

From: **Ben Smith**

Date: Saturday, April 18, 2015

Subject: Deletions report

To: Editorial

I wanted to share with you the results of our internal review, which as you know Annie-Rose has been working on this week. The goal of this was making sure we know why things were deleted before our standards guide was published this January, including whether or not external pressure played a role in any of the decisions to delete a post. This isn't intended to suggest writers did anything wrong: back in those days it was common practice to delete posts for a range of reasons. Annie-Rose and her team of seven reporters talked to more than 100 current and former staffers to get to the bottom of as many of those posts as possible.

Here's her summary of the preliminary findings of her report, which was based a set of deleted posts provided to her by the data team:

**Total deleted posts: 1,112**

**Editorial decisions (100):** This category runs the gamut: Pieces that editors felt were sloppily done, pieces that editors or writers later decided were in bad taste, pieces that editors deemed inaccurate or in some other way flawed, pieces where a subject requested content be removed, etc.

**Advertiser complaints (3):** These stories were pulled after an editor fielded a complaint from a business-side BuzzFeed staff member who worked with a brand mentioned in the piece.

**Copyright issues (65):** It's hard to verify since the posts are gone, but these are pieces that editors and reporters said they thought were pulled because the authors didn't have proper permissions to reprint a photo or video in the post. We are hoping to get a list of these posts to cross-check.

**Technical error (263):** Posts in this category were either removed by accident, because they were tests never meant to be published, or because they were withdrawals of drafts that were accidentally published too early. Also included in this category are pieces that were published under the wrong byline and pieces that were published on two different urls (in which case one was withdrawn).

**Duplicated already published work (122):** These were situations where an author wrote a piece without realizing another BuzzFeed editorial staffer was working on the same topic. In most cases, the second piece was pulled, but there are also situations where the earlier post was deleted in favor of a post with more reporting in it.

**Community user deletions (140):** These are posts that were created by interns, fellows, or staff members when they held community accounts. So, before they were on staff they wrote posts -- either as community posts or trials for jobs -- and then deleted them. Reporters told us that some of these deletions were manual, while others seem to be the result of onboarding.

**Non-edit staff deletions and unidentified bylines (377):** This is the category that includes any non-editorial post that was deleted -- pieces being tested by dev or projects being developed by sales. We did not dive fully into all of those posts. There are also pieces in this category that are from unidentified users who we have not tracked down -- people with community bylines who seem to have done some kind of work for us but are not part of edit (as far as we know).

There is a small number of posts -- 42 -- where we're still waiting on answers from people who are OOO and the like.

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I want to specifically address the three posts that were deleted after complaints from advertisers. I don't routinely share my conversations with our business side, and don't plan to make a practice of it, but it's something you have a right to be concerned about.

1) Mark Duffy, who wrote under the byline copyranter, was a blogger and ad critic at BuzzFeed in 2013. An ad agency complained, via our chief revenue officer at the time, that he was accusing them of advocating "worldwide mass rape" in an ad for Axe body spray, and that the tone of his item was over the top. I agreed that this was way outside even our very loose standards of the time. He complained on [Gawker](#) in 2013 that we deleted this post unfairly, and my correspondence with him at the time is in that post as well.

2) Tanner Ringerud led BuzzFeed's Creative department in its early days; he moved over to editorial on January 25, 2013. On March 5, he published a post making fun of a Microsoft product, Internet Explorer. He had worked on a Microsoft ad campaign, and BuzzFeed's chief

revenue officer complained about the post to me. We agreed that it was inappropriate for Tanner to write about brands whose ad campaigns he'd worked on. We set up a "cooling off period" in which he wasn't allowed to write about any brands he'd worked with for six months. We've made that a policy in the two other cases in which a staffer moved from the business side to editorial — one BuzzFeed News writer and one BuzzFeedTeam illustrator.

3) On January 27, 2014, the head of BuzzFeed's creative division complained that Samir Mezrahi had taken a gif from a Pepsi advertisement created by BuzzFeed's creative team and turned it into a Vine without indicating where it had come from. I asked Samir not to use advertising our business side had created in an editorial context. Four days later, he published a post titled "These Brands Are Going To Bombard Your Twitter Feed On Super Bowl Sunday," which was a mix of criticism and praise for a long list of brands on Twitter. I again heard a complaint from our business side about Pepsi, which was the first item in the list, and whose Twitter feed they were making content for during the Super Bowl.

We'd never previously considered the case of an editor would be writing about an ad that was produced by our creative team, but we decided it was inappropriate and deleted the post. I wrote Samir that night that "there just has to be a pretty high bar around writing about advertising that is going on in the building. It creates an appearance of a conflict I'm really uncomfortable with."

Senior editors discussed this at the time, and this specific instance informed this passage in the [standards guide](#) we published in January:

### ***Ad Campaigns***

*We don't write about ads that are running on BuzzFeed unless they are genuinely newsworthy. Appreciation buzz posts celebrating a fun or cool ad are fine, as are posts critical of ads — but that content should not be about ads BuzzFeed's business side has created.*

Jonah and I sat down yesterday with our hardworking volunteer ombudsman, Keenan Trotter of Gawker, and we shared some of this with him. But it's jarring to read about our internal affairs on other sites, so I wanted to share Annie-Rose's findings with you now.

I'm so grateful to Annie-Rose and the team (Talal Ansari, Tamerra Griffin, Maggie Schultz, Matt Ford, Anita Badejo, Brendan Klinkenberg, and Susie Armitage) who really cranked on this report without making their colleagues — who hadn't broken any rules — feel like there

was some kind of witch hunt underway. We can't wait to turn that team loose on some big breaking news.

I'm also frankly relieved that the review didn't turn up any external pressures or advertiser contacts that I didn't know about.

And amid all this conversation about church and state, I do want to make one thing clear: We expect you to write and make decisions independently of our advertisers and our sales side. If you ever believe that pressure is being brought to bear, please tell me or your editor.

We've asked to be held in public, and by all of you, to the highest standards. It makes us better as a editorial operation and ultimately strengthens our culture. We are fortunate that so many smart people hold us to high expectations journalistically, culturally, and ethically. We won't always perfectly meet these expectations, we (and I) will undoubtedly make mistakes again, but I know we will keep getting better. I can't wait to see the amazing work all of you will do in the coming days and years, and to feel the huge impact it will have.

Ben