F

or more than 40 years now, newspaper read-

ership by Americans has been in a slow decline.

With cable television and the Internet feed-

ing them a steady diet of up-to-the-minute

news, many Americans no longer make a habit of read-

ing a daily paper over morning coffee or after dinner—

particularly the 18- to 25-year-olds coveted by advertisers.

The sad tale of century-old newspapers shutting down

down their presses has been repeated in cities across the nation.

Futurest who have gone so far as to predict the event-

ual extinction of newspapers might have second thoughts if they had witnessed a scene at Vanderbilt last fall. At

the annual Organization Fair, during which students—

mostly freshmen—get information about hundreds of

opportunities to join everything from Ducks Unlim-

ited to the Vanderbilt Speculative Fiction Society, more

than 500 students signed cards indicating their interest

in working on the Vanderbilt Hustler.

The majority of those who express interest each year

soon become overwhelmed by writing papers and prepar-

ing for exams and having a life so that visions of getting a

Hustler byline quickly fade—but for a surprising num-

ber of students, the Hustler becomes the defining Van-

derbilt experience, more important than top grades, the

start of a lifelong career.

“I wrote a lot of words for the Hustler, banging out

long editorials late at night when I didn’t have to be care-

ful and write what someone else wanted me to write,” says humorist Roy Blount, BA’63, one of Vanderbilt’s most

famous Hustler editors and the author of 12 books.

“I think it’s good when you’re young to do a lot of what-

ever it is you hope to do in the future. Freedom to write

what I pleased, an important subject and deadlines—

that is a great combination of three things that enable

you to work out and build up your chops.”

The Vanderbilt Hustler, which printed its first issue

only five years after the University’s 1873 founding, ex-

ists without benefit of ties to any journalism pro-

gram—or, since 1998, any subsidies from the Univer-

sity. Hustler staffers take pride in the fact that, unlike

student newspapers at most universities, the Hustler is

100 percent financially self-sufficient, paying for print-

ing, rent for the space it occupies in the Sarratt Cen-

ter, and small salaries for its advertising and editorial

staff.

Students like Emily Abbott, editor of the Hustler dur-

ing the spring 2002 semester, and Jennifer Whatley, edi-

tor for two semesters prior to Abbott, acknowledge that

working 60 to 70 hours a week on the paper means sleep

deprivation and a lower grade point average—for pay

functioning across 21st Avenue South and working at Starbucks.

But the rewards are worth it. By becoming involved in

the most important issues in the life of the University, students who work on the Hustler bring information to

fellow students, speak out in print when they see the

University taking, in their view, a wrong turn, and become

chroniclers of Vanderbilt’s history and zeitgeist.

“There’s a certain pride that goes with walking to

class and seeing someone reading your article,” says

Abbott. “Working on the Hustler has taught me how to

deal with a wide variety of people. It’s taught me to wade

through what’s important and what’s not. And it teach-

es you how to deal with mistakes.”

“I’ve definitely learned more working on the Hus-

tler than I did in any class,” says Whatley. “I’ve crossed

paths with people I never would have met otherwise. I

can call up administrators on campus and catch up on

things. It’s nice to walk around campus and know who

the deans are, to recognize the important players.”

The position of Hustler editor has long been and

remains one of the most powerful roles available to Van-

derbilt students. Chris Crain, BA’87, now editorial direc-

tor and chief operating officer of Window Media, was

Hustler editor his sophomore year and editor of Ver-

sus his junior year. “I remember [Associate Provost of

Student Affairs] Johan Madson telling me how Van-
derbilt administrators would all shawl hard before they walked in the office on Tuesdays and Fridays morn-
gings, the days the Hustler came out, because they didn’t
know what was going to be there,” says Crain.

“I was always a thorn in Joe B. Wyatt’s side. He was
fairly new, and I would write about how he wasn’t inter-
acting with students enough. I tried a thousand differ-
ent ways to get him to do an interview, but he had not
given an interview to anyone in the Vanderbilt student
press,” Crain remembers.

