The Spaces of Sensationalism:
A Comparative Case Study of the *New York Journal* and BuzzFeed

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This article examines how space mediates the relationship between publishers and public attention. Drawing on a heterodox reading of attention economics, it relates the rise of the yellow newspaper the *New York Journal* and the viral news publisher BuzzFeed to the spatial structure of two marketplaces of attention: the streets of New York City in the late 1890s and the Facebook News Feed today. It finds that the sensationalist media forms developed by these two publishers were institutional adaptations to spaces in which information and sensation were heavily *concentrated*; time–space was radically *compressed*; and multiple different social contexts were *collapsed*. By juxtaposing Facebook's News Feed with the streets of New York City, this article ultimately endeavors toward a more rigorous understanding of the space of social media.

Keywords: space, attention economics, BuzzFeed, New York Journal, sensationalism, news feed

From their cramped third-floor office in New York City's Chinatown neighborhood, in November 2006, BuzzFeed's first employees began churning out articles about "eating endangered species" ("Eating Endangered Species," 2006), dealing with the "ugly side effects" of "crystal meth" ("Crystal Meth," 2006), and strategies for navigating "Ivy League naked parties" ("Ivy League," 2007). Over the next decade, BuzzFeed developed new methods for breaking through the cacophony of voices competing for attention on Facebook's News Feed, pioneering media genres such as listicles (list-format articles) and personality quizzes. By 2013, BuzzFeed was amassing more clicks and page views than almost any legacy news outlet in the United States, eclipsing even *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* in website traffic (*The New York Times*, 2014).

In the 19th century, metropolitan newspapers fought for circulation numbers with the same ferocity that BuzzFeed competes for clicks, hits, and unique visitors today. After William Randolph Hearst bought *The New York Morning Journal* in 1895, the newspaper began publishing screaming, sensationalistic headlines designed to captivate the fleeting attention of people walking through the bustling streets of New York City. The front page of the *Journal* was adorned with provocative titles such as "Drop Dead and Have Yourself Plated," "White Woman Among Cannibals," and "A Genius Has Conceived Plan for a Machine That Will Kill Everybody in Sight," (Stevens, 1991, pp. 83–84). By the end of the century, Hearst had established the *New York Journal* as the dominant force in American publishing (Whyte, 2009).

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The semiotic similarities between the *New York Journal* and BuzzFeed are not a matter of mere happenstance. Based on a comparative analysis of these two publishers—including 23 interviews with current and former BuzzFeed staff members—this article argues that the sensationalistic media forms developed by the *New York Journal* and BuzzFeed were institutional adaptations to the marketplaces of attention in which each publication was distributed: the streets of fin de siècle New York City and the Facebook News Feed today. It understands the *New York Journal* and BuzzFeed's deployment of bold and brash headlines, hyperbolic rhetoric, enticing imagery, and other characteristics associated with sensationalism as spatial strategies for luring attention in these densely packed, fast-moving, and sensation-saturated spaces. While recent scholarship has foregrounded how social media algorithms, big data, and other novel aspects of the digital media environment condition journalistic practice, this article ultimately argues that space—particularly the spaces in which media is *distributed*—exerts a profound, enduring, and radically undertheorized influence on how media is produced.

This article proceeds in tripartite fashion. First, it theorizes the attention economy in spatial terms, as material and historically conditioned spaces in which people and institutions vie for the public's attention. Second, it examines the streets of turn-of-the-century New York City and the Facebook News Feed as attention economies and considers the aesthetic, rhetorical, and visual techniques that the *New York Journal* and BuzzFeed deployed to attract attention in these environments. Finally, I reflect on what these negotiations between publisher and space reveal about the geographies of sensationalism.

Spatializing Attention Economics

In contrast to the industrial era, when information was scarce and communication was expensive, many new media economists stress that there is an abundance of information in the digital economy. The ubiquity of information online is variously attributed to the explosion of user-generated content made possible by the panoply of opportunities for users to self-publish on social media platforms (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Shirky, 2010), the ability of Internet users to engage in novel forms of networked production (Benkler, 2006), and the treatment of information as a common or public good that diverges from the market laws that govern the flow of commodities within a capitalist economy. According to theorists of the "information economy," this augurs radically new economic models that break from orthodox economic approaches, which are principally concerned with the efficient allocation of scarce resources (Castells, 2000).

The attention economy is typically conceptualized as a direct response to the emergence of the information economy. Herbert Simon (1971) theorized the attention economy as nearly the inverse of the information economy, reasoning that "in an information-rich world, a wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients" (p. 40). Human attention is considered a necessarily scarce resource because of the neurophysiological limits (Kahneman, 1973), as well as the social limits to the time available to consume information (Marazzi, 2008). The presence of scarcity in theories of the attention economy implies the return of competitive market conditions, as an ever-growing number of people, platforms, and publishers on the Internet compete for a relatively fixed pool of human attention (Franck, 1999). More recent work has explored the relationship between the attention economy and social media platforms from

diverse theoretical perspectives, including critical political economy (Wu, 2016), infrastructure studies (Bucher, 2018; Marwick, 2015), and cognitive psychology (Lane & Atchley, 2020).

