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Strife at a Southern magazine

Half of publication's staff members resign over publisher's interference

BY LAURA WAGNER

On a hot Tuesday in late June, staffers at Atlanta magazine gathered for a tense meeting with longtime publisher Sean McGinnis. On his agenda: pronouns.

"Are we, as a matter of fact, now writing stories based upon preferred pronouns?" McGinnis asked, citing a recent profile of a labor organizer. "She" is referred to as "they" throughout the story."

One editor responded that using pronouns corresponding with a subject's identity is standard journalistic practice, "not a left or right thing." The publisher disagreed, according to a recording of the meeting obtained by The Washington Post: "People will think that that is taking a stance."

It was hardly the first time colleagues have disagreed over editorial choices — in Atlanta or anywhere in the media industry, where business concerns, personal politics and news judgment often come into conflict. But McGinnis's statements and sub-

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TOP: At Atlanta magazine, three of six full-time editorial staffers have resigned, citing corporate interference, and the editor in chief has announced plans to retire. ABOVE: The Atlanta city skyline.

Ex-NYT executive tapped to lead CNN

Thompson follows Licht, who had a tumultuous reign at cable network

BY JEREMY BARR

Mark Thompson, the former chief executive of the New York Times, has been selected as the next leader of CNN, parent company Warner Bros. Discovery announced Wednesday.

He will replace Chris Licht, who was ousted in June after a short and tumultuous run as the network's leader.

"I couldn't be more excited about the chance to join CNN after years of watching it and competing against it with a mixture of admiration and envy," Thompson said in a statement. "I can't wait to roll up my sleeves and get down to work with my new colleagues to build a successful future for CNN."

Thompson, who begins in the role Oct. 9, comes to CNN after a lengthy career in media. He spent eight years as chief executive of the New York Times Co., where he oversaw significant growth in digital subscription revenue, helping to offset losses in print circulation and advertising. He stepped down from that role in 2020, after he said that he "achieved everything I set out to do."

Thompson had come to the Times after spending nearly his entire career at the BBC, where he served as director general.

In addition to overseeing CNN's strategy, operations and business units, he will serve as the network's editor in chief, the company announced Wednesday.

"There isn't a more experienced, respected or capable executive in the news business today than Mark, and we are thrilled to have him join our team and lead CNN Worldwide into the future," Warner Bros. Discovery chief executive David Zaslav said.

Zaslav called Thompson "a true innovator who has transformed for the digital age two of

SEE CNN ON C3

MEDIA

The Post lays off seven from its publishing software division. **C3**

TELEVISION

Five late-night talk show hosts to produce podcast to aid striking writers. **C4**

CAROLYN HAX

Grandfather's slapping of a teen reverberates through a family. **C8**

An era ends for political comics journalism

The Nib, which showcased and lifted the art form for the past decade, signs off

BY MICHAEL CAVNA

Matt Bors was a creatively hungry 29-year-old cartoonist with energy to burn and a vision to fill a journalistic void. The popularity of nonfiction comics and graphic novels was soaring in 2013, yet many news outlets were cutting back on their topical cartoons.

Bors's dream concept, a daily one-stop shop for socially engaged comics and illustrated reporting called the Nib, launched online 10 years ago next week. Ever since, the site has published an impressive blend of comics journalism and political cartoons, expanding into animated shorts and a print magazine. The Nib gained thousands of paying supporters and across its lifetime paid about \$2 million total to contributors, according to

Bors.

On Sept. 1, all that will end. The Nib will be no more.

The Nib's decade as a leading voice in alternative media reflects the strengths and struggles of many such media outlets in the 2010s — a decade of high but volatile traffic and business turbulence. The pressures on the Nib involved "well, everything," Bors wrote in May in announcing the outlet's shuttering. "The rising costs of paper and postage, the changing landscape of social media, subscription exhaustion, inflation, and the simple difficulty of keeping a small independent publishing project alive with relatively few resources — though we did a lot with them. The math isn't working anymore."

Bors, a two-time Pulitzer Prize

SEE THE NIB ON C3



GABE GINSBERG/GETTY IMAGES

Martha Stewart, seen in Las Vegas, posted a photo of herself in Greenland holding a cocktail chilled with a piece of iceberg.

