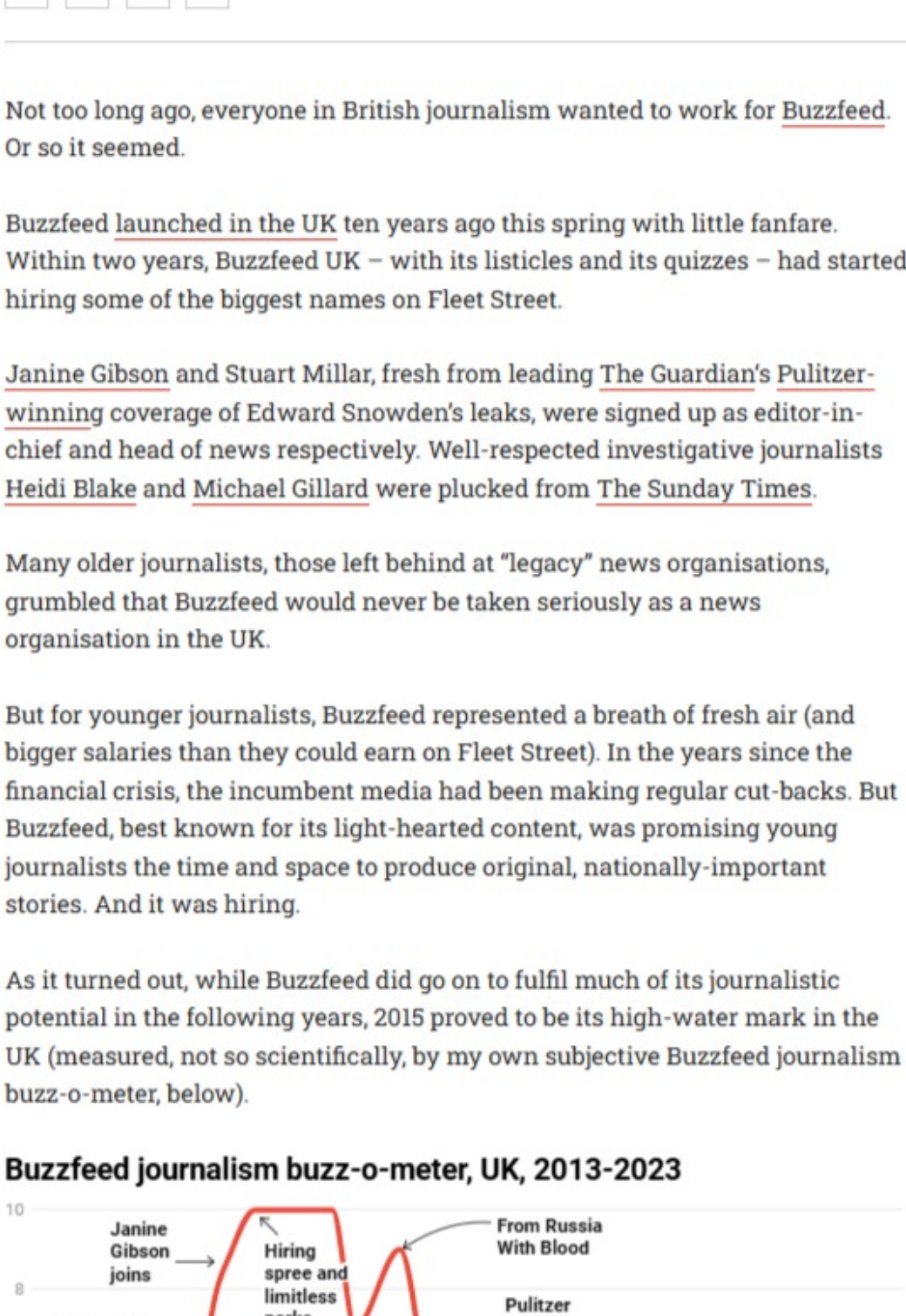


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From unlimited oysters to redundancies: WTF happened at BuzzFeed in the UK?

It is ten years since BuzzFeed launched in the UK and shook up Fleet Street.

