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Organization activities include conferences, research projects and publications designed to advance an understanding of and access to popular music and the processes involved in its production and consumption.

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Introductions

Paul Friedlander, Peter Winkler

Articles

- 3 John Cage and Popular Music
Charles Hamm
- 8 "Symbolic Rhetoric and the Struggle for Meaning: A Popular Music Performance in Beijing, China"
Tim Brace
- 26 Crossing Over: Musical Perceptions of Black Adolescent Culture
Venise Berry
- 39 "Total Trash:" Analysis and Post-Punk Music
Theo Cateforis
- 58 "Ride the Rhythm:" Two Approaches to DJ Practice
Daniel Hadley
- 68 Professing Censorship: Academic Attacks on Heavy Metal
Robert Waiser
- 79 Popular Music, Criticism, Advertising and the Music Industry
Steve Jones
- Reviews**
- 92 Julie Malnig, *Dancing Till Dawn: A Century of Exhibition Ballroom Dance*
Susan C. Cook
- 94 Philip H. Ennis, *The Seventh Stream: The Emergence of Rock'n'Roll in American Popular Music*
Keir Keightley
- 100 Rafael Figueroa, *Salsa and Related Genres: A Bibliographical Guide*
Deborah Pacini Hernandez
- 102 Robert Waiser, *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*
Peter Winkler

Steve Jones

Popular Music, Criticism, Advertising and the Music Industry

Introduction

It is difficult to ascertain from only listening to popular music the conditions of its production (the myriad musical, technological, economic, political and other decisions within which it is created) just as it is not easy to determine authorial intention (regardless of its place in the interpretive scheme). Consequently, popular music consumers, and producers, regularly go to sources apart from the music itself to determine the authenticity of a performance, the meaning of a lyric, or the character of a performer.

Among the most important sources for such work are record reviews, most often published in magazines (as those are generally the timeliest publications). But few scholarly works examining record reviews and music magazines exist. Among the most notable and well-known books about popular music that grapple with criticism, authenticity and its role in the consumption of popular music are Simon Frith's *Sound Effects*, a sociological study of popular music, and T. W. Adorno's *Prisms*, a marxist/critical analysis of pop fans and mass culture.

Weinstein (1992) in an analysis of heavy metal music and its subculture devotes several pages to heavy metal magazines, but focuses little attention on criticism preferring to recognize the social and informational roles those media play. Sanjek (1992) takes a look at the role authenticity plays in rock criticism, but focuses on claims critics make for particular styles of music, groups, or recordings that will "elevate" rock to the status of "art." In a very informative article Farr (1990) interviews several music critics. However, all write for newspapers and Farr's emphasis is on criticism as daily journalism.

The best recent scholarship on music magazines is in an article by Theberge (1992). In it he examines musicians' magazines of the 1980s, and agrees that there is "little serious scholarship of the music press" (Theberge 1992, 271). Though he is less

concerned with magazines to be analyzed here; he finds that:

The level of concentration within this specialized area of publishing may also affect relations between the publishers and the industry they serve, as well as having an impact on the general character of the magazines themselves (Theberge 1992, 281).

He also notes the possibility of tension or "conflict ... between the requirements of writing for a readership and simultaneously selling it to advertisers" (Theberge 1992, 285). From personal interviews, he found that conflicts often arise when manufacturers attempt to have the amount of editorial content devoted to their products tied to the amount of advertising dollars spent in the magazine ... For their part, some of the manufacturers seem to feel that the magazines do not co-operate enough with them in their marketing efforts (Theberge 1992, 285-6).

Theberge, however, does not follow up on the relationships between the manufacturers and publishers, but provides keen insight into the social significance of musicians' magazines. Likewise, in another article (Jones 1993) I examine the social significance of popular music criticism. What is absent from that work, as from that of Theberge, is an understanding of music criticism as industrial practice, or in other words the interplay of music publications, music criticism and music industry. This article seeks to fill that gap.