Iceberg in a cocktail leads to tempest in a teapot

Stewart's photo from a Greenland cruise sparks anger online, but experts say everyone can chill out

BY JONATHAN EDWARDS

Those looking to boost their craft cocktail game have in recent years turned to "luxury" or "designer" ice in place of the ordinary tap water variety. Its proponents champion luxury ice as the superior way to chill cocktails — boasting that it is individually carved, slow melting and has no minerals or chemicals that might affect how a drink tastes. Such an indulgence can cost nearly \$10 a pop.

Martha Stewart bested all of that Monday by chilling her cocktail with an actual iceberg.

On Monday night, Stewart posted on Instagram a photo of herself in a winter hat and parka, showing off a beverage in a tumbler with the wilds of Greenland behind her. In the caption, she revealed that, while sailing

aboard a Swan Hellenic cruise off Greenland's east coast, they had "captured a small iceberg for our cocktails tonight." Other photos showed still-intact glaciers with breakaways floating in the sea below and a pair of "captured" icebergs on a bar cart.

Some of her 1.9 million followers bristled, chiding her in the comments for being elitist and "tone deaf," given that climate change has made Greenland the fastest-warming region in the world, where ice melts at twice the pace of Antarctica.

"Global warming and melting ice caps but we need glacier ice for cocktails?!" one person commented.

Someone else said that keeping cocktails cold using the remnants of a glacier "sounds like a line from a dystopian novel."

SEE MARTHA ON C8

Crackdown on 'woke' coverage creates rift at magazine

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sequent request to approve editorial content ahead of publication marked a tipping point in a small-scale culture war that had been building for a few years within the award-winning magazine. Staffers saw the interference as an egregious crackdown on coverage that management deems as too "progressive" — at a time when they are resolved to reflect the evolving reality of Atlanta, one of the Blackest, queerest cities in the South.

Now, three of six full-time editorial staffers have resigned, citing untenable corporate interference, and the editor in chief has announced plans to retire at the end of the year.

"Any journalist ... would feel challenged to work in a place where the line between the edit side and the business side is as eroded as it's become this year," departing deputy editor Sam Worley wrote in his resignation letter this month. "That editorial independence is the bedrock of what we do, and it's why readers trust us."

McGinnis did not respond to repeated messages and emails. His current and former employees say they are concerned that their longtime boss's perception of Atlanta's leftward drift is based less on his own opinions than on orders from his bosses — the owners of a Michigan-based publishing company that purchased Atlanta and several other regional magazines — who, McGinnis told them, believe "woke" coverage is bad for business and wants it to stop.

Five years ago, Atlanta faced a rather different critique.

Mike Jordan, a culture writer and Atlanta Press Club member, called out the magazine on Facebook in 2018 for an "inexcusable absence of ... African-American journalists on the editorial staff."

The criticism hit home in a city known as America's "Black mecca" for its role as a center of African American culture and power. Atlanta-based freelance journalist Jewel Wicker said that to many in town, Atlanta magazine frequently felt more like "a Buckhead magazine" — for and about the affluent, largely White neighborhood known for its posh private schools and high-end boutiques.

In many ways, Atlanta had set the pace for an entire generation of city magazines that cropped up around the country in the 1960s and '70s, merging investigative journalism with restaurant rankings, "top doctors" guides and upbeat cover stories about local celebrities.

The magazine was founded in 1961 by Chamber of Commerce leaders who initially envisioned an economic-development brag sheet — but was quickly taken over by Jim Townsend, a charismatic editor with visions of creating a world-class magazine, a New Yorker of the South, with ambitious storytelling and bold design. Townsend went on to found city magazines in Cincinnati and New Orleans and consult on dozens of others — and in the meantime, Atlanta launched the careers of lauded writers such as Anne Rivers Siddons and Tom Junod.

"When people ask me what we're about, my short answer is 'telling the story of Atlanta,'" Editor in Chief Betsy Riley told The Washington Post in an email. "We cover all the diverse, fascinating, creative people who live here or who come here to find a home."

So Riley took Jordan's criticisms to heart. She asked Jordan to help her form an advisory panel that held meetings with members of non-White communities in the city.

