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**THE RISE AND FALL OF GRANTLAND**

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Media Studies

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The day before Halloween 2015, ESPN pulled the plug on Grantland. Spooked by slumping revenues and the ghost of its ousted leader Bill Simmons, the multimedia giant axed the sports and pop culture website that helped usher in a new era of digital media. The website, named for sports writing godfather Grantland Rice, channeled the prestige of a bygone era while crystallizing the nature of its own time. Grantland's writers infused their pieces with spry commentary, unabashed passion and droll humor.

Most importantly, they knew what they were writing about. From its birth in June 2011, Grantland quickly became a hub for educated sports consumption. Grantland's pieces entertained and edified. Often vaulting over 1,000 words, they also skewed toward a more affluent and more educated audience. The internet promoted shifts and schisms by its very nature. Popular with millennials, Grantland filled a certain niche. It depicted sports and pop culture as synonymous, and did it with a distinctive voice.

Grantland's rise and fall illustrates the changing dynamic of journalism online, and offers clues as to how the profession will sustain itself in the coming years. New models may have augured better returns for Grantland and promoted its continued growth. For the next Grantland, availing itself of more tailored business models will prove wise in the digital era. Using Grantland as a case study, this thesis seeks to provide a historical account of the site and explore the fit between content and consumer.

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## **CHAPTER 1. Introduction**

Grantland was a sports and pop culture website that launched on June 11, 2011. Its launch came with fanfare. Critics chimed in. The internet was abuzz. The New York Times, The Atlantic, AdWeek – the list went on – all published pieces musing about Grantland’s beginnings, its present, its future. Stakes were high.

Grantland was the brainchild of Bill Simmons, an internet star. It was being bankrolled by ESPN, the self-proclaimed Worldwide Leader in Sports. Simmons had a big mouth. Bristol had big money. The internet couldn’t help but watch. In many ways, Grantland would become a prime example of the era, a time when digital journalism evolved quickly and when the medium often made for strange bedfellows. Bound by their respective brands, Simmons and ESPN created a fruitful yet ultimately untenable partnership.

The Grantland project embodied the drama. While it was drawing acclaim for its in-depth features and the voice of its young staff, its internal drama made for a wealth of think pieces and criticism. Office politics at ESPN can play like a reality show. Grantland, through its rise and fall, was no exception. The site lasted four years. They were never dull.

Grantland was a mix of new and old. It was an extension of Simmons, at once a throwback but with a voice made for the age of social media. Its writers, most of whom Simmons had hired himself, were mostly young. They grew up with the internet, the world of blogs and Twitter and Facebook. Some wrote traditional features. Others posted columns, discursive, irreverent, not adhering to antiquity. Many did both, moving in between roles with fluidity.

The rules were being rewritten. Grantland, the spotlight always on it, was an exemplar for the change taking place.

After a tenuous start, Grantland gained momentum. Its following included superstar athletes, late-night television hosts, the president. Simmons had brought together the high-brow world with the universe of the bros. For many of its writers, Grantland made names. It made careers.

But it didn't make money. As the business side of journalism was undergoing several changes, Grantland couldn't adjust successfully. As a boutique site, it could exist within ESPN's ecosystem. Richard Deitsch, Sports Illustrated's media columnist, said its value could be felt in other ways, the simplest being "it made ESPN look better."<sup>1</sup> ESPN had loss leaders. Grantland, despite its inability to turn a profit, could be its indie flick, its Oscar contender. For ESPN President John Skipper, a former English major, the site – and Simmons – held a special place in his heart.

Because they were close, the ultimate parting of ways between Simmons and Skipper cut deeper. Their relationship deteriorated during Grantland's run, along with Simmons' overall feelings toward Bristol, more than 3,000 miles away from Grantland's Los Angeles offices. The gulf – and the hurt – deepened. Simmons disagreed with ESPN on business decisions, editorial decisions, taste. ESPN, paying Simmons one of the largest contracts in the industry, tired of its star player's diva-like tendencies. More than once, Simmons bit the hand that fed him in very public forums. For Disney-owned ESPN, its eyes on Wall Street and its falling subscribers, the differences became too much.

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1. Richard Deitsch, interview with author, July 7, 2017.

The marriage ended messily, with Skipper bypassing a “Dear John” or “Dear Bill” letter and going straight to The New York Times’ Richard Sandomir with the story: Bill Simmons was done at ESPN. According to former employees and reporters who covered the story, Simmons was stunned. The relationship hasn’t been the same.

At HBO, and then with The Ringer, a new site, Simmons has tried to recreate the Grantland magic with mixed results. He’s tweaked the formula somewhat, doubling down on his extensive podcast following and aligning himself with digitally native platforms such as Vox Media.

ESPN, meanwhile, has continued to draw ire while still dominating the market. Some of its problems from the first half of the decade, highlighted during Grantland’s run, are being addressed, namely its mobile offerings and the development of its own streaming service. It still relies on big brands and big names, but ones who better follow the company ethos. But, with its stature, drama is never far behind.

Grantland’s story is one of big money, big personalities, big egos. It dreamt big. It failed big. Its story helped to define a time when journalism was going through several changes. The evolution continues today.

In telling this story, this paper seeks to provide an account of Grantland, a site that did not revolutionize the industry, but was a high-profile project that came at a time when digitally native publications grew significantly. By exploring Grantland’s rise and fall, this paper will review what made the site successful in addition to what contributed to its closing. Besides parsing the business aspects surrounding the Grantland saga, it will also highlight the consequences of the industry environment at the time and the decisions made by both Simmons

and ESPN. The common thread connecting those consequences were the lives affected by the drama.

The paper will conclude with what the site could have done differently. The lessons taken from the Grantland story can be applied to other digital publications, and through them this paper will provide further context to the shift from print to digital.

## **Method**

The main method for telling the Grantland story was through interviews. The sources ranged from those directly involved in building the site to reporters who covered the story for the site's duration. Secondary sources came from books, digital publications and online news articles.

Sources who worked at the site included Rafe Bartholomew, Rembert Browne, Jay Kang, Robert Mays and Louisa Thomas. Bartholomew and Kang were senior editors who were hired early in the process, with Kang being a founding editor. Mays was one of the first employees hired for the project, prior to the site having a name. Browne was hired in year one. He remained at the site until the last few weeks of publication. Bartholomew and Mays remained until the end.

Thomas worked both as an editor and writer, adding the perspectives of each. She was hired in early 2014, a year in which the site grew but also one in which things began dissolving quickly behind the scenes. Listening to viewpoints of both "ground-floor" employees and newer talent was helpful in piecing together the narrative.

Outside of Grantland, sources included Richard Deitsch, Peter Kafka, Kyle Godwin and Eric Benson. Deitsch, a media columnist and reporter for Sports Illustrated, covered the Grantland story from beginning to end. He interviewed several of the key players, including founder Bill Simmons, ESPN executive editor John Skipper and Grantland's interim editor Chris



Connelly. He provided background concerning ESPN's corporate culture at the time and also context surrounding the media environment in general. Simmons' publicist and ESPN did not respond to interview requests.

Kafka, senior editor of technology business publication Recode, also covered the Grantland story and interviewed Simmons on two separate occasions, the first following one of Simmons' suspensions at ESPN and the second about 16 months after Grantland had ended. Kafka provided perspective on Simmons at both points in time, and how his subject's outlook had changed during that period.

Godwin formerly worked as an associate producer on "30 for 30," the acclaimed documentary series that Simmons helped create. He worked at ESPN from 2008 to 2014, a timeline that coincided with the height of Simmons' influence at the company. Godwin provided background on life at ESPN and the internal changes that took place during his career there.

Benson is a freelance writer who has written stories for Grantland and FiveThirtyEight, another site owned by ESPN. He gave feedback on working with Grantland's editorial staff, and how the process compared to contributing to other publications.

Other former Grantland staff members, including Sean Fennessey, Bill Barnwell, Emily Yoshida and Kevin Lincoln, were also contacted, but either declined or did not respond to interview requests. James Andrew Miller, who co-authored "Those Guys Have All the Fun: Inside the World of ESPN," an oral history of the company, also did not respond to interview requests.

Interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes and were conducted through the phone. They were conducted from January 2017 to September 2017. Video conferencing was offered, but each source opted for a phone call. Introductions were made via email.

For further background, secondary sources were gathered from a range of publications. Miller's book included several discussions with Simmons about his time at ESPN. It helped to illustrate Simmons' relationships with several key figures at the company, including Skipper and longtime executive editor John Walsh. Travis Vogan, a media scholar at the University of Iowa, also wrote a book about ESPN. Vogan devotes chapters to Grantland and ESPN Films, both of which detail Simmons' influence at the company.

Profiles of Simmons appeared in Rolling Stone and The New York Times Magazine. Along with interviews with former employees, these articles helped to illustrate Simmons, the person. Simmons' past columns also aided in understanding his interests and his voice. Learning about his motivations, his history and his personal life was helpful in telling the Grantland story.

## CHAPTER 2. Beginnings

### The Intern

The intern drove to the offices in a hurry. He needed to see the email he'd heard about, the one that might change his life. It was late summer in New England. Apart from the Boston traffic, perfect conditions.

Red lights were a problem until they weren't. Sheer determination could make you see things differently. Especially when you were 23 years old, you had student loans and your job prospects beyond your internship were nil. Especially when the email was from one of the most famous sportswriters in America.

Robert Mays has forgotten many car rides in his life. He didn't forget that one.

"I broke like 17,000 traffic laws,"<sup>2</sup> he said.

He couldn't open the company email from his apartment. It lacked the appropriate servers. Bill Simmons, even to an unknown intern, could make things difficult. Challenging people was something he did, Mays said, whether out of conscious effort or not. Sometimes, Simmons played it up. He did when he was on television, he'd say later in interviews.<sup>3</sup>

But to Mays, none of that mattered. As he was driving to the Boston Globe that morning, there was only one thing on his mind: Open the email. Simmons, his teenage idol, had told him to.

"That's how I started considering you could grow up and write about sports and make a living doing it, was reading his column on ESPN.com," Mays said.

And so, after navigating the streets of Boston, he did. "Nice story today," it began. "When does your internship end? I have a job for you."

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2. Robert Mays, interview with author, June 21, 2017.

Mays emailed Simmons back immediately. His internship ended September 4, 2010.

At first, Mays couldn't believe it. About four months ago, he was walking the stage at his graduation from the University of Missouri's School of Journalism, where he'd been a top student. On his second day at the Globe, he introduced himself to Simmons, who was known as "The Boston Sports Guy" across the country for his popular, often irreverent, columns on ESPN's Page 2.

His first encounter with Simmons went as he expected.

"He was gracious and dismissive in the way that gracious, famous people are," Mays said.

Two months passed. The summer and his internship were coming to an end. It had been a whirlwind, even if the team he was covering, the Red Sox, had been struggling of late.

But the team's poor play turned out to be Mays' big break. He followed ticket scalpers around Fenway Park for two weeks to see how hard they were getting hit. As the season's fortunes took a downturn, their pockets held fewer crisp notes. October was approaching and the Red Sox would not be a part of it.

The team missed the playoffs, finishing third in the division.<sup>4</sup>

After Mays wrote the story, the tweets followed.

In 2010, Twitter was still young. The social media platform started in 2006, a year after YouTube was founded and two years after Facebook.<sup>5</sup> The same year Mays had started college. Both were growing up quickly.

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3. Rob Tannenbaum, "Bill Simmons' Big Score," *Rolling Stone*, April 29, 2014, accessed August 18, 2017, <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/bill-simmons-big-score-20140429>.

4. Baseball Reference. "2010 Boston Red Sox Statistics," *Baseball Reference*, 2010, accessed September 3, 2017, <https://www.baseball-reference.com/teams/BOS/2010.shtml>.

Companies were still figuring out how to harness these strange new ways of communicating. For writers, it was becoming a popular way of getting noticed.

“There was sort of the chamber effect that happens on Twitter where new writers got a lot of support from other internet writers,” said Jay Kang, a writer at large for The New York Times Magazine. “The community was smaller, and so if you got a lot of attention it got you in front of a lot more people more quickly.

“Now, there’s a higher volume, it’s more diluted, so maybe it’s harder to get noticed.”<sup>6</sup>

Simmons had tweeted Mays’ story. Mays’ friend from college had noticed and called him. Mays was thrilled. He emailed Simmons to thank him.

He didn’t expect the Sports Guy’s reply to come with a job offer.

“That was the best-case scenario in my mind,” he said.

The job would be with a startup, albeit one backed by ESPN. Simmons would lead it. It was his idea, one that had been brewing in his mind since he was a writer for “Jimmy Kimmel Live!” He moved to Los Angeles in 2002 to work for Kimmel’s late-night show and ABC, another Disney property.<sup>7</sup>

Mays was just happy to be getting a check. It was for more money than he had ever imagined, he said. Time flew. He met with some executives from ESPN, who told him they were in the process of starting the site and it would be based in Los Angeles. They asked if he would be willing to move there.

To Mays, it was a no-brainer. “I will fucking walk there on broken glass,” he said.

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5. Nick Bilton, “All Is Fair in Love and Twitter,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 2013, accessed September 1, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/13/magazine/all-is-fair-in-love-and-twitter.html>.

6. Jay Kang, interview with author, July 5, 2017.

7. Bill Simmons, “Welcome to Grantland,” *Grantland*, June 11, 2011, accessed May 23, 2017, <http://grantland.com/features/welcome-grantland/>.

When Mays, a Midwestern kid, arrived in Los Angeles, it was a strange new land. He'd wake up to the ding of his email before his alarm. In the first few weeks, it was just him, a 23-year-old kid from Chicago, and Lane Brown, a former New York Magazine editor who had helped found the culture and entertainment site Vulture.

Simmons often wasn't there. He was busy recruiting. As with Mays, Simmons found several writers through Twitter. Reinforcements were coming, but in the early days it was a bare operation, getting by on grit, a little guile and lots of caffeine.

"There were nebulous conversations that really didn't go anywhere, but also formative conversations that kind of set the tone of the place and what the bones of the place would be philosophically," Mays said. "It was a weird time. It's hard to imagine now just how unstructured it was."

For Mays, the adjustment period was difficult. He gained weight. He didn't go out much. Most of his friends were back east.

When editor David Jacoby began working at the site, he asked Mays if the kid owned any other clothing. For about a week, Mays wore the same University of Missouri sweatshirt to the office.

He missed his family. He missed home.

"I'll be honest," Mays said. "I hated LA for the first six to 12 months I was out there."

At first slowly, then quickly, the offices, located blocks away from The Staples Center and a hard negotiation through traffic from Hollywood Boulevard, began filling up. Two editors, Kang and Rafe Bartholomew, both then in their 20s, were hired. Dan Fierman, a former editor at GQ and one of the first people hired for the project, started not long after.

Simmons' vision was unfolding. For Mays, the mad dash to the Globe offices was just the beginning.

"That was seven years ago," Mays said. "Which seems funny now."

### **The Sports Guy**

Irony isn't lost on Bill Simmons. He became "The Boston Sports Guy" by writing a column on AOL while bartending, before "blogger" had entered the vernacular. It was the early 1990s. He was making \$50 a week.<sup>8</sup>

After graduating from Boston University with a master's degree in print journalism, he worked at the Boston Herald for three years covering high school sports. But he saw no future there.

He left in 1996.

"It was like being on an NBA team where you don't get to start until you're (45) years old," he told James Andrew Miller in Miller's "Those Guys Have All the Fun: Inside the World of ESPN."<sup>9</sup>

But his column on "Digital City Boston," the AOL website, gained a following of about 15,000 by 2001.<sup>10</sup> For the time, the numbers were substantial. His stories got emailed around by fans, who came for the analysis tinged with pop-culture references and immature humor.

