

# Opinion

## The Daily Tar Heel

COLUMN

### After eight years in journalism, I'm worried about the truth

By Satchel Walton  
Senior Writer

In most fields, eight years isn't much of a career. Eight years after starting med school, a doctor might still be in residency. An aspiring professor can easily spend eight years accumulating graduate degrees.

But in student journalism, eight years is a long time. Even when that work has been both seasonal and part-time, it feels like eons have gone by since 2018, when I published my first piece and entered a journalism-focused magnet program in high school.

In those eight years, I ran a local environmental news site where friends and I investigated everything from Ohio River water quality to the strain of cryptocurrency mining on rural Kentucky's electrical grid. One article I wrote led the commissioner of the Kentucky State Police to resign. In my three years with The Daily Tar Heel, my cultural commentary roamed between serious long-form writing and gonzo pieces. In my year abroad, I rose to the senior editorial team of Oxford's student newspaper, where I wrote about housing policy and religion and the future of meaningful work. In my senior year with The DTH, I've returned to profiles, analysis and news.

And through all that writing — and editing, design and even occasional photography — I never made a dime from it, bar a few hundred bucks of prize money in high school.

That was a fine system for the person I've been: a relatively privileged high schooler and a college student on a full scholarship. As a graduating senior, I'm faced with the fact that this model doesn't work once you have to start paying rent yourself. No one has really figured out how to make high-quality journalism a reliable 21st century business, especially on the local level.

#### Now, too few value the truth

Of course, there has been some version of this conversation for



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DTH senior writer Satchel Walton poses for a portrait at the DTH office on Tuesday.

decades: local news is dying, our information is poisoned, it all has something to do with the internet and maybe social media and maybe cable news — whatever shall we do? When I was born, about 380,000 Americans were employed by print newspapers. There were 150,000 when I started high school. It's fewer than 80,000 now.

But it wasn't long ago when many believed that society would work better as knowledge became more accessible online. A widespread belief stemming from educated circles in the early 2010s was that more information, digital connection and globalization would lead us to more peace, tolerance and good government. In middle school, we were told that our grandparents might fall for anything they saw online, but our digital-native generation would be able to discern fact from fiction and put the previously inaccessible swathes of information to good use.

How foolish that seems now. Instead, the online flood of

information and noise seems to have drowned out the truth. At the click of the keyboard, Americans have access to all manner of knowledge: minutes from town council meetings, detailed statistics on economic trends and scientific studies are a Google search away. But too few members of our society seem to value such things.

At the top levels of government, the "truth" hardly seems to matter. Does it matter if an American who was wrestled to the ground and shot dead in the streets of Minneapolis was a "domestic terrorist" trying to kill ICE officers, or if he was filming with a cell phone? Does it matter why our country is at war (excuse me — conducting a "military operation") against Iran, or what it has accomplished or when it will end? The answers to those questions coming from the White House seem to change each day. They can get away with this because too few of their citizens and potential voters stop to demand the truth.

In this context, does journalism

matter? When Woodward and Bernstein were unravelling Watergate, the public and Congress were outraged, forcing Nixon's eventual resignation. Now, when we hear that the Trump family is enriching itself by cutting deals worth hundreds of millions of dollars with a Middle Eastern autocrat, Congress does nothing. When it appears that White House staff are using insider information to get big paydays, gambling on bombing campaigns, most Americans simply brush it off, if they hear at all.

If Woodward and Bernstein were young, intrepid reporters today, they could be among the 300 Washington Post journalists who were laid off in February.

What's worse, the problem for journalism is not that its marketers are stupid. The fundamental problem is that sufficient demand for high-quality information about the world around us just doesn't exist. The old model, which subsidized journalism with high-value classifieds and advertisements, doesn't work in a digital age.

The trouble is that the truth might make us free, if only we wanted it. If only the average American had an incentive to find it. But I can't help but feel that some combination of the social internet and Americans' own lack of civic virtue has led our public realm badly astray.

#### Goodbye for now

I shouldn't be too bleak. An old mantra in journalism says that 'if it bleeds it leads' — negativity bias is the most persistent bias in all of the media. It's easier to write about things that are getting worse than those that are getting better. It's easier to write about problems than it is to offer meaningful solutions. It gets more clicks, too. That's important work, but it can easily twist your psychology if you read (or write) too much news.

So, was it worth it, after all? After the late nights of dragging and dropping photos into Adobe InDesign for the yearbook? After sending hundreds of interview requests, many of which never got a response? After countless feuds with The DTH Copy Desk over what was and was not prohibited by the "style guide?"

Absolutely. It's been one of the highlights of my life so far. There's no excuse as good as journalism to talk to total strangers about their lives and expertise. There's nothing so gratifying as publishing a big piece and having people tell me that they got something out of it. Fundamentally, there's no other forum where my work has been as meaningful and useful.

