

## *Editor's Exit At The Times Puts Tensions On Display*

**B**ACK in 2010, before she became executive editor of The New York Times, Jill Abramson sent me a handwritten attaboy note about a big story. It still hangs in my cubicle: "You wrote a story about the trashing of a once great American institution and people never tire of that."

Jill loved juicy stories, the ones full of subtext, intrigue and very high stakes. Now she is right in the middle of one.

On Friday, she was on the cover of The New York Post as the deposed editor of The Times, shown in a trucker hat, boxing gloves and T-shirt hitting a heavy bag, a portrait taken from her daughter's Instagram account that carried that hashtag "pushy."

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THE MEDIA  
EQUATION

I have witnessed some fraught moments at The New York Times. Jayson Blair was a friend of mine. I watched Howell Raines fly into a mountain from a very close distance. I saw the newspaper almost tip over when the print business plunged and the company had to borrow money at exorbitant rates from a Mexican billionaire.

But none of that was as surreal as what happened last week. When The Times's publisher, Arthur Sulzberger Jr., stood up at a hastily called meeting in the soaring open newsroom where we usually gather to celebrate the Pulitzers and said that Jill was out, we all just looked at one another. How did our workplace suddenly become a particularly bloody episode of "Game of Thrones"?

It is one thing to gossip or complain about your boss, but quite another to watch her head get chopped off in the cold light of day. The lack of decorum was stunning.

Even though Mr. Sulzberger wanted to effect a smoother transition, Ms. Abramson refused to make nice. She had fought her way to the top, and now she would fight on her way out. She may have professed love for The Times, but once

it decided not to love her back, she decided to inflict some damage on its publisher. (She'll have more opportunity on Monday when she gives the commencement speech at Wake Forest.)

After very public charges that sexism drove his decision, Mr. Sulzberger responded with a statement on Saturday that was both specific and personal, saying that Jill had engaged in "arbitrary decision-making, a failure to consult and bring colleagues with her, inadequate communication and the public mistreatment of colleagues."

Her approach created a fair amount of *tsoris* — a favorite Yiddish word of hers that connotes aggravation — but along with that it also produced, as Mr. Sulzberger acknowledged even as he fired her, a very good version of The Times.

Jill rose as a woman in a patriarchal business and a male-dominated organization by being tough, by displaying superlative journalistic instincts and by never backing up for anyone.

Some might suggest that these traits are all in the historical job description of a man editing The New York Times, but Arthur concluded "she had lost the support of her masthead colleagues and could not win it back." I like Jill and the version of The Times she made. But my reporting, including interviews with senior people in the newsroom, some of them women, backs up his conclusion.

When he announced Jill and Dean Baquet's appointment in 2011, Mr. Sulzberger was rightfully proud of his dream team, two talented journalists to lead the paper who were not white men. But while there may have been a dream, there was never a real team.

Jill did a six-month tour of The Times's digital endeavors before assuming the editorship, and was publicly supportive of a recent groundbreaking report on innovation at The New York Times. But the report plainly stated that the paper was lagging in that area, and according to several executives in the newsroom she took

some of its findings personally.

Perhaps that is part of the reason she tried to bring in Janine Gibson, a senior editor at The Guardian, as a co-managing editor for digital. That was a big tactical mistake, at least in terms of office management. Dean was not aware that Jill had made an offer to Ms. Gibson, and he was furious and worried about how it would affect not only him but the rest of the news operation as well. (All the talk about pay inequity and her lawyering up to get her due was a sideshow in my estimation.)

When Dean let Arthur know that he would leave the paper because he found the situation untenable, it was clear that an important insurance policy for the newspaper's future was going to leave the building.

You can't blame Dean for advocating on his own behalf — after all, life is short. And almost anybody at The Times will tell you that Dean will make a great leader. He is courageous and smart, and he makes newspapering seem like a grand endeavor.

But the sense of pride that we should all feel at his ascension — as a great, decorated journalist and the first black executive editor of The New York Times — has been overwhelmed by the messiness surrounding it.

Mr. Sulzberger has been accused in the past of waiting too long to make a change, including fiddling while the newsroom smoldered and then burned under Mr. Raines. This time he moved decisively, clearly believing that Ms. Abramson's shortcomings were a threat to the newspaper.

He gets to do that because he owns the joint, and as The Times has sold off assets and pared down to a single brand, Mr. Sulzberger has been focusing acutely on that brand. He has a chief executive he trusts in Mark Thompson, and the increases in digital circulation have bought the company some breathing room. The New York Times is the whole ballgame now, and his instinct to protect it has only increased.

Still, Mr. Sulzberger, working with Mr. Baquet and Mr. Thompson, may have failed to understand the impact Ms. Abramson's firing would have, both internally and with the public. Planning went into immediately erasing



RUTH FREMSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Arthur Sulzberger Jr., center; Jill Abramson, right; and Mark Thompson, left, celebrated four Times Pulitzers in April 2013.

her name from the masthead, but not so much into the splatter it would create. A meeting of executives scheduled for last Thursday, which Jill could no longer lead, created a false deadline that forced management into what seemed like a hurried, ill-considered announcement.

An executive involved in the decision and the rollout of the news said that by Wednesday, it was clear that there would be no exit agreement between Jill and the company. Canceling a big meeting scheduled for the next day would set off a rash of questions, followed by leaks. People close to Mr. Sulzberger said that he was fully aware his decision would create an uproar, including charges of sexism, but that he made the announcement because it was right for the newspaper and the people who work there.

The current mayhem aside, Mr. Sulzberger's real failing has been picking two editors who ended up not being right for the job.

I was standing there when Howell Raines, taken down by the Jayson Blair plagiarism scandal, handed over control of the newspaper. There was sadness and anger, but also a measure of dignity. Instead, this has become a grinding spectacle.

The news set off a gleeful frenzy in Manhattan media, which usually have to subsist on fake New York Times controversies. For pundits and reporters, the episode is akin to a piñata that hangs itself and then hands you a stick. The candy has spilled out for everyone to grab at. Jill's firing provided proof that the pa-

per was, depending on the agenda, too liberal, not liberal enough, a hotbed of feminism, rife with patriarchy, drunk on affirmative action, ignorant of its own traditions and clueless on digital matters.

It has probably been fun to watch, but not for the people who work here. I heard from several talented young women who are a big part of The New York Times's future. "I really don't see a path for me here," said one. "Are we O.K.?"

Well, that depends on how the next few weeks go and whether The Times can convince female employees that it is a fair place to work, with ample opportunity to advance. But more broadly we'll probably be O.K. We have a talented executive editor, a stable if challenged business outlook and a very dedicated audience. To the extent that The New York Times does anything remarkable, it emerges from collabora-

tion and shared enterprise. It's worth remembering that its legacy begets an excellence that surpasses the particulars of who produces it.

The New York Times is overseen by its executive editor, but it belongs to the Sulzbergers, to its readers and to all of the people who work here.

Before I came to work here, Gerald Boyd, the crusty — or should I say "pushy"? — managing editor who would eventually be swept up in the Jayson Blair affair, was interviewing me. I could tell it was not going well. He was skeptical of my lack of daily experience and my more noisy tendencies. I finally realized what he was waiting to hear.

"I understand that if I come to work at The New York Times, the needs of the many will frequently supersede the needs of the one," I said.

I meant it when I said it and I learn the truth of it with each passing day. ■