By William Turvill



The BuzzFeed newsroom in New York. Picture: Reuters/Brendan McDermid

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Not too long ago, everyone in British journalism wanted to work for [Buzzfeed](#). Or so it seemed.

Buzzfeed [launched in the UK](#) ten years ago this spring with little fanfare. Within two years, BuzzFeed UK – with its listicles and its quizzes – had started hiring some of the biggest names on Fleet Street.

[Janine Gibson](#) and [Stuart Millar](#), fresh from leading [The Guardian's Pulitzer-winning](#) coverage of Edward Snowden's leaks, were signed up as editor-in-chief and head of news respectively. Well-respected investigative journalists [Heidi Blake](#) and [Michael Gillard](#) were plucked from [The Sunday Times](#).

Many older journalists, those left behind at "legacy" news organisations, grumbled that BuzzFeed would never be taken seriously as a news organisation in the UK.

But for younger journalists, BuzzFeed represented a breath of fresh air (and bigger salaries than they could earn on Fleet Street). In the years since the financial crisis, the incumbent media had been making regular cut-backs. But BuzzFeed, best known for its light-hearted content, was promising young journalists the time and space to produce original, nationally-important stories. And it was hiring.

As it turned out, while BuzzFeed did go on to fulfil much of its journalistic potential in the following years, 2015 proved to be its high-water mark in the UK (measured, not so scientifically, by my own subjective BuzzFeed journalism buzz-o-meter, below).