Finally, Crain showed up in Wyatt’s office and refused
to leave until he got an interview. “His secretary threat-
ened to call security. I said fine, I’ll call my photogra-
pher and we’ll do a story about it. Finally, after about
three hours, Eliot Frankel, who was then head of pub-
lic affairs, came down and said, ‘You’ll get your inter-
view—now get out of here,’” Crain says.

On Commencement day, as Crain walked across the
stage to receive his diploma, he recalls, “Chancellor Wyatt
shook my hand and said he wished me very well in the
future and added that he’d never been happier to
see someone graduate—which I took as a respectful
compliment.”

From the Hustler’s early years, when editors advo-
cated Vanderbilt’s separation from the Methodist Church,
up until today, when writers speak out against racial gra-
fiti and report on the proposed move to a residential col-
lege system, the paper has been a forum for debate. We
tried to provide a forum for debate. We

T. Van Magers, BA’66
Special agent, Federal Bureau of
Investigation
Vanderbilt major: mathematics
Hustler sports editor, 1964-66

Mary Louise Elson, BA’74
Associate managing editor for
features, Chicago Tribune
Vanderbilt major: English
Hustler editor, 1973-74

OCTOBER 4, 1929
Sisterly love is being manifested in its usual out-throat manner
early this fall. At one sorority house two dainty brunettes are
pulling hair over a blonde swain. One has the advantage of
having been the most constant companion of the man in ques-
tion last year, while the other siren has stepped in to break up
the once happy home. ...

Some of us may think we rate sitting in the seats of the
mighty, but few of us presume so far as to eat there; unlike
the boy and girl seen eating lunch serenely, deep in conversa-
tion, at the family table in Kissam one day. The girl was new—
so that lets her out, but there really was no excuse for the
boy, since he is a senior and a Sigma Chi and should know his
caferterias by now.

The Editor as Catalyst

Blount and Lamar Alexander, BA’62, two south-
erners who attended Vanderbilt when it was
still an all-white school taking its first wobb-
ly steps toward integration, both served as
editor during their senior years. Alexander, with
the encouragement of then-chancellor Harvie Branscomb,
who was struggling to convince a reluctant Board of
Trust of the need for integration, wrote a series of edi-
torials calling for Vanderbilt to desegregate—at a time
when the majority of the student body and the Student
Senate favored preserving the status quo.

“The majority of Vanderbilt students were from the
South back then,” Alexander remembers. “Desegrega-
tion was a very unpopular point of view. I wasn’t harassed,
but I was considered a troublemaker for raising an issue
a lot of people thought I had no business raising. Peo-
ple regarded it as unnecessary, almost impolite.”

Blount, whose work for the Hustler included a column
recounting his experience going on a sit-in with civil rights
activist John Lewis, brushes aside any suggestion that Hus-
tler editors had a sense of doing something historic. “At
that age I figured I’d be doing something historical all my
life,” he says with characteristic self-effacement. “It was
the black kids from Fisk and Atlanta who were making
history; sitting at lunch counters and riding buses and get-
ing beat up. There was all sorts of media attention on
‘student unrest’ as they called it, and the issues of the day
were threshed out on college campuses.”

Bridge Kelley, BA’88, now an editor of National Pub-
ic Radio’s Morning Edition, sums up her experience as
Hustler editor this way: “Vanderbilt was becoming a
much more diverse institution, and we worked hard at
the paper to try to reflect that, to bring in different voic-
es and also to foster a more inclusive spirit at the Uni-
versity. Black students presented a manifesto of demands.
There were incidences of anti-semitism. Whether they
were done out of maliciousness or ignorance was not
clear at the time; the interpretations were very different.
Those were important stories for us and important issues
for the University. There were students who did not feel as
welcome as others at Vanderbilt. If we had a mission
or a goal, it was to encourage Vanderbilt as it worked to
become a more diverse university. I was proud of the
work that we did, the stories that we wrote, and the edi-
torial coverage that we provided.”