His running commentary on the ESPYs, ESPN's annual awards show, for example, was laced with sexist asides about tennis player Amelie Mauresmo, basketball coach Pat Summitt and comedian Rosie O'Donnell.

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8. James Andrew Miller and Tom Shales, *Those Guys Have All the Fun: Inside the World of ESPN*, (Little, Brown & Company, 2011), 660

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

At nine minutes and 16 seconds into the show, Simmons penned the following:

“As we prepare for Arthur Ashe Award for courage — which will be presented to Billie Jean King — ESPN's Robin Roberts comes out and introduces presenter Rosie O'Donnell, who in turn will introduce King. Ironically enough, this same sequence of events will be happening at the Meow Mix Bar & Grill in Greenwich Village later this evening.”<sup>11</sup>

In another column, Simmons provided a play-by-play of the final game of the 2004 World Series wherein his team, the Red Sox, triumphed over the St. Louis Cardinals. He presages Twitter with timed updates of his viewing experience.

“We're coming to you live from the Sports Guy Mansion!” Simmons wrote. “I'm sitting here with my dog Dooze, the Sports Gal (Simmons' wife) and a bottle of Veuve Cliquot on ice.”<sup>12</sup>

About 30 minutes later, Simmons commented on a miscue from Scott Rolen, the Cardinals' third baseman.

“Thank God for Scott Rolen – he just stranded Womack on third to end the first,” Simmons wrote. “Even Ben Affleck isn't in this big of a slump.”<sup>13</sup>

Also in 2004, Simmons recapped the night known as “The Malice at the Palace,” offering his opinion on everything from each player's role in the brawl to ESPN's basketball coverage to the fans' conduct. The bedlam that took place in the Palace of Auburn Hills in Detroit was perfect fodder for Simmons.

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11. Barry Petchesky, “Here's The AOL Column That Got Bill Simmons Hired By ESPN, In Which He Calls The ESPYs A 'TV Holocaust,’” *Deadspin*, January 30, 2012, accessed August 8, 2017, <https://deadspin.com/5880534/heres-the-aol-column-that-got-bill-simmons-hired-by-espn-in-which-he-calls-the-espys-a-tv-holocaust>.  
12. Simmons, “The Nation's destination: Destiny,” *ESPN*, 2004, accessed March 25, 2018, <http://www.espn.com/espn/page2/story?page=simmons/041028>.  
13. *Ibid.*



The incident began when Indiana Pacers forward Ron Artest ran into the stands and struck a belligerent fan, starting a fight that involved more fans, coaches and players from both teams.

“Because the Detroit fans threw all that stuff on the court, I would have suspended the Pistons from selling beer for 60 days,” Simmons wrote. “There has to be SOME accountability there. I would fine them for not having enough security on hand for the first Pistons-Pacers game of the season – maybe the toughest rivalry in the league right now other than Minnesota-Denver – and I would fine the Pistons CEO for unveiling the ‘He was asking for it’ defense about Artest (just a sleazy thing to do).”<sup>14</sup>

It was typical of Simmons’ style. In a profile of Simmons for *The New York Times Magazine*, Jonathan Mahler attempted to explain the columnist’s frat-boy sensibilities.

“Simmons is not a literary sportswriter,” Mahler wrote. “You can’t capture his resonance with lyrical quotes from his oeuvre, because they don’t really exist.”<sup>15</sup>

Mahler continues: “His power resides in the overall effect of his columns, the mix of honesty, enthusiasm, smart analysis and an implicit recognition that for fans, anyway, the sports experience is bound up in our lives.”<sup>16</sup>

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14. Simmons, “Tale of the tape,” *ESPN*, 2004, accessed March 25, 2018, <http://www.espn.com/espn/page2/story?page=simmons/cowbell/041122>.

15. Jonathan Mahler, “Can Bill Simmons Win The Big One?” *The New York Times*, May 31, 2011, accessed May 17, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/05/magazine/can-bill-simmons-win-the-big-one.html>.

16. *Ibid.*

Simmons wrote through the lens of the fan. For the time, he was the voice of the average American sports fan – typically white, male and a child of the 1970s and 1980s – in the eyes of advertisers. His references to movies and television shows such as “Rollerball” and “Cheers” were redolent of the times. Sports could be a flashpoint, a peek back into life before you grew up. Simmons was your avatar for adolescence.

Reading Simmons, Mahler argued, it was possible to recapture those feelings. Establishment reporters had access to locker rooms and press conferences. Many prided themselves on maintaining some semblance of objectivity.

Simmons was the opposite. He was the id of the sports world.

“He’s the most famous sportswriter in the country, not counting Adam Schefter or Woj (ESPN NBA reporter Adrian Wojnarowski),” said columnist Richard Deitsch, who covers sports media for Sports Illustrated. “But unlike those guys, he pioneered a certain style of first-person fandom writing.

“When his career is over, he’ll be one of the 10 most famous sportswriters in the history of the profession – one of the most influential sportswriters of any time, and certainly the most influential of his time.”<sup>17</sup>

It started with the ESPYs column. The piece was forwarded around ESPN management, according to Deadspin. It made its way to John Walsh, ESPN’s executive editor at the time, who loved it. He read the rest of Simmons’ work online.<sup>18</sup>

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17. Deitsch, interview with author, July 12, 2017.

18. Miller and Shales, 660-661.

“The Sports Guy” soon had a gig freelancing for ESPN’s Page 2, a fitting space for Simmons’ brash voice. Jay Lovinger, an editor at ESPN then, called Walsh to convince him to hire Simmons full-time.<sup>19</sup>

“Bill’s obviously good for the company,” Lovinger told Miller. “It’s just that he’s an incredibly pain-in-the-ass guy to work with.”

In “Those Guys,” Lovinger continues, “You don’t really edit him. He turns in his thing, you suggest stuff, he writes ‘Stet all changes’ on the copy, you fight with him over things, he goes to Walsh or (ESPN executive vice president of content John Skipper) to complain, and you say to yourself, ‘I don’t need this grief.’ His goal is to get you to the point where it’s such a pain in the neck that you just put the stuff through – unless there’s something that you’re going to get sued over.”<sup>20</sup>

To say Simmons chafes at authority would be an understatement. It’s the trait that got him hired at ESPN.

It’s also the trait that led to his departure. He worked for ESPN for 14 years. Former employees of his remark about his taste as a businessperson, his ability to motivate, his outsized persona and his tenuous relationship with Bristol, the headquarters of ESPN.

As a manager, he was lauded by his former staffers. But his leadership style could rankle, too.

“Bill knows the buttons to press on you,” Mays said. “That can be problematic.”<sup>21</sup>

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19. Ibid.

20. Ibid

21. Mays, interview with author, June 21, 2017.

Yet, Mays added, the staff loved him and were steadfastly loyal to him. He was a writer, like them, and let writers be themselves. Backed by ESPN's money, he also paid his staffers and freelancers better than most other places, former editors and contributors said.

In creating his own site, his own environment away from Bristol, Simmons cultivated a loyal following, one ESPN underestimated when push came to shove.

“He turned a lot of people who did not have major gigs into prominent writing names in the space,” Deitsch said. “He paid them significantly good money. He gave them a job at a very high-profile place with great benefits. The loyalty existed because he game-changed people's lives.

“They saw it as Simmons hired them, not ESPN hired them,” Deitsch continued. “Simmons would probably be able to create that because he was doing it in LA, not in Bristol. It's not like these guys were going into the office in Connecticut every day and seeing the ESPN establishment. They had their own little island in Los Angeles. That's how you kind of create a loyal army, you keep them insulated compared to the outside.”<sup>22</sup>

To Mays, Simmons went from idol to mentor to occasional aggravator to mentor again.

“Having Bill in a meeting will automatically make it three times longer,” Mays said. “But he often comes out of it really helping and making it better. Bill never said, ‘I hired you to be this.’ I think that's why a lot of people flourished under him because you got a lot of support and you got a lot of direction, but you never got any shackles put on you.”<sup>23</sup>

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22. Deitsch, interview with author, July 12, 2017.

23. Mays, interview with author, June 21, 2017.

When Kang first met Simmons, he noticed “The Sports Guy” was “very similar to how he was in writing.” Simmons gave Kang a choice of being a writer or an editor. Kang, despite having had no editorial experience, opted for the latter. He wanted to be part of the team that built the site.

Like most of the staff, Kang came to Simmons’ attention through the internet and Twitter.

“At the time, he was just looking for young writers who were internet-conversant, who didn’t have any sort of long career in sports journalism,” Kang said. “He wanted writers who were very non-traditional.”<sup>24</sup>

For Bartholomew, Simmons’ passion for the site was unmatched. But that same passion could conflict with Bristol’s ideas about the direction of the site. ESPN and Simmons’ publicist did not respond to interview requests.

“It was very empowering in that you knew he was sort of throwing his weight around behind the scenes to get more resources for the site, whether that was in terms of placement on ESPN’s homepage, whether it was eventual podcasts or TV stuff, access to big stories he wanted,” Bartholomew said. “Because I think he saw the site as a direct extension of him and something he was as invested in as all the writing. He was going to use every tool in his shed to get all the resources and attention that it deserved.”<sup>25</sup>

Grantland launched on June 8, 2011 and shut down on October 30, 2015. In its lifespan, it earned recognition and condemnation from all corners of the internet. It made careers. It also marked the end of Simmons’ with ESPN.

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24. Kang, interview with author, July 5, 2017.

25. Rafe Bartholomew, interview with author, June 26, 2017.

“It was like college,” said Rembert Browne, another former staffer. “I spent exactly four years there. If you’re looking for a good narrative to a story, it has an amazing ending. I’m in the business of storytelling, and taking some time away from it, I’m like, that was the best thing ever. It’s something that had a very clear beginning, middle and end.

“It happened almost like a movie.”<sup>26</sup>

## **The Site**

Simmons’ tenure at “Jimmy Kimmel Live!” lasted a year and a half. He returned to ESPN and sportswriting in 2003, building his brand through a number of channels.

In the years leading up to the site’s launch, Simmons’ brand – and his influence in Bristol – had grown significantly. “The Book of Basketball,” a 2009 history of the NBA interlaced with Simmons’ commentary, had been a New York Times Bestseller.<sup>27</sup> His podcast, “The B.S. Report,” averaged nearly 2 million monthly downloads that same year, a number that would nearly double by 2012, according to Business Insider.<sup>28</sup>

Most notably, he played a key role in creating the Emmy-nominated documentary series “30 for 30,” which debuted in 2009. It was a prestige property for ESPN and one of Simmons’ biggest achievements while at the company.

In 2010, Simmons signed a new contract with ESPN, one that payed him more than \$3 million a year. When ESPN left his final contract unrenewed in 2015, he was one of the highest-paid sportswriters in the nation, making about \$5 million annually.<sup>29</sup>

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26. Rembert Browne, interview with author, August 8, 2017.

27. Richard Sandomir, “In So Many Words, the NBA Redefined by Bill Simmons,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2009, accessed October 9, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/10/sports/basketball/10sandomir.html>.

28. Cork Gaines, “Bill Simmons’ new podcast is putting up massive numbers,” *Business Insider*, November 3, 2015, accessed May 23, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/bill-simmons-new-podcast-downloads-2015-11>.

29. Scott Davis, “Bill Simmons’ ugly exit from ESPN created a media bidding war that ended with a \$7-9 million salary with HBO,” *Business Insider*, June 8, 2016, accessed June 9, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/bill-simmons-espn-exit-bidding-war-joined-hbo-2016-6>.

Grantland, the site built around, by and for Simmons, was supposed to be the apex of his growing empire. Pieces would run long, in keeping with Simmons' opening manifesto on the site. The writing would feature footnotes, as was his wont, and wouldn't play by Bristol's rules.

"For instance, I dropped an F-bomb earlier and it felt pretty organic, you have to admit," Simmons wrote in a footnote. "If I dropped a second F-bomb to celebrate dropping the first F-bomb? Probably a little gratuitous. Then again, fuck it."<sup>30</sup>

Named after Grantland Rice, known as the one of the forefathers of the profession, the site evoked the prestige of a bygone era, a time when sportswriters carried their typewriters and newsmen were played by Humphrey Bogart and Cary Grant. But that image – the initial homepage featured Rice's hand, supposedly, holding a fountain pen – was combined with "The Sports Guy's." There, the literary and the lowbrow could coexist in harmony.

There was a mix of both on the site, from Browne's first-person account of riding Air Force One with Barack Obama<sup>31</sup> and Brian Phillips' travelogue through Japanese Sumo Wrestling<sup>32</sup> to various listicles and clickbait, including predictions for "The Gilmore Girls" revival<sup>33</sup> and "A Definitive Ranking of 'Star Wars' Jackets, from a 'New Hope' to 'The Force Awakens.'"<sup>34</sup>

But this divide – the ability to feature content that would never appear on ESPN's regular homepage – gave Grantland a rebellious charm. It was similar to its creator in that way.

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30. Simmons, "Welcome to Grantland."

31. Browne, "Barack and Me," *Grantland*, March 9, 2015, accessed June 11, 2017, <http://grantland.com/features/barack-obama-selma-50th-anniversary/>.

32. Brian Phillips, "The Sea of Crises," *Grantland*, November 4, 2014, accessed June 12, 2017, <http://grantland.com/features/sumo-wrestling-tokyo-japan-hakuho-yukio-mishima-novelist-seppuku/>.

33. Megan Schuster, "Predictions for the 'Gilmore Girls' Netflix Revival," *Grantland*, October 20, 2015, accessed September 8, 2017, <http://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/predictions-for-the-gilmore-girls-netflix-revival/>.

34. Jason Concepcion, "A Definitive Ranking of 'Star Wars' Jackets, From 'A New Hope' to 'The Force Awakens,'" *Grantland*, October 21, 2015, accessed September 8, 2017, <http://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/ranking-star-wars-jackets/>.

More importantly, it was a perception that Simmons had cultivated over his career, one John Skipper, ESPN's president, was banking on.

Grantland would be classy yet hip. It would attract a younger, affluent audience. With its longer pieces, it would hold a visitor's attention longer – a boon for attracting advertisers. That was the thinking anyway.

It would be “what Miramax was to Disney, a boutique division with more room for creativity,” Simmons told Mahler before the launch.<sup>35</sup> Most of all, Grantland would be different.

In 2014, amid growing tensions between ESPN and Simmons, Skipper discussed this halo effect at a September Re/code conference.

“Bill Simmons and (FiveThirtyEight founder) Nate Silver help our brand,” he said. “That helps people think about ESPN. One of the biggest things we face is that we are big, and big companies are not lovable. You've got to find other things – ‘30 for 30,’ Grantland, FiveThirtyEight – that people love and feel passionately about.”<sup>36</sup>

Media scholar Travis Vogan echoed those sentiments. In “ESPN: The Making of a Sports Media Empire,” he writes that in creating Grantland and affording such a platform to a personality like Simmons, ESPN could create the perception that it wasn't only big, bad Bristol. It could be cool, too.

Big corporations rarely win public sentiment, Vogan argues, echoing Skipper. By creating a site with a perceived independence – Vogan likens it to a big studio appropriating an “indie” production company – ESPN can dominate not only the market, but the marketplace of ideas.<sup>37</sup> Cultural currency could feed actual currency, even if indirectly.

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35. Mahler.

