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A Dickensian Curative

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In the fall of 1843, Charles Dickens walked the empty streets of London late at night wrestling with the question: Are there answers to humanity's indifference, negligence, and lack of charity? Is there solace to be found in a holiday tale? From those solitary walks, sometimes ten to twenty miles at a time, the idea for a story grew and blossomed.

Dickens completed *A Christmas Carol* in six weeks and published it on December 17, 1843.

The first edition sold out in three days. *A Christmas Carol* had touched a nerve. It was an otherworldly remedy for a world-weary age, and an unsettling admonition to those who neglected the poor and destitute. It was his tribute to the "Spirits of Christmas," and it served as a counterbalance and restorative measure against societal apathy and community disconnect. Dickens did not call for a government solution to poverty, a new program, or a symposium. He asked his readers to change how they interacted with their fellow voyagers, to be a kinder, more generous, and better version of themselves.

Dickens invented a haunting and enchanting Christmas story about a cold-hearted skinflint with the perfect moniker, Ebenezer Scrooge, as a cautionary tale. Scrooge was a monument to miserliness. He did not embrace life; he buckled under it and was derelict in his attention to others' suffering. Ebenezer was the textbook Dickensian character, squandering the time he had on earth in pursuit of material excess. Ebenezer Scrooge, in name and deed, was first mocked and then converted by the specter of Jacob Marley and the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future. Fred, his nephew, was the family's quixotic optimist—perhaps a stand-in for Dickens himself. He wanted his stingy uncle (and us) to have a change of heart. He wanted

Scrooge to be a different man, someone who valued human interaction and was generous and big-hearted. Fred was given the duty of delivering the most important message of the book. He expressed to his uncle what the true Christmas spirit should be: "a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know of,

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in the calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys." Fred's hopefulness, with a little help from some Spirits, was rewarded at story's end.

Through *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens revealed the value of memory and imagination. In it, he called on Londoners to keep the spirit of Christmas by breathing in the magic and wonder of the world. Through remarkable characters with peculiar habits and unusual names (Scrooge himself, Fezziwig, Tiny Tim, Jacob Marley, and Bob Cratchit), Dickens showed that the goodwill, love, and joy of the Christmas season could change even the most hardened hearts. However, the surprising success of *A Christmas Carol* may be found especially in its fanciful journey and unusual circumstances. The impossible was made believable; it was a vehicle for Dickensian mirth, edification, fright, and whimsy.

Peruse a newer edition and examine the wonderfully detailed first-edition artwork of illustrator John Leech. The drawings are a perfect complement to the story. To read *A Christmas Carol* is to immediately feel open to its influence and enchantment, and thankful for the creativity, insight, and talent of Charles Dickens. So raise your glass to toast past and present joys, friends, family, and this New Year.

Running for President

MONTANA SPRAGUE
STAFF WRITER

I used to believe people ran for president because they actually wanted to become president. That seems rather naïve to me now. It occurs to me that the endgame is all too often candidacy for candidacy's sake, with contestants showing little interest in, or hope of, coming close to winning the election.

And why not? At practically no cost, anyone at all can announce their candidacy, instantly elevating their stature and visibility as a "presidential contender," and ride the ego trip for years. Being on the news every night gives them something else to do than what we are often paying them for in the case of current senators, House members, and governors. Sometimes it has even led to opportunities as a news commentator or something similar, merely because the "candidacy" has made them famous and a "rising star in the party," all for just saying, "I'm running." In the current flooded field of Democratic hopefuls, we see people who have barely started their first days in any elected position who, before accomplishing a thing, are already asking voters to presume they're qualified to lead our country.

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So now there are around 30 Democrats who have at least been seriously considering the race for 2020, giving them two years to campaign. They will be on the Sunday talk shows, posing for pictures, giving interviews, mixing with Hollywood celebrities, all the while doing next to none of the governing they were elected to do. It has become such a farce that you can even generate headlines for yourself by

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announcing that you are not running this time, as occurred last week when former pro wrestler Dwayne Johnson, “The Rock,” gave us the disappointing news.

For political junkies, the growing caravan of candidates will provide a tremendous source of entertainment. If nothing else, their clamoring to express profound opposition to anything Trump while promising to outperform their political competitors remains amusing.

