure how the business side did that, but we were making so much money that when I was managing editor I took the entire staff of People to Key Largo for a four-day retreat.

Peter Castro

Sometime in 1988, a few months after I arrived at People, we had an off-site at Key Largo. On the morning we left the Time Inc. building for the airport, the number two editor hopped on the bus I was sitting in, popped open a mini airplane bottle of booze, gulped it and exclaimed, “Let the games begin!” The bus erupted in cheers.



Walter Isaacson was managing editor of Time magazine from 1996 to 2000, before stepping up to become editorial director of Time Inc., and later chairman of CNN. Fred Conrad/The New York Times

Janice Min

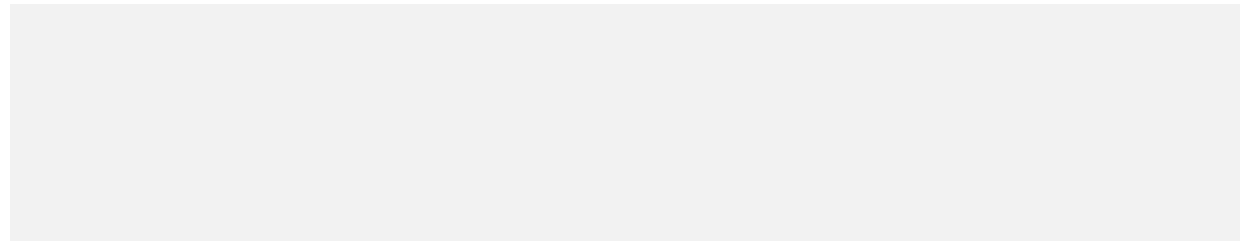
By the early- to mid-90s, it was well established that People was the cash cow of Time Inc. I had come from working at a newspaper and there were crazy things: Let's have a Hawaiian party for the staff! And they would truck sand in and create a beach inside a conference room. There would be exotic birds and drinks and maybe a band. Alcohol was a huge theme, and there was one off-site where people got so trashed they drove a golf cart into the water and destroyed it. And it was all, "Ha ha ha!" Things that would never fly today in a corporate culture.

Adam Cohen

Correspondent, staff writer, senior writer, Time (1995-2001)The mid-1990s was this rollicking time. Almost everyone got a very nice office with a nice big TV and a nice couch that you could nap on. And there was smoky glass so that no one really knew if you were awake or asleep.

Jim Kelly

If there was one moment in the '90s where Time was able to flex its muscle and show how much a part of American culture it had been, it was the 75th anniversary party at Radio City Music Hall in 1998. We invited pretty much everyone who had been on the cover of Time — and a shocking number showed up! From the President of the United States to Mikhail Gorbachev to Joe DiMaggio to Muhammad Ali to Leni Riefenstahl to Jack Kevorkian. That night showed the history of Time and the power of the brand, a word I initially despised but have come to accept.



Martha Nelson

Early on, I recall a very formal luncheon inside the Time Inc building with Fidel Castro. I don't think he ate a single bite of food or took one sip of water, but he told some amazing tales. Equally memorable, many years later, was a visit from Steve Jobs, when he handed us each an astonishing new device – the Ipad – which felt, that day, like a preview of our future. All of the titles had the power to draw attention from newsmakers, so you never knew who to expect.

Bethany McLean

Reporter, staff writer, editor-at-large, Fortune (1995-2008)The perfect sign of the top was in March 2001, Fortune took us all, both the business side and the editorial side, to Hawaii for a week.

Dimitry Elias Leger

We spent a week on the island of Lanai at the hotel where Bill Gates got married. I had a piña colada in my hand at all times, from breakfast on. Many of us sat around at the pool going, “Yeah, this is probably the tipping point.”

Dan Okrent

Managing editor, Life; editor-at-large, Time, Inc. (1989-2001; 2006-2014)When I went to work there in 1989, it was just so strange,

because I had prided myself on being an outsider and I was coming into the belly of the beast. And once I got inside the belly I said, “Oooh, this is pretty great.” If I needed something in Vladivostok tomorrow, I could get it.