36. Nicholas Carlson, “Why ESPN Pays Bill Simmons \$3 Million Plus, Even Though His Traffic Is So Tiny,” *Business Insider*, October 10, 2014, accessed June 2, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/why-espn-pays-bill-simmons-3-million-2014-10>.

37. Travis Vogan, *ESPN: The Making of a Sports Media Empire*, (University of Illinois Press, 2015), 160-161.



“As John Skipper puts it, Grantland helps ESPN to ‘get at the edges of what sport touches’ and the consumers who occupy those margins,” Vogan wrote.<sup>38</sup>

Simmons came to ESPN’s attention from the margins – the internet and blogging rather than an established journalism career. By having personalities like Simmons in-house, the evil empire could feel a bit more like the people’s champ.

“At that time, ESPN was and still is massively profitable,” Deitsch said. “So if you have this one place where it’s not making money, but it makes you look good, it makes you look smarter, it brings in young, affluent, intellectually savvy or highly educated people to your site, that to me would be a pretty good demographic.

“But, for the life of me, they created something organically that was really, really smart,” Deitsch continued. “And they killed it.”<sup>39</sup>

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38. Ibid., 167-168.

39. Deitsch, interview with author, July 12, 2017.

## CHAPTER 3. The Startup

### Growing Pains

Rafe Bartholomew remembers his “Rookie Camp,” the name ESPN gives its orientation for new employees. It was on a Monday, a full day. He rented a car and drove up from New York, where he was living at the time.

His taste of Bristol was short-lived, however. He flew out to Los Angeles that night.

He started at Grantland the next day.

“Definitely crazy,” he recalled.

The week went by in a blur. After a meeting among the staff and Simmons that Friday, the crew headed to the Hotel Figueroa, a favorite of Simmons and host to a pool bar two blocks away from the Grantland offices.<sup>40</sup> They discussed the site over margaritas and laughter.

Bartholomew had been a fact-checker at Harper’s Magazine when he’d been hired. The environment he found in Los Angeles was far different from the one he left behind in New York.

“I remember early in the beginning kind of just feeling constantly underwater with all the stuff we were trying to edit and stay on top of and make sure that it was of some decent standard, especially because it was such a high-profile project,” he said. “Compared to what it became and compared to what a lot of other well-oiled digital media newsrooms looked like, it was a bit ad-hoc. We were just throwing stuff together and not necessarily having all the trains run on time.”<sup>41</sup>

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40. Simmons, “Welcome to Grantland.”

41. Bartholomew, interview with author, June 26, 2017.

Major League Baseball playoff previews were posted within 15 minutes of the start of the game sometimes. The site, early on, was a simple scroll of stories. The popular Triangle (sports) and Hollywood Prospectus (entertainment) sections of the site hadn't yet evolved. The staff played video games in the afternoon.

"But that ended pretty quickly," Mays said, laughing. "It never really ever slowed down that first year until we added more people."<sup>42</sup>

Days in the early going regularly went 12 hours. Despite being on the West Coast, Grantland published according to Bristol's East Coast schedule.

"I don't know if I ever felt like the momentum was picking up in year one just because we didn't know what the fuck we were doing," Mays said.

Roles were still undefined. Simmons had never done something like this before. Neither had most of his staff.

The results were unforgiving.

"At the very beginning, it was just a disaster," Kang said. "We didn't have a copy editor. We made all of these mistakes. It was where we didn't quite know what Bill wanted, we didn't know what we wanted, we didn't know what our writers could do, so everyone was kind of throwing shit at the wall, and we should have launched six months later."<sup>43</sup>

But the team, Kang added, found out about Grantland's launch date from ESPN's Upfronts, the company's annual showcase. They watched Skipper make the announcement. Surprise registered.

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42. Mays, interview with author, June 21, 2017.

43. Kang, interview with author, July 5, 2017.

“We were like, ‘What? Fuck, how are we going to launch then?’” Kang said. “So we didn’t really have time, we didn’t have a staff, it was just the three of us then. Mays was 23 years old then, and I had never worked as an editor. Poor Lane obviously had a lot of experience, but he was going nuts. And Dan was not really there, he was engaged in a long contractual thing with negotiation, and we were all just fucked.”<sup>44</sup>

But by month three, the growing pains were starting to ebb. Simmons had brought on more staff. They developed a rhythm. The content improved.

Several early works came to define Grantland’s voice. Kang, for instance, produced an essay on the importance of Seattle Mariners outfielder Ichiro Suzuki shortly after the site launched. In the piece, Kang attempts to reconcile his Korean heritage with his Asian American identity, all while cheering for Ichiro, a Japanese baseball player.

“Ichiro,” he wrote, “was my guy,” recalling 2001, the outfielder’s first season in Major League Baseball. Ichiro was named the American League’s Rookie of the Year and the Most Valuable Player that year, the first time a player accomplished the feat since 1975.<sup>45</sup>

For immigrants, baseball could be a pathway to assimilation. America’s pastime creates a sense of community, Kang argued. The difficulty lies in making sense of that community, and how the community comes to define you.

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44. Ibid.

45. Kang, “Immigrant Misappropriations: The Importance of Ichiro,” *Grantland*, June 20, 2011, accessed January 26, 2017, [grantland.com/features/importance-ichiro/](http://grantland.com/features/importance-ichiro/).

“Similarly, my own stake in baseball comes from the fact that I am the foreign-born child of Korean immigrants,” Kang wrote, “and that sometimes finding acceptance in this country is as simple as shouting out in a crowded bar that you know who started each game of the 1986 World Series because you, like the rest of the people there, watched every game on TV and talked about it the next day at school.”<sup>46</sup>

But upon further reflection, Kang realized that cheering for Ichiro produced as many questions as it did answers. Rooting for a Japanese baseball player because you were categorized as “similar” was in many ways illogical. If you were Korean, Kang contended, the act was also near sacrilegious: Several times throughout the history of the two nations, Japan has occupied the Korean peninsula and oppressed its people.<sup>47</sup>

“I could watch Ichiro stretching in the on-deck circle and conjure the image of Jackie Robinson sliding home in 1947,” Kang wrote. “But that association never brought hope, but rather a wariness that both told me that the association was wrong and that the only reason why I was cheering for Ichiro was because someone, something else had lumped us together.”<sup>48</sup>

Other stories resonated. In early October 2011, Bartholomew had profiled Erik Spoelstra, the coach of the then-dominant Miami Heat, and documented Spoelstra’s visit to the Philippines, a nation where basketball’s popularity almost rivals that of Manny Pacquiao. The piece was part-travelogue, part-sports feature, part-long blog post. It explored Spoelstra’s roots – his mother hails from the Philippines – while also examining acculturation and its resistance within an individual.

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46. Ibid.

47. Chong Ik Eugene Kim and Han-Kyo Kim, *Korea and the Politics of Imperialism, 1876-1910* (University of California Press, 1967), 6-11.

48. Kang, “Immigrant Misappropriations: The Importance of Ichiro.”

“Aspects of Philippine life that other American visitors might find disturbing seem to fascinate Spoelstra,” Bartholomew wrote. “Where many foreigners look at Manila’s poverty and see nothing but despair, Spoelstra was moved by the ingenious ways Filipinos found to bring joy (and basketball) into the most difficult living situations. This is not to sugarcoat the country’s problems, but to recognize that the poor still lead dignified lives despite circumstances that might break someone raised among American middle-class comforts.”<sup>49</sup>

Like Kang, Bartholomew covered themes of race and identity through the lens of sport, while relating it to his own experiences. After *Grantland* ended, *Slate* called Bartholomew’s story one of the best the site had produced.<sup>50</sup>

“Most other news sites would have said, ‘Who cares about basketball in the Philippines?’ and forced Bartholomew to focus on more mainstream stories,” *Slate*’s Justin Peters wrote. “But one of the best things about *Grantland* was the site’s readiness to let its writers pursue their own interests, no matter how obscure. This 2011 Bartholomew piece about Miami Heat coach Erik Spoelstra’s off-season trip to the Philippines is a great example of how *Grantland* could, at its best, combine the arcane with the mainstream, to great effect.”<sup>51</sup>

In September 2012, Wesley Morris, one of the site’s more prolific writers, critiqued the character of Rob Gronkowski, the then-23-year-old tight end for the New England Patriots who was known for his fun-loving demeanor. “Gronk” was both persona and the person, Morris argued, a sincere representation of the man-boy himself.

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49. Bartholomew, “Spoelstra in the Philippines,” *Grantland*, October 6, 2011, accessed February 20, 2018, [grantland.com/features/spoelstra-philippines/](http://grantland.com/features/spoelstra-philippines/).

50. Justin Peters, “Farewell, *Grantland*,” *Slate*, October 30, 2015, accessed February 20, 2018,

[http://www.slate.com/articles/sports/sports\\_nut/2015/10/these\\_were\\_grantland\\_s\\_best\\_stories\\_espn\\_please\\_don\\_t\\_take\\_them\\_down.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/sports/sports_nut/2015/10/these_were_grantland_s_best_stories_espn_please_don_t_take_them_down.html).

51. *Ibid.*

Morris uses the example of Simmons spotting “Gronk,” Gronkowski’s brother and a group of friends in the men’s bathroom at the ESPY’s doing “crossies” – or patterned group urination – in a stall and also running up an escalator that was going down. The acts weren’t for the cameras or the sponsors. Instead, they were for the pure joy of it.

But because “Gronk” is a professional athlete with all the attendant pressures of the position – Morris dubs this as “heaviness” – he is a study in fame, and its effect on young men with ample time and money. In “The Tao of Gronk,” Morris argued Gronkowski was an outlier. The superstar had transcended “heaviness” through sheer boyish charm. But that only could work for “Gronk” and perhaps “Gronk” alone, Morris continued. For other athletes – those of color, for example – the expectations shift and the same actions can be construed differently.<sup>52</sup>

“He isn’t bearing the burdensome self-consciousness of blackness,” Morris wrote. “If nothing else, his behavior is an exclamatory rejection of heaviness and expectation, of those stupid, oppressive, and undying social institutions that he had nothing to do with creating or fostering and doesn’t want to uphold. He signifies certain privileges of whiteness — casual public nudity, being nationally celebrated for acting like a fool — without embracing them.”<sup>53</sup>

By the end of 2012, about a year and a half into the site, Simmons had added Bill Barnwell and Zach Lowe, who wrote about the NFL and NBA, respectively. By the end of 2013, he had added Morris, a Pulitzer Prize-winning film critic, to the team. Each writer’s fame grew significantly while at the site. The talent was there, Mays and Kang said, but Simmons’ platform had made each a superstar.

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52. Wesley Morris, “The Tao of Gronk,” *Grantland*, September 18, 2012, accessed February 21, 2018, <http://grantland.com/features/rob-gronkowski-new-england-patriots-party-style/>.

53. *Ibid.*

“He basically collected all the young stars of the internet,” Kang said. “He wanted them all to figure it out together.”<sup>54</sup>

Through Grantland, each shot to fame. Kang said working for the site, one with ESPN’s and Simmons’ name attached to it, launched careers. Kang had written for The New York Times Magazine prior to and while working at Grantland, but with the magazine he was “just a byline.”

“I didn’t really have a career before Grantland,” said Kang, who now also reports for Vice News Tonight. “I think I would have always been able to write reported, long-form features for The New York Times Magazine, but like you do three of those a year and you make \$30,000 at best. You can’t live off that with no benefits.

“I find when I talk to people who are familiar with my writing at all, they all talk about Grantland, and I’m like, ‘you know I did write for The New Yorker, The New York Times Magazine,’ and they don’t remember anything I’ve written there, and part of me is always annoyed because I’ve put so much time and effort into those pieces,” he continued. “At Grantland, I had a sense that this was a home for me. That’s something Bill would always say: ‘Writers need homes and you go to The Times, you’re just going to be a guy who writes good things, but no one is going to care.’ He’s probably right.”<sup>55</sup>

## **Money**

Despite the staff settling in and Grantland finding its footing, new problems arose. By August 2014, the site was attracting 4.8 million unique visitors, according to comScore data, 19 percent better than the previous year.

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54. Kang, interview with author, July 5, 2017.

55. Ibid.



But it was a paltry figure compared to competitors such as Deadspin, Business Insider reported, which boasted 25 million visitors that month to the tune of a 303 percent year-over-year growth.<sup>56</sup>

Despite having visitors funneled to the site via ESPN.com, Grantland's monthly traffic consistently ranked below competitors. Its highest traffic figure came near the end, May 2015, the same month Simmons' contract wasn't renewed. According to comScore, it drew 7.2 million visitors that month.<sup>57</sup>

In October 2015, its final month of publication, it attracted about 6 million in traffic.<sup>58</sup>

By comparison, ESPN was regularly drawing more than 70 million unique visitors in 2015, eclipsing 90 million in January. In February, competitors such as SB Nation, Yahoo Sports, Fox Sports, Bleacher Report and Sports Illustrated all saw their traffic surpass 20 million.<sup>59</sup>

"It sucked when the numbers would come out and people weren't reading the site as much as they should," Kang said.<sup>60</sup>

To compound matters, the site lost money. Sponsorship deals with Subway and Lexus helped, but Simmons wanted the site to be kept clean aesthetically. White space dominated, while banner ads remained sparse. David Cho, Grantland's publisher, remarked in 2012 that banner ads remained popular among sites and marketers, while lamenting their lack of creativity.<sup>61</sup>

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56. Carlson, "Bill Simmons' Websites Are Surprisingly Tiny, And One Potential Bidder Says He's Not Worth \$3 Million A Year," *Business Insider*, October 6, 2014, accessed June 21, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/grantland-and-fivethirtyeight-traffic-2014-10>.

57. Max Willens, "Five months in, Bill Simmons' The Ringer tries to find its footing," *DigiDay*, November 14, 2016, accessed September 9, 2017, <https://digiday.com/media/five-months-ringer-use-pick/>.

58. Richard Sandomir, "HBO Silences Show, Leaving Bill Simmons With a Weaker Voice," *The New York Times*, November 13, 2016, accessed September 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/14/sports/bill-simmons-hbo-any-given-wednesday-ringer.html>.

59. Eric Fisher, "ESPN Leads ComScore Rankings For 12th-Straight Month With 74.7 Unique Visitors," *Sports Business Daily*, March 13, 2015, accessed September 9, 2017, <http://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Daily/Issues/2015/03/13/Media/ComScore.aspx>.

60. Kang, interview with author, July 5, 2017.

61. Brian Morrissey, "The Great Banner Ad Debate," *DigiDay*, May 16, 2012, accessed September 16, 2017, <https://digiday.com/media/the-great-banner-ad-debate/>.

Yet how to monetize Grantland was long a point of contention between Simmons and ESPN. Simmons had editorial control, but ESPN owned the site. Bartholomew, Browne and Kang said the staff knew Simmons was often keeping them protected from Bristol, fighting to improve Grantland’s visibility on ESPN’s homepage and for increased support regarding the site’s other properties, such as its extensive podcast network and the “Grantland Basketball Hour,” a show hosted by Simmons on the NBA.

“We should have made a lot more money than we did, and part of this is my fault,” Simmons said on his podcast in November 2015, after the site had shut down. “I always felt like we should just worry about the words — people are going to come — worry about the quality. The staff can back me up; I never looked at the pageviews and stuff, I never cared about that. I always was worried about the overall calibration and quality of the site, and I felt like in the long run we were going to win.

