

# EPIC 2030

## introduction

- It is the best of times. It is the worst of times.
- In the year 2030, we live in a world where 7 Billion people use 50 billion connected devices daily to freely follow each other across all continents. Smartphones and wearables are joined by always-on implants. 10% of world population commutes with self driving cars, unlocking incremental hours of free attention. Some use it for work, some use it for entertainment.
- the media experience depends on the media outlet and the user preferences. some feel like digital slums, others are paid for or filled with non-interruptive, voluntary engagement with product placements. each user has a different experience of the internet that fits her sensitivity to interruption and her ability to pay for services.
- A decade of populist media wars and extreme liberal policies has left the society in extremely segregated, polarised and unequal state. first billionaires are moving to mars to escape the imminent threat of global warming and global war.
- Governments have established policies and technologies to guarantee online and offline identity and security of personal data.
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- Incidentally, all this enabled a stable independent media landscape again for the first time after 30 years. Just in time for quality journalism to step up and help humanity deal with challenges of the most dramatic century we will have ever seen.
- This is the story of how news fell and rose back again.

## The beginnings

- First sign came soon after the advent of the web. Craigslist went online in the Bay Area in 1996 and spread across the continent like a weed, choking off local newspapers' most reliable source of revenue: classified ads. If only anyone had the ability to predict the rest of the story.
- Year 2007 was pivotal in every possible way.
- The New York Times moved into their shiny new skyscraper, built with profits from advertising gold age that will never return.
- By now several popular news aggregators were started, including Google News, Facebook News Feed and the Huffington Post. Populist BuzzFeed and extremist Breitbart will follow soon.
- Soon after the big recession started, print advertising and subscription revenues started declining in unison, and online consumers are not used to paying for anything yet. This spawns a decade of agony and hundreds of failed news organisations.
- the playbook for digitally native publishers like Facebook and BuzzFeed was one of exploiting the nascent unregulated wild west markets by luring readers into their walled gardens with free attractive unverified content and making them available to advertisers with no limitations and at whatever price they wanted to set. they were literally printing money.
- traditional news organizations kept protecting the quality they have learned to value over centuries, despite its weight in efficiency. during the downturn, they systematically

tested any and all ideas for revenue creation that crossed their paths, while depleting their gold reserves. one of the key methods was to repeatedly outsource ad sales to vulture ad networks and technology platforms who maximised their margins through untransparent pricing practices.

- In 2009 facebook released the Like button. a stroke of genius that enabled their dominance in performance advertising for the next ten years. It exploited poor awareness of online privacy, and trained a generation of consumers why value virality over truth.
  - In 2011, Jonah Peretti launched BuzzFeed News, whose editor in chief asked for a “scoop-a-day” from his reporters. they had little interest in the rules of journalism: “They didn’t even know what rules they were breaking.”
  - In 2013 BuzzFeed surpassed the Times Web site in reader traffic.
  - In 2016 a skilled populist Donald Trump runs for the president of the USA. with that journalism entered a new, Trumpian, gold-plated age during the campaign, with the Trump bump, when news organizations found that the more they featured Trump the better their engagement numbers, which, arguably, is a lot of what got him elected.
  - The media became complicit in the all-in assault on truth, enabling circulation and amplification of fake news.
  - By 2017 most newspapers and online sites laid off hundreds of people. The only survivors were the guardian, the new york times and the Washington post, who found their funding with trusts and billionaires. the rest was left to deal with market forces.
  - In 2019, Apple launches apple news subscription. It enables users to subscribe to all quality journalism instead of having to register to each publication. Google tries to follow with its own "Google News Plus" service but publishers do not agree to collaborate with them.
  - By 2019 all main publishers on the planet started collaborating by pooling their individual audiences and making them available as an alliance in a desperate attempt to match the reach of facebook and google.
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## The future

- in 2018 the web foundation led by tim berners lee starts working with UN and governments around the world to upgrade legislation, to fix the malicious activities online. in 2021 they announce first stable release of Solid, the personal identity and data framework for the new internet.
- Also in 2018 EU declares humans are now “data subjects” and what follows is a series of blows to the programmatic online advertising market. after a decade of pillage and the rise of populism, the society started to sober up and begin the march towards regulation of the web. privacy of consumer data and content police are key topics.
- ironically, these first attempts at regulation only strengthen the duopoly. google and facebook are the only ones who can easily ask all users to agree with updated terms of service. They are in full milk mode before the time runs out. meanwhile apple aligns with the consumer and vows to develop client side advertising technology.
- media was meticulously counting the number of times the president lied during the first mandate, driving trump mad and frustrated. After winning re-election in 2020 it was time for revenge.
- “night of the great silence” happened on the day of the inauguration, when an executive order was signed, that declared publishing any false claim against the government equal to treason. this enabled the army to arrest hundreds of journalists, and launched countless lawsuits that dragged on for years.