Former Hustler editor Mary Elson, BA’74, now asso-
ciate managing editor of features for the Chicago Tri-
bune, recalls the student paper covering controversy
over a dance for gay students. “There was a lot of intrigue
and a big blow-up with the chancellor involving our
reporting. We tried to provide a forum for debate. We
were crusaders.”

OCTOBER 17, 1958 by Lamar Alexander

Moaning freshman men display an almost unanimous condemnation
toward the recent cancellation of the traditional Homecoming pajama
parade, a disorderized event which has occurred intermittently in
Vandy history as long as members of the present administration can
recall. …

Tradition has motivated numerous pajama-clad, song-singing fresh-
man classes to gather at Rand Hall the morning before the
Homecoming Game and, with the band and cheerleaders heading the
disturbance, descend upon downtown Nashville …

Last year’s “harmless tour” included capricious capers such as
kidnapping an LSU cheerleader, emblazoning large and beautiful yellow
lettering on large and clean plate glass windows, and coasting up and
down Fifth Avenue in grocery carts pilfered permanently from a sur-
prised supermarket staff. All of this unscheduled entertainment landed
several of the less fleet students in the local police station.

A Century of Sports Writing

From the days of Granrland Rice a hundred years ago up to the present, the Hustler has
been known as a training ground for future
sports writers. Today former Vanderbilt sports
writers occupy the sports desks at papers across the
country, including the New York Times, Washington Post,
and the Dallas Morning News. Terry Eastland,
now the New York Yankees; Olney has covered the Mets, Yan-
kees, and now the Giants.

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over a dance for gay students. “There was a lot of intrigue
and a big blow-up with the chancellor involving our
reporting. We tried to provide a forum for debate. We
were crusaders.”
BA’71, is publisher of The Weekly Standard. Eastland became interested in Vanderbilt when a guidance counselor at his Dallas high school told him about the Grantland Rice Scholarship. He subsequently applied for and was a runner-up for the scholarship. Despite not winning, Vanderbilt turned out to be a good choice for him.

“A great liberal arts education is a good education for someone who is interested in being a journalist,” Eastland says. “If you’re going to a university, you ought to spend your time studying English or political science or history or philosophy or foreign language. Journalism is best learned in terms of technique on the job.”

At times, sports writing involves larger questions being debated at the University. Mississippi-born T. Van Magers, BA’66, now an FBI special agent, was a Hustler sports editor his last two years at Vanderbilt. Most of the time, he says, “We didn’t push the envelope. A lot of our stories were rah-rah support-the-team stuff.”

But in Magers’ senior year, Vanderbilt was attempting to recruit a young African American named Perry Wallace to play basketball. “I told Coach Roy Skinner I wanted to interview Perry for the Hustler, and he said he really wished I wouldn’t. I told him it was a big story. He said, ‘Okay, but don’t discuss race.’ I said, ‘That isn’t going to be easy.’”

SEPTEMBER 30, 1960 by Roy Blount

The only place in town where you can get a real coffee-house atmosphere and eighteen kinds of coffee is The Turf, a little place estab-

lished this July on 21st Avenue next to the barbershop by Vanderbilt senior Robert Allen and ex-Vandy student Larry Conneratzer. ... The walls are hung with drawings and paintings; “people come in and hang them up,” Allen said. One painting, ... is the work of Dr. Eugen Bli-Blienne, a Vanderbilt professor. [It] depicted a couple who seemed to be doing something vaguely unhallowed, but who looked neither healthy enough nor close enough together to be doing anything really reprehensible ...

Anyone who has a musical instrument ... is welcome to entertain, and Allen hopes more Vanderbilt students will come over to pick and/or read (poetry). ... I ordered coffee espresso and rum cake, having some idea what coffee espresso was and being able to pronounce rum cake ...