Walter Isaacson

It’s a shame that young, aspiring journalists will not likely find such opportunities these days to be trained by people like Strobe Talbott as you wander Russia in the era of glasnost. You remember when Gorbachev and Reagan met in Reykjavik for the summit? We had six or seven reporters on that story, two great photographers, editors, writers, just trying to figure out the Reagan-Gorbachev relationship. Now people would probably ridicule it as being profligate but we thought it was important. And it was.



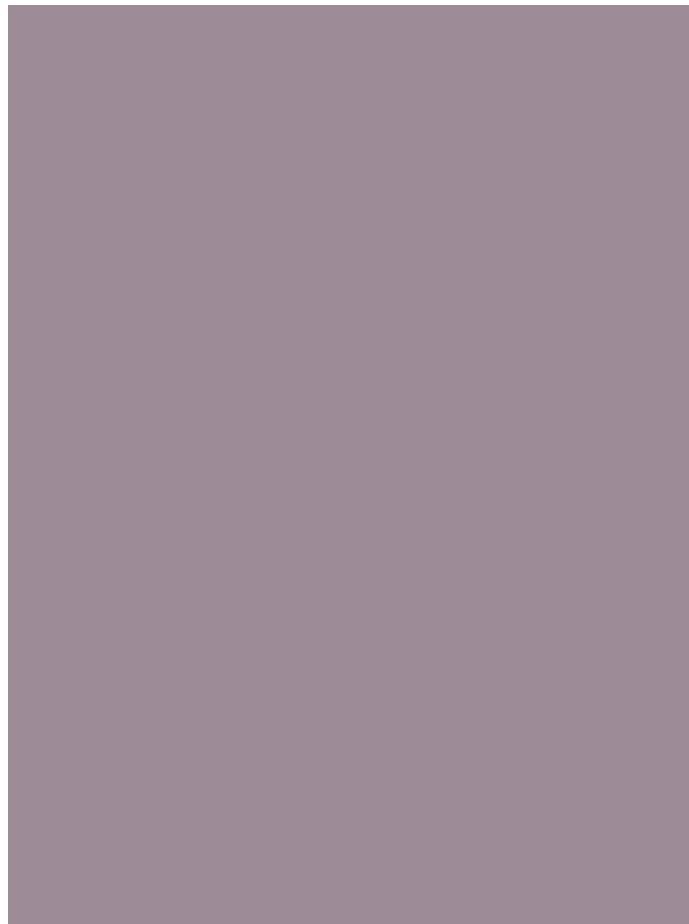
Joseph Stalin appeared on the cover of Time at least eight times, including on Jan. 4, 1953, when he was named “Man of the Year.” Time



In 1997, Ellen DeGeneres came out on the cover of Time, an issue timed to run the week that her character on the ABC sitcom "Ellen" did the same. Time



Historic events, like the moon landing in 1969, were ones that often turned that week's Life magazine into a collector's item. Life



Henry Luce started Sports Illustrated against the advice of his most trusted aides, who viewed the very idea of starting a weekly magazine devoted solely to sports as an expensive, misguided and inherently trivial folly. Mark Rucker/Transcendental Graphics, Getty Images

Karl Taro Greenfeld

Staff writer, Time; editor, Time Asia; editor at large, Sports Illustrated (1998-2007) When you went abroad as an editor for Time magazine as an expat, it was like going abroad as a banker. There were all the allowances. Tax equalization. A housing allowance. Your kids' school would be paid for. You got a company car. You got a driver. You got club memberships. I don't know whether packages like that exist anymore in journalism.

Peter Castro

As the writer for the "Chatter" column at People, my job was to go out, preferably five nights a week, and get items and make connections. I got a call from the number two at the time. I go into his office, and he said, "I want to talk to you about your expense report." I was like a Boy Scout, only spending what I had to. And he


said, “Peter you’re not spending enough.” I said, “But I’m going out five nights a week!” He said, “Well, go out more! Stay out longer!” I did the best I could without ending up in A.A.

