



The Future of Florida Journalism: An interview with Brian Burgess, Publisher & Editor-in-Chief of *The Capitolist*

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In today's rapidly changing world, industries that take advantage of new technology and adapt quickly to change survive while those who remain stagnant become extinct. It is Social Darwinism 101, and the news industry is no exception.

With Florida at the forefront in so many different landscapes, a look at the Sunshine

State's news and media industry is a case study for how this industry has changed in recent years and, more to the point, the direction that journalism is headed.

There are few people more in tune with these changing trends than Publisher & Editor-in-Chief for *the Capitolist*, Brian Burgess. Brian's exceptional understanding

of both the political and media landscapes gained throughout his career has given him a unique insight into this topic and has helped him to launch a successful new-era news outlet at a time when traditional legacy news has struggled.

I interviewed Brian to get his take on the news industry and what he sees as the future of Florida journalism. Read the questions and Brian's answers below:

Tell us about your background and your experience in communications and in journalism, as well as your experience working with the Florida Press Corps during your career.

My first experience with the Florida media was in 2010, when "Tea Parties" were all the rage and an unknown businessman named Rick Scott started putting together a team to help him run for governor. Prior to that point, I'd worked for over a decade in business, but I only had five years of experience in politics and media.

When Scott won the 2010 election and tapped me to lead his communications team inside the governor's office, I knew I needed to surround myself with people who had a deep understanding of Florida's business, policy, and political history, and with people who had an institutional knowledge of Florida government and the way it functioned.

Scott challenged me to think outside the box when it came to media relations - it was something we could easily do during the campaign because we had no shortage of funding to get our message out - but once Scott became governor, the game changed considerably and we were forced to play

more frequently on the media's home court in Tallahassee.

We weren't afraid to experiment in those early days - we did the first-of-its-kind "Twitter town hall" and we leaned heavily on the governor's access to his own private plane, which enabled us to take our message in a more direct way to local media markets rather than duking it out with the capitol press corps, which were considerably more adversarial than local TV reporters around the state.

After I left the governor's office, I went back to the public affairs/media relations world for a few years, helping clients, and trying to pitch stories to the same media outlets I'd just spent years largely fighting against their narratives.

What led you to launch *the Capitolist*?

The Capitolist exists because of a confluence of factors that all came together in 2016:

1) The capitol press corps was undergoing a rapid drawdown and realignment, leaving fewer reporters to cover the same number of stories.

2) A national center-right media outlet had brought me in to talk about opening a Florida branch, but those talks bogged down and it never came to pass. But the discussion opened my eyes to the opportunities that existed here.

3) My own skillset had ripened to the point I was ready to take the plunge: I knew many of the newsmakers in state government, I understood the media and how it worked, my technical skills were good enough, the technology was available,

the costs were low, and I knew a lot of the organizations and groups that could help fund the endeavor. To top things off, love him or hate him, Donald Trump was exposing the legacy media's built-in biases like never before, opening the door to alternative media outlets. The timing was just right.

In recent years, we have seen an increase in online-only news services like *the Capitolist* emerging. Why do you think there is a growing demand for these new outlets and how do you see this trend developing in the future?

Most people understand the impact that the internet has had on legacy media outlets, how their stovepiped organizational pyramids were no longer sustainable in the information age.

I could spend hours on this subject, but I'll focus in on one key difference: breaking news versus "value-added" content.

Legacy outlets expend enormous resources to break news stories and be "first" to report something.

In the past, it used to matter that an outlet was first. It gave the outlet credibility, people became reliant on that outlet, which translated to direct revenues.

That's simply no longer the case. There's just not enough revenue in breaking news stories - especially at the local or state level - when information is so rapidly disseminated on the internet anyway.

For example, in the golden age of newspapers, if the New York Times broke a story on Monday, the soonest the

Washington Post could publish a similar story was Tuesday morning, leaving the Times to sell as many newspapers with that story as possible, with no competition for a full day.

That's just not the case anymore. Today, breaking news stories is more a matter of personal and professional pride than a matter of direct revenue. We still strive to do it and we love it when we break news.

But a modern digital outlet like *The Capitolist* focuses more on "value-added" news rather than "breaking news." That's an area where we can excel, in taking a story beyond the breaking news phase to the point where we're analyzing a story, speculating on what it means, thinking about the facts of a story in different ways, or providing new context that the reader may not be aware of.

In short, new digital media outlets are leaner, more flexible, almost as fast, equally informative, and definitely as entertaining as any of the legacy media outlets we compete against.

In contrast to the increased success of these new forms of news services, there has been much discussed about the decline of traditional and print news. For decades, newspapers such as the *St. Pete Times*, *Miami Herald*, *the Florida Times-Union* led the news, but today are shrinking their staff or closing their newsroom altogether. What do you feel has played a role in the decreased subscription rates and shrinking readership of these long-standing members of the Florida Press Corps?

Their information monopolies are gone. The *Tampa Bay Times* isn't the only way for someone in Tampa Bay to get news

these days. And the breaking news and exclusive stories monopoly no longer has the same value. Couple that shriveled up revenue stream with the enormous costs those media outlets are burdened with - pension funds, high salaries for layers of largely unnecessary editors - and they've essentially become a victim of their own success.

The good news is that their decline is almost over. It'll take until the end of this decade, but those local outlets that survive will soon figure out how to thrive. They just have to work through the financial pinch, shed their pension funds, and get rid of all the dead weight at the top of their organizations.