Most of the clientele ... looked like the kind of people you would want to be sitting near you in a coffeehouse—authentic-looking, but not way-out. ... Allen volunteered the information that “some pretty exotic people” to be sitting near you in a coffeehouse—authentic-looking, but not way-out enough to be doing anything really reprehensible ...

For Love and Money

All this is not to claim that Hustler staffers have such weighty issues as their sole moti-

vation. Lamar Alexander was passionate about the issues of the day, to be sure, but he had another motive as well. Working to pay his $600 a year tuition, not only did he sell cigarettes and mag-

azines and wash dishes, but as Hustler editor, he and the business editor were allowed to split any profits. “The first year we put out what I was editor was six pages,” Alexander recalls. “Aside from a picture of a cheer-

leader on the front, most of it was ads. Dean Babbitt called me into his office and said, ‘Lamar, this isn’t exactly what we had in mind for the campus newspaper.’”

“While we were dealing with civil rights issues, we were also dealing with lots of trivial stuff,” says Blount. “It was a lot of fun. The Hustler offices in those days were in Alumni Hall. I remember one time while I was a junior and Lamar Alexander was editor, we were there put-
ting together a book. Lamar had come back from a tour of Latin America during the summer and written a col-

umn called ‘Joe College Meets José Collegio.’ He had heard all these revolutionary speeches, and he went out on the little balcony of Alumni Hall and harangued the campus in Spanish.”

Student journalists can also be given to flights of fancy on the printed page. “I remember once I put a story about a Phi Psi falling out the window on the front page because I thought it would be cool to use the word ‘defenestrate’ in a headline,” says Crain. “The Greek stu-

dents felt we were always running negative things about them,” he adds.

For some Hustler staffers, late nights and countless hours spent working on the paper have led to romance. “There was a lot of socializing as well as journalism,” recalls Elson, who was the first female Hustler editor (except for World War II, when a woman briefly filled the role while the men were away). “It was a magical combination of things. The kids who worked on the paper were bright and funny and creative. There was a real sense of camaraderie, both intellectual and social.

We had the craziest printing operation which involved going to Murfreesboro twice a week. We would be there all night long, then come back and eat at the Campus Grill. There was a famous waitress there named Roxy who knew all our orders by heart.”

Her senior year, Elson married another staffer, John Bloom, BA’74, who had come to Vanderbilt on a Grant-

land Rice Scholarship and went on to write movie reviews as Joe Bob Briggs and host his own cable television series. Elson and Bloom were also friends with Skip Bayless, who was Hustler sports editor. “Skip has become kind of famous as a sports jour-

nalist. John and I divorced after a couple of years, and John has become something of a celebrity. Skip and I always joke that we get calls asking to be interviewed about John even now—25 years later, we’re still all glued together because of our Hustler experience.”

Magers interviewed Wallace and wrote about a black man considering Vanderbilt four years after the student body had voted not to admit black students. “I didn’t show up at the athletic department after that,” he adds.

“A couple weeks later I got a call from Coach Skin-

ner saying Perry Wallace was going to announce his col-

lege choice that day. I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, and then he added, ‘He’s coming to Van-

derbilt, and he told me you Hustler article played a role in his decision.’”

Wallace, of course, went on to enjoy great success in his basketball career and broke down racial barriers at Vanderbilt and elsewhere. Now a law professor at the Washington College of Law of American University, he received Vanderbilt’s Bachelor of Unglness Award, pre-

sented annually to the most popular male student.

The reaction of college students to Watergate has been less than tumultuous. In fact, it would be hard to characterize any overt display of concern that has surfaced in their ranks—a striking departure from past organized protestations against governmental fellings. Probably the closest assessment is, on the one side, an aloof Hooliganism so gauze by those who were convinced Nixon never was the one, along with an indulgent snicker at the adults squirming over the accountability of a prime leader in their moral camp.