Buzzfeed journalism buzz-o-meter, UK, 2013-2023

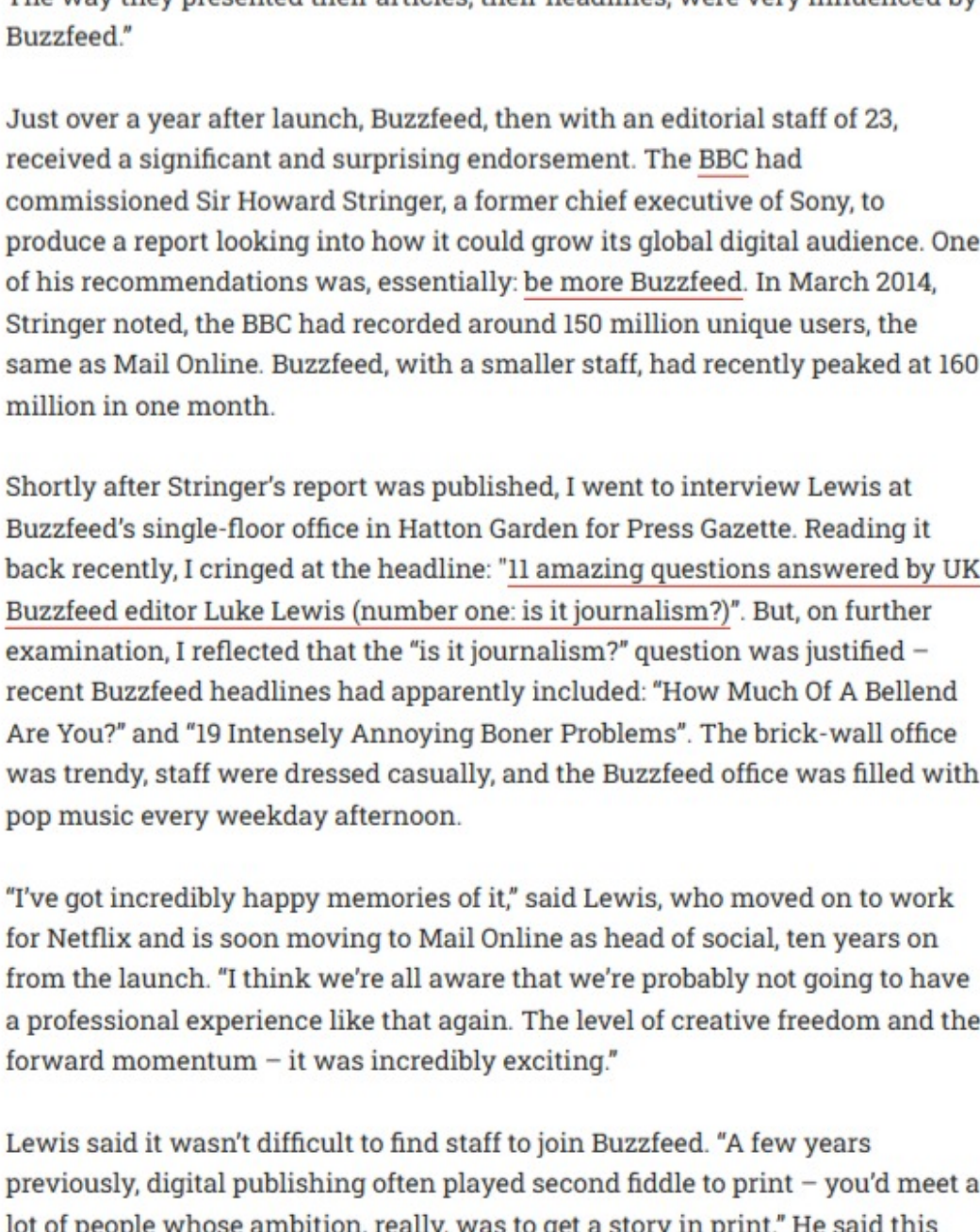


Chart: William Turvill, Press Gazette

After building up an editorial workforce of 76, BuzzFeed began [cutting back in 2017](#). In 2020, in the grips of a global pandemic, the company [disbanded its London-based news team](#). And last week, with its news brand long having dwindled in the UK, BuzzFeed announced the [closure of its US news team](#).

While BuzzFeed.com remains alive and well – and it is worth noting that BuzzFeed the company now owns [Huffpost](#) as well – last week appeared to effectively end the BuzzFeed brand's reign as a major force in serious journalism.

To mark the tenth anniversary of BuzzFeed's UK launch, and the closure of its US news operation, I interviewed several former staffers from its UK operation to ask how they reflected on their time at the website. I expected these conversations to be light-hearted, nostalgic and melancholic. Some were. But, as it turned out, there were a lot of hard feelings as well.

Many former UK BuzzFeed employees couldn't speak to me because they had signed non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) on being made redundant (this is a common, but for obvious reasons untold, story across media companies). Others spoke on condition of anonymity. And a handful agreed to speak on the record.

The launch, 2013-15: 'Private Eye for the social era'

Buzzfeed was set up by Jonah Peretti, a co-founder of HuffPost and still the company's chief executive today, and John S Johnson III as a "social lab" experiment in 2006. The website launched itself as a journalistic operation in late 2011 when it [hired Politico's Ben Smith](#) to be its editor-in-chief. By 2012, it had grown to become America's master creator of "shareable" content, i.e. stories that readers were minded to share with their friends and family via social media. In the words of some of my sources for this story, BuzzFeed had "gamed the internet".

The website first crept into the consciousness of Luke Lewis, its UK founding editor, during the 2012 Olympics. Lewis, then the digital editor of NME, was impressed by BuzzFeed's "visual and entertaining coverage" of the Games, which he felt stood out from anything that was being produced in the UK. At that time, he said, British news websites were geared towards SEO and maxing out page views (sometimes by creating galleries of images that forced readers to click through several URLs). Little thought, he felt, was going into what might work on social media.

Lewis emailed Peretti with a pitch, featuring a photoshopped version of how BuzzFeed UK might look, and he was given the go-ahead to launch with an editorial team of three in late March 2013. Lewis said he was given 12 months to make it work – "the brief was to test and learn," he said in a phone interview – but it turned out he didn't need long to establish BuzzFeed in the UK.

"The audience was there from day one," he said. "Within a few months, we could see the cultural impact of what we were doing in the UK because some of the established news brands were just clearly copying what we were doing. The way they presented their articles, their headlines, were very influenced by BuzzFeed."

Just over a year after launch, BuzzFeed, then with an editorial staff of 23, received a significant and surprising endorsement. The BBC had commissioned Sir Howard Stringer, a former chief executive of Sony, to produce a report looking into how it could grow its global digital audience. One of his recommendations was, essentially: [be more BuzzFeed](#). In March 2014, Stringer noted, the BBC had recorded around 150 million unique users, the same as Mail Online. BuzzFeed, with a smaller staff, had recently peaked at 160 million in one month.