The Space of the Marketplace

Despite the breadth of this literature, there is a strong and often overwhelming tendency to prioritize information abundance as the constitutive feature of the attention economy. One representative description of the genesis of the attention economy suggests that:

> perhaps the most astonishing thing about digital media is their numerical abundance. . . . There are plenty of eye-popping statistics on the totals, such as the number of tweets (five hundred million a day), the new videos on YouTube (one hundred million hours uploaded every minute), or the sheer number of words we generate each day (enough to fill all the books in the U.S. Library of Congress). (Webster, 2014, p. 4)

This quantitative understanding of the attention economy—the result of information abundance and attentional scarcity—neglects the spatial dimensions of human attentiveness. This lacuna gives us a truncated grasp of the physical and social environments in which people and institutions compete for attention. While the phrase "marketplace of attention" often appears in the literature on attention economics as a heuristic device for thinking through the tensions between information and attention in broad strokes, marketplaces of attention are rarely analyzed as spaces. Although a few scholars have interrogated the interaction of space, attention, and media practice (Fritzsche, 1996; Wallace, 2012), extant scholarship on the attention economy too often elides the issue of space.

Following the "spatial turn" in the social sciences and humanities (Soja, 1989), this article considers the embeddedness of attention economies in space. The theory of space mobilized throughout this article departs from traditional, Cartesian notions of space that posit it as abstract, linear, and lying outside society—an empty, passive container devoid of substance or content. By contrast, space is conceived of here as active, constituent, and relational, as a concatenation of material forms, practices, sensations, and routines of life. Consequently, I attend not only to the streets of New York City and the Facebook News Feed as built environments—as slabs of concrete or rows of code—but also to the types of activities occurring within these spaces that make them meaningful.

This understanding of space also deviates from certain Marxist theories of space in which spatial structure is viewed as an appendage of social structure, as an expression of the relations of production (Castells, 1977). Rather, this article conceives of space as a generative force, a medium through which social relations are produced and reproduced. As the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1991) argued, "Social space is always, and simultaneously, both a *field of action* . . . and a *basis of action*" (p. 191). In the following analysis, the *New York Journal* and BuzzFeed are thus considered relationally through an examination of the way their practices for attracting attention evolved alongside the respective spaces that they sought attention within.

Continuity, Change, Comparison

In recent years, a torrent of scholarship has considered the manifold ways that news publishers have adapted to the growth of social media platforms and search engines (Bossio, 2017; Usher, 2014). These studies are generally confined to how particular news organizations interface with new media over a relatively short duration. As a result, they tend to assume a presentist orientation to the current media environment, privileging technological change over the more durable structures and institutions that texture journalistic practice. A comparative approach, by contrast, allows us to weigh up the continuities and changes presented by social media platforms and to situate the contemporary information environment within the *longue durée* of American media history.

This study is therefore not *primarily* a comparison of the content published by the *New York Journal* and BuzzFeed, but an examination of how space informs journalistic production. To assess how urban space informed the rise of Hearst's *New York Journal*, I consulted the voluminous secondary literature on yellow journalism in the United States. I also drew on the history of New York City to illuminate the more localized factors that shaped the city's newspaper market in the last quarter of the 19th century.

This case study of the *New York Journal* is juxtaposed with an appraisal of the strategies that BuzzFeed has wielded to garner attention within online spaces such as the Facebook News Feed. Between September 2017 and June 2019, I conducted 23 semistructured interviews over Skype and Google Hangouts with current and former BuzzFeed employees, including content creators, social media strategists, data scientists, and engineers. The interviews lasted approximately 1 1/2 hours and focused on three general areas of inquiry: the daily production routines and rituals of BuzzFeed staffers; the influence of social media platforms on their work practices; and their broader understanding of BuzzFeed's organizational structure. With the permission of the respondents, audio of the interviews was recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were then coded and analyzed inductively using a grounded theory approach in which provisional ideas were iteratively revised and harnessed to help direct subsequent interviews and coding cycles (Charmaz, 2014). In the first coding cycle, space, attention, and visibility emerged as salient concepts that informed how my interlocutors perceived the quality and value of their work. In the secondary coding cycle, I focused on the particular mechanisms through which social media spaces impacted media production at BuzzFeed.

Both case studies are confined to a three-year period associated with the respective "takeoffs" of the *New York Journal* and BuzzFeed. My analysis of the *New York Journal* begins in 1895, the year that William Randolph Hearst bought the newspaper and imposed his editorial vision on the publication, setting the stage for a tremendous spike in the *Journal*'s circulation. My BuzzFeed study starts in 2012, the year that BuzzFeed became one of the most visited publishers on the Internet.