The one wild card in the nascent field of Democratic candidates would be Starbucks magnate Howard Schultz,

who is flirting with the idea of running as an independent. He is probably doing the most harm to the Democrats right now, ridiculing the ideas and comments of recent media favorites like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Kamala Harris. Schultz is considered anathema to both parties, but should he decide to run as neither a Republican nor a Democrat, he would most likely do for Donald Trump what Ross Perot did for Bill Clinton in 1992—all the while, again, never really having a chance of actually becoming president of the United States.

One thing, though, has become undeniable in American politics today: with the amount of money spent on campaigns higher than ever, and the jockeying for front-runner status beginning earlier than ever, there really is no longer any such thing as being “in between election seasons.” The 2020 race began in the minds of many observers the day after Trump was elected in 2016, and is clearly in full swing just minutes after the recent midterms, making running for president as much of a full-time career and goal as actually being president.

Incomplete Reporting and Covington Catholic

ERIC FISCHER
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On January 18, a short video showing a smiling white teenager in a Make America Great Again hat standing face-to-face with an elderly Native American banging a drum, while a number of other white teenagers stood behind them, was widely shared on social media and reported on by media outlets. The event, known as the Covington Catholic incident for the high school these teens attended, has added fuel to the long-running national debate about the integrity of our news media.

Although they had barely more than a short clip and a headline, media outlets reported hastily on the incident. This

celebrating a three-pointer while claiming that the image showed a Nazi sign.

In the next three days, follow-up coverage gave a more nuanced depiction of the story, but the work put into those reports should have gone into the initial coverage. Media outlets revised their stories to include important details: a group of Black Hebrew Israelites agitated the situation, it was the Native American who approached the Covington students, and the students did not harass him as previously reported. The outlets also noted that new information had provided a different angle to the story. Unfortunately, these revisions

provide context for their reporting. When President Trump takes seemingly every opportunity to bash what he calls “the fake news media,” this kind of laziness among the news providers in question is irresponsible and dangerous. It also raises two key issues.

First, each political news story has one or more, perhaps multiple, people at its center. While condemning them may be justified once thorough reporting has been carried out, exposing them to immediate, brutal, public criticism based on incomplete information is unfairly damaging to people’s character. Regardless of one’s own opinion on the Covington Catholic incident, wishing physical harm on a teenager, or anyone for that matter, is disgusting, especially when based on incomplete information.

Second, rushed and irresponsible reporting provides another opening for an attack on the media, which are crucial to maintaining our functioning democracy. Although the early stories on this incident may not have been “fake news,” they certainly represented a collective failure of many mainstream news providers to report accurately, fairly, and completely. While news outlets rightly condemn damaging rhetoric from the Trump Administration that attacks the quality of their reporting, they must bolster their own cause by tightening up their standards and providing critics with fewer examples of poor reporting.

The modern rapid news cycle will not stop, but traditional outlets, especially, must maintain standards in this environment. They can do that by using more neutral language, especially about people at the center of a story, and by delaying reporting until at least basic background information has been collected. Above all, the media should recognize that the best response to a dangerous media environment is not to play into the preconceived notions of one’s audience based on scant information, but to tighten standards and commit to reporting the news more accurately, fairly, and completely than ever before.

Twenty-four-hour news cycles have created an environment in which outlets rush to share a clip and a headline before they can provide context for their reporting. When President Trump takes seemingly every opportunity to bash what he calls “the fake news media,” this kind of laziness among the news providers in question is irresponsible and dangerous.

thin reporting invited members of the public to rush to judgment, filling in the background information based on what they saw: a Native American man and a MAGA hat. Celebrities took to Twitter, posting pictures of a wood chipper with blood spraying out of it and demanding to know the names of the students involved. Elected officials and Catholic clergy alike condemned the snippet they had seen. Kathy Griffin took the top prize for absurd reaction, tweeting an unrelated picture of the Covington basketball team bench

came too late to stop the immediate torrent of condemnation and online harassment the students in question faced.

The media response to the incident has inflamed the conversation about the media during the Trump presidency. While the social media have almost always suffered from too much viral content, this incident suggests that traditional media outlets may fall victim to the same trend. Twenty-four-hour news cycles have created an environment in which outlets rush to share a clip and a headline before they can

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CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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