Albert Kim

staff writer, senior editor, Sports Illustrated; staff writer, senior editor, Entertainment Weekly; assistant managing editor, People (1987-2005) When I was at People, I had to approve the photo department expenses. Not long into my tenure, there was that famous set of pictures that had Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez kissing in a convertible — the first affirmation that they were a couple. We got into a bidding war with Us Weekly over those pictures and we ended up buying them for \$50,000. That’s what triggered everything in tabloid culture and the paparazzi. After that, every week was me approving tens of thousands of dollars in paparazzi pictures. A lot of times I was buying pictures I knew we weren’t going to run, just to keep them out of the hands of our competitors. I once spent \$10,000 on a photo of Eminem and his daughter knowing we wouldn’t use it, but knowing no one else could, either.

Dan Okrent

It seemed as if no one was paying attention to the money that was going out, because there was so much coming in.



Page proofs for the Aug. 25, 2014 issue of People magazine, the week Robin Williams committed suicide. On closing night, the staff stayed until 3:30 a.m. to pull together a special section commemorating the actor's life. Jake Naughton for The New York Times

LAST STAND

When Time Warner merged with AOL in 2000, the company seemed poised to conquer the internet. History, however, had other plans. Subscribers and advertisers turned away from the core publications. Budgets shrank. Layoffs became commonplace. In 2014, Time Inc. was spun off from the Time Warner mother ship, and in 2015 it left the Time & Life building for a comparatively modest space on Liberty Street in Lower Manhattan.

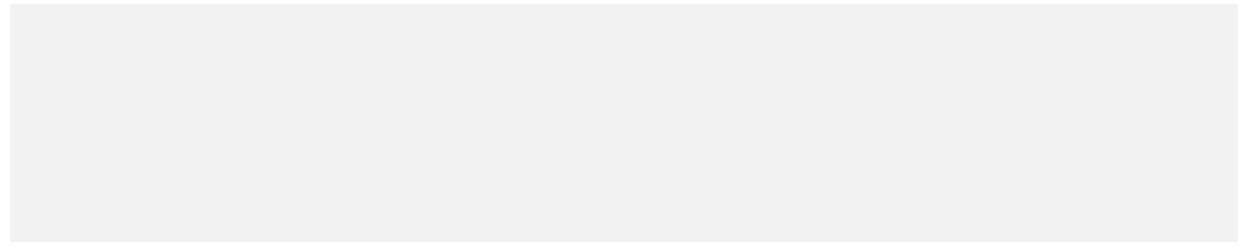
Norman Pearlstine

Editor in chief; executive vice president and chief content officer; vice chairman (1995-2005; 2013-2017)The merger with Warner changed Time Inc. and its culture in good ways and bad. HBO and

Time Inc.'s cable assets were shifted to other divisions. With Jerry Levin [the former Time Warner chief executive officer who engineered the merger with AOL], and Walter Isaacson assembling an extraordinary team, I thought Time Inc. was on the cutting edge.

Kevin Fedarko

While there was a tremendous amount of prestige and fulfillment that came with working there, there was also quite a bit of arrogance. We viewed Time magazine as this vehicle that basically taught the American public what was important and what you needed to know over the course of the previous week's news events in a way that is impossible to conceive of now, when the news cycle is five minutes instead of five days.



Albert Kim

It was very clear that the internet was going to be a huge part of the future of media. But for most of the time I was there, people treated it as a nuisance. It was a problem to be solved, not an opportunity.

Bethany McLean

All of Time, Inc. was very flush with money after the dot-com boom and we had already started to chronicle its demise — but nobody saw that it would be our demise, too.

Janice Min

I was there the day that the merger between AOL and Time Warner happened and if you were at all at any level of management — and even if you weren't — you had stock options. There was a lot of buzz in the office of "How much are you going to sell today?" There were people who sold everything that day and got quite wealthy and were the smartest people at the company. I sold half of what I had, and the second half didn't even matter because it never amounted to anything. But that was probably the last great day at Time, Inc. You had senior editors who were able to make six-figure sums that day,

if not more, and top editors who probably made several million dollars.