"The attendees shared their thoughts and feelings and insights and ideas," Jordan said. "All of these conversations led to a real change."

Atlanta staffers resolved to more fully represent their city, commissioning more Black writers and spiking the usual fare of city-living stories with reports on the protests against plans to develop a police-training compound in a forested area near a Black neighborhood, the city's unregulated night club scene and a state law banning medical treatment for transgender adolescents. One issue, spearheaded by editor Kamille Whittaker, who is among the employees who resigned this month, focused on Caribbean communities and culture in Atlanta. There was also a package about Atlanta women shaping hip-hop and an issue dedicated to a "block-by-block exploration of our city" that examined gentrification as well as the restaurant hot spots of long-overlooked Southwest Atlanta.

This shift coincided with in-



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creased feedback from McGinnis.

In late 2018, colleagues say, the publisher became angry about an illustrated magazine spread devoted to Atlanta's upcoming Super Bowl. One small graphic element among many was an image of Colin Kaepernick — the former San Francisco 49er turned civil rights activist, whose silent national anthem protests against police brutality had conservatives burning their Nikes.

According to Heather Buckner, who resigned as senior editor this month, and another former employee who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of rules at a new job, McGinnis insisted the Kaepernick drawing be removed.

It was replaced by a cartoon of a generic football player. Buckner and other staffers worried they had stepped onto a slippery slope, where "once he starts telling us what we are and aren't allowed to run in the magazine, he's just going to get more comfortable [doing it]," she recalled.

In August 2020, the magazine gestured to the country's racial reckoning after the killing of George Floyd. Writer David Dennis Jr. won the prestigious American Mosaic Journalism prize in part for his cover story about the Ahmaud Arbery's murder in Brunswick, Ga., with cover art by renowned painter Fahamu Pecou capturing Arbery mid-stride. The well-received issue also included a feature on the Black podcast hitmaker Donald Albright and stories about the city's celebrated Black chefs.

After it published, however, McGinnis told staffers the issue "missed the mark," according to Buckner and the other former employee. Pressed for specifics, he said it was "too urban."

"My jaw dropped. It was really disheartening," the former employee said. "I understood 'too urban' to mean 'too Black.' But how could these stories be too Black for Atlanta, especially dur-

ing the 2020 summer of racial reckoning?"

Disagreements had occasionally cropped up between McGinnis and the editorial side in his two decades at the magazine, but a balance always held. Staffers say that started to shift in 2017 when it was sold by Emmis Communications to Hour Media along with several other city magazines for \$6.5 million.

Emmis had kept its magazines' editorial staffs separate from business, the two sides reporting to different executives at the parent company who largely allowed each magazine to make its own choices. "I consulted with editors about covers, giving them feedback, but I trusted my editors and their design directors," said Mary Melton, who ran Emmis's editorial division from 2013 to 2017. "At the end of the day, it was their choice."

Hour Media, though, instituted a new chain of command, in which each editor in chief answered to the magazine's publisher, who reported directly to corporate brass. To Steve Fennessy, Riley's predecessor as editor in chief, the new structure suggested that "whoever is in the editor's chair ... that person isn't going to enjoy that same independence" that he once did.

By the time McGinnis called the meeting in June, staffers were already nervous about what might be coming. The soft-spoken publisher was clearly nervous, too.

"Any journalist ... would feel challenged to work in a place where the line between the edit side and the business side is as eroded as it's become this year."

Sam Worley,

Atlanta magazine's departing deputy editor, in his resignation letter

He opened by asking for patience if he said the wrong thing. He said he prides himself on remaining "nondenominational" on social and political issues, adding that "I don't touch politics, as much as I'm tempted to jump in the fray" — and then jumped into the fray, reeling off a list of subjects he considers "divisive."

"Black Lives Matter movement and how you feel about that then and now, the Trump effect, the stolen elections, defund the police, legislation around pro-life heartbeat bills, bathroom bills, voting access, election security, transgender," he said.

"More recently you start to delve deeper into issues around the impact of Dylan Mulvaney and Bud Light and Target and Riley Gaines versus Lia Thomas and the White House Pride celebration," he said, shorthanding several topics animating the Republican Party's base and conservative media. "It's enough, right, to make us all crazy."