We're already seeing this play out with some of the hedge funds that are buying large stakes in media outlets, then making ruthless cuts to jettison some of the more expensive pieces of their newsroom operations, consolidating where possible.

Within a few years, these problems will finally be solved, and the surviving newsrooms will be lean and mean. My goal is to ensure *The Capitolist* is prepared to compete against those survivors.

In their 2017 report, Ericsson stated that the internet, smarter software, and social media can all be seen as a "gift to media and journalism," because of the potentially limitless opportunities that they provide. As we have seen, however, many traditional news outlets have not been able to take advantage of these new technologies effectively in a way that translates to subscriptions

or increased revenue. What do you feel is the reason for this disconnect when other organizations, like *the Capitolist*, are able to succeed in this new landscape?

Ericsson is correct, and smarter news organizations like ours are finding ways to generate compelling, relevant content at a low cost. Our team can spend five minutes on Twitter and find half a dozen story ideas that will easily generate as much traffic as a Miami Herald story about a legislative committee hearing. But we'll also cover that hearing, too, or pick up the wire version of the same story so our readers can have that, too.

The news outlets that survive into the next decade will be the ones that figure this out. The ones that die will be the ones clinging to the stodgy old business model of working to break a story, running it through several different editors, and finally publishing it digitally, and getting a few extra clicks for their effort. Meanwhile, our team sees their story on Twitter, and within an hour can have a "what's gonna happen next?" story out that gets 80 percent of the clicks but cost just 20 percent of their effort and resources.

In 2019, the Pew Research Center found that over half of Americans (54%) either got their news "sometimes" or "often" from social media. With this explosion of online publishing sources and social networking, many argue that this has caused a "bubble" due to cherry-picking and consuming only news

that conforms with one's worldview or political ideology, while other studies suggest that has caused increased exposure to diverse perspectives and news sources that many would not normally consume. What are your thoughts on this debate and how people are affected by this growing trend of news coming from social media sources?

Is there anyone advancing a credible argument that we should have fewer news options? Show me that person and I'll show you someone who just lost an election.

I grew up in a world where the news was "cherry-picked" for me by the editors of the *New York Times*, ABC, CBS, and *NBC News*.

I like this new model a lot better.

I have no doubt that "confirmation bias" is a thing. But it's not a new thing. And the fact that people are becoming aware of it will help encourage them to seek out a broader base of facts and information before making a decision.

Access to more news sources is always better than being force-fed a limited narrative by a third party.

How big of a role does social media play for *the Capitolist* in disseminating the news to your readership, and do you see that changing or growing in upcoming years?

Social media is crucial to how our content gets distributed. Our site is certainly designed to attract readers to our homepage with our statewide breaking

news and business news tickers, plus our original content all there at the top of the page. But most people aren't just waiting there on *TheCapitolist.com* for something new to post.

Social media is how traffic actually flows to us. We post a story on the site and immediately cross-post it to Twitter and Facebook, which instantly drives clicks, comments, and shares to other people's feeds. People also grab the link and email it around or post it themselves to share with others.

Facebook is far and away the largest driver of traffic for us. But we have a rather large Facebook audience that we've cultivated over the last five years.

In the next five years, I think our email newsletter, *The ReCap*, could supplant Facebook as the top traffic driver because it's growing significantly faster than our Facebook audience right now, but we'll have to see how things shake out.

There have been several instances in recent years of news outlets pushing out breaking news without verifying facts or checking sources, often due to prioritizing being the first one to break a story over accurate reporting. This has most notably caused commotion among government administrations and political organizations. In your opinion, what has caused this disturbing trend?

That's just a product of the speed with which information travels. Reporters are human, they'll see something on Twitter, and make very human and therefore occasionally erroneous assumptions about

those facts, and those assumptions then manifest in their own coverage of the event, which in turn gets repeated.

But I don't think it's anything to worry about. We as news consumers are growing more savvy about this, we're more skeptical, we're less likely to just believe the first thing we read online.

The modern internet is really only about twenty years old. My generation is this "straddle" generation, the first to grow up in the old media world while learning how to forget that world and navigate the internet. We're the most susceptible to "fake news" because we grew up relying on newsrooms taking their time to get it right.

My kids though? They know better. They're much more internet savvy, they have a healthy dose of skepticism. They've grown up in the digital world and know it better than you or I ever could.

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally disrupted the way many industries conduct business, bringing in technological alternatives and new ways of interacting into everyday life more than ever before. In what ways has the journalism industry been changed and do you see these changes lasting in the long term?

The most notable change to the news business has been the lack of face-to-face media gatherings or "gaggles" where reporters surround a newsmaker and ask questions. Just two years ago, these were a regular thing, and they often yielded some surprising news nuggets because of the free-for-all atmosphere.

This new COVID-19 media world is a lot different, with spaced-out press conferences that are far more reserved and tame, and a lot more Zoom meetings that just don't have the same feel.

What other thoughts do you have on the future of Journalism in Florida?

The news business is largely starting to gel into the existing outlets you see today: *POLITICO Florida*, *The Tampa Bay Times*, *Miami Herald*, and a handful of surviving legacy newspapers, a couple of wire services, and the rest all digital outlets like *Florida Politics* and *The Capitolist*. There will be fewer failures, fewer layoffs, but more consolidation in the next few years, especially in Tallahassee. But by and large, the most painful cuts have already been made, and we're starting to settle into the final configuration for media outlets in the internet age.