Shortly after Stringer's report was published, I went to interview Lewis at BuzzFeed's single-floor office in Hatton Garden for Press Gazette. Reading it back recently, I cringed at the headline: "[11 amazing questions answered by UK BuzzFeed editor Luke Lewis \(number one: is it journalism?\)](#)". But, on further examination, I reflected that the "Is it journalism?" question was justified – recent BuzzFeed headlines had apparently included: "How Much Of A Bellend Are You?" and "19 Intensely Annoying Boner Problems". The brick-wall office was trendy, staff were dressed casually, and the BuzzFeed office was filled with pop music every weekday afternoon.

"I've got incredibly happy memories of it," said Lewis, who moved on to work for Netflix and is soon moving to Mail Online as head of social, ten years on from the launch. "I think we're all aware that we're probably not going to have a professional experience like that again. The level of creative freedom and the forward momentum – it was incredibly exciting."

Lewis said it wasn't difficult to find staff to join BuzzFeed. "A few years previously, digital publishing often played second fiddle to print – you'd meet a lot of people whose ambition, really, was to get a story in print." He said this had changed by 2013. "There was a lot of digital talent coming through, joining the workforce, who were true children of the internet. And they were just immersed in digital."

The BuzzFeed operation, both in the US and the UK, had developed an expertise for going viral on social media. Stories counted page views and "social lift", with the latter category often seen as more important. Through experimentation they had worked out several formulae for success. For instance, in a listicle headline, the number 17 was more likely to go viral than the number 19.

Lewis said a breakthrough success for the UK team was Tom Phillips' October 2013 article: "The 29 Stages Of A Twitterstorm." Lewis said Phillips' October filed his story after a couple of days' work, "it was a goosebump moment. We just couldn't believe how funny it was."

Arguably, peak BuzzFeed was "the dress". (Several sources for this story mentioned "the dress", as if no further explanation was needed. And it wasn't.) In February 2015 a US staffer, Cates Holderness, uncovered a debate on Tumblr about whether a dress was [blue and black in colour or white and gold](#). (My answer: white and gold.)

Around this time, BuzzFeed's US news operation was establishing itself as a serious journalistic institution. In the UK, Lewis's ambition was for BuzzFeed to become a "[Private Eye](#) for the social era. So you could bring people in with the strength of humour and satire, but then keep them coming back with the strength of original journalism."

In line with Lewis's vision, BuzzFeed began pillaging Fleet Street for its biggest talent in early 2015.

The boom, 2015-17: Oysters, Busted and shark chairs

In August 2014 BuzzFeed had raised \$50m in an investment from venture capitalist Andreessen Horowitz. A year later it raised a [further \\$200m](#) from NBC Universal. In November 2016 NBC Universal invested a [further \\$200m](#), giving BuzzFeed a private market valuation of \$1.7bn.

In London, this money translated into a swanky new office on Argyll Street, near Oxford Circus, and a dizzying array of worker perks and novelties. "The office was set up like you were in a meme, or inside a BuzzFeed article," said one former staffer.

At the entrance to BuzzFeed's floor, staff and guests were greeted by novelty shark chairs. The office was colourful, with BuzzFeed's trademarked yellow symbols – "WOW" and "LOL" – scattered across its walls. Meeting rooms were named after biscuits. "It felt very fun and very branded," added the source. "All very different to a newspaper office." When new staff joined, they were welcomed with a personalised message on a mock cinema listings board. Hoodies and personalised merch were also handed out.

Staff said they had access to free snacks. Breakfasts were available, and free lunches were put on two or three times a week. One day staff were offered a seemingly limitless supply of free oysters to chow down on. Celebrities would come into the office for interviews and photographs, and then often stick around. Busted once performed a set for staff, while Five, another boyband, [delivered dance lessons](#). One former staffer recalled a day when a meeting room was filled with puppies for staff to pet. At one point, the idea of a video games room was apparently mooted.

More importantly, BuzzFeed paid its journalists relatively well by most accounts. One source estimated the average reporter would have been on £40,000. Another said senior correspondents would have been on far north of £50,000. "It very much felt like the place to be," said one former BuzzFeed journalist.