- us elections of 2020 drive the online world into chaos. unable to fix their service, facebook follows bell playbook and files for protection and regulation as utility provider.
- Regulation also moves in to separate Google to different companies - one with its own properties and one, based on DoubleClick, focused on publishers advertising tools and services. Google is not allowed to have its own inventory preferred in their exchange.
- Microsoft changes direction of MSN in 2021 because baby boomer audiences are falling and are being replaced by millennials. they acquired epic games and converted MSN into the largest community of gamers. more adults play games daily for more time than they read news.
- In 2021 buzzfeed news receives its first pulitzer for their pivotal role in exposing previous years election fraud. same year it was sold to rupert murdoch 2 months before he died. the aftermath of his departure was brutal, with several household media brands around the world collapsing or being absorbed into buzzfeed. after five painful years of trying to fix the mess, board of directors hired Jonah Perreti back from his retirement in 2026 to fix the news once again. This time he focused on closed, subscription based media.
- by 2022 the consumer has choice of dozens of OTT subscriptions, only slightly better than the cable chaos of the nineties.
- in 2023 pandora announces expansion into OTT after striking a deal with sony, hbo, hulu and time warner. their 'tv genome project' based recommendation algorithm, coupled with pressures from hollywood studios lead to serious challenges for netflix and roku. They both start introducing more and more ads. Netflix uses product placements more and more, while roku relies on programmatic video demand.
- in 2023 Apple releases next iteration of their wearables line, that is designed for unobtrusive always-on experience, powered by kinematics of the body. it has the ability to always talk to you and to always physically nudge you to draw attention to relevant impulses in the environment. all IoT, OTT, auto, outdoors vendors happily implement the required support and finally get a controlled and reliable channel for mass direct communication.
- Verizon and AT&T continue to make big bets and acquire their way into a full stack + adding their OTT and Cable abilities to provide full funnel solutions for marketers, who start to shift budgets from google and facebook.
- the period of media consolidation in the hands of telcos ends right when the public is most sensitive about privacy and when facebook is in courts to be regulated. a series of regulatory actions in 2023 in US, EU and APAC kill all expected synergy values from the conglomerates by requiring strict separation of infrastructure and media business.
- Also in 2023, european union passes third iteration of the "link tax" legislation, which prescribes strict online citations protocol, and payment of royalties to the original sources of the stories regardless of where they are consumed. EU launches an agency to track and process all these payments on behalf of the platforms, which completely levels the playing field. Small and large publishers can now earn their fair share of ad revenue, guaranteed by the government.
- the facebook FCC case dragged until 2024, when in a historic judgement, it was rejected. Facebook is allowed to remain a private company, but now it has to honor the new privacy regulations that were put in place in the meantime.
- 2025 was the turning point.
- By 2025, any serious data sharing and tracking is forbidden to advertisers, and all ad serving logic now lies in the client side. this reduced the difference between walled gardens and the rest of the web.
- starting in 2025 total number of ads on mainstream sites started to drop, caused by heavy regulation and by publishers finally mastering subscriptions. at the same time,

deeper integrations between largest buyers and the limited number of supply side vendors enabled much more advanced ad experiences, often indistinguishable from publishers own content and services. we saw a new Cambrian explosion of branded digital formats, starting with crossword puzzles and comic strips.

- In 2026, US introduces a version of the “link tax” legislation. The new york times employs more reporters than it did in 2007, again covering the global events as they happen.
- The white house wasn’t able to change the constitution in time to allow Trump to run again. after the election of 2028 he fled to Slovenia with his family and secured a special deal to create a golden tower on the southern border and declare it independent territory.
- in 2028 sweden is the first government that requires all digital interactions to be encrypted and users identified by a government-issued, user-controlled digital container holding all their personal information. the service providers are welcome to implement it’s sdk for client-side modifications of service according to preferences, which advertising happily accepts after years of frustratingly low performant spray and pray advertising.
- By now in 2030 most of OECD countries have a version of this legislation in process of rollout, and privacy is considered a solved problem. all mega corps have a solution for this, from ibm to snap.

## Conclusion

- In 2030, everyone truly has access to all of the world's information, including the best quality journalism. Most pay for it with personalized ads of greatest diversity, but ad-free subscriptions are available to the elites.

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## Notes

- Basic thesis of the original epic was: technological advances enabled private companies to create an ecosystem that cheaply produces content through crowdsourcing and smartly personalizes it in distribution without needing the big inefficient media organizations with journalists and editors.
  - Today we know that while it did happen like that, the simplistic solution to the ancient crave of news created the problem of fake news, which enabled rise of populism worldwide.
  - At the same time, lack of regulation made the web a true wild west, where 90% of the global population resides half of their waking hours, without guaranteed basic human rights, and with poor government oversight of corporate as well as individual actions.
- Basic thesis of this version is: capitalism and populism kept deepening the social inequalities; solving for online privacy had long term effect of giving power back to open web and supply side; this strengthened the fourth estate. Next ten years will be about re-educating the readers back into responsible citizens.
  - Wave of regulation started in 2018 with focus on privacy. Meanwhile monopolists are asking for official content guidelines. In five years the online playing field will be leveled, and 10 years for scalable federated identity solution. The first will give needed oxygen to publishers.
  - Technological advances will enable true always-on experience for 90% of world population, and processing of revenue transactions for all these users. Coupled with the identity framework, this will create the true big brother state.