“But then when the business stuff started and we needed to keep growing the site and they were like, ‘look, the site’s not really raking in the cash,’ I’m like, ‘that’s not possible,’” he continued. “We have the best advertising demo there is. This doesn’t make sense. Explain this to me... We were like this little boutique place that’s trying to build traffic and trying to give them a little soul. You almost have to think outside the box a little bit.”<sup>62</sup>

In an interview with Deitsch, Grantland’s Chris Connelly, who replaced Simmons after Simmons left in May 2015, argued the company would be “very closely scrutinized if you are not a money-making operation.” Connelly alluded to ESPN reading the tea leaves, noting pressure would mount for a site they understood was “not making money.”<sup>63</sup>

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62. Simmons, interview with Malcolm Gladwell, The Bill Simmons Podcast, podcast audio, November 5, 2015, <https://soundcloud.com/the-bill-simmons-podcast/ep-19-malcolm-gladwell-1>.

63. Deitsch, “Connelly Q&A: Editor-in-chief on what went right, wrong with Grantland,” *Sports Illustrated*, November 1, 2015, accessed November 20, 2015, <https://www.si.com/more-sports/2015/11/01/grantland-chris-connelly-interview-bill-simmons-ESPN>.

On top of that, Grantland’s staff, which numbered from 40 to 50 at its peak, former employees said, were all paid well. And Simmons was paid handsomely.

“That was a big part of the equation,” Deitsch said.<sup>64</sup>

From a business standpoint, the site itself wasn’t sustainable. But backed by ESPN, which was estimated to be worth more than \$50 billion in 2014, it could exist within the ecosystem.<sup>65</sup>

From a cultural standpoint, it added to ESPN’s cache. That had value.

“That’s what had to be frustrating,” Deitsch said. “It was doing smart work, it built a loyal audience, it made ESPN look better. And even if it wasn’t making a ton of money, they have loss leaders that were far less impactful for them.”<sup>66</sup>

## **Relationships**

Another part of the equation was Simmons himself.

When John Skipper was promoted from executive vice president of content to company president in late 2011, the changes that came at first were subtle, rather than sweeping. Former president George Bodenheimer moved into an advisory role as executive chairman. Skipper was now in charge of the business side. He didn’t name his successor.<sup>67</sup>

Skipper loved the content side, Miller and Simmons said on the latter’s podcast, and was brilliant at it. But he loved it insofar as he didn’t wish to give it up.<sup>68</sup>

In Simmons’ estimation, that was his mistake: Skipper couldn’t do both.

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64. Deitsch, interview with author, July 12, 2017.

65. Kurt Badenhausen, “The Value of ESPN Surpasses \$50 Billion,” *Forbes*, April 29, 2014, accessed October 9, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kurtbadenhausen/2014/04/29/the-value-of-espn-surpasses-50-billion/#6c3f75c461f5>.

66. Deitsch, interview with author, July 12, 2017.

67. Sam Schechner, “ESPN Names New President,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 23, 2011, accessed October 2, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203710704577054541786018680>.

68. Simmons, interview with Jim Miller, *The Bill Simmons Podcast*, podcast audio, July 12, 2017.

“It seemed weird that he wasn’t going to replace himself and as it was happening I was watching it going, ‘So you’re going to do George’s job?’ Simmons said on his podcast. “Which George’s job is basically to fly everywhere, you’re on an airplane all the time, you’re going to Burbank for a meeting every week, you’re just immersed in the business side – but also try to do the content job. And the thing with Skipper – and I’ll defend him to the death on this – he’s great on content, great taste, I would say he’s had the best taste of anyone who ever ran ESPN, and a lot of the stuff he did, especially from (2008) to 2012 was lights out, really smart, really forward thinking.

“Now all of sudden he’s doing this other job,” Simmons continued. “It’s a little like in the NBA when people are coaching and they’re doing the GM job at the same time, and you just can’t, like Doc Rivers, you just can’t do both jobs. So we all thought he’ll figure out who his No. 2 is, it will happen, and then six months pass, nine months pass, 12 months pass, and it became clear it was bullpen by committee. And I think that was his biggest mistake. I think he thought the direct reports he had... all these people could just collectively do his old job. And it’s wrong. You need somebody who has the taste, who’s the tastemaker and the content maker and that’s when the wheels came off.”<sup>69</sup>

Simmons and Skipper had been close, Simmons said on his podcast, particularly from 2009 through 2013 – the era when Simmons’ star was burning brightest. Skipper, along with John Walsh, had always championed Simmons, Miller reported in “Those Guys,” and shared a genuine bonhomie.<sup>70</sup>

Deutsch, who covered Simmons and Skipper, agreed.

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69. Ibid.

70. Miller and Shales, 660-668; 726-729.

“They were very, very close,” Deitsch said. “He had a direct line to Skipper, which most talent did not. I mean, Skipper is a pretty open president. But Bill could call him anytime day or night, could text him anytime day or night. I think they were friends. I think at some point Simmons would have considered Skipper a mentor on the business side of stuff. Bill was let into places that almost no other talent was let into, just in terms of executive-like decisions. Today, it’s definitely not the same.”<sup>71</sup>

Browne also noticed the hot-and-cold relationship between Simmons and ESPN establishment, and how market forces – and Simmons’ mouth – could create a tense environment between Los Angeles and Bristol.

“Bill was always close with John Walsh, that was his guy,” Browne said. “I think when things are good, everyone’s friends, everyone’s making money. When things begin to go south, unfortunately everything comes down to money, that puts strains on everyone’s relationships.”<sup>72</sup>

But as the final months of Simmons’ tenure with ESPN were closing in, Walsh was also nearing the end of his career with the company. He retired at the end of January 2015, closing the book on one of the most successful careers at ESPN.<sup>73</sup>

With Walsh gone and Skipper now responsible for juggling rights fees, a dwindling pool of cable subscribers and a slew of big-name personalities like “The Sports Guy,” Simmons was losing his two biggest supporters in Bristol.

The relationship began to splinter further as the business, both inside ESPN and the marketplace surrounding it, was beginning to shift quickly, and as Simmons continued to act out in public to his bosses’ chagrin.

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71. Deitsch, interview with author, July 12, 2017.

72. Browne, interview with author, August 3, 2017.

73. Miller, “John Walsh: His Own Unique Self,” *Sports Business Daily*, May 11, 2015, accessed August 13, 2017, <http://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Journal/Issues/2015/05/11/Media/John-Walsh.aspx>.

Back east, trouble was brewing. A star player for another team would set in motion a chain of events spelling the end of more than one career.

Ray Rice, then a prolific running back for the Baltimore Ravens, had been seen in television ads, done radio spots,<sup>74</sup> scored endorsement deals with Nike and M&T Bank.<sup>75</sup> The Baltimore Sun had dubbed him the “most popular Raven in town, at least on offense.”<sup>76</sup> Ravens Coach John Harbaugh called Rice “a high-character guy.”<sup>77</sup> His smile flashed on billboards across Charm City.<sup>78</sup>

The Ravens had won the Super Bowl a year earlier, capping a season in which the Rutgers product had rushed for more than 1,000 yards, his fourth-straight year breaking the millennium mark.<sup>79</sup> In 2012, the team rewarded him with a five-year contract worth about \$40 million.<sup>80</sup>

Baltimore loved Ray Rice. After former team leaders, linebacker Ray Lewis and safety Ed Reed, retired following the Ravens’ Super Bowl run, Rice appeared poised to take over as face of the franchise.

But in February 2014, about a year after the Ravens’ Super Bowl victory, news surfaced that Rice had assaulted his then-fiancée, Janay Palmer, in the Revel Casino in Atlantic City. Both Rice and Palmer were arrested and charged with simple assault domestic violence. They were taken to jail and released that night.<sup>81</sup>

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74. Kevin Van Valkenburg, “After taking time to reflect, Ray Rice says losing frustrates him, not the lack of carries,” *The Baltimore Sun*, November 16, 2011, accessed January 9, 2018, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/sports/ravens/ravens-insider/bal-after-taking-time-to-reflect-ray-rice-says-losing-frustrates-him-not-a-lack-of-carries-20111116-story.html>.

75. Katie Zavadski, “Ray Rice Loses Nike Contract, Shunned by Rutgers,” *New York Magazine*, September 9, 2014, accessed January 9, 2018, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2014/09/ray-rice-loses-nike-contract-shunned-by-rutgers.html>.

76. Van Valkenburg.

77. Ibid.

78. Ibid.

79. ESPN, “Ray Rice Stats,” *ESPN*, 2018, accessed January 8, 2018, [http://www.espn.com/nfl/player/stats/\\_id/11289](http://www.espn.com/nfl/player/stats/_id/11289).

80. ESPN, “Ravens sign Ray Rice for 5 years,” *ESPN*, July 16, 2012, accessed January 8, 2018, [http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/\\_id/8171271/ray-rice-baltimore-ravens-signs-5-year-40m-deal](http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_id/8171271/ray-rice-baltimore-ravens-signs-5-year-40m-deal).

81. Justin Fenton, “Ravens running back Ray Rice arrested after incident in Atlantic City,” *The Baltimore Sun*, February 16, 2014, accessed January 8, 2018, [www.baltimoresun.com/sports/bal-ravens-running-back-ray-rice-arrested-after-incident-in-atlantic-city-20140216-story.html](http://www.baltimoresun.com/sports/bal-ravens-running-back-ray-rice-arrested-after-incident-in-atlantic-city-20140216-story.html).

It happened on a Friday. Valentine's Day.

“We are aware of the Friday night situation with Ray Rice and his fiancée,” Chad Steele, the Ravens' director of public relations, told *The Baltimore Sun* in a statement. “We have spoken with Ray, and know that they returned home together after being detained.”<sup>82</sup>

But the story grew. The “minor physical altercation” offered by Rice's attorney turned out to be much more. Days later, TMZ released footage of Rice dragging Palmer out of an elevator inside the casino.<sup>83</sup> Palmer appeared unconscious. Several media outlets, ESPN included, reported Rice had struck Palmer with his hand.<sup>84</sup>

About a month later, Rice's charges were increased to aggravated assault after the case went to a grand jury. The charges carry a maximum sentence of five years. Rice avoided jail time and a trial by agreeing to participate in a “pretrial intervention program.” All the while, Janay spoke out in defense of her husband.<sup>85</sup>

In June 2014, the Rices, along with Ravens team brass, met with Goodell and the NFL to explain the situation. In July, Goodell gave Rice a two-game suspension for the upcoming season.<sup>86</sup> The punishment was widely criticized for being soft. In question was whether the NFL had seen the full video.

The full video showed Rice punching Palmer inside of the elevator. The footage was graphic. It caused an uproar. TMZ released it after the first week of the NFL season on Sept. 8. That day, the Ravens released Rice and the NFL suspended him indefinitely.<sup>87</sup>

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82. *Ibid.*

83. Jeff Gray, “Ray Rice seen dragging fiancée in surveillance video,” *SBNation*, February 19, 2014, accessed January 8, 2018, <https://www.sbnation.com/nfl/2014/2/19/5425994/ray-rice-video-tmz-arrest-fiancee-unconscious-video/in/5191279>.

84. Jamison Hensley, “Ray Rice knocked fiancée out,” *ESPN*, February 20, 2014, accessed January 8, 2018, [http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/\\_/id/10484945/ray-rice-baltimore-ravens-knocked-fiancee-unconscious-altercation](http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/10484945/ray-rice-baltimore-ravens-knocked-fiancee-unconscious-altercation).

85. Nina Mandell, “Janay Rice defends husband, ex-Ravens RB Ray Rice,” *USA Today*, September 9, 2014, accessed January 14, 2018, <https://www.indystar.com/story/sports/nfl/2014/09/09/janay-rice-defends-husband-ex-ravens-rb-ray-rice/15326767/>.

86. Louis Bien, “A complete timeline of the Ray Rice assault case,” *SBNation*, November 28, 2014, accessed January 8, 2018, <https://www.sbnation.com/nfl/2014/5/23/5744964/ray-rice-arrest-assault-statement-apology-ravens>.

87. *Ibid.*

On Sept. 9, Goodell denied having seen the full video, saying that the league had asked for it more than once, but no one in the league's offices had seen the second tape.<sup>88</sup>

Following the scandal, Simmons called NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell a "liar" on his podcast, criticizing the league's handling of the situation. He dared his bosses to suspend him and they obliged. He was suspended for three weeks without pay.<sup>89</sup>

Simmons wasn't the only member of the media who disagreed with Goodell's position. But as "The Sports Guy," founder of Grantland and owner of one of the largest Twitter accounts in sports, his voice carried over the din. He was angry, former employees say, not only with the NFL but with ESPN. He criticized ESPN for being "in the bag" for the NFL, its broadcast partner with whom it has a \$15.2 billion deal through 2021.<sup>90</sup>

"The way ESPN has covered the NFL for the last year has been really shaky," Simmons would say on his podcast a year later, after he and ESPN had cut ties. "You didn't really see it (coverage of Ray Rice and Goodell) on ESPN. You saw it everywhere else. You start to say, 'Wait a minute, this is their biggest partner. Are they holding back a little?'"<sup>91</sup>

The podcast episode that followed Goodell's denial didn't fit the image of a Disney-owned company. Several curse words were invoked. The dare – "I really hope somebody calls me or emails me and says I'm in trouble for anything I say about Roger Goodell" – was typical Simmons.<sup>92</sup> The mouth often moves before the mind.

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88. Molly Kordares, "Roger Goodell: We didn't see full Ray Rice video," *CBS News*, September 10, 2014, accessed January 8, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/roy-rice-controversy-commissioner-roger-goodell-defends-nfl-says-league-didnt-see-second-video/>.

89. Petchesky, "The Sports Guy vs. ESPN: How Bill Simmons Lost Bristol," *Deadspin*, September 26, 2014, accessed October 29, 2015, <https://deadspin.com/the-sports-guy-vs-espn-how-bill-simmons-lost-bristol-1639533260>.

90. Sandomir, "ESPN Extends Deal With N.F.L. for \$15 Billion," *The New York Times*, September 8, 2011, accessed January 8, 2018, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/09/sports/football/espn-extends-deal-with-nfl-for-15-billion.html>.

91. Cindy Boren, "Bill Simmons keeps bashing ESPN for 'shaky' NFL coverage," *The Washington Post*, October 8, 2015, accessed January 8, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2015/10/08/bill-simmons-keeps-bashing-espn-for-shaky-nfl-coverage/?utm\\_term=.6f113791eec2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2015/10/08/bill-simmons-keeps-bashing-espn-for-shaky-nfl-coverage/?utm_term=.6f113791eec2).

92. Ryan Parker, "ESPN's Bill Simmons suspended for Goodell rant; barred from Twitter," *The Los Angeles Times*, September 24, 2014, accessed January 15, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/sports/sportsnow/la-sp-sn-espn-bill-simmons-suspended-20140924-story.html>.



ESPN responded with the following:

"Every employee must be accountable to ESPN and those engaged in our editorial operations must also operate within ESPN's journalistic standards," the company said in a statement. "We have worked hard to ensure that our recent NFL coverage has met that criteria. Bill Simmons did not meet those obligations in a recent podcast, and as a result we have suspended him for three weeks."<sup>93</sup>

ESPN also stripped Simmons of his tweeting privileges during the suspension, not the first time he was barred from the platform. The Twitterverse responded with support and #FreeSimmons began to trend worldwide.<sup>94</sup>

By Simmons' own account, he's said he's acted like a "jackass" for things he's said before regarding ESPN, and former employees who respect him also say he could be less than cordial.<sup>95</sup> Being polite didn't make him famous.