Music and Magazines

Advertiser influence on editorial content of newspapers and magazines has been a concern of journalism scholars for decades. Several media ethics books (Christians, Rotzoll and Fackler 1983; Merrill and Barney 1975; Rivers and Mathews 1988) and reporting texts (Mencher 1987) criticize newspaper and magazine editors for bending to the wishes of advertisers by killing stories, printing stories favorable to an advertiser, or altering copy. Recent scholarship uses anecdotal evidence to bear out some of these concerns. Tankard and Pierce (1982) found a correlation between magazine content and amount of alcohol advertising. Hays and Reiser found "clear evidence that advertiser-related pressure on farm magazine writers and editors is a serious problem ..." (1990, 941).

Wyatt and Hull (1990) studied music critics in the American press and, in an earlier, preliminary study Wyatt and Hull (1988) surveyed newspaper editors and critics to assess differences between critics at newspapers and magazines, and to ask questions regarding values and beliefs that music critics bring to their work. Their study found that the majority of critics who responded to the survey had a college education, that the majority held a journalism degree and few held music degrees. Wyatt and Hull wrote:

Given these results, a composite image of the "average" American music critic begins to emerge. That critic is, in all probability, a well-educated male in his 30s with about 10 years' experience covering music. He has at least a bachelor's degree with perhaps even some graduate work (Wyatt and Hull 1988, 20).

Wyatt and Hull's analysis is based on a response rate of less than 24 percent. Moreover, the population is from *Standard Rate & Data Service* and *Editor and Publisher Yearbook*, sources which are not likely to include any but the most

mainstream music publications. Moreover, their study is heavily skewed toward music critics at newspapers (fully two-thirds more newspapers were surveyed than magazines). Also, Wyatt and Hull do not distinguish between pop, classical and jazz music critics.

Analyses of critics in non-music areas do occasionally focus on the ethics of reviewers (Albert 1958; Brown 1978; Wyatt and Badger 1988) but rock music critics are a breed apart. Most popular music critics begin as fans whose delight and fascination in the music has led them to toss their hats into the critical arena, and the novelty fades quickly. Music criticism is at the bottom of the journalistic totem pole in many ways, as Wyatt and Hull note, and the majority of music critics do not work for newspapers and have little journalism education.

This study is an attempt to assess the interplay of influence between music critics, their editors, and music industry professionals with whom critics and editors come in contact. The research was motivated by a broader study of the evolution of popular music criticism, during which interviews with critics, editors and music industry professionals were conducted, textual analysis of criticism was performed, and a content analysis of record reviews initiated. While the research was in progress it became apparent that many of the interviewees believed that good criticism was "bought" by record companies. Few studies of popular music and the popular music press bring up the issue. In an unpublished paper, Chiarella (no date) asks whether or not positive music reviews in *Rolling Stone* affect record sales. Her data suggests only that they might, but that *Rolling Stone*'s negative reviews seem to not affect sales. This study does not address connections between sales and reviews, instead it seeks to understand the combination of critic, editor, content and the music industry.

Measuring Across Music Media

To gain insight into the general state of advertising and reviewing, open-ended interviews with editors and contributors to popular music magazines were conducted by the researcher. These were conducted in person and by telephone. A total of 74 interviews was conducted. The questioning was guided in part by the author's experiences as a music critic. A snowball sample was used (Faulkner 1982) as interviewees suggested other potential subjects. Though such sampling may induce a bias, it is unlikely that another form of sampling would generate a rich set of data.

To restate, the goal of the project is not to discern the extent of advertiser influence, but to gain insight into the relationships between critics, editors and advertisers. Consequently, the goal was to "maximize information, not facilitate generalization" (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 202).

Research was begun in 1982, and it quickly became apparent that two directions were appropriate. First, it was necessary to analyze record review content and advertising purchases over time. Second, it was particularly appropriate to apply quantitative measures to the correlation between evaluations found in record reviews and the purchase of advertising.

Five mainstream music magazines were chosen for analysis: *Musician*, *Rolling Stone*, *Creem*, *Trouser Press*, and *Spin*. Four issues of each were selected by means of simple random sampling for each year of publication from 1979 to 1991, and content analyzed to address the following hypotheses:

A. Increased advertising by a record label leads to an increase in that label's record

reviews.
 B. Increased advertising by a record label leads to an increase in positive reviews of that label's records.

