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Illustration: Sunday Büro

The age of Donald Trump is an age of consequences. That's been an unexpected realization, given that Trump's entire life has been lived as if consequences did not exist—as if you could lose all your money on bad deals and keep on living as a wealthy and famous businessman, as if you could lie about everything and be caught lying and keep going, failing and bumbling toward ever-greater power and influence.

Yet consequences don't mean the same thing as accountability, let alone justice. Consequences are simply what happens after, and because, something else has happened. And Donald Trump has always, in all his

phoniness and denial, been really happening to someone: a would-be tenant who can't get an apartment, a plumber who can't get paid, a city gutted by business failures, thousands of aspiring students defrauded out of millions of dollars in educational fees, a dozen women saying they had been groped or harassed. A dead body in the street in Charlottesville.

The question this year was how to explain or even describe this, as these causes and effects expanded onto a global scale. To say that journalism is the first draft of history is to presume that history is unfolding slowly enough to make sense, so that reporters may place events into context as they come. But the Trump presidency smashed context. Scoops and breaking news and false alarms came in at a stupefying pace, too fast to hold onto. Basic assumptions about how things worked or how things could be allowed to work were flung down.

It was stimulating but demoralizing. In January, my company sent me to a newly formed investigations unit to help reporters pursue long-term projects. When people heard this, they were enthusiastic: What a time to be doing investigations! But we spent the early part of the year in a state of confusion, if not despair, struggling to imagine what "investigation" could even mean.

What counted as uncovering something? The president had doubled his Mar-a-Lago initiation fees, charging his customers an extra \$100,000 for proximity to power so they could watch him perform state business while they dined. The EPA administrator was collaborating with polluters; the secretary of energy had no idea what the Department of Energy did; the secretary of the treasury was a financial predator. Trump family members were being given official jobs for which they were wholly unqualified. Each of these things might have been a catastrophic scandal, except they were all taking place more or less out in the open and more or less all at once.

Meanwhile, the first official interaction between the presidency and the press was that the newly installed press secretary took the stage to lie—angrily and brazenly—about whether the sparsely populated mall at the swearing-in had contained the largest crowd in inaugural history. It was a declaration of war: Simple and obvious-seeming facts would have to be

fought for, or fought over. There was no safe, neutral observational position to occupy. The members of the media would have to be active and visible participants in the creation of history.

No one was really ready for this. Journalism holds itself to be apart from cause and effect, except at prize-submission time. There are existing boundaries—laws, standards, procedures—and reporters, by digging, may discover that someone has violated those boundaries, so that they may be held to account.

Suddenly, in place of that old sense of holding people to the agreed-upon rules and limits, there was the grim and terrifying knowledge that the limits were being swept away, and that journalists and the public had to somehow keep track of where they'd been or where new ones might be. There were still, in the old-line press, the institutionalists hoping to redirect the turbulent, overspilling present back within its former, normal engineered banks—forever eager to identify the moment when Donald Trump would Become President, the same way people used to set and reset a six-month horizon for resolving Iraq.

But Trump was already being president, and he would never become anything other than what he was. And with him, his congressional majority, its members already used to smashing precedent before their party had chosen Trump, would follow him into chaos. No matter how blithely or thoughtlessly or ignorantly the people running the country might precipitate events, those events would have consequences, and the consequences had to be seen and measured and named.

There were no safe assumptions. Nazism was not a bygone history or a shallow pose, but a thing with blood on its hands once more. Facebook and Twitter were not just unfortunately passive sources of misunderstanding, but engines of malice and malpractice. Nuclear war was not an unspeakable apocalypse; it was being spoken about by men who controlled the missiles.

How could anyone react to it all? The easiest way to recover one's bearings was to look away from Trump for a while. The worst piece of journalism of the year—or as bad a piece as any, and a failure defining our moment—didn't even have to do with the United States. It was a

think piece by Megan McArdle for *Bloomberg View*, dashed off immediately after the Grenfell Tower fire.

It didn't really have to do with Grenfell. With less than half the eventual death toll on the books, McArdle felt the urge to warn, in abstract economist terms, against overvaluing the lost lives. "It's possible that by allowing large residential buildings to operate without sprinkler systems," McArdle wrote, "the British government has prevented untold thousands of people from being driven into homelessness by higher housing costs."

The monstrosity wasn't merely in the cost-benefit analysis. It was in the moral deadness behind it—the smug confidence that the still-unmeasured horror could be fit into a premade argument about regulation and sentimentality, that there was nothing to be known about Grenfell that could change McArdle's conclusions. This was news being analyzed on the premise that news could not mean anything. The world was an omelet and the lives were the necessary eggs.

In fact—that is, in the facts, which were learned and reported after McArdle told readers not to take Grenfell as a parable about underregulation—the tower burned because it had been covered with a flammable facade of aluminum panels to make it less offensive-looking to the surrounding wealthy neighborhoods. The panels were illegal for use on high-rises in other countries, including the United States, and the manufacturer had omitted warnings about the fire hazard from the marketing materials it used in Britain. Cause and effect, knowable and avoidable.

Facts could still be assembled into truths, and those truths could provide bearings. In October, *Esquire* and the *New Yorker* both published pieces that were, at bottom, restatements of a set of known facts. The real news in them had been broken by the *Los Angeles Times* a year before, when it revealed that all the while Purdue Pharma was marketing OxyContin, the company had known that the drug didn't work as the 12-hour painkiller it was supposed to be, and that its shortcoming made it even more addictive. This year's pieces tied that discovery into the broader history of the company—its decades of overselling various addictive

drugs—and linked that to the generous philanthropists of the Sackler family, who have controlled and profited from Purdue.

The result was a sort of moral scoop that a respected fortune was built on suffering and deception. It was a story because the magazines were willing to write it.

The same applied to the other pair of stories that came out that month—the back-to-back harpoonings, by the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*, of the once-elusive, untouchably dangerous white whale that was Harvey Weinstein. That the movie producer was a brute in general and a danger to women had been known for years, but only gossips and risk-takers had dared say so. And then someone else said it: a whole list of women, speaking on the record to the *Times*, describing Weinstein isolating them in hotel rooms, demanding massages, exposing himself, propositioning them. Five days later, while Weinstein was fighting back, Ronan Farrow, in the *New Yorker*, published more accounts from more women, including stories of rape.

Vague knowledge was now public record. The *New Yorker* piece included a police recording of Weinstein trying to badger a woman he'd groped, Ambra Battilana Gutierrez, into entering his hotel room. "I won't do it again," Weinstein said. The authorities had heard the tape in 2015 and decided not to prosecute him. There had been no consequences—for Weinstein, anyway, though women have suffered and fled the industry because of him—and now there were.

The *Times* has a whole house vocabulary meant to deny and disembody its active hand in the news: "raises questions," "paints a portrait," "critics say." Yet as the Weinstein story became the Weinstein stories, and as those multiplied to become the stories of women and men harmed by other men in other industries, the *Times* adopted a different attitude. It began running a tally of prominent men who'd been named and resigned or been fired or suspended "since *The New York Times* published its investigation into Harvey Weinstein." The world is not the same place it was before the news broke. Someday, it might not even be the same place it was for Donald Trump.