"Bill's like sandpaper," said Kyle Godwin, a former associate producer with ESPN Films who was at the company during Simmons' heyday. "He was like Odell Beckham Jr. with the Giants. Like off the field he's not doing anything wrong, but he can cause headaches. You find yourself always defending or making statements regarding him, whether it was a tweet or bumping of heads with the direction of the business."<sup>96</sup>

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93. Ibid.

94. Ibid.

95. Parker, "Bill Simmons Apologizes for "Being a Jackass" in THR Interview," *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 8, 2016, accessed January 15, 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/bill-simmons-thr-interview-sorry-900897>.

96. Kyle Godwin, interview with author, January 10, 2017.

In May 2015, he attacked Goodell again. While a guest on Dan Patrick's radio show, Simmons panned Goodell's role in the "Deflategate" investigation, which scrutinized the New England Patriots' deflation of footballs during the 2015 AFC Championship Game.<sup>97</sup> That the Patriots, Simmons' team, were involved did not go without notice to those in the media.

"Deflategate," as it has come to be known, stayed in the headlines for more than a year. The story transcended the sports world. It appeared on the "Today" show. Late-night television writers penned skits about the controversy.<sup>98</sup> The 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals spent time listening to a case about deflated leather balls, whether or not a person who throws those balls knew about rules involving PSI and evidence invoking the Ideal Gas Law. More than one person called the situation ridiculous.<sup>99</sup>

Yet it continued. In May 2015, the NFL found evidence that Patriots personnel had tampered with footballs used in the 2015 AFC Championship Game and that Tom Brady, the team's star quarterback, had known about it. The NFL punished the Patriots, issuing a \$1 million fine, forcing the forfeiture of several draft picks and suspending Brady for four games.<sup>100</sup>

Brady appealed, was denied, then had his suspension erased by a U.S. District Judge. The NFL then appealed the judge's decision. Brady's suspension was reinstated. Brady appealed again and was denied again.<sup>101</sup>

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97. Sandomir, "ESPN Is Splitting With Bill Simmons, Who Offers an Uncharacteristic Word Count: Zero," *The New York Times*, May 8, 2015, accessed October 13, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/09/sports/bill-simmons-and-espn-are-parting-ways.html>.

98. Scott Stump, "Bob Costas: Tom Brady 'mishandled' Deflate-Gate with NFL, public," *Today*, May 12, 2015, accessed January 15, 2018, <https://www.today.com/news/deflate-gate-tom-brady-mishandled-issue-bob-costas-says-t20561>.

99. Sean Gregory, "Here's Why Deflategate Is Still Ridiculous," *Time*, July 29, 2015, accessed January 15, 2018, <http://time.com/3975905/tom-brady-deflategate-ruling/>.

100. ESPN, "Deflategate timeline: After 544 days, Tom Brady gives in," *ESPN*, July 15, 2016, accessed January 8, 2018, [http://www.espn.com/blog/new-england-patriots/post/\\_id/4782561/timeline-of-events-for-deflategate-tom-brady](http://www.espn.com/blog/new-england-patriots/post/_id/4782561/timeline-of-events-for-deflategate-tom-brady).

101. *Ibid.*

“Deflategate” ended with Brady declining to appeal his four-game suspension from the league to the U.S. Supreme Court.<sup>102</sup> It was a larger sentence than what Rice initially received for hitting a woman. More than 500 days had passed since the game.<sup>103</sup>

To critics, Simmons included, “Deflategate” represented all that was wrong with the NFL. On Patrick’s radio show, Simmons was venomous in his criticism of Goodell and the league. He said Goodell “lacked the testicular fortitude” to punish the Patriots when the league’s findings came out. To Skipper, who was looking for a reason to cut ties with Simmons, Deadspin reported, it was the final straw.<sup>104</sup>

The next day, Friday, May 8, ESPN announced it was parting ways with Simmons, four months before his contract was set to expire.<sup>105</sup> The announcement took Simmons and his staff by surprise. Most, including Simmons, found out through The New York Times’ story on Twitter. It did not go over well.

The Times’ Richard Sandomir reported that Skipper had not called Simmons beforehand.<sup>106</sup> The once-close relationship had soured.

“I think they made a pretty bad PR judgment just in terms of ‘let’s get ahead of the story,’ but they tried to get ahead of the story by calling a New York Times reporter and having the reporter report it,” Deitsch said. “It was going to be huge news, but they probably miscalculated just how big in terms of social media, Twitter, Facebook. But I think once John Skipper made that decision, he wanted to control the narrative, and he wanted to control the narrative by letting The New York Times know first. I know the Simmons camp was very pissed by that story.”<sup>107</sup>

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102. Ibid.

103. Ibid.

104. Dave McKenna, “Bill Simmons Cribbing An Old WWE Catchphrase Was The Last Straw For ESPN,” *Deadspin*, May 8, 2015, accessed January 9, 2018, <https://deadspin.com/bill-simmons-cribbing-an-old-wwe-catchphrase-was-the-la-1703247060>.

105. Sandomir, “ESPN Is Splitting With Bill Simmons, Who Offers an Uncharacteristic Word Count: Zero.”

106. Ibid.

107. Deitsch, interview with author, July 12, 2017.

Mays had been in Chicago, his hometown, the night before it happened. He had been out with friends. They had drinks, commemorating the sixth anniversary of his father's death. Mays went into the early hours, commiserating and catching up, buzzed then woozy from the booze. It had been a late night.

He woke up the next morning to a text message from a friend. The link to Sandomir's story was attached.

"Bill has always been more than a boss to me," Mays said. "What began as a rough day, that turned into a rough month. I think that we all felt a certain pain about it, and we all understood that things weren't going to be the same because they couldn't be. That was Bill's place."<sup>108</sup>

Bartholomew had been in Manila when it happened. He had been there to cover the fight between Pacquiao and Floyd Mayweather, where a large public viewing was set up by the government.

It was Friday going into Saturday in Manila. At midnight, his phone began to buzz with texts and notifications.

"That particular day is sort of a flashbulb memory in the minds of a lot of my co-workers and for me," he said.<sup>109</sup>

He spent his remaining week in the Philippines posting fan-made stickers bearing the phrase, "Bill Simmons for Sports Czar 2016," around the islands. Simmons had Grantland-branded apparel, everything from pickup league basketball jerseys to hooded sweatshirts, made up for the staff.

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108. Mays, interview with author, June 21, 2017.

109. Bartholomew, interview with author, June 26, 2017.

Bartholomew gave a handful away while overseas. A Grantland hoody had even appeared in Pacquiao's Instagram account, donned by one of Bartholomew's friends who had worked for Team Pacquiao. On Twitter, the Bill Simmons-ESPN story became the No. 1 trending topic.

The story had been larger than the Grantland staff or ESPN had imagined. Skipper said Grantland would soldier on – with ESPN's blessing. Grantland staffers said they would continue to work.

At ESPN's Upfronts a few days later, Skipper told Deitsch that ESPN was committed to Grantland for the long-term.

"We are going to continue to do it and we are going to continue to do it at the same level both financially and staff-wise," Skipper said in the interview. "Bill did a great job building that site, and I think he and I will be on the same page in suggesting we want to build on that legacy."<sup>110</sup>

But inside Grantland, something had broken. The person who had hired and mentored the largely millennial staff was gone. Simmons had been Grantland's link to the ESPN East Coast establishment. He had also been the barrier.

"He really protected us with whatever was going on in Bristol," said Louisa Thomas, a former editor.<sup>111</sup>

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110. Deitsch, "ESPN president John Skipper talks Simmons, EPL & more at Upfronts," *Sports Illustrated*, May 12, 2015, accessed September 9, 2017, <https://www.si.com/more-sports/2015/05/12/espn-upfronts-john-skipper-bill-simmons-grantland-epl>.

111. Louisa Thomas, interview with author, June 13, 2017.

## CHAPTER 4. Changes

### Gone

After Simmons' ouster, ESPN named Chris Connelly, a veteran reporter who had joined ESPN the same year as Simmons, as interim editor-in-chief. Writing for *Vanity Fair*, Miller reported that many staffers had found out about Connelly's appointment via Twitter.

"Discussions on background with Grantland staffers past and present (ESPN executives associated with Grantland declined to talk on the record or on background for this column) reveal that the site is beset by a climate of fear, a cycle of mistrust, and a belief amongst several that staff are 'treated like children,'" Miller wrote. "An overall lack of communication with management has been beyond frustrating for the staff."<sup>112</sup>

Connelly swiftly implemented changes, placing an emphasis on reporting over analysis and commentary – hallmarks of the site under Simmons' leadership – and enacting his own style, one foreign to most of the staff.

According to Kang, in initial conversations about building Grantland, Simmons had wanted non-traditional writers, those who grew up outside of the establishment and found their voice online. In essence, proteges.

With Connelly, the tenor of the site had changed. So, too, had expectations.

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112. Miller, "Can ESPN Solve Its Grantland Problem?" *Vanity Fair*, October 16, 2015, accessed October 15, 2015, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/10/espn-grantland-problem>.

“It’s not all Chris’ fault, Bill knew all of us and Chris didn’t,” Browne said. “He had like 30 experts on Grantland in front of him, which was the staff, but he thought he kind of knew what Grantland was – and he didn’t. I don’t have any ill will towards him, but I didn’t want to work for him.”<sup>113</sup>

ESPN had underestimated the staff’s loyalty to Simmons, Deitsch and former staffers said. Despite Skipper’s wish to continue the site for the long haul, the situation grew bleaker with each month.

The divide between Bristol and Los Angeles had never been larger.

“ESPN is a company that thrives on control,” Browne said. “With Bill gone we didn’t have our buffer anymore from ESPN. Now that Bill was gone they could start to dictate what happened at Grantland, which was I think ultimately why people started to try to leave and why a lot of people were unhappy with the post-Bill situation.

“I actively went out of my way to avoid anyone who worked at ESPN who wasn’t part of the Grantland, ‘30 for 30’ universe, those were my people,” Browne continued. “(ESPN) is a place that operates on control and Bill’s got a loud mouth. He says what he knows is right even if it’s not going to rub people the right way.”<sup>114</sup>

Browne said staffers had started to look for jobs elsewhere. Morris, the site’s movie critic, left for The New York Times in September. Browne left for New York Magazine in October, during the site’s final days.

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113. Browne, interview with author, August 8, 2017.

114. Ibid.

A few weeks earlier, four top editors, including deputy editor Sean Fennessey, left to join Simmons as part of his then-unnamed project with HBO. Fennessey had been offered the interim editor-in-chief job after Simmons' departure, Skipper said in November 2015, but had declined.<sup>115</sup>

With Connelly, former staffers said, Skipper had wanted to exert more influence over the site now that Simmons was gone.

“I think Chris is a friend of the company and he was very familiar to them,” Thomas said. “I think they underestimated the staff loyalty to Bill and to the people internally and kind of didn't foresee what would happen. There was kind of a separation from Bristol that was not something that everyone in the company liked, so in some ways I think it made sense to bring in someone who could kind of keep an eye on things.”<sup>116</sup>

The office was as bare as it had been in those early days, said Bartholomew, who stayed until the end. After the departures, Bartholomew was one of the few senior editors left.

“We sort of knew that things were trending in a bad direction, though it wasn't immediately clear that they were going to shut it down,” he said. “It was a bit of a triage unit in there.”<sup>117</sup>

When the four editors left on Oct. 11, the site was continuing to pump out good content, Mays and Bartholomew said, but the relationship between staff and management was in a state of disrepair. In one episode, Mays and Barnwell had mentioned the four departing editors on their NFL podcast, paying tribute to their former colleagues.

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115. Miller, “Can ESPN Solve Its Grantland Problem?”

116. Thomas, interview with author, June 13, 2017.

117. Bartholomew, interview with author, June 26, 2017.



But the segments never aired. Connelly, Miller reported, had the segments praising the former staffers edited out.<sup>118</sup>

“It was frustrating,” Mays said. “I think that Barnwell probably felt the same way. I think it shined a light on a greater problem. (Connelly) said it wasn’t the right place or time. He’s the boss, you know?”<sup>119</sup>

The departure of the four editors left both management and the remaining staff reeling. The move wasn’t seen as cordial by everyone. For some, it was an orchestrated attempt by Simmons’ loyalists to stick one to ESPN, regardless of the collateral damage.

“It was a really shitty way – both on the part of ESPN and the part of people who decided to turn it into the end of season two of ‘Mad Men’ – to try and do a big symbolic gesture as a ‘fuck you’ to ESPN, and then freeze out the rest of the people who were still working there, so they basically had to try and take over and steer something that was clearly going to end,” Kang said. “But that’s the other side of Bill – like half his life he wants to live as a movie.”<sup>120</sup>

Kang, a founding editor, left Grantland in 2014 because of the culture Simmons had created at the site. The content had deteriorated, Kang said, apart from pieces by Lowe and Barnwell and the occasional long-form piece by a contributor.

“It was a very exciting place to work at first and Bill was a great leader at first,” Kang said. “Then something happened where I think the wrong people got in his ear.

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118. Deitsch, “SI Media Podcast: Featuring guest James Andrew Miller,” *Sports Illustrated*, October 20, 2015, accessed November 17, 2015, <https://www.si.com/more-sports/2015/10/20/si-media-podcast-james-andrew-miller-grantland-espn>.

119. Mays, interview with author, June 21, 2017.

120. Kang, interview with author, July 5, 2017.

“The way that went down bred a lot of resentment,” he continued. “I don’t think Bill has sort of the magic touch, do-no-wrong magic touch that he had when he started Grantland, and I think he has too many enemies now.”<sup>121</sup>

The bleeding of talent continued. On Oct. 30, 2015, ESPN released a statement announcing it was shutting the site down.

“We have decided to direct our time and energy going forward to projects that we believe will have a broader and more significant impact across our enterprise,” part of the statement read.<sup>122</sup>

Connelly had summoned the staff to the conference room at 10:50 a.m. He read the statement prepared by ESPN. It was timed that by the end of the meeting, the press release would come out and the website would be changed to what it is now.

“It feels cold when it’s happening, but for a big corporate entity there’s really no other choice,” Bartholomew said.<sup>123</sup>

The homepage of the site was changed to a graphic containing the sentence: “It was a good run.”

Grantland was over. The movie had ended.

## **Rights and Wrongs**

For Simmons and ESPN, there were choices, many of them, concerning Grantland, but greater forces were at work that contributed to the end of the site. At the end of many enterprises, a clash of big egos is often coupled with big money, with no clear culprit. Everyone carries some blame.

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121. Ibid.

122. ESPN, “ESPN Statement Regarding Grantland,” *ESPN*, October 30, 2015, accessed January 7, 2016, <http://espnmediazone.com/us/espn-statement-regarding-grantland/>.

123. Bartholomew, interview with author, June 26, 2017.

“Simmons had a point of view on this as the talent and as the person who built the site and who they decided not to bring back and at the same time ESPN management has a point of view on what they did, what they outlaid, the amount of money they paid,” Deitsch said. “It’s not even really a question of what is the truth, it’s very much a ‘Rashomon’ situation where there’s truth from different sides, everybody believes their truth. It doesn’t mean that anyone is lying, they just believe their truth.”<sup>124</sup>

Faith and fiduciary become tangled up together. More control begets the opposite. Feelings are hurt. People move on.

It’s the startup story, one Simmons has said he has been attracted to. In his podcast, he said ESPN should have had an office in Silicon Valley near the start of the decade.<sup>125</sup>

But like “The Social Network,” a movie about the rise of Facebook, the human element cannot be extricated from an equation of ones, zeroes and dollar signs. “The more you get into the world of media and journalism, you can’t take it personally,” Browne said. “A lot of times someone is acting on the orders of someone else, who is acting on the orders of someone else.”<sup>126</sup>

At the time, while ESPN was dealing with pressure internally from Simmons, it was facing greater external pressure from a falling number of subscribers, increases in rights fees for live programming and its parent company Disney. The latter, in turn, was facing pressure from Wall Street and its shareholders. Like any publicly traded company, it still is.