Jim Gaines

I think Jerry Levin should be credited for being out front of the digital revolution. The idea that we had to become digital was correct and was foresighted. I blame Time Warner for bilking the magazine brands for their profits and not putting investment toward their digital future.

Jim Kelly

Things truly changed in 2005, when it was clear that Time Inc. was a declining asset but still part of this very big company that expected to get its billion dollars a year in profit. The revenue, the profit each year, was going down. There had to be a lot of cutbacks. A lot of people got fired.



Norman Pearlstine was editor in chief of Time Inc. from 1995 to 2005. He returned to the company in 2013 as executive vice president and chief of content. Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Norman Pearlstine

John Huey succeeded me as editor in chief toward the end of 2005 — a very good year for the company. It was only when I returned to Time Inc. in the fall of 2013 that I found myself asking, “What happened?” I was part of the fifth management team in four years. There had been very little investment in new media. Before my return, Time Inc. was still thinking of digital as a product for the desktop, even though it had begun to decline in importance as mobile and video were clearly gaining in importance.

Terry McDonell

Managing editor, Sports Illustrated; editor, Time Inc. Sports Group (2002-2012) I had freedom, autonomy, got to develop all kinds of digital stuff. The problem was there was no significant reinvestment. Time Inc.’s relationship with Time Warner was fundamentally feudal. That’s where the profits went.

Martha Nelson

For years, Time Inc was run by a team of brilliant business leaders, publishers with deep knowledge of the company and the industry. Then we went from an 80-year-long winning streak to a storm of

change – a string of outside CEOs in rapid succession, insufficient digital investment, the economic meltdown of 2008, and a growing frustration and lack of confidence from Time Warner corporate.

Bethany McLean

I remember sitting next to Jeff Bewkes, the CEO of Time Warner, at an internal Time Inc. event that was celebrating journalists. And he asked what I had done before Fortune, and I said, “Oh, I worked at Goldman.” And he looked at me like, why would I leave that to do this? And I thought, Uh-oh, it’s over.

Norman Pearlstine

The constant changes in management and in strategy had an adverse impact on Time Inc. and its employees. From the fall of 2013 through 2014, our management team had no choice but to focus all of its energies on the spinoff from Time Warner. The spinoff freed us to evolve from a print company to a multi-platform media company, but we were relatively small, making it hard to catch up.



On Jan. 31, 2018, the Meredith Corp. finalized its purchase of Time Inc. That same day, workmen at the company’s headquarters in downtown Manhattan replaced the Time Inc. sign with that of its new owner. Drew Angerer/Getty Images

ONE ERA ENDS, ANOTHER BEGINS

A year after Time Inc. left its longtime home in Midtown Manhattan for Liberty Street, an even more dramatic change took place: The purchase of the company by Meredith and the erasure of the Time Inc. name, both physically and symbolically.

Betsy Gleick

Senior writer, Time; deputy editor, People (1994-2014) My feeds were filled with people posting pictures of the Time Inc. sign coming down and the Meredith sign going up basically the minute the deal closed. From the outside, the haste struck me as so depressing. Why the race to obliterate a great legacy? Friends who were there describe an awkward catered “welcome breakfast” that was brought in to the downtown offices the Monday after the deal closed. Some “legacy Meredith people,” as they’re called, came down from Third Avenue. And to us they felt like interlopers, so it

was weird to realize, “Oh no, wait, we, the Time Inc. folks, are the interlopers.”

Siobhan O’Connor

Editorial director for health, executive editor, Time (2014-2018)By the time the acquisition was announced, we’d been hearing about it for months. So we all knew — or at least we believed — this was going to happen. When it did, I think a considerable portion of the staff felt a strange relief, at least at first. But, as is human nature, many people began to worry about what the news meant for them. Would they lose their job? If not, would they be forced to move to Des Moines? It was a tough day. Mostly, it was a sad day. I would guess that a lot of wine was consumed that night.