But for all the frivolity, the BuzzFeed newsroom could also be quiet, according to two sources (at least when the old tradition of playing music in the afternoons had ceased). "It had a big Slack culture," said one former BuzzFeed News journalist. "People talked on Slack a lot, made lots of jokes. People spent lots of time on Twitter making jokes – there were lots of big personalities on Twitter. So it meant that sometimes the office was really quiet." Another source said: "The newsroom was completely silent because we did everything on Slack. Talking was frowned upon." A third said that the silence was prevalent among younger staff, who would spend days plugged into their headphones, but that more experienced journalists worked hard to change that culture.

However, clearly this set up worked for many journalists. During this period, BuzzFeed established itself as a major force within the UK news industry. It was lauded for its investigative work on the collapse of Kids Company [alongside Newsnight](#). It was named [website of the year at the 2018 Society of Editors Press Awards](#), which were traditionally focused just on Fleet Street. And its UK-led investigation into mysterious Russian deaths was a [Pulitzer finalist](#).

Buzzfeed was also writing stories that might not have garnered coverage in the national press. "They were giving space to really good journalism – on, say, social issues or LGBT issues – that just wouldn't have got the space at legacy publications," said one source.

Still, though, for several of my sources, this period is remembered best for the perks. Especially the oysters ("unlimited oysters!"). Not long afterwards, the cuts began.

The bust, 2017-20: 'It was a shock, and the scale of it was a shock'

At some point between the hiring spree of 2015 and the cuts of 2017, the atmosphere within BuzzFeed had soured for many.

Some attributed this to an ultimately unsuccessful bid for union recognition that was [announced in November 2016](#). Peretti and the US leadership responded by flying to London to set out why they felt this would be a bad idea. This put senior journalists at BuzzFeed UK into a difficult position. According to numerous accounts, divisions opened up within the newsroom.

"The push for a recognised union was very stressful for everyone involved because the management in America were not keen," said one source. Another said: "The union definitely soured everything. I think nearly all of us who worked at BuzzFeed were aware that the happy-clappy facade was not what it really was. But I think the union [episode] was very much the definitive death of that."

Another source of contention within BuzzFeed was the division between news journalists and the "Buzz" team. Peretti created a standalone [Buzzfeed News brand](#), separate from its traditional entertainment coverage, in August 2016.

"There were weird politics between Buzz and News," said one source. "We became the shiny new bit of the organisation – you know, 'Buzzfeed, the real news organisation' and stuff. And every article written about the company was like: 'and it's paid for by stupid videos of cats!' And obviously the people doing the stupid videos of cats were, quite reasonably, like: 'Hello, we actually work really hard, and the business is built on the money we're making, so maybe don't treat us like crap.'"

Tensions were exacerbated in late 2017 when BuzzFeed, to the surprise of many, announced its first round of cuts. BuzzFeed put [23 of the UK's 76 editorial positions at risk of redundancy](#).

"It was a shock, and the scale of it was a shock," said one former staffer. "A lot of the journalists were very young, and didn't know about redundancies, and hadn't been through them. So that was very frightening and destabilising for people."

In July 2018 BuzzFeed UK staff [voted against unionisation](#). Janine Gibson [resigned the following January](#) (2019), and weeks later came another round of redundancies – this time, the editorial workforce would be cut from 37 to 20.

Buzzfeed News's remaining journalists continued to produce quality, original journalism. In March 2020, despite a looming pandemic, the operation looked reasonably stable. Joey D'Urso [was hired from the BBC](#), while Alex Wickham was promoted to become political editor.

As it turned out, D'Urso would be BuzzFeed News UK's last new recruit. In May 2020, staff were informed over a video call that the UK news operation would be closed.

"I had been working there just under ten weeks before we were all told on Zoom," recalled D'Urso. "It was an absolute disaster, but long enough ago that I can laugh about it now – and I genuinely think it has served me well in the long run. I learned lots from great people even in a really short space of time."

The post-mortem: 'Clearly wasn't sustainable longer term'

What went wrong at BuzzFeed in the UK?