Case Study 1: The *New York Journal*, 1895–1898

Founded in 1882, the *New York Journal* was initially a fairly conservative daily newspaper in both appearance and content, catering to a small, well-to-do base of subscribers. It was not until Hearst purchased the *New York Journal* in 1895 that the paper began to appeal to New York's working classes. Like other publishers before it—such as London's "scandal sheet" newspapers in the late 18th century and New

York's penny press newspapers in the 1830s and 1840s—the *New York Journal* ventured to court a mass readership through sensationalist rhetoric and aesthetics. By 1897, the *New York Journal* was accused by its more conservative rivals of engaging in yellow journalism, an epithet derived from the immensely popular "Yellow Kid" comic strip that ran in both the *New York Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*.

Sensation and the Streets

Under William Randolph Hearst's management, the *New York Journal* adopted an advertising-centered business model that placed a greater emphasis on achieving mass circulation than on generating sales revenues from newspaper subscriptions. To achieve mass circulation and attract advertising revenue, Hearst endeavored to expand the *New York Journal*'s readership beyond the urban bourgeoisie. While New York's prestige newspapers traditionally drew on their institutional reputation to cultivate a relatively narrow base of well-educated, loyal subscribers who were willing to pay for multiple months up front, during Hearst's lifetime, the *Journal* came to rely on single-copy street sales to the city's working class (Smythe, 2003). Although newsboys and newsgirls (or "newsies," as they were known in 19th-century parlance) hawked newspapers in New York as early as the 1830s (Lee, 1937), it was not until the end of the century that street sales began to dominate circulation. As Thomas Leonard (1995) notes, "In the 1890s, if a naive New Yorker walked into the office of [the *New York Journal* or the *New York World*] to subscribe, the customer was directed to the nearest newsstand" (p. 159).

The crowded, bustling streets of turn-of-the-century New York were a site of voracious competition for the attention of the city's booming population. Over the course of the 19th century, the population of New York surged as the city transformed from a fledgling port city into a thriving industrial hub and a major entrepôt for world trade. By 1895, the two-mile-wide island of Manhattan was home to 3 million residents, with an additional 1 million people commuting into the city on the weekdays for work. South of 110th street, New York was the most densely populated city in the world (Gilfoyle, 2001).

A raft of primary and secondary literature testifies to how the sounds, sights, and smells of industrial modernity permeated city life at the end of the century (Kenny, 2014; Mack, 2015). A *New York Times* article entitled "New York the Noisiest City on Earth" conveyed that "the average Manhattanite realizes only occasionally that there is scarcely an hour in the twenty-four that his ears—and incidentally his entire mental and nervous organism—are not being bombarded with sound" (Griffith, 1905, p. 3). The writer proceeds to list the some of the principal culprits of noise pollution in the city:

> Trolley cars, boiler making, elevated roads, Subway trains, harbor sirens, and various steam whistles, riveting machines, trucks laden with slabs of iron and rails of steel, milk wagons banging over the pavements in the small morning hours, hand organs, phonographs with megaphone attachment, fish horns, knife-grinding serenades, yelling junkmen, hucksters and peddlers with cowbell distractions, cracked bells ringing day and night in churches and chapels. (Griffith, 1905, p. 3)

In response to this menagerie of sounds, in 1906, a group of New Yorkers founded the Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise, noting that, "to the sensitive, noise, even amidst spacious surroundings, is disturbing, in confined quarters it is torture" (Rice, 1907, p. 569).

This stampede of sounds was joined by a host of smells that flooded the urban sensorium at the turn of the century. Offensive odors emanating from industrial runoff (Hurley, 1994), overcrowded tenements, slaughterhouses, raw sewage, and garbage that was unceremoniously heaped on the sidewalks scented the air. These smells even compelled the New York City Metropolitan Board of Health to prepare "stench maps" that located the sources of these foul smells throughout Manhattan (Kiechle, 2017).

Newspapers were set in motion in and by the streets of the city: The *Journal*'s sales and distribution channels ran right through this concentrated torrent of sensation. Newsstands thrived in the tight spaces near the city's transportation hubs and at the edges of congested streets and sidewalks (Leonard, 1995). Newsies staked out territory in overcrowded residential areas such as the Lower East side, burgeoning centers of commerce in the Financial District and midtown, and heavily trafficked public spaces such as Union Square, Washington Square Park, and the Brooklyn Bridge. These spaces were awash with the ambient sights, sounds, and aromas of a rapidly expanding city.