If it was initially unclear what exactly McGinnis found crazy-making about these topics, he clarified what he meant when addressing the magazine's content.

A cover story about the Atlanta brunch scene featuring a drag queen posing with chicken and waffles? "Optics say a lot," McGinnis said, "and a cover like this is going to get a reaction."

Worley was surprised. "I was aware of some controversy related to drag, but it never occurred to me that something like this

would be objectionable in Atlanta, specifically in this city," he told The Post, noting Atlanta's vibrant LGBTQ+ scene. "It's really colorful, it's really eye-catching. That's what you're going for with a magazine cover."

McGinnis also shared concerns that a story about how families of young trans people and their medical providers are contending with legislation in Georgia that restricts access to gender-affirming care lacked balance. "The optics of that story is that we're favoring one point of view," he said.

Buckner, who consulted three dozen sources for the story, told The Post that because "all leading medical and mental health organizations in the country support age-appropriate gender-affirming health care," it made sense to focus on those who would be affected by the bans.

Still, McGinnis told staff he feared the story would alienate some readers, though he acknowledged he had no statistics or reader input to support his concerns. "It's my personal opinion," he said.

Riley, the editor in chief, told The Post that she is still conducting her first reader survey but has seen no increase in negative reaction relative to her 20-plus years with the magazine.

Later, McGinnis emailed Riley saying the meeting had confirmed his "opinions regarding the direction and content of the magazine" and that "it's clear to me that the staff does not want to accept accountability." He requested that the advisory board members be removed from the masthead and that Riley provide "a complete editorial outline of each issue with enough time for review and discussion of any topics that I believe warrant further discussion."

Who gets to decide what stories are told and how? In an earlier media

Sean McGinnis, publisher of Atlanta magazine, told staffers that the August 2020 issue that featured a cover illustrating a story about Ahmaud Arbery's murder in Brunswick, Ga., as well as stories about a Black podcast hitmaker and the city's celebrated Black chefs "missed the mark" and was "too urban," which one former employee interpreted to mean "too Black."

era, it was understood that a publication represented the viewpoint of whoever paid for the printing presses. That changed in the 20th century as journalism began to find a competitive advantage in "editorial independence" — the promise that editors decide what to publish, even if it offends the owner or its advertisers — and objectivity, the notion that journalists follow the reporting where it leads, regardless of their opinions or the opinions of their bosses. Though debates over these ideals and how they work in practice are not new, they have produced a number of high-profile disputes in recent years.

At CNN, where corporate bosses charged a new executive with striking a more politically neutral tone, staffers were some of the loudest critics of a town-hall-style interview with Donald Trump that they believed gave the former president too much control over the forum. The newsroom of The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette erupted over what many saw as indirect interference from conservative owners, from the firing of a cartoonist whose work was critical of Trump to the decision to ban a Black reporter from covering Black Lives Matters protests after she tweeted wryly about the chaos and debris left behind after a country music concert. And at the New York Times, hundreds of contributors and tens of thousands of readers signed a letter condemning the paper's coverage of gender-affirming health care for minors, arguing it was overly influenced by conservative talking points.

In the June meeting, McGinnis acknowledged that his opinions about the magazine were informed by his discussions with Hour Media's CEO John Balardo and co-founder Stefan Wanczyk. "[They] use terms like 'woke' and [say] we shouldn't be taking on issues that are divisive and we can ill afford to lose any readers and stop it, stop it, stop it," McGinnis said.

In particular, he noted that the drag queen brunch cover and the trans health-care story caught the owners' attention — and warned that staff are better off hearing these concerns from him "rather than from John and Stefan." Hour Media, Balardo, and Wanczyk did not respond to multiple calls and emails seeking comment.

For the staffers who would soon quit, McGinnis's declaration set off alarm bells and played into their decision. "Having to worry about where stories sit on some wokeness spectrum" would make the process of assigning and editing stories impossibly burdensome, said Worley, whose official last day at the magazine is Thursday. "I don't know how this works in practice," he said, "and I don't know how we would do our jobs like this."