Trouser Press published only sporadically until the mid-1980s when it ceased publication altogether, and *Creem* ceased to publish in 1988 (though it has since been revived, the new *Creem*'s issues are not included in the content analysis). Both are still included in the study. The magazines were chosen from a survey of college students at a large midwestern university. Random conversations with music fans at a variety of rock concerts also helped establish a list of magazines with widely read record reviews. Also, only reviews of records released by major labels (defined here as the "Big Five," or CBS, RCA, WEA, EMI and PolyGram) and advertisements taken out by major labels were coded, as major labels are likely to be the most influential component of the music industry. Items coded were record label advertising and record reviews (by record label and reviewer opinion; positive, negative, indifferent/not ascertainable). Record reviews were defined as those articles written as criticism of newly-released recordings that exceeded two column inches. The column inch measure was used to weed out "consumer guide"-style reviews and notices of new releases which were not likely to contain opinion. Future research may work toward assessing correlations between these shorter editorial artifacts and advertising. Inches of advertising, a standard measurement in the magazine and advertising industries, were also tallied. A total of 829 record reviews and 643 advertisements were coded by three trained coders (the author and two assistants). Inter-coder reliability was assessed by computing agreement coefficients from a subset of the data. Agreement coefficients range from +1.0 to -1.0 with +1.0 indicating perfect agreement, 0 indicating agreement due to chance, and -1.0 indicating perfect disagreement. The agreement coefficient computed for the category of reviewer opinion was .92.

Measurements

Given the above, what does quantitative assessment of record reviews and advertising reveal?

TABLE 1
 Record Company Advertising and Reviews

Record Label	Advertisements	Advertisements (%)	Reviews	Reviews (%)
WEA	199	30.1	224	27.0
CBS	154	24.0	217	26.2
PolyGram	125	19.4	174	21.0
RCA	95	14.8	135	16.3
EMI	70	10.9	79	9.5
	N=643	99.2%*	N=829	100.0

* Does not total 100% due to rounding.

As hypothesized, record labels that advertised frequently received more reviews of their records than those labels that advertised rarely. Table 1 shows a distinct correlation between the number of advertisements a record label purchases and the number of reviews its records get. Yet it may be argued that record labels with the greatest number of releases naturally advertise more and have more records reviewed, particularly in light of the fact that CBS and Warner Bros., which, along with their affiliated labels lead the industry in sheer number of releases, rank at the top of Table 1.

According to the data reported in Table 2, increased advertising does not automatically lead to a greater number of good reviews of a company's records. Table 2 shows no distinct correlation between the amount of advertising and the content of record reviews.

TABLE 2

Record Company Advertising and Review Content

Record Label	Positive Reviews (%)	Negative Reviews (%)	Indiff./NAsc.* Reviews (%)
PolyGram	29.2	30.4	40.4
RCA	47.1	31.8	21.1
CBS	41.2	46.6	12.2
Warner Bros.	50.0	32.8	17.2
EMI	65.1	13.4	21.5

(n=348) (n=280) (n=201)

Total number of reviews = 829

* Not Ascertainable

EMI, the lowest apparent spender on advertising, received the highest amount of favorable reviews. A look at the number of column inches of advertising purchased reveals additional information.

TABLE 3

Record Company Advertising in Column Inches

Record Label	Column Inches
WEA	4,780
CBS	3,251
PolyGram	2,942
RCA	1,823
EMI	1,298

Not surprisingly this measure yields results similar to that of Table 1. Moreover, from random samples of issues of each magazine it was estimated from measurements of advertising space that record company advertising accounts for nearly 25 percent of advertising revenue in the magazines studied, a substantial amount. Yet, from the quantitative data gathered in this study it seems that there is not a connection between record review content and advertising revenue. Where, then, do the attitudes music critics and editors expressed about advertiser influence come from?

Practice and Process

Much of the advertising in music magazines and other music-related media is bought by record companies, or by firms that are part of communications conglomerates that own record companies.

Of the kinds of advertising done by record companies, the most prominent and, according to music industry salespeople, effective is magazine advertising, followed by radio, then television. It is in music magazines that a record company can catch and hold the consumer's attention with an advertisement.

Similar to the free advertising received by means of radio airplay, or by airplay on MTV, magazines provide record companies free advertising in the form of record reviews. Often, reviews of major releases will have photos of the album cover or artist, and will take up considerable space on a page. Indeed, it is worthy to undertake other studies to assess the space allocated to album covers and artist photos that appear in magazines and are not part of a paid advertisement. Often a record company will make a strong effort to see that a review is published in a well-known magazine such as *Musician*, *Rolling Stone* or *Spin*. However, such efforts (which frequently include free lunches or dinners, concert tickets and merchandise) are not without a price. To consider any form of such publication "free" is erroneous.