New York's market for newspapers was, at least in part, an attention economy: Generating street sales required piercing through the manifold sensations pulsing through the city and drawing the public's attention toward the newspaper. On the sales side of the newspaper industry, newsies honed a variety of practices to attract attention: They juggled folded newspapers, banged and blew on brass musical instruments, and turned street sales into a "kind of performance art, with the most talented vendors using the sidewalk as a stage" (DiGirolamo, 2019, p. 339). The exigencies of the urban attention economy also inflected the production side of the yellow press, as newsrooms sought to create a newspaper fit for street sales.

Sensationalist Strategy: The New York Journal

As the *New York Journal* pivoted from a business model based on subscription revenues to single-copy street sales, the newspaper's staff deployed a repertoire of visual and rhetorical strategies to arouse sensation and capture attention on the bustling streets of New York. William Randolph Hearst was said to have wanted his readers "to look at page one and say 'Gee Whiz,' to turn to page two and exclaim 'Holy Moses,' and then at page three, shout 'God Almighty!'" (Spencer, 2007, p. xii).

In part, this was accomplished by trafficking in sensationalist subject matter intended to hook readers. Randall S. Sumpter (2001) notes that although "sensation was not new to the metropolitan press" of the 1890s, yellow newspapers like the *New York Journal* nevertheless used it "with an urgency driven by competition for more readers and greater advertising profits" (p. 64). The operative conception of newsworthiness at the *Journal* in the late 1890s was considerably broader than the standards of newsworthiness at the more conservative "grey newspapers" and capacious enough to include straight news as well as entertainment and human interest stories. The pages of the *New York Journal* were filled with tawdry tales of corporate greed, sex, sin, crime, gossip, scandal, and other signs of moral decay in the late Gilded

Age. The use of lurid, extravagant, and emotive language heightened the sense of vaudeville melodrama throughout the paper.

The *New York Journal*'s sensationalistic headlines also accounted for much of the broad appeal of the newspaper. In 1895, the *Journal* began running piercing, hyperbolic headlines that were crafted to draw attention to the drama of their stories in the brief moments that people encountered them on the street or newsstand. The *Journal*'s headlines elicited outrage and intrigue by teasing, revealing little of the major part of the story being told. For example, in one month during the fall of 1896, the *Journal*'s circulation jumped by 125,000 when it ran headlines such as, "Real American Monsters and Dragons," "One Mad Blow Kills Child," and "Startling Confession of a Wholesale Murderer Who Begs to Be Hanged" (Emery & Emery, 1972, p. 200).

In addition to dramatizing the content of the *Journal*'s headlines, Hearst also made his newspaper more visually stimulating by changing the formatting of its headlines. Before the rise of the yellow press, newspaper editors used small type headlines to cram a large amount of information into a limited space (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2002). Taking a cue from his rival Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, Hearst's *Journal* broke from the modest, light-faced headline type that was standard at the time and implemented large, capitalized headlines that ran the full width of the front page (Mott, 1962). While the *World* and some other papers throughout the country occasionally used black type one to two inches high, the *Journal* went even further and printed headlines that were upward of 4 or 5 inches high. The *Journal*'s critics derisively referred to these large, sensationalized headlines as "scare-heads" (Stead, 1902). Scare-heads conferred clear advantages for newspapers competing in New York's attention economy. As one business manager for the *Journal* explained, "The beauty of the scare-head is that it scares . . . it catches the eye on a news-stand or over the shoulder of the man who has bought the paper" (Smythe, 2003, p. 183).

More than any of his contemporaries, Hearst emphasized the importance of the visual appeal of his newspaper. As owner of the *Journal*, he spent more time going over artwork and illustrations than editorial copy (Stevens, 1991). Hearst asserted that the function of illustrations was not to simply "embellish a page, [they] attract the eye and stimulate the imagination of the lower classes and materially aid the comprehension of an unaccustomed reader" (Nasaw, 2000, p. 75). The *Journal* paired sensationalist news stories and scare-heads with eye-catching imagery. For example, on December 11, 1898, the *Journal* (1898) published a front-page story entitled "Most Colossal Animal Ever on Earth Just Found Out West," accompanied by a tall drawing of a brontosaurus peering into the 11th story of the New York Life building. Drawings and sketches often spanned the entire width of the front page, occasionally taking up more space than the text of the articles.

The *Journal* was also one of the first newspapers in the United States to use photographs and to print in color. Although photographs and color cartoons were expensive to produce, they visually differentiated the *Journal* from the city's dreary, "grey newspapers" that depended on subscription revenue rather than street sales. Indeed, Hearst called the *New York Journal*'s vibrant color supplement "eight pages of iridescent polychromous effulgence that makes the rainbow look like a piece of lead pipe" (Carlson & Bates, 1936, p. 92).