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124. Deitsch, interview with author, July 12, 2017.

125. Simmons, interview with Jim Miller, The Bill Simmons Podcast, podcast audio, July 12, 2017.

126. Browne, interview with author, August 8, 2017.

ESPN makes about \$7.6 billion in affiliate revenue from subscriber fees alone, according to data from financial firm SNL Kagan, with subscribers paying about \$7 a month for ESPN – one of the highest fees for cable programming in the industry.<sup>127</sup>

Among sports networks, its subscriber fees are the highest. According to Business Insider, subscribers pay \$9.06 each month for ESPN’s four top networks, ESPN, ESPN2, ESPNU and the SEC Network, regardless of their viewership of those networks.<sup>128</sup> By comparison, ESPN dwarfs the next closest competitor Fox Sports, whose networks cost a subscriber \$1.86 per month.

For parent company Disney, its media networks “like ESPN bring home more than double annually what Disney makes off all the movie tickets, DVDs and digital copies, and other revenue tied to its studio films—combined,” Quartz reported.<sup>129</sup>

In 2016, Disney reported \$6.7 billion in operating income from its cable properties, Miller reported, with ESPN accounting for about half of those dollars.<sup>130</sup>

ESPN has “a big moat,” Miller said on Simmons’ podcast.<sup>131</sup>

But ESPN’s subscribers, attracted by on-demand programming and over-the-top “skinny” bundles, are leaving in droves. In the last six years, more than 12 million cable subscribers have left ESPN, according to Nielsen data.<sup>132</sup>

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127. Andrew Bucholtz, “ESPN’s main network makes \$7.57 billion in subscriber fees, almost seven times what FS1 gets,” *Awful Announcing*, May 4, 2017, accessed September 5, 2017, <http://awfulannouncing.com/espn/espn-757-billion-subscriber-fees-fs1-116-billion.html>.

128. Gaines, “Cable TV customers pay more than \$9 per month for ESPN networks whether they watch or not,” *Business Insider*, April 27, 2017, accessed September 5, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/cable-satellite-tv-sub-fees-espn-networks-2017-4>.

129. Ashley Rodriguez, “Even with Star Wars and Marvel, Disney’s movie business is worth less than half of ESPN,” *Quartz*, May 9, 2017, accessed September 5, 2017, <https://qz.com/979288/even-with-star-wars-and-marvel-disneys-dis-movie-business-is-worth-less-than-half-of-espn-and-its-networks/>.

130. Miller, “James Andrew Miller: ESPN Executive Shake-Up Ushers in ‘New World Order’ (Guest Column),” *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 19, 2017, accessed September 5, 2017, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/james-andrew-miller-espn-executive-shakeup-ushers-new-world-order-guest-column-1014567>.

131. Simmons, interview with James Andrew Miller, The Bill Simmons Podcast, podcast audio, July 12, 2017.

132. Miller, “James Andrew Miller: ESPN Executive Shake-Up Ushers in ‘New World Order’ (Guest Column).”

“They could have been at the forefront with some of this stuff, and instead they’re trying to belatedly catch up because of some of the decisions they made,” Simmons said on his podcast. “ESPN is not going under. I think the issue for them is their cable deals are so good... Now people are like, ‘I’ll pay for Netflix.’”<sup>133</sup>

After a dalliance with original programming and reality television, ESPN under Skipper began to shift its investments toward live programming and its flagship “SportsCenter.” Its deals with the NFL (\$1.9 billion annually through 2021)<sup>134</sup> and NBA (a reported \$1.4 billion annually through the 2024-2025 season) are higher than what other networks pay.<sup>135</sup> (ESPN shares the NBA deal with Turner.)

“SportsCenter,” meanwhile, has lost traction with consumers, who now reach for their phones before their remotes when looking for their sports fix. In 2016, ESPN’s viewership ratings fell 11 percent from 2015 and advertising dollars for “SportsCenter” fell by more than \$100 million from the January to June 2016 period to the same time frame in 2017, Forbes reported.<sup>136</sup>

Meanwhile, according to ESPN Digital Media data, ESPN reached 12.9 million average daily unique users on smartphones in March 2016, more than double the number of No. 2 Bleacher Report (5.6 million).<sup>137</sup>

Competition also upped the pressure inside Bristol. The network’s bid for the NFL, for instance, was \$800 million more than the next closest deal.<sup>138</sup>

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133. Simmons, interview with James Andrew Miller, The Bill Simmons Podcast, podcast audio, July 12, 2017.

134. Sandomir, “ESPN Pays Top Dollar for Football, but Audience Isn’t Buying,” *The New York Times*, November 28, 2016, accessed September 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/28/sports/football/monday-night-football-tv-ratings-espn.html>.

135. ESPN, “NBA extends television deals,” *ESPN*, February 14, 2016, accessed September 9, 2017, [http://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/11652297/nba-extends-television-deals-espn-tnt](http://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/11652297/nba-extends-television-deals-espn-tnt).

136. Madeline Berg, “Don’t Blame Jemele Hill For ESPN’s Ratings Problem,” *Forbes*, October 10, 2017, accessed October 12, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/maddieberg/2017/10/10/dont-blame-jemele-hill-for-espn-ratings-problem/#1df9f69e6ae3>.

137. Kevin Ota, “ESPN Digital Media in March: 110 Million Unique Fans Worldwide,” *ESPN*, May 4, 2016, accessed October 8, 2017, <http://espnmediazone.com/us/press-releases/2016/05/espn-digital-media-in-march-110-million-unique-fans-worldwide/>.

138. Jay Yarow, “ESPN made 2 critical mistakes, and now it’s paying the price,” *Business Insider*, October 27, 2015, accessed October 9, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/espn-mistakes-led-to-layoffs-2015-10>.

With the launching of rival sports networks at NBC and Fox in 2012 and 2013, respectively, rights fees continue to grow, despite the migration of subscribers from cable to streaming services.

“I think it’s going to be Amazon, Facebook, Netflix and Google deciding everything,” Simmons said on his podcast. “Look at what Netflix did with standup comedy... ‘We’re just buying it.’ They just did it, and eventually (the tech companies) are going to look at the NBA or the NFL and they’re going to be like ‘we’re just buying it.’”<sup>139</sup>

### **The Postscript**

Simmons, now 48, lives in Los Angeles with his wife and two children. A diehard Boston sports fan, he’s grown accustomed to living on the West Coast. He hates the Lakers on principle, but goes to their games from time to time.<sup>140</sup> He’s made a career out of heckling.

In 2002, before leaving Boston for the Kimmel show, he wrote a Page 2 column about his trepidation – but also his excitement – concerning the move.

“I didn’t want to move to the West Coast, scale back my ESPN.com columns, leave my family and ditch my beloved Boston teams,” he wrote. “I don’t even have to explain why. You know me by now.”<sup>141</sup>

He goes on to describe his own Hollywood dreams. He writes he “always wanted to try the TV thing,” and that “the chance to live in the Capital of Unintentional Comedy was just too enticing.” He gives the example of going to a charity event featuring a Tony Danza performance. Danza begins singing, but doesn’t fancy how the song starts off. He stops the band and makes them start over.

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139. Simmons, interview with James Andrew Miller, The Bill Simmons Podcast, podcast audio, July 12, 2017.

140. Tannenbaum, “Bill Simmons’ Big Score.”

141. Simmons, “The Sports Guy goes Hollywood,” *ESPN*, 2001, accessed October 1, 2017, <http://proxy.espn.com/espn/page2/story?page=simmons/021101>.

“Things like this happen in Hollywood every day,” Simmons wrote. “And I’m going to be there. It’s my destiny.”<sup>142</sup>

He goes to Los Angeles Kings games. His daughter is a fan. His family, being a father, dad jokes – the topics of his columns have aged with “The Sports Guy.”<sup>143</sup>

“His column is essentially an evolving first-person chronicle of sports fandom, and he has moved on to new obsessions, like trying to prevent his young daughter from becoming a Lakers fan, or exposing his 3-year-old son to the exhilaration of watching Tiger Woods at Augusta,” Mahler wrote. “If this strikes some as Simmons veering perilously close to sentimental middle-aged-sportswriter terrain — picture Mitch Albom — well, Simmons is now a middle-aged sportswriter.”<sup>144</sup>

He writes less than he used to, but when he does it’s for *The Ringer*, the sports and pop culture site he launched in June 2016. After the ESPN-Grantland saga, he signed a three-year deal with HBO in July 2015 for an estimated \$7 million to \$9 million annually.<sup>145</sup> The network, which was among several in the bidding for Simmons’ services, gave Simmons his own show and also chipped in startup funding for *The Ringer*.

But Simmons’ show, “Any Given Wednesday,” was a critical and ratings failure. HBO canceled it after four months.<sup>146</sup>

His only other show at the network, “After the Thrones,” a recap of HBO’s “Game of Thrones,” was canceled in November 2016.<sup>147</sup>

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142. Ibid.

143. Simmons, “28 Days Later: Re-Throning of the Kings,” *Grantland*, March 14, 2012, accessed October 9, 2017, <http://grantland.com/the-triangle/28-days-later-re-throning-of-the-kings/>.

144. Mahler.

145. Eric Jackson, “The Ringer and Bill Simmons get a second chance with Vox,” *CNBC*, June 1, 2017, accessed August 3, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/06/01/the-ringer-and-bill-simmons-get-a-second-chance-with-vox.html>.

146. Bucholtz, “HBO’s investment in Bill Simmons/*The Ringer* doesn’t look great after latest cancellation,” *Awful Announcing*, June 13, 2017, accessed August 3, 2017, <http://awfulannouncing.com/hbo/bill-simmons-deal-isnt-bearing-fruit-hbo-got-aftershow-moving-twitter.html>.

147. Cynthia Littleton, “HBO Cancels Bill Simmons Talk Show ‘Any Given Wednesday,’” *Variety*, November 4, 2016, accessed August 3, 2017, <http://variety.com/2016/tv/news/bill-simmons-any-given-wednesday-hbo-canceled-1201909990/>.

“HBO is committed to Bill Simmons, and we are excited to bring his unique vision to bear on an array of new programming initiatives under the HBO Sports banner in 2017,” said Peter Nelson, executive vice president of HBO Sports, in a statement at the time. “Bill is an award-winning executive producer in the documentary arena, and we will work closely with him in developing new and engaging content for our subscribers.”<sup>148</sup>

But his time at HBO remains tenuous. Michael Lombardo, the executive who signed Simmons, left the network in 2016. Simmons’ only project at HBO is a forthcoming documentary on professional wrestling star Andre the Giant.<sup>149</sup>

The news came out in February 2017. In December, HBO announced it will air in spring 2018.<sup>150</sup>

The Ringer, meanwhile, launched in July 2016 with about 1.2 million unique visitors – a far cry from Grantland’s peak of 7.2 million and nowhere near the ESPNs and Yahoo Sports of the world.<sup>151</sup> About a year later, The Ringer had about 300,000 unique visitors for the month, according to comScore, while ESPN had 80 million and Yahoo Sports had 125 million.<sup>152</sup>

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148. Jackson, “The Case For Prodigal Son Bill Simmons Returning To ESPN In 2018,” *Forbes*, April 11, 2017, accessed September 5, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ericjackson/2017/04/11/the-case-for-prodigal-son-bill-simmons-returning-to-espn-in-2018/#56de5e0915ce>.

149. Deitsch, “Bill Simmons’s first HBO documentary will focus on André the Giant,” *Sports Illustrated*, February 13, 2017, accessed October 12, 2017, <https://www.si.com/tech-media/2017/02/13/andre-giant-bill-simmons-hbo-documentary>.

150. Zac Wassink, “Trailer for ‘Andre the Giant’ HBO Documentary Drops,” *Bleacher Report*, December 1, 2017, accessed January 8, 2018, <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/2747098-trailer-for-andre-the-giant-hbo-documentary-drops>.

151. Mike Shields, “Why Vox may be able to revive The Ringer, even though its traffic has plummeted,” *Business Insider*, May 30, 2017, accessed August 17, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/one-reason-the-ringer-may-be-ditching-medium-for-vox-is-that-traffic-was-slipping-2017-5>.

152. Jackson, “The Ringer and Bill Simmons get a second chance with Vox.”



“If Grantland does a story that the people at ESPN think they can put on the homepage and get a lot of run on, that sort of becomes a conversation starter throughout all of sports,” Deitsch said. “That is much harder for The Ringer to do on a daily basis given that they don’t have ESPN’s portal. They have to generate that on their own and through their own writers, which is harder to do. I know this just from working at Sports Illustrated, we don’t have a TV network, it’s just hard to do.”<sup>153</sup>

The site, Forbes reported, carries a staff of about 70 full-time employees.<sup>154</sup>

For more than \$20 million over three years, two canceled TV shows, a round of funding for an expensive-but-underperforming site and one documentary with the WWE haven’t been the return on investment HBO originally pictured, wrote Awful Announcing<sup>155</sup> and Deadspin, two frequent critics of Simmons.<sup>156</sup>

Then there’s Simmons himself. According to former employees and critics alike, he can be his own worst enemy.

“I’m sure someone will give him another shot,” Kang said. “I know his days at HBO are over. It doesn’t matter how long that contract is, those guys are just done with him. They made some fake announcement that he’s going to work on documentaries and stuff with them – that’s bullshit. He was just a dick to them in the same way he was a dick to everyone at Bristol.”<sup>157</sup>

Despite his failures at HBO and tepid numbers at The Ringer, Simmons still has a legion of fans. He has 6 million followers on Twitter. Among sportswriters, only Adam Schefter, ESPN’s star NFL reporter, has more.

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153. Deitsch, interview with author, July 12, 2017.

154. Ibid.

155. Bucholtz, “HBO’s investment in Bill Simmons/The Ringer doesn’t look great after latest cancellation.”

156. Kevin Draper, “Bill Simmons Isn’t Too Big To Fail,” Deadspin, November 17, 2016, accessed January 11, 2017, <https://deadspin.com/bill-simmons-isnt-too-big-to-fail-1788556607>.

157. Kang, interview with author, July 5, 2017.

A nation of sports fans either fell in love with Simmons' "frat-boy schtick," wrote *The Atlantic's* Nicholas Jackson, or hated it. There were few who are neutral.

Throughout its existence, critics called Grantland a vanity project. Simmons would be synonymous with the project, even if ESPN was writing the checks. On launch day, Jackson, then an associate editor for *The Atlantic*, predicted the site would fail for this very reason.

"But Simmons will lose this battle – the rebellious teenager still relies too heavily on its parents for support – and ESPN will drive this site into the ground," Jackson wrote. "It's only a matter of time before he leaves."<sup>158</sup>

So has age mellowed Simmons? Or is he still "the rebellious teenager," owner of a petulant streak that prevents him from staying at any one place for too long?

Peter Kafka, the senior editor of tech business publication *Recode*, has interviewed Simmons about his time at ESPN and his plans for *The Ringer*. He's seen both sides: Simmons, the punk, and Simmons, the media mogul.

In March 2015, while Simmons was still with ESPN, Kafka interviewed him in Austin, Texas at the South by Southwest festival. After Simmons had done a podcast with Horatio Sanz, a former "Saturday Night Live" cast member, Kafka and Simmons nudged into a cubicle inside a Four Seasons to do the interview. The quarters were tight. But Simmons opened up about his situation at ESPN.