The editorial content of music magazines is often dictated by editors' perceptions of their audience's musical tastes. Ira Robbins, former publisher of *Trouser Press* magazine, said:

We simply try to promote it (independent music). I mean, major record labels already have a pre-eminence, and anything independent is bound to be underdog in nature, and we support it. We root for it, and we give ad concessions, make special rates available to independent labels and artists (Robbins 1983).

More mainstream music magazines, like *Rolling Stone* and *Musician*, carry less of this sort of "cheerleading" as their editorial policy and market lead to coverage of primarily the most popular groups and styles of music. Robbins' comments illustrate a form of bias that is still present among critics and editors that does not relate to advertiser pressure, and it is important to consider that individual taste does have an impact on this study's results.

Hays and Reisner (1991) found that in the agriculture industry, "Some advertisers try to make sure copy in farm journals is favorable to their product" (Hays and Reisner 1991, 172). Similarly, according to music industry professionals, there is some pressure put on the media by advertisers, either to give the advertiser's acts more exposure or the advertiser's records good reviews.

Jeff Tamarin, editor of *Goldmine*, a national record collector's magazine, and former editor of *On Music & Media* as well as a regularly published music critic, said

that there were subtle pressures on him often, mainly from independent labels. "They really need the exposure," he said, and seem to expect it "especially if they send me large quantities of review records" (Tamarin 1983). Tamarin's feeling is that, because independents have a tough time getting any kind of exposure, they'll fight for whatever they can get.

Robbins also thinks there are pressures from advertisers:

There are certainly those forces coming into play sometimes. They're usually not verbalized, but certainly advertisers sometimes feel they have more rights than they actually do. Advertisers rarely make direct demands (though) (Robbins 1983).

It is very rare that advertisers will directly pressure an editor or publisher of a music magazine, possibly because to do so would rekindle memories of the payola scandals of 1959 and 1960, when it was discovered that record companies were giving cash to deejays who would put on the air what the record companies wanted. The kind of pressuring that goes on is very indirect, most often taking the form of complaints from the advertisers if a bad review is given to one of their records, or one of their artists gets negative press. One way that record companies can exert an influence on a magazine, according to Bill Altman, an editor at *Creem*, is by denying access to certain artists the magazine wants to report on, unless the magazine covers another artist as well, or begins favorably reporting on the label's acts in general (Altman 1983).

Sometimes record companies will approach writers directly, bypassing editors and publishers. This creates an interesting situation, since the record company builds a list of writers, and notes what kinds of music those writers like, and which groups they favor. Then, when the company wants coverage of a group, they simply go to the writer they think will give them the most positive article. The writer will pitch the idea to the editor who, having heard it from the writer and not the record company, will be more open to the idea. "It's just sort of a nudge, then, rather than payola," Altman said. "It's three-quarters above board" (Altman 1983).

Cary Baker, formerly a freelance music writer from Chicago and a publicist for IRS Records, stated that he had never experienced pressure from record companies. Interestingly, Baker ran a public relations firm in Chicago, Press Relations, Inc., that did publicity for Chicago-area bands and nightclubs. The conflict of interest did not bother him, because "every freelance writer I know, on either coast, with one or two exceptions, works or runs a PR firm. So it's a very viable and useful means of support" (Baker 1983). Baker saw nothing questionable about his PR work specifically. An odd contradiction did arise, though, when he was asked if he had problems writing about bands that appeared at one of the nightclubs he promoted. Baker said:

I know that (the club) and I have gotten a bad rap in a local magazine, and we didn't pull our advertising. We just called them up and had a good stern talk with them (Baker 1983).

By having a "good stern talk with them" he was pressuring the magazine as much or more than he would have by pulling his advertising.