Case Study 2: BuzzFeed, 2012–2015

Jonah Peretti, cofounder of the liberal political blog *The Huffington Post*, launched BuzzFeed in 2006. He initially envisioned BuzzFeed as a laboratory dedicated to querying why information spread online. Peretti and his small team sought to tap into the zeitgeist of online culture by tracking down content that was circulating on blogs and forums and then aggregating them as daily blog posts on their website.

Over the last decade, BuzzFeed has erected an online content empire on top of social media platforms: By 2015, more than 75% of BuzzFeed's 200 million monthly users came from social or "dark social" sources such as instant messaging programs, messaging apps, and e-mail (Nguyen, Kelleher, & Kelleher, 2015). Billing itself as the "first true social news organization," BuzzFeed contends that it is "inventing and defining the viral media space" ("Buzzfeed 2017 Media Kit," 2017). BuzzFeed has one of the largest digital audiences in the United States, periodically even surpassing *The New York Times* in website traffic and unique visitors. BuzzFeed has developed a repertoire of tactics for attracting attention in the online spaces in which information is increasingly distributed and consumed, particularly the Facebook News Feed.

Feeding the Attention Economy

Although hierarchies of attention and influence were pervasive on the Internet when BuzzFeed was founded in 2006 (Hindman, 2008), it was not yet a centralized environment; publishers were not at the mercy of powerful intermediaries such as Facebook to drive traffic to their websites. Influential studies by Barabási (2002) and Watts and Strogatz (1998) created network maps of the link structure of Web 1.0: The resulting maps were not unified, but full of interconnected continents, archipelagos, and small islands. This led many scholars to conclude that audience attention on the Internet was more fragmented than it was in the mass-mediated public sphere of the 20th century (Gitlin, 2002; Sunstein, 2001).

The architecture of the Internet has evolved considerably since these pioneering studies. The "small world" networks that characterized Web 1.0 have been joined by big, centralized platforms. More time is being spent in fewer online spaces: Attention is much more concentrated on the Internet today than it was in the early 2000s; a small number of powerful social media platforms, search engines, and news aggregators exert a centripetal force over the online attention economy (Hindman, 2018). Rather than dispersing the public sphere into small, niche audiences, digital giants such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram account for a growing proportion of time spent online, centralizing attention that was previously spread out across the Web.

BuzzFeed's meteoric rise over the last decade is intimately connected to the development of Facebook into a centralized marketplace for attention. When BuzzFeed was founded in 2006, Facebook had 12 million active monthly users and was used almost exclusively for personal updates and interpersonal communication. However, Facebook grew fast: The platform had 350 million users by the end of 2009 and crossed 1 billion monthly active users in October 2012. Facebook drove the majority of BuzzFeed's referral traffic between 2012 and 2015, although Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat all eventually became important platforms for the company.

Like the streets of New York City in the 1890s, the Facebook News Feed is a highly concentrated and competitive space for attention. BuzzFeed competes not only with *The Wall Street Journal*, TMZ, and other purveyors of news and entertainment for attention on the News Feed, but also with every page and individual account that Facebook users follow as well—from their friends, family, and coworkers to their favorite bands, celebrities, and sports teams. At any given time, several thousand posts can potentially surface on a Facebook users' News Feed (Mosseri, 2018). To reach audiences in this frenetic social environment, publishers are compelled to differentiate their content from the deluge of information, advertisements, images, videos, and other content cascading down each user's News Feed.

Sensationalist Strategy: BuzzFeed

Like the *New York Journal* in the late 1890s, BuzzFeed places a heavy emphasis on the importance of headlines in maximizing the circulation of its articles. BuzzFeed's writers craft their headlines to grab attention by stoking particular affects and sensations as Internet users browse their social media streams and feeds. As one former member of BuzzFeed's social strategy team explained,

> When we're working through the titling process, we're definitely drawing on a certain set of emotional cues that play on social [media], that experience and data tell us are more likely to grab your attention than whatever else is on your feed.

This approach to writing headlines is consistent with numerous academic studies that have found that emotionally laden content is more readily shared online (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Kilgo, Lough, & Riedl, 2017). Indeed, headlines that convey a sense of joy, fear, and astonishment are all affective staples of BuzzFeed headlines that the company purposefully draws on to stand out on social streams and feeds. Kilgo and Sinta (2016) discovered that many digital native publishers try to evoke curiosity through their headlines, particularly through "forward-referencing" headlines that tease by withholding critical details about the contents of the underlying article. BuzzFeed headlines such as "This Is What Happens When You Replace The Women In Ads With Men" (Cowie & Rose, 2014) do not define what "this" is, thus inducing readers to click on the article to find out.