On the other side is a sober, somewhat sheepish retreat by the once wildly eccentric group who overwhelmingly gave Nixon their all in the November presidential election. Both reactions are dangerous, because both signify a belief that students really don’t have to worry about Watergates until they step through the shell of university life into the real world outside.
The Hustler in 2002

Today’s Hustler editors are selected for one-semester posts, which gives Peabody students who do senior internships a shot at being editor. Often editors reapply and serve as editors for more than one semester, however.

Both Abbott and Whatley are English majors, but the Hustler also attracts students from a wide spectrum of majors and from all four of Vanderbilt’s undergraduate schools—Arts and Science, Peabody, Engineering and Blair. Though the Hustler mirrors newspaper editorial staffs in most of the country in being overwhelmingly white, its advertising staff for 2001-2002 included African American, Chinese, Indian and Pakistani students. Two of its business managers in the last five years have been African American women.

Online capabilities have also brought changes, for good or ill. Most communications between Hustler staff members now take place via e-mail. “Our Web presence has become increasingly important,” says Abbott. “It enables us to be a part of Viewwire, a wire service that allows other publications to pick up our articles and get Vanderbilt’s name out there. It also enables alumni and parents to see what’s going on.”

Earlier this year, after the Hustler political columnist found out about it, our Web page was flooded with e-mails from the community saying, “We’re not going to have this in our community.” But the response from students was “But the response from students was disappointed.”

Today, as ever, editors can differ from the student body in what they view as priorities for the University. And emotions about Greek coverage can still run high. Earlier this year, religion ran an opinion piece calling for the elimination of the Greek system, says Abbott. “We received a dozen letters in response to the first day and probably more than 50 letters in a two-week span. But our coverage of incidents of the graffiti got only two letters. Sections of the campus were being threatened by the acts of a coward, and I thought the best way to get rid of that would be peer pressure from the community saying, ‘We’re not going to have this in our community!’”

Chris Carroll, director of student media for Vanderbilt Student Communications Inc., is one of three advisers for VSC, which encompases eight organizations including the Hustler, WVXU Radio and Varsity VSC. The Hustler was formed in 1967 when University officials sought to separate student media from the regular departmental structure at Vanderbilt in order to limit liability. A former journalist, Carroll just finished a term as president of College Media Advisers, an association of about 750 advisers to colleges and universities in the U.S. and Canada.

“Vanderbilt’s student journalists don’t approach their jobs like those I’ve seen at some student papers where their biggest splash is whatever dirt they dig up for the sake of sensationalism. Vanderbilt students have a sense of community—they want to do things that somehow better the environment here. When they look at things like the restructuring of student life or diversity issues, it’s with genuine interest, not just a knee-jerk reaction.”

The downside, Carroll maintains, is that they reflect the student body’s overall emphasis on conformity. “For the most part Vanderbilt students don’t challenge or question. They may shy away from covering something if they’re afraid they’ll upset people or they’ll go too far or it’s none of their business. I tell them, ‘If you don’t, who will?’”

The Thrill of Being at the Center

We made lots of mistakes doing the Hustler, certainly, and we made people mad, too,” Kelley reflects. “We had occasional run-ins with student government, with faculty, and with administration. One thing that hasn’t changed for me is the thrill of being in the center of the story and tracking developments and communicating information in a clear and accurate and concise way.”

Sam Feist, BA’91, worked on the Hustler from his first semester on, and during his senior year, as political columnist, wrote a series of editorials addressing issues of race and condemning Vanderbilt’s willingness to have a trustee who belonged to a country club that excluded members from certain racial and religious groups.

Now, as executive producer for CNN’s Crossfire, Feist still enjoys being at the center of the day’s most important issues. “I think we did an excellent job of covering those issues right in front of you. You’re only as good as the next thing you turn out. You can’t rest on your laurels.”

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