At the time at least, age wasn't the only thing that had mellowed him.

"He reeked of marijuana," Kafka said.

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158. Nicholas Jackson, "Bill Simmons's Grantland Is Doomed Even Before Launch," *The Atlantic*, June 8, 2011, accessed September 9, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/06/bill-simmonss-grantland-is-doomed-even-before-launch/240095/>.

Kafka interviewed Simmons again in February 2017. Among the things they discussed: Simmons' time at ESPN, starting *The Ringer* and the challenges in building his own company.

"I've seen people float the idea that he'd go back to ESPN one day, but I find that very hard to imagine," Kafka said. "But he will answer (about ESPN) a little more dispassionately today, with less rancor."<sup>159</sup>

According to Deitsch, Simmons still has friends at ESPN, including former Grantland staffers Lowe and Barnwell. But, he said, the level of resentment between Simmons and ESPN management surprised him during Grantland's run.

Grantland, a comet in the world of sports media, defined Simmons' career with ESPN: productive, distinct and never dull.

### **The Writer**

The morning Grantland ended, Mays was driving back from his alma mater, where he had visited a professor's class. It was an annual ritual for him. He loved doing it, seeing his old editor from the paper and fielding questions from the students. They weren't much younger than he was.

It was afternoon by the time he reached Chicago. His friend was playing at Wrightwood Tap, a favorite bar of theirs, that night. It was the night before Halloween.

"It was kind of like a weird Irish wake for Grantland that night," Mays said. "Everyone was there and came up and gave me a hug and was like 'sorry, man,' and in part it was just one of those things, it was fun. My friend, while he was singing, was like, 'this is the Grantland funeral,' which was funny. I'll never forget that."<sup>160</sup>

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159. Peter Kafka, interview with author, July 11, 2017.

160. Mays, interview with author, June 21, 2017.

The weekend passed. On Monday, Mays received a call from Peter King, the head of Sports Illustrated's Monday Morning Quarterback blog.

King offered Mays a short-term deal through the end of the NFL season.

"It was a life raft," Mays said.

In April 2016, Fennessey, his old editor at Grantland, called. The Ringer was getting ready to launch, he said, and they wanted to get the band back together. At first, Mays was hesitant. He didn't want to feel like the intern again. He didn't want to be the newbie on the ground floor.

But then he realized he couldn't be, he said. He was 28, instead of 22. He was still young, but a lot had changed in six years. He wore nicer clothes, for one.

It wasn't about replicating Grantland, he said – that was impossible. The decision was personal as much as it was professional.

"By no means was I done growing then, by no means am I done growing now," he said. "Going somewhere that was going to help me grow was important."<sup>161</sup>

Mays continues to cover the NFL for The Ringer. In some ways it does feel like Grantland, he said. The roster is young. The energy is good. Jokes, pop culture and lengthy opinions populate every corner of the black, white and melon-green site. The Ringer's offices are in Los Angeles.

There's Fennessey. There's Simmons. Juliet Litman, Mallory Rubin, Chris Ryan and Andy Greenwald, all former Grantlanders, are there.

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161. Ibid.

But in other ways, it's different, the biggest changes being time and distance. Though his beard is a bit bushier than before.

"I'm not there and I'm older," Mays said, laughing. "I'm at a different stage of my career. I'm not a kid anymore like I was there."

He works from Chicago. He tweets about the NFL, movies, the beards of athletes – hello, Dallas Keuchel – the music of Canadian rock band Japandroids. He hosts a podcast for *The Ringer*, where he riffs about football week to week.

He feels blessed, lucky, he said. He loves his job.

"Bill gave me a career," Mays said. "It's nice to be able to make a living doing this because someone gave you a shot."<sup>162</sup>

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162. Ibid.

## CHAPTER 5. Conclusion

### Lessons Learned

In 2011, the year Grantland launched, Vox Media launched The Verge, a digital technology publication. In 2012, Vox launched Polygon, a site devoted to the gaming industry, and in 2013, it added Racked and Curbed, sites covering the fashion and real estate industries, respectively, under its brand umbrella. In 2014, it introduced Vox.com, a general news site, and brought on former Washington Post columnist Ezra Klein to head the venture. Klein had risen to fame for creating Wonkblog, a space for policy analysis that had garnered a large following. When Klein left to become editor-in-chief of Vox.com, Wonkblog was attracting more than 4 million pageviews a month.<sup>163</sup>

Klein's departure was representative of a larger trend. "Mr. Klein is not running away from something, he is going toward something else," wrote The New York Times' David Carr.

"Vox is a digitally native business, a technology company that produces media, as opposed to a media company that uses technology. Everything at Vox, from the way it covers subjects, the journalists it hires and the content management systems on which it produces news, is optimized for the current age."<sup>164</sup>

Carr's colleague, tech writer David Pogue, left The Times for Yahoo in October 2013.<sup>165</sup> Also that month, BuzzFeed hired Mark Schoofs, a former Pulitzer winner with The Village Voice, to lead a newly created investigative team.<sup>166</sup>

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163. Dylan Byers and Hadas Gold, "Why the Post passed on Ezra Klein," *Politico*, January 21, 2014, accessed November 8, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2014/01/ezra-klein-leaves-washington-post-102424>.

164. David Carr, "Ezra Klein Is Joining Vox Media as Web Journalism Asserts Itself," The New York Times, January 26, 2014, accessed November 8, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/27/business/media/ezra-klein-joining-vox-media-as-web-journalism-asserts-itself.html>.

165. Mark Jurkowitz, "The Growth in Digital Reporting," Pew Research Center, March 26, 2014, accessed November 8, 2017, <http://www.journalism.org/2014/03/26/the-growth-in-digital-reporting/>.

166. Johana Bhuiyan, "Buzzfeed hires Pulitzer winner Mark Schoofs to head new investigative unit," *Politico*, October 21, 2013, accessed November 8, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/media/story/2013/10/buzzfeed-hires-pulitzer-winner-mark-schoofs-to-head-new-investigative-unit-001235>.

Nate Silver, founder of the statistics blog FiveThirtyEight, took his product from The Times to ESPN to create a standalone site in the vein of Grantland.

“Grantland was kind of one of the first signs of the bubble bursting,” Browne said. “It takes a lot to stay alive right now.”<sup>167</sup>

In 2015, Vox landed a \$200 million investment from NBCUniversal.<sup>168</sup> A year later, Inc. Magazine named Vox Media a “Company of the Year” candidate.<sup>169</sup> In 2017, Vox added The Ringer to its publishing platform, agreeing to sell advertising and share revenue with Simmons’ site.<sup>170</sup>

The old guard was bleeding. Talent was leaving, taking with it readers accustomed to thumbing through screens rather than newsprint. The money followed. It had been following for some time.

Revenue from newspaper print advertising fell by more than 57 percent from 2008 to 2014, according to data from the Newspaper Association of America. Between 2000 and 2015, print ad revenue dropped from about \$60 billion to about \$20 billion, returning the industry to levels last seen around 1950.<sup>171</sup> Meanwhile, mobile ad revenue grew from about \$1.6 billion in 2011 to \$46.7 billion in 2016.<sup>172</sup> By 2017, nearly nine in 10 U.S. adults consumed their news online.<sup>173</sup>

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167. Browne, interview with author, August 8, 2017.

168. Emily Steel, “NBCUniversal Invests \$200 Million in Vox Media,” *The New York Times*, August 12, 2015, accessed November 8, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/13/business/media/nbcuniversal-invests-200-million-in-vox-media.html>.

169. Melissa Matthews, “Vox Media: From Sports Blog Hobby to Multimillion-Dollar Media Company,” *Inc.*, November 22, 2016, accessed November 8, 2017, <https://www.inc.com/melissa-matthews/vox-2016-company-of-the-year-nominee.html>.

170. Daniel Victor, “The Ringer, Bill Simmons’s Site, Will Switch Its Host to Vox Media,” *The New York Times*, May 30, 2017, accessed June 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/30/business/media/the-ringer-vox-bill-simmons-medium.html>.

171. Mark J. Perry, “Creative destruction: Newspaper ad revenue continued its precipitous free fall in 2014, and it’s likely to continue,” *AEI*, April 30, 2015, accessed November 10, 2017, <https://www.aei.org/publication/creative-destruction-newspaper-ad-revenue-continued-its-precipitous-free-fall-in-2014-and-its-likely-to-continue/>.

172. *Ibid.*

173. Pew Research Center, “Digital News Fact Sheet,” *Pew Research Center*, August 7, 2017, accessed November 10, 2017, <http://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/digital-news/>.

Advertisers were following readers' tastes. Average daily circulation for newspapers fell 7 percent from 2014 to 2015, according to Pew analysis of Nielsen data, marking the greatest decline since 2010.<sup>174</sup>

In response, legacy publications such as *The Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* turned to other revenue streams. They reinvested in digital subscriptions. They focused on social feeds; by 2015, half of all digital ad revenue was flowing through Facebook and Google.<sup>175</sup> Seeing the money move towards mobile, *The Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* upgraded their smartphone and tablet apps. From 2011 to 2014, *The Times*' digital subscriptions nearly doubled.<sup>176</sup>

Circulation, which made up about 26 percent of *The Times*' business in 2000, made up about 54 percent in 2014. In contrast, advertising revenue had fallen below both circulation and digital subscription revenue in the last six years, according to investor relations data from the company.<sup>177</sup>

While advertising still dominates across the industry, recent trends have placed a larger emphasis on value-based reporting, curtailing an overreliance on pageviews. A simple click is not enough. In *The Times*' "Journalism That Stands Apart: The Report of the 2020 Group," an internal report released in January 2017, the paper outlined its manifesto going forward, diving into the economics of a changing environment.

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174. Pew Research Center, "State of the News Media 2016," *Pew Research Center*, June 15, 2016, accessed November 10, 2017, <https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2016/06/30143308/state-of-the-news-media-report-2016-final.pdf>.

175. Derek Thompson, "The Print Apocalypse and How to Survive It," *The Atlantic*, November 3, 2016, accessed November 17, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/11/the-print-apocalypse-and-how-to-survive-it/506429/>.

176. Thompson, "The New York Times Is a Great Company in a Terrible Business," *The Atlantic*, July 29, 2014, accessed November 17, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/07/the-new-york-times-is-a-great-company-in-a-terrible-business/375240/>.

177. *Ibid.*



“We are, in the simplest terms, a subscription-first business,” the report read. “Our focus on subscribers sets us apart in crucial ways from many other media organizations. We are not trying to maximize clicks and sell low-margin advertising against them. We are not trying to win a pageviews arms race. We believe that the more sound business strategy for The Times is to provide journalism so strong that several million people around the world are willing to pay for it.”<sup>178</sup>

Other publications are following suit. The Guardian, for instance, uses a model similar to The Times, with a few caveats. Whereas The Times has a paywall after five stories, The Guardian keeps its product free for consumers.

It’s a fact the UK-based paper points out when asking readers to become “supporters” because “advertising revenue is falling.”<sup>179</sup> Readers of The Guardian can support the paper by making financial contributions or, through the more traditional route, by becoming subscribers.

This shift in focus – from the advertiser to the individual consumer – was a response to market forces. But before then, before around 2015, the year Grantland ended, the paradigm was flipped. Advertising ruled.

From 2006 to 2015, according to Poynter, “journalism was optimized for viral buzz and ‘click-bait’ entered common parlance.”<sup>180</sup> Social networks guided the industry. Writing for the reader wasn’t lucrative; writing for the advertiser was. That meant tempting headlines, shorter articles, a banner ad, a pop-up, more clicks, more impressions. Less substance, but more saturation.

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178. The New York Times, “Journalism That Stands Apart,” *The New York Times*, January 2017, accessed November 17, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/projects/2020-report/>.

179. The Guardian, “Support The Guardian,” *The Guardian*, accessed November 17, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us>.

180. David Skok, “The current move to subscription models is a revolutionary shift for journalism,” *Poynter*, April 27, 2017, accessed November 23, 2017, <https://www.poynter.org/news/current-move-subscription-models-revolutionary-shift-journalism>.

The market rewarded those who solved the equation first. From 2013 to 2014, BuzzFeed, one of the winners of the social era of journalism, grew from 300 employees to 700 employees, The Wall Street Journal reported, and surpassed \$100 million in revenue.<sup>181</sup> In 2015, the site, famous for its click-through “listicles,” scored a \$200 million investment from NBCUniversal, a pact in a similar vein as the Vox deal. NBCUniversal invested another \$200 million a year later, putting the valuation of BuzzFeed at about \$1.7 billion.<sup>182</sup>

From an editorial standpoint, “click-bait” was met with derision. In a New Yorker article, critic Alex Ross lamented, “even if the data could measure every twitch of every eyeball, should that information control editorial choices?”<sup>183</sup> Writing for Vox in 2014, Nilay Patel, now the editor-in-chief of The Verge, wrote that click-bait was essentially media companies playing “games” with the reader. The exercise broke trust rather than built it.

“Upworthy’s now-infamous ‘You’ll never guess what happened next’ headline construction is a one-question pop quiz; a call for the reader to actually guess what happened next, and then verify that guess by reading the article,” Patel wrote. “It creates value because there’s a chance you’ll be rewarded with the smug satisfaction of being right. (And if even you’re not, you still get to share that question on Facebook to trick your friends.) Click-bait irritates when the real answer doesn’t live up to the wildest guesses of the reader; no one cares if what happened next is actually boring. The virtual scarcity of the game doesn’t create any value.”<sup>184</sup>

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181. Lucas I. Alpert, “Buzzfeed Crosses \$100 Million in Revenue, Staff Memo Says,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 25, 2014, accessed November 23, 2017, <https://blogs.wsj.com/cmo/2014/11/25/buzzfeed-crosses-100-million-in-revenue-staff-memo-says/>.

182. Peter Kafka, “NBCUniversal is doubling its bet on BuzzFeed by investing another \$200 million,” *Recode*, October 20, 2016, accessed November 23, 2017, <https://www.recode.net/2016/10/20/13352900/nbcuniversal-buzzfeed-investment>.

183. Alex Ross, “The Fate of the Critic in the Clickbait Age,” *The New Yorker*, March 13, 2017, accessed November 23, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-fate-of-the-critic-in-the-clickbait-age>.

184. Nilay Patel, “Can you answer these 4 questions and save the media industry from Taylor Swift?,” *Vox*, July 15, 2014, accessed November 25, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2014/7/15/5901977/can-you-answer-these-four-questions-and-save-the-media-from-taylor-swift>.

But from an economic standpoint, it made sense: Follow the money. In 2013, Pew reported that nearly 70 percent of the industry’s revenue came from advertising.<sup>185</sup> The market demanded that value was linked to impressions rather than readership. Glancing at the ads surrounding and preceding the article translated to financial survival. Reading the article didn’t.

Those who succeeded realized that truth: clicks over content. The method wasn’t popular among aesthetes, but in a market-driven economy, aesthetics only served to direct traffic to the highest bidder. Most consumers didn’t pay to read. They paid for the products that the headlines motioned them towards. Faust regretted his deal, but he was fictional.

But why the change now? With its seeming dominance, why is ad revenue falling out of favor? Though ads still generate the bulk of industry dollars, revenue from them has steadily declined since 2004, according to Pew data, falling 10 percent in 2016. Total industry ad revenue was about \$18 billion in 2016, about a third of what it was a decade ago.<sup>186</sup>

Digital subscriptions, meanwhile, have grown, seeing larger increases in recent years.<sup>187</sup> Media critics and companies cite several reasons for the change. For starters, the market has become more fragmented. The social era was built upon the viral nature of an article, rather than its actual value.<sup>188</sup> News became more diluted. Less-credible sources appeared, peddling “click-bait” for profit. The market didn’t filter them out; instead, it supported their growth.