BuzzFeed also tends to deploy extravagant language in its headlines. Words such as *insane* and *awesome* appear frequently in BuzzFeed's headlines and are key drivers of referral traffic from Facebook. From "The 18 Most Awesome Things That Ever Happened At Whole Foods" (Epstein, 2014) to "These Are 15 Of The Craziest Things That Animals Do To Get Laid" (Umer, 2015), BuzzFeed's superlative soaked headlines are a structural response to the competitive dynamics of the News Feed: They are attempts to outmaneuver the myriad accounts vying for attention on social media platforms by raising users' expectations about the underlying contents of the accompanying article. One BuzzFeed writer compared the titling process to "an arms race":

> If I'm writing a story and I know that there are a thousand pages on Facebook that are probably making a story about the same thing, I know that somebody out there is going to do clickbait. So am I going to be the one who takes this stand and doesn't use it in the

title?. . . There's this pressure to poke and prod and titillate on social, so we're constantly pushing it to the nth degree.

A final point of emphasis for BuzzFeed regards the visual presentation of its content on Facebook. Facebook allows pages to select a thumbnail image that is displayed prominently alongside each article. Until the early 2010s, many legacy publishers either posted default images that had no relation to the associated post (generally these images were automatically populated by their content management system) or neglected to include a thumbnail image altogether when they shared an article on their Facebook page. BuzzFeed, however, was early to identify thumbnail images as a potent vehicle for visually differentiating its articles from the other content competing for attention on the News Feed. As one former social media editor argued, "Facebook is a highly visual medium, people are probably 'seeing' social media more than they are reading it. . . . So outside of headlines, share images are probably the most important thing that we optimize for." In a crowded and competitive visual field, BuzzFeed chose images that elicited an instantaneous reaction over ones that conveyed complexity or provided deeper context to the article. For example, BuzzFeed's writers and social distribution team intuited—and its data scientists later confirmed— that thumbnails that prominently feature human faces garner more clicks than those that do not.

The Geographies of Sensationalism

The sensationalist visual and rhetorical strategies deployed by the *New York Journal* and BuzzFeed were institutional adaptations to the spatial structure of the reigning attention economies of their day. In particular, this section emphasizes three spatial characteristics of these attention economies: the concentration of information and sensation, time–space compression, and context collapse.

Implicit in the following analysis of the streets of New York City and the Facebook News Feed is a rejection of the idea that there is a neat dichotomy between "physical" and "virtual" space and that the theoretical insights developed to understand social life in the analogue world are not applicable to the Internet—a tendency that Jurgenson (2011) refers to as "digital dualism." Instead, the Internet is considered here not as a single, transcendental space with a unified essence, but as heterogeneous and multiple. That is, the space of the Facebook News Feed is not the same as *The Washington Post*'s home page, an individual's Gmail inbox, and so forth, and they each may exhibit a different spatial logic. The following analysis is therefore not a comparison of physical and virtual space writ large, but of particular urban and social media spaces at particular points in history.

The Spatial Concentration of Information and Sensation

The attention economy is generally conceptualized as the result of technological advancements that create a surfeit of information for people to consume. However, the modern urban experience demonstrates that there is a distinct spatial dimension to human attentiveness as well. If, as both Marxist geographers and neoclassical economists contend, there is a tendency for capital, labor, industry, housing, and people to concentrate in urban space (Amin, 1999; Harvey, 1982), so too is there a concomitant tendency for sound, noise, and other sensations to saturate urban space. As early as the 18th and early 19th century, keen observers of European city life held that the urban subject was bombarded by a

succession of heterogeneous visual, auditory, olfactory, and tactical stimuli that often defied mental synthesis (Baudelaire, 1985; Simmel, 1950). It was not only the informational output of the burgeoning media industries that challenged the city dweller's capacity for absorbing sensory stimuli at the turn of the century, but also the teeming sights, sounds, and rhythms of city life itself.

The online attention economy is animated by the spatial concentration of information as well. As discussed in the previous section, since the mid-2000s, the Internet has undergone a structural transformation from a network of relatively noncontiguous websites and blogs to one in which a few massive, centralized platforms predominate. A growing proportion of online attention now flows through a small number of spaces such as the Facebook News Feed as Internet users increasingly read by feed and stream rather than by publication (Shearer & Grieco, 2019). Rather than navigate to publishers' individual homepages, the spatial form of the News Feed enables users to access content from a wealth of sources on a single visual plane. Facebook users browsing their News Feed are confronted with a stream of posts from their friends and pages as well as private messages, notifications, event updates, and advertisements. This makes for a highly compacted space of media consumption: Although Facebook's infinite scroll feature automatically loads new posts as users near the bottom of their feed, most users only view the first few posts at the very top of the page (Peterson, 2015).

The attention economy is therefore kindled not only by the quantitative increase in the amount or ubiquity of information, but also the intimate copresence and intermingling of media objects, ideas, and other sources of stimuli in space. In both urban and digital space, it is when information and other sources of stimuli are crammed and crowded into our perceptual field that we are challenged to process this wealth of information and that publishers are compelled to explore new ways to make themselves seen and heard. By theorizing the attention economy in spatial terms, we are drawn to considerations of concentration and *density* rather than sheer abundance. That is, we are pushed to examine the amount of information, sensation, and attention *relative* to space—and at particular points in space—rather than technologically deterministic understandings of the attention economy that are grounded in the productive capacities of novel information and communication technologies.

