The Last Days of Time Inc.

An oral history of how the pre-eminent media organization of the 20th century ended up on the scrap heap.

By SRIDHAR PAPPU and JAY STOWE MAY 21, 2018

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

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

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

The flush times went on for a while. But then, starting about a decade ago, the company began a slow decline that, in 2018, resulted in the Meredith Corporation, a Des Moines, Iowa, media company heavy on lifestyle monthlies like Better Homes and Gardens, completing its purchase of the once-grand Time Inc. in a deal that valued the company at $2.8 billion. The new owner wasted no time in prying the Time Inc. logo from the facade of

its Lower Manhattan offices and announcing that it would seek buyers for Time, Fortune, Sports Illustrated and Money. The deadline for first-round

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We reached out to more than two dozen editors and writers who worked at Time Inc., asking them to reflect on the heyday of this former epicenter of power and influence, as well as its decline. These interviews have been condensed and edited.

THE OLD CULTURE

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

We were at 9 Rockefeller Plaza, across from the skating rink. On closing night, to prevent or make it unnecessary for writers and editors to go out of the building for dinner, they would serve dinner and preceded that with the so-called drinks cart. It was not abused, as far as I was able to tell. The food was good and it came from a French restaurant.

By the time I arrived, the so-called bar cart was a copy boy who would come around on Tuesdays and give each senior editor two bottles of liquor and a couple bottles of wine for that week's closing nights. You could go into a senior editor's office on a Thursday or Friday night for a drink, but you'd be

crazy to, because the senior editor would ask, “So, how’s the story going?”

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n writers and editors and women researchers who ten had affairs. People just stayed in the office and would make drinks, or people would go out to long dinners. You felt like you were in some movie version of an elegant magazine.

The first time I was on the 34th floor, where the executive offices were, I thought I was in some part of the Pentagon. Everything was shiny. Everything was marble.

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

RUMBLINGS OF CHANGE

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

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

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

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

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

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

Was I ever propositioned by my colleagues? Of course I was. But I was also lucky to be supported by powerful men: Henry Muller, Lanny Jones and

John Huey in particular. Few people understood that Huey, the “good old boy” from the South, was a feminist ally who supported my career and that

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

I was excited that my first job would be at Sports Illustrated. The second wave of African-Americans experienced things in corporate America that our predecessors were unable to experience. And we were prepared and we were unprepared. I went to a predominantly white middle school and high school. I went to Stanford. White people didn’t scare me. There were many times that I was reminded that I was a rarity in those hallways, but I never felt like I didn’t belong. Others might have thought that, but I really didn’t give a damn what they thought.

THE GILDED AGE

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

When I got to People in 1976, everybody said, “You should have been here when it was great.” And that was because Life had folded as a weekly and

People was looked down upon as a runt reincarnation. We got a lot bigger and made a lot of money. We were hiding money. Seriously. We were t our targets from one year to the next would not I'm not sure how the business side did that, but we h money that when I was managing editor I took the entire staff of People to Key Largo for a four-day retreat.

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

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

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

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

initially despised but have come to accept.

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ry formal luncheon inside the Time Inc building with think he ate a single bite of food or took one sip of water, but he told some amazing tales. Equally memorable, many years later, was a visit from Steve Jobs, when he handed us each an astonishing new device – the Ipad – which felt, that day, like a preview of our future. All of the titles had the power to draw attention from newsmakers, so you never knew who to expect.

The perfect sign of the top was in March 2001, Fortune took us all, both the business side and the editorial side, to Hawaii for a week.

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

When I went to work there in 1989, it was just so strange, because I had prided myself on being an outsider and I was coming into the belly of the beast. And once I got inside the belly I said, “Oooh, this is pretty great.” If I needed something in Vladivostok tomorrow, I could get it.

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

When you went abroad as an editor for Time magazine as an expat, it was like going abroad as a banker. There were all the allowances. Tax ing allowance. Your kids' school would be paid for. You ou got a driver. You got club memberships. I don't ges like that exist anymore in journalism.

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As the writer for the "Chatter" column at People, my job was to go out, preferably five nights a week, and get items and make connections. I got a call from the number two at the time. I go into his office, and he said, "I want to talk to you about your expense report." I was like a Boy Scout, only spending what I had to. And he said, "Peter you're not spending enough." I said, "But I'm going out five nights a week!" He said, "Well, go out more! Stay out longer!" I did the best I could without ending up in A.A.

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

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

LAST STAND

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

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

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

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

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

I was there the day that the merger between AOL and Time Warner happened and if you were at all at any level of management — and even if you weren't — you had stock options. There was a lot of buzz in the office of

"How much are you going to sell today?" There were people who sold everything that day and got quite wealthy and were the smartest people at [illegible] half of what I had, and the second half didn't even [illegible] ever amounted to anything. But that was probably the [illegible]e, Inc. You had senior editors who were able to make six-figure sums that day, if not more, and top editors who probably made several million dollars.

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

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

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

I had freedom, autonomy, got to develop all kinds of digital stuff. The problem was there was no significant reinvestment. Time Inc.'s relationship with Time Warner was fundamentally feudal. That's where the profits went.

For years, Time Inc was run by a team of brilliant business leaders,

publishers with deep knowledge of the company and the industry. Then we went from an 80-year-long winning streak to a storm of change – a string

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apid succession, insufficient digital investment, the of 2008, and a growing frustration and lack of e Warner corporate.

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

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

ONE ERA ENDS, ANOTHER BEGINS

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

My feeds were filled with people posting pictures of the Time Inc. sign coming down and the Meredith sign going up basically the minute the deal closed. From the outside, the haste struck me as so depressing. Why the race to obliterate a great legacy? Friends who were there describe an

awkward catered “welcome breakfast” that was brought in to the downtown offices the Monday after the deal closed. Some “legacy Meredith people,” as down from Third Avenue. And to us they felt like weird to realize, “Oh no, wait, we, the Time Inc. folks,

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

I’m cautiously optimistic to see how this story goes now. If they find the right buyer, there is enormous power globally in Time as an institution. And I would hate to see that lost or squandered. The most painful thing for me was something experienced by editors across a great many news organizations: that the business model was broken.

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