A more recent case involving *Hit Parader*, a heavy metal music magazine, illustrates the tensions between the press and record labels. *Hit Parader* started its own label, Titanium Records (distributed via Atlantic Records), and immediately came under fire from other labels and magazines. Heavy metal magazines have a particu-

lary strong influence on the market and are widely read by heavy metal fans. Two scenarios are possible. First, *Hit Parader* may use its influence to promote bands on Titanium. Second, *Hit Parader* may ignore groups on other labels that could compete with Titanium. One of Titanium's owners, John Ivany, said:

It is a glaring conflict ... right up there with Rupert Murdoch ... *Hit Parader* is the biggest-selling all-music magazine in the country. When we started (Titanium), our consensus was that record companies need us to write about their bands, and we need them to fill our pages ... But it would be a foolish mistake for record companies to use Titanium against us (and pull their advertising from *Hit Parader*) (Associated Press 1988).

Atlantic Records, though, insisted that Titanium not use the name *Hit Parader*. Ivany went so far as to state that *Hit Parader* will give Titanium artists preferential treatment, and said, "The bands that we sign for Titanium are groups that we would put into *Hit Parader* anyway" (Associated Press 1988). A similar situation occurred at *Dance Music Report* in 1991, when that trade magazine's publisher, Tommy Silverman, head of one of the most successful dance music record labels, Tommy Boy Records, hired a new managing editor, Vince Pellegrino. Apart from conflict of interest on Silverman's part, the potential for conflict existed with Pellegrino, who ran a record promotion company. It was this company that began providing charts for *Dance Music Report*, and many of that company's clients purchased ads in the magazine. Yet another inking of the conflicts of interest present in music magazines surfaced in 1991 when publishers of the revived *Creem* magazine could not pay their bills and it was discovered that Sire Records gave one of the publishers money for a record deal. When one considers the extent and nature of advertiser influence on media content it is important to remember that it may not be necessary to assume the worst and believe that advertisers are only out to make money and do not care about quality and content. The truth is, though, that editors and publishers are also interested in making money, and as Ted Peterson has it:

Content, after all, does represent an expenditure, not income, and it is something that can be skimmed on, especially if the audience does not demand something better (Peterson 1968).

Why spend more money on content, especially if it is something that can be used to generate income by essentially selling editorial space (and, in this case, one can view many music magazines as lengthy advertorials)? And, since it can be argued that the media "deliver" blocs of consumers, why not engage in cooperative efforts with advertisers to make that delivery more efficient?

Music media, especially the music press, are in an odd position. There is a vague notion of responsible journalism in the music press, as it relates to fairness in reporting. However, when it comes to journalistic style, the music press defies categorization. Some magazines pride themselves on good reporting. Others are proud of their irreverence, wit and sarcasm. There is not so much a lack of financial commitment to promote good reporting as there is a lack of distinct definition of the reader. Does an 18-year-old rock music listener care about good reporting? Or, as Frith (1981) states, do they simply want the latest gossip and "inside dope" on the artist they like? And, anyway, how exactly does one define good reporting? In terms of the audience's desires, journalistic standards, or some combination of the two?

There is a tendency towards laziness on the part of the editor, a laziness to go out and get stories, which in turn leads to a reliance on record company publicists to tell you what is going on in the industry. As Bill Knight, former editor of a mid-west regional music magazine said:

You can get really lazy and rely on (record companies) for information and, by virtue of them being the only ones to let you know something, you restrict yourself and let them tell you what to cover in a way (Knight 1983).

It is not that there exists a lack of reporters, or people interested in writing about music. An editor at *Creem* said there are too many reporters, so many that it makes it difficult for editors to weed out the good from the bad. But the editor may also believe that there is no need for reporters who can write well and are professionally trained as journalists because the subject matter, popular music, is not something that needs to be written about too professionally. Indeed, many magazines get by with at best shoddy reporting.

Journalistic standards of fairness are further swept away by advertisers who approach writers with various incentives like concert tickets, records and free travel. Some prominent critics receive hundreds of promotional records a month, each of which is worth a couple of dollars (at least) at used record stores and when sold, the profit can easily overtake a freelancer's pay. Moreover, how is a writer expected to have cognizance of the audience (which is often difficult to define anyway) when free tickets, special pressings of albums, pre-release tapes and so on, keep coming? The tendency for the writer is to identify more with the music industry than the music listener. Similarly, when it comes to writing about music and doing public relations work for record companies or groups, the line between journalist and publicist is often erased. It is not difficult for a writer to promote a group but make it appear as if it were solely for reasons of personal taste.