Legacy publications weren’t immune. Nor were they innocent. The crowd had money. To follow it was just good business.

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185. Jesse Holcomb and Amy Mitchell, “The Revenue Picture for American Journalism and How It Is Changing,” *Pew Research Center*, March 26, 2014, accessed November 22, 2017, <http://www.journalism.org/2014/03/26/the-revenue-picture-for-american-journalism-and-how-it-is-changing/>.

186. Michael Barthel, “Despite subscription surges for largest U.S. newspapers, circulation and revenue fall for industry overall,” *Pew Research Center*, June 1, 2017, accessed November 22, 2017, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/01/circulation-and-revenue-fall-for-newspaper-industry/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/01/circulation-and-revenue-fall-for-newspaper-industry/).

187. Pew Research Center, “Digital News Fact Sheet.”

188. Skok.

But those factors – fragmentation, dilution – led to a pushback among consumers. Yin swung back to yang. Trust of the media fell. According to Gallup, confidence in newspapers fell to a record low in 2016.<sup>189</sup> Consumers began paying for content. Digital circulation ticked upward. In 2012, it comprised 11 percent of total digital revenues, according to the WAN-IFRA World Press Trends report. By 2017, it had nearly tripled.<sup>190</sup>

Credibility had value again. Grantland was in the middle of that shift from social-driven content, how “viral” a piece can be, to content driven by subscribers. Digital media executive David Skok separates these eras as “social” and “Software as a Service,” also known as “SaaS.” Skok, a former digital managing editor of *The Boston Globe*, rephrases “SaaS” as “Stories as a Service” in the context of journalism.<sup>191</sup>

With the social era, think Facebook, Twitter, the early days of Grantland. Sharing without caring. With the latter, think Netflix and Amazon. Grantland in its waning days. Sharing still mattered, but now the quality of the story had a higher value. For consumers, truth came into sharper focus and the markets followed.

In the case of Grantland, what could have been done differently? In some ways, it was ahead of the curve. Simmons’ focus on long-form content and the quality of his staff and their stories was in line with the current marketplace. The site’s audience was targeted, reflecting the rise of niche sites and publications a la Vox’s model.

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189. Jim Norman, “Americans’ Confidence in Institutions Stays Low,” *Gallup*, June 13, 2016, accessed November 22, 2017, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/192581/americans-confidence-institutions-stays-low.aspx>.

190. Shan Wang, “As news organizations around the world struggle with advertising, more are prioritizing the individual reader,” *Nieman Lab*, October 13, 2017, accessed November 25, 2017, <http://www.niemanlab.org/2017/10/as-news-organizations-around-the-world-struggle-with-advertising-more-are-prioritizing-the-individual-reader/>.

191. Skok.

Cho, Grantland's publisher, said he saw New York Magazine's model, which included several "destination" sites such as the style-focused The Cut or entertainment offshoot Vulture, as attractive.<sup>192</sup> "That's sort of what we want to do: create destination pages that are stronger and feel like products of their own," Cho told Ad Age.<sup>193</sup>

Moreover, Grantland's podcasts brought in a bevy of possible subscribers; in 2013, Grantland's podcasts racked up 19 million downloads, Kafka reported for Recode.<sup>194</sup>

Technology analyst Ben Thompson wrote that Grantland's value was that it became a "destination site" for a specific audience. By focusing on content, it developed a distinctive, trusted voice. "Speaking personally, the site was one of only a handful I visited directly daily; if an article was on Grantland I presumed it was worth reading," he wrote.<sup>195</sup> That could bring in dollars.

"It's really hard to become a destination: You need compelling content of consistently high quality," he wrote in tech blog Stratechery. "Notice, though, that that is precisely the opposite of what most online publications have focused on: In their race for ever more content and ever more clicks most publications have lowered their quality bar."<sup>196</sup>

Grantland, Deitch said, delivered on its promise to ESPN and fulfilled "its charter": Make ESPN smarter. For all their differences, both Skipper and Simmons saw the value in the cultural caché that Grantland provided. But its failure to capitalize on that commodity, to turn soft power into cold cash, defines its legacy as much as its successes.

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192. Jason Del Rey, "As Grantland Grows Up, It Looks to New York Magazine as a Model," *Ad Age*, January 10, 2013, accessed November 25, 2017, <http://adage.com/article/digital/grantland-grows-york-magazine-a-model/239098/>.

193. Ibid.

194. Kafka, "Sports Guy Bill Simmons Helped Make Podcasts a Thing. Next Up: A Business," *Recode*, January 3, 2014, accessed November 25, 2017, <https://www.recode.net/2014/1/3/11621882/sports-guy-bill-simmons-helped-make-podcasts-a-thing-next-up-a>.

195. Ben Thompson, "Grantland and the (Surprising) Future of Publishing," *Stratechery*, November 4, 2015, accessed November 25, 2017, <https://stratechery.com/2015/grantland-and-the-surprising-future-of-publishing/>.

196. Ibid.

“Possible subscribers” is telling: Throughout its run, Grantland had none. Mathew Ingram, who covers media for The Columbia Journalism Review, argued Grantland’s writing alone could not sustain its staff, let alone make a profit.<sup>197</sup> Neither could advertising, which was kept minimal out of an aesthetic decision on Simmons’ part.

The context was also challenging. Being a sports site, Grantland was competing in a world dominated by box scores, fantasy leagues and skim-friendly recaps. Get the score, get the stats, get out. Though Grantland had a dedicated following, it would never dominate the market.

“It’s always going to be hard to get people to read that in the sports space, where most of the options will always be shorter,” Deitsch said. “It’s a different ball game than politics or news in places like The New Yorker where I think readers are conditioned to go and read long, and it’s harder to do in sports. And I say that as someone who works at SI.com, because you have a lot of readers who are looking for short stuff.”<sup>198</sup>

Solutions, Ingram contended, could have come in the form of subscriptions and more aggressively monetizing its podcast network. The subscriptions could have then pointed consumers toward other bankable services offered by the site or ESPN, including events hosted by Simmons and Grantland writers, Grantland merchandise and its podcasts. Grantland had a loyal, affluent following. In several ways, it failed to capitalize on and maximize this attractive market.

Simmons himself argued for the value of podcasts, extolling their advertising capabilities on his own podcast. A spot for Dunkin’ Donuts, for instance, is harder to ignore in the flow of a recording than if it exists as a banner on a scrollable webpage.

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197. Mathew Ingram, “What the Death of Grantland Says About the Future of Web Journalism,” *Fortune*, November 4, 2015, <http://fortune.com/2015/11/04/grantland-journalism/>.

198. Deitsch, interview with author, July 12, 2017.

Yet monetizing podcasts was difficult for a separate issue, one that recurs in accounts by former staff: Simmons and ESPN couldn't get along. Cue the what-ifs, regrets, recriminations. Simmons hasn't made peace with the Grantland story, Deitsch and former employees said, but he has become less aggrieved as the years pass. Time doesn't heal wounds, it turns out. It just knits them into a scar.

"ESPN was, in a lot of ways, the middleman for us," Simmons said on his podcast in 2017. "They weren't doing the greatest job, I think so, on the site, especially the podcast network, and it felt like it was a bigger business than it was. And we clashed about it when I was pushing for stuff. Now maybe it makes more sense than it did in 2014, 2015."<sup>199</sup>

Grantland's major issue, as this paper has outlined, was personal. What happened between Los Angeles and Bristol, a gulf of 3,000 miles and countless arguments and egos so large they had their own gravitational fields, lopped off whatever legs the site had to stand on.

Simmons was a media superstar. Some contend he still is, though his star has dimmed somewhat since leaving ESPN. Following a trend of digital media, both he and ESPN leveraged that following into a standalone site that attracted a niche audience. But Simmons' ego combined with ESPN's mismanagement was too much. The situation became toxic. Together, they contributed to the unraveling of a well-regarded source of sports journalism.

It was as if Simmons had been gifted a car, but the deed was in the parents' names. As Jackson described, the "punk" and his "parents" were destined for a messy end.<sup>200</sup>

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199. Simmons, "Interview with James Andrew Miller."

200. Nicholas Jackson, "Bill Simmons's Grantland Is Doomed Even Before Launch."

“In fact, I think the new site is doomed, and I suspect ESPN's executives will recognize that in only a month or two even if they refuse to admit it until millions of dollars have been spent,” Jackson wrote the day of Grantland’s launch.<sup>201</sup>

Grantland’s story is instructive for the industry. In droves, consumers have moved towards subscription-based, a la carte models, such as those offered by Netflix and Amazon; in journalism, The Times and The Wall Street Journal stand out in particular. ESPN, Simmons and critics have said, was slow to grasp that trend in comparison.

Tied to its lucrative cable deals, Bristol botched its chance to lead rather than follow the crowd. Its mistake cost it 12 million cable subscribers during this time.<sup>202</sup>

Grantland’s audience overlapped with these legacy publications’ pool of subscribers. Its failure to build a subscription model was a missed opportunity.

“I don't think Grantland is designed to be a major volume play,” said Eric Johnson, ESPN’s vice president of multimedia sales in 2013. “It's a sophisticated site with a very unique blend of sports and pop culture and that's ultimately what we bring to advertisers.”<sup>203</sup>

As the lines become more blurred between technology and media companies, so too are their methods of monetization. Several media companies have shifted to strategies favored by startups. It was a strategy Simmons favored near the start of the decade, and one ESPN has begun to adopt in recent years with its plans to offer an over-the-top package to consumers in 2018.<sup>204</sup>

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201. Ibid.

202. Miller, “James Andrew Miller: ESPN Executive Shake-Up Ushers in ‘New World Order’ (Guest Column).”

203. Del Rey.

204. Stephen Battaglio, “ESPN's streaming service could be a game changer,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 10, 2017, accessed November 22, 2017, <http://beta.latimes.com/business/hollywood/la-fi-ct-espn-streaming-20170810-story.html>.



As media companies recalibrate toward changing tastes, they're looking more to direct consumers to services they offer, rather than outside advertisers. Besides subscriptions, these include podcasts, events, travel, hosted discussions and contests. These all serve to create the "community" the social era was predicated upon, and ironically, serve to disrupt it.

It may be working. In 2017, for instance, Gallup found that confidence in newspapers rebounded 7 percent, the largest jump among the institutions included in the poll.<sup>205</sup>

Journalism may never again be a lucrative industry. Apple, Samsung and Microsoft, by comparison, combined to make nearly \$500 billion in revenue<sup>206</sup> in 2016, dwarfing the \$29 billion newspapers made through advertising and circulation.<sup>207</sup> But by copying some tech industry plays while responding to challenges within its own market, survival is possible.

Grantland informed and entertained. It existed at a time when the media industry went through sweeping changes. It still is. In planning how to adapt, there were disagreements that became personal, fires that were fanned by oversized egos on both sides. Distance, time and human nature conspired to bring about its end. It deserves its own "30-for-30."

But its story informs the greater picture of journalism in the digital era. Social networking and advertising still reign supreme, but reigns, however potent, are cyclical by nature. For the better part of the last ten years, the market promoted a reliance on both.

In recent years, however, the marketplace has trended away from these models that defined the early century. More people are willing to pay for quality content, packaged and tailored for their needs.

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205. Art Swift, "In U.S., Confidence in Newspapers Still Low but Rising," *Gallup*, June 28, 2017, accessed December 3, 2017, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/212852/confidence-newspapers-low-rising.aspx>.

206. Samantha Sharf, "The World's Largest Tech Companies 2016: Apple Bests Samsung, Microsoft And Alphabet," *Forbes*, May 26, 2016, accessed December 3, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/samanthasharf/2016/05/26/the-worlds-largest-tech-companies-2016-apple-bests-samsung-microsoft-and-alphabet/#f00d32eb6614>.

207. Pew Research Center, "Digital News Fact Sheet."

Companies, such as The Times and Vox, have developed additional services on top of the content they've been known for. The Times' "Smarter Living" section, created in 2016, is a prime example of the growth of service journalism – journalism centered on the consumer.<sup>208</sup> In 2016, The Times also launched "Watching,"<sup>209</sup> a section providing recommendations for television and movies, and acquired The Wirecutter, a product review site.<sup>210</sup>

"The news cycle is relentless, and people are always looking for other ways to escape," Karron Skog, editorial director for Smarter Living, told DigiDay. "The Times is expanding to say, 'Come to us for everything.'"<sup>211</sup>

Grantland was never The Times. It could not be The Times. But its writers were on par with The Times' staff – Morris, its movie critic, left for The Times in Grantland's twilight, and Kang, a founding editor, contributed to The New York Times Magazine throughout his time at Simmons' site. Remove the enmity between the Bristol and Los Angeles, and solutions may have been implemented with more ease. The business models differed. But the ingredients were in place to learn from The Times' strategy, a parallel that Cho, Grantland's publisher, alluded to with New York Magazine.<sup>212</sup>

But that is easier said than done. In "Those Guys," Miller closes the introduction with the following:

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208. Kara Bloomgarden-Smoke, "'The New York Times' Focuses on 'Smarter Living,'" *WWD*, January 10, 2017, accessed December 3, 2017, [wwd.com/business-news/media/the-new-york-times-smarter-living-tim-herrera-10743380/](http://wwd.com/business-news/media/the-new-york-times-smarter-living-tim-herrera-10743380/).

209. Gilbert Cruz, "Introducing Watching, a New TV and Film Website," *The New York Times*, October 27, 2016, accessed December 3, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/27/arts/television/introducing-watching-tv-movies-what-to-watch.html>.

210. Alexandra Steigrad, "New York Times Expands E-Commerce Reach; Buys The Wirecutter and The Sweethome," *WWD*, October 24, 2016, accessed December 3, 2017, <http://wwd.com/business-news/media/new-york-times-buys-wirecutter-the-sweethome-10689620/>.

211. Lucia Moses, "'It's new territory': The NY Times eyes expansion of its service journalism," *DigiDay*, October 30, 2017, accessed December 3, 2017, <https://digiday.com/media/new-territory-ny-times-eyes-expansion-service-journalism/>.

212. Del Rey.

“ESPN’s playing field has been populated with winners and losers, champions and chumps, cads and catalysts, heroes and, for lack of a better word, villains – and theirs is a shared story of struggle, defeat, more struggle, losses, and victory.

The story began decades ago, but in a way, it’s a saga that’s just getting started. As, indeed, are we...”<sup>213</sup>

Cutthroat corporate culture. An unforgiving landscape. Sweeping change with how journalism is done and delivered. And surviving. Just surviving.

Grantland went the way of so many other promising enterprises. It lived and died. It was ahead of its time, perhaps too much so. Under difficult circumstances, many self-inflicted and some beyond its own control, it could not hang on.

But its life helps tell the story of media in the 21st century. It provided a model for others to follow, as well as steps to avoid.

And the lives that were a part of it, they were changed, too. For good.

“The internet is not the same,” Browne said. “It’s not the easiest time to want to be a writer... But it was a privilege to work somewhere like that. A lot of what I do for the rest of my life professionally will be to try to recreate the feeling I had while working there, and that doesn’t mean it’s going to be in the same field or the same type of work, just the feeling of working there is something that I crave.

“The hunt for that is exciting.”<sup>214</sup>

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213. Miller and Shales, xv.

214. Browne, interview with author, August 8, 2018.

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