I'm immensely grateful to the people I've worked with along the way; to those who taught me the trade; to the many peers I refined my skills with; to my editors in Chapel Hill and Oxford who ran with my zany ideas; to my brother and parents who have always been my most enthusiastic supporters and most perceptive critics.

I know that is true, and in my book, the truth still matters. I hope it does in yours, too.

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COLUMN

### The good people of Orange County deserve a light-rail

By Kyle Bublic  
Columnist

In 2019, bureaucratic buffoons in dark blue at Duke University betrayed the good people of GoTriangle, effectively vetoing a proposed light-rail project between their university and our beautiful campus. Duke, who was offering the land needed to connect the twin cities via light-rail, pulled their support for the project and refused to sign off on any construction despite almost 30 years of prior commitment.

The light-rail, pitched in the midst of the '90s as an efficient way to connect Durham and Chapel Hill, aimed to keep commuters from gunking up the roadways and establish 19 stations running along a 17.7-mile route between our cities.

GoTriangle's magnum opus offered a potential respite from the hellish conditions endured by thousands of commuters on the blessed U.S. 15-501, that would have provided a fixed-track tram system and reduced the amount of people congesting the highway. Over \$150 million poured into the project from the light-rail's introduction to its untimely death in 2019 — much of

it coming from the pockets of North Carolina's taxpayers. The original report aimed to begin light-rail services this year, meaning that instead of typing this on my phone in standstill traffic, I could have been writing while riding high on the light-rail.

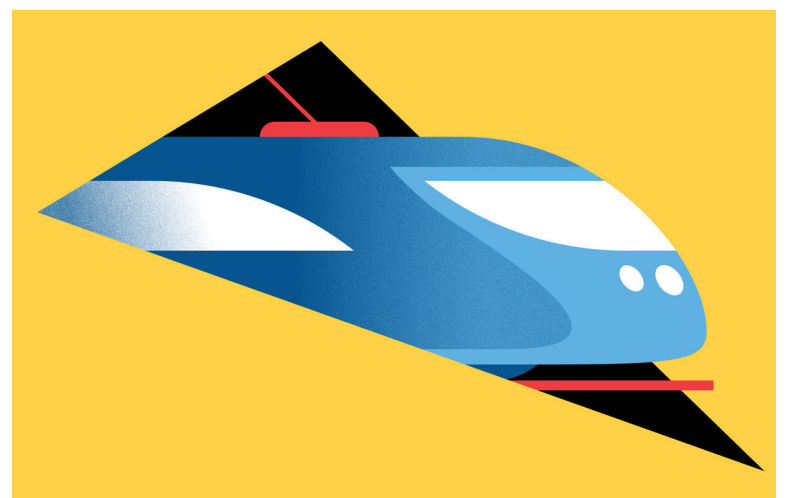
The project was axed due to Duke's concerns that the rail's magnetism would interfere with medical equipment positioned nearby the projected track. However, these worries seem to highlight the University's performative anxiety, considering other cities — such as Minnesota's Metro Green Line and the METRORail Red Line in Houston — have implemented light-rail projects in similar conditions by using a little ingenuity. Up north, the University of Minnesota was able to lay tracks within 150 feet of their equipment by installing mitigation measures and monitoring vibrations. The adaptations, which included the addition of rubber membranes along the track, allowed for thousands of commuters to enjoy the benefits of public rail.

My suspicion for the real reason behind the Blue Devils' cold feet

was funding by the Koch brothers, a dynamic duo that has been interrupting any sort of innovation in public transport all across our beautiful nation. The Koch Foundation, a major shareholder in the oil and asphalt industries, provided funding to Duke in 2018, suspiciously coinciding with the shutdown of the longstanding light-rail project.

It may just be my Tar Heel pride, but I believe that we deserve the utility of the light-rail, as the Durham-Orange transit corridor creates the perfect environment for an improved transit system. The route, being under consistent, heavy strain due to the growing population of both counties, needs more options for travel. While GoTriangle's current transportation routes give our commuters an alternative to taking their chances behind the wheel, the light-rail would provide another, more efficient option to serve the needs of our community.

These needs are being made increasingly obvious as our virtuous leader continues to champion for campus enlargement, pushing Orange County's roads to their limit. The introduction of Carolina North would



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likely further the influx of outsiders into Chapel Hill. As the new arrivals travel between Chapel Hill and Durham for work and Durham Bulls games, the already unbearable traffic is only destined to get worse.

With the expansion of the Triangle being inevitable, infrastructure needs to keep up with the growing pressures of an increased population. As a proud

patron of Chapel Hill Transit's own beautiful bus system, I hold the opinion that public transportation is the missing link to put our society on the path to utopia. By strengthening our commuter systems, we can keep our movement modernizing and continue to make fabulous North Carolina the greatest state on Earth.

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