Conclusion: Action and Reaction

Whenever an advertiser has a vested interest in the content of the media in which it advertises, there may be a struggle for control of content. Perhaps the cause of uneasiness among editors and music critics interviewed for this study lies in the self-censorship by editors and publishers who are never unaware of the advertiser. Advertisers may thus easily play upon the fears that are already in the minds of editors and publishers.

Some editors are not worried about losing advertising, because income is divided among several advertisers. As an editor at *Creem* said:

(Advertisers) try to have (editorial control), but we're always going to say, "we're going to write whatever we feel about records." If they stopped sending us review records we'd still have a reviews section because we would just go out and buy the records. We can afford to (Altman 1983).

But most magazines are small and cannot afford big expense accounts (and *Creem* itself went bankrupt). The only way to become less reliant on advertising revenue from any one source is to diversify, but in an age when specially magazines are the norm, that is difficult at best. Advertisers do not only want to reach specific audiences, they

want large audiences. As Jim Scully, Midwest marketing director for CBS Records said, "I would choose the most popular (magazines to advertise in)" (1983). Chapple and Garofalo (1980) point out that many underground music magazines in the 1960s and 1970s came to rely so heavily on record company advertising that some were forced to fold as the industry took a downturn.

What may become most troublesome is the recent surge in vertical integration in the music industry. Warner Brothers' owns MTV (and Time, Inc. and Warners are now one). Sony owns CBS. The Tower Records chain publishes its own magazine, *Pulse!*. The Musicland chain publishes *Request*. Advertisers have to operate within certain limits, at least insofar as they try to stay on the good side of editors and publishers. As an editor at *Creem* noted, "They need us for exposure too" (Altman 1983). But one must wonder how long it might be before they need them so much that they buy them outright, or successfully compete in the publishing industry.

One interesting and useful way to think about relationships between the music industry and music magazines is to identify their behavior in terms of Turow's "power roles" (1992), and note that both groups act as what he calls **normative reference organizations**. That is, they become entities that production executives see as generating requirements that they must contend with if they are to bring in the cash necessary for survival (Turow 1992, 80).

He claims that there exists a "structural influence" by advertisers on media content, that editors will perceive advertiser needs and shape content to meet them, or avoid content detrimental to those needs in an effort to not alienate advertisers. This seems likely in the case of the magazines studied in this article.

In sum, this study has shown that advertiser influence on editorial content does exist at popular music magazines, albeit not in a quantifiable form. The extent of that influence, and the extent to which it is direct, are thus limited, and can be viewed as a "structural influence" rather than direct one, to borrow from Turow. Further research needs to be done to assess the industry's perspective on the music press, to assess the influence of record reviews on the public and on industry "insiders," and to assess the way critics, editors and publishers understand themselves within the context of the music industry. As Frith wrote:

Music papers and record companies work together not because the papers are "controlled" by the companies' advertising, but because their general images of the world, their general interpretations of rock, are much the same (Frith 1981, 173).

This makes for a compelling connection between the music industry and the music press. But it is not by necessity a connection between the music industry and music critics, and such connection should not be implied. Still, as Chapple and Garofalo (1980, 168) note, "Rock critics are welcomed into the music family... On a personal level they begin to identify with the record companies." Perhaps it is as Fenster claims:

Rock criticism not only accepts but supports the present system of production and consumption and doesn't even question its own position, let alone do anything about it (Fenster 1989, 17).

Music media are a part of the present system of music production and consumption, and further research should use a variety of research methods to understand the

complexity of interweaving relationships between music critics, editors, publishers and the music industry. It is also important, among all studies of advertiser influence on editorial content, to assess the impact of advertising sales people at the publications in question.

Given the nature of criticism it will also be interesting to study, as Hays and Reisner put it, "whether readers are in any sense aware of this issue" (1990). Credibility is a prominent issue in popular music's production (Jones 1992) particularly as it interacts with the construction of authenticity (by consumers and producers). Credibility is also important to popular music publications, for it is a means of rising above the pack, of becoming the pre-eminent publication. This in itself leads to ethical questions for it may be that the only way to achieve pre-eminence is to bend to advertiser wishes in exchange for the latest information or "scoop."

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