One source suggested there weren't enough "grown-ups" in the newsroom. "If about 80% of your newsroom is under 30, the office politics will be really intense," they said. "You do need a layer of people who have kids and a house and they're just here because they're paying off the mortgage. For lots of people at BuzzFeed it was their first job out of uni. It was a really unhealthy bubble."

Some former staff found fault with the US leadership. One former Buzzfeeder said: "Jonah expanded too fast, didn't have a plan for when things went wrong, ran out of money, lost the confidence and respect of the industry, threw away this dream of being a big media player, ended in failure."

The truth is, UK-specific issues and office politics aside, the fate of BuzzFeed was sealed by its business model. According to accounts for BuzzFeed UK Limited, which appear to cover some non-UK lines of business, it generated £139m in revenue between 2015 and 2021. Over the same period, its losses amounted to nearly £31m.

Buzzfeed built itself using traffic from social media, Facebook in particular. Meanwhile, as well documented by Press Gazette and [as cited several times by Peretti](#), tech companies like Facebook benefited from journalistic content while keeping nearly all the advertising revenue. This meant that BuzzFeed, and many other news organisations, struggled to fund serious journalism.

As social traffic and ad opportunities fell, so did BuzzFeed's financial prospects. When native advertising failed to cut the mustard, BuzzFeed was forced to start [accepting banner ads](#). In 2018, apparently unable to sustain itself on advertising alone, BuzzFeed launched a [membership programme](#). When that didn't bring in enough new money, more cuts came.

Simon Neville, a former BuzzFeed UK business editor who now works as a media strategy director at PR agency SEC Newgate, told me: "It clearly had a huge influence above and beyond its station when it was doing what it was doing. But, financially, how sustainable is that?"

"You could say it's doing what GB News is doing now, but five, six, seven years ago. I think it's quite a good analogy, because you look at how much money GB News are throwing at people – big name talent.

"Remember BuzzFeed hosted an EU referendum debate with Cameron, Sturgeon and Farage. They were really quite influential in the world of politics for quite a while. But it clearly wasn't sustainable longer term. You've got to have deep pockets to break into this world."

The epilogue: 'The internet is a darker place'

Buzzfeed as a company is not dead, despite its stock market value [crashing to below \\$100m in the past week](#). The US-headquartered company still has around 60 employees in the UK. HuffPost, another brand co-founded by Peretti, was acquired by BuzzFeed in 2021, and HuffPost UK remains active with some well-respected journalists. According to Ipsos, HuffPost had a unique UK audience of 3.3 million in March. BuzzFeed also operates the lifestyle brand Tasty.

Meanwhile, BuzzFeed.com is still around, and has London-based journalists, although much content is geared towards a US or international audience. According to Ipsos, BuzzFeed had a UK audience of 2.9 million in March. The UK team also produces podcasts, a TikTok series on [how celebrities make tea](#) and has landed some big recent entertainment interviews.

Stats and headcounts aside, there can be no doubting that BuzzFeed's status has diminished significantly in the UK. The closure of BuzzFeed News in the US will mean its reach falls even further.

It is notable that BuzzFeed UK's breakthrough article, "The 29 Stages Of A Twitterstorm", now consists of a page of 29 listicle subheadings that make no sense because they are placed above blank spaces that tell readers: "This image is no longer available." (Fortunately, it is still possible to find out [how much of a "bellend" you are](#).)

Reflecting on the BuzzFeed UK of ten years ago, founding editor Luke Lewis said: "The internet was a happier place. A lot of former BuzzFeed people, we like to talk about, 'what was the last good day on the internet?' A lot of people say that it was the dress. On that day it was a real phenomenon. That was an example of internet culture that was wholesome and joyful. And often those really big viral moments were joyful and wholesome in a way that isn't really true any more.

"So if you're a social or internet trends reporter now, you're dealing with some pretty weighty themes – disinformation, doxing, government regulation, creators who are suffering from burnout. It was a more innocent era of the social web where it was possible to have fun with some of these topics."

What is BuzzFeed's legacy in the UK? Lewis is proud of the journalism, and the journalists, that his news organisation created. "I would say our contribution to the UK media was giving a lot of really talented people their first big break and their route into the industry," said Lewis. "And giving some really talented people the time and space to really excel."

Topics in this article : [Buzzfeed](#)