Time–Space Compression

The spatial concentration of information, sensation, and attention has a distinct temporal dimension as well: As space is contracted, time horizons become shortened. In his analysis of the historical geography of capitalism, Harvey (1989) advances the concept of time–space compression to signal the ways that advancements in communication and transportation technologies accelerate the velocity of people, commodities, and information across geographic distance. Harvey (1989) locates a particularly intense phase of time–space compression in metropolises such as New York, London, Paris, and Berlin during the second half of the 19th century. In these densely packed, spatially compressed urban environments, the heightened rhythms and timbres of urban modernity permeated everyday life (Berman, 2001). The German sociologist and cultural philosopher Georg Simmel (1950), for example, noted that urbanization was accompanied by a feeling of accelerated life, or "time pressure" characterized by a "swift and continuous shift of stimuli" (p. 410). For Simmel and other theorists, social life in the urban maelstrom tended toward the transient and ephemeral.

While the Internet is often analyzed as a newfound *cause* of time–space compression that facilitates the global flow of information, commodities, and capital (Freund & Weinhold, 2004), social media platforms are also *sites* of spatial and temporal compression. In compressed online environments such as the Facebook News Feed, there is a pressure to "hyperread" (Hayles, 2010), or skim everything on the screen, because there is too much material crowded together to pay close attention to everything for a prolonged period. This engenders a highly abbreviated mode of attentiveness (Vraga, Bode, & Troller-Renfree, 2016): Facebook users spend an average of just 2.5 seconds per post when browsing the News Feed on a desktop computer, and 1.7 seconds on a mobile device (Facebook IQ, 2016).

The streets of New York City and the Facebook News Feed are both fast-moving and fleeting spaces of encounter. In both spaces, people tend to make decisions about which information to pay attention to in a greatly compressed time frame. It was in the evanescent moments amid the hustle and bustle of city life that the *New York Journal* sought to attract the attention of passersby. It is in the split-seconds during which people view posts on their social media feeds that BuzzFeed piques or loses the public's interest. These two publishers both tuned their content to the rhythms and tempos of the spaces in which they distributed their media.

Spaces of Context Collapse

The Facebook News Feed is an unbounded space in which various spheres of modern life readily intermingle and overlap. New media scholars have theorized social media as a site of "context collapse" in which the networked architecture of platforms blurs previously distinct social contexts (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Context collapse is at once about the blurring of identity—in the challenges posed to individual expression on social media when family members, friends, and coworkers are all part of the same audience—and the blurring of space, the muddling of the boundaries that demarcate different spheres of social life. The Facebook News Feed is one such space of context collapse, simultaneously functioning as a marketplace of attention for publishers such as BuzzFeed, a commercial space for advertisers, and a space that facilitates interpersonal interaction among networks of friends.

More than a century earlier, the streets of New York City were also spaces of context collapse. For the *New York Journal*—along with other companies that peddled their wares on the streets of the city in the late 19th century—streets were commercial spaces. Streets were also social and recreational spaces, where much of the city's life was lived—particularly for the city's lower classes, who could not retreat to the tranquility of the bourgeois home—as well as spaces for labor, providing the main setting for a host of jobs for people who preferred to work outside rather than toil in the city's stifling tenement buildings. The boundaries between public and private, labor and leisure, and professional and personal faded on the streets of the city.

In spaces of context collapse, publishers vie for the public's attention not just with rival publishers, but also with a wide berth of social life. Newsstand owners and newsies selling papers on the streets of New York City in the 1890s had to compete with the howls of children playing on the street, the clatter of pushcarts, the briny smell of oysters emanating from food vendors, and all the other sensations in their immediate environment. Similarly, on Facebook, a family member's vacation photos, videos of a friend's new cat, tour announcements from bands, and all the other content that crowds the News Feed are sources of competition for publishers. Indeed, BuzzFeed staff members rarely invoked institutional media actors—either legacy or

digital native—when talking about the competitive nature of social media distribution. Instead, their understanding of competition on social media was far more generalized and diffuse. One former BuzzFeed social media strategist expressed the nature of competition on Facebook in Hobbesian terms:

> There are just too many publications, too many random accounts [on Facebook]. Even just random meme accounts and joke accounts all of a sudden are getting huge, ridiculous traffic. . . And then you have friends and family, and we have to think about creating something more compelling than a picture of what your aunt made for dinner. So we're not so much worried about like how well BuzzFeed is doing against how well the *New York Times* or even *Digiday* is doing as we are with the avalanche of shit that is constantly being posted [to social feeds]. It's a war of all against all.

Like the *New York Journal* before them, BuzzFeed's terrain of competition was vast, including, but extending far beyond, large, industrial media actors to the informal actions of the networked multitudes.

Algorithmic Discontinuities

There are important differences between the spatial structure of the attention economies in the late 1890s and today. The *New York Journal*'s sales and distribution networks ran through the streets of New York City. By contrast, the competition for attention online takes place not on municipally owned urban infrastructure, but on commercial platforms and search engines that are animated by content-sorting algorithms (Bucher, 2018; Vaidhyanathan, 2018). Facebook's algorithm is a mode of spatial governance, a technological mechanism through which Facebook adjudicates which content appears on users' feeds; the streets of New York City possess no direct corollary. While Facebook's engineers and 19th-century urban planners both organized, modified, and administered space, the power of platforms over content distribution is more direct and muscular: Every adjustment that Facebook makes to the algorithm changes what content is surfaced and suppressed on the News Feed, thus redistributing attention from some people and publishers to others. Some of these are small tweaks that nudge the flow of content on the platform in subtle ways, whereas others are seismic shifts that cause massive changes in referral traffic. For example, Facebook's 2018 decision to prioritize posts from users' friends and family members over content from news publishers and brands led to a double-digit decline in website traffic for outlets like BuzzFeed (Moses, 2018).

The algorithmic ordering of the space of the News Feed accounts for many variations between the publishing practices of BuzzFeed and the *New York Journal*. Algorithmically ordered spaces such as the News Feed are highly personalized environments in which individualized calculations of "relevancy" determine what content surges to the top of each user's feed. Consequently, whereas the *New York Journal* built a mass readership by featuring stories that held wide appeal to the general public, much of BuzzFeed's content strategy is directed toward targeting much more granular, niche audiences, producing articles for a wide range of identities, fandoms, and subcultures. In economic terms, if the *New York Journal* succeeded by achieving economies of scale through spreading out their first copy costs over a large readership, BuzzFeed has succeeded by achieving economies of scale *and* economies of scope by producing a diverse array of content for a multitude of algorithmically fractured publics.

However, the power of platforms over publishers cannot be reduced to algorithms alone. While Facebook's algorithm influences which *content* surfaces on users' News Feeds, it does not change the spatial *form* of the feed itself. The spatial form of the News Feed—the crowding of the perceptual field with content and the presentation of multiple different social contexts in a single visual plane—must be distinguished from the sorting and ordering power of the algorithm. The compressed spatial structure of the News Feed, the scarcity of user attention, and oversupply of content are together constituent of competition on Facebook. It is this disequilibrium among information, sensation, attention, and space that sanctions yet increasingly radical tactics to attain market share in the attention economy—digital, urban, or otherwise.

Concluding Remarks

Journalism does not operate independently or outside of space. Yet, Akhteruz Zaman (2013) observes that journalism studies "has generally overlooked the issue of 'space' in news work" and that scholars in the field "hardly mention space as a distinct issue for discussion" (p. 819). This article has addressed this gap in the literature through a comparative case study of how space informed the production practices of the *New York Journal* and BuzzFeed. In particular, I argue that the sensationalist media practices developed by these two publishers emerged dialectically out of the interplay between social structure and spatial structure, between the financial imperative to build readership and the practical challenges of attracting attention in densely packed, fast-moving, and sensation-saturated spaces.

The spatial framework advanced in this article can enrich other approaches to journalism studies, particularly the political economy tradition. A spatially sensitive approach to the political economy of the media does not deny the importance of structural influences such as public policy and financing, but rather suggests that we need to attend to how these influences are mediated by space. The business models of publishers like the *New York Journal* and BuzzFeed were *actualized* in space, in the sale of newspapers on the city streets and in the clicks of Facebook users on the News Feed. While this article foregrounds the spaces in which media is circulated and distributed, political economists of the media should also interrogate the spatial structure of the sites in which media is *produced*, exploring how structural changes in media markets are manifested in the spatial organization of newsrooms (Usher, 2019).

Finally, the main limitation of this study is that many publishers are not as financially dependent on attention economies as the *New York Journal* and BuzzFeed. Publishers that are funded primarily through subscription revenue, government subsidies, or donations do not encounter the same pressure to amass circulation as advertising-based media outlets. *The New York Times*, for example, is more insulated than BuzzFeed from the vicissitudes of social media platforms by virtue of their large base of paid subscribers. Generally speaking, the spatial pressures described in this article are expressed quite unevenly across the media industry and vary to the degree that publishers count on Facebook to generate clicks, hits, and advertising revenue. Nevertheless, the creeping influence of social media platforms over the circulation of news and information in the public sphere points to a growing need to continue to think critically, historically, and spatially about the interaction of space, attention, and media practice.

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